

The Rebel Behind 'MacBird'

by Jane Wilson



Barbara Garson's now notorious play *MacBird* opens next week for a season at the Village Gate, and success is expected by all concerned, including the 58 backers who raised \$30,000 among them to finance the venture.

The author herself makes no predictions but observes that "an ultimate time limit for performances is set by the 1968 presidential elections." Mrs. Garson is 25 years old, small but sturdy, articulate, earnest and a veteran of battles at Berkeley. She has been married for six years, and both she and her husband Marvin, whom she describes as "accident prone with the police," are from Brooklyn. They met while still at high school—she at Madison and he at Stuyvesant. Her father owns Rudy's Best Wines & Liquors on Sutter Avenue, and Marvin's father is a retired post office worker now living in Mexico. Their separate student careers were complicated and disjointed. She went first to Antioch and then came back to Brooklyn College. Meanwhile, he was being expelled from Brandeis for an offense classified by the authorities as blasphemy. "It was nothing serious," she says. "They just had a mock crucifixion. They do it at Harvard quite a lot, I believe, but Brandeis got pretty upset."

After Marvin's expulsion, he and Barbara were married and set off for a honeymoon in Cuba. "We went because it was cheap and pleasant—nothing political. But we did speak on the radio in Havana and criticized Castro for fearing an invasion from America. They were spending a lot on defense when there was so much else to be done. That was about a year before the Bay of Pigs." When they got back from Cuba in 1960, they were angry to read what they believed to be misrepresentations of Castro's policies in the press. "From that date we became involved with other people politically, and didn't just have little anarchist ideas by ourselves." After involvement came commitment to Students for a Democratic Society and the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, where both finally graduated in history—he specializing in American and she in Greek.

Mrs. Garson has steadfastly refused to be interviewed, and an initial request to speak to her on

the telephone prompted a most challenging response from her husband: "Can you speak to Barbara Garson? *That depends entirely on who you are.*" Marvin Garson was recently arrested and, amazingly, convicted for attempting to carry somewhere near President Johnson a banner inscribed: "By the pricking of my thumbs something wicked this way comes." His wife, it seemed, had been harassed by reporters who had not read her play but wanted to know about her "motivation" in writing it. Their job, they explained, was not to read controversial works but to collect controversial quotes. Eventually, after messages of goodwill, reassurances, letters and so forth, I was welcome, or tolerated, at Flatbush Avenue.

Mrs. Garson was cleaning out her refrigerator when I arrived, and she continued in this task throughout our conversation. I sat at the kitchen table, hemmed in by boxes of groceries. Were she not a playwright, her role in life, she says, would be that of combined "housewife and agitator." Anyone who is not a paid-up, card-carrying member of the New Left is likely to feel, in Mrs. Garson's company, that he is guilty, or at best thoroughly misguided, until proved innocent.

She was at first unable to find a publisher for *MacBird*, and it was therefore printed and distributed by her husband, proprietor of the specially established Grassy Knoll Press. At latest count, 120,000 copies of the play have been sold. As new printings succeeded one another, small bookshops all over New York posted announcements in their windows with news that "MacBird Lives!" or "MacBird Is Back!" Few

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new plays can have been so well read before performance as *MacBird*. Having proved their point, the Garsons have now sold the Grassy Knoll Press to Grove Press. But in case you've been away, the play is a political satire based, somewhat roughly, on *Macbeth*. There are borrowings from a dozen other plays by Shakespeare, and Mrs. Garson has plundered skillfully and without inhibition. Johnson is *MacBird* the tyrant, and John Kennedy is Ken O'Dunc, the murdered king. In *MacBird*'s team are Lady *MacBird*, the Earl of Warren, MacNamara and various cronies. In the Ken O'Dunc corner are brothers John, Bobby and Teddy, and a few plotters. Guest appearances are made by the Wayne of Morse and by Adlai Stevenson in the guise of the Egg of Head, while the three witches are represented in the archetypal forms of protesting beatnik, Thirties-style revolutionary and Black Muslim agitator. Dwight Macdonald, the Elder Anarchist, has reviewed the play at length and given it the seal of his political, if not literary, approval. Paul Krassner, editor of *The Realist* and professional provocateur, is the play's principal backer. He remarks, simply, that "it is nobody else's business what I choose to do with my money."

It should be apparent immediately to the least among Shakespearean scholars that the plot of the chosen tragedy has one sensationally awkward requirement: *MacBird* must kill John Ken O'Dunc. This in fact he does, though by arrangement off-stage rather than personally with a dagger. What, if anything, is implied here? At the backers' auditions of *MacBird* there were cries of "Treason!" at the crucial moment, and one or two chairs were overthrown. Mrs. Garson's approach to the central difficulty in *MacBird* is sophisticated. "Many people have said to me about the play, 'I thought the same thing myself, but I put the thought out of my mind.' Well, I don't think the 'thought' is true, but I don't need to put it out of my mind. I don't count on politicians anyway. I don't rely on them to solve my problems, and I don't trust them to run things for me. But for people who do trust them, such a 'thought' might, I suppose, be shattering. I assure you that I didn't write a (Continued on page 12)



(Continued from page 11) play that made me suffer. I didn't take up 'the unpleasant and disturbing task of showing that our President is unfit to rule.' I didn't disturb myself in the least. It was easy."

