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*76th Festival D'avignon* (review)

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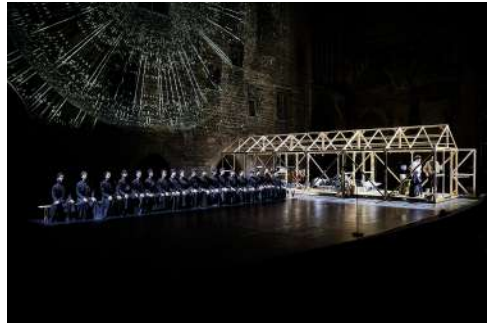
ent ages (one being young and the other being middle-aged). While her Black husbands evoked specific Black archetypes, the white husbands seemingly were “individuals” and free of racialized characterization. In the latter third of the play, the imagined colonial Jamaican idyll, though evocatively staged, also seemed to ignore any reference to the history of British imperialism. In these ways, the production’s engagement with race seemed more aesthetic than discursive.

Despite these shortcomings, I believe *The Wife of Willesden* offers thought-provoking fodder for scholars of both adaptation studies and medieval studies as well as those considering intercultural performance across disciplines. The relative dearth of staged performances of Chaucer’s masterpiece suggests an “unstageability” that is worthy of renewed efforts by practitioners, especially those considering how to reinterpret historical texts for modern times and people of color. Scholars of genre studies may also benefit from considering the opportunities and pitfalls of transposing premodern poetry to postmodern drama. *The Wife of Bath* has much to offer, and Smith’s version of her tale succeeds in gesturing to the potential of reapproaching medieval texts through the lens of intercultural performance.

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**76TH FESTIVAL D’AVIGNON.** Palais des Papes and various other venues, Avignon, France. July 7-26, 2022.

After the collective trauma that made the live (co-) presence of people in public irrelevant, or even dangerous, the breath of a certain freedom soared afresh along the ramparts of Avignon. The longest-running theatre festival in France was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and then returned in 2021 with strict “social distancing” measures in place, which brought forth an atmosphere of crowd management, surveillance, and insecurity. In July 2022, those restrictions were rescinded, which allowed the Festival to once more pervade the one-half-square-mile within the fortifications of the former City of Popes that houses upward of two hundred performing venues. Given that theatre attendance in France had plummeted by as much as thirty percent compared to pre-COVID times, theatre companies were eager to embrace the Avignon festival as a way to revitalize attendance at live art events.



Heavenly bodies as the archetype of the chorus in *The Black Monk*. (Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.)

By dehierarchizing and depersonalizing dramatic personae, as well as assembling them as choruses and in chorus-like configurations, several festival productions reflected on the tensions surrounding contemporary collectivism. Specifically, the festival spoke to lingering tensions regarding governmental policies enacted during the pandemic in the name of collective values and public health, which were perceived by some members of the public as examples of latent authoritarianism. As if to suggest ways out of this impasse, the choral formations, as well as the dehierarchization of dramatic character, necessitated performers’ multidisciplinary versatility and volatility, hinting at an artistic ambivalence that elided overt contestations between the state and the individual.

After Russian authorities disbanded his Moscow theatre, the popular Gogol Center, Kirill Serebrennikov became the first Russian artist to have the honor of opening the Avignon festivities with a premiere at the Palais des Papes. Although the director had long been considered an opponent of Vladimir Putin’s politics, and since 2021 an antiwar spokesman to boot, he was chosen as the festival’s drawing card long before the February 2022 onset of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. By the same token, his conceptualization of the play *The Black Monk* (*The Чёрный Мönch*)—co-produced by the Gogol Center, Hamburg’s Thalia Theater, and, as rumor had it, Russian tycoons who defected to Berlin—predated the war’s outbreak. The mixed critical reception of the show, which had attracted considerable attention from festivalgoers, was due partly to the audience’s inflated expectations as well as to the artistic team’s unfulfilled ambitions.

