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It's Cold and Gray in Scandinavian Plays

PARIS — “

Nathan Gabily in Lars Noren's "Le 20 Novembre." Written in the wake of a 2006 school shooting in Emsdetten, Germany, this monologue imagines the final hour of the 18-year-old killer in his bedroom. Credit...A. Delpech

At that point, Mr. Noren's direction becomes less subtle, with ill-defined stage action on the other side of the gauze curtain. The text's sharp tonal contrasts reward close attention at times, but it's easy to lose track of individual story lines as the characters babble away in their own worlds. They are together on stage, yet very much alone in their mental and physical decay. Upon entering this world, abandoning all hope is practically a prerequisite.

Death also haunts "[Le 20 Novembre](#)," another play by Mr. Noren, which opened at the [Maison des Métallos](#) in Paris shortly before "Poussière." Written in the wake of a 2006 school shooting in Emsdetten, Germany, this monologue imagines the final hour of the 18-year-old killer, Sebastian Bosse, in his bedroom.

The idea for the play came from an actor from the company of [Berlin's Schaubühne theater](#), Anne Tismer, who was so struck by the event that she contacted Mr. Noren. Under his direction, Ms. Tismer created the lead role in the original production. The text is gender-neutral as a result, but in the version here in Paris, the director Elodie Chanut has cast a male actor, Nathan Gabily.

Ms. Chanut's production is tight and straightforward. The small set recreates a spare teenage bedroom; Sebastian tapes his final message with a video camera connected to a small, unobtrusive screen. The performance rests squarely on the shoulders of the excellent Mr. Gabily, who brings an unsettling physicality to the role, his eyes wide with irrational intensity.

The attention given to killers and their motives in the wake of shootings remains controversial, but there is value in exploring the buildup to the crime through fiction. One of Sebastian's counterintuitive mantras, in "Le 20 Novembre," is that he's not a Nazi, despite the hatred and xenophobia that Mr. Noren makes plain. References to bullying at the school he attacks point to a teenager who feels cast out by society, and a mention of the Columbine massacre suggests there are common traits between Emsdetten and other campus attacks.

Image

Ms. Chanut took "Le 20 Novembre" as an opportunity to speak directly to high school students, and she stages workshops in the banlieues, the low-income, multicultural suburbs of big French cities, alongside performances. When, near the end, Sebastian asks, "Does anyone want to say something before I go?" the audience at the Maison des Métallos remained silent. With teenagers from Nanterre, in the west of Paris,

however, the question provoked reactions, leading to a follow-up creation, “Notre 20 Novembre” (“Our November 20”), performed recently in Colombes, another Parisian suburb.