



THE  
JAMIE  
LLOYD  
COMPANY

# THE

BY JEAN GENET DIRECTED BY JAMIE LLOYD  
IN A TRANSLATION BY BENEDICT ANDREWS & ANDREW UPTON

# MAIDS



EDUCATION RESOURCE

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PRODUCTION

Not staged in the West End for 20 years, this production is a welcome return for this challenging and confrontational piece. Casting his maids with women, Jamie Lloyd has sought to explore both the violent and sadistic desires being played out in the text but also to disrupt notions of sisterly connection and femininity.

In a new translation by Benedict Andrews and Andrew Upton, we find vitality in the sister's aggressive nature and a direct wanton awareness of their own desires that they seem all too willing to realise.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

First performed in Paris in 1947 and published in 1956, the play is famously said to be based on and inspired by the Pappin sisters, two maids who violently murdered their master's wife and daughter in 1933.

In the initial responses to the murder case some leftist writer's saw the act as a demonstration of the dissatisfaction of workers against their oppressed state, Genet's play focuses more on desires, both sexual and violent, and how we are all in some sense seeking to escape our own forms of incarceration.

The play explores fantasy and fantastical imagination as the sister maids become more fixated on how they might inflict pain on and escape their mistress. The preoccupation with clothes, appearance, ritual and vanity, all act as a metaphor for the theatricality of our imagination, and our lives, and draws the audience into a fantasy that we are never quite sure whether will be enacted.

The mistress herself is characterised by shallow desires and superficial needs. Yet her maids seem to wrestle with their own sense of responsibility to her as well as each other as they enjoy their violent fantasies so much, but struggle to realise them.

## SYNOPSIS

The play begins with sisters and maids, Claire and Solange acting out the ritual of getting ready as if the Mistress and maid respectively. The role play appears well rehearsed and as if sticking to a given formula and even script, from which Claire as the Mistress occasionally appears to enjoy deviating from. In the fantasy we learn of the maids' intention to murder the Mistress, but the role play is cut short as an alarm signals that the real Mistress is soon to return. As the sisters bicker and trade insults over the deviations in their role play, they attempt to return the room to its correct tidy state and order but Solange complains of being tired and having had enough. They resolve that they must be more resolute, summon their energy and finally enact their murder of their Mistress.

Their enthusiasm is interrupted as the Master calls on the telephone revealing he has been released on bail, having been arrested and imprisoned via a plot of accusations and secret letters engineered by the maids. Fearing they will soon be discovered they decide they will not tell their Mistress about her partner's release and will poison her with tablets in a cup of tea. The Mistress returns and bemoans the fallen status of her partner, saying she will reject all worldly goods and live only for him. She berates Solange and complains about the flowers in the room whilst Claire makes the poisoned tea. As the poisoned concoction arrives the Mistress appears slightly taken aback by some of the maids' comments and behaviour then notices the phone being off-the-hook. Claire and Solange explain the Master has called, has been released on bail, and wishes to meet the Mistress at a bar. Solange is sent for a taxi

and Claire tries to get the Mistress to drink her tea but she is too intent on leaving to meet her partner and the tea is left undrunk.

Solange returns and insults Claire accusing her of never wanting to really kill the Mistress and explaining there is no way they can escape. Claire retreats back into the fantasy role play as the Mistress screaming insults at Solange and verbally whipping Solange into a state of arousal. In a chaotic final sequence where both sisters gain and lose control of the situation and each other insulting and demeaning each other, it appears that Solange might kill Claire in role as the Mistress. Working themselves into an exhausting frenzy Solange enacts a monologue where she imagines carrying out the murder and her punishment. Finally, collapsed and exhausted Claire insists on drinking the poisoned tea as if she has become the Mistress and Solange is fulfilling their plan.

## WORKING WITH THE TEXT

The following pages contain extracts from the new translation and accompanying activities. The activities are designed to be used by students of English and Drama, and to a lesser extent those studying French. The activities can be used either as pre- or post-production visit tasks, and in a practical or analytical context. All activities can be adapted for use in pairs, small groups or as a whole class.

