

"The Balcony" a play by Jean Genet to be performed

March 3, 1978

Jean Genet's "The Balcony," a play about lies, secrets, illusion, subterfuge and the sexual and ritualistic symbolism of dressing and disrobing, will sizzle across the stage of the UCSD Theatre at the University of California, San Diego beginning at 8 p.m. Thursday, March 9.

The setting is Madame Irma's brothel, The Grand Balcony, a house of illusions where games of lust and dominance are played out in "studios" by the town's leading citizens while, outside, a revolution rages.

Genet was himself a thief and criminal and spent most of his adolescence and adult life in reformatories and prisons. He spent his first 30 years prowling the European underworld. His first novel, recreating this world of brutality, betrayal and perversity, was written in prison in 1940. Seven years later, a petition signed by artists and authors including Cocteau, Sartre and Picasso, was presented to French President Auriol who granted Genet a pardon.

"Genet became deeply committed to the idea that all life is a masquerade, says Michael Addison, chairman of the UC San Diego Department of Drama and Director of "The Balcony." According to Addison, Genet felt that all forms of virtue and social morality are merely games people play to achieve mastery over others and veil the fact that their lives are empty.

"He operates from the premise that all of us to a greater or lesser degree are impotent both socially and sexually. We're trapped in human situations that bog us down in deadening routine even if we've attained what seem to be the most elevated positions in society."

The scenic and costume elements for the play have been designed by James E. Sims, assistant professor of drama, who calls the play's effect "cinematic, aggressively forcing you to look at the central drama through many different perspectives and on a dizzying number of levels."

According to Sims, the play was originally designed for a proscenium stage. The thrust construction of the UCSD Theatre's playing area has challenged the production's designers to suggest a great deal through lighting, textures, colors and outline which otherwise might have been more specifically defined through set changes and multiple playing locations. For instance, the individual "studios" in which the men act out their fantasies with the whores have been edited down to one space altered through stage effects and the audience's imagination.

"The settings don't manipulate the actors as at Disneyland," says Sims. "We have opted for the minimal, the neo-classic, the lean and the spartan."

One aspect of the current production which Sims describes as "shocking" in its contrast to the atmosphere surrounding the original production of "The Balcony" in 1960 is the fact that the whores' clothing is being purchased at "a family store like the Broadway instead of someplace like Frederick's of Hollywood.

"The essential silhouette in contemporary clothes is without foundation," Sims says. "Underwear has become outerwear. It's a fascinating connection to be using these perfectly acceptable current fashions. The play is considered surrealistic and fantastic and here we are basing it on today's reality. It's blowing our minds!"

While the whores wear Vogue-inspired fancy underthings, the men they are hired to excite are clothed in costumes like totems which, Sims explains, "make them look like overstuffed, upholstered furniture."

The men wear cothurni, tragedians' platformed sandals, and are larger than life, dominating the restricted spaces in which they act out their fantasies as judge, bishop, general.

Every brothel has a pouf," Sims smiles. "Ours doesn't. The people are poufs."

In addition to Sims and Addison, the production staff for "The Balcony" includes lighting designer Amarante Lucero, sound designer James LeBrecht, technical director Gerald R. Burke and dramaturg Edvard Ronning.

The cast includes: Joey Garcia, the Bishop; Marcia Raquel Robinson, Madame Irma; Carol Davis, Carmen; William Davis, Chief of Police, and Valerie Shanks, Chantal.

After March 9, the play will be performed at 8 p.m. March 10-12 and 14-19. Tickets are \$3.75 for general admission and \$2.50 for UC San Diego students and may be purchased at the UCSD Theatre Ticket Office, Building 203, Warren campus (452-4574 or 452-3791)

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