

The Balcony

By: Jean Genet

THEMES

The Balcony is a play about the breakdown of a civilization and the roles that fantasy and illusion play within it. It presents a bleak view of how unjustly political and social structures are perpetuated in society and how fraudulent liturgical, legal, and royal titles can be.

"Genet uses the theatre as a hall of mirrors, in which he reveals the underlying perversity of political power with its use of symbols and rituals for achieving political goals."

"It soon becomes apparent that in the brothel and in the political struggle outside, the symbols and rituals of power assume even more importance than power itself."

SYNOPSIS

The play is set in a brothel (or 'House of Illusions') called The Grand Balcony, that caters to the fantasies of its male clientele. In the opening scenes three common men play out their fantasies with a chosen whore, each in full costume in a lavish themed studio, one a Bishop, one a General and one a Judge. Outside there is a revolution going on, growing nearer and nearer, and despite the danger these men experience in getting to and from the brothel, they are still obsessed with playing out their roles.

Madame Irma is in her room going over accounts with her bookkeeper Carmen, who used to be one of her whores. Irma worries that her lover, George, the Chief of Police, has not shown up yet. Carmen is unhappy and does not like Irma's rules that the whores cannot laugh or talk about what they do. While they talk, Irma checks in on her clients via her closed-circuit monitoring system. Sounds of fighting between the rebels and the army grow louder. Irma wants Carmen to die with her, but Carmen only wants to flee and find her daughter.

Carmen reports to Irma news about Chantal, who left the brothel to join the rebellion, alongside Roger, the brothel's former plumber.

George, the Chief of Police, arrives. He reports that the palace is surrounded and the Queen is in hiding. However he is far more interested to know if any clients have wanted to imitate him here at the House of Illusions, because he believes that once he has been imitated, he will become immortal. When Irma says no, George vows to prove his worth as a

leader and to keep killing so that clients will want to be the Chief of Police in their fantasies.

Near the Grand Balcony, Chantal and Roger express their love for each other among the rebels. Roger is jealous that Chantal has become the symbol of the revolution, her image posted everywhere to motivate the revolutionaries to keep fighting.

The Queen's Envoy arrives at the brothel. The building shudders from explosions outside. The Envoy is enigmatic in his news of the Queen who is most likely dead. The Envoy wants Irma to play the Queen for the populace so that they will feel safe and remain loyal.

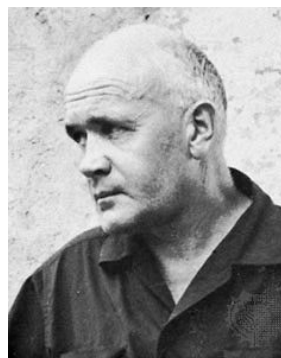
Irma agrees to play the Queen and appears on the balcony of the brothel, accompanied by George and the clients who are dressed as the General, the Bishop and the Judge. Chantal appears and is shot by an assassin.

In Irma's room inside the brothel, the Bishop, the Judge and the General meet. The men are taking their roles too seriously, and begin to believe they have more power than the Chief of Police. The fighting takes a turn and the revolutionaries begin to lose their grip.

Carmen reports that a man has come to the brothel, and he wants to play the role of the Chief of Police. George is ecstatic. Roger, Chantal's lover, dons the outfit in the specially designed Mausoleum studio. When his fantasy has been fulfilled, Roger will not leave. Instead, he castrates himself.

Irma is upset at the damage Roger's act does to her brothel. George, now that someone has finally dressed in his image, decides to spend eternity in the mausoleum, and locks himself inside. Irma dismisses the men who played the Bishop, Judge, and General. She is left alone as machine gun fire is heard outside.

