

The 70th Avignon Festival: An Experiment In Living Together

The 70th [Avignon Festival](#) (6–24 July) was an especially memorable celebration of the best in innovative international performing arts and dance. From Ivo van Hove's *Les Damnés* to Krystian Lupa's *Place des héros*, audiences were treated to a number of powerful pieces, both large and small, that spoke eloquently to our troubled times. With a focus on new voices from Belgium and the Middle East, and a special place given to women writers, this year's edition also gave voice to a young generation of artists, mostly in their thirties, many of whom were invited to the festival for the first time. Many program choices also underscored the urgency felt throughout the festival that the performing arts must play an active role in confronting contemporary social and political issues.

The festival opened with Ivo van Hove directing the Comédie Française in an unforgettable production of *Les Damnés* (*The Damned*), based on Visconti's screenplay for his 1969 film. Performed in the majestic Honor Court in the Popes' Palace, with the Comédie Française returning to Avignon after twenty-three years, the play tells the story of the von Essenbecks, a wealthy family who own steel mills in Germany in the 1930s. With varying responses to Hitler's rise to power, most of the family members ultimately sign on with the National Socialists and embark on careers of pure evil.

Van Hove decided to use the Honor Court's vast stage horizontally rather than vertically. Working as always with stage designer Jan Versweyseld, he focused the action center stage on a large bright orange carpet, with few if any objects to distract from the family's evil purposes. A dining table set with silver that is strangely too bright, and a large funeral urn in front to receive the ashes of the key players in this drama of power, are the only set pieces. There is also a row of open dressing rooms to the far right of the stage, with brightly lit mirrors where the actors get ready for their performances as well as for the birthday celebration that is about to take place. To the far left we notice a row of six open white coffins and a live orchestra that provides appropriate music by Schoenberg and Berg.

We are quickly introduced to the play's thirteen main characters thanks to video images of their names and positions in the Essenbeck dynasty: Baron Joachim, whose birthday is about to be celebrated; his son SA officer Konstantin, a devoted follower of Rhoem; Wolf von Aschenbach, a young cousin, SS Hauptsturmführer whose sinister design is to keep the SA from acquiring the Essenbeck weapons. We also meet Baroness Sophie, the widow of Essenbeck's eldest son, who has an incestuous relationship with her son Martin, the heir to the Essenbeck fortune, and her lover, Friedrich Bruckmann with whom she plots to own Essenbeck steel. There is Herbert Tallmann, vice president of the steel works and husband of the Baron's niece Elisabeth, their two little girls, and Gunther, Konstantin's son who is playing a mournful piece on the clarinet as the play begins. Valets, a governess, a prostitute, and a little girl, who is raped by Martin, complete the cast.

Throughout the play's dazzling two and a half hours, a discreet camera crew of two films individual performers and scenes which are projected onto a large LED screen on the rear wall of the Honor Court. Video artist Tal Yarden achieves miracles with his stunning overlaps and

mergings of the characters' interactions, both on the stage and in their enhanced images on the screen. For example, we catch a glimpse of Baroness Sophie ' s back far across the stage at the same time that we see a large close-up of her face on the screen that tells us what she is up to. Equally fascinating is how Yarden uses live camera feed and pre-recorded video to add multiple layers to the interaction between family members as they scheme their way to the top. The audience is not just watching these images; we are completely implicated in van Hove ' s story, all 2,000 of us captured by the video cameras and projected onto the large screen.

A shrill whistle announces the play's beginning. The Tallman girls run across the stage to wish their uncle a happy birthday with a recitation of a piece they've prepared for him. Martin, wearing a sexy black pantsuit, high heels, and heavy makeup, stumbles onto the stage wielding a baseball bat and searching for "a man, a real man." He is the central character in this celebration of evil, a depraved psychopath who will survive all the others to become an emblem of pure evil.

