

Reimagining Macbeth Through Immersive Storytelling: Audience Autonomy, Embodied Spectatorship, and Accessibility in *Sleep No More*

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Abstract: In Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (SNM), audiences wander through dark hallways, chase performers across different floors, and assemble individualized interpretations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through bodily participation and immersive engagement. Rather than positioning spectators as passive observers, the production promises audiences a high degree of autonomy and agency to physically navigate the performance environment and construct individualized interpretations of the narrative. However, this paper argues that immersive theatre presents a paradoxical form of audience autonomy. By examining collective environments, embodied spectatorship, and spatial limitations in both the New York and Shanghai productions, this study suggests that audience autonomy within immersive theatre is relational and interdependent, emerging not through isolated individual choice but through ongoing interactions shaped by collective movement, bodily engagement, and spatial conditions.

Keywords: Sleep No More; immersive theatre; Macbeth; audience autonomy; embodiment; accessibility.

1. Introduction

Created by the British theatre company Punchdrunk, *Sleep No More* (SNM) is considered a pioneering example of contemporary immersive theatre and one of the genre's most commercially successful productions [1]. The production operated in New York for nearly fourteen years before closing in January 2025, while the Shanghai production continues to run today. Adapted from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the production departs from conventional theatrical structures and reconstructs the narrative through a multi-floor performance environment, fragmented storytelling, and sensory immersion [2]. Existing scholarship on immersive theatre frequently emphasizes the autonomy and agency granted to audiences within productions such as *Sleep No More* [3]. Drawing upon Kantian conceptions of autonomy as self-governed action independent from external determination [4], immersive theatre appears to position spectators as freely self-directing participants within the performance environment. Director Felix Barrett similarly describes *Sleep No More* as offering audiences "total autonomy over their own experience," encouraging spectators to "follow their impulses" through unrestricted exploration [5]. At first glance, immersive theatre therefore appears to offer audiences complete freedom over how they experience performance.

However, this paper argues that audience autonomy within SNM is fundamentally paradoxical. Although spectators appear free to move independently through the performance space, their experiences are continually influenced by surrounding audiences, environmental factors, and embodied forms of participation. Audiences frequently follow one another through space, compete for proximity to performers, and rely upon collective behaviours to navigate unfamiliar environments. As a result, audience autonomy within SNM and immersive theatre cannot be understood as self-determined, but emerges through the relational conditions of participation. Focusing on the New York City and Shanghai productions of SNM, this paper examines how audience

autonomy is mediated through collective behaviour, embodied participation, and negotiated access to performance space.

2. The Illusion of Audience Freedom

One of the defining characteristics of *Sleep No More* is its transformation of audiences from passive viewers into active participants. Unlike traditional theatre, where spectators receive a unified narrative from a fixed perspective, SNM encourages audiences to create individualized experiences by choosing where to move, which characters to follow, and which scenes to prioritize [6]. Gareth White argues that immersive theatre fundamentally alters the relationship between audience and performance space by granting spectators participatory agency [1]. Within SNM, audience movement itself becomes central to storytelling. Many audience members describe the excitement of uncovering hidden rooms, unexpected encounters, and fragmented storylines. At the same time, the non-linear narrative structure of SNM reshapes the temporal experience of storytelling itself. Unlike conventional theatre, where audiences collectively follow the same dramatic sequence, SNM generates multiple overlapping timelines that are experienced differently by each spectator, with narrative meaning emerging through movement, memory, and retrospective interpretation rather than through a linear dramatic sequence. However, the emphasis on individual exploration often coexists with forms of collective behaviour. During my attendance at both the New York City and Shanghai productions, audiences frequently gathered around emotionally intense scenes despite repeated instructions emphasizing "personalized" and non-repeatable audience experiences. Spectators often followed crowds instinctively, particularly during climactic moments involving Macbeth or Lady Macbeth. This phenomenon resonates with Ritter's discussion of immersive spectatorship as collective movement through performance space [7]. This contradiction reveals a central tension within immersive theatre: although audiences are encouraged to exercise autonomy, spectators may still inevitably rely upon

collective movement and crowd behaviour to navigate unfamiliar environments.

3. Collective Movement and Embodied Spectatorship

Julia Ritter describes immersive spectatorship as a form of “extended audiencing,” in which audience members continuously follow performers and one another through space, generating contagious patterns of movement and emotional behaviour [7]. Similarly, Reason and Reynolds argue that audiences may experience emotional participation indirectly through witnessing the reactions of surrounding spectators, producing forms of “participation-by-proxy” [8]. One particularly memorable moment during my experience of the New York City production was Macbeth’s hanging scene, during which audiences silently gathered beneath the suspended body while sharing collective stillness and attention. In this moment, emotional intensity emerged not only from Macbeth’s performance itself, but also from the collective bodily presence of surrounding spectators.

