

A memorable outpouring of pathos and savagery

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GAZETTE CULTURE CRITIC

Brigitte Haentjens has done it again.

Before taking on her cushy new job as director of the French theatre of the National Arts Centre, this Siminovitch award-winning director has gone wild with a searing one-man show by Bernard-Marie Koltès staged in a former industrial workshop in St. Henri. As if to prove that she hasn't lost her claim to radical chic.

Point taken.

La nuit juste avant les forêts quickly sold out and is now being held over until Dec. 11. It has people lining up on Rose de Lima St. (next door to the headquarters for the Blue Metropolis Foundation) long before show time.

Once allowed into the huge space with its well-worn brick walls held together by steel girders and dusty windows with broken panes audi-

ence members are guided to the performance space: a small corner of the building, sans decor, facing about 80 chairs on platforms. Blankets are provided for those vulnerable to chills.

Haentjens doubles as usher, making sure every seat is filled before actor Sébastien Ricard, who could be mistaken for a rain-drenched squatter, slinks in from the back. He positions himself, half squatting, his back wedged into the corner, and begins to spew out his verbal guts in rapid-fire Parisian argot.

The result is exhausting, but memorable. This outpouring of pathos and savagery, replete with hallucinatory images and offering only the sketchiest of storylines, continues for 45 minutes without pause. It's a bit like being accosted by a madman who has learned James Joyce's Ulysses by heart.

Only this stream of consciousness comes from Koltès, a middle-class French rebel who travelled widely,

lived dangerously and became a cult figure after dying of AIDS during its peak period of destruction in 1989.

The young man (whose blue jeans, black boots and hoodie look remarkably new), an Arab immigrant, is desperate for shelter, begging for a room, any kind of room, perhaps to share, even for half the night, with anyone.

His scruples have been beaten out of him. He has no beliefs, despises the rich and the unionized equally.

His is a world without love, although he hungers for it: scrawling "I love you Maman" on walls after making love to an anonymous woman on a bridge. Fascinated by prostitutes, he watches one toss her client's clothes from a fourth floor window onto the street, with violent consequences. Other street incidents are witnessed, or experienced, then woven into his poetic pitch for survival. Ricard is amazing for his endurance as well as his impeccable delivery.

This is extreme monologue theatre that pleads the case of the underdog.

Koltès, however, like Samuel Beckett, is an acquired taste, all the rage in Europe still, but generally ignored in North America, except for Quebec.

His other plays include Quay West, Robert Zucco, Black Battles With Dogs, In the Solitude of Cotton Fields and A Day of Murders in the History of Hamlet.

Anyone who admires Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Jim Morrison (The Doors), or remembers Paris in the 1970s will not want to miss Koltès in St. Henri. The atmosphere is ideal.

La nuit juste avant les forêts, by Bernard-Marie Koltès, directed by Brigitte Haentjens continues at 661 Rose de Lima in St. Henri, until Dec. 11. Tel: 514-845-7277. Sibyllines info: www.sibyllines.com.

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Sébastien Ricard is a desperate Arab immigrant in Sibyllines's production of *La nuit juste avant les forêts*.

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