

YorkShakes 2015 Review: Two Shakespeare Heroines

As York's International Shakespeare Festival opens, [Lily Papworth](#) reviews the very first production of the week: Two Shakespeare Heroines

Saturday 9 May 2015



Image provided by York Theatre Royal

Venue: De Grey Rooms Ballroom, York Theatre Royal

Yesterday evening, York's very first International Shakespeare Festival opened, marking the beginning of just over one jam-packed week of Shakespeare across York. To celebrate this occasion, *Two Shakespeare Heroines* was performed by the highly acclaimed Aki Isoda – a production I had tipped as one to watch. Performing as both Lady Macbeth and Ophelia, Isoda presented her interpretation of Western as well as Japanese theatre, demonstrating to the audience what exactly the next week of Shakespeare has in-store. Despite the Western portrayal of *Macbeth* not really matching the beauty and power of the Japanese *Hamlet*, the overall evening was still very unique and one that has really excited me for the festival.

Isoda as Lady Macbeth

★★★★☆

The way in which Isoda chose to perform *Macbeth* was intriguing, as only the female characters and their respective dialogue was used to tell the infamously tragic story. The piece was opened by the three witches who, dressed in painted black gowns, attempted to give a more contemporary feel to their

characters. This initially surprised me, as I had expected both performances to be solo endeavours on Isoda's part.

The three, unfortunately, did not deliver a spectacular performance, their portrayals being somewhat melodramatic at times. The stereotypically frail and shaky voices alongside the squealing cackles of the witches lacked power, and left these significant characters without distinction. This was not helped by the music choice (a little more 'Haunted House' than *Macbeth*), as it resulted in the trio seeming a more comical than perhaps planned.

The performance, as a whole, was a lot less sinister than what would be expected of *Macbeth*. Even Isoda's delivery of Lady Macbeth's dialogue lacked fire and passion. Speaking Japanese, Isoda's vocal intonation did not seem express to the emotions typically associated with Lady Macbeth – anger, hunger, and ruthlessness – leaving her character a little lacklustre. Although her performance was engaging, it did at times leave me a little disappointed.

Evidently, Isoda's *Macbeth* was an attempt at something rather alternative. However, if something out-of-the-ordinary is attempted, I feel that 110% should be given in the delivery in order to achieve the desired effect. Unfortunately, this performance felt more 80% than 110%, and so failed to impress me as much as the second performance did.

Isoda as Ophelia

★★★☆☆

Sitting down for the second half, I was a little hesitant. However, once the performance started, I realised that this was what I had been hoping for. Performed in typical Kabuki fashion, Isoda's Ophelia was beautiful.

Despite the changes in Acts (of which there were three) and the related costume changes (I adored them all), this performance was simplistic and far more enthralling than its Western counterpart. Performed almost entirely in Japanese, it was hard to draw attention away from Isoda's performance. Of course, there were subtitles shown to help the audience's understanding, however I often found myself ignoring the subtitles completely: the performance was poignant enough without the words.

Not only were Isoda's monologues enchanting, but the scene changes between Acts seemed to be an art form of their own. The stylised manner really reflected the precision and finesse of the entire performance, allowing the production to flow seamlessly and maintaining the audience's attention.

Overall, Isoda's Ophelia was far more passionate than her Lady Macbeth. Her performance proved to the audience that it is not just the words that make Shakespeare's work so enduring: it is the ability of those words to influence an actor and allow them to convey meaning with such poignancy that understanding of the text itself is not required. Most certainly the highlight of my evening and a fantastic way to start the festival.



Image: James Hostford



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