

The Murder of a Tale

Pamela J. Rader, Georgian Court University

Abstract

A review of one spectator's experiences in the role of a silenced voyeur and an explorer of intricate installations, this essay reads *Sleep No More* as a "literary lite" phenomenon.

"An event" and "an experience." I would have to agree with these two succinct descriptions of Punchdrunk's extended production of *Sleep No More* at the McKittrick Hotel, which reminded me in a way of the final lines from the Eagles' eponymous song, "Hotel California" — "You can check out any time you like / but you can never leave" — more than it did the oft-referenced Manderley of *Rebecca*. One acquaintance suggested that I re-read *Macbeth* before going. True, the production's title originates from act 2, scene 2 of *Macbeth* when, after committing regicide, the eponymous murderer relays the bloody deed and his own horror to his wife: "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep' — the innocent sleep" (*Macbeth*, 2.2.33-34; Shakespeare 1997). Just because the production gives a titular nod to the bard's work (as does Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, for instance), it is neither a contemporary post-mortem nor postmodern staging of *Macbeth*.

If you've read the reviews and scanned the internet for its textual buzz, then you know that *Sleep No More* is not your traditional theater-going experience. Confined (a choice word!) to five or six floors of an old building or two, the spectators roam and prowl with their plague doctor-esque masks, choosing to investigate the rooms on any of the floors, follow "actors," and remain silent all the while. (We got busted for our utterances in the stairwell by one of the shadow-enforcers when I failed to understand my companion's finger-spelling through the mask.) To say the hallways and rooms are dimly lit would be an understatement. Hallways are marked only by candles in the corners to show the contours of your path, which was not as disorienting as it could have been (although a twenty year old on some kind of chemically altering substance might beg to differ). With the music industry's chalky-scented smoke, the graveyard and the dead-tree-forest gave an impression of fog. In the crafted room-sets, sometimes the only light one has are those flameless

tea lights, which make snooping in drawers, poking in boxes, or reading book spines more of a tactile than visual experience. Event-goers are encouraged to engage the senses, particularly touch, even as the meager lighting and compulsory soundtracks of electronic and swing interfere with other senses. As for taste? Behind a reception desk/bar, I confess to staying true to Onkel Emile's name for me — *Spitzbübe*, or rascal — by opening a decanter and pouring myself a glass of its contents. Secretly hoping for bourbon or scotch, I tasted discolored, tainted water. (No, I did not down that first swig, and my antics went unnoticed.) Moments later, performers came on the scene, followed by a predictable swarm of voyeurs.

The theatrics of setting and design appealed to my interest in art installations and use of space. The collages and wall art that involved book pages and egg imagery particularly appealed to me. There was an interesting "witch's" herb-drying room whose contents emitted their earthy and musty odors; for some spectators, the witch motif may be adequate for drawing sophomoric parallels to *Macbeth*. In another space, an odd mobile of dozens of headless dolls loomed over an empty crib. The aforementioned hotel reception area was replete with the front desk, faux bar, room keys (bolted!) on their hooks, the telephone booths, a lobby, and a valise storage area. Predictably, this space became the site for more wordless drama between the "actors," whose main genre of action revolved around the bodily magnetism of attraction and repulsion — both with one another and with the paying viewers.

I keep putting the term "actors" in quotation marks because I likened them, with their athleticism and interpretive movements, to a modern dance troupe. There was a meant-to-be intriguing dance between two actors and a door. We commiserated later on (adhering to the rules of silence) that we were more worried about the door. An actor feigned sleep in a large bed, while another one gyrated and rolled around her bed for the masked peeping masses. The former scene required patience from the ticket-holding spectators; one had to watch and wait for change, emphasizing the importance of voyeurism in the *Sleep No More* experience. While "drama" and action are contrived, as in the reality show phenomenon, McKittrick guests lack the editorial aids of elapsed time and must suffer the waiting with the watching. The transparency of the "boudoir demonic possession" scene counts on gathering a large, lingering audience to watch a woman perform self-pleasure, an event that culminates for her not in orgasm, but in becoming the object of so many anonymous gazes. There was another scene that mirrors what I call the "rape shower" of film: a nude male performer huddled in the corner of a shower stall as one lone male onlooker provided him with not only an audience of one, but a towel. Such scenes are typically uncomfortable on film and invite compassion; this one, however, was disquieting in its quiddity as a performance to be observed and its absence of humility or sympathy. One of the most well-executed scenes

