

AUDIENCE GUIDE



JEAN GENET'S

# THE MAIDS

TRANSLATED BY BERNARD FRECHTMAN  
DIRECTED BY STEPHANIE SHROYER

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 aNoiseWithin <sup>25</sup> CELEBRATE  
Classic Theatre, Modern Magic

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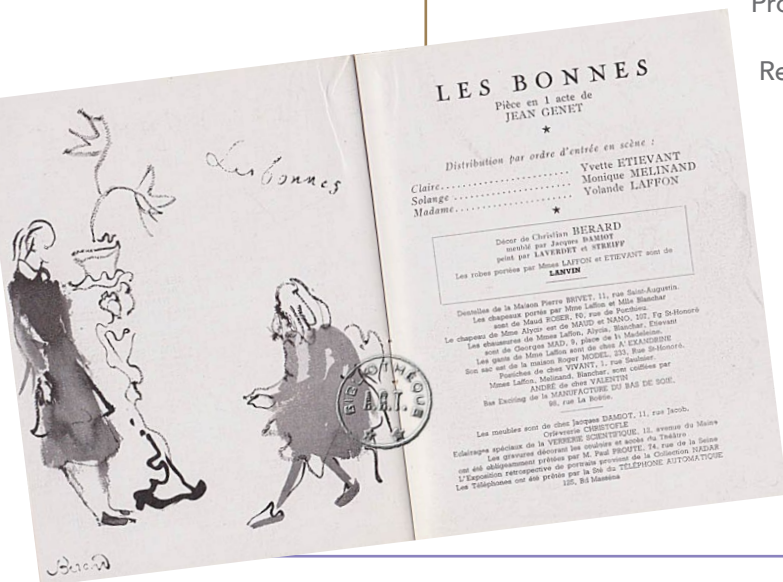
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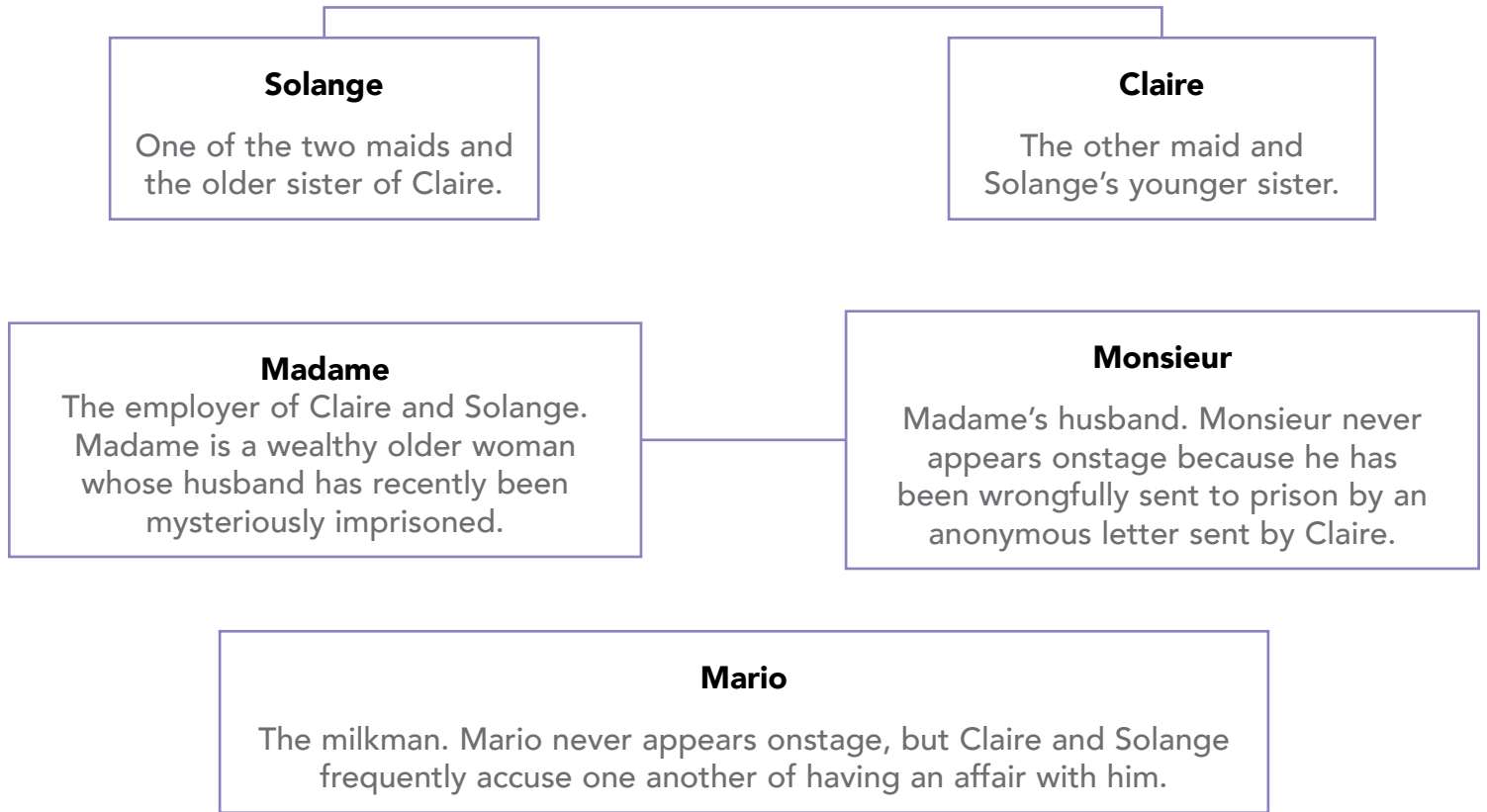
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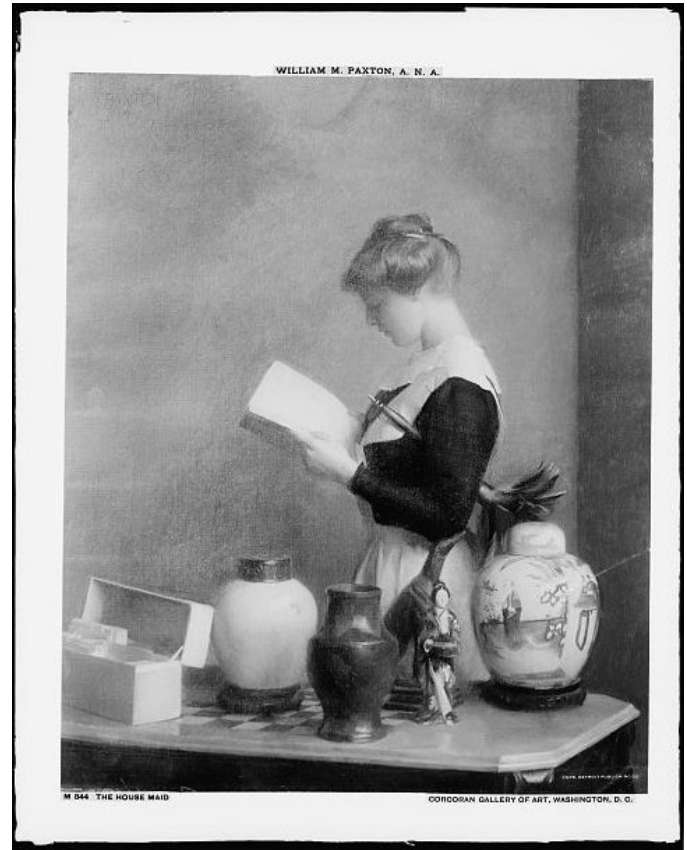
# Character List



