

THEATER

'MacBird' is wicked delight

MACBIRD! a play by Barbara Garson; staged by Roy Levine, with Gerald Freedman; songs and music by John Duffy; scenery by Clarke Dunham; costumes by Jeanne Button; lighting by Robert Brand. Presented by Julia Curtis and David Productions, at the Village Gate, Bleecker and Thompson Sts., New York. Complete text printed by Grove Press, 80 University Place, N.Y., 75c.

"To the artists of the stage, who give us all mankind in all its disguises and so give us ourselves as truly we are, I pay tribute . . ."

—Lyndon B. Johnson, March 27, 1966, a statement for World Theater Day, quoted in Grove Press edition.

ALL HAIL "MacBird"! Barbara Garson's saucy theatrical urbecue of politicians in high places has made it to the boards, relatively without incident ("a tribute to America's freedom of speech," the New York Post observed), and it is a triumph in every respect. Politically razor-sharp, uproariously funny, and aged with immense ingenuity and high spirits, it is a show which ought to run for years until 1968, Mrs. Garson predicts, when its characters may be reshuffled at the polls) in its present basement quarters off Broadway, and be mobilized for the road without delay, into as many campuses and communities as it can reach. Foreign production rights have already been sold to Italy, France, Germany, Holland and Scandinavia, and negotiations are in process for a London production in March, to be directed by Joan Littlewood.

For those who have not yet dithered from the flood of artled commentary in the press since the play was first unchained privately in printed form, the plot goes as follows:

The present Big Bird in Washington is cast as a bloody Macbeth figure, whose ambitious appetite leads him into combat with the computer-powered Ken Dunc clan, John, Robert and Teddy. All goes according to the word — assassination, implications, retributions, and ultimate seizure by heir-apparent Bobby, in a vicious, heroless circle. In supporting roles (supporting whoever happens to be in" at the moment) are such figures as the Earl of Warren and Egg of Head (the late Adlai Stevenson), and the renegade Wayne of Morse.

NOBODY COMES OFF well. John Ken O'Dunc, regal in armored elegance, denies tyrant intent against "small nations"

with a smiling "Our force shall only force them to be free." (The coronation scene in which these words are uttered, to the strains of "Pomp and Circumstance," so moved New York Times critic Walter Kerr with "hurt" and nostalgia, presumably for bygone glory, that he reported himself unable to be amused for the rest of the play). Robert is revealed with feet firmly planted in whatever stance opportunism dictates. (On the Vietnam war: "I basically agree with both positions.") And Teddy is pictured as an addled tag-along who amuses himself playing cat's cradle and tugging at his brothers' coat sleeves with reminders that he will be eventual successor to the throne.

The entourage fares no better. The Egg of Head is confronted by Robert after his brother's murder, charging that he take a stand. Robert to Egg: "Your well-draped words oft veil a bloody fact." Egg: "Security makes cowards of us all. I fear to break; I'll work within for change." Later, apparently on the verge of changing his mind, he is found dead in the street, a poison dart lying near the body.

Such "tragic ambiguity" similarly assails the Earl of Warren, portrayed with gray mane and flowing academic robes. After the assassination he is approached by MacBird to conduct an investigation.

Earl: Oh, cursed spite That ever I was born to set things right.

MacB.: I don't believe you understand the job.

I wouldn't say you're asked to set things right.

I think you get the point.

Earl: Oh, whine and pout, That ever I was born to bury doubt.

But "duty" wins. He agrees.

Even the Wayne of Morse charges around ineffectually, clad in long red underwear and waving an enormous lance. Congressman: "A bit of an extremist I would say." Robert: "I think that we can use him anyway."

BUT FOR CARICATURE, none lend themselves so well as the MacBird aviary. The figure of MacBird is vulgarity itself in leather kilt and jacket, oversize boots and battered stetson, clutching a scruffy stuffed eagle as scepter. Crude in language, hot in temper, grandiose in design, he is imperialism with boots on, stomping his way through an imagined China shop of the third world.

Crony: There's news, more news!

MacB.: Spit out your spiteful news.

Crony: Peace paraders marching.

MacB.: Stop 'em!

Crony: Beatniks burning draft cards.

MacB.: Jail 'em!

Crony: Negroes starting sit-ins.

MacB.: Gas 'em!

Crony: Latin rebels rising.

MacB.: Shoot 'em!

Crony: Asian peasants arming.

MacB.: Bomb 'em!

Crony: Congressmen complaining.

MacB.: Fuck 'em!

Flush out this filthy scum; destroy dissent.

It's treason to defy your President.

Lady MacBird comes off equally coarse. Decked out more like a gaudy strumpet than the "sweet innocent" her husband calls her, she is another blow struck at the image of Southern ladyhood. True to the MacBeth design, she stands heavy as the power behind the throne, brushing aside any squeamish scruples of MacBird with a harsh "screw up your courage!" Like her prototype, she goes mad in the end, seeking with Air-Wick and roadside flowers to sweeten the countryside after their bloody deed.

