

NOTES

This is my second attempt at a one-act opera adaptation of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist play *Huis Clos*. I wrote the first over the summer of 1999 during my bachelors degree studies at California State University, Hayward (now CSU East Bay). Timothy Morningstar, who was director of the university's opera workshop at the time, had asked me to create a one-act "psychological drama." I knew Sartre's play from seeing it in high school and thought it ideal. The semester after my opera was finished, it premiered as an unstaged concert presentation. (To my shock and dismay, I was drafted into performing the small tenor role.) Several years later, a San Francisco-based cabaret opera company, Goat Hall Productions, premiered the work fully staged for a three-show run in Berkeley. I am forever indebted to mezzo-soprano Meghan Dibble, who performed the Inès role in both productions and was instrumental in making the latter happen. To my knowledge, neither production received any reviews, and press from the performances was limited to their announcements and programs.

The original was not a bad work, but it seems painfully obvious to me now how it was not composed as part of my regular studies: the music is simplistic in places; the opera's overall construction is a series of nearly arbitrary scenes devoid of any regard for larger story structure; and my understanding of the source material was limited at the time. For some time now, I've felt the kernel idea of an adaptation was sound and that my compositional instincts from that first attempt had merit; I made the decision in early

2018 to take what was good from the first attempt and try again.

This new opera is the result, and it stands on its own as a distinct, separate work. In a way, the two versions are like a study sketch and subsequent oil-on-canvas. The minimalist style in the original opera has been refined; the music maintains its emphasis on pulse and the relentless inevitability that evokes—a symbolic expression of the opera's setting. The women's duet, the cacophonous trio, and Estelle's aria, while all still present, are now more adeptly actualized. The harmonic language is richer, and the structural flow of individual scenes, as well as the opera as a whole, has been improved.¹ I have also made a pointed attempt to better understand Sartre's play, as well as the Existentialist philosophy he is remembered for. This deeper understanding has informed my compositional choices, and I expect the information will be equally useful to performers of this adaptation and its excerpts.

II.

The Story of *Huis Clos*

Huis Clos is remembered as one of Sartre's most prominent works. The action features three characters, GARCIN, INÈS, and ESTELLE, who are trapped together in a room with three couches and no windows or mirrors. (An additional character, VALET, makes only brief

1. I have long desired to write an epic opera based on the Greek figure Cassandra. As part of my work toward that goal, I've been studying story structure and development, learnings that have been useful here.

appearances and serves little function beyond escorting the main characters onto the stage.) It quickly becomes apparent that the characters are in a version of Hell, and that they are to spend all eternity with each other in that room. Sartre did not hesitate to use religion and religious ideas in his works even though he was himself a confirmed atheist (from the age of twelve!)² Sartre's use of and views of theatre meant he consistently placed characters in difficult situations with choices of great significance.³ But the story of this play's creation has its roots in World War II and the German occupation of France.

Sartre was drafted into the French army in 1939, interrupting a burgeoning career in which he had already published a novel, a series of essays, and other works. He was captured the following year by the Germans and held as a prisoner of war for the next nine months, ultimately housed at Stalag XII-D in Trèves. That Christmas, the prisoners were permitted to put on an "entertainment"⁴ and Sartre wrote *Bariona or the Son of Thunder* for the occasion. Though Sartre eventually felt disdainful of the Christian themes in that narrative, below the surface of the play—a thinly-veiled allegory for the prisoners seeking release from their captivity—the seeds of his existentialist ideas about freedom can be seen.⁵

His time as a prisoner of war haunted Sartre—particularly the memory of how the German soldiers regarded him, the way they looked at him. Though he wrote *Huis Clos* specifically to "dramatize certain aspects" of what came to be called Existentialism, it was his memories as a prisoner of war, the feelings of "living constantly and totally beneath the eyes of others, and the Hell which naturally set in under such circumstances,"⁶ that Sartre's play was specifically born out of.

Huis Clos was written for three of Sartre's friends to perform. The characters in the play are

2. Hazel Estella Barnes, *Sartre*, (London: Quartet Books, 1974), 11.

3. John Gillespie, "Sartre and Theatrical Ambiguity," *Sartre Studies International* 18, no. 2 (2012): 52.

4. Barnes, *Sartre*, 31.

5. Barnes, *Sartre*, 31–47.

6. Michel Contat, Michel Rybalka, and Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 98.

well-balanced in both stage time and lines, and in relation to each other. Sartre did this to ensure no one character could be considered a lead role, hoping to avoid any "rivalry" and to keep things amicable between the three actors.⁷ In contrast, the play itself contains much conflict. It often takes the shape of two characters ganging up against the third. The makeup of those pairings and who is under the onslaught moves through every possible combination.

