

Under the Surface in 'Just for Nothing'

Theater Beat

Indefinable truths remain hidden between the lines of "Just for Nothing" (*Pour un oui ou pour un non*), currently receiving its U.S. premiere at the Tamarind Theatre. Nathalie Sarraute's taut 1982 duologue between estranged childhood friends typifies her *nouveau roman* aesthetic.

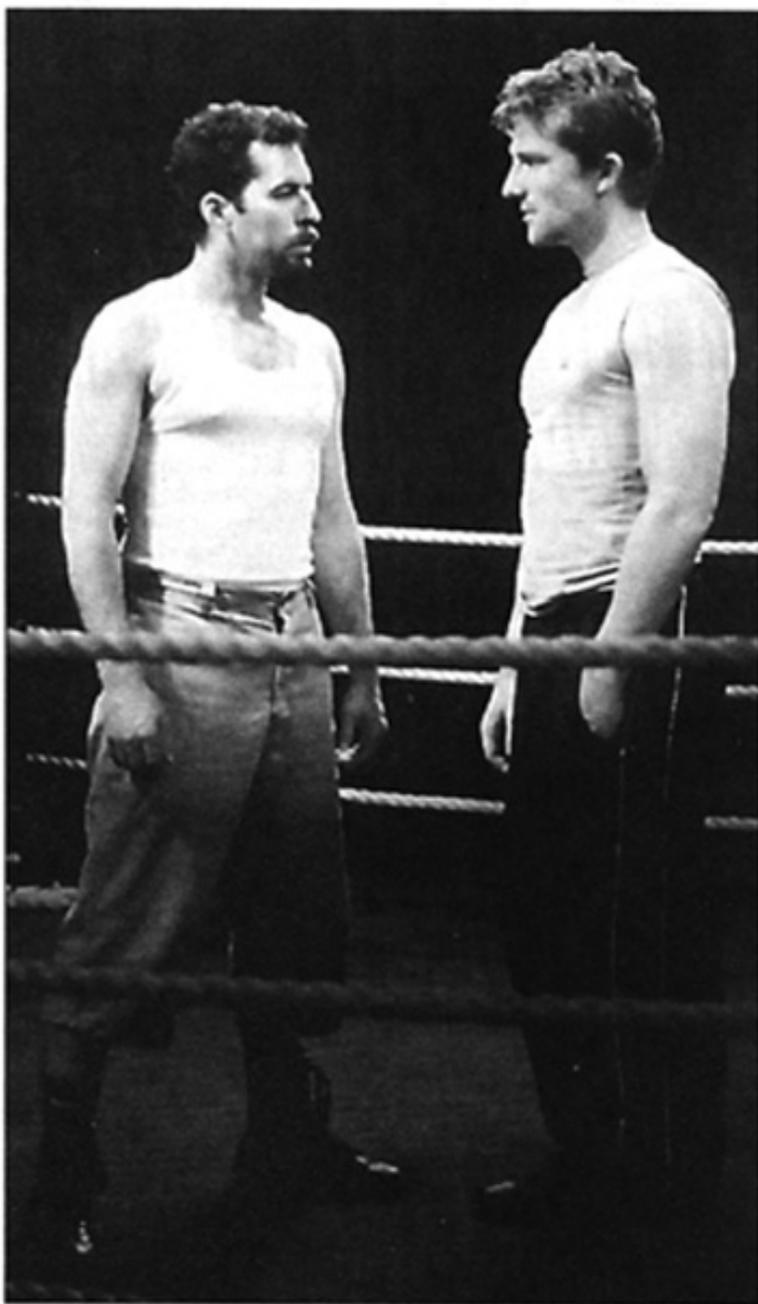
Rejecting conventional narrative and character, Sarraute's tropism deploys specific choices of word and gesture to glean unspoken information, moving emotional prototypes into behavioral dynamics with the formal precision of a sonata. So goes "Just for Nothing," a phenomenon in France, where it was filmed for television in 1990 by director Jacques Doillon, featuring Jean-Louis Trintignant and André Dussollier.

