

British Theatre Guide

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Thérèse Raquin

Emile Zola, adapted by Nicholas Wright

RNT Lyttelton

(2006)

Marianne Elliott, with a beautifully moulded production, has created the most atmospheric evening in London. The count of shivers down the spine gets close to double figures in this extraordinary combination of elements drawn from Greek Tragedy, *Macbeth* and ghost stories.

Emile Zola is a master of grim realism but does not seem to lend himself to stage adaptation. Cleverly, Nicholas Wright has allowed the whole play to take place in a massive grey room above a shop, occupied by the Raquins under the tight control of Judy Parfitt's tough matriarch. Our imagination and a soundscape that rarely lets up fill in the gaps.

Designer Hildegard Bechtler has gone for stark simplicity with her set but, thanks to stout support from lighting designer Neil Austin, a master of scary shadows, and composer Olly Fox, this play is constantly unsettling and might lead some visitors to suffer as many nightmares as the protagonists.

Thérèse Raquin is the unhappiest of Parisian wives, forced to marry her semi-invalid husband Camille (Patrick Kennedy) by the aunt who has brought her up. A loveless marriage would be bad enough but when the family receives daily visits from amateur artist Laurent, played by Ben Daniels looking like a more handsome Vincent Van Gogh, it becomes unbearable.

Almost under the noses of her husband and mother-in-law, Charlotte Emmerson's Thérèse begins the most passionate of affairs with the handsome house guest.

All of this is played out with the greatest seriousness, so we are grateful that Miss Elliott has lightened the atmosphere by the casting of that excellent Shakesperean clown, Mark Hadfield as M.Grivet. He is a motormouth self-promoter who cannot resist a tasteless joke, whatever the circumstances.

Once the couple have taken the irrevocable decision to remove the obstacle to their love, in a particularly poignant scene we watch Thérèse washing joyfully while we simultaneously listen to Camille drowning.

The second half of the play sees Laurent and Thérèse married but not since the Macbeths has a marriage been this unhappy. You are just waiting to hear "Is this a dagger" or "Out, out damn spot" before they self-destruct amidst mutual recrimination in a visually stunning wedding night ballet of fear and self-loathing.

Matters get even worse once Mme Raquin becomes paralysed and vegetative, but retains her disapproving eye. She may have to endure the triumphalism of her beloved son's murderers in mute distress but soon enough, guilt grabs hold and will not free them from its torment.

This chilling adaptation is distinguished by some fine acting with Charlotte Emmerson excelling both when passionate and despairing. It is good to see her return to the National where she has previously impressed in their ensemble equivalent of upmarket *Charlie's Angels*' roles with Anna Maxwell Martin and Eve Best, She is matched by Judy Parfitt on top form, while the men led by Ben Daniels are not too far behind.

One must always recommend the rather dark pleasures of reading Zola but as a complement to the work of this greatest of French novelists, Nicholas Wright's stripped down stage adaptation is not to be missed.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)