Report on the twentieth Season of L’Avant-Scène
2020-2021
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It’s a great pleasure to write a report on the twentieth season of L’Avant-Scène of academic year 2020-2021. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, it was an enriching year of theater for the students of the company, and it felt good to keep on creating in the historic circumstances. L’Avant-Scène produced three plays online and offered a full virtual Seuls en Scène festival at the beginning of the academic year. Actors and directors joined us virtually from France, during the festival and throughout the year for Q&As on their works, or for special class visits and rehearsals. The students bravely adapted to a digital theater format. Everyone progressed during the year. As a troupe, we kept on making strides in the online format, and improved as we went along. We were particularly pleased with the productions of the spring semester when we performed our full-length plays live for the audience.

What a feat the students made! These were not easy conditions and yet the magic of the theater happened! This season will certainly go down as a memorable one in all the seasons of L’Avant-Scène for all the efforts the students made and all the patience they demonstrated. This report chronicles the 20-21 season, from the preparation of the online season to the hybrid end-of-year works by students.

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The season started with the ninth edition of *Seuls en Scène*, Princeton French Theater Festival that was offered virtually. The festival took place between Thursday, September 10 and Sunday, September 20, 2020. It consisted of video recordings of shows, documentary films, and video recordings of readings specially prepared for the festival. All contents were available to stream for a few days. Everything had been pre-recorded before. Additionally, Zoom Q&As took place with each one of the artists of the festival, giving students and audience members the chance to interact and converse with professionals after viewing their work. We were pleased to attract online roughly the same amount of spectators that we do in person, and it certainly was a stimulating experience considering the limitations we were in during the pandemic.

The festival opened with a pre-recorded conversation on the state of French theater with three Directors of production, representing major French festivals and institutions. Anne-Mathilde Di Tommaso joined us from the Avignon Festival, Pierre Gendronneau from Festival d’Automne in Paris, and Baptiste Manier from the Comédie-Française. The lively and informative conversation gave us a good sense on the state of French theater as it was – temporarily – resuming its operations. Though theaters had remained dark in France during the height of the pandemic, there was a brief opening in both September and October 2020, before the county moved back into lockdown from the end of October 2020 until the end of May 2021. The conversation centered on efforts made by these institutions to adapt to the present times, plan a season despite much uncertainty, and manage cancellations, sanitary restrictions, etc.
As in 2019, we continued our collaboration with Festival d’Automne in Paris whose 49th season was already underway in Paris and its suburbs. We featured a list of prominent guests that were concomitantly featured at Festival d’Automne. Among these artists were Marion Siéfert for *Du Sale!,* Penda Diouf for *Pistes,* Mohamed El Khatib for *La dispute,* Louise Hémon and Émilie Rousset for the *Rituels* series, and Jonathan Capdevielle for *Rémi.*

Marion Siéfert’s *Du Sale!,* and Penda Diouf’s reading of *Pistes* were the highlights of the first days of the festival. Marion Siéfert had created *Du Sale!* in the 2018-2019 season at Théâtre de la Commune in Aubervilliers, a suburb of Paris. In late spring 2020, she was supposed to bring it to Vienna for the Wiener Festwochen. Since Wiener Festwochen was cancelled (along with all the other European festivals that spring-summer 2020), she produced, for Viennese audiences, a documentary film on the rehearsal process leading to the final production of the show. Marion kindly agreed to show the film at Princeton. We too had planned to bring the show to Princeton and were pleased to show the documentary film instead. At the core of *Du Sale!* is the desire to showcase underrepresented artists and create a *pièce d’actualité:* a piece centered on current affairs to help attract and include local populations of Aubervilliers. Students in L’Avant-Scène were involved in the preparation to present *Du Sale!* at Princeton. Isabelle Chen GS, translated the text, and Morgan Teman ’23 made the English subtitles.