Nevertheless, her position has been made more difficult by the march of events since she began serious work on the play over a year ago. At that time Lee Harvey Oswald was accepted, more or less, as the lone assassin. In such circumstances the inference in *MacBird* was definitely in bad taste, but was otherwise no more than irresponsibly sportive. However, the determined demolition attempts that have since been made on the Warren Commission Report have removed certainty in many heads, and to some *MacBird* has apparently offered an unthinkable alternative solution. It was never intended as such. Mrs. Garson's attitude to the Warren Report is brisk. "All it says is 'this is what we want you to believe, and it is just about conceivable in nature that it could have happened this way.' I don't think the Commission knows anything more. If the Report does represent the truth, it's entirely a coincidence."

She is irritated by the exclusive attention that has been given to the assassination scene in her play. For some reason she expected a remarkable detachment in her audience, hoped that they would, like Dwight Macdonald, merely nod in recognition of the parallel to *Macbeth*, and pass on to consideration of other matters. For other matters are on her mind. She maintains that neither Johnson as MacBird, nor John Kennedy as Ken O'Dune, is her principal concern in the play. MacBird is a ridiculous figure, crude and criminally ambitious, but no specific political attack is made upon him. No mention is made, for instance, of his current incredulity. He appears simply as a dangerous buffoon. In the fourth act of the play the primary target is at last revealed:

*MacBird's too easy to attack.
By now he's scoffed and sneered at right and left.
He's so despised it's fash'n'able in fact
To call him villain, tweak him by the nose,
Break with his party and jeer him in the press.*

*But we don't wag as tail behind the mass.
Our role is to expand their consciousness.
We must expose this subtle Bob-cat's claws.
He even now collects the straying sheep
And nudges them so gently toward the fold.
O sheep awake! Reject this cursed cur.
He's just like all the rest. They're all alike.*

But by now, dramatically, it is too late. The gigantic doomed figure of MacBird has held the stage for too long. It is as though, on a different level, Iago were to be finally proposed as the hero of *Othello*. Mrs. Garson fears that her play has already failed politically, and thinks that it will backfire altogether if the audience leaves with their consciousness of the dangers of Bobby Kennedy quite unexpanded. She has therefore written in an extra scene. Like Hamlet, Bobby is arranging a playlet to be performed in the presence of MacBird. His object is "to catch the conscience of the king" and he is speaking to the witches, who will double-up as the performers:

*Insert what words you will,
Any lines you like, any phrase you fancy.
Any play you write will in the end advance me.*

Mrs. Garson has been driven to such overt and despairing commentary by the nature of her expected audience at the Village Gate, and by the level of comment so far in the press. "This play was originally written to be put on at Berkeley before an audience with whom one could immediately drop any discussion of Democrats versus Republicans. In that group the questions were not 'Are we against the war?' or 'Shall we vote for Goldwater?' Our question was whether Bobby Kennedy was our best hope for peace, whether we should jump on his bandwagon, or whether we should form an independent party. These were the specific tactical problems. The audience there was far to the left of the political spectrum, too far in fact from the 'general' audience that has now picked up the play."

But why is she so concerned to "expose this subtle Bob-cat's claws"? She believes, most vehemently, that those who want peace in Viet Nam and an effective war on poverty at home should not place their confidence in Robert Kennedy.

"These causes don't mean anything to him. All things being equal, I daresay he would prefer peace to war, but at the moment he is playing an exciting power game. He is caught up in a game of political manipulation in which the real goals are forgotten. I don't know, and I don't care what is in his heart, but I believe that these goals are a matter of relative indifference to him.

"He has got to balance one force against another. Once the peaceniks are in his pocket—and have no place else to go—then he can just turn his attention to winning over other groups. Half the students in this country seem to think that Bobby Kennedy smokes pot, and his supposed hipness wins him the support of people whose energies might otherwise be used for positive good—to end the war and to fight poverty. We can have much more influence on politics if we remain independent of candidates like Bobby Kennedy. We will be most effective where we can say: 'You will definitely lose our vote and our support if . . . ' rather than having to say, weakly, 'We helped you; why don't you help us?' This is simply a matter of efficiency. The Southern Democrats threaten to withdraw support, and they get serviced rather well. They don't get ignored or cut off; they get committee chairmanships and anything else that is important to them. But when politicians know that a group of people have no place else to go, then those people don't get anything.

We must not get involved with individuals. You start with a party with policies and goals, not with a personality. What we need are *spokesmen* who become leaders because of the point of view they represent, not leaders who cannot be controlled because the people have passively relinquished all their power in the hope that all problems will be solved for them. I don't

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look fearfully at unpleasant happenings, and then surrender my judgment saying, ‘I hope those guys know what they are doing.’ I work from another direction, and hope that everyone soon learns that those guys don’t know at all what they are doing. I am angry at the abuse of power. In a sense I am angry at the existence of power. But I have no strong antagonistic feelings toward politicians. As institutions, they are too far away from me to be personally insulted. It is a political shortcoming of the play that it can be taken personally, and that those who are moved by it can go away thinking: ‘Well, if we can just get rid of that lot, everything will be okay.’”

