GENET

A BIOGRAPHY

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WITH A CHRONOLOGY BY ALBERT DICHY

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Genet's experience with *The Blacks* was far more satisfying than with *The Balcony*. In 1955 Annette Michelson, who lived with Bernard Frechtman and had become Genet's friend although she was twenty years younger, invited Genet to see a short documentary film with her at a commercial movie theatre in Paris, Le Pagode. The film was *Les Maîtres-Fous*, which had been made in 1954 by Jean Rouch, and it was the direct inspiration for *The Blacks*, which Genet was working on at the time. Shot in the countryside near Accra, the capital of Ghana (then called the Gold Coast), the film was about the Black urban proletariat of Accra who go into the bush and celebrate a ritual, enter into a trance and perform a sort of exorcism. Jean Cau, who was still friendly with Genet, wrote in *L'Express* in 1958, as a way of beginning an article about *The Blacks:*

> Have you seen *Les Maîtres-Fous*, the filmed reportage by Jean Rouch? In a clearing in a virgin forest, Blacks play Whites. One of them is the Governor, another the General, still another the Wife of the Doctor, and still another the Locomotive, which, although a mechanical engine, is supposed to belong rightfully to the white race—speaking 'poetically'. Astonished, the spectator thinks he is attending a game. Ill at ease, he soon realizes that the game is a ceremony which involves a sacrifice. In fact, the Blacks kill a dog, an animal which their sect reveres above all others, and thus they commit the most sacrilegious of acts. Through this crime, they are completely exiled in their colour, they have suddenly become Blacks who are condemned to be so. Now they are ready to dematerialize, that is to realize to the most absolute degree the world of the Whites.[72]

The description of the central mechanism—Blacks who impersonate whites in order to re-enact a crime—fits Genet's play as well as *Les Maîtres-Fous*, although to be sure the play also draws on devices Genet had already used in *The Maids*, *Splendid's* and *The Balcony:* dressing up, impersonation and playacting. Genet himself, however, was quick to recognize his debt to Rouch. As he wrote to Frechtman when the latter said he might prepare an introduction to the published version of *The Blacks*,

> If that's still your plan, I will be happy if you would establish a parallel as exact as possible between my plays and *Les Maîtres-Fous*. All kinds of developments, of relationships, of analogies are possible. Show them. But also say that all of this theatre of exorcism is already dead. Forgotten. *The Screens* is a rather precise indication already of the direction in which I am going.[73]

What Genet is calling the 'theatre of exorcism' corresponds well to one of the principal movements that arose later in the 1960s, the 'theatre of ritual', although Genet's theatre remains primarily verbal, whereas the theatre of ritual was sometimes worked out by a troupe of actors without a fixed text, around a semi-religious act of worship. In fact, the 'theatre of exorcism' describes fairly well *The Maids*, *The Balcony* and *The Blacks*, although only the latter two were written after Genet saw *Les Maîtres-Fous*.

In the summer of 1956 Genet told an interviewer, 'I haven't published anything new for ten years. Several plays, after *The Thief's Journal*. I'm going to do other ones, other plays; one about Blacks, and you will see how they will speak, people will be staggered. Finally, I'm going to write a great poem about death. A man like me sees death everywhere, he lives with it all the time.'[74] Interestingly, what Genet himself saw as the most astonishing feature of *The Blacks* is the grandiloquent language put into the mouths of Black characters, who up till then were often either not represented on stage at all or were given a funny, broken speech. When quizzed about this elevated language, Genet said, 'If people tell me that Blacks don't talk that way, I'll say that if you would put your ear against their heart, you would hear more or less that. You have to be able to listen to what is unformulated.'[75]

Genet occupies a curious position in the theatrical landscape of his day. For a long while he was grouped with Beckett and Ionesco as one of the 'Absurdists', a label derived from Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. According to Camus, at around the age of thirty a man or woman discovers he or she is going to die, that death is an inevitable personal fate; this discovery leads to a new perception of time as destructive, of nature as a chilling complex indifferent to its occupants, and of humankind as akin to machinery. Camus sees the absurd in the rupture between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints.

Ionesco, Genet and Beckett all share an orientation toward death, but their response to it differs appreciably. Ionesco feels outraged but mainly panicky in the face of the scandal death represents: it makes all human schemes and yearnings seem nonsensical. Over and over again, in such plays as *The Killer* and *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco dramatizes this scandal that everyone knows about and everyone wants to forget. At the end of *The Killer*, the main character, Bérenger, fervently comes up with one hopeful

reason for living after another, but they all wither away when confronted by the killer's chuckle and shrug of the shoulders. In *Rhinoceros*, the moral isolation of the dying man conscious of death is dramatized by an allegory; all the other human beings in the play metamorphose into rhinoceroses, but Bérenger refuses, remaining constant to his pitiful and indefensible humanity. Strangely enough, when Ionesco came to see *The Blacks* he walked out early, saying he felt uncomfortably that he was the only white man in the theatre. Perhaps he felt he was once again the only human being amidst alien creatures. The director Roger Blin recalled: 'Ionesco . . . was shocked as a white by being insulted as a white.'[76] Genet was vexed and forbade the theatre to admit Ionesco again, although he continued to read Ionesco's plays with interest.

