

From Genet  
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## Introduction

by Peter Brooks and Joseph Halpern

For more than thirty years, the name of Jean Genet has been synonymous with scandal. The reaction to his writing and to his life has always been vehemently polemical. His earliest works, written in prison, were his most autobiographical and shockingly pornographic, and if Cocteau presented him to the world in these first moments of his career as "the greatest poet of our time," Sartre refused to allow us to forget who Genet was: abandoned child, beggar, rag-picker, deserter, homosexual, pornographer, male prostitute, thief and convict, society's cast-off, society's nemesis. According to Sartre, Genet was not one to be recuperated by society, neither by critical appreciation nor bourgeois acceptance, and in his works form could not be separated from content, aesthetic achievement from ideology, vocabulary and metaphorical flourish from moral statement: "Do not take refuge in aestheticism; he will drive you from under cover. I know people who can read the coarsest passages without turning a hair: 'These two gentlemen sleep together? And then they eat their excrement? And after that, one goes off to denounce the other? As if that mattered! It's so well written.'... So long as you play at amorality you will remain at the threshold of the work" (*Saint Genet*).

Sartre taught us to understand Genet's works as acts of revenge on a world that had rejected him. But what happens to Genet in a world he no longer shocks? Genet's explicit descriptions of homosexual activity, his celebration of the criminal and the traitor, are no longer unique in contemporary literature; his plays will probably never again cause riots. He himself has turned outward from a narrow obsessional universe to broader political commitments: over the last decade, he has become a champion of the militant Third World. But as sources of scandal, his novels and plays seem outdated, either because Genet's "verbal victory" is complete, and he

has indeed participated in changing the world, or because an essentially unchanged world has simply assimilated him.

In an early book on Genet, one American critic predicted that Genet's works "will be appreciated and enjoyed to the extent that they do not accomplish what Genet wants them to accomplish. Genet's instinctive imagination—the apparatus which forms the terms of his vision of reality—will be rejected, and with it will be rejected his most cherished ideas. But his presentational imagination—the force which allows him to organize the insights of his instinctive imagination and to impose them aesthetically—may very well give his works endurance; it already gives them power as it gives the theatre refreshed vitality" (Joseph MacMahon, *The Imagination of Jean Genet*). Whether one aspect of Genet's writing can be isolated from another, in spite of Sartre; whether Genet's ideas have been or will be rejected (by whom? by what authority?); whether he speaks primarily as a member of an oppressed class or as a poet and universal ritualist are still open questions. But what the critic captures, in the terms he uses to evaluate Genet's work, is the impression left with everyone who has seen or read Genet: power, force, vision, energy, intensity, vitality, passion. Genet's subject is power and his works are incarnations of that power. He defines poetry as a force. His world exists as a theological universe turned upside down, in which hierarchy and the flow of power and energy are reversed. His writings perform apparent acts of adoration and submission, incantation, liturgical dramas that reveal only on a more fundamental level the demiurgic force that shaped them.

In the very first novels that Genet wrote the measure of that power was already evident. There are aspects of Genet's technical accomplishment in the novel—the autonomy conferred on time and space, the framing of illusion within illusion, the breakdown of plot and the contempt for the concept of character, the insistence on the status of the text as fiction—that make of him an intuitive precursor of contemporary experimentation in the form. The impact of his first novels, however, came not only from this kind of originality and from their subject matter but also from a debt to the past. Genet's debt to Proust is unmistakable: a good part of his language, theme and narrative sense seems only to extend aspects of Proust along a single, narrow line—at whose origin stands Proust's character, Baron Charlus. But a surrealist background, too, plays a part in

the make-up of Genet's novels. Genet's flexibility in narrative technique, the dismantling of structures and the refusal to let things freeze, the use of metaphor as a violent yoking, the generalized explosive shock of his work, if not a heritage from the Surrealists, at least fell on terrain prepared by them, in a milieu open to the force of his writing. Still, Sartre claims that the explosive surrealist influence was only a foreign element grafted onto Genet's deeper need for strict form. The looseness of the early novels works both for and against Genet; despite the desperate strength of his fiction, Genet does not prove himself to be basically a storyteller, and it can be claimed that he never manages to create a narrative form strong enough to hold the reader. As Georges Bataille says, "*ses récits intéressent mais ne passionnent pas.*"

One can nonetheless speak metaphorically of two primary, inseparable sources of form present in all of Genet's work: sexuality and language. In the existentialist interpretation of Genet's life, it is language, the act of naming perceived as an act of violence, that turns Genet into a homosexual and a thief. For Genet as a young man, language seems to have miraculous powers; certain sacred words transform the world and invest him with their power. Through affinities of sound and rhythm without logical signification, he can reify feelings and capture the world. Genet's linguistic imagination extends onto social reality primarily through a sexual construct. We have been told that the episodic nature of his first novels reflects their masturbatory nature, but, beyond that, sexuality organizes the hierarchy of being and sequence of images in his world; it gives structure to his vision of reality. The power relationships so dominant in his work are actualizations of sexual and linguistic potential; out of those fluid energies emerges a patterned world of oppressions and violent acts in ritualized literary forms. Out of the picaresque chaos of *The Thief's Journal* emerges the classic theatre of *The Maids*.

"Try," Genet wrote to Roger Blin when Blin was directing *The Screens*, "try to lead [the actors] toward a more hieratical theatre." Everything in Genet's often weird theatrical practice relates to this central concern with a hieratical theatre: theatre as the place of ritual and sacred mystery. "If we maintain that life and the stage are opposites," he writes again to Blin, "it is because we strongly suspect that the stage is a site closely akin to death, a place where all

liberties are possible." This suggests why all the details of Genet's theatrical art are conceived to irrealize, to create a magical world of costume and artifice where characters, often masked, mounted on high platform shoes, ceremoniously enact the relationships and dramas of life, all the while insisting that they are actors, and that the rituals in which they are engaged belong to a special space of play unaccommodated to the demands of the reality principle. Genet is in this manner the inheritor of Pirandello, a playwright ever attuned to the special nature of the theatre as play, as gratuitous performance: as, by its very nature, "celebration of nothing." Yet the celebration is far from innocent or anodine. Genet also displays affinities with Antonin Artaud's view of the theatre as an assault upon the audience. Rather than seeking the illusionistic realism of traditional middle-class theatre, and without escaping into fantasy, Genet stages dramas of unnerving social and psychological implication by seizing the central issues of life on the borderline of death or sleep, at the moment where our most thoroughly repressed wishes and fears glimmer into consciousness.