The metaphoric setting is a boxing ring, here rendered with clean verisimilitude by set designer Oliver Noinan, around which the affluent M1 (Stefan Cattan) and isolated M2 (Charles Fathy, who also directs) spar over their dissolved friendship. This colloquy, whose conundrum remains unsolved despite invocation of audience perspective in a wry *coup de théâtre* at midpoint, is the existential *raison d'être*.

Fathy's acerbic intensity and Cattan's early-period Jean Marais quality are keenly attuned, both scrupulously observing Sarraute's exacting cadences.

Occasionally, hesitant articulation of Kaye Mortley's English translation blurs the pace and nuances, ironic given the central theme. That liability aside, this is a fascinating cerebral exercise, with Sunday performances in French affording the opportunity for stylistic comparison studies.

David C. Nichols



HARRY M. DIXON IV

Charles Fathy, left, and Stefan Cattan co-star in "Just for Nothing."

Los Angeles Times

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Just for Nothing **The Tamarind Theatre** **reviewed by Jose Ruiz**

Russian/French author Nathalie Sarraute lived 99 years, and in that time she created a genre of literature that was not only unique, but also groundbreaking (and for many, scandalous). Sarraute often eschewed conventional concepts of plot line, characterization and chronology and instead applied her "tropism," which she defined as "interior movements that precede and prepare our words and actions, at the limits of our consciousness." It was a method, in other words, of implying certain things about a character which are not articulated by monologue — by using body movement, for example.

Her play *Pour un oui ou pour un non* originally translated as *For No Good Reason*, is now presented by Typex Productions as using the above concepts in presenting a vignette of two men, identified as M1 and M2, at a juncture in their life.

The action takes place in a boxing ring, where the childhood friends spar physically and metaphorically over the implication of an earlier statement made by one which has caused them to not keep in touch.

The symbolism is plentiful here. A slow clock makes time drag; a ringside bell rings, indicating the end of a verbal round; and even an impromptu conversation with two "audience members," asked to pass judgement on the actions, point to an attempt at communication, which, nonetheless, usually fails.

How people perceive relationships takes front and center theme here. Unspoken but definitely implied, is the issue of social status: one of the men may feel that the other one is better than he, in other words. And the thorny subject of love comes up as well: the married man's wife may be a factor, as she has taken attention away from the friendship.

The strong tension between the men could also suggest a homosexual link — it's never said, never implied, but...

Words fly, like punches, sometimes striking, sometimes missing and in the end, as the two learn more about each other, the concept that friendship should exist not for what one gains from one another, but just for nothing, never gets resolved. Stefan Cattan and Charles Fathy, who also directed, are exceptional in the intensity of their characters. Be prepared for serious afterthought on this one, but keep in mind that this is a translation from the French, and faithful as it is, there are some elements that don't quite cross over. The play will continue through June 2, 2002 and is presented in French on Sundays. Call (323) 969-4848 for reservations. **T**

MAY 24-MAY 30, 2002 **ENTERTAINMENT TODAY**

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JUST FOR NOTHING

at the Tamarind Theatre

Reviewed by J.A. Eliason

Nathalie Sarraute's play examines friendship: What makes it worth fighting for and when should we throw in the towel? Is it acceptable to end a friendship over a few ill-chosen words? Can we let go of relationships "just for nothing"? Or is there something underneath the small gesture, the occasional irksome tone that deserves notice? Are the little cruelties we inflict on one another just the tip of the proverbial iceberg?

After great success in France, *Just for Nothing* (*Pour un Oui ou Pour un Non*) is staged in English and is now in the hands of its director and star, Charles Fathy. He plays M2, a dark and goateed poetic type. His lifelong friend, M1 (Stefan Cattan), is the handsome golden boy, the very essence of the "successful" mainstream. The two are locked in an argument that evolves from a little pinprick of condescension into a flood of accusations and revelations.

