

Critical Acts

Fantasy on the Clock

The Virtual Cruelty of Collected Works' The Balcony

Rebecca Chaleff

The first time I saw Collected Works' production of Jean Genet's *The Balcony* (1956) was the first time I set foot in San Francisco's iconic Old Mint. It was 14 February 2015; wandering the halls, I saw traces of history in cubes of glass, maps of memories I did not know, and pictures of a city so demolished by the 1906 earthquake that I could not recognize it. In the basement, I discovered deeper remnants of that history in the marks that millions of pieces of gold had imprinted against the stone walls. There, where the stone gave way to the gradual and persistent pressures of coins, I began to imagine how Collected Works' immersive production of *The Balcony* might begin.

Today, the Old Mint stands as a massive, stone emblem of history in San Francisco's Civic Center district. Although the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society originally planned to convert the landmark into a museum, their plan was terminated before full restorations were complete. Now, the building is used for special events, only some of which are open to the public. Although not all rooms are accessible, some still exhibit remnants of the original damage. Collected Works' production uses

both the raw and restored spaces to stage the polarities of wealth, power, poverty, and despair enacted by the characters of *The Balcony*. Before the production begins, the audience is allowed to roam the smaller rooms of the basement. As we wander, we are surrounded by stone and concrete, ensconced in the secretive chambers of Madame Irma's brothel.

Amidst this history, glimpses of the set are visible to the audience: white fabric hanging from the ceiling of one room; cords of yarn

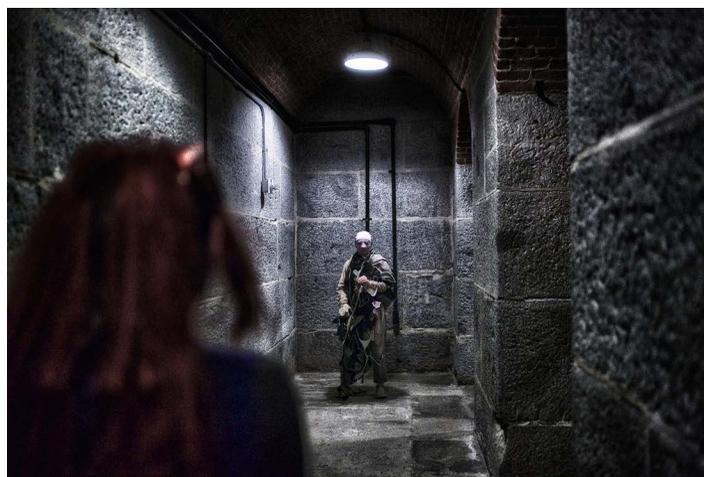


Figure 1. Penny and the Beggar perform a ritualistic encounter in the Old Mint's basement halls. Nathalie Brilliant and Florentina Mocanu in *The Balcony*, directed by Jamie Lyons and Michael Hunter. The Old Mint, San Francisco, 4 February 2015. (Photo © 2015 Jamie Lyons)

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strung from the wall to the floor in another; a wooden cross, candles, ladders, and other mysteries for the audience to explore. Surrounded by these objects, my attention turned from the history of the Old Mint towards a temporally amorphous space rich with the memories and everyday practices of characters I had yet to meet. In this setting, past, present, and future were poised to unfold simultaneously. The set and design of this production reference multiple centuries at once and no location in particular; temporalities coningle to complicate the relationship between truth and illusion, the real and the virtual. In the dialogue are indications of Revolutionary France; in the costumes, influences from 19th-century to contemporary styles; in the set, objects you could find either in your living room or in a museum. The basement became a curiosity cabinet full of memories yet to unfold.

This creative staging of *The Balcony* is typical of a performance by Collected Works, a young company based in San Francisco with a knack for site-specific works staged in unusual locations. *The Balcony* takes place on two and a

Genet’s depiction of the relationship between power and illusion by emphasizing the entanglement of capital. The Old Mint’s stature within Bay Area history implicitly underscores this aspect of the production. Immersed within this complex spatiotemporal field, the audience’s imagination becomes irretrievably intertwined with their perceptions of the multiple histories present—histories that bind past and future within the momentary experience of performance.