Biography Of Jean Genet



Jean Genet was born on December 19, 1910, the illegitimate son of a Parisian prostitute, and orphaned seven months later. At the age of ten, he was accused of stealing. Although innocent but having been described as a thief, the young boy resolved to be a thief. "Thus," wrote

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Genet, "I decisively repudiated a world that had repudiated me." At the age of thirteen, after being a ward of the state, he began a life of crime and adventure. From 15 to 18 Genet was in the Mettray penitentiary, a place of hard labour, where a code of love, honour, gesture and justice was enforced by the inmates, and where his sexual awakening occurred. He then joined the French Foreign Legion in Syria. He deserted and spent more periods in prison living by petty theft, begging, and homosexual prostitution. By the age of 23, Genet was living in Spain, sleeping with a one-armed pimp, lice-ridden and begging - a period which became the basis for *The Thief's Journal*, his record of a journey, in which no aspect of suffering, sordidness, and degradation was spared him.

Between 1930 and 1940, he wandered throughout Europe and he eventually, he found himself in Hitler's Germany where he felt strangely out of place. "I had a feeling of being in a camp of organized bandits. This is a nation of thieves, I felt. If I steal here, I accomplish no special act that could help me to realize myself. I merely obey the habitual order of things. I do not destroy it."

At age 32, while in prison, he started writing his first manuscript, *Our Lady of the Flowers*. It was discovered and destroyed. Genet rewrote it from memory. This handwritten manuscript was smuggled out of his cell and eventually came to the attention of Cocteau and Sartre, who lobbied vigorously for a pardon from a life-sentence. More than forty intellectuals and artists petitioned the French government on Genet's behalf. Ignoring traditional plot and psychology, Genet's work relies heavily on ritual, transformation, illusion and interchangeable identities. The homosexuals, prostitutes, thieves and outcasts are trapped in self-destructive circles. They express the despair and loneliness of a man caught in a maze of mirrors, trapped by an endless progression of images that are, in reality, merely his own distorted reflection. Genet's stature as an original and important writer was cemented with Sartre's study of him in the book *Saint Genet*.

After five novels, and then silence for several years, Genet re-emerged as a playwright. He wrote a number of theatrical pieces which further established his success, beginning with the production of *The Maids*, and followed by the other classic plays: *The Blacks*, *The Balcony*, and *The Screens*. Genet, believed the theatre should

be an incendiary event, and was precise about how his works should be produced.

Genet wrote of the gay world, without apology or explanation, revealing beauty in the harsh world in which his characters lived loved and died. He deeply felt a sense of solidarity with thieves, and society's dispossessed. In later life, Genet championed the causes of the Black Panthers in the United States and Palestinian soldiers in Jordan and Lebanon. His final work, *Prisoner of Love*, is a record of his years spent with these two groups. He died on April 15th 1986.

Theatre in the 20th Century

France

-Realism was the mainstream (originally began to make theatre more useful to society- a reaction against melodrama, high romanticized plays.)

- Attention was brought to certain fundamental traits such as bewilderment, anxiety, and wonder.

-Claude Debussy introduces impressionism in *Pelléas and Mélisande* at the Opéra Comique in Paris.

-In France the theatre was well attended yet the productions were rarely outstanding. During the mid-century, steps were taken to improve plays' quality. New plays were chosen, acting troupes were added, and an annual competition was set up to spark better acting, directing, and improve the overall production quality.

- In France, there was an attempt to decentralize the theatre and move it out of Paris. To do this the French used theatre festivals which spread performances throughout the countryside with actors traveling to perform in different towns and villages.

-Between 1915 and 1940, concepts such as dadaism and surrealism played on the belief that nothing in the world makes sense.

In America

-The theatre boomed averaging 200 to 275 new productions a year!

- During the roaring twenties, American musical theatre began to develop more fully with Ziegfeld follies offering variety acts and introducing songwriters and performers to theatre audiences.

- In 1919, the Theatre Guild, one of the most important groups enhanced the theatrical

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presence. its intention was bringing foreign works to improve theatre in the U.S.

- Drama education became accepted.

Other Playwrights of Jean Genets Time:

-Jean -paul Sartre (French Novelist, Playwright, existentialist philosopher, and literary critic)

-Andre Gide (French writer, humanist, and moralist who received the Nobel Prize for Literature)

-Jean Cocteau (French artist and writer, who made his name widely known in poetry, fiction, film, ballet, painting, and opera.)

Fact: In 1948 Genet was convicted of Burglary for the 10th time and condemned to automatic life imprisonment; but because of his fellow playwrights petition to the President of the Republic, Genet was released.