# Synopsis

**TWO SISTERS**, Solange and Claire, work as maids for a wealthy woman they refer to only as “Madame.” Each night while Madame is away they recreate a sadistic and subversive ritual in which they impersonate both Madame and one another. The two women play out meticulous scenes together, fantasizing about how Madame might abuse them and how they will ultimately murder her. The play begins in the midst of one of their rituals – the sisters switching in and out of portraying their characters and their own selves. The ritual is ended by an alarm, signaling the imminent return of Madame. As they hasten to conceal the evidence of their role-play, they receive a call and learn that Monsieur, Madame’s husband, has been released from jail. Claire and Solange panic at the news: it was their false accusations that put Monsieur in jail and now that he has been released, Madame is sure to find this out and punish them. They decide that they must kill Madame that night and arrange a poisonous tea for her to drink when she gets home.

When Madame arrives home, it becomes clear that she is not the maniacal Madame of their fantasies, and although she is exceedingly melodramatic and extravagant, seems to somewhat dote on her maids. Despite their best attempts to conceal it from her, Madame quickly discovers the truth about Monsieur’s release from jail and orders them to fetch a taxi so she can go to him immediately. While Solange lingers in her attempts to locate a taxi, Claire tries every tactic to get Madame to drink the poisonous tea, knowing that if Madame speaks with Monsieur, he will tell her everything. The maids ultimately fail in poisoning Madame and as she drives away, the two women fight desperately about their failure. Solange then enters into a lengthy reverie about death, about the subversion of power-structures and class, and about the possibilities of upward mobility through murder. As Solange brings her fantasy to an end, Claire insists on drinking the fatal cup of tea herself. She forces Solange to reenter their role-play world with her: in this world Solange embodies Claire while Claire embodies Madame. Solange as Claire fulfills the task the real Claire failed to do: successfully poisoning Madame with the cup of tea. Only it is the real Claire who fulfills the role of the poisoned Madame and as Claire dies, Solange continues her reverie, imagining that the real Madame is dead and that Claire and Solange can live on, finally free from Madame’s oppression. ♦

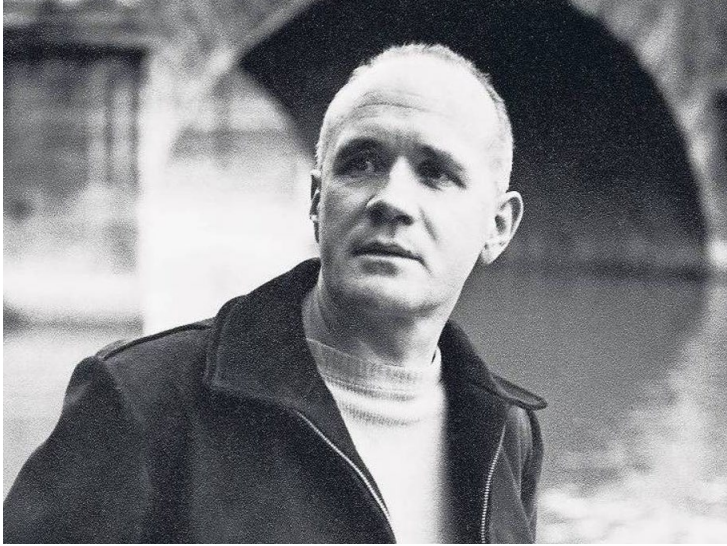


Paxton, William McGregor. *The House Maid*. 1910. Oil on Canvas. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



Exterior of Théâtre de l'Athénée. Photograph. Paris.

# Playwright Biography: Jean Genet



Jean Genet. Photograph by Roger Parry.

**JEAN GENET**, an illegitimate child abandoned by his mother, Gabrielle Genet, was raised by a family of peasants. Caught stealing at the age of 10, he spent part of his adolescence at a notorious reform school, Mettray, where he experienced much that was later described in the novel *Miracle of the Rose*. His autobiographical *The Thief's Journal* gives a complete and uninhibited account of his life as a tramp, pickpocket, and male prostitute in Barcelona, Antwerp, and various other cities (c. 1930–39). It also reveals him as an aesthete, an existentialist, and a pioneer of the Absurd.

He began to write in 1942 while imprisoned for theft at Fresnes and produced an outstanding novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, vividly portraying the prewar Montmartre underworld of thugs, pimps, and perverts. His talent was brought to the attention of Jean Cocteau and later Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Because Genet in 1948 was convicted of theft for the tenth time and would have faced automatic life imprisonment if convicted again, a delegation of well-known writers appealed on his behalf to the president of the French republic, and he was “pardoned in advance.”

*His plays are concerned with expressing his own feeling of helplessness and solitude when confronted with the despair and loneliness of man caught in the hall of mirrors of the human condition, inexorably trapped by an endless progression of images that are merely his own distorted reflection — lies covering lies, fantasies battenning upon fantasies, nightmares nourished by nightmares within nightmares.*

—Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*.

