

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
Carey Perloff, Artistic Director • Ellen Richard, Executive Director

PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

No Exit

BY JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

ADAPTED FROM THE FRENCH BY PAUL BOWLES

PERFORMED IN CONCERT WITH *THE VALET*,
BY JONATHON YOUNG

CONCEIVED AND DIRECTED BY KIM COLLIER

ORIGINALLY PRODUCED BY THE VIRTUAL STAGE AND
ELECTRIC COMPANY THEATRE

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A MATTER OF CHOICE

Sartre and Resistance

BY MICHAEL PALLER

Some of the more revealing aspects of a play aren't found in dialogue but in unspoken words: in stage directions and the playwright's choice of where the action is set. As Jean-Paul Sartre describes it, *No Exit* takes place in "a drawing room in Second Empire style." Of all ways to decorate a room in hell, why Second Empire?

A little history: In June 1940, the French division in which Sartre served as a meteorologist surrendered to the Germans, and he spent the next eight months in German POW camps. When he returned to Paris the following March, he found a city ruled by the Nazis, who had divided France into an occupied territory in the north and southeast, and a "free" zone in the south, ruled by a puppet government in Vichy. As did other writers and intellectuals, Sartre chose to resist. He wrote for a resistance publication, *Combat*, edited by Albert Camus. With some students from the École normale supérieure, the Parisian graduate school that educated many of the leaders of French culture and politics (including Sartre himself), he formed a group called Socialism and Liberty. This disparate lot of anarchists, Communists, and Trotskyites wrote and distributed anti-Nazi pamphlets until it ceased operations at the end of 1941. Aside from one or two abortive efforts to get involved in violent resistance, Sartre spent the rest of the war writing.

He wrote a play based on the Elektra myth called *The Flies*, and his major statement on existentialism, *Being and Nothingness*, simultaneously in 1942. *The Flies* turned the Greek tale into an allegory of life under the Nazis, about those who collaborated and those who resisted. In *Being and Nothingness*, he laid out his existentialist philosophy, which says, among many things, that we are flung into a world that is without meaning until our actions give it one; that our choices are made in freedom and that we must acknowledge that fact and not blame them on other people; that we shouldn't rely too heavily on others' opinions to arrive at our own self-image; that we must make choices as if we were acting on everyone else's behalf; and that the only meaning our lives have comes from the sum of the choices that we make. In 1943, he wrote a play titled *Huis clos*. In Britain it was translated as *In Camera*, as in an enclosed space or a legal procedure held in private. In America, it was called *No Exit*. Both *The Flies* and *No Exit* were produced in Paris during the war; *No Exit*, about three people sentenced to spend eternity in hell for the choices they made in life, opened two weeks before D-Day.



Andy Thompson (background) as Cradeau and Jonathon Young as The Valet in *No Exit*. Photo by Michael Julian Berz.

It is painful to admit responsibility for one's choices, Sartre believed, and so it was for many in France during the war. Like most people, he found himself hemmed in by a deadly set of circumstances. He said, "During the occupation, we had two choices: collaborate or resist." However, not every one of the myriad daily choices that writers and artists had to make was so clear-cut.

During and after the war, Sartre was accused of resisting the occupation from a table at the Café de Flore, and there is some truth to this. *The Flies*, though no great popular success, brought him a lucrative screenplay deal with the French studio Pathé, enabling him and his companion, Simone de Beauvoir, to move into commodious rooms in the Hôtel La Louisiane. He taught three days a week at the Lycée Condorcet, a prestigious secondary school whose alumni included Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Verlaine, and Marcel Proust. Evenings, Sartre and de Beauvoir hobnobbed with other artists who were surviving the occupation, including Pablo Picasso and his mistress Dora Marr, George Braque, the actor Jean-Louis Barrault, writers George Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Camus, and others. Sartre would claim that these "fiestas," as they called them, of singing, dancing, and drinking, were examples of resistance: "As an omnipotent police kept forcing silence upon us, every word we uttered had the value of a declaration of rights; as we were constantly watched, every gesture we made was a commitment."

