

# Discomfort at the Intersection of the Imaginary and Everyday Worlds in Friches Théâtre Urbain's *Macbeth* for the Street

Susan C. Haedicke

*During 2004 and 2005, Friches Théâtre Urbain, a Paris-based professional théâtre de rue, performed a multilingual adaptation of Macbeth at several European street theatre festivals. This vivid promenade performance pushed the limits in terms of scale and intensity in its use of stilts, giant flags, animal masks, abundant fireworks, and loud music and challenged the spectator physically, emotionally, and intellectually as it took possession of the real time-space of the streets. This essay explores how the audience's physical discomfort contributes to the blurring of boundaries between art and life, thereby pushing the aesthetic world of the play into the everyday world of the street and potentially influencing the efficacy of the performance.*

*Keywords: Discomfort; French Street Theatre; Macbeth; Efficacy; Spectacle; Friches Théâtre Urbain; Stilts*

The sun sets; the streets darken. The spectators mill around the square as they peer first one way, then another. Not knowing from which direction the actors will enter the space and hoping to be the first to spot them, the audience members jostle one

---

Susan C. Haedicke teaches performance studies, theatre history, and theory in the Department of Theatre at University of Maryland, College Park. She also works as a professional dramaturg, most recently with Friches Théâtre Urbain, a street theatre company in Paris, France. Her current research looks at European street theatre, particularly in France. Dr. Haedicke has published several essays on community-based theatre and co-edited the book, *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Community-Based Performance* (University of Michigan Press, 2001). In addition, Dr. Haedicke established Inside French Theatre, an annual summer program for American students in Paris, France in 1999, and has directed the program for the past seven years. A shorter version of this essay was presented at Performance Studies International conference at Brown University (2005). Another version exploring similar ideas was presented at Performance Studies Conference at University of Massachusetts/Amherst (2005). Correspondence to: Susan C. Haedicke, Department of Theatre, 2816 Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA. Tel: 301-405-6682; Fax: 301-314-9599; Email: shaedicke@umd.edu.

another trying to figure out the best place to stand. Music begins to emanate from a chariot that stands at the periphery of the crowd, and people push to see if anything is happening there. Suddenly, someone notices a soft glow and a flare down a side street on the opposite side of the square; the whole crowd surges forward. Out of the haze of red smoke, a figure appears in the distance—nine feet tall, dressed all in white, a wolf's head visible above the human head, sparklers ringing the stilts. The larger-than-life character slowly approaches the audience. Words in English, French, and Spanish, weaving together lines spoken by the witches throughout Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, begin to fill the space: a voice-over of male and female, old and young voices:

*Autours du chaudron tournons;  
 Jetons-y tripe et poison,  
 Crapaud qui sous froid caillou  
 Trente nuits et trente jours  
 Dormant, sua son venin,  
 Fais bouillir dans le brassin.  
 Double, double peine et tourment  
 Chaudron bouille à feu brûlant.  
 Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,  
 Witch's mummy, maw and gulf  
 Finger of birth-strangled babe,  
 Ditch-delivered by a drab,  
 Make the gruel thick and slab.  
 Double, double toil and trouble;  
 Fire burn and cauldron bubble.  
 Carne de culebra de pantano,  
 Cuécete y hierve en el caldero;  
 Ojo de tritón, pata de rana,  
 Cabello de murciélago y lengua de can  
 Dobla, dobla trabajo y afán.  
 Avívate, fuego, y tú, caldero, hierve.*

Sometimes dragging a huge white net on the ground, sometimes swinging it high overhead, the mysterious character penetrates the crowd. This ambivalent character—male and female, human and animal—represents the three witches melded into one (Figure 1). The spectators jump out of the way or shove each other to gain a better view. Another chariot resembling an army tank advances from behind the crowd. Fireworks shoot from its roof. The soldiers, all on stilts, rush in; the pyrotechnician sets off firecrackers sounding like bursts of gunfire close to the disoriented spectators; the music becomes loud and aggressive, punctuated by what sound like military orders. The action surrounds the audience. Huge flags brush against our faces; an enormous black fabric held by two stilt-walkers rushing past us billows over our heads. We bump into each other; we are confronted by the stilt-walkers, the technicians, and the safety staff moving us out of the way. Fire crackers explode near our feet; smoke makes our eyes water. The fast-moving action is beside



**Figure 1** The Witch. Photo by Pierre Baelen.

us, behind us, around us. We are caught in the war, and there is no safe spot, no place just to observe untouched (Figure 2).

During 2004 and 2005, Fiches Théâtre Urbain, a Paris-based professional *théâtre de rue* or street theatre company, performed a multilingual adaptation of *Macbeth* at several European street theatre festivals.<sup>1</sup> From 2002 to 2004, I worked as dramaturg on this production of *Macbeth*, adapting Shakespeare's text for the street in close collaboration with director Sarah Harper, Artistic Director of Fiches Théâtre Urbain. Actors on one-meter stilts led the audience on a *déambulation*, a promenade performance over about one mile in and through the narrow streets of a European town. Harper defines *promenade performance* as "a moving form of theatre in which ideas and stories can be retold or played out. The movement from place to place is hidden or slipped into the event and drags the audience along, almost not noticing that they are moving. Ideally the moments of traveling are dramatically justified by the needs or dynamics of the story" (Email). Accompanying the actors on the promenade are a pyrotechnician and two additional technicians moving two large chariots (mobile set pieces for costumes, props, and sound equipment). One chariot is designed to look like an enormous fist broken from a huge statue and holding a bit of a sword or a scepter, while the second is shaped like a stylized white tank with a map in green and red painted on one side. The promenade performance stops at five points or *stations* along the route for scenes that combine text, movement, music, and pyrotechnics to retell and update Shakespeare's play. Choreographed processions that



**Figure 2** The war. Photo by Pierre Baelen.

lure the spectators into following the actors to the next station connect the stationary scenes.

