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

ORIGINALY PRODUCED BY THE VIRTUAL STAGE AND ELECTRIC COMPANY THEATRE

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ABOVE Jonathon Young as The Valet in *No Exit*. Photo by Tim Matheson.

ON THE COVER Lucia Frangione and Andy Thompson in *No Exit*. Photo by Michael Julian Berz.
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No Exit illustration for the cover of Fast Forward Weekly magazine by Scott Kowalchuk, Scott Kowalchuk Illustration
CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF NO EXIT

Jean-Paul Sartre’s No Exit was first presented as Huis clos in Paris in May 1944. Paul Bowles’s English adaptation opened on Broadway in 1946. The Virtual Stage and Electric Company Theatre coproduction—a “live-cinematic interpretation”—ran at the Centre for Digital Media in Vancouver in May 2008, after which it toured Canada. A.C.T. presented the U.S. premiere in April 2011.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

THE VALET   Jonathon Young
CRADEAU     Andy Thompson
INEZ        Laara Sadiq
ESTELLE     Lucia Frangione

SETTING

A sparsely furnished, enclosed hotel room and the corridor just outside of it.

SYNOPSIS

The Valet enters, picks up the telephone, and reports to his uncle (who works on the third floor of the hotel) that everything—including the audience—is in place and ready to receive the soon-to-arrive guests. He then collects Vincent Cradeau, a journalist, and delivers him to his room. Cradeau, fully aware that he has died and is in hell, admits that it is hardly what he expected from the stories told about “down there.” The Valet scoffs at the idea of an afterlife filled with torture chambers—hell is merely a room in a passageway that leads to more rooms. Cradeau tries to steel himself against his situation, asking The Valet a number of questions. He learns that in this reality, where the lights never go off, no one sleeps: “It’s life without time off, without a break.” The Valet leaves. Cradeau finds that the service bell is broken and he is unable to open the door. He is trapped.

Soon Miss Inez Serrano—a secretary—is brought in by The Valet. Unlike Cradeau, Inez takes in her new surroundings in silence, and The Valet leaves soon after depositing her. Cradeau suggests that the two could ease their situation by behaving extremely courteously to each other; Inez, however, says that she is not a polite person and takes issue with the way her roommate’s mouth involuntarily twitches. Inez does not “care much for men.”

As both occupants await the official start to their suffering, The Valet ushers in Estelle Delaunay, the last of the room’s occupants. Inez immediately warms to her. The three
introduce themselves: Inez died a week ago when her lover, Florence, filled their apartment with gas; Estelle has only been dead one day, from pneumonia; Cradeau was executed by firing squad a month ago.

Without leaving their room, the three occupants can look back on the living, watching the activities of those left behind. Meanwhile, in his own space, The Valet monitors the activity of the room on three large screens. He secretly interacts with the images of his three wards while killing time trapped in his own personal hell, eternally presenting the play *No Exit* under orders from his uncle.

Estelle questions why the three have been grouped together. Cradeau suggests that it is by chance, but Inez argues that nothing has been left to chance, especially the room’s heat: it is so hot that Cradeau begins to take off his jacket, but Estelle refuses to suffer the indecency of a man in his shirt-sleeves. Inez suggests that they might be able to understand their predicament if they were to reveal the crimes they committed while alive. Estelle claims innocence: her only crime, she says, was growing up poor and marrying a wealthy older man. Cradeau asserts that his only fault was that he stuck to his principles and
told the truth in his newspaper articles, which landed him on death row as a traitor. Inez accuses both of holding back, and the ensuing squabble reveals the truth: they are destined to serve as each other’s torturers. In an effort to avoid this fate, the three agree to sit silently, each in his or her own corner of the room. This doesn’t last long: Inez begins singing, and Estelle—anxious to make sure she looks pretty—asks Cradeau for a mirror. After Cradeau ignores Estelle, Inez offers to act as her mirror. Estelle, who is more interested in Cradeau’s opinion, hesitantly accepts. Inez tests her new power over Estelle by lying to her about a fictitious pimple; she threatens to be a cruel reflection if Estelle is unkind to her. Estelle laments Cradeau’s disinterest. Cradeau bemoans their harping.

Cradeau proposes they make a new effort to ignore one another, but Inez will have none of it: Cradeau is torturing her by his mere presence in the room, because Estelle refuses to pay attention to Inez so long as a man is present. Inez vows retribution against Cradeau. Cradeau decides to find out exactly with whom he is dealing, so he renews the conversation about their earthly crimes by exposing his own: he mistreated his wife, to the extent that he boarded his own mistress in their home. Inez confesses that she seduced her own cousin’s wife, Florence, away from him, and he died under the wheels of a trolley car; she gradually wore her lover down until Florence killed them both in their sleep. Estelle eventually admits that she was responsible for her own lover’s death because she threw their illegitimate infant daughter off a balcony; he subsequently shot himself.

Gradually, as the living forget about them, the two women lose touch with the earth. The memory of Cradeau, however, lives on much longer: he is remembered as a coward. Cradeau frantically seeks consolation from Estelle, who is willing to accept whatever portrait he wants to paint of himself; but Inez points out that Estelle will cling to any man, coward or no. Cradeau, who cannot stomach a woman who does not honestly believe in him, pushes Estelle away; Estelle desperately tries to make Cradeau love her; and Inez desires only the attention of Estelle, who will have nothing to do with her. In frustration, Cradeau pounds on the door, which, to their surprise, opens. Suspicious of what new tortures await them, they all refuse to step outside.

Cradeau realizes that his only salvation is to convince the hard-minded Inez that he is not a coward. Inez celebrates her new authority, but Estelle undercuts it by showing Cradeau that he can hurt Inez by making love to Estelle. Cradeau cannot make love to Estelle, however, with Inez watching and judging him, so Estelle stabs Inez with a letter opener. As Inez is already dead, however, this accomplishes nothing. They settle in for an eternity of suffering.
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
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.”
VISION STATEMENT

BY JONATHON YOUNG

In this new vision for No Exit, the sense of entrapment and alienation is complete and palpable: the characters are literally cut off from us, and the essentially “live” component of theater is hidden behind the four walls of a tiny, claustrophobic hotel room.

Inside the room there are hidden cameras, which capture footage that is then projected to the audience. The projected image therefore becomes our primary access point to the story, as only in selected moments do we see the main characters live. The filmed version of the hell they are enduring speaks to our experience of watching human suffering, removed emotionally and physically by the media that stands in for the real thing.

When the projected image is shown in such striking contrast to the presence of the living, breathing performer, it draws attention to how video (and media in general) represents a kind of death. The characters Inez, Cradeau, and Estelle are “made dead” by the technology that mediates between performer and spectator.

The other significant difference between our interpretation and other productions of No Exit is that the character of The Valet is given greater presence, inhabiting the “live” space that surrounds the hotel room. As in the original script, The Valet is responsible for showing the recently deceased to their quarters, but in our production he serves as a kind of go-between, a link between the audience (with whom he interacts), his never-seen uncle (who works on the third floor and calls him on occasion), and the main characters of the play. We watch The Valet watching. His presence as an omniscient viewer, having to endure this play yet another time, gives rise to a number of questions: Whose hell is this? Is it being shown for him, or for us? What is the purpose of recording their suffering? Is it still relevant? Do we see ourselves caught in a similar predicament? And how do we as audience fit into this cycle of watching, watcher, and watched?

This conceptualization of No Exit gives us a platform to, first, continue our investigations of the intersection between live theater and film, and, second, to investigate how the presence of a new narrative can reframe an existing, well-known play.
“IS THIS WHO YOU ARE?”
An Interview with Director Kim Collier and Actor/Writer Jonathon Young

BY ELIZABETH BRODERSEN

For me, live performance is a rare place where we share the investigation of who we are, what we believe, and find a collective experience in an increasingly mediated world that pulls us apart and forces us into isolation. . . . Theater is that bottomless place of discovery where we can always find the new, the curious, the remarkable, the insight, the wisdom. It is the muse of my questing life.

