

The Avant-Garde Constructions of Dramatic Expressiveness of The Sardegna Teatro's "Macbettu" and The Dead Centre's "Lippy"

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Abstract: The Italian Sardegna Teatro's "Macbettu" and Ireland's Dead Centre's "Lippy" have emerged as groundbreaking avant-garde representatives in contemporary dramas, making waves across multiple festivals. Through analyzing their innovative practices in text reconstructions, stage spectacles, emotional expressions, philosophical connotations, and physical languages, this paper reveals how avant-garde dramas transcend traditional narrative frameworks and aesthetic paradigms, expanding artistic boundaries while delving into spiritual core themes. This research demonstrates that these two works draw from ancient cultural roots and modern philosophies, employing heterogeneous cultural symbols and subversive theatrical languages to create dramatically impactful and thought-provoking performances. These works provide vital inspiration for the innovation and development of contemporary theatre.

1. Introduction

As an ancient art form, drama has always been in a dynamic process of self-renewal and continuous transformation. Avant-garde drama represents the cutting-edge exploration of theatrical arts, aiming to break traditional conventions, experiment with novel forms, challenge reception habits, and significantly expand the expressive power and ideological depth of drama. In contemporary theatre arts, Sardegna Teatro's "Macbettu" (adapted from Shakespeare's "Macbeth") and Ireland's Dead Centre's "Lippy" stand out as exemplary works of avant-garde dramas. These two productions premiered at the 2019 Wuzhen theatre Festival, offering audiences a breathtaking experience of cutting-edge international art while achieving remarkable success in constructing avant-garde theatrical expression.

Alessandro Serra, director of "Macbettu", masterfully blends Shakespeare's timeless classics with Sardinian cultural traditions to create a raw, primal theatrical language steeped in ritualistic sensibility. The production, featuring an all-male cast, Sardinian dialect performances, and minimalist stage design, has captivated audiences worldwide during its tour, hailed as "One of the most original interpretations of Shakespeare's works". Meanwhile, The Dead Centre's "Lippy" explores the complex relationship between language, power and truth through postmodern fragmented storytelling, multi-media interweaving, and profound philosophical contemplation, and was praised by The

Guardian as "breaking the limits of drama".

2. "Macbettu": The Rebirth of Classic Reconstructions and Ancient Rituals

While Shakespeare's "Macbeth" has been adapted by countless theatre troupes across centuries, the Sardegna Teatro's production of "Macbettu" stands out with its groundbreaking originality. Through cultural transplantation, ritualized staging, and raw emotional interpretation, this adaptation breathes new life into the classic text while maintaining its artistic power.

The most striking avant-garde feature of "Macbettu" lies in its radical reimagining of Shakespeare's original work. Director Alessandro Serra did not simply adapt or transplant "Macbeth" into Sardinian cultural contexts, but instead achieved profound cultural hybridity and semantic reinvention. By embedding the play's core narrative within Sardinian carnival rituals, employing the Sardinian language as the performance medium, and casting all male actors to faithfully recreate Shakespearean theatrical traditions. This kind of handling is not a superficial display of folk customs, but a deep grafting of cultural genes.

Serra's creative inspiration originates from the ancient carnival rituals of Barbagia in Sardinia. In this tradition, carnival is not merely a celebration but a ritual practice imbued with ancient beliefs and collective unconsciousness. Serra acutely captures the primal elements present in Shakespearean tragedies — fear of fate, the allure of power, the torment of sin, and the dark side of human nature — these eternal themes transcending specific eras and cultures. By integrating the plot into Sardinian ritual structures, Serra strips Shakespeare's "Macbeth" of its Elizabethan historical veneer, revealing a more primal and universal tragic essence.

