The germ for *The Screens* was an anecdote. An Algerian mason, working on the house of one of Genet's friends (Lucien Senemaud's house?), was robbed of his savings and was rendered so poor he could afford to buy only a very plain wife back in Algeria. This story, with its suggestion of humiliation and social failure and its promise of a grim love between desperate people, generated the immense play, which in its final printed version is 276 pages long. On the stage, if uncut, it plays for about five hours and comprises ninety-six roles plus extras (an instruction reads: 'Each actor will play the role of five or six characters, male or female'). Its very size was probably designed to make of it an event not likely to be repeated often, somewhat like Wagner's Ring cycle.

The 'message' of the play, if there is one, is certainly elusive (Paule Thevenin, who worked closely with Genet on the text, thinks it is 'about' betrayal). The story is simple. Said Nettle, a poor worker in an unnamed colony, has a wife, Leila, so ugly that she must wear a hood that entirely covers her face except for cut-outs for her eyes and mouth. Leila and Said live with his mother, and the three members of the Nettle family, true to their name, are prickly, unwanted weeds who grow in the wasteland. Said does not get along with his fellow workers on Sir Harold's estate; they ridicule him because his wife is ugly, which leads to fistfights he always loses. He saves every cent he can earn—or steal—in order to go to a whorehouse ruled over by Warda, a middle-aged prostitute with sumptuous clothes, weighted skirts and rotten teeth she picks with gold pins. When Said is caught stealing a jacket from a fellow worker, he is put in prison. Leila, in order to join him there, arranges to be caught stealing as well. The villagers mock Said's mother because her son is an outcast; she is not even allowed to mourn with the other women when they accompany a dead villager to his grave.

Scenes in the whorehouse and the village alternate with scenes of the European settlers, who are variously French, German, Italian and English. In order to impress his Arab servants, one colonist, Mr Blankensee, pads his clothes with an impressive false stomach and buttocks, and Sir Harold, when he himself cannot supervise his servants, leaves behind a huge, disembodied glove to hover in the air to intimidate them. The Europeans, however, are so self-absorbed that they fail to notice the outbreak of a rebellion that soon leads to revolution. They chat contentedly while furtive Arabs set the orange grove on fire.

Slowly things run down in a sort of moral entropy. The Europeans lose their power and take refuge in self-intoxicating rhetoric. Said's mother, almost unintentionally, strangles a French soldier in a parody of an amorous embrace. A French lieutenant dies; since his men cannot bury him with proper honours in French soil, they send him off in a cloud of collective farts, the air of the various French regions they've long been ripening in their bowels. The mystery surrounding the whorehouse, compounded by the rejection by respectable Arab women, begins to break down during the revolution; the prostitutes become women like all others. More and more of the characters die. We see each newly dead person breaking through a screen in order to enter the other world, where all social and political distinctions are dissolved in a sea of laughter. As each person realizes he is dead, he exclaims: 'And to think we make such a fuss over it!'

At the end of the play a trial scene takes place, the very trial of a traitor that occurs off-stage in *The Blacks*. In *The Blacks*, however, it is possible to imagine that the Black traitor in a new Black nation should be punished. But in *The Screens* Genet, the great apostle of treachery, reveals that the real danger is that the revolutionaries will all too successfully emulate their ex-masters, that instead of inventing or rediscovering their own culture and values they will simply retain the European system but fill in the blanks with new Arab names. As proof against this misguided urge to imitate the oppressors, nothing is so valuable as the Nettle family's selfishness, underhandedness and passionate inassimilability. Genet once said that he wrote The *Screens* to show the saving importance of 'a little pile of garbage'.

In the trial scene the revolutionary soldiers want to punish Said for having betrayed them to the enemy, but one of the strongest village women, Ommou, herself on the very edge of the grave, defends Said.

OMMOU  
The lords of yesteryear say it to the lords of today that nothing is more worthy of being protected than a little pile of garbage.... No one should throw out all of the dust he's swept up

LALLA  
I always put a pinch under the radio.

CHIGHA  
I put it in my vest pockets....

AZIZA  
And I in the salt-shaker to salt the soup....

The dead, listening to Ommou's arguments and knowing the soup needs salt, cheer her on until one of the revolutionary soldiers shouts at them: 'Enough. You're not going to decide what to do with this victory, nor what meaning to give it. It's up to us, the living, to decide.’ The soldier stands for efficiency in battle, for Cartesian logic, for glorious parades and the new order. Ommou drily observes: You and your buddies are the proof that we need a Said.

In the end Said attempts to flee and is gunned down by the soldiers. But he alone of all those people who have died in this play does not pass over to the other world. Just as the other workers quarantined him, so now he isolates himself. He refuses to join in with the big party going on among the dead. He is the irrational number that cannot be factored into society's tidy sums, the faint promise of continuing—or endless—revolution.

