

Avignon the 69th Festival, July 4 to 25, 2015: Discovery Beyond The Classics

In 2014, the 68th Festival d'Avignon, for the first time under artistic direction of Olivier Py, managed to survive both the strikes by part-time cultural workers (the "intermittents") who fought to close down a number of shows as well as the bad weather that caused several cancellations. It was inevitable that the festival would have to deal with major budget cuts this year. A deficit of 240,000 Euros was not covered by the government and Avignon's mayor cut the city's funding by five per cent. As a result, there were fewer venues, and the 69th Festival was shorter than last year's (but only by two days). Nonetheless, Py met his goal of presenting increasing numbers of living authors along with artists whose work had not previously been programmed in the festival. Many of these vital talents were exciting, fascinating, and sometimes transformative.



Teatr NO99's N051. Photo credit: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

N051 *Mu Naine Vihastas* (My wife got angry at me and deleted all our family vacation photos), by Teatr NO99 from Estonia, was a delightful farce, performed by a superb ensemble of actors and directed by Tiit Ojasoo and designer-director Ene-Liis Semper, that perfectly captures today's obsession with images. The play opens in a large hotel room with a queen-sized bed, pictures of the sphinx behind the bed, side tables and lamps. There is also a living area with a comfortable white sofa and chairs, and a round cocktail table complete with glasses ready to be filled. A nervous middle-aged man in tennis shoes bursts into the room. He grabs the candy left on the pillow, sits on the bed, goes into the bathroom and washes his hands. He looks around, takes the free pen and paper, and washes his hands. A quick look in the mini bar causes him to remark, "Too expensive," so he tries out the bed, lies down and sucks his thumb. He even walks

on the sofas and table as we hear the song "I am the greatest motherfucker," by John Grant. This mime goes on for about fifteen minutes, followed by a blackout.

When the lights come up, there is loud music and a strange group of seven uninvited guests fills the room. A pretty blond in sleeveless summer-flowered dress, another in short shorts, a young man in a bright blue shirt and jeans. What are they doing there? How did they get in? Have they broken in to rob the room's occupant? Instead of showing fear, the man confides to them that his wife got angry at him and deleted all of the family photos taken on their recent vacation. His camera is empty, he moans. There is not a single photo left. He is clearly distraught. Finally, he asks them why they are there. They do not answer; they just enthusiastically offer to recreate the family photos right then and there. The man is delighted. He hands out vodka and begins to snap pictures as the visitors pose for what he describes as the scenes from his vacation. First comes the shot of the family on the plane on their way to an island paradise. Then there's his five-year-old son with a banana in his right hand. "Who will play my son?" he asks as he points to one of the young men. "You look like a child," he tells him. At the restaurant, his son refuses to eat and he cries so the father sticks a banana in his mouth. Before each photo he tells them to look happy or be joyful. Then he sets up a photo of his twelve-year-old daughter on the bed in the hotel. To play his wife, he turns to the blond. He tells her to sleep in the bed with their son next to her. Later he joins her in the scene on the beach in which he and his wife shared a cocktail and a kiss. "Let's go for a swim!" one of them shouts. There isn't any water, so they swim on the floor.

Before long, the man is frantically recreating scene after scene from his vacation. Each photo is transformed into enlarged black and white stills projected on the blank hotel wall as soon as they have been taken. The zanier the romp gets, the more the picture-taking becomes a raucous free-for-all. People are caught jumping on the bed or flying across the room. They get so involved in their roles that they start to invent scenes, which never happened. They pose for a fashion shoot and invent scenes for a porn movie. They even recreate famous paintings, such as the well-known *La Mort de Marat* by David.

NO51... Is a wondrous send-up of our fascination with selfies and endless picture taking and the importance that people place on them. Of course, it is not possible to recover those original moments, as if a picture could stand in for the affection and pleasure that the father may or may not have had with his family. Why can't the husband's pleasure of being on vacation with his family be enough? In the end the husband thanks them and they leave except for the "wife." The "husband" tells her that he was taking a picture of his daughter in the waves, swimming toward her to get more and more photos. The mother cried, he admits, but then adds: "We were rescued." Perhaps this is why his wife got so angry and deleted all of their vacation photos.



A mon seul désir (To my only desire). Photo courtesy of Gaële Bourges.

