glorious experience of exaltation, perhaps man's only claim to immortality. To this end Mallarmé dedicated his life. As the psychologist Ernest Fraenkel has suggested in *Les Dessins transconscients* . . ., Mallarmé's agonizing struggle to capture "sa chimère, son Rêve" on paper for the ultimate good of others, may have even subconsciously triggered the spasmodic constriction of the throat which prematurely took the poet's life (13). If this is indeed so, then Mallarmé could well be counted among humanity's most courageous martyrs.

● NOTES

[1] See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, eds. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1945) 1274.

[2] See particularly the first chapter, "Contempler," 25-41.

[3] For a complete presentation and discussion of this dialectic, see Gaudon 36-41.

[4] Cited by John Senior, *The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959) 24.

[5] Of course, a liberal application of this "initiatory principle" could be applied to all literature, but we shall attempt to indicate how Mallarmé's poetry is particularly suited for this interpretation.

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Jean Genet at the Guthrie: Akalaitis's Taming of *The Screens*

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Les Paravents (The Screens), Genet's last and most challenging work for the stage, is a powerful play of contradictions and profusions. To produce it is an act of courage, because the play is so demanding— technically, emotionally and financially, with its uncommon length (four and one-half hours) and large cast: approximately forty actors, most playing multiple roles. Since it was published in 1961, *The Screens* has been produced only ten times. Patrice Chéreau, the director of the most recent staging in France, in fact called it "an impossible play. It is a polyphony without a score; we need actors trained in disciplines that haven't yet been invented" (Bernard 7).[1] The latest production of *The Screens*, in an excellent new American translation, took place at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis two seasons ago under the direction of Joanne Akalaitis, one of the founding members of the Mabou Mines theater troupe.[2]

As a spectator who had studied *The Screens* before seeing this staging, I admired the undertaking of this ambitious project by Akalaitis and the Guthrie; at the same time, however, I was disturbed by differences between the written text and the production. In my paper I will discuss both Genet's play and the performance that I attended, and reflect upon the difficulties inherent in my position between the two.

As I have indicated, Genet's play is a complex one, for spectators and theater troupe alike. Both the difficulty and the strength of *The Screens* lie in its ambiguities. Like all of Genet's work, it straddles the line between comedy and tragedy, beauty and ugliness, good and bad, and reality and illusion. On one level, the play concerns the Franco-Algerian war of the late 1950s and early 60s—the war that led to France's loss of its colony. It depicts the changing relations between Arabs and European (largely French) colonists, focusing upon an Arab family of petty thieves called the "family of the Nettles": Saïd, his Mother, and his wife Leïla, anti-heroes in the tradition of Alfred Jarry's Ubu. Saïd, a disgusting young thief, marries Leïla ("the ugliest woman in the country," as she is called by other characters), since she is the only one whom he can afford. Leïla responds to Saïd's hatred of her by embracing along with him the practice of evil—thievery, betrayal, and humiliation of self and others. The Mother com-

pletes this typically abject Genetian group by encouraging both of them in their pursuit of baseness. As the play continues, the colonists lose power and the Arabs gain it, along with much of the vanity and oppressiveness of their conquerors. Finally, the victims from both sides meet in the land of the dead; they meet in harmony, though with all of their individual quirks intact. Saïd and Leïla, who in the course of the play descend completely into evilness, finally disappear altogether, free from both the living and the dead.

The Screens is disturbing in a number of ways: it has an unclear political line, as both the French and the Arabs are ridiculed; it blatantly displays taboo acts—sexual and otherwise—on stage; and the one positive element of its action, Saïd's and Leïla's attainment of individual liberty, is hardly comforting to most spectators or readers, as the characters attain their freedom through self-degradation. Another potentially disruptive or at least confusing aspect of the play is that it is only partly *about* the Franco-Arab conflict and liberty through corruption. At every step of the way, Genet undercuts reflection upon the political situation and upon the characters' debasement. The plot is relatively unimportant in the context of the play as a whole: moments of visual and verbal poetry, which vary from the sublime to the disgusting to the ridiculous, are more significant than the advancing of the action. Character development is absent—or rather, as I will explain later, there is a development of characters *as* absence.