After writing two other novels, *Funeral Rites*, and *Querelle of Brest*, Genet began to experiment with drama. His early attempts, by their compact, neoclassical, one-act structure, reveal the strong influence of Sartre. *Deathwatch* continues his prison-world themes. *The Maids*, however, begins to explore the complex problems of identity that were soon to preoccupy other avant-garde dramatists such as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco. With this play Genet was established as an outstanding figure in the Theatre of the Absurd.

His subsequent plays, *The Balcony*, *The Blacks*, and *The Screens*, are large-scale, stylized dramas in the Expressionist manner, designed to shock and implicate an audience by revealing its hypocrisy and complicity. This “Theatre of Hatred” attempts to wrest the maximum dramatic power from a social or political situation without necessarily endorsing the political platitudes of either the right or the left. ♦

**Source:** Jean Genet. (2016). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Genet>

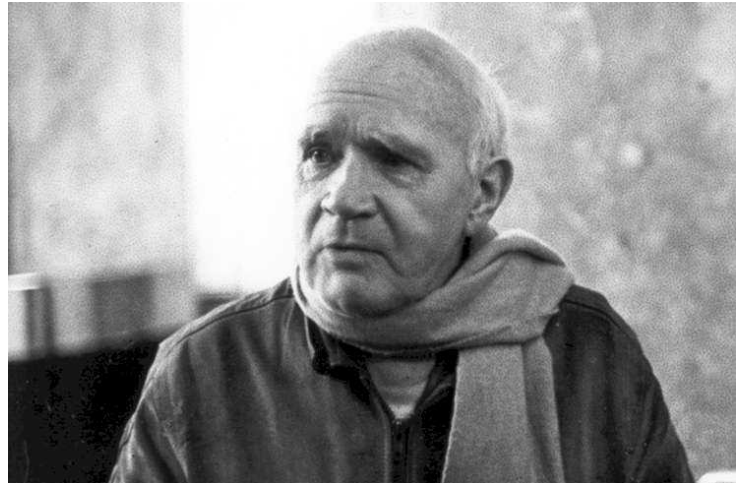
# Jean Genet Timeline

- 1910** — Jean Genet is born in Paris.
- 1911** — Genet's mother abandons him, leaving him a ward of the state.
- 1922** — His foster mother dies and he begins committing petty crimes, primarily theft.
- 1925** — He is placed in the Mettray reformatory for boys.
- 1929** — In order to escape the reformatory, Genet joins the French Foreign Legion.
- 1933** — He travels across Europe, living as a beggar, thief, and prostitute.
- 1934** — He signs up for another tour of duty in the army.
- 1936** — He deserts the army.
- 1937** — He returns to Paris and spends time in and out of prison for a variety of crimes, primarily theft.
- 1938** — He is tried as a deserter and placed in a military prison. He will spend the next several years in and out of prison on a variety of charges. During these periods of imprisonment, Genet begins to write.



Interior of the theatre where the first production of *The Maids* was staged

- 1944** — His first novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, is published.
- 1946** — *The Miracle of the Rose*, a semi-autobiographical novel, is published.
- 1947** — Another novel, *Querelle de Brest*, is published. *The Maids* is produced by Louis Jouvet in Paris.
- 1948** — Genet is convicted of burglary and, because he is a repeat offender, is sentenced to life imprisonment. Several prominent writers, including Sartre, Gide, and Cocteau petition for his release, arguing that Genet's literary career is far too important to let him waste away in prison. Their request is eventually granted and his sentence is reduced to three months.



Jean Genet. December 19, 1983. Photograph by International Progress Organization.

- 1949** — Genet's autobiography, *A Thief's Journal*, is published. His play *Deathwatch* is produced under the direction of Genet and Marchat. Another novel, *Funeral Rites*, is published.
- 1950** — Genet directs *Un Chant d'Amour*, a 26 minute black and white film depicting the fantasies of a gay male prisoner and his prison warden.
- 1951** — Genet's work is banned in the United States.
- 1957** — His play *The Balcony* premieres at the Arts Theatre Club in London. Genet is unhappy with the production because he finds it too tasteful and realistic.
- 1959** — *The Blacks* premieres at the Théâtre de Lutèce in Paris.
- 1960** — *The Balcony* is produced at the Circle in the Square Theater in New York City. It enjoys a run of 672 performances and wins an Obie Award. *The Balcony* also makes its French premiere at the Théâtre du Gymnase in Paris under the direction of Peter Brook.
- 1961** — Genet writes *The Screens*, but it is considered too subversive to be produced.
- 1966** — *The Screens* is produced at the Théâtre de l'Odéon.
- 1970** — The Black Panthers invite Genet to the United States. He accepts their invitation and gives several lectures during a three-month stay. He attends the trial of their leader, Huey Newton.
- 1986** — Jean Genet dies in Paris at the age of 75. His final novel, *The Prisoner of Love*, is published.

