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'MacBird' Lets Fly

*Englishman Salutes Off-Broadway Satire
As a Powerful Piece of Pro-Americana*

By Peter Brook

Co-director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, the author is the creative force behind "US," the controversial production about Vietnam which is now in the Company's repertory at the Aldwych Theater.

New York.

I DREAMED I unscrewed an American head and peered inside. I found that the shape of the brain was oddly familiar. I looked again and realized it was an American city I was seeing, with its monolithic buildings, its canyon-like avenues, its intersecting streets, the dense block of traffic creeping up and down.

I saw thoughts shaped as paragraphs halting at the lights. I saw ideas turn sharp left, sharp right or continue in a straight line, never making U-turns, never taking curves, never darting down alleys, never taking short cuts.

Then I woke up to a world where the war in Vietnam was still continuing, and I thanked God that there was another America, the quick-witted America, that is fighting this war with the flash of thought. For today in New York, in a downtown nightclub, the Village Gate, in front of packed and enthusiastic houses, the Nation's leaders are represented as victims of a power network which they believe they dominate but by which they are each destroyed, and the elected president of the Nation is shown to his voters as an assassin.

After a long struggle, which frightened theater owners and word-shy printers, "MacBird" has arrived. It was so huge a success at its previews that the producers postponed the official opening for four weeks, toying with the idea of never inviting the press at all. Then on Wednesday, Feb. 22, they rashly took the plunge and were rewarded by the predictable cries of "embarrassing," "boorish," "gratuitously nasty," "crackpot," Walber Kerr in *The New York Times* hurls in as the crowning insult the term "desperate vaudeville." But were I the author I would take this as a great compliment.

BARBARA GARSON has devised a play that in spirit and style is Elizabethan theater. The audience sits at cafe tables round a raised platform and the actors, on easy, intimate terms with them, exchange common references through a nod or a hint: this is pop art whose every element is expendable. It is like a shotgun marriage between Shakespeare and Spike Milligan in which raincoats, tam-o'shanters, breastplates and snatches of song draw a strip of lurid pictures, a horror comic

sprinkled with crude puns and jangling rhymes.

Some of those who have only read the play complain that the lines seem feeble, but so does all revue material divorced from performance. The manner of "MacBird" seems derived from British satire, but where the English jokes are often larky and without a target, this is immediate theater whose purpose is clear.

A sense of courage provides the energy that makes the show explode with theatricality. It is exuberant, inventive and in their context the words are not at all facetious. They take on a biting edge. The Egg of Head, or Adlai Stevenson, tortures himself with the question, "To see or not to see"; the Earl of Warren, white-haired and stubborn, refuses to compromise but lets himself be persuaded; the noble Wayne of Morse charges quixotically behind an unwieldy lance; the Burning Wood comes to destroy MacBird as the Negroes set fire to the avenues of Washington—event the parallels make icy sense.

SOME OF the play could stem from a New Statesman competition, but in performance the shorthand cyphers are inevitably nourished by the dramatic truth of the Shakespearean original. "Shakespeare raped," says a reviewer, but in using a Shakespearean structure, however farcically, the author benefits from the breadth of a Shakespearean chronicle: behind the in-jokes and the collegiate gags lurks the dark and sinister weight of "Macbeth" itself, parodied but not submerged. And there is a salient difference: an historical play is unavoidably romantic. At a distance the cruellest bloodshed takes on an exciting red glow, the comic-strip version without poetry, without beauty, without art, is a sobering and disturbing blueprint.

I will give an example. In Shakespeare, when an actress sleepwalks rubbing her hands, if she is any good the result is always impressive. Compare this with "MacBird," where the uncertain agonized wife of the President follows her husband, obsessively deodorizing him with Airwick. The image is hardly funny, certainly unpleasant—what bad taste, many people exclaim. But it is worth pursuing the question to see whether taste is truly a yardstick for assessing the quality of a living event. Then one can compare the urgent need to make instant sense in "MacBird" with the intimate anecdotes told by William Manchester in the name of history, and wonder by

what standard his sort of taste is the more acceptable one.

BUT THERE are many American intellectuals who are truly disturbed by the question of whether an author has the right to suggest on no evidence at all that Johnson was involved in a conspiracy. If the accusation is just a flight of fancy, they say, does not this make the whole enterprise "camp" and therefore meaningless?

This is serious criticism, but I think it misses the entire purpose of the play which also demystifies the Kennedys just as ruthlessly and unfairly, yet which neither begins nor ends with the slandering of its protagonists.

Through her deliberately simplified language, Barbara Garson is talking about the mechanism of power, about this and nothing else. Her objective is precise: it is the entire Washington Establishment, the entire Washington structure of ruling that she wishes to hold up to the light.

The fact that the material is flimsy, the idiom pulp, the expectation of literary immortality nil is a source of strength, and one must face the fact that from many points of view this is a more considerable event than a more lasting play, Brecht's "Arturo Ui." When Brecht in "Arturo Ui" showed that Hitler was a murderous gunman from Chicago, the indictment only rang out in Berlin years after the Fuehrer had turned to ashes in the bunker. But "MacBeth" is a word that has crossed the land and already is better known than the name of Norman Morrison—who burnt himself in protest.

BUT LITERARY theater dies hard and a young man in front of me announced loudly: "If this weren't about Johnson and Kennedy, it just wouldn't stand up at all." Some reviews are wildly enthusiastic. Robert Lowell has called the text "brilliant" and everyone praises the performance itself. The verve of the actors, the skill of the staging, ascribed to both Roy Levene and Gerald Freedman, the bravura MacBird of Stacy Keach—all produce a truly American excitement.

"MacBird" has one meaning for the United States, another for us. For an Englishman it is a positive glowing refutation of our own anti-Americans, I mean those who forget the splendid image of America, the open land of the free, the land to which the immigrants swarmed, the only land in the world in which an accusation like "MacBird" could be heard on a public stage. "MacBird" is the most powerful piece of pro-American theater for a long time.

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