It is a great pleasure to report on the wonderful eighteenth season of L’Avant-Scène that ended very recently with the performance of *Others* by Pascal Rambert in the Common Room of Rockefeller College. The year was filled with memorable performances and exciting events marking the semester-long visit by French playwright and director Pascal Rambert. Students from the classes of 2020 and 2021 confirmed their talents while visiting exchange students from France and seniors from the great class of 2019 excelled on our stage offering exquisite performances.
The season started with the seventh annual edition of *Seuls en Scène*, Princeton French Theater Festival, that took place between Friday, September 21 and Saturday, September 29, 2018. It offered five shows (each one of them performed twice) and one staged-reading in English. Large audiences joined the events; nearly 1000 tickets were sold.
38 French artists and 3 early career actors from New York traveled to campus to perform in this new edition of the festival. Students, faculty, staff, Princeton community members, and visitors from New York made for the majority of our audience.

Continuing with the tradition of using various venues on campus for the festival, we presented *Doreen* by David Geselson in the Matthews Acting Studio of 185 Nassau Street, *Dough* by David Lescot in the Hearst Dance Theater of the new Lewis Center for the Arts Complex, *Gonzo Conférence* by Fanny de Chaillé in the Drapkin Studio, *Claire, Anton et Eux* in the Wallace Theater. *Harlem Quartet* and *Portrait de Ludmilla en Nina Simone* were both presented at the Whitman College Class of 1970 Theater.

Audience members at the festival – Wallace Theater Lewis Arts Complex

During this new edition of *Seuls en Scène*, our partnerships with the Lewis Center for the Arts, Cultural Services of the French Embassy and French Institute Alliance Française kept on growing. The Lewis Center staff offered great help and support for our visiting artists who felt very welcome and eager to collaborate with their American counterparts. The Cultural Services of the French Embassy generously helped present the staged-reading of *Dough* by David Lescot. Before coming to Princeton for *Doreen*, David Geselson’s Compagnie Lieux-Dits presented the performance *Unwritten Letters* at the French Institute Alliance Française of New York.

*Harlem Quartet*, based on the novel *Just Above My Head* by James Baldwin opened the festival. Adapted and directed by Élise Vigier in collaboration with Kevin Keiss, with original music by Saul Williams. This critically acclaimed show from the 2017-18 French theatrical season stands out with a rare all-black cast, unusual for a production in France. The festival opening evening continued with *Portrait de Ludmilla en Nina Simone* written and directed by David Lescot. Ludmilla Dabo thrilled audiences with her electric performance of Nina Simone alongside David Lescot who also performed in the play.
A solo performance by Louis Arène had opened the very first Seuls en Scène festival in 2012. Louis Arène had conceived La dernière berceuse when he was still a student at the Paris National Conservatory for Dramatic Art. Six years later, it meant a lot to host half of the 2017 graduating class of the Paris National Conservatory for Dramatic Art and have them perform in the new Wallace Theater of the Lewis Arts Complex. This development marked the exciting expansion of the festival.

Spectators praised the offerings of the festival; especially Doreen by David Geselson, Claire, Anton et eux by François Cervantes, and Portrait de Ludmilla en Nina Simone and enjoyed the opportunity to meet artists at the end of each performance. L’Avant-Scène and Program in Theater students met our guest artists in intimate settings for master class sessions or in classes directly.

As always the festival helped launch our season and start it on a high note. Once more it celebrated the spirit of partnership between various departments and centers. The list of sponsors and contributors has continued to grow and we were very pleased that this year’s festival emphasized a particularly diverse group of artists. The Department of French and Italian, Lewis Center for the Arts, Provost Office, Council of the Humanities, Rockefeller College, Cultural Services and Institut français provided key support to make this seventh edition a great success.
While the events of *Seuls en Scène* were unfolding, L’Avant-Scène students were already at work for the first two productions of the year: *Tous des oiseaux* by Wajdi Mouawad scheduled for mid-October 2018, and *La Double inconstance* by Marivaux for mid-February 2019.

