



**'TOUTES LES FEMMES
QUI SOUFFRENT'
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A SPECIFIC CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE FEMALE FIGURES OF THE 38TH EDITION OF THE PRINTEMPS DES COMÉDIENS FESTIVAL IN MONTPELLIER (MAY 30 - JUNE 21, 2024)

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On the website of the 38th *Printemps des Comédiens* Festival in Montpellier, it is possible to read and download all the brochures from the previous thirty-six editions (one is missing because it was among the first institutional festivals in France to decide to take a year off), thus discovering a precious archive of what it meant – and what remains to be said – about the phenomenon of decentralization that has characterized, in a complex and articulated form, all post-war French theater culture. The peculiarity of the *Printemps des Comédiens*, conceived and developed by the genius of its historic artistic director Daniel Bedos and president Jean-Claude Carrière – after whom the beautiful main hall of the great theater in Domaine d'Ô, the green heart north of Montpellier, is named – has always been the contamination between genres (a coexistence of circus, dance, shadow and puppet theater, prose, contemporary dramaturgy), combined with a significant openness to the world – entire editions dedicated to theaters from other continents, particularly notable is the 1993 program, which even embraced the idea of nomadic theater. Today, the *Printemps des Comédiens* – established as one of the unmissable summer events in Occitanie, alongside the other historic institution Montpellier Danse and the Radio France music festival – has been directed for over a decade by Jean Varela, an elegant artist and theater operator of Occitan origin. However, the mission of heterogeneity in the program has not changed, in a constant attempt to attract diverse audiences, to avoid being labeled, and in a sense, to "dare," as Varela himself states in one of his many charismatic presentations to the public, with the typical pride of a territory that, just a couple of weeks later and less than a hundred kilometers to the northeast, will be crowded with hundreds of thousands of spectators for what is the living monument of the French cultural decentralization policy, naturally the Avignon Festival.

One prominent element that stands out, even just from reading the casting references of the selected proposals of the Festival, is the

overwhelmingly predominant presence of women on stage (although it should be noted that female directors are in the minority compared to male directors). The mayor of Montpellier, Michael Delafosse, particularly focused his editorial, the traditional institutional contribution to the official presentation of the Festival, on their numerous presence. He highlighted it, also referencing explicit statements from the artistic director Jean Varela on the matter, observing how this thirty-eighth edition of Printemps des Comédiens seems to pay tribute to “toutes les femmes qui souffrent sous tant de latitudes” (“all the women who suffer under so many latitudes”). Indeed, from the very first works of the festival that I had the opportunity to follow, I encountered almost exclusively female casts (*Gaviota*, by Cacace, *Villa*, by Calderón, as well as *Kill me*, by Marina Otero, with the five performers on stage, complemented by an extraordinary reincarnation of Nijinski). This significant imbalance inevitably influenced my experience of the subsequent works and, despite having missed the opportunity to attend some very interesting proposals (among which my biggest regret is *L'assemblée des femmes*, by Roxane Borgna, Jean Claude Fall, and Laurent Rojoll, based on materials from Aristophanes in a short circuit with current Palestinian crisis). So I immediately felt that the topic of Resistance – a keyword evoked by Varela, coinciding with the eighty years since the Liberation from Nazism – which in some way seems to unite, albeit in different historical, social, and geographical contexts, all the shows of the Festival, chooses to bear witness primarily through the female body (the suffering female body, as Delafosse puts it), as if to sabotage every stereotype of fragility and build upon it (her) an elusive and heterogeneous alternative of the common life.

I have selected seven productions distributed over the twenty-three days of the event. Of these, only two are original works conceived specifically for the stage, without relying on adaptation or reinterpretation principles (Guillermo Calderón's *Villa* and Marina Otero's *Kill*

me). Among the remaining six, there are two adaptations of Chekhov (Cyril Teste's *Sur l'autre rive*, derived from *Platonov*, and Guillermo Cacace's *Gaviota*), a complex dramaturgy which merges two different materials, drawing from texts by John Maxwell Coetzee and Federico Garcia Lorca (Krystian Lupa's *Balkony pieśni miłosne*), a staging of the *novella* by seventeenth-century Neapolitan writer Giambattista Basile (*Re Chicchinella* by Emma Dante), and a version of an already existing theatrical work: Marcel Pagnol's seminal French theatrical piece from 1929, *Marius*, here adapted by Joel Pommerat.