Gaëlle Bourges, French choreographer and performer, presented her latest work, a visually stunning and mysterious piece inspired by *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries in the Cluny Museum in Paris. Entitled *A mon seul désir* (To my only desire), Bourges's investigation of the secrets hidden in this fifteenth-century masterpiece could not have been more different from *NO51*. A deep red velvet curtain fills the front of the stage leaving only a narrow walkway for the initial scenes of the play. Four naked young women walk slowly along this path and stand in front of the curtain. They are quite lovely. Their nakedness is not at all sexually explicit or offensive. With their backs turned to the audience, they carefully "plant" artificial flowers in the curtain—bluebells, hyacinths, jasmine and carnations—creating a backdrop that evokes the millefleurs-style tapestries of the Middle Ages. When they turn around, they are wearing animal masks, a perky lion, a majestic unicorn, a rascally rabbit, and a sly fox. A woman's voice-over provides a running commentary about the tapestries and the significance of the unicorn in medieval times. The voice is soft and uninflected. "Unicorns really existed in the Middle Ages," it tells us. "It was a composite animal both ferocious and frightening, capable of restoring fertility and sexual vigor ..." As the narrator continues, one of the women becomes the noble lady of *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries. She is dressed in rich garments of brocade and velvet. They place a necklace made of precious stones on her throat. Attended by her ladies in waiting, with their masks now monkeys and parrots, she poses in front of the red curtain, surrounded by the animals and flowers of the medieval tapestry. It is exquisite. "Only virgins could approach

the unicorn," the commentary continues. "Are the young women of the tapestries virgins?" Unicorns could only be caught by virgins, we learn as we hear the distant sound of a bagpipe. Immersed in our reverie of the days of courtly love, we are abruptly awakened from our dreams and delightfully so. The back curtain opens and voila! groups of "rabbits" appear, performed by nude dancers wearing rabbit masks. They slowly accumulate until they fill up the whole space, thirty-five "rabbits" in all, human symbols of lust and fertility dying to copulate and multiply. They perform a suggestive dance to the Doors song "The End," sung by Jim Morrison (and memorably used in the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*), creating a perfect counterpoint to the virginity and purity of *The Lady and the Unicorn*.



The Last Supper directed by Ahmed El Attar. Photo courtesy of Temple Independent Theater Company.

The Last Supper, by Egyptian director Ahmed El Attar and his company brings us back to contemporary reality with a portrait of Egypt's ruling class at a table. Their supper takes place in a vast space with a backdrop of shimmering blues and silver. A very long table made of plexiglass dominates the scene. It is set with expensive glasses, silverware, and china. A man sits on the edge of the table looking out into the distance. Another joins him while another walks over to the table to make sure the place settings are correct. Soon an entire family is seated, paterfamilias smoking an expensive cigar, in the center, a general next to him, the father's son and daughter-in-law and their children, their daughter and her husband, a close family, friends,

and three servants. This is clearly not "Christ's Last Supper," as the ironic title of the play infers. As the play began, I realized that I could not read any of the French supertitles. They were much too light on a light background. I decided to sit back to see what I could understand of the play. Interestingly, as it turned out when checking with other audience members after the show, my understanding of the "plot" and even the insipid conversation was quite accurate.

The Last Supper presents a microcosm of "Egypt's class-led society with its hegemony of despotic father figures," to quote the director. Even if I could not understand what the characters were saying, the visual composition of the play speaks volumes. Here is a self-satisfied, vacuous group of people, incapable of imagining or even thinking about their country's needs. The Arab Spring has come and gone, and Egypt's economic elite is not the least bit changed. As the general says: "It's just a few months and everything will go back to normal. It will even be better than before." His words illustrate the general tenor of the dinner conversation. The play's dialogue was actually composed from private telephone conversations that El Attar recorded.

A very large cow's head serves as the centerpiece for the table. It is bright and white and visually symbolic, perhaps, of the emptiness of these frivolous people. The woman at the far end of the table is especially mindless. She is the mother of two children seated on the floor in front, and a baby who is held by a nanny who is not allowed to approach the table unless beckoned by her. She clearly cares little for children or her baby, who is handed off to the nanny whenever it doesn't suit her. She prefers to read her tablet while the general talks on the phone and a younger woman sends text messages on her I-phone. The children, a boy and a girl, are of course spoiled brats, the boy in particular. He gleefully runs around throwing things at one of the servants and hitting him. The conversation turns to their preferences in cities other than Cairo. The mother prefers London to New York: "London is amazing," she announces in English. "Big Ben, Harrod's, shopping" sum up her preferences. The uncle is cooking up some prank with the boy. It concerns the servant, who is obliged to kiss the boy's hand to ask forgiveness for something he did not do and he is fired for no reason.