*Tous des oiseaux*, that premiered in Paris in November 2017 at Théâtre National de la Colline, was an instant success. It is Mouawad’s new masterpiece after *Scorched* (2003). The play tells the story of Eitan, a German student of Israeli descent, who studies in New York, and who falls in love with Wahida, an Arab-American student. His family’s refusal to accept his relationship with a Muslim woman launches his quest of self-discovery. As it is often the case in Mouwad’s works, characters must journey back to their country of origin and confront the truth of their identities.

Juniors Jianing Zhao 20 and Michael Smilek 20 starred in the leading roles of Wahida and Eitan. Nicholas Shashkini 21 played Eitan’s grandfather, Julien Laks his father, Elyssa Schaeffer GS her mother, and Ellie Maag 19 his grandmother. Carlotta Platt 21 and Jivahn Moradian 20 played supporting roles. Nathnael Mengistie 22, Yowan Ramchoreeter 19, Jason Qu 21 and Anatole Grieu completed the cast. The performances thrilled audiences who enjoyed discovering Mouawad’ most recent work. It was the true *premiere* of the play in America where it should soon be presented in professional settings in Mouawad’s own staging. Students loved the text and the story, and excelled at every step of the way during the production process. We also take pride in the fact that it is a book on Leo Africanus *Trickster travels* by Princeton Emerita History Professor Natalie Zemon Davis that had influenced Mouawad to write the play.
After *Tous des oiseaux*, L’Avant-Scène took a short break to allow students to review for their midterms before fall break. Once classes resumed in early November, rehearsals intensified for students acting in *La double inconstance* by Marivaux. Students enrolled in French theater courses FRE-THR 211, French Theater Workshop, and FRE-THR 389 Producing Theater : French Festivals Today, started preparing for their end-of-semester performances. FRE-THR 211 students presented the traditional end-of-semester *Fragments* and for the first time, FRE-THR 389 students presented some stage work as part of the new seminar. They performed scenes from major plays presented at the legendary Festival during its history, as well as excerpts from *Avignon à vie* by Pascal Rambert.

In addition to these works, L’Avant-Scène also presented, during the last week of courses, a staged-reading of *Sans Vincent*, a new play written by André Benhaïm and Aymeric Glacet. Nick Shashkini 21, Julien Laks, Jianing Zhao 20, Elyssa Schaeffer GS, Anatole Grieu, Michael Smilek 20, Ellie Maag 19 and Jason Qu 21 participated in the play; the story of Vincent Vago, a modest cobbler who lives in the Parisian neighborhood of the canal Saint-Martin, and who, one morning, wakes up convinced he is the reincarnation of Van Gogh. Everyone enjoyed working on the play before winter break. André Benhaïm and Aymeric Glacet attended the performance and were delighted with its result.
After winter break, work on *La double inconstance* by Marivaux intensified. The cast brought together seniors Sherry Romanzi 19, James Tralie 19, Isabel Leigh 19 and Adnan Sachee 19 and junior Donald Della Pietra 20. Newcomers Anna Vinitsky 21 and Joseph Prentice 22 also joined the cast. With *La double inconstance*. In addition to writing a piece of critical work on female roles in the theater of Marivaux, Sherry Romanzi 19 performed in the lead role of the play as part of her departmental senior thesis requirements.

Students worked diligently and very hard during exam period in January and in the first two weeks of the spring semester to be ready for the play’s two public performances in mid-February at the Art Museum. They mastered the intricate language of Marivaux and prepared exquisite individual performances of their characters. Seniors Isabel Leigh 19 and Adnan Sachee 19 made spectacular progress playing Silvia and Trivelin. James Tralie 19 excelled as the Prince, Donald Della Pietra amused everyone as Arlequin, and Sherry Romanzi captivated audiences with her cunning and very personal interpretation of Flaminia. Anna Vinitsky 21 and Joseph Prentice 22 made an impressive debut on our stage, as Lisette and Le Seigneur.
The romantic backdrop of the Sterling-Morton Gallery in the Art Museum proved timely to celebrate love a few days after Valentine’s Day. With *La double inconstance*, L’Avant-Scène performed its 60th full-length production since its inception in 2001.