Sardinian, as a performance medium, represents an ancient yet obscure language — a deliberate strategy of "desensitization". The Sardinian dialect, characterized by its "lack of emphasis on pronunciation and articulation, resembling more of a chanting style"[1], creates a striking resonance with the rhythmic quality of Shakespeare's poetic dramas while producing an unfamiliar auditory experience. For non-Sardinian audiences, language ceases to be a transparent medium for information transmission but transforms into a tangible sonic presence, significantly enhancing the ritualistic atmosphere and mystical ambiance of the performance. The Chinese subtitles installed in some theatres not only fail to diminish this estrangement effect but also reinforce the opacity of meaning transmission and the cultural distance through linguistic transformations (English→ Sardinian→ Chinese).

3. The Bodiliness and Primitive Rituals Constructed the Stage Spectacle

The stage of "Macbettu" presents a powerful and distinctive bodiliness and sense of ritual, another crucial manifestation of its avant-garde nature. Serra's creation is rooted in "body theatre", placing performers' bodies at the center of the stage, through actors' movements, minimalist spaces, and the interplay of light and shadow between black and white, it constructs an audiovisual spectacle within the theatre. This approach returns the play to early theatrical traditions — the sacred, secretive, and ecstatic Dionysian rituals.

On stage, ox bells, animal hide drums, horns, and cork instruments weave a mystical soundscape. Actors strike metallic devices in the darkness, producing piercing vibrations that resonate with murmured chants through the void. These elements transcend mere background noise — they become integral components of the performance, seamlessly blending with the actors' physical movements and vocal expressions (For specific analysis, see Table 1). A group of male performers emerge as "dogs" (See Figure 1). their fierce, frenzied gestures embodying primal urges mythologized into totemic forms. Through ritualistic choreography, the minimalist lighting cuts through swirling dust to shape spaces, transforming Shakespeare's essence into a visual epic transcending language.

This approach diminishes traditional drama's narrative tension and character depth, amplifying the performance's immersive atmosphere and sensory impact.



Figure 1 Macbettu's actors appear in the scene

The all-male cast stands as another bold innovation in "Macbettu". This production not only preserves Shakespearean theatrical traditions but also continues Sardinia's ancient custom of prohibiting women from performing on stage. In portraying Lady Macbeth, Serra deliberately retains male actors' thick beards, exploring gender identity through the contradiction between role and appearance. This approach isn't mere historical revival or conservatism, but a deliberate strategy for gender defamiliarization. It breaks away from modern realistic performance conventions, creating an abstract and symbolic aesthetic. This interpretation also serves as a practical response to Plessner's "New Perspective" theory.[2]

Leonardo Capuano, the 190cm-tall actor portraying Macbeth in Wuzhen, delivers a performance that amplifies the play's visual impact. The character transforms into a colossal, almost inhuman figure — embodying both the embodiment of power lust and a puppet in fate's hands. His body becomes a totem of authority on stage, evoking both fear and pity, vividly capturing the tragic duality inherent in the role.

Table 1: The stage elements and their symbolic meanings in "Macbettu"

Stage elements	Specific presentation	symbolic meaning	artistic effect
body	the tall Macbeth, the bearded Lady Macbeth	the physicalization of power, gender deconstruction	visual spectacles, identity deconstruction
sound	Sardinian chanting, cowbells, animal skin drums	ancient beliefs, primitive witchcraft, collective unconsciousness	mystical atmosphere, audiovisual impact
stage property	steel, dust, blood	violence, war and death	primitive religion, brutal aesthetics
lamplight	dark atmosphere, light beam in dust	sacred beliefs, evil forces, supernatural phenomena	religious space, spiritual space
space	minimalist stage, abstract installation	psychological space, cosmic atmosphere	strangeness, solemnity, transcendence of history

4. The Avant-Garde of Emotion: Primitive Emotion and Collective Unconsciousness

"Macbettu" demonstrates groundbreaking avant-garde expression of emotion. Rather than

exploring characters' inner worlds through nuanced psychological analysis or emotional shifts, Cerra employs ritualized, bodily, and sensory-driven techniques to directly engage the audiences emotional nerves and collective unconscious. This approach elevates the work beyond individual tragic destinies, transforming it into an existential allegory about humanity's universal condition.

