Erotic fantasy in the jailhouse

Ismene Brown reviews the The Maids at the Barbican Pit

By Ismene Brown

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Jean Genêt found sexual arousal in most things, notably in confinement, where the imagination might fester and fantasise.

The French thief and author's play, The Maids, concerns Claire and Solange, below stairs, whose obsessive relationship leads to murder upstairs, but this dance-theatre

production by Theaterhaus Stuttgart has resonantly conflated that book with a short film by Genêt himself, making the maids into two men, their circumstances prison, their employer their jailer - and putting the lot into dance.

So the maids are, instead of white women, black men, and instead of Madame, their cool boss, there is a Turkish guard who has an interesting line in drag and gymnastics. But if this production of The Maids strays far from the letter of Genet's book, it is not far from Genet's spirit, which finds an instinctive home in dance.

Inside the humble black space of the Barbican Pit, things almost feel home-made. Two

white beds, two black men in white pyjamas, bleak lighting. Every prop drops red into the black picture: the ladies' hats they secrete under their beds, a bunch of cotton flowers, a huge sheet of red velvet, which they use to construct their fantasies.

The music is conjured by a percussive wizard, João de Bruço, from chains in buckets or odd wiry sculptures, veering between African beats and Japanese remoteness. Sometimes he walks on between the prisoners, Ismael Ivo and Koffi Kôkô, like a stage manager giving them props or rattling his unusual instruments. His music contributes vastly to the success of this show, though his voiceovers of bits of story are a feature we would do better without.

Ivo and Kôkô are big men of monumental gracefulness; in their backs and faces the light catches every smallest inflection. The opening is perfectly judged: dark stage split into two by light, deepest silence.

Kôkô lights a cigarette, inserts a straw through an imaginary wall to the other cell, and blows smoke through it. Ivo's reaction, rolling his head raptly in the smoke, is both erotic and spiritually exultant, and there becomes something fascinating about seeing these two fabulously male bodies delicately and seriously putting on fancy red hats or their red washing-up gloves to dust and clean.

Against their brittle carefulness, Ziya Azazi's coarse little guard erupts in flying cartwheels and back flips, becoming Madame, dressed like a scarlet dervish going to Mardi Gras and jabbering at them in Turkish. He has the gross task of ending the production by shoving a revolver into Kôkô's mouth and starting to unbutton his trousers.

A stylish 1950 film by Genêt himself shown afterwards, Un Chant d'Amour, concerning the sexual obsessiveness of prisoners, reveals that this production's most striking visual ideas came from it. Still, Yoshi Oida's production is powerful in its own right.

- Until tomorrow. Tickets: 020 7638 8891.

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