

The 2017 Avignon Festival: July 6-26, Witnessing Loss, Displacement, and Tears

Among the wide range of diverse offerings that I attended at this year's Avignon festival, I was struck by a recurring theme, the theme of exile and its devastating effects on characters torn from home and family, far from worlds they yearn for yet will never see again. From Dorothee Munyaneza's ode to the unwanted children and their mothers, victims of rape in Rwanda, to Caroline Guiela Nguyen's *Saigon*, which captures the thoughts and dreams of Vietnamese caught between cultures, many plays and performances shed light on the plight of today's vast odyssey of refugees, and devastated lands. Even the maids in Katie Mitchell's version of Genet's *Les bonnes* speak to the many who have left their homelands, hoping to find a better life but ending up exploited and isolated in a foreign land.



Nguyen, *Saigon*. Photo: Christophe Reynaud de Lage.

Especially compelling among these performances, in terms of a direct experience of multiple displacements, was Caroline Guiela Nguyen's *Saigon*, a four-hour saga inspired by her experience of growing up in France as the daughter of a Vietnamese mother who, like so many others, had left Vietnam in 1956, after the battle of Dien Bien Phu, to settle in France. They raised their children to be fully integrated in French society, making sure that they did not learn to speak Vietnamese. When Caroline Guiela Nguyen's mother took her to Ho Chi Minh City in 1997, she was surprised that her mother's

native language was no longer the language spoken after forty years of absence. It was as if her mother had become a relic in the land of her birth.

Guiela Nguyen became a theatre director, founding her own company, *Les hommes approximatifs*, in 2009, and eventually creating *Saigon*, in collaboration with her artistic team, returning several times with them to Vietnam to research the culture of the country she never knew.



Nguyen, *Saigon*. Photo: Christophe Reynaud de Lage.

The play takes place in a Vietnamese restaurant in Paris, owned by a Vietnamese woman called Marie-Antoinette, a role played by Anh Tran Nighia, an actress who had been a cook in a Vietnamese restaurant. It is set in 1996, when a number of Vietnamese are planning to return to Ho Chi Minh City now that they are allowed to go back. The set is an exact replica of a typical Asian restaurant, with a real kitchen and an unpretentious dining area. It is a place where French people of Vietnamese descent, French with ties to Vietnam, and Vietnamese immigrants gather to meet friends, enjoy the food they may remember from the old country, and talk about the new developments of possible returns “home.”

Saigon resembles a TV series, with installments from the present as well as the past. A large cast of characters played by professional as well as amateur actors introduce us to a close-knit community of old friends and new ones of all ages. They come in and out of the restaurant, voices overlapping at times, some of them heavily accented so that it is not always easy to follow their conversations.

We meet Hao, a young Vietnamese man who left Mai, the woman he planned to marry, in Vietnam, Edouard and Linh who met in Vietnam where he was stationed. They too were planning to be married but she needed a French passport and his family did not want him to marry a Vietnamese woman. There is Louise, the wife of a colonist, and so many others. There is a wedding party with balloons, champagne and cake, and romantic songs are sung throughout the show. What was especially interesting to me was the cultural mixture of languages and customs of these representatives of this “wounded land of Saigon,” so beautifully captured by Caroline Guiela Nguyen. Appropriately, the play ends with the words, “this is the way we tell stories in Vietnam, with lots of tears.”



Mitchell's *The Maids*. Photo: Christophe Reynaud de Lage.

British theater artist Katie Mitchell tackled Genet's *Les bonnes* (*The Maids*), in *De Meiden*, with superb actors from Amsterdam's Toneelgroep. In her version of Genet's masterpiece, Claire and Solange are Polish immigrants working for Madame (played as a transvestite). The maids deliver their lines in Polish and Dutch, with French supertitles. Their Dutch is reserved for Madame, as if these domestics were forced to learn the language of the oppressor with no other outlets to practice their newly acquired language.

The single set, a stunning all-white bedroom in a wealthy person's apartment in today's Amsterdam, is the scene of much running around and rushing back and forth, as the maids take turns pretending to be Madame. They try on her elaborate gowns and make-up and wigs, taking pictures of everything so they

can put things back where they found them. They speak very fast, cough, and have difficulty breathing. Marieke Heebink and Chris Nietveld of Toneel Groep Amsterdam give flawless performances, as does Thomas Cammaerk as Madame, in all her splendor. Mitchell's objective is to explore the boss-employee relationship and the exploitation of these underpaid women. They are immigrants trying to escape the bleakness of their reality back home, but something is missing—a sense of ceremony so vital to Genet's theatre, perhaps.



Stone's *Ibsen Huis*. Photo: Christophe Reynaud de Lage.

Ibsen Huis, by young Australian director Simon Stone, an epic four-hour piece in Dutch, was thrilling. The play, a dark social drama filled with characters that could be related to Ibsen's well-known protagonists, takes place in a vacation house originally designed and built in the 1960s by Cees Keekman, a famous architect, who as it turns out, stole the plans from his nephew Daniel. The house, which holds our attention throughout the play, is a masterpiece of glass and wood, with gigantic windows looking out over the surrounding landscape. It revolves, taking us back in time and returning to the present, from 1964 to 2016, as we meet some twenty members of Cees' extended family, a family in crisis, played by eleven remarkable Toneel Groep actors. Narrative fragments introduce us to the victims of Cees' incestuous behavior with his children and grandchildren whose lives and relationships are seen from different perspectives and in different rooms of the house. To take just one example of these multiple stories, we see Lena who is about to marry a man who is upstairs, leaving to join her former husband, Jacob, and their daughter Fleur.