So it is that each detail of action, gesture, costume, and language must for Genet be essentially artificial. He urges Blin to avoid having the actors make any natural noises in their stage movements, he complains that the striking of a match onstage will always appear a real rather than an imitated action; he even seeks to denaturalize actors' voices; and of course he gives to his characters language of a rich and decadent sumptuousness which breaks with any representative function. As Susan Sontag has written, Genet's language is always "in drag": dressed up, travestied, artificialized. It is thus that the characters can imagine, shape, and express the essence of the being of their roles, rather than their mere function. In *The Blacks*, for instance, the characters are first of all concerned with what it means to play at being blacks—or to play at blacks playing at being whites. In *The Balcony*, Madame Irma exhorts Carmen to "exalt" her role as whore, to work on it so that it may "illumine" her being.

It may be worth dwelling for a moment on *The Balcony*, possibly Genet's most perfectly successful achievement, and the play that makes clearest the central tendencies of his theatre. The bordello in which the play takes place is referred to as a "House of Illusions," and each client who comes there is playing out an erotic fantasy which engages the whole of his being. For each of the "scenarios"

that unfolds in the multiple specialized rooms—stage sets—of the bordello, there must, as Irma explains to Carmen, be an authentic detail and a false detail: a seeming paradox which enables the clients both to enter into their fantasies and to conceive their realization as essentially theatrical, a moment of self-conscious play and artifice. One "false" detail is maintained throughout the play: the elaborate chandelier that hangs above the stage, as if to remind us that we cannot leave the role of spectatorship. The very name of the bordello, "The Grand Balcony," suggests spectatorship and voyeurism, and insists that the imitation of life going forward on the stage is an imitation of life as theatre, life as the place of enactment of roles, behind which there is no stable "reality." Not only are Irma and Carmen stage managers and spectators of their clients' enactments of censored desires, the clients themselves are witnesses to their own stageplay. Everyone is double, reflected in the bordello's ubiquitous mirrors. As Genet states, it is a play of "Image and Reflection."

When revolution breaks out in the streets of the town beyond the bordello's walls—offstage—it threatens to disrupt the paradise of illusion. There is the risk, for instance, that Chantal, one of the prostitutes, will become "virginized" by her revolutionary ardor (a romantic revolutionary cliché) and that the victory of the revolutionaries will bring a puritanical regime that allows no place to the House of Illusion. But all will return to the theatrical order: Chantal dies from a stray bullet, and Roger, the revolutionary leader, enters the bordello with the request to play the role of his archenemy, the Chief of Police. The self chooses to enact the Other, revealing the profound instability—and essential theatricality—of the notion of self. Political action as dis-illusion, the path to firm self-definition, has met defeat—or so we may want to interpret Roger's act of self-castration at the end. At the same time, the Chief of Police by Roger's choice to play him as a role himself becomes a Personage: a mythic figure whose being, like that of the Bishop, the Judge, and the General, will be replayed again and again in the House of Illusion. Everything in the world exists to become theatre, and when Irma at the end, extinguishing the lights of the stage, bids the audience to exit and return home, she assures them that back in "reality" everything will appear still more false than it has here, in the House of Illusion, onstage.

Genet has understood an authentic mission of the theatre: to

induce a suspicion of the real through theatrical acting out, to blur the sharp boundaries that we like to maintain between fantasy and reality, art and life, sleeping and waking. As the Envoy suggests, in Scene 9 of *The Balcony*, "This is a true image, born of a false spectacle." All Genet's plays (and most of all *The Balcony*) are filled with a kind of theatrical metaphysics, reflections of what it means to play a role, to act a personage, to "be" someone. Through theatricality, we reach an unsettling reversal of perspectives, and a challenging reflection on the stuff of our social relations. Whether it be imprisonment (*Deathwatch*), servitude (*The Maids*), blackness (*The Blacks*), colonial exploitation (*The Screens*), each of Genet's plays explores an existential condition through a full dramatization of the roles which its victims—be they slaves or masters—are forced to play out. In each instance, the stage contains both actors and spectators—those watching from "the balcony"—and there is always a moment of reversal, where such an opposition is called into question, and where the larger body of spectators—the audience in the theatre—must ask about its own role. If Genet's plays through their artificiality and ritualism refuse the status of direct social realism and *théâtre engagé*, they do not fall into frivolous fantasy. Through their thorough and vertiginous exploration of the experience of theatricality itself, Genet's plays make central probes into man's condition.

For all that has been written about Genet the man, he remains a figure of mystery: his truth—including the facts of his biography—seems inextricably interwoven with his fictionalized self-images. He clearly wishes to remain protean, ungraspable. And it is difficult to know what surprises he may yet produce as an artist—if any. His recent creative activity seems to have principally taken the form of political articles and the production of a film. It has been more than a decade since his last major work—*The Screens*—and it may be that his *opus* is substantially complete, ready for overall critical estimate. But it will be a long time before we arrive at a cool, "objective" verdict on Genet. He continues to be an unsettling force in culture, difficult to assimilate and to make peace with.

## On the Fine Arts Considered as Murder

by Jean-Paul Sartre

Allow a poet who is also an enemy to speak to you as a poet  
and as an enemy. — THE CHILD CRIMINAL

It is within the framework of Evil that Genet makes his major decision. Moreover, he has not at all given up stealing: why should he? It is hard to imagine him renouncing burglary for belles-lettres the way a repentant embezzler gives up swindling and opens a shop. "The idea of a literary career would make me shrug." When he writes these words, he has already had two plays performed and has published a volume of poems and four of his great books; he is completing the fifth and is preparing a film scenario; in short, it is the moment when people are beginning to talk about his work. All the more reason for affirming his loathing of the idea of having a literary career. Each of his works, like each of his thefts, is an isolated offense which may be followed by other offenses but which does not require them and which is self-sufficient. In each of them he bids farewell to literature: "If I finish this book, I finish with what can be related," he says in *Miracle of the Rose*. "The rest is beyond words. I must say no more. I say no more and walk barefoot." And in *Funerary Rites*: "If I submit to the gestures [of thieves], to their precision of language, I shall write nothing more. I shall lose the grace that enabled me to report news of heaven. I must choose or alternate. Or be silent." And in *The Thief's Journal*: "This book is the last... for

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maintain his inner balance. Quickly he returns to sweet, natural confusion. But while he is stealing in innocence, while he modestly covets the martyr's palm, he is unaware that he is forging his destiny.