It is 27 February 1933. News footage of the burning of the Reichstag is projected on the screen establishing the historical background of the play. Family members show a variety of responses to this news. Baron Joachim cannot even speak Hitler's name, referring to him only as "ce monsieur" (that man). Still he knows that he has to do business with him and in order to achieve his goal, he fires Herbert and replaces him with Konstantin. Konstantin and Wolf are already members of the SA and the SS respectively while Herbert fully rejects the new regime, pointing out that civil liberties are being taken away and people imprisoned, but his voice is drowned out by the others. He will turn out to be the only decent character in this den of inequity and he will pay dearly for his views with his life and the lives of his wife and children who are sent to Dachau by Baroness Sophie.

By the end of the opening scenes the Essenbeck clan has shown its true colors. They are thoroughly corrupt and ready even to commit murder when necessary. Everybody is manipulating everybody, principally the Baroness Sophie (a modern Lady Macbeth whose devise is "power or nothing"). She will do anything to make sure her lover Friedrich takes over the steel mills and that her son achieves greatness. "Love and Art mean nothing to these perverse people," in the words of van Hove. "Theirs is a dehumanized world, a world in which we would prefer not to live."

Les Damnés is not just about the Essenbecks and their downfall. It also follows the rise of Nazism and its ultimate triumph from scenes of the burning of the books episode to "The Night of the Long Knives," during which large numbers of SA officers were assassinated by the SS. Van Hove's reenactment of this bloody purge is stunning. Konstantin and his valet Janek, now a fellow SA member, appear on stage while their fellow storm troopers are seen cavorting on the large overhead screen, led by Konstantin and Janek in a drunken orgy of singing German songs, stripping naked and shouting "Heil Hitler." Konstantin and Janek wrestle and swim in a river of beer, while the others are shown on screen repeating their bacchanal on the orange carpet. They are all brutally murdered and left lying in pools of blood on the screen while Konstantin and Janek are gunned down and doused with buckets of blood in front of us.

Van Hove's stage action is neither historical nor naturalistic. It is a dance of death and

destruction complete with solemn rituals of dying. Ultimately, seven von Essenbeck family members are led to the coffins where they are buried alive. When it is their turn, each member must stand between a cordon of men and slowly climb the steps to the coffins in a ritual procession. They seem to go willingly until once in the coffins, their final moments are projected onto the large screen. We try not to watch their blown-up images on the screen as they take their last breaths, writhing in agony.

Other scenes are painfully real to us today, especially the final scene in which Martin appears alone and larger than life. Stripped of his clothes, he covers himself in the ashes of all who have died throughout the play. He aims his machine gun at the audience and symbolically mows us down. It is mass murder on a grand scale and too close to home in our world today.

On 10 July, the Honor Court was once again filled to brimming, this time for only one performance of a new play by Israeli director Amos Gitai, Yitzhak Rabin: Chronique d'un assassinat. Based on interviews that Gitai conducted with Leah Rabin before she died, the play covers the events leading up to her husband's assassination on 4 November 1995. Chronique is a deeply moving theatrical performance/dramatic reading/recital that eloquently reminds us of this shameful moment in Israeli history which remains "an open wound," to quote Gitai.



Yitzhak Rabin: Chronique d'un assassinat, directed by Amos Gitai. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

Gitai's award-winning 2015 film *Rabin: The Last Day* had already covered this material in the form of a thrilling documentary. *Chronique* offers the audience a new reading of these events, bringing us even closer to the reality of those terrible days as lived by Leah Rabin. Her words were read by two exceptional women, Franco-Israeli star Sarah Adler and Hiam Abbass, a Palestinian actress, seated quietly at a table. They are accompanied by a pianist and a cello player with appropriate selections from Bach, Monteverdi, and Ligeti. The Luberon choral group soon joins them, slowly lining up on a strip of sand, their crunching footsteps meant perhaps to produce a soundscape of sand and wind.

