

No Escape, just the brutal truth: a review of Halden Theatre's *Huis Clos*

The most dangerous plan of attack for a performance of any kind is to corner the audience and force them see themselves in all their brutal ugliness. This can be both cruel and rewarding. Stay aware always that, when one is dealing with wild animals, there is a great risk involved that the whole thing will turn sour. And if you pack twenty of us sceptical and over zealous bastards into the basement room of Lee Rosy's Tea house this effect can only be expected. Then, to methodically twist the knife, set the lights down low and project upwards a lurid mix of primary colours. Really turn the stomach. Rile us to the point of a sweating hysteria. Yet this could be the point of such a damning and morally corrosive play. Taking up the challenge are the new to Nottingham Halden Theatre as they face one of Jean-Paul Sartre's most admired and feared plays, *Huis Clos*, or to you and me, *In Camera/No Exit*.

All the costumes are a perfect bleached white, but don't let the face fool you. On stage are a trio of the most wonderfully dislikeable characters one will ever have the great fortune to meet. And there is a sickly pleasure in observing the infantile and incredulous coward journalist Garcin, the smiling stiletto stuck in the side that is the socialite Estelle, and of course the strong headed postal clerk Inez.

As we sit, crushed into the narrow rows of small wooden stools, surrounded by the heavy heat of our enclosure, the effect is powerful and all consuming. There is no escape. No promise of an easy way out. Get good and tight before would be my strongest advice. Don't try to face the awful truths these mean fuckers will lay on you without a softer head. The brutal truth and nothing but is what this play delivers. This said, I don't want to discourage any naïve and uncertain viewers from soaking deep in the experience; merely give a little heads up to this fantastic play that, when well delivered properly, will sicken the heart.

There is a true pleasure in gawping up at these highly sexualised cowards and con artists as they stand judge and jury, spending this desperate hour attempting to convince themselves and us poor fools that they have some slim waver of human decorum. The result is terrifying, and equally fascinating. They take this front and with the true gamble give it their all. Their fully white attire evokes the notion that these blank and hollow husks have nothing but their voices, echoing out from the darkness between the human spaces of the throat, to offer us. Enjoy the voyeuristic horror show and, if luck prevails, observe yourself within it.

Huis Clos is a play that can present the absolute terror within the mundanity of our death and, by approaching it from such an abstract absurdist angle, some of the mystery is displaced. Such an approach can either separate the conscious questioning process or provoke it. By removing attention from the social content, it is placed upon the singular human condition; and yet it's difficult to see one's self within such strongly developed characters. Praising the actors in their ability to create such three dimensional personas, it seems that the universality of the design and the individual characterisations, are very much at war.

I won't go into detail about the group's manifesto, as the cast and crew hold regular question and answer sessions after performances, so the message is theirs to push, not mine. Strange though, for a group promising to make theatre less intimidating, to pick a play which demands the audience to consider what a destructive and violent nature they each endure. A light hearted romp, it is not. As I sit alone and drunk, staring into the narrow room, the play feels closer to the meeting of new neighbours, a family of dangerous imbeciles that you could pass in the street without a thought. Beautiful, but furiously crazy underneath.

Halden Theatre is new. And although such performance styles may not be (I'm thinking of the Bread and Puppet, or any pub theatre troop), they are here in Nottingham.

And the group does offer strong promise with its ideals and intentions. If this performance is any given standard, then I will happily trot my weary head down the dark steps once more to again seek a small taste of solitude, given to an engrossing and involving hour. We have only ourselves to blame, watch with terrible fear. Fantastic.

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