was at the ballroom banquet table, where the diners moved in slow, fluid motion as if in some 1940s tableau vivant rendition of Leonardo da Vinci's iconic *Last Supper*. Were there more scenes like that? We could not know: we have not perfected the art of occupying multiple sites at once. Otherwise, these "actors" simulated what they naively perceived to be "sexy" behavior; when they weren't stroking (or suffocating a lover in a tent), they did quite a bit of running and stomping to entice the mob of masked sheep to follow them. As tempting as it was to mimic woolly farm creatures when they passed, I kept silent. (After all, I had been scolded into silence once before.) Nothing shocks me in the realm of art, fiction, or theater anymore, especially when the obvious goal is to shock. Perhaps the production merely borrowed its high-brow reference to imagine disjointed hauntings and sleeplessness and to skip out on cohesion. Moreover, Punchdrunk's *mise en scène* courts an audience familiar with impressionistic, punk-styled lyrics in which words and their haphazard arrangement might have more in common with Dadaist chant; instead of speech acts, deliberate, yet meaningless gestures and actions are the lingua franca of these performers. Their movements and gaze *require* that we watch them. Their bodies silently command, "Watch me. Watch us." We all stalk silently through the McKittrick.

Sleep No More is an event for those who participate daily in the voyeur-exhibitionist dyad: I'm watching you, and I hope someone is watching me. The generation that comes of age in the era of social media, tweets, foursquare, texts, etc. willingly shares its mundane details of day-to-day living as if it were a reality show we're expected to follow. Depending on privacy settings, one can browse anonymously through a friend's posts and photos as well as one's friends' friends' posts and photos. Tweets and wall-posts about one's current mood and rant are made public, soliciting "likes," comments, or other acknowledgments. Today's technology facilitates peeping and unannounced gazing with tools to alert you (or not) of your following. The paradox of social media and technologically enhanced interpersonal interactions enables us to prowl anonymously and to celebrate ours and others' navel-gazing practices.

What would be considered annoying behavior, bordering on stalking, out on the streets and in the workplace is integral to the "interactive" elements of the event. The spectacle of looking down from a balcony into the ballroom of masked visitors proved more interesting than watching "actors" from the troupe. If interaction is what you seek, you can be one of those spectators who hover around an "actor," waiting to be pulled in to some kind of drama. As herds stampeded by, we watched a few masked voyeurs do just that. Watching other masked goers interact was part of the experience. I found myself drawn into this world of watching and seeing: what else could one do? However, I could choose what I would watch and see. Choosing not to follow the techno music and the swarm around the performers, I nosed around odd office spaces and watched other aimless

masked wanderers. *Sleep No More* says something about desire. Many of the masked spectators desired communion with the silent actors through the gaze and even the body — but an elusive one at that. Lone "actors" fostered that desire with a nudge and a hand to follow him or her for a private moment. Voyeurism often cultivates expectations to be noticed and selected from the crowd: "I have been watching you; now, notice me." Finally, scanning the internet, we discover that, after the event, there is a desire to interpret and understand *Sleep No More*: to talk and post about it.

Conceptually, the success of the phenomenon that is *Sleep No More* results from its manipulation of space and time. Without knowing the precise square footage of the production, I would say that the troupe's business and social acumen acknowledges the antsy, attention deficient nature of its pleasure-seeking-mobile-voyeurist-audience and offers an illusion that there is just "not enough time" to see everything. There is no narrative, but instead a collage of scenes (human and inanimate) to experience. Experience is the key here because it celebrates the self and its affective navel-gazing tendencies. The repeating taxidermy, the repetition of beds and tubs, the variations on altars, the abandoned offices, the maze of thin branches, and other elements of design create a dreamscape in which each room presents itself as a new landscape for exploration, rather than the respite of sleep. Design, combined with the "actors'" anguished interactions, serve the mood, engage the senses, and trick the naïve mind into thinking it all must mean something. That's the gimmick of *Sleep No More*: reviewers and goers want to believe that there are "real" parallels to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, so they return to the McKittrick (with their wallets!) to figure it all out. An audience that rejects didacticism *can* be at the center of *Sleep No More*'s experience because the experience will mean what the spectator makes it mean. Such a production counts on individual narcissism. But these days, performances and spectacles do not have to mean anything. Isn't it just another "tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (*Macbeth*, 5.5.25-27)?

References

Shakespeare, William. 1997. *Macbeth*. In *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: Norton.