

'Daddy' Review: Deeper Into the Internet's Darkest Corners

In Marion Siéfert's much-anticipated new show, the French director explores the dynamics of online grooming.



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Louis Peres, as Julien, and Lila Houei, as Mara, in "Daddy" at the Odéon — Théâtre de l'Europe, in Paris. Mathieu Bareyre

By [Laura Cappelle](#)

May 11, 2023

Daddy

The French stage director Marion Siéfert has her finger on the pulse of our digital lives. In “2 or 3 Things I Know About You,” she playfully tackled oversharing on Facebook, before turning to the perils of online streaming in “_jeanne_dark_” — a show that [fell foul of Instagram’s moderation policies](#) when it was relayed live on the platform.

With “Daddy,” a sharp, no-holds-barred new production at the Odéon-Théâtre de l’Europe, in Paris, Siéfert has ventured even further into the internet’s dark corners. In it, a 13-year-old is groomed online by an older man and gets lost in a virtual reality game that exploits teenage girls for profit.

It also marks a new stage in Siéfert’s career. “Daddy” is her first big-budget production for a major playhouse, and one of the Paris season’s most anticipated premieres. So Siéfert is swinging much bigger, on every level: larger cast, more atmospheric sets and a somewhat indulgent running time of three and a half hours. Yet her biting originality remains intact.

Reality is no match for screen entertainment in “Daddy.” The central character, Mara, is a quiet teenager from southern France. A subtly written scene, early on, introduces her family: Her parents, a nurse and a security guard, are too exhausted by their poorly paid jobs to devote much attention to their daughters. It’s no surprise that whenever she can, Mara escapes to the brighter landscape of online gaming.

In an unnamed video game, she joins Julien, a smooth-talking 27-year-old who is her frequent online partner in crime. The easy intimacy they have built is showcased through a spectacular video sequence: On a screen the size of the Odéon’s stage, we see a 3-D game designed by the video artist Antoine Briot in which Mara and Julien’s avatars who shoot at enemies with assault rifles before hopping on fluorescent skateboards.

Throughout, we hear Mara and Julien banter over their headsets. “You’re the most badass girl in this game,” Julien says.

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The groundwork is laid for the abusive dynamic that ensues. When they first meet outside the game, on a video call, Mara confides in Julien that she dreams of being an actress. He compliments her, and tells her about “Daddy” — a new game that allows players, Julien says, to become avatars sponsored by sugar daddies, and showcase their talents to a “fan base.”



Peres, right, has appeared in several French television shows and movies; Houel is a newcomer to professional acting. Mathieu Bareyre

Siéfert has a knack for assembling captivatingly unconventional actors, and just as “_jeanne_dark_” was tailor-made for Helena de Laurens, a shape-shifter unafraid to lean into grotesque physicality, “Daddy” owes much to its two central performers. As Mara, the 15-year-old Lila Houel, who came to the production with limited stage experience, is coarsely candid in these early scenes, with turns of phrase that emphasize the character’s working-class background. Opposite her, Louis Peres, best known as a screen actor, is a startling tech-generation descendant of Christian Bale in “American Psycho”: clean-cut, in control, smoothly scary.

Siéfert’s smartest move is to leave video and special effects behind once the two enter the game world of “Daddy.” The virtual space becomes a sinister, near-empty stage dotted with what look like snow mounds, where Mara encounters other preyed-upon young women.

The rules of “Daddy” aren’t wholly clear. Men invest so teenage girls can perform routines that earn them points with fans. Houel, for instance, interprets a scene from the movie “Interview with the Vampire”; the sparkling Jennifer Gold, who plays the game’s reigning star Jessica, delivers cabaret-style numbers, including Marilyn Monroe’s “My Heart Belongs to Daddy” from the 1960 film “Let’s Make Love.”

The points and the fans are never shown — Siéfert keeps things deliberately vague. The focus is on the dynamics of child abuse, and the erosion of Mara’s individuality and willpower by Julien. While some scenes of verbal and physical violence are troubling enough to make you fear for Houel’s mental health, she rises to the occasion with astonishing sang-froid, quietly haunted then seething in the second act.

Siéfert co-wrote “Daddy” with Matthieu Bareyre, and some of the points they make don’t need so much time to come across: Cuts would be welcome. Yet “Daddy” speaks to the zeitgeist and the lives of teenagers today with a mix of ease and critical distance that few stage directors can match.

And even at 11:30 p.m., one final scene had the audience sitting up and leaning forward. After a bloody narrative twist, the back wall of the stage slid away to reveal the street outside, and a performer staggered out of the game into the Odéon’s leafy neighborhood — while a few passers-by stopped, puzzled, to peek at the action onstage. In Siéfert’s theater, the real and the virtual keep colliding in invigorating ways.

Daddy

Through May 26 at the Odéon — Théâtre de l’Europe in Paris; theatre-odeon.eu.