Un théâtre populaire

The 78th Avignon Theatre Festival

Judith G. Miller and Rachel M. Watson



Prepping for the 78th Avignon Theatre Festival (29 June–21 July 2024) and responding to the political turmoil gripping France, Tiago Rodrigues, the festival's director, said at every presentation: "I want a festival for the people, one that's progressive, ecologically minded, feminist, and antiracist" (see *Le Monde* 2024:1). His agenda could not sound more "woke"—a concept many French people find reprehensible—but one that means, in his case, theatre work open to different voices and to revising history by bringing to the stage what had been previously hidden or ignored. A citizen of Portugal, Rodrigues anchors his creative action in the historical memory of his country's long and punishing dictatorship: he has always championed antiauthoritarian theatre that comes to grips with the political problems of the here and now, creating works in conversation with the most confounding issues of the times—for instance, *Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists*, written and directed by Rodrigues, seen at BAM in November 2024. Not one to shy away from controversy, Rodrigues inveighs loudly and publicly against France's far right party, the National Rally (NR), at a potential cost to himself, unabashedly aligning himself and the theatre he produces with the French Left in order to keep the NR from gaining control of the government and turning France

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into yet another far right–led country. Indeed, on 5 July 2024, he sponsored an all-night debate at Avignon's Papal Palace to shore up support for a coalition of the Left that effectively kept the NR from winning a majority of seats in Parliament in the second round of voting on 7 July.

The performances we cover, from among the 34 invited productions curated by Rodrigues for the "In Festival" (rather than the 1,600 fringe pieces in the "Off Festival"), give a glimpse of how the festival's best work corresponded to Rodrigues's deeply held commitments.

Rodrigues's calls for *un théâtre populaire* (a theatre for the people) echo the passionate appeal of the festival's founding director, Jean Vilar (1912–1971), whose commitment to decentralizing French theatre from its de facto headquarters in Paris helped promote the still viable, albeit fragile, notion that all French citizens have as much right to theatre as to education. Theatre, according to this principle, belongs to everyone, no matter their social status or claim on cultural capital: it follows that theatre be financially supported by the government, whatever the government's reigning political philosophy. (As a point of comparison with US theatre, we saw a total of 24 subsidized shows and attended nine readings for slightly less than $400 per person.) An avantgardist (some might argue elitist) strain in contemporary French theatre, as well as the ubiquity of film and television, have contributed to the difficulty of making theatre relevant to *all* people: today France's many government-subsidized theatres are primarily enjoyed by the middle classes. Rodrigues, however, is expanding and enhancing the Vilarian concept of *théâtre populaire*[1] by sponsoring an annual outreach program that trucks a festival theatre piece out to the Provençal villages surrounding Avignon. His outreach also includes producing theatre with prisoners; this year the lead actor in the prison performance of *Bernarda Alba* was liberated officially from prison at the last show—a gesture representative of what Rodrigues believes theatre can do. Rodrigues also subsidizes tickets for first-time theatregoers and provides free entrance to young spectators from the Avignon region who would not otherwise have the wherewithal to experience live performance.

1. Vilar originated the Théâtre National Populaire (TNP) in 1951 and ran it until 1963. With the Avignon Festival, which he created in 1947, the TNP was meant to be understood as a public service.

Figure 1. (previous page) La Vie secrète des vieux *(The Secret Life of Old People). Directed and conceived by Mohamed El Khatib. La Chartreuse de Villeneuve lez Avignon, 15 July 2024. (Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage—Festival d'Avignon)*

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Rodrigues also foregrounds productions helmed by directors and devisors who work with nontheatre professionals, programming them alongside the work of such internationally renowned directors as Krzysztof Warlikowski, who this year in the Honor Court of the Papal Palace directed actors from Poland's National Theatre in his own adaptation of J.M. Coetzee's 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello*. The long-standing festival commitment to what one might call "community theatre," very different from Warlikowski's Polish extravaganza and reinforced since Rodrigues came on board in 2023, gives voice to those who are rarely or never represented onstage. It extends the notion of where theatre can happen, who can make it, and whose words can be spoken.

