

Review: In This ‘120 Days of Sodom,’ Sadism Stands in the Way

The provocations in Milo Rau’s stage adaptation, featuring actors with Down syndrome, confuse the production as it grapples with weighty issues.



Tanne Lemmens and Gert Wellens in “The Last Generation, or the 120 Days of Sodom” at Théâtre de Liège, in Belgium. Credit...Dominique Houcmant

By [Laura Cappelle](#)

The critic Laura Cappelle saw the show in Liège, Belgium.

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Is anything even shocking on a stage anymore? Simulated rape, coprophilia and torture all feature heavily in Milo Rau’s “[The Last Generation, or the 120 Days of Sodom](#),” a theater production starring actors with Down syndrome that opened Saturday at the Théâtre de Liège, in Belgium.

The show was inspired by Pier Paolo Pasolini’s brutal 1975 film “Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom,” in which a group of libertines inflicts sadistic acts on imprisoned young people, and the point, presumably, is to get a reaction from the audience. But the torments inflicted on the characters feel like an annoyance rather than a meaningful transgression in this day and age, and stand in the way of a work that actually has much more to say.

Rau, a high-profile Swiss director who is now at the helm of Vienna's prestigious Wiener Festwochen festival, is certainly adept at showing and contextualizing extreme violence. Just in recent years, he has recreated [the violent murder of a gay man in Belgium](#) (in "La Reprise — Histoire(s) du Théâtre (I)"); [the collective suicide of a family of four](#) (in "Familie"); and [the massacre of farmers in Brazil](#) (in "Antigone in the Amazon").

Yet while these stage works were based on real events, "The Last Generation" delves into fictional barbarity. Pasolini's film was an adaptation of the Marquis de Sade's 18th-century novel, transposed to Italy at the end of the second world war. The torture party became a metaphor for the twilight of Mussolini's Fascist regime.

In Rau's reinterpretation, he has opted to work with Theater Stap, a Belgium-based professional company of actors with learning disabilities. (A previous iteration of "The Last Generation," in 2017, featured Theater Hora, a similar Swiss ensemble.)

Alongside 10 Stap performers, four actors without Down syndrome play their persecutors. As often with Rau, commentary is woven into recreations of scenes from "Salò." The cast members discuss their feelings about Down syndrome, violence and Pasolini's film. (One admits sheepishly that the movie made her laugh.)

Image



Jacqueline Bollen, Robert Hunger-Bühler and Koen de Sutter play three of the four persecutors in the production. Credit...Dominique Houcmant

In many ways, this setup lessens the effect of the violence. The Pasolini scenes only form a portion of "The Last Generation" and are often set on a small stage within the stage. At other moments, the perpetrators become outwardly protective of their

castmates with Down syndrome, taking them by the arm to move around the stage, or interview them about their personal lives.

Their answers, in some cases, are then stitched together with moments from Pasolini. After Gitte Wens and Gert Wellens, two Stap members, discuss their real-life relationship, an actor asks them to be intimate. Then, as they lie on a bed, they are pulled apart and shot, as happens in “Salò.”

The idea of casting performers with learning disabilities as torture victims has caused debate in the Belgian media. [In interviews](#), Stap’s members have insisted on their agency in the process of making the show and their desire to do more than feel-good productions. They are obviously gifted performers, and deserve to tell the stories they want to tell.

What is less clear is whether the story of “120 Days of Sodom” really serves Rau’s purpose, and theirs. A key theme throughout is how genetic testing is leading to the slow disappearance of people with Down syndrome. According to the play, nine out of 10 couples who receive a prenatal Down diagnosis in Belgium opt for an abortion. Rau posits that as a result, the actors onstage may be part of a “last generation.”

One of the non-Down actors, Koen De Sutter, is tasked with delivering a monologue inspired by the story of a man who chose, with his partner, not to have a child with the condition, and harbors some regrets.

The torture portion of the evening doesn’t shed much light on this delicate issue, and it is a tricky proposition within the constraints of theater. Are scenes in which actors pretend to rape each other and eat excrement any worse than what can be found in a handful of clicks on pornography websites? What reaction are stage depictions of scalping and eye-gouging, performed using prosthetics, supposed to elicit at a time when social media is full of actual filmed violence?

In [an interview for the Théâtre de Liège](#), Rau said that his goal was to comment on societal decline today, especially the quest for physical perfection and what he called “Belgian fascism.” In “The Last Generation,” there are pointed digs at the political history of Belgium, where Rau was based from 2018 until this summer as director of the playhouse NTGent. “We were all collaborators — maybe the best in Europe,” an actor says early on about Belgians in World War II, triggering slightly shocked whispers from the audience.

Yet “The Last Generation” is vague about what fascism means today, and doesn’t connect the dots between Belgian politics, “The 120 Days of Sodom” and decisions to abort fetuses with Down syndrome. Many scenes are powerful and intriguing on their own: “I hate Down’s,” one Stap actor screams repeatedly at one point, while throwing food to the floor. I would have liked to know more — ideally without having to watch a performer fake-pee on a colleague’s face.

The Last Generation, or the 120 Days of Sodom

Touring theaters in Belgium through Dec. 21; ntgent.be.