

Reviews Don't Go There

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Don't Go There directed by Gilles Bannier, créée au Festival d'Avignon en 2018 avec Robert Plagnol.

La Provence

Fabien Bonnieux

For the first time, one of the most luxurious hotels in the Vaucluse is hosting a play from the OFF Festival in Avignon this summer. From 6 to 29 July, the Hôtel d'Europe, a 5-star palace if ever there was one, will be converting its ballroom into a theatre and opening its doors to the team behind *La Femme de Ma Vie*. It's a show that's sure to cause a sensation, not only because of the relevance of its darkly comic, very British content but also because of the profile of its protagonists.

Star designer Paul Smith has designed the costumes, a first for him, the text is by Englishman Andrew Payne (screenwriter of the TV series *Inspector Barnaby*), and the direction is by Gilles Bannier, creator of Canal +'s flagship series *Tunnels*. Last but not least, the play stars Robert Plagnol, a former Molière winner. He brilliantly portrays Franck, a chauffeur with violent tendencies who works for the very rich. "What I love about Andrew Payne is his unparalleled portrayal of the complexity of the human soul and the questions he asks the audience," says the actor.

Gilles Bannier, who has just filmed an international series in Canada with Tim Roth, is directing his first play, as film and television have been his sole concern until now.

"Don't forget that the playwright's name is Andrew... Douleur (Pain). He navigates between drama and black humour and is a connoisseur of intimacy".

It was Robert Plagnol who came up with the idea to stage the play in this off-the-beaten-track venue. "Since the play is about luxury, calm and voluptuousness, I said to myself: I might as well do it in a place of comfort and well-being like the Hôtel d'Europe". Gille Bannier agrees. "I was surprised at first, but I find this place incredibly inspiring".

franceinfo:

Jacky Bornet

While *La Femme de ma vie* confirms Robert Plagnol's loyalty to Andrew Payne, the play is a triple premiere. It is the first theatrical production by director Gilles Bannier (En Grenages), the first stage production by designer Paul Smith, and it inaugurates a new Avignon venue, the Salon Baroncelli in the heart of the prestigious Hôtel d'Europe.

In the dead of night, a man paces around his living room waiting for the return of his "darling wife". He reflects on how they met, his life before that, and his recent escapade as chauffeur to an elegant underworld tycoon which has led him into a scenario worthy of a thriller. He reveals himself to be an arrogant, apparently self-assured man, riddled with insecurities...

Film Noir

Alone on stage, Robert Plagnol launches into a monologue in which his character exposes his personality with unrequited narcissism. Inviting his audience to share his prejudices, he berates his parents, colleagues in his various professions, and the whole of humanity in general, the complete misanthrope. He spent time in prison, where he acquired a taste for reading great authors and where he forged his sense of elegance. In great detail, he recounts his latest misadventure which ends in tragedy despite his quick-thinking, and intersperses his account with memories which reveal his dependency on his "darling wife" and his troubled relationship with his father, the cause of all his woes.

Robert Plagnol perfectly conveys the volatility of this character in **a script written by Andrew Payne, psychologist and master of action, at his best.** The writing is cinematic, very British in its dark, offbeat humour, *La Femme de Ma Vie* provokes from the audience a strong reaction to this provocative, impulsive character who becomes almost touching.

LIBRETHÉÂTRE
DU TEXTE À LA SCÈNE

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Behind the window of the dark flat where he is hiding, Franck is waiting for his “darling wife”. She’s the one who will get him out of the scrape he’s got himself into in an attempt to escape his job as a chauffeur and join the gilded ranks of the unscrupulous, wealthy people he drives around. But his guardian angel is delayed so Franck tells us about the circumstances that led him into this tricky situation. It has to be said that his whole life has been an endless series of tricky situations. Franck is a strange guy. He reads books, but he's impulsive. He knows how to use his head, but as a last resort, the solution to all his problems is always a good headbutt.

Andrew Payne, the English author of this monologue, is also a screenwriter. With this play, he plunges us into the atmosphere of an American film noir.