The smartest, most charming, and most moving of such community theatrical creations was Mohamed El Khatib's documentary *La Vie secrète des vieux* (The Secret Life of Old People),[2] which El Khatib created from interviews with elderly and nursing home personnel, people experiencing the reality of homes for the aged—more lugubriously called in French *les mouroirs* (death camps). El Khatib queried his subjects cum collaborators about love and desire. With exquisite comic timing, seven of them, residents all over 76 years of age—one in a wheelchair, one holding onto a walker—performed what they had themselves divulged to the interviewer about sex and love in late life. From still wanting "it" to still getting "it," they did not shy away from sharing their most intimate secrets—"it" being among the fundamental ways of proclaiming their aliveness. "I used to wear stockings to seduce, now I wear them to compress," sighed Jacqueline (age 91), while Jean-Paul, reflecting on the suicide of a fellow amorous witness, raged: "Today it's the children who won't allow their parents to fall in love." Yasmine, the deceptively shy caretaker who accompanies them in life as onstage, ended the show by deconstructing their stereotypes about her. The residents assumed, because her origins are North African, that she must be adept at belly dancing and preparing couscous. She performed, instead, a spot-on imitation of Céline Dion, belting out the theme song from *Titanic*. The message was clear: death is as inevitable as Atlantic shipwrecks, but "hearts go on" and, until the encounter with a metaphoric iceberg, old people still have lives to live, things to learn, and most of all in this production, the will to "get some."

During the curtain call, the actor-elders, some moved to tears as they joined hands and gazed at one another, appeared touched not solely by the audience's enthusiastic reception, but also by the realization of having created together, beyond the walls of the mouroir, something alive. In the show, they also paid tribute to a cast member who had passed away during the rehearsal period. In programming this piece, Rodrigues confirmed his conviction that theatre can be life-renewing, life-altering, even freeing.

El Khatib's cautionary tale about the obtuseness of warehousing old people as though they were brainless and sexless was in line with the progressive thrust of Caroline Guiela Nguyen's *Lacrima*, a multimedia production that portrayed the work of behind-the-scenes artisans responsible for some of the world's most precious and intricately realized couture fashion. For Nguyen, progressivism means speaking out for those oppressed by globalized capitalism and the ever-present and even more insidious violence of empire. Now head of Strasbourg's National Theatre, Nguyen has defended progressive themes before: memorializing, for example, the survivors of French colonization in South East Asia (*Saïgon*, 2019). She has also celebrated in a dystopian vision of the future a community that holds itself together through empathy for cultural difference (*Fraternité*, 2021). Like El Khatib, she is interested in writing and directing plays to make visible what has been made invisible by social hierarchy, greed, and Western imperialist mentalities.

Nguyen constructs *Lacrima* around three spaces: Paris (the haute couture headquarters), Alençon (the lacemaking atelier), and Mumbai (the embroidery workshop), layering the latter two into the Paris setting via live feed and recorded video. She condemns the global luxury market's damage to the health of its tailors, lacemakers, and embroiderers who, in thrall to the beauty and excitement of their work, lose their sense of agency to a faceless, nameless British princess, who

2. Translations of dialog and performance titles are by the authors.

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Figure 2. Lacrima*, written and directed by Caroline Guiela Nguyen. (Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage—Festival d'Avignon)*

has commissioned the nearly unrealizable wedding dress that both captivates and crushes the plays' creative protagonists. Though we never see her—the princess "appears" onstage as a disembodied voice via Zoom, represented only by the crest and shield of the British Royal family—this icon of empire wields the power to break the lives and bodies of those working to serve it/her.

Focusing on the forgotten or "little" people of global capitalism and the destructiveness of imperialism, Nguyen zeroed in on what the obsessive and stressful nature of this kind of work can do to mental health and family relationships, potentially alienating neglected daughters and enraging partners who feel overshadowed. The structural violence of global hierarchies, for example, seeps into the domestic violence that almost kills Marion, the head of the French workshop and the central figure of the drama—a drama that unfolds as an old-fashioned flashback and builds on suspenseful encounters between Zoom-connected characters. The most popular production of the festival, *Lacrima* combined the kind of human-interest story typical of the best television series with the fine details of a documentary and the juicy characters often found in melodramas. It also underscored the vulnerability of women who outclass and outperform their husbands.