—Kim Collier, in her acceptance speech for the 2010 Siminovitch Prize in Theater

Atom Egoyan said that the reason film is so successful is because it’s the medium that has come closest to imitating our dreams. And I think that’s quite succinct. Film does do that. . . . And theater does that, but it preserves the sense of community. I love being in the theater and sometimes just looking at the audience. Sometimes my favorite part of theater is just the fact that we’re all in the building together and engaging in the story.

—Jonathon Young, in a 2006 ArtsAlive.ca interview

Kim Collier and Jonathon Young, co-artistic directors of Canada’s groundbreaking Electric Company Theatre, met while training at Vancouver’s Studio 58 acting school. In 1996 they joined fellow alumni Kevin Kerr and David Hudgins to form an unconventional collective that has become a driving force in the vibrant community of innovative theater and film makers (which also includes No Exit coproducer The Virtual Stage and the artists who created the popular production of The Overcoat seen at a.c.t. in 2005) that now flourishes in Canada’s westernmost metropolis.

In creating and producing original works of event-based theater, Electric Company takes an interdisciplinary approach that considers the script equal in value to scenic design and visual imagery, crosses artistic disciplines, emphasizes physical movement, and integrates the use of new media. A formidable theatrical team (as well as husband and wife), Collier and Young work collaboratively with their colleagues on virtually every aspect of each production, with Collier typically in the role of director and Young performing and often writing. Among their best-known projects are Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla, a multimedia examination of Western culture’s fascination with and fear of
technology; Young’s solo show *Palace Grand*, a snowbound fantasy set amid the Klondike gold rush; *Studies in Motion: The Hauntings of Eadweard Muybridge*, a multimedia exploration of the life and work of the turn-of-the-century photographer whose obsession with capturing the human body on film led to the birth of cinema; *The Score*, a multimedia stage-project-turned-film, which fuses science and art in an exploration of the implications of the Human Genome Project; and their most recent project, *Tear the Curtain!*, a stylish theater/film hybrid that plays on film noir archetypes.

Collier was recently honored with the prestigious Elinore & Lou Siminovitch prize, an award recognizing her “leadership and spirit of innovation in the theater world.” A prolific actor as well as author, Young appears frequently on stage, television, and film. While on a much-deserved holiday, they graciously agreed to a joint email exchange discussing their unconventionally contemporary approach to Sartre’s enduring classic.

**I understand that Electric Company is known for developing “creation-based theater.” How do you define that?**

**Jonathon Young:** Electric Company (ec) is “creation based” in that, with the exception of *No Exit*, where we started with a preexisting script, all of our plays have been created
by a tight-knit group of artists at the core of the company. But as a term for a certain type of theater, “creation-based” is really just another way of describing what is more widely known as devised theater. The creation process for this kind of work varies from company to company (and in the case with EC often from project to project), but there are some common elements that define the piece as having been “devised.” Primarily the term signifies the breakdown of the traditional hierarchy, wherein the playwright’s text and the director’s subsequent interpretation of that text informs the whole of the production. Most of our scripts have been collectively written, and in these works the text is often informed by a design or staging concept, the narrative is often conveyed wordlessly through the use of choreography, and on occasion dialogue is generated through improvisation by a cast of actors. Several of our plays, even those performed on a traditional proscenium stage, are site specific, and here the script is informed by the physical space it is performed in. So, regardless of whether the script has been written by a single writer or by the group, it has undergone an intensive collective process and, from its infancy, has been shaped by a variety of factors.

**HOW DID YOUR PRODUCTION OF NO EXIT COME ABOUT?**

*Young:* Andy Thompson, artistic director of The Virtual Stage (TVS) [and the actor who plays Cradeau], approached Kim to direct *No Exit* as a site-specific piece, to be performed in an actual hotel room in Vancouver. In this vision of the piece, which came from Andy, the audience would be caught inside the room, viewing the action within the same claustrophobic confines as the actors. After considering this as a possibility, Kim realized that to push Sartre’s premise to its extreme, the characters should be truly locked up, behind closed doors, and within four solid walls. This gave birth to the conceptualization of the current production, because it immediately posed some interesting theatrical complications, namely: How does the audience see the actors, and what does The Valet do if he remains onstage? When Kim pitched this idea to me as a possible coproduction between TVS and EC, I began work on what became The Valet’s “underscore” to Sartre’s play.

**YOU’VE SAID THAT THIS PRODUCTION “SITS NICELY BETWEEN THE MEDIUMS OF THEATER AND FILM.” HOW SO?**

*Young/Kim Collier:* The production is a rather unusual artistic experience for the audience. First of all, the show is not prerecorded; the actors are present and performing live. The audience does gain access to this performance through media, but the treatment is not filmic—like big sweeping shots or pushing into a close-up—rather, the cameras remain fixed while the actors move through their (theatrical) blocking. And with three screens
simultaneously showing different angles, the film is deconstructed into three distinct playing areas or “stages.” In film, the movement and positioning of the camera plays a huge role in the emotional experience of the viewer. In No Exit, the fixed camera positions create a voyeuristic experience, compress the room, and intensify the sense that the characters cannot escape the oppressive gaze of the audience—or of each other.

**HOW DID YOU DEVELOP THE FILMIC ASPECTS OF THE PIECE?**

Collier: It all began on paper. I knew that it was important to me that the three characters would be alone in the room, so I knew the voyeurist cameras would be stationary. I drew the room and played with camera positions and what could be seen in the frame depending on where they would be located. What kind of blocking would reveal the action of the play, and what kind of shots would support this action from the camera’s static position? While playing on paper and talking with my friend Brian Johnson (a professional director of photography), I began working out how to frame the performers to provide both the close-up and the long shot in one frame. I had also realized that each screen onstage would commence as the frame for each character, as in Sartre’s play each couch or chair is that frame. From these individual frames the characters penetrate each other’s frames (screens) to unfold the power dynamics of the piece. Then the full design team met up and we worked on mocking up how to make these three primary frames work. What did the measurements need to be to get key set pieces in frame? How to reveal one character in a camera and not catch the others ones as well? How to have the eye lines between characters feel real while performing to the camera? On and on it went. In the end, we created the design with seven cameras, and we can select through live editing which cameras are on which screen at which time. Part of the pleasure for me with this setup was to work in a graphical sense, composing always what the audience can see even in empty frames, and to create a visual arc for the piece that helps the audience understand the relationship progressions in the piece.

**WHAT WAS THE REHEARSAL PROCESS LIKE, AND HOW WAS IT DIFFERENT FROM REHEARSING A CONVENTIONAL PIECE OF LIVE THEATER?**

Collier: The rehearsal process was extremely rigorous and extremely detailed. What happens in the room with the actors in order to create a strong image on screen is often completely unnatural physically. Literally one inch more or less in one direction or another in the room in front of the camera can have huge implications on a 16-foot-wide screen. The actors had to learn how to connect to their scene partners and the material while performing highly unusual physical gymnastics in the room to compose the staging to the camera.
It is important to note that the performers also appear live in front of the audience. Those sections of the play were rehearsed in a very typical fashion, but we needed to balance the vocals between mic voices in the room to live voices onstage. The rehearsal process to explore the underscore of The Valet was extremely subtle. How to allow the audience to stay fully engaged with the main narrative of the play, while experiencing as well the world of The Valet? This balance is under constant refinement.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE FUTURE OF FILM AND OTHER NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN LIVE THEATER?**

Collier: I think the use of media in theater will continue and there is still much to be explored. But I think it is a tool like music or dance or design . . . using media is one of the many tools we have to realize a theater performance. It should not be used every time, but it can at times provide a deepening relationship to the content and take theater towards some exciting new territory. I love working with media; it seems to be the frontier of theater art at this time.

**THE PRODUCTION AT A.C.T. WILL BE THE FIFTH TIME YOU HAVE MOUNTED NO EXIT. HOW HAS THE PIECE CHANGED SINCE ITS FIRST INCARNATION?**

Collier: This project had its first run in 2008 in a warehouse space in Vancouver, complete
with a cinderblock-like bunker we used as the room, which we designed the interior of to fit the description in the play. In a warehouse we could have incredible lateral staging and huge projections side by side. When we toured the project in 2009 to three theaters, we had to reconcile the design for a more traditional theater. This meant we had to build the bunker (the room) and adjust our projections and staging to a tighter scale, and we needed to resolve the space around The Valet—in the warehouse we used the existing walls.

