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Julie Deliquet, *Welfare*, play adapted from the film *Welfare* by Frederick Wiseman at Théâtre Gérard Philippe in Saint-Denis, September 29 to October 15, 2023

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Julie Deliquet, *Welfare*, play adapted from the film *Welfare* by
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Frederick Wiseman was familiar with the work of Julie Deliquet having seen her adaptation of *Fanny and Alexandre* by Ingmar Bergman at La Comédie Française, *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* at the Théâtre Gérard Philippe (TGP) and *Un conte de Noël* by Arnaud Depleschin at Odéon. So, in January 2020, the documentary filmmaker contacted the stage director to see if she would be interested in adapting his 1973 film *Welfare*, which he considers to be one of his most theatrical films, into a play (Fabienne Pascaud, "Julie Deliquet, invitée du Festival d'Avignon avec 'Welfare': 'Je veux que le théâtre mette en colère,'" *Télérama*, July 5, 2023). This is not the first adaptation of the film, in 1992 Wiseman directed an Opera version of *Welfare* at the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia and at the St. Anne's Center for Restoration and the Arts in New York in 1997 (Barry Keith Grant, *Voyages of Discovery: The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman*, Revised and expanded edition, p.240). Nevertheless, Wiseman wanted her to create the first theatrical adaptation. She accepted even though she had not seen the film, and did not know that just a few months later she would take over as the new artistic director for the Théâtre Gérard Philippe (TGP) in Saint-Denis a suburb of Paris that in 2020 was being devastated by the pandemic. Deliquet included elements of the city into the play by hanging drawings made by children from schools in the neighborhood. She also made a point of visiting Welfare centers in Seine Saint Denis, bringing social workers in to watch rehearsals and casting actors who were themselves socially committed.

On est allés à la rencontre de structures sociales de Seine-Saint-Denis et des travailleurs sociaux ont assisté à des répétitions. Au TGP, on travaille quotidiennement dans des centres sociaux, à l'hôpital, dans des écoles. Je ne peux pas choisir des acteurs qui n'aient pas des engagements actifs, surtout pour cette pièce (Diatkine and Artiges, "Julie Deliquet et Frederick Wiseman : « Sur la grande scène de la cour d'honneur, 'Welfare' devient une parole citoyenne vitale »,” *Libération*, 2 juillet 2023, sec. Culture).

Three years later, on July 5th, 2023, her theatrical adaptation of *Welfare* was chosen by Tiago Rodrigues to open the prestigious theater Festival d'Avignon, becoming only the third woman to do so after Pina Bausch, and Ariane Mnouckine. Despite two Molières nominations, the theater production was criticized for displacing an intimate close quartered documentary to the sprawling venue of the Cour d'honneur du palais des Papes (Laura Cappelle, "At Glamorous French Festivals, Poverty Is Only Onstage," *The New York Times*, July 6, 2023, sec. Theater). So, perhaps the next venue on the play's itinerary at Deliquet's own Théâtre Gérard Philippe at Saint-Denis would be more appropriate. Indeed, Saint-Denis is a city much more representative of the lower-class claimants seen in *Welfare* than Avignon and the TGP is much smaller than the Cour d'honneur du palais des Papes.

The documentary film *Welfare* is regarded as a masterpiece and was Wiseman's ninth film after his controversial first film *Titicut Follies*, 1967 and other successive films about American institutions such as the educational system (*High School*, 1968), public medical services (*Hospital*, 1970) or the military (*Basic Training*, 1971). The film is in black and white, and except for a couple of initial outdoor shots, the rest of the 2 hour and 37-minute film takes place inside the Waverly Welfare center in lower Manhattan. This gives the film its ambiance of asphyxiation and intimacy with notable close-ups of claimants' faces. The task of adapting such a long film to the stage is therefore quite daunting.

Nevertheless, there were elements and artistic decisions that were successfully carried out. With 15 actors on stage at the same time for the majority of the play, the ambient chaos of the welfare office comes across quite well and notably the audio cacophony created by multiple people speaking at the same time. The play even innovates with the addition of a musician, not present in the film, who intervenes during the middle “intermission” moment where the boldest choices were being made to depart from the film. Indeed, the film is situated in the Welfare center and the setting does not change from beginning to end. The play, on the other hand, has been split into two parts and separated by a break in which two characters start playing basketball. This of course is possible because the Welfare office on stage is also a basketball court with a basketball hoop and floor markings showing the free throw line and the boundaries of the court. There were other departures from the film, for example the mother and daughter that visit the Welfare office are both Black in the film but in the play the mother is white and the daughter is black. Yet, this difference was not consequential.

The adaptation also took advantage of the French language to insert a double entendre in the scene where the welfare worker Rose flirts with one of the welfare claimants. He responds to her flirting by lamenting “Vous ne m’avez pas donné satisfaction” playing off the double meaning in French that she has not totally fulfilled his request and that she has not satisfied him. There is also another where the play translates the absurd Kafkaesque administration denounced by the film when a visibly pregnant woman is asked to prove that she is pregnant by producing the necessary form.

Wiseman gave Deliquet free rein to do what she wanted with the film and despite Wiseman’s offer Deliquet decided not to look at the footage he left on the cutting room floor and only consider the finished film. She wanted to concentrate on adapting the finished film and not Wiseman’s experience of making it. She also decided not to update the film to 2023 but leave it in the original period of 1973 as well as keeping the length of the play close to that of the film, 150 minutes versus 167 respectively. The play received mostly rave reviews from the critics and as mentioned earlier two Molières nominations. This is not surprising as Deliquet's direction is both raw and empathetic, presenting a stark portrayal of poverty, bureaucracy, and human dignity while the cast delivers authentic and compelling performances.

Yet, despite all the good things that can be said about the play, the adaptation seems to be much flatter, lacking in nuance and complexity when compared to the film. It is as if the original film has been absorbed only through the lens of tragedy while leaving out the comedy. Indeed, the play comes across as one note showing a succession of scenes that immediately crescendo in intense emotional outbursts. The film’s dynamic rhythm has been misunderstood or discarded. A case in point is the final monologue delivered by Hirsch in the film. This key moment has been cut into several parts interspersed throughout different moments during the 150 minute play. This meant that his notable quote about waiting for Godot which occurs at the end of the film, is heard in the play after 1h30 minutes with one hour still left to go. By placing it in the middle it loses most of its force. Wiseman’s films are constructed so that the first and last 10 minutes are the most important parts. Moreover, the play lacks subtlety and relies on hysterics and the nervous breakdowns of each actor (welfare workers, policeman and welfare candidates). These systematic hysterics go against the original rhythm of the film which starts slowly and then builds up gradually.

But Hirsch’s final dialogue is not only important for the rhythm, it is also one of the funniest moments in the entire film. This is when Hirsch is rambling about how this will be the end of the US as we know it, he goes on and on, and the camera slowly pulls back to show the facial reaction of the woman sitting next to him, which can be loosely translated as “Will you please just shut up!” a true comic and theatrical moment par excellence but, alas, not in the theatrical adaptation.