Cerra observes: "Sardinian's intimate connection with the body resonates with Shakespearean drama through its raw textures, embodying an ineffable vitality." [1] This "ineffability" precisely reveals the essential nature of emotional expression in "Macbettu". Rather than conveying emotions through dialogue or narrative, it directly triggers reactions via non-verbal elements like vocal timbre, physical tension, and spatial oppression. Such primal and direct emotional transmission transcends regional cultural boundaries, demonstrating universal appeal. In essence, a core tenet of modern theatre lies in breaking free from the "Logocentrism" framework of classical tragedy, as Hans-Thies Lehmann said: "Today, people no longer believe that everything in the world can be explained through model-based explanations... This eliminates one of the essential foundations of theatrical theatre: the totality of Logos." [3]

On stage, recurring elements like sandstorms, steel, and blood form a powerful visual imagery. These are not decorative but emotionally charged symbols that directly evoke primal fears of death and violence in the audience. Much like Shakespeare's original texts brimming with blood, darkness, and supernatural imagery, Cerra visually materializes these elements to fully unleash the text's emotional potential. This approach is not merely a graphic illustration but a materialized presentation of emotions, transforming the invisible emotional experience into visible, tangible and almost touchable.

The emotional avant-garde of "Macbettu" is also reflected in its redefinition of tragic emotion. Traditional stage productions of "Macbeth" often emphasize the conflict between personal ambition and moral punishment. However, Cerra's version downplays these moral and psychological dimensions, instead emphasizing the universal nature and fatalistic sense of tragedy. Here, Macbeth is no longer portrayed as a flawed individual hero, but rather as a symbol of humanity's condition: driven by fate and desire, he struggles blindly yet inevitably leads to destruction. This approach does not weaken the tragic power, but rather grants it a broader and more profound resonance.

Notably, while "Macbettu" employs numerous pre-modern elements, its emotional resonance remains thoroughly contemporary. Rather than reviving antiquity, the production seeks to forge an emotional imagery pathway that transcends modern divisions — a theatrical language bridging ancient wisdom with modern sensibilities. This endeavor highlights a crucial direction in avant-garde theatre: instead of blindly chasing the future, it turns back to excavate the simple knowledge and emotional logic suppressed by modern rationality, bringing new life into them within contemporary contexts.

5. Deconstruction and Reconstruction: The Stage Art and Narrative Level of "Lippy"

Dead Centre's "Lippy" represents an alternative path in avant-garde theatre: instead of seeking resources from pre-modern contexts, it fully embraces post-modern fragments, finding its anchor in uncertainty and reflexivity. Adapted from a real event that occurred in Leixlip, Ireland in 2000, the play centers on "An aunt and her three nieces who made a mind-blowing decision — to starve themselves at home for forty days until their deaths. We didn't know them. We weren't present. We don't know what they said. We just put words into their mouths." —According to The 2019 Wuzhen Theatre Festival Official Brochure. Rather than attempting to explain this perplexing social accident, the production uses distinctive theatrical language to explore the intricate relationships between language, silence, power, and truth.

The stage design and narrative structure of "Lippy" demonstrate strong postmodern characteristics.

Through the interweaving of multiple media, self-referentiality, and nonlinear storytelling, it constructs a complex and polysemous world of meaning. Rather than attempting to interpret this tragic event, the play innovates formally to restore the inherent ambiguity of the incident itself. This approach compels audiences to abandon conventional theatrical expectations, plunging them into an open-ended contemplation that defies definitive conclusions.

The most striking feature of this play lies in its unconventional narrative structure. The production opens with a fake "post-performance discussion": A "reporter" interviews a "lip-reading expert" who claims to be able to "replace" speech in subjects mouths. Having previously used this skill to help police solve cases, he now attempts to decode the motives behind four womens suicides. He then demonstrates his "decoding" ability, delivering chaotic, hilarious statements that elicit laughter from the audiences. This plot device humorously deconstructs the solemnity and tragedy surrounding the suicides while subtly questioning the works premise of authenticity, representation, and understanding itself. By shattering traditional theatrical illusion, the play reminds viewers they're watching a live performance rather than a historical reenactment, ultimately prompting a rethink of concepts like "Truth" and "Reality".