Beckett's attitude toward death is one of bleakly humorous acceptance; since his characters suffer so much and see so little purpose in living, death is a deliverance, although one equally without meaning. As Ionesco himself observed, much of Beckett's writing is akin to that in the Book of Job. What all three writers—Ionesco, Beckett and Genet—share is an emphasis on the human predicament in general rather than on individual characters. None of the three has created a Hamlet or a Lear or even a Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* or a Martha and George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* They are more concerned with types, masks, predicaments than with fully formed individuals.

The real difference, of course, amongst the three playwrights is a difference of vision, tone and procedure. Beckett is a minimalist whose characters, in each successive play, do less and less. Genet said of Beckett: 'He is a monumental grain of sand.'[77] The woman in *Happy Days* is buried up to her neck in sand. The dialogue is chaste, desperate and mordantly funny. Politics is absent and love is merely the memory of a physical need or the abrasive practice of cheerless mutual dependence. Genet's theatre, by contrast, is full—full of ideas, of characters, of costumes, of extravagant language and of events. If Beckett speaks for the scorched earth, Genet expresses the feelings of foetid, luxuriant overgrowth. With time Ionesco, once considered their equal, has come to seem trivial. Of the three, Ionesco is the only satirist; he makes middle-class audiences congratulate themselves for laughing at middle-class foibles.

THE BLACKS had been commissioned by the director Raymond Rouleau, who in turn had been asked by a Black actor for a text that could be played by Blacks. Rouleau had already worked with Black actors, including Darling Légitimus, who would eventually originate the role of Félicité in *The Blacks;* now he wanted a play for a large, all-Black cast.[78]

At the time only one Black actor, Habib Benglia, was known to the French public, and the only celebrated Black playwright was Aimé Césaire, whose most important works had not yet been written (*La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* [1964], *Une Saison au Congo* [1965] and *Une Tempête* [1969]).

Genet always insisted that he had been *asked* by Black actors to write this play; he certainly didn't want to impose his ideas on them. Moreover, as he said, 'This play is written not *for* Blacks but *against* Whites.'[79] Elsewhere he said he had written it against himself. If Rouch's film *Les Maîtres-Fous* was one influence, another was an elaborate music box:

> The point of departure, the trigger, was given me by a music box in which the mechanical figures were four Blacks dressed in livery bowing before a little princess in white porcelain. This charming *bibelot* is from the eighteenth century. In our day, without irony, would one imagine a response to it: four white valets bowing to a Black princess? Nothing has changed. What then goes on in the soul of these obscure characters that our civilization has accepted into its imagery, but always under the lightly foolish appearance of a caryatid holding up a coffee table, of a train-bearer or a costumed servant bearing a coffee pot? They are made of fabric, they do not have a soul. If they had one, they would dream of eating the princess.
>
> When we see Blacks, do we see something other than the precise and sombre phantoms born of our own desire? But what do these phantoms think of us then? What game do they play?[80]

The plot of *The Blacks* is difficult to summarize for, as in the plays of Harold Pinter, everything is oblique, suggestive, open to interpretation, not because the plot is abstract but only because we have come in too late and heard too little of the exposition. The play, which centers on a mock trial on-stage while a real trial takes place off-stage, is imbued with an intense sexuality as well as an easy-going transvestism (Blacks play whites, men play women); this sexuality and transvestism mark the place 'occupied', one might say, by the total absence of homosexuality. Not only are men played against women and Blacks against whites, but the dead are also constantly contrasted to the living. The high level of energy and the constant suggestiveness mean, as Nabokov might have put it, that 'everything is teetering on the edge of everything'.

A journalist who visited Genet at the time he was writing his plays said he worked all night long, blackening large sheets of paper that he later pinned to the wall. He fell into a deep sleep from which he emerged at noon, 'small, chubby, his nose round, like a vintner coming back from his

vine, with liquid eyes where a timidity gathers which sometimes freezes brusquely; and you feel weighing on you the "stony look" that he lends to his most inexorable characters.'[81] Genet complained to Maurice Saillet, the critic, that up until now he had always worked with pleasure but now he was finding *The Blacks* (then called *Foot-Ball*) hard going. He seemed unsure of himself, full of doubts and depressed.

