Killers, Queers, and Cowards: Suffering and Freedom in Jean-Paul Sartre’s No Exit

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Killers, Queers, and Cowards: Suffering and Freedom in Jean-Paul Sartre’s No Exit

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Film and Theatre
Specialization: Theatre Performance – Acting

By
Aaron Brewer
B.F.A. Northern Kentucky University, 2010
May, 2024
Acknowledgments

To my partner Brik, thank you for the gift of laughter.

To my siblings and parents, thank you for the endless affirmations and support.

To my Self, thank you, you did it, bitch.
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Abstract

Throughout *No Exit*, Sartre’s mirror is key to understanding his characters and philosophy. It is his tool for exploring ideas that are limited by the time in which he lived. Here, the play does what all great works should do: it challenges the status quo and looks beyond what can already be seen. This thesis will use his established mirror metaphor and an expanded mirror metaphor to unearth the true nature of *No Exit’s* characters.

In setting down the characters’ path, Sartre asks questions that humans have considered for Millenia: Why are we here? Why am I suffering? How can I stop it? Sartre rarely answers these questions in his existential opus. To find them, we shall examine the original existentialist: the Buddha.

Finally, with the nature of his characters and their journey established, I will reflect on the University of New Orleans’ production of *No Exit*. 
Introduction

I was fortunate to be able to suggest the play that was chosen for my thesis project. The process of examining this play began over a year and a half ago. Since coming of age, I’ve always had a fascination with the history of human sexuality. Growing up in a time when popular belief was that homosexuality was a choice, I dedicated my young life to finding examples of the existence of homosexuals throughout history. This was a way of affirming that my own understanding of who I am was legitimate – my feelings were not a choice, but a natural occurrence that many other people had also had, documented throughout human history. Therefore, I knew I wanted to find a play that predated the decriminalization of homosexuality. I wanted to examine a play’s representation of gender, identity, and sexuality that predates our contemporary understanding as an opportunity to apply new thoughts to old ideas - like DNA testing on cold cases. All of the plays I examined as potential options for my thesis dealt, in some way or another, with characters who explore gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation.

Queer people have long lived in the shadows. They’ve been sidelined and stereotyped but, if we take a closer look at historical literature, we can see the traces of queer people even when storytellers couldn’t speak their truth explicitly. With the right lens, we can see the reflection of societies’ attitudes toward queer people in the characters that stray from the status quo. Plays throughout history are speckled with characters who defied societal norms long before discussions of gender roles and sexuality entered the conversation. *No Exit* is one of those plays.

What sets *No Exit* apart from other plays that nod toward queerness is Sartre’s existential questions. He interrogates the nature of being, living, dying, and suffering. My own life’s path
has led me to ask these same questions. It is through my relationship with yoga and Buddhism that I have found answers to the same questions that plagued Sartre and other great thinkers for millennia. These ancient philosophies parallel Sartre’s Existentialist philosophies and permeate the pages of No Exit.

These were the main reasons I wanted to do No Exit. These aspects of the play called to me and thus became the primary lenses through which I saw the character of Garcin and the journey he takes over the course of the play.

In the coming pages, I will examine the metaphor of the mirror and expand upon its widely accepted meaning. I will show that there is more to be seen in this metaphor than what has previously been explored. We can use it and expand upon it to understand who these characters are and why they are together. I will then pull in Buddhist and yogic philosophy to uncover the nature of their lives, deaths, and suffering, as well as the journey they take toward salvation. Concurrently, I will support my arguments with academic research and clues from the text itself.

These questions and concepts are what made me fall in love with the play. Exploring these questions was crucial to my understanding of Garcin, his journey, and what brought him and me together as actor and character. This was the joyful part of the process. Equipped with these dueling lenses – Garcin and Aaron – I crafted my view of the author, the play, the character, and the story.

As I entered the rehearsal process, the work part began: the skill aspect of performance. I had to dig into all the less fun stuff - memorizing lines, writing down blocking, etc.
Performance was the amalgamation of these worlds. The repetition of rehearsal and the skill-based acting methods put the text and blocking on autopilot (mostly), my understanding of the character and his world melded with my own flesh, and I was free to live (or die) as Garcin each night: to probe the nature of being and journey to blissful emptiness night after night.

In retrospect, many things went right and some things could have gone better. But in the end, the lessons of the play and the Buddha permeated the process for me. If I had attached myself to expectations and desired outcomes, I’d be doomed to suffer. But the more I let go, the more freedom and bliss I found.
1: Understanding Garcin

Given Circumstances, The Established Mirror, and the Expanded Mirror

Given Circumstances

Sartre wrote the characters of *No Exit* as specific, fleshed-out characters with vivid (former) lives. There is a spoil of riches for an actor to draw upon in developing their character, from Inez’s proclivity for manipulation to Estelle’s love for dancing. Sartre provides several unmistakable given circumstances that provide insight into each character’s personality. Garcin is no exception. He is old enough to have a career and a family, but young enough to be recruited for military service. He has always lived in the same city. He works in a newspaper office and used to “like living among men in their shirtsleeves.” He is a pacifist and a deserter. He views his actions and beliefs as noble and imagines himself as a martyr. In his relationship with his wife, he is cruel and negligent. These flavors of Garcin are peppered generously throughout *No Exit*.

In addition to the given circumstances of the play, the director also made a crucial creative choice that affected my understanding of Garcin. He changed the country of origin for the three primary characters. Inez went from being Spanish to Nepalese, Estelle was from South Carolina instead of Paris, and Garcin “always lived in London” (14) instead of Rio de Janeiro. This is especially important considering Garcin’s role as a WWII deserter. It was an intelligent choice by the director to play to the actors’ strengths. It maintains the diverse worldliness of the characters but utilizes the dialects native or familiar to each actor, lending authenticity to their origins.
The Established Mirror Metaphor

There was no shortage of blatant character traits given to Garcin by the author. Sartre brings these aspects of the character to the surface because they encompass the image that Garcin wants others to see: the self-for-other. This is one of the primary tenets of Sartre’s philosophy of existence, the symbol of which provides the framework for *No Exit* – The Mirror. Throughout the piece, we have Sartre’s mirror as the biggest window into Garcin’s true nature.

The characters allude to the mirror often. Garcin points out the deficit of mirrors in hell almost immediately as he observes, “No mirrors, I notice. No windows. Only to be expected… And why should one want to look at oneself in a looking glass?” (4) Garcin primes the audience for Sartre’s great philosophical question from the get-go.

Estelle provides the answer to that enigmatic query, stating:

When I can’t see myself I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist… I’ve six big mirrors in my bedroom. There they are. I can see them. But they don’t see me. They’re reflecting the carpet, the settee, the window – but how empty it is, a glass in which I’m absent! When I talked to people I always made sure there was one near by in which I could see myself. I watched myself talking. And somehow it kept me alert, seeing myself as the others saw me…. (19)

Inez provides immediate and continual examples of how one possesses another through the gaze. She suggests, “Suppose I try to be your glass?” (19) Then, she further taunts Estelle:

You know the way they catch larks – with a mirror? I’m your lark-mirror, my dear, and you can’t escape me… So what about it? Suppose the mirror started
telling lies? Or suppose I covered my eyes – as he is doing – and refused to look
at you, all that loveliness of yours would be wasted on the desert air. (21)

She emphasizes the power we give to the other in the play’s climax proclaiming, “You’re a
coward, Garcin, because I wish it. I wish it – do you hear? – I wish it. And yet, just look at me,
see how weak I am, a mere breath on the air, a gaze observing you, a formless thought that thinks
you.” (44)

The mirror metaphor is long established and has been widely studied by academics,
philosophers, and existentialists. Dr. Dorothy McCall is uniquely suited to examining Sartre’s
philosophies. On a Fullbright fellowship to Paris, she was able to interview the author in person
and access the theatre scrapbooks of the Collection Rondel at the Biblioteque de l’Aresenal for
her book *The Theatre of Jean-Paul Sartre*. In it, she describes in plain language how we come to
realize our selfhood. She explains, “The existence of the other is directly revealed… by his look.
The look that sees me endows me with an identity, a nature… Sartre connects the fall, then, not
with any particular sin but with [one’s] discovery in shame of a symbolic state of nakedness, of
[one’s] defenseless state as an object in the eyes of the other. I experience his gaze as a form of
possession and even of theft… captured as by a photograph, given another meaning over which I
have no control.” (112)

Sartre himself speaks of the metaphor in his philosophical works and it is central to his
existentialist ideology. In *Saint Genet*, Sartre’s classic biography of Jean Genet – thief, bastard,
homosexual, convict, and legendary playwright – he provides insight into his mirror: “The mirror
is as personal as an eye… and [one] expresses his secret will to pluck out those eyes and graft
them on himself… The mirror was an illusory mediation, but it incites to a quest of the true
mediations which would confront Genet with himself and be eliminated immediately thereafter:
since the thief is forbidden to enjoy his being and since others enjoy it insolently, if only he could at least possess those who possess it. Unable to enjoy it himself, if only he could enjoy the Other who enjoys it!” (74)

The metaphor is clear. One is made aware of one’s own being when one is perceived by another. The notion of “other” is inextricably linked to the notion of “self”. All humans and each character in No Exit seek to control that perception. When there is no mirror image to affirm one’s perception of oneself, one is at the mercy of others’ perception of oneself. The more one seeks to control that image, the more they are tortured by their inability to do so. This is the foundation of No Exit.

