

Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*: Masks, Unmaskings, One-on-Ones

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Abstract

This essay examines *Sleep No More* in the context of interactive entertainment in contemporary culture, with a focus on the production's much discussed "one-on-one" encounters between performers and audience members.

Oddly enough, given its painstakingly detailed physical setting, in which one moves along with other bodies and occasionally finds oneself not only in close, unbounded proximity to the actors themselves but also engaged in brief encounters with them, *Sleep No More* resembles nothing so much as an opened up, interactive digital environment or alternate reality game (ARG), drawing on some of the same logic of role-playing scenarios derived from established texts/plays/films — as, in this instance, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, du Maurier's novel *Rebecca*, and Hitchcock's film version of the same (see Grant 2011). It also draws, of course, on the broader cultural vogue for what used to be called "audience participation," which has its avant-garde roots in theater events such as *Dionysus 69*, but which has heretofore been superseded by the ever-proliferating range of/rage for reality TV programming. Indeed, though *Sleep No More*'s British creators, Punchdrunk, erstwhile fabricators of immersive theatrical versions of texts like Poe's "Masque of the Red Death," may have initially seen themselves as postmodern avatars of groundbreaking avant-gardists like The Performance Group, they now find themselves purveyors of the hottest off-Broadway ticket in New York and the preferred focus of largely twenty-something audiences competing to experience (and testify online to) *SNM*'s notorious "one-on-ones." Punchdrunk's sponsor, Emersive, has in turn mastered an insider-internet marketing strategy that arguably has closer ties to the commercially and celebrity-driven NYC club-scene — and of branding practices of shows that have become semi-permanent fixtures in New York (BlueMan Group, for example) — than to anything traditionally associated with experimental theater. The tripartite leadership of Emersive — Jonathan Hochwald and Arthur

Karpati, whose backgrounds include real estate development and touring concert promotion, and Randy Weiner, managing partner of "The Box," a late-night club with outposts in NYC and London's Soho whose website shares both the same format and pitch-perfect pretensions as the *Sleep No More*/McKittrick Hotel website — claims to have formed Emursive "to create immersive experiences in extraordinary places" and further claims that their first production, *Sleep No More*, is "the most monumental immersive installation ever presented in New York" (Souvenir Program 2011, 6).¹ No doubt it is. It also promises to be the most permanent. With its origins traceable to London 2003, and its revival to Boston 2009, *Sleep No More* opened in New York City on 7 March 2011, and so long as it continues to be all-but-sold-out one month in advance of current performances, the production shows no sign of closing any time soon. Indeed, a call has gone out on the date of this writing (10 July 2012) for Male/Female Professional Dancers for auditions to be held 18-19 July 2012, a sure sign that we are in for a very *longue duree*.

Why, then, my apparent sarcasm? Shouldn't we celebrate the success and longevity of so innovative and interactive a project/production? Although I found my own experience of *Sleep No More* almost always intriguing and at times deeply compelling, I cannot summon up the kind of enthusiasm for the project of *SNM*'s online acolytes, which informs even W. B. Worthen's remarkably generous recent essay on the subject in *Theatre Journal* (Worthen 2012). Possibly because it seems to me too gimmicky. Possibly because of my aversion to role-playing elevator operators, nightclub hostesses, and bartenders who insist on pretending that I'm a guest at a 1930s hotel. Possibly because I feel baited into believing that there is more in the project's intense but elusive performances than meets the eye. (I *know* there's much more than my eye will ever meet in *Sleep No More*'s inspired and richly-detailed physical sets and settings.) And possibly because I see *Macbeth* serving only as an occasion around which so much that is decidedly not *Macbeth* circulates, so overwhelmed is the Scottish play in this oblique retelling by film noir-ish understandings and pretensions, imagery drawn from Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) and Kubrick's earlier haunted hotel sh(l)ocker, *The Shining* (1980), and Hitchcockian plots, miasmas, mysteries, minutiae, and soundtracks drawn from *Rebecca* (1940) and (as Worthen notes), *Vertigo* (1958). Fan as I am of the collisions of high and low, the esoteric and the vulgar, A-grade theater and B-level movies orchestrated by New York's Wooster Group, it isn't *Sleep No More*'s mixing and mashing and merging that underwhelms me as much as its variable melodramatizing, literalizing, and sentimentalizing of *Macbeth*.² (Is staining the bedclothes of the Macduff children with the semblance of blood so decidedly "cool" in today's cultural register that it doesn't also register as maudlin, melodramatic, and sentimental?) I also admittedly recoil at the overwhelming

