

THE FESTIVAL D'AVIGNON – A SHARED CULTURAL EXPERIENCE AS A WAY FORWARD

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Abstract: This article is a reflection on the 76th edition of the Festival d'Avignon. It provides a brief introduction to the issue of festivalisation in France and presents the research conducted in this field in relation to theatre audiences in the past three years. It also includes shorter reflections on productions by international theatre makers that the author had the opportunity to see at the festival. It analyses the context in which these productions are presented to the public in the festival programme, in dramaturgical and thematic lines (for example, the themes of power, manipulation, sacrifice, defiance of fate, emotions that bind people together or make them go insane), and it also highlights the return of the theatre makers to the basic means of theatre expression instead of complex effects and technologies. There is an imbalance stemming from this: often, productions have an epic and storytelling non-dramatic basis, but their stage form goes back to a theatre of simple and effective images that are based on symbolic theatre signs and acting action. The Festival d'Avignon adheres to the concept of storytelling with initiatory potential and thus can engage theatrically in a better real world. In 2022, it was a post-pandemic challenge for both the theatre and society.

Key words: Festival d'Avignon, Olivier Py, Tiago Rodrigues, Alessandro Sierra, Kirill Serebrennikov, Jan Martens, Dada Masilo, Hanane Hajj Ali, Meng Jinghui, Rober Sandoz, Christophe Rauck

Festivals, especially international ones, offer, besides the presentation and promotion of the works of art and creative professionals, mainly the experience of a shared cultural experience. This is an important synergistic and intercultural aspect of mutual exchange – between creative professionals, visitors, organisers, the venue as a specific environment, etc. A lot of countries recognise the significance of such exchange and understand it as part of cultural diplomacy, the development of their own cultural policies and creative industries, generating economic and social benefits. Slovakia still lags behind in this respect, with domestic festivals receiving symbolic support and patronage rather than actual support in terms of strategic planning and development activities by the government or municipalities. The global pandemic that has crippled the live collective arts for almost two years, and the ongoing economic and war crises, raise further questions in this context.

However, some countries are aware of the potential of the festivals, and their role in the rebuilding of culture in the post-pandemic period. This is demonstrated by the research of Emmanuel Négrier, director of research at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) and director of the Centre for Political and Social Studies at the University of Montpellier, who has long been involved in the issue of cultural festivals, and sociologist Aurélien Djakouane. With the Department of Studies, Foresight and Statistics (DEPS) of the Ministry of Culture and the France Festivals

network, a comprehensive mapping exercise was performed to determine the importance of visitors to French festivals – SoFest! The results of the research, which had been launched before the pandemic and completed in 2021, are to be found in a publication entitled *Festivals, territoire et société* [Festivals, territory and society], and provide the reader with some interesting data. In France, there are currently almost 6,800 official and supported festivals of different sizes and focuses. The high figure proves a continuing trend in the country's cultural life, namely that cultural events have been among the driving forces behind cultural policy over the past four decades, particularly under the tenure of the culture minister Jack Lang. Indeed, festival productions boost national cultural sector, educational and other social activities and contribute to a large number of touring performances in different countries or to new co-productions and co-financing opportunities.¹

As Emmanuel Négrier points out in an interview with *Movs.World* magazine, the logic behind the festivalisation of France is the logic of democratisation through supply: "Before Jack Lang, the development of the festival world was done in a scattered way, it seemed linked not to territories, but to people who create their festival or to local considerations. For example, historically there are festivals in all casino towns, as 25% of their revenue must be spent on culture. From the 1980s, Jack Lang focused on events – the Music Festival, Heritage Days, etc. Why? Because he knows that the effect of his policies in favor of buildings and annual programs will take much longer than the political mandate. So, the event was there to both give a taste and attract the public to a practice that many were not used to. It was a logic of democratization through the offer, a festival offer with all that that could entail of decompartmentalization and relaxation in the relationship to culture. What Jack Lang did, had cascading effects on local authorities. The latter said to themselves that offering a festival to their population only had advantages for the brand image of the city or region, and vis-à-vis voters."²

However, the epidemiological crisis has also led to the rupture and discontinuity of the country's cultural and festival life. At present, it is quite difficult to get a sense of the overall condition of culture in France. For example, cinemas have lost more than 30% of their audiences, festivals were completely suspended in 2020 and restarted in 2021.³ Only this year have they aspired to a complete rebirth without sanitary restrictions, but not without problems in the form of a threat of a recurrent pandemic outbreak, cancelled shows, rising costs⁴ or staff shortages.