*Translated by* BERNARD FRECHTMAN

## A Note On Theatre

By JEAN GENET

*The pages that follow were written in 1954 at the request of the Paris publisher Jean-Jacques Pauvert as a foreword to a new edition of The Maids. The note thus precedes the writing of The Balcony, The Blacks, and The Screens.—Editor's Note.*

So you need a foreword. But what is there to say about a play from which I felt detached even before it was finished? To speak of its composition would be to evoke a world and climate without grandeur. But I would rather say a few words about the theatre in general. I dislike it. One will gather as much from reading this play. What I have been told about Japanese, Chinese, and Balinese revels and the perhaps magnified idea that persists in my brain make the formula of the Western theatre seem to me too coarse. One can only dream of an art that would be a profound web of active symbols capable of speaking to the audience a language in which nothing is said but everything portended.

But any poet who tried to realize this dream would see the haughty stupidity of actors and theatre people rise up in arms. If, on occasion, their boorishness does subside, then lack of culture and shallowness become evident. Nothing can be expected of a profession that is practiced with so little gravity or self-communion. Its starting-point, its reason for being, is exhibitionism. One can elaborate an ethic or an aesthetic on the basis of any aberrant attitude. But to do so requires courage and renunciation, and the failing that makes for the choice of the actor's trade is governed by an awareness of the world that is not despairing but complacent. The Western actor does not seek to become a sign charged with signs. He merely wishes to identify himself with a character in a drama or comedy. The world of today, a tired world, incapable of living by acts, likewise draws him into this

vulgarity by requiring him to enact in its stead not heroic themes but dream characters. What, then, will be the ethos of these people? If they do not vegetate in intellectual, but bitter squalor, they go in for stardom. Look at them vying for the first page of the newspaper. It is therefore necessary both to establish, rather than a conservatory, a kind of seminary and then, with that as a basis, to build theatrical constructs, with the texts, sets, and gesticulations that these should imply. For even the finest Western plays have something shoddy about them, an air of masquerade and not of ceremony. The spectacle that unfolds on the stage is always puerile. Beauty of language sometimes deceives us as to depth of theme. In the theatre, all takes place in the visible world and nowhere else.

My play, which was commissioned by an actor famous in his day,<sup>1</sup> was written out of vanity, but in boredom. Nevertheless—I am speaking of the making of it—already disturbed by the dismal bleakness of a theatre that reflects the visible world too exactly, the actions of men and not of Gods, I attempted to effect a displacement that, in permitting a declamatory tone, would bring theatre into the theatre. I hoped thereby to do away with characters—which stand up, usually, only by virtue of psychological convention—to the advantage of signs as remote as possible from what they are meant first to signify, though nevertheless attached to them in order, by this sole link, to unite the author with the spectator, in short, so to contrive that the characters on the stage would be only the metaphors of what they were supposed to represent. In order to carry through this undertaking with some measure of success, I had, of course, to invent a tone of voice, a gait, a gesticulation. The result is a failure. I therefore accuse myself of having abandoned myself uncourageously to an undertaking without risks or perils. I repeat, however, that I was impelled to do this by that universe of the theatre which is satisfied with approximation. For the most part, the work of actors is based on the teaching dispensed in official conservatories. Those who have dared innovations have been inspired by the Orient. Unfortunately, they operate the way

<sup>1</sup> Louis Jouvet.—Translator's note.

society women practice yoga. The manners, way of life, and environment of poets are often depressingly frivolous, but what is to be said about those of theatre people? If a poet discovers a great theme and starts developing it, he must, in order to complete it, imagine it being performed; but if he brings to his work the rigor, patience, study, and gravity with which one approaches a poem, if he discovers major themes and profound symbols, what actors can express them? Theatre people live in a state of self-dispersion rather than self-communion. Are they to be accused? Probably their profession foists itself upon them in this facile form because, before the eyes of a smug and slightly jealous public, they cut a figure both in a short but safe life and in a mechanical apotheosis. Marionettes would, I know, do better. They are already being considered. However, it may well be that the theatrical formula for which I am calling, an entirely allusive one, and allusive only, is a personal taste of mine. It may be that I am using this letter merely to vent my spleen.

On a stage not unlike our own, on a platform, the problem was to reconstitute the end of a meal. On the basis of this one particular which is now barely perceptible in it, the loftiest modern drama has been expressed daily for two thousand years in the sacrifice of the Mass. The point of departure disappears beneath the profusion of ornaments and symbols that still overwhelm us. Beneath the most familiar of appearances—a crust of bread—a god is devoured. I know nothing more theatrically effective than the elevation of the host: when finally this appearance appears before us—but in what form, since all heads are bowed, the priest alone knows; perhaps it is God himself or a simple white pellet that he holds at the tips of his four fingers—or that other moment in the Mass when the priest, having broken the host on the paten in order to show it to the faithful (Not to the audience! To the faithful? But their heads are still bowed. Does that mean they are praying, they too?) puts it together again and eats it. The host crackles in the priest's mouth! A performance that does not act upon my soul is vain. It is vain if I do not believe in what I see, which will end—which will never have been—when the curtain goes down. No doubt one of the functions of art is to substitute

the efficacy of beauty for religious faith. At least, this beauty should have the power of a poem, that is, of a crime. But let that go.

