

THEATER REVIEW

A Director Returns (Uncomfortably) to His Working-Class Roots

Christophe Honoré's latest work, for the Paris stage, is part of a recent wave of stories in France about the complex aftereffects of social mobility.



Youssouf Abi-Ayad, on screen, with Julien Honoré, second from right, and Chiara Mastroianni, right, in Christophe Honoré's "The Sky of Nantes." Jean-Louis Fernandez

By **Laura Cappelle**
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PARIS — The French director Christophe Honoré, best known for films including "Love Songs" and "Sorry Angel," has been making exceptional work in recent years — and international audiences have been missing out on it. The reason? It's happening on theater stages in his home country.

From “[The Idols](#),” a play dedicated to a series of French artists who died at the height of the AIDS crisis, to “[The Guermantes Way](#),” his Proust adaptation for the Comédie-Française, Honoré’s storytelling onstage has a kind of tragicomic immediacy that is instantly recognizable. His latest production, “The Sky of Nantes” (“Le Ciel de Nantes”), applies this sensibility to Honoré’s own family. The resulting journey, back to his working-class roots in the Brittany region of northern France, is fraught, yet poignantly astute.

The starting point of the play, [running through April 3 at the Odéon - Théâtre de l’Europe](#) in Paris, is an aborted film. Honoré had long wanted to tell the story of his grandmother Odette and her 10 children — eight of them fathered by an abusive Spaniard, Puig. Honoré went so far as to cast actors and do screen tests; at one point, some videos of these tests are projected on a scrim in “The Sky of Nantes.” Yet the project never came to fruition. Instead, it became a play about the sticky nature of autobiography.

Honoré has a stand-in in “The Sky of Nantes”: a young actor, Youssouf Abi-Ayad, who introduces himself as the director in the first line. The play is set in a timeworn movie theater, faithfully recreated on the Odéon stage, its red seats facing the audience. Around Abi-Ayad, six of Honoré’s relatives — Odette and Puig; his mother, Marie-Dominique; and three of her many siblings — have gathered to hear him talk about their family history and the film he is (supposedly) making about it.

Honoré’s staging style is playful enough that this meta self-reflection doesn’t weigh the show down. He makes no attempt to recreate things as they might have happened: Instead, “The Sky of Nantes,” like “The Idols,” brings its characters back from the dead and invents new, casual conversations between them. (They are fully aware of their demise but seem unfazed by it.) Regularly, the actors use microphones on stands to deliver pensive monologues, or a song, to the audience, only for others to interject and draw them into spontaneous-seeming banter.

And Abi-Ayad, as Honoré, gets interrupted more than anyone else. Fascinatingly, the play makes space for the other characters to disagree with the polished, screen-ready version of their lives he attempts to recount at the beginning. His boorish uncle Roger objects to a poetic description of him contemplating ladybugs on his father's tombstone, saying indignantly: "I'm not gay!" Soon after, Odette — whose age is superbly conveyed by the much younger Marlène Saldana — offers her take on her marriage to Puig. When Abi-Ayad corrects a word she uses, she berates him for suggesting she doesn't speak "well enough."



From left, Stéphane Roger, Marlène Saldana, Chiara Mastroianni, Jean-Charles Clichet, Harrison Arévalo and Julien Honoré in "The Sky of Nantes." Jean-Louis Fernandez

The effect is one of dynamic contrast: As in his other plays, it allows Honoré to reconcile impulses — his penchant for literary self-indulgence on the one hand; his love of fantasy and surprise on the other — that film critics have occasionally found contradictory. But the back-and-forth between the director and his unruly characters serves another purpose in "The Sky of Nantes": It highlights how difficult it can be to narrate the stories of a world one has left behind.

Trauma runs deep throughout the play, from violence against women to suicide, and memories of France's war in Algeria. The life of Honoré's aunt Claudie is especially tragic and sensitively portrayed by Chiara Mastroianni (a longtime collaborator of Honoré's, making her stage debut here). Honoré doesn't shy away from the casual racism and homophobia of some characters, yet he also shows what gave them joy, too, like their fierce, relatable attachment to Nantes' soccer team.

"The Sky of Nantes" adds to a recent wave of stories in France about the complex aftereffects of social mobility, led by writers like [Édouard Louis](#) and [Didier Eribon](#). In the role of Honoré — the gay, upwardly mobile grandson who moved to Paris — Abi-Ayad cuts a pained, melancholy figure. He is often seen smoking on the sidelines while the family quarrels, at once detached yet intermittently drawn back to the fold. "I'm mad at myself for changing," he tells the others when he admits that he couldn't complete his film. His focus on bourgeois characters throughout his screen career is no coincidence, Honoré says through Abi-Ayad: "I can only betray you." Without anger, his uncle Jacques replies: "You're ashamed of us. We're not chic enough to put into your films."

Honoré allows his mother, Marie-Dominique, the only member of the family who is still alive, to have the last word. Her role is gender-swapped in "The Sky of Nantes," and affectionately played by Honoré's own brother, Julien Honoré.

At the very end, however, the real Marie-Dominique appears in a short video clip, and reveals her discomfort with the retelling of family stories. "They're a pain," she says of her two sons, with a laugh. Here, and elsewhere, "The Sky of Nantes" captures the thorny reality of autobiography — and its heartbreak, too.



Bboy Junior, left, and Djamil Mohamed in Julie Berès's "Tenderness." Axelle de Russé

So does another new Paris production, Julie Berès's "Tenderness," at the Théâtre Gérard Philipe, in the suburb of Saint-Denis. With a cast of eight young people, Berès explores masculinity in the #MeToo era, through a mix of real stories and fiction. Onstage, the diverse cast members appear to be drawing from their lives, yet "Tenderness" ("La Tendresse") was based mostly on research: Together with her co-writers, Kevin Keiss and Lisa Guez, with additional help from Alice Zeniter, Berès surveyed around 50 young men about their relationship to masculine norms.

The result illuminates the reality of men's experiences without requiring the actors to share their own intimate stories, as other theater projects sometimes do. With the help of the choreographer Jessica Noita, Berès also matches movement to the text, and many in the cast are accomplished dancers. Bboy Junior (Junior Bosila Banya), an astonishing slow-motion break dancer, holds impossible-looking handstands as he speaks, while the ballet-trained Natan Bouzy recounts a youthful addiction to online pornography while on pointe.

There are scenery-chewing group dances, too, which unleash extraordinary energy, but like "The Sky of Nantes," "Tenderness" is strongest when it acknowledges the contradictions and complexity of its characters. Both productions speak to larger realities of French society, and just like Honoré's best films, they deserve to be seen widely.

Le Ciel de Nantes. Directed by Christophe Honoré. Odéon - Théâtre de l'Europe, through April 3.

La Tendresse. Directed by Julie Berès. Théâtre Gérard Philipe, through April 1.