

THEATER REVIEW

Avignon Festival Gets Its Buzz Back

With striking premieres in the main program and enchanting discoveries on the supplementary Fringe, the eminent event in European theater is flourishing after some difficult years.

By Laura Cappelle

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AVIGNON, France — After two years of pandemic-related disruption, the Avignon Festival is well and truly back. As the event, a longtime highlight on the European theater calendar, got underway here last week, there were familiar sights everywhere. All around the small city center, buzzing crowds filled the streets, while blasé regulars zigzagged between performers handing out fliers for some 1,570 Fringe productions.

That's 500 more shows than last year, when the open-access Fringe — known as “le Off,” and running in parallel with the Avignon Festival's official program, “le In” — attempted to find its feet again after the 2020 edition was canceled. While coronavirus cases are rising again this month in France, even masks have been few and far between in the Avignon heat.

In the “In” lineup, one world premiere captured the boisterous mood better than any other. “One Song,” developed by the Belgian artist Miet Warlop at the Belgian playhouse NTGent, is loud, preposterous and extremely entertaining — if a little troubling. It requires superhuman feats from a group of musicians, dressed like sports competitors, who are alternately cheered on and screamed down by performers cast as zealous fans, in front of a mumbling referee.

A double bassist plays his instrument horizontally while doing ab crunches; one of his colleagues must jump up and down to reach a keyboard set above his head. A metronome sets the often wild tempo for the production's “one song,” composed by Maarten Van Cauwenbergh, which the group performs on a loop. It could hardly be more literal: Its opening lines are “Run for your life/'Til you die.”



The cast in “One Song,” developed by the Belgian artist Miet Warlop. Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Avignon Festival

Near the end of the performance I saw, the physical extremes that Warlop pushes her cast to execute became a little too real. A violinist who plays on a high beam, sometimes balancing on one leg, became disoriented after jumping off the beam and hit her head hard against it. Despite the concussion risk, she climbed back up and kept going, her face tight with pain.

When the show ended with much of the cast collapsed from exhaustion, the instant standing ovation for the show was more than earned, yet it also felt like “The Hunger Games” for theater aficionados. Still, it is a classic Avignon production: ripe for debate long into the night.

Other productions from the official lineup were less invigorating, but together they made for a respectable lap of honor for the Avignon Festival's departing artistic leader, the French writer and director Olivier Py. His eight-year tenure has felt muddled, with quarrels about the event's dearth of female directors and several ill-conceived premieres on Avignon's biggest stages.

That was especially true of productions at the open-air Cour d'Honneur, a majestic stage inside the city's Papal Palace. This summer, however, Py corrected course with a high-profile and thought-provoking show, Kirill Serebrennikov's “The Black Monk.”

“The Black Monk” was first staged at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg, Germany, in January, yet much has happened since. A message against a red backdrop during the play’s curtain calls at Avignon — “Stop War” — was a reminder of the conflict in Ukraine and Serebrennikov’s status as a high-profile Russian dissident, who was put under house arrest in Moscow in 2017 and prevented from traveling outside his native country for five years.



Kirill Serebrennikov’s “The Black Monk.” Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Avignon Festival

Not that war features in “The Black Monk,” which is based on an 1894 short story by Anton Chekhov. Despite its scale — four parts, a running time of nearly three hours and an expanded cast of 22 in Avignon — it is more personal than political in nature, and mainly focused on the descent of one man, Kovrin, into delusion and megalomania.

Each part of the show focuses on a single character’s perspective. First there is Yegor, Kovrin’s childhood guardian; then Tanya, Yegor’s daughter, who marries Kovrin. He makes for a terrible husband, unsurprisingly, and in the third and fourth parts, his recurring hallucination — a black monk — takes over the stage as well as Kovrin’s mind.

At the midway point, the structure starts to feel repetitive, and a few people walked out as a result. Yet Serebrennikov wisely pivots to a more operatic approach in the second half with a large chorus of singers and dancers, all in black monk’s cowls. The result aptly fills the expansive Cour d’Honneur stage and testifies to Serebrennikov’s obvious craft and passion for the characters, although the choreography remains too generic to fully carry the piece to its intended destination.

On other stages, the mood was also bleak, as it often has been under Py. “Iphigenia,” staged at Avignon’s opera house, sneaked in a nod to Py’s successor, the Portuguese writer and director Thiago Rodrigues. The director, Anne Théron, opted for Rodrigues’s 2015 retelling of the myth of Iphigenia, sacrificed by the Greeks in exchange for the wind needed to carry them across the sea to Troy. It is a delicate, evocative version, told by characters who remember — or refuse to remember — the story even as it happens, as if the tragedy was bound to happen over and over again.



Bashar Murkus’s “Milk.” Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Avignon Festival

Child sacrifice also features in Bashar Murkus’s “Milk,” albeit in a very different context. Murkus, a young Palestinian director based in Haifa, took maternal milk as a central metaphor for this wordless work about mourning mothers. The women onstage cradle mannequins, slowly then frenetically; milk flows from the fake breasts they wear, ultimately filling the stage. The result is full of arresting tableaux, despite a subpar musical score.

For vibrant, energetic theater, however, the best bet remains to delve into the motley Fringe offerings. This year, for instance, nine companies from the French island of Réunion, in the Indian Ocean, banded together to present an invigorating mini-series of shows.



David Erudel and Lolita Tergémina in “The Game of Love and Chance,” directed by Tergémina. Sébastien Marchal

One company, Sakidi, is performing Marivaux’s “The Game of Love and Chance,” a classic 18th-century French comedy, in the Creole language spoken on Réunion (with subtitles). Réunion Creole is very rarely heard on French stages, and this vivacious production by Lolita Tergémina, at the Chapelle du Verbe Incarné theater, suggests that is a shame. Since the language is heavily influenced by French, a lot of it is understandable without the subtitles, and the translation is full of images that make Marivaux feel fresh again.

New French plays often come to Avignon for a trial run, too, and at a theater called 11, the playwright Jean-Christophe Dollé has landed a hit with “Phone Me.” This well-crafted intergenerational story revolves around what now feels like a 20th-century artifact, the phone booth. There are three onstage along with three central characters — a member of the French Resistance during World War II and her son and granddaughter, in the 1980s and 1990s — whose secrets converge in this unlikely setting.



Amal Allaoui, left, and Alice Trocellier in “Tales of the Fairies,” directed by Aurore Evain. Mirza Durakovic

Among 1,570 shows, there is a special kind of delight in happening upon a gem like “Phone Me,” or “Tales of the Fairies,” a bright, family-friendly production at the Espace Alya. The director and scholar Aurore Evain is part of a French movement aiming to reclaim the legacy of forgotten female artists, and in Avignon, she has revived two fairy tales by the 17th-century writer Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy.

On a pocket-size stage, at lunchtime on a Monday, Evain's three actors and musicians brought a demanding queen, a kind prince and some very helpful animals to whimsical life. Call it a sprinkle of vintage Avignon fairy dust: There was certainly some in the air.

Avignon Festival. Various venues, through July 26.

Off d'Avignon. Various venues, through July 30.