In terms of stage design, "Lippy" employs a strategy of multi-media juxtaposition. Following the "pseudo-interview" segment, the play immediately transitions to its main narrative — An embedded square proscenium stage represents the protagonists domestic setting (see Figure 2), which can be interpreted as a form of installation art. The performance utilizes multiple media elements including video projections, lighting, and sound effects. These elements serve not merely to support the narrative but maintain relative independence, forming intricate dialogues and tensions with each other. For instance, when the curtain rises, four figures in white protective suits emerge, tracing human contours on the wall as they reconstruct the crime scene. This treatment creates a forensic, analytical visual atmosphere, suggesting that the plays narrative logic involves investigating and examining events while simultaneously denying that such an investigation can achieve perfect expectation.



Figure 2 The actresses of "Lippy" appear in the scene

In the final act of the performance, the screen descends once more to reveal a colossal mouth occupying the entire frame. This video clip originates from Samuel Beckett's 1972 monologue play "Not Me", where the entire work consists of a single verbal monologue. The phrase of "Giant Mouth" not only emphasizes the materiality of language and sound, but also, the medium form that only has images without sound is a negation of language communication. This tribute to Beckett's work precisely captures the core theme of "Lippy": our craving for language and its inherent limitations plunge the psyche into a paradox of meaning, revealing existencialisms inherent fragility.

6. Philosophical Interpretation of the Dramatic Connotation: Language, Power and Silence

"Lippy" is not merely a theatrical performance, but a profound philosophical inquiry that delves into fundamental questions about language and power, truth and representation, existence and silence.

Through its distinctive theatrical elements, the play offers embodied reflections on these philosophical issues, demonstrating remarkable intellectual depth and avant-garde spirit.

The play centers on the relationship between language and power. In a fake "post-performance discussion" segment, a self-proclaimed "lip-reading expert" demonstrates how to "replace words in others mouths." This scene carries profound metaphorical weight: people constantly impose their interpretations on others. While most claim to pursue truth, they're essentially exercising linguistic hegemony — a particularly harmful dynamic for those without voice. The failure of lip-reading reveals the inherent impossibility of truthful communication: we can never truly grasp others' inner thoughts and emotions. Every interpretation becomes a form of coercive imposition.

As the director noted in interviews, this play is deeply influenced by Slavoj Žižek and some French postmodernist thought. The Postmodern thought's distrust of language, skepticism towards grand narratives, and subversion of power and knowledge systems is fully expressed in this production. It essentially argues that truth isn't transparent or directly accessible—it's perpetually reconstructed and distorted through linguistic constructs and power dynamics. When four women employ hunger strikes and document destruction to "self-deletion", conventional interpretive frameworks appear pale and weak, while the "illegitimacy" of symbolic tools becomes strikingly evident. As Jacques Lacan's short essay "Lituraterre" reveals: "The letter is litter." [4]

The emotional core of "Lippy" does not seek to pity or reject traditional tragic sentiments, but rather confronts the world through a postmodern stance of confusion, unease, and epistemological crisis. Audiences are compelled to confront their own perplexity and endure the helplessness of unanswered questions. While unsettling, this emotional experience carries profound ethical significance: it embodies respect for otherness, resists simplistic interpretations, and defends the right to silence. Just as the four women choose not to confide in the world, the play itself partially safeguards this right to remain silent.

This approach is not rooted in nihilistic stances, but rather embodies profound ethical concern. It suggests that when confronting others' suffering and choices, our duty lies not in providing faster or more extensive explanations, but in maintaining humility, respect, and the courage to remain silent. Through innovative theatrical techniques, "Lippy" creates an atmosphere of silence that allows audiences to maintain a close connection with the events while remaining puzzled. This represents a significant contribution of postmodern theatre to ethical discourse.

7. Beyond Language: The Dance-Like Performance of the Body on Stage

In "Lippy", actors' physical performances transcend traditional psychological realism in theatre, evolving into a highly stylized, dance-like movement language. This bodily expression serves not as narrative support, but as the primary means of communication — particularly where words fail, the body itself becomes the ultimate "voice".

