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From left, Julien Frison, Denis Podalydès and Christophe Montenez at the Comédie-Française in "Tartuffe," directed by Ivo van Hove. Jan Versweyveld

By Laura Cappelle
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PARIS — When Molière first presented "Tartuffe," in 1664, Louis XIV is said to have laughed his head off at the play's satire of religious zealots. The zealots in question were less amused: "Tartuffe" was swiftly censored and only re-emerged five years later, in an expanded and softened version.

The 1669 "Tartuffe," in five acts, is the classic play everyone in France knows, about a pious fraud who weasels his way into a bourgeois family's home and attempts to steal both wife and fortune. Yet this month, 400 years after the birth of Molière, the original — or a reconstruction, at least — returned to the stage in a sleek and moody production directed by Ivo van Hove for the Comédie-Française.

"Tartuffe" opened France's yearlong celebration of Molière's quadricentennial, an event that is no small matter for the Comédie-Française: The house's permanent ensemble was born in 1680 from the fusion of Molière's own acting troupe and the players of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. The Comédie-Française considers Molière its founding father, and ensemble members know their way around his wittiest lines like no one else.

Van Hove at least gave them something new. The 1664 version of "Tartuffe" was recreated a few years ago by two researchers, Georges Forestier and Isabelle Grellet, using Molière's own sources. To understand what the play might have been like in three acts, they went back to commedia dell'arte and other 17th-century stories, which the plot of "Tartuffe" partly mimics.

The result is a genuinely intriguing alternative to a familiar narrative, but it will take further stagings to reveal its potential, because van Hove's directing choices are idiosyncratic. His "Tartuffe" has the familiar look of many van Hove productions: dark and minimalistic, here with no wings on the sides of the stage and a metallic platform along its length for entrances and exits.

The transitions are especially awkward, with asinine titles projected onto a screen (samples: "Is Madam right?"; "Love, or submission?") and bombastic sound effects marking the beginning of new episodes. Most of the cast wear suits; at times, when they stiffly convene for family conversations, it feels as if Molière's characters have landed in the middle of the HBO series "Succession."

It's a shame, because there is much of value in seeing some of the play's characters through a new lens. Tartuffe, for instance, is more clearly a destitute figure than usual. Christophe Montenez — who was also a highlight in "The Damned," another van Hove production for the Comédie-Française — is fascinatingly strange in the role, at once lonely and creepy.

Yet the actors wrestle with Molière's text, in part because of van Hove's deadly serious approach. Throughout the performance I attended, "Tartuffe," which was written as a comedy, elicited little laughter from the audience; when it came, it felt like an automatic reaction to familiar lines, rather than a reflection of what was happening onstage.

Van Hove also sees a love story where there isn't one. In his production, Tartuffe doesn't just try to deceive Orgon, the man of the house, and seduce Elmire, his wife; Elmire actually falls for Tartuffe, an absurd development since she is the one to uncover his hypocrisy at the end of the play. This forces Marina Hands, as Elmire, into an acrobatic performance in which she by turns refuses Tartuffe, gives in, and silently apologizes for betraying him. Tartuffe verbally abuses Elmire on two occasions (to the point that she cowers in a corner) before she snuggles up to him. Is it Stockholm syndrome? In any case, this diminishes what is typically a powerful, and very funny, female character.

At least this "Tartuffe" is a reminder of just how mordant and modern Molière's take on religious piety was. As the church's anger over the play showed, this was a controversial position in the 17th century. On the other hand, Racine and Corneille, who make up French theater's trinity of classic playwrights with Molière, both wrote religious plays dramatizing their faith in line with church dogma.

Those plays are rarely seen today, but "Polyeucte," a 1641 work by Corneille inspired by the life of a Christian martyr, is back onstage at the Espace Bernanos, a Roman Catholic cultural center. It depicts the religious conversion of Polyeucte, a nobleman, and the initial despair of his wife, Pauline, and his father-in-law, whom the Roman Empire has tasked with persecuting Christians. Directed by a veteran actress, Rafaële Minnaert, the production, a straightforward delivery of Corneille's text in Roman-inspired costumes, contrasts sharply with "Tartuffe."

Aloysia Delahaut, left, and Romain Duquaire in "Polyeucte," directed by Rafaële Minnaert. Matthieu Maxime Colin

While the cast is often overemphatic, Aloysia Delahaut carries the day as a dignified Pauline. For nearly the entire play, Corneille's rhymed alexandrines are skillful enough to make you think "Polyeucte" warrants more performances. Then, at the end, both Pauline and her father abruptly convert to Christianity, their strong stance against it forgotten. This makes "Polyeucte" feel preachy — a cardinal sin by contemporary standards — which helps explain why it, and other religious works, are so little performed.

Still, contemporary theatermakers are finding ways to weave religion into topical dramas. The playwright and director Hakim Djaziri tackles the subject especially openly as a way of understanding major political debates in France. After "Unbalanced," a play about his own youthful religious radicalization in an underprivileged Paris suburb, he has turned to the real-life story of a white woman who converts to Islam in "Audrey, the Diary of a Convert," currently at La Scène Libre theater.

In a series of smartly constructed vignettes, we see Audrey grow up with an alcoholic mother and a violent stepfather, seeking meaning in the religion of a friend whose happy family she admires. Yet soon enough, she is roped into a violent take on Islamism by characters she meets online. She ends up in Syria, as the wife of a Frenchman who has vowed to fight for the Islamic State.

Karina Testa, left, and Arthur Gomez in "Audrey, the Diary of a Convert," written and directed by Hakim Djaziri. JMD Production

It is a lot to get through in 90 minutes, and the Syrian scenes especially feel overly expository, but Djaziri delivers a lot of emotion with the performances of his small yet brilliant cast. Karina Testa captures Audrey's childlike need for love and meaning, while Arthur Gomez shines in a range of characters, from friends of Audrey's to extremists.

As they do every night, Djaziri and his actors stayed onstage after the performance I caught for a discussion with the audience. He spoke candidly of his own experience of radicalization, and said he felt compelled to respond, through theater, to Islamophobia in France's public sphere. With "Audrey," he does this subtly, by depicting the peaceful facets of Islam as well as the hypocrisy of its radicals. After all, the Tartuffes of today need their own plays, too.

Tartuffe or the Hypocrite. *Directed by Ivo van Hove.* Comédie-Française, through April 24.
Polyeucte. *Directed by Rafaële Minnaert.* Espace Bernanos, through Feb. 13.
Audrey, the Diary of a Convert. *Directed by Hakim Djaziri.* La Scène Libre, through March 26.