## EXTRACT ONE

The opening of the play and both maids are in the midst of their role play. As an opening it is deliberately unclear as to what exactly is going on and who we are watching. Consider the following questions either as a response to reading or by experimenting with the section through improvisation:

How convincing is Claire as a mistress? How would you demonstrate this in performance? How was this presented in the live production?

- Is the scene unnerving or amusing? Justify your view with reference to specific lines
- What is the response of the reader/audience to the use of strong and sexual language?
- What kind of relationship between the maid and mistress is suggested? When is it troubling?
- What is the significance of the clothing/appearance?

Mistress' bedroom. Flowers everywhere. Evening. The actress playing Solange wears the little black dress of a servant. On a chair, another little black dress, black stockings and a pair of flat-heeled black shoes.

CLAIRE (stands wearing a slip, her back to the dressing-table. Her gesture – arm outstretched – and tone are intensely tragic) Those gloves. Those awful fucking gloves. How many times have I told you to leave them in the kitchen? What? Do you actually think they'll make the gardener hot for you? Don't lie to me, it's a waste of energy. Go hang them back over the sink. When will you get it into your head that this room must never be polluted. Everything – every single thing – that comes out of that kitchen is covered in cum and slobber. Get out. And take your slobber with you.

Will you stop that.

During this speech, Solange has been playing with a pair of rubber gloves, staring at her gloved hands, sometimes bunched up like a bouquet, sometimes fanned out.

Oh no don't mind me. Rehearse your little bitch routine. And don't rush whatever you do, there's plenty of time. Get out. Out.

Solange abandons her pose and leaves humbly, holding the rubber gloves by her fingertips.

Claire sits at the dressing-table. She sniffs the flowers, runs her fingers over the toiletries, brushes her hair, rearranges her face.

Prepare my dress. And hurry up. We haven't got all night. Where are you?

She turns round.

Claire! Claire!

Solange returns.

SOLANGE I'm awfully sorry, Mistress. I was preparing your tea. (She says 'tah)

CLAIRE Lay out my toilette. The white dress with the sequins. The fan. The emeralds.

SOLANGE All mistress' jewels?

CLAIRE Get them out. I want to choose. (Sarcastic.) And oh yes – the patent leather heels. The ones you covet.

Solange takes out several jewel box cases which she opens and lays on the bed.

For your white wedding, I bet. He fucked your brains out, didn't he. And now your belly's getting bigger. Admit it. Go on.

Solange crouches on the carpet, spits on the shoes and polishes them.

## EXTRACT TWO

This extract is from slightly later in the first role play we witness and we get our first clearer clues that all is not as it may first have seemed. Consider the following in response to your own reading or improvisation and in response to the production:

- Identify the clues in the text that suggest this is supposed to be a role play that fits to a script that has been practised before.
- How clear was this/should this be in performance?
- Discuss how the audience see/experiment with Solange's reactions through tone of voice, facial expression and body language. How clear should it be and at what points in the text that the role play is not being played out as it should? Is she frustrated, angry, upset, tired, confused?
- Discuss the audience's response to the physical violence – it is surprising or expected? Do we feel sorry for Solange or are we sufficiently aware that this is a 'performance' or is it still disturbing/arresting even in that context?

SOLANGE We're so unhappy. I could cry my eyes out.

CLAIRE That's it. We won't detail our devotions before the plaster virgin, down on our knees, grinding them into the old floor. We won't mention the paper flowers.

She laughs.

Paper flowers. And the branch of blessed palm. But look, cunt, these flowers spread their petals and raise their stamens in my honour. I'm more beautiful than the Virgin, Claire.

SOLANGE Shut up.

CLAIRE And there – the holy skylight through which the half naked hot young gardener bursts into your hot little slit.

SOLANGE Mistress has deviated a little.

CLAIRE Your hands. They've deviated. Touching me all over. Ugh. How many times do I have to tell you? The rag that cleans the toilet bowl is cleaner than you.

SOLANGE THE FALL.

CLAIRE What?

SOLANGE (arranging the dress) I'm arranging the fall of your dress – lovingly.

