

Confessions, storytelling and worlds in which the impossible becomes possible. The 77th Avignon Festival, July 5-25, 2023.

By Philippa Wehle

From the daily chorusing of the ever-present cicadas to the familiar fanfare of Maurice Jarre's trumpets, which have announced the opening of new shows in Avignon since early festival times, and the black swifts piercing the sky with their loud screams as they fly over the majestic 14th century walls - - Avignon, the yearly festival I've attended since 1968 with a few missed years, is once more on my mind. Avignon, the name always brings forth indelible memories of navigating my way over cobblestones and through jubilant crowds to the many outdoor cloisters and other spaces serving as theatres during the festival. My yearly foray into this remarkable festival was no exception this year. No matter what shows may have disappointed or which ones delighted, Avignon for me is a yearly must despite my advanced age and frailties. I had to be there for the 77th Avignon festival. I had to discover what the festival's new director Tiago Rodrigues had in store for us.

Seated among some two thousand spectators in the open-air Honor Court of the Popes' Palace, I was ready and eager to receive *Welfare*, a new work by Julie Deliquet, director of the Gérard Philippe theatre in St. Denis. She is only the second woman to be invited to present a show in the Honor Court in the seventy-seven-year history of the festival, and I was looking forward to discovering her work even though some were saying that the Honor Court's forbidding dimensions call for majestic stagings and that Deliquet's choice of an ordinary school gymnasium was questionable.



Welfare. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

Deliquet's *Welfare*, an adaptation of American filmmaker Frederick Wiseman's 1973 documentary, does indeed take place in a replica of a school gymnasium some place in New York City in the 1970s. Stagehands are slowly taking down sports equipment and moving other athletic paraphernalia out of the way in preparation for the day's welfare center, temporarily located in a make-shift venue. They bring out a table for the social workers who are about to begin dealing with the day's cases while empty bleachers offer seating for the clients. A young man with a guitar provides musical commentary. A policeman strolls by. It is December.

Throughout *Welfare*'s two and one-half hours a cast of fifteen actors reenact the hardships of the homeless and the poor, single mothers, drug addicts and others in desperate need, as well as the beleaguered director of the Welfare Center and his staff as they try to navigate their way through the overwhelming dysfunction of the system. Some clients need immediate attention. Others wait on the bleachers or wander about aimlessly. These are not anonymous people. They have names: Valerie Johnson, Roz Baker, and Larry Rivera. Their complaints are valid and their frustration tangible as are those of the team trying to help them. Reactions range from angry outbursts to

forlorn acceptance. When Valerie Johnson is told “There is no Valerie Johnson in our records. You will have to wait until January 1st,” we cannot help but commiserate with her, especially when her anger becomes so loud that she is carried off over the policeman’s shoulder. We also cannot help but laugh at the absurdity of the heavily pregnant woman who is told that she has to get written medical proof of her pregnancy in order to receive her stipend. Of course, we are touched by the gentleman who tells us that his dog is all he has, and we sympathize with the center’s director who is overwhelmed. Still, there is something missing.

Deliquet’s theatre is a theatre of testimony. *Welfare* documents the situation of welfare recipients and those who help them, but the play seemed not to elevate beyond reporting. We are simply witnesses to these case histories dating from the 1970s and the losing battle that clients and staff endure. In an interview, Julie Deliquet shared that she hoped that her show would be received with anger and that her theatre would invite us to rethink the way we create society. Yet, drawing our attention to the flaws of the welfare system as it existed in the United States in the 1970s is puzzling when the system was overhauled twenty years ago and despite its many flaws, it is no longer the portrait that we encounter on Deliquet’s stage.

In contrast to the many lives encountered in *Welfare*, *The Confessions*, by British author Alexander Zeldin, tells the tale of just one woman, Alice, a child of the working class in Australia, born in 1943. Based on hours of interviews Zeldin conducted with his mother, *The Confessions* is a portrait of an “ordinary” life with its many stories told in a series of hyper-realistic moments by nine actors playing all of the roles: mother, father, husband, friends, lover.