The opinions, expressed from the inside of her refrigerator, are not completely discernible in Mrs. Garson’s *MacBird*, and quite properly not, since it is a play rather than a political tract. “My next play,” she says, “will be less enjoyable and more dogmatic.” However, her opinions do explain the markedly un-Shakespearean absence of hope in the play, the absence of any savior in the wings, of a Fortinbras who will repair the state of Denmark when the tragedy has run its course. Alienation is to be expected in the work of a young woman who is “in a sense angry at the existence of power” and whose ideal of democracy belongs to the ancient Greek city-state. This ideal may seem feasible on the campus at Berkeley. But the elation of that battle is over, and Mrs. Garson knows that it is not feasible in a world where film stars are politicians and where cynical popular protest at such fantasy takes the form of buttons marked “JOHN WAYNE FOR SECRETARY OF DEFENSE.” She says she has no program, that this is not a winning battle. “But you can always bring things round a bit without actually winning. And trouble stirred is always fun.”

Meanwhile, the fun is back at the Village Gate where the actors are rehearsing in the only theater that would give *MacBird* house room. Roy Levine, the director, is also from Brooklyn and is a high school friend of Barbara Garson’s. They studied *Macbeth* to-

gether in the same English class. It was he who bullied her into completing *MacBird* last winter. “It was much more than a sketch even then, but it lacked a coherent play form.” On the telephone Levine said I would be able to recognize him by his close resemblance to the Ghost of Christmas Past. In fact, he is small and pale, and gives the appearance of wearing an unusual number of anoraks, sweaters, jackets and scarves. He has never directed before, outside of Yale Drama School, but he is quite impressive in action. The rehearsal progresses evenly, but is interrupted from time to time for political teach-ins at which Levine explains the ideological backgrounds and attitudes of the various characters. His eyes tend to blaze when mention is made of Johnson. Then the scene re-groups on the long ramp stage which stretches out diagonally across the auditorium. “Now no breast beating,” he admonishes the Joan Baez-type witch. “The audience will just think, ‘Go-away-and-shut-up-already. There’ve been wars since the beginning of time.’ And don’t make a big business of that bit about jail. Much more casual there. The prototype of that character did go to jail, incidentally.” Later on he has something to say about napalm. “When a truck driver is transporting napalm, he ought to know, he must know, what it is that he is moving.” The actors stand and listen, seriously.

Stacy Keach plays a huge MacBird, but he doesn’t look, or try to look, like Lyndon Johnson. “Any cabaret comic can do that impersonation.” What is intended here is something more grotesque, incarnate power swaggering about, bellowing blank verse. Paul Hecht, who plays John Ken O’Dunc, has a full beard that gives him an air of having just flown in from Oberammergau. The beard may remain, for blasphemous reasons, during the run of the play. But the most astonishing member of the cast is William Devane, whose resemblance to Bobby Kennedy, particularly in profile, is riveting. However, he has none of the famous boyish charm, nor the vigorously healthy gloss. He is pale, and his face has an exhausted and slightly sinister aspect.

Roy Levine intends to keep as close as possible to

what he calls “The Elizabethan Conceit” in both staging and delivery of lines, but there is some entertaining realism in his stage directions. This is how the parallel to the banquet scene in *Macbeth* is described: “MacBird’s hotel room. The rustic atmosphere is something between a Western saloon and an Elizabethan tavern. A raucous rendition of ‘Hello Lyndon’ on a player piano. MacBird’s followers are scattered around like Renaissance cowboys playing poker, etc. Enter MacBird, jovial, swinging a daughter on each arm. Amidst a lot of ya-hoos. Crony follows along behind. Lots of circulating, jolly carryings-on.”

“A company of about a dozen will play the 15 individual roles and will also double as senators, aides, retainers and crowd members,” Levine says. “Sunglasses, false noses and various mask devices will be worn to help transformations. Actual scenery and fixed props will be kept to a bare minimum, and costume will be based on modern dress. To a business suit, for example, may be added a cloak, boots and wooden sword. The Wayne of Morse appears as a Quixotic figure, and will therefore be equipped with some sort of scrap-metal armor. MacBird must obviously have a kilt and Texas boots, while MacNamara may perhaps wear a bearskin rug suspended from his shoulders, plus a conspicuous snap-on plastic collar and tie. In the final scenes of impending conflict the principal contenders will wear football pads, helmets and baseball catcher’s chest protectors. In such armor MacBird sinks to the ground with a fatal heart attack.”

The surreal effects possible are limited only by funds, according to Julia Curtis, the play’s producer, who raised the basic \$30,000 virtually by herself. The *MacBird* company subsequently took a want ad in *The Village Voice* asking for “press cameras, stuffed hawk, athletic equipment of all kinds, authentic carpet bags, antique globestand, pair mother of pearl opera glasses, throne-like rocking chair, portable musical instruments.” With such equipment they will make a start, says Roy Levine, at “shaking off all the junk of the political past.”