ARTS

"Apple, peaches, pumpkin pie, soon your love will be all mine"
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REVIEW

With regalia and regime change, 'The Balcony' undresses power

BY CAMERON NYE
STAFF CRITIC



ANDRE CHAVEZ / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

In the Yale Dramatic Association's Fall Experimental Show, Jean Genet's brothel of borrowed power seduces, bewilders and draws laughs a little too easily.

The Bishop buries his face in his vestments and breathes in lace, brocade and the musk of sanctity like incense. Then, alone before a mirror, he makes his private devotions, losing his robes as he sinks his hand into his pants. His soliloquy rises and quickens until liturgy and lust become one, and the mitered figure in the glass, flushed and swaggering with the smugness of a fraternity brother, begins to absolve himself.

So opens the Yale Dramatic Association's Fall Experimental Show, Jean Genet's "The Balcony," at the Iseman Theater. The production opened on Thursday and ran through Saturday.

Genet, a former thief who discovered his literary calling in prison, wrote "The Balcony" in 1955, taking inspiration from Francisco Franco's Spain and its fascination with monumental tombs. He kept revising it for the rest of the decade, as if the play were itself a body to be re-dressed. Its first production, in London in 1957, so displeased him that he physically tried to obstruct the performance.

The play later passed through the hands of Peter Brook in Paris and José Quintero in an off-Broadway theater, and in 1973, it reached the Yale Repertory Theatre, where a young drama student named Meryl Streep DRA '75 performed in its cast. This past weekend, the play returned to Yale's campus at the Iseman Theater, in a production directed by Alice Kasdan '28 and produced by Molly DellaValla '29.

On opening night, the audience entered the Iseman and stepped into the Grand Balcony, Madame Irma's house of illusions, a decaying brothel where white linens cascade from the rafters and gilded frames glint against walls that have become soft with rot. Beyond its shutters, a revolution smolders, its gunfire slicing through the sultry air. Within, the city's residents pay to wear the uniforms — and wield the power — of its bishops, judges and generals.

Madame Irma's patrons sink deeper into their libidinous rites. Each studio is a little chapel of depravity, where lust for bodies is complemented by a lust for dominance. Meanwhile, the chief of police, who is also Irma's lover, is tormented by one indignity — no man has donned his uniform yet at the brothel.

Then the palace falls. The Queen's envoy arrives with a perverse proposal to let the brothel's counterfeits take their place of the fallen dignitaries. Power, it seems, only needs a convincing silhouette.

Genet insisted that "The Balcony" be performed as a "glorification of the Image and the Reflection" in his 1962 edition of the play, with mirrors as its central device. Every figure of authority in "The Balcony" is a costume waiting for someone to wear it, and every costume reveals that nothing much lies underneath.

The bishop needs his robes more than he needs God. The judge cannot exist without a criminal to condemn. The general is nothing without his mount. Power, in Genet's telling, is not something a person holds but something staged, and it lasts only as long as an audience keeps believing in it.

Rebellion fares no better. The insurgents need their own icons and their own pageantry, and the regime absorbs those symbols as easily as it once wore its vestments. Genet spares no one. He is equally contemptuous of the throne and the barricade, and of the spectators who came to watch both.

It is hard to watch the play this autumn without thinking of the stone halls and ivy-coated grounds a few blocks away. Several student coalitions have spent the semester pressing the University to change how its trustees are chosen, to better protect speech and academic freedom and to cease negotiations with the federal government. Its members argue that their institution's decisions are made behind closed doors.

Genet would have recognized that view. His play is built around an establishment under siege that survives by maintaining appearances — the curtains are drawn, regalia is donned and actors step onto the balcony as if nothing had changed after the first regime falls. Whether Yale is that establishment is for viewers to judge. "The Balcony" asks how much of the authority we answer to is anything more than a convincing costume.

At the center of it all stands Madame Irma, played by Arya Stapleton Dhillon '29 with a mix of matron and mistress. She runs her house like an abbess, keeping accounts, tallying sins and dressing its visitors' fantasies with the care of a mother laying out Sunday clothes. Yet there is ice beneath the rouge. Her tenderness toward her girls is real, but so is her readiness to trade them, her lover and the revolution itself in exchange for one more night of business. Stapleton Dhillon depicts a woman who has survived by understanding that every man who climbs her stairs wants to be lied to, and who, in turn, has become very good at lying.

Her clientele makes an impressive procession: a man of considerable cloth given his voluminous robes, a military leader who is the very model of a modern major-general and a powdered, petulant judge who sulks with the wounded pride of a king who has just lost his colonies.

Then there is the general's horse, played by Henry Cohen '29 with a ferocious, athletic commitment that almost steals the evening. He stamps, crouches and drives his fists toward the floor in a brown tule tail, turning the bit and bridle into choreography.

Of the three dignitaries, only Alfonso Calice '30 as the Judge finds the narrow path Genet laid out. His magistrate snivels and preens, flutters his frilly collar and swings between cruelty and pleading from one line to the next. He is ridiculous, but he is never a cartoon, because he believes in every word. When he begs the thief to confess so that he may become a judge, the scene is funny and pathetic, and somewhere beneath both lies something akin to grief. This is the balance Genet asked for — satire that arises from solemnity, not satire performed in its place. Other moments are not so careful.

"A giggle spoils everything," Irma warns, and the production would have done well to listen. Where the judge believes, the bishop and the general perform for the crowd. The bishop's sniffing of his vestments and his urgent penitence before the mirror, brought by Sasha Foer '28, get roars from the audience, but the laughter is aimed at him, not at what he represents.