Penda Diouf is a new playwright to emerge on the French stages and a new voice in contemporary French theater. In *Pistes* she writes about her own experience growing up in provincial France in the eighties, facing racism and racial injustice. The text also takes us to Namibia where Penda Diouf traveled in 2010, to strengthen her Afro descendant identity and recover from depression. A production of the play, directed by Burkinabe director Aristide Tarnagda was scheduled at Festival d’Automne in December 2020. Penda Diouf generously offered to read her text for *Seuls en Scène* and recorded herself on Zoom. Her reading touched many audience members. We were particularly pleased to feature Penda Diouf in the festival, and start collaborating with her.
The second week of the festival featured more traditional offerings. Audience members could stream three shows: La dispute by Mohamed El Khatib, Rituels series (especially Le Grand débat) by Louise Hémon and Émilie Rousset & Rémi by Jonathan Capdevielle. We were delighted to stream these shows; shows that we wouldn’t normally be able to bring to Princeton (due to logistical and technological complexities and/or size of sets). The productions were well received. Audience members enjoyed the opportunity to meet the artists, joining us live from Paris, during Q&A sessions that followed the streaming timeframe of the shows.

Students in French theater classes joined in for La dispute and Rémi. They raved about Rémi by Jonathan Capdevielle, a stage adaptation of Hector Malot’s novel Sans famille, a vibrant classic of French literature.
The festival emphasized a diverse group of artists. We were pleased with this emphasis and are committed to continue in this direction in the future, especially in light of the nationwide protests against racism and police violence that have swept the country in the wake of George Floyd’s killing, and the long-overdue attention that systemic racism is finally receiving.

During this new edition of *Seuls en Scène*, our partnerships with the Lewis Center for the Arts, and the Cultural Services of the French Embassy kept on growing. The Lewis Center staff offered great help and support. Its Communications team generously helped set up streaming contents and publicize the festival offerings. As always the Cultural Services of the French Embassy based in New York City actively spread the word about *Seuls en Scène* and offered great spiritual support.

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L’Avant-Scène students started rehearsing remotely in early September for the beloved classic *On ne badine pas avec l’amour* by Alfred de Musset that we presented in late October 2020. At the end of the rehearsal process, the performance was recorded and then streamed online for four days. Students made great efforts to adapt to the new medium and delivered a convincing performance of the nineteenth century popular play. For everyone involved, it was a rewarding and fun new experience. With virtual backgrounds (recreating the estate and gardens of the home of Le Baron), and other creative tools, students rapidly felt at ease in the virtual setting and released their acting talents!

Virtual rehearsals followed the same schedule that we have in normal times. Rehearsals took place in late afternoons or early evenings during the week, and sometimes in the weekend when a production nears. The living room of L’Avant-Scène’s director transformed into “L’Avant-Scène studio.” Students appeared on the large TV screen, making the directorial process easier. “L’Avant-Scène studio” helped throughout the academic year both for the productions and French theater classes taught in the fall and in the spring. Special thanks to the Department of French and Italian Computing Support Specialist, Charles Leonardi, who helped set it up in the very last days of summer 2020. It helped immensely and gave students and L’Avant-Scène's director motivation to devise plays online creatively.
In late October 2020, L’Avant-Scène streamed Une des dernières soirées de carnaval by Carlo Goldoni, directed by French actor and director Clément Hervieu-Léger from the Comédie-Française, who has often visited us at Princeton. The exquisite Une des dernières soirées de carnaval was followed by a remote conversation with Clément Hervieu-Léger who has often visited us at Princeton. Students enrolled in FRE 221 "The Rise of France: French Literature, Culture and Society from the Beginnings to 1789" taught by Flora Champy & FRE-THR 211 "French Theater Workshop" taught by Florent Masse attended the event for class and asked Hervieu-Léger questions on his work as director, and other plays that he had previously directed at the Comédie-Française. L’Avant-Scène students were also encouraged to join, and some alumni (who had started following and joining the online festival) also joined in!
FRE-THR 211 – French Theater Workshop - students also acted remotely during the fall semester. They presented their final works online during Fragments XX, A Student Recital of French Theater Scenes, between November 23-25, 2020. Like their fellow classmates in L’Avant-Scène, they made great effort throughout the semester. The virtual adaptation and preparation for FRE-THR 211, French Theater Workshop, had been made possible in the summer of 2020 by support from The 250th Anniversary Fund for Innovation in Undergraduate Education. “L’Avant-Scène studio” proved key for class sessions enabling the students’ director-instructor to move around the space and lead by example. As most performing arts courses, FRE-THR 211 had less students than usual, but the small group of 7 students did help in this particular setting. The students must be lauded for their hard work during the semester. They were always upbeat and formed a wonderful group.

