

# Crossing the Line: Liminality and Lies in *Sleep No More*

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## Abstract

Focusing on the author's experience in "the hut" during a New York performance of *Sleep No More*, this essay discusses the way in which boundaries are crossed, not only those distinguishing Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the Tom Waits version of "The Children's Story," but also those separating performer and audience.

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I pull in resolution; and begin  
To doubt the equivocation of the fiend  
That lies like truth. — William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 5, scene 5

Of everything I could say about *Sleep No More*, I would primarily concur that it's more of a haunted house than a theatrical production. The performers — who only barely qualify as characters — are themselves an extension of a moody mise en scène, an environment in which the audience is truly embedded. Employing one of the oldest theatrical conventions, the mask, the production mutes the audience. Masked in a white void, the audience becomes part of the background — and a cyclorama is still a part of the production. By sublimating the audience while including it as a distinct aspect, the production makes the audience an extension of the performance, or better yet, another incarnation of the non-Macguffin posited by Alice Dailey in her contribution to this cluster. The McKittrick needs patrons, just as a film needs spectators, or a murder needs witnesses. And no viewing experience of Hitchcock's *Psycho* is quite complete without the shrieking jump of the woman seated in front of you. The macabre and horrific requires a group experience; the reactions of others set us off, making disturbing sensations both more palatable and more incendiary.

On a much more basic level, any performance, by definition, requires an audience. A grandmother alone in a room reading in silence is not a performance; that same grandmother reading aloud to her grandchildren is — in every pause for effect. The audience shapes the performance, even as the performer shapes the audience's reaction. Yet even in live theater, we as

an audience have been conditioned to ignore the other observers between us and the proscenium; we look over their heads and focus on the stage. An immersion experience such as *Sleep No More* allows no such denial and even offers the rare opportunity for closer contact, for communion at the fragile liminality between performer and observer.

My private experience happened in "the hut," in the back of the forest labyrinth on the fifth floor. As I approached through the wire-and-bramble fence, I saw a window open in the hut, through which I could see a young woman rocking in a chair. I came around to the steps leading up to the hut and noticed two or three other masked audience members watching. As the door opened, the woman stepped out onto the staircase. As usual, I had a notebook in one hand and a pen the other, and so I probably stood out. The woman came straight down to me and took my hand. Leading me into the hut as the other masked ciphers watched, she closed the door behind me, took off my mask, and looked into my eyes, saying, "That's better." She had me sit and served me a cup of tepid tea, asking if I wanted sugar or milk. I nodded to the sugar. She handed me the tea, but then bent over me and spooned the tea into my mouth, serving me like an invalid, an experience I found extremely disconcerting and discomfiting. After a few spoonfuls, she took the tea away, sat, and told me a story taken from Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*:

Once upon a time there was a poor child  
with no father and no mother  
and everything was dead  
and no one was left in the whole world  
everything was dead

and the child went on search day and night  
and since nobody was left on the earth  
he wanted to go up into the heavens  
and the moon was looking at him so friendly  
and when he finally got to the moon  
the moon was a piece of rotten wood

and then he went to the sun  
and when he got there  
the sun was a wilted sunflower  
and when he got to the stars  
they were little golden flies

stuck up there like the shrike  
sticks 'em on a blackthorn

And when he wanted to go back down to earth  
the earth was an overturned piss pot  
And he was all alone  
he sat down and he cried  
and he is there till this day  
all alone. (Büchner 2000-2001)<sup>1</sup>

Even in the source material, this is a story within a story, told by a grandmother to children at bedtime. Büchner's unfinished work, "completed" by multiple posthumous collaborators, has become one of the most-produced German plays. Americans generally get introduced to stories from older cultures through adaptation, and *Woyzeck* surfaced most recently in a production by Robert Wilson and Tom Waits. I suspect that the producers found this text via the recorded Waits version, since so much of *Sleep No More* is a club sandwich of stacked allusions.

*Woyzeck* has little in common with *Macbeth*; to say that both stories involve a murder is to say that both *Donnie Darko* and *Mean Girls* are about high school. Yet *Sleep No More* borrows from both, understanding that appropriation is popularization — casting an ever-widening net, reaching devotees of the source while developing fanatics for the new. Shakespeare took Romeo from Ovid centuries before *West Side Story*. Academics might disdain teenagers who miss the *Taming of the Shrew* latticework behind *10 Things I Hate About You*, but the kids aren't really missing anything. A five year old isn't wrong to laugh at "What's Opera, Doc?" just because he's never heard of Wagner. The indoctrinated just get to experience an additional level. Perhaps the insistence that *Sleep No More* is a *Macbeth* derivation is the ultimate Macguffin, a stratagem to get an audience in the door.

Here, the *Woyzeck*/Waits mashup is what I would like to call a double Macguffin with cheese. The mashup doesn't matter, but it leads us to Waits, which itself isn't included, yet melts into the experience of the environment, like a fog machine that you smell without seeing smoke. Remember, this is a haunted house, and we're being led down the forest path to receive a communion only tangentially related to text. The most memorable *Macbeth* I've seen was in Malta, performed in Maltese, a language equal parts Arabic and Italian. I couldn't understand a word of it, and it was absolutely terrifying.

The Waits allusion feeds the *Sleep No More* aesthetic. The tone and timbre of Waits's version of "Children's Story" is trash-can-lid clanky and world-wearily desultory, playing perfectly to the

tone of the McKittrick Hotel. If Hitchcock were alive today, he'd be hiring Waits and Brennan to score his films.

