

"A Mistaken Understanding":  
*Dunsinane* and New Writing at the RSC

Emily Linnemann, The Shakespeare Institute

---

Abstract

This review uses David Greig's sequel to *Macbeth* as a case study to consider the place of new writing at the Royal Shakespeare Company. It examines *Dunsinane* within a context of previous new writing productions and in the light of the RSC's new writing manifesto. The cultural values surrounding new writing at the RSC come from a variety of sources, including directors, playwrights, and RSC management. These values include the desire for relevance, a need for political and social commentary, and a nostalgia surrounding the RSC's traditional role as a new writing company. Always, Shakespeare remains at the heart of the new writing project. Plays like *Dunsinane* are intended to illuminate Shakespeare's works and stand as a testament to his universality. This review argues that these demands do not fully encourage artistic and aesthetic independence. However, Greig's play manages to achieve such autonomy by challenging conceptions of Shakespeare and *Macbeth*. *Dunsinane* constitutes an important part of the RSC's 2010 repertory because of this challenge. Its illumination of Shakespeare is also a statement of its independence from him.

---

*Dunsinane*, by David Greig. Royal Shakespeare Company. Director, Roxana Silbert. Designer, Robert Innes Hopkins. Lighting, Chahine Yavroyan. Music and Sound, Nick Powell. Movement, Anna Morrissey. Company Dramaturg, Jeanie O'Hare. Music Director, Alex Lee. Stage Manager, Kristi Warwick. Performers, Malcolm

(Brian Ferguson), Siward (Jonny Phillips), Gruach (Siobhan Redmond). Hampstead Theatre, London. 10 February - 6 March 2010.

In one of the initial scenes of playwright David Greig's *Dunsinane*, the body of Macbeth is brought onto the stage — except that it is not signified as the body of "Macbeth." It is referred to as the "tyrant," and the audience do not see it. We see instead a bulky stretcher shrouded in a rich cloth. Macbeth's wife asks to be able to accompany his body to Iona in the tradition of their people. "No," Siward tells her, "The grieving is finished" (Greig 2010, 35). Our encounter with Macbeth ends just as abruptly. His body is carried from the stage and the shadow that he casts over the play goes with it. *Dunsinane* is a play about strangeness, about feeling alien in a society, culture, and landscape that is different from one's own. As Macbeth is transported from the stage during the performance of a play that he inspired, but in which he is never named, the effect of strangeness is all too apparent. This sequel to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was not behaving like a sequel. It seemed to be offering up a challenge to its audience and a distortion or refraction of its predecessor. But why? What were the creative impulses behind Greig's play, and how do they coalesce with and confront the cultural values attached to new writing at the Royal Shakespeare Company?

One of these questions entered my mind an hour earlier as I stood waiting in the foyer for the play to begin. I was impressed by the relatively youthful crowd that *Dunsinane* had attracted to Hampstead Theatre on a cold Monday night in February. For a playgoer more used to the RSC's Stratford audiences of devoted locals and eager tourists, the Hampstead set seemed arty, edgy, cool. Then, a voice over the tannoy announced that *Start Night*, a "fast and furious new writing initiative," was beginning in the Michael Frayn space in five minutes. As the foyer bar cleared and I was left standing with the usual suspects, I began to feel slightly cooler and a little more edgy myself. I started to wonder if this issue of audience demographic gets to the heart of what the RSC's new writing program is about. Why should a company that is dedicated to a 400-year-old playwright encourage and even stage new works? Is it an obligation imposed by public subsidy, or does it arise from a sense of artistic duty? What are they hoping to achieve by supporting such creativity, and what limitations do they impose? Do they hope to attract newer, younger audience members — audience members who, on the night I saw the play, were downstairs in the Michael Frayn space, watching *Start Night*? Or is there another project behind it?