Chronique completes Leah Rabin's story with news footage and commentary, but it is her clear memories that earn our full attention. She tells us of what happened on 3 November, the night before the assassination. She and her husband were at home when a large crowd of extreme right wing activists surrounded their house shouting and throwing rocks at their windows. She hears them threaten to hang her "by the heels next to her husband." While she is naturally disturbed by this, Yitzhak takes it in his stride. On 4 November, Yitzhak played tennis in the morning and he was calm when he left for the Oslo Peace Accords with the Palestinians. Newsreels of the huge crowds in Tel Aviv set the scene in which she heard three quick shots. She concludes that he is dead, shot at point blank range, she finds out later, by a right-wing Jewish student. For a much too short hour and forty minutes, we experience Leah Rabin's words as if we were living the events with her. And we mourn her great loss as well as the loss for the Israeli people

In an entirely different vein, *Tristesses (Sadnesses)* introduced audiences to the work of Anne-Cécile Vandalem, a young Belgian writer, director and actress, who takes on the subject of the rise of far right extremism in Europe in the form of a murder mystery. *Tristesses* is the name of a fictitious island somewhere off the coast of Denmark where a farming community once made its living raising cattle to send to the local slaughterhouse. As the play opens, we learn that the slaughterhouse has been closed for several years and only eight residents remain on the island. One wonders why they have not left with the others.

The set, composed of three little Scandinavian houses and a church, squeezed in together off the public square, immediately tells us how diminished their lives have become. They no longer enjoy the open spaces of farms and surrounding water. Thanks to a wandering video artist who creates a real-time film throughout the show, we are invited to enter their homes and catch glimpses of hidden tensions within. It is early dawn and a bluish haze hovers over the village. A few street lamps are still lit. We are introduced to Soren Petersen, the Mayor, his wife Anne and their two teenage daughters, Ellen and Malene (who has lost her voice since she witnessed her two uncles' gory death), Kare Heiger, former director of the slaughterhouse and founder of the People's political party, Joseph Larsen, the pastor, former accountant at the slaughterhouse, and his wife Margret. There are also three ghost-like figures wandering about during the play, singing of unspoken deaths and secrets as they shadow the residents.



Tristesses, written and directed by Anne-Cécile Vandalem. Photo: Bachibouzouk - France Télévisions.

It is clear from the outset that there is no friendly feeling among these neighbors. With no cultural activities or intellectual stimulation, their lives are reduced to quarreling and shouting at each other. Their only entertainment consists of playing games like "1, 2, 3, Freeze!" or Trivial Pursuit with its silly questions. They also enjoy cleaning their guns and organizing shooting matches. Such a gloomy existence is especially hard on the Petersen teenage daughters who never smile or laugh. Why wouldn't guns appeal to them, we wonder.

As the play opens, the Mayor discovers Ida Heiger's body wrapped in the Danish flag and hanging from a flagpole. The villagers are alerted and the play quickly becomes a murder mystery, since it is hard for them to believe that she would have committed suicide. Did she hang herself or did someone kill her, they wonder. Soon her daughter, Martha, head of a new extreme right wing party and about to become Prime Minister of Denmark, arrives on the island for the funeral and to transport her mother's body back to the main island despite Madame Heiger's express wishes to be buried in Tristesses.

Beautifully captured by Vandalem, Martha is a hard, cynical politician who is anxious not only to leave quickly with her mother's body but also with a contract signed by the island residents whom she insists must sign over the island to her. Her plan is to turn the island into a movie

studio to produce propaganda films to promote her party's right wing message. Her presence causes a civil war to break out among the islanders. By the end of the drama, long-held secrets have been revealed concerning the reasons for shutting down the slaughterhouse and for Madame Heiger's death. The final image of bodies, sprawled out on the public square, speaks to sadly wasted lives.

Despite this grim subject matter, and the title *Tristesses* (Sadnesses), the play is actually a comedy. The funeral service in the church is especially funny as the residents struggle to find something nice to say about Madame Heiger who supposedly committed suicide, an unacceptable act in their world. The Mayor's brutal treatment of his wife when she cannot answer an inane Trivial Pursuit question is more comic than tragic since it is so disproportionate to the situation. One can't help but think of Archie Bunker berating his poor long-suffering wife Edith. Anne is so deprived of affection from either husband or children that she even tries to dance with the cameraman who is busy filming their private lives. It is a sad but somehow amusing moment. Vandalem's fascinating play warns against how easy it is for far right-wing parties to take hold when a country (the island) has been reduced to political and personal impotence. These islanders have become incapable of changing their fate. They cannot move on. They can only keep on playing "1 2 3 Freeze!"