Genet's most persistent theme, abjection, is given its fullest treatment in *The Screens*, but here the political and social implications are more fully drawn out. No longer is abjection presented, as it is in the novels, as a form of satanic glamour. Now it is shown stripped of the transforming magic of Genet's language. It is laid bare in all its squalor, smelliness, ugliness and pettiness. No religious or aristocratic images redeem it. But, through a new sleight of hand, the very anti-social qualities of the outcast Nettle family are shown to serve social ends; they keep the revolution honest. A love, like the one sketched in between the beggars 'Genet' and Salvador in the opening pages of *The Thief’s Journal,* links the ugly Leila to her worthless husband, Said. The most powerfully eloquent moment in the whole play is Leila's speech:

LEILA: I’ll obey you. (With sudden severity.) But I want—it’s my ugliness, earned hour by hour, that speaks, or what speaks?—I want you to stop looking backward. I want you to lead me without flinching to the land of shadow and of the monster. I want you to plunge into irrevocable grief. I want you—it’s my ugliness, earned minute by minute, that speaks—to be without hope. I want you to choose evil and always evil. I want you to know only hatred and never love. I want you—it’s my ugliness, earned second by second, that speaks—to refuse the brilliance of darkness, the softness of flint, and the honey of thistles. I know where we’re going, Saïd, and why we’re going there. It’s not just to go somewhere, but so that those who are sending us there remain tranquil, on a tranquil shore.

This must surely be one of the strangest declarations of love ever written, with its elevated diction linked surprisingly to the stuttering of spoken demotic, with its fierce embrace of darkness and despair that, equally surprisingly, expresses the love of two Dostoevskian sufferers, a love as searing as it is devoid of dignity, as buffoonish as it is tragic, as intense as it is unsentimental, as devoted as it is treacherous. Characteristically, when Genet discusses *The Brothers Karamazov* in an essay written in about 1981, he prefers the filthy brother Smerdyakov to the Christ-like Alyosha. Blin felt that this love—a love that uses words of hatred and words of contempt—was the real subject of the play, not colonialism or politics.

In the later scenario for 'Nightfall', Genet writes in a note after one scene, 'This girl, this whore, should have her own life, very personal, very sensual. She does this work, but she should also be someone, and the spectators should see it.' This is the same particularization—sensual, integral, unique—that Genet brings to the population in revolt in The *Screens* but denies to the Europeans, who are simply interchangeable with their roles (the Academician, the Banker, the Judge, the Vamp, the General, etc.); their roles, in turn, exist only if they are perceived. Hence the importance of photographers, who pursue them and record and publish their smallest action.

*The Screens* anthologizes the themes of *The Balcony* and *The Blacks*. As in *The Balcony*, a bordello is central to T*he Screens*, but with a critical difference. In *The Balcony* the prostitutes imitate and eroticize the power relationships of society (bishop-sinner, judge-criminal, general-horse) and therefore participate in the dangerously illusory and denaturing propagation of Imagery. They aren't people but Figures. In the Arab bordello, by contrast, the women don't impersonate anyone; rather they glory in their uselessness, a luxury status close to the sacred, to the mysteries of ancient temple prostitution. In this house the whores remain dressed in their magnificent robes and take pride in their age and accomplishments:

WARDA (haughty, with a languid, disenchanted voice) Twenty-four years old! ... A whore isn't thrown together overnight, a whore is something that matures. I've spent twenty-four years in the trade. And I am gifted! A man, what's a man? A man remains a man. He's the one who strips himself before us like a whore from Toul or Nancy.

As Genet said later, 'A bishop, or even the present Pope, is contained entirely in his costume. Arafat is not contained in his checkered headdress. He is elsewhere too. But imagine the Pope dressed as you are, or as I am!'

The Figures of Authority and the revolutionaries of *The Balcony* and *The Blacks* are brought back in *The Screens* but, as already suggested, Genet's last play shows that once the revolution is accomplished the new victors run the risk of imitating their predecessors. In later years, when Genet became a friend to the Palestinian people, he was still capable of saying: 'Listen: the day the Palestinians become institutionalized, I will no longer be on their side. The day the Palestinians become a nation like other nations, I will no longer be there ... I believe it will be at that moment that I will betray them.' The Nettles and Ommou resist assimilation. They refuse to lead symbolic lives, to take on the status of a banner or flag. Ommou says: 'No! No! Not me! I will never float, I will never be beaten by the winds.' Of the figures of authority, only the French Sergeant is an authentic being. As Roger Blin pointed out, the Sergeant is Said's double and is alight with the same glow of rot and filth

Genet’s writing takes on a new tone with *The Screens*, a broken music closer to the spoken tongue than anything he had written before. When Said first enters, he says: 'Pink! (A beat.) I tell you it's pink! The sky's already pink.'47 This way of backing into a sentence, of displaying the diamond and only then setting it into a ring of syntax, is a feature of Genet's new style. Or characters speak in rhymes and nonsense, excavating a verbal site, but throwing up too much dirt to permit us to see what's at the bottom of the pit: 'My head's on fire and bells in the fire, not my eyes in your pockets, the wind in my femur, ice under my petticoat, it's death, you should be dead but it's living not dead.'