Very little scholarly work exists on European street theatre, especially in English, and what is available (primarily in French) tends to be descriptive rather than analytic. This essay seeks to begin to fill that gap in scholarship by describing this one production and by elucidating the critical force of its excessive, risky, and spectacular elements, which produce varying kinds and degrees of “discomfort” in its audience. In this case, I will argue, the audience’s discomfort contributes to the efficacy of street performances such as this one as it contributes to a blurring of boundaries between art and life, thereby pushing the aesthetic world of the play into the everyday world of the street.

The opening battle scene described above not only establishes the spectacular, visceral and risky tone of the production. It also introduces the Witch, an omnipresent shape-shifter who embodies the characters’ desires and temptations, and the Porter, a ubiquitous jester-like character expanded in this adaptation from Shakespeare’s original. Present throughout the performance, the Porter is an actor in Macbeth’s story, but he maintains a foot in today’s world. He can be a soldier in Macbeth’s army carrying a huge flag in the war one minute, and he can roll it up to complain about being a present-day foot-soldier, hungry and cold, while the leaders jet around to posh resorts for summit meetings the next.

A victory procession marking the end of the war leads the audience to the second station in which the Witch tempts Macbeth and Banquo with prophesies. Macbeth’s first prophesy is soon fulfilled as Duncan arrives carrying the head of the traitor Cawdor that he thrusts into Macbeth’s hands as he honors him with the title of Thane of Cawdor. The procession to the third station, representing the voyage to Macbeth’s castle, dramatizes fears of betrayal as the characters following Duncan glance warily over their shoulders several times. Each glance becomes bigger and more stylized until it shifts from being a mere nervous character gesture into a fully embodied choral dance.

The third station dramatizes Lady Macbeth’s excessive ambition as she embraces temptation embodied by the Witch, the violent murder of Duncan (presented in full view of the audience), the fight for the crown, the subsequent coronation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and finally the ensuing social and political upheaval that the Duncan’s murder causes. Macbeth’s coronation procession that gradually degenerates into chaos leads the audience to the fourth station that portrays the murder of Banquo and the reappearance of Banquo’s ghost to haunt Macbeth. The increasingly tormented king returns to the Witch and learns, through a conjured image, that Banquo’s descendents will ascend the throne. That realization catapults Macbeth into a rampage of killing as he leads a zombie-like chorus of hooded figures on a choreographed “massacre of the innocents.”

Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene immediately follows, but here she is metaphorically drowning in a sea of blood represented by a huge red cloth that becomes a maze from which she cannot escape. The final station transforms Shakespeare’s Act V battle, ending in the execution of the tyrant, from the original

play into a contemporary-sounding political rally for Macduff who calls for the overthrow and execution of the tyrant. As in the original play, Macduff kills Macbeth, but in this production Macduff himself is assassinated a few moments after he is crowned.

The over-large actors in vivid costumes, the flamboyant chariots, giant flags and banners, animal masks, abundant fireworks, and blaring music create a production that constantly hovers at the edge of being *too much*—too big, too loud, too complex, too vivid, too dangerous—and this excess creates a sense of uneasiness in the audience. The discomfort is physical, certainly, though it is also ideological and aesthetic. But the discomfort that Friches Théâtre Urbain's *Macbeth* generates becomes, somewhat perversely, a source of disturbing pleasure, a pleasure born out of the realization that the visceral response that the *unpleasure* engenders transforms the spectator's relationship to the imaginary world by transgressing traditional performance boundaries and, perhaps by so doing, points the way to make other transgressions possible. This production pushes the limits in scale and intensity even for street theatre, which has built-in expectations of political confrontation, artistic extremes, and lack of the usual creature comforts of watching a play in a theatre. Friches' *Macbeth* does not pamper its audiences, but rather challenges them physically, emotionally, and intellectually and dares them to ask uncomfortable questions both about the ideas explored in the world of the play and about the implications that the play performed on the street raises. Exploring theatre's potential for efficacy, Janelle Reinelt points out that "theatre is especially well-suited to influence as well as reflect the course of history by providing imaginative mimesis, transformative models, and observant critique" (366). In this production, those qualities appear not only in the aesthetic world, but also in the actual world as the play's action takes possession of the real time-space of the streets. This slippage in *Macbeth* between the imaginary world of the play and the everyday world of the audience prevents the spectator from comfortably occupying a passive observatory position outside the narrative. Instead it compels the spectator to choose to follow the action from station to station and thereby metaphorically to enter the narrative and to take responsibility for the events, not necessarily in the world of the play, but for those very actions as they merge and coalesce with those of the lived world of the spectator.

Blurring the boundaries between imaginary and everyday worlds is an important characteristic of European street theatre. Jean-Jacques Delfour argues that *théâtre de rue* "n'efface pas la différence entre théâtre et vie sociale. Il transforme cette différence entre théâtre et non théâtre, entre théâtre et réalité commune, non pour l'abolir mais pour la faire fonctionner autrement" ["does not erase the difference between theatre and social life. It transforms this difference between theatre and not-theatre, between theatre and communal reality, not to abolish it, but to make it function differently"] (Delfour 148).<sup>2</sup> The spectators, whose defenses are worn down by the extreme action both in terms of Shakespeare's story and the way it is performed and by their involvement with those actions as they travel with the actors, unconsciously allow the clear demarcation line between art and life to fade as they sense the parallels between

the world of Macbeth and our own. “The story of Macbeth begs comparison with the current situation in world politics, where market profit censors, expels, forbids, and kills” states the marketing dossier (*Dossier* 3), and director Sarah Harper, in an interview at the festival in Chalon-sur-Saône, answered the question, “Why Macbeth?” by emphasizing these parallels:

Nous commentons la façon dont le pouvoir est pris puis repris. . . . Nous sommes concernés et à la fois complètement dissociés de la manière brutale dont agissent nos dirigeants, dans un monde censé être civilisé, démocratique. . . . Cette vieille histoire entre clans écossais est inévitable, elle se raconte en ce moment partout dans le monde. [We are commenting on the way power is taken and re-taken. . . . It concerns us and at the same time we are completely dissociated from the brutal ways of our leaders in a world that is supposed to be civilized, democratic. . . . This ancient story between Scottish clans is retold at this moment everywhere in the world.] (Harper, “L’Internationale Bestiale” 2)

One reviewer of the production recognized the link: “The company has reworked Shakespeare’s tragedy for the 21st century, in a production set in an international war zone” (Fisher); another wrote: “d’une obsédante fable guerrière, une fresque théâtrale, chronique du mal—Du Moyen-Âge à notre temps” [“a haunting fable of war, a theatrical panorama, a chronicle of evil—from the Middle Ages to our own times”] (Berry, “Macbeth” 2).