The extraordinary circumstances of No Exit dramatize Sartre’s particular notion of death as it relates to the other. Dr. McCall cites a crucial passage from Sartre’s quintessential work Being and Nothingness:

The very existence of death alienates us wholly in our own life, to the advantage of the Other. To be dead is to be a prey for the living…. So long as I live I can escape what I am for the Other by revealing to myself by my freely posited ends that I am nothing and that I make myself be what I am; so long as I live, I can give the lie to what others discover in me, by projecting myself already toward other ends and in every instance by revealing that my dimension of being-for-myself is incommensurable with my dimension of being-for-others. Thus ceaselessly I escape my outside and ceaselessly I am reapprehended by the Other; and in this ‘dubious battle’ the definitive victory belongs to neither the one nor the other of these modes of being. But the fact of death, without being precisely allied to either of the adversaries in this same combat, gives the final victory to
the point of view of the Other by transferring the combat and the prize to another
level – that is, by suddenly suppressing one of the combatants. (122)

Essentially, Sartre states that once we die, we can no longer participate in the battle to
project the image of ourselves that we want others to see. In No Exit, each character wrestles
with how they are being perceived on earth, realizes the futility of their efforts, and subsequently
steers their efforts toward trying to control the perception of their fellow hell-mates.

Garcin and Estelle are the most transparent with their desire to control their image. At
first Garcin grapples with how he is remembered by the people he loves most – the pressmen,
Gomez (Neville in our production), in particular. He laments:

“They’re thinking: ‘Garcin’s a coward.’ That’s what they’ve decided, those dear
friends of mine. In six months time they’ll be saying: ‘Cowardly as that skunk
Garcin.’… Oh, if only I could be with them again, for just one day – I’d fling
their lie in their teeth. But I’m locked out; they’re passing judgment on my life
without troubling about me, and they’re right, because I’m dead. Dead and done
with.” (38, 39)

He very quickly shifts his focus to Estelle, pleading for her to have faith in him. He continues,
“A thousand of them are proclaiming I’m a coward; but what do numbers matter? If there’s
someone, just one person, to say quite positively I did not run away, that I’m not the sort who
runs away, that I’m brave and decent and the rest of it – well, that one person’s faith would save
me. Will you have that faith in me?” (39) In his moment of greatest weakness, he turns to Inez,
pleading, “The curtain’s down, nothing of me is left on earth – not even the name of coward. So,
Inez, we’re alone. Only you two remain to give a thought to me. She – she doesn’t count. It’s you who matter; you who hate me. If you’ll have faith in me I’m saved.” (43)

Estelle has a similar struggle. She entreats an old flame to think of her as the object of desire she so desperately wants to be – a “crystal girl”. She begs of him, “Peter dear, think of me, fix your thoughts on me, and save me. All the time you’re thinking ‘my glancing stream, my crystal girl,’ I’m only half here. I’m only half wicked, and half of me is down there with you, clean and bright and crystal-clear as running water…” As the music of earth grows faint and leaves her, she turns her desperation to Garcin:

Don’t turn away. You’re a man, aren’t you, and surely I’m not such a fright as all that! Everyone says I’ve lovely hair and, after all, a man killed himself on my account. You have to look at something, and there’s nothing here to see except the sofas and that awful ornament and the table. Surely I’m better to look at than a lot of stupid furniture. (33, 34)

Perhaps the only exception to this rule is Inez. She states clearly that on earth she was damned already and that she is not in the least surprised to have ended up in Hell. She recounts her “…dead men’s tale. With three corpses to it. He to start with; then she and I. So there’s no one left.” (25) Though, in doing so, she inadvertently reveals her desire to be perceived as the ultimate controller and manipulator by admitting, “When I say I’m cruel, I mean I can’t get on without making people suffer. Like a live coal. A live coal in others’ hearts. When I’m alone I flicker out.” Indeed, she spends the majority of the play attempting to take hold of Estelle’s puppet strings, but to no avail. Even in Estelle’s desperation, Inez’s attempts to seduce her are in vain. She tries to use Estelle’s desires against her by proclaiming, “Estelle! My glancing stream! My crystal!” She is rebutted by Estelle, “Your crystal? It’s grotesque. Do you think you can
fool me with that sort of talk?... The crystal’s shattered, but I don’t care. I’m just a hollow dummy, all that’s left of me is the outside – but it’s not for you.” (34) In doing so, Inez’s greatest fear is realized – she is seen as vulnerable.

Each of the three is metamorphosed by the look of the Other into that which they cannot bear to see themselves: Estelle as a mad murderess in the eyes of Garcin, Garcin as a coward in the eyes of Inez, and Inez as a powerless deviant in the eyes of Estelle. (McCall, 121)

The following graphic depicts the desired image each character wishes to present and the torturous version of themselves they must witness through the eyes of their fellows.
This is the long-established and accepted metaphor that is soaked into the pages of *No Exit*. There is no way around it and no way to argue it away. And why would one want to? It is ingrained into Sartre’s understanding of the nature of existence and provides the foundation of the characters' objectives and the action of the play. One wouldn’t be able to miss it if they tried.
The Expanded Mirror Metaphor

In examining the play, I found myself asking, “is that how a mirror works? Is that the extent of the metaphor? Would Sartre so blatantly spew his philosophy without asking us to look a little deeper?”

Surely, he put these particular characters together in a room for eternity for a reason - to torture each other, no doubt. One could argue that they are uniquely equipped to torture each other, which they very well may be. If we look closely, we can see that they are reflections of one another. They are uniquely sorted to torture each other because they each contain a kernel of the others’ fatal flaws. They know each other as they know themselves. This has been touched on by some but is often completely eclipsed by the overpowering theory of seeing oneself through the eyes of the other. This variation of the metaphor speaks less to their objectives as characters. Rather, it informs who they are and why they have found themselves together.

The following graphic quickly illustrates the expanded mirror metaphor and the idea of the other as a reflection of one’s self.
The designation of “killer”, “coward”, and “queer” are chosen carefully. They are broader umbrella terms that are generalized versions of more specific character classifications, such as “infanticide offender” or “lesbian”. This means that the three characters are not identical reflections of one another but share root tendencies. They each exist, to varying degrees, on the same spectrums of “deviance”.
This relationship to each character’s fatal flaw – direct, adjacent, and peripheral – is recurrent.

Inez reveals their interconnectedness almost immediately when, near the beginning of the play, she states, “Yes, we are criminals – murderers – all three of us. We’re in hell, my pets; they never make mistakes and people aren’t damned for nothing.” (16) This premonition is confirmed as each character recounts the story of their lives.

As killers, each character reveals how they are responsible for the deaths of members of their families. Estelle is the cruelest of killers. It is by her own hands that she murders her newborn baby. Subsequently, the father of the baby brutally “blew his brains out”. Rather than expressing remorse for the deaths, Estelle brushes off the actions of her lover with a single statement: “It was absurd of him, really, my husband never suspected anything.” (28)

Inez’s lethal tendencies are more roundabout. Preferring torture over outright murder, she utilizes her talent for subterfuge to influence her lover, Florence, to drive her own cousin to despair. Without shame, she proclaims, “He was pathetic really. Vulnerable…When she left him, I had her on my hands…Then the tram did its job. I used to remind her every day: ‘Yes, my pet, we killed him between us.’” (26)
The most tangential killer is Garcin. The death of his wife is essentially reduced to a footnote as he casually addresses her end with Inez:

GARCIN: Yes, she died just now. About two months ago.

INEZ: Of grief?

GARCIN: What else should she die of? (38-39)

Though not a murder by his own hands, he admits to being the cause of his wife’s death.