The structure of the play is rambling, polyphonic, epic rather than well made, and those people who complain it is too long or crowded with incident or slack ignore Genet's intentions. Whereas *The Maids* is one of the most economical and tightly written plays of the modern repertoire, a direct descendent of Racine's spare dramas (one critic has even shown that it is organized in five 'acts' in the Racinian fashion), *The Screens* is more Shakespearean than Racinian with its interweaving plots, its blend of comedy and tragedy, and its political and historical overtones. Odette Asian, the French critic who has studied *The Screens* the most closely, refers to the play's 'dishevelled abundance' (foisonnement echevele),which is a good description of this untidy masterpiece. Genet was also influenced by Chinese opera. In 1955 he saw the Peking Opera in Paris during its first tour in France. A roaring success, the opera presented several extracts from much longer works, showed off its skilled acrobats and demonstrated its highly stylized ways of indicating travel, water, war, etc.

The Nettle family, all three members, charm us in a peculiar way. They have a direct relationship with nature reminiscent of Saint Francis of Assisi's. Said speaks to stones, his mother can recognize the different kinds of trees in the forest just from the sound of the wind in their branches, Leila sets fire to the neighbour's straw because she loves the fire (when Cocteau was asked what he would save if his house were on fire, he made the celebrated reply: 'The fire').

Once, years before, when Java had quizzed Genet about his origins, he had joked about the botanical meaning of genet, the weed-like broom plant. 'First of all, Genet, what's that? Did they find you in the nettles?' (a reference to the French notion that babies are born under cabbages). If Genet belonged to no one, then he must have been born amongst the Nettles, a family that dramatizes his simultaneous and conflicting needs to mother people (harshly), to betray everyone and to serve his intimates.

Between the scenes of the play Genet writes short essays—intended for the reader, not the spectator—that give a glimpse into his prejudices, ideas and feelings. We learn that every character harbours a wound that disappears under the ornaments worn by the person—a wound that also becomes apparent thanks to this disguise. As in *The Balcony*, the characters carry one real object (a Legionnaire's bag in leather) and one object that is false (a painted wooden rifle)—Genet's nods to reality and artifice, the twin gods of his theatre. Many of Genet's notes are idiosyncratic, not to say capricious: 'If this play is put on, it's indispensable to create a school of trembling.' As in his other plays, the notes work against everything in the action and dialogue that might be naturalistic.

Some of Genet's ideas about the theatre, particularly relevant here, are formulated in 'The Strange Word D' ('L'Etrange Mot D'...'), an essay published in Tel Quel in 1967. He wrote it, as he put it, 'with the active nonchalance of a child who knows how important the theatre is' The essay begins with a look at contemporary 'urbanism' (the 'strange word' of the title). In one unconventional recommendation after another, Genet urges that the theatre should be built in the shadow of a cemetery and its crematorium (which in turn should be sited in the centre of the city) and that after rehearsal, only one performance of the play should be given, an event of such splendour that its reflected glory would affect even those people who had not seen it. He suggests that to see Mozart's Don Giovanni in a cemetery would make death lighter and the opera more serious. In the cemetery a mime should impersonate the dead person before his coffin and his friends.

An architect designing a theatre should recognize how it actually functions in the world as it is, then should elaborate his work with a priestlike and smiling gravity. A play dissolves, at least during its duration, the audience's sense of historical time and creates a hushed sense of dramatic time—which amounts to a dizzying liberation. This new orientation in time is a useful weapon in struggling against the Occidental calendar, which begins with the Nativity, and which Westerners are always seeking to impose on other cultures.

Just as photography freed painting from the job of catching a likeness, in the same way movies and television have freed the theatre from the job of narrating anecdotes and allowed it to concentrate on its essential domain: myth. In Genet's own theatre, dirty words and shocking situations are so numerous because in other contemporary plays they are so few (If my theatre stinks it's because the other one smells good')54. Politics, morality and mere entertainment are irrelevant to true theatre. Any subject at all, if properly fragmented and displayed, can be an appropriate theatrical theme, but only if it has burned us first with its fire.

……………….

…….In a conclusion worthy of Roland Bathes (whom Genet knew and read), Genet writes that both words and acts conform to a syntax of their own, which must be properly learned and manipulated. If the funeral mime performs efficiently, he will find those words which will be able to make the dead man live and die again and which will devour life and even 'the death of the dead man'. As an example of an act which is as hard to learn as this syntax, Genet cites treason: 'I had to work hard to betray my friends, but in the end it was worth it.'

Out of this welter of ideas emerge a few notions more central to *The Screens* even than to his earlier plays: the link between death and theatre; the need to create a new sense of psychological duration (as opposed to clock time) inscribed within the performance of a play; the subordination or exclusion of political and social messages in favour of a new form, which depends on fragmentation; and the recognition that whatever subject one chooses must be one that has deeply moved us. Elsewhere Genet has emphasized that he is against psychological studies in the theatre and mere entertainment.