So, what you see onstage here at A.C.T. is the design reimagined for this space. We carried forward the interior of the room design intact, as well as the impulse to have the entire space (now theater) be the world of the play. With each venue we travel to, we adapt the piece to the new space. Blocking changes, the set gets completely rotated, or the floor space shrinks. There are really important sightline considerations for this piece. We have to play with our necessary set pieces and projections for each space until we find the best way to reveal the show to the audience in the new space. Here at A.C.T. we chose to make our playing area smaller, to rotate the room upstage, to animate a high catwalk. We as well continue to refine what The Valet says and does from production to production. This play-around-the-play is an ongoing artistic investigation, and as we continue changing as artists, so does our desire to interact with our creations.
WHY DO YOU THINK THIS PRODUCTION OF WHAT SOME CONSIDER TO BE A RATHER BLEAK CLASSIC TEXT HAS BEEN SO POPULAR WITH AUDIENCES?
coller: I think it is so popular because it is working with a fairly well-known classic text but completely reimagining how it is presented. The form of this production as a “live film” is really new and allows the audience to come to this work with fresh eyes and ears. The project is delicious in its theatricality. I think for Sartre aficionados the commentary around the play provides another layer of interest that they can apply their critical thinking towards.

YOU’VE DESCRIBED THE VALET’S TEXT AND ACCOMPANYING PHYSICAL NARRATIVE AS A “PARALLEL PLAY” TO SARTRE’S TEXT. HOW DID YOU DEVELOP THE ADDITIONAL MATERIAL? DID YOU HAVE ANY PARTICULAR INSPIRA TIONS? (ONE REVIEW SUGGESTED SAMUEL BECKETT’S ENGAME.)
young: I prefer the term “underscore” to “parallel play.” But yes, we have created another hell, that of The Valet, which is a parallel to the hell of the three central characters. I’m not sure where you got the reference to Endgame; that particular reference isn’t really applicable. However, The Valet’s absurd situation of waiting through the endless repetition of the same words is a hellish state certainly evocative of Beckett’s theatrical terrain.

The bulk of rehearsal time was spent on the meticulous staging for the cameras inside the room. It was almost impossible to begin developing blocking for The Valet until we got into the theater, because until then we couldn’t see the relationship between The Valet and the screens. So building the physical underscore to the projected narrative (i.e., where The Valet would take over and where he would become “background”) was almost entirely figured out in the week prior to opening. Now The Valet’s path onstage is more or less established; however, at A.C.T. the set configuration has changed and the theater itself provides new possible paths, so once again those decisions will be made once we get “installed” at the theater.

The inspiration for The Valet’s text came from my first reaction to Sartre’s text, which was that, at its core, there remain some profoundly timeless observations or ideas about human nature, but that, in contrast, much of the dialogue, or the surface of the play, had aged and become dated. The play is at once stale and contemporary.

When it was first performed, No Exit was part of a profound shift in thinking and understanding of the world. To imagine no higher authority than yourself and to understand you are responsible for all your actions and that they define who you are was groundbreaking. Sartre’s writing on self-deception, another key theme to the play, is a huge challenge to us all. He looks at how we manufacture identities to create ourselves,
but that they often are self-deceptions, that if you go deeper to the core, there is another truth there of who you are. And the presence of others, their view of us, always shapes our understanding of who we are.

What we found a bit dated in the play were the surrounding circumstances. Can a young person today born in Vancouver, Canada, fully understand the hauntings of Cradeau as a collaborator during the Nazi occupation of France? The fact that the play’s given circumstances for the characters are to reveal Sartre’s ideas (they are not so much a plot unto themselves) is why it can feel a bit musty and dusty. So I guess we observed that the ideas are powerfully relevant, but sometimes the circumstances feel removed.

The question that arose, then, was: Are we still today susceptible to suffering the kind of self-imposed hell that Sartre portrays? Is this condition inescapable? If the surface of the play no longer speaks to me the way it would have in 1944, will the same eventually occur with the core ideas? In other words, is there hope for escaping Sartre’s portrait of humanity? Is there hope for change?

The Valet is aware (while the other characters are not) that there is an audience present, an unreal aspect of spectacle to this hell. People are here to watch this—that’s all he knows. He suffers as the dialogue among the three remains the same, looping, while they seem to speak it as though for the first time. In a bid to stop it he breaks the rules (or so he thinks) and opens the door, but they never leave.

But aware as he is of the audience’s presence, he’s not permitted to speak directly to them, for this would undermine the integrity of the work. He pushes the limit and tries to make contact, to say something, to give his opinion, to beg for mercy—he is threatened with physical punishment. Is his fear valid? Or is he, too, caught in the loop?

Could he just up and leave? There is an authority, an imposed sense of duty, that keeps him here. A voice on the telephone from an upper floor: his uncle. His superior. Likely the family connection who secured his position and to whom he is now indebted. But he can’t quite recall. If he did leave, where would he go? Unlike the characters in the room, he has no story, no details of any life beyond his position here. He is, in Sartre’s play, a mere device—necessary to set it in motion and then rendered mute and without agency or motive. In other words, he is bound to this play as long as it continues running. As long as it’s speaking to us—holding up even the faintest glimmer of reflection and showing us an aspect of who we are—it is serving its purpose, and he, too, must serve. Total irrelevance is his only hope for salvation.
This production places a great deal of importance on the role of the audience. Do you think your _No Exit_ requires more of an audience than a conventional play?

Collier: Yes, I do; we implicate the audience as having a role to play. Simply: Will they see a reflection of themselves in the characters onstage? They are observed by The Valet towards this end. He addresses them directly, counts them, watches them, moves through them, so yes, we have given the audience the role of “audience.” They are to be none other than they are, but we place meaning in this role as we all observe the play cycle to life once again. The frame of the play has widened to include The Valet, the theater space, the audience.

Sartre said, “One of the chief motives of artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world.” What do you believe is the role of theater and the theater artist in society?

Collier: Perhaps to help us awaken—to life, to beauty—to question and provoke. To help us see from another perspective; to create compassion, to investigate the complexities of the human heart or human nature. To hold a mirror up to contemporary culture and ask, “Is this who you are?” To break down black and white and slip into the grey areas of life. To illuminate, to create hope, to inspire change, to challenge the status quo, to remember our humanity. I truly believe theater is a place that can connect to the divine, to our greater or more universal selves, by participating in a collective communal experience.
HELL BY DESIGN
An Interview with Scenic Designer Jay Gower Taylor

BY DAN RUBIN

“If I had known that this show was going to places like Toronto and San Francisco,”
scenic designer Jay Gower Taylor confessed during a phone interview a month before
he was to arrive in San Francisco with the Canadian production of No Exit, “I probably
would have approached it differently, but this is what it is and it’s working. It’s more than
working. I think it’s a brilliant show!”

Taylor—a reformed dancer who enjoyed a 20-year career touring internationally as a
founding member of Ballet British Columbia and with Toronto’s Dancemakers—began
doing set design ten years ago. “In our business,” he explained, “you have to learn to do a
number of things.” He was eligible for a grant from Canada’s Dancer Transition Resource
Centre to retrain in another discipline—“because the life of a dancer only lasts so long”—and
it was while studying in The University of British Columbia (ubc) Theatre Department
that he was approached by Kim Collier and Jonathon Young to design No Exit. “They had
limited resources, and it was an incredible opportunity for a student. I had done some work
with Jonathon before. He was in a one-man play called The Invisible Life of Joseph Finch. I
had done the set for that, and we had struck up a wonderful relationship. We have a simi-
lar sense of thinking [about collaboration]. He and Kim are very involved in their own set
design, because their work is always deeply integrated with their environments and they have
a strong collaborative spirit.”

