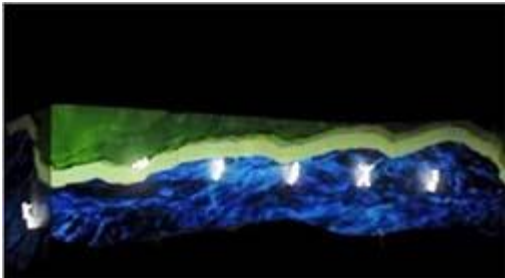


Avignon: Avant-Garde Performing Arts and Globalization

by [Larry Bridwell](#)

The best modern theater and dance is often about ideas. That was true in works at this year's Avignon Theater Festival, held every July in the medieval city where Catholic Popes ruled from 1309 to 1377. Several performances I saw magnificently portrayed the positive and negative forces of globalization.

The issues included the personal transitions of people moving from rural to urban lives and the often difficult political transformations of people seeking to replace tyrannical regimes with democratic governments.



The most visually stunning event was the official opening of the Festival. The French *Groupe F*, which participated in the opening ceremonies of the Athens Summer Olympics, created a powerful multi-media performance on the outer walls of a former factory building they renamed *La Fabrika*.

Accompanied by music, computerized visuals were displayed while dancers, who appeared as tiny white figures, walked up and down the factory walls, often at 90-degree angles to the ground. The projected videos showed people living and working in modern cities. Adult activities were interspersed with children expressing their creativity through finger painting. The childhood experiences were juxtaposed with portrayals of the disciplined regimentation of industrialization including a scene of a large prison with guards and prisoners interacting in a fashion that conjured up video games.

Another theme was the long journey across rural lands and oceans. Ambitious human beings would arrive at the gates of a modern city, but could not enter. It was an allusion to migrants from poor countries being rejected when they try to move to Europe or the United States.

In between the wall-climbing pieces were rooftop fireworks. The event was seen by more than 8,000 spectators.

The outdoor setting, the computerized visuals, the music, the gymnastic wall climbing, and the fireworks created a powerful depiction of the forces of industrialization. It was ironic that this occurred at a former factory in a country experiencing high unemployment



In another dance-theater production, “Qaddish,” by Qudus Onikeku, a father and son in an African village want a better future and hope for positive political developments and modernization.



Emil Abossolo Mbo, who wrote the dialogue, plays the role of the 80-year old father. Onikeku, as the son, also interacts with three other village figures, including fine soprano Valentina Coloadonato.

Onikeku, who studied in Europe, Asia and the United States, returns to his Yoruba roots to portray his family’s journey through the forces of modernization. Tensions develop, but in a spirit that seeks village unity, there is also the hope that differences can be reconciled.

The choreographer’s world travels and village life are reflected in the combination of a classical cello, electric bass guitar and traditional African instrument. It is unclear at the end what the future will be.

In addition to the main Festival productions, hundreds of fringe events are put on in the “Off” Festival. One was “Deceitful Appearances,” created by Feng Jiangzhou and Zhang Lin for the Beijing Fringe Festival. It has no dialogue but uses computer graphics and four dancers to illustrate the dilemmas of globalization. Two young men, workers, start in a rural setting, dancing very slowly. With their move to the city to work in factories, the stresses of urban life are reflected in rapid, tense movements.



Later, two women, alluringly dressed for night life, tempt them. The four performers dance like rubber bands coming together and then moving apart. The stressful uncertainties of working and living in cities are artistically portrayed in a frenetic combination of dancing and graphics, including projections of tightly packed subway trains.

In the dance-theater of ideas, the three productions are connected by their computerized graphics, powerful dancing, and the expression of the uncertainties of industrialization and globalization.

Getting there

We went to Avignon by train with a [Rail Europe](#) Eurailpass. We found it an easy, efficient and economical way to travel through France and the rest of Europe. There are two rail stations in Avignon, one for the high-speed TGV trains (15 minutes by bus from

the historic center) and the other for local trains, just outside the medieval walls. The bus from the TGV station will take you to town for free when you arrive if you show your rail ticket. Same for the return.

If you go



The compactness of Avignon means that its 110 performance spaces are within walking distance, and one can easily attend 3 or 4 events a day of the hundreds of theater, dance and music productions in the main Festival and the “Off.”

Tickets are \$20 to \$35 (cheaper for the “Off”) and for most are readily available at the door. You can book in advance via the websites.

Along pedestrian streets, actors parade in costumes to promote their plays. They provide color for diners at the dozens of good, reasonably-priced bars and restaurants, many in the open air at side streets and squares.

[Avignon Theatre Festival](#)

[Avignon “Off” Festival](#) (the fringe)

[Video](#) of *Groupe F* multi-media production opening the Festival. And [this one](#).

Main festival production photos by Christophe Raynaud de Lage, Avignon Theatre Festival.

Street photo by Lucy Komisar.