

THEATER REVIEW

At Avignon Festival, Competition Comes From the Fringe

An underwhelming official lineup led many festivalgoers to branch out into the less well-known complimentary program.



The hotly anticipated “Outside,” by the Russian director Kirill Serebrennikov, is intriguingly personal.
Christophe Raynaud De Lage/Festival d'Avignon

By Laura Cappelle

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AVIGNON, France — There isn't one Avignon Festival every July, but two. On the one hand, France's biggest theater event presents an official selection of productions, known in Anglicized French as “le In.” On the other, you have “le Off” — an open-access, Fringe-style festival which has mushroomed to include more than 1,500 productions this year.

This summer, the contrast between the two events has been especially stark. Disappointment in the main lineup has dominated conversations here, inevitably followed by recommendations for the Off. The In and its director, Olivier Py, have themselves to blame for the downturn. Too often, the theme of this year's edition — odysseys — led to predictable and preachy theater. Productions raced straight to answers, political or otherwise.

The journey was at least intriguingly personal in “Outside,” a hotly anticipated new work by the Russian director Kirill Serebrennikov. Mr. Serebrennikov, who has been accused of fraud in Russia, was [released on bail in April after nearly 20 months of house arrest](#), yet remains banned from leaving Moscow.

The case against him is widely seen as a trumped-up attack on artistic freedom, and Mr. Serebrennikov has continued to work regardless, directing productions from afar. For “Outside,” he took inspiration from another artist who fell afoul of the authorities in his country: [the Chinese photographer and poet Ren Hang](#), who was arrested several times for his explicit work before killing himself in 2017, at age 29.

It’s clear Mr. Serebrennikov feels a kinship with Mr. Ren. The two artists corresponded, and arranged to meet in person, though Mr. Ren died before they could do so. “Outside” stages an imaginary encounter between them instead. One character, who refers to himself as the Escapee and is stuck in a room represented by a single wall with windows, clearly stands in for Mr. Serebrennikov. Early on, he is even visited and searched by the F.S.B., Russia’s Federal Security Service.

When Mr. Ren appears, he draws the Escapee into dream scenes that are half biographical, half fictional. Mr. Serebrennikov quotes from Mr. Ren’s poems and reconstructs his nude photo shoots, in which models often posed with organic props including flowers and plants, alongside fantasy tableaux. Chinese pop songs and a clownish ballet dancer feature, as well as an imaginary run-in with the American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe at the Berlin nightclub Berghain.

“Outside” has the makings of a powerful meditation on solitude and confinement, yet loses itself in its own fascination with soft porn. The extensive nudity and one all-male leather orgy would undoubtedly be provocative in Russia, but Avignon has seen it all before, and these scenes gradually started to feel disconnected from the main characters’ stories.

During the curtain calls, the cast and creative team donned T-shirts reading “Free Kirill,” to a standing ovation from some of the audience. The sentiment is understandable, but Mr. Serebrennikov has directed stronger productions. Hopefully he will again.

Other productions telegraphed their messages even less subtly. The fact that European theater-makers are preoccupied with migration is hardly a surprise in the current context, but the stage isn’t a witness stand. The odyssey of the singer and songwriter Yacouba Konaté, who fled war in Ivory Coast and was forced into slavery on his way to France, is obviously moving, and Mr. Konaté’s musical gift is evident. However, the writing in “Le Jeune Yacou” (“The Young Yacou”) was too raw and naïve to elevate it beyond testimony.



A scene from “Nous, l’Europe, Banquet des Peuples” at the Avignon Festival. The multilanguage show included performers from across Europe. Christophe Raynaud De Lage/Festival d’Avignon

Another show, “Nous, l’Europe, Banquet des Peuples” (“We, Europe, Banquet of Nations”), written by Laurent Gaudé and directed by Roland Auzet, attempted to make sense of the Continent’s shared history, starting in the 19th century. Mr. Gaudé doesn’t shy away from the darker sides of his story, from colonialism to the European Union’s recent crises, and Mr. Auzet has invited performers from around the Continent to appear in his polyphonic, multi-language production.

Still, its format often felt contrived, with direct addresses to the audience summarizing complex events, and aimless musical interludes. Tellingly, the most successful scene was in effect a live interview. Every night during the run, a different politician or artist was invited onstage to talk about his or her relationship to Europe. On the night I attended, Eneko Landaburu, a Spanish former official of the European Commission, was thoughtful and candid about the mistakes of European leaders.

Avignon also looked back to ancient odysseys with varying degrees of success. “Sous d’Autres Cieux” brought a pedestrian adaptation of Virgil’s “Aeneid,” directed by Maëlle Poésy. There was more life and tension in “Le Reste Vous le Connaissez par le Cinéma” (“The Rest Will Be Familiar to You From Cinema”), a 2013 play by Martin Crimp, who based the plot on Euripides’ “The Phoenician Women.”

The director Daniel Jeanneteau cast young amateur actresses from the suburbs of Paris as Mr. Crimp’s inquisitive chorus. They held their own alongside experienced actors including Dominique Reymond (arresting as Jocasta), a performance made more impressive by the chorus’s central role here. Not only do they surround the mythological family of Oedipus, but they spur characters on and recite Sphinx-like riddles of their own.



The profoundly imaginative “Des Caravelles & des Batailles,” a Belgian play, is a deceptively sweet and simple tale. Héloïse Legrand

For more original odysseys, however, you have to turn to the Off Festival. “Des Caravelles & des Batailles,” a Belgian play performed at the Théâtre des Doms, comes with no neat message. Instead, Eléna Doratiotto and Benoît Piret have crafted a work of profound imagination, loosely inspired by Thomas Mann’s “The Magic Mountain,” in which a lost traveler happens upon a remote community. It’s a deceptively sweet and simple tale, conflict-free yet full of subtle back-and-forth among its six characters.

Companies presenting work in the Off Festival often take financial risks to attend; by contrast, the official lineup is well-funded, which should allow it to roll the dice on more complex projects. So it was frustrating to find that the best productions Mr. Py programmed this year were as spare as the fringe offerings.

François Grémaud’s “Phèdre!”, a comedic retelling of Racine’s play of the same name, was hilariously performed by Romain Daroles as an overenthusiastic teacher with a taste for bad puns, yet he needs little more than a table and a book.

Similarly, Henri Jules Julien’s “Mahmoud & Nini” required only two chairs for its actors, Mahmoud El Hadded and Virginie Gabriel. This one-hour dialogue between a gay black Egyptian man and a straight white woman from France sees the characters debate awkward cultural clichés and common misunderstandings, from the Muslim veil to poverty in Egypt, and often, it hit home.



Léa Girardet drew on her passion for soccer in “Le Syndrome du Banc de Touche,” a witty, inspired one-woman show that is one of the breakout Off hits this year. *Pauline LeGoff*

Yet the Off is replete with similarly scaled productions, many of them more stimulating. Take “Le Syndrome du Banc de Touche,” a witty, inspired one-woman show that is one of the breakout Off hits this year. At the Théâtre du Train Bleu, the actress Léa Girardet drew on her passion for soccer to explore her real-life experience as an unsuccessful bench player — in the world of film and theater. It’s an unlikely premise, and yet from sexist directors to the trials of unemployment, Ms. Girardet’s monologue (directed by Julie Bertin) is refreshingly earnest and funny.

That’s Avignon at its best — taking the road less traveled, without giving away the destination.

Avignon Festival. *Various venues, through July 23.*

Festival Off d’Avignon. *Various venues, through July 28.*