

British Theatre Guide

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Macbeth

William Shakespeare

HER Productions, Girl Gang Manchester and Unseemly Women

Hope Mill, Manchester

18–29 June 2025

It is often suggested an underlying cause of the greed and ambition of the Macbeths is a desperate effort to fill the void created by the lack of children in their marriage. Co-directors Hannah Ellis Ryan and Amy Gavin put this point to the forefront, opening their production of *Macbeth* with Lady Macbeth (Frankie Lipman) suffering a miscarriage and being carried offstage by her husband.

Indeed, the co-directors push home the point by adding new rhyming dialogue in which the Witches make their mistress, Hecate, aware of the trauma caused by the loss of a child. The significance of children hangs over the play; a baby and a nursery rhyme are used to lure Hecate from the stage at the end of act one.

The innovations in the production include pushing the traditional opening scene—in which the Witches schedule their next meeting and predict the coming of Macbeth—back after the scene in Duncan's court, which jars a bit when it is referenced at the conclusion to draw attention to the cyclical nature of ambition and conflict.

This is a stripped-back production, with the only props being a large war-drum and a zinc bath, which serve multiple purposes as cauldrons, tables, a birth pool, a place of refuge and even a bath. It is also starkly violent—the miscarriage is linked to the loss of soldiers in warfare, so, by the close of the opening scene, the stage is already littered with bodies.

Zoey Barnes's costumes, featuring strips of tartan, set the scene in Scotland. Notably, after Macbeth is crowned, he and his wife appear in cool, stylish, almost futuristic, black and silver attire, possibly suggesting the Scottish tribes have been eliminated.

There is a strong supernatural atmosphere. Lady Macbeth's opening speech is performed by Frankie Lipman less as an internal monologue, more as an invocation, offering a deal to the Devil. The second act opens with a full witches' coven, creating some difficulties for patrons returning late from the bar and getting caught in the *mêlée*. The Witches are a constant presence, lingering in the background, with the actors switching into secondary characters at the drop of a hat. This facilitates a rapid pace, although, on occasion, the approach hinders clarity; the switch from Witch to cutthroat is achieved by the actors donning some unconvincing veils. Concentrating on the supernatural elements of the play limits the development of the friendship between Macbeth and Banquo.

The three Witches (Paryce Richards, Zoey Barnes and Pavanveer Sagoo) are an eerie, otherworldly presence, twisting their limbs into awkward shapes or shuffling zombie-like around the stage and occasionally into the audience. Inconsistent as the wind, the Witches shift from offering sympathy for Lady Macbeth's loss to gloating over cruel developments.

The co-directors push the supernatural vibe to the maximum with some gruesomely effective staging. The guilt-ridden Macbeth does not simply imagine Banquo's ghost haunting his celebratory dinner but rather sees his late friend's corpse served as dinner and devoured by the guests. In a nice touch, the Witches leave the stage in disgust at the boozy antics of the Porter, interpreted by Miranda Parker as a cross between a pub bore and a music hall entertainer.

In an interesting interpretation, Naomi Albans suggests Duncan might be an inadequate ruler, effusive, insincere and dependent upon alcohol.

To say Elaine McNicol's Macbeth is subject to mood swings is an understatement. Initially, the character seems more proclaimer than plotter, boldly stating his plans and optimistically sure he might be able to acquire the crown without any direct action only to crumble into self-doubt once it becomes apparent this is not the case. Macbeth does not so much gain confidence as slip into arrogance so deep as to be close to madness. McNicol uses her wonderfully sinister smile to great effect as Macbeth moves into his imperial phase of imagined invulnerability.

There is a brittle fragility to Frankie Lipman's Lady Macbeth, using ambition as a shield against her existing trauma but rapidly getting out of her emotional depth. Having been initially stronger than her wavering husband, she cannot cope with the juggernaut she has helped create.

The addition of new dialogue to *Macbeth* may offend purists, and audiences unfamiliar with the text may be challenged by members of the cast adopting more than one role. But the switch to the Macbeths being motivated by loss and grief rather than blind ambition makes them a more human couple, and the supernatural staging is highly effective.

After a run at Hope Mill, *Macbeth* moves to Lawrence Batley Theatre 2 and 3 July 2025.

Reviewer: [David Cunningham](#)