



**Then What & Squash** directed by Patrice Kerbrat with Benjamin Boyer and Robert Plagnol at Le Petit Montparnasse, Paris, 2006.

**Le Canard  
enchaîné**

**Smash!**

*Bernard Thomas*

These two plays are performed by two excellent actors. In terse exchanges, they etch in acid the duplicity of the world we live in to the point where familiar values mean nothing and we lose our moral compass.

Brian and Alan are sitcom writers. Brian, played by Robert Plagnol, sprawled on an old sofa that seems to have been made to measure for him, cares for nothing. Caught in a cycle of binge-hangover-binge, his scornful scepticism hides a small but nonetheless real talent. Talking? What's the point? "Look at my jaw, it goes up and down, there's air coming out, there are sounds coming out, a, e, i, o, u... We're talking here. It's cool, isn't it? You're right, I feel so much better." Alan, played by Benjamin Boyer, is not satisfied with his lot... Unbeknownst to his co-writer Brian, he has written a movie script which John Malkovitch and a well-known director have shown an interest in. This is the beginning of Alan's problems.

Brian will sabotage his partner's film project in the most despicable way. Disillusioned, Alan will be lured back into their dysfunctional partnership. Worse still, Brian will take Alan's movie idea and re-work it as an episode of the second-rate sit-com that they are working on. One more commercial piece of work but it will earn Alan enough money to buy a new car and a bigger flat. Above all, it will appease Brian's jealousy, who can't stand to see his old friend and collaborator recognized for his real talent.

The second play introduces us to two smart guys, Ryan and Greg, in the locker room of a squash club, the kind of place where real men can talk to each other without the inhibiting presence of women. They are brokers, highly paid, hard-working, but in need of 'relaxation'. Ryan has a wife and kids but is a committed philanderer. Greg is a real family man, monogamous, devoted to his family. But there's a sense that his sex life leaves something to be desired.

Ryan meets a woman in the lift at work and the mutual attraction is immediate. Ryan explains his theory to Greg: humans are civilized man and feral beast unhappily conjoined. They coexist as best they can. Example: A man and a woman are sitting quietly in a restaurant, discussing fixed-rate mortgages. An hour later they are writhing

in bed, yelping with pleasure, "Oh ! Oh! Oh!"... Two states of mind, two personas, fucking and not fucking.

Man, the polymorphous pervert, has trouble reconciling morality and animality. **Our failing societies flounder in this confusion which, without the humour of the author Andrew Payne, would be unbearable.** Patrice Kerbrat relishes this murky pond in which English frogs become hilarious toads.

**LE FIGARO**  
magazine

## **Hand to hand combat**

*Philippe Tesson*

**In the rather dull landscape of this new season, a small, unidentified object has just landed: something original, hard as a rock, fast and bright as lightning,** which brings with it two formidable young actors. This is an electrifying twin-engined rocket, two short plays called *Then What* and *Squash* by the London-based playwright Andrew Payne. **This show is highly recommended for lovers of theatrical adventures.**

The title *Squash* perfectly sums up both the spirit and the form of the piece. **The dialogue is sharp, full of anxious banter, and the language is resolutely contemporary.** The plays set two young men who are friends in competition with each other. In *Then What*, their rivalry is direct: the two men are a screenwriting team whose differing ambitions will end up separating them when one betrays the other. In *Squash*, the competition is more subtle, it is about issues beyond their relationship: their very different notions of love and marital fidelity.

The themes evoked by the two plays are multiple. None of them are explored at length but the skill of the dialogue creates a tension which, by revealing the personality of the characters, illuminates them with surprising truth. Thus two universal male types take shape before our eyes, governed alternately or simultaneously by their violence and their vulnerability, a mixture of instinct and reason, selfishness and tenderness, mirrors turned to face each other. **This very physical yet very sensitive theatre is so out of keeping with the taste of current French drama that it comes as a happy surprise.** Patrice Kerbrat directs it effectively and his direction of the actors is remarkable.

Let's talk about the actors. They are not yet stars, but we know them well. They both reaffirm their talent brilliantly. Robert Plagnol's personality is strong, we remember his performance in *Rue de Babylone* by Jean-Marie Besset. His elongated figure, his beautiful face, his forceful diction, the provocative frankness of his acting make him a very modern and original actor. Benjamin Boyer, whom we liked so much in *Bent*, is a more classical actor than Plagnol, and here he is very perceptive and nuanced in his depiction of a troubled but honest man. Both of them bring out the full potential of this magnetic work.

