



During the 45-minute show, the realities of algebra, physics and civics are forgotten as New Dorp High youngsters are plunged into the magical world of martyred saints, lusty wenches and noble emperors.

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Is 'MacBird' Pro-American?

By PETER BROOK, co-director of the Royal Shakespeare Company and director of "Marat/Sade."

WALTER KERR describes "MacBird" as a "desperate" vaudeville and, were I the author, I would take this as a great compliment. Barbara Garson has devised a play that is the nearest I have seen to the Elizabethan theater, where the audience is on easy, intimate terms with the actors and common references are exchanged through a nod or a hint.

Her intention is deadly serious but her idiom is a Pop art in which every element is potential scrap; here a number of traditions meet—that of the great Shakespeare, that of "Ubu Roi" whose author Jarry was also called "puerile" in his time, that of American pulp, for "MacBird" is a horror comic, crude in its puns, jangling in its rhymes, and also that of British satire—with a difference. English political jokes are often facetious and without a target, but this is immediate theater whose purpose is clear. A sense of outrage provides the energy that makes the show explode with theatricality. It is exuberant, intensive and, in their context, the words take on a biting edge.

When Adlai Stevenson tortures himself with

the question of whether to see or not to see, when the white-haired Earl of Warren, stubborn and uncompromising, lets himself be persuaded, when the noble Wayne of Morse charges quixotically behind an unwieldy lance, when the burning avenues of Washington destroy MacBird, event by event, the parallels make icy sense.

Collegiate, they say, but this strip of lurid pictures is a shorthand; in performance, the ciphers are inevitably nourished by the dramatic truth of the Shakespearean original. "Shakespeare raped," writes 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 gags lurks the dark and sinister weight of "Macbeth" itself, parodied but not submerged. And there is a salient difference. Barbara Garson is not Shakespeare—why should she be?—and her play serves a different purpose from straight Shakespearean revival.

A historical play is unavoidably romantic: at a distance, the cruelest bloodshed takes on an exciting red glow. But the (Continued on Page 3)

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Continued from Page 1

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 what we term "impressive." Compare this with "MacBird" where the uncertain, agonized wife of the President obsessively deodorizes her husband with Airwick. The image is funny, but nasty. What bad taste, many people exclaim.

It is worth pursuing this question to see whether taste is truly a yardstick for assessing the quality of a living event. Walter Kerr points out that the assassination of Kennedy is still too painful a subject to touch. In this case, one must compare the urgent need to make instant sense in "MacBird" with the collecting of intimate anecdotes by William Manchester in the name of history and wonder by what set of standards his sort of taste is the more acceptable one.

Yet the great journals of the world print Manchester and none of the adjectives are hurled at them that are hurled at the Village Gate. It may be that Manchester's gory trivia are considered "true," while Barbara Garson's accusations are "flights of fancy." If the author says that President Johnson was involved in the assassination with no pretense of serious evidence, it seems reasonable to ask if the whole enterprise is not "camp" and therefore "meaningless." This criticism misses the whole point of a play which demystifies all Kennedys and all Johnsons with the same unfair ruthlessness, yet which neither begins nor ends with the slander 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 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 most points of view, this is a more considerable event than Brecht's "Arturo Ui,"

which is theoretically a more lasting play. When Brecht showed in "Arturo Ui" that Hitler was a murderous gunman from Chicago, the indictment only rang out in Berlin years after the Fuhrer had turned to ashes in the bunkers. And even today "Arturo Ui" has failed to find an audience in New York, while "MacBird" is a word that already is better known than the name of Norman Morrison who set himself afire as a gesture of protest against the war in Vietnam.

Unfortunately, literary theater has conditioned itself sick, and people are lost in front of an event that sets up other references. At the Village Gate, a young man in front of me announced quite seriously, "If this weren't about Johnson and Kennedy, it just wouldn't stand up at all." For me, "MacBird" is one of the most interesting and enjoyable performances I have seen in New York for many years. I say this very soberly, because I believe this is an event which opens a long series of vital questions.

What Is Urgent?

When it is condemned, it is condemned as against another, "better" theater. What is this theater? What is meant by serious theater? People accept the concept, that, for the theater to be serious, it should deal with what concerns its audience most. What concerns us? What are our themes? What is urgent? What is immediacy? Then, what form does seriousness take? Have the terms "well documented," "investigation in depth," "fair approach" anything to do with theater? Is it a true standard to expect the theater to say something? If so, how? Through rational statements, conclusions, solutions? Or is there another way? Is it a true standard to expect an act of theater to "do" something? What does satire "do?" Can an act of theater topple a government? Or end a war? If not, has it failed?

Does literary theater exclude non-literary theater and vice versa? What is the role of entertainment? Does pleasure let us off the hook or does fun vivify us? Are purpose and solemnity inseparable? Is irreverence childish? Are tragedy and farce opposites? These are not rhetori-

cal questions. They are difficult ones and need to be explored with care.

Someone reproached Barbara Garson for not having Shakespeare's "humanity." Where should she have bought this? Would a few life-loving lines have made her a better woman and a better writer? Do we really distinguish between the pseudo-serious, the solemn and the sentimental? Wasn't there a much admired play about Roosevelt in one of these categories? When we compare the experience of a joyous performance with the act of listening to idealistic dialogue, which is the more convincing? Which is the greater affirmation? Why in the theater alone among the arts is the honorable middle-of-the-road taken seriously?

The directors and the actors at the Village Gate have between them forged a very remarkable theater-object. Cans of soup and sheets of blue canvas are hallowed by a different set of critics and hung in national galleries. Are the standards different? What are they? Is the theater more menacing than painting? What does it menace?

It is said that critics try to judge each event by its own standards, so that, without inconsistency, they can praise a good conventional comedy and damn an imperfect but ambitious drama. "MacBird" then can only be judged in its own context of political protest. Is all lovely

in the garden? If not, what is the artist's role? Is protest art only for the converted? I wish I understood this word, "converted," for I get the impression that the audience of "MacBird" is potentially all those millions of restless and dissatisfied people who are not "converted" to official beliefs. "MacBird" has clearly many different meanings for many different Americans and, as a foreigner, I can add nothing to this. I can only say what it can mean for an Englishman.

For an Englishman, "MacBird" is a positive and glowing refutation of all anti-Americans. By anti-Americans, I mean those anywhere who support a war that daily tarnishes the splendid image of America, the open Land of the Free, the land to which immigrants swarmed, the only land in the world in which accusations like "MacBird" could be heard on a public stage. It is only a tiny group of men who are pursuing a war most Americans want to end, believe can be ended, urgently, now. At the Village Gate, I found a normal mixed group of American people on and off the stage, whose enjoyment, talent and concern reminded me of the America that we love and support, to whom we are inseparably linked, and whose present entanglement tears us also. "MacBird" is the most powerful piece of pro-American theater in a long time.