Nguyen was one of the first in the lineup of many women artists whose work was presented in the 2024 festival. There have never been, in fact, as many women creators and directors invited to the main stages of Avignon as there were in 2024. Indeed, the festival opened spectacularly with a performance by the controversial, iconoclastic, and inconvenient Spanish artist Angélica Liddell, who, in *Dämon* (Devil), washed her genitals on the vast stage of the Papal Palace and threw the dirty water on the walls of the ancient home of the popes. It is hard to imagine a more potent put-down of patriarchy than hers. Rodrigues's support of Liddell and so many other women creators attested to his commitment to feminist ideals. Even as women are losing ground—there are, for example, fewer women legislators in France now than 10 years ago—giving women creators equal stage time enacted a vision of equal opportunity. Nevertheless, the gut-wrenching focus on sexual abuse and exploitation in so many of their productions provided a terrifying reminder that women still have a long way to go, even to just feel safe.

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Figure 3. Mothers: A Story for Wartime*, directed and conceived by Marta Górnicka. Cour d'Honneur du Palais des Papes, 11 July 2024. (Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage—Festival d'Avignon)*

French theatre has long been concerned with the extraordinary number of reported femicides—that is, the planned or impulsive killing of wives, girlfriends, or random women, and the legal system that excuses men and abets such violence. Many of the Spanish-language plays invited to the festival explored these murders and the many forms of abuse endured by women—as well as women's ability to resist. They spoke of figurative and literal prison-houses, of beatings, and lost opportunities, but also of spectacular communal acts of resistance, as in Uruguayan Tamara Cubas's performance piece, *Sea of Silence*, and Argentinian Lola Arias's cabaret show, *Los días afuera* (The Days Outside). In the latter, the multifaceted, prolific, and award-winning artist directed formerly incarcerated drug "mules." Once forced into carrying drugs across borders as a way to survive, in Avignon these performers exuberantly sang and danced an ode to the freedom they had learned in jail.

At the other end of the emotional spectrum, in many staged readings from the Francophone Caribbean—produced in both the fringe festival and the official festival and comprising a special homage to Caribbean theatre—women authors attended to the destruction that rape had brought into their lives as well as to their countries. The Martinican-descended playwrights Yasmine Modestine, in *L'Origine du café* (The Origin of Coffee), and Fabienne Kanor, in *La Grande chambre* (The Big Room), alluded to the shame felt by women whose history clearly includes sexual abuse at the hands of the French plantocracy. The Haitian Andrise Pierre in *La Petite fille* (The Little Girl) featured a child protagonist who—like the central character of another Haitian work, Stéfanie François's *Fifi, les tambours et les étoiles* (Fifi, Drums and Stars)—looked like prey to every man who saw her. These works, chillingly echoing the macho gang mentality in Haiti, portrayed rape as a means for formerly colonized men to exert some kind of perverse control in a society where chaos is king.

Of all the productions dealing with rape, the most relentlessly gruesome, *Mothers: A Song for Wartime*, condemned rape as a weapon of war. Directed by the Polish artist Marta Górnicka and performed by a chorus of one little girl and 21 Polish, Ukrainian, and Belarusian adult women—the latter two groups now exiled to Poland—the production pounded out in rhythmic chants the horror of being war targets, of losing sons, of being separated from mothers and fathers. The insistent

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Figure 4. Hécube, pas Hécube *(Hecuba, Not Hecuba). Written and directed by Tiago Rodrigues. Carrière de Boulbon, 1 July 2024. (Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage—Festival d'Avignon)*

chorus chided Europeans for paying more attention to cat videos than to the war and for losing interest in how Ukrainians are serving as buffers against the invasion of Europe by Vladimir Putin, with his dangerous dreams of conquest. This piece asks the audience to consider not only the devastation that war wreaks, but also how war is often the result of leadership that props itself up with myths of lost splendor and pure origins.

While so many productions called attention to the abuse of women, Rodrigues's own contribution to the festival, which he wrote and directed, staged a woman's strength. *Hécube, pas Hécube* (Hecuba, Not Hecuba) also called attention to another neglected victim of bankrupt social institutions: a child with autism. Performed at nightfall in the haunting space of the Boulbon granite quarry, this stark and sculptural production transported the audience back and forth from a rehearsal space to contemporary halls of justice to ancient Troy. *Hécube* weaves the story of Nadia Roger (a character based on an actual Swiss woman) into Euripides's *Hecuba*, with both Nadia and the Greek queen fighting to save their children. Only Nadia succeeds, finally able to extricate Otis, her son, from the state-sponsored institution for neurodiverse children that had been abusing him for over a year. She also triumphantly convinces a state prosecutor to investigate the overarching structure that made such abuse possible.

