

# Macbeth close but Kerr's no Polanski

Theater review by Milfred Campbell

It's like the old days Alice, you and me at the opening of *Macbeth* at the Rice Theatre. You don't talk very much and I think I have to; otherwise I will go on looking at those eyes till the lights are turned down and it is time for you to go.

That's something Keith Ashwell or Thrumbo Wattskiller will never understand.

"And what's that?" your eyes ask, smiling.

It's you, me, Brendan Barry, Susan Chapple, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and the Rice Theatre. You try and make me find the words for it: this time it's a real fight for me because of the opening night wine which is flowing like water, and because of *Macbeth* itself which I first got to know when we staged it in Mrs. Frumpstrom's drama class back in Thorsby. Thrumbo played Macbeth, Irma played his lady and I was Duncan.

For one thing, Barry's Macbeth was different because Barry plays an older Macbeth, a characterization that is new to all the versions of Macbeth I've seen. Surprisingly, Barry's older Macbeth works quite well. In fact it adds an interesting dimension to the play; Barry's Macbeth seems to be conscious that he is doomed to a tragic end; in Barry's portrayal there seems to be the subtle, but distinct recognition of the tragic results of unchecked ambition which can only come from an older man who has already seen it happen in the world.

Thrumbo's Macbeth never could show this kind of awareness because he was a young man drunk on his potential like a Faustus (which is incidentally not too far off from the real life Thrumbo judging from his recent attempts to upstage Keith Ashwell and myself.)

Thrumbo doesn't have far to go when you take a look at what Ashwell thinks these days. What the hell does Ashwell mean, for instance, by calling Barry's Macbeth a '1980 Everyman'? Does he mean us average folk bumbling through these strange times are potential Macbeths? And what does it have to do with the 80's? Or is this Mr. Ashwell's way of saying that he is hooked on seeing Shakespeare 'done modern' like his good friend Mr. Coe likes to do it?

Mr. Ashwell is somehow quite surprised by the notion that even when Macbeth is done 'traditionally' it is a play that can speak to people like Mr. Ashwell's cab driver — if it's explained to them by people like Mr. Ashwell.

Thrumbo could do it a lot better. At least since Thrumbo's hung around the Power Plant where he's discovered that Freud liked Macbeth a lot because this play powerfully reveals the psychology of obsession, and where he's discovered things like the 'hermenutic'

approach to aesthetics, or Rene Wellek and so forth.

You frown, Alice. Later, over a bowl of *won ton* soup at the Lychee, I try to tell you how strange and impossible a thing it is to go to a reasonably competent production of a play like *Macbeth* and try to explain in words what it all meant.

"Why do you try to do it then?" you ask.

I say competent because the acting was good, the direction balanced — if not a bit cautious. There is a lot of respect for the text and a professional approach to its rendition on the Rice stage. But there is very little flash, except for Barry. The witches could have been highlighted much more, the pacing could have been more varied. And the lighting could have been used more effectively.

Macbeth's ambition is what brings about his downfall. His ascendancy to power with the help of Lady Macbeth is beautifully realized by Barry and Chapple up to the point Duncan is murdered. The overwhelming moral implications of this and subsequent murders is what takes over in the play; Chapple and Barry are not quite as successful in portraying the fragmentation of both personalities when confronted by the extremity of their actions.

In Polanski's screen version of *Macbeth*, the psychological nature of Macbeth's and his lady's

breakdown is exploited fully. This is simply what makes Polanski's work a masterpiece and Kerr's work simply — but satisfyingly — competent.

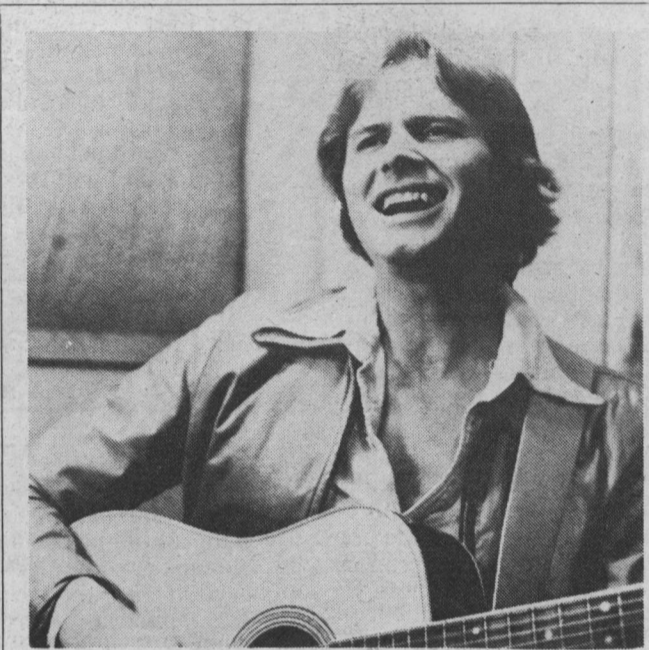
I try to tell you Alice that we live in a world that would seem strange to Macbeth. Our world is proud of the power it thinks it has to do the very thing Macbeth failed to do; to succeed in a world where the Macbeths are no longer answerable for their unchecked ambition.

Your eyes are amused by this. I think you think it quaint. If you do, it's unfair. And I tell you why. The twentieth century tragic hero is a guy like Chance in a movie like *Being There*. The hero is a mental cripple. Things like ambition and pride are external things imposed on the mind which is already stunted by the incomplete information which has shaped it in the first place.

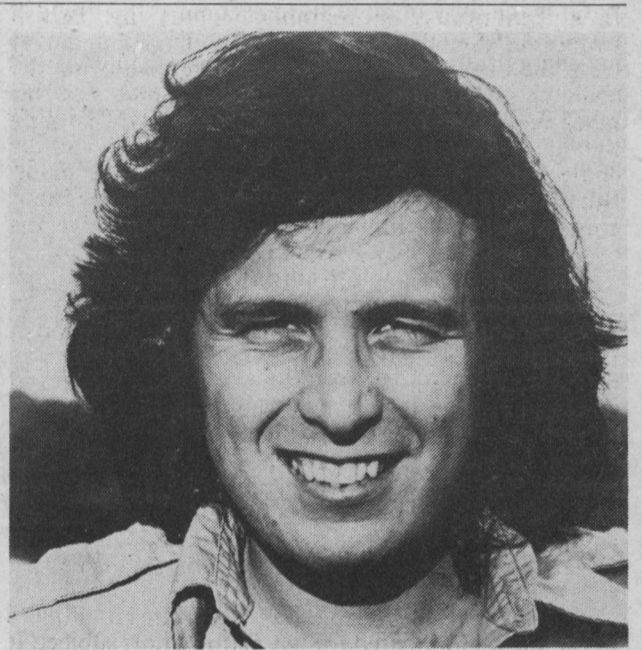
Your eyes, wine tired, now suspect that what I say sounds jaded. The way you ask me if I remember the white beaches of the Baja south of Mulege, the beach where you recall you read me *The Tempest* to show me how Shakespeare's words filled that deserted, silent, world with magic, confirms it.

I say I remember and you sigh. Your eyes ask what happened to that world.

I can only invite you home for tea.



Bill Wesson is playing at L'Express Thursday noon to 2 p.m.



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