**Edited from:** Jean Genet Timeline, Theatre Database, retrieved from [http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th\\_century/jean\\_genet\\_timeline.html](http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th_century/jean_genet_timeline.html)

## Jean Genet loosely based *The Maids* on an infamous murder case from 1933.

Christine and Léa Papin were sisters who came from an abusive, dysfunctional, poor family. As adults, the two were extremely close and may have had an incestuous relationship. They worked as maids for the Lancelin family for many years, but one night in February 1933, they brutally murdered their employer, Madame Lancelin, and her daughter, Genieve, in their home. The bodies had been maimed and their eyeballs gouged out. When the police arrived at the scene of the crime, they found Christine and Léa huddled together in their bed upstairs. The sisters confessed to the murders and the murder weapons were found, but gave no motive. It was eventually revealed that one possible motive for the murders was a dispute the maids and Madame Lancelin had had about an electrical fuse that had blown, which was to be subtracted from the maids' wages. In the public opinion, their act came to be seen as a rebellion of the oppressed working class against their bourgeois oppressors.

At the time, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan wrote that the sisters "mingled the mirage of their illness with the image of their mistresses," and so they murdered their mistresses because they saw in them their mirror images. Theatre critic Lyn Gardner, writing for *The Guardian*, explains that this is the idea taken up in *The Maids*, "in which fantasy and reality fold into each other. The story is reimagined in a ritualised, hyper-theatrical dance of death... in which the two maids renamed Claire and Solange – play a deadly game where personalities and identities are fluid and exchangeable, as the pair plot to dispatch their spoilt mistress with poisoned tea." (Gardner, 2016) ♦



Lambert, George. *The Maid*. 1915. Oil on canvas. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.



Breakspere, William Arthur. *The Maidservant*. 1881. Oil on canvas. Astley Cheetham Art Gallery, UK.

The public fascination with the story Christine and Léa Papin has inspired many works of literature, analysis, and film, in addition to *The Maids* by Jean Genet:

- *My Sister in This House*, a play by Wendy Kesselman
- *The Maids*, a film based on the play, directed by Christopher Miles
- *Sister My Sister*, a film version of the play directed by Nancy Meckler
- *Les Abysses*, a film directed by Nikos Papatakis
- *La Cérémonie*, a film directed by Claude Chabrol
- *Les Soeurs Papin*, a book by R. le Texier
- *Blood Sisters*, a stage play and screenplay by Neil Paton
- *L’Affaire Papin*, a book by Paulette Houdyer
- *La Solution du passage à l’acte*, a book by Francis Dupré
- “The Murder in Le Mans,” an essay in *Paris Was Yesterday*, a book by Janet Flanner
- *La Ligature*, a short film by Gilles Cousin
- *Les Meurtres par Procuration*, a book by Jean-Claude Asfour
- *Lady Killers’*, a book by Joyce Robins
- *The Maids*, an opera by Peter Bengtson
- *Les Blessures assassines* (English : *Murderous Maids*), a film by Jean-Pierre Denis
- *En Quete des Soeurs Papin (In Search of the Papin Sisters)*, a documentary film by Claude Ventura
- *Gros Proces des l’Histoire*, a book by M. Mamouni
- *L’Affaire Papin*, a book by Genevieve Fortin
- *The Papin Sisters*, a book by Rachel Edwards and Keith Reader
- *The Maids*, artwork by Paula Rego

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# The Maids: Themes

## IDENTITY

Throughout the course of *The Maids*, both Claire and Solange slip into and out of elaborate fantasies in which they interchangeably assume identities other than their own: namely of Madame and of one another. There are moments when they become so embroiled and invested in another identity that they are almost unable to return to their own selves. Claire and Solange both define and understand themselves almost entirely in relation to one another and through their relationship to Madame. Their weak grasps on their own identities are indicative and symbolic of the instability of their own realities.

