

British Theatre Guide

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Macbeth

William Shakespeare
Secret Shakespeare
Reading Abbey Ruins
23 July–7 August 2025

What does it take to make an evening of compelling drama? A grand theatre with plush seats, complex lighting and dazzling costumes? None of these feature in Secret Shakespeare's production of *Macbeth* in the open air at Reading Abbey Ruins. And yet this new promenade production is stunning.

The concept is an unusual one. The audience gather uncertainly. Who are the players? When and how will the action begin? They are told that they can stand or sit wherever they like—and as close to the cast of 11 as they wish, as long as they do not touch them. The action moves through four main spaces in the abbey ruins, one of which is a massive 70 metres or so from end to end.

In the first scene, the three witches—who are dressed just like the rest of us—emerge from amongst the audience—and so it continues for the rest of the show. The 'fourth wall' is broken consistently as players unflinchingly interact directly with the crowd, who can be quite literally in their face. The stakes are high because every night is potentially different to its predecessors—after heavy rain tonight, a convenient puddle was deployed for a game of ducks and drakes, and fights had to be re-set because of slippery ground.

Artistic Director Gavin Leigh modestly credits his casting with much of the success of the show, but he has self-evidently done much more. This bold show makes such excellent use of its surroundings. The weird sisters' famous "hubble, bubble" cauldron scene is hugely gutsy, the ground scraped up with bare hands, the characters' interaction quite wild. All three witches give strong performances.

The play's captivating lead has something of the look of a young Bowie about him. His portrayal is a study of increasingly mad wickedness and of doomed ambition, building in intensity to the epic battle scene when Great Birnam Wood finally comes to Dunsinane Hill. The 900-year-old stones of Reading Abbey Ruins rang with some of Shakespeare's best words, delivered with clarity and conviction.

Some of the other stand-out roles include a strong Banquo, Macduff and Malcolm (in a Black Sabbath shirt).

If you want to experience Shakespeare that is thrillingly new and thrums with raw energy, then go and see Secret Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. You won't be disappointed.

Reviewer: [David Woodward](#)