

French Stage Welcomes Foreign-Born Playwrights

In France, as in the United States, there are politicians who rail against immigrants, but the French stage continues its long tradition of welcoming foreign-born playwrights and often forgetting that they were not French at the outset. Currently Cuban-French playwright and novelist Eduardo Manet serves as president of the Conseil Permanent des Écrivains, the writers' council of SNAC (national union of authors and composers). Among immigrant authors of what Martin Esslin called the theatre of the absurd, I found a new production of Spanish-French playwright Fernando Arrabal in theatre listings for spring 2012. My pre-Easter trip to Paris also gave me the opportunity to become acquainted with works by two younger writers, the Algerian-French Rayhana and Italian-French playwright Fabio Marra.

Dramatist, novelist, poet and essayist Fernando Arrabal, now in his 80s, is one of the most staged playwrights around the world from both Spain and France [See WES 11.3: 109-10; 14.3: 119-21]. Perhaps his best known play, part of his "Panic" theatre, is the two-hand tour de force *The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria*. It premiered in 1967 in Paris, at the Théâtre Montparnasse-Gaston Baty under the direction of Jorge Lavelli. Born in Argentina, Lavelli has been instrumental in introducing many Hispanic authors to the French stage.

During the waning years of the Franco regime, which ended in November 1975, Arrabal was unwelcome in Spain. Indeed he was imprisoned there briefly in 1967; it took an international outcry to get him released. *The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria* reached the New York stage in 1976, at La Mama, under the direction of Tom O'Horgan and was performed in Barcelona the following year. I was able to attend its belated Madrid premiere in 1983. In that I had seen the play on stage and had taught it in university classes a number of times, I did not anticipate difficulties in following the dialogue at the Paris staging on Sunday, 1 April. That assumption was quite wrong. In a phone conversation, Luce Arrabal alerted me that the text had been changed, but she offered no judgment on whether the modification was acceptable or not to her husband, who was in Montreal when I arrived in France. Arrabal has been generous in approving use of his work, so I doubt that he protested the rewriting of his text.

The Sunday matinee I attended at the Théâtre de l'Épée de Bois, Cartoucherie, a co-production with La Piccola Compagnia della Magnolia from Turin, was a final performance for this particular run. It would next be performed in Lyon. Graziella Lacagnina, who played "La Tía" in the version of *The Architect*... written and directed by Antonio Díaz-Florián, kindly clarified for me that the trilingual company - Italian, French, Spanish - had begun working with the Arrabal text in 2007 and that their script had evolved over time. By the spring of 2012 Arrabal's two character cast had been expanded to three characters and a curious straw puppet on a broomstick. The puppet represented the Architect, who is held by a tall, veiled woman dressed in black (Fabrizia Gariglio), presumably the mother figure from the original Architect's role-playing within his role. The Emperor (Luca Busnengo) is dressed in a military uniform from the 1930s. A final scene introduces the Spanish Republican flag, symbol of the duly-elected government that was overthrown by Franco's forces after a bloody civil war. In the original play, there are no overt references to the Spanish Civil War.

To create this new text, Florián must have read a great deal about Arrabal ' s life and that of his father, a military officer who refused to join Franco ' s Fascist coup, was imprisoned, and ultimately disappeared. Much of Arrabal ' s early writing reflects his anguish about the father he can barely remember and how his conservative mother opposed her husband. There are references to the formidable mother image in the original text of *The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria* as well as the desire of the Emperor to kill her, but largely missing from this new version is the rapid, comic action with its nonstop role-playing within the role that permeates Arrabal ' s script. Florián ' s text develops a dream-like ambience but shuns the playful, surreal qualities of the source play.

The intentions of Florián and the acting company are clearly stated in their press dossier. Considering the Architect to be the Emperor ' s double, they determined that the straw-broomstick puppet would allow for a deeper development of the main character ' s complex role. Moreover the veiled figure of the mother would add a deeper and cruder dimension to that character. The Spanish Civil War would become the backdrop for the play. Not explained is the function of the Tía (Aunt); perhaps she is inspired by the aunt in Arrabal ' s early novel *Baal Babylone*, but in any event her role here, with little dialogue and limited motion, is secondary to the Emperor-military officer and the Architect-mother.

Perhaps I would have been more open to this production if it had a different title and had been advertised as Florián ' s adaptation, based on Arrabal, rather than as Arrabal ' s famous play. Other spectators in the little theatre at Cartoucherie applauded enough that I assume they did not share my concerns or confusion.