Attention to capital is further pronounced through the diegetic elements of the set, designed by Angrette McCloskey. In a smaller room at the end of a long hall, with brick walls and a tile floor, a giant, magnified dollar bill is framed above a fireplace. Aside from a green velvet couch, it is the only adornment. There, currency literally hangs over the characters’ conversations. In other scenes, they count heaps of cash while they carry out their dialogue. All the while, they slip in and out of fantasies in which they mobilize financial power to disrupt their dependency on corrupt political networks.

Confined by the walls of the Old Mint, the characters remain captured within a powerful economy, which, given the temporal flexibility of the staging, also comments on neoliberal capitalism as the West (and, more specifically in this context, the Bay Area) experiences it today. If, as David Harvey explains, neoliberalism is the “financialization of everything” (2007:33), then this setting underscores the financialization at work within the play, opening its political commentary to critiques of neoliberal as well as liberal capitalism. This staging references the history of Western capitalism through its temporal valences. The revolutionary characters of the play seem at times to have stepped out of a Victor Hugo novel; the urgent plans, rallying cries, and spirited songs they share in their decrepit headquarters call up the history of resistance to the burgeoning bourgeoisie capitalism of 19th-century Europe.



Figure 2. In a basement room, the Bishop ceremoniously dons his robes while Rosine looks on impatiently. Todd Pivetti and Jeff Schwartz in *The Balcony*, directed by Jamie Lyons and Michael Hunter. *The Old Mint*, San Francisco, 4 February 2015. (Photo © 2015 Jamie Lyons)

half floors (including an additional staircase and a balcony) of the Old Mint, and even stretches into its courtyard. But the building provides more than a flexible space; it also complicates

cries, and spirited songs they share in their decrepit headquarters call up the history of resistance to the burgeoning bourgeoisie capitalism of 19th-century Europe.

The Old Mint itself pivots the play at the crux of a historical moment when the building transformed into a signifier of the strength and resilience of capital amidst a natural disaster that reduced San Francisco to rubble and embers. The costuming, props, and set pieces that reference a more contemporary timeframe echo the Bay Area's recent source of vast economic growth via an emphasis on technology that connects the play to the audience's contemporary milieu. Time crosses over itself to cross-reference the history of liberal capitalism and the revolutions it extinguished in its wake.

Genet originally wrote *The Balcony* in 1955 in France. Although it is not his most popular play, it has circulated widely on global stages. It has been produced on the European continent and off Broadway in the US, perhaps most famously by Peter Brook in Paris (1960). With a plot so complex it ultimately becomes secondary, *The Balcony* attends best to the significations of its characters. In the midst of the political turmoil the rebels have stirred while rallying to the defense of the oppressed. Irma, the Madame of an upscale brothel, covets the power of the Queen while the Chief of Police rushes to her aid with plans to suppress the revolution and solidify his control over the city. The Court Envoy protects the Queen's power by manipulating Irma into believing she might inherit that power. The Bishop, the Judge, and the General alternately assert their religious, legal, and military power while cowering beneath the weight of their inherent austerity.

The first production of *The Balcony*, directed by Peter Zadek, premiered in 1957 at the Arts Theatre Club in London. Disappointed in the production, Genet tried to physically obstruct the continuation of the play's performance but was prevented from doing so by the police. This story echoes with irony in relation to the play itself which, like many of Genet's plays, comments on police brutality and structures of power. Genet's lifelong contention with the politics of power is expressly apparent in *The Balcony*. As Rustom Bharucha explains, Genet's ethics align with the oppressed only so long as they are oppressed. These ethics are explicit in Genet's provisional support of Palestine: "The day the Palestinians become an institution, I will no longer be on

their side. The day the Palestinians become a nation like other nations, I won't be there anymore" (in Bharucha 2014:41). For Bharucha, Genet's allegiance to revolutionary struggle sets his plays within "revolutionary time," which is "neither yoked to the Past that needs to be reclaimed, nor suspended in the endless deferral of the Future, in which much contemporary politics find refuge" (41–42). The open and flexible timeframe of *The Balcony* therefore underscores Genet's critique of power through the multiplicity of its temporal valences. Present actions, past memories, and virtual becomings are all oppressed by structures of political and economic power.

