

# What's Missing in *Sleep No More*

Sophia Richardson, Oberlin College

Lauren Shohet, Villanova University

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## Abstract

This essay explores dialectics of absence and presence in *Sleep No More*, considering how the production plays with fullness and vacancy in its source, its audience, its theatrical space, and its program book. Inverting the tradition of masked performers by instead masking the audience, *Sleep No More* thematizes the obscuring and revealing inherent to performance and particularly to adaptive performances. Insofar as *Macbeth* itself is a play haunted by absence, *Sleep No More* multiplies the resonant echoes of what is not quite there in ways that illuminate larger operations of adaptation and of drama.

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The Punchdrunk *Sleep No More* unfolds as a continuous game of absence and presence. Theater-goers are invited to wander through a vast maze of rooms where the real is insistently present, every nook and cranny meticulously filled with period objects. Shelves are littered with kerosene lamps and candles, the dining room is furnished with antique chairs and china, and the doctor's waiting room displays a collection of old magazines fanned out on the table. Yet these rooms also emphasize at their edges gaps and absences: a corridor opens into a skeletal forest swirling with blue fog; a ballroom vanishes as trees roll in. The sets have no contiguity, so the spectator moves from indoor to outdoor, domestic to commercial, effecting transitions by displacing her own body through empty corridors or stairwells, unescorted by the narrative or theatrical machinery that sequences scenes in more conventional forms. Often the visitor finds herself alone, in a gap between staged spectacles, unnerved by the demand to choose her own next step. At other times, caught up with one of the bands of theater-goers that collect around actors rushing to execute different scenes in different rooms, quite the opposite ensues. The experience is at once isolating and communal, at once meta-theatrical and immersive.

*Macbeth* itself is a play haunted by absence. The ambiguous status of the witches' prophecy — prediction? description? instigation? — and Macbeth's strategic mystification of his own agency

in regard to the sisters' weird words render what is not there, or may not be there, the engine of the plot. Discussing *Sleep No More* in a journal of "Shakespeare and Appropriation," whose contributors largely agree that *Macbeth* is not centrally present in the Punchdrunk production, is thus intriguingly consonant with the play itself. *Sleep No More's* wordless scenes of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth washing away their deeds, for example, may import elements into the *Macbeth* story that are not fully underwritten by the Shakespearean script. But the Shakespearean *Macbeth* homologously appropriates the "scripts" of the witches' words, expeditiously arriving at the "horrid image" of becoming a murderer within twenty lines of hearing he has been named Cawdor (*Macbeth*, 1.3.125) and claiming that the spectral dagger "marshals" him "the way that [he] was going" already (2.1.42). Protracted engagement with *Macbeth* may be missing from *Sleep No More*, but both *Sleep No More* and *Macbeth* invite, and repay, examination of what's missing.

### Absence-presence on the Page and Stage

The printed program booklet for *Sleep No More* locates generative absence-presence in spaces that readers cannot quite plumb, in its sewn bindings and unopenable double pages. The booklet offers a "Relationship Diagram" of its characters, spread over facing pages (Souvenir Program 2011, 15-16), with human characters taken from *Macbeth* on the left-hand page, the witches plus the non-Shakespearean personnel (ostensibly historical figures, McKittrick Hotel "staff," and staff of the "King James Sanatorium") on the right. The lineation that should lead to the issue of Malcolm and of Duncan, like the line that should connect back to forebearers of Nurse Christian Shaw, provocatively disappears into the bound gutter, pointing toward but not connecting with the genealogy on the facing page. This places the links that we can't quite see — stitched into the binding that holds things together, but blocks the readerly gaze — in the center, provocatively resonating with the relationship between adaptation and source, between *Sleep No More* and *Macbeth*, Hitchcock, du Maurier, and *The Newes from Scotland*.<sup>1</sup> The distinctive physical structure of the booklet also lures its users into a codicological counterpart of theatrical voyeurism, both hiding and revealing what's inside. The booklet doubles many of its pages, conventionally folding them, then cutting the doubled pages at top and bottom but leaving them uncut, unusually, on the side. This yields paired sheets that we cannot open out, but into whose facing versos we can peer. These versos are inked blood-red. Hereby the booklet visibly saturates its hidden pages, and, with its doubled leaves, produces a tactile density that lets us feel the extra pages, despite their absence of words and refusal of full access.

In performance, the actors' elusiveness, as they rush about in a perpetual game of hide-and-seek, depends on a congruent dialectic of presence and absence, the expectation of one inflecting

the momentary experience of the other. The performances foreground physical presence: actors' bodies, their interactions, and their limits. The performers dress and undress, caress blood-streaked skin, press up against one another, and reach out toward audience members. The performance is overwhelmingly physical, with hardly any speech. Instead, the performers kinetically explore their own bodies (Lady Macbeth gazes perplexed at her hands, grasping at her extremities as she repeatedly washes them) and engage one another's physical presence (coming together and pulling apart, lifting and spinning and fighting). And yet the actors are also *not* there. They run away, they disappear through doors or behind the crowd of white-masked voyeurs. Audiences' struggles to find and keep up with performers can make the actors' threatened absence the defining feature of their presence. And some of the production's characters are *most* present when they are absent: the personalized artifacts left in uninhabited rooms index some of the characters more definitively than do their wordless and fleeting appearances.