*The Black Monk* is based on a meditative, intimist novella by Anton Chekhov that explores questions of insanity and delusions of grandeur. Serebren-

nikov elevated his source text into a Gesamtkunstwerk that felt even more grandiose for having been staged under the imposing walls of the Court of Honor, which seats 2,500 spectators. Four distinct sections of the play allowed the spectators to linger over the perspectives of central characters: an overworked young intellectual Kovrin, who is haunted by hallucinations of a black-robed monk convincing him he is chosen by God for his genius to save mankind from millennia of suffering; his foster father, who offers him refuge at the countryside estate with breathtaking gardens where he grew up; his wife, who is compelled to cajole him into undergoing treatment, after which he regains mental health but loses joy in life and thus starts missing conversations with the monk; and the apparition itself, brought back one last time by Kovrin's own remorse for ruining his family, in an encounter that leads to his death—with his face frozen in a blissful smile.

To develop an aesthetic that would intimidate the spectators by penetrating the mechanisms of madness, the dissident director went beyond intensifying Kovrin's frenzy and aggressiveness. In the production, which largely adhered to the strategies of character- and action-driven representational theatre, several international actors alternated in the main roles and replicated certain lines in Russian, English, and German, such as Kovrin's man-

tra, "Without freedom, there is no madness. Without madness, there is no freedom." This emphasis on fragmentation as a directing choice clarified the theme of dissociative identity. Furthermore, the eponymous character was multiplied into two male choruses costumed in black cassocks: choristers singing psalms and dancers absorbed in dervish whirls were unified to stand for the harbinger of Fate in the manner of a Greek chorus. As they roved spectrally over the expanse of stage as if floating through the cosmos, the synaesthetic combination of their dance and song reflected the way that ancient Greek culture imagined the supreme motion of heavenly bodies as the archetype of every chorus. However, both the solemnity and imperativeness of the majestic stage and the massive size of the ensemble—a dozen dancers, seven singers, and seven actors, who, during scene changes, took part in stage business along with chorus members—did not suffice. Serebrennikov, as if too deeply absorbed in his character's megalomania, supplemented the stage picture with smoke and light effects, live video close-ups of performers, and projections of cosmological spheres. Despite his scenic inventiveness and compelling performances all around (Mirco Kreibich, Odin Biron, and Filipp Avdeyev took turns in the role of the intellectual), the quadruplication of lines and stage goings-on unnecessarily slowed



"Crammed together into a rectangle in the middle of the stage" in *Solitaire*.  
(Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.)

the production and weighed it down, causing it to veer toward pomposity.

Another choral mass of bodies transported Avignon audiences to an outlandish locale that confronted them with a similarly terrifying existential situation. “A group of an unknown number of people gets confined and crammed together into a rectangle in the middle of the stage. No wall surrounds them, but they cannot nonetheless get out nor do they have any clue as to why they found themselves there in the first place.” These stage directions open *Solitaire*, the last play written by Lars Norén, one of the luminaries of contemporary Swedish theatre, who passed away in 2021 from complications of COVID-19. Director Sofia Adrian Jupither, helming a co-production that brought together actors from six theatres in three Nordic countries, approached the play as a conductor—exacting in her minimalism and precision. During the one hundred minutes of the show, the ten unnamed individuals she distinguished in Norén’s amorphous and polyphonic script barely moved an inch from their initial positions. As all their individual, anxious attempts to move got caught up in collective writhing, there was nothing they could do but continue standing in a forcedly erect posture, stare, and resort to short soliloquies. (Realizing the futility of waiting, one of them, in a line charged with dramatic irony, gasped out: “There is nothing here, not even a tree.”)

Each performer seemed thoroughly alienated from the others and epitomized the tendency of contemporary Western European society to emphasize individual rights at the expense of collective responsibilities. Positioned downstage center on a proscenium stage in Avignon, and occupying no more than one fifth of its width, the tangle of their bodies seemed arrested by the obscurity pierced only by pale front lights, resembling a group sculpture surrounded with a boundless negative space. Out of it, as if from a cauldron, oozed forth nameless citizens’ narrow-mindedness, pugnacity, urges, fears, and neuroses. Only a few humorous exchanges broke out beneath the anguish that this unidentifiable environment impinging on the audience exuded. No cooperation aimed at resolving the situation nor any collective feeling was to be witnessed. And yet, despite the title—a double entendre suggesting both the single-player card game and an exercise in “patience” (as the game is otherwise known)—the work could be viewed as a choral requiem. Even though there were technically no choral utterances, the ten figures’ lines accumulated, creating the overall impression of a chorus. Without any need for counting beats, their speech, delivered and perceived as “word-music,” was impelled by a physical unity of action (or lack thereof), so much so that they appeared to be breath-



