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## **Baby Macbeth, directed by Agnès Limbos**

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## Performance reviews

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*Baby Macbeth*, directed by Agnès Limbos for the Compagnie Gare Centrale in association with Théâtre de la Guimbarde, Théâtre d'Arras, France, 21 November 2023, stalls.

**Reviewed by:** Sandrine Le Pors, *Université de Montpellier Paul-Valéry, France*

*Baby Macbeth*, performed and played by Agnès Limbos, founder of the Belgian theatre company Gare Centrale, is a show created in 2017 that is aimed at audience members ages 12 months and over. The performance was conceived to welcome 55 spectators, including 25 babies when I viewed it. After a long and prolific career, this is Limbos's first creation accessible to a public of a very young age. As is often the case for these types of offerings, the piece is short (25 minutes), and the performance requires the adults' willingness and readiness to share a theatrical experience alongside little ones who, caught between fascination and surprise, then shifting to fear, joy, and jubilation, do not wait for the end of the show to react. Their sudden reactions at any given moment, which can be disruptive at times, can only be expected and were certainly taken into account in the show's conception. Yet, this show digs further than one might expect: it provides older viewers with a fresh and surprisingly effective look at well-known extracts from Shakespeare's works, while younger audience members, who may be attending a play for the first time, are offered a crash-course and teaser about what is to come if they continue attending future productions and grow into regular spectators.

Though *Baby Macbeth* was created within a few months, the creative process had been brewing for some time in the director's mind. Limbos decided that other Shakespeare shows aimed at younger audiences were a bit too soft or predictable, and she wanted to tackle creation for younger audiences from a new perspective. The relation to this first theatrical encounter, with its codes for babies that are expertly understood by a practitioner for youth audiences, lays at the heart of *Baby Macbeth*. At the same time, the link between repertoire and dramaturgy bears mentioning, for it is seemingly rarely ever made in theatre for young audiences, where the aim is usually not to dive into the details but rather create a point of contact between a child's imagination and Shakespeare's world: a world shaped by love, anger, desire for power, and fear, which very young children may feel and recognise without any prior knowledge of Shakespeare. What comes out of it is a show where in which one moves freely from one selected excerpt to the next

– from *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear* – while *Hamlet's* Ophelia floats in and out of the liminal space that separates the plays.

The stage is set at a large table around which the audience is seated in a semi-circle, opposite the performer. Five holes have been carved into the table, and in each of these, five babies who had been greeted by Limbos herself upon arrival, are dressed in royal clothes and given a crown, as if they were the kings and queens for the upcoming show, or even characters in the staging.

The unusual stage design by Sophie Carlier offers a set up that resembles an amphitheatre evoking the Globe but exclusively arranged for children. This mini-Elizabethan theatre is organised as such: the first row is occupied by babies seated in high chairs, with children on cushioned seats behind them, and adults on benches bringing up the rear. On one side of the table is Joachim Caffonnette, who composed the music for the show and offers live accompaniment, while stage manager Joël Bosmans is positioned opposite Caffonnette. Both are wearing wigs. Between them, puppets made of simple sticks covered in velvet fabric and hats reminiscent of the Renaissance period as well as hundreds of objects, including used toys, are manipulated. Limbos displays the objects and keeps the audience in thrall, waiting for opportune moments to show and hide the various Shakespearean characters, animals, and scenery (including deer, cows, castles, and trees) as well as perform fights and races with a playful tone, to the delight and amusement of the audience. The children are sometimes called upon as part of this light-hearted affair, for example when they are offered to seize the crown of Scotland dangling from a string tied to a wooden stick, teasingly held aloft by the Brussels artist over the cheerful public.

Each short scene proposes an original piece, with lullabies and Scottish bagpipes moving the action forward in various rhythms. The scoring blends well-known pieces, such as Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, in such manner that the show succeeds in developing both musical and theatrical repertoires for its younger viewers. The play is also performed in early modern English – another noteworthy and surprising aspect, given its target audience. It may be that the lyrical text is not meant to be understood but rather heard and appreciated for its poetic rhythms and resonance, further supporting the show's strong musical dimension. The close proximity between Limbos and the child spectators can only serve to support this daring choice, as it is arguably the case that oftentimes young audiences are placed too far from the performer to be able to capture as much as they are capable of at their level, especially when it comes to the text.

While *Baby Macbeth* does not solely focus on *Macbeth*, it fittingly borrows its title from the tragedy. For older spectators, this 'baby', affixed to 'Macbeth', in addition to directly addressing babies, eerily echoes 'Lady Macbeth'. Are we in one of her dreams? Or perhaps spirits of Fleance or Macduff's son, or of other murdered children haunting Shakespeare's plays? In this tragedy, with its undercurrent of infanticide, this character is also conceived as asexual and without children.

Limbos's staging may provoke questions about characterisation and interpretation, but the messages transmitted are by no means absolute. *Baby Macbeth* appears less to be about introducing babies to Shakespeare than engaging with composites of his characters through puppetry and object theatre and allowing spectators of all ages to enter into a

sensory world that differs radically from what one might expect from a Shakespearean production. Nonetheless, it conjures similar feelings and perhaps inspire new readings of celebrated roles and well-trodden passages. It offers an avenue of research into the seldomly frequented field of Shakespeare for very young audiences. Rather than leading the public to tease out specific themes or conclusions that may be expected when one hears the play title, *Baby Macbeth* encourages open and plural expression, allowing more room for discussion about the desires and meanings of depicted characters and scenes than may be possible in more traditional stagings.

With vital energy, Limbos extends the audience an invitation at the end of the performance: ‘Don’t forget love and rage’. The words resound as a wish, a prayer, or a direction as much as a magic formula. Though maybe not understood by younger audience members, the plea may still resonate in their ears like an incantation by three witches. *Baby Macbeth*, then, may be viewed as less of an adaptation than a metaphor for theatre itself: a pretext to create, with its carefully curated infusion of objects, music, and voice, supported by a dramaturgy emanating from a baroque mindset that returns frequently to play-within-a-play trope.

Making Shakespeare for all ages without sugarcoating it or mistaking childhood for infantilism is essentially what characterises *Baby Macbeth*. In placing babies at its centre, Limbos succeeds in spotlighting the *infans* (that which cannot or does not yet have the ability to speak) aspect of Shakespeare’s theatre, but also that which is inherent to theatrical gesture. It is a token moulded as much in softness and love as with rage and cruelty – traits that characterise all of Shakespeare’s plays – and while memories of the production will inevitably fade for the youngest spectators, the sentiments shared may leave traces with them for the rest of their lives.

## Note

1. For more information about *Baby Macbeth*, see the Compagnie Gare Centrale’s website: <https://garecentrale.be/wp/en/baby-macbeth-2/> (accessed 15 April 2025).

## Author biography

**Sandrine Le Pors** is Full Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at Université de Montpellier Paul-Valéry. She pursues a path of research and teaching in the performing arts alongside artistic and dramaturgical collaboration in the theater. She is the author of numerous articles on contemporary theatre, theatre of voices and theatre for young audiences. As a contemporary theatre specialist she has published ‘Le théâtre des voix, À l’écoute du personnage et des écritures contemporaines’, in *Le Spectaculaire* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011), and ‘L’enfant qui nous regarde. Persistances de l’enfance dans les écritures textuelles et scéniques contemporaines’, *Études théâtrales*, 71, 2022. She has also edited several collected volumes.

