

THE THEATER

New Play Off Broadway

The Blacks (translated from the French of Jean Genet by Bernard Frechtman) finds the most trenchant of French avant-gardists once more leading his own fierce assault on his own unyielding terms. Avant-garde, with Genet, is in part millenniums-old *ancien régime*. His originality rests on the very origins of theater, on ritual and ceremony, magic and masks; his modernity lies in how he reshapes, distorts, sophisticates, extends

is his shifting, jarring, distorting, disrupting color effects that constitute his theatrical thrusts. What most flares and flashes is a scathing, mocking Negro anger toward the whites. Where in Genet's *The Balcony* men act out their dreams, in *The Blacks* they act out their nightmares as well. Often unbridled, sacrilegious, obscene, *The Blacks* is echoing too at times, with travestied ceremonies, Pirandellian illusion and reality, a sense of secular Black Masses and *King Lear* mock trials. A savage Negro assault that is also a



SCENE FROM "THE BLACKS"

Martha Swope

A white man's idea of Negroes' ideas of white ideas of Negroes.

them. Of all this *The Blacks*—a white man's often extraordinary venture into Negro fantasy and psychology—is strongly compacted.

The multilevel method, the box-within-box technique of *The Blacks*—which, so far as it boasts any narrative, concerns finding a white woman's murderer—involves conscious play-acting and play-within-a-play acting. Two sets of actors, all Negroes, make up the scene: those in outright Negro roles and those in white masks who haughtily pretend to be white observers. As the play moves forward by way of diatribe, mimicry, mockery, profanity, it variously depicts Negroes' ideas of whites (and Negroes' ideas of white ideas of Negroes), whites' ideas of Negroes (and whites' ideas of Negroes' ideas of whites), all this in terms of whites who are not whites, and for that matter, of a murdered woman who was nonexistent.

It is this kaleidoscopic use of attitudes that Genet substitutes for action; and it

Genet indictment, in places *The Blacks* indicts the savagery as well.

A truly provocative work well staged by Gene Frankel, *The Blacks* can be poetic, caustic, slapstick, can startle, puzzle, perturb. And Genet, in going back to the ritual origins of theater as a way of going beyond its modern routine conventions, achieves startling effects. But he pays a pretty steep price for them, either through a self-defeating technique or through an insufficiently mastered one. For, unable to advance through plot, *The Blacks* can only assault through repetition. True ritual serves well-defined occasions; "ritual" here is stretched out to meet a varying host of demands. The shocking, never a full substitute for the dramatic, at length often fails to shock; the boxes within boxes begin to seem empty; an overextended technique all but reaches a point of no returns. At half its length *The Blacks* might have twice the impact—as, at the halfway point, it actually does.