**In theatre, English authors are fast where French writers are profound. Sometimes, we prefer speed which can bring its own profundity** as when we watch Andrew Payne's two short plays, *Then What* and *Squash*, directed by Patrice Kerbrat with a lovely sense of venomous rhythm. In both parts, a man harms his friend because the success or happiness of one triggers strange reactions in the other. So they are false friends, but the two writers in the first piece don't know it - they write mediocre scripts until one of them, working on his own, gets a script picked up by a star and some big producers. It's enough to drive the one who thought he was the most imaginative of the pair crazy.

The businessmen in the second piece are also unaware that their squash-playing camaraderie is about to take a dramatic turn when one of these two family men confesses his illicit liaison with a sexually adventurous female executive...

**It's raw, hilarious, formidably intelligent**, played by two contrasting actors who make an ideal duo : Robert Plagnol, sharp, frenzied, gifted, and Benjamin Boyer, gentle, reserved, discreet.

**Excitable, edgy, focused on their game : Robert Plagnol and Benjamin Boyer go head to head in a raw, muscular verbal battle** in two short plays by the same author, the Englishman Andrew Payne, in an adaptation by Vanessa Chouraqui and Robert Plagnol.

In the first, two script-writers bicker. Together they write mediocre scripts for popular TV series. One, in secret, has managed to write a script that has been accepted by a major production company. The other, eaten up with envy, furious at the betrayal, sabotages the project. But can you live without your best enemy ?

In the second play, we find our two actors in a locker room, squash racket in hand for one, sports bag for the other. They play two executives, both married, both fathers, who get together on Wednesday evenings to play a game of squash. But Brian gets caught up in a turbulent affair and asks his friend Alan to provide him with an alibi. You have to see Benjamin Boyer, wide-eyed, aghast, the perfect innocent as he reacts to his friend's proposal. He is not far from reminding us of Jacques Villeret. **We laugh a lot at this moment in which betrayal has the last word. These two plays**, directed with clarity by Patrice Kerbrat, in a clever set by Jean Hass, **are like a game of ping-pong. The ball is returned, each time faster and harder**, requiring strength and humour from the two performers who are the perfect emotional athletes for the occasion.

London, today. Alan and Brian are friends and partners : they share a small, shabby office in Soho where they co-write rubbish sitcoms for television. One day, Alan thinks he's hit the jackpot : the script he's been writing on the sly is finally going to be made into a movie...

London, today. Greg and Ryan, two traders, meet every Wednesday for a game of squash before treating themselves to a night out. They both think they are good fathers and husbands - maybe that only exists in England ! - but one shy, discreet, the other rather boisterous and verbose. One day, everything changes...

The two actors, Robert Plagnol (who adapted Andrew Payne's text into French, with Vanessa Chourauqui) and Benjamin Boyer, make a great double-act on stage: they show a brilliant virtuosity in the interpretation of their characters. **Do you have to betray another to be true to yourself?** It is sharp, biting, and contemporary. And Patrice Kerbrat is a subtle director of actors. We spent a very pleasant evening.

Squash is an indoor sport that combines tennis and pelota. The exchanges are fast, almost brutal, and the rhythm is hellish. Young executives with sharp teeth like to play this sport, showing off their fitness. If you don't die on the court, you feel euphoric afterwards.

Brian and Alan's tumultuous relationship, alternately warm and confrontational, is like boxing and squash combined. Lifelong friends, the two men make a good living writing sitcom scripts for TV. In fact, Alan does all the work, and Brian, who doesn't give a damn, sneers, snipes, gets drunk and lives off his hard-working partner. So when he learns that Alan has written an ambitious screenplay in secret and had it accepted by Hollywood, Brian realizes that he may not only be losing his friend, but also his cash cow...

Another couple, Greg and Ryan, meet up every Wednesday night for a game of squash. In the locker room, they have men's conversations. Ryan adores his wife but cheats on her shamelessly. A good husband, a good father and a good man, Greg at first resents his friend's antics. It takes all of Ryan's powers of persuasion to lead his friend down the slippery slope where the pupil will soon surpass the master... **Conflicting needs, conflicting personalities. Sparks fly from this confrontation. Ping, pong, pif, paf. In passing, Andrew Payne, author of these two short plays, touches on real problems, but the best part is the rhythm of the dialogue.** Robert Plagnol, as a tough guy flaunting his cynicism, and Benjamin Boyer, a good man who goes to the bad, are the powerful

combatants in these two very physical matches, perfectly directed by Patrice Kerbrat.