Blurring the lines between singing and dancing in *t u m u l u s*. (Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.)

ing together. Most astonishing was the level of restraint, physical and mental alike, required of the classically trained actors barely stirring as Norén’s captives of some ineffable force huddled at the center of the huge empty stage. They loomed like fanatics taking part in a durational performance or, alternatively, like living elements of an installation art piece transforming the perception of theatrical space. Signs of an outside world—the sounds of a bang and raindrops on a roof, as well as sheets of paper with characters’ photos on them pouring down from the ceiling—either recalled the life that could continue if they found some exit or foreboded a life after death. Even before most of them caved in over each other, in a collective rigor mortis of sorts, the ominousness of their condition made an unbearable visceral effect (aggravated even more in the wake of the pandemic) and left viewers, almost literally, gasping for air.

Elsewhere at the festival, a grave mound covered with moss took up the entirety of the stage in a show aptly entitled *t u m u l u s*. This barrow belonged to a chimerical community of unidentified provenance, and they spun around it as if in a ring dance, slid down it as if on a toboggan, and played hide-and-seek through the tunnels that riddled it—all while singing, a capella, polyphonic choral songs from the European early music tradition. Costumes of robes, bamboo headgear, and woolen ankle gaiters intermingled with contemporary down jackets (zany ahistorical costumes by Romain Brau). Intentionally bereft of a developed plot, individualized characterization, or spoken dialogue, this show (co-produced by the vocal ensemble Les Cris de Paris and Mandorle productions, an artistic hub primarily engaged in choreographic collaborations) allowed each of the thirteen performers to blur the lines, in an extraordinary tour de force, between singing and dancing. By thoroughly committing themselves to interdisciplinary fusion, the co-devisers (choreographer François Chaignaud and early music director Geoffroy Jourdain) showed how these two artforms



*One Song*: athletes or artists? (Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.)

reabsorbed each other and exhibited a certain nostalgia for times before the institutionalization and professionalization of art disciplines. They also gave attendants at this sepulchral yet joyful conclave an opportunity to witness first-hand how movement and voice, whether trained or raw, both arise from and merge into each other. The instances of singers' and dancers' respective encroaching upon the model of representation of the artform they were not trained in—just as with the actors in *Solitaire*—required the performers to unlearn, in some measure, the sign systems of their own craft, which shifted the focus to the processual aspects of their performances and brought about fluidity within choral unities.

*One Song*, a rare bird at Avignon, broke out as the Festival's surprise hit. With a gymnasium set onstage that was gradually populated by an assortment of quirky sporty personas—a three-legged old lady acting as a sportscaster, four boisterous and equally insatiable sports fans, a slender young male cheerleader, and five athletes—everything looked like an absurd yet oddly quotidian setup for a sporting event. After a short warm-up, the gymnasts approached exercise equipment—and also grabbed nearby musical instruments. To the delight of the spectators (both those offstage and the rest of the ensemble serving as an onstage audience), they struck up a tuneful rock 'n' roll number while indulging, to

even greater delight, in heavy workouts: the singer ran on the treadmill; the violinist balanced on the beam; the drummer scrambled around, grappling with scattered drum kit parts; the keyboard player kept jumping to reach the synthesizer placed on top of the Swedish ladder; and the double bassist, not standing, but rather flat on his back, spared no effort at doing abs. An inexorably ever-faster metronome enforced the multitask performance of one song—the same song over and over—which never stopped repeating and reinventing itself as the players gave up in especially difficult moments, then joined in anew and kept discovering balance and brio in out-of-the-ordinary situations.