Just as they are killers, all three characters reveal themselves to be cowards in their actions and decisions. The most obvious of the three is Garcin who refuses to confront those who demand his participation in war efforts. Rather than face those who would drag him into conflict, he focuses his effort on escape. Estelle hides her affairs and pregnancy and favors murdering her own child over facing the fall from grace that would surely come about if her secret was revealed. Inez, who fancies herself as brazen and openly vindictive, chooses to commit her dirty deeds through manipulation rather than making her affair known and facing the consequences. Each shows cowardice in how they lived their lives.

Dorothy McCall identifies the moment of universal spinelessness among the trio. “The unexpected opening of the door gives all three of them a kind of reprieve, a possible second chance. In rejecting it, they all show themselves to be cowards”. (116)

Garcin and Inez confirm their shared cowardice in an exchange just after the incident of the open door:

GARCIN: …when you say I’m a coward, you know from experience what that means.

Is that so?
INEZ: Yes.

GARCIN: So it’s you whom I have to convince; you are of my kind. (42)

The expression and expectation of each character’s sexuality and gender are by far the most complex and ambiguous “fatal flaws” to explore. To do so, we must shift from pulling established examples of “immorality” from the play to a more academic study of gender and sexuality. Understanding Sartre’s representation of queer characters requires that we investigate the attitudes toward sexuality and gender leading up to and at the time of the play. Then we can use contemporary and ancient lenses to gain insight into the more nuanced aspects of gender and sexual expression that were unexplored or considered taboo at the time of the play’s authorship.

From the end of the Classical period, leading up to the 19th century and the scientific revolution, homosexuality was considered a “sexual deviance” – a perversion of the laws of nature. It was largely based on moral, legal, and theological considerations. It was lumped into the same category as masturbation, bestiality, and other sexual acts that could not result in the conception of a child. With the dawn of modern psychology, expertise in the field of “sexual deviance” shifted from the hands of Medieval theologians and Christian philosophers to that of psychiatrists. The accepted notion of homosexuality shifted from a disease of the body and sex organs to a disease of the mind. These notions of homosexuality were thought to be deeply intertwined with what we would now consider “gender issues”. They were seen as a symptom of the feminization of men and the masculinization of women. (Adriaens, Block, 276-280)

These were the popular beliefs that surrounded Sartre during the writing of No Exit that were no doubt influential on the creation of his characters. Sartre’s personal beliefs regarding homosexuality can only be the subject of speculation, but it has been reasoned that his view is
inspired by Sigmund Freud’s notion of potential bisexuality in everyone. (Ringer, 30) Although Freud did not quite view homosexuality as an illness, he certainly did not believe adult homosexuality was normal. Freud offered an alternative view of sexuality, but the psychoanalysts that proceeded his death in 1939 perpetuated the falsehood that homosexuality was an anxiety disorder and, in some cases, even a psychotic disorder. (Drescher, 125)

Four years after the first presentation of No Exit, Alfred Kinsey published his explosive survey of sexuality and created the Kinsey Scale – a 7-point scale used to assess sexual orientation. (Savin-Williams, 556) It would be another 19 years before England and Wales decriminalized homosexuality in 1967. (Dickinson, 200) It wasn’t until 1973, four decades after Sartre wrote No Exit, that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual which was a giant leap toward the dissolution of nearly a millennium of medical and legal classifications that deemed homosexuality an illness. (Drescher, 124) In essence, we have only had 50 years – a mere blip in history – to explore the vast expanse of sexual and gender expression.

Although crucial to the advancement of the scientific study of sexual identity and same-sex relationships, the Kinsey Scale stifles our understanding of the substantially prevalent unacknowledged, extraneous, and non-exclusive identities by categorizing them as “bisexual”. A significant number of recent studies show a wide variety of behavior and attraction of individuals who identify as “bisexuals”, suggesting the label consists of multiple subgroups. Some studies show that even among those at the extreme poles of sexual identity (near exclusive heterosexual or homosexuality), a significant minority express a small degree of fantasy, attraction, and/or behavior toward their less preferred sex yet do not identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. (Savin-Williams, 446-447) Contemporary study of sexuality has led to the dawn of “queer theory”
which seeks to go beyond the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality as stable categories and to probe the expansive spectrum of intersections that exist between bodies, genders, and desires. (Myles, 200)

I categorized the characters of *No Exit* under the classification of “queer” for its ubiquitous qualities and relevance to each character. From the 1700s to the mid-20th century the term “queer” often referred to something “strange”, “odd”, or “peculiar”. Sometimes it took on the negative connotation of something “bad” or “worthless”. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the adjective began to take on the meaning of something “not normal” or “out of sorts”. In the first two decades of the 20th century, the term became linked to sexual practice and identity, and by the 1940s it had been popularized in mainstream culture as a pejorative referring to “sexual perverts”. During the 1980s and 1990s, a movement was formed to reclaim “queer” as a term of empowerment and inclusivity that persists to this day. (Somerville, 203-204) The totality of the term aptly describes the peculiarity of all three characters in *No Exit*. Each has a fascination with members of the same sex that is, to some degree, outside the parameters of the strictest definition of “absolutely heterosexual”.

Now that we have a foundation of knowledge relating to queer theory, we can examine the characters of *No Exit* more closely. The most traditional and blatant of “queers” in *No Exit* is Inez. It is no secret that she was engaged in a lesbian relationship with her cousin’s domestic partner, Florence. In keeping with the theological and moralistic views of homosexuality, she unapologetically divulges her reputation as “…a damned bitch.’ Damned already…”. Without remorse, she uncovers the truth of her “…affair with Florence. A dead men’s tale… he was run over by a tram. A silly sort of end…. I was living with them; he was my cousin… When she left him, I had her on my hands. We shared a bed-sitting-room at the other end of the town.” (25-26)
Sartre leaves no doubt about the inclinations of Inez. She states openly, “Oh, I don’t care much for men any way.” (13) Indeed, her objective revolves solely around seducing Estelle, and she is tortured when her advances are rebuffed.

Estelle exists on the other end of the spectrum. Her efforts are focused on gaining the attention of the only man in the room – Garcin. Though she may compulsively seek his adoration, she does so to affirm her self-image as an object of desire rather than out of sexual or romantic desire for him. References to her deviation from traditional standards of heterosexuality, though scarce and fragile, do exist. She curiously states to Inez, a brazen lesbian, “I feel so queer. Don’t you ever get taken that way?” (19) One might argue that Sartre simply meant to use the word “queer” in the context of “strange” or “unusual”, or that it is inserted coincidentally in the translating of the text from Sartre’s native French to English. With the knowledge that the term, for decades preceding the authorship of the playscript, implied “homosexual”, it seems unlikely that here it was used by accident, especially when directed toward the most openly homosexual in the play. Another hint at Estelle’s queerness comes at the height of her connection to the earthly realm, just before it is lost to her. While observing her “bosom friend” (11) Olga (Daphne) dancing with Peter, an old flame, she relinquishes her control over those still on earth and relents the loss of Peter’s finest attributes, particularly, his “long eyelashes” and his “pretty girlish face.” Notably, her observations do not mention his strong jaw, masculine physique, or other traditionally “manly” features. Though she may not identify herself as a homosexual, she lives under the canopy of queerness through her adoration of Peter’s feminine qualities.

Between the two, we have Garcin who, though married, despises his wife. He coldly recounts a sexual encounter with another woman, but his attentions and desires are solely
focused on men, particularly his coworker Gomez (Neville). Even when envisioning his wife, he is constantly searching for Gomez. He reveals his true feelings when he states, “I’m here because I treated my wife abominably. That’s all. For five years. Naturally, she’s suffering still. There she is: The moment I mention her, I see her. It’s Gomez who interests me, and it’s she I see. Where’s Gomez got to?” (24) This obsession is repeated throughout the play and he makes several eyebrow-raising remarks about his fellow newspapermen, like, “The air stinks of men and cigar-smoke. I used to like living among men in their shirt-sleeves.” (13) Though not explicitly homosexual in nature, the contrast between his attitude toward the women and the men in his is life is telling.