For me and other RSC aficionados, seeing *Dunsinane* could never be about watching an individual play. My ears were alert to any *Macbeth*-esque lines. I compared the squashed seat

in Hampstead with the more spacious ones at the temporary Courtyard. I found myself thinking about how much Jonny Phillips (Siward) resembled the RSC's most recent Richard III (Jonathan Slinger).<sup>1</sup> I was always aware that I was watching the RSC and constantly considering what *Dunsinane's* place was in their repertory and in British drama in general. I wondered if the play would be likely to be performed outside of this short run and whether another theater company would ever take it up. Was it an independent piece of new writing, or did it rely on the cultural values of the RSC for its reception and its theatrical success?

That the performance of the play encouraged me to reconsider and analyze new writing and its place at the RSC is testament to its theatrical effectiveness and ability to promote dialectic. Theater's value as a dialectical space is alluded to by both theorists and practitioners. Stephen Purcell, taking his cue from Robert Weimann's assertion that theater is not about confrontation, but "interplay," describes it as a place where "inconsistent and contradictory attitudes can exist without synthesis" (Purcell 2009, 36; Weimann 1978, 81). Eugenio Barba evokes a similar image when he imagines the spectator "for whom the theatre is essential precisely because it does not present them with solutions, but knots" (Barba 1995, 96). In this sense, the questions and considerations about the cultural context of new writing in a theater dedicated to Shakespeare not only inform my response to *Dunsinane*, but enrich it. I will begin with a brief overview of some of this context before I turn to the review proper.

According to the RSC, new writing is "at the heart" of their work and is "as important" to their repertory as Shakespeare. To read the new writing manifesto on their website is to imagine a company in which new writing and Shakespeare sit side by side, neither one privileged above the other. They emphasise the "symbiosis" of the relationship and underline new writing's place in the company's history. In describing the relationship between new writing and Shakespeare, the RSC draws on the cultural values of Shakespeare's relevance and universality: "New plays have the ability to reflect Shakespeare, to transform him and to illuminate meaning. Plays about contemporary experience sit alongside Shakespeare's universality as much as adaptations of plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries reflect recognisable modern experience" (Royal Shakespeare Company, "New Writing at the RSC" 2009b, para. 6 of 6). Yet, despite references to Shakespeare's universality and a suggestion that Shakespeare can be "transform[ed]" into multiple new cultural objects, the RSC's new writing is not presented as entirely plural and divergent. Instead, it is always subordinated to Shakespeare. It draws on his narrative, aesthetic, and dramatic qualities in order to "illuminate" the meaning of his plays. New plays are presented as aiding our understanding of Shakespeare rather than as independent entities. They are passive reflections and responses. Even

the more active noun "transformation" suggests that Shakespeare will always sit alongside RSC new writing.

Roxana Silbert, the director of *Dunsinane*, sees it a little differently. For her, the tradition and heritage of the RSC are bound up with its commitment to new writing: "The RSC had always had . . . an experimental heart" (Silbert 2010, para. 4 of 11). Silbert constructs a nostalgic narrative of the RSC's new writing, remembering a company who "at its height had . . . blended technique, intelligence and the urgency of the new better than anyone" (para. 4 of 11). Silbert associates the new writing program with the RSC's golden years and believes that a return to new writing under Michael Boyd will re-energize and reinvigorate the company. She endows new writing with a purpose beyond illuminating Shakespeare's works. It is intended to create a future for the company that blends the classic and the contemporary and is thus "unpredictable and limitless in dramatic possibility" (para. 6 of 11). It is not surprising that Silbert would champion new writing. She was formerly artistic director of Paines Plough, a company that has "the playwright always at the heart of everything we do" (Paines Plough 2010, para. 2 of 4). This is Silbert's directorial debut with the RSC and follows her recent appointment to the role of associate director with the company. The relationship among director, writer, and new writing is crystallized in Silbert's professional experience. Appointing a director who specializes in new writing productions signals to audiences that the RSC is willing to take artistic and aesthetic risks. According to this new associate director, it is the cultural values of innovation and experiment that motivate the RSC's new writing program. The relationship between Shakespeare's work and that of the twenty-first-century writers is, therefore, reciprocal, interactive, and mutually beneficial.