Genet's bishop is terrifying because he is sincere, a man who sees in his own reflection the whole architecture of the church. When played with bro-y debauchery, he becomes only a punchline, and the ritual that should disturb us collapses into a sketch. Genet warned against playing "The Balcony" as a simple satire, and here the production does exactly that.

Kasdan clearly has a gift for directing physical comedy, and Genet possesses a penchant for dark humor. Some of the pairing is inspired. After the judge finishes flipping between giddy cruelty and pathetic groveling, the revolution's gunfire slowly turns into the snare drum of Maurice Ravel's "Boléro." Violence becomes rhythm, and rhythm becomes ritual as the music marches in place, building without ever arriving.

But a production that relies this heavily on comedy must pay for it, and the bill comes due when the play turns serious. As the first act closes, with the city burning and the regime's last defender facing his end, the chief of police declares that he will die in a whorehouse, and the audience laughs.

Perhaps Genet would have enjoyed that, as his play does make fun of the chief's vanity. But the laugh comes from the wrong place. It is the comfortable laughter of spectators who have been told all night that these men are clowns, not the uneasy laughter of people who realize the clowns are in charge.

None of this undoes the evening. Comedy is not Genet's enemy. Played with conviction, laughter is one of the play's sharpest tools, a way of carrying the solemn past our defenses until it is too late to resist. The judge proves that the production understands this, even if it doesn't always trust it. And there is a pleasure in watching a company this young throw itself into a play this dangerous.

Genet ends his play by sending the audience home to a world he calls even falser than Irma's house, and that is where this production's real work begins. Look past the pratfalls and the crude gags to the costumes themselves: the robes, the wigs, the medals, the regalia worn by those who govern us and by those who stand in for them while the real decisions are made.

On a campus, and in a country, where power is often just as much a matter of appearance as of substance, "The Balcony" asks us to recognize the costume and wonder who is beneath it. The mirror is held up. It is up to us not to laugh too quickly at what it shows.

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Community theater heralds Halloween with 'Rocky Horror' screenings

BY ANGELINA KOVALCHUK
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Costumes and cult-classic theatrics are enlivening Wooster Square's museum and venue Lost in New Haven for a production of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show."

Rosetint Community Theatre, a local theater company, hosted four screenings of the cult film last weekend, complete with a live shadow cast and pre-show performances, and will host four more this weekend. Each screening is also accompanied by an hour-long pre-show with trivia, karaoke and performances by local drag and burlesque artists. Audience participation was highly encouraged.

"I want you to be as loud as humanly possible," Miranda Rector '20 SPH '22, Rosetint's outreach director, said to the audience before presenting the show on Saturday night.



ANGELINA KOVALCHUK / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Rosetint Community Theatre, a New Haven-based theater company, is celebrating its origins with a quirky production of Rocky Horror Picture Show at a local museum venue, complete with a live shadow cast and pre-show drag performances.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show, a musical comedy horror film released in 1975, has amassed a cult following over the decades, and is now accompanied by distinctive fan traditions, such as using props and shouting callbacks at timed cues. The "shadow cast," a group of performers that act out the show while the movie is playing, originated during late-night screenings as part of these traditions.

The company's production draws on these traditions but offers its own vision, with neon signs and costumes, black lighting, original comedic bits and twists on gender.

Charlotta Lebedenko GRD '32, the company's managing director, highlighted the production as "quick," "scrappy" and "fun" in a phone interview.

"We have a take on the shadow cast where we're not perfectly matching the movie, which a lot of shadow casts tend to do," Lebedenko said. "We have our own artistic, visual aesthetic to the design."

Tyler Harding, the company's artistic director, said the company's founding last year was inspired by another production of Rocky Horror that brought together local performers and audiences seeking opportunities in musical theater.

"The mission is to do excellent musical theater for the everyday person, not being limited or bound by university walls or professional stages," Harding said.

Rosetint has operated in many different venues, including non-traditional theater spaces. Harding found that collaborating with a large and accommodating space like Lost in New Haven has allowed the company to branch out.

"This venue is accommodating of that extra hour before, so we can add all this programming to make it a big event," Harding said, referring to the pre-show hour of trivia, karaoke and drag performances.

Aside from the pre-show, the venue also accommodated representatives from New Haven community organizations and vendors like Planned Parenthood and the New Haven Craft Club.

According to Harding, since its founding, Rosetint has been planning to return to Rocky Horror. This year's production also honors the late Tim Curry, who starred in the film as "Dr. Frank-N-Furter" and died in August.

Harding also highlighted Rocky Horror's importance in the queer community as another motive behind the company's production.

"I think we're a company that's chock-full of queer people, and theater is typically something that serves the queer community," he said. "Rocky Horror is something that just signifies everything that's weird and crazy and othered about the queer community and celebrates it, and so this project is perfect for that."

Lebedenko, a student in Yale's joint MD-PhD program, said Rosetint has become part of her community in New Haven.

"Rosetint, I think, is very unique in that it's one of the few things that is really bridging gaps between the New Haven community and Yale," Lebedenko said. "I really urge Yale students to branch out and come get involved."

Both Lebedenko and Harding said Rosetint encourages anyone in New Haven with an interest in theater to audition, regardless of age, affiliation or experience.

"We want people to walk away from the show thinking, 'I could do that too,'" Lebedenko said. "This is community theater. Anyone is welcome whether you've performed or not."

Lost in New Haven is located on 80 Hamilton St.

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