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*MacB: The Macbeth Project* (review)

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Ray was a teacher? Was it Newsome's voice? Atlas's? Another collaborator's? When asked, Atlas said that the epilogue was part of the script as he received it. Regardless of how the epilogue came into being, its effect perfectly reiterated that of the production as a whole: powerfully drawing attention to the reciprocal relationship between lived experience and the expression of this experience through various hip-hop idioms.



***MacB: The Macbeth Project***

Presented by **The African-American Shakespeare Company** at the Buriel Clay Theatre, San Francisco, California. September 19–October 5, 2008 and Willow High School, Crockett, California. March 9–March 20, 2009. Directed and adapted by Victoria Evans Erville. Lighting designed by Kevin Myrick. Set designed by Atom Gray. Costumes designed by Steven Lamont. Choreography by LaTonya Watts. Fights directed by Dave Maier. Music by Dogwood Speaks and Johnathan Williams. Teaching by Sherri Young. With David Moore (Macbeth), Melvina Jones (Lady Macbeth, Melody), Johnathan Williams (Banquo, Hipcat, Macduff), Maikiko James (Witch 1, Old Man, Ensemble), DC Allen (Witch 2, Porter, Ensemble), Toya Willock (Witch 3, Lenox, Ensemble), Clifton Jones (Duncan, Ross), Levertis Stallings (Fleance), and others.

TODD LANDON BARNES, *University of California, Berkeley*

San Francisco's African-American Shakespeare Company recently finished staging its second hip-hop *Macbeth*. This time it's a project. Not too long ago, at the height of the culture wars, any project combining hip-hop and Shakespeare seemed like the radical and inventive solution to increasingly turbulent racial politics and troubled divisions between high and low culture, but today we can find Shakespeare and hip hop conjoined in a host of pedagogical and performance practices. Stephen Greenblatt has enthusiastically endorsed Flocabulary's hip-hop curriculum, *Shakespeare is Hip Hop*, and Ian McKellen recently recorded a rap version of Sonnet 18 before joining Akala, a British rapper claiming to be "Shakespeare reincarnated," to form East London's Hip Hop Shakespeare Company.

The San Francisco Bay Area is no stranger to hip-hop Shakespeare. In 2006, we saw Jonathan Moscone and the California Shakespeare Theater performing Naomi Iizuka's hip-hop remix of *Hamlet*, *Blood in the Brain*, at San Francisco's Intersection for the Arts. In 2007, we saw Ayodele "Wordslanger" Nzinga direct West Oakland's Lower-Bottom

Playaz in her localized and poetic hip-hop adaptation of *Macbeth*, *Mack, A Gangsta's Tale*. It's no surprise, then, that this year the Bay Area, home of everything Mac, from Oakland's *The Mack* (1973) to Vallejo's Mac Dre, hosted a play calling itself *MacB: The Macbeth Project*. What did the African-American Shakespeare Company add to the mix with their *Macbeth Project*?

We might begin by looking at what made the AASC's *Macbeth* a "project." The word "project" evokes corporate and artistic collaboration at the same time that it conjures the specter of public housing. As an action, "project" is doubly verbal, containing both language and movement; to project is to utter in the linguistic or theatrical sense, but it also includes the spatial emanation which results from such utterances. A project can be simultaneously an *eidos*, its *logos*, and its *telos*. The AASC's project performs all of the above. The *Macbeth Project* is an ensemble of sites and institutions, players and pupils, actions and ideas. Partially funded by an NEA grant as part of the latter's "Shakespeare for a New Generation" initiative, the *Macbeth Project* conjoins performance and pedagogy as its teaching artists engage at-risk Bay Area youth in theatre games through their "Shake-It-Up" program (The NEA's "Shakespeare for a New Generation" program is part of the larger "Shakespeare in American Communities" initiative, both of which are partially supplemented by funding from the US Department of Defense and the Department of Justice's Office of Justice and Juvenile Delinquency Prevention). The *Macbeth Project* involves schools in San Francisco, Oakland, Richmond, and Crockett. As a series of nodes in a larger network of projects, the *Macbeth Project* operates, in part, as the local and mobile expression of a national arts pedagogy as it projects itself through local voices and bodies.