If we look to ancient Greek commentary on love – before the stranglehold of ecclesiastical opinions on same-sex relationships – we can gain insight into Garcin’s particular connection to other men. In her article “A ‘Rehabilitation of Eros’”, Alexandra Fidyk explores the concept of the Greek term “eros” quite eloquently, describing its most accurate English translation as “true love”, and not simply desire or sex. She defines eros as a “…love [that] includes and transcends the body’s limits, even mortality”. (61)

In his examination of eros, Clifford Hindley explores the writings of Xenophon – a disciple of Socrates. He explains, “The sexual appetite may be satisfied quite casually – without any thought of procreation – and, Sokrates observes, the streets are full of those who are willing to oblige. The gender of the object of desire is immaterial… Beyond (but including) this bodily appetite lies [eros], which Dover defines as ‘the obsessive focusing of desire upon one person’”. (76) These explorations of sex and love encapsulate Garcin’s indifference toward those with whom he is engaged in sexual gratification and his simultaneous near-obsessive love for Gomez.
Further, Hans Kelson seems to pinpoint Garcin’s struggle in his article “Platonic Love” from *American Imago*. He states:

"The awareness of ‘being different’ induces a painful isolation, and with this, there arises a certain hostile opposition to society, which, failing to comprehend fully these peculiar forms of Eros, not only scorns [one] but often subjects [one’s] expression to legal punishment. The violation of the legal norm which is more or less associated with the departures from the sexual norm, indeed even the awareness of inclinations towards such violation, generates the feeling of guilt and inferiority, inclines to pessimistic world-views and creates a longing for personal salvation… Thus it is characteristic of this type of Eros that it is two-valued… a pessimistic dualism. The guilt and inferiority feelings are compensated, or better overcompensated, by a self-consciousness increased by social ambition. (7-8)"

Herein, we can discern a general map of Garcin’s mental and emotional landscape. Garcin’s particular relationship to sex and love (queerness) fueled his pessimism and cruelty toward his wife as well as his aversion to his war-torn world (pacifism and feelings of cowardice), leading him to seek salvation in the afterlife.

For me, the most valuable aspects of becoming Garcin came from this expanded mirror metaphor. I believe this subsurface interpretation of the mirror was structured into the story intentionally by Sartre. But whether or not that is “true”, and whether or not others agree with my assertion, Sartre himself grants permission to my interpretation in his own words: “If, when I speak, I have the agonizing certainty that words escape me and that they will take on elsewhere, outside me, unexpected aspects and unforeseen meaning, does not this mean that it is inherent in
the very structure of language to be understood by a free individual other than myself?” (McCall, 125)

Through the given circumstances, the established mirror, and the expanded mirror I gained invaluable insight into Garcin’s nature. This study was crucial for understanding who he is and how he interprets the world. To understand where he begins and where he ends in the play, though, I pivoted from queer theory to philosophy.
2: Garcin’s Journey

Suffering and Transcendence – Existentialism through the lens of Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths

Sartre: Philosophical Treatise vs. Philosophical Drama

It is no secret that Sartre’s philosophies are, to put it kindly, dense. In perusing his quintessential philosophical non-fiction, Being and Nothingness, one begins to wonder whether his tap water was laced with LSD. “Thinkers and writers are not always their own best advocates or the best ‘vulgarizers’ of essential doctrines.” (Douglas, 245) Though Sartre attempts to withhold flowery rhetoric, those lacking a Ph.D. in philosophy may struggle to extract the essence of his theories. At times, his writings are cyclical, self-contradicting, and stream of consciousness. For these sins, though, we can forgive him. It is no simple task to excavate the nature of existence.

Thankfully, as is often the case, the theatrical genre allows us to gain an intuitive understanding of concepts that are difficult to grasp. Through his plays, we can unravel the knots of complex subjects by immersing ourselves in the theatrical medium. In theatre, we move beyond mere academic study; we live and feel challenging ideas through experiential empathy. In her analysis of Sartrean theatre, Dorothy McCall relies heavily on Sartre’s writings, both fiction and non-fiction. But, she states, it is a close study of his plays that reveals, “…perhaps more fully than any other single genre in which he writes, the moral and political complexities of Sartrean existentialism.” (viii)
Sartre: Christian Hell vs. Theatrical Hell

Sartre’s philosophies became emblematic of the existential movement. Like all revolutionary theories, his works have invited both praise and criticism. As groundbreaking as his theories were, he is certainly not the first person to consider the nature of being, nor is he the most eloquent in his articulation of said theories. In fact, the search for what it means to “be” can be traced back thousands of years, preceding the common era. Through my study and practice of Buddhism, I was able to unlock the abstract concepts of Sartrean existentialism.

Sartre, himself, lived openly as an atheist, though his works often reference the predominant belief system of his time and culture: Christianity. “Death in No Exit thus becomes analogous to the Christian idea of the Last Judgement… The dramatic idea of No Exit depends upon the existence of some Supreme Power that has seen what Inez, Garcin, and Estelle are and has condemned them to eternity in Hell. Throughout the play, Sartre uses Christianity as the cultural myth that gives force to his own secularized version of what the Last Judgement means.” (McCall, 124)

The Christian concept of hell indeed provides the framework for the setting of the play. However, the journey of the characters, from suffering to freedom, more closely aligns with the four Noble Truths of Buddhism. These similarities come into greater focus if we can abandon the Christian notion of the afterlife and simply see the setting of hell and the concept of death as theatrical devices. “No Exit… go[es] beyond the concepts [Sartre] elaborates in Being and Nothingness, where he insists on the irreversibility of time; on the fact that with death our game is up and we fall into the public domain; and, finally, that in real life there is no such thing as a second chance. On the contrary, in such plays, his theater becomes precisely the domain in which all these strictures fall away or are tested severely.” (Van Der Hoven, 60) The only “gods”
in the theatre are the spectators who look down on the human turmoil, while the performers
satisfy the opposite illusion, exhibiting themselves as an essence. (Douglas, 256)

Within the play, Estelle, in response to Garcin’s comment of “company among the dead”,
alludes to the idea that Hell in No Exit is simply a removal of the characters from the constraints
of the earthly realm: “Please, please don’t use that word… It doesn’t mean much, anyhow.
Somehow I feel we’ve never been so much alive as now. If we’ve absolutely got to mention this
– this state of things, I suggest we call ourselves – wait! – absentees.” (12) Therefore, when we
set aside hell as a Christian construct and view it as a theatrical experiment, it no longer stands at
odds with a Buddhist journey from suffering to bliss. The second empire drawing room becomes
a petri dish, removed from the world, primed for the study of being, suffering, nothingness, and
freedom.

The Buddha and Existentialism

The life of the first Buddha predates the birth of Christ by over 500 years. The earliest
Buddhist texts indicate that the man who would become the first Buddha or “enlightened one”
was born Siddartha Gautama, on what is now the Indian-Nepalese border. He was the son of a
local chieftain and a member of a relatively privileged, wealthy family. At some point, he
became disillusioned with his privileged life and felt troubled by the suffering that awaited him
and others in sickness, old age, and death. Soon, the pleasures of life seemed empty, so he left
home and embarked on a spiritual quest as a wandering ascetic. He practiced extreme
austerities, as was the custom of some ascetics, yet found no peace. Finally, seated beneath the
bodhi tree on the banks of the river Nairanjana, he experienced an awakening in which he gained
the deepest understanding of the four Noble Truths: 1) the nature of suffering, 2) its cause, 3) its
cessation, and 4) the path that leads to its cessation. The Buddha devoted the remainder of his life to teaching this path to the cessation of suffering. (Gethin, 14-15)

The first Buddha, though a prophet, is not “God” in the Western sense of the word. Unlike the Judeo-Christian and Mohammedan religions, there is no one true “God” in Buddhist philosophy. A Buddha is just a Buddha. According to Buddhist thought, any being that pursues the Four Noble Truths can attain transcendent enlightenment. (Gethin, 28-29) The journey begins with the acceptance of life as suffering and leads to a state of bliss or “emptiness”. Though the characters in No Exit do not attain perfect enlightenment and ascend to Buddhahood themselves, their journey, and Garcin’s journey specifically, moves toward profound awakening. This is how I formulated the arc of the character. We can document Garcin’s travels on the path toward salvation (enlightenment) and establish the Four Noble Truths as a mirror of Sartre’s existential philosophies. Sartre’s description of this journey is uncharacteristically simple and remarkably similar to that of the Buddhists: “Imperfect being transcends itself toward perfect being”. (Cumming, 171)

The Disease of Suffering

“This creeping pain that gnaws and fumbles and caresses one and never hurts quite enough.”

~Garcin, 41

The first of the Four Noble Truths is the reality of suffering. It is birth, aging, sickness, grief, and pain. It is also separation from what is liked. Any pleasant experience is ultimately subject to loss or change. (Gethin, 59-61) Kenneth Douglas, in his reflection on Sartre’s Existentialism explicitly points out Sartre’s and the first Buddha’s connection:
What is to be done? Retire from life, refuse to commit oneself to any project whatever? Obviously not… Sartre, recommends, as the first step on the road (and as the Buddha had done before him), a lucid view of man’s condition. We are better prepared to act when this insight is ours, and we fully realize that every decision is arbitrary, that its outcome cannot live up to our expectation, and that goals are transitory – once they are reached, we must abandon them, must choose and struggle towards other goals. (256-267)

Sartre himself confirms this connection in *Being and Nothingness* and notes the immediacy of suffering at birth. He states that human reality exists first “in immediate, synthetic connection with what it lacks. Thus the event by which human reality emerges as a presence in the world is apprehended by itself as its own lack. In its coming into existence human reality grasps itself as an incomplete being.” (139) Curious that Sartre should choose the verb “grasp”, as that is the term frequently used to describe the root cause of suffering, which I will discuss more in my analysis of the second noble truth.