Three women take turns using ballets stylized physical language to portray their final moments. This deliberate choice carries profound implications: Rather than serving to enhance "authenticity," the incorporation of ballet — a highly formalized and unnatural bodily expression — emphasizes the symbolic mediation and artistic beauty inherent in physical gestures. The stark contrast between ballet's elegance and deaths agony creates a surreal, unsettling atmosphere that epitomizes the works postmodern aesthetic essence.

Body language here serves multiple functions: it explores the body's extreme states (hunger or death) while expressing what words cannot convey. When language proves inadequate or unreliable, the body becomes the ultimate medium of expression. Yet this communication transcends standardization and clarity, existing in a realm of ambiguity and openness that allows for active interpretation through diverse readings and free projection.

The approach of the Dead Centre resonates with contemporary dance theatre development, reflecting the blurring boundaries between drama and dance. Current theatrical creations in the industry indeed demonstrate a trend of de-emphasizing narrative while focusing on formal aesthetics and defamiliarization. Artists seem to be striving to break through audiences' preconceived notions of drama. This trend is neither simplistic formalism nor mere artistic experimentation, but a powerful response to the complexity of modern experiences: As the world becomes increasingly fragmented and uncertain, traditional linear narratives and psychological realism have proven inadequate. Consequently, theatrical creation demands more flexible and multifaceted forms of expression.

The physical performances in "Lippy" possess a ritualistic dimension that forms an intriguing contrast with those in "Macbettu". While the latter references ancient pre-modern rituals, the former constructs a contemporary, postmodern ritual: not one of communicating with deities, but of engaging with absence, silence, and the unknowable. This ritual lacks a unified belief foundation — it is transient, fragile, and personal, reflecting the common mental states of humanity in the postmodern context.

8. Conclusion: The Expressiveness and Boundary Expansion of Avant-Garde Drama

Through analyzing Sardegna Teatro's "Macbettu" and Dead Centre's "Lippy", people can witness the diverse explorations and achievements in expressive techniques within contemporary avant-garde theatre. While these works employ radically different approaches — one drawing pre-modernism and the other pushing boundaries of postmodern innovation — they both significantly expand theatrical expression and intellectual depth, opening up new possibilities for modern theatrical art.

Both works emphasize the central role of bodily expression in theatrical communication. Whether through the ritualized physicality in "Macbettu" or the dance-like embodiment in "Lippy", these forms transcend mere psychological appendages to become primary mediums for expression. This bodily turn represents a hallmark of avant-garde theatre, reestablishing connections between sensory perception, emotional resonance, and intuitive intuition — addressing the fractures and existential pains during humanity's transition from classical to modern consciousness. These productions remind people that avant-garde theatre's true value lies not merely in formal innovation, but in the profound intellectual depth and emotional intensity it generates. "Macbettu" explores eternal themes of power, violence, and destiny, while "Lippy" confronts postmodern ethical dilemmas through reflections on language, silence, and the concept of "the Other". They demonstrate that form and substance, experimentation and depth, are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary forces that enhance each others' impact.

These two works exemplify the trend of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary integration. "Macbettu" blends Shakespearean drama, Sardinian culture, and contemporary theatrical artistry, while "Lippy" fuses theatre, dance, visual arts, and philosophical drama into a multidimensional experience. This fusion isn't mere eclecticism but a creative breakthrough, offering audiences groundbreaking art forms and sensory adventures that demonstrate how avant-garde drama's boundaries keep expanding and blurring.

Amidst the dual pressures of commercialization and shifting public tastes in contemporary theatre, avant-garde works like "Macbettu" and "Lippy" stand out as particularly valuable. These productions not only push the artistic boundaries of drama but also preserve theatre's vital role as a space for critical reflection and sensory experimentation. Through examining these works, we gain deeper insights into the current state and future trajectory of theatrical art, while recognizing its irreplaceable value and significance in modern cultural discourse.

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