I attended a performance of *MacB* towards the end of its run in San Francisco. Before taking my seat in the Buriel Clay Theater, I decided to get a closer look at Atom Gray's set. A graffiti piece covering the apron emblemized the analogy structuring the production. A microphone icon emblazoned upon a crown served as both heraldic crest and corporate logo for Scotland Records. In Erville's production, the fragile structure of seventeenth-century political sovereignty existed alongside the equally fickle and yet radically different political-economic structure of the twenty-first-century music industry. David Moore's *MacB* struggled not for land or kingship, but for intellectual property and "CEO rights," a phrase I noticed tucked into Gray's emblem. Gray's stage piece is a beautiful illustration that seamlessly blends his background in tattooing with graffiti-writing's signature paraps. The rest of the set presented a

(stereo-) typically “urban” or “hip-hop” *mise-en-scène*: a chain link fence, a city skyline, graffiti spelling out “dissent” and “hyphy” (a hip-hop movement originating in the Bay Area) alongside a neatly stenciled counter-imperative: “post no bills.” The upstage-left corner of the stage was cordoned off by a scrim behind which the play’s bloody business was acted out in silhouette. Erville’s *Macbeth* was bloodless, but Maier’s fight choreography was sharp, terse, and effective. The AASC’s *MacB*, less concerned with representing bloody deeds, chose to focus on the series of choices and forces leading up to these murderous events. Erville’s production, with an eye towards teaching youth to avoid bloodshed, eschewed the temptation to romanticize the play’s violence. According to the AASC’s executive director Sherri Young, *MacB* aimed to show teens how that which often appears as immutable destiny actually involves a series of choices.

The AASC billed their project as an “old classic infused with a new beat.” We might wonder which was the “classic” and which the “new beat.” Throughout the play, Afro-Atlantic polyrhythms punctuated and overlapped with Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter. Unlike many hip-hop Shakespeares, the *Macbeth Project* retained most of Shakespeare’s verse. Small textual alterations (mostly proper nouns) localized and contemporized the play: the Thanes of Glamis and Cawdor became the Emcees of Frisco and Oakland, and Duncan was reimagined as “Top Dog,” an industry mogul in the mold of Suge Knight, the notoriously violent Death Row Records CEO. Additionally, references to Cristal champagne and Hummers replaced Shakespeare’s wine and horses. When Williams’s Banquo combined his question about “The insane root, / That takes the reason prisoner” with a blunt smoking gesture, the witches’ prophecies became instantly suspect as drug-induced hallucinations. For the most part, Erville used MacB’s monologues as opportunities to interpolate the play’s hip-hop aesthetic. The verse of MacB’s dagger soliloquy was retained but rapped to the rhythmic backdrop of the Geto Boys’s “Mind Playing Tricks on Me.” Audiences familiar with this classic hip-hop ballad could immediately sense the affinity between these texts, both of which present paranoid and haunted protagonists who hallucinate while wandering through sleeplessly hostile landscapes. The banquet scene was restaged as a music-video shoot, where the rehearsal served as a play-within-a-play. When MacB broke character mid-routine, Lady Macbeth deftly assuaged the fears of fellow actors and dancers with her powerful smile and optimistically buoyant eyes.

As the play gained momentum, I struggled to discover the particular period of hip-hop culture represented. Electronic text “Messengers” and

allusions to the hyphy movement (Duncan wears mirrored Ray-Ban Aviators, what hyphy youth call “stunna shades”) made the play feel relatively contemporary. However, Steven Lamont’s costumes extended the play’s historical engagement and provided a palimpsestic hip-hop backdrop that sampled the ’90s (MacB’s Timberland boots, bandana, and camo vest seemed contemporaneous with Lady Macbeth’s J-Lo-inspired velour track suits) and the ’80s (an oversized Flavor Flav clock medalion hung from the Porter’s neck). Banquo, in Adidas Shell Toes and a leather jacket bearing the moniker “Hip Cat” seemed to represent hip hop’s ostensible origin in the ’70s. In this production, Banquo appeared to serve as the seed spawning two origin narratives, one begetting kings, the other future CEOs. If the *Macbeth Project* was engaged in staging hip hop’s oft-proclaimed death at the hands of corporate media, Banquo, dressed in the trappings of the genre’s originary era, seemed to represent the dead father to a long line of corporately invested hip-hop projects. What did it mean, then, that Johnathan Williams doubled as both the murdered Banquo and the vanquishing Macduff? Williams was the clear highlight of both performances; his casual, idiomatic and sibilant delivery naturalized Shakespeare’s verse and made every line feel conjured on the spot. Very “hip” indeed.