The use of masks further reinforces embodied spectatorship. Although the identical white masks encourage anonymity and individual exploration, they also position spectators as part of a visually “unified collective body” within the performance environment. Jonothan Neelands describes drama as “the art of togetherness,” emphasizing that theatrical experience fundamentally relies upon collective participation [9]. Audience autonomy in SNM therefore exists not in isolation but through ongoing interactions with the choices, movements, and affective responses of others. As audiences move together through dark hallways, crowded rooms, and emotionally intense scenes, immersion becomes increasingly bodily rather than observational. Merleau-Ponty argues that this immersive form of spectatorship is inseparable from bodily experience, and that the body itself becomes a primary means of understanding the world [10]. Within SNM, audiences do not simply observe emotions from a distance; they physically move through emotional environments shaped by darkness, uncertainty, sound, touch, and crowd movement. In this case, rather than sympathizing with characters from a distance, spectators move through emotionally charged environments alongside other audience members. Empathy within immersive theatre therefore emerges through movement, proximity, and sensory engagement, a phenomenon that Cummings et al. associate with affective and associative forms of immersive empathy [11]. Audiences encounter fear, tension, and vulnerability not only through narrative events but also through shared spatial experience, collective audience dynamics, and physical co-presence. As a result, audience autonomy is not simply granted but must be actively negotiated through ongoing interactions with other spectators and the performance environment.

4. Accessibility and the Limits of Autonomy

Although immersive theatre expands audience participation, it also creates new limitations regarding accessibility and inclusion. The physical structure of *Sleep No More* requires audiences to continuously navigate staircases, narrow hallways, and crowded rooms for extended periods of time. Experiences of exhaustion, confusion, and difficulty navigating the performance space are particularly noticeable

during emotionally intense scenes involving large crowds. Such conditions may create barriers for elderly audiences, disabled spectators, and individuals with limited mobility. Therefore, audience autonomy within the production is unevenly experienced, as spectators who are physically faster, more familiar with immersive theatre conventions, or more confident navigating crowded environments are often better positioned to access performers, key narrative moments, and emotionally intimate scenes. The agency promised by the production is therefore experienced unevenly across different audience groups.

Accessibility concerns within *Sleep No More* are not limited to physical mobility alone. The production’s reliance on darkness, silence, fragmented narration, and environmental “ambiguity” may also create anxiety and disorientation for audiences unfamiliar with immersive theatre conventions. Unlike traditional theatre, where audiences collectively remain seated and receive a relatively stable narrative structure, SNM demands constant bodily alertness and independent decision-making. Audience members must determine where to move, which performers to follow, and how to interpret fragmented scenes without explicit guidance. For some spectators, this uncertainty becomes exciting and liberating; for others, it may produce sensory overload and emotional stress [12].

The immersive experience may also become physically competitive, particularly when audiences must chase performers or struggle to secure viewing positions during important scenes. Numerous audience reviews on Google describe overcrowding as a significant factor affecting audience enjoyment and accessibility within the performance. Such limitations may become even more pronounced for first-time spectators unfamiliar with the immersive conventions of the production or the competitive dynamics involved in securing advantageous viewing positions. Spectators positioned near performers often gain greater access to emotionally intimate moments, while others may experience blocked sightlines or difficulty navigating crowded environments. Gezgin and Imamoglu similarly argue that audience behaviour within immersive theatre is strongly influenced by environmental design and spatial negotiation [13].

While the use of masks may temporarily conceal spectators’ daily personal and social identities, allowing them to explore the environment more freely, the inability to communicate verbally can heighten disorientation in crowded and unfamiliar settings. The fragmented and silent structure of *Sleep No More* may also contribute to narrative distance and feelings of alienation. Gordon argues that Punchdrunk’s immersive adaptation disrupts conventional modes of narrative comprehension and stable character identification, distancing audiences from the coherent and continuous dramatic experience associated with *Macbeth* [2].

However, this highly embodied and sensory mode of storytelling does not necessarily reduce accessibility in every context. Traditional Shakespearean theatre often relies heavily upon language and textual interpretation, whereas SNM communicates primarily through dancing, lighting, body expressions, music, and spatial interaction. As a result, international audiences who may not fully understand Shakespearean English are still able to engage emotionally with the performance through sensory experience. This may partially explain the positive reception of the Shanghai adaptation, where many audiences embraced ambiguity,

uncertainty, and sensory immersion rather than relying upon narrative clarity.

The Shanghai production further demonstrates how immersive theatre may expand cultural accessibility through localized adaptation. By integrating 1930s Shanghai aesthetics and elements of Chinese folklore, such as *The White Snake*, into the performance environment, the production creates greater cultural familiarity for Chinese audiences, enabling them to engage with the performance without relying primarily on Shakespearean language or narrative clarity. The familiar cultural references embedded within the Shanghai adaptation further enable spectators to mobilize existing cultural knowledge and associations, fostering greater inclusiveness and accessibility while expanding opportunities for audience autonomy.

5. Conclusion

Sleep No More reconstructs Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through immersive storytelling and participation, suggesting that autonomy within immersive theatre is fundamentally relational and interdependent rather than purely individual. Although spectators are encouraged to navigate the performance environment independently, their experiences remain shaped by the presence and actions of others, as well as by environmental conditions. Spectators frequently follow shared movement patterns, compete for access to performers, and negotiate space alongside one another. Ultimately, *Sleep No More* demonstrates that autonomy within immersive theatre is fundamentally relational, emerging through the dynamic interplay of social interaction, embodied spectatorship, and spatial conditions.

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