The French stage has welcomed Rayhana, who goes by her first name only, but the reaction from some Islamist men to her first play in French, *À mon âge je me cache encore pour fumer* (At My Age, I Still Hide to Smoke), has been violent. This feminist, prize-winning tragicomedy, which reveals the oppression in Algeria of women regardless of their age, social class, or beliefs, opened at Maison des Metallos in a suburb of Paris in December 2009. The next month, Rayhana was attacked in the street. She says two men, one a French convert and the other from Northwestern Africa, were waiting for her outside the theatre; they insulted her in Arabic, then threw gasoline and a lighted cigarette in her face. She says greasepaint protected her from cigarette burns; probably because of the cold weather, the cigarette did not ignite the fuel. Rayhana filed a police complaint. Some days later other men tried to rape her but she managed to run away.

Ironically, in performances of her play Rayhana has portrayed, Myriam, a pregnant young woman who takes refuge in a hammam (Turkish bathhouse) because her brother has threatened to kill her to cleanse the family honor. The frightened character, who appears only briefly, speaks in Arabic. Rayhana ' s agent, Geneviève Ulmann, affirms that *À mon âge...* is a powerful statement for peace and against religious fanaticism.



Fatima (Marie Augereau), the masseuse, in *A Mon âge je me cache encore pour fumer*. Photo: courtesy of Maison des Métallos

Following the attacks, Rayhana, in collaboration with journalist Didier Arnaud, wrote an autobiography that was published by a major press, Flammarion: *Rayhana: Le Prix de la liberté* (The Price of Liberty). Her play, as well as Fabio Marra's *La Naïve* (The Naïve Woman), are included in a relatively new theatre collection, *Les Cygnes*, which has featured other promising younger authors like Dany Laurent [See WES 17.3 (2005): 100-03]. Because the suburb had become so dangerous for her, Rayhana moved into the city. Her text continues to be performed in productions or readings throughout France and abroad, and always plays to full houses. The author says the audience seldom includes Algerians, who usually don't go to the theatre, and that publicity has primarily been word of mouth. It has had three runs at Maison des Métallos (8-19 December 2009; 5-16 January 2010, and 4-29 January 2011) as well as a six-week run in early 2012 at the more centrally located Théâtre 13-Seine in Paris. During the ten days I was in France, it was performed in Montargis, a Paris suburb, in the city of Orléans, and in Italy. I was not able to attend any of these stagings but have viewed a DVD of a performance at Maison des Métallos, directed by Fabian Chappuis. The original cast has remained with the production throughout its tour.

In her native country, Rayhana studied at the school of fine arts and the national institute of drama and choreography. She began her theatrical career in Algeria acting in film and television as well as on stage. Her first work as author and director was a children's play staged in Algeria

in 1992. She has prepared a film version of *À mon âge...*, primarily in Arabic, that features a cast of Algerian actors, including Eduardo Manet ' s Algerian-French wife Fatima.

Despite frequent laughter from the audience, the subject matter of *À mon âge...*, related by the several women who come to the bathhouse, is serious. Their stories range from that of Louisa (Catherine Giron), an older woman who remembers how terrified she was as a ten-year-old when instead of bringing her toys as she expected, her husband raped her on their wedding night, to that of Nadia (Rébecca Finet), a university student, now happily divorced, who shows her companions the injuries she suffered when attacked by fellow students for not wearing a veil. Fatima (Marie Augereau), a masseuse in her 50s, is adept at mediating disputes and solving problems. She hides Myriam and, in the absence of the matchmaker, even persuades Madame Mouni (Paula Brunet Sancho), a woman visiting from France, that her co-worker Samia (Linda Chaïb) would be an ideal wife for Madama Mouni ' s son.

The Rayhana play is an example of ensemble acting at its best. Nevertheless, Maria Laborit and Linda Chaïb stand out. Laborit creates Aïcha, a proud, aristocratic older woman who is the only one in the group with the skills of a midwife. It is Fatima ' s challenge to get her to collaborate for Myriam ' s well-being and that of the baby. Chaïb plays an exuberant, somewhat naive 29-year old who longs to find a husband and wants to believe in love. She is thrilled that Madame Mouni has chosen her for a daughter-in-law, despite their difference in social class, and is sure that she will find happiness in France.

The women ' s conversations are interrupted by loud knocking at the door: men who have come to kill Myriam. They ignore Fatima and even Aïcha who tell them to go away. Inspired by an episode from the Ulysses epic, the diverse group, in solidarity, decides that the nine of them will exit together, all veiled alike and disguised as pregnant women. Thus Myriam can be escorted where she will deliver her baby safely.

The single set, designed by Chappuis, is merely a raised platform, center stage. The bare set is enhanced by costumes, designed by Rayhana. Although from conversations about female nudity on stage and in the projected film, I anticipated that the women actors would be unclad throughout much of the action, in fact they show little skin. Mostly they enter wearing beige or deep rose-colored garments and then are draped in beige towels or light robes. By play ' s end, the dominant color is deep rose except for their identical white veils. As the women assume their disguises, they are choreographed to move about the stage in a lovely, triumphant dance. The interlude of music and dance is shattered by a single gun shot. The fatally-wounded woman, who removes her veil in a dying gesture, is not Myriam: but Samia. The ending has a deep emotional impact on spectators, who gasp in dismay, but serves to reinforce Rayhana ' s message in defense of women and against senseless killing.