The plot is less important than the fate of the narrator, the main instigator of countless misadventures. While the mood is sombre, it is also very humorous. Black humour, of course, which, when stirred into this detective story, is sometimes reminiscent of Frédéric Dard and his famous Commissaire.

Apart from this overtly cinematic aspect, Gilles Bannier's direction takes us right back to the world of live performance, playing masterfully with theatrical possibilities. Sometimes distant as he plunges into the depths of his own thoughts, sometimes in direct communication with the audience, even risking improvisation, Plagnol makes marvellous use of pauses and silences in a syncopated rhythm reminiscent of Harold Pinter.

The text is magnificently performed by Robert Plagnol who also translated and adapted Andrew Payne's monologue. He is an actor of elegance, and not just because he is dressed by the fashion designer Paul Smith. Robert Plagnol gives substance to this macho character and succeeds in arousing empathy by revealing the fragility of this gorilla with a tragic backstory who fears only one person on Earth, his father, and whose only hope of escape is his “darling wife”.

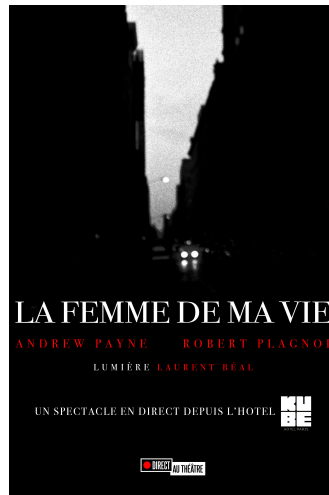
An extraordinary piece of theatre not to be missed under any circumstances.

A man waits for his “darling wife” but she doesn't come. This errand boy for the rich has a quick punch and a handy gun. He loves style, well-cut suits and great writers. He loves Dostoyevsky, that remorseless bruiser. But will his “darling wife” return? Time, love and vanity will tell...

Actor Robert Plagnol has had a long association with English playwright Andrew Payne, whose plays *Synopsis* and *Squash* he has performed in. This new text, *La Femme de Ma Vie*, was written for Plagnol, who translated the cold, raw, cruel language himself. Gilles Bannier has staged it in a deceptive tranquillity which is always on the verge of explosion. All the lies of the modern world are to be found in this spring-loaded performance!

Our favourites.

What? A 5-star hotel, the new venue for the Festival Off? Yes, but only in one room. And what a play! *La Femme de Ma Vie* by Englishman Andrew Payne, premiered at the Hôtel d'Europe, is a total success. While luxury certainly provides the backdrop to this nocturnal drama, calm and voluptuousness remain on the sidelines. For his first foray into theatre, Gilles Bannier directs the confrontational Robert Plagnol. **Black humour with an edge, razor-sharp lines, it all works at full throttle.** If you want to show off at fancy dinners, you should know that the designer Paul Smith has designed the costumes for the play. A first for him.



La Femme de ma vie mise en scène par Robert Plagnol puis Patrice Kerbrat pour directautheatre.com depuis le Kube Hôtel et Molitor, 2020 & 2021.



Sylvain Merle

Intimate thriller live on Zoom.

Confined to his studio while rehearsing, actor Robert Plagnol continued his work via videoconference, adapting his show to offer a captivating hybrid theatrical experience live from his home.

You log on to Zoom. You see the other spectators waiting on their sofas. On Thursday 11 June, people came from London, Germany, Brittany and Nanterre to watch the show. Some chat, others wait in silence.

At 7pm, there is complete silence when Franck arrives. Franck is the only character in this monologue, *La Femme de ma vie*, by Andrew Payne which actor Robert Plagnol has already performed in Avignon in 2018. He was reworking it when lockdown started. He carried on, and one thing led to another, from rehearsals to videoconference rehearsals, and he ended up offering it online, live from his home. First for free, then at a cost of €10, taking the gamble of paid streaming. He now offers it from Thursday to Saturday. Through the keyhole that is the screen, the viewer enters Franck's home. He talks to us in close-up. We follow him as he walks around his flat, from one room to another. He

paces, sits down, drinks some vodka, gets up, cooks an egg, eats it, goes to the bathroom, the toilet... movement that reflects whatever is on his mind.