No Exit’s French title, Huis clos, means “behind closed doors.” That is exactly where
No Exit audiences usually find themselves—locked in an eternal room with three lost
souls. Collier, however, wanted to keep the audience outside. She presented Taylor
with a warehouse space at Vancouver’s Centre for Digital Media, where the plan was
to build an enclosed hotel room in which the action of the play would take place. This
action would only be visible to the audience through live video projected on a series
of screens, while The Valet (played by Young) remained outside the room, watching
Sartre’s damned characters with the audience. For each remounting of the production
at theaters across Canada, Taylor has adapted this original set to suit the needs of the
particular venue.

Taylor spoke with us after he had spent the morning chasing down wayward prop
elements, which the tight-budgeted original production had begged and borrowed from
friends and colleagues. Once he caught his breath, he told us about his experience designing
(Front to back) Laara Sadiq, Lucia Frangione, and Andy Thompson acting in the No Exit bunker with cameras. Photo by Tim Matheson.
theater’s most infamous hell in a way that turns theatrical tradition on its head and about the process of rethinking the original set for the American Conservatory Theater.

I UNDERSTAND THAT ORIGINALLY THE IDEA WAS TO CREATE A SITE-SPECIFIC PRODUCTION OF NO EXIT, STAGING IT IN A REAL HOTEL ROOM. I ASSUME YOU WEREN’T A PART OF THE CONVERSATION UNTIL THEY STARTED TALKING ABOUT DOING IT IN THE WAREHOUSE?

That’s correct. [Kim and Jonathon brought me on once] they had the warehouse. They had the idea to stage it in a 16’ x 16’ enclosed room where the audience couldn’t see the action and then pick the action up with the camera. I worked on various positions of the enclosed room inside the warehouse and different configurations of the audience in relation to that room. [One idea was to] put the room right in the center of the warehouse and have the audience walk around it and hear [the dialogue] coming from inside.

WITHOUT CAMERAS?

No, but you’re right that there was this idea, “Is it enough just to hear the play?” What was interesting about the space, though, was that there was this 14’ x 16’ cement bunker that was the car or truck washroom—it was a very bizarre space, used for washing trucks down chemically—and it already had a cinderblock look to it. We decided we could just build the actual hotel room interior inside that with theater flats. Picture a large rectangular room
(what we called “the hangar”), about 140' x 140', with this bunker way off in the corner. What was really interesting was that the audience got the viewpoint of the opening of the door. You could see into the room, and you could catch glimpses of the mantelpiece and the bust, but the rest of the room wasn’t visible. It was nice that the audience could visually see that door open, the light coming from it, the action coming from inside the room, and hearing it [come from inside the room].

**WHAT DOES THE INSIDE OF THE ROOM LOOK LIKE? THERE ARE CONFLICTING STAGE DIRECTIONS DEPENDING ON WHICH TRANSLATION YOU ARE READING. ONE DESCRIBES THE ROOM AS “RATHER LIKE A DENTIST’S WAITING ROOM” WHILE ANOTHER SAYS IT IS “A DRAWING-ROOM IN SECOND EMPIRE STYLE.”**

We went with a hotel room.

**WHY?**

We were thinking of it as a large hotel in hell, where there is just room after room after room after room on floor after floor after floor after floor after floor. The warehouse was sort of this cavernous space, and outside the bunker, where The Valet was, was kind of dingy and not “hot like hell” but sort of damp and miserable. There is nothing really interesting about his space, so he projects (secretly, in my mind) the lives of these people up onto the dingy walls—to witness them. That’s what comes alive. And it is those characters that he falls in love with, or is amused or not amused by. He’s reacting to them.

It is really difficult for any actor to catch the audience’s attention when there are three huge screens onstage, and it is just beautiful how Jonathon does it and how Kim directed it, because you want to add to the layers of what is going on in the room rather than steal attention away from it.

**DOES HE DO THIS BY TREATING THE SCREENS AS CHARACTERS?**

He does. He interacts with the screens like characters, but he also engages the audience in certain ways. He’ll climb up on a ladder and get up in the face of one of [the projected characters] and try to reach out and touch them. At one point—and this doesn’t always work with the angles in all the theaters, but in the warehouse it was really beautiful—he would waltz. He has his own little record player and he would play these songs, and his shadow would then dance with the person who was projected.

**WHAT ELSE DID YOU USE TO CREATE THE WORLD OF THE VALET?**

We wanted to incorporate a stack of mirrors, because a mirror is taken out of the hotel room by The Valet.
SO THEY’RE FORCED TO USE EACH OTHER AS MIRRORS.
Right—a stack of them would evoke the idea that this event has repeated itself many times. Similarly, he has a pile of bells that the characters would have used to call The Valet to service. And there were things we found from the ’40s—a big clunky old desk, and old speakers that we actually use, because the sound designer liked the funky sound that was coming from them. We were going into these [performance] halls that had hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of sound equipment, and we were using these garage-sale speakers. So that was fun. There was also this beautiful old beam projector from one of the old theaters here in Vancouver, and it was just in the back of the prop storage, and I thought it looked so interesting. It was on a big tripod, and it had all these pulleys and arms and plates that could go in and out to get different looks. It just mysteriously sits there [onstage] as an artifact, for people with their own imaginations to run with: “Why is that there?”

(L to R) Andy Thompson, Lucia Frangione, Laara Sadiq, and Jonathon Young on the original No Exit set. Photo by
These old gadgets give a sense of The Valet operating and controlling the situation and the play itself. The eccentric style and vintage of his world evokes loneliness, nostalgia, and the passage of time. He has been doing this forever.

**How Many Cameras Does This Production Use?**
The three performers are each framed [by cameras] in their chairs, which is often what happens in the set design [for *No Exit*]: there is a chair for each of the three characters. Then there is a spy camera, and then there is a wide-angle camera overhead. They are always stationary, but what gives them the movement quality is that there is a switcher that keeps switching the viewpoint. The three cameras that are on the chairs [take the place of the perspective of a] typical production, where the fourth wall of the room becomes the audience. [When they look into these cameras,] it looks like they are looking back at the
world from hell. In the story, they are looking back and saying, “Oh, they’re at my funeral now. Come on, cry! You can cry more than that!”

**WHAT HAPPENED TO THE DESIGN WHEN NO EXIT WENT ON TOUR?**

It’s been interesting adapting the original site-specific staging to traditional theater spaces. Each theater brings different challenges and opportunities. The Valet, in particular, has the flexibility to respond to the eccentricities of any given space. When we put it onto a proscenium for the first time at Western Canada Theatre in Kamloops [British Columbia], the same rectangular shape [that we used in the warehouse] didn’t work anymore, because a proscenium opening is quite narrow. We had to hide a lot more of the actual space. We also had to recreate that cement bunker, or some sort of idea of that exterior, because we had just been using the walls of the warehouse, the actual building. At the American Conservatory Theater, the audience will get a better sightline down on top of the bunker, so we’ve had to paint it.

When we started going into theaters, I thought it would be beautiful to have a long red carpet that takes you right up to the door of the bunker, and that could come right from the audience. So that’s worked its way into the design now, and John Webber’s lighting for that is just exquisite. It’s almost like this celebrity invitation, but of course it’s not! It’s an invitation to hell! And there are a couple of great scenes of The Valet bringing people in, them getting away, and him racing after them into the audience to get them and then pulling them screaming back onto the carpet and marching them into the room.

**THOSE SCENES COULD NOT EXIST IF THIS WERE A TRADITIONAL STAGING, IF THE THREE MAIN CHARACTERS WERE IN THE SAME ROOM AS THE AUDIENCE.**

Exactly. You would just see the entrance [from the inside of the room]. For all of the sets I researched, you just see the actual doorway, the moment of entry.

**HAVE YOU DONE ANYTHING SPECIAL TO MAKE NO EXIT WORK AT A.C.T.?**

We’ve had to turn the room 90 degrees, and now the angle looking into the room through the door shows the opposite side [from what was seen in past productions]. Instead of seeing the mantelpiece and the bust of Caesar (which was a very prominent image), they’ll see the curtained window frame. This will be a brand-new version [of the room] with respect to how an audience member views it. The doorway used to open stage left and out; now it’s been turned 90 degrees clockwise and is facing the audience more.