The blurring of art and life is most blatantly felt in the physical discomfort so palpable in this production as the spectacle assaults all five senses of the audience member. A review describes the discomfort: “Quelques centaines de spectateurs pour un spectacle non-annoncé suivant médusé le délirium impose. . . . Dans une position inconfortable: l’espace est mouvant, les courses et danses des acteurs se propagent dans un espace sans cesse modifié, les explosions peuvent vous heurter. . . . Perte de repères. . . . Va-t-on être percuté, happé par ce tourbillon de violence, ces poignards ensanglantés?” [“Several hundred spectators followed the unannounced show dumbfounded by the imposed delirium. . . . in an uncomfortable position: the space shifts, the rushing and the dancing of the actors spread into a space that is constantly changing, the explosions can strike you. . . . loss of landmarks—is one going to be hit, caught up by the whirlpool of violence, the bloody daggers?”] (Berry, “Macbeth” 2–3). Spectators not only see and hear the show, but taste it, smell it, and feel it. The physical world of the play thrusts itself into the audience’s world, thus merging the two and creating an atmosphere of carnivalesque thrill and anxiety that encompasses both the imaginary world and the everyday world. The almost constant use of pyrotechnics leaves a lingering pungent taste in one’s mouth and ensures the presence of the fictional world in the actual one. The excessive smoke and gunshot-like fireworks thrown on the ground in the opening scene not only create an atmosphere of war for the world of the play, but they approximate those sensations in the lived world of the audience members by making it hard for them to see, to breathe, to know where to turn, and by adding the possibility, however slight, of physical harm. Later, a dark and smelly medieval castle is evoked by smoky kerosene canisters placed at the spectators’ feet to signal the welcoming of Duncan to Macbeth’s abode. And,

immediately after the murder of Duncan that turns the world upside-down, high-pitched and piercingly loud squeals from fireworks cause one's ears to throb. Later still, in the "massacre of the innocents," burning bits of cloth soaked in gasoline are thrown down onto the street under the actors' feet by the pyrotechnician. Visually this scene evokes a wasteland, and the audience experiences the devastation through the smell, the heat, and the proximity of the flames on the street. At the end of the play (in Friches' version) when Macduff is crowned, confetti rains down on the spectators drawing them into the actual celebration. And even after the show is over, the smell of smoke clings to one's hair and clothing. The spectators participate involuntarily and perhaps unconsciously through their bodies and thus inhabit both an objective and a subjective perspective as they watch the events of the story unfold at the same time as they live in the experience through the unavoidable physical sensations they feel.

Physical discomfort is, in fact, a significant part of the experience even before the show begins as no seats await the spectators; no roof protects them from the weather.<sup>3</sup> This "gathering phase," to use Richard Schechner's concept first explored in *Environmental Theatre*, alerts the audience as to what to expect from the performance; it is "designed to produce a special attitude of reception, to encourage the audience to participate in the *making* of the performance in a particular frame of mind" (Kershaw, *Politics* 24, emphasis added). Once the show begins, not only must spectators stand for the duration (almost ninety minutes) and walk for up to a mile to follow the production, they must struggle for a good vantage point from which to see the action—a constant battle since the performance space is not static—and they must often leap out of the way of the chariots and the speeding stilt-walkers or get shoved to a different spot by the security personnel. In opposition to the Porter who superimposes the play world on the actual world, the security personnel superimpose the actual world on the play world. They constantly remind the audience of the real physical harm that the fireworks and the heavy stilts can cause as they help establish a distance between the action and the public, but their very actions insert the spectator into the dangerous world of Macbeth.

Physical discomfort is aggravated by the unabashed use of spectacle that keeps the audience in a constant state of surprise. "Spectacle," writes Baz Kershaw, "seems always aimed to produce excessive reactions—the WOW! factor—and at its most effective it touches highly sensitive spots in the changing nature of the human psyche by dealing directly with the extremities of power: gods, monarchy, regicide, war, terrorism, catastrophe, apocalypse now" ("Curiosity" 592). Shakespeare's *written text* dramatizes the spectacle of the "extremities of power," and Friches *Théâtre Urbain's performance text* certainly exploits spectacle as it visually and aurally intensifies the impact of these extremities by increasing the scale and thus shifting the world from human-sized to monumental, a shift that powerfully and viscerally reminds us in the audience how small we are. The altered scale moves the focus and significance from the depiction of a specific event in the life of Macbeth to an attempt to make sense of parallel events in the larger world. The changes in scale accomplished through spectacle offer a new geography of the world: a replication of the actual world but



larger than life in size and sense. Like a telescope, spectacle can magnify and bring into focus what might otherwise remain hidden or obscured. Here spectacle not only draws attention to, but also makes transparent, symbols of power and ambition; it unmasks concealed motivations. But magnification can have the opposite effect as well, much like a photograph so enlarged that it becomes grainy and indistinct. The small spectator can get lost in this large world or lose a sense of where he or she stands in relation to this world with its altered scale. Kershaw warns, "spectacle may well produce a kind of surrogate celebration through quasi-carnavalesque excesses of imagery and action that amaze and overwhelm the spectators. However, as a form of protest and socio-critical agitation it is saddled with the necessity to use simple codes which resist anything but the broadest ironies, the most straightforward satire" (*Politics* 237). In *Macbeth*, on the contrary, the "excesses of imagery and action" do not just draw attention to the obvious, but also to the more subtle, often overlooked, significations that problematize or destabilize the obvious.

