

# Fractured Realities: A Receptive

## Review of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*

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### Abstract

Branding itself as an immersive production, *Sleep No More* proposes a certain blurring of the distinction between audience and performers. On the surface, permission to explore the space is key, but the disconnection from performers prevents any sense of collaboration; an alternative sense of collaboration is available if the audience are understood as performers.

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They told me not to wear my glasses. A week before I attended Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* at the abandoned McKittrick Hotel in lower Manhattan, I received an email recommending that "given the choice," I should wear contacts.<sup>1</sup> I do not wear contacts, and my inability to comply with the directions led to a state of mixed anticipation and anxiety that came to define my entire experience with the deconstructed, immersive amalgamation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Alfred Hitchcock's film noir classic *Rebecca*. Punchdrunk is known for productions that draw the audience in, surrounding them with and occasionally weaving them into the performance, and I took their instructions seriously, spending quite some time wondering whether I really needed to see. In the end, I left my glasses on, but, to make up for my disobedience, I arrived at the McKittrick Hotel determined to surrender to whatever experience awaited. However, that surrender proved more elusive than expected. Although I was certainly impressed by the craftsmanship of the show and emotionally sapped by its eerie, haunted atmosphere, at the end of the evening I left feeling curiously cold and detached, frustratingly unable, despite my willingness, to connect to the production. This may have been in part due to my aforementioned anxiety, but a theatrical relationship, especially one so closely involving the audience, should run both ways, and my inability fully to engage pointed not only to my shortcomings as spectator, but also to *Sleep No More's* limitations as theater. Despite its best efforts and much-touted reputation as *the* immersive experience, the show failed to create any sense of unity with the audience.

### Sinking In

Of course, my personal lack of connection to *Sleep No More* in no way defines a collective audience response (immersive theater is, by its nature, a highly individual experience, and I have it on good authority that several people had far more intimate experiences than I did). For better or for worse, my attitude was heavily colored by my prior knowledge of Punchdrunk and their theatrical style; however, although I had a rudimentary idea of what I was getting into, my horizon of expectations did not prepare me for the stressful actuality of entering the McKittrick hotel or for the split in my brain as it strained to comprehend the experience on two levels at once. Half of my mind was busy analyzing the neighborhood, the bouncers, and the imposing double doors. The remainder of my consciousness was struggling (against a significant amount of internal resistance) simply to ease into the reality unfolding around me. To their credit, Punchdrunk must have anticipated that ceding one's control to an unfamiliar party would make it difficult to relax, because they structured the introduction to *Sleep No More* in tiers, providing a process that, to borrow Victor Turner's succinct description of ritual, theoretically "separated specified members of a group from everyday life, *placed them in a limbo* that was not any place they were in before, and not yet any place that they would be in, then *returned* them, changed in some way, to mundane life" (Turner 1988, 25, emphasis in original). The multi-step immersion eased my transition between the everyday life of a busy New York night and the (not quite mundane) life that existed only within the confines of the hotel.

My descent began with a separation, as, entering the murky lobby — flustered and off balance from having gotten lost three times on the way — I divested myself of outside trappings and became acclimatized to the sudden cessation of city sounds. This served to clear and prepare my brain for the journey to come. From the lobby, I was pointed in the direction of a dark stairway, at the top of which was a pitch-black maze, possibly the most frightening, yet importantly transitional segment of my experience. It was a truly terrifying, liminal conduit, a corridor of sensory deprivation that symbolically erased my identification with the reality I was leaving behind. Out of it I stumbled, blinking, into a cocoon-like, red velvet limbo, not yet the new world, merely another threshold where I was able to gather my thoughts and prepare, along with the rest of the unnerved audience members, for the final return into Punchdrunk's new world.

This return commenced as we were herded towards the elevators, where two rules were clearly laid out, both effectively scotching any attempt at a communal experience. First, everyone was to wear a white, Dottore-like mask, completely concealing all facial expression. Second, there was to be silence throughout the installation. We were encouraged, although not required, to experience

the production individually. "Fortune favors the bold," the elevator operator grinned. Then he pushed us out, several on each floor, and rode away, leaving us firmly in the grip of a new reality, struggling, at least in my case, both to understand and to lose myself in a coherent narrative.

