

Festival d'Avignon – The Challenges of a Doctoral Documentation

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Abstract: In my doctoral research, even though I chose the scientific route and not the professional one, I sought to expand the theoretical discourse in various applicative areas. In order to understand the springs of clowning and the psychosomatic structure of the clown actor, I conducted a non-verbal monologue study about the trickster, I participated in physical and online workshops with clowning teachers from the UK and Spain and, last but not least, I conducted together with an interdisciplinary team a niche theatrical laboratory with the theme: the clown condition of some dramatic characters. After all these practical extensions of the research, it was my turn, this summer, to undertake a documentary visit to the Avignon Festival. I had planned to watch shows that clearly contain a clownish expression, but also shows where I could identify it based on criteria defined in my research. Thus, I discovered that getting to Avignon during the festival is an adventure in itself. You risk yourself into a heterogeneous theatrical dynamics that is difficult to assimilate. The diversity of events that take place both in the courtyard of Palais des Papes and in several hundred other locations in the old town, but also in five other neighbouring towns – Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Monteux, Courthézon, Vedène and Noves – surpasses any other festival approach from Europe. This fact complicates the options for any viewer, competent or not. This year, in the official section (July 7-26), there were more than 40 events, some resumed in consecutive days, resulting in several hundred performances, all of them sold out. The “Off” section of the festival had a longer duration (July 7-30) and 1570 performances, each show having multiple performances, some even running the entire duration of the festival. No mathematical calculations are needed to get an idea of the artistic effervescence of those summer days in the south of France.

Keywords: clowning; Avignon; the Other.

In our doctoral research, although we chose the scientific path instead of the professional one, we sought to extend the theoretical discourse to certain applicative areas. In order to understand the sphere of clowning and the psychosomatic structure of the actor-clown, we carried out a monologue study about the trickster through non-verbality, we participated in onsite and online workshops delivered by teachers of clowning from Great Britain and

Spain and, last but not least, we implemented, together with an interdisciplinary team, a niche theatre laboratory on the topic of the clown condition of certain dramatic characters.

Thus, through the practical, applicative extension of our research, we sought to approach cultural paradigms, which are fundamental for the topic of our doctoral thesis. From this perspective, it has become impossible to ignore the French cultural space, which has imposed models of clown expression in artistic fields such as theatre, film or literature.

During the doctoral study, we have identified multiple reference frames of the clowning practices from this space, beginning with Fiurelli¹, whose character, Scaramouche, inspired from the nature of the Italian Commedia dell'arte, had developed his visual and performing aesthetic, decisively influencing Jean-Baptiste Poquelin Molière. Moreover, Pierrot², a sort of a French Pedrolino, is typical for the transformation of the interior essence that the clown develops along with the emergence of this character. Also, we cannot omit the presence of the Footit and Chocolat duo, the same as that of the Fratellini brothers, who are illustrative for the contemporary visual aesthetic of the clown. Let us remember that the red nose was for the first time worn as an accessory by Albert Fratellini, after he had appeared, again for the first time, together with his brothers in a trio. In the French cinematography, Jacques Tati is acknowledged to be a true innovator of the comic film in the 20th century. In literature, the existentialist clown characters are brought by Jean-Paul Sartre, he himself a clown-like character. In 1964, he was awarded The Nobel Prize for literature, but the writer refused it because “no man deserves glorification during lifetime”. We thus encounter a clear pattern of the inability of the individual to adapt to his social context, a feature which is specific to the clown. In theatre, clown characters are launched by those absurdists who break up the human consciousness to the point of alienating from the others and from the self. The characters of this dramaturgy are the expression of a naivety bordering foolery, another feature of the ontological crisis of the clown. The French artistic pedagogy is strongly marked by Jacques Lecoq³, whose theory of performing extended from the stage practice to the alternative therapy.

Obviously, the French culture, given its prominence, could not ignore the expressive and semantic potential of the condition of the clown. In fact, in the papers that we have written and defended during the research, we analyzed the main promoters of the clown character in France. The

¹ Maurice Willson Disher, *Clowns and Pantomimes*, London and New York, edited by Benjamin Blom, 1925, p. 73.

² Robert F. Stoney, *Pierrot, A Critical History of a Mask*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 28.

