

## Performance Review

### Ouagadougou – A Site for Theatre and Dance in 2016: *Les Récréâtrales* and *Danse l’Afrique danse!*

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In the autumn of 2016, two major festivals of very different outlook took place almost back to back in Ouagadougou. *Les Récréâtrales* (Oct. 29 to Nov. 5) is a biannual Burkinabè theatre festival which celebrated its 9<sup>th</sup> edition; *Danse l’Afrique danse!* (Nov. 26 to Dec. 3) is a dance festival which started off in Madagascar in 1995; during recent years several African countries have taken turns in welcoming the festival.

*Les Récréâtrales*, an acronym, “Resistances panafricaines d’écriture, de création et de recherche théâtrales” [Pan-African resistances of theatrical writing, creation and (re)search], which the organisers recently changed from “residence” to “resistance”, is a tripartite programme, consisting of an initial phase of training in February, a phase of creation during the summer and a festival phase that same year in October. In contrast to other years, this year’s productions were mostly related to the programme ELAN, a Pan-African training programme for young actors, writers, directors and scenographers started in 2014 by *Les Récréâtrales*. Some of the 2014 participants took part in the 2016 productions, which fused the energies of several ELAN competences. In this way, Hakim Bah, winner of the 2016 Radio France International prize for playwriting and ELAN participant, wrote a play for the festival, specifically for a mixed cast of young French and African actors. *Gentil petit chien* [Nice Little Dog] is the story of a girl who survives a terrorist attack because she is saved by a homeless African struck by the bullet aimed at her; she decides to return the body to his family and thus travels to Africa. Live music, especially by Martine Umulisa, a Rwandan actress, whose great talent for singing in the production brings out, creates a melancholic backdrop

to the unfolding of a story which ends in disaster. Hakim Bah takes apart myths of happiness and belonging; the colour-blind casting (dir. Aristide Tarnagda), which refuses to read skin colour as a marker of racial identity, aligns well with this dismantling of seeming givens.

Interrogations of national identity and political processes prevailed in other productions, too. The Togolese production *Si tu sors, je sors* [If You Betray Me, I'll Betray You](dir. E. M. Agbedjidji, text by himself and Gustave Akakpo) told the history of African wax print cloth in a mix of initial lecture on colonial history and family drama. Wooing, marrying and betraying are played out via the gift of the appropriate wax prints. *Africa Democratik Room*, starting from interviews on Plato's *Republic* (idea and dir. Bérangère Jannelle) investigated the idea and practice of democracy and the rhetoric of politics, speaking up-front to the public for most of the performance. Certainly post-dramatic in its structure, the production converted the stage, filled with used tyres (Scen. Heidi Folliet), into a site of complete disorder, but in which political discourse was put on display. By contrast, Sony Labou Tansi's stance on politics was kept alive in two different productions: Etienne Minoungou worked on Tansi's political speeches in *Si nous voulons vivre*, a solo performance with two musicians, whereas Ildevert Méda staged Tansi's classic *La parenthèse de sang* [The Parenthesis of Blood] with a cast of acting school graduates, delighting in the play's grotesque display of power.

With his homage to Jean-Pierre Guingané, Paul Zoungrana created a kind of meta-theatre in his *To Be or not To Be*. The play sets up a boxing fight between the author, John, and his characters, especially two characters from Guingané's political satires *La musaraigne* [The Shrew] and *La malice des hommes* [Men's Malice] (see Bühler-Dietrich/Mandé 2011). These dictators, impersonated by Justin Ouidiga, attack and torture John (Paul Zoungrana) wanting him to disavow his œuvre for having depicted them as evil. In the production (dir. Mahamadou Tindano), the gripping interaction between the writer and this more than natural force of his characters, was alleviated by musical interventions and the uncanny yet also comic acting of Ouidiga.

The most impressive production by far was Christian Schiaretti's *Une saison au Congo* by Aimé Césaire. The production, which had premiered at the Théâtre National Populaire in Lyon in 2013, was resumed in Ouagadougou with the Burkinabè actors who had been part of the Lyon production as well as a new local cast. The production with its more than 30 actors on a vast outdoor terrain impressed by its sheer size, but also by its decision to adhere to the rich and complicated Césaire text. A musical band placed on a podium a little above and behind the circular stage accompanied the actors, the female lead singer partly replacing the

intra-diegetic senza player of Césaire's text. Many of the actors figured as several characters at once, changing roles and costumes at high speed. Even though the audience showed occasional signs of fatigue during this 2½hour production – hardly ever do productions in Ouagadougou run this long – the acclaim of the public was unanimous. Some of the actors have now moved to Lyon for several weeks in order to rehearse *La tragédie du roi Christophe*, Césaire's second play.