The staging [inside the room] will be exactly the same. It’s just, when they open the door, they are going to have to face a different way.
YOU MENTIONED THE CAESAR BUST. ONE TRANSLATION SAYS THAT THERE SHOULD BE “A MASSIVE BRONZE ORNAMENT” ON THE MANTELPiece, AND ANOTHER SAYS IT IS A “STATUE OF CUPID.” WHY CAESAR? Because it was the most interesting of what was in the basement of props. It just seemed like it would work. Now that the production has been redone, redone, and redone, you start to think, “Wow, was that the right choice?” But I think it works because Caesar was such a prominent historical figure, and considering what he went through with people, being such a ruthless leader, and, of course, his own death, I think it’s interesting that that happened to be down there in the basement.

[During the 1940s,] when the play was first produced in France, it was chic to have some sort of mass-produced statue on your mantelpiece. Like how home décor is such a big thing right now, and you have all these shows telling you what’s in—“It’s really nice to feature a Picasso” or something on your mantelpiece. It had to be some object that is by now outdated or kitsch, and I thought [our Caesar] went with how I did the squareness and the Empire look of the molding.

DID YOU DIP INTO YOUR PERSONAL THEOLOGIES WHILE DESIGNING HELL? I was designing a place I would hate to stay in, something I hated the aesthetic of, but it was more important that the room itself didn’t become something [that would overpower] the words or the situation of the actors. What was fascinating about this project was that we were bringing these actors onstage and locking them in a room, and then picking them up [with cameras] and projecting them onto huge screens. That’s really captivating. The physical space that The Valet creates is also wonderful, and it is fun to go into every new theater and see what it can provide for this world: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the actors entered from there?” “Oh, the atrium eye light could really pick up the details here beautifully.” There is something unique about each space.
THE WORLD WITHIN THE ROOM IS OF TERTIARY IMPORTANCE TO THE SCREENS AND THE WORLD OF THE VALET.

It is. It is totally necessary, but it’s not meant to stand out. It stands out in a dull way, in that it is a room that the audience does not want to be in. Or it stands out because it doesn’t look like hell. It just looks like a regular old room. How can it be hell? It is more about how these characters discover amongst themselves, “Oh my God, we are hell.”

HOW HAS YOUR FIRST CAREER AS A DANCER INFLUENCED HOW YOU DESIGN?

I toured a lot. In every city, whether New York or Paris or Calgary, I would go to the gallery spaces, I would see the architecture. I was exposed to so much. We had a fantastic tour through Asia. Japan. Going to Kyoto. Seeing the Temple of a Thousand Buddhas. All those things are in my mind, and when someone gives me the freedom to create a world, I recall all those things I’ve seen. That is the kind of design I do. It’s more sculptural than what you might call a box set design. No Exit was a challenge for me. I had to create a real room of a specific period, which I had never done. I really enjoyed it, but I also enjoyed the fact that there was an outer chamber that allowed for more freedom. Right now I am trying to locate another 150 bells so I can get the bell pile bigger and bigger each time.
SARTRE’S “UNLIKEABLE SCOUNDRELS”
An Interview with Actors Lucia Frangione, Laara Sadiq, and Andy Thompson

BY DAN RUBIN

Since the 1944 premiere of Sartre’s *Huis clos (No Exit)*, the play’s central characters have been languishing in a small room that eternally ensnares them in a hell designed specifically for them. It is unusual, however, for the actors who play these roles to share the same fate—even if just for the two hours they perform the play. Typically, *No Exit’s* hotel room for the damned opens up to an audience: when the play is produced on a framed proscenium stage (like that of the American Conservatory Theater), the fourth wall of the room is replaced by the openness of the auditorium; when done in-the-round (with the audience surrounding the stage on all sides), all the walls are typically imaginary. Unique to The Virtual Stage and Electric Company Theatre’s production of *No Exit* is the use of an actual room—one door, four walls, a ceiling, and a floor. There is also a window, but it is bricked up. When Jonathon Young’s Valet closes the door on actors Andy Thompson (who plays Cradeau and is artistic director of The Virtual Stage), Laara Sadiq (Inez), and Lucia Frangione (Estelle), they are not pretending to be cut off from the world—they actually are.

Before traveling to San Francisco, these actors were scattered across Canada working on various projects, but they were all kind enough to answer a series of questions we posed to them via email. Here’s what they have to say about their experiences with *No Exit* and acting inside a box.

**WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THE FIRST TIME YOU EXPERIENCED NO EXIT, EITHER BY READING THE SCRIPT OR SEEING A PRODUCTION?**

**ANDY THOMPSON:** My first exposure to the text was when I saw it in French at college in the late 1980s. A girl I was dating played one of the main characters. I don’t remember which. It was in French. I do vividly remember, however, that woman. Ever since, *No Exit* has had a special place in my heart. And my sex life.

**LAARA SADIQ:** I first came across this play in high school—and it blew me away. I didn’t really understand what existentialism was outside of an academic context, but I was fascinated by this tiny capsule of a world and the notion that hell wasn’t a destination, but a living, breathing, tangible thing that these characters could only experience through their relationships to each other. Pretty heady stuff for a 17-year-old to digest, and I’m sure that
most of the finer points were lost on me at the time. But the ideas and the questions stuck with me. Years later, when I finally had the opportunity to do the show, I was amazed how much of it had stayed with me. And the irony is that, although the dilemmas seemed clearer to me later on in life, figuring them out was no easier.

**Lucia Frangione:** I first studied as a playwright. My mentor gave me the play to read when I was 19. I marveled at how Sartre was able to keep the tension in the room going even though the three people in hell were already dead (what do they have to lose?). The structure of the play is passive in nature, an elaborate retelling of the past, and yet Sartre manages to make the retelling of vital importance, so it becomes active. The confessions determine the shape of hell, the status of each character, their hopes for getting what they want. They may be dead to the world but they are very much alive spiritually and desperate to maintain an idea of who they are—who they have been—a legacy they can stomach for eternity. They are all rather unlikeable scoundrels, and yet there is just enough vulnerability there for me to be able to relate to all three of them and have compassion. The suspense is created out of my own desire to find some sort of redemption for them. For myself. My relationship to this play deepens with age as I get closer to death, quite frankly, and wonder what sort of impression I have left: What is my identity, the worth of my existence? How have I affected others: for better or for worse? What hell do I choose? It interests me that theologian C.S. Lewis published *The Great Divorce* in 1944, the same year *No Exit* was published: a Christian and an atheist both profoundly exploring the concept of an inner hell at the same time.

**Many people have a love/hate relationship with No Exit. Did you bring any preconceptions about the play—or your character?**

**Thompson:** As a producer and originator of the idea to do a production of *No Exit*, I certainly did come up against some backlash from the elder of some of my professional peers when I asked them for their thoughts and feedback. Several of them said, “Oh my God. It’s been overdone.” In one sense, that’s true. It is a play that is very well known by people...
who have been exposed to theater for years. But what I discovered is that there was a whole huge, new, young audience who was discovering it for the first time. That, in combination with the fact that [director] Kim Collier’s interpretation is so new and innovative, silenced anyone who may have had doubts.

sadiq: As with any piece of classic theater, context is everything. We’re always asking the questions, Why are we doing this now? How can we contextualize something for an audience that comes from a time and place that we no longer have any connection to? In the case of No Exit, wartime France can be a bit of a stretch for the average theatergoer to relate to. Kim was right on the money when she re-envisioned this world as a place where nothing is private and everything is under surveillance and Big Brother is very much alive and well and keeping tabs on us. cnn and the internet and social media and reality tv (the list is endless) have created this kind of world that we’re all very familiar with. So this production, although it is a period piece, is kind of like the love child of 1940s Europe and the new millennium. There’s your context.