During the post-WWII to 1950s era, Sartre's plays "dominated" stages in France.⁸ In the years after its Paris premiere, numerous performances of *Huis Clos* were held across Europe. When the play premiered in the United States in 1946 under the re-title *No Exit*, it was already a "phenomenon of the modern theatre."⁹ The first US performance was at the Biltmore Theatre in New York City (re-named the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre in 2008) and directed by John Huston. In his review for *The New Republic*, Stark Young emphasized the play's importance, characterizing it as something that "should be seen whether you like it or not." Young also referenced Sartre's views on existentialism and asserted that a better understanding of those ideas can inform an audience member. But he stressed a greater point: that the people in Sartre's play are in Hell less for their "sins," and more for their "basic lack in ... character."¹⁰ Loosely translated, these are not nice people.

For my one-act opera adaptation, I have attempted to preserve as much of Sartre's intentions as possible. There are a few minor changes made to accommodate the shorter length: Garcin's conversation with the Valet when he initially arrives in Hell has been shortened; Inès and Estelle both arrive at the same time instead of one after the other. To an extent, the constantly shifting two-against-one antagonisms have been simplified into major conflicts between each of the characters. Inès and Estelle's main interaction takes place in the context of a duet; Garcin and

7. Peter Caws, "To Hell and Back: Sartre on (and in) Analysis with Freud," *Sartre Studies International* 11, no. 1 and 2 (2005): 169.

8. Gillespie, "Sartre and Theatrical Ambiguity," 49–50.

9. Stark Young, review of *The Fatal Weakness* by George Kelly and *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre, *The New Republic*, December 9, 1946.

10. Young, review of *No Exit*.

Inès reveal the true reasons for their damnation in a shared aria; and I've selected Estelle's story of her affair and infanticide of the resulting child as the opera's lone true aria. In the original play, it is implied that Inès is in Hell simply because she is lesbian; this has been eliminated. And the depths of the interpersonal back and forth between the characters aren't as pronounced, as would be expected in an abbreviated adaptation.

III.

Characters, Setting, Action

The first character to 'arrive' in Hell is Garcin, who is escorted onto the stage by the Valet. In the original play, the audience learns that he is a journalist originally from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil who spoke out against the government's war efforts through his writings. He says at first that he was persecuted for his pacifist stances, but we later learn he was actually hunted down and executed for failing to report for military duty.¹¹ The reveal that Garcin was a deserter foreshadows the cowardice he demonstrates at the end of the play when he cannot force himself to leave the room he shares with Inès and Estelle; he would rather face the devils he knows than whatever unknown might be outside.

Inès arrives next, and though Garcin tries to engage with her, she is generally hostile toward him. She was a postal worker in life and says she is not surprised to find herself in Hell. Inès makes no bones about being gay, and reveals over time that she seduced her cousin's wife, breaking up their marriage. The character is prickly throughout the play, except in her attempt to seduce Estelle—an attempt that backfires. Inès ultimately reveals that she believes she is in Hell because she not only killed her lover's husband, but convinced her lover to take part in the deed and then held the fact of it over her head. Then, in a tragic turn, the audience learns that Inès was killed by her lover in a murder/suicide.

When Estelle, the third character, arrives, she is very frightened. She is a high-society type, somewhat shallow, and has just died of

pneumonia. She flirts with Garcin, largely to no avail. She is repulsed by Inès' attraction to her, though it does appeal to her vanity. It takes some time for Estelle's walls to break down. She insists that it is a mistake for her to be in Hell and that there is no reason for her to have been sent there. She reveals that she had an affair—she took a lover who stirred her passions more than her much-older husband. But it is only later in the play that the audience learns the full extent of this tryst: their coupling resulted in a pregnancy. Estelle hid the truth from her husband and social circle, and traveled with her lover to another country where she had the baby. Though her lover was happy, Estelle was disgusted and murdered the baby by drowning it in a lake. Her lover, distraught, committed suicide.