Codirectors Michael Hunter and Jamie Lyons take a creative launch from the play's ambiguous timeframe and catapult the events into a temporal space that effectively lacks specificity. Although the play's dialogue reflects the social politics of another century, the production's design situates the contemporary and the historic side by side, refusing temporal consistency: Madame Irma uses an iPad-like tablet to keep track of her house; photographers take snapshots of the General, the Bishop, and the Judge on their cell phones. Latifa Medjdoub's costumes reference no stylistic era in particular, but clothe the characters in rich, anachronistic details. Each character has the vague look of a different time, but the cast, overall, appears tied to no time at all; while the Court Envoy wears a regal red dress and Irma a tight corset, the Chief of Police sports a trench coat and Roger wears jeans. In a similar manner, the Old Mint also plays an important role in the play's temporal ambiguity. Although much of its interior has been restored, certain rooms remain untouched, accented by a decay that marks the rupture of the building's history.

The play officially begins in the basement with the appearance of Carmen. Playing the role of hostess and whore, she is the only character who addresses the audience directly; gathering the audience around her, she explains, for the purposes of this performance, how we will navigate the play. She tells us that in entering the chambers of Madame Irma's brothel we have entered a realm of fantasy, desire, and luxury. "Masturbation," she says coyly, "while



Figure 3. *The Chief of Police describes his phallic monument to Madame Irma, the Court Envoy, and the Judge. From left: Scott Baker, Val Sinckler, Florentina Mocanu, and Lauren Dunagan in The Balcony, directed by Jamie Lyons and Michael Hunter. The Old Mint, San Francisco, 4 February 2015. (Photo © 2015 Jamie Lyons)*

encouraged, is strictly prohibited.”¹ Ryan Tacata plays Carmen in a provocative drag performance punctuated by skyscraper heels and a sharply edged blazer. She is all business and all pleasure at once.

As per Carmen’s instructions, the audience divides and disperses into four rooms where four scenes occur on simultaneous repeat. This device separates the audience into more intimate groups; as the groups part company, it becomes clear that the action in each chamber loops continually during this portion of the performance. Each audience member is free to move among the four scenes, crafting their own narrative sequence. After the first scene, I found myself entering the others somewhere in the middle, staying while one group filtered out and another filtered in, and exiting halfway through. The start and end points appeared deliberately ambiguous. Watching the scenes end and begin again made me keenly aware of their repetitive continuity. I may have been convinced that time circled within this perpetual loop, had it not been for Madame Irma visiting the doorway every so often to ask if the characters had finished, or to say that time was up. A rich paradox emerged: this was fantasy on the clock, paid

for by the minute. Madame Irma’s success was thus bound to the timelessness of capital exploiting the timelessness of fantasy.

But in the world of *The Balcony*, fantasy is both morally and financially corrupt. In one chamber, the Judge (referred to with a male pronoun in Genet’s script but cast here with a female actor in the role) plays out a court scene in which a thief is exposed, condemned, and prompted to cry and beg for mercy. In another, the General designs a fantasy of loyalty with a young woman costumed as a bright pink horse. In another, the Bishop dons his holy robes to preach of his importance and impermeability. “Ornaments, mitres, laces!” he proclaims. “You, above all, oh gilded cope, you protect me from the world.”

The structural pillars of systems of moral judgment, military violence, and religious belief all circle within this underworld of imagination. Protected from the outside, they selfishly reimagine the world as they believe it would best serve them. With an (in)appropriate dose of camp, Genet gathers these lascivious characters here to show that their power is sustained by fantasy sustained by capital. Time loops within Madame Irma’s chambers not only because each scene is played out four times, but because every moment of the present blurs into the virtual fantasies of the Bishop, Judge, and General. These three characters carry the meta-theatrical weight of the play as iconic yet corrupt figures of belief, justice, and war. Each is exposed to be just as susceptible to illusion as those of us in the audience who have become enrapt in the illusions of the play.

