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A Tale Told by an Idiot

By PHIL DAVIS
Special to The Times

"Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee."

—**Macbeth**

"Is this a dagger which I see before me, or a pizza? Mmmm, pizzaaa."

—**MacHomer**

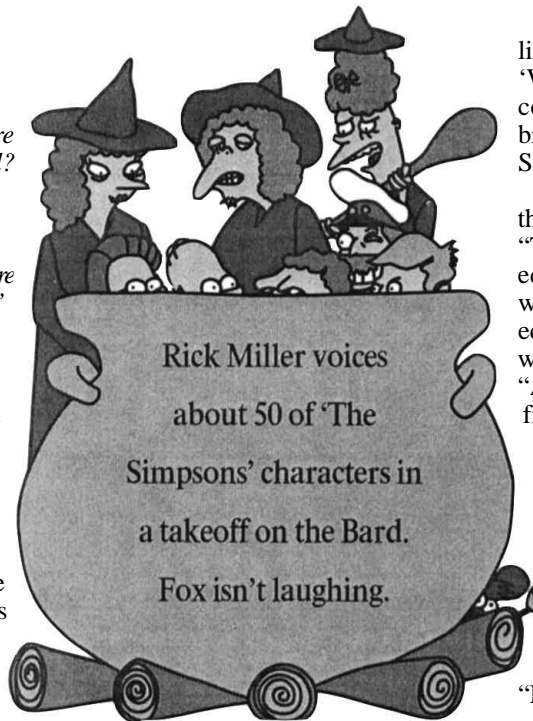
Welcome to the warped world of Rick Miller, where the dysfunctional humor of television's animated sitcom "The Simpsons" merges with the bloody verse of Shakespeare's "Macbeth." The result is "MacHomer," Miller's somewhat schizophrenic reading of the Scottish play in the voices of more than 50 "Simpsons" characters.

"It's a very loose interpretation of 'Macbeth,' obviously, but it's also pretty strict to the text," Miller said. "Most of the words are Shakespeare's." Bumbling Homer as murderous Macbeth?

Miller admits it's a bit of a stretch, but the two characters do share some traits. Macbeth, for example, invites his doom with, "Lay on Macduff, and damned be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough!'"

Meanwhile, Homer's philosophy about his beloved Duff beer—"Bring on the Duff, and damned be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough!'"—frequently gets him in trouble down at the nuclear plant. In "MacHomer," the thoughts merge as town drunk Barney, speaking as Macduff, knocks Homer's block off with a beer mug.

"The only drawback is he has to be dumber than Macbeth is usually played," said Miller, a Canadian actor and playwright. "It's this guy with this



huge ambition and inability to see beyond the actual act to the consequences, which is very Homer."

Appropriately, Miller is bringing his one-man show to the Irvine Barclay Theatre on April Fool's Day. This isn't the first time Homer has laid waste to Shakespeare. In season four's "Treehouse of Horror III," Homer guns down historical zombies, including the Bard: "Show's over Shakespeare!"

Scholars say both "The Simpsons" and "MacHomer" continue Shakespeare's proud tradition of poking fun at popular culture.

"I doubt that much of the tragedy of 'Macbeth' survives when it's done in the voices of the Simpsons," said Paul Cantor, a University of Virginia English professor who has written three books on the Bard. "But the Simpsons comedy has many Shakespearean elements. There's a

line in 'Much Ado About Nothing,' 'What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light.' That line is very Simpsonian."

Taking it a little deeper, Cantor said the Itchy and Scratchy cartoons on "The Simpsons" are the animated equivalent of Shakespeare's play within a play. Shakespeare used "stilted, rhetorical" verse to set productions woven into the plots of "Hamlet" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" apart from the main production. Cantor said Itchy and Scratchy use "pure, mindless violence" to the same effect.

Megan Lloyd, an assistant professor of English at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., said Miller clearly has miscast Homer as Macbeth. Homer's closest Shakespearean kin would be Dogberry, the bumbling lawman in "Much Ado About Nothing."

But, she said, "MacHomer" is still hilarious.

"I saw it at a Shakespeare conference," she said. "The room was full of Shakespearians and we were all laughing riotously. It's funny if you're a fan of 'The Simpsons.' It's also funny if you are a fan of Shakespeare. It's wonderful and hilarious on a number of levels."

To the untrained ear, Miller's rapid litany of character voices in Shakespearean dialect can be difficult.

"Sometimes I had a little trouble following what the guy was saying," said Darrel Jones, a fan from Santa Rosa who frequently contributes to The Simpsons Archive, an Internet clearinghouse for all things Simpson (<http://www.snpp.com>).

The strain of doing roughly 50 cartoon voices in just over an hour led Miller to make a few strange casting decisions. He said Bart and Lisa get only minor roles "because they're the hardest voices to do." And instead

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of the obvious choice of Selma and Patty—Marge’s “weird sisters”—as Macbeth’s famous witches, also known as “the weird sisters,” Selma and Patty get only a cameo in “MacHomer.”

SHOW TIMES

“MacHomer,” Irvine Barclay Theatre, 4242 Campus Drive. \$15 and \$20. 3 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. (949) 854-4646. Both shows are sold out, but the Barclay has added a four-performance return engagement Aug. 25-26. Ticket prices will increase to \$16 to \$22 for the August shows, but those buying in advance by Sunday will get a discount and pay the April 1 rate of \$15 to \$20. (949) 854-4646.

Miller chose Moe the Bartender, Principal Skinner and salty Capt. McCallister to speak the lines of the three main witches. Less toil, less trouble. “Ultimately, it has to be what voices I can do for the longest time and who sounds funniest doing what lines,” Miller said.

As if the Simpsons voices weren’t enough, Miller closes the show with a rendition of Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” sung by “the most annoying voices in the music industry,” including Neil Diamond, Meatloaf and Bob Dylan.

“I kind of end on a fun note instead of having a guy get his head chopped off and then goodbye,” Miller said.

“MacHomer” started as a cast party joke on a production of “Macbeth.” Miller was playing a bit part as Murderer No. 2, a role that gave him plenty of time to scheme. He’d been imitating Simpsons voices for fun and started casting them in what actors superstitiously call “the Scottish play.”

“I never thought it would become a show in itself, but it did,” Miller said. He started out performing at small fringe theater festivals in 1995. He set up the show himself, working the lights and displaying his own paintings of Simpsons characters in medieval garb. As the show grew in popularity, he added more lights and fog until it became a true multimedia experience, not “one guy on a stage doing lines.”

The show was a big hit at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland, where



MICHAEL COOPER

Playing Homer Simpson playing Macbeth, Rick Miller brings his one-man show “MacHomer” to Irvine.

he met the cast of “The Simpsons” and creator Matt Groening. Miller said they were impressed.

But lawyers for Fox, who are notoriously protective of the copyrighted voices and images of Simpsons characters, were not amused. Miller is still negotiating with Fox for official permission to do the show.

“We’re trying to work with him, but technically he’s doing something we don’t authorize,” said Fox spokeswoman Victoria Coffman. “Fox owns those voices. Our actors can’t even go out and do commercials with those

voices.”

Miller said “MacHomer” is his homage to The Simpsons. “It’s fun. It’s silly as hell, but it really is a tribute to both The Simpsons and Shakespeare,” he said. “It’s certainly not meant to change your life, but it’s meant as an appreciation of satire in general. It’s spoken to a lot of people, so I hope I can keep doing it for a while.”