In the play, the Valet role is minor. He escorts characters onstage, engages in a small amount of discussion with them, and reveals almost nothing about himself beyond that his relatives also work in Hell. The role has been reduced even further in my adaptation. Though technically a tenor role, I've voiced it high to allow the greatest flexibility in casting. There is nothing about the character that would imply a specific gender, and in my adaptation I have conceived it as a role that could be performed by any.

The play's setting is significant. Sartre's three *Huis Clos* characters are in Hell (though they do occasionally glimpse visions of the Earth they left behind.) Yet the three have not been placed in a medieval torture chamber; they find themselves instead in a formal drawing room with three couches.¹² There are no mirrors or windows anywhere in the room, no place where any of the characters can see a reflection of themselves. In the play, Garcin tries to move some of the other objects—the lamp that lights the room, a bronze statue on the fireplace mantle—but to no avail. A letter opener rests on one of the tables between the couches. And there is a doorbell ringer next to the door, but it doesn't respond when the characters press it. Supposedly it summons the

11. In the opera, I focus less on his desertion and more on his confession of brutality toward his wife; this character flaw strikes me as deeper and a greater betrayal of Sartre's existentialist ideals.

12. The original play states the room is decorated in the French Second Empire style, which the characters comment on. For my adaptation, I have specified the room be decorated in the Mid-Century Modern style because I believe it better represents timelessness to contemporary audiences.

Valet, but he never comes when called.

When they first arrive in Hell, the three characters are surprised at the comfort of their surroundings; it is a far cry from the torture dungeons and horrors they were expecting. Though not exactly hostile to each other at first, the three do not become fast friends. Each understands to a varying degree just exactly what has happened and where they are. But their personalities are at odds with one another, and the conflict soon escalates.

Garcin attempts to get control of the situation and suggests that the three of them could avoid conflict if they simply ignored each other—if they don't speak to one another, if they don't look at each other, there will be no interaction to provoke reactions.

As it turns out, Garcin is the only one interested in abiding by this request. Inès attempts to get closer to Estelle, who enjoys the attention until she realizes it is not innocent and becomes disgusted. When Estelle rebuffs her, Inès turns back to Garcin and unloads on him. She refuses to let him dictate the terms of her afterlife; she will not be silent, and certainly not just because he says so.

Inès and Garcin then agree to confess the crimes they committed in life that have led to their being condemned in death, but Estelle refuses. She tries to flee the room, but the door is locked. Cornered, Estelle confesses as well.

The three ponder what to do next, and guess that they should try to help each other. Garcin seeks absolution from Estelle, who only tells him what she thinks he wants to hear. When Inès points this out, Garcin turns to her for affirmation, but she refuses him. Defeated, Garcin decides he has had enough of the conflict and wants to leave.

After making a great show of trying to get the locked door open, Garcin gives up and walks away. Once he has crossed the room, though, the door opens on its own, and yet Garcin can not make himself go through it. Inès laughs at Garcin's demonstration of the full depths of his cowardice. Estelle tries to console him, inviting Garcin to take solace in her arms, but he cannot be physical with her while Inès watches.

In a final attempt to end their predicament, Estelle grabs the letter opener and tries to murder

Inès. Inès laughs again, this time at Estelle's denial and folly. The three resign themselves to their sofas ... and an eternity at each others' throats.

IV.

Analysis, Part I: Plot

Jean-Paul Sartre wrote *Huis Clos* specifically to explore and enunciate a philosophy he is widely considered the father of: Existentialism.¹³ This group of ideas was “as much a literary phenomenon as a philosophical one.”¹⁴ It is in Sartre's writings such as the play *Huis Clos* and the essay *Being and Nothingness* where his ideas are most readily discovered and explored. Many of Sartre's contemporaries, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus, expressed existentialist ideas in their own writings. Though this philosophical school has largely been left behind, there is today a “revival of interest in moral psychology” not dissimilar from and with roots in Existentialism and new authors are actively exploring “the existential themes of self-making and choice.”¹⁵

Because there are so many aspects to Existentialism, and so many writers and philosophers subscribed to it in such varying degrees, it is somewhat difficult to encapsulate.¹⁶ For a brief definition, the New Oxford American Dictionary considers Existentialism “a philosophical theory or approach that emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will.”¹⁷ Oxford further stresses the denial of objective values, and the “significance of human freedom and experience.” Furthermore, Existentialism considers the existence of human beings as whole individuals rather than just their essence

13. “Jean-Paul Sartre,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified December 5, 2011, accessed March 27, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sartre/>.