Numerous philosophers and theorists have analyzed the virtual in terms of space, time, affect, and politics. In *Matter and Memory* (1896), Henri Bergson writes that past, present, and virtual are all experienced in the moment of perception. In this moment, memory, consciousness, and virtual action bleed together

1. The accuracy of this quote, which is not in either Genet’s or the Collected Works’ script for the performance, has been confirmed by Ryan Tacata.

to “create something new every moment” (1988:223). More recently, Brian Massumi has described the virtual as the realm of potential (2002); and Patricia Clough has tied Bergson to Massumi by arguing that the virtual’s potential is dependent on its specific temporality, which folds past, present, and future into its temporally open affective resonance (2008). Theorizing the threshold of the virtual, Clough presents this virtual affective space as “a chance for something else, unexpected, new” (2008:19).

The characters of *The Balcony* luxuriate in the potentiality of the virtual to a dangerous degree. Each character becomes so enrapt with their imagining of a future that they cannot separate from their actions in the present moment. More than a spatiotemporal field of possibility and becoming, then, the virtual is immobilizing. Carmen fantasizes about the garden in which she will meet her daughter, and throughout the play drifts in and out of this virtual comfort. Madame Irma scoffs at Carmen’s musings, but in so doing reveals her own fantasies of power and pragmatism. Roger, the young, impassioned rebel, dreams of toppling the powers that be with an ambition that is only thinly veiled by romance. But if the virtual is a space of becoming, then these characters are only becoming more thoroughly entrenched in their present moment of social and political reproduction and corruption. Roger refuses to abandon romance for rebellion. The Chief of Police pursues his own ambitions despite his office, puffing on cigars while describing his beloved dream of a phallic mausoleum. Irma sacrifices those she claims to have loved along her immoral pathway to power that is always virtual and never actual.

Capital looms throughout this staging of the play, aligning Genet’s cynicism with Clough’s claim that the virtual is “met by the reach of political economic capture” (2008:3). For Genet, this capture is located in the relationship between the virtual and the desire for power. Power corrupts the virtual while, inversely, the virtual corrupts systems of power.

Indeed, power is revealed in the hands of those who effectively manipulate the virtual. In the chambers of Madame Irma’s house the Judge, the Bishop, and the General feed their sanctioned power with fantasies that simultaneously revamp and reveal their manipulations of that power. Although Irma prides herself as being an adept exploiter of fantasy, in the end it is the Court Envoy who holds the virtual reins of power.

The Envoy reveals this distinctive power in her very first appearance, in conversation with the Chief of Police and Irma over the body of Irma’s lover, Arthur, while Carmen dream-



Figure 4. *The Rebels*, masked in Latifah Medjdoub’s renderings of Jean Genet’s face, serenade the audience as they enter their camp. From left: Will Trichon, Nathaniel Berman, Derek Phillips, and Jamie Freebury in *The Balcony*, directed by Jamie Lyons and Michael Hunter. *The Old Mint*, San Francisco, 4 February 2015. (Photo © 2015 Jamie Lyons)

ily rearranges the flowers strewn alongside Arthur’s body. Dressed in an extravagant red felt dress and hat, the Envoy is the power tie to the political body. When pressed to reveal the location of the Queen, the Envoy playfully muses at her whereabouts. “She is embroidering,” she tells Irma, for it is the Envoy’s duty to describe the Queen as well as to conceal her: “She is embroidering and she is not embroidering. She picks her nose, examines the pickings and lies down again. Then, she dries the dishes.” The Envoy flaunts her power by deliberately toying with the imaginations of Irma and the Chief of Police. Her playfulness reveals the ease with which she manipulates the

possibilities of the virtual. Irma and the Chief of Police, who know they cannot believe what she is saying, thrash in her virtual web. “By God! What have you done with Her Majesty?” the Chief of Police exclaims. “I want a straight answer. I am not amused...” But the Envoy’s answer does not attend to his urgency. “She is in a chest. She is sleeping. Wrapped in the folds of Royalty, she is snoring...she is snoring and she is not snoring.” The game goes on, weaving truth and lies through the eyelet of fantasy as the Court Envoy playfully weaves her way through the audience. With smiles and winks, she makes us feel as though we are conspirators while asserting her power over everybody in the room, regardless of whether they are

realm where they wield their powers as they wish; but with the exception of the Envoy, who paints pictures for others and not for herself, the virtual ultimately entrenches these characters in their original positions and functions. The imagination becomes a space of unrealizable fantasies and futures that render the subject idle and complicit. Divorced from action, the virtual loses the power of its potentiality, its chance to create something new. Instead, it capitulates to economic capture.