Fabio Marra ' s *Naïve*, although far more farcical at the outset than the Rayhana piece, is also a tragicomedy. The action of the play is set in Italy, in the 1960s. Confessing a deep admiration for the work of Eduardo de Filippo (1900-84), also a native of Naples, Marra writes in Neapolitan dialect, which he finds to be very musical, and then translates his plays to French. In our interview in early April, he affirmed that his theatre is intended to be popular, with a blend of *commedia dell ' arte* (without masks) and neorealism, but that he is not interested in laughter for

laughter ' s sake.

Given my greater knowledge of Argentinean theatre than of Italian, I find in Marra ' s piece a certain resemblance to the grotesque sainete of Armando Discépolo (1887-1971) and, much more recently, Roberto Cossa (b. 1934). Both of these playwrights come from Italian immigrant families; indeed Discépolo ' s father was a musician from Naples. The grandmother of Cossa ' s *La nona* (1977; staged in Paris in 1990, dir. Lavelli at the Théâtre National de la Colline) is an exploitative figure who has many exaggerated comic traits in common with Marra ' s Monsieur Gennaro.

Now 27, Marra moved to France when he was 20 and began studying at the Jacques Lecoq theatre school. In 2005 he founded the Carrozzone company, where he serves as actor, author, and with actress Sonia Palau, as co-director. Like the group at the Théâtre de l ' Épée de Bois, members of Carrozzone, who work collaboratively, come from various countries; in 2012 they included three Italians, two French, a Spaniard, and a Turk. In April, Marra was hard at work on two scripts his company expected to stage the following summer at Avignon-Off: *Rappelle-toi* and *A ma place*. The Carrozzone troupe has performed at Avignon-Off since 2008. In 2010 the group was chosen by television channel France 3 to film coverage of this highly regarded theatre festival.



M. Gennaro (George d' Audignon), standing, and Federico (Fabio Marra) in *La Naïve*. Photo: Eva Blanch.

Like Rayhana's play, *La Naïve* has toured to provincial cities and been performed for longer periods at some playhouses, in this case in Avignon and Paris. It ran for four weeks in July 2010 and again in July 2011 at Avignon Off and has been staged at the 100-seat Théâtre le Funambule de Montmartre in Paris (10 January to 30 March 2011 and 1 November 2011 to 31 January 2012). Always it has received favorable reviews. For example, Grégory, writing for *ParisTribu* in February 2011, called the play a true ray of sunshine in the middle of winter and proclaimed the acting company to be fantastic. The actors are uniformly praised by critics, who urge spectators not to miss this comedy, but the bittersweet aspect of the text leaves some of them wondering if they should laugh or cry.

At the center of the action are Federico (Fabio Marra) and his wife Anna (Sonia Palau). Federico is unemployed and is not seeking a job as vigorously as Anna would like. In the meantime, Anna supports the household single-handedly with her sewing. That task is complicated by the presence of her father, Monsieur Gennaro (Georges d' Audignon), who constantly drinks Federico's coffee before he can, takes Federico's clothes and sells them, and otherwise wastes Anna's hard-earned money. In developing these characters, Marra cleverly uses all the time-honored devices of farce, such as repetition, exaggeration, slapstick, and surprise. Anna's burden becomes greater when her brother Stefano (Aurélien Gomis) and sister-in-law Sofia (Valérie Mastrangelo) also arrive with their hands out. It should be noted that Stefano is less naïve than Federico: knowing his father as he does, he keeps his clothes locked in his suitcase.

Early in the comedy, Anna's one understanding ally is her friend and neighbor Caterina (Selin Oktay), who urges Anna to ditch her undeserving husband. Anna disregards this advice on the grounds that Caterina is single and knows little about marriage. As it turns out, Caterina does know a great deal about Federico. She is his secret lover - as is Sofia. Stefano reacts to this discovery by threatening Federico with a knife. Anna, now pregnant, intervenes to protect her husband and is killed. This tragic ending is as stunning as the one in Rayhana's work.

Foreign-born playwrights have contributed much to the French stage in the past. Younger writers like Rayhana and Marra hold out the promise that they will continue to do so.

Phyllis Zatlin is Professor Emerita of Spanish and former coordinator of translator-interpreter training at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. She served as Associate Editor of *Estreno* from 1992 to 2001 and as editor of the translation series *ESTRENO Plays* from 1998 to 2005. Her translations that have been published and/or staged include plays by J.L. Alonso de Santos, Jean-Paul Daumas, Eduardo Manet, Francisco Nieva, Itziar Pascual, Paloma Pedrero,

and Jaime Salom. Her most recent book is *Theatrical Translation and Film Adaptation: A Practitioner's View*. See www.rci.rutgers.edu/zatlin.
