

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Linda Johnson

you are nothing but your life

by desire amaiya

Quintessence Theatre Group employs the nuances of French and English to poignantly retell *No Exit*, [Jean Paul Sartre's](#) classic. fear and hope are the backbone of this piece. with a strong ensemble featuring Melody Ladd as Inez Serrano, Aneesa Neibauer as Estelle Rigault, and J. Hernandez as Joseph Garcin, there's a deep unsettling unease with the unknown, with reality. a mirror, sleep, sex, and omission all warp each character's fabric of reality. "seeing" as a mode of understanding yourself from the perspective of another consciousness is a central theme of the work. from the beginning, they hate one another and vie for dominance in this perception-bending work. Garcin's line spoken at the end of the show calls back to this beginning, foreshadowing the complexities of their troublesome relationships: "hell is other people."

in blackout we see a projection; "Huis Clos," the French title of the work (that translates to "closed door"), as Benny Bennis's Satisfaction ("push me, and then just touch me, 'til i can get my, satisfaction") rearing atmospherically from the speakers. Garcin is escorted into the room from stage right by the valet, Gabriel W. Elmore, whose comedic timing, expression, and care are so spectacular that they exist in a stunning world of their own. thank you sincerely, Elmore. Hernandez uses heartfelt storytelling in unexpected, offbeat ways. although initially inorganic, Garcin unravels himself with a clear sincerity that gives purpose to his erstwhile coolness, distance, and separation from the room.

a short while later, Inez stubbornly introduces herself as "MS. Inez Serrano." she is so gay; i am thrilled. Inez immediately challenges Garcin for the role of dominant figure in the room, and they clash expectantly. Inez is the only character whose guard against vulnerability feels like it's a part of her; perhaps it's because of her queerness, but her guard feels natural, expected, and even admirable. Ladd's voice is striking, clear, animated, and unabashedly authentic, her face and body equally as expressive. Inez's sin is her harsh tongue and adulterous sexuality.

Neibauer's aura and disposition as Estelle are spot on and immediately noticeable, wearing a blue satin dress and a pompous parisian air. she successfully adorns the space with both a sureness of herself and a haughtiness dressed in a fearsome lunacy borne from a secret; she dropped her baby from a balcony, causing her lover to shoot himself in the face...she feels no remorse. Neibauer at this point is at her most striking, losing the mask of ignorance/ambivalence, becoming honest about what she is now vying for—or for what once was—in her living days. Inez and Estelle stare at one another hungrily, with a dense sexual tension. each one has moments where they could see back into the living world, as they both have unresolved business there.

as they watch those they once loved, they lose their hold on that plane of reality. they search for something to grab onto, through each other.

Inez is immediately smitten with Estelle and attempts to seduce her by becoming her human “mirror,” using her own vanity against her. Estelle fixes her lipstick while looking into Inez's eyes, using the warped reflection to see herself. this relationship questions their respective reality and creates a tantalizing tension, making it difficult to affirm who they are as the story progresses. they look for themselves, and hate what they see in one another. Garcin pleas for the others to believe he is not a coward. they each reveal their vulnerabilities, drawing them closer to some kind of contentment. layers peel off in the final scene, when Garcin asks Estelle if she believes he is a coward, begging for her confidence. she replies, “i do not have the confidence to give myself!” (i.e. she believes he is a coward).

an opening door reveals a golden light. the players have the option to go toward it as they have been begging for throughout. they choose to remain in the room, more fearful of what lies outside than an eternity stuck together. director and translator Alexander Burns' personal handling of this translation pulled forth a story grappling with fear, hope, cowardice, queerness, vanity, vulnerability, satisfaction, confidence, and hell. "you are nothing but your life," and it reminds me of the [Toltec Wisdom](#), "but we have a choice: to suffer our destiny or to enjoy our destiny...to live in hell or to live in heaven." what would your choice be?

[No Exit](#), Quintessence Theatre Group, Sedgwick Theatre, sept. 27-oct. 28, 2023.

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