With the many collaborations between the artists-participants and the artists who had run the ELAN workshops at the basis of this year's *Récréâtrales*, the festival and its preparatory phases were all about networking. Even though the market aspect, so strong in the dance festival discussed below, existed, the focus was much more on the possibilities for transnational collaborations. In addition, a modest, yet important venue was created for play readings in the morning, which allowed for a first complete reading of RFI-prize winning drama, *Convulsions* by Hakim Bah, an almost Greek-tragedy family drama, but also for a hilarious and provocative reading of David-Minor Ilunga's new play, *Délestage* [Power Cut] by the actor-writer himself.

As in previous years, *Récréâtrales* took place in the family courts next to a small street in Ouagadougou, lavishly decorated by the trainees of the festival-affiliated scenography programme and crowded with locals, ex-pats and visitors alike all through the week.

Whereas *Récréâtrales* built its programme around a limited number of productions shown almost every night, giving the spectator the chance to see almost everything, the prestigious dance festival *Danse l'Afrique danse!* programmed every production only once, starting at 3pm and running until way after midnight sometimes. Clearly a market for European festival organisers, the festival offered them the opportunity to see a maximum of productions of quite different sizes and quality. Co-organised by the Burkinabè choreographers, Salia Sanou, Seydou Boro and Irène Tassembédo, the festival was likewise co-authored by the Institut Français of Paris. It turned out to be a Francophone dance festival after all, with the exception of dancers from Mozambique, Tunisia, and South Africa. The productions themselves were partly chosen during four African festivals in 2014 and 2015; some of the productions had profited from artists-in-residence programmes; other productions by established choreographers were invited into the core of the festival.

The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the festival was also an occasion to look back on the development of contemporary dance in Africa. Next to the dance performances were round-tables which discussed the role of the artist and the function of memory and transmission in dance; the third round-table paid homage to some of the founding dancers and choreographers

of (Francophone) African dance like Germaine Acogny and Elsa Wollaston, who shared their personal history of the evolution of modern dance in Africa with the audience. One further step to preserve the memory of major choreographies was the restaging of five selected pieces either by the original choreographers or, in the case of those passed, by their former dancers. A night of “transmission” made the choreographies of *Ti Chèlbè* (Kettly Noël), *Sans repères* (Béatrice Kombé), *Figinto* (Salia Sanou, Seydou Boro), *Gula “Bird”* (Vincent Sekwati, Koko Mantsoe) and *Um Solo para Cinco* (Augusto Cuvilas) anew and visible to the audience. The desire to see these performances was enormous – the CDC (Centre de Développement Chorégraphique) almost burst with all the people wanting to attend. While the young dancers were all proud to have been chosen to restage these choreographies, the challenge of the project became transparent as well: once at the heart of a personal artistic research, at a specific point in time, the resumption needed to bridge that gap in order to reach young dancers and audience alike. Embedded in budding reflections on the necessity of artistic memory, the choreographic transmission can be one element in this process.

Among the contemporary productions by young as well as established choreographers, solo, duo and larger cast performances prevailed. Two ensemble productions, programmed back to back, stuck out by their quality – and their difference. Salia Sanou showed his production *Du désir d’horizons* [On the Desire of Horizons] which had already experienced its première abroad. Inspired by Sanou’s work with Malian refugees in Burkina Faso and Burundi, the choreography, alternating between solo dance and ensemble, tells the story of refugee life and distress in several tableaux. Sanou changes between different types of music, and the ingenious scenography of Mathieu Lorry Dupuy ever creating new images. Bunk beds, first stacked at the back of the stage, are spread out geometrically by the dancers who are resting for a moment, tormented, before putting the beds upright, a kind of labyrinth through which dancers move; then the beds are assembled in a cluster: shield and bulwark. Eventually, the dancers take the stage on motorcycles, image of rebellion and freedom. The production always claims all of the large space of the professional dance theatre and the ensemble choreography strikes by its precision. Two Malian refugees were part of the troupe and one can only applaud their capability to blend into the group of professional dancers.

