Shakespeare in Immersive Theater:

Atmosphere and Familiarity in *Sleep No More* and *The Donkey Show*

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Expos 20: Why Shakespeare?

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Recent years have seen the rise of a new performance style, sometimes called "interactive" or "participatory" but generally referred to as "immersive" theater. Many if not most examples of this new type of theater are based on classic texts, and adaptations of the plays of William Shakespeare are particularly popular. Examples include dreamthinkspeak's *Who Goes There?* and *The Rest is Silence* (both based on *Hamlet*), Mike Pearson and Mike Brooks's *Coriolan/us* (*Coriolanus*), Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner's *The Donkey Show* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), and Punchdrunk's *The Tempest* (*The Tempest*), *The Firebird Ball* (*Romeo and Juliet*), and *Sleep No More* (*Macbeth*) (Purcell 129-35). Why is Shakespeare so popular in immersive theater? What is it about his plays that makes them particularly suited to this new medium?

The term "immersive theater" covers a wide variety of shows, and thus is difficult to define. "Immersive" and "immersion" in general refer to "absorption in some condition, action, interest, etc." ("Immersion"), and thus in terms of theater to absorption in the world of the production. In her book *Immersive Theatres*, Josephine Machon identifies three central features of all immersive productions: involvement of the audience, prioritization of the sensual world, and significance of space (70). In *Shakespeare and Audience in Practice*, Stephen Purcell expands on this, saying that "spectators are typically given a role which involves physical activity and an element of decision making" (132). In the simplest terms, "immersive theater" refers to productions in which the actors and audience share the same space (hence, the audience is "immersed" in the production), and thus the actor-audience relationship is fundamentally changed. Rather than being confined to a stage, actors move through the audience, in some cases interacting with audience members directly. Thus, audience members play an active role in the production, materializing into what Jacques Rancière has termed "emancipated spectators":

spectators "who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the 'story' and make it their own story" (22), no longer merely passively absorbing what they see.

Despite the style's short history, several Shakespeare and drama scholars have considered the phenomenon of Shakespeare in immersive theater. Most of these critical pieces take the form of reviews of specific productions, often relying heavily on personal experience. As a result, they differ in their approaches and address different issues. For example, William Worthen, in his *Shakespeare Performance Studies*, focuses on how *Sleep No More* specifically uses the text of *Macbeth* to inform everything from plot to choreography to set, rejecting the criticism that Shakespeare is irrelevant to the show and arguing instead that "despite the absence of Shakespeare's words, *Sleep No More* spatializes a familiar and fully 'literary' sense of character" (132). On the other end of the spectrum, in her piece "Pedestrian Shakespeare and Punchdrunk's Immersive Theatre," Colette Gordon argues that *Sleep No More* strips Shakespeare's text of its argument and interest, saying the show is "just a haunted house party" (49). While both Worthen and Gordon are interested in the role that Shakespeare plays in immersive theater, others look at the immersive qualities of the shows and the impacts they have. Purcell surveys several examples and discusses the strategies of each, focusing on the varying degrees of "immersivity" and ultimately arguing that although these shows fail in some respects across the board, they all succeed in captivating the audience in a visceral manner (144). Machon, too, considers the emotional impact of the shows in her *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance*, drawing a distinction between traditional shows in general, which ask the audience to respond intellectually, and immersive shows such as *Sleep No More*, which force an emotional response (90). In sum, these studies tend to analyze *how* immersive shows use Shakespeare's texts or to

give an opinion as to how *well* the texts are used, however no one has yet sought to answer the first-order question of *why* Shakespeare is there in the first place.

This article explores the reasons for Shakespeare's popularity in immersive theater, looking at *Sleep No More* and *The Donkey Show* as representative examples, by considering the relationship between the needs of immersive theater and the features of Shakespeare's original texts. I argue that immersive theater has two basic requirements for its source material—popularity in the world at large and the ability to produce an emotional response—and that Shakespeare's texts are remarkably well-situated to fulfill both these criteria, as they are extremely well-known and possess distinct and vivid atmospheres, and thus are a natural choice for the source material of immersive productions.