At first Genet was going to direct *The Blacks* himself, but as time went by he must have realized he had neither the patience nor the training for the job, since the play requires the most precise staging in order to differentiate between the Black actors masked as whites and the rest of the cast. Other scenes, such as the descent of the 'whites' from their perch and their progress through the jungle, demand a choreographic clarity. He and Raymond Rouleau also had trouble assembling a French-speaking Black cast.[82]

Roger Blin (who would later play the Envoy in the Paris production of *The Balcony*) finally directed *The Blacks*. A group of four Black actors approached Blin in 1957 and asked him to work with them. They called themselves Les Griots; 'griot' is a word for 'storyteller' in Black Africa. Blin agreed. They succeeded in perfecting a few fragments from Aimé Césaire's difficult, sumptuous text *Et les Chiens se taisaient*. Sartre's *No Exit* also appealed to them. They worked on Pushkin's *The Stone Guest* (*L'Invité de pierre*) because of the Russian poet's African ancestry. They then worked on *The Daughter of the Gods* (*La Fille des dieux*), an African tale by Abdou Anda Ka.[83]

Les Griots were invited to two theatre festivals, one in France and one in Italy. Their success encouraged them to undertake rehearsals of *The Blacks* when they came back to Paris. The script had been handed to Blin by the producer Lucie Germain. Blin had seen Genet frequently in the Café Flore during the war years.

Blin was used to pursuing his own vision regardless of the difficulties. He had encountered Antonin Artaud in 1928 and quickly became fast friends with the great theatrical innovator, who made Blin an actor despite his stutter. Blin was determined to surmount this difficulty; as he put it, 'If I had had my hands cut off, I would have doubtless sought to become a sculptor!'[84] From Artaud he learned to count on no one but himself. Blin contrasted Artaud's 'cruelty' and Genet's: 'Artaud's cruelty resembled ... religious cruelty as it is practised by the Aztec Indians. Genet's cruelty is more classical, closer to the Greek theatre.'[85] Genet, in other words, represents the cruelty inflicted on the hapless individual by the gods or society. Blin also praised Genet's inspired madness, the poetic furor that relates with a metaphor two apparently dissimilar things, and

contrasts it with what he considers Camus's and Sartre's pedestrian style.[86]

In the 1930s Blin had been part of a circle that included the acting teacher and director Charles Dullin, Dullin's star pupil, actor and director Jean-Louis Barrault, and the poet Jacques Prévert, who had written numerous screenplays for Marcel Carné and was the founder of the group Octobre, to which Blin belonged. This was a group of amateur actors hostile to the commercial theatre and dedicated to putting on plays linked to current events seen from the point of view of the class struggle. No wonder Genet begged Blin not to make leftist tracts out of his plays, an injunction Blin understood and respected.

After the war Blin briefly managed La Gaîeté-Montparnasse in Paris, a former music hall known for variety acts and girly shows. There he staged Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata* in 1944. Three years later he put on Adamov's *The Parody* (*La Parodie*) at the Théâtre Lancry. Finally, with much acclaim, he staged Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (*En attendant Godot*) in 1953 at the Théâtre de Babylone. Later, referring to his production of Strindberg, Blin remarked, 'If Beckett gave me his text, it's because he was not looking for a commercial success and the *Sonata* did not fill the auditorium.'[87]

It was *Waiting for Godot* that made Blin famous. For the young Michel Foucault, *Godot* was *the* turning point of his intellectual life, just as for the novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet the text was a dramatization of Heidegger's philosophy. Certainly it was the most prestigious intellectual event in Paris in the early 1950s. In 1957 Blin staged Beckett's *Endgame*, first in London at the Royal Court Theatre, then in Paris at the Studio des Champs-Elysées.

Now Genet and Blin worked on the script of *The Blacks* for a month in Italy, polishing every word. As Blin recalled: 'We looked at the whole play with the greatest attention. We cleaned up the text ... suppressed everything which didn't really work ... we dramatized it.'[88] Director and actors alike worked without recompense. The thirteen-member cast rehearsed every afternoon for six months in Caribbean dance halls.

Rehearsals were troubling and sometimes stormy. Many of the actors were alarmed by the anti-white hatred emanating from the play. They were for the most part well-assimilated Parisians who didn't want to cause trouble. As a psychologist, Blin had to dig for the pain and resentment in each actor—which was usually not hard to find. Eventually the actors achieved a spirit of jubilation while playing each evening before excited audiences.

At this time many of the former colonies of Europe in Africa were

declaring their independence and most of the actors, even those who had never been to Africa, discovered within themselves an intense sympathy for these new Black nations. Later, as Blin remarked, the excesses of Black dictators such as Bokassa, who ruled Central Africa from 1966 to 1979, complicated the picture, but in the late 1950s everything was still black and white, that is, Black was good and white bad.[89]

One actor, to whom Genet wanted to offer the role of Village, refused it because he was shocked by the language, particularly the White Queen's line: 'My mother shat me standing up.'[90] Some of the actors were amateurs, others professional. One actor came from Guyana, another from Guinea, one from Cameroon, two from Haiti. Lydia Edwandé, who played Virtue, was the only African woman in the company. All the other women and most of the men were from the Antilles.[91] Standardizing all these accents was one of Blin's biggest jobs. The Africans, for instance, rolled their *r*'s, whereas the actors from the Antilles tended to drop them.[92] Some critics complained that despite all Blin's work they had trouble understanding the actors. Mastering Genet's long phrases and elaborate syntax also taxed the young company; finding the right places to breathe required drawing up a detailed chart, something like a musical score. As in every cast, rivalries cropped up. As Blin said, 'The two actresses from Martinique (the Queen of Africa and the White Queen) hated each other. I didn't know about it at first. One day, the White Queen burned incense in order to undo the evil face that she accused the Black Queen of having cast on her in order to make her forget her lines.'[93]