If we accept Estelle’s assertion that the trio is more alive than they have ever been, then we can view each character’s entrance as a “birth” of sorts. Each character comes into their new world dissatisfied with the condition of their environment and existence. Garcin laments his lack of a toothbrush, inability to sleep, and powerlessness to escape his self-imposed teasing. Inez is immediately disgruntled by her forced proximity to a man and Estelle is disturbed by the decoration and furniture. Though Garcin states, “We haven’t yet begun to suffer” (10), their dissatisfaction is immediate and innate.

The Origin of Suffering
“Oh, if only I could be with them again, for just one day...”

~Garcin, 39

The Second Noble Truth explains the origin of suffering. It stems from the thirst for objects of sense desire, the thirst for existence, and the thirst for non-existence. Crystallized, this craving leads to “grasping” or “attachment”. Craving of the objects of the sense desire manifests through greed, aversion, and delusion – and desire tends to increase. “At first desires may be like the trickle of a stream, but they grow into a river of craving which carries us away like the current of a swiftly flowing river.” (Gethin, 71) The nature of all things is transient, though, and thirsts and cravings of any kind can never fully be satisfied. When we grasp at or attach to them, we suffer. This is the origin of suffering. (Gethin, 68-71)

Sartre’s idea of desire perfectly parallels the Second Noble Truth. One cannot deny the sense of craving and the feeling of grasping when reading his parable about possessing a bicycle:

…ownership appears to the owner simultaneously as something given all at once in the eternal and as requiring an infinite time to be realized. No particular act of utilization really realizes the enjoyment of full possession… To possess a bicycle is to be able first to look at it, then to touch it. But touching is revealed to be insufficient; what is necessary to use the bicycle to go on some errands. And this refers us to uses longer and more complete, to long trips across France. But these trips themselves disintegrate into a thousand appropriative behavior patterns, each one of which refers to others. Finally as one could foresee, handing over a bank note is enough to make the possession. In acquiring the object, I perceive that
possession is an enterprise which death always renders still unfinished.

(Cumming, 325)

Craving for the objects of the senses is just one type of craving. One might crave to be a particular type of person, fame, or even immortality. Conversely, one may bitterly turn their back on ambition, craving to be a nobody. One might become depressed and long not to exist or even take one’s own life. Buddhist thought indicates all these feelings and desires are the workings of craving for existence and non-existence. These cravings, too, are forms of aversion and delusion. They lead only to suffering. (Gethin, 70-74)

Sartre also comments on the effect of desire: “The expressions which we use to designate desire sufficiently show its specific character. We say that it takes hold of you, that it overwhelms you, that it paralyzes you… even the feeblest desire is already overwhelming.” (Cumming, 214) He expounds even further on the nature of desire with a comparison to water:

The man who desires exists [in] his body in a particular mode and thereby places himself on a particular level of existence… Desire is defined as troubled – as stirred up and disturbing. This notion can help us better to determine the nature of desire. We contrast troubled water with transparent water… Troubled water remains water; it preserves the fluidity and the essential characteristics of water; but its translucency is “troubled: by an inapprehensible presence which is indiscernibly with it, which is everywhere and nowhere, and which appears as an incorporated obscuring of the water by itself. (Cumming, 212-213)

In this metaphor, we see, again, that desire is troubling. It disturbs our natural state and leads to our suffering.
It is undeniable that all three of the main characters in *No Exit* suffer. They do so most obviously as they gaze upon the earthly realm. As they long to return to those “below”, their desire to control the perceptions of others becomes their “torture”.

Inez struggles with the illusion of possession of the room she shared with Florence: “The windows are wide open, a man is sitting on my bed. *My* bed, if you please!... Step in, step in, make yourself at home, you brute!... But that’s my room, *my* room!... I feel so empty, desiccated – really dead at last.” (29)

Estelle similarly struggles with possession, but her desire is to possess her young admirer, Peter. “He belonged to me”, she says, “I tell you he was mine. All mine.” In the proceeding monologue, she desperately attempts, in vain, to control his interaction with her former “bosom friend”. All the while her suffering is apparent. She bemoans, “No it’s absurd, we’ve laughed at her together… How dare she discuss me with Peter?... Isn’t it *foul*, Garcin? How I’d love to go down to earth for just a moment, and dance with him again.” (32-33)

Garcin, too, suffers immensely as he bears witness to those he cannot control. He can barely pay attention to what’s happening in the room when Gomez (Neville) appears to him, that is the level of his desire to be with him. When his fellow pressmen begin “passing judgment on [his] life” and unable to impose his own projection of himself that he wants others to see, he lashes out: “There they are, slumped in their chairs, sucking at cigars… They’re thinking: ‘Garcin’s a coward’… That’s what they’ve decided those dear friends of mine. In six months’ time they’ll be saying: ‘Cowardly as that skunk Garcin.’…Oh, if only I could be with them again, for just one day – I’d fling their lie in their teeth. But I’m locked out…” (38-39)
Each character’s desire is immediately transferred to another person in the room after their connection to Earth fades away. They are constantly grasping at an image of themselves that they must witness through the eyes of the other. Garcin begs both Estelle and Inez to believe that he is not a coward. To see him as “brave and decent and the rest of it”, believing that their “faith would save him.” (39) Well, it won’t be their faith that saves him, nor would they give it even if it could.

The Cessation of Suffering

“Open your hands and let go of everything...”

~Garcin, 30

In the normal course of events, our hunt for happiness leads us to attempt to satisfy our desires – no matter their nature. In the process, we become attached to things that are unstable and impermanent. As long as there is attachment to things changeable there will be suffering when they cease to be what we want them to be. Though we may try to find something in the world that is permanent, we must always fail. “The Buddhist solution is as radical as it is simple: let go, let go of everything. If craving is the cause of suffering, then the cessation of suffering will surely follow from ‘the complete fading away and ceasing of that very craving’: it's abandoning, relinquishing, letting go.” (Gethin, 74)

The Buddhist path leads one toward this letting go and the phenomenon of nirvana. Buddhists understand nirvana as three-fold: the event of the moment of awakening, the content of that experience, and the state of condition enjoyed by Buddhas after death. Nirvana translates as “blowing out” or “extinguishing”, and all who reach awakening are said to experience the complete extinguishing of the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. (Gethin, 74-75)
Of this awakening, it is said that “At the moment the Buddha understood suffering, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation, these fires were extinguished.” (Gethin, 75) In an astoundingly similar description, Sartre echoes, “If one succeeds in resisting it, the desire, before disappearing, will become wholly distinct and clear, like hunger. And then there will be “an awakening”. (Cumming, 214)

Though similar, there is a cleave between Buddhism and Sartre’s Existentialism. Buddhist thought tries to steer a middle course between annihilationist views and eternalist views. (Gethin, 78) Though Sartre recognizes the role of creation and nihilation as tools of awakening to the reality of attachment, he seems to have no qualms about tipping the scales toward nihilation, which we witness in his metaphor of the burning barn:

Recognition that it is impossible to possess an object involves… a violent urge to destroy it. To destroy is to reabsorb into myself; it is to enter… along with the destroyed object into a relation as profound as that of creation. The flames which burn the farm which I myself have set on fire, gradually affect the fusion of the farm with myself. In annihilating it I am changing it into myself… I am the foundation of the barn which is burning; I am this barn since I am destroying its being. Destruction realizes appropriation perhaps more keenly than creation does, for the object destroyed is no longer there to show itself impenetrable… it has the invisibility and translucency of the nothingness which I am, since it no longer exists. (Cumming, 325-326)

Indeed, what Buddhists might describe as “unconditioned” or “emptiness” (nirvana), Sartre describes as “freedom”. The twin blades of “nothingness” and “salvation” act as opposing means to the same realization of Sartrean “freedom”. In his words, “Freedom is the human being
putting his past out of play by secreting his own nothingness… In freedom the human being is
his own past (as also his own future) in the form of nihilation.” (Cumming, 116) In *Being and
Nothingness*, Sartre does not exclude the possibility of deliverance and salvation but insists it can
only be achieved after a radical conversion or awakening. (McCall, 12)

It is this precise salvation that Garcin seeks in *No Exit*. Of the three, he seems to be the
most interested in the cessation of suffering. His insistence on solitude and silence toward the
beginning of the play illustrates his desire to escape suffering. He states, “So the solution is easy
enough; each of us stays put in his or her corner and takes no notice of the others… Also, we
mustn't speak. Not one word… And that way we – we’ll work out our salvation.” (17-18) Inez
even notices a connection to Eastern philosophy as she disrupts his attempted meditation: “No,
take your hands from your face, I won’t leave you in peace – that would suit your book too well.
You’d go on sitting there, in a sort of trance, like a yogi”. (22) Curious that she should call him a
yogi, as Yoga and Buddhism share common ancestry, ethical values, and teach a path toward
liberation from suffering.