Pascal Rambert, a celebrated French writer, choreographer and director for the stage and screen, joined Princeton this spring as a Belknap Fellow in the Council of the Humanities and visiting lecturer in French and Italian (following Guillaume Gallienne from the Comédie-Française in the spring of 2018). In 2016, Rambert received the “Grand prix de l’Académie Française pour l’ensemble de son œuvre” or “Theater Prize from Académie Française for his entire body of work.” Rambert heads his own production company, structure production, and is an associate artist of Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris, El Pavón Teatro Kamikaze in Madrid and Théâtre National de Strasbourg in Strasbourg.

From 2007 to 2016, he served as artistic director of T2G-Théâtre de Gennevilliers, which he transformed into a national dramatic center for contemporary creation, exclusively dedicated to living artists (theater, dance, opera, contemporary art, film and philosophy). Rambert’s theater plays and choreographies are now produced by structure production, and are supported by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication. His plays are staged in Europe, North America, Asia, Russia, South America and the Middle East. Rambert is the author of more than 20 plays; his international hit *Clôture de l’amour* was translated into 23 languages. This summer, he will be one of the lead guest-artists at the 73rd Avignon Festival, where he will stage a new play: “Architecture.”
In late February, L’Avant-Scène students prepared and presented *A Tribute to Pascal Rambert* to welcome Rambert to Princeton. They gathered late one evening in the Chancellor Green Rotunda and performed excerpts from some of Rambert’s recent plays such as *Clôture de l’amour* (2011), *Lac* (2015), *Avignon à vie* (2013), *Actrice* (2017) and *Soeurs* (2018).

After offering Rambert a tribute to honor him, L’Avant-Scène students started work on their next big production: *Roberto Zucco* by Bernard-Marie Koltès (1948-1989). A murderer without a motive, Zucco decimates his own family, kills innocent citizens, and executes policemen. On his quest to find himself, he meets a rebellious young girl with no identity, who falls in love with him: la Gamine. Her rage leads her to lose herself for him in a place with the fateful name of Le petit Chicago. L’Avant-Scène had first staged Bernard-Marie Koltès’ last play in October 2007. The production was the start of a novel era for the troupe with the rise of a new generation of students from the great classes of 2009, 2010, and 2011. More than ten years later, it meant a lot to stage *Roberto Zucco* again with a new generation of students.
Nicholas Shashkini 21 played the title-role and offered audiences one of his mostefined performances to date. Alongside Shashkini, Jane Sul 20 played the beloved role of La
Gamine. The family of La Gamine was brilliantly performed by Jianing Zhao 20 as La Soeur,
Julien Laks as Le Frère, Jivahn Moradian 20 as Le Père, and Sara Anjum 19 as La Mère.
Danielle Stephenson 20, Helena Van Brande 20, Jason Qu 21, and James Facon 21 played
various supporting roles in the production. Playing Roberto Zucco’s mother and La Dame,
graduate student Elyssa Schaeffer, from the Department of French and Italian, once again
excelled.