In this production, spectacle offers a visual rendition of the tale of ambition and abuse of power in vivid images that tell a parallel, yet particularized, story if they are followed through from beginning to end. One striking example is the image of the red cloth that highlights Lady Macbeth's role in "writing" the story of violence and corruption. As in the original text, Lady Macbeth first appears lusting after the role of queen, even if it means murder, and calls on the "spirits that tend on mortal thought," on the "murd'ring ministers" to "unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty" (*Macbeth* 1.5.47–53). In Friches' production, the words explode out of her violent dance with the Witch who is, at this moment, not a supernatural power, but the embodiment of her disastrous ambitions. Lady Macbeth gives herself fully to temptation—theatricalized physically as she grabs for and finally gains possession of a red shawl-sized cloth that the Witch has used to arouse her desire. She wears it with pride as her ambition takes over. As one violent deed leads to the next and Lady Macbeth's involvement prevents any possible escape, the idea of entrapment in a narrative of one's own making is visually signified by the increasing size of the red cloth each time it appears, thus transforming Macbeth's words, "I am in blood / Stepp'd so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (3.4.168–70) into vivid images.

After Duncan's murder and the subsequent coronation of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, the shawl has grown into a regal train five meters long and two meters wide carried by four actors behind the new king and queen as they lead the royal procession to the next station. Their reign begins in peace with the cloth carried unwrinkled behind them. But the legacy of murder and betrayal soon causes warring factions to disrupt the apparent unity of the state under Macbeth, visually expressed as the stately procession degenerates into a tug-of-war as the actors pull the cloth in opposing directions. As the dignified procession becomes more chaotic, Lady Macbeth joins the fray and tries to yank the train back into position at the same time as she attempts to continue to walk like a queen by Macbeth's side. As her ambition and willingness to use violence to achieve her goals grow, so does the cloth until it engulfs her.

Toward the end of the play, in Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, the spectator does not just observe her madness through her hand-washing stage business, but rather is hurled into her mind as she "drowns" in a sea of blood metaphorically portrayed by the red cloth, now grown to approximately fifty meters in length, held by the other actors to create a pulsating, constantly shifting maze that Lady Macbeth struggles to escape. As she battles with the cloth, she often pushes this sea of blood into the audience space, physically thrusting her madness and guilt into the audience, almost like an indictment. Her loss of control over the events she has helped to set in motion is presented in a visual language of spectacle that depicts her rapidly diminishing size in relation to the cloth, and by extension, the violence, and her consequent inability to contain it.

In another example, spectacle and visual imagery explore the permutations of the quest for power. The real crime that Macbeth commits is not simply murder: the earlier scene in which Duncan tosses Cawdor's head from one character to another shows how insignificant actual killing can be. Macbeth's real crime is betrayal of trust and loyalty when he breaks the rule of hospitality by murdering his guest, even though he recognizes the enormity of the transgression before the act when he wavers in his determination to do the deed. The audience watches as Macbeth, goaded by his wife, kills Duncan on the tank transformed into a bed covered in white fur—the same bed from which Lady Macbeth arose in the previous scene when the Witch seduced her with the red cloth. After the murder, the Witch warns of the coming chaos:

'Tis unnatural.  
 Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last,  
 A falcon, tow'ring in her pride of place,  
 Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed.  
 And Duncan's horses (a thing most strange and certain),  
 Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,  
 Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,  
 Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would  
 Make war with mankind.  
 'Tis said they eat each other. (2.4.13–22)

This transgression of the rule of trust and loyalty turns the world upside-down. Once the murder is discovered, the characters and the pyrotechnician transform themselves into bears, boars, wolves, and foxes by putting on oversized full-head animal masks in full view of the audience and by snarling and clawing at one another in their attempt to seize power—here represented in the physical tug-of-war to gain possession of the scepter (Figure 3). Their growls are amplified by the sounds of fighting dogs replacing the music.

The masks here unambiguously represent the animality of those fighting for the throne and signal an immediate shift to a metaphoric level of reality, to a carnival world, "an upside-down world (*monde renversé*) in which fish fly and birds swim, in which foxes and rabbits chase hunters, bishops act crazily, and fools are



**Figure 3** Animal masks. Photo by Pierre Baelen.

crowned. . . . Carnival is the natural theatre in which animals and animal-like beings take over the power and become the masters” (Eco 2–3). The *mise-en-scène* exploits this *carnival sense of the world* that “places image and word . . . in a special relationship to reality” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 107); it underlines “the brutality of a so-called ‘civilized’ society” (*Dossier* 10). But it also disrupts the comfortable recognition of the mask as a simple external sign for an innate aggressiveness or animalistic interior. Here, the simple visual code on its grand scale of spectacle is complicated by the self-consciously performative act of donning the masks—an action that functions, in contrast, on a miniaturized scale of motivation. The beasts do not suddenly appear; rather the audience watches the transformation occur, so that the focus shifts from the meaning of the mask itself to the issue of *why* it is being put on.