Sarah Maldoror (an original member of Les Griots, who was supposed to play one of the two Queens but who finally did not appear in the play) told Marguerite Duras and the readers of *L'Express* in an interview that 'Genet's play will help you to understand us better. It's the only play that we've found for the moment at our disposal to educate you, to try to translate how ridiculous your idea of us is.'[94] Maldoror saw the play as a statement of Black pride, although she recognized that it was written by a white man who knew only part of the meaning of being Black. Robert Liensol, another member of Les Griots, said of Genet, 'He could have been Black himself.'[95]

The virulence that Genet ascribed to his Black characters startled white left-wing intellectuals, who were more focused on the evils of socialism than racism in general. The aggressiveness of *The Blacks* Genet saw as a salutary contrast to the inoffensiveness of Katherine Dunham's Black American dancers. This company had toured Europe extensively after the war. Genet was shocked by the American dancers' decorum:

> I was disturbed, to the point of being ill at ease, by athletic Blacks who accepted to perform before an audience, which was first of all American, a diversion which delighted it and in which they appeared overflowing with talent, with skill, with beauty, and all in order to present themselves in an inoffensive posture, at a time when they would have been refused the simple audacity of rubbing shoulders with a Yankee citizen.[96]

In tones that seem inspired by Frantz Fanon, Genet wrote disingenuously in a fine example of preterition that he didn't have 'the audacity to claim that every act, and every gesture, born in humiliation should be tinged by revolt'.[97]

GENET was delighted by reports of Blin's two-hour, non-stop production and said of it, 'Its success was close to perfection.'[98] The play opened on 28 October 1959 at the small Théâtre de Lutèce with sets and costumes by André Acquart, whom the producer Lucie Germain had known in her native Algeria. Because of the first stirrings of the Algerian independence movement, Germain's husband had sold his extensive property there and moved to France, where he hoped to play a cultural role. Lucie Germain bought the Théâtre de Lutèce, which Acquart completely remodelled for her—and according to Genet's specifications. Genet very much wanted a curtain which drew open rather than one that was raised and, despite the narrowness of the theatre, Acquart devised a cunning little proscenium with drawn curtains. The set itself was something like a jungle gym of metal poles which had a sculptural power and was an extremely versatile piece of stage machinery. The actors—true to Genet's original point of departure, the eighteenth-century music box—were dressed in lace jabots, flowered waistcoats and bright yellow shoes, and the actresses in silk gowns dripping with braid. Audiences scarcely knew how to react—whether to applaud the beauty, hiss at the hostility or walk out in cold disapproval. In any event the Lutèce was packed every night and Genet had never received such brilliant notices. Genet did not attend the opening night. He was not in France. To a puzzled Blin, Genet wrote, 'I told you, I'm also afraid of being hypnotized by myself for I don't know how many days.'[99] He needed a clear head, he said, to get on with *The Screens:* 'I don't want to do any more of these thick plays. No, that's finished. The action must be rather evasive—but not vague!—in order to leave the spectator confronted with himself alone.'[100]

Genet did, however, send a list of people to be invited, which included: Fernand Lumbroso, the producer of *Deathwatch;* Marie Bell; Pierre Lazareff; Leonor Fini; Jacques Guérin; Gaston Gallimard; Java; Gabriel Pommerand, the poet; Olivier Larronde; Giacometti; the cartoonist Siné; Florence Malraux, the writer's daughter and a journalist at *L'Express;* Maurice Garçon, the lawyer who had defended Genet during the war; André Masson; André Breton; Gala Barbizan, the patron of the arts; and Monique Lange, a writer who worked as an editor for Gallimard and who had become a close friend.

Perhaps because of his revisions of the script with Blin, *The Blacks* plays like the wind. Tension is maintained better than in all his other plays except *The Maids,* speeches are held down to an acceptable length, and everything radiates a bristling, menacing energy. Not surprisingly, the two scripts (*The Maids* and *The Blacks*) on which Genet worked with a great director (Jouvet and Blin) are the most stageworthy. The original production of *The Blacks* was so successful that it was transferred to the Théâtre de la Renaissance, where it finished its unusually long run of 169 performances. It won the Grand Prix de la Critique for the best play of 1959.

