It is a great pleasure to write a report on the twenty-second season of L’Avant-Scène, the French Theater Workshop. L’Avant-Scène fully resumed its activities this academic year, producing the eleventh edition of Seuls en Scène in person, offering five plays from November 2022 until April 2023, resuming L’Avant-Scène in Paris, and welcoming guest-artists during the year to actively participate in rehearsals and classes. It felt that the pandemic was finally behind us, and the troupe grew substantially with new recruits. All in all, it was a wonderful season!
The season started with a new edition of *Seuls en Scène*, Princeton French Theater Festival. After two years of virtual editions, it was high time to welcome artists in person again. This eleventh edition of the festival marked its tenth anniversary since the festival was founded in September 2012. It was exhilarating to celebrate this milestone with distinguished artists. The festival lasted two weeks from Friday, September 9th through Friday, September 22nd, 2022. It brought more than 1,400 spectators across 16 performances. Hits of the recent Paris theater seasons opened the festival: *Stallone* and *La Nuit juste avant les forêts*. They were followed by *Moi fardeau inhérent*, the first play from the Caribbean that we brought at the festival and *Radio Live* that returned to Princeton after its successful first run in 2019. The second weekend of the festival featured renowned artist Pascal Rambert who came to present two shows *Deux amis* (featuring the landmark actors Stanislas Nordey and Charles Berling), and *Huit ensemble*. Before the end of the festival, *Traces* delighted audiences at the Matthews Acting Studio. *Angela Davis: A History of the United States* captivated audiences as well thanks to Astrid Bayiha’s remarkable performance.

Acclaimed actress Clotilde Hesme opened the festival with “Stallone”
As always, artists visited French Theater classes. This year, they particularly spent time with students enrolled in Race in French Theater whose program mirrored the one of the festival. Moi fardeau inherent, Radio Live, Huit ensemble, Traces and Angela Davis: a History of the United States having been specifically selected to enhance the FRE-THR 390 students' experience.

Support came from the Provost Office, The Lewis Center for the Arts, The Council of the Humanities, Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, the Department of Art and Archaeology, the Program in European Contemporary Politics and Society, Villa Albertine, Rockefeller College and The Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the United States. In 2022, we continued our collaboration with Festival d'Automne in Paris, presenting fours shows from its recent lineups. We also continued our collaboration with New York City French cultural
organizations such as Villa Albertine (French Cultural Services of the French Embassy) and FIAF, French Institute Alliance Française. All together we partnered to welcome Traces by Felwin Sarr. Our new FACE – Contemporary French Theater Fund – grant helped support the invitation of Moi fardeau inherent by Guy Régis Junior and Traces by Felwin Sarr.

Renowned Burkinabes actor Étienne Minoungou presented “Traces” by Felwin Sarr

L’Avant-Scène didn’t wait until the end of the festival to start work on its semester’s productions. One innovation this year concerned the schedule of rehearsals. Students alternated between rehearsals of Des territoires (…Et tout sera pardonné) and Cyrano de Bergerac and there were two distinct groups in the troupe: one group acting in the contemporary play by Baptiste Amann, and the other, performing the classic by Edmond Rostand. Rehearsals started promptly the second week of classes. It took less than a week or so to finalize castings: several students joined the troupe: Michaela Avakian ’24, Gil Joseph ’24, Anaïs Yolka ’24, Éloi Delort ’24, Michaela Avakian ’24, Josie Smart ’25, James Hamilton ’26, Hervé Ishumwe ’24, Cecelia Ramsey GS, and Pierre Azou GS. They were joined, a few weeks later, by Hannah Grunow GS, and Clément Génibrèdes GS. Like Cecelia Ramsey, and Pierre Azou, Hannah Grunow and Clément Génibrèdes are graduate students from the Department of French and Italian. It was important to recruit these new students and exciting to see the Department of French graduate students’ growing interest in joining L’Avant-Scène.

Yasmine Zein ’23, Anaïs Yolka ’24, Éloi Delort ’24 & Gil Joseph ’25 in “Des territoires (… Et tout sera pardonné)”
With *Des territoires (… Et tout sera pardonné?)* L’Avant-Scène continued its trajectory consisting in presenting a contemporary play every fall. Baptiste Amann had started writing his trilogy *Des territoires* at the beginning of last decade. We performed the last part of *Des territoires*, set in both Paris and Avignon, France. We follow a sister and two brothers who must decide whether to give their brother’s organs or not. He has been critically injured during riots that have just erupted across France after the killing, by the police, of a young man, Marvin.