Of course, the boundary for Garcin is his *desire* for salvation – the craving. “The
problem is that we can become attached to even useful things, even to the practice of the
Buddha’s teaching”. (Gethin, 71) When he grasps at this solitude and it is inevitably disturbed,
he is thrust back into the cycle of suffering – though he seems to be intuitively sensing that
something isn’t right. “You’re crazy, both of you. Don’t you see where this is leading us?”,
Garcin says. (22) It is possible to get snared in the trap of desiring what is essentially an absence
of desire or craving not to crave. (Gethin, 80)

After revealing their reasons for being in hell (the acknowledgment of their suffering),
Garcin seems to be more focused on a mode of deliverance. He propositions the others: “And
now suppose we start trying to help each other.” (29) He is tantalizingly close to unlocking the freedom he so desires while trying to deter Inez from her pursuit of Estelle, begging her to, “Drop it, Inez. Open your hands and let go of everything. Or else you’ll bring disaster on all three of us.” Here, he accurately predicts the inevitability of suffering in the absence of abandon.

Garcin’s true moment of revelation comes at the very end of the play. Inez destroys the illusion that Garcin has worked so hard to create by chanting “coward” and calling him a dog. In an instant, he understands the nature of suffering, “Hell is – other people!” (45) – or suffering is attachment to others and their perception of ourselves.

Immediately following, Estelle attempts to stab Inez, who finds the attempt hilarious. Confronted with the inevitability of death, it is as if they all three achieve an awakening and they laugh together in a state of liberated bliss.

The Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

“Suppose we start trying to help each other... It only needs a little effort... just a spark of human feeling.”

~Garcin, 29

The first three Noble Truths apply mostly to the theory of Buddhism. With the fourth, we come to the practice proper. The first three provide a framework for the application of the fourth. If the end of suffering is found in the ceasing of all craving, the fourth noble truth is concerned with the practical means of bringing this about – namely, the eightfold path. (Gethin, 80)

For Sartre, the path to obtaining freedom is not as concrete. Generally, he is more concerned with the nature of freedom. Though he outlines no explicit route, there are rare
examples of him referencing the discovery of freedom. His philosophy is “a recall to ourselves”, and “The way back does not necessarily involve the abandonment of activity, or introspection…and may be presented as… essences struggle to free themselves from the utter contingency of existence.” (Douglas, 260) Similarly, the Buddhists believe, “any person who attains nirvana does not remain there-after forever absorbed in some transcendental state of mind. On the contrary, he or she continues to think, speak, and act as other people do – with the difference that all his or her thoughts, words, and deeds are completely free of the motivations of greed, aversion, and delusion”. (Gethin, 75)

As I have previously discussed, the characters in *No Exit* certainly do not achieve perfect enlightenment or ascend to Buddhahood. At best, they experience an awakening that sets them on the path. We could call this the first step. Of course, enlightenment isn’t achieved with a single thought or action. In fact, it is said that enlightenment often arises after a culmination of many lifetimes of practice. Therefore, I will not attempt to show that the characters of *No Exit* complete the Noble Eightfold Path and finish the Buddhist practice. Instead, I will show examples of Garcin’s preliminary steps on his journey toward freedom and bliss.

The eightfold path falls under three larger categories: Conduct (right speech, right action, right livelihood), Wisdom (right view, right intention), and Meditation (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration). (Gethin, 81) As we already know, Garcin attempts a meditative state twice in the early stages of the play but is foiled by Inez and Estelle. His conduct on earth was atrocious; there was no way to change his past. His actions toward his wife were cruel. Though he claims to regret nothing, once sequestered from the earthly realm, he begins making the effort to help Inez work toward salvation – a fundamental tenant of the eightfold path. This is a manifestation of conduct, specifically right action, known as generosity.
or “dana” which leads to a loosening of attachment. (Gethin, 108) Even his simple acknowledgment of the cause of suffering, “hell is – other people” can be seen as a seed of wisdom – as a seeing of the four truths.

Of course, there is no rush for the three captives to achieve nirvana. “Time coagulates in No Exit… When the action reaches its conclusion, past and present and future have become undifferentiated in the eternity of Hell.” (McCall, 127) Just as Inez says, “Yes, we’ve lots of time in hand. All time.” (43)

The knowledge of Buddhism I brought with me into this production was immensely helpful for my understanding of Sartre’s philosophies and how I came to see Garcin’s journey. His path originates in suffering and attachment and leads to bliss and freedom. The following graphic depicts that journey:
3: Aaron’s Journey

Rehearsal and Performance

The rehearsal process began, like many others, with a read-through. In fact, we had two. The first night we read through the newer translation of the play from 1972. The following night we read through the original translation from 1944. After the read-throughs, we were asked to give our opinions about which one to choose.

Though the other cast members didn’t have a strong opinion either way, I felt strongly about doing the original translation. I was far more familiar with the original, which was the version I had read and suggested for the season. The later translation was much more straightforward and simplified, which isn’t surprising considering it was adapted nearly 30 years after the release of the original. The setting of the play was stripped bare in comparison to the second empire drawing room of the original and I felt as though the decadence of the setting helped subvert the viewer’s expectation of hell and the environment in which the characters find themselves. Also, the original’s dialogue is often poetic and laced with metaphor. In the later translation, much of that had been replaced with blunt and obvious language.

This decision was made around Thanksgiving, and it seems as though the director and I were “on the same page”, so to speak. The original translation was chosen.

Throughout the rehearsal process, I kept an eye out for examples of the expanded mirror and Buddhism within the script. Having had the advantage of suggesting the play, I knew, generally, the content of my thesis. Therefore, any time I encountered a line that reinforced my theories I would mark it in my script. If my script was not readily available (because I was running lines orally or in the midst of an off-book rehearsal) I would document them in my notes.
app or jot them down in a journal after rehearsal. This was very helpful in creating a well of resources for my writing and shaping the structure of the document in my mind.

After Thanksgiving, we began blocking the play and I began work on my dialect. Although I was excited to attempt the unique, highly nuanced Brazilian Portuguese dialect, in the end, it was much easier to brush up on the Received Pronunciation Dialect.

During my time at the University of New Orleans, I did an independent study of European Dialects. I studied Irish, British (Estuary), British (Received Pronunciation), and German. Though I’d collected many resources regarding accents and dialects, the most valuable was *Stage Dialects* by Jerry Blunt. In *Stage Dialects*, each accent begins with an introduction that explains the uses, influences, and history of its development. This is followed by a description of key sounds then substitutions, changes, and special pronunciations that are compared to the sounds of standard American English. Each accent features several individual word drills, drills in the context of a sentence, and reading practice for fluency.

One of the biggest challenges of utilizing this resource was its reference to the phonetic alphabet. I did my best to learn the appropriate symbols and corresponding sounds, but I also made myself a non-phonetic worksheet that lived in the front of my show binder. This worksheet was crucial to my practice of British Received Pronunciation.

The following is a copy of the worksheet that I made which is an adaptation of “Standard English” from *Stage Dialects* by Jerry Blunt:
Received Pronunciation Worksheet

Out of the multiple dialects of England, one form of dialectal utterance has been given quasi-official acceptance as standard. Being “standard” does not mean absolutely uniform, but is taught, and consequently sustained, in major public schools. It is the speech of the British Broadcasting Corporation and the plays of George Bernard Shaw and Noel Coward. Daniel Jones, a pioneer English phonetician, termed it Received Pronunciation. Some eight principal alterations separate Standard American English and English Received Pronunciation; if an American speaker can maintain these limited changes, they will speak Received Pronunciation well and properly.

VOWELS, DIPHTONGS (DOUBLE VOWEL SOUNDS), AND TRIPHTHONGS (TRIPLE VOWEL SOUNDS): Generally, vowels live more forward in the mouth, with the lips slightly more rounded and tensed and the tongue slightly lifted.