Most striking of all is the role of the servants. They are not allowed to approach the table except to bring food or pour water. In the case of the children's nanny, she must stand at a distance from the table, ready to take out whatever is needed for the children's pleasure games, books, and lollipops (which she has to unwrap for them). If the mother wants her head massaged, the nanny may perform this duty and then return to her standing position. The waiter never walks; he runs to fetch more water or whatever else is needed. Throughout the fifty-five minutes of the show, the supper is never served. It seems that the group is waiting for the father's wife to appear. While they are waiting, they cannot resist taking a selfie to post on Instagram. They all gather and the group is captured in all of its inanity, frozen forever in a red light that El Attar shines on the group from time to time to immortalize their futility.



Fugue. Photo credit: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

Fugue, directed by Samuel Achache, created by the Collectif La Vie brève, and produced by La Comedie de Valence, was a breath of fresh air in more ways than one. Achache introduces us to a group of scientific researchers and explorers out to find a lake in the South Pole that has been buried for twenty-five million years. Their adventure takes place on a stage covered with snow made of white gravel. Their base is a very small building minus a wall that allows us to see inside. A piano, a cot, a work table, and various other items are all squeezed into this tiny space. There is no way that a bathtub could fit into this room, so it has been placed squarely out front. Six characters (five men and one woman) wearing fur hats, dark glasses, gloves, ski jackets and heavy boots, are enough to convince us that they are really freezing. This was a welcome sight, given the extreme heat of the Avignon summer. The performers are accomplished musicians and actors, and they frequently pause to play and sing musical pieces from the Middle Ages to the Baroque period. They are also inveterate and versatile comedians. The scene in which one of the explorers makes his way back to camp, chilled to the bone and unable to speak clearly because his mouth is frozen shut is priceless; it is reminiscent of the best sketches from Monty Python. Two men ask him his name and all he can spout out is a word that sounds like Jorge when in fact he is saying that he is French (français). His timing is perfect. The men insist that he is Spanish and his name is Jorge. When he finally thaws out, he strips off his clothes and jumps into the icy waters of the bathtub but first he wraps his private parts with black tape as if he needed to shield the audience from his nudity. He dives into the

tub from a ladder, and splashes water everywhere before swimming at a furious pace as if hell-bent to get out of this insular frozen world. "Fugue" refers not only to the musical form, but it also means flight, or running away in French. Achache's characters may well want to escape from the bitter cold and ice, but it is clear that there is no way out. In fact, it is suggested that these explorers might have already died. At least one of them is dead even though he continues to haunt his girlfriend, the female explorer, who can't seem to get of him. Fugue is not only enjoyable for its music and comic turns, it raises important issues concerning human relationships. How can people stay in tune with each other? Is it possible to live in harmony, especially in a frozen, icy wilderness?



Antonio e Cleopatra directed by Tiago Rodrigues. Photo courtesy of Teatro Nacional D. Maria II.

Antonio e Cleopatra, by Portuguese director Tiago Rodrigues, was definitely not Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra, as many festivalgoers thought it would be. Rodrigues's inspiration came from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, one of Shakespeare's sources for his tragedy, Joseph L. Mankiewicz's 1963 film *Cleopatra* starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, and a few lines from Shakespeare's tragedy, very few. To begin crafting his contemporary *Antonio e Cleopatra*, he invited dancer/choreographers Sofia Dias and Vitor Roriz, who have worked together since 2006, creating and touring their own original pieces, to join him in making this new piece.

Rodrigues is especially fascinated by the possibility that two such unlikely lovers should have

ended up together. In fact, as he likes to point out, they were unfit for each other. They are from two entirely different cultures, socially and politically, yet they allow love and intimacy to take over their public life. It is this aspect of their story that he chose to underscore. Rodrigues sees their intense attraction to each other, excluding all others, as essentially biological. They seem obsessed with each other's physical being. Antonio notices Cleopatra's beauty mark on her earlobe or the serpent bracelet on her arm. Even when they are not in the same space, Cleopatra and Antonio sense each other's scent. When they are reunited after a two-year absence, Antonio first notices Cleopatra's hair while she notices his teeth. He sees her fingers while she sees his shoulders. What interests Rodrigues is that they are not naïve lovers. They are cynical and cruel performers.

To capture the private, intimate space in which the lovers have enclosed themselves, set designer Angela Rocha and lighting designer Nuno Meira created an enchanting décor made of a swooping gray blue concave wall suggestive of a sky with swirls of white wispy clouds. A Miró-like mobile hangs above the stage, its four transparent colored discs slowly swinging in the Egyptian breeze. A wooden bench stage left supports a record player and speaker. One record stands out: the soundtrack for Cleopatra, featuring a photograph of Elizabeth Taylor on the album cover.