I have spoken of communion. The modern theatre is a diversion. It is sometimes, rarely, an estimable diversion. The word somewhat suggests the idea of dispersion. I know no plays that link the spectators, be it only for an hour. Quite the contrary, they isolate them further. Sartre once told me, however, of having experienced this religious fervor during a theatrical performance: in a prison camp, at Christmas time, a group of soldiers, mediocre actors, had staged a French play evoking some theme I no longer recall—revolt or captivity or courage—and the far-away homeland was suddenly present, not on the stage, but in the hall. A clandestine theatre, to which one would go in secret, at night, and masked, a theatre in the catacombs, may still be possible. It would be sufficient to discover—or create—the common Enemy, then the Homeland which is to be protected or regained. I do not know what the theatre will be like in a socialist world; I can understand better what it could be among the Mau Mau, but in the Western world, which is increasingly marked by death and turned toward it, it can only refine in the “reflecting” of a comedy of comedy, of a reflection of reflection which ceremonious performance might render exquisite and close to invisibility. If one has chosen to watch oneself die charmingly, one must rigorously pursue, and array, the funeral symbols. Or must choose to live and discover the Enemy. For me, the Enemy will never be anywhere. Nor will there ever be a Homeland, whether abstract or interior. If I am stirred, it will be by the nostalgic reminder of what it was. Only a theatre of shadows could still move me. A young writer once told me of having seen five or six youngsters playing war in a park. They were divided into two troops and were preparing to attack. Night, they said, was coming on. But it was noon in the sky. They therefore decided that one of them would be Night. The youngest and frailest, having become elemental, was then the Master of the Fray. “He” was the Hour, the Moment, the Ineluctable. He approached, it seems, from far off, with the calmness of a cycle, though weighed down with the sadness and pomp of twilight. As he drew near, the others, the

Men, grew nervous and uneasy . . . But the child was arriving too soon to please them. He was coming before his time. By common consent the Troops and the Chiefs decided to eliminate Night, who again became a soldier on one of the sides . . . It is on the basis of this formula alone that a theatre can thrill me.

*Translated by* BERNARD FRECHTMAN

at least, he has not done it, knowing perhaps that thereby he would belie the fundament of his theatre and his gesture. The mind is too petty an instrument for his intentions. This is not the case because he is an "Occidental" when he tries to be a critic—self-conscious or outgoing—but because the essence of his drama lies in the act, the deed, which defies concepts and requires no explication to be understood. Of course, this is also his limit, though not necessarily a limitation; so far he has left the task of criticism and social attribution to the theatre of "idiots, madmen, invert, grammarians, grocers, anti-poets and positivists, i.e. the Occidentals,"<sup>21</sup> the debilitators of pure theatre.

But one becomes too easily satiated by the abundance of his effluvia, particularly if one has permitted himself to be affected even in the slightest degree. Who has not seen a Genet audience rise after the sacral ceremony which did not drop and straighten its skirts again, pull tight its ties, let drape its cassocks in pious protection? One is almost tempted to say that it suffices to have only *Deathwatch*, *The Maids*, *The Blacks*, and perhaps, *The Balcony* of Genet in our repertories. These plays are of a kind and of one purpose; any more would be merely for variety and occasion, like an increase of vintages in one's cellar. *The Blacks* and *The Balcony* are plays that are beyond the single mode and action of the two shorter plays, and in that sense are marred by didactic elements, by notes of justification, by attempts to explain and attribute causes. This certainly is the case in *The Blacks* where the almost naively expounded and constructed black pilgrimage diverts and disperses the drive of the opening ritual. *Deathwatch* and *The Maids* are prime examples of purely vicarious theatre. They present a single amplified ritual without complication of plot. There is no need to even explicate these plays: they are to be described if they are to be communicated, experienced if they are to be truly known and apprehended.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* "Like the plague the theatre is the time of evil, the triumph of dark powers that are nourished by a power even more profound until extinction. In the theatre as in the plague there is a kind of strange sun, a light of abnormal intensity by which it seems that the difficult and even the impossible suddenly become our normal element."

## An Interview With Roger Blin

By BETTINA KNAPP

Roger Blin—still virtually unknown in this country—is one of France's finest directors and actors. He directed the premiere productions of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, Krapp's *Last Tape* (acting in these plays as well) and Genet's *The Blacks*. He is planning to direct Genet's newest play, *The Screens*, in New York this spring. Blin was born in 1907 at Neuilly-sur-Seine, a Paris suburb. He was brought up in a bourgeois and devoutly Catholic household but, after attending parochial school and the Sorbonne, he left home to begin a bohemian existence, a life without restraint. He became an atheist, and remains one. He refused to join any political party or literary group, although he maintained close ties with many surrealists. Blin met Artaud in a Montparnasse café and they became good friends—the young actor played one of the Assassins in Artaud's production of *The Cenci*. Slowly Blin's interests expanded. He wrote movie reviews and then began to act in the films and on stage; he directed; he designed his own sets and costumes. A careful and painstaking worker, Blin has directed relatively few plays in his life—he absolutely refuses to undertake a work he does not love. Blin always chooses the hard road, never the easy way out. When he began his acting career he had great difficulty getting roles because he was a stutterer. At this decisive point in his life he could easily have become an outstanding painter, for he has substantial visual talent (he still draws today, and continues to execute the designs for his own productions). In describing why he did not pursue his abilities as a painter, Blin reveals the wellspring of his person-



ality: "Had I no hands I would have become a painter. But because I stutter I had to become an actor."

—Interviewer's Note.

**Knapp:** Do you think Genet is a representative of a decadent society? Please explain.

**Blin:** Yes. Perhaps in a way. He was once part of a society in which anarchy, capitalism, and communism vied with each other for supremacy, and in so doing, paved the way toward self-destruction. Genet was a victim of this society which he now seeks to destroy. In this sense, then, he could be called a representative of a decadent society. But now Genet has passed on to the other camp. He is against all order. He hates bourgeois society and is no longer duped by it. His brand of hatred is purely individualistic. He takes pleasure in it and experiences great jubilation, a feeling of revenge in his looking out at society. But he does not try to correct the society he denounces. He does not try to substitute one order for another since he is against all order. He owns nothing and yet he stays at the finest hotels. He can live in total discomfort and yet, when it comes to going downstairs and buying a small item, he will usually send the bellhop. Morally speaking, however, Genet is not decadent. His homosexuality is part of his make-up, part of his very life. He defends homosexuality as he defends the highest moral courage possible, the greatest sacrifice of which man is capable. This verges on the mystical. Genet is not decadent. He is human on all levels; human without being sentimental because his views on poverty and homosexuality forbid any sentimentality.

