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# An Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre

By ORESTE F. PUCCIANI

[The highlight of last year's theatre season in Paris was the opening of Jean-Paul Sartre's newest play, *Les Séquestrés d'Altona*. Oreste Pucciani, in France last spring, interviewed M. Sartre for TDR concerning his new play.]

PUCCIANI: From remarks of yours which I have read here and there, I gather that your ideas of engaged literature have changed since you published *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* in 1948. Simone de Beauvoir has told me that you no longer feel that people can be changed by literature; that one of your greatest impressions of Cuba was that the Cuban people have been changed.

SARTRE: Yes. To an extent that is true. I remain convinced, however, that if literature isn't everything, it is nothing.

PUCCIANI: What precisely do you mean by that statement?

SARTRE: I mean that a writer, a novelist cannot deal with the slightest concrete detail of life without becoming involved in everything. If I want to describe a scene—Saint-Germain-des-Prés, for example—I am immediately caught up in all the problems of my time. I may try to avoid these problems, limit my world and deal only with a small fragment of reality. But actually I cannot. Look at Jouhandeau. I like Jouhandeau very much, but Jouhandeau has limited himself to the world of a couple: Lise and Jouhandeau. This sort of writing, however interesting, is bound to produce monsters. The writer cannot *not* be engaged. In one way or another all writers know this. Yet they don't accept it. Consequently, when they do try to deal with their own times, they end up by writing detective stories. Look at the last volume of Durrell.

PUCCIANI: Isn't this a different sort of engagement from engagement as you saw it in 1948? The engagement of 1948, as I understand it, was essentially an engagement of content over form.

SARTRE: Yes. Content over form, if you will. But I have certainly evolved since 1948. In 1948 I was still naïve—the way we are all naïve. I still

believed in Santa Claus. Up to the age of forty! I believed, as you say, that people could be changed through literature. I no longer believe that. People can certainly be changed, but not through literature, it would seem. I don't know just why. People read and they seem to change. But the effect is not lasting. Literature does not really seem to incite people to action.

PUCCIANI: Is it perhaps because literature reaches people within their essential solitude?

SARTRE: Yes. There is certainly that. But there is something, for example, in a political meeting—and I do not mean that political meetings are in any way superior to literature!—which has a more lasting effect. Direct political action seems to be more *effective* than literature. I think it perhaps comes from the fact that we writers don't know too well what we are doing. The situation of the writer today is very strange. Today the writer has more means at his disposal than ever before and yet he seems to count for so little. It's incredible. Today everyone is known; everyone knows each other. A writer of relatively little importance can easily be as famous or more famous than Baudelaire or Flaubert in their time. Look at my own career. I started around 1938 with *La Nausée*. There had been a few things before; nothing much. Then with *La Nausée* I had a nice *succès d'estime*. Now look at what has happened. In a way I should actually have fewer means at my disposal than I do. And yet what does it all amount to? There is a kind of impotence about being a writer today. I think the realization of that is the difference between my position today and my position in 1948.

PUCCIANI: You have mentioned impotence and that brings me to the *Séquestrés d'Altona*. As I see it, the great theme of the play is "sequestration." But the corollaries of "sequestration" are impotence and power. Do you agree?

SARTRE: Yes. Certainly that is so. But the play is really about torture.

PUCCIANI: It is an engaged play?

SARTRE: Yes. But it is not the play that I really wanted to write. I wanted to write a play about French torture in Algeria. I especially wanted to write about the sort of chap who tortures and who is none the worse for it. He lives perfectly well with what he has done. It never comes out

unless he starts boasting some night in a café when he's had a little too much to drink.

PUCCIANI: Why didn't you write that play?

SARTRE: For the simple reason that there isn't a theater in Paris that would have produced it!

PUCCIANI: So you chose to set it in Germany?

SARTRE: Yes. After all, no one is going to contradict me if I say the Nazis committed torture.

PUCCIANI: Would you explain the title of the play to me?

SARTRE: Well, I used to be very fascinated by the "sequestered life." You know the sort of thing I mean. There is a common myth—it was very common in my youth—about the writer or the poet who locks himself up and just writes and writes because he can't help himself. It's his nature to be a writer and that's all there is to it. Of course, I no longer subscribe to that sort of nonsense, but I used to be very fascinated by it. Now I subscribe to the point of view that a writer writes because he has something to say. Anyway . . . I wanted to show this sort of sequestration in terms of liberation. As you say, the whole theme of the play is sequestration from the beginning. Léni is a *séquestrée* because she is incestuous. Old Gerlach is the powerful industrialist—*un grand bourgeois*—who is a *séquestré* because of his class. Frantz is also a *séquestré* from the beginning. The first sign that Frantz was really guilty of torture, that he was actually the first to torture, is his reaction to the Jewish prisoners. He was disgusted by their dirt and their degradation rather than revolted by their plight. This is not the sort of reaction to have. You can see from that that he was going in for such abstractions as "human dignity" and that sort of thing.

PUCCIANI: It seems to me that one might say in the final analysis that Frantz was a good man *because* he committed suicide.

SARTRE: Yes. Provided you say *because* he committed suicide. Actually, the terms "good" and "bad" have no meaning in history. The more one goes along, the more one realizes that the "good" were "bad" and that the "bad" were "good." It is a sort of mystification. The terms really mean nothing. There is no justice in history. Frantz comes to face what

he has done; so does his father. They have to commit suicide. But the production of the play didn't really put the meaning across. Ledoux as old Gerlach wasn't what I intended.