Rodrigues's play within a play embeds Euripides's Greek tragedy in a fictional theatre company's production, borrowing dialog from Euripides's treatment of Hecuba's tragic loss of children and husband during the rout of Troy. Nadia, the theatre company's leading actor, plays Hecuba in the company's production, while at the same time channeling Hecuba's dignity and strength as she struggles with both the legal system and the institutional authorities who have beaten and starved her child. Actors from the Comédie Française, for whom Rodrigues drafted the play, handled the complexities of switching between classical tragedy and contemporary drama with subtlety and immense skill. In the fictional rehearsals, the actors sometimes stepped out of their Greek roles and played themselves, commenting on the rehearsal process that was interrupted by Nadia's need to appear in court. Rodrigues's layering provides a meditation, as often the case in his plays, on how theatre functions, on its ability to create and sustain a supportive collective—out of which a civic chorus might emerge organically to effect change.

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Figure 5. Absalon, Absalon!*, an adaptation of Faulkner's novel by Séverine Chavrier. La Fabrica, 3 July 2024. (Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage—Festival d'Avignon)*

The festival's spotlight on the Caribbean demonstrates that Rodrigues understands French territory as more than a "Hexagon," and French history as painfully haunted by slavery and colonization.[3] Séverine Chavrier, the director of the Comedy of Geneva, created *Absalon, Absalon!* (Absalom, Absalom!) for the festival in her second foray as adaptor and director of William Faulkner. Chavrier's five-hour production brought Rodrigues's concern about racism to the fore—in one of the festival's most innovative and thought-provoking works—by using Faulkner's Southern Gothic to address fraught questions of representation of race on French stages as well as "race" as a category in the European imaginary. The French, though they officially recognize that the concept of biological "race" is a fiction, do not escape racist stereotypes or racial segregation in the arts.

Absalon, Absalon! included a number of actors of color, in keeping with the story of enslavement and miscegenation in the American South, but the production also integrated their personal histories into Chevrier's multifaceted approach to Faulkner's convoluted and murky narration. The piece was more successful, ultimately, as a way for the acting company to work through questions of representation and race in Europe than as a persuasive adaptation of Faulkner's America. Hip hop dancing, an African-descended solo musician linking the scenes, the powerful questioning of a Black actress on what it means to be a mixed-race West Indian—again implying years of rape by white French planters—bring into focus the esthetic and personal stakes confronting Euro-Black artists. Chevrier's indirect portrayal of "race" in Europe via Faulkner is likely part of Rodrigues's overall strategy for producing consequential works that spark discussion and nudge his audiences out of a state of complacency. He has, indeed, a capacious appetite for innovative form, including the arts of obliqueness and allusion—as long as the subject matter speaks to thorny social and political issues.

3. The Hexagon is the name for the French mainland, to distinguish it from greater France that also has overseas departments. It references the six-sided shape of the country.

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Figure 6. Qui Som? *(Who Are We?) by the new circus group Baro d'evel. Cour du Lycée Saint-Joseph, 13 July 2024. (Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage—Festival d'Avignon)*

Rodrigues's antiracism collides with the assertion of national identity that obsesses so many conservative politicians. Adherents of the French far right, like the far right everywhere, want to reclaim strict borders and strict identity markers, and believe that this is possible. They instrumentalize fears about immigration and the arrival of the "others" to their electoral benefit. Yet France has always already been a country born of the mixing of different peoples. The "others" have, of course, been arriving at least since the Romans breached the Rubicon in 49 BCE. Through his festival, Rodrigues, the first non-French director, refused repugnant notions of borders and sick dreams of cultural purity. In programming immigrants and non-French artists on various prestigious stages in Avignon, he claimed not only his and France's European-ness, but also a cosmopolitanism that included many languages and cultures. In fact, under his direction, the festival has begun to highlight a different language group every year. In 2024, as noted, the invited language was Spanish (but Catalan had a role as well, which says something about Rodrigues's definition of inclusivity and his ability to weather volatile debates around identity). Next year, the invited language will be Arabic, a show of support for the millions of bilingual speakers in France whose other language is dialectical Arabic. Given the Islamophobia of the far right, which dismisses and disrespects such communities as "not French," the choice of Arabic as a major festival language sends its own signal of inclusion.

