

# All Hail MacBird... ?

By John Lahr

MacBird: . . . [Ominously] "Stars hide thy fires  
Let no light see my black and deep desires."

— *MacBird*, I, iii

*MacBird* is a satire that picks up the political cudgel so often ignored in American humor and goes straight for the jugular vein of contemporary politics: the Johnson-Kennedy power struggle. The play is unabashedly offensive; and its author has every intention of haunting the audience, like a bad smell.

If the vehicle is different, so too are the people connected with it. Barbara Garson, the author, is an unlikely satirist. A small, diminutive woman who wears her hair in a bun and has the hard-water

sheen of a Midwestern home economics student, she hardly looks dyspeptic enough to write a play which the *Village Voice* has praised for "a Swiftean dimension."

During the parties to raise money for the play, she sits at the back of the audience mouthing the words which have been reprinted in such establishment publications as *Ramparts*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *New York Times*. Her husband and publisher, Marvin Garson, sits smiling and rolling his own cigarettes

while the producer explains why the play is not libelous and how to invest as a *silent* partner.

*MacBird* uses an Elizabethan framework to skewer contemporary figures, especially Lyndon Johnson. No politician in this century has exhibited such a Renaissance fascination with power and its use. No one has come closer to mastering that fine art of manipulation than Johnson, whose courtly manner has become known as "The Johnson Treatment" and whose labyrinth of alliances, "The Johnson Network," are as carefully chosen as an Elizabethan courtier's. The political ideas in the play have captured the imagination of a large, disenfranchised segment of the population

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# MacBird

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at the expense of a close examination of the text.

Although its backers see *MacBird* as an important contribution to American theater, none of the pre-production kudos which has been heaped on the play deals with its *dramatic* dimension. What will be put on stage at the Village Gate is an adaptation of Mrs. Garson's fundamentally *literary* idea.

The play which people have been lauding as "the most important parody of the post-war period" is a satire whose humor and force come from the printed word, whose dramatic potential Mrs. Garson's instincts cannot control as ingeniously as she does the words. Mrs. Garson's fun is always conscious of a reader. One witch says:

*"But if you skip and read a  
later page  
We take the final bow upon  
this stage . . ."*

Shakespeare's plays are conscious of the business of playing to an audience and the dynamics of the stage; Mrs. Garson's instincts are based on a literary eye, which is witty but which was never intended to be synchronized for the demands of the stage.

Unlike Swift, who couched his hatred in a parody of the enemy's style and ideas, and then went on to explode them (*A Tale of a Tub* and *A Modest Proposal*), Mrs. Garson wants fireworks before truth. She lacks anything approaching Swift's corruscating logic or the inventiveness necessary for a stage satirist. This limitation is crucial to stage humor. The difficulty with parody on stage is precisely that it is a literary genre, and it takes a rich and complicated imagination to render its good spirits for an audience.

*Beyond the Fringe* lampooned the pomp, structure, and rhetoric of Shakespeare's historical plays (O, saucy Worcester!). The effectiveness of this comic gem came out of a love and understanding of Shakespeare. Important to the laughter was the simple fact that the sketch lasted only twenty minutes. *MacBird* will probably run closer to an hour and a half.

Once we have seen Lyndon Johnson in a kilt and had an inkling of the fractured Shakespearean diction, *MacBird* as a stage offering seems in great danger of palling. The random sampling of Shakespearean misquotes is amusing, but shallow. This ingenious device is effective when it parallels *Macbeth*, but becomes merely decorative and cerebral when it strays to *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*. Mrs. Garson can get a good laugh with her sleights of hand, but it is nothing like the inspired lunacy of the *Beyond the Fringe* take-off.

**"MacBird shall never, never  
be undone**

**Till burning wood doth come  
to Washington."**

The excited, grapeshot language and situation in this play will not work as easily on stage as on the printed page. Many of the political characterizations are set down with such pallid strokes of color that they become irrelevant, and worse, predictable. Laughter on stage is a communal activity — it must be built steadily for satire to gain momentum and overwhelm the audience. The mediocrity of some of the material stymies any force of the play and saps it of much of its vinegar. The problem with *MacBird* as satire is not, as its detractors claim, that it is "outrageous," but that it is not

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outrageous enough. Ted Kennedy as Ted O'Dunc is dispatched in symptomatic cartoon fashion.