³ Simon Murray, *Jacques Lecoq*, London, Routledge Press, 2003, p. 79.

theoretical study lacked a fundamental component: the direct contact with the French cultural model. This is why, when the opportunity of a study visit abroad appeared, through the FDI “DOCTART.INT” project coordinated by professor Matei Bejenaru, the destination came with no hesitation: Avignon Festival. We had the intention of viewing performances manifestly containing clown expression, together with performances in which we could identify this form of expression based on certain criteria defined in our research. For the moment, we shall not mention them, as the list is still under investigation.

The history of this festival is centered around the emblematic appearance of Jean Vilar, actor and theatre manager, who has fervently advocated for the decentralization of the French theatre. The Avignon Festival, founded in 1947, is one of the theatrical “constructions” which link their existence with the efforts of this visionary artist. It is also worth mentioning that it is the oldest French festival and, at the same time, one of the most important manifestations dedicated to the contemporary performance arts in the whole world. Over the years, outstanding figures of the 20th century theatre have been invited to the festival, such as: Robert Wilson, Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Antoine Vitez, Thomas Ostermeier, Jan Fabre or Romeo Castellucci.

The “Off” section of the theatrical event is nowadays the largest performance market in the world. In 1980, the Avignon Festival went under the financial patronage of the state of France, which has enabled its sustained development. The flourishing of many generations of playwrights, directors and choreographers is linked to this festival; they have reinvigorated the theatre of the 21st century.

Thus, between 21 and 26 July, we carried out this work-related trip in the South of France, in the city which served, in the 14th century, as house of the pontiffs, for a period of 72 years. On this occasion, we found out that reaching Avignon during the festival is an adventure itself. The diversity of the events which take place both in the courtyard of Palais des Papes⁴ and in other different spaces from the old town and from five neighboring places - Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Monteux, Courthézon, Vedène and Noves – outranks every other festival in Europe. This aspect makes it difficult for every spectator, competent or not, to choose where to go.

This year, during the official section (7-26 July), over 40 events took place, some of them replayed in consecutive days, resulting in a few hundred performances, all sold out. The “Off” section of the festival took longer (7-30 July) and had 1570 performances, each having several presentations, some

⁴ <https://www.palais-des-papes.com/en>, accessed on 16.11.2022.

during the entire festival. There is no need of arithmetic to discern the artistic effervescence of those summer days.

The massive amount of theatrical information which was brought to us did not offer enough time to process all that we had seen. It was difficult to decide between different spaces, conventional or not, between *mainstream* and Off, young or mature artists, well established or beginners, famous or yet to be known productions. Animated by the desire to feel the pulse of both sections, we decided to view, for start, two performances from the official programme of the manifestation. *Tumulus*⁵, a scenic construct designed at the crossroads of theatre dance and sonant expression, offered us the chance of a vibrant, carnal journey throughout the European art, from the Renaissance to the present day. What seems to be important for us to mention here is the space that hosted the production, La Fabrica, a former industrial warehouse, today one of the most reputable performance rooms in Avignon. The second performance of the official section which I attended was *Richard II* by William Shakespeare, directed by Christophe Rauck. The coherent perspective of this director has revealed multiple subtleties of the Shakespearean tragedy, concentrating the attention on the actors' discourse placed in a timeless, almost sterile spatiality. The performing aesthetic featured a very skillful balance between acceptance and detachment, with the public becoming the partner to whom the characters confided. A parable of the struggle for power par excellence, the play permitted, in the perspective of Christophe Rauck, a contemporary validation of a seductive freshness. This was the performance which confronted us with an unexpected festival reality. The Avignon Festival does not include English subtitling for those who do not speak French. The French *Richard II*⁶ is a surgically designed performance, with a distinctive aesthetic, but which does not equal many of the Romanian performances directed by Mihai Măniuțiu or Silviu Purcărete. To all which has been mentioned, we should add that the presentation took place in a school auditorium, Gymnase du Lycée Aubanel, a space so generous that it made me think of the importance that the French give to non-formal education. As expected, neither of the two *mainstream* performances that we watched allowed us to measure the elements of my doctoral topic. They only counted as experiences of the competent spectators who wished to understand, through sampling, the phenomenon in which they took part.

As for the Off section, we enjoyed a few performances with a manifest clowning aesthetic. The linguistic barrier, French indeed being a foreign language to me, allowed me to detachedly regard and identify elements of

⁵ <https://festival-avignon.com/en/edition-2022/programme/t-u-m-u-l-u-s-191103>, accessed on 29.10.2022.