youthiness of the enterprise, which seems to be made by, for, and about people too young, hip, and good-looking ever to venture far from Williamsburg, the Lower East Side, or London's East End. (Compared to *Sleep No More's* Macbeths, Macduffs, Banquo, and nubile cast of extras, the youthiness of Francesca Annis and Jon Finch in Polanski's 1971 film of *Macbeth* seems positively old-fashioned.) Indeed, *Sleep No More* corresponds to *Macbeth* in some of the same ways that HBO's trendy *True Blood* corresponds to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. That said, I have found enough that is inventive and even intoxicating in *Sleep No More* to want to take the production seriously in what follows, and will concentrate on the promenading audience's required wearing of masks and the *noli me tangere* ethic hovering over, if not always inhibiting, audience/actor interaction, particularly with respect to those notorious "one-on-ones," in all of which I will often be drawing more on the impressions and experiences of other auditors than on my own.

No one who has seen Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* will fail to register the connection between the wearing of masks and the invitation to participate anonymously in forbidden sensual delights. But this being immersive theater undertaken in the arguably decadent but legalistic institutional confines of 2012 USA, the only participation audiences are officially (or publicly) allowed in *Sleep No More* is vicarious, with the "one-on-ones" officially imposing the same constraints on "clients" officially prescribed for lap-dance transactions — which they resemble in more ways than one, particularly with respect to the private rooms to which auditors are invited and where these intensely sought-for encounters take place. (See Sean Bartley's observations, in his contribution to this issue, on the limitations *SNM's* creators have imposed on the experiences of "narrator-visitors," despite their comments to the contrary.) That the one-on-ones promise — and occasionally deliver — more erotically charged experiences to consumers/clients/audiences than are on offer in the more public spaces of the McKittrick Hotel is richly attested to by the abundant comments and anecdotes that may be harvested from online blogs and the like.³

Given the many accounts of one-on-ones I have reviewed, the following is far from normative, but it supplies a fairly complete inventory of what audiences are looking for in such encounters and what the "luckiest" among them receive:

I remembered feeling slighted my first visit that I didn't get any 1 on 1 time with the actors but shit. This time I got FIVE. I was ecstatic for my first one and then they kept coming so I was euphoric!!!

...

My first was with the Nurse (I believe played by Marla Phelan) getting tucked in and closely examined. I was so stoked.

I wandered around and found the Bartender (Sal) and we had a nice moment and he escorted me to the prophecy rave (one of my all time favorites). I then found the incredibly talented Careena Melia and fell in LOVE with her performance. Then was so lucky to get a 1 on 1 with her as well!! We danced back and forth and she eventually let me into her lair. She removed my mask and we shared potions. She sent me to find the Porter with a message and I hurried off after receiving a kiss on my mask (*squeal*).

I found the Porter (played by Paul Zivcovich) and gave him his letter and received a ring to deliver to Hecate upstairs. He looked at me, held up four fingers, pointed up, and retreated (gave me chills).

Running up stairs I found Hecate and delivered the ring. She smiled, kicked out her chair in the bar, and sat me down next to her supporting her as she eats. She then performed her lip sync which was flawless. She retreated with a new love so I moved on.

After a little wandering around I stumbled upon William Popp as Malcolm and fell in love with his performance. I followed him intently as he then led me to an interrogation room and had a VERY intimate, homoerotic, sexual, hot experience with him, some eggs, and some close encounters in the dark. I walked out a little flustered after he fled, put my mask back on, and continued.

After the banquet I decided to follow Matthew Oaks (?) as Macduff even though he sprinted around many times. Thought I may pass out but kept up well. So was right in the lobby of the McKittrick with him as he discovered deceased Lady Macduff and he pushed past many onlookers to let me hold her with him. It was a beautiful and intimate moment that I loved. (dmoldovan 2012)

Among the many things on display in dmoldovan's account is his craving for intimacy, which seems conjoined, in some respect, to his transforming the hard-to-distinguish, and, for most auditors, anonymous actors into local celebrities. The blogger falls in love with two performances, considers others "flawless" and chilling, but reserves his most heated language for the "VERY intimate, homoerotic, sexual, hot experience" and "close encounters in the dark" sans mask he claims to have had with "William Popp as Malcolm." Given dmoldovan's full narrative, it's clear that he got even

more than he came for, and that what he came for was more of a direct and interactive, as opposed to a performative, intimacy, a sense of sustained personal connection with named actors who also seem to have delegated him smallish roles to play in what could be called the more informal plays-within-the-formal-production.