CLAIRE Stop feeling me up, slut.

She hits Solange across the head with her heel. Solange still crouching, staggers and moves back.

SOLANGE Stealing you up?

CLAIRE I said feeling me up. And if you must howl, do it in your cat-box. Here in my room, I only accept noble tears. One day the hem of my gown will be studded with precious, glittering tears. Arrange my train, you cunt.

SOLANGE Mistress is getting carried away.

## EXTRACT THREE

This section is from the end of the first 'role play' when Claire and Solange run out of time and realise the mistress will soon be home and they must return the room and wardrobe to its former tidy state so that they are not discovered. We see the status shift as they return to their work as maids and as sisters.

- How do the audience respond to the moment of the strangling? How far would you want Solange to go? Should the audience feel genuine threat and concern?
- Consider how Claire shows the transition from 'the mistress' back to her role as maid.
- How would you describe their relationship as sisters? Is anything surprising about the roles they assume in the role play? Does one seem more dominant than the other? Experiment through improvisation with staging the scene in different ways and consider the effectiveness of each version:
  - ◇ Solange more dominant physically and vocally
  - ◇ Claire more dominant physically and vocally
  - ◇ Solange more dominant physically but Claire more dominant vocally and vice versa
- In what ways do the sisters seem to be different in their personalities?

SOLANGE Whatever you say Mistress. Back to my kitchen. To my gloves and the stink of my rotting teeth. I am your maid of the cistern and you are my lady of the flowers. I'm shit, right? But you can't make shit more dirty. Huh? Can you? Here I come. Pray fast. Pray, real fast. Shit's drowning you now. You'll regret this. I'll follow you into the grave before I bury my hatred. Laugh, go on. Laugh and say your prayers as quick as you can. You're done for.

She hits Claire's hands, which are protecting her throat.

Hands down. Show me that delicate neck. I'll go back to the kitchen but not until the job's done.

Let me see your neck. Hands down. Your neck. It's alright Mistress, it's alright. I'll be quick and quiet. Show me your neck.

She looks to be on the point of strangling Claire. Suddenly an alarm-clock goes off. Solange stops. They huddle together and listen.

Already?

CLAIRE Christ. Hurry up. She'll be back soon.

She begins unfastening her dress.

Help me. Time's up. And you didn't even finish.

SOLANGE (helping her) It's the same thing every time. It's all your fault. You take too long to get ready. I never get to kill you.

CLAIRE It's all the preparations. We lose too much time.

SOLANGE (takes the dress off for Claire) Keep an eye on the window.

CLAIRE We've still got a few minutes. I set the clock ahead so we could put everything back.

She wearily flops into the armchair.

SOLANGE Real muggy tonight. Been muggy all day.

CLAIRE Yes.

SOLANGE This is killing us, Claire.

CLAIRE Yes.

SOLANGE It's time.

CLAIRE Yes.

She gets up wearily.

I'll go make her tea.

SOLANGE Keep an eye on the window.

CLAIRE There's time.

She wipes her face.

SOLANGE Still looking at yourself. Claire, really.

CLAIRE I'm exhausted. I'm old and exhausted.

SOLANGE Keep an eye on the window. With all your fucking around, nothing's where it's supposed to be. And I have to clean the spit off her dress and put it away.

She looks at her sister.

What's wrong? You can be yourself again now. Your own face. C'mon Claire. Be my sister again.

CLAIRE I'm done. The light's killing me. Do you think the people out there can see in.

SOLANGE Who cares. Anyway – what're we supposed to do? The whole thing in the dark? Close your eyes. Claire, you close your little eyes and rest.

CLAIRE (puts on her little black dress) Listen, when I say I'm done, it's just an expression. Don't go feeling sorry for me and don't think you can walk all over me.



## EXTRACT FOUR

This scene is a turning point in the play as the sisters realise they are unlikely to get away with their plans. It is a useful scene in considering what Solange and Claire think of each other and of their likelihood of success.