⁶ <https://festival-avignon.com/en/edition-2022/programme/richard-ii-191116>, accessed on 29.10.2022.

clowning stylistics in the expression of certain characters, in the making of certain scenes, in the interpretation style and even in the theme of some performances. *L'Adulte, mode d'emploi*⁷ represented an initial experience of encountering the clown expression in theatre. Developed as a lecture given by a clown, the performance aimed at providing a sort of a hilarious guideline for children to understand the problems specific to the adults. I could gather little information about the performance, right before its presentation, from one of the English speaking volunteers. This was the reason why, during the play, I could follow the clowning mechanisms which determine reactions from the public. By far, the physical comedy, the gesticulation and the behavioral construct of the actress, Muriel Henry, determined the most intense reactions from the public, even to the detriment of the text.

A performance with distinctive dynamics, meant to demonstrate the multiple capacities of the actor was “All abroad (on va bien s’amuser)”⁸ with and by Michelle Cajolet-Couture. By interpreting the character Diesel, a clown doll, the performer had, for almost an hour, an exceptional solo performance. The pantomimist’s refinement was perfectly counterbalanced by the moments in which the performer sang and danced with the most various of rhythms, from arrangements of famous Russian songs to sounds of psychedelic origin. This show surveyed in what seems to be the clearest of terms the fine line between the actor and the clown, bringing the problem of identifying the characteristics of the actor-clown into focus.

By far, the performance which drew my attention the most was “Old Clown Wanted” by Matei Vişniec, performed at Théâtre du Balcon, one of the five “historical” theatres of Avignon, active all during the year. The other locations are Théâtre du Chien qui fume, Théâtre du Chêne noir, Théâtre des Halles and Théâtre des Carmes. Matei Vişniec has been present as an author, and also as a permanent guest at the Avignon Festival since 1990. His play, “Old Clown Wanted” was mounted precisely by the manager of this theatre, the actor and director Serge Barbuscia. He plays the role of Nicollo. The role of Filippo is played by Richard Martin, the manager of the Tourski Theatre of Marseille. From what I understood from Matei Vişniec himself, Richard Martin has worked with Cătălina Buzoianu and Virgil Ogăsanu, and they organized an artistic cruise on a Romanian warship to promote performances in different ports in the Mediterranean Sea. The third actor, playing the role of Peppino, is Pierre Forest, a French actor highly admired for his many roles in movies. This noteworthy distribution assured a mature and profound approach to Vişniec’s text. We

⁷ <https://www.laprovence.com/article/critiques-avignon-off/6432601/ladulte-mode-demploi-indispensable.html>, accessed on 29.10.2022.

⁸ <https://www.festivaloffavignon.com/programme/2022/all-aboard-on-va-bien-s-amuser-s30641/>, accessed on 29.10.2022.

should mention, however, a certain theatricality which we sometimes encounter nowadays in the case of Romanian actors, an echo of the boulevard comedy, rather than of the clown art, which aims at the superficial, the effortless.

During the five days spent in Avignon, I have had the feeling of a race against the clock. Maybe it was an expression of the avidity with which I wanted to receive as much information as possible from this epicentre of the European and world theatre. The permanent tumult of artists promoting performances, of managers seeking to sell or purchase, of the public migrating between locations, shelters something which, in Romania, is still at its beginning: a culture of artistic demand and offer. It exceeds primary needs, the chase after the immediate, the need of having. I believe that what vivifies the artists from the Avignon Festival is probably an ardent desire to live within and through theatre. The spirit of the place prompts theatre consumption. Even when it is excessively practiced, it does not destroy, it builds.

Overall, I have understood, from firsthand experience, that the Avignon Festival is a successful cultural enterprise, a model of good practices which gathers hundreds of thousands of spectators every year, as the city has an economy mainly based on cultural tourism. The days spent there gave us the impression of an enormous edifice from which we could grasp a few small fragments. There are major differences in terms of perception of ideas and theatrical practice between Romania and France, and the connection with such events could act as a reset, a vital reset I would say, of the artistic beliefs and biases. The conclusions of my study visit in Avignon are slowly settling, waiting for the right moment to be displayed, most likely on the pages that will come out on the last mile of the research I am still carrying out.

(Translated by Andi Sîsiac)

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