Another account — which in this case comes from one of the most talented students and student-actors I have ever taught (let's call her Rosalind) — takes a rather different approach to the quest for one-on-ones, but confirms dmoldovan's representation of their erotic potential and, in some cases, content:

A fellow actor friend, who had already seen the show, urged me to chase after the characters that enticed me. At the performance, taking my friend's advice, I found myself dressing the part. I wore tennis shoes, comfortable clothing, secured my long hair in a ponytail, ate protein for energy. I was ready to win. I sprinted up staircases, pushed past other attendees, and dodged crowds, knowing some actor might take me into a closet. The New York theatre community swaps anecdotes of their time at *Sleep No More* like war stories. I had heard of people being kissed and lured into dark places. Sure enough, the actor (who I think played Banquo) pulled me into a small closet, sat me down, took my mask off, handed me an extremely heavy sword from a coffin, looked me in the eyes, shared some Shakespeare text about a queen and a king, showed me three playing cards, kissed my forehead, put my mask back on, and pushed me out of the closet. I got what I wanted. I left the performance reflecting on my competitive spirit and on my desire to connect with actors in this intimate, performative way. ("Rosalind" 2012)

This account of Rosalind's comparatively more chaste encounter conflates what one would normally assume are two very different forms of *connection*, one defined in terms of intimacy, the other in terms of performativity. A seeming condition for the intimacy of the performative transaction seems to be the removal of the auditor's mask, which, at least on one level, temporarily makes the auditor feel co-equal with the actor, though never to the extent that the actor lets down his own mask by surrendering or suspending the role he is playing in *Sleep No More*. In this sense, one might say that the auditor is experiencing the illusion of an intimacy that is not in fact reciprocal, indeed, that is decidedly one-sided. Oddly enough, this one-sidedness would seem to be enhanced by the temporary loss of the mask itself, which, though it identifies Rosalind as only one of many "faceless" auditors, also allowed her to "act" with an anonymity that could be said to match the actor's effacement by the role he is scripted to play. Once that mask is surrendered, Rosalind's "real face" is exposed to the actor, who, given his dominant role in the transaction (he is, after all, not

only pre-scripted but positioned as the sought-for, desired party), may respond to it as he chooses, *in* character or out, with a chaste kiss on the forehead or more passionate embrace.⁴ Yet Rosalind's comment on having gotten the desired confirmation of her "competitive spirit" in this exchange may well indicate how one-on-ones become more of a two-way street when their performative gamesmanship is registered or acknowledged.

Worthen has called "the masking of the spectators" in *SNM* "the most provocative element of the production," but claims that "unlike the masks in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* [. . .] in *Sleep No More* our masks provide a familiar theatrical anonymity, underwriting the agency to watch though not to act, at least not to act with the legitimate performers [. . .] The mask performs the work of the darkened auditorium and the theatre seat, separating, individualizing, and interiorizing us as a group of spectators" (Worthen 2012, 94-95). But what happens when the masks that initially supply "a familiar theatrical anonymity" begin to underwrite the agency not just to watch but to *act* when the actors themselves remove them, and, as it were, invite auditors to participate in the dance, as they do in the two accounts we have just reviewed? Indeed, the desire to be *unmasked*, to be recognized or acknowledged, if not exactly known, seems to be one of the primary informing motives behind the craving of *SNM*'s fan-base for one-on-ones.

Alternatively, I would submit that the mask may be construed as the defining condition of the audience's participation in a process of role-playing that begins as soon as the masks are handed out. Felix Barrett, co-director (with Maxine Doyle) of *SNM*, claims that "handing out the masks is like assigning seats in an auditorium. It establishes each individual as part of an audience, and creates a boundary between them and the action. The masks create a sense of anonymity; they make the rest of the audience dissolve into generic, ghostly presences, so that each person can explore the space alone." But in also claiming that the masks "allow people to be more selfish and more voyeuristic than they might normally be," and that "[h]idden behind a fictional layer, [auditors] lose some of their inhibitions" (Souvenir Program 2011, 24), Barrett allows for a different range of possibilities to emerge that auditors have shown little reluctance to experience. In this respect, I'd argue that the masks often operate as a license or permit for auditors to see themselves as active participants in *SNM*, and that the much bruited anonymity they enforce is actually the enabling medium of their vicarious experience as unscripted actors or extras in the production itself.⁵

In a brilliant recent essay that has more to say about the interactive claims of promoters of Shakespeare's Globe reconstruction than about *SNM*, Robert Shaughnessy notes that

