

Books of The Times

Experiments and Fashions

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

MACBIRD. By Barbara Garson. Illustrated. 56 pages. Grassy Knoll Press Berkeley, N. Y. Paper, 95 cents.

EIGHT PLAYS FROM OFF-OFF BROADWAY. Edited by Nick Orzel and Michael Smith. Introduction by Michael Smith. Illustrated. 281 pages. Bobbs-Merrill. Cloth, \$5; paper, \$2.25.

ASSEMBLAGE, ENVIRONMENTS & HAPPENINGS. By Allan Kaprow. Illustrated. 341 pages. Abrams. \$25.

THESE three new titles represent, in appearance, three modes of publishing: the pamphlet, the regular or ordinary book in hardcover and paperback editions, and the outright extravaganza. In subject, they represent three new, or supposedly new, overlapping departures from what is currently thought of as traditional theatre.

The departures are: specific and immediate political criticism, in contrast to the more general and indirect moral commentary of the "theatre of commitment"; low-budget experimental workshop theatre, in contrast to Broadway and now Off Broadway hit-or-flop profit productions; and the Happening, or what might be called participation theatre or extension theatre, wherein both physical and metaphysical (esthetic) boundaries, between theatre and the other arts and between performer and observer, are erased.

The first departure is the least revolutionary. In fact, in the guise of "MacBird," Barbara Garson's much ballyhooed satire, it is barely discernible. Yet the play, which has been endorsed by Robert Brustein ("one of the best and most needed political parodies of the post-war period"), Robert Lowell, Eric Bentley and others, and is scheduled to open in New York this winter—the script has been available for some time—is likely to shock and probably anger many people.

Written in clever, comical blank verse and based on Shakespeare's "Macbeth," "MacBird" seems to be a blistering indictment of, first of all, the President and Mrs. Johnson (MacBird and Lady MacBird) and then of everyone else in government since the election of President Kennedy (Ken O'Dunc in the play). The other chief characters—the names convey the play's tone—are Robert and Teddy O'Dunc, the Egg of Head (Stevenson), the Earl of Warren, the Wayne of Morse and Lord MacNamara—plus assorted daughters, witches, cops, cronies, Senators, Representatives, reporters and retainers.

Reading a play, of course, is not the same as seeing it, and in the flesh it may turn out to be very funny. Its apparent intention, however, seems more than this: it suggests, in its paralleling of "Macbeth," that the Johnsons were responsible for the Kennedy assassination—and this is what is going to shock a lot of people. At the same time, however, the play's "courage" is somewhat compromised: everybody important seems fit for parodying, except Jacqueline Kennedy—a matter of taste, no doubt. In the end, of course, MacBird gets his as a heartless Robert O'Dunc ascends his late brother's throne.

In fact, however, the political criticism here is not specific; at most it consists of an even-handed satirical take-off on various surface styles of political ambition and rhetoric. In this, it often touches the mark, but doesn't really penetrate, nor, except in a most personal way, insult. The play can soothe and



Drawing by Lisa Lyons
The MacBirds

amuse the more self-indulgent of current anti-Administration fashions, but, lacking a point of view, it is neither serious criticism nor politically germane.

In contrast, Jean-Claude van Itallie's "America Hurrah," now playing downtown, is far more scathing and upsetting, even though its target is modern, chromed, buck-passing, impersonal American life and manners, not just First Families. The inventive dolls' masque from "America Hurrah," which was first performed at Ellen Stewart's valuable and hounded Cafe La Mamma Experimental Theatre Club, is one of the eight scripts included in Nick Orzel and Michael Smith's useful off-off Broadway anthology.

The other plays range from Joel Oppenheimer's surprisingly touching "The Great American Desert" to Paul Foster's visual curio, "Balls," in which dialogue is tape-recorded and all one sees are two suspended table tennis balls. Michael Smith, drama critic of *The Village Voice*, supplies an intelligent introduction about noncommercial off-off Broadway theatre.

One Is a Book Happening

"Assemblage, Environments & Happenings" is a sumptuous pictorial album of a movement that began in the 1950s. Approximately, the book was designed by Allan Kaprow as a book Happening (it "begins" in the middle, continues at both ends) and is beautifully printed in Japan on two types and colors of heavy stock.

Mr. Kaprow traces the movement's origins in architecture and current throw-away culture (*vide* Buckminster Fuller, Lawrence Alloway), the Theatre of the Absurd, Marcel Duchamp's Ready-Mades; the spatial expansions of Jackson Pollock and the Neo-Dada combines of Robert Rauschenberg and others. He makes useful distinctions—e.g., between change and chance; between assemblages, which can be walked around and handled, and environments, which are walked into—and offers a good outline of the metaphysics of the Happening, which is ideally performed only once.

There is a sense here that it is *all* metaphysics, and ancient art history to boot. But this may merely reflect the incredibly accelerated pace of our current times, a phenomenon all the "new arts" are trying to deal with. The diagrams, scenarios and photographs in this volume, which, incidentally, predates the latest mixed-media experiments, handsomely illustrate a line of approach that can be serious and stimulating, as well as accessible and chic.