1. “A to AH” – The “a” as in glass, pass, class (and other words that end in f, nc, nt, ss, and th) can shift to the more formal or broad “ah” as in father. Even this common affectation has exceptions such as lamp, ample, and plastic - They maintain the wider mouth American style “a” as in “ant”.

   a. Practice words – ask, answer, after, half, past, bath, demand, disaster, master, command, castle, France.

   b. In context – Father passed down the path after the dance./The pastor asked that the answer be given at half-past four.

2. “rounded O, AL, OR” – The closest thing we have in America to this vowel sound is the “aw” in words like fought, bought, and ought. The new sound is made by dropping the
jaw then closing the lips in a restricted circle at the same time. This applies to words like
“off, fork, walk, important, sauce, awful”

a. Practice words – off, fork, walk, forty, torch, important, sauce, hospital, awful, all,
   law, off, horse, pause

b. In context – Paul thought they took an awful fall./He’s got no fork to eat the sauce.

3. “IH for terminal Y, LY, LLY” – The vowel sound “ih” as in “it” replaces the terminal
   ending of “y, ly and lly” in words like very, lovely, frightfully.

a. Practice words – ability, necessity, policy, many, berry, funny, lovely, really,
   carefully

b. In context – The lovely lady had many friendly calls on Thursday./Obstinacy in
   diplomacy is not always the best policy.

4. “IH for terminal ERY, ARY, ORY” – The vowel sound “ih” as in “it” replaces the
   terminal ending of “ery, ary and ory” in words like stationary, cemetery, and laboratory.

a. Practice Words – Secretary, necessary, evolutionary, cemetery, laboratory,
   satisfactory

b. In context – My secretary has not been revolutionary for the last half century./It is
   not necessary to go to the elementary conservatory.

5. “OH-OO to UH-OH-OO” – The “oh-oo” in words like go, don’t, stone, slow, and know
   change to the triphthong “uh-oh-oo”, so “go” or “goh-oo” sounds like “guh-oh-oo”.

a. Practice Words - Go, below, throw, hello, slow, over, stone, don’t, know

b. In context – Don’t throw the stone below the snow./He told the old fellow to hold
   the rope.
6. “YOOH for OOH” – The “ooh” in words like “new” can have a “y” sound added. Therefore, “new” would be pronounced like “nyooh”. This change can be overdone and must be used carefully.

   a. Practice Words – duke, duplicity, new, Tuesday, duty, student.
   b. In Context – The new duke came on Tuesday./The duplicity was due to the student’s stupidity.

CONSONANTS - The “R” – The most important consonant to consider when learning the Received Pronunciation accent is the “R” which changes depending on its position in a word, and what letter follows that word or “R” sound.

   R1. “R – mid-word before a consonant” – When an “r” is in the middle of a word and immediately followed by a consonant, it is not sounded.

       a. Practice Words – observe, short, word, bird, Portia, hard
       b. In Context – Portia spoke some short words to the parson./I observed the bird hit the window hard.

   R2. “R – terminal not sounded” – Some words that end in “R” (particularly single syllable words) simply leave off them “R” sound all together, when followed by a word that begins with a consonant.

       a. Practice Words – car, far, her, sir, slur, are
       b. In Context – The car struck the bar with a fearful jar./Sir, tell her you’ll not slur.

   R3. “R – terminal but replaced with ‘uh’ (schwa)” – Some words that end in “R” (particularly multi-syllabic words) replace the sound with “uh”, also known as a “schwa” sound, when followed by a word that begins with a consonant.
a. Practice Words – year, there, here, after, empire, matter, letter, your  
b. In Context – Last year I saw the empire bow in fear./ After the matter, please write your letter.

R4. “R – terminal but sounded when followed by a vowel” – When a words ENDS in “R” but is followed by a word that STARTS with a vowel sound, the “R” is lightly sounded to connect the two words together.
   a. Practice Words – star is, pair off, wore a, nor I, for it, slur at, farther on  
   b. In Context – They will all pair off for it farther on./To star in the film Roger or Mary will go for it.

R5. “R – tapped between two vowels” – when an r is located between two vowels, it is delivered with a single tongue tap.
   a. Practice Words – very, sorry, character, mirror, variant, Mary  
   b. In Context – Harry was very sorry about the lost terrier./Every variant was a cause for worry to Harriet.

**SPECIAL PRONUNCIATIONS** – Certain words with the same spellings and meanings as their American counterparts require special pronunciations.

1. Special Pronunciations
   a. Practice Words – schedule, privacy, issue, tissue, figure, patent, clerk, Derby, laboratory, aluminum, garage, patriot, hostile, been, again, either, neither  
   b. In Context – Every schedule has been set by a hostile clerk./We must either settle the issue about the aluminum in the laboratory or go over it again and again.
We had only just finished blocking the play before we had another hiatus for winter break. During winter break I began scoring the script and memorizing lines. At this point, memorization primarily consisted of reading and repeating lines – familiarizing myself with the sequence of the play and the language. I began to discover “Garcin-isms” – Garcin’s sayings that were repeated throughout the play. He loved to say “Well, well”. It begins his fourth line: “Well, well, I dare say one gets used to it in time.” It is also the beginning of the last line of the play, “Well, well, let’s get on with it…” It is sprinkled throughout the play and is one of my favorites of his character nuances. He also loved to try to convince himself that “I regret nothing”, a suspicious phrase to repeat for a character who is constantly trying to convince others of his valor.

My approach to scoring the script was rooted in methods outlined by Konstantin Stanislavski and Stella Adler. They are the standard bearers of modern acting techniques. They emphasize discipline, imagination, and script analysis. I quickly identified Garcin’s superobjective as “to conquer suffering”, and when I struggled to feel connected to the dialogue I broke it into smaller objectives and beats. I identified actions and tactics that served my objectives and my superobjective. “When we study the script, we’re trying to find what actions it requires of us… If we truly do these actions, we don’t have to worry about ‘acting’”. (Adler, 86-87)

Imagination, too, was particularly important for this role. In addition to the fantastical elements of the play – being trapped in hell and having visions of the earthly realm – I wanted to put myself into the mindset of a man who lived in the 1940s. Discussing her experience working directly with Stanislavski, Adler writes, “Particularly, he made clear that an actor must have an enormous imagination, uninhibited by self-consciousness”. (237) This was especially true for me
during moments of intimacy with Estelle as well as when Garcin begins to slip into insanity. I have never had “intimate relations” with a woman, and I’ve never had a full mental breakdown on par with Garcin’s, so the tensest moments of the show are experiences that I haven’t had, personally. I had to free myself from feeling silly or uncomfortable and allow myself to be “living truthfully under the imaginary circumstances of the play.” (Bruder et al. 8)

Upon returning from the break, it became immediately obvious that I would need to kick memorization into high gear. I utilized a method that I had never tried before, recording the other actors’ lines. This became my saving grace. Coincidentally, my car began to have issues related to the cold weather in January. It became necessary for me to alter my form of transportation. I began riding my bike to and from rehearsal. During the ride, I would listen to my recordings of the other actors and run lines with myself. This became my ritual, and it was invaluable for me.

* A Practical Handbook for the Actor advises a technique that aligns with my own: “The best advice we can give you about the lines you will be speaking is to learn them *by rote* so that you don’t have to concentrate on them while you are playing. We’ve found drilling the lines while jogging or exercising to be effective because it relieves some of the tedium.” (57) I agree completely. As someone who is easily distracted, running lines while moving or exercising gives me an additional task to help keep my mind focused and stimulated, and I find that the lines become more deeply ingrained in my mind.

After memorization was complete, I started playing with the Laban technique. Rudolph von Laban was an Austrian choreographer, teacher, and philosopher who lived and was active at the turn of the 19th century – almost exactly the same time as Stanislavski. (Adrian, 3) I found his
physical approach to body, voice, and movement to be extremely helpful in making new discoveries during rehearsal and performance.

It stands in contrast to the Stanislavski-Adler techniques, or what I call “inside-out” techniques. Even though they encourage you to hone your physical memory response, you are called to find the essence of the action of the text, which may or may not contradict the text as written. This work is done in advance of rehearsal and is intellectual work that uncovers the internal landscape of the character and is meant to produce authentic action onstage.

Laban is what I think of as an “outside-in” technique. He was a keen observer of the body and its movement through space and its relationship to nature. His work on “effort factors”, especially “action drives” became the framework I used for experimentation and discovery in rehearsal.

In Laban Movement Analysis, *effort* is defined as the “manifestation of moment-to-moment impulses that relate to feelings or emotions.” (Adrian, 8) Laban further identifies four “Factors” that are involved in effort – Time, Weight, Space, and Flow. Each of these factors represents an “Effort Element” or spectrum trait.

