

The New York Times

Rage Takes the Stage in France



Anne Azoulay, left, and Marie Denarnaud in “King Kong Theory” at the Théâtre de l’Atelier.
CreditStanley Woodward

By Laura Cappelle

- PARIS — Have the times finally caught up with Virginie Despentes? A quarter-century after the release of her novel “Baise-moi,” a savage tale of rape, revenge and murder that propelled her to fame, the French author reads like a prescient feminist voice in the #MeToo era.

“Vernon Subutex 1,” her latest book to be translated into English, was [shortlisted for this year’s Man Booker International Prize](#); a big-budget TV adaptation, headlined by the French movie star Romain Duris, is scheduled to start filming this year. And in Paris, a staging of Ms. Despentes’s 2006 memoir, “King Kong Theory,” is a timely reminder that she has long been a vital thinker, who deserves better than the aura of scandal that has defined much of her career.

“King Kong Theory” doesn’t attempt to appeal to fair-weather feminists. Ms. Despentes pulls no punches in this manifesto against the patriarchy, in which she recounts how she was raped at age 17 and subsequently worked as a prostitute. At no point does she court pity. Instead, as in most of her works, her writing is alive with no-holds-barred anger.

Vanessa Larré wasn’t the first director to see potential for a stage version, but she shrewdly opted to turn Ms. Despentes’s monologue into something more polyphonic. First performed in 2015, her [“King Kong Theory”](#) reopened at the Théâtre de l’Atelier in late May with a new cast and runs through July 7. Three

women (Anne Azoulay, Marie Denarnaud and Valérie de Dietrich) take turns center stage: They all highlight individual aspects of the text, yet together they project the strength of a small army.

And they deliver Ms. Despentès's blows without a hint of sensationalism. Ms. de Dietrich, who adapted the book along with Ms. Larré and who opens the performance, sets a no-nonsense tone from the first scene. She describes herself wryly as “more King Kong than Kate Moss,” “too noisy, too fat” and “too masculine,” and excoriates the male gaze and its influence on women's lives — later calling on men to free themselves from it, too.

What Ms. Despentès rejects, above all, is the victimization of women. While she describes being raped as a “founding event” in her life, she has no time for the narrative of enduring trauma. It was the “price to pay” for freedom in a male-dominated society, she writes, while fantasizing about the violence she wishes women were able to inflict in return.

She reclaims prostitution, and pornography, in a similar manner, stressing that her “gratifying” years as an escort helped rebuild her sense of self. It would be easy for a director of this material to lapse into vulgarity, but Ms. Larré tackles the text with just the right amount of crude humor. At one point, the actors appear in T-shirts printed with images of breasts; one wears underwear depicting a penis, while another emerges with a dildo strapped to her crotch.

The cast clearly relishes Ms. Despentès's defiant voice. Her style resists translation, because it is full of colloquial French structures and expletives; she deploys them with abandon and an unerring sense of rhythm, lending the performance a directness that works well in the compact Théâtre de l'Atelier. Ms. Larré provides the actors with cameras, which they use to film one another in close-up — and, at one point, they turn their focus onto the audience.

The topic at that moment was female masturbation. Suddenly, the lights went up, and one actor asked onlookers for their thoughts. She zoomed in on a man who stared uncomfortably into space. Although a young woman ended up speaking about her experience, the silence in the rest of the auditorium was deafening.

In truth, as the warm ovation that erupted after the performance suggested, the time is ripe for such unflinching examinations of sex and gender. Ms. Despentès, who is now 48, has been consistently cast as a foul-mouthed *enfant terrible* since “Baise-moi”; her own film adaptation, in 2000, proved so controversial that a new rating was created for it in France, barring all minors from attending. (The movie was banned outright in Australia and had to be cut before it could be released in theaters in Britain.) The brouhaha has often obscured the force of her writing. Ms. Larré's take on “King Kong Theory” clears the stage for it.