Yet, elsewhere concerns about the quality and scope of the RSC's new writing program are voiced. Events such as the 2004 and 2005 New Work Festivals were criticized by playwrights (Costa 2004, para. 11 of 20). These festivals were designed to showcase the RSC's portfolio of writers and were curated by Dominic Cooke. The plays staged during the festival were nearly all performed in small studio spaces for limited runs, and mainly as matinees. Plays such as *Breakfast with Mugabe*, directed by Anthony Sher, were performed in the Swan, but none of the new plays was staged in the RST. During this time the RSC's main stage remained devoted to Shakespeare. The Soho Theatre, where the plays were staged in London, is another example of a small, studio-like space. The new writing that the RSC champions in theory seems to be marginalized in practice.

Despite its apparent marginalization at the RSC, Dominic Cooke sees new writing as a responsibility of the UK's national theater companies:<sup>2</sup>

We have a responsibility to be talking about the state of our nation . . . More than that: they have a responsibility not just to commission the tried-and-tested political writers, but to give a home to the younger generation of writers who are still seeking the voices in which they might address the world. (Costa 2004, para. 20 of 20)

Once again, the cultural value of relevance is applied to new writing, suggesting that it is more difficult to apply to classical drama. However, Cooke couples this with an obligation to comment on the most important political issues of the day. It is not enough for RSC new writing to embrace youth culture or be written in street slang. It must also encourage its audience to consider and reconsider the biggest global problems. Thus, Shakespeare is co-opted into a project of social, cultural, and political regeneration that seems to constitute a testament of his "universality," as championed by the RSC in their new writing manifesto.

The RSC's new writing has a large burden to shoulder. It must illuminate Shakespeare's work, but also reinvigorate our approach to that work. It must be relevant whilst remaining true to the traditions of the RSC. It must be innovative and yet reflective of Shakespeare. Many of the cultural values surrounding Shakespeare, the RSC, and new writing seem contradictory. However, it is the process of negotiating these tensions that allows writers to create successful and meaningful work. Theater is a place where opposing attitudes, ideas, and aesthetics can exist in the same moment and, most importantly, "without synthesis" (Purcell 2009, 36). The synthesis of opposing ideas is problematic within the theater because it occludes the opportunity for a dialectic to be created. This dialectic should allow audiences and performers the space and time to think about the issues with which they are being faced. Thus, theater's value as a dialectical space is heightened in the RSC's new writing program. An approach to theater that embraces both tradition and radicalism, contemporary relevance and historical drama, will always be inherently contradictory. New writing at what is nominally Shakespeare's theater will always have the opportunity to act as a catalyst for debate and offer up a valuable challenge to Shakespeare's cultural hegemony.

Whether recent new writing has fully delivered on its potential value is another point entirely. The evidence of recent years suggests that new plays have tried to embrace their role as political and social commentary, but are less inclined to challenge our reception and conception of Shakespeare. At the 2006-2007 Complete Works Festival, the RSC's new writing included *Days of Significance* (Roy Williams), *The Indian Boy* (Rona Munro), *One of These Days* (Leo Butler), and *Regime Change* (Peter Straughan). These plays dealt, respectively, with young soldiers fighting in Iraq, property development in a local woodland, the English invasion of Ireland in 1775, and a political coup in an unnamed state. Echoes of twenty-first-century political and social conflicts are

more or less evident in each of these plays. Since 2007, Adriano Shaplin, an embedded writer with the company, has written *The Tragedy of Thomas Hobbes*, and two new Russian plays have been commissioned. *Days of Significance* was revived for a brief London run, but aside from these plays, the repertoire has remained largely Shakespearean. David Greig's *Dunsinane* and Dennis Kelly's *The Gods Weep* thus represent the first RSC-backed, Shakespeare-focused new writing since 2008.

