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Macbeth
(Anchor Bay, 9.25.2007)

With the notable exception of Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has had a rather spotty film history. Welles' 1948 version is compromised by budgetary restrictions. In his 1971 adaptation Polanski handles the violence well—big surprise, huh?—and then there's Francesca Annis' nude stroll down a corridor. Which brings us to Geoffrey Wright's 2006 endeavor which relocates the setting to contemporary Australia and changes the characters to gangsters. As might be expected from the director of *Romper Stomper*, Wright's take is heavy on the old ultraviolence.

Re-imagining Shakespeare's characters as criminals is nothing new. *Men of Respect*, a mess but a guilty pleasure, salvages a bit of the Bard's language while emphasizing the gore. Wright and co-writer Victoria Hill, who also plays Lady Macbeth, preserve the language and do an excellent job of refining the play to its essentials. Visually stunning at times, it's a lot of fun.

Wright opens the film with three attractive, thin young women (Chole Armstrong, Kate Bell, Miranda Nation) dressed in school uniforms carousing in a cemetery. Will Gibson's monochromatic images and Wright's swooping camera quickly establish that this isn't going to be your grandfather's *Macbeth*. With a drug deal gone wrong—automatic weapons, bullet-riddled bodies—Wright presents Macbeth (Sam Worthington) as a Melbourne gangster on the rise. He's content to be the loyal henchman of Duncan (Gary Sweet) until the aforementioned “witches” and Lady M. start stirring up his ambitions—and hormones.

While a few scenes suffer from being merely expository, *Macbeth* frequently percolates: the “Is this a dagger I see before me” scene with Macbeth confronted by a plant's ominous shadow, his reluctant murder of Duncan that illustrates how difficult it can be to kill someone, the dinner scene in which the Thane of Cawdor sees the ghost of Banquo (Steve Bastoni) in a mirror only to be attacked by said image, and the hero's nude orgy with the fetching witches.

“Mom, Dad, I'm going to be in *Macbeth*.”
“That's wonderful, dear.”
“I get to run around starkers with these weird tattoos all over my body.”
“Have a good time, sweetheart.”

The orgy indicates Wright has seen *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist* a few times. The clever way he brings Birnam Wood to Dunsinane is a hoot, in part because it is so obvious a way of dramatizing and modernizing the fulfillment of the witches' prophecy. Although this *Macbeth* is tad tongue in cheek at times, the humor and frequent excesses energize the film. In the twenty-first century, is there any reason to do a straightforward Shakespeare film?

In *The New York Times* Matt Zoller Seitz called *Macbeth* “brutal and thrilling,” but it is clearly not for all tastes, owing a considerable debut to violent Hong Kong crime movies. The Internet Movie Database voters, for example, don’t like it at all, and Melbourne’s *The Age* gave it two negative reviews. I was engrossed, no pun intended, from beginning to end and can quibble only about the thick Aussie working-class accents that make some of the dialogue impenetrable.

Anchor Bay’s crisp transfer captures the dark beauty of Gibson’s lighting and Wright’s detail-crammed frames. The only significant extra is a rather disappointing 13-minute making-of with Wright and Hill making bland comments. The much livelier Worthington, who will appear in James Cameron’s *Avatar*, comes across as more passionate about the film.

Another interesting take on *Macbeth* is available as part of a set entitled *Shakespeare Retold*. Presenting Macbeth (James McAvoy) as a chef in modern Scotland and Lady M. (Keeley Hawes) as a duplicitous restaurant manager, this 2005 TV film matches Wright’s version in offbeat humor.—Michael Adams