One such event that has already gained an established and prestigious position on the European cultural and artistic map is the summer Festival d'Avignon.⁵ In 2020,

¹ For more see the website of the Ministry of Culture of the French Republic: <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/en/Thematiques/Etudes-et-statistiques/Publications/Collections-d-ouvrages/Questions-de-culture-2000-2022/Festivals-territoire-et-societe>.

² NÉGRIER, E. – HALLY, S. The magic of the word festival and the device is always present. [Interview]. In *Movs.World*, 2 July 2022. [online]. [cit. 10 August 2022]. Available at: <https://movs.world/culture/the-magic-of-the-word-festival-and-the-device-is-always-present/>.

³ See FRAISSARD, G. We need to ask what it is that makes us go out to theaters and museums. In *Le Monde*, 24 June 2022. [online]. [cit. 10 August 2022]. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2022/06/24/we-need-to-ask-what-it-is-that-makes-us-go-out-to-theaters-and-museums_5987894_23.html.

⁴ The Avignon festival budget has risen to EUR 16,7 million.

⁵ According to Emmanuel Négrière and Aurélien Djakouane's typology, the Festival d'Avignon could even be described as emblematic. In their publication *Festivals, territory and society*, the authors list seven

its full format was cancelled; the organisers at least offered the public a week-long version in the autumn. At the time, the festival's director, Olivier Py, recalled its beginnings and Jean Vilar's idea of "encounters" in the form of the Avignon Art Week: "Upon its creation, the Festival wasn't called "Festival d'Avignon" right away. It had a more modest, yet more poetic, name: "Une Semaine d'art en Avignon" ("An art week in Avignon"), and Jean Vilar, its founder, never subscribed entirely to the title of Festival. Later, he dreamt of changing back to another name, using the word "encounters," which he saw as the core aspect of the event. Yet while "Une Semaine d'art en Avignon" was a sort of vague dream carried by Vilar and his team's enthusiasm, all the fundamental ideas that would make the Festival were there already: to change art in order to change the world, to change the relationship with the audience in order to redefine democracy, to invent a new theatre and a new way of being citizens, and beyond to push the boundaries of decentralisation, of cultural public service, and of the democratisation of knowledge."⁶

In 2021, the organisers attempted a pluralistic restart of the festival with a rich international offer of theatre productions by big names, but when it comes to attendance figures and participation of foreign theatre companies, the situation was still very fragile. This year, from 7 to 26 July, the impressive 76th edition took place, borrowing the stock phrase "il était une fois" [once upon a time] used in the beginning of fairy tales, bad stories, and political storytelling and almost all the tickets were sold out.

The festival has once again become an open forum for theatre performances, debates on theatre and also for film, literature, music, dance, exhibitions, and installations. For several years now, the main programme has been featuring performances for children and a guided tour through the history of the festival. In this way, visitors are familiarised with its development and its gradual blending with the city and its inhabitants. This summer, an exhibition of large-scale photographs from Villard's time has also been set up in Jardin des Doms, a popular outdoor recreational area. A tastefully and thoughtfully displayed social sculpture, through evocative archival photographs, brought the festival's beginnings to life and transferred them to the present. Several photographs were exhibited in the same location where their original shots had been taken. Alongside artists from France and Western Europe, the festival featured ensembles and performers from Afghanistan, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, South Africa, and China. The Eastern European bloc was represented by theatre professionals and dancers from Ukraine and Russia. The country composition suggests that the audiences were given an opportunity to familiarise themselves more closely with culture and what arouses the curiosity of the theatre makers from Muslim countries.

The opening performance, which was staged on the Cour d'Honneur of the Papal Palace, was a production of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's short story *The Black Monk*. Its director, Kirill Serebrennikov, belongs to the progressive and critically engaged strand of Russian theatre. His presence certainly aroused the interest of the entire theatre community and the public. For several years, a political ban was imposed on

categories of festivals Emblems, Large Formats, Brands, Public Centers, Volunteers, Small Formats and Off-Season.

⁶ PY, O. *Une Semaine d'art en Avignon*. [online]. [cit. 11 August 2022]. Available at: <https://festival-avignon.com/en/news/une-semaine-d-art-en-avignon-17518#page-content>.