In Blin's production the Black actors who play the white members of the European court (Missionary, Judge, Governor, Queen, Valet) enter from off-stage wearing official costumes and half-masks. They mount a tribunal from which they view the action. At the same time the actors who play the Blacks enter from the rear of the hall and come down the aisle through the audience. They are dancing a minuet to Mozart's *Divertimento* around a catafalque. When the Queen wonders 'if they are going to kill her' (presumably a white woman is intended for the catafalque), the Blacks laugh and remark that whites need their adornments, nostalgia and grief. The elegant master of ceremonies, Archibald, then makes us uneasy by assuring us that nothing here on stage will be clear: 'We shall even have the decency—a decency learned from you—to make communication impossible.'[101]

The white woman in the catafalque is reputedly a beggar found under a bridge and killed in a rite of exorcism. When the Royal Court, which has been sitting in judgment, descends to punish the Blacks, the whites are massacred. But of course they are not really white; they lift their masks and assume their real identities as Blacks. The catafalque is revealed to be empty. In fact everything we have seen has been a diversionary tactic to distract us from the reality happening off-stage: a Black who has been found guilty of betraying his people has been executed. This real punishment of a Black traitor, like the imaginary sacrifice of a white

woman, enables the young lovers of the play, Village and Virtue, to express their love for one another in a new and pure form without any reference to white culture and white conventions.

The language of the play is dense with contradiction, elegant and hostile, starting with the title—the French *Les Nègres* might better be translated as *Niggers.* The characters' repeated use of the word, as Jeannette L. Savona has pointed out, recalls Aimé Césaire's coining of the word *'Négritude'.* He and Léopold Senghor had started a new Black literary movement in French in the 1930s and called it *Négritude* as a defiant, violent affirmation of a previously shameful word. When Frechtman translated the play into English (it premiered in New York in 1961), he knew he would create a riot if he used the title *Niggers.* Accordingly, he chose *The Blacks,* at a time when African Americans still called themselves 'Negroes' and considered 'Blacks' to be faintly pejorative. Only later did the Black Power movement affirm this previously negative term, much as Césaire had affirmed *'nègre'.* Frechtman, in a letter to Charles Monteith, an editor at Faber and Faber in England, wrote that *The Negroes* as a title was 'too polite and flabby' and loftily liberal-sounding, whereas *The Blacks,* the title he preferred, had 'bite'. He recalled the appalled reaction of Tennessee Williams to the possibility that the play might be called *The Niggers,* which, he said, would be 'suicidal'.[102]

The dialogue is equally loaded. After Archibald tells us that the actors on-stage 'are involved in your life' as a cook, nurse, serving maid, medical student and curate, he adds, 'Tonight, our sole concern will be to entertain you. So we have killed a white woman. There she lies.'[103] Each sentence ignites a new firecracker, which explodes closer and closer to the spectator. Genet comes closer to a true poetic diction in this play than in any of his poems. The characters burst into verse—sometimes bawdy, lurid Brechtian doggerel, sometimes a Homeric grandeur ('Princes of the Upper Empire, Princes of the bare feet and wooden stirrups, on your caparisoned horses, enter!'[104]). The deep ambition to replace all values by making black beautiful and white livid or insipid inspires some of his finest passages: 'Black was the colour of priests and undertakers and orphans. But everything is changing. Whatever is gentle and kind and good and tender will be black. Milk will be black, sugar, rice, the sky, doves, hope will be black. So will be the opera to which we shall go, Blacks that we are, in black Rolls-Royces to hail Black kings, to hear brass bands beneath chandeliers of black crystal.'[105]

Ritual ('I'm glad you performed the rite, as you do every evening'); meta-theatre ('Greek theatre, my dear, decorum. The ultimate gesture is performed off-stage'); obscenity ('My mother shat me standing up'); sat-

ire of European culture ('Virgin of the Parthenon, stained glass of Chartres, Lord Byron, Chopin, French cooking, the Unknown Soldier, Tyrolean songs, Aristotelian principles, heroic couplets, poppies, sunflowers, a touch of coquetry, vicarage gardens . . .'); tight-jawed Black wisdom ('Invent, not love, but hatred, and thereby make poetry, since that's the only domain in which we're allowed to operate')—all of these tesserae compose this play in which the elements are set at slightly different angles, as they were in Byzantine mosaics, in order best to catch the light.[106] The Black actors repeatedly interrupt one another, hiss out elaborate instructions, refer to earlier re-enactments of the same bloody rituals, suggest a still starker reality that underlies this frightening exterior, and all these proofs of self-discipline, hate, deception and complicity only augment the powerful sense of menace generated by the spectacle, which Genet subtitled 'A Clown Show', possibly because the actors do vaudeville 'turns', become still blacker by 'blacking up' with shoe polish, and re-enact their murders with grotesque masked doll-like stand-ins, but mainly because the Black characters play with the white audiences.

One of the strangest aspects of the play is lost on most contemporary audiences. Genet pretends in the text that all African countries have already won their independence and now must free themselves of nothing but cultural colonization (which the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci has seen as one of the most demanding revolutionary tasks, and which in France Roland Barthes had ingeniously explained in his book *Mythologies*). In fact, the day of African liberation was still a few years off when Genet composed the play.

