Accessors to Shakespeare... Impostors

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Theatre today, from Broadway to Off-Broadway, in London, Paris, all over the western world and behind the Iron Curtain, Beckett and Genet are names to be conjured with. Their detractors—violent, scathing in their denunciations; their partisans—equally violent, scathing in their denunciations of the detractors. Beckett and Genet: poets of the stage, or impostors? Writers of sordid, revolting, confusing nonsense, trash, or playwrights who may take their place in the theatre today, from Broadway to Off-Broadway, in London and Paris? Are we placed in "unreal" situations, in which no problem is to be stated or solved, just as we also look for an examination of the major characters, Solange and Claire; are mirrors to society, to work and to use to the fullest whatever creative powers, in harmony with the general "sordid" atmosphere that seems to envelop the plays, the seemingly barren settings of Endgame and Happy Days, or, on the other hand, the gorgeous brothel evoked by Genet in The Balcony? And as for characterization...

But if we judge these plays by conventional standards we are confused and irritated; we must, therefore, look further afield, and proceed to the premise upon which the plays are constructed.

The premise deals with the predicament of contemporary man: man in a universe where nothing is certain, man in a world without meaning. Man has lost his bearings, his purpose, his God. In such a world, man is alone; the old standards no longer suffice; what seemed real now seems illusion and man is left in a state of anxiety and despair. It is just this predicament that Beckett and Genet are exploring; consequently, the familiar "real" world of the stage, as we have known it, no longer is of use, in the same way that the familiar world of certainty, of answers to our problems, no longer exists.

The plays, then, are no longer clear-cut expositions of an idea through psychologically motivated characters, making use of a conventional and "real" language, which has lost much of its former meaning in today's world; the plays do not posit a problem and then provide a solution, because there is none; they rather ask us, through their presentation of the human predicament of all men, to examine ourselves, to become aware of ourselves and our condition, to ask, ask and, finally, to face our own reality.

And so, if we accept the premise upon which the plays are founded, we have a chance of understanding and perhaps of appreciating and valuing the plays of Beckett and Genet, as well as those of other playwrights working in the same vein. Not that Beckett and Genet are alike—a reading of or participation in the works of Beckett and Genet, as those of other playwrights working in the same vein, is expensive of time and money. Nevertheless both writers deal with the complexities of life in a way that sometimes does not always say what the writer really intended. We must, then, look further afield, and proceed to the premise upon which the plays are constructed.

The question remains, of course, of how valid is the premise upon which these and so many other of our so-called avant-garde plays are based. How true is it? Is the world we live in one without meaning, or is this idea only a personal view of the writer, which the spectator is expected to accept?

Whether one says "yes" or "no" to these questions, whether one denies or affirms the truth of the basic premise, one must, I think, acknowledge the excitement and provocation which the plays of Beckett and Genet have brought to the theatre and to all of us who look to it for something beside entertainment.

**Recommended Reading**

**ON BECKETT AND GENET**

*By Samuel Beckett, all in Evergreen Books:*

**ENDGAME.** ($1.25)

**HAPPY DAYS.** ($1.45)

**KNAPP'S LAST TAPE.** ($1.95)

**WAITING FOR GODOT.** ($1.45)

*By Jean Genet, all in Evergreen Books:*

**THE BALCONY.** ($1.95)

**THE BLACKS: A CLOWN SHOW.** Tr. by Bernard Frechtman. ($1.75)

**THE MAIDS AND DEATHWATCH.** Tr. by Bernard Frechtman. ($1.95)

**Books about Beckett and Genet:**

**MODERN FRENCH THEATRE FROM GIRODoux TO BECKETT.** Jacques Guicharnaud. (Yale, $1.45)

**THEatre of the ABSurd.** Martin Esslin. (Anchor, $1.45)