

At The Theatres

THE BLACKS by Jean Genet

Before remarking on some of the notions: weird and powerful, that jump from the stage to disturb the middle-class audience, let me first outline the action of *The Blacks*:

After a precious minuet, six Negro actors stage a funeral ceremony over the flowered catafalque of a white woman they claim to have raped and murdered. From a ramp above them watch their "betters"—Negros in grotesque white masks affecting the roles of a queen and her missionary, judge, valet and governor. These "white" Negros display hatred and contempt for the negrofied actors who perform the ritualistic rape, murder and funeral.

Though the watchers condemn the black Negros to die, the tables are turned in Act Two, which takes place in a mock African setting—and, to a voodoo chant, the white masked colonists are themselves killed with a touch of good humor. The play closes with the minuet danced by the black Negros in their garish costumes.

Genet—the most powerful voice in the theatre today—uses this strange plot as a framework in which to hang a variety of exacerbating and somewhat cynical thoughts—I hesitate to call them truths—about the changing relationships between the races. Genet implies that although the Negro may appear to adopt the mannerisms and trappings of a degenerate European culture, a substratum of African attitudes and beliefs still permeates his being. Genet also says, in the best theatrical manner, that hate has no color. His Blacks display an unadorned venom, often in the same breath with an obsequy, towards the Whites—and towards the predominately pale-skinned audience. After all, why should the pale-skinned not expect the same cruelty, haughtiness, and viciousness from dark-skinned governments as is now practiced by the rulers of such places as South Africa and Mississippi?

Genet has little hope for the religion of the Whites. When the submissive clergyman—who later turns transvestite—asks for love and conciliation—he is shouted down: "for the Whites—only hate and fury and ultimate destruction." And as for politeness, it is "at times raised to such a pitch that it becomes monstrous," as when it glosses over the truth festering near the surface of reality. "If they change towards us," admonishes an urbane actor, "let it be through terror and not indulgence." This is only a play, dear audience.

If what Genet says is not precise, neither are the situations he touches on.