I. Two Examples of Shakespeare in Immersive Shakespeare

Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, based mostly on *Macbeth*, is perhaps the most popular immersive theater production to date. After runs in both London and Brookline, MA, the show settled in New York City, where it has been extending its "limited" run since 2011. It is set in "The McKittrick Hotel," a complex of warehouses with six stories containing over one hundred rooms. The audience members (referred to as "guests" of the hotel) are directed first through a pitch black, sharply winding corridor, representing the transition from the outside world to the world of the show, into the Manderley Bar, where the 1930s setting is established, before being let into the show itself. Each person is given a mask and told not to speak, but otherwise has complete freedom to explore the space for up to three hours, as the show cycles through a loop three times (*Sleep No More*).

Audience members are thus very much in control of their experience of the show. One could choose to follow one of the over twenty characters, many of whom run between several floors over the course of one cycle. Conversely, one could instead focus on the space, exploring the various rooms and their intricate details—audience members are invited to pick up objects, read letters, sift through drawers, and even eat and drink. Changes in the film noir-inspired music and lighting indicate when particularly dramatic scenes are taking place, but otherwise the audience are given no clues as to what they "should" be doing or seeing. Given the expanse of the venue, each guest will necessarily miss the majority of the scenes, which serves to make the decision of what to seek out all the more important.

Though the show is firmly rooted in *Macbeth*, the spoken text is nowhere to be found.[1] In fact, the characters do not speak at all. Rather, Shakespeare's characters and dramatic situations are brought to life through dance. "Emotion is really the key driver of this work, and that's why I work predominantly with dancers. I think dance can express humanity more directly than any other art form," Maxine Doyle (choreographer and co-director) explains (Barrett and Doyle 29). However, rather than tossing the text out completely, Doyle carefully analyzes its rhythm and structure to inform her choreography (Barrett and Doyle 29). For example, act one, scene seven of *Macbeth*, in which Lady Macbeth admonishes her husband for his cowardice, is translated into a somewhat violent sequence in which the two characters tumble and toss each other from one end of a bedroom to the other. In Gordon's words, "One could see, feelingly, the emotional arc of the couple's conversation, the seesawing between attraction and repulsion" (45). Thus, Shakespeare is certainly not lost in the production. In fact, according to the assistant director, "Every line of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is embedded in the multiple languages—sound, light, design, and dance—of [*Sleep No More*]" (Gordon 44).

Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner's *The Donkey Show* differs from *Sleep No More* in many respects—most obviously in the fact that it adapted from a comedy rather than a tragedy. At the same time, however, it not only shares the basic features of immersive theater, but also employs similar strategies to incorporate Shakespeare into the medium. Set in "Club Oberon," a single large room with a balcony level, meant to represent a Studio 54-esque night club, it tells the story of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through existing '70s disco songs, including "Don't Leave Me This Way," "We Are Family," and "Never Knew Love Like This Before" (*The Donkey Show*). Though there is a stage in the space, the characters more often run through the crowd, who are invited to dance as though the space were truly a club. Hermia, Helena, Lysander, and Demitrius are now Mia, Helen, Sander, and Demitri, four young patrons of the same club as the audience. The second time I attended the show, during the half hour after the doors open but before the show begins, Demitri approached me, closely followed by Helen, who dragged a male audience member in tow. Helen called out, "Demitri! Aren't you jealous? Look, I'm dancing with this guy!" only to be reproached in an echo of Demetrius's line: "Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit. / For I am sick when I do look on thee" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.1.211-12). The audience is thus made to feel as though they and the characters truly share the same world, that of Club Oberon. The four lovers are simply at the club to dance and have a good time, just as everyone in the audience is. As for the rest of the characters, the mechanicals are condensed into two afro-topped friends, both named Vinnie, Oberon is the owner of the club and Titania his frustrated girlfriend, Puck is renamed "Dr. Wheelgood" and roller-blades through the crowd causing mischief, while the fairies are re-imagined as a number of glitter-covered, shirtless young men who spend most of the performance dancing atop go-go-style boxes.

Like *Sleep No More*, this show also eliminates Shakespeare's dialogue, but where *Sleep No More* uses dance to replace the spoken word, *The Donkey Show* uses music, another "emotional" medium. "I feel music is what people care about in a loyal, passionate way," Paulus said (Aucoin). She explained that popular songs effect the audience by reminding them of personal moments attached with the songs, by energizing them in the present, and by forcing them to see the songs in a new context, all of which come together to create a multifaceted experience (Paulus). "Many people experience a kind of catharsis by the end of the show," according to Paulus (Paulus). *The Boston Globe*'s review of the show supports this, saying, "It's not that the show completely defies description, but rather that the sensations it creates are so visceral that words seem almost beside the point" (Aucoin).