The Confessions. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

The play begins in the family kitchen in Australia where we meet Alice fighting with her parents who want her to go to university while she wants to break free of her confined life as a child of a conservative, narrow-minded milieu. Multiple scenes follow Alice's determination to reinvent herself. London in the 1980s, marriage and divorce, jobs as an art history professor and social assistant, even a sexual assault. We follow her into her living room with friends, and back in a kitchen with other friends. Other scenes are set in other kitchens and other living rooms, with other sofas, chairs, sinks and refrigerators. The play's hyper-realistic dialogue and sets and the many personal moments captured over a lifetime, leave us wishing for something beyond the stark realism of this "ordinary life."

All of it, a trilogy composed of three monologues written for actress Kate Flynn, by Alistair McDowall, co-directed by Vicky Featherstone and Sam Pritchard, and presented in Avignon by the Royal Court Theatre from London, also tells stories of women dealing with "ordinary lives," but these three female characters escape their everyday lives through sharing their inner worlds with us.



All of it. Photo: Manuel Harlan.

The first monologue takes place in War time, 1940. Speaking in blank verse, a woman is sitting in her rather shabby dining room in a home she shares with her father. She is trapped at home during an air raid. To protect her against the bombs outside, she has a Morrison shelter, a large wire cage on the dining room floor, into which she crawls and stays until the air raid is over, more confined than before and still talking all the while.

In the second monologue, a woman speaks to us in a pre-recorded voice that echoes throughout the theatre. She has become obsessed with a stain on her wall. As she stares at the molding, she starts to see double. Talking to herself in a psychotic rant, she becomes increasingly drawn into to the moldy green wall as it turns into rubble.

The third monologue portrays a woman from birth to death. It is composed of half sentences and repeated words, from baby's babbling to discovering language, school, her first kiss, university, motherhood, and death. She delivers her lines on a microphone, varying rhythms from fast to slow and back, repeating words, noises, and finally the mutterings of old age. Her stunning performance of "a whole life in one breath" was extraordinary.

Director and Visual Artist Philippe Quesne's new creation *Le Jardin des Délices* (*The Garden of Delights*), loosely based on Jerome Bosch's sixteenth century triptych of fantastical allegories, received its premiere in the Carrière Boulbon, an awe-inspiring quarry 15 kilometers outside of Avignon. The quarry had not been used as a theatre for the past seven years and one could feel a sense of expectancy and excitement in the audience. What magic would Philippe and his Vivarium Studio players conjure up for us?



Le Jardin des Délices. Photo: Phippe Dauphin.

Soon, a white tourist bus appears to our left. It is being pushed into the quarry by a group of passengers, two women and six men, stranded in the middle of imposing limestone cliffs. They slowly look around and take in the landscape, barely saying a word to each other. They don't seem concerned that they are lost and that their bus is broken down, but they do have a plan. The bus driver brings out a shovel and pickaxe and they begin digging in the quarry's chalky soil in preparation for the arrival of a large stone egg.



Le Jardin des Délices. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

It is time to gather for the first in a series of rituals and performances that compose *Le Jardin des délices*. Circling around the egg, they pay tribute to this mysterious presence with music provided by a guitar, a tambourine and a recorder and even a piano played by the bus driver inside the bus. When the performance ends, they take their leave with a kiss and a bow to the egg, along with a handful of earth. What secret does the egg hold? The promise of a new life, or a way out of their predicament, perhaps, but they choose not to open it.

Other rituals, other performances follow as the travelers explore possible ways to fill their time in this “garden” where nothing green grows. While folding chairs are placed around in a wide circle, long time Vivarium artist Gaetan Vourc’h, tour guide and master of ceremonies, invites the group to feel free to express themselves in any way they choose. One reads a poem, another balances a chair in his mouth, and others strike poses reminiscent, perhaps, of figures in Bosch’s Triptych, they go about inventing micro-performances and creating “works of art.”

