

NTQ Reports and Announcements

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X04210089

Carl Lavery

Jean Genet: Utopian or Deconstructionist?

Report on the 'Genet in Performance' symposium held at the University of East Anglia on 17–18 October 2003

WHILE Jean Genet's play *Les Bonnes* (*The Maids*) has long been a popular text in British theatres and universities, his more theatrically experimental work, with the possible exception of *Le Balcon* (*The Balcony*), continues to be neglected. It is telling, for instance, that, in spite of the current glut of drama anthologies and performance readers, little is still known in Britain about Genet's radical contribution to the theory and practice of avant-garde theatre. Too often, he is depicted according to the myth – that is to say, as a queer novelist or existential outlaw, and not, as he most certainly is, a key figure in the history of twentieth-century drama.

It was against this background that the 'Genet in Performance' symposium, held at the University of East Anglia's Drama Studio, took place. There were two main intentions: to revise Genet's status in the English-speaking world; and to celebrate the originality and influence of his performance making. The international team of speakers who gathered in Norwich responded to the brief by exploring Genet's experimental work in diverse performance media, including theatre, film, and dance.

In his provocative opening address, entitled 'Theatricality to Performance Theory: the Lesson of Jean Genet', David Bradby, a much respected writer on French theatre, established immediately the tone for the symposium. In the first half of his paper, Bradby argued that the modern discipline of performance studies owes a great debt to Genet's theatrical practice of the 1950s and 1960s that has still to be fully acknowledged. In the second half, he went on to explore the political significance of *Les Paravents* (*The Screens*), Genet's masterpiece about the Algerian war, by describing in detail Patrice Chéreau's production of the play in Paris in 1983 and Peter Sellars's *mise-en-scène* in Los Angeles in 1998. It was difficult to disagree with Bradby's conclusion that in today's mediatized society, Genet's critique of theatricality

has a political dimension that is more relevant than ever.

The first panel on 17 October, 'Theatre as Void: a Graveyard for the Dead', built on Bradby's insights by focusing on the themes of death and the void in Genet's work. Mischa Twitchen began proceedings by explaining how Genet's theatre is a summons to the dead, an attempt to transcend the visible. Carl Lavery went on to politicize that summons by arguing that Genet's aim to awaken the dead is inseparable from a desire to revolutionize everyday life. In Lavery's view, here were clear parallels between Genet's late drama, particularly *The Screens*, and the utopian agenda of the Situationists. Claire Finburgh concluded the panel by explaining how the scenography of *Les Paravents* simultaneously constructs and deconstructs meaning. For Finburgh – and this was a recurrent theme during the symposium – Genet's quest to unveil the void is political. Like Derridean deconstruction, it opens the space for new, always futural, identities to come into being.

The final panel of the day, 'The Vision of Genet: Eye, Camera, and Screen', explored the centrality of the gaze in Genet's aesthetics. In two intriguing presentations, Scott Sherer and Matthew Melia looked at how Genet's articles on Rembrandt and Giacometti in the mid-1950s are not just exercises in art criticism, but sketches for a new theory of theatre. Switching the focus to film, Scott Mackenzie, in a neat deconstruction of Peggy Phelan's argument about the 'ontology of performance', discussed how watching Genet's queer classic, *Un Chant d'amour*, in underground cinemas in the 1960s and 1970s constituted a 'live' performance event in itself.

David Fieni from UCLA brought the day to a close by claiming that the synthetic materials prevalent in Roger Blin's staging of *Les Paravents* in 1966 act as historical and political markers. According to Fieni, the plastic screens used in the production draw attention to the revolution in consumer goods that occurred in 1960s France. At the same time, they comment, ironically and bitterly, on how the Algerian war was treated by the French media. For Fieni, in a memorable phrase, the screens are 'what filter the raw events of the Algerian War – or the real features of the human face – into representable and consumable commodities'.

Events on 18 October began with Albert Dichy, Director of the prestigious IMEC in Paris (Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine), defending Genet from the accusations of anti-Semitism made by the French critic and academic Eric Marty in *Bref séjour à Jérusalem* (2003). Although Dichy had little to say about Genet's performance

practice, his masterful deconstruction of Marty's argument was intensely relevant to the symposium's overall aim. It proved, beyond any doubt, that, despite the claims of conservative detractors, Genet is a progressive political playwright, whose insights into the Arab world need to be taken seriously, and not dismissed, as they sometimes are, as anti-Semitic.

