



**GLEND A JACKSON**

# **The Maids**

Jean Genet's *The Maids* is an outstanding example of the French avant-garde wave of playwriting that flowered after World War II and produced such other major dramatists as Ionesco and Beckett. The story of two servants who dream of killing their mistress, the play is not only a study of the master-slave relationship but also a probing examination of the bounds of role playing and of the insatiable desire for freedom on the part of the outcasts in society.

Now it has been put on film, mostly through the efforts of producer Robert Enders and star Glenda Jackson, and is part of The American Film Theatre's Second Season of five motion picture productions based upon great works of the contemporary theatre. The film also stars Susannah York, Vivien Merchant and Mark Burns and was directed by Christopher Miles.

Enders and director Miles, working from a translation by Minos Volanakis, have devised a screenplay that firmly establishes the time, the place and the mood of the drama, while still retaining all of Genet's many themes, his 'whirligigs' as philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre calls them, intact and unblurred.

Ostensibly the work deals with two maids of a wealthy woman, alienated from their environment and resentful of their servitude, who dream of escape and revenge. In their fantasies, enacted by them almost ritualistically whenever Madame is absent, they seek to discover their own identities by murdering their mistress and earning the acclaim of all other downtrodden lackies. The two women lack the strength to carry out their plans and thus their own delusions must compensate for their inaction by becoming ever grander, ever more threatening and ever more removed from reality. Both the maids and their mistress are caught on a merry-go-round of false illusions and inaccessible desires that ultimately ends in tragedy.

It's all part of the 'most manifest falsehood' of the stage that is its most attractive element to Genet, according to Jean-Paul Sartre. In a preface to a volume of Genet's plays, Sartre noted that Genet's great achievement was that he 'has managed to transmit to his thought an increasingly rapid circular movement. He has a vision of an infinitely rapid rotation which merges the poles of appearance and reality, just as, when a multi-coloured disc is spun quickly enough, the colours of the rainbow interpenetrate and produce white. Genet constructs such whirligigs by the hundred ... The most extraordinary example of the whirligigs of being and appearance, of the imaginary and the real, is to be found in his play, *The Maids*. Perhaps nowhere has he lied more brazenly.'

It's an extremely deceptive work, one that on the surface seems to be a fairly simple study of delusion but that reveals layer upon layer of inner reverberations to the educated ear.

As contradictory and multi-faceted as his play, Genet is a man who has been imprisoned for such doings as smuggling, theft and prostitution. But his literary output so astounded first France and then the rest of the world that when he was faced with life imprisonment after ten convictions, the Elysee Palace was flooded by petitions for a presidential pardon from eminent writers and artists. The pardon was granted.

Genet's plays – *Deathwatch*, *The Maids*, *The Balcony*, *The Blacks* and *The Screens* – are portrayals in multiple refractions that stress rather than conceal theatricality, plays that depict a world of loneliness, emptiness and nihilism. This vision of the world has made Genet, in Sartre's mind, the prototype of modern existentialist man.

Thus to bring a work of Genet's to the screen requires a special determination and the finest talents available. It has not been tried often but it was at the back of Glenda Jackson's mind when she put together a revival of *The Maids* in London. The part of Solange, the older and more domineering of the two servants, was a great challenge to the actress who surmounted the problems inherent in such other roles as Charlotte Corday, the madwoman assassin in *Marat/Sade*, Queen Elizabeth I from a young girl to an old woman in the six-part BBC series and the liberated Gudrun in Ken Russell's film version of D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*.

38-year-old Glenda Jackson admits that 'there is a dearth of good roles for women between my age and the early fifties, and so you just have to go out and see what you can find.' Having already found two Academy Award-winning parts, the one in *Women in Love* and opposite George Segal in *A Touch of Class*, as well as strong roles in such films as *Sunday*, *Bloody Sunday*, *The Music Lovers* and *Triple Echo*, it's obvious that not only does the lady have a good eye for quality but that her standards are unusually high.

Convinced of *The Maids'* filmic possibilities, Ms Jackson started looking for ways to put it on the screen. One of her first moves was to get in touch with producer Robert Enders. 'Glenda and I had been wanting to work together for some time,' says Enders, 'and after I read the play I agreed it would make a fabulous film.'

Casting the other roles was no problem. Susannah York and Vivien Merchant had appeared in the revival with Ms Jackson and were delighted to recreate their roles on film. York plays Claire, the younger and dreamier of the two maids, while Merchant brings her quiet, compelling style to the part of Madame, the flighty but not unkind mistress who loves her maids 'but with an icy love, "like her bidet".'

