

Unhappy Families Onstage, Unhappy in Their Own Ways

By Laura Cappelle - Feb. 28, 2019



Left to right: Denis Podalydès, Julie Sicard, Rebecca Marder, Gaël Kamilindi and Jean Chevalier in Julie Deliquet's reworking of "Fanny and Alexander" for the Comédie Française.
Credit: Brigitte Enguerand

PARIS — "As far as feelings are concerned, we are illiterate," Johan laments to his wife Marianne in Ingmar Bergman's "Scenes from a Marriage." Watching the Swedish master's characters grapple with their emotions can be equal parts riveting and frustrating — and it's true of their stage incarnations, too.

In February alone, Paris welcomed two: "Les Analphabètes" ("The Illiterates"), an adaptation of "Scenes from a Marriage" by the company Le Balagan' Retrouvé, and Julie Deliquet's reworking of "Fanny and Alexander" for the Comédie Française. That Bergman's works continue to find new life in theaters seems natural. While he is remembered more as a filmmaker, Bergman directed many more plays than movies, and he was a fixture for many years at Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theater.

"Fanny and Alexander" and "Les Analphabètes" speak of the gap between the world as Bergman experienced it and our own, however. Both provide meaty roles to outstanding casts, as the Swedish director so often did, but fall just short of asserting their contemporary resonance.

Still, with "Fanny and Alexander," Ms. Deliquet has crafted an impressive vehicle for the Comédie Française. The young director first worked there in 2016, when she staged "Vania" at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, one of the company's smaller theaters. Her main-stage debut suggests she clearly understands the strengths of the institution's permanent troupe, one of the last remaining in France.

The depth of talent available to perform roles big and small is chief among them, and there are few dull characters in "Fanny and Alexander." (Oddly, the young Fanny, who says very little, is one of them.) The family banter alone is worth the admission price in the first act, which takes place in the wings of a theater run by the Ekdahls, the tight-knit family at the play's center.

Three generations are celebrating after their yearly Nativity play, and much like at an actual gathering of relatives, Ms. Deliquet doles out attention carefully to her performers. Dominique Blanc, one of France's most decorated film and stage performers, has a limited role as the family's widowed matriarch, yet shines with unforced wit. As her three sons, meanwhile, Denis Podalydès, Laurent Stocker and Hervé Pierre, all very different, play off each other's idiosyncrasies with gusto.

Mr. Podalydès's gift for finding comedy in pathos, and vice versa, is especially striking in the role of Oscar, the overworked director of the theater, whose death precipitates an upheaval. The heart attack he suffers mid-rehearsal made for a tableau reminiscent of a famous moment in French theater history: Molière's final performance in "The Imaginary Invalid," in 1673, just a few hours before his death.

Grief-stricken, Oscar's wife, Emilie, opts to remarry, and the second half of the play takes place in the home of her new husband, the cold, authoritarian bishop Vergéus. The contrast with the Ekdahls' world is designed to be stark: The sets, designed by Ms. Deliquet together with the Comédie Française director Érif Ruf, shrink to a stiflingly sparse room, where Emilie's son Alexander bears the brunt of Vergéus's humiliating punishments.

Thierry Hancisse is chillingly great as the dogmatic bishop, but a stage production of "Fanny and Alexander" should probably make clear why this turn of events and its improbable resolution are an essential development in the story. Bergman's exploration of ascetic Protestantism and faith is so specific to his cinematic aesthetic that onstage it feels like a caricature. Ms. Deliquet inserts other material into the film's script, including excerpts from a TV series and novel that Bergman wrote first, and she allows for some improvisation. Her direction is often brilliant, but there is nothing urgent about the play's second act: It seems to happen merely out of deference to Bergman's work.



Gina Calinoiu and Lionel González in "Les Analphabètes" at the Théâtre Gérard Philipe.
Credit: Charlotte Colman

"Les Analphabètes," staged at the Théâtre Gérard Philipe in Saint-Denis, featured a similar problem at its conclusion. In this loose adaptation of "Scenes From a Marriage," Bergman's forensic look at a relationship on the rocks, Gina Calinoiu and Lionel González of the company Le Balagan' Retrouvé, have woven improvisation through a work Bergman originally wrote as a six-part television mini-series.

It works to perfection — until what was the final episode on TV. By that point, the dynamics between Ms. Calinoiu and Mr. González, who play the characters as a contemporary couple, are noticeably different from Liv Ullmann and Erland Josephson's on screen. Early on, Ms. Calinoiu emphasizes the woman's vulnerability and her inability to assert herself (verbally and otherwise) in front of her husband.

As Johan, on the other hand, Mr. González gives a master class in gaslighting. Even as he leaves his wife and children for a younger woman, he manages to simultaneously blame Marianne and demand her help and pity. To Mr. González's credit, he makes an insufferable character credible, but when Marianne finally realizes she no longer cares about him and pushes for divorce, it was all I could do not to cheer.

"Les Analphabètes" should have stopped there, especially after Johan becomes physically violent with Marianne. The final scene, in which they reunite for a sad affair 20 years later, undoes the work of making Marianne her own person — a beautiful, feminist arc that never feels preachy. What made sense as a conclusion in 1973 seems more like Stockholm syndrome in the context of a 21st-century relationship.



Vincent Garanger, left, and Philippe Torretton in "J'ai Pris Mon Père sur Mes Épaules" at the Théâtre du Rond-Point.
Credit: Sonia Barcet

Meanwhile, a more modern family saga turned into one of the season's hits at the Théâtre du Rond-Point. With "J'ai pris mon père sur mes épaules" ("I Carried My Father on My Shoulders"), the playwright Fabrice Melquiot confirms that he is one of his generation's great storytellers.

Set in an impoverished housing project, "J'ai Pris Mon Père sur Mes Épaules" manages to be at once epic and bleakly realistic. It is partly modeled after Virgil's "Aeneid," in which Aeneas carries his father Anchises to safety after the burning of Troy. Here, a penniless modern Aeneas attempts to take his cancer-stricken father, Roch, on a final journey.

Around them is a tight group of characters who live in the same building, including Grinch, Roch's closest friend, who remains haunted by the death of his son. The sweeping force of the text is reminiscent at times of the Lebanese-Canadian playwright Wadji Mouawad's most vital plays, and like

Mr. Mouawad, Mr. Melquiot is occasionally given to drawn-out digressions. Skim off 5 percent of “J’ai Pris Mon Père sur Mes Épaules,” however, and you are left with a searingly good play, which treats its working-class characters with rare dignity.

The director Arnaud Meunier sets it in and around a revolving two-tier set, which recreates the neighbors’ apartments and the stairs that serve as a communal space. As Roch, Philippe Torreton is all gentle gravitas, so earnest that he draws tears without so much as raising his voice. His character shuns effusive demonstrations all the way to the end: His is the death of a common man, yet Mr. Melquiot lends it the moving texture of an odyssey.

Fanny et Alexandre. Directed by Julie Deliquet. Comédie-Française, through June 16.

Les Analphabètes. By the company Le Balagan’ Retrouvé. Théâtre Gérard Philipe, Saint-Denis.

J’ai pris mon père sur mes épaules. Directed by Arnaud Meunier. Théâtre du Rond-Point, through March 9.