14. “Existentialism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified March 9, 2015, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>.

15. “Existentialism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

16. George Cotkin, “French Existentialism and American Popular Culture, 1945–1948,” *The Historian* 61, no. 2 (1999): 327.

17. The New Oxford American Dictionary, s.v. “existential.”

or thoughts. A common maxim in existentialist thought is the idea that “existence precedes essence.”¹⁸ Taken to its furthest extreme, this idea might take a shape akin to Nihilism—that life has no inherent purpose or meaning. And while Sartre claimed many times to have read Nietzsche, it is unclear exactly in what regard he held the German philosopher or how well he understood his writings.¹⁹ Certainly, Sartre did not embrace the same level of extreme skepticism typical of Nietzsche’s Nihilism.

In Sartre’s essay *Being and Nothingness*, he examines many of his ideas about Existentialism. One of these is how human beings exist in relation to each other, which is to say that a person is not merely themselves experiencing the world around them—they are also being perceived and experienced by the other people in it. This experiencing is referred to as “the look” or “the gaze,” depending on translator. Sartre saw an inherent conflict in this, since how we experience ourselves is naturally going to be different than others’ experiences of us.

Sartre also wrote that our experience with the gaze results in conflict because of how it affects our freedom. Human beings have the freedom to self-determine, and yet that same freedom can be limited by others through their actions. This is experienced subjectively when we, as part of expressing our own freedom, act in ways that limit the freedom of others who are experiencing us.²⁰ Freedom and the ability to self-determine are intrinsic values of Sartre’s Existentialism. Early in his professional life, he rejected the metaphysical because he saw it as a potential limitation—“[a] subject’s free consciousness might be determined ‘from above’ by an ... existing value system.” Sartre saw humans as having both “the freedom and autonomy of consciousness” as well as the grounded reality of a “concrete,” ordinary world.²¹ As such, human beings have a responsibility to themselves to self-determine.

In the climax of Sartre’s play (and also in this

one-act opera adaptation), the character Garcin proclaims, “Hell is other people!” which, while striking and memorable, loses something in the translation from French to English.²² Sartre felt this significant line was “always misunderstood”²³ and made a number of attempts to clarify his intentions. In a 1965 spoken preface to a recording of the play, he relates, “These statements”²⁴ dovetail with comments Sartre made in an interview with *Playboy Magazine* the same year. Sartre said that, “other people are hell insofar as you are plunged from birth into a

““ People thought that what I meant by it is that our relations with others are always rotten or illicit. But I mean something entirely different. I mean that if our relations with others are twisted or corrupted then others have to be in Hell ... Fundamentally, others are what is most important ... for our understanding of ourselves.

situation to which you are obliged to submit.”²⁵ He went on to give examples of how accidents of birth, geography, class and socioeconomic status greatly determine what someone’s life will be like, and made the point that these circumstances are beyond an individual’s control, determined by others. ‘Hell’ is your life—who you are and what you do—not being under your own control, but under others’. Furthermore, someone can take steps to change their circumstances; those who don’t can be thought of having chosen to remain in that ‘Hell’ others made for them.

These are some of the main ideas behind Sartre’s *Huis Clos*. Who we are, our sense of ourselves, is revealed in and dependent upon how others perceive us. If we are in conflict with others, we don’t get a clear picture of ourselves, creating a personal hell in our lives. The room the three characters are trapped in has no mirrors, forcing

18. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet, (1947).

19. Christine Daigle, “Sartre and Nietzsche,” *Sartre Studies International* 10, no. 2 (2004): 195–196.

20. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, (1956).

21. Sam Coombes, “The Early Sartre and Ideology,” *Sartre Studies International* 9, no. 1 (2003): 58.

22. Caws, “To Hell and Back,” 169.

23. Contat, Rybalka, and Sartre, *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, 99.

24. Contat, Rybalka, and Sartre, *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, 99.

25. Jean-Paul Sartre, interview by Madeleine Gobeil, *Playboy Magazine*, May 1965.

them to either self-actualize, or be dependent on the others present to define them. Since the characters exist in large part to demonstrate “sins” against Existentialism, it is easy to see why Sartre so often has them choose the latter.