Productions and Reviews

Jean Genet's The Balcony (Le Balcon in original French) is considered by many to be the one of his masterpieces, though it was written after he said he would give up writing plays altogether. The Balcony was his first commercially successful play. Like many of Genet's works, the play was inspired by Genet's contempt for society and obsession with topics such as sex, prostitution, politics, and revolution. Set inside a brothel where common men play men of power in their sexual fantasies, The Balcony reflects on the emptiness of societal roles. Reality and illusion feed off each other in the difficult play. Dreams may make reality tolerable, but when they come true, as when the customers are forced to live the roles they play, it is not as satisfying.

Synopsis of Reviews

NEW YORK TIMES THEATRE REVIEW - Work by Genet Opens at Circle in Square (**SEE ATTACHED REVIEW**)

By BROOKS ATKINSON, March 4, 1960, Friday, Page 21, 649 words

DON'T expect in this column a rational explanation of Jean Genet's "The Balcony," which opened last evening at the new Circle in the Square, 159 Bleecker Street. It would have to be understood, to be explained.

NEW YORK TIMES THEATRE REVIEW -

'Balcony': The Fantasy Within A Fantasy

By MEL GUSSOW

Published: April 9, 1990, Monday

More than three decades after it was written, "The Balcony" no longer seems so outrageous. In the interval, too much has happened in the world and in art. But Jean Genet's play retains its diabolical originality, and if properly presented on stage, it should still have the power to disturb and even disorient an audience.

"The Balcony" demands a production as audacious as the author's concept and actors who are equipped to handle the earthy, liturgical flights of dialogue and the physical demands of the characters. This was certainly the case in the first New York production directed by Jose Quintero. Unfortunately, Geoffrey Sherman's anniversary production at the Hudson Guild Theater is reductive in every sense. Scene by scene, it diminishes the play, until one wonders why the company chose to stage it in the first place.

NEW YORK TIMES THEATER REVIEW -

Untangling Genet's Puzzle Of Power, Lost and Found

By D. J. R. BRUCKNER

Published: November 19, 1999, Friday

When Irma, the madam who has been queen for a day, dismisses all her prostitutes and customers at the end of the Jean Cocteau Repertory's production of "The Balcony" and stands alone in her house as the lights go down, a wave of sadness sweeps the theater. That is exactly the right feeling: the world has been emptied, for her and for us.

...this Jean Genet play...is peculiarly malleable. It is as though Genet, in his many revisions of the play, stripped it of all authorial intention to force the director to give it meaning. It can be a political tract, a social satire, a farce, whatever.

In this production, the director, Eve Adamson, has made it a psychological puzzle, handing on to the audience much of the task of supplying meaning, and that twist at the end makes one rethink the entire piece.

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Synopsis of Discussions

- The Balcony deals with the "undecipherable nature of levels, dimensions, contexts...rituals and infinities of reflections" - Society as a Brothel: Genet's Satire in The Balcony, Bermel.
- "Genet is less interested in the titillations of pornography than its philosophical implications; and the erotic scenes are merely a prologue to his theatricalized version of society, of life, and of history." - The New Republic, Robert Brustein.
- Though The Balcony is absurdist, it is revealing in its contradictions about women and their place in the world. Genet's version of women's role in society is complex and paradoxical, as it was in the reality of his time and still is today. - Annette Petruso.

When and Where It Was Performed

The play was originally produced in London, England, in 1957, at the Arts Theatre where the performance had to be arranged at a "private club" to get around the Lord Chamberlain's ban on public performances of the play. Genet himself participated in the theatrics by accusing the director of ruining his play during the opening night performance. Genet did not like the production because it was done in a way that was too tasteful and realistic. His protests led to his banishment from the theater during the production. It received mixed reviews. Genet preferred the Peter Brook production in Paris, France, in 1960. The New York stage production was based on Brook's version. Translated into English by Bernard Frechtman, the play had its New York première, Off-Broadway at the Circle in the Square Downtown theatre. It was directed by José Quintero and featured Nancy Marchand, Grayson Hall, Sylvia Miles, Arthur Malet and Salome Jens. There The Balcony ran for 672 performances and won an Obie Award for Genet. It was generally well received, though some critics thought it was hard to understand because of its complexity and reliance on illusion. The first French performance of The Balcony took place in May 1960. Since these initial performances, the play has been produced on a regular basis. As Donald Malcolm of the New Yorker wrote, "M. Genet's vision of society is both perverse and private, and his play is a species of Grand Guignol—arresting, horrific, and trivial."