With the launch of the new academic calendar (with final exams taking place before Christmas break), L’Avant-Scène ended its fall semester season at the end of November with the works of students enrolled in the French Theater Workshop. Rehearsals didn’t resume before early February when the spring semester officially started. L’Avant-Scène started rehearsing immediately for its main spring show: Le Malade imaginaire by Molière featuring, in the lead roles, our upcoming graduating seniors Anna Vinitsky ’21, Nicholas Shashkini ’21, Jason Qu ’21, and Peter Foster ’21. It also started rehearsing for its second production of the spring semester: Berlin mon garçon by Marie NDiaye.
In the spring, the troupe brought together 10 students, 2 community members and 1 faculty member. The new students joining the troupe: Marley Jacobson '22 and Sultan Al Habsi '22 participated in both productions.

For L’Avant-Scène, this was the second production of Molière’s beloved *Malade imaginaire*. The troupe had performed the play in April 2007. Revisiting it was a joy, and a wonderful opportunity for students, who immediately enjoyed working together on the play. Unlike in the fall, we decided early on that we’d be performing the play live at 8pm on the East Coast the weekend of March 4-5, 2021 (with a matinee on March 5, 2021). This made the experience most exciting and thrilling for students!
In less than five weeks, the students were ready to take on our virtual stage! They made a steady effort in the first weeks of the semester, memorizing text, acting in synch, listening to one another as if they were nearby. To make the process easier, we even imagined that the play would be set in a Paris mired by a pandemic… characters would connect on a social distance device but they would be in the same seventeenth century Parisian bourgeois house. Remarkably, the students followed this directorial choice with ease; acting remotely felt more natural and they made a great effort to make us believe that they were almost right next to one another while being apart, on campus, off campus in town, and as far as Baton Rouge, Louisiana!

We had very good turnouts for the online production and were very pleased. What’s more alumni joined in from DC, New York, the West Coast, France, and even Turkey! This was a blessing of the pandemic: to bring together current students and alumni of the program. The idea of performing live added much to the students’ work who offered exquisite and memorable performances. The joyful and comic play was the perfect project to warm us all during the winter months and keep theater alive during the long winter of 2021! Special thanks to Kelly Eggers, Office Coordinator in the Department of French and Italian, and Charles Leonardi, Departmental Computing Support Specialist who both attended the dress rehearsal and each performance since we offered the play on Zoom as a Webinar. Their presence was reassuring and much appreciated by all of us in the company. Together, they ensured that everything worked well technologically speaking, and we enjoyed having them with us.

Before Spring break, students in FRE 311-THR 312 performed some works in hybrid fashion: we filmed some scenes that they performed in person, and recorded other scenes on Zoom. We streamed everything together and made the video available for a few days. FRE 311-THR 312,
focused on the works of playwrights Molière, Musset and Rambert. It benefited from the opportunity to teach in hybrid fashion during the Spring semester when students were back on campus. Specifically, we were allowed to hold private rehearsals for the course in person in New South on campus. Classes continued to be offered online since one student in the course was studying at home, away from campus. The combination of virtual classes and some rehearsals in person proved exciting for students who enjoyed being back (masked) in the studio. The first series of work that they presented were excerpts from plays by Molière they had been working on. We presented these works right before the break.

Right after the break, work continued for the third and last online production of the academic year. *Berlin mon garçon* by Marie Ndiaye would close the season at the very end of April 2021. The contemporary play had never been created before (only rehearsed) and we had the privilege of creating it first. French actor and director Stanislas Nordey had commissioned it from Marie NDiaye for Théâtre National de Strasbourg. Thought Nordey’s actors had started rehearsing the play, its opening was delayed by almost a year because of the pandemic. It tells the story of a French mum, Marina, taking a trip to Berlin to look for her disappeared son. Through her journey, we hear about life in Chinon, her hometown, where her son grew up, first as a gentle son and then as a troubled young man. Marina shares her past with the enigmatic Rüdiger, her host in Berlin. Later we learn, through a former girlfriend, Charlotte, that the son is about to commit horrendous crimes in the city… Rüdiger protects Marina and falsely translates what Charlotte is saying. Marina parts with her difficult past, and starts a new life. Her husband Lenny, who eventually makes the trip to Berlin, cannot convince her to return to Chinon.

