

Fleeing Home, but Not Homophobia

Two plays based on the autobiographical novels of Édouard Louis put the problem of violence against gay men in a larger social context.

In one play, Eddy is beaten up, spat upon, tormented with homophobic slurs by schoolmates and family. In the other play, he is raped on Christmas Eve.

And yet homophobia is not really the subject of either.

“The End of Eddy” and “History of Violence,” both of which opened in Brooklyn on Monday, are based on autobiographical novels by Édouard Louis. “The End of Eddy” describes the author’s miserable childhood from age 10 through 15 in the impoverished, postindustrial town of Hallencourt, some 100 miles north of Paris. “History of Violence” has a much narrower focus: the rape that took place in 2012, when he was 20, after he’d moved to the capital for graduate school.

The books naturally differ in tone, and the plays — one soothingly jolly, the other brilliantly harrowing — exaggerate that difference. Seeing them on subsequent nights, as produced by companies from England and Germany, I experienced a kind of whiplash. Or perhaps it was more like PTSD, as I was forced to rethink the meaning of violence against gay people, including the kind I endured for a time, in terms that felt foreign to me.

Because the plays are based on works by a French intellectual, those terms are inevitably political. “The End of Eddy,” which runs through Nov. 21 at BAM Fisher as part of the Next Wave festival, is a boy’s survival story, picaresque like David Copperfield but with a hip-hop soundtrack. Following Louis’s novel, it chronicles Eddy’s attempts to make peace with his gayness in a community that considers that “choice” a form of class betrayal.

In Hallencourt it’s not homosexuality itself but the identification as different that seems to stir hatred. When Eddy, long since marked as effeminate, starts “playing the woman” with a bunch of boys having sex in a barn, only he isouted and made to pay a price in shame. Schoolmates torment him; his out-of-work father slaps him around and shouts, “If you ever do that again, things will go very badly for you.” Not that you see the abuse directly in Pamela Carter’s theatrical adaptation. In it, Eddy, like everyone else in Hallencourt, is played by two actors, performing live and on prerecorded video.

Often the violence is abstracted in Stewart Laing’s clever staging: The aggressor may be shown onscreen while the victim is enacted onstage, or vice versa. Eddy’s unbearable isolation is likewise mitigated by the fact that there are two of him.

This is only partly a matter of practicality for a touring production that must tell a sprawling story in 90 minutes with a minimal cast and affordable effects. It’s also an aesthetic choice in keeping with the show’s aims. “The End of Eddy” comes to New York from Scotland’s Untitled Projects and the London-based Unicorn Theater, which bills itself as Britain’s leading producer of plays for young audiences. It recommends the show for anyone 16 and older.

I wish I’d been one of them back in high school; it’s heartening to think of the good work being done for today’s youth, even if I can’t quite cheer the result for adults. Too much effort has gone into making the play’s theatricality welcoming. The set, with those screens, is flat and cartoonlike; the lighting is never dark enough for deep feeling. Even the expert actors, Oseloka Obi and James Russell-Morley, are made maximally ordinary in their striped T-shirts and trainers, as if to demonstrate that they are just like most of the teenagers they are meant to perform for.

But Eddy is not just like them; if he were, he wouldn’t have a problem. And the more the play tries to sell a rational, political interpretation of his plight — arguing that poor people, shamed by elites, strike back at what they perceive as superiority — the less plight there seems to be. Even Eddy comes around

to this stance, once he transfers to a school in the bigger, better-off city of Amiens and meets richer students with nicer manners.

“Perhaps I’m not gay after all,” he says wryly. “Perhaps I’ve only ever been a middle-class boy trapped in a working-class life.”

Unicorn’s version of “The End of Eddy,” which sometimes seems like an exceptionally well made anti-bullying video, does its best to promote this idea, perhaps as a way of encouraging any homophobes in the audience to shift their animus against gays to a different enemy. At the same time, its tagline in Unicorn’s brochure—“Can We Create Our Own Freedom?”—suggests a happy ending in which personal empowerment solves social problems. Offered as proof is an entirely invented moment late in the play in which Eddy’s father says, “I’m proud of you, son.”

