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## **An Invitation to Play: *Sleep No More***

**Emursive presents Punchdrunk at The McKittrick Hotel  
New York, New York  
Performance date: April 6, 2015**

Reviewed by SHANNON MCHUGH, ALICE FISCHETTI,  
MOHAMMAD SADIC, and AMY MOORE

**Y**ou enter Macbeth's infernal realm through an antiquated hotel elevator. A dapper young man in a tailcoat is your "porter of hell gate" (2.3.1-2).<sup>1</sup> He gazes over your huddled group with playful malevolence, stopping the car at intervals to eject passengers into the misty darkness. He is purposeful in separating loved ones: "This is a journey," he croons, "best undertaken alone."

*Sleep No More*, written by Felix Barrett, founder of the immersive theater company Punchdrunk, and Maxine Doyle, the company's choreographer. Following successes in London and Boston, it is now in the seventh year of an open run in New York. Based on *Macbeth*, the play unfolds in the fictional, Hitchcock-like McKittrick Hotel (the name is a reference to *Vertigo*), a refitted warehouse in the far western reaches of Chelsea. The setting quietly informs attendees of the part they are to play, for they are not simply audience members, but guests, a role requiring active collaboration and exchange with the host. The set has no single stage, and the narrative is non-linear, meaning audiences may wander as they will. You might tail a character down labyrinthine hallways, or find yourself alone in silent rooms, squeezing between abandoned place settings in the hotel dining hall or deciphering scrawls upon the walls of a padded cell (the fifth floor, a mental hospital, recalls both Rupert Goold's 2007 production and Alan Cumming's 2013 one-man performance of *Macbeth*). In the elevator, the diabolical porter encouraged guests to plunder the sets for information, and so you do, opening drawers, rifling through letters, inspecting the pockets of hanging coats.

What astonishes is not the creators' adaptation of Shakespeare, but rather their accomplishment in world-building. Sets are intricately detailed; the noir soundtrack is chilling. The otherworldly effect is enhanced by the donning of full Venetian-style *bauta* masks and the strict code of silence (even the actors speak only rarely). Guests have the hair-raising sense that, having accepted Macbeth's offer of diabolical hospitality, they are at nearly as much risk as Duncan. The production allows audiences to cross a threshold into another universe, a thrill that would have resonated with early modern consumers of Dante's *Inferno*, Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, and Shakespeare's *Tempest*.

The deep engagedness engendered by the immersive environment dovetails with one of *Macbeth*'s central themes: the conflict of fate versus free will. At a more traditional performance, the spectator reflects on who is in control, providence or protagonist, from the safety of her seat, able to judge the debate, perhaps, but not to join it. In *Sleep No More* (henceforth *SNM*), she embodies the

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debate in her every action. Turn left or right? Follow Macbeth or linger in the lobby? The guest is painfully aware that every decision may lead to a delight or a dead end.

One of the best features of *SNM*, then, is its privileging of individual experience, emphasized from the moment the guest is cast out from the elevator *solus*. This aspect makes the production not only enjoyable but an excellent teaching tool. I have been a guest at the McKittrick several times, but my appreciation of the range of interpretive possibilities was enhanced when I attended with my students during an undergraduate seminar I taught at New York University about literary underworld journeys. Like Macbeth, I have chosen to consult three “imperfect speakers” (such are all guests at *SNM*), asking my students to tell their tales (1.3.70).

### **Thematic Reinventions (Alice Fischetti)**

Shakespearean influence reverberates in the most unexpected of places, revealing that even a single scene, isolated from its larger narrative, aligns *SNM* with the central thematic elements of *Macbeth*. Abandoning the markers of language, I found myself wandering into the Macduff residence on the third floor. Here, Lady Macduff crossly shined a light bulb, a distraught Macduff attempting to calm her nerves. They burst into a whirlwind of modern-dance pirouettes and leaps, space both an instrument in their flight and an obstacle to their outstretched limbs. Their *pas de deux* bordered on violence, Macduff breaking Lady Macduff’s form as she reached for the consolation of a nearby Madonna. The aerial choreography, varying between passionate embraces and forceful throws, recalled Lady Macduff’s distress and confusion at her husband’s departure: “What had he done, to make him fly the land?” (4.2.1). In *Macbeth*, the scene maintains its high-flying dimension linguistically, through both aviary imagery and repetition of “fly” and “flight. The couple’s literal flying translated this spoken fear into a visual language of frenzied movements. *SNM* reinvents dimensions of Shakespeare’s work through such subtle optical markers, the audience able to decipher Shakespearean echoes without a viewing of the entire play. Here, Lady Macduff’s flight honored both the lyricism of Shakespeare’s words and their emotional thrust, transforming her frantic verse into fervent movement.