This spring, the troupe also benefited immensely from the presence of talented and
dedicated French exchange students from Sciences-Po Paris and Sciences-Po Reims as well
as from École Normale Supérieure Ulm. In Roberto Zucco, Anatole Grieu, Tommaso Buso
and Mathéo Malik took an active part and performed multiple small roles. Their
contributions were much appreciated and, like former great exchange students from France,
we wish they could stay longer with us.
The troupe presented three performances of *Roberto Zucco* at Whitman College Class of 1970 Theater, the weekend of April 13-14, 2019. Next for L’Avant-Scène was the presentation of a new *Tribute to Pascal Rambert* open to the public in the Berlind Theater Rehearsal Room at McCarter Theater Center on April 25, 2019. Students refined performances they had previously worked on and added new excerpts from Rambert’s texts. In particular Helena Van Brande ’19 performed a memorable excerpt from *Clôture de l’amour*. Playing Audrey in *Clôture de l’amour*, she led her fellow L’Avant-Scène actors Julien Laks, Anatole Grieu, Jianing Zhao ’20, Jane Sul ’20, Mathéo Malik, Jason Qu ’21, Ellie Maag ’19 and Jivahn Moradian ’20 during an unforgettable evening of theater.

Rambert co-taught FRE/THR/CWR 388 Writing, Directing and Acting Others with Florent Masse, and directed students in a final production at the end of the semester: *Others* performed twice on May 2, 2019 (in French and English). Rambert explained the following to the students: he wanted them to experience all the steps of a playwrights’ work and stage with the result themselves. He asked them to seek people off-campus. To speak with them. To choose one person of any age who interests them. To conduct interviews. And then to formulate a monologue. To translate it in French. To edit it. And finally to begin working on these people, simply and from within. No caricature. No ostentatious drama. Just to be them. To become them. To find their breath, their rhythm. Then he said: instead of establishing an exact staging with a pre-set script, let’s make this piece “in real-time,” if they were up to it. “In real time” means that each staging was unique and the piece never happened twice in the same way. Nothing was fixed. And they were up to it. It this that the audience saw on May 2, 2019: the pure real.
The creative class received support from a new 2018-2019 David A. Gardner Magic Grant, intended to help prepare the class and create its end-of-semester production. It brought together a diverse group of students: a good number of them from L'Avant-Scène or The Program in Theater. Rambert thoroughly enjoyed teaching and directing the students, and getting to know them outside of the studio room this spring, attending productions of the Program in Theater and L'Avant-Scène. He marveled at the students' many talents, their learning curve and ability to understand the type of performance he wanted to create with them. L'Avant-Scène integrated *Others* as part of its main productions of the year.
This spring semester, *Il Laboratorio Teatrale*, the Italian theater section of L’Avant-Scène also returned. Students worked on a stage adaptation of the award-winning film *Le Fate Ignoranti* (2001) that they presented on May 6, 2019 at Whitman College Theater.

Once the season and classes were over, L’Avant-Scène senior and exchange students enjoyed some downtime in New York City to celebrate their accomplishments. On Wednesday, May 8, 2019 they attended Emmanuel Noblet’s award-winning solo *Heart* (based on Maylis de Kerangal popular novel *Réparer les vivants*) at FIAF, French Institute Alliance Française. It was a perfect spring evening in the city. The year had just finished and everyone was in the spirit of end-of-year festivities.
The special performances of Others at Rockefeller College concluded a new extraordinary season for L’Avant-Scène. With 24 active members in the troupe, L’Avant-Scène had never been so large and it almost produced an event every other week. There will be much to look forward to in the new 2019-2020 academic year, especially in the fall of 2019: L’Avant-Scène will host a new short-time visitor: French actor and director Clément Hervieu-Léger from the Comédie-Française. It will produce the eighth edition of *Seuls en Scène* featuring an exceptional lineup of events and start a partnership with the prestigious Festival d’Automne in Paris. To highlight the many talents of its student actors, it will present *Le pays lointain* by Lagarce, *Le Mariage de Figaro* by Beaumarchais and *Les Fourberies de Scapin* by Molière. In the spring of 2020, its director will be on leave to research and visit the world’s most engaging contemporary theater festivals.

![Seniors Sherry Romanzi, James Tradie, Isabel Leigh and junior Donald Della Pietra in the last scene of La double inconstance by Marivaux February 2019](image)

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