Exhibition of large-scale photographs in Jardin des Doms, Festival d'Avignon 2022. Photo by Elena Knapová.

Serebrennikov to travel and make public presentations of his work abroad. The official reason for his home detention was the artist's financial indiscipline, but back in 2017, during the 16th ceremony of the Europe Theatre Prize, this was not considered a real or true reason by theatre critic, historian, producer, and playwright Marina Davydova. Even then, she made it very clear that political censorship and totalitarian practices were enforced upon politically incorrect filmmakers in Russia.⁷ Kirill Serebrennikov was subsequently given suspended three-year prison sentence for embezzlement in 2020 and was unable to leave Moscow. The ban was only lifted in January 2022, when he was allowed to travel to Hamburg just for the premiere of the co-production of *The Black Monk*. His participation in the Festival d'Avignon with that production had been arranged before the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but nothing was certain: "The Black Monk is a European production by a Russian director. It's a production by the Hamburg-based Talia Theater, and it's a French artist, Olivier Py, who generously invited me to put on a show in the Cour d'Honneur. It's very important to me. It's my first truly international and European project."⁸

⁷ For more see KNOPOVÁ, E. Rozpačitý XVI. ročník Európskej ceny za divadlo v starobyľom, ale aj modernom Ríme. [Astonishing XVI. Annual Europe Theatre Prize Set in Ancient but Modern Europe]. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2018, Vol. 66, Issue 1, p. 100. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/sd-2018-0007>.

⁸ SEREBRENNIKOV, K. – FLANDRIN, M. *Interview with Kirill Serebrennikov*. [online]. [cit. 12 August 2022]. Available at: file: <https://festival-avignon.com/en/edition-2022/programme/the-black-monk-190891>.



The Black Monk. Based on Anton Chekhov's novel. Direction, adaptation and set design Kirill Serebrennikov. Hamburg – Moscow – Avignon 2022. Photo © Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Festival d'Avignon.

The central figure of the production is the mysterious Black Monk, who appears once every thousand years to pass the knowledge of life onto the chosen followers of the higher principles, to disclose to them eternal truth that will enable them to make mankind worthy of the Kingdom of God in a few millennia, thus ridding humanity of the millennia of struggle, sin, and suffering. The story is set in the country estate of the Pesotsky family, where the exhausted poet Andrey Korvin (in Chekhov's story he is a professor) arrives, yearning for perfection and all-round harmony. The poet meets an apparition who encourages him to fulfil his creative destiny, but he soon descends into madness. He sees all the mediocrity, stupidity and herding of his surroundings, soon questions everything, the lines between hallucination and reality are blurred. He feels that everyone around him is a hostile madman, but in reality, it is him going insane.

Kirill Serebrennikov reworked the short story and offered the audience a repetitive story retold from the perspective of three characters – Yegor Pesotsky, his daughter Tanya, and Andrey Korvin (played by three actors), who, in his euphoria of being able to perform great deeds in the name of good, takes Tanya as his wife. However, this only served as a lengthier preparation and reanimation of what the character of the Black Monk had been referring to – the Kantian starry sky above me and the moral law within me, aided by the open-air performance at the Cour d'Honneur. The Black Monk, spectacularly multiplied by sixteen dancers and singers dressed in black, arrives on stage in the last act, with the wind ripping the walls of one of the greenhouses (the greenhouses allude to the Pesotskys' beautiful garden) and psychedelic video projections of celestial bodies follow one another on the walls of the



Futur Proche. Choreography Jan Martens. Set design Joris van Oosterwijk. Video Stijn Pauwels. Antwerp 2022. Photo © Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Festival d'Avignon.

historic Papal Palace. The final words are associated with the director's artistic and civic gesture – a big red heading Stop the War! In this context, Andrew Todd of *The Guardian* pointed out that the Russian director had been under house arrest in Moscow for almost two years. He endured pressures that Western society enjoying a comfortable lifestyle can hardly imagine.⁹ A certain biographical mirroring of the director, like Anton Chekhov earlier on, is evident in the work, and his appeal leaves no one in doubt as to why he found Chekhov's work appealing for the present day.