There is no doubt as to who killed Duncan since Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, with blood dripping from their hands, thrust themselves into the chaos that the murder created. Macbeth immediately recognizes that he must subdue the others to gain the scepter, and so holds his animal mask—the head of a bear—out in front of him. Banquo, in response, challenges Macbeth with his suspicions and his mask, the head of a boar. This belligerent *pas-de-deux* escalates as each one “dresses” for battle by covering his human head with that of an animal, and the fight for the scepter begins in earnest as the animals grab it from one another until Macbeth triumphs. The simple message of the inevitability of innate aggression is complicated by the exposure of a conscious desire for vicious animal-like behavior in the quest for power: the characters choose to adopt certain animalistic traits to intimidate a rival. Thus the notion that animal aggression is a part of “human nature” is challenged by the disquieting one that it is consciously chosen as the most efficient strategy, that such an identity is constructed to guarantee success. The image/sense correspondence of the mask itself *vis-à-vis* the donning of the mask is troubled even further as the beasts, acting human and dignified, assemble into a formal coronation procession once Macbeth is the clear winner, signified by a flame shooting out of the scepter when he takes possession of it. The image of the regal procession of beasts exploits a visual language to trouble the textual language of civilization and dignity by presenting an ironic version of the political ceremony, a parodic skepticism of the ability of humans to act with humanity. The rapid reversals in scale from the external manifestation of aggression evident in the masks to the motivations behind them and back again act almost like a camera zooming out to get the panorama and zooming in to reveal the tiny detail. This zooming in and out, in turn, parallels the zooming in on the imaginary world of Macbeth and the zooming out to the actual world of the spectator and thus encourages the audience to participate in the making of meaning in both worlds.

Actual audience participation is difficult to assess in this production, however, and in fact, it might be more accurate to call it “audience collaboration.” The spectators actually stand at the center of the dramatic events—ambition, corruption, murder—as the actors constantly shift the performance space by charging into the crowd and forcing the action into the audience space, surrounding the spectators and speaking

over their heads, or moving to a new station in a choreographed procession that encourages them to follow. The performance's form assumes audience engagement in the action in a way that yanks the story of murder and political upheaval in medieval Scotland from its geographic and temporal roots and thrusts it into a social space not confined by the calendar or the clock and not delimited by national borders. The form of the performance requires an active level of commitment on the part of the audience members as they must choose to follow the *déambulation* for about a mile. This form of participation points to the permeable boundary between the fictional world and the actual world and underscores the uncanny ability of fiction to seep into the lived experience as the street artists transform an un-self-conscious *public* space into a self-conscious, self-reflexive *performance* space by occupying it and playing there. Michel Siminot writes, "Le propre d'un spectacle de rue, c'est qu'il transforme n'importe quel lieu ouvert ou fermé en espace de représentation par sa seule irruption. Il y a là, à la fois, une démarche politique, sociale et une démarche artistique." ["The peculiarity of a street performance is that it transforms any place, open or closed, into a performance space by the simple fact of its irruption. It creates both a sociopolitical intervention and an artistic intervention simultaneously"] (6). Gwénola David in *Scènes Urbaines*, one of the leading French journals that attempts to analyze street theatre, argues that as the street is "métamorphosée en agora ouverte aux expériences esthétiques comme aux revendications politiques, devenait le lieu où pouvait se recréer un lien direct avec les gens" ["transformed into an agora that is as open to aesthetic experiences as to political demands, [it] becomes a place where a direct link with the public can be recreated"] (26). The spectator is lured into collaboration with the performance, not to change the events within the story, but to experience the action with his or her body, an experience that alters the relationship between the audience member and the "story." The spectator inhabits the space of the tension between the narrative (that he or she cannot change) and the experience (where change is possible).

It seems obvious to look to Augusto Boal to understand the relationship between participation and the possibility of change, but the spect-actor in *Theatre of the Oppressed* functions quite differently from the participating spectator for street theatre. Boal explains that in *Theatre of the Oppressed*

the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change—in short, trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theatre is not revolution itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution. The liberated spectator, as a whole person, launches into action. No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action! (122)

In *Macbeth*, on the other hand, participation is a result of the porous border between art and life. Unlike *Theatre of the Oppressed*, where the focus is on the *action* itself as performed by the spect-actor, here the "physical" dimension is inextricably tied to the form of the performance. The very act of following the action from station to station implies an active choice since it is very easy for a spectator to turn away or simply stay

put as the show moves on to the next station. The spectators, like the characters, are thrown into moments of choice, and this collaboration with the theatrical event makes the spectator physically and voluntarily a part of that world and, at the least, a witness to, if not an accomplice in, the events.<sup>4</sup> The performance opens a space for participation and possible activism, but the goal here does not seem to be a Boalian call to immediate action on the part of the audience. Rather this form of participation acts as a strategy to make fictional actions seem “actual” and to make parallel real-life situations seem “strange” in ways that highlight how they came into being. This, in turn, gives the audience some tools with which to interrogate the symbiotic relationship between power and corruption inside and outside the world of *Macbeth*.

The blurring of distinctions between what is perceived as *real* and *not-real* in the performance allows Friches Théâtre Urbain’s *Macbeth* to approach what Kershaw calls “radical performance” that “as a profoundly public genre . . . is inevitably thoroughly contaminated by its wider cultural context. . . . [It is] by definition . . . deeply rooted in the conditions of the contemporary. So radical performance always participates in the most vital cultural, social, and political tensions of its time” (*Radical* 7). The tensions spotlighted in Friches’ *Macbeth* clearly revolve around the politics of power and regime change as the show *performatively produces* the workings of various power dynamics. Kershaw claims that radical performance’s efficacy comes from the

potential to create various kinds of freedom that are not only resistant to dominant ideologies, but also are sometimes transgressive, even transcendent, of ideology itself. In other words, the freedom that radical performance invokes is not just freedom *from* oppression, repression, and exploitation—the resistant sense of the radical—but also freedom *to reach beyond* existing systems of formalized power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action—the transgressive or transcendent sense of the radical. (*Radical* 18)

Friches Théâtre Urbain’s carnivalization of Shakespeare’s text enables the production to approach Kershaw’s ideal of radical performance.

