

# Introduction

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## Abstract

This introduction to the cluster of essays analyzing and assessing *Sleep No More* as theatrical experience focuses on the centrality of place to the New York production.

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*(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*

Punchdrunk first staged *Sleep No More* in London in 2003, and a second production was mounted in 2009 in Brookline, Mass., where it ran for three months. The current iteration opened in New York City in March of 2011 and has been extended indefinitely. Whether it's fair to refer to these distinct productions by the same name isn't quite clear; while the performance principles and the general subject matter have carried over, the cast, the script, and of course the venue itself have changed from iteration to iteration. Site is especially important to Punchdrunk's work — as Artistic Director Felix Barrett has repeatedly noted, "it's the space that builds the show" ("Felix Barrett" 2007).<sup>1</sup> But to say that *Sleep No More* is site specific is merely to touch on the matter, since it might be argued that the site *is* the performance. On my first visit to *SNM*, I spent half an hour exploring the set before I happened upon a cast member. Because performers follow a carefully planned and timed circuit as they enact the storyline in three cycles during the course of each night's performance, a visitor could, conceivably, see *SNM* without ever encountering an actor.

The relationship between the performance and the space it inhabits also involves the surrounding community, beginning with the building's recent history as a venue. As part of the widespread and often elaborate marketing initiative surrounding *Sleep No More*, the company has developed an alternative history of the location as a luxury hotel that was built in 1939 but closed almost immediately, on the eve of World War II — and this history, which is central to the project's psychological geography and *mise en scène*, circulates well beyond the company's immediate web presence and promotional material.<sup>2</sup> The site's actual history is more fraught, at least in recent years. Beginning in the late 1990s, the building served as the central address in a decade-long run of mega-clubs that operated along West 27th street, before momentum wound down amidst a string

of overdoses and deaths. The current popularity of *Sleep No More* recalls the building's past as a nightlife location with a full social and cultural profile, generated in part by cameo appearances, celebrity audience members, and references across popular media and television. The show is not merely theater or immersive theater; it is also a destination and a marker of social orientation, which highlights its specific relationship to cultural space and the cultural trends that have sustained it. Ticket sales have been so strong that a limited engagement has become semi-permanent, and the site is also developing a life of its own beyond the play. The McKittrick Hotel now routinely hosts holiday events — meals and parties — independent of the performance itself.

Adding to the production's presumably unanticipated (d)evolution into a kind of nightclub is an accidental resonance with New York City's frontrunner role in nightlife locations that celebrate and fetishize the recovered past. The world of the play, from the Manderley bar to the candy shop and taxidermist, is of a piece with the speakeasy aesthetic of bars like Little Branch and Death + Company, and with the entrenched hipster fascination with sleeve garters, mustachios, and apothecaries. Though hardly more predictable than its critique, this fascination is the hallmark of a generation whose patronage of *Sleep No More* has made it profitable.<sup>3</sup> The production's engagement with the past reflects and performs a defining cultural interest and anxiety in which the past, imagined as a familiar, stable alternative to the present, turns out to be alien and frail. It is a past that is both recovered, in the sense that it is revisited in progress, but also recovered *as* past, marked already with the passage of time that has rendered it yellowed and dusty. Although we can realize the fantasy of returning to the past in *Sleep No More's* elaborate and exquisite reproduction, where we can explore it and exist in it, we cannot be fully present there: the distance between the spectators and the performers, as many of the essays here will argue, turns out to be unbridgeable. The production is populated by ghosts, either ours or theirs.

The site transforms the text of the play into a physical space, where it is further abstracted and remediated, construed in the production's material expressions of *Macbeth's* anxious psychologies: a sanitarium, specimen jars, patient charts, studies, and notes, all part of a world familiar from popular imagination (Hitchcock) but, as Glenn Ricci discusses in his contribution to this cluster, alien in its sounds and hues. As an appropriation, *Sleep No More* is fascinating for its vision, and for the confidence its designers have in the production as a reading of the play. Paul Stacey, assistant director of the 2009 production, notes that "every line of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is embedded in the multiple languages — sound, light, design, and dance — of *Sleep No More*" (Stacey 2009). As Sophia Richardson and Lauren Shohet argue, issues of presence and absence in *Macbeth* register

richly and variously in Punchdrunk's rendering, visible or implied in everything from masks to stage space to the souvenir program's binding and margins.