Perhaps a stage for individual performances might provide more entertainment. They remove the sides of the bus to reveal an open stage on which one of the travelers, a man in bright red long johns, sings opera in full throat, but here again, this performance does not seem to satisfy them. Magic perhaps might offer some answers. “Do you believe in miracles?” Gaeton asks as he provides a demonstration. “Abra Cadabra” and his bald head is covered with a thick head of hair. This is fun but clearly, they must organize themselves. Perhaps this is the garden of earthly delights but as Gaeton asks, “What is your long-term strategy?” They must come up with a plan.

Wearing Medieval costumes and wigs, they make their way to the quarry walls with Gaeton among them dressed as a skeleton. The play’s title lights up against the walls in giant letters with skeletons flying overhead, seeming to beckon to them. The egg is cracked open now but instead of entering it, they try to climb up the quarry walls with ladders that are much too short. Caught in the middle of an impressive lightning and thunderstorm, they seem lost until a shimmering triangle of light appears overhead. Perhaps this offers a better world than the disappointing garden of earthly delights. They seem to disappear into the smoke and loud noises and dogs barking, moving toward a better world, perhaps. They are survivors.

Tiago Rodrigues’ *Dans la mesure de l’impossible*, (*As Far As The Impossible*), a play that Rodrigues created in 2022 at the Comédie de Genève, was a welcome choice to replace Polish director Krystan Lupa’s *The Emigrants* when it had to be canceled to the regrets of many.



Dans la mesure de l'impossible. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

Based on interviews with thirty some collaborators of the International Committee of the Red Cross and Doctors without Borders who shared their harrowing experiences and first-hand accounts to create this powerful piece, performed at the Avignon Opera House, with just four performers and a percussionist. The show presents a number of questions. How to manage a refugee camp? How to deal with life and death decisions? How to survive when it is clear that one cannot change the world alone? In this world where the impossible is an everyday companion, Tiago Rodrigues offers us a theatre of words which puts us in touch with a reality that is deeply moving.

The set is composed of large white sheets floating above the stage at different heights, suggestive of a tent where humanitarian workers retreat to recover from their encounters with disaster and death on a daily basis. These will be pulled up to varying heights and configurations throughout the show. Four actors, two women and two men—the humanitarian workers--deliver their lines in a mix of English, French and Portuguese. They are joined by a musician/ percussionist whose masterful drumming provides running commentary throughout the two-hour show.

Thanks to them, we become familiar with the everyday lives of workers in humanitarian aid, those who witness horrors every day, and who are forced to make split-second decisions, as they provide relief from disaster and other emergencies. The geographical areas that they travel to throughout the world are referred to as The Impossible. Back home with family and friends is The Possible. “We work.” they tell us. “It’s a real job, helping to save others.” But they also admit that their work is no more than “a band aid placed on human suffering.”

Of course, they are aware that the world cannot be saved and that they must go deeper into the frontier of the impossible. The stories they tell are the real-life stories that the interviewed humanitarian workers had told Tiago and his team, transposed into a form of documented theatre composed of testimonies. The horrors reported are almost too much to bear. Still, these brave humanitarians survive despite all of their scars, comforted by a beautiful rendition of a Portuguese “fado” sung a capella by one of the women. The final moments of the show, a virtuoso drum concert, sends the ear-splitting sounds of war throughout the theatre, as a reminder of the world of the Impossible.

Black Lights, by noted choreographer Mathilde Monnier, portrays equally harrowing stories but of a different nature and they exclusively concern women—women who speak in a different voice, a voice between text and dance.



Black Lights. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

Inspired by a TV series, H24, on Arte, based on twenty-four hours in a woman's life in the form of written texts by well-known women, with a focus on different kinds of violence, Mathilde Monnier chose eight of these texts as the source for her choreography performed at the open-air Carmes cloisters theatre.