Le  
Quotidien

## A remarkable exchange

*Armelle Héliot*

Patrice Kerbrat has created an excellent production of two short plays by Andrew Payne, adapted by Vanessa Chouraqui and Robert Plagnol. The latter plays a man of our time opposite Benjamin Boyer: two excellent collaborators and a shared triumph.

**Andrew Payne is a British screenwriter. He is talented and successful.** He has made forays into theatre and, judging by this play presented at the Petit Montparnasse, **he is also suited to the stage. He cuts to the quick. His characters (in this case two young men of the world) are strikingly authentic.** They are very well and economically drawn, and if Patrice Kerbrat's show is powerful, it is because it is based on a very effective adaptation by Vanessa Chouraqui and Robert Plagnol. Neither of them is afraid of the rawness of the language, a contemporary way of speaking that truly reflects the environment in which the two plays take place.

The first, *Then What*, introduces us to two young scriptwriters, one gifted, the other a plodder. Plagnol and Boyer are made for these roles. The character played by Boyer plays second fiddle to the one played by Robert Plagnol. **Their small world is forensically examined in Andrew Payne's texts.** But Patrice Kerbrat, an excellent director of actors, goes further. At first we admire the thousand and one nuances of two formidable performances, well matched and equally powerful, then we are drawn in to reflecting on the world we ourselves live in. **The two men are torn between action and inertia, between the easy lie and the difficult truth.** These two characters ring true thanks to the talent of the author, his adapters, and two formidable performers in two riveting pieces : Plagnol and Boyer. Boyer, shy, inhibited, and Plagnol, electrifying, cunning. Pure pleasure for the audience!



**Squash** directed by Patrice Kerbrat with Benjamin Boyer and Robert Plagnol at Le Petit Chien, Festival d'Avignon, 2007.

This winter they performed one of the best shows of the season, Squash by Andrew Payne. Now Benjamin Boyer and Robert Plagnol reprise the adventure this summer, at 5.40pm, in the rue Guillaume Puy theatre. The action takes place in a locker room. Two friends meet to play their weekly game of squash. Married men, family men, they seem to have it all. But one needs the other to provide an alibi. **Double lives, lies, betrayal, themes that explore married life with power and vivacity. This is hard-hitting theatre that makes for a fine acting experience.**

Robert Plagnol is one of the most arresting young actors of his generation. He had only modest success at the Montparnasse theatre in Paris with Squash by Andrew Payne, which he had adapted with Vanessa Chouraqui. He was partnered by Benjamin Boyer in a production directed by Patrice Kerbrat. Instead of throwing in the towel, he made his debut at the Off, accompanied again by Boyer. "In Paris, we suffered from a lack of visibility in the middle of a hectic season," he explains, "like a small boat thrown off-course by big ships. We had to keep going, not return to port". In Avignon, the show is rewarded with good audiences. **Squash examines relationships and out-of-control sexuality with the rawness of the English, which, with humour, pushes at the limits of political correctness.** Plagnol is deliciously highly-strung, Boyer a fascinating bundle of insecurity and inhibition. **A match diabolically driven by our darker impulses.**

Translating, adapting and performing is what Robert Plagnol did with Squash by Andrew Payne which he adapted with Vanessa Chouraqui. Under the firm direction of Patrice Kerbrat, he brings power and complexity to his performance opposite the talented, sensitive Benjamin Boyer. The piece portrays the chaos that ensues when forty-something husbands and fathers go off the rails. **The language is harsh, the experience punchy, funny and poignant.**

Delphine Apiou, Biba

Robert Plagnol co-adapted as well as acting in Squash, a play in the Off festival at Avignon which is not to be missed! And for a very good reason: with the help of his fellow cast member Benjamin Boyer, Plagnol answers a frightening question - what do men talk about amongst themselves? **Droll, true, and highly stimulating, this locker-room debate about love and loyalty is a real treat.**

 *Gilles Costaz*

In Then What and Squash, **Andrew Payne ferociously lays into the world of businessmen and bohos.** Robert Plagnol has long been recognized as one of the most outstanding of the new generation of actors. Now he takes on Squash, a show that did not quite find its audience in Paris and he finally achieves great success with this debate on sex and lies between two squash players. Plagnol and Benjamin Boyer, one tough, the other tender, make **the words blaze in a raw, intense and often hilarious match.**

