

Press review



The Meeting directed by Patrice Kerbrat with Swann Arlaud, Anne Bouvier, Patrice Kerbrat and Robert Plagnol at Le Petit Montparnasse, 2013.

**Le Canard
enchaine**

Jacques Vallet

British film and TV screenwriter Andrew Payne is formidably effective at exposing the warfare hidden in our relationships, whether in the media, politics, business – or love. *The Meeting* takes a look at the ruthless world of business: after months of tedious negotiations, Frank (50's), Stratton (40's) and Cole (20's) are preparing to sign off on a contract that is crucial to the future of their company when they learn that the opposing negotiator, Jack, is not coming. He has been fired from his company that morning because he cracked up and was "found with his balls hanging out in a meeting room".

We don't know what the company's business is (apart from 'nitpicking everything: licences, percentages, the Asian market'), nor the content of the agreement, nor the points of contention. That is not the point. The point is this: with Jack replaced by his colleague Karine David, the fragile balance of an office life is shattered with unexpected emotions and raw language. No holds are barred, as everyone tries to salvage what can be salvaged, not only in the workplace but also in domestic life which, along with sex, intrudes into the workplace and complicates everything.

First of all, we are presented with a representation of the utmost banality of office life: computers, sofas, files, a coffee table, and characters constantly on their phones, talking or texting. **But one is grabbed immediately by the language and it doesn't let you go until the last line.** The atmosphere is tense and suffocating, not so much in the mechanics of the piece or the sober and accomplished direction of Patrice Kerbrat as the performance of the four actors. Precise, dynamic, efficient. They are virtuosos in their handling of the cruelty and cynicism that lurk behind appearances, and allow us relish Payne's devastating humour.

Patrice Kerbrat (Franck), elegant boss of the negotiators, keeps the pressure on his team, an iron hand in a velvet glove: "You're pale, my dear...". An old carnivore, full of sly plotting, who suddenly explodes: "Turn off your bloody phone!". This is directed at Robert Plagnol (Stratton), the most touching, the one who is under the greatest pressure feverish, vulnerable, hesitant. Stratton is a scrupulous employee but unhappily married to a hysterical woman who never stops harassing him at work, calling him five, ten times a day to express her anxiety, or to tell him about their daughter's aggressive behaviour...

At his side, Swann Arlaud (Cole) plays the youthful creative genius. He ambles around, headphones on, relaxed, self-confident, slouching on the sofas. An insolent game-player, he accuses the newcomer of having eliminated her boss: "Of course she fucked that poor guy! And not out of pity! It was to fuck him even better!"

When Anne Bouvier (Karine Davide) arrives in this macho world that plans to trap her, she offers some feisty resistance. Perfectly calm, she makes fun of her reputation as a bitch. She is ready to trick her rivals. And she plays a game of legs that would make a saint's day: sitting on the sofa, she crosses and uncrosses them with such naturalness, such charm, that it becomes a ballet. Cole's and Stratton's eyes pop out of their heads and powerful emotions flood the stage. Despite the chilling spirit of the events, the show remains captivating.

The logo for 'Le Point' consists of a solid red square with the words 'Le Point' written in white, bold, sans-serif font inside it.

Gilles Costaz

Little games between friends.

The Meeting, directed by Patrice Kerbrat, paints a ferocious picture of the business world in a fascinatingly enigmatic narrative.

Corporate life has become one of the favourite themes of the comedies that flourish on our stages and screens. How do you cheat your employee when you are the boss, or your boss when you are a subordinate? How do you steal the wife of your colleague or the husband of your office neighbour? How do you destroy a rival by mixing up the siren calls of sex and money? On these topical but hackneyed themes, the joke is on you, from the lowest of the café-theatres to the highest of the big productions. Le Petit Montparnasse's new show, *The Meeting*, deals with this world but with a complexity and a humour that come from London, a city where, luckily, they take humour seriously.

The author, Andrew Payne, is no stranger. Thanks to the actor Robert Plagnol, who is also the translator, we have already seen *The Plan*, *Then What* and *Squash*, robust comedies that do not necessarily take place in the business world, but revel in the human capacity for betrayal in all circumstances. And, more precisely, provided theatrically delectable tableaux of those betrayals. So here is another one, brilliantly translated again by Plagnol and directed by Patrice Kerbrat. This is the world premiere of the play, which has yet to be performed on the banks of the Thames.

Courtesy and savagery.

