

Review ‘This is my father’

By Clare Shine – Financial Times

In the newcomer’s corner on Festival Le Standard Ideal, MC93 Bobigny in Paris was the young Dutch director Ilay den Boer. *Ceci est mon père* explores Jewish identity through his own family’s experience. It starts interactively, an artfully casual mix of the conversational and the confessional, but ends deadly serious, teetering between hatred and tenderness.

The show’s sporty compères are Ilay, born in Israel to a Jewish mother, and his 50-ish father Gert, ex-hippy and ex-Protestant. Ilay speaks in English, Gert translates into approximate French. The audience is encouraged to correct mistakes and to choose dates from a booklet handed out about Gert’s life. The backdrop is a grey wall of assorted drawers, one for each year, from which Ilay picks out objects that have forged their respective identities.

This Proustian biographical zapping has novelty value but soon dragged, the spark returning when chunks of the audience complained loudly about historical errors or lack of interest. “We’ve done 54 performances and never had this reaction,” protested the den Boers. In fact such polarisation plays into their hands. An endless narrative about a football team bullying Ilay erupts into a bitter confrontation of father-son perspectives: random nastiness or anti-semitism? Their mutual recrimination and painful reconciliation blur the boundaries between the personal and political.

The sincerity and appeal of the performers are unmistakable. The denouement comes perilously close to polemic, but is saved by the extraordinary gentleness with which the father wipes his naked, shivering son dry and dresses him as if he were still a child.

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