What's on Franck's mind is his "darling wife". He's waiting for her. It's after 3am and she's still not home. He opens up to us about his life as a delinquent, the upbringing he was desperate to escape from, his dreams of great things, the wheeling and dealing, the fights, the honour and the pride...

The boy could have escaped from a Tarantino film, a well-read thug in an impeccable suit, hot blood and polished shoes, good taste as a religion, a cinematographic sense of observation, reading is his escape having discovered books in prison. "I dream of luxury, calm and pleasure, but I have nothing".

He has nothing, apart from a high opinion of himself, which he repeats constantly as if to convince himself. Or to delude himself. Perhaps he really believes it after all? And then there's the "darling wife he's waiting for. "Money loves stupid" she said to him. Amidst these snapshots of life, there are also the events of this evening and the resulting crisis. Franck grimaces with pain and annoyance, often staring into space, talking so as not to think too much...

He's a chauffeur for his wife's luxury concierge firm Largesse, sent to drive a client on an urgent mission. **An intimate thriller with a dark, foreboding atmosphere**, we follow Franck into the very heart of his chaotic existence. There is humour: "Alright, I admit, I couldn't finish Proust, the man drove me mad, he can't finish a sentence. Do the deed! Finish the sentence!", But more often melancholy reigns as he talks to us via the screen.

Actor and director, Robert Plagnol films himself with his tablet which allows him to vary the points of view. We see him opening the fridge, then switch to the reverse angle to see the inside of the fridge, all with fluidity. The image has a raw feel, lending authenticity to this live confession that could be from a guy on a social network. It's a form that brings an intimacy and a closeness to the character. The live action adds to the tension. Part theatre, part movie, we're captivated by the story and the performance.

Antoine Perraud

"Playing *La Femme de ma vie* live on Zoom is above all a way of putting up a fight and not allowing ourselves to be defeated by the closure of the theatres, by inventing a new form that will enable me to continue practising my craft", actor Robert Plagnol tells Mediapart.

Every Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 7pm, he performs an hour-and-a-quarter-long monologue written for him by Andrew Payne. This British playwright also writes screenplays. But his work is better known across the Channel than beyond it, thanks to Robert Plagnol, who has been translating it and performing it on stage for the last fifteen years. It all began around 2005, with the adaptation of *Squash* - in the company of a more experienced translator, Vanessa Chouraqui. The play premiered at Le Petit Montparnasse in Paris in 2006, and was staged again the following year in Avignon, to great critical acclaim. It caught the eye and ear of Didier Bezace who welcomed it in 2009 to the Théâtre de la Commune d'Aubervilliers, which he was directing at the time - a rare move from the private sector to subsidised public theatre in France.

Robert Plagnol continued his exploration of Andrew Payne with *Le Plan B* and then *En Réunion*, before daring to approach the author, who accepted the commission. The result was *Don't Go There*, transposed under the title *La Femme de Ma Vie*, in 2015: a chauffeur waits for his "darling wife", tells the story of his life, takes the audience as witness, sings of his love of literature discovered in prison, all between tales of brawls with his employers. **It's a storm in a slightly cracked head, and it grips you to the core.**

The young man can't stand authority - and yet he shows a rare willingness to be subservient as soon as he feels recognised or loved. He proclaims his contempt for bad taste, his reverence for impeccably cut suits, especially with Russian leather shoes. And yet, time and again, he descends into the bouts of violence that are his undoing. We go from Proust to blood on the walls, from Dostoyevsky to shattered teeth.

Such is the life of an unstable, unsocialised character whose face holds your attention from the back of the stalls, thanks to an actor capable of going, without batting an eyelid, from tender-hearted lover to hard-nosed hitman. Robert Plagnol explains: "I was immediately seduced by the freedom of interpretation that Payne's writing allows both the audience and the actors. For the audience, because they always have the choice of understanding the play as they see fit. Payne never gives lessons, even though he is profoundly a writer of his time and describes people as they live; with their flaws, their ordinariness, but also their poetry and their dreams. The same freedom is given to the actors, because he calls on his performers to play, where words are ultimately of most interest in terms of what they don't say".

