

Finding *Beauty* in darkness



David Mead talks to **Mark Bruce** about his new *Macbeth*.

Photographs by **Nicole Guarino**

“**O**ver the last few years, I’ve been through a period of recognising fundamental works that have had a really strong influence on me,” says choreographer Mark Bruce. “I did *Macbeth* at school, and it’s never left me. You realise it’s everywhere; in other stories, very real and always relevant. It conjured up such a powerful world in my head. When things like that won’t leave me alone, I seem to come to some point when I want to realise

them and communicate them.”

Explaining his thinking behind his new dance version of *Macbeth*, Bruce says he has remained as true as he can to Shakespeare’s narrative and characters while bringing his own thoughts to the story. “I really wanted to take the audience into Macbeth’s mind, to show what is going on inside him, both in his imagination and emotionally with his subsequent descent into madness. That, and to create a world where the supernatural is always present and, in a very interesting and surreal way, is accepted as part of that world. It’s just right for dance theatre, I think.”

Bruce grew up with the dance theatre of Rambert during the 1970s and early

1980s, on films and graphic novels. *Macbeth* promises to be typical of his style, as much as he has one, in that it involves taking a story and layering it with imagery, movement and music. Narrative has gone in and out of fashion in dance, but it’s not as easy to conquer as people might think, says Bruce. “People need to understand that there aren’t any rules about how to interpret it. It can deliver an experience, touch you emotionally and send you into your dreams, as well as tell the story. If you are going to work with it, you need to know a lot about theatre.”

Dance theatre adaptations are about finding a balance between the narrative, the words and your own imagination, Bruce believes. Narrative



is important because it's the thread that guides people along the journey, he says, but sometimes it is fine to let go of it and dig deeper. "I try to tell the story of *Macbeth* as clearly as I possibly can, but I'm equally looking to take people into their own subconscious, help them use their imagination and allow them to make their own decisions about things."

Bruce accepts that putting the words of a classic novel or play to one side can be problematic for some, but while acknowledging that Shakespeare's text is important, he feels that words can be quite misleading. "You often think they are a clear form of communication but when we think

we reach their meaning, all sorts of trouble can surface. I've learned so much from actors, and the way they deliver lines can change the whole meaning behind what they are saying. I've taken a lot from that process and put that into what I'm doing.

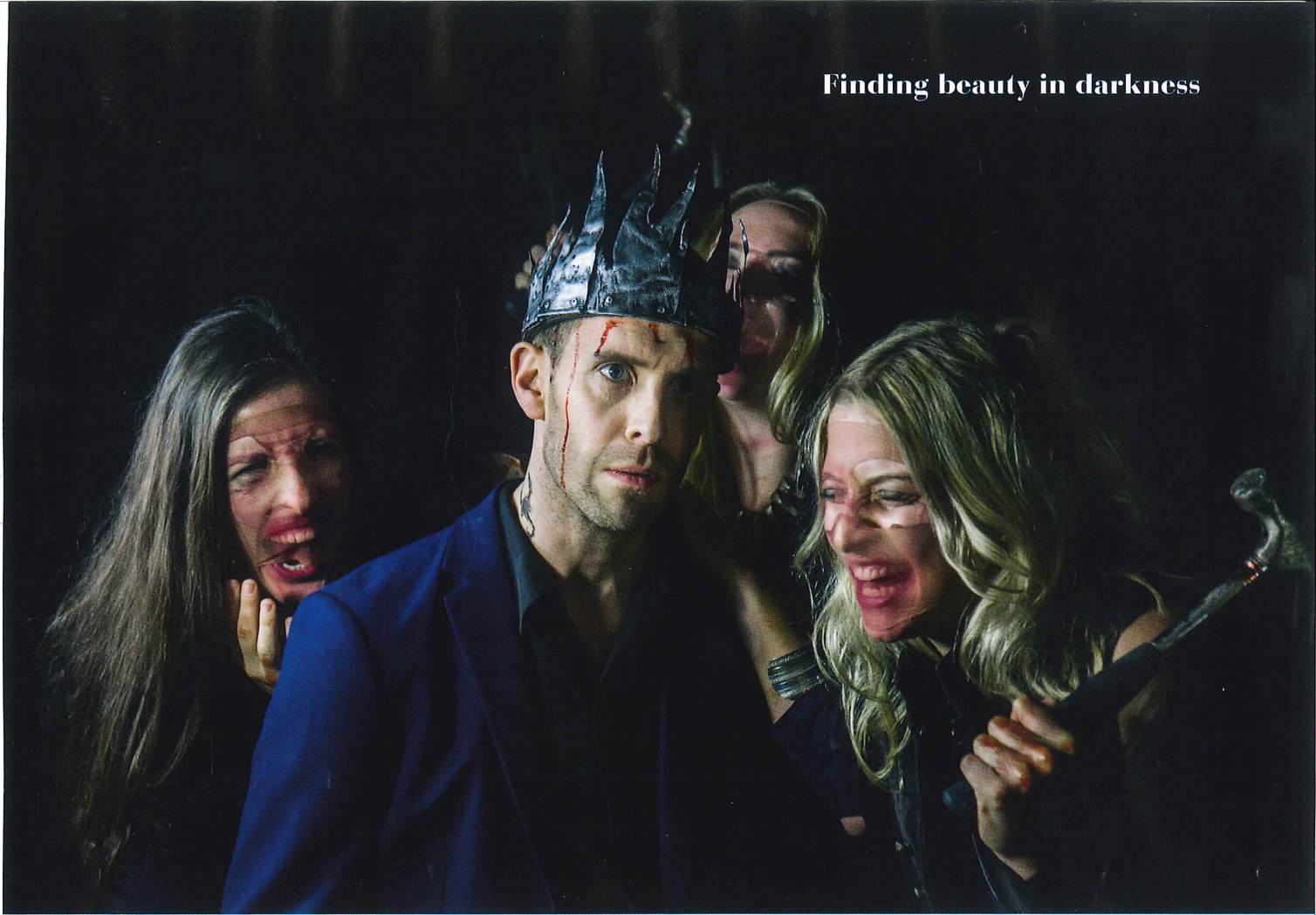
"The thing about dance theatre, sound and vision, is that you can cut through people very quickly, and really get underneath your subject matter, go in different directions and go deeper into people's subconscious. I think the subject matter in *Macbeth* certainly has the potential to go deeper than the words can."