The following graphic shows their relationship and is adapted from the “Effort Table” in *Actor Training the Laban Way* by Barbara Adrian:
Each of the first three effort factors, Time, Weight, and Space, comprise an action drive — each action drive contains one element of the corresponding effort factor:

- **Action Drive** = **Time** + **Weight** + **Space**
- Punch = Quick + Strong + Direct
- Dab = Quick + Light + Direct
- Slash = Quick + Strong + Indirect
- Flick = Quick + Light + Indirect
- Press = Sustained + Strong + Direct
- Glide = Sustained + Light + Direct
- Wring = Sustained + Strong + Indirect
- Float = Sustained + Light + Indirect (Adrian, 147)

This congregation of elements, synthesized into a physical action created a recognizable, distinct movement that I would superimpose over the text. Oftentimes, if I felt stuck or artificial, I could utilize an action drive – a simple playable action – as a sort of stimulant. Sometimes it would reveal some hidden truth of the text or lend authenticity to my performance by pulling me away from what I think I should be playing. Even though the action drive is an artifice, I could distill the essence of the action into the line, and ditch or diminish the physical action itself. However, occasionally it felt appropriate to keep the physical action of the action drive.

At times, I wondered what Stella Adler would think of me combining these two techniques. “Nowadays we don’t want artificiality. We want realism, and that’s why if the audience thinks you’re acting, you’ve failed them. What you have to learn is to perform actions, because if you’re performing an action, you’re doing something. You’re not indicating, you’re doing.” (Adler, 86)

In some ways, they’re not entirely dissimilar. Both methodologies place great emphasis on playable action. In my mind, the key difference is the nature of the implementation of that action. In the school of Stanislavski/Adler, the internal desires and objectives inform the action (inside-out), and in the Laban method, physical action affects the internal landscape of the actor and character (outside-in).
Both methodologies also strongly encourage physical and psychological wellness. My personal yoga practice satisfied this qualification and became a unifier for many aspects of this production. Laban specifically instructs actors to practice yoga as a part of the technique. Garcin is referred to as a yogi within the play. Yoga shares a common ancestry with Buddhism. It is fitting, it seems, that in Sanskrit “yoga” means “union”. Crucially, my yoga practice helped me remain calm and focused during what could have easily been one of the most stressful and tumultuous experiences of my life.

The cultivation of calm focus was especially useful in moments when I wasn’t actively involved in conversations or plots on stage. The first thing that happened in the play was the valet leading me into the drawing room and I remained onstage for the entirety of the play. There were several times that I was not the focal point but needed to be present in the scene. This required immense concentration. The key to keeping myself (and the audience) engaged in the scene was simply listening. I paid attention to every word said. I heard the lines as if I were hearing them for the first time and attempted to react truthfully in the moment.

My greatest struggle as an actor is straddling the line between realism and elevated performance. I like to say that I was built for outdoor Shakespeare. I have a booming voice and exaggerated mannerisms. I can easily be over the top. That’s a great thing for musical theatre and Greek drama, but perhaps not the best for post-war existential drama in a 50-seat lab theatre.

The challenge was that the play does have fantastical elements. Garcin has heated arguments with people who aren’t even in the room. Facing eternal suffering he begs for relief from his cellmates. In the end, he slips into an insanity-like mania. How does one play such wild moments realistically? “Eric Bentley has commented, ‘Intending no slur, I would call No Exit philosophic melodrama.’ In an important sense, this description applies to all Sartre’s plays;
they make use of sensational effects to create serious drama. Sartre himself has spoken of his plays as ‘false melodramas’’. (McCall 124-125)

This was always the biggest struggle for me in preparation and performance – walking the tightrope between honoring the fantastic and melodramatic elements of the play and rooting it in real life and authenticity. Some of the best antidotes to this performative plague are the technical elements of the play. The walls of the drawing room went up and the world began to feel more real. With each added element, the lamps, the statue, the pull for the bell, the reality of the play became more crystalized. By the time we were in costume tech (which, of course, hit a speed bump when a strain of COVID-19 worked its way through the cast), everyone’s efforts paid off, and the true joy of acting emerged.

When performances began, it was the perfect melding of study, creativity, passion, discipline, and communion. The weeks and weeks of rehearsal were absorbed into the actors. It was no longer about trying to remember lines or blocking (for the most part). It became communion with my fellow craftspeople – a game of listening and reacting truthfully. We took part in a ritual that goes back thousands of years. Through storytelling, we lived and shared ethereal, latent human truths. We weren’t just in communion with one another, but also with every person that walked through the theatre door. Some nights were challenging, some were a breeze. Each night, I got to go on stage and play with my friends for 90 minutes, and it was truly bliss.
4: Reflection

This play was a joy to work on. That is not to say it didn’t have its fair share of challenges, there were many, but the play itself encompassed a wide range of my interests. I loved returning to the British Received Pronunciation. A dialect always helps me get into character and leave Aaron behind. It centers me in a place and time outside my own and reinforces the feeling of freedom that comes from abandon and vulnerability.

*No Exit* also satisfied my interest in examining historical attitudes toward same-sex love. It challenged me and demanded I deepen my knowledge of queer theory. The task of researching and compiling evidence to support my claims was arduous but ever so rewarding. Part of my interest in queer theory is derived from my desire to validate my experience as a young queer person in conservative Kentucky by relating my experience to others throughout history. This play has successfully deepened my connection to an ancestral line of beings who felt their expression of love diverged from the experience of the majority.

In addition to fortifying my passion for queer theatre, I felt nourished by deepening my understanding of Buddhism. My sense of the correlation between Existentialism and Buddhism was primarily instinctual during rehearsal and performance. Afterward, it was incredibly gratifying to dive into the principles of each belief system and draw the connections between them. For me, it reinforces the idea that there are universal truths in this world. Our means of realizing those truths are varied, but in the theatre, we are given the opportunity to act as a medium for exposing those truths. They become a part of us and move through us and that is the magic of this craft.

Another reason theatre brings me so much joy is its collaborative nature. The collaborators gathered were ideal. It started with the director, David W. Hoover. Having worked
with David before, I knew his directing style to be one of cool steady confidence. He is not afraid to make decisive choices but is also open to the perspective of others. Knowing that my last year of graduate school had the potential to be chaotic and overwhelming, I was relieved to have David steering the ship.

My castmates were absolutely ideal. The “perfect cast” I had gathered in my mind turned out to be the cast in real life (except for the Valet, who had to be recast multiple times, eventually going to a talented actor). It was a wonderful gift to enter this project with actors I respect and trust. We lifted each other; we were partners - a family. If I forgot a line, they guided me back. When I looked at them, I saw their open eyes gazing back at me. I saw people being brave, allowing themselves to be vulnerable, seeking honesty and authenticity. I saw my mirror image. I always felt supported and safe, and both of my costars brought a sense of sincerity and reverence for the characters. It was a gift to create and explore a world with them.

The stage manager was excellent. Like the director, she was cool, calm, and collected. She was always kind when keeping the more loose-lipped of us on task. Though she stressed the importance of crossing milestones in the rehearsal process, she was always understanding and supportive.

The designers were also fantastic. I was so delighted to hear that the scenic designer wanted to create a faithful representation of a second empire drawing room. The design was appropriately ornate, standing in contrast to the commonly accepted notion of hell. The lighting was mostly understated which, in my view, served the poetic language of the play and supported the psychological distress of the characters rather than distract from it. The costumes, similarly, reinforced the time of the play, lended authenticity to the characters and story, and strengthened the suspension of disbelief.
I look back on the production with immense pride and feelings of accomplishment. Of course, in retrospect, if I could do it all over again there are things I would do differently. Most of all, I would have spent more time learning lines earlier. The volume of lines and lack of relief from being on stage was hugely demanding. It took an incredible amount of energy and concentration to remain active and present for 90 minutes and any effort to anticipate coming moments and lines was an unnecessary distraction. I would have liked to have had more time to explore with my fellow actors without the crutch of using the script.

For me, the most difficult aspects of this show were cultivating authenticity in my performance and playing an intimate theatre. As I previously discussed, I lean toward exaggerated expression, and what helped me feel rooted in my performance was listening. I worked diligently to listen and react authentically to the people on stage with me. I knew if I could be present with my fellow artists then I could keep my performance anchored in truth. If I could maintain this authenticity, the more melodramatic and fantastical moments would feel earned. The skill of listening and communion with the other artists was my biggest reward and takeaway from our production.

I’m incredibly proud of the whole experience. I felt challenged yet supported throughout the production. There was a sense of urgency, but the process was calm and steadfast. I feel as though I’ve been able to share a bit of myself and my passions in this piece and, in return, my relationship to those passions has been fortified. I’m not sure I could ask for anything more.
Works Cited


Vita

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