Both plays live up to the expectations of new writing at the RSC. They are undeniably connected to Shakespeare, contain echoes of contemporary events, and hence seem to provide evidence of Shakespeare's universality. *The Gods Weep*, inspired by *King Lear*, deals with the fallout from the credit crunch, whilst *Dunsinane* is a sequel to *Macbeth*. The marketing literature for *Dunsinane* is suggestive of its topical relevance: "Late at night in a foreign land, an English army sweeps through the landscape under cover of darkness and takes the seat of power" (Royal Shakespeare Company, *London Season*, 2009a, 4). This play, the leaflet suggests, will use eleventh-century Scottish history to comment on current conflicts. Yet, if I was expecting a simplistic reading of either the Iraq war or the eleventh-century Scottish conflict, I was mistaken. *Dunsinane* offers more to audiences than anti-war polemic or a clumsy "contemporization" of *Macbeth*. This is not to suggest that reading the play in terms of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan is misguided. Greig himself admits that these wars were at the back of his mind during the creative process. His inspiration for the play came from several recent productions of *Macbeth* that had sprung up after the invasion of Iraq. However, what interests him about the play is not the overthrow of a tyrant, but what happens to the country after the overthrow has been achieved. He "began the play very clearly wanting to talk about the present day and the conflicts we were involved in," but this focus shifted during the writing process (Royal Shakespeare Company, "Interview with David Greig," 2009c). He became more interested in the story he was telling, and he asserts that parallels with current affairs ultimately arose as a by-product of *Dunsinane*'s narrative. Rather than presenting his audience with simplified allegory, Greig manipulates the value of relevance and inverts the usual process of reading contemporary events through historical foils: "In a way, I would like people's knowledge of Afghanistan to help them think about tenth [sic] century Scotland" (2009c). The contemporary is clearly visible in Greig's play, but it is not the sole guiding principle of the narrative. This play challenges our conceptions of contemporary relevance just as it challenges our conceptions of a Shakespeare sequel.

While Greig has avoided making clichéd and overt comparisons between the war in Scotland and the wars in the Middle East, echoes and resonances abound throughout the play. The head-scarved women who attend on Gruach, the factious warring clans, and Siward's inability to see nuance in political situations all subtly echo present global circumstances. Less obvious is

something that occurred to me a few days after watching the play. It is an echo, a reverberation with *The Hurt Locker* (Boal 2009). Of course, both the film and the play are, to a greater or lesser extent, about current conflicts in the Middle East. But it is both works' emphasis on the alienation of soldiers from their war-torn landscape that seems most poignant. Watching the film, I began to think again about *Dunsinane* and realized that the play is not simply an allegory, but also an evocation of the strangeness and alienation felt by invading soldiers. In turn, this alienation is felt by the audience as we are led further and further from the *Macbeth* narrative we recognize.

And so, with this alienation in mind, I return to 22 February 2010 and the night of the performance. A young soldier enters the playing space. From the outset, this play exposes the fear, uncertainty, and alienation of the young English army, many of whom are facing battle for the first time. The young soldier is played by Sam Swann, an actor still training at LAMDA (London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art). His youth and inexperience mirror that of his character, and his soldier's description of the army on the shores of Essex is evocative of his own naivete and that of the audience:

We stood on the Essex shore a mess of shingle,  
Some of us new and eager for a fight and others  
Not so sure but all of us both knowing and not knowing  
What lay ahead of us. (Greig 2010, 9)

Like the Boy Soldier, we are unaware of the surprises to come. Like him, we will soon learn that in Greig's Scotland "nothing is solid" (Greig 2010, 40); nothing is as we would expect it to be. The soldiers feel lost in the Scottish landscape. It is colder and wetter than anything they have ever known. The harshness and cruelty of the landscape are evident in the soldiers' complaints and their imagined letters home to their mothers. It is made apparent to the audience in the jagged stage that juts awkwardly into the theater. Set into the right hand corner of the auditorium, the stage is surrounded by an oval of seats. The audience, used to looking at a stage straight ahead of them, are required to crane their necks, swivel in their seats, and adopt an uncomfortable position. (At least, this is true for me, sitting in one of the highest seats with my legs forced into the aisle.) Like the soldiers, we are uncomfortable and in unfamiliar territory.

