

'The Tragedy of Macbeth' is filled with haunting images, powerful roles

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: <<<<

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 105 minutes

This film is currently playing in limited release at theaters and will begin streaming on Apple TV+ on Jan. 14.

Of all of the plays ever written, Shakespeare's "Macbeth" is one of the most enduring and famous. It has been performed countless times and has been adapted to film on several occasions (perhaps most notably in a 1971 feature starring Jon Finch). So, one would think that nothing new could be done with this very familiar source material. While that assumption is true to an extent, "The Tragedy of Macbeth" still manages to exceed expectations.

For those unfamiliar with the original story, it involves a noble Scottish lord named Macbeth (Denzel Washington). After fighting bravely in battle for King Duncan (Brendan Gleeson), he is informed by a trio of witches that he will soon be King. Both the lead character and Lady Macbeth (Frances McDormand) are pleased by this prediction. But greed and lust for immense power soon begin to influence their actions.

In order to attain the throne rapidly, Macbeth is convinced by his spouse to secretly murder the King. Their plan works, but soon it becomes clear that finalizing their accomplishment requires

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tying up and removing many loose ends. Macbeth becomes a panicky, distrustful, violent and murderous authoritarian, wiping out anyone with the potential to expose his criminal act. Guilt and madness begin to take hold, threatening to ruin everything.

As mentioned, the story will be familiar to many, but the cast is uniformly excellent, helping to keep things lively. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are meaty roles and the two lead performers sink their teeth into the material. Director Joel Coen ("Miller's Crossing," "Fargo," "No Country for Old Men," "Inside Llewyn Davis") keeps things moving at a surprisingly rapid pace. The story has been pared down and condensed in comparison with other adaptations.

The film actually benefits from being presented in an abridged manner. While the story is still clear and as it appears in the classic play, there isn't a wasted minute onscreen.

Still, what really elevates this particular version is the technical panache on display. The movie looks phenomenal. While it is clear that most of the film was shot on a soundstage, the process has allowed the production design and cinematography to really stand out. It is shot in black and white in a boxy 1.33:1 or 4:3 aspect ratio that feels claustrophobic, especially when the camera is tight on the actors' faces.

The interiors are sparse-looking and cold, while bits taking place on exteriors are even more wonderfully moody and expressionistic. From the fog-shrouded fields to the stark, inky black-bare trees set against crumbling structures, the movie's sets maintain a gorgeously gloomy appearance. One expects that those involved in the look of the picture may receive some significant award nominations in the coming weeks.

So, while this is a fairly faithful and familiar telling of the famous tale, the accelerated storytelling, committed performances, and incredible camerawork ultimately result in a unique experience. If you're curious about the work of Shakespeare or simply want to see a masterclass in set design, lighting, and photography, then "The Tragedy of Macbeth" is something you will want to check out. The haunting images on display in this tragedy will likely make as much of an impression as the tale itself.

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