Karamazov, a thoroughly captivating five and a half hour adaptation of Dostoevsky's epic novel by Jean Bellorini, director of the Théâtre Gérard-Philipe in Saint-Denis, was one of those memorable Avignon moments when the extraordinary physical environment matches the show and its players. As if the Boulbon quarry weren't enough with its breathtaking cliffs, the journey to reach this open-air venue is always an integral part of the theatrical event. Walking on a path of stones as the sun is going down and breathing in the heady perfumes of pine groves is a treat, as is the prospect of a light meal needed to confront the bitter Mistral winds that will test our fortitude throughout the show.

Seated at last and hanging on for dear life to the blankets provided by the festival, we look forward to living closely with Dmitri, Ivan, Alyosha and Smerdiakov, their father Fyodor, Grushenka, Katerina and so many others. An elongated stage stretches out before us. On one end a glass cage contains a child's bed and a toy horse. Another displays two chairs and a candle stand with candles that have burned down. We also see a green wheel chair and drums way across the stage. A large dacha painted black, Fyodor's home, provides a look into his living room as well as another room that houses the show's musicians who are an integral part of Bellorini's troupe of superb singers, musicians and actors. In front of the house, railroad tracks provide the means to transport the players from one end of the set to the other and back. They slide along the rails standing or seated on small platforms, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups. There are moments when they are separated as if pulled apart despite themselves. At others, they climb up on the dacha roof, a haven where they can look up to the stars and passionately discuss their views of life and death.

A young boy sits on the steps or walks around on the stage as we wait to discover how Bellorini will condense the epic Russian novel to one third of its size. Suddenly a narrator dressed like a schoolmarm in a sensible plaid outfit and rust-colored wig appears to tell us who the characters are and how they fit in to this engrossing tale of strife and the search for meaning in the lives of

the three brothers Karamazov. He/she breathlessly informs us of the family background and why they have come together in this town. As a woman enters one of the glass cages and lights the candles, we settle in for the long haul, ready to revisit this fascinating nineteenth century Russian tale that addresses so many consequential questions that speak to us today of freedom and suffering and especially moral responsibility.

We first meet Fyodor, the brothers' good-for-nothing father who cares nothing for his sons and who at age fifty-five boasts that he plans to live a long life of debauchery, hopefully with Grushenka. From a distance, Alyosha appears, tall and handsome in his long scarlet cloak and amazing shock of white hair. He seems surrounded by an aura of goodness and purity. He is coming from the monastery where he is an acolyte of the elder Zosima, his beloved teacher. We marvel at how gentle and kind he is, always stepping in to mediate the family quarrels or help his brother Ivan and Katerina to express their love for each other. In another scene, he befriends Grushenka and helps her to begin her spiritual redemption. In one especially moving moment, we watch him sweetly tend to his father's wounds after Dmitri has thrown their father on the ground and threatened to kill him.

Equally fascinating is Ivan, the magnificent, ever searching for answers to questions of faith. His Grand Inquisitor speech, masterfully delivered in the icy winds of the Mistral, was especially powerful. Dmitri, who betrays his fiancée Katerina and falls in love with Grushenka, is accused of killing his father and forced to stand trial. Finally, there is poor Smerdiakov, Fyodor's bastard son, whose name means "stinking lackey," and who is poorly treated by all. Like Tristesses, Karamazov is a murder mystery as well as a wonderful example of the kind of popular theatre that Jean Vilar, the founder of the Avignon Festival, espoused. In scene after scene, in which the personal and the political come together, and with little tech if any to speak of, Bellorini and his fabulous ensemble achieved a theatre for all.

Polish director Krystian Lupa's *Place des héros*, performed by the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, was another unforgettable and deeply disturbing Avignon production. His stunning adaptation of Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* reminds us that we are not that far today from being swept up by extreme nationalist groups.