The performance sets up as well a disquieting experience of presence-absence for spectators, as it plays with our sense of our own embodiment. The experience of *Sleep No More* vacates the expected environments that allow quotidian navigation of space. As theater-goers step past the ticket collector into a twisting, nearly lightless corridor, they become dramatically aware of somatic conditions. Almost entirely deprived of sight, we grope about, reaching out to locate ourselves in space, running hands along fabric-lined walls to keep our clumsy bodies in line. Without normal cues to guide proprioception, we blind spectators (this paradoxical phrase captures the experience rather well) find ourselves spatially dislocated. Defamiliarizing the relationship between spectator and environment continues in the disorienting elevator journey that brings audiences from the speakeasy to the primary performance spaces. Lacking floor-selection buttons, the elevator seems to move of its own accord, eventually opening onto an unnumbered, unlabeled floor. An empty box in an empty shaft, the elevator removes the indicators that usually tell us where we are. Once discharged from the elevator, we continue to find our navigational tools disrupted by the unpredictable blocking and unblocking of doorways throughout the night, which rearrange and transform space.

Spectators' disorientation and heightened awareness of somatic presence also come with a certain alienation from the body. The obligatory white plastic masks distance us from ourselves and also make us more aware of the body's boundaries. The sweaty piece of plastic pressing up against the face constricts peripheral vision, affecting perception and navigation. Furthermore, the physical barrier of the mask separates the spectator's body from the exterior world, and the production's injunction that prohibits us from intruding audibly on the performance removes us from full presence in the scenes. Finally, the actors' ignoring of the throngs of surrounding

spectators, while carefully not bumping into them, further erases the audience's somatic immediacy. The performance allows us to be everywhere — we can poke about in private bedchambers and hospital wards, we can move through space and time in physically impossible ways — yet our presence is also denied.

### Absence-presence in Adaptation and Re-mediation

A banquet disrupted by a ghost: a provocative figure for the absence-presence that is adaptation. In *Macbeth's* banquet scene, Banquo's ghost is discomfiting and generative, inviting response to a source that is not quite there, visible to none of the guests at the communal feast that the ghost disrupts. Locating the banquet hall on the ground floor of the "McKittrick Hotel," *Sleep No More* makes the banquet scene foundational, at least spatially, to this production. In *Macbeth*, the spectral masque of Banquo's heirs, "a show of eight Kings and Banquo, the last with a glass in his hand" (4.1.111), stages a multiplication of royal progeny, images made infinite in a mirror. Like the banquet scene, this offers both an example of adaptive re-mediation and a figure for it.

Congruent with the inset and self-multiplying iterations produced by *Macbeth's* deploying a mirror within a dumb-show, within what may be a vision, within a play, the banquet in *Sleep No More* multiplies the forms and media it invokes. Performed in slow motion, lit by strobes, the *Sleep No More* banquet codes as cinematic: slow motion renders live action as if it were filmed, and the intermittently illuminated scenes look like film stills, or perhaps zootropic machinery run at an off-speed. This spectacle of re-mediation, film minus celluloid, stimulates our consideration of relationships among the genres contributing to the production: Shakespearean drama, Hitchcockian film, gothic novel, museum collection. The cinematic spectacle embodied in the room affects spectators' sense of time, continuity, and how these play out in different media re-mediations. Temporally, adaptations locate us in both the time of the source text and of the adapted text; *Sleep No More's* slow motion puts us in the two different time frames of our own somatic experience, which unrolls at its accustomed pace, and of the staged action before us. The discontinuity created by strobe flashes likewise suggests a mode of interaction between sources and appropriations. Discontinuity evokes the inherent gaps between call and response, and the intermittent illumination makes perceptible those moments when action and light intersect (and emphasizes the gaps between those intersections), just as we perceive in distinctive ways the intermittent moments when source and adaptation closely coincide (and notice when they don't). When the *Sleep No More* banquet transforms from feast to orgy, it emphasizes the promiscuous, generative response of richly, perhaps transgressively, dynamic adaptation.

Inverting the tradition of masked performers by masking the audience instead, *Sleep No More* thematizes the obscuring and revealing, the absence and presence that are inherent to performance and particularly to adaptive performances. In the dramatic banquet that is *Sleep No More*, we are the ghosts — unreliably present, partially detached from space, time, and our own bodies. In *Macbeth*, the strange semi-presence of Banquo's ghost makes him a pivotal figure motivating much of the play. Is that not what audiences always do, offering as we do the pretext for the night's work to unfold?

### Notes

1. This last is a 1591 publication proposed in the program booklet as a source for *Sleep No More*. From it, the program takes an account of the witchcraft trial of Agnes Sampson (Souvenir Program 2011, 30, 39), as well as proper names of persons and places used in the production and its para-texts.

## References

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

Souvenir Program. 2011. *Sleep No More*.