An entirely different type of dance theatre was presented by Serge Aimé Coulibaly and the dancers he works with. Coulibaly’s choreography *Kalakuta Repulik* is dedicated to Fela Kuti, a long-term object of interest and admiration of the choreographer. The music of Fela Kuti dominates this production in two parts. In part one, the seven dancers

danced mostly together, in a highly energetic, ceaseless movement, upright or close to the ground; in the second part, solo performances dominated, a projection read “You always need a poet” and Coulibaly spoke into the microphone “Vous avez peur” [You are scared], evoking Fela’s fearless posture. The contrast of the extremely dynamic Part I and the hallucinatory Part II irritated some of the spectators. Yet Coulibaly’s approach in having his dancers transform their reactions to Fela Kuti into individual expressions which the choreographer then arranged, is just right to evoke the Nigerian singer’s universe without representing it.

Adonis Nébié, part of *Kalakuta Republik*, also showed his solo performance, *Spirit*. Dancing on the large CDC stage decorated with laundry lines from which hung pieces of colourful cloth, Nébié danced with and against this cloth, being entangled in it and freeing himself. The choreography set out to explore the relation between spirit and body, and the struggle against matter became visible in the dancer’s entanglement. Dancing naked at the beginning and end of the performance exposed the fragility of the body to the gaze of the audience. The ingenuity of Nébié’s solo lies in the fact that the struggle between body and spirit was played out via the body of the dancer, but this body in physical upheaval could be spirit or matter or both at once.

In a different way, young Tunisian dancer, Oumaïma Manaï, tackled the issue of entanglement in her choreography, *Nitt 100 Limites*. In the course of her performance, she enveloped herself in a large wire fence, first stretched across the stage, from which she freed herself in the end. The choreography worked like a study in subjectification, with the female subject victorious in the end – a fight of liberation alluded to in the music score, among it, prominently, “Bang Bang (My baby shot me down)”, Tarantino’s title song in *Kill Bill I*. Manaï was not the only woman dancer to interrogate the female subject position. The social constraints which gender the body were at issue in *Lady Lady* (Gaby Saranouffi, Désiré Davids, Edna Jaime), in *XXL* (Kaisha Essiane) and in the daring *Métamorphose*, where Madagascan dancer, Judith Olivia Manantenaso, transformed her finally nude body by way of clothes pegs.

Another interrogation of matter and spirit was Seydou Boro’s *Le cri de la chair* [The Cry of Flesh]. Five dancers, one singer (Perrine Fifadji) and one musician (Tom Diakité) interacted on stage. Accompanied by Diakité’s rhythms and Fifadji’s intriguing voice, the choreography alternated between meditative parts and strict rhythmic group sequences. Clad in long tunics in earthen colours, the dancers’ attire underlined the spiritual search of the performance. The contrastive scenography of wooden stakes and golden metallic plates visualised the bi-polarity of this spiritual search.

Sponsored by the Total Foundation, the festival was able to show all productions for free and made an effort to allow a maximum amount of people into the theatre spaces. At the opening night, about 80 kids from the neighbourhood watched the outdoor performance, *Kombibissé* [Youth], a choreography by Irène Tassembédo. The children were a good seismograph for strengths and weaknesses in the choreography, even though they clearly preferred “action” on stage. One of the strengths of Tassembédo’s large cast is Souleymane Démé (see also Mahamat Saleh Haroun’s film, *Grisgris*, 2013). Even though his left leg is lame, his solos and *pas de deux*, in which his leg is part of his body as well as alien object, are impressive. Next to Ida Faho, a young dancer also part of *Kalakuta Republik* and present at the festival with a solo piece as well, he is certainly one highlight of the company.

Whereas a political fervour was visible in many of the theatre productions, which reclaimed African writers and topics, the choreographies focused on political issues much less. Equally, it was noticeable how much little traditional African dances there were at issue in the choreographies. The artistic search of the modern dancer in Africa or modern African dancer has clearly gone beyond an adherence to traditional or classical dance. “Sortir de l’ombre”, “coming out of the shadow” was the motto of this year’s Les Récréâtrales, “memory and transmission” the theme of the dance festival. Visibility and the necessity to maintain an artistic heritage in order to guarantee this visibility are important stakes for artists everywhere but especially so in Burkina Faso, where public funding for the arts is still almost unheard of.

## **Works Cited**

Bühler-Dietrich, Annette/ Mandé, Hamadou. The Artist as Educator: The Œuvre of Jean-Pierre Guingané. *African Performance Review* 5.2 (2011): 78-94.