Isaac Dayley, Leah Gabriel, Sarah Grace, James Channing

Work by Genet Opens at Circle in Square

By BROOKS ATKINSON

DON'T expect in this column a rational explanation of Jean Genet's "The Balcony," which opened last evening at the new Circle in the Square, 159 Bleecker Street. It would have to be understood to be explained.

But thanks to José Quintero's subtle and ingenious direction, it is as absorbing as a blending of a modernistic ballet and painting would be. The Balcony of the title is a brothel—the theatre's favorite institution this year. But it is a brothel that has symbolic rather than carnal significance.

It is a house of illusions. The patrons come there to impersonate their dreams; one to act the part of a bishop, another a judge, another a general. Since the patrons wear gigantic costumes and shoes with thick soles, they become grotesque images who tower above the level of human beings. In Mr. Quintero's staging, this part of the play is like a black masquerade of obsessed people.

After the preliminary scenes, "The Balcony" extends beyond the specific into a simile of modern life. In M. Genet's view, the whole of life is an illusion; all its people impersonate their dreams. Outside the Balcony, a revolution is going on. The sound of machine-guns comes from the streets. The Chief of Police, who represents the power of the state, visits the brothel, which is one of his perquisites, and discusses the progress of the revolution with the madame.

The symbolism becomes important in this portion of the play. Those who have been impersonating characters in the brothel now attempt to act the same parts in real life, and the madame becomes the queen of the new, unestablished state. But this is the part of "The Balcony" that becomes a riddle wrapped in an enigma. The double images acquire new significance. Everything means more than the author or the characters say.

Only a mechanical computer could absorb all the meanings and tick out the correct answers. Perhaps Mr. Quintero has already consulted the modern oracle. For his production has a certainty of outline and accent that makes everything look plausible, as



Salome Jens as the Pony Girl, in "The Balcony."

The Cast

THE BALCONY, a drama from the French of Jean Genet as translated by Bernard Frechtman. Staged by José Quintero, produced by Lucille Lortel and Circle in the Square; scenery and lighting by David Hays; costumes by Patricia Zipporoti; stage manager, Thomas Burrows. At Circle in the Square, 159 Bleecker Street.

The Bishop.....	F. M. Kimball
Irma.....	Nancy Marchand
Penitent.....	Grayson Hall
The Thief.....	Sylvia Miles
The Judge.....	Arthur Malet
The Executioner.....	John Perkins
The General.....	John S. Dodson
The Girl.....	Salome Jens
Carmen.....	Betty Miller
The Chief of Police.....	Roy Poole
The Envoy.....	Jack Livingston
Roger.....	Joseph Daubenas
The Slave.....	William Goodwin

if "The Balcony" were living a private life according to its own rationale.

In the first place, the stage and its décor look like a rummage sale of toys—gaudy costumes, store-window dummies hanging in a circle around the ceiling, a platform with a monstrous throne chair pushed on and off to stage M. Genet's macabre revels, spectral lighting spots, the whole paraphernalia of a ghoulish dream.

In the second place, the acting is an exercise in incantations—Nancy Marchand, cold and austere as the madame; Salome Jens, like a dancer of the damned as a girl who impersonates a pony; Roy Poole, brutish and shrewd as the chief of police; Betty Miller, sad and servile as madame's secretary; F. M. Kimball, Arthur Malet and John S. Dodson as weak and desperate men who impersonate men of settled affairs.

Apart from being elusive, "The Balcony" is full of a destructive sickness that infects the whole of M. Genet's empire of wraiths and demons. It also provides the materials for one of Mr. Quintero's most imaginative productions—a travesty on reality, a withering of dreams.

The New York Times

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