As the play begins, Sofia and Vitor walk out on the stage, dressed in similar outfits: dark gray tops, black jeans, and suede shoes. They have come in all simplicity to share with us a tale of love and loss beyond time and culture. Like bards, their tale will be "sung" in nine cantos. As the play begins, Sofia says "Antonio." Vitor says "Antonio e Cleopatra." Sophia repeats "Antonio e Cleopatra." They are not introducing themselves. They are introducing the characters in the story they are about to tell. They are not actors; they are narrators describing the scene in the present tense: "Antonio is standing." Sofia says. "Cleopatra is standing next to Antonio." "Antonio lightly spreads his legs." Interestingly they do not make the accompanying gestures to the scenes they are describing. Yet their arms and hands are not still. They have developed a choreographic language of their own. Pointing at an empty space, reaching out towards something or someone who isn't there, invoking an invisible presence.

In canto 1, Sofia describes how Antonio sees his future in the form of an extended chant of "Antonio sees..." followed by every detail of the final moments of his life, the rope hanging from the tower, his body lying on the ground, his sword piercing his body and his blood flowing from his wound. She knows that this will be his future, but Antonio, she says, is not sure that he has seen this future. Together they enter the present, to the telling of their love story. Cleopatra breathes in, Antonio breathes out. They breathe together, we're told. Even their breathing is in perfect harmony. Breathing is a recurrent theme throughout the play, as if to say that these ethereal beings are not just fictional characters but living, breathing beings. They describe each other's moves. "Antonio is walking," "Cleopatra is running," they repeat as Sofia circles around Vitor. They are alone together in their special space even though Cleopatra knows that there are other people in that space: Enobarbus, Antonio's friend, Philon, Alexas, Mardian the Eunuch, and Charmian. What matters, however, is the two of them.



Antonio e Cleopatra directed by Tiago Rodrigues. Photo courtesy of Teatro Nacional D. Maria II.

The arrival of the messenger breaks the spell. Despite their passion, Cleopatra knows that Antonio must listen to the message from Rome but they are too wrapped up in their pursuit of pleasure. They put on disguises and run down to the banks of the Nile to take a swim. As the stage turns into the rich golden hues of the sandy dunes where they dry off, Sofia and Vitor describe the scene as if they were seeing Antonio and Cleopatra from above. Pointing down at the imagined bodies of Antonio and Cleopatra drying their feet and hair after their swim.

As Sofia and Vitor move through their narration, we follow them closely, listening intently to the sounds of the Portuguese language and mesmerized by the unaffected presentation of these two performers. Rhythms and sounds vary; their voices rise and fall, words are reiterated at a fast pace or slowed down. Lengthy monologues follow or precede moments of dialogue, dialogues that are not direct exchanges. At times the performers stop to put on the music from Cleopatra. They sit on the bench, drink some water and exchange a few inaudible words.

For an hour and twenty minutes, we follow the key moments in the lovers' story from their passion for each other, their separation, Antonio's return, the battles they lose, to the final tragic scene. In canto 3, after Antonio goes to Rome, Cleopatra imagines him meeting with young Caesar. She is sure that he has not forgotten her. He is looking at Caesar with Cleopatra's eyes, Sofia tells us. He is crossing his legs as Cleopatra crosses hers and he moves his head to

the side the same way Cleopatra does. Soon we learn of Antonio's marriage to Octavia, and we hear of Cleopatra's rage when she hears the news. Vitor shares this information in an extended monologue (canto 4) in which we are told with little emotion that Cleopatra has had the messenger killed and has ripped up the clothes that Antonio left behind. In contrast, during canto 5, Sofia does not so much describe as she becomes Cleopatra, a devastated, jealous, angry woman who has been abandoned by her lover. "Antonio occupied..." she whispers at first and then shouts, "Antonio occupied with politics, Antonio occupied with making an alliance with Caesar and Lepidus. Antonio occupied with everything and everybody but Cleopatra. Sofia stumbles and gasps for breath as she moves about the stage followed by her larger-than-life shadow. Antonio appears in her imagination. His shadow joins hers and their shadows perform a dance together.

Their story builds to the inevitable climactic moment. Antonio is dying. He is seated on the ground at the far end of a long path of light. Cleopatra is standing across from him. Sofia delivers a stunning rant composed of words spoken so fast that it is impossible to read them in the supertitles. Her impassioned tirade is a purely auditory experience and it is extraordinary. In the final scene, Sofia crosses the path of light and kneels next to Vitor. They are no longer Sofia and Vitor, they have become Antonio and Cleopatra. They breathe again together one last time until Antonio's final breath. [The Antonio e Cleopatra section was originally written for TheatreForum.]

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