frangione: I was surprised to be asked to read for this part. I had in my head some young, fluffy poodle-type woman for Estelle. At first I wasn’t sure how to get into Estelle’s skin and find my character’s sense of self-worth there. I don’t put much worth in my looks (or so I thought!). I’ve always put more into my generosity, work ethic, and coconut cream pie. But often the unexpected can be the most interesting casting choice. It reminds me of an interview I read with Janet McTeer about playing Nora in A Doll’s House on Broadway. It was very interesting to see such a tall powerful woman play the “little sparrow.” Same with Estelle. Her need to cling to sexual power and physical beauty is even more desperate now that she isn’t as young as she once was. When Estelle is called “Little One” it is even more powerful for her. The ache is stronger because she is even further away from her own ideal of herself. But, that said, when I was cast as Estelle, many people said, “Well, of course, you suit her,” which actually makes me a little nervous. What do they mean by that? Perhaps I am perceived as a neurotic, vain sexpot despite my coconut cream pie! Ahhhhhhh!
WHAT WERE YOUR INITIAL IMPRESSIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF TURNING NO EXIT ON ITS HEAD BY KEEPING THE AUDIENCE OUT OF THE ROOM RATHER THAN HAVING THEM INHABIT HELL WITH THE CHARACTERS? WHAT WERE YOUR INITIAL IMPRESSIONS ABOUT THE USE OF CAMERAS?

THOMPSON: The show originally started as a production of The Virtual Stage. It was going to be an “anti-technology show” celebrating the roots of theater not being technological in nature. It was to be site-specific in a hotel, completely bare bones, and with the audience in the room with the characters. It was going to be a super-intimate experience. We even had the hotel room scouted and booked. Then Kim had this other idea of using hidden cameras and making it live-cinematic in a warehouse in coproduction with Electric Company Theatre. I loved the concept. And given the mandate of The Virtual Stage [to investigate cutting-edge technologies in live theater], it was very easy for me to wrap my head around it. I told Kim to do whatever she wanted. I feel that the best choice I can make as a producer is to bring excellent people on board and give them a lot of freedom to be creative. It goes without saying that I’m very glad I did that, given the success of the show. Not allowing the audience to see the show “live” is also a comment on technology and where it’s taken us today: we are often confined to an existence that is removed from a genuine experience. That’s quite hellish.

SADIQ: Isolating the three characters made perfect sense from the get-go. It’s a way of physically expressing their internal, emotional states. Keeping them locked away with only a view through the lens is an alienating and somewhat frustrating experience for both the actors and the audience, but I can’t think of a more visceral way to tell the story.

FRANGIONE: I thought the idea would either be a great success or a complete failure. At worst, we could end up with a theater experience that lacked immediacy and a film that lacked the finesse of something properly shot, lit, and edited. What we ended up with, however, was the best of both worlds, thanks to Kim’s brilliant directing: a live-filmic event. Theater with close-ups. Film with immediacy. There is a lot of exploration right now of film onstage, and often it is a distracting spectacle that alienates us from the action...
on the stage. The spectacle becomes the technology instead of the human talent. Not here. I feel the creators have integrated the film into this production in a way that makes it a vital part of the storytelling process and draws us into the real spectacle: the human heart, soul, and mind in action.

HAS THE SHOW CHANGED SINCE IT STARTED TOURING, OR DOES IT SEEM ODDLY SIMILAR REGARDLESS OF THE VENUE BECAUSE ULTIMATELY YOU’RE PERFORMING THE BULK OF THE PLAY IN THE SAME ROOM? WHAT EXCITES YOU MOST ABOUT BRINGING THE SHOW TO SAN FRANCISCO?

THOMPSON: We adapt the piece to each particular venue we visit, so there will be unique entrances and exits, as well as The Valet’s blocking and related activities that will be unique in this production for A.C.T. We are tremendously excited to be bringing the show to San Francisco! I visited the city a couple of years ago for the first time and was completely blown away by how beautiful and “European” it was. I was reminded of my first drive across the Golden Gate Bridge on a road trip to San Diego when I was 17 and being moved to tears as Led Zeppelin’s “Going to California” was blaring away on the speakers of my 1972 vw Beetle. That I’m “going to California” once again, this time to A.C.T., is a complete honor and a total thrill.

SADIQ: This show started off several years ago as a curious experiment in a warehouse, with a bunch of artists wanting to see if we could take a classic piece like No Exit, hybridize it, and give it some relevance. It was also very much about experimenting with technology and figuring out how that could be used to serve theatrical ends. This little curiosity is now in its second year of touring—and I think we’re all a little amazed that the show has endured for as long as it has. The biggest challenge has been playing such widely varied venues. We’ve performed No Exit in every kind of space imaginable, from a hangar, to a traditional proscenium theater, and everything in between. It doesn’t affect what’s happening in the room—because that space is always constant—but it does affect the entire environment around it. The world of The Valet (which figures quite prominently in this production), our relationship to the audience when we enter, and the very end of the play are impacted significantly by the space we’re playing in, because it determines how the audience relates to us in those brief moments of actual contact.

FRANGIONE: Hell seems oddly similar wherever we go. We may be in gorgeous San Francisco, but for two hours we are always in that blasted, horrible hotel room, smelling each other’s smell. Each time we do the show it gets better. We are able to finesse
the visual picture. We are able to go deeper into the dense text. This show has traveled across Canada, and now it is going to the American Conservatory Theater. I am living the Canadian dream and the American dream at the same time. This is heaven, this particular hell. I am very grateful. The play’s themes are universal—well, perhaps I should say they are Western-Worldly understood. That is why it has survived for so long in our culture. The play itself won’t change much crossing the border in how it is seen, I wager. I wonder a little bit about the rawness of the film element being even more shocking in the U.S.A., as Hollywood tends to have even more focus on beauty and youth than Canadian or European film. For Canadian and European film it’s okay to have average-looking people with bad teeth talking about death.

**How has performing No Exit been different from your other stage work (or work for the screen)? Is there a comfort having the buffer between you and the audience, or does it make it harder to gauge how each performance is going?**

Thompson: The process of developing the piece was arduous. We actually had to take things a step backward and create the process with which we would develop the piece. That wasn’t easy. Laara and I had acted in front of cameras before, but not in a single take lasting over an hour. What emerged was a new type of rehearsal process that was part acting and part dance—with the three of us contorting our bodies off camera to get into the frame and hitting marks by a fraction of an inch. I’m about a foot taller than Laara, so that also posed a challenge, as we have to be in frame at the same time without the luxury of having the camera move (all the cameras are “locked off” in terms of their angle and positioning). The result was me doing many deep lunges, which look ridiculous if you are backstage but are hidden from view for the audience. Acting in such contorted conditions was challenging, but the hellishness was also occasionally useful.

In the original production we were in a concrete bunker and the resultant sound barrier was rather significant. That we couldn’t even hear the audience was very bizarre to us as performers. When we replicated the “chamber” with this tourable set made of wood, the sound barrier was somewhat reduced. Now it’s nice to at least somewhat have a sense of what’s going on in the house.

Working with Lucia and Laara has been lovely. They are wonderful and generous performers. Working with anyone in such an enclosed and claustrophobic space can be challenging, and we all took relish in using that to our advantage in the work. That’s what’s going on for these three tormented souls, after all. And the luxury of this show, of course, is that we get to leave hell after the curtain call.
SADIQ: I’ve done film-theater hybrids before, but never quite like this. It’s a unique experience on many fronts, not the least of which is the fact that a live audience you can see and hear is part of the ecology of theater. Without that synergy crossing the fourth wall, it can be disorienting. So the world that we’ve created within the room is like a little microcosm—and we only have each other to rely on. As actors, all we can do is pursue our objectives, climb over the obstacles (and each other, literally!) and tell the story as concisely and economically as we can. Which, again, reflects the greater themes of the play. I’ve worked extensively in film and television, and I can say without a doubt that how we use the cameras in *No Exit* is a completely different animal. Yes, it’s acting in front of a camera, but we’re acting for theater, not film. The technique is different, the parameters are different, the objectives are different.