**Knapp:** Genet's plays have a deep effect on their audience. This is often described as a "shock effect"—an adjunct of the "theatre of cruelty." Would you describe Genet's theatre as shocking and cruel in Artaud's sense of these words?

**Blin:** Many people are shocked by Genet's plays. They are fright-

ened when confronted with a world they know really exists—a complete world. Ionesco, for instance, never stayed to see the end of *The Blacks*. As a white man he felt uncomfortable; he felt he was being attacked; he sensed the great pleasure the Negro actors took each time they insulted the whites. If people are shocked by Genet's plays, they are completely disarmed by his other great quality—his ability to evoke laughter, and laughter relaxes the spectator. If a spectator is shocked by the obscenities he hears on stage, he is won over by the sheer beauty and poetry of Genet's language. Even those who feel they are being mocked and ridiculed are struck by the "truth" and burning sincerity of his poetry and are held by a sense of "fair-play." There are, of course, bigots like Gabriel Marcel who turn away. Genet's brand of cruelty is quite different from the type Artaud advocated. Artaud's cruelty resembles in many ways religious cruelty as practiced by the Aztec Indians. Genet's cruelty is more classical and is closer to Greek theatre. This may seem strange in view of the fact that Artaud was half Greek, his mother having been born in Smyrna. Artaud's break with Greek theatre may in part be due to his own strange personality as well as to the profound influence of the surrealist movement upon him. Genet was not influenced by Artaud. He has read little of Artaud's work. Genet's cruelty is simpler, more classical, more fatalistic—the cruelty of gods inflicted upon men in those days when gods were close to men. Genet feels deeply that people are victims of society, and it is in illustrating this that his cruelty becomes most apparent. Genet's asceticism is hedonistic. This is obvious in his admiration of the body, in his sensual descriptions and imagery. Genet's theatre is devoid of a goal, of an ideal. His theatre is the expression of himself in that it is constantly renewing itself, continually offering new series and stages of revolt. Genet's effectiveness is based on that mysterious poetic phenomenon without which everything would be meaningless. Genet is the bold inventor of his own brand of metaphoric imagery, of the "coq à l'âne," the discoverer of secret relationships between two things which seem to have no rapport at all. Added to this is Genet's brand of "madness" or "folly," of which Camus and Sartre are totally devoid—that little thing which makes for the poet.

**Knapp:** How did you go about directing Genet's play *The Blacks*? And how will you direct his new work *The Screens*?

**Blin:** What I try to do when directing a play is to translate the author's ideas, his aesthetic that is, both visually and emotionally. I want the audience to feel the immense jubilation Genet felt when he wrote *The Blacks* and *The Screens*. It's the jubilation of a child who punishes others and at the same time punishes himself. Take *The Blacks*. It's anti-white, but don't think for a moment that it's a glorification of the blacks either. The play is purposely ambiguous—what with blacks acting out their ritual in front of a white audience which isn't white at all, but made up of blacks disguised as whites. Genet is not shedding tears over the fate of the blacks. He is showing humanity with all its passions, its hatreds, jealousies, and vices. He is trying to penetrate the inner core of man, to understand it. He is searching for man's motivations, really Genet's motivations. Each time Genet writes, he tries to get to the bottom of things. This is the only way he can find himself and so liberate himself. The pen is his only friend and confidant. My role as director is to make this clear to the spectator.

**Knapp:** *The Blacks* is an anti-white play set in a primitive mold, yet you had to work with "white" Negroes for the most part. Did this give you any problems during rehearsals? In other words, were your Negro actors truly "black"?

**Blin:** *The Blacks* is an anti-white play. I did work with "white" Negroes—West Indians, Africans, Parisian Negroes. This mixture was necessary for two reasons: material and moral. It is almost impossible to find thirteen professional Negro actors in Paris. I used amateurs for the most part. I took the best of what I could get and I worked with them for two years trying to improve their diction—to make actors out of them. Genet wrote *The Blacks* for all Negroes the world over, from the blackest of Africans to the honey-skinned West Indian. The Negroes were slaves, victims of society—and it is to these that the play was addressed. There were many problems involved with such a

production. The problem of accent for one—the rolling of the "r." More serious, however, were the difficulties I encountered with the "white" Negroes living in Paris. They were well brought up Negroes, assimilated Negroes who were shocked by Genet's language. They did not want to be taken for savages. And yet, one did not have to scratch too deeply to discover that they had suffered the tortures of racism and persecution, the immense pain of being considered inferior. Fundamentally, they agreed with every word in the play, with the spirit of the work. And keep in mind that *The Blacks* went into rehearsal at a time when many African countries were seeking their independence. For these actors then, the piece took on great meaning. Even the most assimilated Negro felt a deep craving for independence, to expel their oppressors. Other problems arose within the cast. The two actresses from Martinique (the one who played the African Queen and the one who played the White Queen) hated each other. I was not aware of this at the beginning. One afternoon after a matinée, I went backstage and smelled the odor of incense. I was surprised. I discovered that the White Queen was burning this incense to ward off the evil spell she accused the Black Queen of casting upon her. The Black Queen, she maintained, aimed the jettatura in her direction and willed her to forget her lines. The Black Queen's witchcraft was present in her on stage acting, in her secret, symbolic and ritualistic gestures. Since most of the actors in the French production were amateurs, I was able to mold them, for I was dealing with raw material. In the English production I was dealing with professional actors who knew every trick of the trade and my task was far more difficult. Though they were admirable actors, their approach to *The Blacks* was highly emotional. This piece should be played without any sentimentality. That's why I decided—and this is not indicated in the text but is my own invention—to transform the general laughter at the end of the play into a savage dance lasting a few minutes, after which would come the minuet.

**Knapp:** Did you encounter any difficulties in the text itself?

**Blin:** Genet's style is unique. His sentence structure is archaic;

it sounds like eighteenth century prose. At times, his writing is also precious. Genet's sentences are long, full of repetitions. It's poetry, and the actors must speak quickly, always keeping in rhythm with the lines... the tempo changes; it's like counterpoint. Insolence and violence are Genet's supreme qualities. He shocks his audiences. He wants to. Yet he is never vulgar. What Genet despises and what he constantly fights against is a shallow and empty style. He hates rhetoric.

