

# A French Festival Focuses (Timidly) on English

The Avignon Festival's new director wants to spotlight drama in a different language each year. This year's first installment had some conventional choices.

**By Laura Cappelle**

Laura Cappelle attended the Avignon Festival in southern France.

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As soon as the Portuguese director Tiago Rodrigues took over at the Avignon Festival, France's biggest theater event, he announced a symbolic move: Under his direction, there would be a special focus on a different language every year, starting, this summer, with English.

There was wincing from some quarters: To many in France, English is already far too culturally dominant. In the end, they needn't have worried. Of several dozen productions in the official lineup of this year's festival, which runs through July 25, only six plays are predominantly in English.

As a result, Avignon, which has long welcomed shows from a wide range of cultures, hasn't felt much different this year. If anything, Rodrigues's Anglo-Saxon choices seem a tad timid. Focusing on a language, rather than a country, could have opened the door to Anglophone theater from underrepresented regions. Instead, five productions came from British directors, two of whom, Tim Etchells and Alexander Zeldin, are already well-established in France.

A few novelties are still to come, including work from London's Royal Court Theater, which is largely unknown across the Channel. So far, however, the most intriguing discovery has been the sole American entry, "Baldwin and Buckley at Cambridge," from Elevator Repair Service. This verbatim recreation of a 1965 debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr., about race in the United States, is spare and meticulous. From tables on opposite sides of the stage, Greig Sargeant (Baldwin) and Ben Williams (Buckley) spar with effective solemnity.

The fact that Elevator Repair Service is widely described as "experimental" in its home country may amuse some French festivalgoers: "Baldwin and Buckley at Cambridge" is fairly buttoned-up by local standards. Only the short final scene, which sees Sargeant and April Matthis, as the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, break character and touch on racial dynamics in the making of a previous Elevator Repair Service production, feels truly biting.



Catherine Dagenais-Savard in “Marguerite: The Fire,” which pays tribute to Marguerite Duplessis, who, in 1740, was one of the first enslaved people to be heard by a Canadian court. Christophe Raynaud de Lage

Another North American production at Avignon is performed in French: “Marguerite: The Fire,” by the Québec-based Indigenous writer and director Émilie Monnet. It, too, touched on the history of racism by way of a little-known historical figure, Marguerite Duplessis. In 1740, Duplessis was one of the first enslaved people to be heard by a Canadian court, after she claimed she had been born a free woman.

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Together with three other performers, Monnet pays tribute to Duplessis in a production that has high points — including evocative choral and dance numbers — but feels overly linear, its text well-meaning yet monotonous. Like “Baldwin and Buckley at Cambridge,” “Marguerite: The Fire” also unwittingly plays into a French national sport: deploring North American racism while struggling to recognize it closer to home.

In the French portion of the lineup, meanwhile, some directors also got involved in the Anglo-Saxon focus by adapting the work of English-speaking authors. Pauline Bayle, a rising star who was appointed to lead the Montreuil Theater last year, boldly took on

Virginia Woolf. Unfortunately, the result, “Writing Life,” is strangely shapeless.

The cast awkwardly veer between peppy contemporary digressions and bits and pieces lifted from Woolf’s works. One minute, they mention the threat of an imminent, pandemic-style lockdown, and engage in slightly forced interactions with three rows of audience members. The next, they grapple with Woolf’s intricate style, which comes across as bombastic by contrast.

“Writing Life” at least came with English surtitles for non-French speakers — a welcome development for the Avignon Festival. While select productions already came with an English translation under the previous director, Olivier Py, Rodrigues has made it the default to appeal to more international visitors.



The cast of “The Garden of Earthly Delights” is wheeled into the venue, a former quarry, by bus. Christophe Raynaud de Lage

There were a handful of exceptions, not least Philippe Quesne’s “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” accessible only to French speakers. It’s a shame, because the production marked the reopening of a legendary Avignon venue: the Boulbon quarry, a majestic natural spot outside the city. It was last used in 2016, not least because of its eye-watering running costs: Fire safety precautions alone ended up costing 600,000 euros, or \$670,000, this year.

“The Garden of Earthly Delights” proved a loving reintroduction to Boulbon. In it, members of an eccentric, hippie-adjacent community are wheeled into the quarry by bus. They carefully lay a giant egg down in the middle of the vast space, and perform

amusingly absurd rituals around it. Some recreate poses from paintings by Hieronymus Bosch; others deliver wacky poems or monologues. Even if you spoke the language, it didn't fully make sense, but it felt at home against Boulbon's arid, otherworldly backdrop.

For English-speaking visitors, however, one major part of Avignon remains difficult to access: the Fringe, known as "le Off." With nearly 1,500 shows on offer in small and big venues all around the city, it dwarves the official lineup, but very few productions offer English versions or surtitles.

If you look closely enough, though, there are some opportunities to hang with the French crowds at "le Off." A handful of venues offer surtitles on select days, like the Théâtre des Doms with "Méduse.s," a well-crafted feminist reinterpretation of the mythical figure of Medusa by the Belgian company La Gang.

Some performers find other ways to bridge the gap with English speakers. On Mondays during the festival, the French writer and performer Maïmouna Coulibaly, who currently lives in Berlin, performs her one-woman show "Maïmouna - HPS" in English at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint Michel. It's a no-holds-barred exploration of her relationship to her body, including her traumatic circumcision as a child and her adult sex life. The back-and-forth between the two experiences induces a little whiplash, but Coulibaly brings galvanizing energy to the stage.



Charlotte Avias and Camille Timmerman in “Punk.e.s,” which tells the story of the first all-female punk band, the Slits. Arnaud Dufau

And some French shows barely need translating. Justine Heynemann and Rachel Arditi’s “Punk.e.s,” at La Scala Provence, dives into the story of the first major all-female punk band, the Slits, with such chutzpah that, by the final musical number at a recent performance, quite a few audience members were on their feet.

Charlotte Avias, especially, gives a manic pixie punk performance to remember as the Slits’ lead vocalist Ari Up, and Kim Verschueren, a powerful singer, finds shadowy nuance in the role of Tessa Pollitt. The set list — which cycles through the Beatles, the Clash and the Velvet Underground — could have used even more Slits songs, but “Punk.e.s” is a reminder that French artists have long taken inspiration from their Anglo-Saxon counterparts.

There’s a way to go to before language differences don’t prove a barrier for theater. Still, the Avignon Festival is increasingly doing its part.