

# ‘The Maids’: Play means to spark debate among the audiences

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Georgia Mallory Guy plays Solange and Katrina Stevenson is Claire in Jobsite Theater’s production of “The Maids.”

Jean Genet’s play “The Maids,” released in 1947, was inspired by a famed French murder trial of two sisters who killed two women, their employer and her daughter, while working as maids in the early 1930s.

Over the years, however, various stage productions have chosen to amplify the implied sexuality and the ambiguous relationship between the two siblings in Genet’s play, who spend much of the performance cavorting in a boudoir, role-playing scenes of desire and revenge while dressed in French maid costumes, awaiting the return of their employer.

For David Jenkins, Jobsite Theater’s producing artistic director, who first saw a production of “The Maids” while he was in high school, the play is meant to spark conversation, debate and self-analysis among the audience. He wants people to walk away arguing about what they’ve just witnessed.

His approach for getting there, however, is what he hopes will elevate Jobsite’s production, which runs from today through May 22 in the Shimberg Playhouse at the Straz Center for the Performing Arts.

“Genet really critiques this idea of these masks we wear all the time, and how some people can really get caught up in that. At a certain point, people can take fantasy and not be able to separate it from reality,” he said. “I’ve seen stagings of this play where the sexuality is so over the top. I don’t really need to do that. I can get a lot of mileage out

## ‘THE MAIDS’

**When:** 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday and Thursday and 4 p.m. Sunday, through May 22

**Where:** Straz Center, Shimberg Playhouse, 1010 N. MacInnes Place, Tampa

**Tickets:** \$28 (discounts available); (813) 229-7827 and [www.strazcenter.org](http://www.strazcenter.org) and [www.jobsitetheater.org](http://www.jobsitetheater.org)

of the suggestion, a lot of mileage out of the tease and suspense. I’m intentionally working toward the idea of the seduction of it, and within that, there is a power play between the performers on stage and the audience.”

For Jobsite’s production, Jenkins and his trio of actors — Georgia Mallory Guy and Katrina Stevenson, who play the maids, and sisters, Solange and Claire, respectively, and Roxanne Fay, who plays their employer, Madame — help invest the audience as a captive voyeur.

Both the performance and the play itself focus on the ritualistic aspect of the siblings’ conversations, something Jenkins said is perfectly suited for the stage.

“The audience is essentially informed that the performers know they’re watching them and they’re a part of this ritual, a part of this ceremony,” he said. “There are moments, even within the play, where the sisters say things — ‘We’re being watched’ — and the other sister says, ‘What of

it?’ ”

The fact that the sisters are dressed provocatively and lounging suggestively as they enact their fantasies can summon certain thoughts, which is intended.

“It’s so much easier to be a voyeur when you don’t think anybody else can see you,” he said. “For those people in the audience who might be having those desires, it puts you in an uncomfortable place because you’re not just peeking.

“I think 10 years ago, 15 years ago, I would have ham-fisted this thing. In my younger days, I would have been assaulting the audience. I think this is far more interesting, making the audience do the work in their head.”

Part of the beauty of Genet’s play is that it often toggles between reality and fantasy in a way that keeps the audience off-balance and unsure of what is happening. Navigating that tricky landscape, for an actor, is part of the thrill.

“The play itself is a very French existentialist piece,” said Guy, appearing in her first Jobsite Theater production. “In that sense, you don’t ever know if what you’re watching is reality or their fantasies. It’s set up very particularly to make the audience question, especially at the end, if what they just witnessed was something completely fantastical or if what they observed just occurred in front of them.”

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