And the actor explains, by way of a recipe: "Playing Payne is like making chantilly cream - pardon the culinary comparison, I recently passed a cookery course! You have to be constantly on the move, never stopping in your efforts. That's the price you have to pay if you want your words to come alive and portray a humanity that is hesitant, fragile and lost, but always combative and never passive.

Lockdown makes this character who speaks to us live on our mobile phones, our computer screens, or our big-screen TV sets - it all depends on how we connect to Zoom - even more dramatic. He tells us that his name is Franck, but makes it clear that it's an assumed name. He talks to us about what has just happened to him, but also about his past and present, all intertwined in sensitive, humorous, ferocious twists and turns, a trademark of British theatre, led by Harold Pinter. Keeping you on the edge of your seat, **it's at once brutal and delicate, raw and complex, direct and undulating, political and dreamlike, idealistic and nightmarish...**

"Franck is a deeply limited man, both in his dreams of beauty and in his issues with violence. More concretely, he is also limited at the moment he speaks to us, locked in his flat. There's obviously much to discuss here about the appropriateness of performing this monologue at this time of year," says Robert Plagnol. And he adds: "Nobody knows when the theatres will open again. And that's just as well, because theatre has never needed theatres to exist. Go figure, even if sometimes it's not the theatres that keep it alive! What I do know is that, since the dawn of time, theatre has needed writers, actors and audiences. These three categories are not yet dead, and bringing them together despite the lockdown not only seems normal to me, it's a passion.

The logo for 'Politis' is a solid red square with the word 'Politis' written in white, italicized, serif font.

Gilles Costaz

Beyond the virtual.

During the period of lockdown of the French population, a number of actors set up sites where pre-recorded shows were streamed and, more rarely, performed live. Robert Plagnol's live performance of Andrew Payne's *La Femme de ma vie* was so well attended and successful that the actor turned the exception into a lasting achievement. He performs Payne's text three evenings a week on directautheatre.com, a website he has set up where you can pay a ten euro ticket.

Plagnol produced *La Femme de ma vie* at the Avignon Off Festival in 2018. On the Internet screen, it's even better, because the actor has matured in the role and his performance with a single camera that frames him almost constantly in close-up creates the effect of a magnifying glass, of voyeuristic indiscretion.

The principle adopted is that of the wild beast in a cage. Plagnol does not leave the screen, and this play takes on a locked room feel that it did have in the theatre. The actor's acting is angular and he is captured from every angle! Plagnol is a particularly gripping actor when he tackles a dark, obsessive text, when you're not playing the text but living it. There's a detective story narrative to wrap up this harrowing hour, but above all we're in a psychological arc that moves between the extremes of misery and happiness. Plagnol is astonishing in his contrasts and contradictions. His intense acting conveys a powerful sense of reality through the virtual medium.

In the absence of venues, some actors take to the camera themselves, or even their smartphones, and film themselves performing live... This is what actor-director Robert Plagnol does.



Fabienne Pascaud

In a deserted flat, a snobbish chauffeur waits nervously for the woman he loves, the one who usually gets him out of the scrapes into which his ambition and raging bitterness lead him. To relieve his stress, he cooks himself a fried egg in a suit and tie, and obsessively recounts his far from straightforward life. Who is this absent companion, who is no doubt manipulating him? Or is he the manipulator? The chauffeur wanders through empty rooms while raving about his love of literature. Anxiety mounts.

Theatre, cinema?

Under eerie lighting, **Andrew Payne plays with the codes of film noir, using his singular rhythm to create a stage atmosphere akin to Pinter...** On Zoom, you'll see Robert Plagnol blend theatre and cinema with bizarre elegance, while giving a sultry impression of intimacy as he stares directly into the eyes of the audience. A unique experience. You may be in your armchair – but you're really in the theatre.

