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The Balcony by Jean Genet (review)

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larly transitioned from historical to modern: at the opening of the show the entire theatre (including the audience, as in the Elizabethan era) could be seen, but by the end only the stage was lit. While these aspects of the production emphasized the continued relevance of Marlowe's play, the same cannot be said of Boyd's staging, in particular the way in which he over-emphasized his double-casting. Most actors played three, four, or as many as six roles. Soon after a king was overthrown by Tamburlaine, the actor would reappear in another role, often maintaining physical characteristics or quirks of the earlier part. Kings were defeated by Tamburlaine only to rise and be defeated once again, and this could have effectively highlighted the repetitive nature of violence in the play. Once or twice it did so, as in two parallel scenes in parts 1 and 2 where Tamburlaine threatened groups of allied kings (played by the same actors), who looked down on him from the balcony. But more often the doubling was played for comedy, as when Paul Lazar, playing the foolish jailer Almeda, echoed actions of the inept King Mycetes, the first ruler vanquished by Tamburlaine, or when Infante appeared as a courtier wearing a neck brace to remind the audience of how his last character had been killed. Through such sight gags Boyd seemed to ridicule the repetitive nature of *Tamburlaine*, thus making the play seem ineptly crafted. This choice undermined the very play he was directing, robbing *Tamburlaine, Parts I and II* of some of its perverse grandeur. However, it also served to focus the production even more intensely upon the central role.

Thompson could be called today's Ira Aldridge. The African American actor Aldridge, unable to find acceptance on American stages in the nineteenth century, was forced to emigrate to Britain and tour Europe in order to portray Elizabethan roles that were not originally written for black actors. A century later, in 1943, Paul Robeson became the first black actor to play Othello on Broadway, and this was seen by critics and audiences alike as a landmark event both in the theatrical world and for race relations in America. As demonstrated by the recent killings of unarmed black men by police officers in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City, the subsequent failure of grand juries to indict those officers, and the protests that followed, America is in no way "post-race." Critics have not significantly focused on Thompson's race in this role, perhaps because Boyd's production highlights its nontraditional casting through its extremely diverse cast. Nevertheless, the facts that Thompson can be hailed, deservedly so, as New York's foremost interpreter of classic roles like Tamburlaine, without critics focusing significantly on his race, and that he can make Shakespeare's and Marlowe's plays relevant

to seasoned theatre-goers and new audiences alike, shows that, at least in the theatre, progress continues to be made.

DAN VENNING

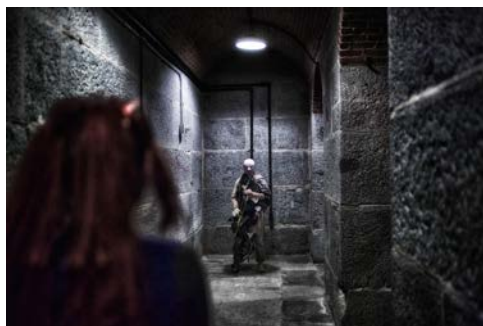
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THE BALCONY. By Jean Genet. Directed by Michael Hunter and Jamie Lyons. Collected Works, Old Mint Building, San Francisco. 7 February 2015.

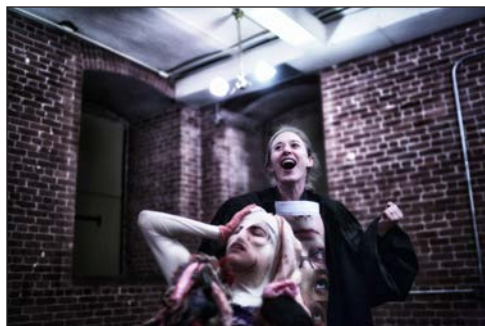
The Old Mint building in San Francisco is, in the words of directors Michael Hunter and Jamie Lyons, a "dead building." Erected in 1874 to print extra money during the Gold Rush, it was decommissioned as a mint in 1937, allegedly transformed into a CIA spy hub during the Cold War, and then fell into disuse. It is a hulking, neglected monument to the city's fluctuating fortunes: "Google buses" drive past during the day, homeless people sleep on its steps at night, and everyone sees the facade though almost no one goes inside.

The building thus provides an ideal site for a drama about the hidden mechanics of power and the role of fantasy in constructing history. Collected Works, a San Francisco-based production company, tapped this potential by staging Jean Genet's *The Balcony* in the vaults, corridors, public chambers, and private meeting rooms of this sandstone-and-granite building decaying in the midst of a city undergoing another epochal shift in power.

When spectators entered the imposing edifice we were invited to explore exhibitions in several ground-floor antechambers. Installations by textile artist Latifa Medjdoub (who also designed the costumes) established an atmosphere of erotic and men-



Nathalie Brilliant (*Beggar's Girl*) and Florentina Mocanu-Schendel (*Beggar*) in *The Balcony*. (Photo: Jamie Lyons.)



