

THE INDEPENDENT **TABLOID** FRIDAY 27/06/97

REVIEWS 19

## THEATRE **The Maids** Donmar Warehouse, London

There are few certainties in theatre, but it's a safe bet that you're unlikely to find a contemporary playwright dramatising "the servant problem". Writers from Plautus via Strindberg to Jean Marsh with *Upstairs Downstairs* found it immensely fertile territory. Genet's treatment of the subject in his first produced play *The Maids*, however, remains unique.

His highly charged tale of two sisters who set about murdering their mistress and end up murdering one another is told through a series of sadomasochistic power games of impersonation and role-play, steeped in formal elements of the Catholic Mass. Small wonder that at its Paris premiere 50 years ago, the press reaction was almost unanimously hostile. Genet even punched the critic of *Le Figaro* for his negative notice. Another reviewer wrote of its "unreal characters, strains of a bad sermon and rebellion, and an unhealthy sense of obsession" which simultaneously misses the point and acts as an oddly succinct summary of Genet's intent.

Contrary to the text, which starts with the sisters

on stage, John Crowley's carefully paced production begins with a shaft of light cutting through an open doorway. Whispering gently into each others' ears, the two sisters steal into the hushed majesty of Our Lady's bedroom. Crowley evokes a mysterious hallowed air as the maids circle the luxuriant Louis Quinze bed, an atmosphere abruptly broken when Niamh Cusack jumps exultantly upon it. This is not some high directorial conceit. Crowley's decision cleverly leads us into the play's governing mood. The heightened language and power games are part of an almost religious ritual for which an audience needs preparation.

There are two major problems facing the director of *The Maids*. The fact that Genet was homosexual doesn't make this "a homosexual play". Crowley reverts to the original all-female casting, avoiding the common trap of casting men and risking not only poorly executed camp but also a blurring of the play's preoccupation with power. The other trap is to bow low before the altar of Genet's high seriousness, a fate he banishes with David Rudkin's fluent translation and occasional flashes of bathetic



humour. "She loves us," says Claire, "as she loves the pink ceramic of her lavatory pan."  
He is, however, better at staging than shaping

**Totally devoted: Kerry Fox as Solange kissing the foot of Niamh Cusack's Claire**

Photo: Geraint Lewis

his actors' performances which, although impressive, are oddly disconnected. (For once, sitting at the side of the Donmar is not like watching through glass). Swathed in Tim Hatley's well-cut New Look black-and-white check and adorned with fur, Josette Simon has a nicely petulant *hauteur* as Our Lady but occasionally you feel you are watching *her* acting rather than her character being playful. Niamh Cusack's sinuous, insidious Claire is similarly detached at first but she gradually slips into the rhythm.

Kerry Fox is bravely sullen as Solange and by the fierce climax, beautifully counterbalanced by the poignant strains of a musical jewel box, her soundless weeping is hugely eloquent. It's a testament to a production which, although low on eroticism, grows in intensity. Aided by Rick Fisher's cunningly manipulative lighting, it goes some way towards convincing you that this is a play that you can actually enjoy rather than merely admire.

Booking: 0171-369 1732. To 9 Aug  
**David Benedict**

## Maids Benedict Indy



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Tue, Nov 15, 2022