

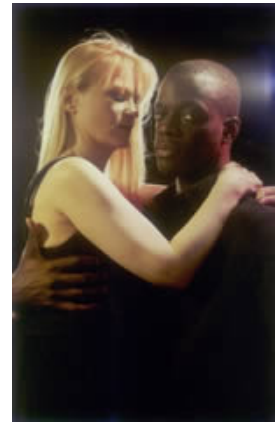
## Macbeth: A Walking Shadow

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nytheatre.com review

Michael Criscuolo · January 5, 2007

Despite ruthlessly cutting the original text, retelling the story in a completely different order, and entirely doing away with several characters, *Macbeth: A Walking Shadow*, Andrew Frank and Doug Silver's audacious new adaptation of Shakespeare's classic tragedy, is one of the best Shakespeare productions I have ever seen. If you're wondering how that can be, then I suggest you run down to Manhattan Theatre Source and check it out in person. All theatergoers who do so will be treated to a production whose persistence of vision is rare in today's theatre. Frank and Silver know what story they want to tell, and simply trim the parts that don't serve their purpose. Such a notion may turn purists aghast with horror, but as a reformed purist myself I'm here to tell you: it works.



*Pictured: Celia Schaefer and Ato Essandoh in a scene from Macbeth: A Walking Shadow (photo © Kate Sessions)*

By now, the story of *Macbeth* is legendary. The title character, an ambitious high-ranking Scottish soldier, works to fulfill a prophecy that he will one day become King. Egged on by Lady Macbeth, his equally ambitious wife, Macbeth attains the throne through treachery, deception, and murder. It's the classic story of a power-hungry rise to the top, followed by the inevitable fall from which no man returns.

However, instead of beginning with the play's traditional opening scene, in which the famous three witches briefly plan to meet Macbeth for the first time, *Macbeth: A Walking Shadow* opens with the climactic battle scene between Macbeth and Macduff. Besides the obvious thrill of kicking things off with a sword fight, Frank and Silver use this scene to introduce their production's conceit: while fighting Macduff, Macbeth flashes back over recent events and reflects on how he wound up where he is. In other words, the entire play happens inside Macbeth's head.

What follows are the highlights from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* filtered through the protagonist's stream of consciousness. Thus, Macduff's Act IV scene with Malcolm is intercut with the previous scene, in which his Macduff's wife is murdered, and both are finally cut down to manageable size; the Porter, Macbeth's brief comic relief, is gone altogether, as is the majority of Banquo's role; and almost all of the cast members can suddenly transform into the witches without warning. The logic of this newly disjointed narrative is one of cause and effect. Each flashback leads to the next as Macbeth slowly connects the dots. Hence, the news of Macduff's flight to England momentarily brings Macbeth back to his present battle with his nemesis (their fight is reprised more than once during the evening) before his thoughts drift back to Lady Macduff right before she is brutally killed. *Macbeth: A Walking Shadow* is full of moments like those.

Frank, doubling as the show's director, takes other liberties with his source material by adding little touches of his own. Most powerful among these is the occurrence of King Duncan's murder on stage. When he finally commits the deed that sets the wheels of the story in motion, Macbeth immediately breaks down into a cacophony of tears, bringing the play's subtitle into sharp focus. Macbeth's grief turns him into a walking shadow of his former self, and it becomes an emotional manifestation of the spiritual murder he commits on himself long before Macduff delivers the final physical blow.

What's most astounding about Frank and Silver's approach is that it takes one of Shakespeare's leanest and most accessible plays and makes it even easier to follow. The authors's extensive but judicious cuts, compounded by Frank's skillfully fluid staging, add up to a production that jumps at the audience like a boxer in serious fighting shape.

Ato Essandoh's performance in the title role is a revelation. He effortlessly navigates Macbeth's deterioration, and commands the stage with natural, unforced authority. Celia Schaefer is every bit his equal as Lady Macbeth, simultaneously communicating The Lady's aggressiveness and sexiness. Other standouts include Lou Carbonneau's stoic, intense Macduff, Chuck Bunting as a benevolent Duncan, and Amy Dickenson as the quietly put-upon Ross. In truth, though, every member of this outstanding cast delivers a memorable performance.

Macbeth: A Walking Shadow is a definitive production of a legendary drama that deserves a large audience and a long life after this production. In the meantime, though, catch it while you still can.