II. The Creative Goals of Immersive Theater

Although the shows that fall under the umbrella category of "immersive theater" vary, and thus have different particular goals and messages, one goal that seems to be at the heart of the medium is that of creating a visceral experience for the audience through their newfound agency. That is, the creators of immersive theater strive to access the inward feelings and bodily experiences of their audience; they seek an *emotional*, as opposed to an *intellectual*, response. As noted, Maxine Doyle considers emotion the driving force of *Sleep No More*, and Felix Barrett even more plainly states, "[I]t's all about being able to *feel* it [. . .] it's all about the visceral" (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 95). In the case of *The Donkey Show* too, Paulus notes the catharsis—that is, the emotional release—that the show creates, and the *Globe* attests to the visceral sensations. Paulus also stresses the emotional freedom of the audience as one of her main goals for the production (Paulus). Unlike traditionally-staged shows, a full understanding of the scenes

and events taking place in immersive shows is relatively unimportant, so long as the intended emotional experience is produced in each audience member. Even the very format of the medium, with its active audience, works towards this goal, as audience members are forced to work instinctively, based on their emotions, in response to the productions.

Along with this creative goal comes a need for a familiar text as the source material. As seen in both *Sleep No More* and *The Donkey Show*, the medium enables and almost necessitates the presentation of the narrative in a fragmented or otherwise vague or unconventional manner, which often includes the elimination of the original dialogue, in order to create the desired emotional response. Given this format, a familiar text is needed in order to guide or locate the audience. As Barrett says, when you enter *Sleep No More*, "[Y]ou don't know where the performers are, you don't know what's happening, you don't know where you are" (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 91). Thus, at least one point of recognition is necessary to produce any reaction other than confusion. If an audience member were, for example, to stumble upon the aforementioned bedroom scene between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, or an even more easily identifiable scene such as the murder of King Duncan (2.2) or the banquet (3.4), she would be able to orient herself within the plot of *Macbeth* and have a basic understanding of the sequence of events that occur for the rest of the night. Though a complete understanding of every action and interaction that occurs in immersive theater is not necessary, some means of orientation is.

Similarly, in the case of *The Donkey Show*, a lack of familiarity with the text could render the production nothing more than a string of popular songs, lip-synced by a variety of eccentric characters. I personally have seen the show twice, once without any knowledge of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and once having recently finished reading the play. The first time I went, I found the show confusing and could only pick up on a general emphasis on relationships and drugs.

When I went the second time, however, I was able to identify the characters and major plot points and generally understand the emotional arc of the show, which greatly improved the experience for me and allowed me to become more of an "emancipated spectator"—knowledge of the text functioned to enable my participation.

Given, then, the goal of creating an emotional response and the need for a familiar text, immersive theater naturally turns to source material that is both widely popular, and thus familiar to as wide an audience as possible, and able to produce an emotional response, especially in a way that can be translated into the language of immersive theater.

III. The Suitability of Shakespeare's Texts to Immersive Theater

Shakespeare's texts fulfill both of these conditions, and are in this sense especially suited to immersive theater. Firstly, Shakespeare's plays are immensely popular and familiar to the general populace, particularly in the English-speaking world. As Alden and Virginia Vaughan assert in *Shakespeare in America*, "[M]ost Americans know, at least superficially, who he was (and is) and that he carries universal cultural cachet" (197). Shakespeare's popularity is, of course, not a new phenomenon—he has been consistently praised from the time of his death to the present. Today, he remains required reading in many if not all American and British secondary schools, ensuring that the educated populace has almost certainly read at least one of his plays. Given immersive theater's need for a familiar, popular text, then, there seems almost no better option than the Bard himself. Even beyond the educated populace, with greater access to Shakespeare's complex language and elite cultural production, Shakespeare's omnipresence in popular culture perpetuates the influence of his works and renders them familiar to all. This can be seen, for example, in recent popular films such as *The Lion King*, *10 Things I Hate About You*,

and *She's the Man*, all of which are based in Shakespeare but do not advertise the influence. Thus, even someone who has never read the text of the play in question may have a basic idea of the plot and characters, which is all that immersive theater requires (although in many cases, those more familiar with the text are able to take more away from the experience).