Another performance given in the courtyard of the Papal Palace, which I attended during the last week of the festival, was *Futur Proche* [Near Future], a dance piece by the Belgian choreographer Jan Martens, performed by fifteen dancers of Opera Ballet Vlaanderen and by the Polish harpsichordist Goska Ispording. It was the harpsichord, which is primarily considered a baroque musical instrument that determined the modern and often amazingly fast rhythm of the dancers' movement on stage. Jan Martens saw potential in the harpsichord, which opened the door for him to explore an unknown realm of music. He rediscovered the musical harpsichord repertoire in the passage of time. In doing so, he also thematised a dance production that was a reflection on how our society today can be restored. It was not only about an ecological perspective, but also about whether and how we can change our bodies, our minds, and our society in times of climate and pandemic crises. Despite emphasising

⁹ TODD, A. Avignon festival review – hit the timewarp gym and dive into a trippy Chekhov. In *The Guardian*, 12 July 2022 [online]. [cit. 12 August 2022]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/jul/12/avignon-festival-review>.



The Sacrifice. Choreography Dada Masilo. Johannesburg 2021. Photo © Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Festival d'Avignon.

its diversity and multiple identities through costumes (the dancers were dressed in recycled, loose, civilian clothes), the ballet ensemble gave a compact and synchronised impression.

Martens abandoned the traditional aestheticised and synchronised movement. The choreography and dance elements were organised by the harpsichord in communication with each dancer's body. A reflection of the theme subsequently grew out of this expression. The dancers moved at a fast pace in various structures in front of, behind, and diagonally across a long wooden bench placed in the centre of the stage. They would use the bench now and then, to rest and reflect, disconnecting them from each other and then connecting them. The final scene was remarkable. For quite a long time, the dancers kept carrying water in buckets to the stage, to fill a vat. They then took turns to ritually bathe in it, conveying a glimpse of the movement and gestures of an exposed/natural human body.

South Africa's award-winning dancer and choreographer Dada Masilo made an appearance with her dance performance. She was introduced to the legendary choreography of *Le Sacre du Printemps* [The Rite of Spring] by Pina Bausch while studying in Brussels. *The Sacrifice* is a continuation of Dada Masilo's choreographic research, this time focusing on Botswana's cultural heritage through an exploration of the concepts of ritual, community, and sacrifice. *The Sacrifice* is a story very loosely inspired by ballet *Le Sacre du Printemps* written by Igor Stravinsky for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes Company in Paris. The original choreography was by Vaslav Nijinsky. Igor Stravinsky gave the work the subtitle *Images from Pagan Russia in Two Parts*. It is characterised by complex rhythms and novel harmony, experimentation in tonality,



Jogging. Text and conception Hanane Hajj Ali. Artistic direction and set design Éric Deniaud. Beirut 2016. Photo © Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Festival d'Avignon.

tension, and dissonance. In particular, the rhythmic element took on an entirely new position in the work as a whole, it was no longer subordinate to melody and form.

Those who were expecting the same innovative approach, a work of stunning pagan drama and ecstatic sacrifice of a maiden to the deity of spring in Dada Masilo production, were disappointed. Though inspired by Igor Stravinsky with the traditional dance of Botswana, it was rather a pleasant jazz concert of a trio of musicians and one singer. The scenic form was aestheticised, slick, with a considerable sentimental touch. The visual element was dominated by a static projection of a dry tree on the backing flat of the scenic space. It was brightened up by coloured lights changing the stage floor into golden sand or green grass. The dancers' costumes were accentuated by natural African colours or by a colour of white sacrificial purity and by a perfect absorption of the change of the lights.

The dance ensemble took the ritual, rhythmic African dance Tswana as a key point of departure, linking it with the movement vocabulary of contemporary dance, thus actually deconstructing it. This could be seen as a deconstruction of a form of collective identity operating on its own conventions, bringing sacrifice to the fore as an act without territorial determination. However, Dada Masilo's concept of *The Sacrifice* might have been appealing by bringing closer the legacy of her African ancestors – their pagan cults, the movement-sound expressions, the tribal event centred on the dramatic situation of sacrificing a living human being to a deity, a form of mysticism. The signs of it could be recognised in the movement register of the dancers, their hand gestures, the energy emanating from the pelvic region and the back, or in the exposed half-naked bodies. Masilo is known for her inventive reinterpretations of

classical ballets such as *Swan Lake*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Giselle*, which she combines with modern dance. However, adding *The Sacrifice* to this list of successful dance productions is debatable.