The actual efficacy of Friches’ *Macbeth* is impossible to determine, but its immediate impact on the audience is evident in the large numbers of spectators who stay in the performance area for up to one hour after the show trying to talk to the actors and the director about what they saw. In Chalon-sur-Saône, festival audience members interviewed immediately after they saw *Macbeth* were thrilled: “le spectacle était très intense, j’ai été très impressionnée. J’ai fait la moitié du voyage la bouche ouverte en regardant ce qui se passait, la passion qui animait les comédiens était très forte. Il y a des choses politiques très puissantes, voir *Macbeth* dans une telle interprétation est incroyable” or “c’était vraiment super bien, je suis encore sous le charme de cette fresque théâtrale!” [“The show was very intense; I was quite impressed. I spent half the voyage with my mouth open watching what was happening. The passion animating the actors was so strong. The play looked at powerful political issues—to see *Macbeth* with such an interpretation is incredible” or “It was really ‘super-bien;’ I am still under the spell of the theatrical panorama”] (Berry, “Paroles” 3). In London, I spoke to a group of American students who somewhat breathlessly spoke of feeling their hearts race during the show. “Now I

understand what theatre can do," said one. "Why can't we see something like this in the States?" asked another. And in Edinburgh, one spectator turned to me to say, "Bush and Blair should have to see this. Then they'd know their game is up."

One theatrical moment in particular haunts spectators long after the performance has ended as numerous conversations, both live and by email, attest. Here vivid images of violence intensify the tale of ambition and brutality in the world of the play, but also resonate in today's world. Macbeth's desperate attempt to ensure his hold on power after he learns from the witch that Banquo's heirs will reign takes the form of a stylized choreography representing the indiscriminate murder of perceived enemies—the "massacre of the innocents." Here all the actors, except Macbeth, wear hoods inspired by a picture of hooded Iraqi fighters in the *New York Times*, but that also act as reminders of the Ku Klux Klan, at least for Americans. Each actor slowly and deliberately enters the performance space carrying a faceless, limp rag doll and a baton. They suddenly charge the audience stopping inches away, beat the dolls, swing around and charge in the other direction. The detailed choreography of murder culminates in the dolls being ripped open and long ribbons in various shades of red being yanked out. The hooded figures swing the dolls by their entrails above their heads and impale them on their batons. Throughout the choreography, the pyrotechnician throws gasoline-soaked burning bits of cloth onto the ground under the actors' feet. The final image of this scene is of the actors pulling a paper doll chain from the mouth hole in their hood and handing it to the pyrotechnician who sets it on fire and lets it go, to be caught by a breeze as it falls to the ground. The visceral response of the spectators to the brutality and potential danger of this scene is palpable in the audible intakes of breath and the cessation of talking in the crowd. Looking at pictures of the spectators taken during the scene at several different performances reveals many of them with their hands on the sides of their faces and their brows furrowed, with a hand partially covering an open mouth, or with their arms crossed in front of them as if to protect themselves as they stare intensely at the action.

The connection between the imaginary and everyday worlds is exploited by the Porter, a "cabotin"<sup>5</sup> of self-conscious theatricality who is not limited to the confines of one scene (or even one time period). Like Shakespeare's original Porter, who uses his short time on stage to go outside the world of Macbeth with his references to people and issues relevant to an Elizabethan audience, Friches' Porter links the world of Macbeth and the contemporary world throughout the play and thus functions as the interpreter of the events and contributes to the potential efficacy of the production. On the one hand, he plays the role of servant in the Macbeth household who sometimes overlays that role and that world with a contemporary persona commenting on the events unfolding from a contemporary perspective or, on the other hand, he is the present-day commentator who sometimes sneaks into Macbeth's world disguised as the "Porter" or as Seyton and unsettles the action with contemporary insights. He is a man of the people who, most of the time, does not speak in Shakespearean verse, but in contemporary prose, in the language of the street or perhaps the pub or bar. His satiric or ironic commentaries, his shorter stunts, and

his more contemporary dress not only create a connection with the public, but also break the theatrical illusion and highlight the street (Figure 4). The Porter prevents the spectator from losing herself either in Macbeth's world or in the thrill of the spectacle. He frequently breaks out of the scene (even at it most tragic) to remind the audience of contemporary resonances or to point out a "theatricalism," a moment of spectacle, so that it turns back on itself. During the war, for example, he draws attention to the fact that the pyrotechnician, not the battle, is creating all the smoke.

The Porter is inspired by Jacques Lecoq's concept of *bouffon*: characters who, through parody and mockery, "deal essentially with the social dimension of human relations, showing up its absurdities. They also deal with the hierarchies of power, and



**Figure 4** The Porter. Photo by Pierre Baelen.



their reversal” (119). Thus the Porter is an important source of what Bakhtin calls the “carnival sense of the world,” of the “uncrowning of the old and crowning of the new” (*Rabelais* 219). In his ludic role, the Porter ridicules the seriousness of the events or speaks in opposition to the “official” language as he expounds on the contemporary real life significance of a theatrical moment to the audience as a whole or as he chats directly with an individual spectator. During the initial scene of the war, after calling for Macbeth whom he cannot find through all the smoke, he drags the battle and the world of Macbeth into a more contemporary setting as he accuses leaders of playing with the soldiers and filling their own coffers:

Whose idea was this war anyway? Generals in their war rooms moving little pins on a map on the wall. What do you think the bloody pins are anyway? I'll tell you what they are. Me, ME, Goddamit, me! Ducking bullets! Scratching lice! Eating crap! Our glorious leaders! Sending ME off to war to get blown to fucking bits. They're all right though! Big, comfy house with the little wife and kids. Good wine cellar. Holidays in exotic places with other leaders—summit meetings to make the world a better place! And we're not supposed to worry! Just go on walking around stark naked, nibbling empty cardboard smartie packets, and listening to sound bites on the radio telling us everything is just great, better than before.

As the battle resumes and he is drawn back into the theatrical fray, he asks a spectator if she agrees with his “analysis” or points out to another that he is re-entering the imaginary war.