- How in performance did Claire convincingly convey her shock and fear on the phone whilst not revealing her true feelings to the master?
- What does Solange do during the phone call? What does this add to the scene? Experiment with the effect if she:
  - ◇ Moves closer trying to listen
  - ◇ Insists on grabbing the phone
  - ◇ Listens from the other side of the room
  - ◇ Continues tidying up and then stops on a chosen line
- What does the way that Claire and Solange react tell you about their relationship and their true feelings about the plans? Through improvisation experiment with playing the scene with different blocking and consider the effect of each version:
  - ◇ With the sisters touching/grabbing each other throughout
  - ◇ With the sisters gradually moving further apart from each other
  - ◇ With the sisters gradually moving closer together
- Look closely at the way that Claire and Solange describe the mistress here and elsewhere in the text. How are their feelings different? How does this affect our understanding of what happens in the final third of the play?
- Through improvisation and/or reading aloud experiment with how this scene can be altered by changing the pace of the sisters lines and movements from the end of the phone call:
  - ◇ Both moving and speaking quickly throughout
  - ◇ Both building in speed as the scene moves on
  - ◇ Both slowing down in speed as the scene moves on
  - ◇ One sister moving and speaking quickly whilst the other is slow and vice versa

The telephone rings. The two sisters listen.

CLAIRE (on the telephone) Hello? (whispers to Solange) It's him. Yes sir, this is Claire. No sir, she'll be home any minute.

Solange tries to pick up the receiver. Claire pushes her aside.

Absolutely sir. Yes, I'll let her know. She'll be so happy to hear you've been released.

Absolutely, sir. Yes sir. I'm writing it down. You're waiting for her at Bilboquet. Absolutely, sir.

Good night, sir.

She tries to hang up but her hand is trembling and she puts the receiver on the table.

SOLANGE He's out?

CLAIRE On bail.

SOLANGE Oh-Sweet-Jesus-we're-fucked.

CLAIRE No shit.

SOLANGE The judges actually had the nerve to let him go? That's a joke. He was arrested. Put in handcuffs. Dragged away. What a fucking joke. They just spit in our faces. Now he's free and he'll tear this place apart to find the culprit. Do you understand?

CLAIRE I did what I could. We both knew the risk.

SOLANGE You did what you could. Congratulations. Your genius idea with the letters. They're working out a treat. And when they identify your handwriting, won't that just be fan-fucking-tastic?

So tell me – why's he going to Bilboquet first and not here? Huh?

CLAIRE If you're so fucking clever why didn't you finish her off? You chickened out. She was right there – Mistress – lovely-scented, slow-breathing in her bed of perfume, her skin all soft and warm in the sheets. There's no way out, we just have to keep going, keep playing along.

SOLANGE It's a dangerous game and I bet we've left a trail a mile wide. Because of you, our grubby smears are all over this. Everywhere I look I see a slobbery mess that I'll never get rid of.

And what about her? Strutting around in total fucking control. She sniffs out the clues. With her little pink toe she points out our mistakes. She unravels us. All because of you. She's laughing in our faces. She'll find out everything. She'll know that we tried on her dresses, that we copied her gestures, that we came onto Master with our fake smiles and shy eyes. Everything will give us away, Claire. Everything will point the finger at us. The marks on the curtain touched by your shoulder. The mirror cracked by my face. The lights. Yes, even the lights will betray us with shadows of what we've done. Because of you – you and your fuck ups – we're done for.

CLAIRE We're done for because you didn't have the guts to –

SOLANGE To what?

CLAIRE Kill her.

## EXTRACT FIVE

This is a longer extract when all three characters are on stage. It is a useful example of showing both how the maids interact with their mistress but also each other. It culminates in a moment where Claire and Solange seem to unwittingly be drifting into their role play, particularly when clothing is a trigger for the usual character change.