The relationships between Sartre’s characters are at first twisted by lies and dishonest intentions, but even after they confess their true crimes and reveal their darker selves to each other, they remain ‘in Hell.’ This is not simply because they lack basic moral character, but more because they refuse to change anything about themselves.²⁶ They refuse to grow. They refuse to try something new or different, to become someone new or different. At the end of the play, when Garcin is unable to go through the open door, Inès laughs at his cowardice, but neither she nor Estelle have the courage to face the unknown beyond the doorway either. They figuratively and literally choose to remain in Hell, trapped there not so much by the evils they committed in life, but because of their stubborn refusal to become different people in death. It’s as though the three could leave at any time if they wanted to, but they don’t, so they can’t. This gives the play a tragic aspect—the characters are trapped in a Hell of their own making and remain there because of their own inaction.

V.

Analysis, Part 2: Characters

Looking more deeply at the characters, we turn first to Garcin. When talking (or rather, lying) about how he was executed for his pacifist positions, he says that in life he was a man of principle. His first instincts are to seek a way for the three of them to avoid contact with each other and so prevent conflict—even to the extent that he covers his eyes to hide his gaze from the two women. Garcin is concerned with civility and manners. It is important to him to be polite, and he is jarred when others like Inès don’t agree to this rule of social conduct. He tries to put a brave face on the situation. Even later in the play, after the characters have revealed what they think are the real reasons they’ve been condemned to Hell, Garcin’s instincts are for the three of them

to find a way to try and help each other.

In Sartre’s Existentialism, the philosopher was concerned with actions taken in bad faith and, specifically, actions motivated by self-deception. Garcin tells himself and others he is a brave man, but this is patently untrue. He was not executed for his political beliefs; he was killed for being a military deserter. He masks his fear of facing the women, of conflict, with a façade of politeness. And when he reveals the real reasons he is in Hell—his treatment of his wife—he is not ashamed of his behavior so much as being exposed to the judgmental gazes of Inès and Estelle. His self-deception is brought to a fever pitch when he finds himself unable to walk through the open door at the end of the play, having just insisted that he wants to leave. He is both surprised at the truth of himself, and humiliated by Inès’ judgmental laughter.

Garcin’s attempts at politeness with Inès and Estelle is, for Sartre, a violation of his inherent human freedom—by choosing not to engage with the other people present, Garcin allows them to decide who he is and thereby eschews his personal responsibility to self-determine. This failure is far more important to Sartre than any religious “sin.” Garcin’s treatment of his wife while he was alive is also important. He sees her as a “victim” and a “martyr.” He Others her all the way into being an object, a mere thing, and then uses that to define her personhood in its entirety. For Sartre, this is also a far more important “sin”—to remove through your gaze another’s humanity.

Where with Garcin we need to peel back a number of layers of self-deception, the character Inès is someone remarkably close to Sartre’s ideal of a self-advocating realist. Inès begins the play with a solid understanding of where she is and why. Over time, it becomes clear that this is a woman who knows herself. She makes no apologies for her working class background, her prickly attitude, or any of the things she did in life.

Inès’ lack of self-deception gives her an advantage in Sartre’s world. Throughout the play, it is she who moves the action forward by forcing the other characters into uncomfortable situations which they then must react to—often with an attempt to escape. I highlight this aspect

26. Contat, Rybalka, and Sartre, *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, 99.

of her character at various times, but especially around the middle of the opera. Her line to Garcin, “I prefer to choose my hell; I prefer to look you in the eyes and fight it out face to face” is brought verbatim into the opera and catalyzes Garcin, Inès herself, and even ultimately Estelle into revealing the true reasons they believe they have been sent to Hell.

In the play, Inès essentially confesses to being a sadist. She talks specifically about needing to make others suffer. When speaking about her lover Florence, she does so in terms of their passion and how it burned so intensely that quickly nothing was left but ashes. (This is revealed to be literal of course when she tells the story of how Florence murdered her.) Early on, when the other two characters are hemming and hawing about what has happened and where they are, Inès relentlessly throws the truth in their faces. She is unkind to them throughout the play. Her attempts to seduce Estelle are cruel, and she reacts furiously when it does not go her way. Toward the end, when Garcin is unable to make himself exit the room through the open door, Inès offers him no comfort and instead laughs at him viciously.