At another moment, after the prophesy scene, a clearly tyrannical Duncan arrives with the severed head of the Thane of Cawdor, a grotesque image that accrues significance by its use at this specific historical moment when gruesome videotaped beheadings in Iraq immediately come to mind. The Porter highlights and simultaneously overturns the power and meaning of the image by playing catch with the head as he asks it whether the person to whom the head was attached—the Thane of Cawdor—was an ally or a traitor and calls into question the clear demarcation between resistance fighter and terrorist. Later he is both a celebrant dancing with the thanes after Macbeth gains the title of Thane of Cawdor and a clown winking at the crowd when he (the contemporary man) fumbles the steps of this period dance. The Porter's self-conscious and irreverent approach to serious material, especially in his many asides to one or two spectators at a time, encourages the spectators to seek contemporary references for themselves. In addition, the Porter intentionally interrupts the narrative structure to create a liminal or suspended moment, or to use Victor Turner's terms, an *anti-structure*, an “interval, however brief, of *margin* or *limen*,” that is characterized by ambivalence, even contradiction, but also by “pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance” (44). The Porter's liminal moments seem to exist outside the world of Macbeth in a space that the other characters cannot see or hear, so his interventions are solely for the audience. Straddling the imaginary world and the everyday world and using the street both as a public or social space and a performance space, the Porter deconstructs the events within the world of the play and helps the spectator to see

them, not just in the fictional world, but on the street, or by extension, in the world at large.

Throughout the production, the Porter is the one character who can understand and explain both worlds. His frequent commentary on events in the play, his contemporary references, and his ability to enter the fictional world as a soldier, a servant, the Porter, or even Seyton complicate his role. Sometimes acting like a fairground barker who “advertises” an item or lures the crowd in; sometimes becoming more like a Boalian joker who analyzes the action, the Porter draws attention to the dual-reality of the performance. Just after he has clearly witnessed Macbeth’s murder of Duncan and as he runs to respond to the insistent knocking (openly created by the Witch’s beating a drum while walking slowly through the performance space), he suddenly steps out of the world of the play—out of his apparent role as Porter—and confides to the audience, “Did you know that psychologists say that right after you kill somebody, you can’t stand any noise? You can’t sleep or concentrate?” Just as suddenly, he jumps back into the Porter role by adding, without skipping a beat, “Not me! I was asleep!”

The adapted version of Shakespeare’s Porter scene that follows keeps the structure of the Shakespearean original as it enumerates the villains who could be knocking at Hell’s Gate. Through the use of *scripted improvisation*, the Porter guides the spectators to anticipate the final “guest.” He repeatedly asks them who could be trying to enter this Hell of murder and betrayal. He answers his own questions quickly the first two times with the names of Hitler and Saddam Hussein, but the third time he repeats the question and pauses, encouraging the spectators to respond. He immediately agrees when someone yells out, “George Bush,” as audiences in Europe inevitably do. This moment gives the appearance of subverting the authority of the narrative text by allowing the spectator to enter the text and to complete the list. Here the Porter acts as a catalyst to intervention as he encourages the spectators to try on the role of co-creator of the story—at first in the specific story of Macbeth, but hopefully later with that same story played out in the everyday world of the audience.

Shakespeare’s Act V with the amassing of the armies around Dunsinane is transformed into a very contemporary political rally where Macduff marshals his supporters to help him defeat the tyrant Macbeth. The advance of Birnam Wood is not represented by branches carried by the advancing soldiers to hide their movements, but by many flags emblazoned with Macduff’s face on four to five meter tall bamboos placed throughout the space: they take over the space so the actors must maneuver around and among them. The whole world, signified by the many flags, has united against Macbeth. In this scene, for the first time, another character aside from the Porter speaks today’s ordinary prose, and that contemporary perspective does change the ending of the play. The audience, along with the Porter, watches Macduff’s meteoric rise to power and can see power’s corrupting influence as Macduff’s rhetoric shifts from “I am not afraid to lead this country” and “I can turn this country around” to:

I will step up security. I will expand the police force. I'll silence opposition. I'll do what is right. I'll do what is honest. . . . We will root out all terrorists. They will rot in Guantanamo. They will be wiped from the face of the earth. I will show no mercy! For the people to be free everything will be bent to our will: credit card records, medical records, telephone records, library records. We are just beginning! . . . For the people to be free there must be No Freedom!

Throughout the rally speech, the Porter has challenged Macduff from the periphery of the space close to the audience members, implying that he is speaking for them, until he finally explodes with:

Down with Macbeth! Down with Macduff! They all sound the same. They use the words we want to hear—Justice! Freedom! They fingerprint us! They round us up! They murder us! All in the name of Security. Down with Macduff! Down with Macbeth! Can't you see? They call our questions, "protests"; our protests, "resistance"; our resistance, "treason." What's the next step? Implanting loyalty chips in our heads so that our noses light up when an anti-government thought crosses our mind?

This outburst foreshadows the final moment of the show. The Porter then "disguises" himself as Seyton and with the come-uppance seen in the rally, happily tells Macbeth of Birnam Wood's advance on Dunsinane using Shakespeare's words, but pointing to the flags.

While Shakespeare's *Macbeth* ends with the promise of a new beginning now that the tyrant Macbeth is dead, Friches' *Macbeth* replaces Macbeth with a potentially worse tyrant in the character of Macduff. As Macduff feels emboldened during the rally and his promises become more and more frightening, the inevitability of tyrant replacing tyrant, of violence begetting even more sophisticated violence seems assured and reinforced. His killing of Macbeth does not even bloody his hands: he simply calls out, "Fire, fire, fire," and Macbeth is shot three times by an invisible source. Another fight in animal masks for the scepter renders Macduff victorious, but his victory celebration with loud rock music, dancing, and confetti exploding into the air is cut short when the Porter shoots him with a large assault rifle. The Porter's act of violence seems to reaffirm rather than to subvert the system he attempts to overthrow since his action repeats the cycle of violent regime change and seems to accept the assumption that getting rid of a tyrant will necessarily improve the situation—an assumption that clearly resonates with recent world events. The Porter has been the bridge between the world of Macbeth and the world of the audience throughout the play and so he metaphorically speaks for the spectator.