The theme of sacrifice also inspired Hanane Hajj Ali in her monodrama *Jogging* (one-actor theatre). This Lebanese actress and director based in Beirut is known for her feminine and civically engaged approach. Based on the Medea pattern of sacrificing one's own children, Hanane Hajj Ali told three other stories of contemporary women – mothers.

The performance unfolds as the audience enters the hall. The actress is lying in a jogging gear with a scarf on her head in the middle of the stage, doing articulation exercises. She then stands up and begins to walk, changing her pace, occasionally pausing, or beginning to perform aerobic exercise, using simple props arranged around her on the floor. Her storytelling is interactive and in no time, she earns the audience's trust – joking with them, asking questions – which is an important condition for the success of the performance. The plain and theatrically pure scenic form is impressive in its honesty. The repetitiveness of the internally dynamic actions alludes to the working of (female) stereotypes and the never-ending, often religiously motivated, suffering of the mothers from the Middle Eastern countries and cultures. Mothers who kill their own children or sacrifice them on the altar of wars and conflicts in the name of a higher (political) principle or religion.

In one of the stories of the monodrama, Hanane Hajj Ali shares intimate thoughts that came to her mind when her son was ill with cancer. As a mother at that time, she could not bear to look at her son's pain and wanted to smother him with a pillow to put an end to his suffering. The second story is inspired by infanticide that is still happening in Lebanon. Yvonne poisons herself and her three daughters when she learns of her husband's double life. She leaves him an explanatory video that becomes key evidence of the crime in the court file, but mysteriously disappears from it. As if removing the evidence can erase even tragic human fate, responsibility, and truth. The last story is about Zahra, mother of three sons. Influenced by her own religious radicalisation, she encourages them in their holy struggle and sees their gradual deaths as martyrdom. Two sons die in Lebanon while fighting for the Islamic Resistance Movement; the third sends her a letter from Syria, where he refused to kill civilians, children, and women in the ranks of Hezbollah. He was imprisoned and tortured for it. Only then will Zahra understand that she was complicit in her sons' early deaths through her religious upbringing.

If George Steiner writes in *The Death of Tragedy*¹⁰ that after *The Diary of Anne Frank* it is no longer possible to write any tragedy, the collage story and the character of modern Medea in *Jogging* challenges this proposition. The anagnorisis of all three cases of scenic storytelling ultimately leads to a tragic sentiment. A feeling that viewers understand, even if they do not rationally identify with the characters' actions. The viewer deeply understands what Hanane Hajj Ali is telling with lightness and wit, even the moments of silence when words would have been useless. A world that would not stop killing its children is not a good place to live, and we should do something about it: "you have to understand, / that no one puts their children in

¹⁰ STEINER, G. *The Death of Tragedy*. London : Faber and Faber, 1961.



Yu Hua: *The Seventh Day*. Adaptation and direction Meng Jinghui. Set design Zhang Wu. Beijing 2022. Photo © Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Festival d'Avignon.

a boat / unless the water is safer than the land (...) / no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck / feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled / means something more than journey.”¹¹

Director Meng Jinghui made history at the Festival d'Avignon as the first Chinese director to have appeared here with his production *The Teahouse*. As the theatrologist Miloš Mistrík wrote for the journal *Slovenské divadlo* [The Slovak Theatre], the production aroused controversy: “(...) some productions that had been very well presented ahead of time, delivered a surprisingly controversial outcome. One such production was the mounting of an older play by the Chinese author Lao She *La Maison*

¹¹ Citation from the poem *Home* by Somali-British poet Warsan Shire, whose excerpt was read in the performance.



Roland Schimmelpfennig: *The Soldier and the Ballerina*. Direction Robert Sandoz. Set design Kristelle Paré. Delémont 2022. Photo © Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Festival d'Avignon.

de thé [The Teahouse], from 1956. (...) As was rightly pointed out by *Libération* daily, it is about an attitude. From what could be seen at the festival, the attitude, not an aesthetic perfection, but rather the cause, the purpose for which the production was created, deserves appreciation."¹²