Place des héros by Thomas Bernhard, directed by Krystian Lupa. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

The play opens on a spacious room in Professor Joseph Schuster's house in Vienna. The room is mostly empty but for large packing boxes lined up against the walls ready to be shipped to Oxford where the professor and his wife had planned to return after living in Vienna for some twenty years. Two wardrobes, a table, an ironing board, and pairs of the professor's shoes lined up on the floor complete this desolate tableau. Stage right, a large window looks out over the Heroes' Square where thousands acclaimed Hitler's annexation of Austria in March 1938. The sun must not be shining, as the window provides little light to brighten the somber room where Herta, the chamber maid, stands on a chair, holding one shoe and a polishing cloth, staring out over the Square, lost in her thoughts. Madame Zittel, the professor's faithful housekeeper, enters carrying a dark suit in a cleaner's bag. Her comment that it is not torn seems odd but we soon learn that it might well have been torn since the professor killed himself the night before by jumping out of the window. As she irons one of the professor's shirts and Herta polishes shoes, we gradually realize that they are preparing for his funeral. Madame Zittel talks as if to herself, remembering how fastidious the professor was about the proper way to fold his shirts and how he always wore the same suit and shined his own shoes. We learn of his passion for the piano and his wife's mental illness. And especially of his reasons for deciding to leave Vienna. "Things are worse now than fifty years before," he would say. As the story builds up slowly, a hologram image of the professor appears on the wall, neatly folding his shirt. His haunting presence will

be felt throughout the play. The movement and dialogue are so slow that it feels as if time has stopped.

Act II takes place in the park in front of Vienna's Burgtheater. A heavy mist floats up from the grass. The sound of crows cawing overhead adds to the bleakness of the scene. The funeral is over and Shuster's daughters are waiting for their uncle Robert. They seem to hover in the cold and damp in a kind of gloomy "entre deux." One sister says very little while the other is agitated and angry. They'll have to sell the house in Oxford, she says, and she wonders what to do with the grand piano that was sent ahead to Oxford. What will happen to their mother whose illness has not improved and who continues to hear the shouts and cheers of the crowd outside that window on the Heroes' Square? The uncle, who has a serious heart condition, makes his way slowly across the park with the help of two canes. He sits down heavily on the bench and proceeds to talk of his resentment of just about all aspects of life in his native country, especially the persistent anti-Semitism in Vienna. "Life is permanent suffering," he complains. "Everything is worse than under Hitler."

In Act III, the family and a few friends are gathered in a large dining room for the traditional meal following a funeral. They are waiting for Madame Schuster to appear when her son Lucas rushes in, late as usual. He's been to the theatre with his mistress, which is unacceptable behavior to a family in mourning. Uncle Robert is ever on the attack against this "nation of sixty-five million idiots," vigorously denouncing the corruption of church, state, the press, and even the German language, "a language that turns your stomach." He has long ago given up actively protesting against the chaos and corruption in Austria. Lukas, the next generation and heir to an intellectually sophisticated and artistic family, is a disappointment. He only wants to have fun and chase women. As for his sisters, they are too discouraged to make any changes. Their father committed suicide in protest or perhaps because he could no longer tolerate what had happened to his country. We hear clamoring noises outside of the window, shouts of "Heil Hitler," and cheering. Only Madame Schuster hears these increasingly loud voices drowning out the dinner conversation. Suddenly the window shatters and shards of glass shower down on the guests, covering the room—a vivid reminder of Kristallnacht in November 1938 when SA forces broke the windows of Jewish businesses and synagogues and killed many Jews.

Lupa's Place des héros, with its superb stage design, directing and acting, left audiences with a deeply disturbing sense of spiritually empty lives filled either with weighty silences or unproductive ravings.

From Syria, Mohammad Al Attar's play *Alors que j'attendais* (While I Was Waiting), directed by Omar Abusaada, gave audiences a chance to enter into the tragic lives and losses of a modest Syrian family. Set in Damascus between 2015 and 2016, the play introduces us to Taim, a young man who has been beaten into a coma and his family and friends who try to make sense of what has happened to him. The set is composed of a two-tiered structure allowing us to be with Taim in his hospital room as well as follow his alter ego on a small platform overhead. As the play opens, our attention is drawn to the lifeless body of Taim on his hospital bed. Perhaps the IV fluids are keeping him alive but it seems doubtful. Overhead, a parallel world offers Taim's spirit the chance to relay what happened to him and to interact with his friend Omar with whom he had shared the heady days of revolution and hope in 2011. Omar has also left this

world.