The Flies and *No Exit* had to be submitted to the Nazi censors before they could be produced. That the Germans, who suppressed *Madame Bovary* and burned more than 2,000 tons of French books, gave their approval testified, Sartre's supporters thought, to the subtlety and skill with which he evaded their blue pencils while damning their regime. Those who were less fond of him thought this proof of just how safe and toothless the plays were. No producer could mount a play without agreeing that Jews would be barred from participating in any capacity; Sartre, although a lifelong foe of antisemitism, went along. *The Flies* was produced at a theater that had long been called the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt but was renamed the Théâtre de la Cité to scrub away any hint of Bernhardt's Jewishness; German officers were in the audience and at the opening night receptions for both plays. However, the Communist newspaper *Action* called *The Flies* a model of "resistance theater," and the Front National du Théâtre, which regularly denounced collaborationist playwrights and actors, protested neither play. Sartre said later that he had sought permission to stage the plays not only from the Nazis but from the National Resistance Committee and the National Writers Committee, an organization of resistance writers, and that both had agreed. In his desire to see his plays produced, did he make the right choices? Were the accommodations he made justified by the anticollaborationist messages of both plays?

What has any of this to do with a room decorated in Second Empire style? Second Empire-style architecture was based in a Roman Empire-inflected, neoclassical gigantism,

often heavily ornamented, with tendencies toward the bombastic, empty, and vulgar. One well-known example of Second Empire architecture was the Reichstag in Berlin, home to the German parliament, which Hitler burned to the ground in 1933, blaming it on Communists. In the hysteria that followed, he consolidated his power. The Second Empire itself was a repressive regime led by the autocratic Napoleon III, born from the ashes of the 1848 revolution and ending in humiliating defeat during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. It was a period of economic growth for the wealthy and the bourgeois, and might be seen as a time when people were happy enough to get on with the regime as long as they weren't inconvenienced by the lack of freedoms around them. What better setting for another allegory, albeit a subtler one than *The Flies*, about the choices the French were making under Nazi rule?

"The most moving thing the theater can show is a character creating himself, the moment of choice, of the free decision which commits him to a moral code and a whole way of life," Sartre wrote. In *No Exit*, the characters have made their choices and are dead. Now they examine them: Could they have chosen differently? Will they accept responsibility for their actions? Sartre rejected the notion of regret, but is it possible that in *No Exit*—written in the relative comfort of the Hôtel La Louisiane with plenty of money on hand from Pathé—he was wondering, unconsciously, about some of the choices he'd made (just as the Cradeau-Estelle-Inez triangle reflects his and de Beauvoir's own romantic entanglements of those years)? Cradeau, the journalist and author, claims to have fled his country in wartime in order to continue his pacifist work across the border in Geneva. He is haunted by doubts, however, and wonders if his ideals were the real reason he didn't fight for his country. Afraid of the answer within himself, he seeks it in Estelle: "If there was one, just one soul who would say with all his might that I didn't run away, that I *have* some courage, that I'm a man—I—I know I'd be saved." One notable detail about *No Exit's* Second Empire room is that it contains no mirrors, so the characters look for consoling images of themselves in the eyes of their fellow captives. Inez constantly invites Estelle to find herself in her eyes: "Look into my eyes. What do you see?" she asks, and later, "You'll find that in my eyes you'll be the way you really want to be." Justifying oneself through the good opinions of others, Sartre thought, is a sure sign that one is in hell.

In a recent article in *The New Republic*, David Bell quotes a postwar, introspective Sartre: "The whole country both resisted and collaborated. Everything we did was equivocal; we never quite knew whether we were doing right or wrong; a subtle poison corrupted even our best actions." If these were, indeed, his real thoughts, then Sartre, who called himself "a writer who resisted, not a resistance fighter who wrote," might have wondered in the dark of night whether there was a place reserved for him in that Second Empire room.