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Theatre

Avignon festival review – hit the timewarp gym and dive into a trippy Chekhov

There are epic and uneven shows from Olivier Py and Simon Falguières but Kirill Serebrennikov and Miet Warlop prove to be essential theatre voices

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The 2022 Avignon festival begins with shows featuring whirling monks, a karate nun and a kind of *It's a Knockout* in papal socks. Outgoing festival director Olivier Py's opening 10-hour production, *My Exalted Youth*, is a meta-theatre fable of a McJobbing Harlequin and his combative relationship with an older lover. The scabrous satire is sharply delivered as a kinky cardinal is tricked by Harlequin into dancing in the underwear of a nun “with a black belt in modern theology” in order to obtain a rare Rimbaud manuscript. But this is blunted by extended ceremonial passages that crowd out the audience's

THIS IS DIMINUED BY EXTENDED SEMIOMISING PASSAGES THAT CROWD OUT THE AUDIENCE'S desire to think for itself. Py's exalted, utopian theatre is - all too often - a sort of lecture hall. I left it after a few hours to see other work.

Similarly navel-gazing - and completing a directorial manspreading over the festival's first three days - is Simon Falguières' 13-hour long *The Nest of Ashes* (★★★★☆), which rehashes various fairytales including Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty with a sprinkling of Beckettian and Mnouchkineian stagecraft, and plenty of tally-ho idealisation of the life of a young theatre troupe. When it is tight - for about three hours of its vast length, in particular the last hour - it is seriously good, revealing a singular imagination. But offering such a huge frame to a 33-year-old director doesn't help Falguières' talent to develop. Crucial moments (so patiently anticipated!) such as the reawakening of the long-slumbering Queen, or the union of the two central lovers - one modern, one mythical - are sometimes botched and passed over too quickly, and the young troupe does not yet have the gravitas to hold a stage for such a long time.





📷 When it is tight, it is seriously good ... Nest of Ashes. Photograph: Raynaud Delage

There is perhaps a psychedelic overdose of gravitas in Kirill Serebrennikov's vast, trippy, brilliant and baggy *The Black Monk* (★★★★☆). An adaptation of Chekhov's early novella, the show proceeds Rashomon-like through three replays of the story, each time increasing the presence and importance of the spectral titular monk until he bursts on to the stage (multiplied into 16 singer-dancers) in an incantatory, overlong final act replete with hallucinogenic, cosmic video projections on the vast Papal Palace wall. The crystalline Chekhov tale is part-Cherry Orchard and part-Hamlet: a dedicated gardener, anxious for the future of his estate, encourages a union between his nervous daughter and the highly strung young poet who was adopted into their family as a child. The poet meets the ghostly monk, who encourages him to fulfil his creative destiny, becoming a blooming lotus flower rather than a hardy shrub. The poet descends into madness, doubting that the apparition is real.

It is played in sequence by three actors as the poet, and I suspect that Serebrennikov's real motivation (he is clearly no shrub) is the build-up to the final ritual dance, an ecstatic exploration of the need for a grain of madness in order to see the truth. He is assisted in this by the Mistral wind, which rips apart the show's greenhouse set as the monks make their first appearance. Serebrennikov - who was under house arrest in Moscow for nearly two years - has endured pressures that comfortable, tally-ho western companies can barely guess at, and this deep, unusual, uneven, fresh show is the harbinger of a great new voice in theatre's midst.





📷 Most exalted show ... One Song by Miet Warlop. Photograph: Christophe Raynaud de Lage/Festival d'Avignon

The most exalted show of the opening days is directed by the uncategorisable Belgian artist [Miet Warlop](#). One Song (★★★★☆) means what it says in the title - a single, boppy composition by Maarten van Cauwenberghe repeated for an hour by a ragtag group of musician-athlete-apostles. There's a frantic drummer, a gymnast-violinist on a balance beam, a double-bassist doing punishing situps to reach his instrument, a jumping keyboard player and a singer on a treadmill, all wearing sports kit with socks sourced from Gammarelli, the papal tailor in Rome. They are imprisoned in a timewarp gym with a crowd of fans on an upstage bleacher cheering them on raucously as they repeat the music faster, even faster and then lurchingly slower, following an on stage metronome and the incomprehensible injunctions of a hysterical, hilarious, megaphone-wielding announcer. Just when you feel they're getting the hang of things, water starts dripping on them, making them slip and slide quite dangerously.

So far, so Sisyphean: but Warlop's real intent is to lead us through the patent humour and futility of this set-up towards deeper concerns about the purpose of human action, collaboration and - etched through the song's incantation - the brutal and universal cycle of grief (Warlop lost her elder brother aged 26). It manages this without dollops of theorising, in an accessible, transparent and original form, eliciting a massive ovation. Completing the frenetic tableau, a whirling performer chants text and assembles clay tiles of words in meandering phrases around the stage, ending by dancing with the word "if".

"In everyday life, 'if' is an evasion, in the theatre 'if' is the truth," wrote [Peter Brook](#) in *The Empty Space*. Brook is in the minds and hearts of everyone here, joyously sharing reminiscences of this awesome director, who is - surprisingly - officially commemorated only by a festival blogpost. Mercifully, however, Tiago Rodriguez - the incoming director - has committed to resurrecting the most exalted of Brook's spaces, the geological-cosmic Boulbon quarry, birthplace of his epic production of *The Mahabharata* in 1985.

The [Avignon festival](#) runs until 26 July.

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