

The Balcony—complex study of illusion, masquerade, roles

Review by
Bill Wallis

Genet's modern masterpiece, *The Balcony*, is presented largely intact in Howell Theatre's present production. The difficulty entailed in conceiving and presenting all aspects of this complex study in metaphysical distortion makes it an ambitious trial, and makes its success dearer—to the players and, hopefully, to the audiences viewing it. It will be presented the rest of this week with curtain at 8 p.m.

The Balcony is about role-playing. With a revolution (one of many) as audio background and cosmic universe, the customers of a unique brothel, The Grand Balcony House of Illusions, masquerade as nomenclature figures (soldiers, judges, priests) in their levels.

IN A MOMENT of crisis, they assume in "reality" the roles from which they had an hour ago received their sexual satiation. Thus, simulation becomes sacred, and the imagined or dreamed becomes the actual.

As the "real" world outside the brothel—the audience hears and even gets slight glimpses of it—collapses in the chaos of revolution, the madame of the brothel assumes the role of queen at the summons of the court envoy from the wrecked palace.

Amidst this instant rebuilding of the collapse of the universe of order and perspective, Genet offers his view of man's place in the universe: his existence in private and public life is a series of projected images born of his sexual fantasies. Man is a player of roles, and he is the role he plays.

WHAT THEN IS real? What we seem to be to ourselves, or what we seem to be to others? What is "real" is what results when the two combine.

And is rebellion the answer to man's unsettled (unreal) situation? No. All rebellions are doomed to take on the characteristics of the old order. When stripping away the lies and pretenses of the respectable world, Genet concludes that these lies and posturings are necessary to existence. All absolutes are dreams; all is pretense.

One joyful way of recognizing a great play is by the way its languages—verbal and non-verbal—and gestures combine to lift both performer and audience to an excellence and clarity of understanding of the nature of the theatric experience.

The sets, costuming, lighting, sound effects, properties and the acting functioned integrally Saturday night under the aegis of William Morgan to create the timeless experience that is the ritual of drama.

THE ACTING is generally quite good. It is a treat to understand practically everything that is said on stage, especially when the language is as lyrically beautiful (and, in delightful contrast, as crude and colloquial) as that *The Balcony* offers.

Margaret Hawthorn as Irma, the madame of *The Balcony*,

Mitch Tebo as the Bishop, Orlan Larson as the Judge are well-cast and impressive.

ADMIRABLE performances are also given by Dana Mills as the Chief of Police, Jan Van Sickle (whose performance is slightly marred by mugging), as The General, Jeannie Mathes (whose performance is marred by posing) as Carmen, Bill Szymanski (who, despite his craftsmanship, should avoid romantic roles) as Roger, Robert Stelmach (who shows some promise) as the Envoy, Vic Smith (who improves constantly) as Arthur, Cindy Wallis (whose equestrian motion and rhythms bring a visual and aural excitement to the performance), Chris Stasheff, Connie McCord and others.

Set and costume design by Nancy Myers are excellent. The set is unobtrusive and functional. It fulfills Genet's requirements for *The Balcony*. It creates a somber, cathedral-like atmosphere, inasmuch as it can be done on Howell Theatre's cramped staging facilities with the use of a set revolve.

THE COSTUMES, which include such special items as the Greek cothurni (pedestal-like footgear) and huge outfits (to match overblown, exaggerated affectation of the characters—or rather, the roles of the characters) are superbly fashioned.

Jerry Lewis' technical direction and lighting design compliment the other aspects of the production beautifully.

Technical excellence in the Theatre Arts too often goes unrecognized. Howell Theatre's technical staff, which consists of Jerry Lewis and Nancy Myers (and the students who execute and augment their designs), has reached a point of excellence in *The Balcony*.

CONCEPTION and execution of scenic and costume design, lighting design, props and sound, all appear integrated in the production; all technical elements compliment the art of the actors as they envision and

present Genet's dramatic masterwork to the audience.

A production of *The Balcony* offers great difficulty for the American university theatre community. It has built-in "problems". It is long—three full hours—and talky, overintellectualized in concept.

From a more literary standpoint, its lyric and incantatory language is as complex and artfully structured as Shakespeare's at times, but is not supported by a recognizable plot, and little enough story.

THE ACTING roles all demand a great deal of maturity. In almost every case, this was lacking. One cannot therefore say that the acting performances were inadequate.

The actors simply were not capable of instilling in the performance the depths of elegance and vularity innate in Genet's work.

GENET SAYS that we are what our sex makes us: the fabrications of our sexual desires and fantasies determine our political, religious and administrative functions in society. The roles we play are what we were, are becoming and will be.

Do not miss this production. It will unsettle you and it will make you think about yourself and others, especially the others who control you through social pressures. Perhaps Genet can help us, and our society. Perhaps not. Give him a chance.

Pressure . . .

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It is not clear where students are supposed to register, in Lincoln or at home Welch said. Married students with a car registered here probably won't get much hassle. But they could make it hard for the student living in a dorm who wants to register in Lincoln.

"Students can take decisions to court and they may win," she said. "But how many students will do that?"



Jan Van Sickle and Cindy Wallis . . . in one of several imaginary games in Howell Theatre's production of *The Balcony*.

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