- Consider how close the performance of the mistress should be to Claire's impersonation/performance. Discuss the effect on the audience if the performance is similar or more overtly exaggerated – is one more disturbing and if so, why?
- Again, we see Solange and Claire behaving slightly differently towards the Mistress. How would you demonstrate/was this demonstrated in performance?
- Consider the positioning and blocking of the Mistress. How would you show that she is in command of the space? Experiment through improvisation with the following blocking options and consider the effect of each. Which is the most fitting and which best conveys your interpretation of the Mistress?:
  - ◇ She is always centre stage either standing or sitting other than when directed towards the wardrobe
  - ◇ She is always moving around the room as if assessing her possessions/the flowers
  - ◇ She is at the dressing table appearing primarily concerned with herself as opposed to others/the room
- As a director/actor you need to decide how unpleasant the Mistress should be. Identify several of her lines which you consider are the most unpleasant in this extract and perhaps elsewhere and explain why. Experiment through improvisation with a focus on vocal skills (pitch, pace, pause, tone, intonation, emphasis, volume, rhythm) on the effect of delivering the key lines.
- Consider what is the risk of making the Mistress either too unpleasant or not unpleasant enough – how does this effect both our understanding of the play and the characters?

MISTRESS Whatever. Hardly worth the effort is it. I'm giving up all luxuries. Perfume, clothes, food. I'm an old woman. Old. Do you think I look old, Solange?

SOLANGE No more gloomy thoughts now.

MISTRESS If it's too gloomy here – if it's too depressing for you –

SOLANGE No, mistress.

MISTRESS There's no reason why you should stay and suffer with me.

SOLANGE We'll never abandon Mistress. After everything Mistress has done for us.

MISTRESS Solange, have you both been very unhappy here?

SOLANGE No.

MISTRESS You're like daughters to me. My two little girls. We'll move to the country. Pick our flowers fresh from the garden. Grow our own food. You don't like games though do you? You're both still young but I've never heard you laugh. In the country the three of us will have peace and quiet. I'll look after you. And one day, I'll leave everything to you. How about that? My dresses. They're worth more than the two

of you earn in a lifetime. All these dresses –

She goes to the wardrobe and looks at her dresses.

What good are they? I'm giving up this shallow, indulgent life.

Claire comes in, carrying the tea.

CLAIRE Mistress's tea is ready.

MISTRESS Farewell red carpets, parties, theatre. You'll inherit all that.

CLAIRE You can keep your clothes.

MISTRESS Excuse me?

CLAIRE Mistress should get even more magnificent ones.

MISTRESS And when would I have time to go see designers? As I've already explained to your sister, all I'll need is a simple black dress for prison visits. But that's different.

CLAIRE Mistress will look amazing. Grief will give her new inspiration.

MISTRESS What? Yes, you're probably right, I should always look my best for him. God, I'll have to come up with something extra-special to mourn his exile. I'll have to redesign my whole wardrobe. You two can have the old dresses. I'll get new, even more beautiful outfits.

CLAIRE But, Mistress –

SOLANGE The tea is ready.

MISTRESS Put it down. I'll drink it in a minute. I'm giving you all my dresses. The whole lot.

CLAIRE We would never dare step into your shoes, Mistress. If you only knew the care we take.

The arranging and the sorting by colour and fabric weight. This wardrobe is like a chapel consecrated to the holiest of the virgins. When we open it –

SOLANGE The tea's getting cold.

CLAIRE A door each. The same door every time. Claire to the left and Solange to the right. We pull apart together and kneel before it in awe. Mistress's wardrobe is sacred. Her magnificent clothes. Hanging there.

SOLANGE You're making Mistress tired with your blabbering

MISTRESS (caresses the red velvet dress) Poor sweet, sweet, beautiful thing. McQueen designed it for me. Here. Have it. It's yours, Claire.

She gives it to Claire and looks in the wardrobe.

CLAIRE Oh Mistress. Really?

MISTRESS Really. I said, didn't I?

SOLANGE Mistress is too kind. (to Claire) Well say thank you. You've been admiring it long enough.

CLAIRE I'll treasure it. I'll never wear it. It's too precious.

MISTRESS You'll have to have it altered a little. In the train alone there's enough material to make another piece. It's very warm and such a strong fabric, you could wear it every day. And you, Solange, what can I give you? These – my foxes.

CLAIRE The dress-ups coat.

MISTRESS What dress-ups?