A real-time spiral of endorphin addiction was at work here, since this frenetic one-hour performance-piece-cum-concert drove the performers' bodies to extreme exhaustion while summoning the audience to sing along. The torchbearer behind this eccentric show, Flemish multidisciplinary artist Miet Warlop, laid out a metatheatrical dilemma of whether to designate the entertaining—indeed, no less than amazing—histrions as athletes or artists. On a more general level, she also conjured a Lyotardian "energetic theatre" that fulfilled itself in forces and intensities and came dangerously close to Antonin Artaud's idea of performers "being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames."



The audience reads along in unison in *An Image from the Inside*. (Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.)

Evoking bygone eras when entertainments such as acrobatics, tournaments, and races were presented in festivals alongside theatrical fare, *One Song* proved its merit as the fourth installment of the *Histoire(s) du théâtre* series, initiated by Milo Rau, artistic director of the NTGent in Belgium, under the aegis of which one theatremaker is invited each year to create a stagework that engages with theatre history and redefines it in some unique way.

*An Image from the Inside* (*Una imagen interior*) by the Spanish company El Conde de Torrefiel explored an especially daring configuration of choral formations. Choral assignments were transferred from stage to audience for a peculiar stage reading in which not a single line was delivered by the performers, who seemed thoroughly intent on abstaining from speaking (similar to how the actors in *Solitaire* refrained from moving). Instead, captions were projected on prominently positioned supertitle screens so that spectators could read along in unison, albeit silently. These captions included descriptions of stage goings-on (oftentimes more vivid than the proceedings observable onstage), dialogues, and soliloquies, as well as pertinent key words that sometimes barged the spectator-readers so fast as to exceed the point of legibility. According to directors Tanya Beyeler and Pablo Gisbert, the script itself emanated from a drip painting occupying the whole width of the otherwise empty stage, which was created by the ensemble as part of the performance itself. Eerie noise music and environmental ambience tracks (by sound designers Uriel Ireland and Rebecca Praga) raised nostalgia—similarly palpable in *t u m u l u s*—for the epoch of primordial human communities when the primacy of the collective reigned supreme, untainted by the forces of “mass mind” social imagery. As if drawing on Chiara Bottici’s recent scholarship on the contemporary imaginal, the show found fault with today’s media for their

capacity to stifle imagination and therefore debilitate human political action, all in an effort to preserve the status quo. The six performers either kept their faces blank or turned their backs on the audience, moving in a surreally sluggish manner, in order to embody impermeable and depersonalized twenty-first-century denizens. Devoid of voice, one of the most identifiable forms of human expression, they remained nondescript as to their artistic training and thus once again challenged the classificability of performance. They were reduced to stage ciphers, left to be filled in by the viewers—who were thus incited to call on their own imaginations in defiance of their soundless choral syncing with other audience members.

Even in our era of representative democracies in which citizens’ voices are not only mediated but also mediated almost to the point of being muted in decision-making processes, these live choral presences recalled the interdependence of the collective and the individual. The choruses and choral-like frameworks employed by the theatremakers at Avignon in 2022 offered the attendants opportunities to balance between individuation and conformity. Instead of periodically commenting on the action, these choruses remaining onstage throughout facilitated a dynamic of mutual affect and intensity. Most remarkably, they seemed to have located the purpose of the choral contract not so much in synchronization or cohesion, but rather in interdisciplinary undecidability. Exercising porosity among the performing and visual arts helped undermine the hierarchies negotiated between collective and individual positions. These choral arrangements could ultimately be viewed as militating against the subservience to a common flow through prismatically generating multiple coexisting forms of spectatorship/collectivity—thus accomplishing, to varying degrees, Jacques Rancière’s “redistributions of the sensible.”

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*Independent Scholar*

**EVITA.** Book and lyrics by Tim Rice. Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Directed by Sammi Cannold. American Repertory Theater, Cambridge, Massachusetts. June 16, 2023.

As audience members settled into their seats for the American Repertory Theater’s revival of *Evita*, a white, shimmering ball gown hung suspended over the Loeb Drama Center stage, floating with ethereal life, though unfilled by a human form. The musi-