PUCCIANI: With reservations Reggiani was very good.

SARTRE: Yes. With reservations.

PUCCIANI: The recent German production in Essen was apparently quite different. Gerlach was, I gather, much more what you intended. The powerful over-bearing industrialist.

SARTRE: Yes. But that was odd too. The Germans apparently cut out the scene where Frantz eats his medals. You remember, they are made of chocolate. At one point he and Johanna eat them. Very strange. Frantz should—he must—*eat* his medals.

PUCCIANI: I noticed that. But I thought the German version was an improvement. I didn't at all like that particular scene.

SARTRE: Really? Why?

PUCCIANI: I thought it out of keeping. It was a trick.

SARTRE: How strange. No one has criticized that. It was very successful on the stage.

PUCCIANI: I know. The audience laughed. But I didn't feel they should have.

SARTRE: Oh, but the audience must laugh! I have learned that if you don't give audiences a chance to laugh when you want them to, they will laugh when you don't. Besides, there is no point in some empty gesture like tearing off the medals or that sort of thing. There is no meaning in that. After all, the medals would remain intact. But if Frantz eats them, that means he eats them every day. The medals disappear. They are digested.

PUCCIANI: But what is the point of that?

SARTRE: You forget that we have heroes in France. They must be made

to feel the insult that is intended. They must suffer a little for what they represent.

**PUCCIANI:** I have frequently heard your play criticized as being a *drame bourgeois*. This strikes me as unfair. I see the first, third and fifth acts as deliberately *bourgeois*; the “downstairs” reality. But the “upstairs” reality is quite different. That is *avant-garde*. There are two levels: physical and metaphysical.

**SARTRE:** Yes. Exactly. That’s exactly it. Perhaps not “metaphysical,” but still that’s it. We must start with the *bourgeois* world. There is no other starting point. In this sense Existentialism is a *bourgeois* ideology, certainly. But this is only the starting point. In a different sort of world, theatre itself would be different. So would philosophy. But we have not reached that point. In a society of permanent revolution, theatre, literature would be permanent criticism, permanent contestation. That is a long way off. But it is entirely wrong to call my play a *drame bourgeois*. *Bourgeois* drama exists only for the purpose of eliminating the problem it deals with. This is not the case in the *Séquestrés*. There is an actual liberation in the two suicides. There is no secret mystery that is revealed. There is a dialectic.

**PUCCIANI:** To come back to the title of the play again, would you tell me just why you chose that title? I mean almost etymologically.

**SARTRE:** Well, you know what it means. In French a person who shuts himself up or who is shut up is called a *séquestré*. I don’t know if you are familiar with Gide’s *Souvenirs de la Cour d’assises*. Perhaps you recall the *Séquestrée de Poitiers*?

**PUCCIANI:** Yes. I wondered if there were an echo of that.

**SARTRE:** Definitely.

**PUCCIANI:** Your play is then actually an act of personal engagement?

**SARTRE:** Yes. Quite. I still believe in engaged literature.

**PUCCIANI:** Mauriac has said that you are the real *séquestré*. I wonder what you think about that? Your play reflects your concern for the writer’s impotence; his frustration in power.

SARTRE: Well, no. I'm not a *séquestré*. No one has locked me up and I haven't locked myself up.

PUCCIANI: I once said in an article about you that engaged literature means *la littérature au pouvoir*. I wonder what you think about that.

SARTRE: Yes. That's correct. As a kind of ideal statement. But one should add immediately that it must be understood that literature will never be given this power. If it were, it would no longer exist. Look at Malraux. This is a great danger for literature. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons for my own evolution in this regard is that I became aware, after 1948, that I was in the process of constructing an ethic for the writer alone. *Une morale de l'écrivain*. I wanted to get away from that. I wanted to deal with all problems. Not just with the world of the writer.

PUCCIANI: I would like to ask you something about Existential psychoanalysis. I am reminded of this because of Frantz's "madness." Could one not say that Existential psychoanalysis is psychoanalysis for normal people whereas Freud requires a category of the "pathological"?

SARTRE: Certainly Existential psychoanalysis is concerned with normal people. Conventional psychoanalysis as it is practiced today in America and France is a plague. It encloses the individual in his malady. There is no way out.

PUCCIANI: This is somewhat erratic now, but I would like to raise another question of engagement. I have often heard Existential engagement criticized—by my students, for example—on the grounds that it is a doctrine for heroes. I remember one student's asking me: "How can the little people be engaged?"

SARTRE: That is very interesting. Yes. That may be a problem. But I wonder if there is not a difference there between France and the United States. I should imagine that in California, for example, where everything more or less works well . . .

PUCCIANI: Hm!

SARTRE: . . . yes, badly, well, but it more or less works . . . I should imagine there would be a lack of *cadres* for engagement. But this is not true of France. There are many *cadres* here where a student like the one you

mention could find a place for individual action. And I mean both on the Right and on the Left.

PUCCIANI: This brings me to a last question about engagement and the effectiveness of the writer. There is great interest in Existentialism. In California, for example, which is very remote from your world. I wonder if that interest could exist if you had not given literary form to your work?

SARTRE: Literature is certainly very important. Yes, I know what you mean. And I do believe that we must continue to give literary form to our work. It is the writer's only chance, as I have said everywhere. At the same time, literature is not the only way. This should not be taken to mean, however, that literature should not be engaged. I am not offering any alibis. I am less sanguine than I used to be, but I still believe the writer can help—if it is only to prevent the worst from taking place.