It was a delight to visit this new dance piece by Mathilde Monnier who had created so many wonderful pieces at the festival, beginning in 1996. Performed by eight dancer/actors of different ages and different nationalities on a stage covered with the gnarled roots of olive trees, we are confronted with the mental and physical impact of different degrees of violence. One tells us how she felt when she had to smile at her old professor when she knew what was really on his mind; another was knocked down and doused with gasoline, another regrets her docile compliancy when receiving a compliment. From uncomfortable moments and regrets to horrifying attacks, the performers of *Black Light* show us the experience of domination, oppression, violence and defense, legs raised high as if kicking their aggressor, fingers extended in front of a face as if to ward off an unwanted attacker and twisted bodies.

Among the many Avignon shows that introduced us to varied and crucial responses to the realities of today's world, Rebecca Chaillon and her team of Afro-descendant sisters, showed us the reality of their world as black women treated as objects of white fantasy, racism and violence in *Carte Noire nommée désir*, a remarkable performance piece in which they present their situation head on with urgency, humor and brio.



Carte Noire nommée désir. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

At the Gymnase du Lycée Aubanel, a large indoor theatre in the heart of Avignon, eight black women stand on a white stage in front of us. Themes of black and white play are introduced from the beginning of the performance and even before. There are two separate audiences on either side of the stage. Only women of color were invited to sit on comfortable sofas and enjoy refreshments facing the “white” audience seated on uncomfortable seats across from them.

Rebecca Chaillon, her naked body covered with white cream, is scrubbing the floor with Clorox as if her life depended on it. Her friend is sitting at a potter's wheel, making white clay coffee cups.

They exchange a few words. Time drags on as we take in this painful picture of a “devoted” servant on her knees for close to forty-five minutes.

In the following scene, Rebecca begins to braid long pieces of white cloth into her black hair. Soon she is joined by her friends who perform a lengthy ritual of hair braiding as if in a beauty parlor for black women. They create a masterpiece of long heavy black and white braids that Rebecca will wear throughout the performance. Seated in the middle of a circle of her sisters, Rebecca seems to enjoy their shared admiration.

Later, as Rebecca smokes and thumbs through magazines, she begins to read a number of racist want ads out loud on the order of “White Man, French, looking for his black pearl” to the delight of the audience who enjoys these outrageous ads. The audience is also delighted when invited to play “Questions pour un Champion,” a popular TV game show, with Rebecca and her company feeding them questions. They seem to know all of the answers and enjoy shouting out their response.

Carte Noire “plays” with the audience in other ways too. Some are provocative and even dangerous. Performers racing into the audience to “steal” women’s handbags, creates moments of chaos and anger. Others are tongue-in-cheek amusing. A beautiful black performer lying on a table covered in foaming milk, while a group of her black friends raise their coffee cups to her, draws our laughter.

One especially powerful and “shocking” tableau features a nanny surrounded by her employer and others. They do not seem to think it odd that her body is pierced front and back with a long spike, as if she has been impaled. On the contrary, they seem to be enjoying themselves, placing little plastic white babies on the pike, one after the other, as the Mother, a lovely lady in Scarlet O’Hara white dress, happily looks on.

Thank goodness for other moments of wild twerk dancing and amazing aerial stunts. *Carte noire, nommée désir* was brave and thrilling and wonderful. A great moment in the 77th Festival.

The official Avignon 77 was a great success, 225,000 audience members and theatres were 94 % full. Tiago Rodrigues’ rich programming gave full weight to the socio-political questions of our time and many new artists were invited for the first time. There was a large presence of English-language shows in keeping with Tiago’s decision to focus on the English language this year. As thrilled as I was with this year’s festival, I admit to being disappointed that American talent was so underrepresented. Only two American companies were invited to the festival, Elevator Repair Service’s *Baldwin and Buckley at Cambridge*, based on their debate in 1965 and Tajal Harell’s choreographed performance *The Romeo*. The other English language contributions were mostly

British, a response to Brexit, it seems. In whatever language, however, Avignon remains the “festival of my dreams.”

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