**Knapp:** Does he ever find himself falling into this shallowness of style?

**Blin:** Yes. We all do. Genet writes slowly. He labors over each sentence, each word. I worked with him on *The Screens* for a month in Italy. We went over the entire play very carefully. We purified the text... eradicated all those parts which did not properly belong... dramatized it.

**Knapp:** In other words, you are to Genet what Jouvet was to Giraudoux.

**Blin:** I detest Giraudoux. His theatre is the most abominable of all.

**Knapp:** Genet's characters have been described as existing in a hall of mirrors. The characters have no center or essence and are only reflections. Is it possible for one actor to achieve this sense of multiple identities? If so, how do you go about working toward this result? What specific directing techniques do you use to evoke this feeling?

**Blin:** The actors who played in *The Blacks* were, unfortunately, not sufficiently well-trained to bring out the myriad subtleties of the text, and so many "reflections of reflections" were lost. Of course the special use we made of the mask, the changing of vocal pitch, the sets, the lighting effects, and the stylized acting (the slowing down and acceleration of speech) added to this willed multiplicity. But these "reflections of reflections" present

in Genet's plays are limitless, and even the author himself gets lost in this labyrinth. For those who can see, many paths and chambers have been opened in this endless hall of mirrors by the text and the actors' interpretation of this text. There comes a point, however, when the actor becomes impotent, unable to correct what Genet himself failed to clarify. A theatrical miracle occurs during a Genet production; the author wants everybody to believe what he says. This audience credibility, however, must be shattered every now and then. As a result, it becomes even more credible. The chain can be broken when an actor winks at his audience or an unexpected literary allusion is interpolated into the text. The magic spell the author and actor cast upon their audience is now broken, but this very rupture increases the extreme tension of the play. For this reason Genet, without realizing it, approaches Brecht without, of course, possessing the latter's didactic attitudes. He goes further than Brecht. Though Brecht fails in achieving this rupture, this very failure constitutes a victory for him, because he is still a poet no matter what he does. But Brecht does not succeed in destroying audience credibility, nor the ever-present theatrical magic. In spite of all his attempts at anti-magic, he creates a continuous, theatrical universe. It is extremely difficult for a dramatist and a director to prevent a spectator from being fascinated by a man he sees on stage who is holding a flower and who speaks to him, or by another whose eyes are blackened by makeup and whose face blazes with light.

**Knapp:** How do you create the décors for the Genet plays?

**Blin:** I strive for total realism.

**Knapp:** What do you mean by that?

**Blin:** Take a telephone, for example; place it on a table on stage. That's all right. But I want that telephone to be able to eat, to talk, to have a life of its own. It must be an animate object. The prop must be a composite of what you see and what you have seen. The décor must be alive, move and breathe. It must be

human. Take a street. The street most frequently placed on stage today is the street you see every day. If you reproduce it on the boards as such . . . well, I call this stupid realism. But the street you see at night when you are drunk—you see it in a different way. You are wobbly. The street turns, it assumes wierd shapes, it's alive. What do you see in the street now? How do you see the street? This is true discovery. You are perceiving reality; for the first time all bonds and restrictions have been broken. Objective reality has been dislocated. You now perceive a far deeper reality. That street has become flesh and blood for you.

**Knapp:** How did you bring this out in your stage sets for *The Blacks*?

**Blin:** The sets were simple. They were made up of iron bars covered over by asbestos. The asbestos made the iron bars look more pliable. It was a stark and yet soft set. From the orchestra the décor looked like a giant sculpture. With proper manipulation of the lights, it assumed different shapes, different colors and moods. It reflected and participated in the action of the play.

**Knapp:** What will the sets be like for *The Screens*?

**Blin:** As the title indicates . . . the sets will be made up of numerous screens which will be brought on stage from the left, from the right, and from the back. The screens will be placed on three different levels. Their appearance and disappearance on stage will blend with the general tempo of the piece. They will be part of the play, while being dramatic entities unto themselves.

**Knapp:** When one talks of Genet, one always mentions the "ritual," the "ceremony" in his plays. What kind of rituals are there in *The Screens*?

**Blin:** There are four rituals in *The Screens*. The first ceremony takes place in a bordello where Mass is being said . . . a very sacred Mass. The prostitutes are garishly dressed. There is an old Arab woman who is walking along. She is so thin that she is made only

of clothes. She has practically no body. The second ritual starts when the Arabs begin to draw on the screens. They draw everything they have done to help the revolutionary forces. Since they have burned, tortured, and slaughtered French people, the screens will slowly be covered with an eye here, a leg there, a gaping mouth, a nose, an arm. . . . All this is done before the audience. This will show how the Arabs pay tribute to their dead. The third ceremony introduces us to the colonials. And we watch them as they pin medals on manikins. This medal-pinning contest is to be played in rhythm with the picture-drawing of the Arabs. This is how Genet points up the idiotic nature of the settlers in contrast with the important work being done by the Arabs. The fourth ritual begins when a French lieutenant is struck by a stray bullet. Before he dies, his soldiers will pay tribute to him. They stretch him out on stage. Each in turn stoops over and farts in his face. "*Un petit air de France,*" they say. "*Respire bien l'air. . .*" In the original version of the play Genet has the soldiers drag the lieutenant offstage for this ritual. But after we worked the play over together, I felt the entire scene would be clearer and more forceful if the ceremony took place on stage.

**Knapp:** *The Screens* has not yet been produced in France. Do you think it will be done there soon?

**Blin:** It cannot be produced in Paris. It's too dangerous since it deals with the Algerian War. The Arabs versus the French on stage. Why we would all be bombed! The play pushes man's emotions to the extreme limit as only Genet knows how. It's a shocking, brutal, but magnificently dramatic and human work.

**Knapp:** What about New York?

**Blin:** Yes, we're aiming for that. We're trying to find a theatre large enough and yet not too expensive. It's going to be a costly production. There are over forty characters in *The Screens*. This play is a culmination of everything Genet has done. All his past themes have been woven into a solid network. It's like a modern

tapestry with all its brilliant, flashing, discordant, and swiftly moving colors . . . a tapestry possessing both artistry and depth.