Lauren Dunagan (Judge) and Amy Munz (Thief) in *The Balcony*. (Photo: Jamie Lyons.)

acing *trompe l'oeil*. Her hybrid fabric constructions combined sculpture, costume, and conceptual art: images of iconic figures of power overlaid complex woven garments, materializing Genet's metatheatrical threads of role-playing and the entanglements of authority. Madame Irma (Val Sinckler), the brothel-keeper, and her principal employee, Carmen (Ryan Tacata), addressed us as valued clients before ushering us down to the basement level. Here, the first scenes unfolded simultaneously in dimly lit granite rooms in which actors played actors playing roles of institutional power and sensual fantasy.

The choice to set us loose in the shadowy underground of a politically charged public building paid dividends with this play in two ways. For one, as it was impossible to see each of the simultaneous scenes from beginning to end, the staging forced spectators to make viewing decisions, and creeping in and out of intimate scenes of sexualized role-playing heightened our sense of voyeurism. For another, these brothel scenes in cramped, unfamiliar spaces had a concrete reality impossible to experience on a proscenium stage—we leaned against cold stone walls, overheard yelling from nearby rooms, and walked among performers whose faces were often obliterated by masks and fabric.

The second half unfolded upstairs in spacious public halls and foyers. Madame Irma, Carmen, and the Police Chief (played by Scott Baker) dominated, plotting their transfer of power from the interior illusionistic world to the real politics of the government under siege outside their walls. When the fantasy-world employees and clients finally assumed their new roles they held court on a literal balcony while paparazzi ran among the spectators and snapped photos from below. The goal of integrating the site with the play was particularly successful here, as most audience members had never been inside before and had only imagined the building as a site of representations of political influence. Now we

were watching representations of such representations within its columned halls.

Lyons—who also works with San Francisco's We Players, a production company committed to "site-integrated" performances that take place in public parks (for example, *Ondine* at Sutro Baths; *Macbeth* at Fort Point; *Hamlet* on Alcatraz)—advocates for performance that uses the site as another creative participant in the work: it should be character and designer, and it should shape the development and understanding of the piece. One scene in this *Balcony* illustrated the payoff of letting the space inform the text: the revolutionaries met in a cafeteria-style hall where lights and sirens from downtown filtered through the barred windows, the spectators sat at tables and were addressed as comrades, and the scruffy contemporary costumes evoked images of Occupy (which had occurred nearby). Since this episode played out in the same building as the brothel scenes it raised the question of the revolution being, perhaps, just another whorehouse fantasy, one more room of role-play for those who want to enact idealistic counter-hegemonic visions in a space parallel to that of "reality."

Part of the recent upsurge in site-specific, ambulatory, and participatory performance, Collected Works is attempting to open a space for a repertoire of plays that might not otherwise be produced; its previous production was Witold Gombrowicz's criminally neglected *Princess Ivona*, which it staged in a warehouse in a back alley in the SoMa (South of Market) district. What it adds to the trend toward interactive performance is excellent dramaturgy: the thought behind its work is rigorous, nuanced, and joyously engaged with the complexities of the challenging texts it selects. (In fact, Collected Works stages informal readings and discussions of the works in advance at its Franconia Salons, which



Val Sinckler (Madame Irma), Scott Baker (Police Chief), and Florentina Mocanu-Schendel (Beggars/Envoy) in *The Balcony*. (Photo: Jamie Lyons.)



Todd Pivetti (Rosine) and Jeff Schwartz (Bishop) in *The Balcony*. (Photo: Jamie Lyons.)

Hunter hosts at his home.) Unlike much contemporary ambulatory and immersive performance that focuses on spectacle and capitalizes primarily on novelty, Collected Works combines excellent thought with the not-inconsiderable pleasure that today's audiences derive from engaging with sites and narratives in original, physically active ways.

A contemporary ideal of a new theatrical *Gesamtkunstwerk* seems to be in the works: an ambulatory production integrated with and responsive to its site, reinvigorating classic texts with the highest quality of thought, designed in ways that minimize the shifting but ever-present challenges of acoustics and sight lines and acted by professionals who can afford to take risks on experimental performance without neglecting their union responsibilities. With international attention focused on financially rewarding companies like Punchdrunk (*Sleep No More*) and Shunt (*Tropicana, Money*)—both of which have been charged with favoring spectacle over thought and thus falling short of this ideal—it is invigorating to see recent productions by Collected Works and We Players pointing toward the possibility of beautifully conceptualized performance that draws its power both from dramaturgical rigor and site integration.

By pairing a brothel with a mint, this production intimately linked the erotic iconography of power

with what money can buy. And this Genet truism resonated culturally as I stood on the massive steps leading up to “The Granite Lady” (as the building is known) after *The Balcony*: the Old Mint, having failed as a nonprofit historical museum, will now be leased to production company SHN SF, a big-budget organization that brings Broadway touring companies to San Francisco stages, which will not likely be producing Gombrowicz or Genet anytime soon. I thought about the building as a symbol of power and illusion; of actors sweeping refuse off the stairs nightly before performances; about the mystery of an iconic, deteriorating building I had often seen though never known. Genet's theme that symbols are more compelling than any reality loomed large as we filtered slowly out of the “dead” landmark and back into the living city.

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