In what kind of society does the action take place? We don't know. A bunch of executives are trying to crank up the profit margins. Each has their own agenda in various deals but we don't know for which products and markets the protagonists - three characters from within the company and one from outside - are competing. It is their conspiracies that are exposed, not the nature of the business they are engaged in. The three executives are waiting for a visitor with whom they have begun negotiations. They learn at the beginning of the play that he has had a melt-down, shown up to work naked, been grabbed by security and hospitalized. A woman, we learn, will replace him to continue the negotiations...

Competing for a mysterious but obviously lucrative contract, three men from the same company are pitted against a woman from a rival company. The three men seem to get along, but are playing their own game as well as that of their company. They will be ruthless with their colleagues. The young woman who joins them is a high-flying lawyer, she sniffs out traps with the instinct of a fox, but a rumour about her sexual behaviour could be exploited by her rivals. The truth, however, is always elusive.

From then on, it's no holds barred, in which each character, no matter how devious, claims the moral high-ground.. This is human warfare, where courtesy is the mask of savagery, is not new to the theatre, but Payne portrays it in a way that is particularly English even if it is a stereotype: as the action unfolds we can never be sure of the truth: is Stratton, the executive in charge of the case, really the most benevolent of the group or is he faking his sensitivity? Has Cole tampered with a colleague's computer for personal ends or as part of a plot? Does Frank, the boss, appear and disappear on a whim or is a strategy? Is Karine David, the young lawyer, playing her own game of deception in the trap that is being set for her?

Each line and each gesture can be interpreted in a different way. The whole thing forms a maze, a puzzle to which every viewer will respond differently, especially in the interpretation of the conclusion. But the story itself, the contest, the aggression, the cat-and-mouse game, keep us from getting lost in the maze. **It's a hell of a boxing match, and very English (one thinks of Pinter, Ayckbourn, Bond or Stoppard).**

Patrice Kerbrat, who has directed Pinter, Reza, Notte and Zeller, is at ease with this complex construction. Everything is tense, knotted. The slightest moment of calm is always about to explode. Only Kerbrat, who plays the senior leader, is tranquil in this electric atmosphere. All his colleagues, for different reasons, are living on the edge of a volcano. Robert Plagnol is a kind of jazz actor, able to riff on the pace of his performance. Swann Arlaud initially appears relaxed, but his casualness hides multiple anxieties that this actor - a revelation - subtly suggests. Anne Bouvier has the difficult part of being a woman in the heart of a man's world, a creature who can be ferocious, but does not have the same weapons, the same claws as her partners: she interprets this character in a remarkable mixture of sensitivity and detachment. This is a formidable quartet in the service of an intellectually stimulating play.

LesEchos

Philippe Chevilley

For Andrew Payne, the company is a formidable human laboratory. Men and women wage war and make love in suits. Blood pumps vigorously beneath the suits.

The theatre has changed its setting: it is no longer in palaces that the dramas of power, love and money are woven and unravelled but in corporations. With *The Meeting*, British writer Andrew Payne offers us a succulent modern tragi-comedy, whose seemingly low-key starting point is the signing of a contract. Around this key moment in the plans of a City company, a battle of fools, a massacre, rages, in which all human weaknesses and fears are revealed. **It is clever, twisted and hilarious.**

Patrice Kerbrat, who directs (very finely), Robert Plagnol, author of the (brilliant) French adaptation, Swann Arlaud and Anne Bouvier form the magic square of this "Meeting" which is sold out at the Petit Montparnasse and should remain on the bill for a long time. One could protest that a reader of "Les Echos" might want to see something other than an office on a theatre stage (a very effective set by Jean Haas), but the show is a kind of joyful and redeeming exorcism.

Stratton (Robert Plagnol), Cole (Swann Arlaud) and their boss, Frank (Patrice Kerbrat), have to sign the contract of the century after months of negotiations. But their contact has gone mad and been fired by his company. He is replaced in a hurry by a young woman, Karine David (Anne Bouvier), who was the cause of their ex-contact's burn-out. The meeting promises to be heated, especially since the three executives are supposed to introduce a last-minute amendment that will hurt the other party..

The negotiations are spiced up by the emotional and existential frailties of each character. The game of liar's dice is epic. We won't reveal whether the contract is finally signed, but none of the four protagonists will emerge unscathed. Robert Plagnol is perfect as an innocent and hard-working executive, overwhelmed by his family problems. Swann Arlaud plays the punky young creative with great naturalness. Patrice Kerbrat is a delight as the tough boss, an old hand and insincere good guy. And Anne Bouvier captures all the equivocation of her character - by turns coldly seductive, perverse and moving.