It is Inès’ need to treat others cruelly that violates Sartre’s existentialist ideals. Enjoying the pain of others, intentionally causing it, these are both forms of creating a self-identity through Others’ reactions. Because Inès is attached to other people’s reactions, she is dependent on them for her sense of self instead of defining herself on her own terms in her own right. Causing others pain is a violation because one does not get to determine who others are, what they think, or how they feel. To do so removes their autonomy and renders them less than their fully human selves.

In some ways, Estelle’s “sins” against Existentialism are the most egregious. That she is a woman of high-society is a purposeful, sharp contrast to Inès’ working class background. Sartre’s Existentialism generally holds high-society in ill regard; many of their faults are personified in Estelle’s character. To begin, she is a woman of deep and well-practiced denial. She first demonstrates this in the play when searching for a gentler word to describe everyone’s being dead, then through her refusal to tell the truth

about her affair and the child, and then on to convincing Garcin the two of them can become lovers, all the way to the end of the drama when she tries to stab Inès and kill her. These are all actions taken out of deep self-deception.

Like Inès, Estelle also seeks external input for self-definition. She is extremely uncomfortable by the absence of mirrors to reassure her about her appearance. When she talks in the play about her lovers in life, the nicknames they had for her also evoke reflections—“my glancing stream,” “my crystal,” etc. There is even a moment when Estelle sees her home back on Earth, empty without her. The mirrors reflect nothing, and she feels this is what she has become—nothing. This need for external validation makes her particularly vulnerable to the manipulations of Inès, who literally offers to be her mirror. Estelle is desperate to be defined externally, attempts again and again to Other herself—to remove her own agency, her own humanity, and have someone else determine who and what she is. This extends even to her own desire for Garcin, which isn’t really desire at all but a need to make him desire her. And her attempts to convince Garcin that they can be lovers don’t have anything to do with Garcin himself as a person. Inès even declares at one point that, for Estelle, “any man will do,” and this is because she is not seeking any one man for their qualities as a person but instead for their potential to turn Estelle into an object of their desire.

VI.

Final Thoughts

When Sartre gave his lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism” in 1945 (later translated into English and distributed in 1947), it helped seed into culture the idea that all individuals are personally responsible for themselves—that we are in charge of our own destinies, and that our lives are what we choose to make them.²⁷ It is somewhat ironic that the originator of this idea of “dreadful freedom” should be so well-remembered for a work in which its characters are trapped for all time. Perhaps this demonstration of ideas by focusing on their opposites is one of the reasons

27. Cotkin, “French Existentialism,” 327.

Huis Clos remains so compelling.

The United States was slower to accept Sartre and his existentialist ideas than Europe. This is partially because of a cultural change to which Sartre was ill-suited: the rise of celebrity worship in the US after World War II.²⁸ Sartre was perceived as bohemian, and Existentialism was seen as a pessimistic philosophy, both of which were at odds with the zeitgeist of the US in a time when the culture preferred its intellectuals be “sober minded, optimistic, and respectable citizen[s].”²⁹ That Sartre gave interviews in fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* compounded these perceptions, and had the added effect of associating the philosopher and his ideas with temporary, “fashionable” fads.³⁰ And the appreciation Sartre’s ideas received at first were largely due to the prestige Americans assigned to works because they were French in origin, regardless of any independent actual worth.

Within a generation, though, Sartre and Existentialism found wide acceptance.³¹ When *Huis Clos* first premiered on Broadway, its run was short—just three weeks. The play has

since received a multitude of performances and adaptations. BBC radio aired a production starring Alec Guinness in 1946; multiple audio recordings of the play have been released; there have been three film adaptations including a 1954 production directed by Jacqueline Audry, one of France’s earliest women directors, and multiple television adaptations. There is also a one-act chamber opera adaptation by Andy Vores which premiered in Chicago in 2009.³²

While I don’t expect my adaptation to become as widely known as the previous examples, it is my hope that the performers and audiences who experience this opera or its excerpts are able to take away from it not just the enjoyment of the work itself, but also some new wisdom and understanding about the underlying philosophies at play. The questions Sartre explored about what it means to be human, what our responsibilities are to others, and especially what our responsibilities are to ourselves, are still as relevant today as they were seventy-five years ago.

—Zachary M. Watkins, Spring 2019

28. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 45–76.

29. Cotkin, “French Existentialism,” 328.

30. Cotkin, “French Existentialism,” 332.

31. Cotkin, “French Existentialism,” 329.

32. “No Exit,” *Wikipedia*, last modified May 20, 2019, accessed April 3, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Exit

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