The creative dislocations in the play's action are both linguistic and physical in nature. A sudden change in subject is provoked by a word or movement, often in combination with elements of the set; all work together to form a line of action that is constantly varying in direction. The first scene, for example, functions on one level to present Saïd and the Mother to the readers or viewers and to introduce the subject of Saïd's and Leïla's interrelationship. But the transmission of this information is incidental to the theatrical magic created during the less "necessary" moments of the action. One such point occurs near the end of the scene. Saïd's view of the Mother in high heels inspires him to compare her step on the stones underfoot to a "revolution [on the] king's streets" (23). The word "revolution" then sparks his verbal imitations of a cannon ("Boum! Zim!"). The Mother joins him, shouting and dancing, and urges him to mimic the cannon's flash. Their booms and flashes eventually transform themselves into imitations of lightning and thunder, producing the Mother's line, "It's a storm!" (24). Costume (the Mother's shoes), sound (Saïd's and the Mother's shouts) and movement work with the dialogue to produce this typically Genetian moment of profusion. Such breaks in logical sequences of action and discourse permit the author to indulge

some of his favorite subjects in the course of the play, including the erotic and comedic force of the body (especially the male body) and of excrement. In the famous "scène des pets" (farting scene), for example, French soldiers perform last rites for their dead lieutenant by individually breaking wind (emitting "un petit air de France," says one of them) over his prostrate body.

The theatrically poetic side of *The Screens* is signaled from the very beginning by the work's title: screens are a fundamental scenic element of the play. They move on and off stage along with the actors and possess a number of functions. Sometimes they serve their traditional purpose as a painted background for the stage set. In other cases, they are canvasses for the characters who, in one scene, for example, draw representations of their feelings toward the colonists. Other screens become doorways into the land of dead, with characters bursting through them as they enter their new existence.

Distractions from the logical progression of the action and character presentation, of which the screens are a part, are themselves multiple in function. On one hand, because they make the play different from more traditional theatrical fare, they disturb; on the other hand, they provide relief from the potential horror of the work's subject and characters.

Director Akalaitis took full advantage of the disruptive undercuttings in *The Screens*. In so doing, she played up their comic aspect and accentuated the beauty of Genet's visual imagination and language, thus unsettling the balance between comedy and tragedy, between the beautiful and the repulsive that Genet had achieved in his script. Saïd, for example, supposedly a disgusting, pustule-covered criminal, was played by a handsome, lithe actor in flatteringly tattered clothes (Jesse Borrego). Ruth Maleczech interpreted the Mother (called in Genet's script, "the laugh that appears when everything has gone bad") as an appealingly stubborn, crazy earth mother; and Leïla (Lauren Tom) most often appeared as an imbecile with a Tweety-bird voice. In spite of the abusive and vulgar dialogue that spewed from their mouths, neither these characters nor the others in the production ever seemed truly odious, as they might have in a differently-directed staging of the play. The sumptuousness of the costuming, set, music and movement played an important part in giving a charming side to these fundamentally nasty characters.

In addition, director Akalaitis somewhat altered the frightening ambiguity of political perspective in *The Screens*; for even though Genet's play permits a feeling of compassion for the oppressed, it certainly displays and ridicules the flaws of the Arabs as well as those of the colonists. Akalaitis emphasized aspects of the storyline concerning the efforts of the colonized to obtain their freedom, anchoring the play in a more realistic revolutio-

nary context than than that in Genet's script. In so doing, she increased sympathy for the Arabs' rebellion. For example, she added an intermittent voice-over, the (male) voice of the "National Liberation Front," which from time to time described events in the on-going war and advised the revolutionaries on further action. The interest in and support of politically oppressed groups that Akalaitis showed was laudable. And with more evidence of a logically-developing "revolution in progress," the play became easier for the audience to follow. But at the same time, to direct the less fixed point of view in Genet's text by emphasizing the revolutionary framework limited it, blunted the play's disturbing edge.