Having the play performed by Black actors was of capital importance to Genet. Bernard Frechtman, who was also selling rights worldwide, had convinced Genet to let his play be put on by white actors in Poland. Genet then fired off a telegram saying no.[107] Frechtman wrote back, asking for Genet's reasons for refusing. One of the translators, he pointed out, was a famous poet.[108] But then Genet exploded:

> Without thinking and because you advised me to do so . . . I gave my agreement for *The Blacks* in Poland. But it is no. My reasons I've already told you. Never counsel me again to take the easy path. I'm sick of it. I did not write *The Blacks* in order to be known by Poles.
>
> Send me the address of the theatre director in Warsaw. I'm going to write him, give him my reasons, he will understand.[109]

As Genet wrote to the co-translator, the poet Jerzy Lisowski:

> Dear Sir,
> Mr Bernard Frechtman has written to inform me that a Warsaw theatre is planning to produce *The Blacks*. I am opposed to such a production for the following reasons: you can well understand that if, a few days before their execution, men under sentence of death—*real* ones—could, in the presence of their judges and executioners, perform, in the prison yard, a play dealing with the perfidious relations between themselves and their judges and executioners, the dramatic emotion arising out of such a performance would have nothing in common with what usually happens in the theatre. Now, it happens that Blacks—real ones—are under a weighty sentence delivered by that weighty tribunal, Whites—also real ones. These Blacks are thus in the situation indicated by the image I used above: real condemned men in the presence of judges and executioners.
>
> Any Negro performer can act in my play, anywhere, without my permission: to that extent it no longer belongs to me. But you must certainly realize that the drama would cease to exist in the hall if white actors, made up as Blacks, appeared on the stage instead of real Blacks speaking out their real miseries. Mr Frechtman has told me that you have gone to great pains to translate this play and I can well believe it. I therefore take this opportunity to express my deep, deep gratitude to you. I also ask that you not feel resentment at my not authorizing this production. You realize that it is not a matter of caprice. If I were granted permission, I would probably go to Poland, and I would then have an opportunity to thank you more warmly and to explain my attitude more fully. Once again, forgive me, and accept my most cordial greetings.
>
> Jean Genet.
>
> P.S. *The Blacks* was played in Rotterdam by Dutch actors without my having been informed in advance. That was wrong of them. Particularly since there are enough Negroes in Holland, or in Indonesia, who know Dutch. Except for miners, there are no Negroes in Poland. But this is not a play about miners.[110]

Genet always remained faithful to Blin and to his vision of *The Blacks* (as he remarked to Annette Michelson, 'So much the better if you like the play. Don't forget you owe a lot of your pleasure to Blin. Think what a Brook would have done, for example. God preserve us from him!'[111]). Blin himself felt that for the first time his work as a director was 'visible'—a foregrounding of his own talent that he found amusing.[112] Genet wanted Blin to add a description of his staging at the end of the second edition of the play, but Blin did not do so.

Blin directed *The Blacks* in London soon after the Paris premiere. It was put on at the Royal Court and later toured throughout Britain, although the English critics complained they had trouble understanding most of the actors, who came from Liberia, Nigeria and the West Indies. Genet himself loved the English production (the first he had seen) and wrote: 'The staging that you have perfected, I tell you, has given to my play an extraordinary force which from time to time frightens me a bit.'[113]

In the United States the play was a roaring success and ran Off Broadway for an unprecedented four years. Directed by Gene Frankel at the St Mark's Playhouse in New York, it opened on 4 May 1961 with a cast that included names that would soon become some of the most distinguished in the American theatre—the elegant, feline and frightening Roscoe Lee Browne as the Master of Ceremonies, the virile and deep-voiced James Earl Jones as Village, the high-cheekboned virtuoso Cicely Tyson as Virtue, the pudgy, humorous Godfrey Cambridge as Diouf (the man who dresses up as a white woman) and Maya Angelou (later one of the most eloquent Black writers of her generation) as the Queen. In the same month the play opened, incidentally, the *Evergreen Review* published the trial scene from *Our Lady of the Flowers* in an issue that also featured the Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Bernard Frechtman attended the New York rehearsals of *The Blacks* for Genet. Frechtman wrote in the *Showbill* that Genet was creating a theatre of ceremony since Genet believed that 'man is a theatrical animal, and his theatricality explains his greatness and his folly. . . . At the end, when the elaborate structure seems to be completed, we discover that there has been no plot at all, that the magician had been diverting us with ceremony itself.'[114] Frechtman was impressed by the professional level of the cast, which he felt was superior to the one in France, where, he said, members included a law-journal editor, an anthropologist, several jazz musicians and a dancer. The New York cast, by contrast, was entirely professional; Louis Gossett, for instance, had just played in *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. The reviews were nearly all positive, even raves ('The Off-Broadway production of *The Blacks* is one of the memorable events of the theatre season,' said Richard Watts in the New York *Post*), but most also stressed the difficulty of understanding the enigmatic play. Bernard Frechtman addressed himself to the problem in an article in the New York *Herald Tribune*. 'A profoundly original work of art is always an assault. In attempting to change our sensibility, to alter our vision, it does violence to our habits.' According to Frechtman the Paris cast had been puzzled by Genet's merciless castigation of whites and had referred to him as a 'white Negro'. Frechtman points out that whereas

the characters in *The Maids* and *The Balcony* perform a ritual, in *The Blacks* the entire evening is a ceremony.[115] After a slow start, the play won several awards, caught on and became a New York fixture. Often the audiences were more Black than white. As director Gene Frankel commented: 'Occasionally when there are too many Negroes in the audience, the performance changes tone. There's more laughing and less stunned silence.' The actor Godfrey Cambridge said, 'I think that they [the playgoers] are mesmerized by the surface excitements, and don't recognize the pungent hostility that the play gives off.'[116]

