

The New York Times

In Paris, a Proust Adaptation for the Ages

Oct. 8, 2020

“The Guermantes Way” at the Comédie-Française sets contemporary concerns aside to carve out a place in the theater’s repertory.



From left, Laurent Lafitte, Yoann Gasciorowski and Florence Viala in “The Guermantes Way,” directed by Christophe Honoré at the Comédie-Française. ©Jean-Louis Fernandez

PARIS – Who isn’t yearning for lost time right now? Surely a new stage production inspired by Marcel Proust’s sprawling, seven-volume saga, “In Search of Lost Time,” will nod to our current circumstances, you might think, as venues reopen and play catch-up with audiences.

Yet the director Christophe Honoré, known internationally for films including 2007’s “Love Songs,” has resisted the urge. “The Guermantes Way” (“Le Côté de Guermantes”), his highly anticipated adaptation for the Comédie-Française of the novel’s third volume, is about little other than the world it creates – and it’s impressive enough to outlast immediate concerns and carve out a place in the storied troupe’s repertory.

Not only does it takeschutzpah to tackle Proust's magnum opus, whose meandering style has wrong-footed many film and stage directors, but Honoré ups the ante by dispensing with the first two books. "The Guermantes Way" opens in medias res, with the grown-up narrator, Marcel, already obsessed with Oriane, the Duchess of Guermantes, and surrounded by characters whose back stories are only hinted at.

While readers of the novel will have a better sense of the big picture, Honoré's production is both respectful and irreverent toward its source. It includes gorgeous stretches of Proust's text, yet intersperses them with anachronistic songs and playful addresses to the audience – a fine balance that made "The Guermantes Way" work even for my theater companion, a Proust virgin. Its setting alone is a



Elsa Lepoivre as the Duchess of Guermantes and Loïc Corbery as Charles Swann in "The Guermantes Way." ©Jean-Louis Fernandez

stroke of genius. Since the Comédie-Française's main stage is closed for renovation until January, the company has temporarily taken over the Théâtre Marigny, a venue near the Champs-Élysées. Improbably, the back of its stage opens directly onto a garden with a fountain, and the set designers, Alban Ho Van and Ariane Bromberger, constructed the décor – the front hall of the aristocratic Guermantes family – around large doors that lead outside.

The result makes for a whimsical throwback to late 19th-century Paris, with characters stepping out into the chilly night air to head to elegant dinner parties. "The Guermantes Way" is a class-conscious piece of the Proust puzzle: The divisions between aristocrats, bourgeois families like Marcel's and servants are as clearly delineated onstage as they are in the book. The nobility's anti-Semitism is also laid bare, though the debates about the Dreyfus affair (a political scandal involving a Jewish artillery officer) are occasionally hard to follow.

Elsewhere, “The Guermantes Way” shuns realism, and not just when sound technicians follow the actors around holding boom mics. Memories, in Proust’s work, have a life and shape of their own, and Honoré treats them with a fantasy and immediacy familiar from his previous stage work.

Take the opening scene, in which Marcel, played with restrained seriousness by Stéphane Varupenne, sings Cat Stevens’s “Lady d’Arbanville” as the Duchess of Guermantes (Elsa Lepoivre) walks in from the garden outside. It is an oddly perfect introduction to their non-relationship: Marcel worships her from afar for the duration of his family’s stay with the Guermantes in Paris.

Nearly all the key characters get a moment in the spotlight. Sébastien Pouderoux is quietly superb as Saint-Loup, an army officer attracted to his friend Marcel, while Serge Bagdassarian chews the upholstered scenery with irresistible bravura in the role of the flamboyant Baron de Charlus. Lepoivre veers between flashes of vulnerability and conceit as the Duchess. The unspoken love between her and Charles Swann, a central Proust figure who makes only a fleeting appearance here, is striking; as Swann, Loïc Corbery deserves awards for the finest 15-minute performance in the repertoire.