I found it rather disappointing, then, that Akalaitis had chosen to wash away the dirt in Genet's play. After studying and writing about *The Screens*, I had anticipated a riotous explosion on stage, composed of equal parts evil, beauty and humour, and had not expected to be shortchanged on the "evil" aspect. However, the director was so completely true to her lighter and more politically focused perspective, that I wished that I had come with no presuppositions at all about the play. The coherence, energy and sheer voluptuousness of her vision were remarkable.

An aspect of the production that greatly contributed to its coherence was its underlying style of movement. This movement incorporated flutterings of the hands (abstracted representations of the flicking away of the flies that constantly buzzed around the filth and death of the Arabs in the script) and tremblings (that of the Arabs before their masters, of the thief and traitor Saïd before his judges, of the colonists in their last paroxysms of sexual spending and death as the play came to a close). Movements forward and backwards as well as acrobatic and swirlings and twirlings accompanied the trembling and the fluttering of hands. Throughout the play, these stylized gestures led smoothly from one scene to another: the organic movement of one group leaving was mirrored in that of the entering actors and of the screens, which were mounted on wheels and rolled on and off stage. According to actress Ruth Maleczech (the Mother), whom I interviewed after the performance, this striking, consistent movement was the result of intensive work at the beginning of the troupe's rehearsal period. These "exercise" sessions, which continued to take place at the start of each rehearsal, served as an emotional and artistic meeting point for the large cast of players from all over the country. The constant action in the play was accompanied throughout by the haunting Middle-Eastern music of Philip Glass and Foday Musa Suso, and by Genet's "orchestrated" lines and laughter. (Genet wrote quite precise stage directions, at certain points indicating the speed, rhythm and tonal quality of the dialogue.) The impression given by this controlled movement was one of incredible contained energy ready to explode (as it sometimes did): the

energy of the revolutionaries' hatred, of Saïd's concentrated capacity for rebellious action, and of Genet's verbal and physical poetry.

According to Maleczech, the actors closely followed Genet's written directions to pursue an "objective" acting style; that is, they distanced themselves from psychologically realistic gestures and expressions, endeavoring to make themselves "absent from the theater, as we are absent from the world" (*Les Paravents* 104-5).[3] Variations in the speed of line delivery, part of this style, were used extremely effectively during scenes such as that between the Mother and the Mouth (the character representing a dead Arab revolutionary). The change in speed worked less well during the final scenes of the production, when the characters fired off lines extremely quickly and in a monotone that too obviously said, "avant-garde theater."

The set decoration, lighting and costuming formed an integral part of the play's force and profusion. The Guthrie stage was metamorphosed into a multiply-serving, multiply-transforming space, and in this way translated the spirit of Genet's stage directions. Middle and down stage remained open during the entire play—open to the entry and exit of characters, to the placement of occasional stage furniture and props and to the movement of the screens. At certain points, the cloth which covered the back of the stage was drawn back or removed, thereby expanding the total area even further. The playing space extended outward and upward, as well. Actors played in the aisles of the house; and above the stage and part of the audience stretched a giant net: the land of the dead, upon which characters moved and lay, spirit-like, during the last scenes of the play. Ramps, extending diagonally from one side of the stage to the other, could be lowered to lead from the top to the bottom levels. Additional levels were created by the use of the false floor on the main stage. The lighting scheme, by Jennifer Tipton, was quite contrastive at many points, casting shadows in an expressionistic way, producing silhouettes through the screens and spotlighting characters. The lighting often upheld the somber side of Genet that the set, costuming and acting style de-emphasized.