In newspaper reviews, *Dunsinane* is referred to as a sequel to *Macbeth* and analyzed in terms of its relationship to that play. And it is a sequel to *Macbeth* in the sense that the action begins in the closing moments of Shakespeare's play and tells the story from this point onwards. Yet, the play that we leave in the opening moments of *Dunsinane* is not the play we thought we knew. We have been misled. Shakespeare has misled us. At the end of *Macbeth*, we are certain of several things:

Macbeth and his wife are dead; Malcolm is king; Malcolm will be a wiser, fairer, and better king than his predecessor. In Greig's version of events, most of our suppositions turn out to be false. "It turns out," as Malcolm says, that there has been "a mistaken understanding" (Greig 2010, 29). Siward and his English army have been misled; "in a sense, they've been told what we know from Shakespeare" (Royal Shakespeare Company, "Interview with David Greig," 2009c). In a sense, we have been misled, too. This play is not only a sequel to *Macbeth*; it is a challenge. It asks its audience to question the power of those who write history and those who make it. It demands that we rethink the story from different points of view. These new angles on the play operate in two interconnecting ways. First, there is an increased focus from within drama on the lives of ordinary people, as opposed to the aristocracy depicted in *Macbeth*. The glimpses that Shakespeare offers us into this world through the characters of the Porter and the Old Man are, in Greig's play, turned into an extended commentary from the soldiers. It is their interpretation of events that is relayed to the audience. This in turn allows Greig to shape the audience's interpretation of both *Dunsinane* and its predecessor. We are asked to reconsider Shakespeare's status as cultural and historical authority and to see *Macbeth* as one version of events, which has been used to promote a particular kind of history. The English thus become an invading force rather than a source of salvation, and *Dunsinane* shows how the Scots react to what is, to all intents and purposes, an invasion of their land.

The invasion and manipulation of Scottish land begins in Birnam Wood. The young soldiers are struggling to become the forest that their commanding officer wants them to be. The humor in the scene arises from its resemblance to an amateur dramatics group searching for their characters' motivations. Physically, the soldiers' attempt to imitate the flora and fauna of the woodland raises laughter from the audience. However, there is a darker undertone to this transformation as the invading soldiers appropriate and manipulate the landscape they are conquering. The scene shifts to the castle of Dunsinane. A Scottish soldier speaks in hurried Gaelic to a red-haired woman, ushering her from the door. He tries to defend the castle, but is eventually killed by three English soldiers, who enter and check for enemies in language that seems to belong in a twenty-first-century war movie: "clear" (Greig 2010, 14). They are followed into the castle by Egham, the lovable rogue of this drama, who is currently in agony from the arrow in his shoulder. It is only after Siward has arrived, removed the arrow from Egham, and learned of his son's death that the red-haired woman reveals herself. Siward asks her for her name and her role in the castle:

Siward: What is your name?

Gruach: Gruach.

Siward: Gruach, what work do you do here in Dunsinane?

Gruach: Work?



Siward: What is your place here?

Gruach: My place here is Queen. (Greig 2010, 27)

From this moment on we know that our understanding of what this play is and what it means cannot be dictated by our reading of *Macbeth*. Like Siward, we are plunged into a world of misunderstandings and half-revealed truths that impinge on our conception of Shakespeare's play and interrupt any misconceptions that we have formed about Greig's. The play is a sequel, but it is a sequel to a play we don't know or, at least, do not fully understand. *Dunsinane* reveals to its audience the danger of reading history through one person's interpretation and accepting the conquerors' understanding of a conflict.

Once Gruach has revealed herself, the play begins to chart a course that could not have been predicted from Malcolm's final speech in *Macbeth*. The thanes and kinsmen whom Malcolm names as the first earls of Scotland turn out to be the heads of feuding clans, many of whom remain loyal to Gruach. Malcolm is a Scotland-hating, greedy, vengeful man who is willing to take bribes and slaughter enemies and friends alike. Scotland is not a country shaking off the yoke of tyranny, but a warring collection of fiefdoms determined to choose their own ruler. Malcolm's claim to the throne is disputed by Gruach. She has a son by her first marriage and claims that he is the true heir to the throne. Siward, charged with bringing peace to the country by the English king, is determined to reconcile the clans and cement Malcolm's position. He becomes Gruach's lover, but tries to persuade her to marry Malcolm. She consents, but on the wedding night soldiers bearing her colors attack the castle and rescue her. Siward begins a year-long quest to find her and her son and put an end to the struggles for the throne. The boy is eventually found and killed, but when Siward finds Gruach on an isolated island in the cruel Scottish winter, he discovers that she has a grandchild. Gruach's family's claim to the throne continues, and Siward's desire for certainty and completion cannot be realized.

