

Manual Cinema's "The 4th Witch" is pure magic

by Ally Watkinson

June 6, 2025

<https://charlestoncitypaper.com/2025/06/06/manual-cinemas-the-4th-witch-is-pure-magic/>



Provided

To quote "Macbeth," "Blood will have blood." Except nobody says that quote — or anything else — in "The 4th Witch," Manual Cinema's exhilarating new adaptation of the Scottish play.

Though the idea of a Shakespeare play devoid of spoken dialogue may be difficult for die-hard bardologists, "The 4th Witch" doesn't need words, words, words.

Part *Phantom Thread*, part *Matilda*, part Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, it's a devilish, delicious delight on its own visually sumptuous terms.

Something old, something new

The play opens in the same way as its predecessor, asking (via text on screen), "When shall we three meet again?" Cut to a war-ravaged French village where a young girl and her parents prepare dinner — until a bomb drops on their home. The girl, safe in the basement, survives. In the remnants of the house, a decorated soldier by the name of Macbeth receives a new medal while his bird companion chases the girl into Birnam Wood. There, she's taken in by a magical old woman, setting her on a course for revenge.

To understand the production, the conventions of a Manual Cinema show must first be understood. As described on its website, the Chicago-based theater company “combines handmade shadow puppetry, cinematic techniques, and innovative sound and music to create immersive stories for stage and screen.” Audience members watch the puppeteers at work, moving slides on old-school projectors and running around to use their silhouettes as puppets. On the other side of the stage, musicians perform the score live. The piece feels worthy of repeat viewings in order to observe every little detail.

Calling “The 4th Witch” a retelling does not accurately encapsulate what it is. Yes, it is inspired by “Macbeth.” But it feels entirely new. What remains faithful is the imagery. “The 4th Witch” heavily relies on daggers and bloody hands, which could have easily felt lazy but does not. Each moment builds onto the girl’s justified anger over her family’s death, and the “aha” moments of recognizing a reference fade with repetition. Toward the end, a clever twist on a later moment in the source material made audience members audibly react.

The biggest difference between “The 4th Witch” and its source material is perhaps the ending. Without giving too much away, Manual Cinema’s version does not interpret the corruption of power the same way Shakespeare does. Though the new ending is satisfying, certain character arcs did not feel complete.

Design details

Watching the production’s five puppeteers (Lizi Breit, Leah Casey, Sarah Fornace, Julia Miller and Jeffrey Paschal) work is an art in itself. The precision and accuracy required for a piece like this are immense, and they deserve kudos for making magic happen in front of an audience.

Every design element, from the puppets to the lighting, perfectly contributed to the overall vision of the production. (Some of its World War II visuals serve as a callback to Manual Cinema’s 2017 Emmy-winning documentary short *The Forger*, set in Nazi-occupied France.) The score by composers and sound designers Ben Kauffman and Kyle Vegter was exquisitely haunting, performed by Lucy Little, Lia Kohl and Alicia Walter. With any luck, it will be recorded so that it can be enjoyed by a wider audience.

Manual Cinema’s “The 4th Witch” represents what Spoleto Festival USA does best: shining a light on art that exists outside of the box. This is a theater experience unlike anything else. Fly, don’t walk, to see this show.

IF YOU WANT TO GO: [“The 4th Witch”](#) will be performed at the Emmett Robinson Theatre at the College of Charleston at 6 p.m. June 6; 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. June 7; and 3 p.m. June 8.