More importantly, Shakespeare's plays fulfill the second criterion, namely the ability to produce the emotional response that immersive theater seeks. But how does a text generate emotion? The sizable Shakespeare studies industry would seem to indicate that his works prompt more of an intellectual response. However, immersive productions are able to tap into the visceral side of Shakespeare by replicating his atmospheres. Each of Shakespeare's plays produces and possesses a distinct atmosphere, which vividly sets the tone for the piece and evokes the desired response from the audience. As M. H. Abrams glossed it, atmosphere can be understood as "the emotional tone pervading [. . .] a literary work, which fosters in the reader expectations as to the course of events, whether happy or [. . .] disastrous" (14).[2] Through descriptions of settings and objects, an author can establish an atmosphere that brings his or her audience into the proper emotional state for the story at hand. During Shakespeare's time, it was necessary for a strong sense of atmosphere to be engendered by the spoken word, since Elizabethan stages were relatively bare, with only a few props used when needed. While modern theatrical productions can use elaborate sets, stylized lighting, and amplified music to establish the atmosphere,[3] productions at the Globe had to rely primarily on language to produce the desired atmosphere, and so that language would have to have been powerful enough to invoke the audience's imagination (Nostbakken 18).

There is no one atmosphere common to all of Shakespeare's plays; on the contrary, each has its own specific atmosphere that is vividly created in the text. In the example of *Macbeth*, the

atmosphere is dark and mysterious. This is immediately established in the very first scene, as the weird sisters cry, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair. / Hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.12-13). Of this introduction, Cumberland Clark writes in *A Study of Macbeth*, “No effect could be more powerful, more indicative of what is to follow. The weird, mysterious, uncanny, supernatural atmosphere descends like a thick cloud upon the drama and never lifts throughout” (51). Indeed, this passage and the continued references to darkness, witchcraft, and blood set the tone for the entire play, such that the tragic, bloody conclusion comes as no surprise. The atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, on the other hand, is light and fantastical. Rather than filth and fog, romanticized descriptions of moonlight, starlight, and woodland settings abound. Barrett Wendell called it a “fairy atmosphere” (Wendell 314), and indeed the simple fact that the play concerns the world of the fairies and includes a character who spends the majority of the play with a donkey’s head attests to the carefree, romantic tone of the piece.[4] Here it comes as no shock that the play ends on a jovial, rather than a dark, note.

Sleep No More and *The Donkey Show* successfully recreate the distinct atmospheres of their source shows non-linguistically, through dance, visuals, and music, such that the familiar plot is invoked. In this way, they are able to, in a sense, tell the story without telling the story. The specificity of atmosphere in the works allows immersive productions to use “visceral” artistic media (as opposed to the “intellectual” medium of language) to produce the desired atmosphere, which once established recalls the popular plot connected to it, thus layering an intellectual response on top of the emotional one. *Sleep No More* recreates the dark atmosphere of *Macbeth* through literal darkness, but also through its film noir score and sets. Some of the rooms include a graveyard, a sanitorium, a forest with a witch’s hut, and a large space filled with ruins and statues. Immediately upon entering the space, the atmosphere “descends like a thick

cloud," just as it does in the text. The first time I visited the McKittrick, I clutched onto my companion for the entirety of the first cycle, responding to the atmospheric cues. Even after seeing the show seven times, I find myself peering around corners and creeping stealthily through the space, and I see countless others doing the same. The '70s disco club setting of *The Donkey Show* likewise recreates the atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The free love and drug cultures of that era perfectly match the rapidly changing relationships and bacchic fun of the lovers and the fairies in the play. The audience is encouraged to dance and let loose, and disco clubs were places for people to escape from their real lives, as though into a dream or fantasy.