James Baldwin, the Black American novelist, was fascinated by *The Blacks*. He had lived for years in Paris, where he had often dined alone with Genet; they both frequented La Reine Blanche, a gay bar in Saint-Germain. Now in New York, Baldwin attended many rehearsals. Maya Angelou recalls: 'Although Jimmy was known as an accomplished playwright, few people knew that he was a frustrated actor as well. I had a role in Jean Genet's play, *The Blacks*, and since Jimmy knew Genet personally and the play in the original French, nothing could keep him from advising me on my performance.' Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry also exchanged verbal fisticuffs with Norman Mailer over *The Blacks*. Mailer, in a long essay, expressed views that Baldwin and Hansberry found racist. Mailer challenged Hansberry and Baldwin to a debate in Carnegie Hall. He also suggested that *The Blacks* should be toured in the Deep South with a white and Black cast. Baldwin complained that Mailer saw Blacks as 'goddamn romantic black symbols'.[117]

When *The Blacks* opened in New York, the United States was living through the optimistic mood of the civil rights movement of racial integration. Segregation was slowly ending in the South. The *Brown* v. *Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision of 1954 had theoretically ended school segregation. Martin Luther King, Jr, had integrated buses in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, and soon the movement extended to restaurants and public transportation in general. In 1957 President Eisenhower sent Federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce school integration. Congress passed a civil rights bill that was made law in 1960. This degree of integration had been achieved through non-violence on the part of Black and white protesters, often in the face of terrifying retribution. These victories, important as they were, represented only a first step; true legal, economic and political equality between the races was decades away from being achieved. In 1964, for instance, only one school in Mississippi was truly integrated. Similarly, in Mississippi in the same year, only 6.1 per cent of the Blacks eligible to vote had managed to overcome the obstacles necessary to register. In that same year, however,

Congress and the states passed the Twenty-fourth Amendment to the Constitution, an amendment that abolished the nefarious poll tax, a sum people had to pay before voting. In 1965, President Johnson pushed through the Voting Rights Act, which authorized the Attorney General to send Federal authorities to the polls to protect Blacks trying to register. Johnson also established Affirmative Action in 1965, a programme that called for racial integration in firms doing business with the government. Soon these hopeful signs dimmed during the general national agony over the continuing Vietnam War.

Genet's play, as an expression of Black pride and Black anger, fell on to this temporary truce of 1961 like a hailstorm—stinging, frightening. Blacks, who for the first time had begun to come to mainstream 'white' theatres just a year or two earlier, now made up an important segment of the nightly audiences. Their laughter, their participation, their pleasure during scenes expressing Black anger, contempt and desire for revenge startled the white members of the audience. Outside New York, the play fared less well. In 1963 a Chicago paper, when a travelling company came there, declared that Genet 'holds out no hope for man, finds him a gutter beast filled with lust, greed, mercilessness, and most of all hate.' As time went by, however, the play came to seem more and more relevant. The vast gathering in Washington on 28 August 1963 calling for Black rights showed the immediacy of Black demands; that was the moment of Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream' speech. Early in September of 1963 James Earl Jones substituted for Genet's line 'One hundred thousand youngsters who died in the dust' the new words 'Four little girls who died in a Birmingham church', a reference to a recent outbreak of violence and the bombing of a Black church.[118]

Altogether, the play set an Off-Broadway record of 1,408 performances during its run between 4 May 1961 and 27 September 1964.[119] It grossed about half a million dollars; Genet probably received only about 20,000 dollars from the New York production (his royalty was 5 per cent, minus agents' and translator's fees). Its principal American producer, Sidney Bernstein, went on to present in 1964 *Blood Knot* by Athol Fugard, a drama about racial tensions in South Africa, just as Roger Blin would later direct Fugard in France, using some of the same actors who had appeared in the French production of *The Blacks*.

