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Sunderland's certain je ne sais quoi wins over French theatre audiences



Constance Dolle, Elodie Navarre (Sally) and Vincent Deniard (Gaven) bring the French playwright Clément Koch's impressions of life in the North East to the stageFollow stories about TheatreArtsStage

The setting is exotic, the decor strange and the characters endearingly unsophisticated.

So it is perhaps unsurprising that Sunderland — a play written by a French author who once worked in a factory in the city — should be hailed as a breath of fresh air on the Parisian theatre scene.

Clément Koch, 40, has won critical acclaim for offering audiences weaned on Château Latour and Chanel No 5 a glimpse of another planet.

Beer, football and unemployment are the backdrop to his work, which portrays the residents of the North East as everything that Parisians are not.

Their manners lack refinement, their home decoration leaves much to be desired and their clothes are garish. But they have a fierce sense of friendship and solidarity.

It rains so much in Sunderland “it feels like you’re living in a washing machine”, says Sally, the central character, who is played by Elodie Navarre, a well-known actress in France. She adds that if you have not lost your virginity by the age of 17, you are regarded as mentally abnormal.

Gaven, her suitor, played by Vincent Deniard, is a shock to French audiences, too. He is awkward and unable to express his sentiments except when drunk. Indeed, the only love he can talk about is the one he feels for Sunderland Football Club.

Yet whenever Sally needs a helping hand with the broken boiler, he is there. “I wanted a little exoticism in the play,” Koch told The Times yesterday. He managed that well enough. Seen from the elegant brasserie in central Paris where we talked over a €2.90 coffee, the North East is about as exotic as you can get.

“My eyes popped when I first went there,” said Koch, who gave up a career in business to become an actor before turning his hand to writing plays. “It wouldn’t have been any stranger if I had arrived in Japan.” He went to Britain in 1991 on a business studies course which involved three months of lessons in Durham and then six months

working at the Nissan factory in Sunderland. He lived in Newcastle with two Nissan workers and became acquainted with a world very different from the one he had known at home.

“I really liked the place, but that whole ‘thank God it’s Friday’ phenomenon was unbelievable. The boozing and fighting and all that — you just don’t get that here.”

He was once chased out of a pub by a “horde of drunken girls”. He complained to the police, who promptly took him to the pub to confront the horde. “It was a bit surprising.” The dress-sense was unexpected, too. “The clothes the girls wore, well they were just, wow!” When his girlfriend visited from France, she looked for her usual soberly coloured nail varnish. “But that doesn’t exist up there.”

He admits that his play “is a bit of a caricature” of the North East, but says he wanted to get away from the usual French theatre diet of well-heeled, navel-gazing couples engaging in adultery.

His work, which revolves around Sally’s decision to become a surrogate mother to raise money to look after her autistic sister, has been playing to packed houses in Le Petit Théâtre de Paris since opening last month.

Le Figaro, the national daily, said the play, which may soon be staged in Russia, was “skilful and clever”, while Premiere, the internet site, compared Koch to Chekhov.

The success was not perhaps altogether unpredictable, however. France has long been fascinated by the grit of British working class culture and holds the likes of Ken Loach and Stephen Daldry in high esteem.

The difference with Sunderland is that it is written by a Frenchman.