If the performance in San Francisco made Shakespeare “hip,” the AASC’s school tour made it “hop.” Last April, I decided to attend a number of the AASC’s “Shake-It-Up” sessions at Willow High School, an alternative school for at-risk youth in Crockett, California. Crockett is an almost forgotten town built around the California half of the once-thriving California & Hawaii (C&H) Sugar refinery (now owned by American Sugar Refining). When the refinery automated its processing and delivery systems and laid off over half its workforce, Crockett went from boom to bust. Since then, the four-school John Swett Unified School District has suffered from declining enrollment. It relies heavily on its ability to bring in students from nearby Richmond and Vallejo in order to maintain a sufficient stream of funding (the state determines funding according to a school’s average daily attendance). This year, the AASC gave the bulk of its attention (ten workshops) to JSUSD’s Willow High, a school whose economic, geographic, and ethnic diversity is rare by any standard. My attendance at these workshops also felt like a homecoming. I taught English in this district for years, running both the main high school’s now-defunct drama program and its hip-hop club.

I sat along with twenty-eight students in a portable classroom awaiting the arrival of Sherri Young, who is both the AASC’s founder and one of its teaching artists. The AASC’s Shake-It-Up Program involves send-

ing one teaching artist to each of its chosen schools. At these schools, teaching artists engaged students in a variety of theatre games related to *Macbeth*. After a series of such workshops, the AASC performed a stripped-down forty-five minute version of *MacB*. At Willow, this performance was staged in one of the school's small portable classrooms. When a cheerful and excited Young entered the room, the students were instantly interpellated into the economy of her performance project. Each time a student participated in any way, either by answering questions or by sharing personal stories of moments when, like Macbeth, they made bad choices, Young would hand that student a raffle ticket. Students who performed for the class were rewarded with a bag of cookies. Students performed vocabulary words from the *Macbeth* text (of which Willow had a mere five copies), translating the black-and-white text into movement and action. This aspect of the AASC's performance pedagogy opened up the polysemy contained within its stated goal of "envisioning the classics with color." The classics-color binary seemed at once to contain a multicultural imperative alongside a desire to breathe color, life and movement into an inert black-and-white textuality. How do students specializing in the "hip" and the "hop" engage with the radical alterity of a moribund text that seems both uncool and unmoving (both physically and affectively)? Young's solution was to encourage students to make Shakespeare's characters "come alive." In this way, her engagement with at-risk youth looked less like a project of juvenile rehabilitation and more like a project of theatrical reincarnation.

I was most impressed by a student who enacted "sovereignty" by taking on what appeared like the Calibanic affect of hunchbacked servant. As his curled body cursed his king and glorified his own labor, his performance seemed to express his situation as the central figure in a Russian doll of political and aesthetic projects. Instead of simply enacting sovereignty by playing the king, this student enacted the idea of sovereignty by presenting the *relationships* and *labor* constituting sovereign power. His monologue, which interrogated notions of credit, theft and profit, seemed to mix commentary on the "CEO rights" and royalties of *MacB* with the rights and limits of sovereignty explored in *Macbeth*. Furthermore, this student himself, through the labor of his performance, became caught up in the equally complicated ensemble of corporate, political, affective, aesthetic and edible economies constituting his classroom, the AASC, and the NEA.

The AASC's *Macbeth Project* puts a number of weighty yet productive hyphenations into play. These hyphenations (African-American, old-new,

classic-color, teacher-artist, national-local) make finding a unifying trait difficult; these diverse and often antithetical *traits d'union* resist the stability of a non-hyphenated identity. The AASC forces us to ask not "What is the *Macbeth Project*?" but rather "What does the *Macbeth Project* do?" The AASC, it seems, hyphenates. It conjoins the hip and the hop, the cool and its movement. It maintains a productive tension between performance and pedagogy, between the old and the new, between classic black and white texts and new hues of performance, between a Shakespearean heritage and "Shakespeare for a New Generation."