Conversations are not always easy to follow, even though the supertitles are easily accessible. At one point during intermission, technicians completely dismantle the house and transform it into a structure that will go up in flames during the final scenes of the show, putting an end to this infernal cycle of family dysfunction.



Miyagi's *Antigone*. Photo: Christophe Reynaud de Lage.

The glorious Japanese production of Sophocles' *Antigone* by Satoshi Miyagi and his company offered a dazzling theatre of fire and water, shadow and light, in the Honor Court in the Pope's palace. It is another family tragedy, told with traditional Japanese theatrical forms, No, Kabuki and Bunraku, used in new, inventive ways. The vast stage is filled with water, creating a lake through which paper boats with candles float and the sound of figures moving through the water produces a rippling effect that is the calm before the storm.

As the play opens, the chorus, a procession of figures in white kimono-like robes, makes their way slowly through the water, carrying candles in tribute to the souls of the dead. Large boulders stacked on top of each other, or lying on the stage, provide playing areas where the familiar tale of the two rival brothers who kill each other, and their sister's fight to give a proper burial to the one who has been left to deliver their lines, play out their tragedy.

A ladder provides Antigone with the means to climb up to the highest boulder to deliver her moving plea

to Creon. Each main character is played by two actors; one narrates the lines while the other silently follows the line with ritualistic gestures. Miyagi calls these roles the “movers” and the “speakers”—one interpreting the body, the other the voice, allowing their bodies to be separated from their voices. Gigantic silhouettes borrowed from the Indonesian shadow puppet theater cover the back wall when the brothers shout their anger, or when Creon weeps at his realization that, through his own folly, he has lost his son.

In the end, the actors remove their wigs and join the chorus as they wade through the water on their journey to the realm of Hades. There has been no separation between the world of the living and the world of the dead in this superb interpretation of *Antigone*.



Gabriadze, *Ramona*. Photo: Christophe Reynaud de Lage.

It might seem a stretch to include the delightful puppet show *Ramona*, by well-known Georgian puppet master Rezo Gabriadze, among the plays that spoke to me of the pain of separation from family and loved ones. However, the character Ramona, a locomotive stuck in a railroad station in postwar Soviet Union, while the love of her life, Ermon, a powerful steam engine, works to rebuild Siberian infrastructure far from his beloved, is quite touching. Theirs is a sad tale of longing and separation, of lovers whose paths never cross, since they are not free to make their own choices. They may be made of wood and manipulated by puppeteers, but their feelings are real.

Fortunately for Ramona, a circus comes to town and she at least gets to have an adventure, carrying the circus performers, tightrope walkers, and acrobats to the town of Tskaltubo to pick up their circus tent. Although she may not reunite with Ermon, but she knows a sense of freedom and purpose before being

retired. Thanks to the delicate workmanship of these enchanting wooden figures, with their fanciful costumes and endearing facial expressions, Gabriadze's message of the power of love to withstand the absence of the loved one is beautifully expressed.

The focus of this year's festival was shared between plays by women and strong women characters, and work from sub-Saharan Africa, which offered a number of exhilarating dance and music pieces such as *Kalakuta Republik* by Serge Aime Coulibaly from Burkina Faso.



Munyaneza, *Unwanted*. Photo: Christophe Reynaud de Lage.

Among these strong women, Dorothée Munyaneza, a choreographer, actor, dancer and singer originally from Rwanda, confronted audiences with her powerful and disturbing performance piece, *Unwanted*, based on interviews she conducted with Rwandan women who had been raped by soldiers during the genocide and who had raised these “unwanted” children despite the obstacles.

We listen with intense compassion to these recorded accounts, translated by Munyaneza and interpreted by her and Holland Andrews, through vocal as well as physical feats that capture a wide range of responses to the stories being told. On a set composed of a tall, totem-pole-like structure, bearing an image of a beautiful, strong, and proud African woman, a pile of wires spread out in the middle of the stage, and a bare platform in the rear of the stage, an unwanted child calls out to its father: “I have your

mouth, your hands and your fingers, Daddy.” Another mother is told by her family to kill her child before it opens its eyes. The baby resembles a hyena, they say. He was born angry, painfully biting his mother’s nipples.

To navigate through these harsh spoken words, Munyaneza performs wild scenes of rage to a soundscape of cement blocks smashing against each other and heavy wooden pestles banging into pots, along with chanting and guttural sounds. In contrast, and wearing a beautiful brown and white gown, she ministers to a woman on the ground (played by Andrews) whose suffering she attempts to console. I spoke with Munyaneza when she was rehearsing in New York City, and she told me of how, despite the horrors that these women lived through, they wanted beauty and hope to be incorporated into her piece.

In an entirely different vein, Rokia Traore from Mali offered *Dream Mandé*, Djata. This was a song poem, based on the epic tale of Emperor Soundiata Kaita, a thirteenth century Emperor who united the Mandé people, through a “bill of rights,” which required his people to respect each other and practice non violence.

In the beautiful Calvet Museum courtyard, under the plane trees, Traore recounted this story in the style of the Griot story tellers of Western Africa. Accompanied by two well-known musicians, Mamadyba Camara on the kora and Mamah Diabale on the ngoni, she sung to us of democracy and peace. When it was over, seemingly no one wanted to leave.

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