In the hut, as the lone woman performed for me alone, she was accompanied by a different music — a dark, brooding, wordless score that was played through a sound system and could be heard throughout the floor. While only I could hear her voice, the crowd gathered outside the hut could hear the building violent intensity of the music. As she began, the woman was smiling, but as the music brooded, her smile faded and she intensified her gaze without raising her voice. Upon reaching the end of the story — the soundtrack breaking with a visceral crack — she quickly clutched the back of my neck with a crooked arm, pulling herself into me as if for a violent kiss, and whispered bleakly into my ear: "Blood will have blood, they say."

Bone-chilling.

She pulled away, looked at me, and stroked my face tenderly. She put my mask back on and we stood. She opened the door, and a crowd of masked figures watched as I descended the steps alone.

"Blood will have blood, they say," is of course a misquotation of *Macbeth*, act 2, scene 4: "It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood," but I'm less interested in the text — *Woyzeck* by way of Waits, smashed up against *Macbeth*— than in the liminal experience. Crossing the threshold into the hut, I also crossed the line from audience to performer. Others saw me enter and waited for my exit, imagining what they were missing. My audience continued to grow as they waited outside. Our isolation could be interpreted in a number of story-honored archetypes: a crone takes in a weary traveler for a meal; a witch takes in a drifter to eat him; a courtesan takes a man inside and draws the curtain.

On an even deeper level, inside the hut I was also performing for an audience of one. Even as she performed for me, I was being asked for more: she had a text and a set of prescribed behaviors, but I was on alien ground, unable to act naturally, following the "audience" rule of silence. At first, I swallowed a laugh, a natural human reaction when faced with nervousness. After she neutered me with her tea-spooning, I sat still for her story, yet as it progressed I felt her drawing a performance out of me. As a trained performer myself, I tend to rise to the occasion when asked, and as an overly-trained audience member, I'm far less reactive to the in-your-face bizarre than, I suspect, this young performer's average nightly victim. I found myself returning her gaze, her intensity, and could feel the collective energy in the room congeal as if we were conducting a séance. We were working the scene together, listening to the rise in the music, painfully aware of the spectators just outside the door.

Here we are at the door together, standing at the threshold, each of us performer and audience at once, and alternating, like subatomic particles and waves. It is this give-and-take, this elusive

truce that illuminates the shifting balance of power between opposites and that proves their mutual reliance, what Buddhists call dependent co-arising.

This intensity of performance is uncommon today. We lack the personal encounter in film, television, and online viewing, all of which remove even the social construct of the audience. Watching TV alone becomes as solitary and unfulfilling — albeit momentarily titillating — as masturbation. If watching TV alone is a hamburger and a live performance in a traditional theater is a lavish steak dinner with friends, what was happening to me in the hut was something akin to eating carpaccio off the nude body of a lover: extremely intimate, overwhelmingly satisfying, and tinged with the possibility for revulsion. It's more than most are accustomed to.

In *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook speaks of the audience this way:

The actor's work is never for an audience, yet always is for one. The onlooker is a partner who must be forgotten and still constantly kept in mind: a gesture is statement, expression, communication and a private manifestation of loneliness — it is always what Artaud calls a signal through the flames — yet this implies a sharing of experience, once contact is made. (Brook 1968, 51)

If performance is a shared experience, the onlooker's prejudice and limitations shape that experience, even for the performer herself. Peter Brook has another observation, far more cutting: "If good theatre depends on a good audience, then every audience has the theatre it deserves" (Brook 1968, 21).

In thinking of the seam, that imaginary line on which performance hinges, I'm reminded of the mythologist Lewis Hyde's work in *Trickster Makes This World*, a book that compares convincingly the role of the trickster in mythology across cultures with the attitudes and motivations of art in the modern era. Hyde states, "There is a long tradition that locates art in that trickster shadowland where truth and falsity are not well differentiated" (Hyde 1998, 78).

It is an illusion that I am the audience; it is an illusion that this woman is performing for me. The truth is something more simple — we are a man and a woman alone in a room together. She has her script, and I have mine — the convention that I should act a certain way, stick to the rules, keep quiet, and play along. It is an illusion that has become truth through repetition and cultural conditioning.

Or, as Nietzsche said, "Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they are illusions" (Nietzsche 1977, 47).

"Blood will have blood, they say," she whispered in my ear, full of breath. She caught me by surprise as she pulled close to me, a thrill of equal parts fright and sexual tension. As she

looked at me, I truly thought she would kiss me. She didn't, and the following caress felt awkward and restrained. Was the wedding ring on my hand itself a performance? Or, for us both, did the rules of society dictate our behavior, even in that isolated room? And yet the sexual charge was unmistakable. When does a stranger ever caress you as such? On the subway? A waitress at a restaurant? At a strip club? In no strip club have I ever shared such intimacy as the two of us did, alone, locked in dual performance.

As I left the hut, I slowly crossed the disintegrating threshold, descended the steps under the watchful eyes of the other audience members, then slowly receded into anonymity as their eyes were drawn back to the woman. I also looked back at her, through my mask, from the void I'd rejoined, and she stood on the porch and looked after me, or perhaps just blankly into the distance. I couldn't help it: I stood still and returned her gaze, until — doubtless following a musical cue— she went back into her hut and closed the door.

Blood *will* have blood. Or so they say.

### Notes

1. The text of the story provided here is Waits's version, not a word-for-word transcription of the text used in *Sleep No More*; see [http://www.tomwaits.com/songs/song/299/Childrens\\_Story/](http://www.tomwaits.com/songs/song/299/Childrens_Story/).

## References

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