**Knapp:** You've indicated that the décor must take on an animated life of its own. Is this best achieved in a proscenium stage or what we would call an open stage? Do you like to work with sets or with set pieces only? In what sense does the actor himself set the stage?

**Blin:** Everything depends on the play. I was very pleased with the sets for *The Blacks*. I always work closely with the set designer. I like working with people. I usually tell the decorator what I have in mind and we carry out our ideas together. I designed the tree for *Waiting for Godot*. Sets on stage must take on a life of their own. One cannot be limited by them. The twenty-five centimeters separating a table from a chair on stage can be made to look like ten centimeters if the decorator so wills it. In Japanese theatre a small piece fifty centimeters high can represent a small mountain. And the spectators will really believe they are looking at a mountain. It makes no difference to me whether I use a proscenium stage, an arena stage, or even the type Artaud had in mind—that is, where the audience would sit in the center. Naturally, it's no good if the stage is too small and the actors cannot move around freely. But if one is too fussy and too exacting concerning the type of stage he wants, few plays would be produced these days. If there is sufficient space (a stage about seven by eight meters square) and the visibility is good, that's all that's needed. A beautiful studio never made the painter. Van Gogh never had a studio. Actors do set the stage. Their gestures, without resorting to miming (that is where perspective is diminished or enlarged as when one walks up a flight of imaginary stairs), their voices if used subtly, their acting—all figure in the stage set. The director's work must remain invisible. The more it is effaced, the better. The director's greatest moments of joy are experienced when he watches his play unfold before him without recalling for one moment the difficulties he encountered in its production.

**Knapp:** Do you ever find your role as designer conflicting with your role as director or as actor? What do you feel the relationship between the designer, the director, and the actor should be?

**Blin:** In France, a director or an actor finds a play which captures his fancy. Then he tries to get a producer or some financial backing. He then looks for a theatre and a set designer. I personally prefer an architect or sculptor to assist me in creating the sets for my productions. I hate painters as designers of sets. I like to work with people who have ideas and who serve the text. Some producers choose plays for certain stars. Not I. I always refuse to direct a play which doesn't enthrall me. I like to discover the play myself and also create the lighting effects myself. My choice of actors for the plays I direct depends upon those I can find at the time—that is, those who are at liberty. I do not direct a play the way a German director does. The German director (a man between fifty-five and sixty years of age with a head which looks like a violin) reads the play he has been asked to direct. He spends several weeks (away from the theatre) writing down in detail all the stage directions. He returns to the theatre with three-hundred pages of notes. He then sits down in the orchestra, talks into a loud-speaker, and directs the actors according to what he has written in his manuscript. Every sigh, every facial gesture—everything has been noted beforehand with the utmost care. There is no leeway. I proceed differently. First of all, I never write anything down beforehand. I'm on stage all of the time. I show the actors how I would like a certain scene to be played, but I never impose my ideas nor do I ever explain the "true" or "fundamental" meaning of the play as such to the actor. I usually draw upon a metaphor taken from daily life, enlarge upon it, and this is how I explain the scene or the play to the cast. Sometimes I let the actors feel their way through a part even though I know they are on the wrong track. After a while they themselves realize they have reached an impasse. Then we rectify the mistakes together. When I see an actor acting out a scene spontaneously and differently from the way I had conceived it, I may suddenly realize that the actor is right and that I am wrong. A good means for discover-

ing the right way to play a scene is by poking fun at it—ridiculing it. Such mocking relaxes the actors and permits them to perceive subtleties and hidden meanings by the very absurdity of certain situations. It also prevents the actors from being overly timid. Some of the actors in *The Blacks* were very timid at first. And timidity is contagious and can ruin a production. An actor must have freedom to express himself, but this freedom must be controlled. A play must breathe and live a life of its own.

**Knapp:** You have directed and acted in the plays of Beckett. What are the major differences between Beckett and Genet? Would you describe them as roughly equivalent authors? Beckett's use of language is much more sparse than Genet's. Is the work on stage with the actors vastly different when you're working with Beckett than when you're working with Genet? Who do you feel is the greater playwright?

**Blin:** These playwrights are vastly different. There is an exuberance, a baroque quality in Genet's use of language whereas Beckett draws his musical and rhythmical effects from his very reserve, his puritanism. Yet, these two authors have some points in common. Both Genet and Beckett are poets who aspire toward a certain type of classicism; both are subjective playwrights who try to express themselves with the same degree of sincerity; both search for verbal and rhythmic effects which are a far cry from the routine, from reality as we know it. It is difficult to point up the differences in directing techniques; I have only directed one Genet play, *The Blacks*. I directed and acted in *Waiting for Godot* and directed *Endgame*. *The Blacks* took me two years to complete; *Waiting for Godot*, four years. Beckett was unknown and Genet already figured in the public eye. I found myself drawn to these works and compelled to bring them to life. I cannot say who is the greater of the two playwrights. They are both solitary men who make little effort to have their works produced and who avoid publicity like the plague.

**Knapp:** What do you feel the theatre of the future will be like? What place in this theatre do you feel Genet will have? Beckett? Ionesco?