## ILLUSION VS. REALITY

Claire and Solange devise and act out elaborate fantasies in order to create an escape from the reality they dread and despise so much. When they escape into their dream world, not only do they reject the conditions of their real circumstances, but they also use their fantasy scenarios to act out a plan of escape for their real-world selves. Their fantasy cannot be completed if they do not reach the critical point of escape. If they are unable to kill Madame in their fantasy world, they may never be able to kill her in the real world, meaning they might never be free from her tyranny. Additionally, Claire and Solange often have trouble moving between their fantasy world and their reality and as a result the two become indistinguishable to them and to the audience. The audience is never clearly given context for what the “real” world is: the play begins in the middle of one of their fantasies and nearly everything the audience sees is filtered through their eyes. Ultimately, Claire and Solange undermine themselves through their own illusions. They destroy their reality because they lose the ability to distinguish what is real from what is fantasy.

## POWER

Power is an all-encompassing and driving force in this play. Claire and Solange want desperately to escape their powerless positions as maids and rise to a higher social status, free from the tyranny of a superior employer. The two also struggle for power over one another and use power plays against one another both in their real world and in their fantasy scenarios. While Claire and Solange are extremely codependent, neither wants to be subordinate, a tension which creates an unstable and erratic power dynamic between the two sisters. As theatre arts commentator Allison Croggin notes, “each character switches without warning from total abjection to an equally total tyranny” in their performed ritual (Croggin, 2012).



# The Theatre of the Absurd

*"It is impossible to identify oneself with characters one does not understand or whose motives remain a closed book, and so the distance between the public and the happenings on the stage can be maintained. Emotional identification with the characters is replaced by a puzzled, critical attention. For while the happenings on the stage are absurd, they yet remain recognizable as somehow related to real life with its absurdity, so that eventually the spectators are brought face to face with the irrational side of their existence. Thus the absurd and fantastic goings-on of the Theatre of the Absurd will, in the end, be found to reveal the irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparent logical structure."*

—Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*.

**Theatre of the Absurd** is a phrase that was coined by theatre critic Martin Esslin in his 1960 essay of the same name. While the title was not borne of a particular movement or school of thought, Esslin identified certain playwrights who he believed shared a clear common denominator that "might well be described as the element of the *absurd*." While he specifies that each of these playwrights embodies his own distinct type of absurdity, he notes that "they all share the same deep sense of human isolation and of the irremediable character of the human condition" (Esslin, 3). He initially specified Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugene Ionesco as the primary playwrights embodying this common element, but later this group grew to include many others.

Absurdism is a theoretical and philosophical facet of existentialism referring specifically to the conflict between the human tendency to seek meaning and purpose in life and the inherent meaninglessness and irrationality of human existence. After World War II, absurdism emerged as a prominent trope in theatre as people sought to make sense of the overwhelmingly cruel and chaotic nature of society, of the world, and of humanity itself:

The Theatre of the Absurd shows the world as an incomprehensible place. The spectators see the happenings on the stage entirely from the outside, without ever understanding the full meaning of these strange patterns of events, as newly arrived visitors might watch life in a country of which they have not yet mastered the language (Esslin, 5).

Esslin explains that the element of absurdism in theatre successfully creates an alienating effect, much like Brecht's intended *verfremdungseffekt*, or *estrangement effect*. The absurdist worlds are so challenging to understand that they are made nearly impossible to emotionally connect with, thus forcing the viewer to ponder the meaning and significance of the story itself. As the audience struggles to intellectually grasp the world they are presented with, they are also forced to contemplate the relevance and familiarity of this world:

The spectators of the Theatre of the Absurd are thus confronted with a grotesquely heightened picture of their own world: a world without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will. In this sense, the Theatre of the Absurd is the true theatre of our time (Esslin, 6).

Furthermore, Absurdist plays will often pinpoint myriad ways in which the accepted structure of a play can be unraveled, thus pointing out the parts of theatre, and of life, that we accept without question. Because of this structural dismantling, many absurdist plays do not follow a linear plotline or coherent narrative arc, often denouncing "...the ridiculous nature of a language which is empty of substance, made up of clichés and slogans..." Esslin cites Ionesco's argument that "such a language has atrophied; it has ceased to be the expression of anything alive or vital and has been degraded into a mere conventional token of human intercourse, a mask for genuine meaning or emotion." To demonstrate this, dialogue in the Theatre of the Absurd is often "...divorced from the real happenings in the play and is even put into direct contradiction with the action" (Esslin, 11).

