

THEATER REVIEW

Putting His Father's Final Words Onstage, With a Little Ambivalence

The Portuguese director Tiago Rodrigues's latest show, "No Yogurt for the Dead," is based on his dying father's scribbles but resists sharing much emotion.



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Reviewing from Ghent, Belgium

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A terminally ill writer goes into the hospital. Aware that it will be his final stay, he holds onto a notebook, declaring to his family that he is working on his last article.

When his son opens the notebook in the wake of the writer's death, however, all he finds are illegible scribbles and a mysterious title: "The Dead Don't Eat Yogurt."

When the son in this story is the renowned director and playwright Tiago Rodrigues, there is a good chance the notebook will still end up becoming art. His father, the Portuguese journalist Rogério Rodrigues, apparently knew it, too. In "No Yogurt for the Dead," which premiered Thursday at the Belgian playhouse NTGent ahead of a European tour, he tells his son: "No one could ever tell you anything interesting about anything at all without it ending up in one of your plays."

Rodrigues, who has been the director of France's Avignon Festival since 2022, has a knack for turning intimate stories into stirring theater. One of his longest-running productions, "By Heart" (2013), pays tribute to his grandmother by teaching audience members a poem; in recent years, he has also explored the real-life struggles of others, as with the humanitarian workers of "Insofar as the Impossible."

"No Yogurt for the Dead" is the sixth installment in NTGent's "History(ies) of Theater" series, which was started in 2018 by Milo Rau, then the director of the playhouse. Rodrigues's play leans much further into autofiction than his work typically does, yet feels somewhat ambivalent about it. In a short introduction, with the house lights still on, the Belgian actress Lisah Adeaga, who plays a nurse, explains that "the writer of this play" — as she refers to Rodrigues — opted to "imagine" what his father's final article might have been like.

Throughout the show, Brás, left, and Manuela Azevedo swap beards, and the roles of son and father: Shortbeard and Longbeard. Michiel Devijver

The result is a blurring of reality and fiction, she adds, before handing fake beards to two other performers, Manuela Azevedo and Beatriz Brás, both from Portugal, who play gender-swapped versions of Rodrigues and his father. For the rest of the play, which unfolds in a mix of Portuguese and Flemish, they are referred to as Shortbeard and Longbeard, lending “No Yogurt for the Dead” a folk-tale-like sheen.

It is a pointed subterfuge to put some distance between Rodrigues and the personal events he is exploring. Azevedo and Brás keep exchanging roles, wearing the exaggerated beards to perform different takes on Rogério’s — or Longbeard’s — final days. His death, indicated each time by sudden bursts of stage smoke, is frequently played up for comedic effect. (Amusingly, on NTGent’s website, one trigger warning reads: “In several scenes, a person dies theatrically.”)

But this approach also highlights a tension the play never quite resolves. At the heart of “No Yogurt for the Dead” is a knotty filial relationship. The pair bicker repeatedly over little things, and at one point the father says that Shortbeard “wasn’t much of a son.” Rodrigues stops short of delving into the pain behind such exchanges.

In that sense, “No Yogurt for the Dead” is a very different proposition than Wajdi Mouawad’s “Mother,” another recent exploration of parent-child dynamics from a high-profile playwright and director. Mouawad, the director of the Théâtre de la Colline in Paris, laid harrowing emotions bare in this work about his mother’s life, in which he himself also appeared. Rodrigues, on the other hand, exercises such restraint that it’s difficult to even decipher Shortbeard’s feelings about his father.

Brás and Lisah Adeaga, who plays a nurse. Michiel Devijver

“The focus remains on Rogério, an antifascist activist in Portugal who was forced to live in exile in France. Some of his work as a journalist is woven into the text, and onstage he comes across as exacting — he berates his son for forgetting to bring him a black pen — yet loyal and loving. When Rodrigues’s mother appears in ghostlike form and sings a song by Jacques Brel to him, the deep bond between them is conveyed beautifully.

Music slowly overtakes the production from that point onward. Azevedo and Brás are superb singers, and they are joined onstage by Hélder Gonçalves, a Portuguese composer and musician who appeared in Rodrigues’s “The Cherry Orchard” in Avignon. Here, Gonçalves provides a melancholy guitar background from a hospital bed perched atop Sammy Van den Heuvel’s otherworldly sets, which look like layers of cracked earth.

The connection between the music and Rodrigues's father is hinted at early on: Longbeard hums songs in his hospital bed, and tells his son they came from a mysterious "Teresa." Shortbeard thinks his father's memory is failing him. In the last 10 minutes, however, a coup de théâtre in the form of a new character reveals the source of the music.

It ties the production together neatly, with Rodrigues's dramaturgical craft on full display. Yet again, his stand-in onstage — at that point, a grieving son — gives fairly little away. On behalf of his father, the new character makes Shortbeard promise not to use what he just learned in a play. "I promise," Shortbeard says, adding, after a pause: "On my father's health."

On opening night, the exchange registered as comedy. Looking directly at the audience, the actress playing the role cheekily implied that Rodrigues wouldn't keep his word. Was it a hard decision? What does it mean for a writer to seize on his father's own words and story? Perhaps Rodrigues will tell us in a sequel someday: "No Yogurt for the Dead" may leave you wanting one.

No Yogurt for the Dead — Histoire(s) du Théâtre VI

Through Jan. 31 at NTGent in Ghent, Belgium; ntghent.be. Additional dates in Portugal (Lisbon and Braga) in February and in Austria (Vienna) in May and June.

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