*The Maids* is a three-character play but for the film producer Enders decided to add a fourth. 'The man who is in many ways the cornerstone of the piece is not seen in the original work,' explains Enders, 'but he's been brought into the screen version. We see him. We can identify with him. He never speaks but the audience knows he is there.'

There was then the question of a director. 'I had heard of Christopher Miles and his work, particularly *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, but I had never met him,' says Enders. 'It took only one meeting to convince me he was the right man for the job. The impressive thing about him was he arrived having done his homework thoroughly. Miles had obviously studied the work and had some valid points to make even at that early stage.'

Miles' credits include *A Time for Loving*, *The Six-Sided Triangle*, *Up Jumped a Swagman* and any number of short films, some made as early as his school days and, as often as not, featuring his sister, actress Sarah Miles. With the addition of Douglas Slocombe, famed for his work on the early Alec Guinness comedies and such films as *The Servant*, *Lion in Winter*, *The L-Shaped Room* and *The Great Gatsby*, and composer Laurie Johnson, remembered for the background music for *Dr. Strangelove* and the theme music for the TV series, *The Avengers*, Enders had his basic production package complete.

The shooting of *The Maids* took five weeks. It was filmed in England with some location shots in Paris. Upon its completion, Enders sought out The American Film Theatre, feeling that Ely Landau would be the ideal distributor to give his product the audience and the attention it deserved.

## Production notes

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### THE MAIDS

*Director:* Christopher Miles  
*Production Companies:* Ely Landau Organisation, Cinevision Ltee, Cine Films, The American Film Theatre  
*Executive Producer:* Bernard Weitzman  
*Producer:* Robert Enders  
*Associate Producer:* Gordon L.T. Scott  
*Assistant Director:* Derek Kavanagh  
*Screenplay:* Robert Enders, Christopher Miles  
*Based on the play by:* Jean Genet  
*Director of Photography:* Douglas Slocombe  
*Editor:* Peter Tanner  
*Art Director:* Robert Jones  
*Set Decorator:* David Lusby  
*Costumes:* Barbara Gray  
*Music:* Laurie Johnson  
*Sound Recording:* Claude Hitchcock  
*Sound Re-recording:* Bill Rowe  
*Sound Editor:* Jeanne Henderson

### Cast

Glenda Jackson (*Solange*)  
Susannah York (*Claire*)  
Vivien Merchant (*Madame*)  
Mark Burns (*Monsieur*)

UK-Canada 1976  
95 mins

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### GLEENDA JACKSON

#### Women in Love

Sat 2 Jul 17:40; Wed 13 Jul 20:3; Fri 15 Jul 20:30

#### Horror of Darkness + Let's Murder Vivaldi

Sun 3 Jul 15:20

#### Mary, Queen of Scots

Sun 3 Jul 18:15; Wed 20 Jul 20:30

#### Glenda Jackson in Conversation

Tue 5 Jul 18:15

#### Sunday Bloody Sunday

Tue 5 Jul 20:40; Sun 24 Jul 18:30

#### Hedda

Fri 8 Jul 18:00; Sat 16 Jul 16:30

#### A Touch of Class

Sat 9 Jul 15:15; Sat 23 Jul 20:45

#### The Romantic Englishwoman

Sun 10 Jul 18:10; Mon 18 Jul 20:40

#### Stevie

Thu 14 Jul 20:30; Sat 23 Jul 12:00

#### Hopscotch

Fri 15 Jul 18:00; Tue 26 Jul 20:40

#### House Calls

Sat 16 Jul 18:45; Fri 22 Jul 20:30

#### The Maids

Sat 16 Jul 20:50; Sun 24 Jul 15:50

#### The Rainbow

Tue 19 Jul 20:40; Sun 31 Jul 13:00

#### Giro City + Glenda Jackson & Politics (clip compilation)

Thu 21 Jul 17:50

#### Turtle Diary

Thu 21 Jul 20:50; Fri 29 Jul 20:30

#### Strange Interlude

Sat 23 Jul 15:30

#### The House of Bernarda Alba

Mon 25 Jul 17:50

#### Elizabeth Is Missing

Fri 29 Jul 18:15

#### Elizabeth R (the complete series)

Eps 1-3 Sat 30 Jul 14:20; Eps 4-6 Sun 31 Jul 14:30

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