Anna Nobili

Theatres are keeping their doors closed for the time being. However, three evenings a week, at 9pm, the curtain rises on Zoom -- the ubiquitous app for lockdown e-meetings. That's when *La Femme de ma vie* begins, performed live by actor Robert Plagnol from his flat.

A simple but brilliant idea.

Walking around his kitchen and living room, filmed on his iPad, he takes up Andrew Payne's dark and powerful monologue, which he adapted for the Avignon Festival in 2018. He is Franck, an "astonishing boy". Dressed in a suit and tie, this underworld chauffeur is waiting for his wife. Nervous and feverish, he takes us into his confidence. Crazy about shoes and literature, he discovered Dostoyevsky, Chateaubriand and Melville in prison. We're in his grasp, we can see the texture of his skin, we can almost feel his breath. It's gripping.

Before the performance, the audience chat as if in a theatre bistro. That evening, people from Brittany and Quebec made friends and toasted each other with wine or coffee. But there's no chit-chat once the performance is over, as the final sequence will have them glued to their seats. To encourage other artists to follow in his footsteps, Plagnol has just set up a website, directautheatre.com, which will list shows filmed live and, this time, allow you to buy your ticket. It's a small price to pay, but a necessary one - and with such a high standard, it promises to be a great evening.

franceinfo:

Jacky Bornet

Following the lockdown leading to the closure of theatres, and an unquenchable need to perform, actor Robert Plagnol - an actor in the theatre, as well as in film and television - has found a way to practise his art. He produces home performances of Andrew Payne's play, *La Femme de ma vie*, created in 2018 at the Avignon Festival with director Gilles Bannier, streaming it live on Zoom, an experience well worth the catching.

Every Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 6.45pm, Robert Plagnol invites internet users

to attend a performance of this psycho-police play in which an underworld chauffeur makes intimate confessions and reveals his many flaws. Joining him couldn't be easier: all you have to do is sign up on the new platform created by Plagnol, directautheatre.com, to attend a performance for €10. This sum pays the author, performer and technicians involved in this performance, which has just been praised by France Inter's *Masque et La Plume*.

Economy of means and efficiency

While many musicians, comedians, choreographers and actors post their live or recorded performances online, Robert Plagnol is without doubt the first actor to perform an entire play live from his home in front of a community of Internet users. The actor brings this hour and fifteen minute monologue to life, despite the distance between himself and his audience. Because, as Robert Plagnol confides, "it gives me immense pleasure to know that there is a real audience behind the screen. I know you're there. It gives me the same acting sensations as on stage".

The set-up devised by the actor is amazingly effective, given the economy of means. The play takes place one night, when a second-rate mobster is waiting for the return of the woman he calls "my darling wife". While waiting for her, he reveals himself to be misanthropic, ambitious and bitterly disappointed by those around him. After a blunder that landed him in prison, he discovered culture, painting and literature, and forged a new personality. Infatuated and arrogant, he recalls traumatic experiences with a violent father and stepfather. These memories and their acceptance perhaps offer him the chance of redemption.

Despite the restrictions of lockdown, Robert Plagnol conveys the causticity of this character in **a script written by an inspired Andrew Payne, psychologist and master of action. The writing is almost cinematic, very British in its dark, offbeat humour, *La Femme de ma vie* provokes a strong reaction from the audience to this provocative, impulsive character who becomes almost touching.**

Robert Plagnol and his collaborators show great inventiveness in adapting the play to the constraints of lockdown. The actor moves around his flat, from the living room to the bathroom, crosses the corridor, sits down, gets up, walks, cooks, constantly carrying his mobile phone or tablet with him as he films. The lighting, designed remotely with Laurent Béal, adapts to each shot with invisible devices installed by Michel Winogradoff which allow the camera to be set for each shot. The idea for this adaptation came to the actor when he wanted to reprise the text with Patrice Kerbrat.

They came up with the idea of giving live performances of the play, devising an adapted and totally innovative staging. After some private sessions, they decided to make the piece available to a wider audience via their personal networks and Instagram. Since

then they have gone from strength to strength, with up to 100 people attending one performance, and more if you join them...