In a similarly controversial vein was his second production that was commissioned directly for the festival, *The Seventh Day*. It is based on the dramatization of an eponymous novel by the writer Yu Hua. A man, Yang Fei, dies, misses his cremation, and in the space-time between being and non-being, he encounters other characters as reminiscences or unresolved business from his past (his ex-wife, a girl-rat, friends), driven by the motivation to find his father, who disappeared under strange circumstances. *The Seventh Day* calls to mind the biblical motif of the creation of the world. The director follows a similar pattern, the story is arranged linearly into seven consecutive days, each introducing a new character and a new revelation of the ordinary life of the hero, perhaps of contemporary Chinese society. But gradually the principle becomes boring, even though the temporal linearity of the narrative is deconstructed by the spatio-temporal indeterminacy. Some scenes are realistic, other resemble a dream or a hazy thought construct, a memory or a figment of the mind in the liminal phase. The protagonist is once present on stage, in the next instance he is smoking and smiling at the other characters from the heights of the walls of the majestic Cloistered Car-

¹² MISTRÍK, M. Avignon abounding in new projects. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2019, Vol. 67, Issue 3, pp. 280–281. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/sd-2019-0016>.

melite Convent, where the show was given. Strange creatures flit through the space, performing strange acts, dressed in spacesuits, some wearing face masks.

This time, the visual concept was a little more intimate than in *The Teahouse* but was again characterised by using several monumental-looking visual elements. The stage was dominated by a giant metal crusher and numerous artificial human skeletons. Throughout the performance nothing happens to them, in fact, they get in the way of the actors, and a few of the installed skeletons are inadvertently knocked over. Only at the end tennis balls appear from somewhere and flood the acting space, unidentifiable material spurts out of the shredder, the characters sit at one table eating Chinese noodles as if at the Last Supper.¹³ Is it Chekhov's gun that must go off? Or is the director, openly espousing the avant-garde and the Dadaists, playing with reality, fiction, and the audience?

Among the domestic, French productions on the programme were, among others, Ronald Schimmelpfennig's *The Soldier and the Ballerina*, directed by Robert Sandoz, and Shakespeare's *Richard II*, directed by Christophe Rauck. The former production was dedicated to children's audiences. The story of two toys, taken from a tale by Hans Christian Andersen, one made of tin, the other of paper, begins, as it were, from the end. They meet in a boy's room during his birthday party, but the boy no longer seems interested in them: "For my sake, throw them in the fire." So, they start telling their stories again and differently to change them. The wind blows the paper ballerina into the air and the tin soldier is thrown down into the water. Both experience great adventures and dangers. The Soldier experiences a passport check in the sewers, where scary rats guard the border and check migrants' passports; the Ballerina manages to escape the family of a possessive magpie. Both are at the mercy of the world outside a children's bedroom window and the earth elements – fire, wind, clouds, storms, and rain. However, everything they experience can be understood as a guide for children to understand and make decisions in the real world, where everything is far from ideal. We are unable to cope in our relationships with friends, parents or with the reactions of those around us to our differences.

The director, in the playwright's intent, retained the voices of both the male and female characters. The scenic design concept facilitated horizontal and vertical movement of the actors, they could literally fly in the air or swim in the water. Sophisticated solutions brought about imaginative mise-en-scène and interaction with the audience. Playing with children's imagination, believing in the magic of a theatre sign and storytelling was important. If Olivier Py, during his directorship, repeatedly emphasised the power of stories and their potential to change our future, Robert Sandoz's production tallied with the concept in every way. *The Soldier and the Ballerina* is an initiatory story in which its two characters decide to retell their stories together and change their endings through theatre. They share this gift or belief throughout the performance with their audience, adults, and children alike.

Rauck's production of *Richard II* was perceived by domestic audiences and journalists in the context of the staging tradition of the tragedy in France, especially by Jean Vilar (Avignon, 1947) and Arienne Mnouchkine (Cartoucherie, 1981). Although it does not fit in the list of ground-breaking productions, it has introduced an inter-

¹³ The main character's story unfolds with his death while eating noodles.



William Shakespeare: *Richard II*. Direction Christophe Rauck. Set design Alain Lagarde. Nanterre 2002. Photo © Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Festival d'Avignon.

esting form devoid of historicising elements. With respect to the visual element, it worked brilliantly with lighting design and 3D projections of parliament and crashing sea waves. Two portable grandstands were placed in front of them, which could be connected, disconnected, rotated, creating a space for actors, who were divided into two camps, distinctive by their costumes. This eased the plot dynamics considerably, as did the venue designation using electronic boards.

