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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]

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By Curtis L. Carter

"Theater of the absurd" has shown us thoughtfulness, introspection, and questioning give the 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 "diversity 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 everywhere by Solange and Claire, two maids.

Solange becomes Claire, and Claire plays as 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 understated homosexual relationship involving all three. Actually, Genet intended this relationship to be accentuated 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 commitment 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 definitive "act" is Claire's suicide. Possibly, Genet is telling us that suicide is the only significant act that a person is capable of executing.

Bonnie Cavannaugh delivered a noteworthy 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 Gordon Furum was a suitable Madame.

The performance of "The Maids" begins well, but lags to the point of boredom as the maids became themselves, then picked up consis-