



Edinburgh festival 2023

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Review

## The Van Paemel Family review - a single-handed family epic

★★★★☆

### Zoo Southside, Edinburgh

Valentijn Dhaenens switches between 13 characters, with the help of technology, to tell a story of poverty and social injustice



Arifa Akbar

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It is maverick, perhaps reckless, to attempt to turn a multi-generational, multicharacter classic into a one-man show. Yet Valentijn Dhaenens pulls it off in this curious adaptation of Flemish playwright Cyriel Buysse's 1903 epic about family, poverty, class and social injustice - with the help of nifty technology.

Dhaenens, a co-founder of Belgian theatre company SkaGeN and 2018 Fringe First award winner, switches between 13 characters, three of them live and the rest pre-recorded and projected on to a screen in the shape of a house (recording and editing by Jeroen Wuyts). Much of the drama is reported and this renders it fairly static, but it strikes a meditative and melancholy tone as it tells of this titular family, who toil on Baron de Wilde's land, exploited by the system.

We see these characters interact, from the patriarch, who believes unfailingly in the social order, to his God-fearing wife, bent over after a lifetime of excessive work, and their children. Among them is Romanie, who becomes pregnant by the baron's son, and Eduard, who leads the socialist workers' movement and tells his father: "All of our lives we have worked for a chunk of bread, like slaves." There is also the baron's wife, who represents careless privilege, complaining of the stink on the farm and berating the bone-tired Van Paemels for taking a nap.

A surtitled production presented as part of the showcase Big in Belgium, the drama on the screen looks like a painting in motion, characters moving against a pitch-black background. One plays a plaintive accordion while Mrs Van Paemel sits with her hands wrung half in anguish, half in prayer.

There are lovely extended moments of music (by Sara Salvérius) which saturate the stage with atmosphere. It is beautiful and contemplative on the whole, though we occasionally see the joins in the technology. And it hits a strange note with some surreal turns in the projections: one character appears upside down, while another is proportionally oversized as she lies ill and prone, like a giant ailing Gulliver. This rubs up oddly against the prevailing naturalism, although Dhaenens's visible costume changes work much more effectively in their exposed artifice. There is also a sense that these characters are simultaneously real and holographic.

It is highly original and yet peculiar as a production, evoking outrage and sadness in its politics of poverty. Dhaenens single-handedly brings the various parts of this epic alive.

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