Genet’s play is a critique not only of the desire for power, but of the futility and futurity of this desire. This circular relationship between the present and the virtual resembles Lauren Berlant’s model of cruel optimism, which she describes as “a relation of attachment” founded on a central connection to “compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too possible*, and toxic” (2011:24). The cruelty of this system of optimism is that the very desire for “the good life” prevents the subject from achieving the object of desire. The virtual has a systemic function: it controls the movement of power and capital.

Without abandoning the looseness of Genet’s original temporal bounds, the Collected Works’ production of *The Balcony* brings the politics of the play into our current moment, where desire entwines power and capital within a virtual without potential. Either impossible or toxic, the desires that comprise the virtuality of the play immobilize its characters. In the end, the burgeoning icon of the revolution is dead, but all else remains the same. Carmen is still running around in the midst of fantasy; Irma is merely the Madame of her house; the Court Envoy has orchestrated all of the possibilities of the play to lead to nothing new. At the close of the play’s cycle, we are left with a conclusion that scarcely realizes the ending its characters desired. Time, power, and capital have surged forward towards virtual possibility only to come right back again, leaving all possibility unrealized.



Figure 5. In the final scene of the play, the Judge, the Bishop, and the General stand before Madame Irma, flanked by magnified depictions of currency. From left: Lauren Dunagan, Jeff Schwartz, and Jack Halton in *The Balcony*, directed by Jamie Lyons and Michael Hunter. *The Old Mint*, San Francisco, 4 February 2015. (Photo © 2015 Jamie Lyons)

standing near the doorway or sitting at her feet. As long as the Envoy controls the virtual space-time of imagining, we, like Irma and the Chief of Police, feel powerless within our present moment, clustered as we are around their feet while our minds stretch towards their fantasies.

Genet’s original script shows how the characters explore the virtual in a way that either exploits others or allows others to exploit them. Power circulates through these tiers of social office, from whore to rebel to Madame to icon to Envoy. At various moments, the characters’ imaginations project them into a virtual

In Collected Works' *The Balcony*, the virtual becomes entangled in the temporal confusion of the play as the movement between tenses gives way to the slipperiness of temporal multiplicity. Immersed in the production, viewers take part in both the action and the illusion of the play, as they travel between scenes, brush up against the performers, and surrender their imaginations to the characters' fantasies. Within the slippage between a past, present, and virtual that are all charged with desires for power and capital, the spectators' protective distance collapses. How easy it is for the spectator, like virtual spacetime itself, to become complicit in the consumption and production of capital.

The Balcony confronts the audience with a simple question: what makes you any different from these characters? Although both the characters and the play position themselves within ideologies of resistance, in the end they are all swept up in the perpetual production of capital. In turn, the audience must ask how their

actions are complicit with this production: in play and in solemnity, in art and in life, in time and in timelessness.

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Gestural Economies and Production Pedagogies in Deaf West's Spring Awakening

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Deaf West is a California-based theatrical institution that has been modeling inclusion through ASL/English theatrical productions for close to 25 years (Deaf West Theatre 2015). I attended the company's production of Steven Sater's and Duncan Sheik's musical *Spring Awakening* first on Wednesday 3 June

2015 at the Wallace Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills, and once more on 29 September 2015 for the opening week of the company's limited Broadway revival run at the Brook Atkinson Theatre in New York City.¹ In this production, gesture reveals and attempts to subvert representational

1. The fastest show ever to ascend to Broadway, Deaf West's revival of *Spring Awakening* has tumbled forward into critical acclaim from its inaugural performance at the Rosenthal Theater at LA's Inner City Arts, through a short run at the Wallace Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills, to the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on 47th and Broadway, where it premiered 27 September 2015.

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