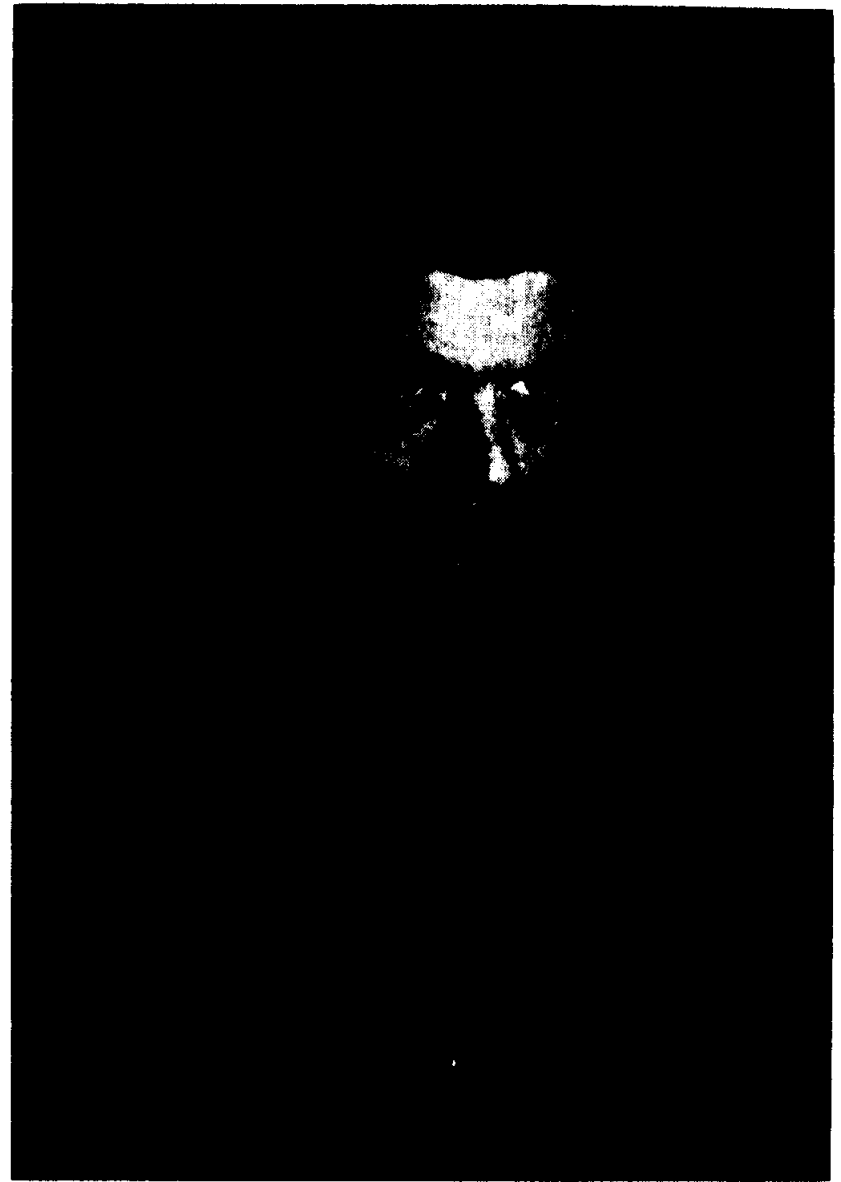
**Blin:** I am not a prophet. Genet, Beckett, and Ionesco have been influenced by their times. They cannot possibly remain disinterested in fascism, anarchy, capitalism, in man's exploitation of man. It is impossible to have a theatre today which does not reflect these problems, which is not tinged with blood. Genet is still going through a sort of "first stage" of revolt which is in itself both positive and negative. He is trying to open up new worlds for us—that's why his plays explode. They are like dynamite, like fireworks possessed of great beauty and poetry. Genet offers no solution to problems, no new forms to replace the old, no goals. This is because he feels that all order, all organizations are the beginnings of new constraints. Genet has not yet said his last word. Some see his work as saintly, others as anarchical. Genet wants us to see and believe in his sincerity. Beckett is far less communicative, far more reserved than Genet. What people consider to be Beckett's negative side (his fear and love of death) is compensated for by his humor, his tenderness, his prudishness. In daily life we are confronted with a positive personality, a man who fought indignities. In World War II he was a liaison man between the French Maquis and the RAF; he was also a nurse for the Red Cross. He is a man who chooses his path of action and proceeds accordingly. I was struck by this character trait. Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot* is an extraordinary portrayal of man's exploitation of man. Man's cynical, his horribly brutal side is here pointed up by Beckett. These satirical scenes are tremendously powerful. Perhaps Beckett will never write another play.<sup>1</sup> I don't know. A parallel can be drawn between his plays and his novels. In both cases there is a lessening of action, a motionless quality present. Beckett is becoming more and more reserved and enclosed. In *Waiting for Godot* we are introduced to four mobile characters; in *Endgame*, three of the four characters are immobile; in *Krapp's Last Tape* there are one-and-a-half characters (one character and his ghost); in *Happy Days* there is one motionless character who is slowly sinking into the sand and one invisible character. Where can Beckett go from here? It is hard for me to conceive of Ionesco's theatrical future. At the beginning he introduced us to a type of poetic theatre—an absurd theatre. He

<sup>1</sup> Since this interview, Beckett has completed two radio plays, *Words and Music* and *Cascando*.—Editor's Note.

is becoming more and more of a moralist these days. Perhaps Beckett will one day be able to communicate with the outside world. Perhaps Genet will become a devout Catholic. One never knows.

**Knapp:** Beckett, Genet, and Ionesco are all dealing with the anxieties of our day, and yet they approach these anxieties from different points of view: Beckett in a naked language with an empty stage; Ionesco through the disarticulation of language and a stage overflowing with things that overwhelm his characters; and Genet in a more or less naturalistic stage with human beings who are larger than life. Do you feel that all three of these approaches are legitimate? Is one necessarily truer or richer than another?

**Blin:** Genet, Beckett, Ionesco, and Adamov are four sincere playwrights. They are individualists and have founded no single school. Adamov, a man without a country, used to have a lot to say concerning surrealism, his fear of the police, his homelessness as a man in exile. When we were with Adamov we used to feel as though we were in the presence of a Kafka who knocks the wind right out of you. Adamov tried to explain the world as he saw it. His political views have limited him theatrically. His plays have become thesis plays in which Adamov, the individualist, the man riddled with anxieties, has disappeared. One cannot say that the work of Genet, Beckett, or Ionesco is "richer" or "truer" than that of the others. They are all poets in their fashion. Their approaches to the theatre, though different, are legitimate. Each in his own way has tried to denounce an evil—whether it be the evil of living or the evil of society. The three then, in this respect, are playwrights of their epoch and reflections of their times. They are modern writers, as opposed to Claudel, for example, who is like a monstrous mushroom living in a feudal world. His plays, written in a marvelous language, are the living incarnations of something which has long since disappeared—they are like goiters, like gothic fibromas. Claudel is a defender of the most reactionary forces, of bondage and stupidity.



—Thérèse Le Prat

Roger Blin