Young accomplished this by engaging the students in a variety of Viola Spolin's theatre games. During the last workshop, after Young asked the students to explain their reluctance to perform, the students shifted focus and pleaded with her, "Can we do the machine?" She responded with a smile and a challenge: "You start it." It took me a few minutes to realize what was happening. Spolin's machine, like the *Macbeth Project*, plays on polyrhythms and collaborative distributions in space. Her exercise, also called "Part of a Whole," is an improvisational exercise that begins with one student performing a mechanized gesture. While this student repeats his or her gesture (often accompanied by sounds), other students, one by one, add complementary gestures that become part of and change the moving whole. As the mechanic assemblage at Willow assumed a shape and temporality, the students lost all stage fright. I noticed that, like the student's earlier enactment of sovereignty, the machine seemed to figure the ensemble's engagement in larger institutional projects. However, the machine assembled by the Willow students was not rooted in industrial technology (as it often is), although it contained those elements. The students were not performing the labor one finds in, say, a sugar refinery. Instead, their machine reflected the newly dominant forms of immaterial and affective labor that have come to characterize our millennial economy. Their machine expressed everything vital about education that refuses to be captured by the Scantron. I was watching an affect machine, and this machine's affect was hyphy.

Hyphy is a Bay Area hip-hop subculture closely associated with neighboring Vallejo hip-hop artists E-40 and the late Mac Dre, both of whom serve as student heroes and local legends. Hyphy is characterized by ingenious and often nonsensical lyricism, tricked-out cars engaged in illegal sideshows (a particular technology of street theatre that sometimes includes "ghost-riding the whip," a term used to describe dancing on a vehicle's hood as it coasts driverless), and above all else, a rambunctious, Dionysian dance style figured in terms of madness and stupidity. To "get



hyphy” is often called “getting stupid” or “going dumb.” As the students bounced and vibrated with the dance of their hyphy machine, I became convinced that “going dumb” never looked so smart. On that day, when the *Macbeth Project*’s hyphenations met Crockett’s “hyphy nation,” it became clear to me that what is more important than adjusting the habits of (re-habilitating) youth is the project of reincarnating our national arts pedagogy. The AASC places reincarnation before rehabilitation, illustrating that what needed to “come alive” was an ensemble capable of illustrating to hip-hop youth how their affective habits already have a home within larger political and aesthetic machines. With the help of the AASC’s project, Crockett’s hyphy performance has already begun to colorfully exceed and reconstitute the contours of our classic, national Shakespearean machine.



### *The Tempest*

Presented by the **Baxter Theatre Centre** and the **Royal Shakespeare Company** at the **Richmond Theatre**, Surrey, UK. March 19–28, 2009. Directed by Janice Honeyman. Set designed by Illka Louw. Lighting design by Manie Manim. Music direction, composition and sound design by Neo Muyanga. Puppetry by Janni Younge. Choreography by Christopher Kindo. With Antony Sher (Prospero), John Kani (Caliban), Atandwa Kani (Ariel), Tinarié Van Wyk Loots (Miranda), Jeremy Crutchley (Alonso), Nicholas Pauling (Sebastian), Lionel Newton (Antonio), Charlie Keegan (Ferdinand), Ivan Abrahams (Gonzalo), Wayne Van Rooyen (Trinculo), Elton Landrew (Stephano), Royston Stoffels (Adrian), and others.

VIRGINIA MASON VAUGHAN, *Clark University*

The Richmond Theatre is a typical late-Victorian playhouse, its proscenium arch decorated with ornate friezes and little cupids. Built in 1899 at the height of the British Empire, this old-fashioned space nicely framed Janice Honeyman’s South African *Tempest*, which was set in the same period. In contrast to many *Tempest* productions of recent years that have paid lip service to the colonial theme in the treatment of their Calibans, only to ignore it for the remainder of the production, this *Tempest* consistently evoked the pain suffered by colonizer and colonized alike. Antony Sher’s Prospero, disheveled and bearded, wore the stained linen suit of a nineteenth-century European who had spent too much time in the jungle, while his daughter Miranda, played by the lanky and ebullient