The logo for L'EXPRESS, featuring the word "L'EXPRESS" in white, uppercase letters on a red rectangular background.

Laurence Liban

This is a strange play! The argument could not be more banal, but the tension is worthy of a thriller. Let's just say that director - and actor - Patrice Kerbrat knows how to build suspense. A banal story - or almost. Before the signing of an important contract, one of the parties - a certain Jack - is found naked and in the throes of a nervous breakdown in his office. Imagine the scene in a Manhattan skyscraper, and you'll get an idea of the setting and the type of dialogue. A woman, reputed to be a bitch, is sent in his place. Mysterious, sultry, with legs that bend and unfold at will under the gaze of three males who are supposed to sign the famous contract while settling their little family affairs.

It's about the collision of work with sex, corporate machinations and the breakdown of over-stressed executives. It is (very) well written and (very) well acted, in particular by Kerbrat, subtle and perverse, and Robert Plagnol, pathetic as a husband harassed by his hysterical wife.

The logo for pariscope, featuring the word "pariscope" in red, lowercase letters with a small red dot above the 'i', on a light gray rectangular background.

Marie-Céline Nivière

For several years now, Robert Plagnol has been committed to making Andrew Payne's work heard.

After *Then What* and *Squash*, Robert Plagnol brings us *The Meeting*. And we are pleased because we are very enthusiastic about this play.

Andrew Payne is an outstanding portraitist. With a vicious but humorous approach, the English playwright shines a light on the dark corners of human nature. Man is a strange animal, closer to the wolf than the lamb. In working relationships, he can even turn into the worst kind of predator, to the point of losing his mind. Robert Plagnol has adapted this English black comedy very well. The story seems banal, one of those that some people experience on a daily basis: a contract that needs to be signed. What is it about? We won't know, but it is only the engine of the plot. What interests the author is to know how people behave in the world of work and business. But also to show how they navigate the murky waters of negotiations, especially when a grain of sand threatens to jeopardise the transaction.

The great strength of the play lies in the choice of protagonists: three businessmen, three generations. There is the old man, the one who interfaces with the management and knows how to manage the talent. Patrice Kerbrat is perfect as a man who is no longer surprised by life. The second is in his forties. His strength? Being able to draw up contracts to the advantage of his company. Robert Plagnol, in a remarkably mature performance, shows the flaws of this man haunted by an unhappy marriage. The third is the gifted youngster, the one with the great ideas. Swann Arlaud perfectly embodies the headstrong side of generation Y, the child king, who rejects the old ways of doing things.. Opposing them is the one who takes charge of the case, a professional woman adept at self-promotion. Anne Bouvier plays with finesse and charm this woman who is not to be trifled with. Patrice Kerbrat's direction is, as always, impeccable.



Armelle Héliot

Andrew Payne likes to scrutinize our world with a cruel eye, in this case the foot-soldiers caught up in the crushing machine that is the corporation. Robert Plagnol, who introduced us to Payne with *Synopsis* and *Squash*, has adapted this new play, *The Meeting*, and plays one of the characters with great talent. Patrice Kerbrat, who plays with relish the eldest of this small group of overexcited and calculating executives, directs the play rigorously, without melodrama. He relies on a very good cast: Anne Bouvier plays a formidable negotiator. Swann Arlaud is a real revelation, edgy and alarming as a gifted but cruel young man. **It's as ferocious as David Mamet, with even more devastating humour.** This show is strong!

English writing gives us more proof of its vitality with this production of Andrew Payne's *The Meeting* at the Petit-Montparnasse.

Once again, it is the actor Robert Plagnol who makes this Payne text available. He has already translated and performed other plays by this author. This one, which Plagnol also adapted, is still unpublished in London. It paints a sulphurous picture of the business world via the actions of four people involved in the drawing-up of a contract. On one side, there are three executives from the same company: while they are all aiming for the same goal (the signing of the contract), they are not bound by a strong sense of loyalty. On the other side, a woman determined to sign off on the deal.

The encounter turns out to be wild behind the civility. We never find out what the contract it is for but the author multiplies the contradictions and complexities of the characters, constantly opening new avenues of possibility. Patrice Kerbrat masterfully directs this puzzle which is as sexual as it is cerebral. He plays one of the important roles himself, along with Robert Plagnol, Anne Bouvier and Swann Arlaud, all of whom play multi-layered roles in the spirit of the play. **A delight for spectators who love the second or third degree.**