Theatrically, *Dunsinane* feels like an RSC production. Silbert's directorial stamp seems to have been cast in the RSC mold. The play is an ensemble work punctuated by three memorable characters. The historical setting and the wartime narrative are reminiscent of many Shakespeare plays. The costumes are sumptuous, and the minimal set provides a flexible, but iconic backdrop to the action. The final scene takes place in the flurry of a snowstorm in which both actors and stage become covered in a white blanket of powder. Live music is provided by three musicians sitting off-stage with the audience. The music, a strange blend of contemporary rock and traditional folk, is accompanied by haunting melodic singing from Gruach's attendants. These flourishes of design and musical technique contribute to the production values and, ultimately, the audience's experience.

The moments when the play becomes truly an ensemble piece remain the most memorable — the wedding night ceildh which fills the stage with music, dancing, and singing being one example.

Unusually for twenty-first-century RSC new writing, *Dunsinane* has been a theatrical success. It has received glowing reviews from the majority of critics. "Thrilling," "crackling," "superb" (Mountford 2010, para. 1 of 8); "exciting" (Koenig 2010, para. 4 of 4); "intellectually sumptuous" (Ferguson 2010, para. 1 of 3); the hyperbole goes on. One critic even noted with surprise that she had enjoyed a night at the theater watching new writing produced by the RSC (Mountford 2010, para. 1 of 8). In terms of critical acclaim, this production was a success. What I am particularly interested in, though, is the production's independence from Shakespeare and its ability to stand outside of Shakespeare's work and aside from the RSC as a convincing and powerful piece of drama.

*Dunsinane's* connection to Shakespeare is overt in that it uses the same characters, setting, and initial narrative as *Macbeth*. However, the reflection of Shakespeare's work ends there. *Dunsinane* was a challenge to Shakespeare and a challenge to its audience. As I read the cast list in the bar before the production, I was baffled by the character Gruach's designation as "Queen." I thought, perhaps, she might be Malcolm's wife. I certainly didn't expect her to be Lady Macbeth. *Dunsinane* may not exactly reflect *Macbeth*, but its refraction of the play illuminates Shakespeare's role as a writer of history. Today, Shakespeare's narrative takes precedence over Holinshed's; we think of Banquo as the noble friend of Macbeth, not a co-conspirator. Greig's play suggests that we need to rethink our reading of *Macbeth* and reconsider where authority lies. While there is a long and complex tradition that argues for a reconsideration of Shakespeare's authority within the academy, *Dunsinane* constitutes an attempt to put this argument to new audiences through a different medium.

Often in the theater, adaptations or appropriations of Shakespeare's plays implicitly believe in or trade off Shakespeare's cultural authority. Plays such as Joe Calarco's *Shakespeare's R&J* (2003) and Malachi Bogdanov's *Macbeth Kill Bill Shakespeare* (2007) are examples of the process that Julie Sanders describes as "citation infer[ring] authority" (2006, 9). *Dunsinane*, on the other hand, works against this authority, implying that Shakespeare's version of the story is just that: another version, refraction, or transformation of the same historical event. The RSC values new writing because of the light it sheds on Shakespeare's plays. In this sense, Greig's production was hugely effective, disconcerting its audience in order to make them rethink their relationship with *Macbeth* and with Shakespeare as a history-maker.

