

May 25 - July 1, 2007

## **The Balcony**

Reviewed by [Brad Hathaway](#)

Running time 2:35 - one intermission A political protest play from the 1930s – Performances at the [Warehouse Theater](#)

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Jean Genet's 1956 "house of illusions" is brought to colorful life in Robert McNamara's staging which tries mightily to move along briskly, but bogs down over the playwright's insistence that the same point be illustrated time and time again. Genet's basic concept, the use of a fantasy-fulfilling brothel as a setting for exposing the emptiness of high hopes, is a naturally theatrical one that lends itself to striking staging. Judicial pretensions can be ridiculed by taking the grandeur of a judges robes to excess. Self-important military martinets can be lampooned through the costume choices of that "little corporal," Napoleon. The showiness of religious ritual can be criticized by exaggerating the robes of a bishop. This is the Potomac Region premiere of Genet's play and devotees of the semi-beat, existential school of literature that flourished in France in the mid-twentieth century will be excited to have a chance to see it played out. Those not quite so devoted to the works of the prominent practitioners of that school, Sartre, Camus and Genet, may find that what begins as excitingly enacted becomes tedious before the resolution of the revolution.

**Storyline: In a famous brothel in a city in revolt, the clients act out their fantasies between bursts of gunfire from outside. When the revolution gets the upper hand and the queen is executed, the clients are drafted to fill their fantasy roles in the real world and the brothel's madam is made queen.**

McNamara has assembled a very large cast (fifteen) for the relatively small space of the Warehouse's main hall. The role that provides the connection between the scenes in this episodic play is that of the brothel's madam who oversees the excesses, protects her "girls" and keeps the customers in line. Rena Cherry Brown is very good in the role, adopting a stern demeanor one moment, a caring one the next, and allowing the periodic interruptions of gunfire from outside to progressively unnerve her. When she is finally elevated to the status of queen, she gives a hint of madness that can be interpreted as a reflection of the madam's unhinging, or as a display of royalty's removal from reality - take your pick.

The parade of prostitutes includes Elizabeth Jernigan who is notable as the Thief in Buck O'Leary's pretend court, Samantha Merrick who prances as the Horse in Terence Heffernan's General's military fantasy, and especially Danielle Davy and Micha Kemp as the brothel's principal attractions. From the outside world, Frank Britton's formality bridges the gap between the reality of the revolution as it closes in on the revelers and their increasingly desperate fears.

The production is notable for its attention to design. The stage is a large black surface

with a bright red runway leading back to the off kilter door in the central structure. Painted panels that are the work of set designer Misha Kachman and Luciana Esteconi are rolled into place to illustrate some of the fantasies the clients bring to the establishment. A red banner is draped from the side of the stage to the balcony of the old warehouse space which is put to brief use. The costumes of the play-acting clients are as exaggerated as their performances with six inch platform boots, wide shoulder pads and elaborate wigs and hats. Aaron Forbes contributes a score ranging from baroque chamber music of a classic bordello to the jazz of Genet's coffee house generation, while David Crandall's gunshot sounds break the spell at just the right times.

*Written by Jean Genet. Translation by Bernard Frechtman, Ellen Boggs and Otho Eskin. Directed by Robert McNamara. Original incidental music composed by Aaron Forbes. Design: Misha Kachman (set) Alisa Mandel (costumes) Marianne Meadows (lights) Andre Manley (stage manager). Cast: Frank Britton, Rena Cherry Brown, Kim Curtis, Danielle Davy, Rashard Harrison, Terence Heffernan, Elizabeth Jernigan, Christopher Keener, Micha Kemp, Samantha Merrick, Elena Mrozowski, Carolyn Myers, Buck O'Leary, Alex Tanouye, Stas Wronka.*