FRANGIONE: I never did any TV or film work before *No Exit*, so the rehearsal process alarmed me at first because it could not be blocked in a way that relied on the physical relationship to my fellow actors. I can’t just walk towards Andy and grab him by the shoulders. So, I fluttered in the back of the room for a while, staring at the monitors, unsure of how to move without popping into someone else’s camera angle or being a distracting pacer. That sort of thing. One day I started to see it as creating three paintings. Once I thought of it that way, I found an active kind of stillness. I started exploring how I could tell the story with my hands, legs, neck, eyes, lips. I played with the line between beauty and grotesque with how I positioned my body angles. I was suddenly free and wildly creative. It requires great physical awareness and discipline to block in such a confined space with live cameras and no glow tape on the floor. I have to memorize my proximity to the other actors, to the chair, to the wall, within inches. If I am off, I chop off my head, or my elbow is in Cradeau’s face, or I’m ten feet tall compared to Inez. It’s been a wonderful challenge. I’ve loved every second of it. It’s also been a great honor to work with some of my favorite theater practitioners in the country.
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 theNazis, 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.
Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris on June 21, 1905, to Anne-Marie and Jean-Baptiste Sartre. Sartre senior died when Jean-Paul was an infant; mother and son then moved into the home of his maternal grandparents, where Poupou (as his mother called him) was coddled and homeschooled for many years. The realization when Sartre belatedly began to attend school that he was, in his own words, an ugly “toad” of a boy (he was very short and had a lazy eye), and his mother’s remarriage when he was 12, are generally considered to have been formative blows for the young philosopher. By the time he left home, he had developed the fierce independence that was to form the cornerstone of his notorious, paradigm-shifting philosophy, existentialism—the philosophy of freedom, its rallying cry Sartre’s statement: “You are free, therefore choose, that is to say, invent.”

Most accounts of Sartre’s life begin this way, and yet it seems wrong not to mention that biography of this sort is in a way antithetical to Sartre’s own philosophy. Sartre’s existentialism broke from the Freudian thinking in vogue in the early 20th century, which mined childhood events for an explanation of adult personality and pathology. Sartre instead insisted, radically and counterintuitively, that past events do not determine future outcomes. It was crucial to Sartre’s notion of absolute freedom that the past not impinge upon the present moment. As he wrote in his famous defense “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” humans’ behavior is not caused by

heredity, or by the action of their environment upon them, or by determining factors, psychic or organic. . . . The existentialist, when he portrays a coward, shows him as responsible for his cowardice. He is not like that on account of a cowardly heart or lungs or cerebrum, he has not become like that through his physiological organism; he is like that because he has made himself into a coward by actions.

Sartre was complex and contradictory, however, in word as well as deed, and strayed from his most stringent existentialist principles. He did give accounts of his life that obeyed conventional laws of causality: when I was a child this, therefore I became that. Sartre’s obituary in the New York Times quoted his memoir, Words, about the effect of his middle-class childhood:
The grandparental home was, he said, a “hothouse” of bourgeois hypocrisy, where role playing was taken seriously and he became an imposter, too. His father’s death, he went on, not only meant that the son grew up with the “incredible flippancy” of a person without a superego, but also led to his inheriting a mid-19th-century concept of society and literature.

Sartre left home with a strong distaste for 19th-century moralism and rigid social roles and an irreverence that he loosed upon his philosophical studies at the prestigious École normale supérieure in Paris.

It was at the École normale that Sartre met the woman who would become his lifelong companion, intellectual rival, and partner in seduction: famed feminist and author of the revolutionary *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir. In a BBC documentary, de Beauvoir recounts their meeting:

I think he was the dirtiest, the most unshaven—even the ugliest! But I remember seeing him in a big hat at the Sorbonne, chatting up some girl. He was always chatting up some young philosopher. But he had a big hat and was laying it on thick and I had a good laugh at him.
Sartre was the kind of ugly man who was nevertheless magnetic to women. Though he and de Beauvoir spent their lives together, they were never married, often lived apart, and had frequent affairs—often with the same person. In fact, the triangle was their preferred arrangement: on more than one occasion, de Beauvoir began an affair with one of her young students, Sartre then seduced her, and the two of them supported the young woman in a small apartment or hotel until they began to find her tedious and moved on. Sartre and de Beauvoir’s unorthodox romantic and sexual lives have titillated the public for the past half-century, spawning numerous memoirs and biographies. Their intellectual connection is equally controversial: the debate still rages over who was the more inventive and influential thinker. That they cared for each other deeply is undisputed, however, and their relationship is one of the greater love stories of the 20th century. At the Sorbonne, Sartre and de Beauvoir came in first and second, respectively, on their *agrégation*, the exam that marked the completion of their studies and their entrance into the academic world.

In a café in 1932, a philosopher friend of Sartre introduced him to the work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl. De Beauvoir recalled in a memoir:

> We ordered the speciality of the house, apricot cocktails. Aron said, pointing to his glass: “You see my dear fellow, if you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy out of it!” Sartre turned pale with emotion at this. Here was just the thing he had been longing to achieve for years—to describe objects just as he saw and touched them, and extract philosophy from the process.

Sartre left for Germany the next year to study Husserl’s phenomenology. A method more than a philosophy, phenomenology aimed to develop a theory of consciousness based on unbiased observation. To that end, Husserl had developed a technique of examining consciousness called an “epoche,” derived from a Greek word related to “suspension,” which Husserl also sometimes called a “bracketing.” An epoche can be performed on any conscious experience by bracketing it and describing it in detail while suspending as many assumptions and judgments as possible. According to Husserl, the consciousness we discover in such bracketing is the “pure ego” or the “absolute self.”

Sartre is indebted to Husserl for his method—the epoche features prominently in Sartre’s 1938 novel *Nausea*—but he came to very different conclusions. Where Husserl found in consciousness an “absolute self,” Sartre found the *absence* of self. In his 1937 *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre writes that consciousness is “an impersonal spontaneity,” a profusion of thoughts, perceptions, and possibilities that has nothing at all to do with a stable, constant, unchanging self. Sartre acknowledged that, for most, the spontaneity
of the mind is terrifying, as it represents “a vertigo of possibility,” demonstrating that far from being bound by a static self or personality, we are “monstrously free.” Monstrous only because such freedom is an enormous responsibility; for Sartre, freedom was an absolute good, perhaps the only good. Interestingly, Sartre never wrote an existentialist ethics. He insisted that his great existentialist work, *Being and Nothingness*, was simply descriptive and promised to follow it with a second volume of moral philosophy, but he never wrote it.

Those who study Sartre are lucky to have not only his philosophical writings, which can be maddeningly dense, but also his novels and plays, which give a human face—and anguished heart—to the state of affairs his philosophy aims to describe. In 1938, Sartre published his first novel, *Nausea*, which takes the form of journal entries by a young scholar, Antoine Roquentin. The novel follows Roquentin as such simple actions as riding a trolley car and sitting in a garden begin to take on horrific aspects; he experiences a spontaneous epoche of sorts as he realizes that everything exists without any a priori meaning:

Suddenly the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have seen. . . . The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench—I couldn’t remember it was a root anymore. The words vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooped forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me. Then I had this vision. It left me breathless. Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of “existence.”

The novel’s conclusion is ultimately redeeming: because nothing has inherent meaning, human consciousness, Roquentin realizes, therefore has the tremendous power, and mandate, to make meaning where there is none. This hope born out of despair is the trademark narrative of existentialist thought.

Sartre’s existentialist thinking took off during his stint in the French army in World War II. When the war broke out he was sent to eastern France, where he took part in the meteorological service, sending balloons into the air to test which way the wind was blowing, an employment somehow well-suited to a philosopher. In June 1940, he was taken prisoner by the Germans. While in the stalag, he began making notes for *Being and Nothingness*.

