Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications | Philosophy, Department of

5-27-1971

The Maids, Nick---theatre of the absurd [Reviews of Jean Genet's "The Maids" and Arthur Kopit's "The Questioning of Nick" at the Studio Theater, Milwaukee]

Curtis Carter
Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

Carter, Curtis. 1971. The Maids, Nick---theatre of the absurd. *Bugle American*, May 27-June 2, Plays Section, Vol. 2, No. 20 (No. 33).

The Maids, Nick---theatre of the absurd

By Curtis L. Carter

"Theater of the absurd" has shown us thoughtfulness, introspection, and questioning give rise to a state of being in which a man is no longer able to take his habitual, mechanical, routine life for granted.

By asking the question, "Why?," one comes to experience a "divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints," as Camus put it.

Two one act plays, Jean Genet's **The Maids** and Arthur Kopit's **The Questioning of Nick**, performed at the UWM Studio Theater, exemplify a sense of absurdity which gives rise to questioning for both characters in the play and for the audience.

The absurdity theme is pursued in **The Maids** by a sort of reversal of values in which good is attacked and evil is positively pursued. This is achieved through a type of ritualistic "Black Mass" which is played every evening by Solange and Claire, two maids.

Solange becomes Claire, and Claire plays at being Madame, their mistress, in a play within the play. The ritual consists of steps toward the murder of the hated Madame--only there is never time to finish her off. The ritual is always interrupted before the act is completed. A mixture of hate, subservience, and aggression, together with conventions binding maid and mistress, fill out the inner drama.

Solange and Claire, two sisters, both love and loathe Madame, themselves, and each other. There exists an underplayed homosexual relationship involving all three. Actually, Genet intended this relationship to be accented by prescribing that the women's roles be played by adolescent boys. This was not done in the original Paris performance, or in the Studio Theater performance. The maids and Madame are fake women portraying a negative ideal of femininity which Genet must have hoped would contradict the expectations of most theater goers.

Not only do the characters avoid any commitments to "reality," but so does the development of the play itself. By the constant shifting from "events in the lives of the maids" to the drama within the play, the viewer is forewarned not to attempt to enter into the reality of the play itself. It has none.

At the end of the play, the maids' "play-acting is pushed to its extreme. Through a complex of events, Solange, acting as Claire, tries to complete the ritual by killing her sister who is playing Madame. But in the end this fails, and the only definite "act" is Claire's suicide. Possibly, Genet is telling us that suicidé is the only significant act that a person is capable of executing.

Bonnie Cavanaugh delivered a noteworth performance as Claire. Her smooth and convincing transition from the roles of "Claire" to "Madame" were skillfully achieved.

Chris Cedarburg as Solange was adequate. She did not show much variety in her multiple character roles, and Gerda Furumo was a suitable Madame.

The performance of "The Maids" began well, but lagged to the point of boredom as the maids became themselves, then picked up considerably in the last half. I could not tell for certain whether the boredom was a result of the Maids' drab lives or a result of deficient acting and direction. (Wayne Baar directed "The Maids.")

* * * * *

Kopit's **The Questioning of Nick**, the other play on the program, is set in a circus ring. The characters, Sergeant Prunchink (clown), Lieutenant Carling (ring master), and Nick Carmonatti (performer) meet in the ring where the questioning is to take place. Underlying the facade of the circus masks we are apparently witnessing the police interrogation of Nick concerning the "throwing" of some sort of game.

But there is much more at stake. Again, we are asked to relate to an Albee-Pinter-like use of "absurd technique" which leads to questioning and exploration of a set of routine experiences. The "absurdity" is enhanced, perhaps too mechanically, by the circus setting.

Acting in "Nick" generated some of the dramatic intensity which the play calls for, but excessive volume and a lack of variety in delivery were a detriment to the performance.

John Groth as Sgt. Prunchink, Hal Erickson as Lt. Carling, and Jim Gage as Nick Carmonatti, were directed by Michael Durkin. In physical appearance all three actors were well suited for the parts. Durkin gave the play a light, entertaining reading, but only occasionally did the underlying strength of the play emerge in the interplay of the characters.

The set itself, though well done, conveyed so much of circus realism that it detracted somewhat from the impact of the play. Accordingly, the production failed to generate the dramatic depth of interpretation that the play might otherwise have yielded.

The plays will be repeated May 27-30 at the Studio Theater.