In both cases, even in the absence of Shakespeare's language, the distinct atmosphere produced invokes his plays and allows the stories and characters, familiar to the audience, to be easily recognized. To give a specific example, one of the most elaborate scenes in *Sleep No More*, commonly referred to as "The Rave," represents act four, scene one of *Macbeth*, in which the witches deliver their second set of prophecies. The scene—from which the line "Double, double toil and trouble, / Fire burn and cauldron bubble" originates—has a definite supernatural atmosphere (4.1.20-21). The Rave begins with Hecate breathing heavily while muttering rapidly, then suddenly letting out a high-pitched shriek, which sends the three witches into a frenzied, seizure-like dance, accompanied by pulsing techno music. The trance-like state of the characters clearly suggests the supernatural, thus making those characters recognizable as the witches. From there, the chaos caused by the frantic movement, loud music, and screaming echoes the confusion and trauma that Macbeth experiences in reaction to the apparitions. Heavy use of strobe lighting allows the audience to only catch glimpses of the actors' movements, heightening the confusion and mirroring the cryptic, unclear nature of the prophecies. The atmospheric cues

are supported by small plot details, such as a bloody child (the second apparition to appear in the text), and a small tree, all of which come together to identify the scene. Although no words are spoken and the prophecies are not all clearly laid out, the audience experiences a strong sense of chaos and horror. By recreating the atmosphere of Shakespeare's plays, immersive theater causes audiences to *feel* the same way Shakespeare intended, thus producing precisely the emotional response that it seeks.[5]

III. Beyond Shakespeare

Thus, given their distinct atmospheres and general popularity, Shakespeare's plays are a natural choice for the source material for the new medium of immersive theater, as these shows demand both a certain degree of familiarity, ensured by the popularity, and an emotional impact, provided by the atmosphere, in order to be fully appreciated. Shakespeare's texts work in similar, effective ways even in shows that take radically different approaches and appear to have different aims, such as *Sleep No More* and *The Donkey Show*. Additionally, immersive theater's general requirements of atmosphere and familiarity explain not only Shakespeare's popularity in the medium, but also the specific plays chosen. *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are among his most famous and widely read plays, as are *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, source shows for several other immersive productions. Thus, even within Shakespeare's body of work, immersive productions favor the more familiar options. Examples of productions based on shows such as *Troilus and Cressida*, which is less familiar and seems to beg an intellectual rather than an emotional response, are notably absent. Furthermore, these two criteria also explain the choice of source material for non-Shakespearean immersive productions. For example, Third Rail Projects's *Then She Fell*, which opened in Brooklyn in 2012 and works similarly to *Sleep No*

More, but on a much smaller scale, is based on Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (*Then She Fell*). The novel's own popularity as well as Disney's multiple adaptations have made it familiar to the general public, and a strong fantastical atmosphere pervades the work, making it as ideal for immersive theater as the plays discussed. It seems, then, that although the techniques of immersive shows can vary widely, perhaps *any* popular, atmospheric text could be translated into this new medium and introduced to a new audience.

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[1] Many argue that the value of Shakespeare's works derives precisely from the language they use, which is deleted entirely here. However, immersive theater is not the first version of Shakespeare performance that contradicts this view. For example, translations of Shakespeare into other languages have enjoyed great success, even though the original spoken text has been completely altered in those cases.

[2] "Atmosphere" can also be called "mood," "ambience," or "*Stimmung.*"

[3] For example, Andrew Lloyd Webber's popular Broadway musical *The Phantom of the Opera* wordlessly establishes the ominous, somewhat supernatural atmosphere of the Phantom's lair through pounding, dissonant organ music, several fog machines, and a large gondola, which actually moves across the stage, dressed to look like a subterranean lake surrounded by candelabras and enclosed by an imposing metal gate. Of course, none of this would have been technologically possible in Shakespeare's day.

[4] The word "love" appears over one hundred times throughout the play.

[5] Furthermore, analyzing Shakespeare in the context of immersive theater allows us to see the immersive qualities intrinsic in his texts. While Shakespeare's atmospheres are recreated today to produce visceral responses in modern immersive theatrical audiences, in his day they were required to spark the imaginations of his audiences—the success of his shows depended on audience participation. Although this participation may not have been physical, the audience nevertheless became active creators. In fact, several scholars have noted that Shakespeare's shows included an intimate, flexible actor-audience relationship. Can Shakespeare's plays themselves be considered "immersive"? This application of the term suggests its theoretical value and its use beyond experimental theatrical or digital media.

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