

The New York Times

THEATER REVIEW

A Hallowed French Company Takes on ‘Angels in America’

And elsewhere in Paris, smaller theaters take more radical cues from the L.G.B.T.Q. world.

By Laura Cappelle

Published Feb. 6, 2020 Updated Feb. 7, 2020, 3:48 a.m. ET



PARIS — Can you admire a stage production if its director’s choices hardly register? In France, where directorial vision is generally considered the driving force in theater, it’s a conundrum.

By local standards, [the Comédie-Française debut of “Angels in America,”](#) Tony Kushner’s epic play about the AIDS crisis in the United States, is a curious success. Onstage, a chorus of voices — including both the actors’ and the playwright’s — converge with clarity yet also seem unfiltered, as if the director had taken a back seat.

Perhaps it shouldn’t come as a surprise: The director, Arnaud Desplechin, whose background is in film, is essentially new to theater. Although he has released a dozen highly individual screen dramas since the early 1990s — including “A Christmas Tale” and last year’s “Oh Mercy!” — “Angels in America” is only his second project for the stage after a rather staid 2015 production of August Strindberg’s “Father,” also for the Comédie-Française.

With its modern setting and sprawling story lines, “Angels in America” was always going to look different from “Father,” which relied on period costumes and static sets. Still, Desplechin’s reading of Kushner’s play is similarly literal. When characters wander around New York City, the city’s skyline, Central Park and the Brooklyn Bridge appear in graceless video projections. As soon as the action moves inside someone’s home, walls are dutifully wheeled in.

Desplechin has little instinct for theater’s visual shortcuts and never quite finds an overall concept to tie the production together. Even the play’s fantastical apparitions don’t spark his imagination. In case the audience doesn’t realize there are angels in Kushner’s America, Desplechin spells it out: Florence Viala is lowered from the ceiling while wearing a long white robe and unwieldy wings.

Add to that an abridged text, and it feels a little like watching a CliffsNotes version. Kushner’s play — in two parts, “Millennium Approaches” and “Perestroika” — typically runs to nearly eight hours. Under the Comédie-Française’s rotating repertoire system, however, productions are limited to three hours to allow for quick turnover. And instead of staging the diptych over two days, Desplechin has condensed it into one evening.

From a storytelling perspective, it works. The pace precludes boredom, and the loss of Kushner's digressions about American history won't be felt too keenly by French viewers.

The Comédie-Française is also the right environment for Desplechin's self-effacing approach to stage direction. For much of the company's history, directors played second fiddle to playwrights and actors. While stars of the field, including Thomas Ostermeier and Ivo van Hove, have made their house debuts in recent years, "Angels in America" harks back to a model that has its merits.

For starters, it may afford the cast greater freedom: They bring a sense of individual spontaneity to the protagonists' inner lives and contradictions. As Joe, the closeted gay Mormon, Christophe Montenez is oblivious to his own pain and that of others, including his wife, Harper (Jennifer Decker, who veers between childlike torpor and lucidity). The verbal sparring between the hateful Roy Cohn (Michel Vuillermoz, on blistering form), who hides his AIDS diagnosis, and his gay nurse, Belize (Gaël Kalimindi), isn't just brutal: Somehow, it carves a space for empathy.

Most of the characters are frustratingly complex rather than likable, and morality is far from black and white in their world. "Angels in America" paints a murkier reality, and if nothing else, Desplechin proves that the play deserves a spot in the hallowed repertoire of the Comédie-Française.

While the treatment of Kushner’s “gay fantasia” remains fairly conventional, other French directors are taking more radical cues from the L.G.B.T.Q. world. Two productions currently playing in Paris — Johanny Bert’s “Hen” and Joël Pommerat’s “Tales and Legends” (“Contes et légendes”) — take gender fluidity as a starting point to bring unsettling creatures to the stage: a shape-shifting puppet, and humanoids that may be just a little too friendly.

The acclaimed Pommerat, who returns to theater for the first time since his runaway 2015 hit, “Ça ira (1) Fin de Louis” (which translates roughly as “It Will Be Fine (1) End of Louis”) can’t be accused of lacking a directorial stamp. The shadowy aesthetic and self-contained vignettes of “[Tales and Legends](#),” which had its premiere at the Théâtre de Nanterre-Amandiers, are unmistakably his, yet he also explores intriguing new ground. In the production’s world, children grow up alongside robots who act as their companions and learning aids.

The result is futuristic and eerily intimate. Teenagers become highly attached to these “artificial people” and can’t let them go when adulthood nears. Flickers of emotion pass across the humanoids’ faces. And Pommerat adds another layer of illusion to these stories through the casting, since nearly all of the roles — humans and robots, adults and children — are played by adult women.



“Tales and Legends” at the Théâtre de Nanterre-Amandiers. Elizabeth Carecchio

Their transformation into boys is especially impressive, and allows “Tales and Legends” to take on the social roots of male violence with sensitivity.

In one scene, a teacher tries to “reprogram” a group of teenagers into warriors by goading them to be bolder and angrier. Yet the audience knows he’s addressing female actors, fostering critical distance. Much like the robots, who can turn male or female at the flick of a switch, the episode shows gender stereotypes for the performance they are.



The puppet Hen in “Hen” at Le Mouffetart. Christophe Raynaud de Lage

Bert’s “Hen” achieves the same result without a single human actor. [Presented on the small stage of Le Mouffetard](#), a venue specializing in puppetry, it is a witty, playful one-puppet cabaret performance. Its star character is named after a gender-neutral Swedish pronoun, and their bald head (save for a thin ponytail) is alternately attached to a feminine or masculine body from one number to the next.

The distance that puppetry creates from real bodies makes it ideal to defuse any tension around sexuality, and “Hen” is painstakingly articulated by two puppeteers (Bert is one of them) who remain hidden in black clothes. Bert also sings the musical numbers, whose lyrics, while uneven, are often amusingly, bluntly sexual. There is a “Clitoris Tango,” an army of dildos of all shapes and sizes, and even a handful of introspective moments that serve to lend the character depth.

Gender fluidity in “Hen” mostly means seesawing between extremes, with the puppet moving from hyper-feminine to muscleman looks, and some of the political commentary feels didactic. Still, on the night I attended, the young audience included a class of high school students who guffawed in disbelief throughout, before giving the performers a standing ovation.

Sex education classes are so passé: Just take teenagers to see “Hen,” and throw in “Tales and Legends.”

Angels in America. Directed by Arnaud Desplechin. Comédie-Française, through March 27.

Contes et légendes. Directed by Joël Pommerat. Nanterre-Amandiers, through Feb. 16.

Hen. Directed by Johanny Bert. Le Mouffetard — Théâtre des arts de la marionnette, through Feb. 8.