Fathy and Cattan attack their roles with energy and intelligence. Fathy is best when specific and pointed; Cattan is slick and shining, emitting success. Problematically, however, this production is a language piece, a detailed argument, performed in English by two French speakers. Sarraute's script gives great weight to the nuances beneath words—the way a phrase is spoken can render it offensive—but the actors simply do not have enough facility with the language to make it sing.

The piece is set in a well-realized boxing ring (Oliver Noinain)—a metaphor for the characters' struggle—with harsh lighting (Harry M. Dixon IV) that creates the feel of an interrogation. There is some boxing in the piece (coached by Nigel Hudson and Christophe Hapillon), but it never conjures a sense of danger or threat.

The play ends with a choice made by each man about the future of the friendship. Unfortunately, on the night reviewed it was unclear what that choice was. Although Fathy and Cattan are clearly in the moment and connected, sections of *Just for Nothing* are lost in the translation. It seems a safe bet that the performances in French (beginning May 12) will achieve a mastery that the English performances miss.

"Just for Nothing," presented by Typex Productions, the Tamarind Theatre, and Elant Donnes—The French American Fund for the Performing Arts at the Tamarind Theatre, 5919 Franklin Ave., Hollywood. Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 4 p.m. May 2-June 2. \$20. (323) 969-4848.

CONTACT
Le Cyber-bulletin
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extrait de Juin 2002

Assister en chair et en os à un spectacle vivant démontrant ,dans la capitale mondiale de la communication que l'on ne saurait s'entendre ne manque certes pas de piquant.

Nathalie Sarraute a su faire des silences le sujet de sa pièce et démontrer avec brio que rien ne nous sauve du quiproquo rien sauf la poésie sans doute et sa capacité à dénoncer sous le langage le plus anodin les pires turpitudes.

Servis par un jeu brillant de deux acteurs s'affrontant sur un ring la mise en scène de Charles Fathy donne au corps des deux amis toute sa place. Tour à tour vainqueurs ou renvoyés dans les cordes les deux hommes se cherchent se retrouvent et se reperdent malgré la médiation du "public "qui pas plus que nous, véritables spectateurs, n'est capable de définitivement prendre parti. La question il est vrai n'est pas là, personne ne gagne durant ce match sinon le théâtre bien sur.

Il n'y a guère de moments à Los Angeles où l'on puisse ainsi savourer un tel jeu au service d'un texte en français aussi puissant: aucune tergiversation possible il faut aller voir" pour un oui pour un non" dans ce petit théâtre lové dans les entrailles du monstre hollywoodien qui veut lui trop souvent nous faire croire que se parler est une affaire de répliques.

Le théâtre contemporain est en revanche un théâtre du doute. Il met en lumière des choses dites "sans importance" que l'on traînera pourtant la vie durant derrière soi jusqu'à ce qu'enfin sur un divan ou dans une confidence formulée entre amis ou encore sur quelques toiles ou partitions ne se susurrent enfin les mots empoisonnés.

Dans la jungle des téléphones portables porteurs de rien, d'aucun messages réels ,et des e-mails insipides noyés dans l'insensé ,"pour un oui pour un non" fonctionne en antidote.

L' on ressort du spectacle comme guéri avec une impérieuse envie de parler vrai.

Laurent Devèze
Attaché Culturel du Consulat Général de France à Los Angeles

"...Nathalie Sarraute has succeeded in making the "unspoken" the subject of her play and has cleverly demonstrated that nothing will save us from miscommunication; nothing except poetry and its ability to denounce the worst concerns underneath casual conversation. With brilliant acting staged in a boxing ring, Charles Fathy's directing gives to the two friend's physicality the space it deserves. Alternatively winners or pushed up against the ropes, the two men continuously provoke each other; find themselves and lose themselves despite the audiences mediation who, like us "real spectators" can't take sides. Truly, this is not the question as nobody wins this fight, except the theatre of course..."

Laurent Devèze
Cultural Attaché at the French Consulate in Los Angeles