Dressed in the traditional chador, Taim's mother enters his hospital room. She sits next to his bed and recites verses from the Koran while Taim's alter ego overhead fills us in on his early days of resistance. In 2011, he had made twenty videos on his iPhone during the uprising and put them on Facebook and YouTube. He wanted to bear witness. Years later, on 29 January 2015, he was driving around Damascus looking for locations to make a documentary film about the 2011 demonstrations when he was stopped at a checkpoint and later found covered with blood and unresponsive.

Omar took a different path after 2011. He first joined the Al-Nusra Front before moving on to ISIS where he discovered that their methods of torture were just as terrible as in Bashar Al Assad's prisons. Taim's first film of hundreds of demonstrators shouting "Fuck off Bashar!" and "Assad traitor!" is projected on a wall and in a brief moment of joy, Taim and Omar happily belt out an Arab rock music number.

Taim remains in a coma for an entire year. His sister Nada arrives from Beirut to find out what happened to him. In contrast to her mother, she wears Western clothes and make-up. One wonders how she managed to leave Damascus and find a job and a life in Beirut. Inevitably there are scenes of her fighting with her mother about her choices. Now she wonders if she shouldn't stay in Damascus and try to get her brother's film produced.

Two other characters complete this family drama: Taim's girlfriend Salma and their friend Oussama. In a series of scenes played out either on a carpet or in a bedroom, Salma tells Nada that she has had an abortion and that she wonders if she should have kept the baby now that Taim is gone. Oussama plays the guitar and sings as he had always done when he and Taim were young together. He admits to being a junky, and the source of the hashish that provided pleasure to Taim and his friends in the face of violence and death in the early days of revolution. At times Taim observes the others from above. At others he stands next to them and listens intently to their struggles as they confront the reality of their lives in 2016. Should they leave Syria or stay and work creatively to change current circumstances?



Mohammad Al Attar's play *Alors que j'attendais*, directed by Omar Abusaada. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

Taim's coma is a metaphor for today's Syria, "a country hovering between life and death," in the words of director Abasaada, who has remained in Syria where he continues to produce his "theatre of resistance" despite safety concerns and lack of electricity. It is the situation most Syrians find themselves in symbolically, he says.

Not all of Avignon's sixty-three productions spoke to the grim realities of today's world. There were a number of lighter plays, especially the wonderful *Le Ciel, la nuit et la pierre glorieuse*, written and performed by Thomas Jolly's *La Piccola Familia*, which took place free of charge in an open-air venue every day at noon. Billed as "chronicles of the Festival d'Avignon, from 1947 to...2086," with a new episode each day, *Le Ciel* was one of the hits of the festival. Huge crowds gathered each day hoping to get a seat but many were turned away for lack of space.

The 70th festival was clearly a resounding success. Director Olivier Py was especially proud to have programmed so many demanding works by unknown artists along with the work of familiar directors. He liked to point out that "500 people a night discovering the work of a young choreographer from Lebanon at the Celestin Cloister, one of the festival's main venues," was just as essential to the success of his festival as an audience of 2,000 in the Honor Court.

Avignon 2016 was a true "experiment in living together," as well as a response to the terrorist attacks in Paris in November and the terror attack in Nice on Bastille Day. After Nice, each show began with an actor reading a message from the festival, followed by a minute of silence or applause. With its official festival and Off Festival teaming with thousands of spectators every year, Avignon could have been an easy target. Security was everywhere, but from all reports, spirits were high and the mood was festive and calm. Olivier Py frequently spoke of the role of the festival, to be a place of creative freedom artistically as well as in the everyday encounters of the audiences. The word "empathy" was heard many times in official meetings as well as discussions with the public, empathy and understanding rather than violent encounters. In his final press conference, Py spoke of how he had experienced his 70th festival as a state of grace. The artists did not give in to despair nor did the audiences. Avignon 2016 offered us a momentary response to our anguished and violent society.

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