In both *Marius* and *Sur l'autre rive*, texts essentially focused on two main male characters who, more by their nature than sadism, subject their lovers to suffering, renunciation, sacrifices, the women portrayed are complex, rich and tormented human beings, presenting intriguing correspondences. *Marius*, by Pommerat, propose a stage device that draws from the tradition of the fourth wall and demands from the actors (some of whom, before embarking on their current professional careers, met the world of theatre during a period in prison) a careful study of character immersion and a close confrontation between the original plot and Pommerat's adaptation, set in a contemporary context. It is indeed a bare *mise-en-scène*, for a brave contemporary adaptation of Pagnol's text (truly beloved in France), in comparison to which everything seems smaller, precarious, mediocre, empty, like the faithful reconstruction of a bakery, in a real-world recreation that reflects the aesthetic of Caroline Guiela Nguyen – who collaborates on this project: a disappointing reality. It particularly contrasts with examples of derelict masculinity, suspended between marginality, senility, and infantilism, staged in an anonymous bakery in Marseille, once popular but now decadent in every aspect. Fanny (Élise Douyère) emerges as the sole element of complexity in this sharp and deliberately austere play: contained in body, with penetrating gazes and disarming sincerity (akin to César, Marius's father), she is a resilient, angry creature, eluding any label,

perhaps overly devoted to sacrificing herself for Marius's freedom, yet always true to her proud autonomy: her most pronounced phrase is "ça ne te regarde pas" (French for "It's none your business").

From Marseille to the rural Russia, in the theatrical variation of *Platonov*, Cyril Teste stages and films his *Sur l'autre rive*, projecting in real-time on large screens specific episodes of what invisibly happens onstage, as a characteristic of this talented and intuitive French creator, who complements his project with a specially crafted film, broadcasted during the festival as an extension of the theatrical performance. Through the screens, we engage with dialogues and monologues running in parallel to the stage setting, and their true appreciation lies in the real-time direction by the operators mixed among the guests. Most of the theatrical piece is a *mise-en-scène* of a sordid ceremony of the petite bourgeoisie, between decadent landowners and newly enriched people, unfolding into alcohol-induced alteration, gradually losing all control, dreams, hopes and sense. Here, amidst almost universally petty male meanness (already present in Chekhov's original), Olivia Corsini stands out, capable of guiding her character, Anna, through accepting a compromise with the triviality and mediocrity that surrounds her; Sofia (Katia Ferreira) is more inclined towards a statuesque bearing, until she falls prey to Platonov-Micha's grasp, and lets her own monument crumbling piece by piece.

All the performers in the emotionally resonant version of a Chekhovian *Gaviota* "at a table" proposed by the Argentinean Guillermo Cacace are women, as are the three Alejandras in the Chilean creator Guillermo Calderón's *Villa*. In both experiences, the exclusively female presence seems to stem from very specific motivations. In the case of Cacace, as he himself asserts, first the pandemic and now the political problems embodied by Javier Milei ("it is the worst moment in our history since the dictatorship," he declares introducing the piece) have hindered the process of his work. Originally, the female

characters were meant to be just an experimental phase of the project. However, crystallized amidst their country's political fragility, it became a permanent condition. Suspended in a perpetual rehearsal room, around a large square table strewn with snacks, glasses, bottles, plates, the five actresses, with microphones and crumpled scripts in hand, "speak" the text in a condensed rearrangement where the characters seem like survivors, the fortunate ones.

The unforgettable moment for me is when Arkadina (Paula Fernandez Mbarak) leans her head back, seated with her legs firmly planted on the ground, and cradles the corpse of her son, wrapped in a blanket in her arms. In her desperate crying, starkly contrasting with the controlled, measured tension (as daily life is under dictatorship) that precedes it, the recent passing of Norita Cortiñas, one of the most beloved Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, seems vividly evoked. Cacace's denunciation circle closes, to me.