### Walking A Haunted Landscape

Finding a cohesive story within the maelstrom of *Sleep No More* was impossible, yet a straightforward meaning was something that I craved. I knew that the production was based on a combination of *Macbeth* and *Rebecca*, so I simply assumed that somewhere a linear plot was unfolding. However, although I caught a few recognizable scenes (*Macbeth* post-murder in the bathtub and a beautifully lit slow motion banquet stick out in my mind), the nature of the production prevented me from following them in the generally accepted sequence. Eventually, I simply stopped trying and began to create my own narrative. I am quite sure that some of the significations I assigned were not the ones originally intended — why were there eggs everywhere? — but there was a certain amount of freedom in letting go of my accustomed assumption that someone else was going to explain what was going on and taking upon myself the responsibility for meaning and plot.

The idea that meaning resides not only in the production of a work, but also in its interpretation is well established; however, the *interaction* between the two sides of the theatrical relationship is a third and central component of interpretation, and it was frustratingly lacking from my experience.<sup>2</sup> Intriguing as it was, at first, to create a plot all on my own, it quickly grew tiresome not to be given any sort of direction. I was unable to surrender to the experience because I was unsure what the experience was supposed to be, and I grew increasingly uncomfortable, spending most of my two and a half hours at the McKittrick Hotel in a state of uneasiness shading into distress. In part, my anxiety had to do with my dislike of haunted houses, but the sense of disquiet was also profoundly influenced by Punchdrunk's oppositional manipulation of distance.

Distance, as an aesthetic concept, heavily affects spectator response. It is tied to an "awareness of fiction" that "fundamentally determines the viewer's experience" (Ben Chaim 1984, 73). Daphna Ben Chaim places that awareness on a spectrum. If a theatrical production employs a significant amount of distance, the spectator is more apt to intellectualize his or her experience, focusing on ideas and principles rather than getting lost in the fiction. If, conversely, the distance between the production and the spectator is reduced, the line between fiction and reality blurs, and the spectator is more likely to become engrossed in a moment-to-moment experience than to enjoy a broader perception of the production. In *Sleep No More*, Punchdrunk managed to hit both ends of the distance spectrum at once.

Physically, my distance from the production was almost non-existent. I could go anywhere (within designated boundaries), touch everything, take as much time as I needed. In essence, I could get lost in the new reality. My ability to do so was aided, in large part, by my reciprocal relationship to the gorgeous space surrounding me. "Any space we occupy," writes Dennis Kennedy, "deeply affects how we perceive events inside it. We are bodies which occupy space and are occupied by it" (Kennedy 2009, 133). Punchdrunk's space was exquisite, incorporating sight and sound, smell, and temperature. Each floor comprised a series of interconnected rooms, differently themed and decorated: a genteel parlor, a graveyard full of empty baby carriages that smelled of dirt, an abandoned psychiatric ward, a detective agency, Birnam Wood. I occupied them each wholeheartedly, allowing each of them, in turn, to seep into my psyche. The rooms were each mini-realities within the larger world of the production. There were multiple nooks and crannies to explore, and I took a trespasser's delight in riffling through papers and opening jewelry boxes, getting to know the space. Interesting as each proved to be, however, eventually it was time to move on to the next reality. Curiously, I found myself incredibly reluctant to make the transitions. Most of the rooms were separated by heavy curtains, which I have always felt to be an unstable barrier, vulnerable, an indefinite threshold that refuses to define spaces clearly. Every time I came across one, I felt myself tense up for a jarring shift, uncertain of what was to come next and suddenly reminded that despite my seeming freedom, someone else was manipulating my experience.

These abrupt reminders that I was not in a real world increased my awareness of *Sleep No More* as fiction and compromised the semi-surrendered state into which I had been lulled in between transitions. I found myself assessing the production rather than living it, an experience that was echoed every time I came across one of the small pockets of actual performers. They reinforced the message that this world was *not* my world. As far as the characters (and possibly the actors) were concerned, I was not there, and I nervously began to believe them, echoing Herbert Blau's troubling assertion that "if the audience is not altogether an absence, it is by no means a reliable presence" (Blau 1990, 1). My own presence as a spectator felt increasingly doubtful. I was a ghost that Lady Macbeth brushed past on her predetermined route. I was the always pursued other, clearly not a body that actually belonged, and perhaps one that did not actually exist. My distance from the other performers felt unbridgeable, a jarring discrepancy with my lack of distance from the space. Negotiating the two extremes left me isolated, alienated, and confused. Was I meant to be immersed in the experience, or was I meant to maintain a critical distance? There was no clear answer, and my attempts at finding a balance were, frankly, exhausting. Eventually I lost interest in both the space and the performers and focused on the most intriguing part of the whole evening: the audience itself.