Jean Genet, while not discussed directly as an absurdist playwright in Esslin's pioneering essay, is commonly associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. Take a look at the following list of common characteristics of absurdist theatre and see how *The Maids* might fit in to some, or all, of these categories.

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## CHARACTERISTICS OF ABSURDIST THEATRE

- 1) **"...neither the time nor the place of the action are ever clearly stated."**

*Absurdist plays are sometimes called "anti-plays" because they seem to counter what would normally be considered "acceptable" on stage. Time period and setting are components that are conventionally expected and by some standards even required. These details are important to contextualize the plot and characters and to help the audience make sense of the world of the play. If a playwright does not want their audience to make sense of this world or if they want the viewer to consider how much they rely on these superficial designations to create meaning or understanding, they might provide seemingly nonsensical information about these factors, or even leave out this information entirely.*

- 2) **"The characters hardly have any individuality and often even lack a name; moreover, halfway through the action they tend to change their nature completely."**

*Characters in absurdist drama tend to resist the trope of Naturalism in theatre that calls for fleshed-out, individualized characters who are believably human and whose lives, issues, and layers are all as realistic as possible. Absurdist characters abide by different rules than humans in the real world because they inhabit a world that is often strange and unfamiliar to us. Characters, and the dynamics between them, often shift throughout the course of the drama to symbolize the instability of their world and of their individuality. It is human nature to create and rely on a stable perception of self in order to relate to your world and those around you – characters in absurdist plays reject that idea and force viewers to question the nature of identity, class, status, and human relationships.*

- 3) **"The laws of probability as well as those of physics are suspended" thus, "...it is often unclear whether the action is meant to represent a dream world of nightmares or real happenings."**

*Absurdist plays often depict a reality so strange and unfamiliar that it is difficult to comprehend how the world presented on stage could be anyone's reality. The plays revel in the unexpected and logically impossible, often deconstructing and reorganizing certain structural standards in order to make the familiar strange. Sometimes absurdist plays seem to follow or imitate the structure of a dream: completely logical to those within it, but fragmented, nonsensical, and illogical to the unsuspecting observer.*

- 4) **"...the dialogue tends to get out of hand so that at times the words seem to go counter to the actions of the characters on the stage, to degenerate into lists of words and phrases from a dictionary or traveler's conversation book, or to get bogged down in endless repetitions like a phonograph record stuck in one groove."**

*A common trope in absurdist plays is the mistrust of language as an effective means of communication. The theatre is traditionally a strongly literary medium and many absurdist playwrights were fed up with the trite and meaningless linguistic exchanges typical of the stage. Many playwrights wanted to point out how language had evolved into nothing more than empty clichés and how words were no longer accurately expressing the nuances of the human experience. This was often achieved by distorting language in such a way that it obstructed or confused, rather than supported, the action on stage.*

Quotations from: "The Theatre of the Absurd" by Martin Esslin.

# The “Failure” of Jean Genet’s *The Maids* | By Christopher Schmidt

**IN AUGUST 2014** Jean Genet’s scandalous 1947 play *The Maids* was revived at Lincoln Center Festival as a star vehicle for Cate Blanchett and Isabelle Huppert as the murderous chambermaid sisters Claire and Solange. In a production by Benedict Andrews, the stars camped up and reveled in Genet’s lethal erotic triangle, taking turns role-playing as their imperious master Madame while plotting her murder. Adding another level of imitation to this mousetrap, this production of *The Maids* incorporated video spectacle into the stage theatrics. While the famous actresses treaded the boards, their visages were filmed and projected onto an enormous screen above the stage, exploiting their talent for devastating close-up.

Not unlike the work of Tennessee Williams, the play can seem simultaneously feminist—a powerful all-female production—and misogynist, engaging that which is most abject and grotesque: sado-masochistic role-play; class domination; murder and suicide. Yet its very thorniness has made it grist for critics. Much has been claimed of the play: that it exemplifies and critiques the master-slave dialectic. That the delusional play-making of Claire and Solange is more intensely realized than the banal “reality” of the upper class Madame. That the play exemplifies the performative aspects of gender and sexuality. Or, conversely, that it demonstrates the *limitations* of the performative. Did Genet really intend the roles of the maids to be played by men, as they sometimes are? (Jean-Paul Sartre advances this hypothesis in an introduction for the play, inspired by a line from Genet’s novel *Our Lady of the Flowers*.)