Interactive performance, particularly in its more media-savvy formats, may be the corollary of a blogging, texting and twittering culture in which everyone has to have their say and

in which no-one can ever really be left alone; but it is born of the desire to restore to, to retrieve within, performance an experience of the immediate, of the authentic, that has within mainstream culture been lost. In conjunction with this runs the desire, at least in theory, to re-empower the spectator so that she is free, or at least freer, to interact with the work as she chooses, no longer its consumer but its co-creator. (Shaughnessy 2012)

Shaughnessy cautionarily adds that "in practice, the rigorous and sometimes coercive stewarding, or policing, of the behaviour of participants in immersive performances means that their freedom of manoeuvre can be quite severely restricted, their range of interactive possibilities relatively limited, and their freedoms more rhetorical than real" (Shaughnessy 2012), a qualification that may apply to the monitoring and shepherding of even the most meandering auditors in *SNM*. However, where the surveillance strategies of the materially based *SNM* — which coordinate the staging of three performance cycles each evening — may imaginably restrict one's ability to explore all that is on offer in the one hundred rooms of the McKittrick Hotel, *Sleep No More* offers its fan-base an unlimited range of digital afterlives in which the generative potential of its auditors may continue to thrive. For if *SNM*, as noted at the start, is an opened up, materialized version of an internet-based ARG, its interactive potential is maximized when its auditors/fan-base choose to repurpose it in terms of its online/gaming source-inspirations. As *Salon.com*'s Drew Grant wrote retrospectively after finding himself unprepared to appreciate fully his physical engagement with *SNM*, "in order to get the full experience of the play I would have had to spend hours unlocking hidden Internet websites and swapping clues on Facebook with other devotees," only somewhat exaggeratedly concluding that "*Sleep No More* is an interactive play that's also a community-sourced Internet game that requires a working knowledge of Greek gods and JavaScript in order to solve it" (Grant 2011).

For my part, I wonder whether conventional binaries such as audience/play really pertain to the immediate experience of *SNM*, and whether the best way to appreciate the project isn't to take Punchdrunk's promotional pretensions literally and accept outright their invitation to "rediscover the childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown" (Souvenir Program 2011, 7). That, after all, seems to be what AndrewAndrew have done (AndrewAndrewTubeTube 2011) — and who could possibly argue against such exuberance?

Notes

1. See the official websites at <http://www.theboxsoho.com> and <http://www.theboxnyc.com>. The Box Soho has been called London's "seediest VIP club," while one of its owners, Simon Hammerstein, describes it as a place of "mystique, mystery and sexual

openness." See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1365849/The-Box-Soho-inside-Britains-seediest-club-enjoyed-Prince-Harry.html>. The Box NYC was voted the best club for remaining anonymous in a *Village Voice* "Best of New York Poll." "Tracy" calls it "a variation of a nightclub & dinner theatre with the most amazing acts I've ever seen. The vibe is voyeuristic, sexy, & usually something that you can't explain unless you've seen it" (<https://foursquare.com/v/the-box/4593be73f964a5204e401fe3>). Like *Sleep No More*, both Box sites are renowned for their abundant instances of celebrity-sightings.

2. Worthen offers an acute assessment of how "surprisingly conventional" *Sleep No More's* "view of dramatic performance" is, one in which "the stage reveals fully formed, organic, psychologically knowable and responsive 'characters' to whom the audience [. . .] respond much as they do to human beings in the social world off the stage" (Worthen 2012, 83).
3. The most exhaustive website devoted to the archiving of responses to, information about, and commentary on *Sleep No More* is "They Have Scorched the Snake" (<http://scorchedthesnake.tumblr.com/archive>).
4. The inequality of what begins to seem a clear-cut power relation is elsewhere evinced in the passivity of unmasked auditors in response to the sexually provocative cues and prompts of *SNM* actors. In the one-on-one experiences of Alex Shaw and Todd Barnes, as recorded and recounted by Bill Worthen, for example, we witness the peculiar awkwardness of auditors who seem to be invited to respond to specific provocations but whose awareness of the passivity conventionally enjoined on auditors prevents them from actively responding (see Worthen 2012, 93-94).
5. See Meg Paradise, "The Aesthetics of Sleep No More" (2011), who writes that "A peculiar thing happens when you dress a group of strangers in identical, expressionless masks. By essentially inviting the audience onto the stage, the masks form a kind of fourth wall, and help maintain a division between performer and viewer. But by stripping you of your identity while maintaining such close proximity to the actors, you take on more of a voyeuristic role in an extremely intimate setting. After all, the story you're watching unfold is rife with violence, nakedness, and all manner of sexual activity" (Paradise 2011).

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