Ted: *Gee, that's keen (counting on his fingers)*

*So let's see . . . That means Jack in '60 and '64*

*Then Bobby in '68 and '72, then me in . . . what*

*would that make it . . . '76 and 80 . . . ."*

Occasionally, history is funnier than satire. Mrs. Garson is never so ridiculous as the actual confusion which surrounded the Johnson nomination for Vice-President. She tends to isolate traits of mind and serve them up as reality. Adlai Stevenson, Egg of Head; Wayne Morse, Wayne of Morse; Earl Warren; Earl of Warren are drawn with witty but adolescent ease which never hints at their complexity.

Mrs. Garson's language also falls short of the mark. She has the unfortunate dramatic penchant for sounding like a satirist but expressing herself like a limerick writer. Lines which may have an appeal on the written page become totally unmemorable when spoken on stage. One passage Robert Brustein quoted in a *New York Times* article for its searing power is a fine example of turgid bathos. A witch drones —

*"Sizzling skin of napalmed child*

*Roasted eyeballs, sweet and mild*

*Now we add a fiery chunk  
From a burning Buddhist monk."*

The rhymes are so forced and easy that they are laughable in comparison to the genuine disgust she feels and the seriousness of her subject.

Most of the action in *MacBird* happens off-stage. The Egg of Head and Ken O'Dunc are killed in the wings, while described in detail to the audience. This is a great problem for a medium whose trump card is gesture and action. *MacBird* poses a difficult dramatic problem. Can a play which parodies people in the public eye be funny when the situations are barely disguised? Can comedy, which Henri Bergson has termed "the momentary anaesthesia of the heart," be retained without the objectivity usually necessary for

laughter?

Mrs. Garson and those involved with the play disclaim that it implies that Johnson abetted Kennedy's assassination. Their argument is two-fold: 1) that the work is a vision, an imaginative fabrication. (This is patently not true since the play barely disguises situations and personalities.) 2) that *MacBird* is equally devastating to other people in this struggle for power including Bobby Kennedy, Adlai Stevenson, and LBJ. This is true, but begs the question. The answers they give may stand up in a court of law, but will not sustain the delicate balance of the stage which demands motivation for humor and drama.

Because the play has the structure of *Macbeth*, a dramatic situation which hinges on the political killing of Duncan, whether anything is actually said or done on stage, the implications are drawn from the structure of the story itself.

If there is no relation between *MacBird* and the political death of Ken O'Dunc, then the framework of the play is ludicrous and unnecessary. What use is the

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stage lampoon of Lady Macbeth's famous letter, the banquet scene, or any other part of the Shakespearean paraphernalia? There is a confusion and self-deception at the core of the play. The text as well as external factors (Mr. Garson worked for Mark Lane; "Grassy Knoll Press," Garson's company which published the play, is named for a spot near the Kennedy assassination) tell us that Mrs. Garson has her hunches and is stating them in no uncertain terms. What evolves on stage is a satire which smacks of the kind of hypocrisy it vilifies so adamantly. What begins as a satire on the falsifying power of rhetoric ends up by becoming just that.

The excellence of satire lies in the acuteness and responsibility of its perception. Mrs. Garson wants to hold the mirror up to Nature and question society — admirable goals for any medium. The democracy which allows a play like *MacBird* to be put on in spite of its innuendoes, should also protect an audience and public figures (no matter how suspect) from easy ambiguity. Mrs. Garson knows what she's saying, and the disclaimer of her prologue cannot erase the impact of her suggestion from the stage.

*MacBird* is faced with the problem of living up to its reviews even before it has been put on stage. It will have many problems, although the "burning wood of Washington" is always more interesting than Camelot. In a satire which is virtually a one-joke situation, the young director, Roy Levine, must find a variety and flexibility on stage which the play lacks in print. He must discover a way of decking out the words with more interest and relevance than their ho-hum rhythms imply.

*MacBird* has achieved its reputation by default rather than excellence (What are the other important post-war parodies?). It is an ingenious play, but not brilliant; witty but hardly illuminating in its laughter. If it can be made ready for an audience, it will be a step, club-footed and faltering, toward a more literate theater. If, on the other hand, it indulges in its disgust, like a collegiate rally, it will be much less than an interesting evening. It will become, yet again, *amateur night in the Village*.

("MacBird" opens at the Village Gate on February 8th.)