### **The McKittrick’s Secrets and Symbols (Mohammad Sadic)**

A few unique journeys are made more distinct by personalized, “one-on-one” scenes. During these moments, a character draws one audience member into an isolated area and tells a story, a rarity amidst the production’s mostly wordless performances. Banquo pulled me into a room alone, placed both hands on my shoulders, and after removing my mask, embraced me and exclaimed, “Fleance!” (Banquo’s only son). He sat me in a chair to give me a sword and anoint me. He swore his fealty to me as a subject does to his king, alluding to Fleance’s future

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reign as prophesied by the Weird Sisters. The private scene conveyed Banquo's uneasiness about Macbeth's tyranny and the depth of his love for his son, an emotional connection that is unexpressed in the original play. The experience came to a close with him giving me a torn card depicting the king of diamonds. Before running off once more, he whispered three words into my ear: "Don't forget me."

A reward for the lucky audience member's persistence (I had to race up and down numerous flights of stairs to keep up with Banquo), the one-on-one is the chance to become privy to the secrets and better understand the symbols inside the McKittrick. Immediately following my private scene with Banquo, I witnessed his murder in the hotel speakeasy. The walls of the room were covered with nailed-up copies of the king of diamonds I now held in my pocket, suggesting the difficulty of removing the despotic Macbeth from rule; however, Banquo's gift of a torn card foreshadowed the tyrant's eventual death. Conceivably the exclusive nature of the one-on-one may have made such peculiar symbolism discernible only to me.

### Lost Threads (Amy Moore)

For all the possibilities of its expansive form, *SNM* does not capitalize on its own immersive potential. Audience members are encouraged to explore the McKittrick in its entirety, yet Punchdrunk's world is prone to crossing from artistic abstraction into functional incoherence.

In my visit to *SNM*, I found it was surprisingly hard to divine the meaning of what I saw or its relation to Shakespeare's original (even though I had just read it for the third time). The problem is not that the production is abstracted, but that everything is abstracted in the same way. Almost every interaction forefronts a violent sensuality, and they only seem to be differentiated from each other in their degrees of savagery or lewdness. If you are not sure who a character is or what they have just done, what does it matter that they are intimately wrestling with someone in a phone booth or flipping around a luggage room alone? It is difficult to be shocked or even just interested if the "shocking" is entirely expected—yet another couple wrenching each other around a sparsely furnished room—and the "interesting" is clouded in layers of symbolism and metaphorical twirling.

*Macbeth* deals with ambition, power struggles, and deterioration of the social order, so emphasizing those concepts is a logical artistic interpretation. However, *SNM* ultimately depends on that conceptual foundation without providing much cohesion in the way of plot, even for those who are familiar with *Macbeth*. Even the major characters can be puzzlingly similar to each other; I didn't know who Banquo was until halfway through the production, when I saw his ghostly appearance at the banquet scene. This may ultimately comment more on the necessity of attending the production multiple times, which many enthusiasts do. Yet if *SNM* can only be truly appreciated by those who have the required money and dedication, it is by nature obscuring itself—and its take on *Macbeth*—to all but the super-fans and the luckiest of wanderers.

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### Conclusion

The lucky wanderer may indeed stumble into a happy outcome by relying on fate, hoping, as the Scottish king did, that “chance may crown me / without my stir” (1.3.146-47). But in the end, the McKittrick demands more of the guests whom it hosts. Collaboration is the production’s cost and its great distinguishing success. When participants step into the story of *SNM*, they find that the rules of this world reward the enactment of will—and a will to play. Indeed, it is best to approach *SNM* not as theater, but as a different sort of fictional immersion: a role-playing game. (Reviewers at *New York Magazine’s Vulture* and others have noted the similarity.)<sup>2</sup> In this regard, the many high-culture lovers in attendance find themselves unwitting participants in the most mainstream live action role-playing on offer. Those who study LARPing and video games, from new literacy scholars to designers like Ted Talk-er Jane McGonigal, have noted that they teach skills like risk-taking and self-motivation. In its function, *SNM* encourages its guests to recognize the power of action and free will, much like Shakespeare’s play. In this happy hellscape, to give too much credence to providence is to end up as deluded as Macbeth.

### Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., eds. Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015).

2. Scott Brown, “The Freakily Immersive Experience of *Sleep No More*,” *Vulture*, [www.vulture.com](http://www.vulture.com), April 15, 2011.

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**Alice Fischetti** has recently completed her M.A. in Italian Studies at New York University with a focus on women's writing in the Italian Renaissance. She is a docent of the Acton Art Collection at Villa la Pietra and spends her free time sipping Tuscan wine and reveling in books of the past.

**Mohammad Sadic** is a recent graduate of New York University with a degree in Biology. He is currently pursuing an MD-PhD at the New York University School of Medicine. As a future physician-scientist, Mohammad hopes bridge basic science and clinical practice by pursuing research questions that are informed by his medical knowledge.

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**Amy Moore** graduated from New York University, where she studied English, Creative Writing, and Web Development. She's also an assistant editor at Bodega Magazine, where she reads a lot of incoming stories, and she was recently published in NYU's undergraduate literary magazine *West 10<sup>th</sup>*.