As a theater experience, however, *Sleep No More* is notable more for its immersive design and for its increasing prominence as an event that transcends theater: *Macbeth*, as Alice Dailey and Tom Cartelli observe, turns out to be a Macguffin. Popular response to the production has inclined toward exuberance, if not veneration, and audiences tend to recognize a defining shift in *Sleep No More*'s "immersive" staging: standing, walking, and actively choosing rather than sitting passively, spectators are integrated with performance in a stage space that sometimes mingles different theater locations and sometimes dissolves altogether the boundaries that separate them: *locus*, *platea*, and audience space are the same. The specifically academic response, by contrast, tends to challenge or doubt the production's radical pretensions, especially its claims to immersive experience. As Pamela Rader and Sivan Grunfeld discuss, the elaborate, even ritualized process by which visitors are introduced to the space can be both over- and under-whelming. And as Colette Gordon, J. D. Oxblood, and Sean Bartley argue, the rules and boundaries that distinguish and separate performer from audience member and audience space from performance space, though disguised, are intact. Visitors are free to explore, but only as far as stewards and locked doors — or the unwritten but understood conventions of theater itself — will allow. For popular audiences, the shift is fundamental and defining; for academics, it is a powerful gesture that turns out to be a pulled punch.

The essays gathered here offer several takes, sometimes overlapping but each unique, on the production and on the site, and on how audiences and performers inhabit both. Sivan Grunfeld and Pamela Rader frame the discussion with general overviews. Colette Gordon, J. D. Oxblood, and Thomas Cartelli explore and theorize the erotics of *Sleep No More*, with a focus on the one-on-one encounters that have come to define the experience among the production's more serious followers. Alice Dailey, Sean Bartley, Glenn Ricci, and Sophia Richardson and Lauren Shohet consider *Sleep No More*'s various methods of producing and maintaining meaning within and across its source texts, from *Macbeth* to Hitchcock to popular music from the 1930s to today. In theorizing Punchdrunk's immersive intertext, these essays offer a range of critical responses to a theatrical phenomenon that is currently positioned to redefine what is possible for and expected by popular audiences.

## Notes

1. Barrett has offered many similar observations. See for instance, a piece published at [broadway.com](http://broadway.com) in November 2011 (Barrett 2011).

2. The production's website offers a "hotel history": "completed in 1939, the McKittrick Hotel was intended to be New York City's finest and most decadent luxury hotel of its time. Six weeks before opening, and two days after the outbreak of World War II, the legendary hotel was condemned and left locked, permanently sealed from the public. Until now . . ." (<http://sleepnomorenyc.com/hotel.htm>). Elaborations are also available elsewhere; see, for instance, [scoutingny.com](http://www.scoutingny.com)'s photo shoot, which goes to great lengths to substantiate the pseudo-history: <http://www.scoutingny.com/?p=3816> [accessed 23 December 2012].
3. See Mark Greif's 2010 *New York Magazine* article, "What Was the Hipster?" (Greif 2010); a monograph also appeared that year under the same title.

### Permissions

Figure 1. *Sleep No More* poster. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (requires login).

Figure 3. © Thomas Kaine. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (requires login).

Figure 4. (l-r) Nicholas Bruder as Macbeth and Sophie Bortolussi as Lady Macbeth with audience member © Yaniv Schulman. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (requires login).

Figure 5. (l-r) Kelly Bartnik, Jordan Morley and Tori Sparks © Matthew Craig. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (requires login).

Figure 6. Matthew Oaks (center) with audience members © Yaniv Schulman. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (requires login).

Figure 7. © Yaniv Schulman. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (requires login).

Figure 8. (l-r) Nicholas Bruder and Sophie Bortolussi with audience members © Robin Roemer Photography. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (requires login).

## References

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