Undergraduate students Gavin LaPlace ’23, Sultan Al Habsi ’22 and Marley Jacobson ’22 made formidable efforts to tackle the complex dramatic language of NDiaye. It took many rehearsals to decipher the meaning and help them get used to the flow of NDiaye’s sentences, the lack of punctuation, and how her writing style might translate onto the stage. The undergraduate students were joined by Prof. Flora Champy and graduate student Elyssa Schaeffer from the Department of French and Italian, as well as Sophie Orloff, a historic member of the Community Atelier (founded in 2004). It was a stellar cast of committed and talented performers. Each one of them worked very hard to bring the world of the play. The Zoom format also helped throughout the rehearsal process and in the end, during the production process. Often it even felt like the play had been written for an online format. At least this is what we felt throughout the creative process.
We performed the play three times on April 22-23, 2021. Once again, it was performed live. To accommodate spectators joining us from Europe, we performed a matinee show at 4pm ET (10pm in Western Europe) on Friday, April 23. We were thrilled to hear that Marie NDiaye joined in from Paris. Marie NDiaye very much appreciated discovering her play for the first time and congratulated the entire cast for a work well done.

With *Berlin mon garçon*, L’Avant-Scène continued its exploration of the contemporary repertoire, and we are committed to continue performing recent texts by playwrights. We also hope to invite Marie NDiaye one day on campus to talk about her overall literary work. It was particularly exciting to produce a play by Marie NDiaye when she herself was in the spotlight in France with two theater productions: *Berlin mon garçon* whose production from Théâtre National de Strasbourg finally took the stage in June 2021 in Paris, and *Reyav* that opened in Avignon in the last week of the official festival there. Once more L’Avant-Scène proved that it follows closely what’s going on on
the contemporary French stages. We look forward to performing more texts by NDiaye and other playwrights that make the headlines in the current theatrical seasons.

Of note during the 2020-2021 season was the informal visit, in class and rehearsals, of Audrey Bonnet, one of the most recognized French performer of her generation. Audrey Bonnet, who had come to Princeton multiple times to perform at Seuls en Scène, was supposed to visit us in person as Belknap Fellow in the Humanities and French and Italian at the close of the 2020-2021 season. We preferred to postpone it to Academic Year 2021-2022, when we hope, that an in person visit will be allowed in mid-April 2022. Notwithstanding the situation, Audrey Bonnet kindly accepted to visit FRE 228-THR 227 Contemporary French Theater and FRE 311-THR 312 Advanced French Theater Workshop. She also attended a run-through of Berlin mon garçon by Marie NDiaye and shared precious notes with the cast. We hope very much that we will be able to host Audrey Bonnet in person at the end of the spring semester, in 2022, and were touched by her friendship.
With *Travaux d’Acteurs : Musset and Rambert* prepared by FRE 311-THR 312 students, the season came to a close on April 27, 2021. Like *Fragments XX* by FRE-THR 211 students in the fall, the show was offered to stream online for a few days. It featured hybrid work like we had done earlier in the spring: some excerpts were recorded from Zoom and others filmed in person in our studio in New South. Students did a wonderful work for these travaux, as they did throughout the semester, patiently navigating restrictions and holding hard standards for their performing work.
Despite the limitations the 2020-2021 season of L’Avant-Scène was a rewarding one. Students refined their acting talents, worked on exquisite texts that challenged them and forced to push themselves. With the online format, there was much adaptations needed. Though it felt strange at the beginning we were rapidly fast on track to produce good work, and improvements during the year felt gratifying.

2020-2021 will remain as a special season in the history of L’Avant-Scène. The brave students who partook in it made formidable efforts to keep the troupe active and offer our dedicated followers memorable moments of theater. Special thanks to all those in the Department of French and Italian, the Lewis Center for the Arts who helped make this season possible. We were grateful for the chance to continue to be bold and aim high.