



The Wisdom of MacBird

By MURRAY KEMPTON

"MacBird" did not seem like much in the reading, but, in the playing, it turns out a marvelous surprise. Barbara Garson may have been led to it by an unattractive and rather unhealthy idea, but, once there, she has escaped to that wildly and vulgarly comic realm whose compass is description and not propaganda.

Her audience and herself alike might have been better off if she had set her play after the assassination; it is not a moment suited to her strength, which is in the mocking imagination; alienated in all other things, she is as incapable as the rest of us of purging herself of affection for President Kennedy. The result is a very queasy first act; but once that is past—and it is a very high hurdle indeed—the rest is altogether brilliant.

Its special brilliance is in the figure of Lyndon B. Johnson. Mrs. Garson would like to hate Mr. Johnson, we are sure, but, like all great characters, he escapes from his creator. Stacey Keach makes him enormous, ridiculous and somehow pathetic, full most of all of undirected energy and self-pity.

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A while ago, Mary McCarthy wrote an essay on "Macbeth" which, crudely summarized, is remembered as an argument that it is best understood as a play about the American corporation wife. The Macbeths, thought about this way, are quite a sympathetic couple. NASA's Apollo report, with its appalling roster of petty examples of indifferences to craftsmanship, is an illustration both of the nature of social enterprise in America and of Mrs. Garson's essential theme, which I take to be the consumption of most public men by the need for command for no purpose but to have it.

Our public men, like our business men, are engaged in distribution and not production. Mrs. Garson's notion of having them speak Shakespeare's lines turns out to be a useful way of describing; not often does a convention require actors to deliver lines with so constant a reminder to the audience that the lines were written by

someone else and for other actors; it becomes also a reminder of a politics in which nearly every utterance of a public man was written for him by someone else.

And, unexpectedly, Mr. Johnson, while blamed at least by innuendo for crimes he would not think of committing, somehow emerges as less blameable for his actual blunders than I at least am used to thinking him. Again it is our old trouble of command as an end without any special purpose; Negroes riot, pacifists picket, Senators scheme, the Viet Cong cannot be dealt with, and all these awful things are reduced to the inconveniences which render it impossible for MacBird to enjoy the simple contentment of his trophy; and he is sorry for himself and we, strangely enough, are sorry for him.

Mrs. Garson is also fortunate that she somehow escapes the illusions of her own New Left that a better future is on her side. We would, for example, expect Wayne Morse, as the most alienated of our public men, to be immune to her mockery; yet his part is as ridiculous as any other in the comedy.

Nor has she foolish hope for herself. Near the end, her three witches—different voices of the New Left—meet her Robert Kennedy and he tries to hire them to perform a playlet he has written to catch the conscience of MacBird.

"We are free spirits," one answers proudly. "Man, we write our own lines," another derides.

"Never mind," her Robert Kennedy answers, "insert what words you will/Any line you write, any phrase you fancy/Will in the end advance me."

And that is the condition of our politics. All troubles, all public unhappiness, all rebellions of the poets and of the poor, in the end advance the Senator from New York. To be in revolt is to work for him. If Mrs. Garson knows this, she knows a very great deal. She has been dismissed as a schoolgirl; and it must be confessed that, in type at least, some of "MacBird" sounds like homework. But she is a very wise schoolgirl indeed.