For his *Villa*, Guillermo Calderón, chooses to work in a totally different direction. The three feminine characters on stage, all named Alejandra – a tribute to Alejandra Holzapfel, a political prisoner who survived Villa Grimaldi – are charged by a political committee of deciding whether to transform a monumental villa, infamous place of tortures during Pinochet's dictatorship, into a contemporary art museum, a horror factory with an immersive experience, or a vast pasture for new thoughts to circulate. Faced with the impossibility of any rational process, they discover why this responsibility falls squarely on them: each of their mothers conceived them following violence that occurred precisely in that place. Calderón's *Villa*, with his icy direction and his essential dramaturgy is like its female figures: a collective body anesthetized to pain, afraid to access its own emotions. Nevertheless, the need for sharing persists, leaving the dilemma of Villa Grimaldi unresolved, but granting dignity to the secret suffering of those who delve into their personal memories.

On different grounds, violence is also the starting point for the Argentinean creator Marina Otero's *Kill me*, staged for the very first time at the Printemps des Comédiens in the ancient and beautiful Chartreuse of Villeneuve-d'Avignon. Otero's journey is deeply personal where the private and political converge: if *Kill me* intends to close a trilogy that began with *Fuck me* (2017) and *Love me* (2021), the broader project seems to compose a very vast autobiographical fresco intertwining the *corpus* (of her works, of her art) and her specific body – naked, powerful, elusive yet finite, destined for decay and death. Indeed, while in *Villa* or *Gaviota* the political urgency required an intermediate container (the metonymy of the scale model of Villa Grimaldi always visible to the public; the mechanism of unhappiness from Chekhov's text paralyzed in Argentine theatrical and social reality), Otero operates on a totally different register, thanks to a dramaturgy consisting of an accumulation of fragments (like *ex-votos* around an altar). Metatheatricality also, in her process, becomes both an auto-sabotage and a mechanism of disambiguation and clarity: every element is sharp and signifies "only" itself, but beyond the confines of any claustrophobic self-referentiality. The group chosen by Marina Otero to accompany her in this creation consists of three female dancers and a female singer, all diagnosed with different mental disorders (complemented by the charismatic Tomas Pozzi in the role of Nijinski): it is a manifesto-proposal, a resistant evidence of bodies accustomed to darkness, deprivations, founding their love not on a specific outcome, but on the simple act of continuing to exist.

A separate discourse is warranted for *Re Chicchinella*, Emma Dante's dark and obscene fable, which, instead of focusing on a complex representation of the predominant and numerous female figures, seems to stage a true device of male self-destruction, through the annihilation of its narcissism and power. Here, the king – the desperate protagonist, besieged by courtesan dancers, a detested wife who detests

him, a vain and frivolous daughter – confronts his own sentimental and physical nullity, imbued with a torment due to the cohabitation of a foreign body in his viscera, that of a golden egg-laying hen (the Neapolitan term, *chicchinella*, stands for hen). As confirmed by the proposition of different versions of an ancient passacaglia-tarantella composed in the Neapolitan environment in the 17th century (*Ah, come t'inganni*), the key, in this fable, is the Vanitas – such a strong connection with Marina Otero's aesthetics. With a progression of caravagesque imbalances and hints of fragility always on the verge of falling, Maringola's body-in-action (as a high representative of Emma Dante's theatrical world) completely takes the place of the word, rendering it superfluous, so accessory that, for it to exist, it must become a sound act, music. It is thanks to this process of diversification that a (offensive) Neapolitan word from the 17th century like *zompapereta*, still in use in this immortal dialect, can elicit an unexpected laugh even from the distinguished audience at the Théâtre Jean-Claude Carrière in Montpellier: because there is a body that has played it, and its sound, even more than its meaning, is precise. In the end, facing the king's torments, even if the female figures in *Re Chicchinella* are mere stylizations, greedy and hypocritical characters steeped in the same vanity as the king, they simultaneously represent the triumphant element, in a flourish of golden eggs. In a somewhat forced but illustrative twist, their dark happy ending, through the death of the king, appears to be in having rid themselves of the patriarch, but not of patriarchy.

