

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

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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DIRECTOR'S NOTES FROM KIM COLLIER

Welcome to our live-film version of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*. When studying the play two years ago, I felt compelled to find out what would happen if we went further with the physical requirements of the production. For those of you who haven't read or seen a production of *No Exit*, typically the entire stage is occupied by the hotel room; the audience watches the action through the traditional, invisible "fourth wall," and The Valet only makes a few brief appearances to escort the characters in. For this production we have turned Sartre's original design inside out. We took the play's minor character, The Valet, who normally spends most of the play offstage, and made his domain the "live" space between the room and the audience. By closing off the fourth wall and creating theatrical space around the hotel room that traditionally defined the play's perimeter, we widened the frame and are exploring a possible exit to Sartre's existential masterpiece.

In Sartre's world, who we are is inseparable from what we do, and we are forever defined by the morality of those actions, not by God or Devil, but by ourselves and each other.

Although the existential ideas in the play are still potent (and perhaps always will be), the character types, some of their language, and the inherent "character flaws" they represent have become slightly dated; thus some of what was written in wartime France doesn't necessarily have the same emotional impact or resonance for audiences in San Francisco in 2011. We've changed since then. Jon Young (who plays The Valet) and I wondered when working on this play: Might there ever be a time when the rest of the play will also have dated to the point of no longer having its original impact? Sartre's play is full of poignant observations on shame, identity, and self-deception. Will we ever get to a place where we no longer recognize ourselves in this play, but see it as a thing of the past? We gave these questions to The Valet, who endures a hell parallel to the one being suffered inside the hotel room. Onstage in front of a crowd, with really nothing to do—and, once his "official" text has been delivered, very little to say—The Valet is condemned to show these three people to a room full of onlookers, in the dark, time and time again. He's stuck, repeatedly holding the mirror up to check for a reflection, longing for his position here to be rendered unnecessary, waiting in agony for human nature to change.

In thinking about this piece, I did not set out to create a live film; rather the form emerged from the desire to fulfill the play's demands and truly lock up the three characters together. The problem then to solve was: How can the audience see the play? This led us to using live video feed, which itself was an extension of an ongoing investigation of ours into the relationship between theater and film. When breaking down the filming style



Director Kim Collier stands on the *No Exit* set with actors (L to R) Lucia Frangione, Andy Thompson, and Laara Sadiq projected behind her. Photo by Nathan Medd.

and positions of cameras, I felt it was really important to deal with the specifics of the medium. I moved towards a very unfilmic approach. Instead of mimicking what good films do—such as cutting between characters and action—I spread the film out and projected each shot side by side. Each character is given their space/frame, like the chairs that Sartre gives them in the room. Then, as we do in theater, we are able to reveal the dynamics and power plays between people by moving the characters into each other’s screens. The result, I hope, is a growing sense of stasis and a desire for movement and release from the “gaze of the other.”