

Sartre and Huis Clos

Programme note for Donmar Warehouse January 2012 production of Sartre's *Huis Clos*

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Jean-Paul Sartre is an extraordinary figure in twentieth century intellectual life. Throughout his career, he continuously developed and applied a sophisticated and wide-ranging philosophy. The early publications analysed the nature of perception, imagination, emotion, and the ego. But by the end, he had made complex contributions to moral and political theory, literary and art criticism, and psychology and psychoanalysis, often through interventions in public events. His media were plays and novels, journalism and criticism, biographies and autobiographies, brisk polemics and weighty treatises. He even once wrote a song for Juliette Greco.

It is not just his range that is remarkable, but the unity and coherence of his vision across this range. At the heart of his project is a concern with what it is to be human. A person's destiny is determined by the choices they make, on his view, but the person who makes those choices is to some extent constructed by their society. The development of his philosophy over his career is driven by a continual investigation of the details and implications of this tension between individual and society.

One abiding theme is an interest in the subtle ways in which people hide from themselves truths they would rather not face and avoid being confronted with evidence contrary to their cherished beliefs. Here he was inspired by Freud, but replaced the machinations of a murky unconscious with a socially sustained self-deception that he called 'bad faith'.

This is why he worked across so many media, rather than being content with communicating his theory to fellow philosophers. He wanted to liberate the culture at large from what he saw as a false picture of life that ultimately condemns us to conflict with one another, alienation from ourselves, dissatisfaction with our achievements, and despair over our prospects for happiness.

Huis Clos is perhaps the purest of all his literary expressions of his philosophy. It was written towards the end of 1943, the year in which he published *Being and Nothingness*, his first attempt at expounding a complete philosophy of existence. It explores his core concerns without relying on particular social or political situations to provide them with content. There is a timeless quality to the action in this play that matches the timelessness of its themes. Perhaps that is part of its enduring appeal.