Krystian Lupa, born in 1943, focuses his work on the concept of imprisonment and denial of personal as well as collective freedoms in his production *Balkony – pieśni miłosne* (*Balcons – Chants d'amour*). Spanning over two acts with a total duration of four hours and twenty minutes, Lupa interweaves a section of John Maxwell Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009) and all three acts of Federico Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936).

Coetzee, Nobel laureate in 2003, recounts in *What is a classic?*^[1] that at the age of eight, while wandering in the garden of his Cape Town home, he was struck by the notes of Bach's *Clavicembalo ben temperato*, from his neighbors' house. It became immediately clear to him that he was in the presence of what he called a 'classic', not due to principles of cultural identity or prior study, but simply for the effect it had on him.

In *Balkony – pieśni mitosne*, Lupa constructs the facade of an old building with two balconies on the first floor and two terraces on the ground floor against an empty space, which serves as the stage. This juxtaposition effectively brings together the dimension of Coetzee the writer (and his apartment where he lives with his father) and that of the family imprisoned by Bernarda's despotism. More than the interesting role of projections, film sequences, animations, and single words overlaying critical and fictional layers throughout the narrative, it is in the director's interventions via microphone that I feel the most effective synthesis of this work.

Certainly, it's within Lupa's general register: his hoarse, faint voice is that of a man suspended between two dimensions, as if trapped in his own dream world, or like a spirit returning from beyond to observe once again, for a few hours, the theater of life and life of theater. However, in a production framing the theme of imprisonment (even the balconies' grilles increasingly resemble prison bars), Lupa's voice, particularly insistent, is, above all else, an element of freedom.

It is the suicide of Adele, the youngest daughter of Bernarda Alba, that closes the imaginary of this claustrophobic contact between Coetzee's fabricated projection and the classic juxtaposed by Lupa. Before her suicide, though, Adele's body is split: we see her dressed

in white fleeing her domestic prisons in the film projection, and simultaneously, she breaks through, flesh and bone, into the audience, delivering a blind and desperate monologue, ultimately failing to escape the theatrical building and her own fate. These two dimensions of entrapment are part of the same narrative, the same condemnation hanging over the female body, incarcerated and violated.

It's with this body in mind that Lupa's voice seems to act decisively: his comments evade any narrative necessity, adding nothing; instead, they merely echo words spoken by this or that character. It's as if Lupa's suspended words, echoing what happens, somewhat sabotage the grip of the dramaturgy, allowing any connections between Coetzee's fictitious autobiographical projections and the torture of paralysis in this Garcia Lorca drama (here, with a Beckettian atmosphere), to unfold on their own before the audience's eyes, found primarily in details and silences.

Lupa's voice, whether with astonishment, irony, empathy, or perplexity, has the effect of freeing his own creation, redeeming the sacrifice of Adele's fictitious body and releasing, through her, the torment of other characters, the actors themselves (who react imperceptibly), and the audience who emancipate themselves from any inevitability of an ending.

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[1] From *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986–1999* (London: Vintage, 2002): 1–19.





GAVIOTA
(Buenos Aires, 2023)

By Guillermo Cacace, from Anton Checkov

STARRING: Clarisa Korovsky, Marcela Guerty, Paula Fernandez MBarak,
Muriel Sago, Romina Padoan

DIRECTOR: Guillermo Cacace

DRAMATURGY: Juan Ignacio Fernández

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Alejandro Guerscovich

VILLA
(Santiago, 2011)

By Guillermo Calderón

STARRING: Francisca Lewin, Macarena Zamudio, Carla Romero

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, PRODUCTION: María Paz González

SCENOGRAPHY: María Fernanda Videla



SUR L'AUTRE RIVE

(Annecy, 2024)

