

British Theatre Guide

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The Balcony

Jean Genet

Get Over It Productions

Bread and Roses

21 November–2 December 2017

George Bataille wrote of Genet's novels that they have "a precipitous quality accentuated by repetition", a description which can be pertinently applied to his play, *The Balcony*. For this 'play about playing' depicts a brothel on the brink, so to speak—a world flipping between illusion and reality, and balancing on the edge of the abyss.

This sense of danger—a wild vitality that could tip the players, and us, over the edge—is somewhat absent from this performance by Get Over It at the Bread and Roses Theatre. It's true that the sadomasochism which so outraged 1950s audiences no longer shocks; but a performance of this deliberately destabilising text should still have power to unsettle and disturb audiences. At no point during the two-hour performance was I alarmed by the threat of an imminent apocalypse, unleashed when forbidden dreams and tabooed desires are fulfilled, or challenged by the ambivalences of sexual and political revolution.

Inside Genet's House of Illusions, Madame Irma's clients turn their most outré fantasies into 'fact'. Outside, in the 'real' world, the revolutionaries are revolting, creating 'vacancies' in the Establishment that the make-believers seize the opportunity to fill, turning masquerade into actuality. However, they soon learn that they are controlled by the fantasies of the bordello, not vice versa.

Though the cast work hard to communicate the polyphonic complexity and verbal contortionism of the text—as the characters speak as themselves, 'in role', and in imitation of other characters—they could not capture the rhythms through which it communicates its 'meaning'. The play needs more physicality and more fearlessness.

The House of Illusions is itself both real and figurative: it has to 'be' a real brothel, a microcosm of the delusions and depravities of the outside world (theirs and ours), and an embodiment of the sleight of hand of the 'theatre' itself. A greater sense of grand scale is needed: as Genet wrote, *The Balcony* should be played "with the solemnity of a Mass in a most beautiful cathedral."

The limitations of space and means do not help director Velenzia Spearpoint, designer Sally Hardcastle and movement director Roman Berry create the necessary imaginative expansiveness. The setting is abstract and minimal; just a few coloured boxes and the odd placard to indicate what 'role' the visitors to the brothel—Madame Irma's House of Illusions—inhabit, as they play out their sexual fantasies.

Genet denotes that during the opening scene, The Bishop, who is participating in an erotic role-play, should be plastered with "garish make-up"—and the actors should wear outlandish padded costumes—as he hears the confession of a scantily clad prostitute. On this occasion, it all feels too

unvisceral and polite. The small studio-space, along two sides of which 'prostitutes' in drab attire lounge and pout at the start of the play, is no pleasure dome.

Sassy Clyde's Madame Irma is more formidable 'modern' business manager—of men and their manias—than the flamboyant entrepreneur of Genet's devising, though the iPad which tracks her clients' appointments and humiliations not only signals the efficiency of her business empire but also evokes Genet's televisual tracking devices: mirrors, earphones, bells. The black camisole under her grey business suit suggests soullessness rather than sensuality—even the washed-out velour dressing-gown she later dons did not persuade me that she was a fading 'queen' who retains a taste for the grotesque, burlesque and spectacular.

Alice Bounsall's squirming, mincing Bishop is wonderfully, hypocritically sanctimonious, launching into a prim oration condemning desire when the 'penitent' prostitute confesses her sins. Both Victoria Porter's Arthur and Pippa Winslow's trench-coated Chief of Police have a good appreciation of Genet's irony and black humour—and the means to communicate them. Helen Liggat's Roger—the revolutionary who wants to change the world and annihilate repression and restriction—is convincingly blinded by idealism and thus destroyed, committing self-castration, by disillusionment.

At the final reckoning, while admiring their ambition and competence, one couldn't help thinking that *Get Over It* had taken on a challenge that was just too vast for their means. The performance is abridged and feels a little reductive, unable to encompass the full extent of the tragic-comic juxtapositions glinting in the play's mirrors.

Reviewer: [Claire Seymour](#)