SOME HAVE SAID that with all Shakespeare to choose from (Mrs. Garson adapts freely from "Hamlet," "Julius Caesar," "Richard III" and others as well as "Macbeth" for her satire) and with the grotesque comedy innate in the current political scene, she could hardly have failed. She could have. Or at best, blessed with such an inspiration but possessing a lesser talent and less political astuteness, she might have come up with a free-swinging broadside at the more obvious features of political personalities and folkways — clever, fun, but essentially harmless to its targets and non-instructive to theirs.

Barbara Garson has accomplished much more than that. She has taken a clever idea, a breezy flair for iambic pentameter, and gutsy irreverence — and added the ingredient necessary for art: solid construction, both theatrical and political. The flash vision that came to her as a Berkeley co-ed, for a 15-minute skit for the Oct. 15-16, 1965, International Days of Protest, has been fleshed out so knowingly that it delineates not only the passing images on our political smokescreen, but the deadly pattern they are weaving.

At the center of her play, like flies seeing the web from the inside out, are her three witches — Marxist, New Left, and Negro. They come on decked out in their popular stereotypes — girl "beatnik" with boots and feather boa; well-groomed figure of a "Muhammad Speaks" salesman; and veteran crier for class strug-

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STACY KEACH IN TITLE ROLE OF 'MacBIRD'
Political satire is at the Village Gate, New York

gle, complete with worker's jeans, lunch pail and lantern. But their roles and words reveal the clearer power behind their stylish images. It is they who prophesy the fatal course of events, act as catalyst among the short-sighted contenders, and stir the pot whose vile ingredients are bound to blow:

"Stench of Strong and tongue of Kerr [Berkeley references], Picket, sit-in, strike, and stir . . . Black men beat and burnt and shot, Bake within our melting pot . . . Sizzling skin of napalmed child, Roasted eyeballs, sweet and

mild . . . Bubble and bubble, toil and trouble, Burn baby burn, and caldron bubble."

Thus events evolve not just in a course dictated by their Shakespearean parallel, but with an inner, much more significant, logic of their own. Personalities are vividly, wickedly parodied, but we are reminded throughout, and as early as the marvelously tongue-in-cheek disclaimer prologue, that these are only ". . . two warring dynasties/Whose high upreared and abutting prides/Now rip a ruling monolith asunder."

The key word is "monolith," and it is all too truly drama-

tized in the final scene. MacBird, in the midst of a sword fight with contender Robert, has dropped dead of a heart attack (his last words: "Thus cracks a noble heart!"). Robert rallies quickly to the occasion in kingly style, assuring his new subjects of his intention "To follow my great predecessor's path/In hewing out the Smooth Society,/ So, choked with grief, I pledge my solemn word/To lift aloft the banner of MacBird."

But those depressed by this circular motion of events should recall the Revolutionary witch's prediction in Act One: "He [Robert] 'll strut and fret his hour on the boards/And be applauded wildly from the pit./But if you skip and read a later page, /We take the final bow upon this stage."

THE PLAY HAS caused a tremendous stir. At first, when "MacBird" lived only in print, it was all hand clapping—Robert Brustein in the New York Times Magazine, Dwight Macdonald in the New York Review of Books, Robert Lowell ("I have nothing to say about the political truth of this play, but I am sure a kind of genius has gone into the writing.") Now that its characters and events have achieved a living presence, however, the voices heard are ringing somewhat more shrilly, in the tone of the New York Daily News head on its review: "MacBird More Nasty Than Funny."

The loyal in-position tolerance seems to be following that of Herbert Gold, writing in the New York Times Book Review Section of Feb. 19 on the California literary scene: "Mac-

Bird] seemed like a very funny and scurrilous joke at first. Later, it seems less funny and more scurrilous." Methink me hears tweaked nerves squealing in the body politic. The push for Robert Kennedy for President in 1968 and the resurrection of the assassination conspiracy spectre may have contributed to the squeamishness.

But one thing don't be fooled about: "MacBird" is FUNNY. And now, brought to life with the high-spirited inventiveness of director Roy Levine, a miraculously matched cast, some wild costumes, and countless inspirations in music, sound effects and stage business, it's a howl. Even those who squirm can't help laughing when MacBird slips and calls the Earl of Warren "boy" in a moment of pique, or breaks into a chorus of "Don't Fence Me In," or falls on his knees in desperation before a massive warrior portrait of himself, calling "My god, my god."

Stacy Keach as MacBird is superb, as is virtually all the cast. Mimicry in voice and gesture of the notables is deliciously rendered, but the emphasis has wisely been placed on character style rather than quirks. William Devane, whose remarkable likeness to the senator from New York has been noted by everyone, wisely saves his Boston accent for a few choice scenes. One might question the virility and Realpolitik vigor with which he endows his character as too attractive for an essentially villainous role, but then charm always was a long suit in the Ken O'Dunc clan. Charm also comes richly embodied in the small person of Jennifer Darling, who makes a most engaging New Left witch.

Altogether, this venture to assault our "leaders who plot in prose" with the juicier vision of free verse is a smashing success. I am under no illusion that a person's politics are likely to be changed by a theater experience, but it would be hard to come away from "MacBird" with any very lofty vision of our Smooth Society unshaken. Besides, as the witches note, "Trouble stirred is always for the good." And if no one emerges too sweet-smelling from the pot, well, "The kings (shall be) unkinged. We have a world to win."

—Patricia Brooks