

Forget Alice in Wonderland, try Paris in Sunderland. A new play that is winning rave reviews in Paris has groups of working-class Wearsiders slagging each other off in French.

The play, set in North-East England during 2006-07, features bird flu, factory closures, rain, football fanatics, sex chat-lines and surrogate mothers. It is not meant to be surreal or mocking or anti-English. Sunderland is a brutal, comic and heart-warming tale of bizarre moral choices confronting people in the early 21st century.

The play was written, in French, by a French playwright, Clément Koch, 40, who lived in North-East England 20 years ago. "The fact that it is set in Sunderland is, in a sense, irrelevant," Mr Koch told The Independent yesterday. "It is a story of our times, with a beginning, a middle and an end. It could be taking place anywhere. I wanted the action to be somewhere far away to distance the French audience from their usual prejudices and preconceptions.

"At the same time, yes, it is a tribute to the north eastern England that I knew, the strength of character, the brutality, the warmth."

The French actors speak in "neutral French". They make no attempt to simulate whatever the French equivalent might be of a Wearside accent.

Bizarre? Molière played by the Likely Lads and directed by Ken Loach? Maybe, but Mr Koch is following a noble tradition. Most of the plays of Shakespeare or Racine take place in foreign places. In any case, the result has been a triumph. Le Figaro's theatre critic spoke of "torrents of laughter" and a "true social comedy in the British cinematic tradition" of The Full Monty or Local Hero. The play earned a score from L'Express of eight out of 10.

Sunderland tells the story of Sally, who has lost her job in a chicken factory because of the bird-flu epidemic. Social services are trying to reclaim her near-autistic 16-year-old sister, who was damaged by seeing their mother commit suicide when she was two.

Sally's would-be boyfriend always wears a red-and-white Sunderland football shirt and says the Wearside weather is so bad that it is like "living in a washing machine". Sally's lodger is a telephone sex-worker.

The play opens with the two sisters chatting while the lodger simulates an orgasm off-stage. To try to make ends meet and keep Social Services at bay, Sally becomes a surrogate mother.

Mr Koch studied at Durham Business School and spent six months at Nissan's factory in County Durham in 1991, then retrained as an actor. Sunderland is his first play to be staged. A Russian version is on the way.

He sees no reason why Sunderland could not be translated into English. "I think it could make a great film," he said. Trouble has been taken to capture a north of England atmosphere in the set and costumes. "English women don't dress like French women," Mr Koch said cautiously. "Not in Durham, anyway. Their taste is, well, more trashy."

"A French girlfriend came to visit me when I was in Durham. She wanted to buy some nail varnish, but couldn't find a single one that she could wear. They were all bright orange or lime-green."