Bruce explains that when adapting a book or play for dance, he first writes a treatment for it, not unlike

Opposite: Dancers of Mark Bruce Company as the Three Witches in *Macbeth*. Above: Jonathan Goddard as Macbeth and Eleanor Duval as Lady Macbeth.

a screenplay. "I always pare the plot down. I don't think dance is the medium to tell complicated stories." This time, that only took a month. "*Macbeth* is a play. It's structured very well already, although you still have to make certain decisions about it." Indeed, he admits to being quite ruthless, taking out sections that didn't interest him or that never really worked for him, such as the humour. "The play has a relentless pace, and I wanted to keep the tension up," he says.

He has aimed to set out a very human tale, to present *Macbeth* ➤



and Lady Macbeth as people who, goaded by their inner demons, "make decisions almost before they've had time to process them. Before they can control themselves, they've set everything in motion. It's like a spiral, like something you watch yourself do in a nightmare. Part of you is screaming 'what are you doing?' but before you know it, you've done it and unravelled a terrible situation."

Dancing the lead roles are Jonathan Goddard and Eleanor Duval, a perfect pairing, thinks Bruce. "They have a presence, an instinct and a timing. They also look the part. They bring so much with them when they walk into the room. They are able to tap into the darkness in the characters although I very much do paint on them, especially to start with. I make all the steps but then they are free to play with them and we grow it together."

Among the other characters, Bruce has enhanced the role of the witches. "They have become a little bit chorus-like in that they show many different sides of us, from almost an image of angels to some kind of abomination that crawls out. A big change is that I've made Duncan's son a daughter. I think it makes more sense in this

day and age that it might not be presumed she would succeed him."

Helping Bruce find beauty in the horrific story is the music of Arvo Pärt. "I've always wanted to go through his catalogue properly. It's a momentous task. I happened to finally be doing so while also thinking about the piece but, at the same time, I think there was a sort of intuition that said now was the time to really listen to his music. I feel it touches something profound that ties in with the characters and the fundamental things that they're dealing with."

The making of *Macbeth* has been smoothed enormously by Bruce's new studio and office space in Frome, which the company moved into last year. An empty industrial unit, the choreographer was able to start with a blank canvas. "It's space we've designed, so it's been set up with everybody's needs in mind. It's really changed our lives. I think people don't realise the conditions many independent companies work in. We made *The Odyssey* in a cold church hall with a very hard floor and *Dracula* in a primary school during the holidays. We've been working in

Jonathan Goddard as Macbeth with dancers of Mark Bruce Company as the Three Witches in *Macbeth*.

places like that for many years, always dreaming about having warmth, a sprung floor and storage. To finally have them is incredible. It can only help the work and everyone's health, as well as solving many practicalities.

"*Macbeth* is a very carefully made production; very layered and hopefully very sensitive," says Bruce. Helping him bring it to the stage are the same creative team he worked with on *Dracula* and *The Odyssey*, with lighting by Guy Hoare, set by Phil Eddolls and costumes by Dorothee Brodrück. Not overtly Scottish, Bruce promises a work for today, somewhere between history, myth and modern tale; a story that crosses the centuries with imagery that is quite cinematic. Needless to say, audiences should expect something dark too. "Well, it has to be, doesn't it," he adds with a smile. "Supernatural – all those things. But it should also be beautiful." ■

Mark Bruce Company's *Macbeth* is now on tour. See Calendar or visit markbrucecompany.com.