Paris under Nazi occupation.

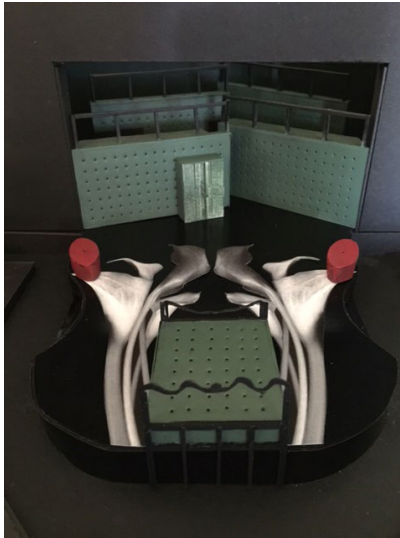
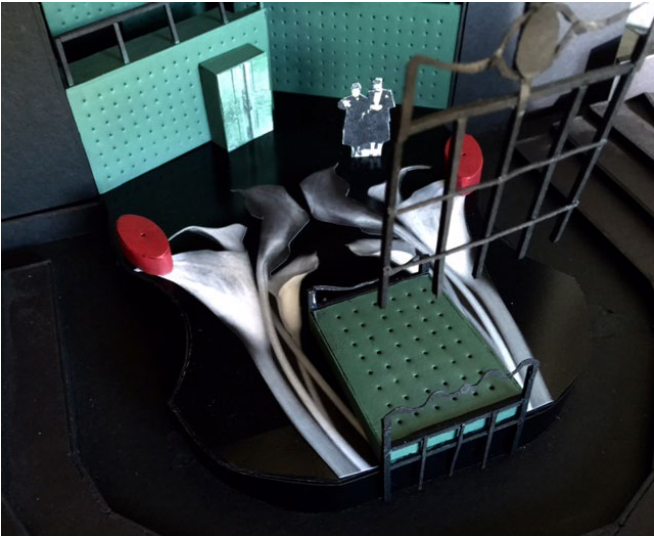
Yet Genet is on record describing *The Maids* as a “failure.” Why? Christopher Lane, in his article “The Voided Role: On Genet,” supposes that the “failure” of the play is encoded in its message, or we might say, in its poetics. Arguing against some of the readings described above, Lane writes that “Genet’s interest in his characters’ fantasies and identifications interrupts what might seem an obvious oscillation between master and slave.” Hegelian sublation of the master-slave dialectic fails because the triumph of one character/role comes at the expense and depletion of the other. As Solange says in the play, “[Madame’s] joy feeds on *our* shame. Her carnation is the red of our shame.”

Although Genet was an activist in real life, he rejected any socially edifying readings of *The Maids* as supportive of workers or the rights of the oppressed. He was more interested in the dramatic moment. Perhaps then it makes most sense to view the play and “failure” as a comment on inevitable failure of theatrical embodiment itself, especially in the theater of personal intimacy. As Jeanette Savona cogently writes, *The Maids* “is based not so much on ‘normal’ human interactions as on the very impossibility of establishing any form of positive interrelations except in the world of fantasy and dreams.” If all the world’s a stage, Genet says, what of the maids who merely wash the boards? ♦

Source: Schmidt, C. (2014). The “Failure” of Jean Genet’s the maids | JSTOR daily. Arts & Culture. Retrieved from <http://daily.jstor.org/the-failure-of-jean-genets-the-maids>

Liberation of Paris in August 1944

Scenic research for *The Maids* | By Frederica Nascimento



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# Resources and Suggestions for Further Reading

## BOOKS

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lloyd-uzo-aduba-zawe-ashton-laura-carmichael

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# About A Noise Within

**A NOISE WITHIN** A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists performing in rotating repertory immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue. Our plays will be performed in rotating repertory, sometimes simultaneously in multiple spaces, and buttressed by meaningful supporting programs to create a symphonic theatrical experience for artists and audience.

In its 25 year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 40,000 individuals attend productions at a Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 15,000 student participants to its arts education program, *Classics Live!* Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides. ♦

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