*Dunsinane's* genre is hard to pin down. Although Siward is the closest Greig provides to a hero, he encourages the audience to shift allegiances constantly. At the beginning of the play,

Siward seems to represent the voice of reason in a chaotic world. Malcolm, insistent on revenge and vehemently political, could be co-opted into the role of villain. However, as Siward's relationship with Gruach alters from that of protector to lover and then to enemy, he seems to unravel. He becomes obsessed with chasing Gruach through the wilds of Scotland. He puts troops of men in danger in order to hunt down her son. When he does eventually find and kill the young boy, Siward no longer clearly resembles a war hero. Throughout the play, Siward continues to misunderstand the social and cultural context in which he finds himself. At the end, it is Malcolm who is the voice of reason. The poetry of his line — "You can no more force peace into existence than you can wander across the surface of the sea stamping the waves flat" (Greig 2010, 126) — seems to send ripples across the audience. It echoes through the centuries and is at once relevant to Siward's unrelenting quest for "definition" and George W. Bush's and Tony Blair's War on Terror.

Yet, Greig does not guide his audience's opinion. We are not told to agree with Malcolm, Siward, or Gruach. Instead, he exposes the weaknesses and follies of each character while allowing these to be tempered by their strengths. This is not anti-war protest theater. It is a play that subtly highlights the various trials and tragedies that a military occupation can bring to its generals, soldiers, and citizens. The audience, aware of contemporary echoes and without clear genre markers, is able to consider the play's issues for themselves. The ambiguity of the play's form allows for ambiguity in its reading of war. In *Macbeth*, a great man destroys his country by acting on desires that he knows are wrong. In *Dunsinane*, we watch the destruction of a country through the good intentions of another great man. Which man is ultimately a villain and which a tragic hero? *Dunsinane* may contain hints of an enduring Bradleyan reading of *Macbeth*, but the play is more complex than that and is certainly relevant to contemporary issues. It encourages the audience to reconsider their position on the issues surrounding war and its morality. Whether it fulfilled the RSC's objective to illuminate the contemporary in Shakespeare is another question, and in considering it, I begin to answer my own question about *Dunsinane*'s artistic independence.

*Dunsinane* is not an adaptation, rewriting, or restyling of *Macbeth*. It is, ostensibly, a sequel, but it does not rely on *Macbeth* for characterization or narrative thrust. It is the wild and untameable Scottish landscape that is most reminiscent of Shakespeare's play. In *Macbeth*, "nothing is / But what is not," and the natural world is disrupted by the strangeness of the supernatural (1.3.140-41).<sup>3</sup> *Macbeth*'s Scotland is a land of witches that "look not like th'inhabitants o th' earth / And yet are on't" (1.3.39-40), where the "earth hath bubbles as the water has" (1.3.77), and where, after Duncan's death, "dark night strangles the travelling lamp" of day (3.1.7). However, whereas Banquo and Macbeth encounter and take note of the weather that is at once both

"foul and fair" (1.3.36), *Dunsinane's* soldiers comment on the physical ground beneath them. The supernatural events of *Macbeth* become the actual, physical reality of *Dunsinane*. The play *Dunsinane* thus acquires independence as it develops, shifts, and moves away from *Macbeth*. As a play and a performance it offers far more to the audience than a simple continuation of Shakespeare's narrative. Its meditations on military occupation, psycho-geography, maternal love, and the ambiguity of conquest may be inspired by *Macbeth*, but a knowledge of that play is not a prerequisite to understanding Greig's *Dunsinane*.

Like the mutable and disconcerting Scottish landscape, from the outset Greig's play is not what it seems. This could suggest that it is an entirely independent aesthetic work that can exist outside of Shakespearean theater. And to some extent, this is true. However, to lose the connection between *Dunsinane* and *Macbeth* would be to lose a great part of what Greig's play is: a challenge to its audience and to its characters. It asks us to rethink the way in which the narrative of history is told to us and inspires us to question our own constructions of both the past and the present. We enter the theater with preconceived ideas of how a response or sequel to *Macbeth* should look. We have all mistakenly understood:

You look at the ground ahead of you and you guess  
 And you make a jump and suddenly you're up to your waist in mud,  
 You think this forest floor can take your weight,  
 You think over there's a lake,  
 But one's mud and the other's rock. (Greig 2010, 40)