I doubt that the novel’s Eddy, who finds safety only by burning bridges to his family, would recognize the sentiment. It’s not called the “end” of Eddy for nothing.

Indeed, by the time he wrote “History of Violence,” at 24, Eddy Bellegueule had changed his name to Édouard Louis. (“Bellegueule,” meaning approximately “prettyface,” must have been like wearing a pink triangle.) If he was under-schooled in Hallencourt, he was perhaps over-schooled in Paris: The story of his rape is rendered, in the book, in a peculiarly distancing way that’s almost a parody of postmodernism. It emerges as a yarn his sister Clara tells her husband while Édouard eavesdrops from behind a door when he visits her in hopes of a solace that is not forthcoming.

Thin-skinned and yet haughty, Clara doesn’t make a very reliable narrator, but she gets the gist right. Walking home late from a holiday party, Édouard is cruised by a handsome man who introduces himself as Reda. At first reluctant, Édouard eventually succumbs to Reda’s seductive wheedling, and they spend a hot night of intercourse and discourse. The discourse is mostly, again, about class: Reda is Kabyle, and his father immigrated to France from Algeria only to find a life of crushing work and poverty. This would seem to make the two men sociological soul mates, yet in the morning all goes haywire when Reda pockets Édouard’s iPad and iPhone. Furious at the implicit accusation that he is a thief, which he is, Reda throttles Édouard with a scarf and threatens him with a gun, then rapes him before apologizing and leaving.

In his stunning production for Berlin’s Schaubühne, which runs at St. Ann’s Warehouse through Dec. 1, the director Thomas Ostermeier makes us wait a long time before showing us this scene directly. As is now almost an avant-garde cliché, Ostermeier works to divide our loyalty to narrative by shuffling events, doubling and casting doubt on them with live video and interrupting the action with moments of abstract physical expression that border on dance. A drum set is also involved.

All this feels at first like throat-clearing: self-important and peremptory. The video imagery seems especially inessential, distracting us from Édouard (Laurenz Laufenberg) by focusing on other cast members changing costumes or detectives dusting the crime scene for DNA.

And yet, as in Ostermeier’s production of “Returning to Reims,” which played at St. Ann’s last year, the conceptual curlicues eventually pay off when the actors are allowed to play real scenes together. (All four are excellent, but Alina Stiegler as Clara and Renato Schuch as Reda stand out.) The long confrontation between the men in the morning is made not just horrifying but also heartbreakingly by the distancing setup that has kept us from feeling much until the moment when it is almost too late. By then we have heard—or read; the production is in German, with English supertitles—the political interpretation that Louis and Ostermeier construct for the events. It is only logical, Édouard tells Clara, that Reda would steal from him and erupt in violence, given the racism and homophobia of the system he lives under. Elites have earned this comeuppance.

The play provides skimpy evidence for this idea, and you may find yourself uncomfortably nodding when Clara discounts it as crazy. But Louis has written elsewhere, potently and with great alarm, about the rise of the right in Europe, and the left’s complicity through its failure to address fundamental problems of class. It is in this context that he sees Reda’s actions as almost justifiable.

Point taken, and yet, speaking as someone who was terrorized for being gay throughout his teenage years—not excluding some of the same acts described in “The End of Eddy”—I’m

not so sure that a class analysis is sufficient to explain or excuse homophobia, let alone rape. Some of my bullies were indistinguishable from me, socioeconomically. Whoever they were, whatever their beef, they did the same damage.

The missing piece of the puzzle is misogyny: Gay men are victimized at least in part because their alliance with women is seen as a threat to men. This is barely mentioned, let alone dramatized, in either play, perhaps because a problem burned into the human psyche is less amenable to political correction. You may switch governments and even redistribute wealth, but I'm not very hopeful about men as a gender even when they have good jobs.

Such thoughts made me resist the two plays, when I wasn't reflexively spooked by them. Still, I was heartened by how both try to use the theater as a tool for stamping new ideas into currency.

Regarding gayness, I have long wondered whether plays have anything left to say. "The End of Eddy" and "History of Violence" do — and part of what they say is: Look beyond the white, Western, male, middle-class concerns that have monopolized the conversation, and into difficult confrontations with the rest of the world. The door that led us out of the closet is only the first of many.