By Cyril Teste

STARRING: Vincent Berger, Olivia Corsini, Florent Dupuis, Katia Ferreira, Adrien Guiraud, Emilie Incerti Formentini, Mathias Labelle, Robin Lhuillier, Lou Martin-Fernet, Charles Morillon, Marc Prin, Pierre Timaitre, Haini Wang

TRANSLATION: Olivier Cadiot **ADAPTATION:** Joanne Delachair, Cyril Teste

ARTISTIC COLLABORATION: Marion Pellissier **ASSISTANT DIRECTOR:** Sylvère Santin

DRAMATURGY: Leila Adham **SCENOGRAPHY:** Valérie Grall

COSTUMES: Isabelle Deffin, with the assistance of Noé Quilichini

ORIGINAL IMAGES: Julien Boizard **VIDEO CREATION:** Mehdi Toutain-Lopez

LIGHTING DESIGN: Nicolas Doremus, Christophe Gaultier

ORIGINAL MUSIC: Nihil Bordures, Florent Dupuis



KILL ME

(Villeneuve-d'Avignone, 2024)

By Marina Otero

STARRING: Ana Cotoré, Josefina Gorostiza, Natalia Lopéz Godoy,

Myriam Henne-Adda, Marina Otero, Tomás Pozzi


MUSICIAN ON STAGE: Myriam Henne-Adda

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Lucrecia Pierpaoli

LIGHTING DESIGN: Victor Longás Vicente, David Seldes

SOUND: Antonio Navarro **COSTUMES:** Andy Piffer





**BALKONY – PIEŚNI MIŁOSNE /
BALCONS – CHANTS D'AMOUR**
(Cracovie, 2024)

By Krystian Lupa, based on Summertime by J. M. Coetzee
and The House of Bernarda Alba by F. Garcia Lorca

STARRING: Anna Ilczuk, Andrzej Kłak, Tomasz Lulek, Michał Opaliński, Halina Rasiakówna, Piotr Skiba, Ewa Skibińska, Janka Woźnicka, Wojciech Ziemiański, Marta Zięba, along with Ola Rudnicka and Oskar Sadowski

SCRIPT, SCENOGRAPHY, LIGHTS: Piotr Skiba **COSTUMES:** Wladimir Schall

MUSIC: Przemek Chojnacki (Yanki Film), Nikodem Marek (Papaya Roster)

VIDEO: Oskar Sadowski **ASSISTANT DIRECTOR:** Natalia Kabanow

COSTUMES AND PROPS ASSISTANT: Mariusz Turchan





MARIUS

(La Rochelle, 2024)

By Joel Pommerat, based on Marcel Pagnol

STARRING: Damien Baudry, Élise Douyère, Michel Galera, Ange Melenyk,
Redwane Rajel, Jean Ruimi, Bernard Traversa, Ludovic Velon

IN COLLABORATION WITH: Caroline Guiela Nguyen, Jean Ruimi

SCENOGRAPHY AND LIGHTING: Éric Soyer

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Lucia Trotta **ASSISTANT DIRECTOR:** Guillaume Lambert

TECHNICAL DIRECTION: Emmanuel Abate **TECHNICAL DIRECTOR:** Thaïs Morel

COSTUMES: Isabelle Deffin **SOUND CREATION:** Philippe Perrin, François Leymarie

RE CHICCHINELLA

(Milano, 2024)

By Emma Dante, based on Giambattista Basile

STARRING: Angelica Bifano, Viola Carinci, Davide Celona, Roberto Galbo,
Enrico Lodovisi, Odette Lodovisi, Yannick Lomboto, Carmine Maringola,
Davide Mazzella, Simone Mazzella, Annamaria Palomba, Samuel Salamone,
Stéphanie Taillandier, Marta Zollet

WRITING AND DIRECTION: Emma Dante

PROPS AND COSTUMES: Emma Dante **LIGHTING:** Cristian Zucaro

COSTUMES ASSISTANT: Sabrina Vicari

COORDINATION AND PRODUCTION: Aldo Miguel Grompone, Rome

ORGANIZATION: Daniela Gusmano