 *Jean-Louis Châles*

**Masculinity. The web of lies that gets out of control and blows apart the lives of ordinary people. This is how it happens.**

They have been friends for a long time, love their wives and children, play squash every Wednesday and traditionally end the evening in a restaurant. Like any self-respecting duo, there's the alpha male (Ryan: a voluble, handsome guy sure of his seductive powers) and the gentle soul (Greg: introverted, loyal). Here they are two senior executives, settled into a comfortable, ordered way of life. But the desires of the flesh intrude on their well-heeled lives. Ryan is infatuated with a sexually adventurous young woman and throws himself into a reckless affair. In order not to endanger his marriage, he asks Greg to give him an alibi. Greg is reluctant, but finally agrees. The infernal machine is activated, the two friends plunge, in spite of themselves, into an abyss of lies.

**The very British Andrew Payne** gives us a series of scenes in a single place (the locker-room), **weaves together seemingly innocuous dialogue, and provides no easy tying up of loose ends. Our thirty-somethings, undone by their sexual appetites, lose the veneer of propriety and wallow in pleasure at the risk of ruining their lives.**

Patrice Kerbrat, a scrupulous director, analyses their downfall with great skill and vicious humour. The two actors, Benjamin Boyer and Robert Plagnol, play this subtle

score marvelously, with its u-turns, outbursts and hasty reconciliations. They are virtuosos of the spoken (and hidden) word, masters of ambiguous body language. **Virile yet vulnerable, cynical yet romantic, they charm us in this hair-raising masculine morality tale.**



**Then What & Squash** directed by Patrice Kerbrat with Benjamin Boyer and Robert Plagnol at Le Théâtre de la Commune, Aubervilliers, 2009.



**Theatre of combat**  
Armelle Héliot

**Don't miss these two short pieces by Andrew Payne. Two young men in London today, living their ordinary lives. Cruel and fascinating, a highpoint of theatrical art.** It's a production that has gone from private to public which is rare, and continues a glittering career in the small hall of the Théâtre de la Commune in Aubervilliers.

Didier Bezace, who directs the Théâtre de la Commune in Aubervilliers, has chosen Robert Plagnol to play Dorante in *Les Fausses confidences* by Marivaux, which he will stage next February with Anouk Grinberg and Pierre Arditi. He wanted us to see again the work Plagnol initiated, this wonderful show linking **two plays by the Englishman Andrew Payne which deal what could roughly be described as the "fragility" of young men.** These two ferocious plays, *Then What* and *Squash*, about the way young men live now, are directed by Patrice Kerbrat.

Robert Plagnol, who made his debut in *L'Eperdue* by Jean Bois, followed by *Grande Ecole* by Jean-Marie Besset, also directed by Patrice Kerbrat, discovered Andrew Payne about ten years ago and translated the text himself with Vanessa Chouraqui.

This intelligent actor with his youthful physique, very grounded in his thinking about his profession, skillfully analyses the subject of the two plays, *Then What* and *Squash*. "Between loyalty to oneself and loyalty to another, there is a no-man's land, an unexplored territory that is always in question and, paradoxically, the one who ventures into it can be trapped. He continues: "It is to this struggle between loyalty and betrayal, the battle with oneself, that Andrew Payne writes about".

Created in 2006 at the Petit-Montparnasse, where Myriam de Colombi always makes interesting choices, and revived at the Petit Chien in Avignon (one of the two



plays, Squash), the show has real power. It is beautifully played by two very talented actors. With a set by Jean Haas, lighting by Laurent Béal, costumes by Malika Guézel, sound by Michel Winogradoff, everything is outstanding in this production. Patrice Kerbrat's direction is superb. He directs the two performers wonderfully. He brings out all the nuances of Andrew Payne's dialogue. And he is admirably served by the two actors. Benjamin Boyer (who plays Alan and Greg) is so meticulous, so sensitive in the face of the verbal onslaughts of Robert Plagnol (who plays Brian and Ryan), the would-be dominant male who wants to impose his lies, and his appetites on the other and in doing so exposes his vulnerability. A fantastic face-off over two rounds.

The two actors take different characters from one play to the next and **this work is magnificently off, an artistic and emotional battle to the end.** And the themes here are as interesting as they are rare. One of the meetings, on 12 November, had as its theme: "On the difficulty of being a man" and it is this difficulty which lies at the heart of these plays.