## Performing Bodies

Intra-audience relationships are a crucial component of reception. In a traditional auditorium, despite individual interpretations it is easy to feel the crackle of collective response. In an immersive production such as *Sleep No More*, forging a community is slightly more difficult, but spectator connections are still highly influential on individual interpretations and experiences. As I wandered from abandoned restaurant to cluttered bedroom, I was increasingly aware of the spectators surrounding me, not least because of the enforced limitations of our social interaction. The masks and the silence ensured that there was no easy discourse amongst us: no gauging facial expressions, no whispered critique to the person standing beside me, just a mass of blank bodies surrounding me. The possibility of a "homogenous group reaction" was remote; we were all following our own path (Coppieters 1981, 47).

And yet, there *was* a certain collective feeling to the crowd. Our lack of communication as an audience led to our loss of definition as one, and, incrementally, we became a part of the production. Not in the originally intended narrative, perhaps (nowhere in *Macbeth* is there a blank-faced mob), but in what was, to my mind, a far more effective and absorbing performance. The closest I came to feeling fully immersed in *Sleep No More* was following the banquet scene, when the previously empty floor of the sizable basement where it was held suddenly filled with moving trees. Birnam Wood was coming to Dunsinane, and I was instantly lost in the pine needles. No sooner had I regained my equilibrium when, out of nowhere an actor came whirling by us, bloodied and intent on escape. True to form, he completely ignored my scramble to get out of his way, but as I slowly turned away from his retreating back I was suddenly surrounded by a thousand streaming white masks, all determined to catch him and all completely silent. I froze as they rushed past me with a distinct and collective momentum; I forgot the actor, intent only on surrendering myself to the enticing energy of the audience following him.

Knowing that it was going to be an immersive production, I had gone into *Sleep No More* expecting a certain blurring of the distinction between audience and performers. I expected to be made welcome, drawn into a "collaborative mode of performance," wherein the idea is "to break down the distance between actor and audience and to give the spectator something more than a passive role in the theater exchange" (States 1985, 170). On the surface it seemed as if my permission to wander around the hotel was the key, but the disconnection that I felt from the performers negated any feeling of collaboration that tentatively developed. However, once I re-created my experience by interpreting the *audience* as performers, I was able to access an alternative collaborative mode. Because I too was a spectator, which meant that I too was a

performer. The distinction between the two sides of the theatrical relationship was successfully blurred. It was with the audience, not the production, that I truly felt immersed.

### Emerging

My emergence from *Sleep No More*, despite involving the same terrifying tunnel as the descent, was far less ritualistic than my journey in, as if, now that I had entered into their world, Punchdrunk could not be bothered with properly escorting me out again. This was a miscalculation on their part; I felt rushed and unwanted, alienated where I should have felt a lingering reluctance to emerge from my immersion in the dreamlike landscape. There was no lingering of any kind, reluctant or otherwise. On the street, I was immediately caught up in prosaic concerns such as the frigid temperature, the length of my journey home, and the suitcase I had to pack when I got there. If *Sleep No More* had fulfilled its promise of a completely immersive experience, these concerns would have been distant, fighting to reach me through a haze of visceral awe and defamiliarization. As it was, my conflicting experiences within the hotel left me feeling nothing. The production was skillfully put together, professional, and beautiful. But its beauty did not suffice to create a consistent connection with the audience. This inadequacy is not entirely Punchdrunk's fault. They were victims of the paradox of theater, which "reminds us somehow of the original unity even as it implicates us in the common experience of fracture" (Blau 1990, 10). Before, during, and after my experience at the McKittrick Hotel, I searched in vain for the unifying connection that I felt sure was lurking amidst its myriad realities. Despite my conscious efforts, however, I was unable to access that connection, and with my anticipation unfulfilled and my anxiety unappeased, I abandoned the search and resigned myself to my own fractured life.

### Notes

1. Performance of *Sleep No More*, directed by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle, a Punchdrunk production.
2. Iser 1978; see especially part four.

## References

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