Dichy's stimulating talk was followed by the most significant panel of the symposium, 'A Historiography of Genet's Drama'. Where the majority of criticism about Genet in performance has been concerned with teasing out its theoretical complexities, relatively little has been written about how his plays have been staged. Deirdre Wilkins, John Warrick, Kara Reilly, and Maria Delgado filled this gap by concentrating on particular productions in specific milieux. Wilkins described Leonor Fini's set designs for J. M. Serreau's production of *Les Bonnes* at the Théâtre de l'Odéon in 1961 and Antoine Bourseiller's staging of *Le Balcon* at the Théâtre du Sud-Est in Marseilles in 1969. Warwick looked at the inflammatory production of *Les Nègres (The Blacks)* by Douglas Turner Ward's Negro Ensemble Company at the St Mark's Playhouse in Greenwich Village in 1963. Kara Reilly noted Genet's influence on North American avant-garde theatre by focusing on Herbert Blau's production of *The Balcony* at the Actors' Workshop in San Francisco in 1963. And Maria Delgado explored Victor Garcia's and Nuria Espert's experimental reworking of *Les Bonnes* as *Las Criadas* in Barcelona in 1969.

The success of this panel was due to the way in which the speakers were able to blend historical analysis with performance documentation. Not only was this theoretically innovative, it had a practical dimension too. It showed how Genet's plays, if they are to work successfully in performance, necessitate a rehearsal process that effectively challenges the identities and bodies of the performers.

The body also played an integral part in the next panel of the day, aptly called 'Bodies in/of Performance'. Using Judith Butler's concept of performativity as a methodological tool, Elizabeth Stephens looked at how the dancing body in Genet's ballet *Adame Miroir* and in his film *Un Chant d'amour* is used to construct a theatricalized sense of masculinity for dancer and spectator alike. Paul Woodward tackled the same theme, but from a more autobiographical and confessional perspective. According to Woodward, Genet is a major influence on queer body artists such as Ron Athey and Franko B. because of his celebration of the abject body: the body that pisses, bleeds, and dies. For Woodward, such a celebration, particularly in the age of AIDS, amounts to an act of resistance, a way of valuing experiences and bodies that are conventionally rejected by mainstream society.

The final panel of the symposium, 'Performing Identity in *The Maids*', was given over to practitioners who had grappled with the difficult issue of how best to stage performativity and gender-trouble in the play. Lizzie Eldridge gave an excellent account of her attempts at doing so in her own production of *The Maids* in Edinburgh in 2002 through cross-gender casting and the use of multimedia devices. Parusarum Ramamoorthi told us how he tried to draw attention to the androgynous quality of the text in his Tamil translation of *The Maids*. And finally, Ralph Yarrow, in a practically based paper that had similarities with the work done by Warrick and Delgado, described his techniques for producing a liminal, troubled mind-set for actors rehearsing Genet's plays and the spectators experiencing them.

Appropriately, the symposium was closed by a plenary speech from Michel Corvin, emeritus professor of theatre at Paris III, and editor of *Jean Genet: Théâtre complet* (Gallimard, 2002), a book described by David Bradby as a 'bible for Genet scholars'. Corvin's paper, 'L'humour dans le théâtre de Genet' ('Humour in Genet's Theatre'), synthesized many of the issues raised by other speakers, but did so in a way that was both original and important. Teasing out the hidden meanings of the word 'humour', Corvin argued that it conveys a sense of distance, detachment, and self-consciousness.

In terms of Genet's theatre, this manifests itself in a performance practice which foregrounds its own artificiality, like the dramas of Brecht and Pirandello. Yet, despite the parallels, intimated by Corvin, between Genet, Brecht, and Pirandello, he insisted – and this for me was the point of the paper – that Genet's humour, his practice of meta-theatre, is unique. Where Brecht alienates to instruct and Pirandello to explore metaphysical questions, the intention behind Genet's alienation, argues Corvin, is to combine politics and metaphysics in a 'vertiginous spiral'. Such a tactic transforms fundamentally the very meaning of politics – as no longer about finding answers and offering solutions, but rather becoming a nomadic quest, a process refuting metaphysical notions of beginnings and endings.