Among the abundance of invited productions in Spanish and Catalan, one stood out above all the others: the ecologically minded Franco-Catalan company Baro d'evel's *Qui Som*? (Who Are We?). It seems fitting to end by praising Baro d'evel's "new circus" piece—a multilayered and politicized concatenation of acrobats, dancers, singers, musicians, and ceramicists, whose energizing generosity and self-deprecatory lucidity counters the narcissistic circus of contemporary politics. The same night that French commentators hysterically focused on Donald Trump's miraculous recovery of his own image after the assassination attempt (and not on the violent climate of his campaign that helped breed the violence against him in the first place), Baro d'evel's 14 performers, including a child and a dog, staged the disequilibrium in which contemporary humans live. In their production, performers kept falling over, always resetting themselves only to slip, slide,

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and end up again on the floor. Covered in clay dust, adorning their heads with malleable clay pots that they turned into eerie faces and quirky hats, some with bright orange Mickey Mouse ears, the performers—Beckettian but uncomplicatedly hopeful—kept on keeping on. Their joyful determination and communal spirit suggested that no living being can ever make it alone. Their penultimate effort had them working together, sweeping a mountain of crushed plastic bottles off the playing space, itself a kind of beachfront promising new beginnings. From there, in a percussive fanfare, they led the audience in an ebullient parade out of the theatre and into the courtyard with the rallying cry: "Never give up; look each other in the face; don't be afraid of having to search for solutions." Like clay, they seemed to say, humans can transform into better, more useful, shapes.

In writing this article postfestival, with the distance of a few months between productions and reporting, it has become even clearer that the shapes—both political and ethical—that our societies will take are very much in flux and hotly contested. Far right movements continue their rise in many Western countries. France, having managed to form a leftist coalition to block Marine Le Pen's anti-immigrant National Rally party from gaining an absolute majority in the French legislature, has proven ungovernable. When President Emmanuel Macron did finally name Michel Barnier as prime minister in September, much to the chagrin of many of the leftist voters who felt unrepresented by this centrist choice, Barnier's government lasted no longer than three months, collapsing under the weight of a no confidence vote on 4 December 2024.

Furthermore, France and the world have watched, in horror and disgust, the unfolding of the trial of Dominique Pelicot, a resident of southern France accused by his wife Gisèle Pelicot of drugging her and inviting over 200 men to rape her over the course of nine years, while he filmed the assaults.[4] If Madame Pelicot has become something of a heroine for allowing the release of the damning tapes in order to demonstrate the brutality of French misogyny, the case has also demonstrated the extent to which all women still face violence at the hands of men. In the United States, the anti-immigrant Donald Trump—a man found liable in civil court for how he spoke about the accusation of sexually assaulting E. Jean Carroll—will return to power in large part because men (and some women) from a variety of backgrounds swung right and voted for him instead of a woman. The "manosphere" influencers seemed to have convinced adherents that Trump would champion the brand of masculinity they perceived as under attack.

Just as Rodrigues's festival has a global reach, so do the social and political issues he addresses: anti-immigrant sentiment, violence against women, silenced minorities, and the difficulty of slowing down the juggernaut of neoliberal philosophies and policies that dictate so much of our geopolitical condition. As much as his curatorial choices for the festival felt pertinent on those long days of July, when the sunlight lingered over the outdoor stages of Avignon well into the evening, they feel even more relevant now in December, given what has transpired geopolitically in the past few months. Rodrigues's festival, committed to being in dialog with its time, has proven to be pitch perfect, almost prescient. If theatre is to have a role in providing space for questioning and debate, as well as for trying on and experimenting with possible solutions for a healthy collective future, Rodrigues, in his expert direction, has established his festival as the preeminent place for creative exploration of today's most acute issues.

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4. Pelicot was declared guilty and sentenced to 20 years in prison on 19 December 2024. Fifty other codefendants were also found guilty.

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