SOLANGE Claire means that Mistress always wears it on special occasions.

MISTRESS That's not exactly true. Anyway, you're lucky to be given dresses. I have to buy them.

God, I can't wait to start creating my new look. I'll be fucking magnificent. His exile. My sorrow. A masterpiece.

CLAIRE Mistress is so wonderful.

MISTRESS No please. Don't thank me. I like being able to make people happy. I only want to do good. It amazes me to think that anyone would want to hurt me. For what? Because I was too happy? I felt so protected from the whole messiness of life – protected by your devotion, protected by him, but all that put together wasn't enough to keep despair at bay. I'm desperate. Those letters.

Letters that only I knew about. Solange.

SOLANGE (bowing to her sister) Yes, Mistress.

MISTRESS What're you doing? Bowing to Claire? How weird. Since when did you two develop a sense of humour?

CLAIRE Tea. Mistress.

## EXTRACT SIX

This final extract sees the sisters returning to their fantasy role play with Claire assuming the role of the Mistress. It is a clear example of Claire's need to escape into the sadomasochistic fantasy world they have created and reveals the sisters dependency on each other to either fulfil their plan or try and find an escape from it.

- Claire seems the driving force in the scene, begging Solange to return to the role play and insult her. She appears to derive a sexual pleasure and power from it and certainly a fulfilment that will distract her from the reality of their failed plan. Discuss how in the production her quick transition back to the Mistress was shown through voice, movement and staging. How is her performance as the Mistress here, altered from that we saw earlier in the production?
- Solange appears initially reluctant or unclear then begins to participate until she is deriving as much pleasure from the 'role play' as Claire – experiment through improvisation with these two performance options:
  - ◇ Solange instantly returns to her 'role' as subservient maid when she realises Claire is in the Mistress' dress
  - ◇ Solange gradually transitions from older sister to subservient maid when she realises Claire is in the Mistress' dress

CLAIRE Claire? Is it Claire? You irritate me, Claire or Solange – you all look the same – Claire or Solange, you annoy me, I'm furious actually because you, bitch, are the cause of all my woes.

SOLANGE Say it again.

Claire puts on one of the mistress's dresses.

CLAIRE I accuse you of the most hideous, sick crimes.

SOLANGE You're crazy, Mistress. Or drunk. There's no crime, Claire. Because nothing has been done.

CLAIRE Then we'll make one up. You want to insult me. Go ahead. Spit in my face. I can take it.

Cover me with your piss and shit.

Solange realizes Claire is dressed as Mistress.

SOLANGE You're beautiful.

CLAIRE Let's not start at the beginning. Let's skip the formalities. They're useless now. Those lies and hesitations. Let's jump straight to the transfiguration. COME ON FOR FUCK'S SAKE HURRY UP. I can't stand the shame, the humiliation any more. The whole world is watching. Grinning. Nodding and tutting. Calling us sick in the head. Evil. Whatever. Claire. (ecstatic) This is how... I'm... This is.... Let's... Oh Claire. Let's... I'm bursting... I'm going to burst.

SOLANGE You're so beautiful.

CLAIRE Insults.

SOLANGE You're beautiful.

CLAIRE Skip all that. Skip the formalities. Insult me.

SOLANGE Your beauty is blinding me. I can't.

CLAIRE The insults, I said. I didn't get all dressed up to hear you tell me how beautiful I am. I want to get to the hate. The insults. The dirt.

SOLANGE Help me.

CLAIRE I hate domestic servants. They make me fucking sick. The whole lot of them. They're not even human. They ooze and slobber and leak all over our floors, between our tiles. They're the foul stink in our bedrooms and hallways, trickling down our throats, infecting us. I abhor you. I shit you out and flush you away.

SOLANGE I'm getting there. I'm nearly there. I'm nearly.

CLAIRE I know they're necessary – people to dig graves, collect garbage, clean toilets – but really they belong in tiny attics far away from the truth and beauty and wonder of life, so they don't ruin it with their stench and awkward, ugly need to please.

SOLANGE Yes. Yes. More. MORE.