The brilliant costuming by Eiko Ishioka translated the lushness of Genet's and Akalaitis's visions. The Arab costumes were, for the most part, voluminous, sometimes ragged and often garishly-colored, as Genet had suggested. Billowing robes added majesty and movement to the actors' large, sweeping turns and gestures. Warda, the madam of the brothel, was Buddha-like in gold and blue, her skirts a pyramid of gold lamé (stretched over a large wooden frame, as the audience saw during her fall from deity in the second half of the play). Her head was topped by an electric-blue wig and a golden, hatpin-ornamented headress. One of the most effective costumes was Leila's: long and black and, except for eye

and mouth holes, covering her from head to toe and extending after her in a train, it made her the concretized shadow of Saïd. She was a striking figure as she darted from one side of the stage to the other, transformed herself into a barking dog on her hands and knees, or became a whirling dervish, sleeves and skirts floating in the air. Leila's death scene, in which she disappeared slowly under her robes as though absorbed by the ground beneath her, was one of the most magical of the play. The colonists' garb translated even more directly from Genet's directions onto the stage. The men, widened by overstuffed shoulder pads and elongated by 12-inch high cothurni, tall hats and wigs, perfectly caricatured late 19th- and early 20th-century European "conquerors."

As I sat watching the production, I thought of Genet's comments on the sixth scene of *The Screens*, in which he defines tragedy as "an enormous laugh broken by a sob that goes back to the original laugh, that is, to the thought of death" (71) —intimating that he intended *The Screens* to be tragic in just that way. Joanne Akalaitis did not let us fully explore the somber core of Genet's laughter in her production. However, to take her perspective for a moment, this directorial choice may in fact not have been hers alone but, rather, part of a larger "productorial" one—a result of the Guthrie's unwillingness to take the chance of offending or profoundly disturbing its (paying) public. *The Screens* had a somewhat limited run of twenty-one performances, half that of the theater's subsequent production. Although the play was quite favorably reviewed and well attended, it was a financial drain on the Guthrie, according to several of the actors. In addition to the show's expense, *The Screens* placed heavy physical and emotional demands on the cast and crew. Ruth Maleczech commented after the performance that Genet had been right in his *Lettres à Roger Blin*: this play can be done only once.[4] A production delving more deeply than Akalaitis's into the darker side of Genet's vision might have made even that one series of performances unbearable for players and spectators alike—an Artaudian purging that our present theater does not permit.

In any case, in light of developments in theater production and criticism over the past twenty-five years, it may be unfair and unhelpful to impose the previously existing written text upon a reading of the performance; for much performance has learned to do without the drama— has learned to revise, deconstruct, or reject the original text. Both American and French theater have witnessed the "dismemberment" of traditional and modern classics. One thinks, for example, of Richard Schechner's and Herbert Blau's plays upon Shakespeare, and Schechner's and the Living Theater's liberties with Genet, as well as the transformations of Shakespeare and Aeschylus by Arianne Mnouchkine, and Antoine Vitez's modernizations of Molière. Criticism of a production based upon its difference

from the author's script in fact may be especially out of place in the case of Genet, whose works are themselves characterized by internal difference and disruption, are so accepting of that which is "other." A more appropriate way of remaining "faithful" to Genet may then be to accept Akalaitis's interpretation of his text on its own terms: as a lavish, largely comedic work produced by an incomparable team of actors and designers.

NOTES

[1] The translations from French to English in this paper are my own.

[2] Since the presentation of this paper, a more recent production of *The Screens* has come to my attention: that done in 1991 by Le Théâtre National de Marseille at La Criée sur le Vieux Port, under the direction of Marcel Maréchal.

[3] Genet's stage directions include those in the script and also his *Lettres à Roger Blin*, a collection of notes written by Genet during rehearsals for the first staging of *The Screens* in 1966. (Interestingly, according to Maleczech in her post-performance interview, she and Akalaitis together attended a performance of that first production in Paris.) Maleczech told me that Akalaitis uses Genet's *Lettres à Roger Blin* in directing other plays, as well.

[4] In his series of letters, Genet makes constant reference to the force of his play and to all that this intensity requires of the actors. His wishes the production of *The Screens* to be a "poetic deflagration . . . so strong and so dense that it illuminates the world of the dead" (11). It will demand that the players "throw themselves into the adventure and triumph over it" (12). Genet indicates that only a small number of performances may be possible since, "if [the actors] plumb the depths of their soul, [they] will not be able to take it" (17). In any case, "[a] single performance, well done, should be sufficient" (18).

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