To ensure social distancing, one seat is left empty between each group of attendees at the Théâtre Marigny, and there is no intermission, two rules that Paris theatergoers are getting used to. Since many French venues reopened in September, attending performances has felt like a race against the clock: Coronavirus infections are rising again, with new restrictions imposed seemingly every week in major cities. Theater has been spared for now, but there is no guarantee that won’t change.

In the meantime, a number of venues hastily rescheduled pre-pandemic productions that had their runs curtailed last season. Two clearly deserved to be seen more widely: “The Dock of Ouistreham” and “And the Heart Is Still Steaming,” which both delve into complex social trauma.



Magali Bonat in “The Dock of Ouistreham,” directed by Louise Vignaud, at Théâtre 14.
©Rémi Blasquez

“The Dock of Ouistreham” (“Le Quai de Ouistreham”), which was performed at the Théâtre 14, is a one-woman staging of a 2010 essay by the French journalist Florence Aubenas. To understand the reality of precarious work, Aubenas registered as an unskilled job seeker in the city of Caen, in northern France, accepted every job that was offered her and found herself cleaning ferries and offices at all hours.

What initially sounds like a gimmick turns into a harsh look at the lives of many workers who tend to go unnoticed, and the director Louise Vignaud found a no-nonsense, charismatic performer in Magali Bonat to match Aubenas’s text.

The rather obscurely titled “And the Heart Is Still Steaming” (“Et le Coeur Fume Encore”) is also a work of documentary theater. Created by Margaux Eskenazi and Alice Carré, this bold ensemble production weaves a large number of stories into a wide-ranging look at the legacy of the Algerian decolonization war, fought against France in the 1950s and ’60s.

To understand the conflict, which split the local population and left a heavy death toll in its wake, Eskenazi and Carré studied literary works of the time and other records. They provide context for both the French and the Algerian sides, with fully fleshed characters of all political allegiances.

Still, “And the Heart Is Still Steaming” is at its best when it gets personal. Some of the cast members have family who fought in the war and play their own relatives, as they explain onstage early on.

The seven actors never falter, yet as in “The Dock of Ouistreham,” I found myself occasionally overwhelmed with the harrowing nature of certain details. This year has been so challenging for most of us that some productions, for all their strengths, may be more difficult to process than usual.



From left, Elsa Guedj, Joseph Fourez and Louise Grinberg in “A l’Abordage!,” directed by Clément Poirée at the Théâtre de la Tempête. ©Morgane Delfosse

Comedy has no such issue, and “À l’Abordage!,” a new play by Emmanuelle Bayamack-Tam, proves a two-hour antidote to gloom. Directed by Clément Poirée at the Théâtre de la Tempête, it is a contemporary reinvention of an 18th-century comedy, Marivaux’s “The Triumph of Love”: Two women infiltrate a cultlike community where love and women – the guru’s sister aside – are banned.

Bayamack-Tam sticks closely to the original plot, sometimes to a fault, but her characters are very much of the 21st century. Fluid sexual expression is the norm, and Poirée has clearly worked hard on comic timing with the cast, led by Bruno Blairet (marvelously deadpan as the guru, Kinbote) and Sandy Boizard (his sister, Theodora).

Love triumphs onstage, as planned. For at least a little while longer, in Paris, it can.

Laura Cappelle

Le Côté de Guermantes. *Directed by Christophe Honoré.* Comédie-Française, Théâtre Marigny, through Nov. 15.

Et le Cœur Fume Encore. *Created by Margaux Eskenazi and Alice Carré.* Théâtre Gérard Philipe (Saint-Denis), through Oct. 11.

Le Quai de Ouistreham. *Directed by Louise Vignaud.* Théâtre de la Croix-Rousse, in Lyon, through Oct. 10, and the Festival Théâtral du Val d’Oise, in Eaubonne, Dec. 4-5.

À l’Abordage! *Directed by Clément Poirée.* Théâtre de la Tempête, through Oct. 18.