The play revisits the history of the Algerian war and delves into this part of French history rarely seen onstage. Of the plays looking at that part of French history, it is considered one of the most accomplished and thought-provoking. Students thoroughly enjoyed working on the play in September, October and early November. The scenes were well balanced between them, and they could all make some substantial progress. It was exhilarating to work together on historical materials and learn more on decolonization and its consequences. The play subtly deals with issues at the core of contemporary France: immigrant youth living in the outskirts of the main cities in France, racism, police violence, and lost territories of the Republic.
We performed *Des territoires* (*… Et tout sera pardonné?*) from November 3, until November 5, at Whitman College Class of 1970 theater in front of large audiences. The play touched students and professors alike who discovered a new talented playwright. We are keen on continuing following the works of Baptiste Amann and putting on contemporary plays. When teaching *Race in French Theater* or other courses on contemporary French Theater, the timing is excellent.

When the performances of *Des territoires* took place and ended, the rest of L’Avant-Scène was hard at work for our second show of the season: *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The beloved play had recently enjoyed a revival with a Hollywood film and a stellar British production by the Jamie Loyd company featuring James McAvoy in the title role. For L’Avant-Scène, it was the third staging of the play. This one would be performed only one night, on December 2, 2022. We used an abridged version of the play that we had already used in 2009. Gavin LaPlace 23, Morgan Teman 23, and Clément Herman GS played the lead roles of Cyrano, Roxane and Christian. Newcomers James Hamilton ‘26, Cecelia Ramsey GS, Clément Génibrèdes, and Pierre Azou GS brought much life to the production!

*Gavin LaPlace ’23, Morgan Teman ’23 and Clément Herman rehearsing for “Cyrano de Bergerac”*

Rehearsals intensified once the production of *Des Territoires* passed. Students worked very hard in between breaks to be fully ready on December 2 at the very end of the semester. The night of the performance brought a large crowd composed of students, friends in the community,
members of the Department, and colleagues from across disciplines. As one of the most popular plays in the canon, the play works wonders every time and brings large audience members. Performing the play in the Chancellor Green Rotunda brought magic to the evening. It was such a pleasure to return to the Chancellor Green Rotunda for a play of L’Avant-Scène (it had been more than 6 years since we hadn’t performed there).

Cyrano de Bergerac wasn’t the only event to brighten the month of December. The students enrolled in FRE-THR 390 Race in French Theater, a new course created in the fall of 2021 on the question of diversity on the French stages, presented a selection of excerpts from the plays the students read in class. Students convincingly performed excerpts from the following plays: Le Iench by Eva Doumbia, Finir en beauté by Mohamed El Khatib, Pistes by Penda Diouf, Des Territoires (… Et tout sera pardonné) by Baptiste Amann, and Ce qu’il faut dire by Leonora Miano.
Of note during the fall semester was the week-long visit of playwright Penda Diouf in early October 2022 with the support of the Princeton Center of Excellence, Center for French and Francophone Studies. Penda Diouf taught two class sessions of Race in French Theater, attended rehearsals of L’Avant-Scène, and discussed her projects during a lunch conversation at Rockefeller College. Penda Diouf later participated in the French radio program by Aurélie Charon Tous en scène dedicated to our new course Race in French Theater at Princeton. The program aired on November 5, 2022, on France Culture.

Gavin LaPlace ’23, Lana Guige 24, Sandra Chen ’24 and Morgan Teman ’23
attending “La Mort de Danton” at the Comédie-Française

After the productive semester, it was time for the winter break. For the quasi first time in three years, the University implemented its new winter schedule, with a long winter holiday and the new Wintersession from mid-January until the end of January. A group of upperclassmen in L’Avant-Scène traveled to Paris for the traditional L’Avant-Scène in Paris trip of the month of January. It was very exciting to resume L’Avant-Scène in Paris after the long hiatus. This was already the sixteenth edition of the trip to France. Multiple Princeton promotions have participated in the program since its inception in 2004. Students saw seven plays in six days, attended classes at the Paris Conservatory of Dramatic Arts, and met with actors, playwrights and directors throughout the week. Highlights were the productions of La mort de Danton at the Comédie-Française, Un mois à la campagne at Théâtre de l’Athénée and a private visit of the Eiffel Tower with its Director, Patrick Branco Ruivo, as well as meetings and meals with Guillaume Gallienne, Penda Diouf, and Sandy
Ouvrier. Upperclassmen of L’Avant-Scène were eager to participate in the trip. They came back rejuvenated and eager to start rehearsing for the L’Avant-Scène spring productions.

Rehearsals resumed the first day we came back for the spring semester. During the early part of the semester, work started on three productions: *La seconde surprise de l’amour* by Marivaux, *Les Caprices de Marianne* by Musset and *Quai ouest* by Koltès. There was much to do in the early part of the spring semester since our aim was to present both *La seconde surprise de l’amour* and *Les Caprices de Marianne* the same evenings in early March (before spring break) as a double-bill program. Actors in the troupe wasted no time to get ready and excellent progress was already made after two weeks of rehearsals in mid-February.

The spring program of L’Avant-Scène mirrored the syllabus of FRE 311-THR 312 Advanced French Theater Workshop in which students worked on Marivaux, Musset and Koltès. They would present one scene of each playwright at the conclusion of the semester. Choosing these three playwrights felt natural and it was exhilarating to study the ways they echo one another.
Rehearsals were well underway when we welcomed Sandy Ouvrier, a highly reputed Acting Professor at the Paris Conservatory for Dramatic Arts in the fourth week of courses. Sandy Ouvrier had often visited Princeton with her students and gave L’Avant-Scène students master classes over the years. The Center of Excellence and Department of French and Italian sponsored her week-long visit that culminated in a conversation with Ouvrier who mentioned the vision she had articulated for the Conservatory as a candidate for its directorship at the time (it’s a pleasure to report that since then, Sandy Ouvrier has been appointed as the new Director of the Paris Conservatory). Ouvrier participated in class sessions of FRE 311-THR 312, and attended all our rehearsals that week, guiding and stimulating students in their respective scenes and plays. It was phenomenal for students to receive encouragements and advice from Sandy Ouvrier at this stage of their work. We are immensely grateful to Sandy Ouvrier for the time she spent with students. She is a gifted director and acting coach, and she has had a long experience working with Princeton students. After her visit it was already time to direct the last acts and scenes of our plays.
We presented *La seconde surprise de l’amour* and *Les Caprices de Marianne* simultaneously during two long evenings in early March 2023 (2 and 5). It was particularly challenging for students to go back-to-back between the two plays (some of them were acting in both productions). For the second time, we performed the plays at the temporary Art Gallery of the Princeton University Art Museum on Hulfish Street in downtown Princeton. It’s always a joy to collaborate with the Art Museum staff and we always look forward to our collaborations with them. We’re particularly excited about the opening of the new museum in 2025!
We thoroughly enjoyed kicking off our spring season with Marivaux and Musset. Students marveled at their exquisite styles. They had much to learn and master playing these two playwrights: understanding the intricacies of Marivaux’ texts and *translating* them to the stage or tackling the long and complex monologues in Musset. Cuts in the texts were necessary though and added fluidity to the performances. Though daunting at first, it became easier and easier to cut in the text of Marivaux and we have Sandy Ouvier to thank for all the good advice regarding necessary cuts. The performances of Sandra Chen ’24, Morgan Teman ’23, Gavin LaPlace ’23, Lana Gaige ’24 and Clément Herman GS stood out. Newcomers Hannah Grunow GS and Clément Génibrèdes excelled on our stage. James Hamilton ’26, Éloi Delort ’24 and Gil Joseph ’25 continued their progress and offered wonderful performances of their characters. Marie-Gabrielle Pelissie du Rausas GS started acting in the troupe and made surprising progress as a true beginner.
In February and early March, cast members of L’Avant-Scène’s production of *Quai ouest* (scheduled for late April) were already at work. They started working on the text; trying to decipher Koltès’ voice. But it is truly after spring break that work in the production picked up. The cast brought together Yasmine Zein ’23, Gil Joseph ’25, John Patrick ’24, Anaïs Yolka ’24, Clément Génibrèdes GS, Éloi Delort ’24, Marie-Gabrielle Pelissie du Rausas GS, and James Hamilton ’26. Students made rapid progress during the weeks of rehearsals, concentrated during a period of five weeks, from the return of spring break until the beginning of the final week of courses.

Students enjoyed discovering a playwright they seldom knew and learning more about the genesis of the play. Bernard-Marie Koltès, a native of Metz, France, had spent time in New York City in the late sixties, the seventies and early eighties. He was fascinated with the city’s old docks...
where he set the story of *Quai ouest*. New York City is also one of the first international cities where his work was presented in the late seventies and early-eighties. We felt fortunate to work on the play, which is particularly visionary about what it says on contemporary life. Koltès understood very early on the mercantile dynamics at stake in human relationships in capitalist societies and deployed a striking vision for the world of his play.

The production, which marked the end of the plays this season, took place in the Godfrey Kerr Studio of the Lewis Arts Complex. Despite performing the play on a Tuesday night during the final week of courses (April 25), it was a sold-out performance. Everyone praised the choice of the Kerr Studio to represent *quai ouest*, one of New York’s long-gone piers, and the students, who offered remarkable performances.

Though *Quai ouest* marked the end of the plays in 22-23, the season was not over since more presentation of works were to come, starting with *Travaux d’Acteurs IX* on May 2, 2023, featuring the scene work of students enrolled in FRE 311-THR 312. Students performed five scenes by Marivaux,
and five by Musset. They excelled in their works capping off a rich semester of French theater. This group of FRE 311-THR 312 students was particularly strong, and we hope some of these students will continue with L’Avant-Scène or other French theater courses. The day after *Travaux d’Acteurs IX*, it was the turn of the students enrolled in HUM 423 Poetry and War: Translating the Untranslatable by Professor Sandie Bermann, to perform their translations of excerpts of *Feuilles d’Hynos* by René Char in the regal setting of the Chancellor Green Rotunda. Students did a wonderful work embodying the words of the poet and *their* words.

In the very last weeks of the semester, students of *Il laboratorio teatrale* of the Italian section of the Department of French and Italian performed an adaptation for the stage of *The Night Porter* by Liliana Cavani.
L’Avant-Scène organized one final event/performance not opened to the public to celebrate its graduates of the class of 2023: Morgan Teman ‘23 and Gavin LaPlace ‘23 who had an exceptional journey at L’Avant-Scène: acting with the troupe as freshmen before the pandemic, courageously acting on Zoom throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, patiently resuming L’Avant-Scène with health protocols during academic year 2021-2022, and finally returning to a full season of plays this academic year 2022-2023. Together they acted in 17 roles spanned between 9 plays. Morgan and Gavin will be missed, such as their classmate Yasmine Zein ‘23, a very talented member of the troupe who started acting in full-length plays of the program this year.

This season, another project got underway: a workshop offered exclusively to graduate students in the Department of French and Italian and curated towards improving their public speaking abilities. Seven students of the doctoral program of the Department met once per month with the director of L’Avant-Scène to enhance their speaking and acting skills. The workshop ran from October 2022 through March 2023. It culminated in early March when a pair of students presented a staged reading of Pascal Rambert’s *Three Annunciations* as part of the Night of Ideas 2023 organized by Villa Albertine and the Cultural Services of the French Embassy. This first run of the workshop was successful and it would be an excellent idea to continue it in the years to come.
It has been great to see L’Avant-Scène fully resumed its projects and vision this year. The troupe recruited several new members and offered once more a season full of events, visits and plays! It augurs very well for the years to come. In 2023-2024, L’Avant-Scène will produce three plays: one contemporary play in the fall semester *Le Iench*, one classical play *Andromaque* in the winter and one comedy at the end of the academic year which will coincide with the twentieth anniversary of the first full-length play ever put on by L’Avant-Scène in April 2004: *Le Dindon* by Georges Feydeau.

Alumni of L’Avant-Scène pictured here in rehearsals for “Lac” by Pascal Rambert in October 2015

The year will start with the twelfth annual edition of *Seuls en Scène* followed by visits and events in October and November. For the first time we will welcome the playwright of the contemporary play that will be presenting. Éva Doumbia will attend the first two performances of *Le Iench* on November 9 and 10. What an exciting opportunity for students. In the spring semester, acclaimed French director Guillaume Vincent will visit Princeton and teach one course for the Atelier program: he plans on directing the students, in English, in a play by Marivaux. The celebrations for the twentieth anniversary of the plays of L’Avant-Scène will bring alumni back on campus, officials and the artists who have closely followed us across more than twenty years of French theater at Princeton. We are eager to prepare this anniversary season and celebrate this milestone in the history of L’Avant-Scène at Princeton.