MacBird!: a history and feminist critique of Barbara Garson’s radical play

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Abstract
Barbara Garson’s controversial play, MacBird!, was written and produced during the Vietnam War era and Johnson administration. The satirical Shakespeare adaptation equates LBJ with Macbeth, the villainous tragic hero who murders his king in order to gain the Scottish crown. The implication that Johnson was responsible for the assassination of JFK created a fury of controversy among critics and the public, as well as the political leaders who were parodied. The play was first published and circulated in 1966 as an underground leaflet. In 1967, it was produced off-Broadway with a cast that featured actors Rue McClanahan, William Devane, Cleavon Little, and Stacy Keach, who won an Obie Award for his performance of the title role. The show launched the careers of these actors. Critics were divided in their reviews of the play’s literary merit, but all seemed to agree that the piece was shocking and significant because it flew in the face of patriotism and of reverence for presidential authority. At the time of its production, acclaimed theater critic Robert Brustein named MacBird! “the most explosive play” of the Sixties theater movement. This dissertation presents the history of the play, within its social and political setting, from its inception through its production and abrupt disappearance at the peak of its success, which coincided with the assassination of Robert Kennedy. Relying upon methodology that includes primary and secondary sources, as well as interviews with the playwright and others involved in the play, this work presents the publication and production history of MacBird!, public and White House response to the play, a contextual analysis under a feminist lens, and a final chapter on MacBird! as a precursor to feminist adaptations of canonical works, Sixties-era Macbeth adaptations, and the notable women whose work intersected in MacBird! MacBird! was a tremendous event in theater history; it belongs at the fore of adaptation studies, particularly Shakespeare and feminist adaptation studies; it is a prime model of performance as a political tool and therefore earns a central place in performance studies; and because it is an attack on patriarchal power and a rare example of a Sixties radical play written by a woman, Barbara Garson needs to be recognized among remarkable women of theater.

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Barbara Garson (born July 7, 1941 in Brooklyn) is an American playwright, author and social activist, perhaps best known for the play MacBird! Garson attended the University of California, Berkeley, where she earned a B.A. specializing in Classical History in 1964. She was active in the Free Speech Movement, as the editor of The Free Speech Movement Newsletter, which was printed on an offset press that she herself had restored. She was one of 800 arrested on December 2, 1964 at a sit-in at Sproul Hall Films like Kurosawa’s Throne of Blood, or Men of Respect may be somewhere on a borderline between the two classes, but Gruach, Ubu Roi, Macbett, and Cahoot’s Macbeth, as well as Barbara Garson’s Macbird!, my topic, are clearly members of the second class. Recommend this book. Email your librarian or administrator to recommend adding this book to your organisation's collection. Shakespeare Survey. Volume 57: Macbeth and its Afterlife. Edited by Peter Holland. Also in 1967, in Madison, Wisconsin, local publisher Morris Edelson donated the profits from his production of Barbara Garson’s satirical play MacBird for the purchase of a used Multilith 1250 duplicator. This became the first movement press in the area, known variously as “Connections” or the “DRU (Draft Resistance Union) Press.” Some lesbian and feminist printers work in relatively large collectively owned shops such as Iowa City Women's Press; others of us run small enterprises singly or with other feminists. Some are part of "movement" press collectives that specialize in printing for liberation and social movements. And a great number of lesbian and feminist printers struggle to maintain their politics in the varying climates of male-owned commercial shops.