As an RSC commission, this play can never be completely independent. It will always be viewed through a predetermined set of cultural values. However, by offering its audience the challenge of a sequel and suggesting that we may have been misled in our assumptions, Greig is able to produce an autonomous play in which we can use our knowledge of *Macbeth* to inform our reading of *Dunsinane* or, alternatively, use our knowledge of contemporary war-scapes — gained through a constant barrage of highly mediated images — to read "tenth-century [sic] Scotland." This production does not passively illuminate Shakespeare or confirm his universality because in Greig's work, there is a more active and equal relationship between sequel and predecessor. Like the strange Scottish landscape, this play does not do what we expect. Without a knowledge of *Macbeth* and a conception of the RSC's role in play-making, we lose the challenging nature of *Dunsinane*. What is significant about Greig's work is that it allows interpretation, from both sides: the relationship between *Macbeth* and *Dunsinane*, Greig and Shakespeare, is symbiotic. What *Dunsinane* is and what it is not is enriched by what we think *Macbeth* is, who we want the RSC to

be, and how we conceive of Shakespeare. Greig's illumination of Shakespeare is also a statement of *Dunsinane's* independence from him — an independence predicated on a continuing, if barely tangible, connection to the RSC and their house playwright.

### Notes

1. And I was not the only one — a friend made the same observation entirely independent of me.
2. The Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre.
3. All quotations from *Macbeth* are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare*, second edition (Shakespeare 2005).

### Permissions

Photos by Simon Annand. Copyright Royal Shakespeare Company.

## References

- Barba, Eugenio. 1995. *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*. Translated by Richard Fowler. London and New York: Routledge.
- Boal, Mark. 2009. *The Hurt Locker*. Director Kathryn Bigelow. Summit Entertainment.
- Bogdanov, Malachi, dir. 2007. *Macbeth Kill Bill Shakespeare*. South Hill Park Arts Centre and The Wales Theatre Company: UK Tour.
- Calarco, Joe, dir. 2003. *Shakespeare's R&J*. London: Methuen.
- Costa, Maddy. 2004. "Where have all the playwrights gone?" *Guardian*. 7 October. Available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2004/oct/07/rsc.theatre> [cited 20 December 2010].
- Greig, David, 2010. *Dunsinane*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Ferguson, Euan. 2010. "Dunsinane/RSC." *Observer*. 28 February. Available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2010/feb/28/dunsinane-hampstead-theatre-review> [cited 20 December 2010].
- Koenig, Rhoda. 2010. "Dunsinane, Hampstead Theatre, London." *Independent*. 23 February. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/dunsinane-hampstead-theatre-london-1907318.html> [cited 20 December 2010].
- Mountford, Fiona. 2010. "Thrilling Production of *Dunsinane*." *Evening Standard*. 19 February. Available online: <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/theatre/review-23807982-thrilling-production-of-dunsinane.do> [cited 20 December 2010].
- Paines Plough. 2010. Available online: <http://www.painesplough.com/about-us/introduction> [cited 31 December 2010].
- Purcell, Stephen. 2009. *Popular Shakespeare: Simulation and Subversion on the Modern Stage*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Royal Shakespeare Company. 2009a. *London Season 2009-2010*. Stratford-upon-Avon: RSC.
- Royal Shakespeare Company. 2009b. "New Writing at the RSC." Available online: <https://www.rsc.org.uk/supportthesc/6674.aspx> [link disabled 31 December 2010].
- Royal Shakespeare Company. 2009c. "Interview with David Greig." Series of video interviews. Available online: <http://www.rsc.org.uk/whatson/9554.aspx> [link disabled 31 December 2010].
- Sanders, Julie. 2006. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. London: Routledge.
- Shakespeare, William. 2005. *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Edited by John Jowett et al. Second edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Silbert, Roxana. 2010. "The Feature." *Official London Theatre Guide*. 15 February. Available online: <http://www.officiallondontheatre.co.uk/news/the-feature/view/item109619/Exclusive%253A-Roxana-Silbert-on-the-RSCs-commitment-to-new-writing/> [cited 20 December 2010].
- Weimann, Robert. 1978. *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*. Translated by Robert Schwartz. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.