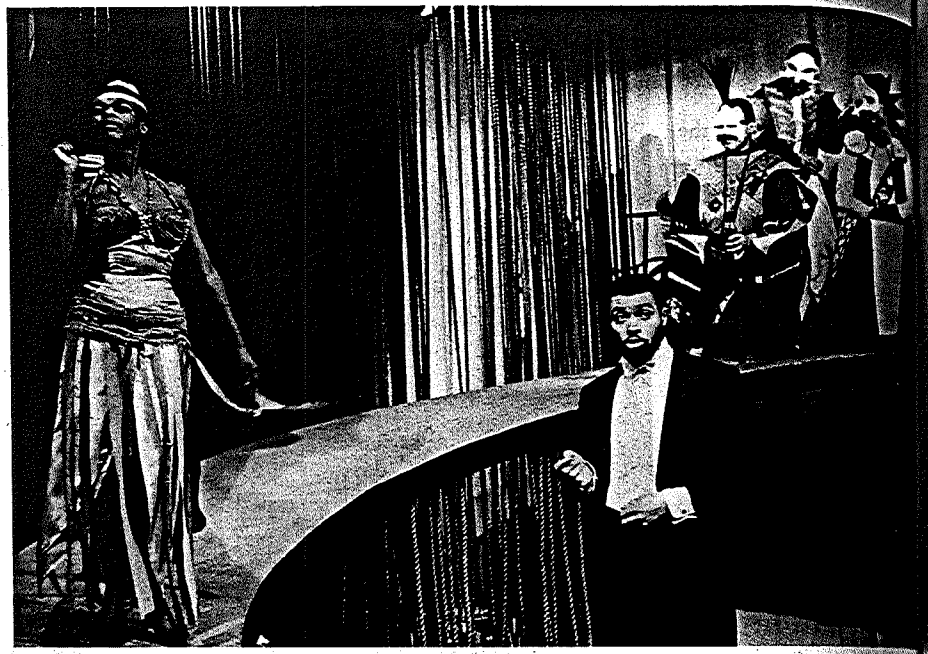
When riots broke out in 1965 in Watts, the Black ghetto outside Los Angeles, 34 people died in 5 days of violence, 35,000 Blacks looted stores and 977 buildings were destroyed. A Black theatre company was founded in the ruins of Watts and one of its first responses to the crisis was a successful production of *The Blacks*. When the play was revived in Washington, D.C., in 1973 at the Kennedy Center by a Black troupe, a reviewer

remarked on 'the prophetic sense of history the play shows regarding Black nationalism and Black militant theatre.'[120] (Genet, incidentally, tried to stop this production, which had not been authorized by his literary agent despite his promise that any Black actor anywhere could put on the play without permission.)

Not all Blacks by the 1970s, however, were still willing to listen to Genet, although by that time he was an active supporter of the militant Black Panthers. Ed Bullins, the Black playwright, for instance, wrote in the magazine *Black Theater* in 1971:

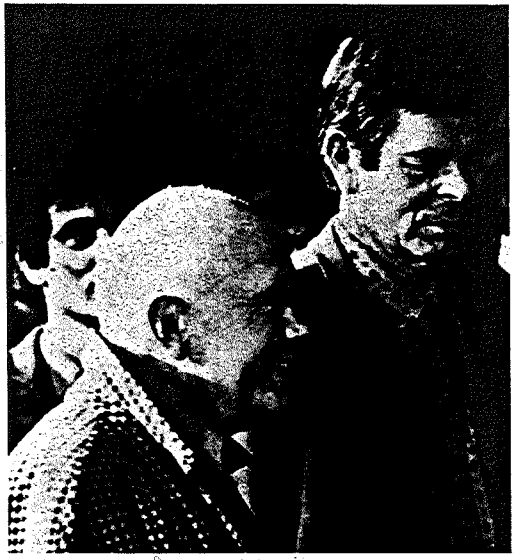
> The editors of *Black Theater* magazine do not think that *any* Black people should see 'The Blacks'. Jean Genet is a white, self-confessed homosexual with dead white Western ideas—faggoty ideas about Black Art, Revolution, and people. His empty masochistic activities and platitudes on behalf of the Black Panthers should not con Black people. Genet, in his writings, had admitted to seeing himself as a so-called 'nigger'. Black people cannot allow white perversion to enter their communities, even if it rides in on the black [*sic*] of a Panther. Beware of whites who plead the Black cause to their brothers and fathers who oppress us; beware of Athol Fugard of South Africa and Jean Genet, a French pervert; disguised white missionaries representing Western cultural imperialism. Black people, in this stage of the struggle, have no use for self-elected 'niggers'.[121]

Black playwright Charles Gordone, author of *No Place to Be Somebody*, was more temperate when he addressed the question in 1970. He considered Hansberry's 1959 *A Raisin in the Sun* (about a Black family in Chicago) to be the initiating work in modern Black theatre, but he generously admitted that *The Blacks* 'dealt with very real problems having to do with Black and white and it introduced a force of talented, competent Black actors who went on to influence change in all the entertainment media.'



Cecily Tyson and James Earl Jones in the first New York production of *The Blacks,* May 1961, directed by Gene Frankel at the St Mark's Playhouse. *(Photo Martha Swope)*

Genet at the Odéon, 4 May 1966, during *The Screens.*
(Photo Patrick Ghnassia/Collection John Edwards)



Jean Genet and Roger Blin in Essen, Germany, for *The Screens.* *(IMEC)*

Genet covers the 1968 Democratic Convention for *Esquire* magazine. Caricature by David Levine. *(Copyright © 1968 by David Levine)*