

Who'd have guessed Polanski had so much blood in him

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There have been 16 versions of Shakespeare's tragedy, **Macbeth**, adapted for the screen. Of these, Roman Polanski's uniquely graphic and visceral interpretation, some would say, a masterpiece, will certainly prove to be the most memorable of all time.

For this **Macbeth** is as much Polanski's as it is Shakespeare's. The difference is that it is told from Macbeth's point of view. This is not a noble tragic Macbeth, but like so many modern day thugs, a person propelled by fear, ambition and stupidity.

Shakespeare's **Macbeth** is the story of a medieval Scottish Highland general in King Duncan's army whose ambition spirals out of control. A trio of witches he encounters after successfully routing an invading army, predict that he will become Thane of Cawdor and eventually King of Scotland.

Macbeth goes into a brooding sleepless reverie in his tent that night. With the announcement at dawn, that as a reward from King Duncan for his victory in battle, he will become Thane of Cawdor he immediately begins to plot the murder of the king with the help of his wife, Lady Macbeth.

Shakespeare's play is based on the tenet of the "tragic flaw" – an innate weakness within a person, a moral failing that brings about his ultimate downfall. The tragically flawed hero is neither eminently good nor bad, yet he is morally responsible for his misfortune.

It's a principle, one that is at the core of classical tragedies since time immemorial, from which Polanski deviates. His Macbeth is a monstrous character, a treacherous tyrant who plots and schemes and murders in his lust for the crown.

Macbeth's boundless ambition is matched by Lady Macbeth, driven by the desire for power and position. Unlike Shakespeare's couple, they are not an established equivalent of a middle class couple, but young social climbers.

The Satanic and possession have never been far from Polanski's complex feelings. A strong fascination with the dark, surreal side of humanity as well as psychological personal horror (*Repulsion*) and the occult (*Rosemary's Baby*) dominate his previous films.

The brooding 11th century Scottish moors (shot on location in Wales during four weeks of endless bad weather) are dark, cold, wet and windswept, a fitting setting for this Gothic universe inextricably linked with human darkness and perversion. It is a chilling Macbeth.

Polanski's witches do not dance around a cauldron. Instead they lead Macbeth into a mouldering dank cave where withered, deformed and syphilitic old hags cackle over a brew into which they drop specimens of everything vile imaginable.

It is impossible to disassociate the brutality of the film from Polanski's own life. He barely escaped the Krakow ghetto and his mother was killed at Auschwitz. He was raised in dreary post war Poland yet still managed to create some remarkably brilliant art films.

He married Sharon Tate, the star of his horror film parody, *The Fearless Vampire Killers*. *Rosemary's Baby* followed.

While in pre-production overseas for another film he learned that the heavily pregnant Tate, along with three of his friends, were slaughtered by cult leader Charles Manson who manipulated his followers to murder on his behalf.

The graphic adaption of **Macbeth** is Polanski's first film which he began working on a few scant months after the massacre.

By revelling in the horrifying screams, the only too real gashes, the wide-eyed horror of the victims, the ripped blood-soaked clothing and splattered walls, Polanski seems to have torn away a part of his subconscious and hurled it into his work. His characters are Manson like – ignorant, brutal cutthroats driven by lust and violence.

Are the bloody, gruesome slayings, first of King Duncan by Macbeth, then of nobleman Macduff's wife, children and servants, a cathartic exorcism for Polanski? Is the sorrowing Macduff who receives the tragic news a reflection of Polanski himself?

I had a chance to ask him when he visited Hong Kong to promote his next film, "Chinatown." His answer was a little cryptic, a little flippant. "Exorcise, exercise, are they really different?" he mused. "It's difficult to talk about." He then changed the subject.

Macbeth in his final soliloquy, upon hearing of his wife's death says of life that it is "a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing." Life is devoid of meaning, filled with conspiracy and struggle, "but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more."

Polanski's horrifying tale of ambition, murder, revenge, fate, madness and guilt is indeed an idiot's tale, grippingly told from the idiot's (Macbeth) point of view, full of sound and overwhelming fury that in the end signifies nothing. Or perhaps something deeply personal on the part of the film maker. We will never know.