More than an ivory-tower philosopher, Sartre was also a passionate chronicler of life as it is lived. As much as he insists in *Being and Nothingness* on the absolute freedom of the individual, he also fully acknowledges that this freedom is rarely felt or experienced. In other words, not everyone is a Roquentin. Absolute freedom, Sartre explains, is experienced as anguish. This anguish is rarely felt, though, because the commonplace routines
of everyday life—our morning rituals, our jobs, our predictable relationships—protect us from coming into contact with the knowledge that things could be other than they are. Sartre describes the mollifying power of an alarm clock: “In short, to the extent that I apprehend the meaning of the ringing, I am already up at its summons; this apprehension guarantees me against the anguished intuition that it is I who confer on the alarm its exigency—I and I alone.” Though we experience the ringing of our alarm clock as a command to get up, in truth it is we who determine what the ringing of the alarm clock means, and we who decide to obey this arbitrary meaning.

In another famous passage, Sartre describes what happens when we free beings encounter one another. He describes the experience of sitting on a bench, observing the flowers, the trees, the grass. In that moment, all of the objects in the park exist only for the person sitting on the bench. Another person walks by, however, and the bench-sitter realizes that the walker, too, has his own perspective. The trees and flowers and grass also exist only for him, and they rush towards this other person as if “the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being.” Just as a child is afraid of falling down the drain in the tub, so, too, is there a fear of being sucked into this other person’s drain—to exist as an object in their perspective and not as an independent being. The objectification is unavoidable, however. There is a constant struggle in each of us between existence as the looker and as the one looked at—a struggle that Sartre takes up in his most famous play, *No Exit*.

In March 1941, Sartre returned to Paris, where he became involved with the French resistance. He founded the short-lived group Socialism and Liberty and produced his first play, *The Flies (Les mouches)*. *The Flies*, an adaptation of the Elektra story, enjoyed a successful run in German-occupied Paris, despite its powerfully anti-Nazi message. Strangely, even though German officers attended the performances, it was never censored. On the heels of *The Flies*’ success, Sartre quickly wrote *No Exit* (originally titled *Huis clos*), in which he pushed his “drain hole” theory to a dramatic extreme, concluding, famously, that “hell is other people.”

The playwright; the director and male lead (and Sartre’s friend), Albert Camus; and the cast began rehearsing the play in de Beauvoir’s hotel room, but they were forced to halt production when one of the actresses was arrested as a member of the resistance. In May 1944, the play received a professional production at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier (under the direction of Raymond Rouleau) and met with critical and popular acclaim. It went on to have more than 600 productions in Europe before opening on Broadway in November 1946 in an English translation by Paul Bowles, staged by Hollywood director John Huston. Hailed by critic Eric Bentley as one of the “chief dramatic events of the present,” *No Exit*
had a tremendous impact on the development of modern drama, influencing such writers as Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and Harold Pinter.

Sartre continued to write plays throughout his life. His theatrical politics were expansive, ranging from commentary on American race relations (*The Respectful Prostitute*), to questioning the ethics of generosity (*The Devil and the Good Lord*, in which a war criminal is hailed as a saint and a hero when he begins giving gifts to the people), to investigating party politics and the true motives behind political assassination (*Dirty Hands*)—to name just a few of his more famous plays. He also wrote a number of screenplays, including an adaptation of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* called *Witches of Salem*.

When the war ended, Sartre found himself a major celebrity in France. Existentialism had captured the spirit of the times; Sartre’s individualist rallying cry struck a chord with young people eager to break away from the violence and conservatism of their parents’ generation. Sartre and de Beauvoir were public figures, with the kind of following that in America is reserved for television and film stars. During this period Sartre served as the editor of *Les temps modernes* and delivered “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” in which he defended his philosophy against charges of pessimism, nihilism, and elitism and proclaimed its famous slogan: “Existence precedes essence.”

Paradoxically, at the height of existentialism’s postwar popularity, Sartre was already beginning to distance himself from the philosophy that had made him famous, moving ever further left. He made many trips to the USSR and in 1960 published *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, an attempt to marry existentialist principles with Communist theory. Critiques had long been leveled against Communism for its relentlessly structural thinking; a theory based on class struggle does not leave much room for individual freedom. In
Critique, Sartre tried to humanize Marxism while rejecting some of the rabid individualism of his earlier philosophy.

As was the case with many 20th-century intellectuals, Sartre began to fall out with Communism as Stalin’s abuses became increasingly difficult to ignore. His final break came in 1968, after the Soviet Union’s repression of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia. In 1971 he broke with Fidel Castro, whom he had supported for years. In 1977, in an interview in Lotta continua, Sartre finally declared he was no longer a Marxist.

Sartre was also an outspoken advocate of the student rebellions of 1968 (he was arrested for civil disobedience but pardoned by President Charles de Gaulle, who scolded, “You don’t arrest Voltaire”), supported the Algerians in the Algerian war, and sat on a tribunal that investigated American war crimes in Vietnam. In 1964, he refused to accept the Nobel Prize in Literature (just as he had refused the Legion of Honor in 1945), writing in an open letter: “A writer must refuse to allow himself to be transformed into an institution, even if it takes place in the most honorable form.”

During the last decade of his life, Sartre drank and smoked to excess and took drugs to give himself the energy to work on the second volume of his Critique, as well as a massive biography of Gustave Flaubert called The Family Idiot, both of which remained unfinished. By 1973 he was fully blind, but he stuck, to the end, to his regular routine: writing from half past nine to half past one, lunching in a brasserie, writing again from five or six until nine in the evening, spending the rest of the evening with de Beauvoir listening to music or to her read, and going to bed at half past midnight. Sartre died on April 15, 1980; physicians had to convince de Beauvoir not to spend the night lying on his corpse. It is estimated that between 20,000 and 50,000 people marched in his funeral procession.

Though his philosophy was one of anguish and he lived through the rise and fall of the Left, near the end of his life Sartre admitted to having no regrets. In an interview five years before his death, he proclaimed:

I have not been had by anything, I have not been disappointed by anything. I have seen people, good and bad—moreover, the bad are never bad except in relation to certain goals—I have written, I have lived, there is nothing to be sorry about.

SARTRE AND THE THEATER OF QUESTIONS
BY MARK POKLEMBA

When Nazi occupation forces began executing three innocent French civilians for each German soldier killed by the resistance, Sartre and his friends in the resistance movement found themselves on a moral tightrope. Their actions fueled murder. Had they all become guilty? Could they continue fighting and bear the blood they saw on their own hands? The situation shocked Sartre into a lifelong conviction that man must negate the moral emptiness of the universe by filling it with actions that have moral value.

Sartre admired the ancient Greek model of a mythological theater that always addressed contemporary politics and could move men to action. In contrast to [film director] George Stevens, who thought that World War II had foreclosed the possibility of tragedy, he saw that his own times reflected the tragic vision. “The very severity of these plays,” he said, “is in keeping with the severity of life.” Could theater become a vehicle of freedom? In defense of French playwright Jean Anouilh’s anti-Nazi adaptation of Sophocles’ Antigone, Sartre proclaimed that a new activist theater was arising: Anouilh’s version of Antigone was not merely a character who rises against the state; rather, “she represents a naked will, a pure, free choice; in her there is no distinguishing between passion and action.”

Sartre participated in rehearsals for his plays, and during these rehearsals he received an education in what theater could accomplish. His focus was on the actor, and what he shows us about ourselves. Sartre saw the actor as an existential hero. In his essays on theater, Sartre expresses bold ideas about what an actor transmits to the spectator. An actor onstage risks everything to embody the precarious human condition, letting us reflect on how we build our lives through choices. For Sartre, the actor, much like the philosopher, demonstrates that the unexamined life is not life.

. . .

Sartre demands bravery from his audience: the courage to choose your own life in your own time.

Excerpted from an article that originally appeared in ARTicles, the American Repertory Theater’s newsletter.
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How does keeping the audience outside *No Exit*’s hotel room, and the use of live cinema, affect the viewer’s experience of the characters’ plight?

2. What is the fate of The Valet? What is his relationship with his uncle? How is his story similar to that of the three occupants of the room? How is it different?

3. How does *No Exit* articulate Sartre’s basic principles of existentialism?

4. What other plays could effectively be adapted using this technique of live cinema?

5. How do gender and sexuality play into Sartre’s portrait of hell?

6. If hell is other people, who would occupy your hell? Why?

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION


