

ARTS

The new face of French theatre from grandma's backyard

Laura Cappelle reports on the *Nouveau Théâtre Populaire*, a Loire festival with humble beginnings but a rising profile

The French village of Fontaine-Guérin, population 966, couldn't be further from the world of big-name theatre festivals. Nestled in the sleepy Loire countryside, it takes 30 minutes and a dozen or so roundabouts to reach it from the nearest city, Angers. However, Fontaine-Guérin is home to an enterprising young festival, the *Nouveau Théâtre Populaire*, which began life in a backyard in 2009 and has injected new life into the theatre-starved month of August.

On a chilly night last week, the festival's troupe could be found performing *The Cherry Orchard* with cherry trees in lieu of sets and church bells interjecting in the background. Nearly all in their late twenties and graduates of top theatre schools, the actors lent an optimism to Chekhov that was both unexpected and, in places, invigorating; the family's farewell to their cherished orchard became less about Lyubov's downfall than a moment of hope and renewal for the younger generation.

Founded in reaction to the perceived elitism of France's theatre establishment, the festival puts traditional stagecraft and dynamic acting front and centre. In a country where the director is usually king, the NTP's 20 members take turns acting and directing, and their robust physicality is in joyous contrast to the cerebral, conceptual fare institutional French theatre is usually weighted towards.

So far in this year's festival, their production of *Le Jour de gloire est arrivé*, a new play about France's Fifth Republic, explored the vanity of personal power with spot-on impersonations of early presidents. And while stagings are constructed on a shoestring, imagination fills the gaps: for a new production of Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, local amateurs were transformed with white



Clockwise from main: *Nouveau Théâtre Populaire* productions of 'Oedipus the King', 'The Cherry Orchard' and 'Falstaff'

Roxane Kasperski

make-up into a haunting chorus of all shapes and sizes.

The NTP's name was inspired by the *Théâtre National Populaire*, which was created in 1920 to bring blue-collar workers into the theatre and was later directed by Jean Vilar (founder of the Avignon Festival) and actor-director Antoine Vitez. Like them, the NTP set out to stage major plays, from Shakespeare to Brecht, and make them accessible (all tickets are priced at €5).

Still, "it started as a joke, not as a mission", says actor-director Lazare Herson-Macarel. He started his first theatre company with friends while in his teens; the idea of setting up camp in his grandmother's garden, where he had put on his first performances as a child, was sparked when they received disappointing news about funding. The NTP was born, with a few more actors joining the group. "We were 19, and couldn't bear

the fact that the world didn't recognise what we could do," says Herson-Macarel. "We realised later that it was also a form of resistance against the system."

Herson-Macarel's then 83-year-old grandmother went along with the plan and his aunt drove a truck filled with wood across France to teach the group how to build their own stage (it was made of maritime pine strong enough to withstand bad weather). In the summer of 2009, they put on three productions. Jean Bonnet, a festivalgoer and theatre enthusiast, remembers his surprise when he happened upon the NTP, straight after the Avignon Festival: "The quality was there, just a few miles from my home."

Word spread fast. Within five years, attendance grew tenfold to more than 6,500 last year, and included first-time theatregoers. The stage bears the name of Vilar, and his philosophy of theatre as

a public service has found unexpected resonance in the village: when Herson-Macarel's grandmother died in 2012, local affection for the festival was such that a campaign to save her house raised €70,000. While insufficient, the donations drew the attention of local authorities, who last year offered to buy the house and grant the NTP an 11-year lease to use it free of charge.

"We did everything backwards," says Herson-Macarel. "First we built it from scratch, then the audience came, and now we're actually opening a public theatre." For Christophe Pot, the federation's president, the move made sense, even in times of restricted spending: "It's a small investment compared to building a theatre from scratch, and given the quality of their work, we know it won't be a hollow shell."

The property itself is homely, with a sturdy-looking house and barn. The



view from the 340 seats in the sloped garden is quietly stunning, with the Loire valley stretching into the distance behind the twisted spire of Fontaine-Guérin's Church St Martin. The €70,000 raised will be used to build a better stage and turn the house into a year-round venue for theatre.

While it has doubled in size since 2009, the collective remains true to its utopian roots: all decisions are put to a vote to avoid power struggles, and everyone is welcome to suggest and direct a play. The multitasking actors also take turns manning the bar and box-office, and mingle with the audience after performances. It hasn't always been smooth sailing, however. "Each time we learn from the previous year's mistakes," says Claire Sermonne, who joined in 2011. "There isn't one artistic director, but 20."

The NTP acts as both playground and training environment for the group, who all work on their own projects during the rest of the year. Sermonne, who was recently cast in the American TV series *Outlander*, says: "We have only three weeks to rehearse, [so] we go straight to the point — it's a more Anglo-Saxon way of working than is usual in France." French theatre is taking notice: Herson-Macarel made his Avignon Festival directing debut last summer with *Falstaff*, created with NTP actors.

With so little rehearsal time, productions have rough edges. *Oedipus the King* offered a fairly crude take on Greek tragedy; *Le Jour de gloire* was timid about dealing with active politicians, from Nicolas Sarkozy to François Hollande. With six productions in two weeks this summer, however, the NTP can afford to take risks.

More often than not, a refreshing sense of freedom carries the day. *La vie treshorifique du grand Gargantua*, revived this year, brings Rabelais's bawdy world to extravagant life, and does so in Renaissance French, a rarely undertaken endeavour. Sophie Guibard, who co-directed *Gargantua*, says it wouldn't have been possible elsewhere: "The NTP is our midsummer night's dream, and we're making it up as we go."

To August 28, festivalntp.com