As this report hopefully demonstrates, the symposium successfully fulfilled its remit, and showed that Genet's dramatic practice has had a telling influence on contemporary performance art and performance theory. This was reflected in the interest shown in Genet's representation of the body, his concern with issues of performativity and identity, and his anticipation of current trends in performance practice: witnessing, site, hybridization, and use of multimedia devices.

The symposium was also important in that it marked, for instance, a crucial shift in the way Genet's politics are received. Where critics in the 1980s were generally confused about the political

significance of his theatre, this is no longer the case. For today's scholars, the crux of the problem lies elsewhere – in whether or not Genet's politics are deconstructionist or utopian. The symposium also heralded, as I mentioned in my discussion of the panel 'A Historiography of Genet's Drama', an exciting new development in Genet studies, one that concentrates not on theory, but on documenting how Genet's plays have been staged by innovative directors and actors.

Given the interest shown in the work of specific practitioners and productions, it was a great pity that Joe Strick, the director of the film version of *The Balcony* (1962), and Barbara Wright, the translator (along with Terry Hands) of the 1972 English edition of the play, were unable to attend because of illness. Their presence was sorely missed. Nevertheless, it did not prevent the symposium from being what I believe it was – an important moment in Genet criticism and for theatre and performance studies in general.

In addition to acknowledging all the delegates for their excellent papers and overall friendliness, I, along with my co-organizer Richard Hibbitt, would like to thank the University of East Anglia Drama Department, Isabelle Joyau, the cultural delegate at the French Institute (L'Institut Français du Royaume Uni) in Cambridge, Granta Books, Screen East, and the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT) for their generous sponsorship and help. Thanks are also due to the staff at the UEA Drama Studio, and the French-language theatre company, Sacré Théâtre, based at UEA, who had the unenviable task of performing *Les Bonnes* in front of an audience of informed critics.

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X04220085

Month-Long Birthday Party for Odin Teatret

Plans for the celebration of Odin's fortieth birthday, September–October 2004

ODIN TEATRET will celebrate its fortieth birthday in October 2004 with a wealth of activities in Holstebro and Aarhus.

The main events will be two international symposia. The first, in collaboration with the University of Aarhus, is entitled *Why a Theatre Laboratory?*

and will take place from 4 to 6 October. It will discuss the concept of the 'theatre laboratory'. What do we mean by this? Which groups or institutions may be so categorized? Do objective criteria exist for defining a 'laboratorial' identity? What does the work of Stanislavsky and Decroux, Meyerhold and Peter Brook, Grotowski and Mnouchkine, Copeau and Odin Teatret have in common?

These questions will be taken up by leading specialists in the field – Georges Banu, Eugenio Barba, Raquel Carrió, Exe Christoffersen, Marco De Marinis, Leszek Kolankiewicz, Patrice Pavis, Zbigniew Osinski, Béatrice Picon-Vallin, Janne Risum, Franco Ruffini, Nicola Savarese, Richard Schechner, Mirella Schinom and Ferdinando Taviani. A living legacy will be present through demonstrations by Gennadi Bogdanov (Meyerhold), Théâtre du Mouvement (Decroux), and Odin Teatret.

The second international symposium, *The Theatre that Dances* from 7 to 10 October, also in Aarhus, deals with the aspects of a theatre whose sensorial and dynamic characteristics have become a genre in itself. There will be practical sessions, lectures, working demonstrations, and performances by the following theatres: The Song of the Goat, Poland; Théâtre du Mouvement, France; Augusto Omolú, Brazil; Granhøj Dans and Odin Teatret, Denmark.

The many other activities celebrating Odin Teatret's fortieth birthday will begin in mid-September and end in mid-October. Among them will be a seminar at the CTLS (Centre for Theatre Laboratory Studies) at the University of Aarhus, about *Professional Identity and Interculturalism*, dealing with the influence of Peking Opera in Europe and of western texts and performing styles on the Peking opera. In Holstebro, Odin Teatret's base since 1966, there will also be a closed symposium about *The Local Roots and Distant Contacts of a Theatre Laboratory*, several guest performances, and a three-week theatre project for children in collaboration with the Brazilian theatre Udi Grudi.

Sixty international participants will be selected for the symposia in Aarhus.

WHY A THEATRE LABORATORY?
4–6 October 2004. Fee: DKK 750.

THE THEATRE THAT DANCES
7–10 October 2004. Fee: DKK 1000.

For application forms and detailed information about the many events, see www.odinteatret.dk