But what is the message here? Unlike both Macbeth's and Macduff's assassinations of kings, the Porter's killing of Macduff acts as a parody of the previous murders. His act is meaningless; it is not done for personal gain or social benefit. "Parodying," writes Bakhtin, "is the creation of a *decrowning double*; it is that same 'world turned inside out.' For this reason, parody is ambivalent. . . . Parody here was not, of course, a naked rejection of the parodied object. Everything has its parody, its laughing aspect, for everything is reborn and renewed through death" (*Problems* 127). If Bakhtin is right, then the Porter's parodic murder of Macduff signals, if not a rebirth,

then at least a reassessment of the cycle of brutality and power. His act does not result in the reappearance of the animal masks, but instead ends the performance by creating a statuesque death tableau—the “performance” of murder. The tableau is held for a few seconds, and then the actors take a bow and dance out of the performance space. Audience members often stay for a long time collecting the confetti as a souvenir, waiting to talk to the actors, trying to help the technicians roll up all the flags, reviewing the pictures they took on their digital cameras, or discussing the political prescience of the spectacle with friends and strangers. In Chalon-sur-Saône, calls for solidarity against the Minister of Culture’s hated new policies on actor compensation followed one performance.

The discomfort engendered by this production is more profound than making the audience physically uncomfortable and more provocative even than the merging of the imaginary and everyday worlds. This production hints that performance can be a symptom of sociocultural instabilities and proposes that it can act as a harbinger of change. It invites the audience to see the world with new eyes, to avoid simple solutions and easy sixty-second-sound-bite answers, and to question assumptions and certainties. It urges the spectator to re-evaluate contemporary politics and to oppose a bad system, the status quo, and what may seem inevitable. But Friches’ *Macbeth* does not provide answers—certainly the Porter’s solution is not a viable option. But while answers are absent, the play does encourage us to look for them, to ask questions, to put ourselves at risk. That challenge is profoundly uncomfortable.

## Notes

- [1] This production is now in Friches Théâtre Urbain’s repertory and will be performed at several locations in Europe, the United States, and Asia over the next three years. In 2005, it was performed at various locations in Europe and Korea and was booked by London’s National Theatre to perform along the walkway by the Thames in front of the theatre.
- [2] This translation and all subsequent translations from the French originals that appear in the text of the essay are mine.
- [3] On several occasions, additional hassles increased the level of discomfort. The first night that *Macbeth* was performed at the Chalon-dans-la-rue festival in Chalon-sur-Saône in July 2004, the Minister of Culture arrived a few minutes early to see the show. He was pursued by angry demonstrators protesting the change in governmental policies concerning actors’ compensation. The twenty-minute delay to the start of the show only seemed to increase the excitement, however. When *Macbeth* was performed at Hogmanay in Edinburgh, Scotland on 30 December 2004, a cold drizzle did not deter the large crowds. And, in fact, photographers filming the show projected the action on large screens so that even those far from the actors could see.
- [4] Diana Taylor exposes the “terrific burden” of the witness for whom “seeing is dangerous. . . . Though not the perpetrator nor the victim of the events, the witness is a part of the conflict and has a responsibility in reporting and remembering of events” (25). She clarifies later: “Witnessing presupposes that looking across borders is always an intervention and that the space of interlocution is always performative. . . . The physical setup of the encounter influences the dénouement of events” (261).
- [5] Meyerhold explains: “The cabotin is a strolling player; the cabotin is a kinsman to the mime, the histrion, and the juggler; the cabotin can work miracles with his technical mastery; the

cabotin keeps alive the tradition of the true art of acting . . . if there is no cabotin, there is no theatre either" (122–23).

## References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- . *Rabelais and his World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.
- Berry, Jean. "Macbeth, une danse dantesque fable guerrière." *Le Journal dans la rue*. Chalon-sur-Saône. 16 July 2004: 2–3.
- . "Paroles de rue: Que pensez-vous de ce spectacle?" Interviews. *Le Journal dans la rue*. Chalon-sur-Saône. 16 July 2004: 3.
- Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985.
- David, Gwénola. "Public Chéri: Un Autre Rapport?" *Scènes Urbaines* 1 (2002): 26.
- Delfour, Jean-Jacques. "Rue et théâtre de rue: habitation de l'espace urbain et spectacle théâtral." *Les Langages de la Rue*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997. 145–66.
- Dossier for Marketing*. Friches Théâtre Urbain Création. 2004.
- Eco, Umberto. "The Frames of Comic 'Freedom'" *Carnivall*. Ed. Thomas A. Sebeok. New York: Mouton, 1984. 1–9.
- Fisher, Mark. "Fireworks, Flair, and a Soupçon of Gallic Drama" *The Scotsman* 30 Dec (2004): 33.
- Harper, Sarah. Email to author. 20 May 2005.
- . "L'Internationale bestiale des hommes de pouvoir." Propos recueillis par Jean Berry. *Le Journal dans la rue*. Chalon-sur-Saône. 16 July 2004: 2.
- Kershaw, Baz. "Curiosity or Contempt: On Spectacle, the Human, and Activism" *Theatre Journal* 55 (2003): 591–612.
- . *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- . *The Radical in Performance Between Brecht and Baudrillard*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Lecoq, Jacques. *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre*. Trans. David Bradby. London: Methuen, 2000.
- Meyerhold, Vsevolod. *Meyerhold on Theatre*. Trans. and ed. Edward Braun. New York: Hill and Wang, 1969.
- Reinelt, Janelle. "Performing Europe: Identity Formation for a 'New Europe.'" *Theatre Journal* 53 (2001): 365–87.
- Schechner, Richard. *Environmental Theatre*. New York: Hawthorn, 1973.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. The New Folger Library Shakespeare. New York: Washington Square P, 1992.
- Siminot, Michel. "L'Art de la rue. Scène urbaine—Scène commune?" *Rue de la Folie* 3.1 (1999): 1–15.
- Taylor, Diana. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997.
- Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1982.