Indeed, *Richard II* is not a tragedy in which much happens. It is more about talking, anticipation, analysis. The story is about the downfall of the narcissist King Richard, who believes in his divine predestination until he stops listening to his own people. He is imprisoned by his own nobles and while in captivity, he is forced to abdicate. His opponent is his cousin Henry Bolingbroke, who is destined for the kingship not only by his blood or intellect, but also by his political dexterity and the popular support won. Both, however, had their majesty stained with homicides and scheming. Micha Lescot, dressed in a tasteful white costume, impressively rendered Richard as he toyed with both his thoughts and the royal crown. At times, this play of moods will challenge Bolingbroke himself in his claim to the royal throne. His final melancholy monologue in his white undershirt, captured in detail by the camera, is the monologue of a king – a fool who no longer wields power, only words. He thus perfectly portrayed the king's two bodies: the physical mortal one and the other, the political spiritual one, which mortal weaknesses cannot defeat. In his concept, Christophe Rauck alerted to another important and currently relevant element of the play, and that is the people. It is as strong a character in the production as the two rivals are. The people is synonymous to a country ruled by power given not only by God



William Shakespeare: *The Tempest*. Translation, adaptation, direction, set design, costumes, sound and lights Alessandro Serra. Torino 2022. Photo © Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Festival d'Avignon.

but also by the people. At the same time, he reminds those in power to be vigilant because the people can support them as well as revolt against them if they pay no heed to the people.

Another production of Shakespeare's play that attracted public attention was *The Tempest* by the Italian director Alessandro Serra. This piece of magical imagery and playful acting opens with a simple but compelling scene. Spirit Ariel lies in the middle of an empty stage, his movements controlled by a black veil that hovers over him like the sea surface. Viewers find themselves on an island reigned by magic tricks that gradually consume all its inhabitants, castaways, and spectators alike. It is as if the director is following Shakespeare's line from Act 4, Scene 1: "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep."

Alessandro Serra's adaptation faithfully follows Shakespeare's text and draws the viewer into the plot, enchanted as much as the characters in the story are. In doing so, he uses a minimum of scenic elements, technology, and props, relying on simple, effective solutions. At times, the viewers see comic acting with costume changes or with an ordinary board (Trinculo and Stefano), at other times they are immersed in a smoky haze in which a feast is served by Roman deities wearing masks. It is a production about power, controlling other people, magic, but also forgiveness. The native Caliban resembles Tadeusz Kantor's Bio-object: a half living Black man, a half wicker basket growing out of his back, his alcoholic scene is an anatomy of ecstatic madness, the subjugation of one culture by another. The rendition of Ariel by a female is also innovative. This spirit simply loves magic tricks – sometimes he would come up with ideas on his own, other times he would childishly pout.



Olivier Py and Tiago Rodrigues – outgoing and new artistic director of the Festival d'Avignon. Avignon 2022. Photo © Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Festival d'Avignon.

With respect to its interpretation, *The Tempest* is either understood as Shakespeare's tribute to the theatre or his farewell to it. In the former case, the world changes by means of the play and magic tricks and there is no need to do any more magic, so Prospero puts his magic wand aside. In the latter case, the state induced by Prospero's magic works only on his island, that is, in the world of the theatre image, but it cannot change the world around him.¹⁴ Prospero's appeal – change the world through theatre – has become the leitmotif and aspiration of the Festival d'Avignon in Olivier Py's time. In the context of the festival's further development, it will be interesting to see how the new director, Tiago Rodrigues, approaches its artistic and social programming as of the festival's next edition. On his departure, Olivier Py wished

¹⁴ VEDRAL, J. *Lámání Prosperovy hůlky*. Praha : Pražská scéna – Akademie múzických umění v Praze, 2020, p. 10.

Rodrigues purity of heart,¹⁵ and strength to cope with all the pressures, but especially with the new artistic challenges of a festival that for years has been sustaining and refining Jean Vilar's idea of "théâtre populaire."

Translated by Mária Švecová

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¹⁵ In this context, it is worth mentioning that Tiago Rodrigues was presented as actor and director during the 2018 Europe Theatre Prize Theatrical Realities event, where he was awarded the Europe Prize Theatrical Realities with his intimate performance *By Heart*. The performance was a very intimate and risky matter. In it, Rodrigues interacted with the audiences face to face, teaching them to memorise an unfamiliar poem with their hearts.