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France's Theaters Grapple With the Legacy of May '68

by Laura Cappelle

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PARIS — The [Théâtre de l'Odéon](#) here had planned a decorous tribute to May 1968. Half a century ago, the 18th-century building in the heart of the city's Latin Quarter was occupied by students and protesters for a month; under the slogan "Power to the imagination," it became a people's forum, open to all.

And briefly, on May 7, it looked as if all hell might break loose again.

The current Odéon director, Stéphane Braunschweig, had gone the safe, rather than imaginative, road for his one-off celebration, "The Spirit of May." For an hour or so, the evening plodded along, with lectures about history and speeches from guest artists and academics — until a young man walked up to the stage, interrupting the proceedings. "While you're doing your commemoration," he admonished the crowd angrily, "students are being tear-gassed in front of the Odéon." (A spokeswoman for the theater later confirmed that she had seen tear gas being used.)

About 70 students were staging a symbolic protest outside and had been denied entry; as in 1968, there has been severe unrest this spring at universities across France in reaction to President Emmanuel Macron's change agenda, which includes more selective university admission rules. According to the spokeswoman, a handful of masked protesters attempted to force their way to the

stage door, prompting the police to intervene. Inside, a heated debate ensued, and some scheduled speakers walked out.

The evening laid bare the uneasiness that has so far surrounded the 50th anniversary of the events of 1968 in France. That revolutionary spring, which saw striking workers and students unite, is etched in the country's collective psyche, yet its legacy remains disputed. After briefly floating the idea of a national celebration, Mr. Macron retreated: Extolling 1968's spirit of freedom and anticapitalism was a juggling act too far for a liberal president facing strikes of his own.

It was left to individual institutions to decide whether to mark the anniversary, and while an onslaught of talks and exhibitions has revived the images and slogans of that era, the theater world's contribution has proved remarkably subdued.



“My Revolution Is Better Than Yours” features actors from France, the former Yugoslavia, Russia and Spain. Credit Martin Argyroglo

Have theater makers lost touch with their revolutionary roots? Fifty years ago, theater played an active role in putting culture front and center amid the clamor. Some companies, including Ariane Mnouchkine's egalitarian Théâtre du Soleil, took their work to factories or to the streets; in addition to the Odéon, a number of venues were occupied or repurposed.

The [Théâtre des Amandiers](#) in Nanterre did not open until 1969. Still, this theater in a staunchly communist outer suburb of Paris stayed true to itself this spring with “Mondes Possibles” (“Possible Worlds”), a festival focused on the utopian legacy of May '68. Philippe Quesne, the Amandiers' director, chose to revisit the production most identified in France with the spirit of that year: “Paradise Now,” created by the avant-garde American company the Living Theater. The troupe faced a ban at the 1968 Avignon Festival in France after the initial performances of the work there prompted street demonstrations.

In "[Re-Paradise](#)," the director Gwenaël Morin has recreated the original "Paradise Now" with minimal changes. Period reconstructions have never been popular in France, but there is real value in what Mr. Morin unearthed in the process. In Nanterre, it provided an illuminating glimpse of the artistic mood in 1968 — and a reminder that some taboos haven't changed much in half a century.

Indeed, some scenes remain more subversive than much of the work currently being made by self-styled radicals. "Re-Paradise" was staged in the Amandiers' workshops, with audience members seated on portable chairs or on the floor. Throughout, Mr. Morin's 36 performers remained almost too close for comfort — discussing social taboos, from talking about money to drug use, while looking us in the eye, or inviting willing onlookers to get up and form revolutionary cells. "I'm not allowed to undress," they whispered conspiratorially, before proceeding to do just that.

"Re-Paradise" speaks of a time without trigger warnings. At one point, the nearly naked performers invited audience members to join them in a huddle on the floor; one cast member caressed the legs and backs of the audience members around him, while others made out. If a director pitched this surreal scene to producers today, concerns about lawsuits would probably factor in.

Yet the result captured some of the happy-go-lucky energy associated with 1968. Many of the text's witty takedowns of capitalism and consumerism still resonate. At the end, the performers simply picked up the stage's makeshift backdrop and gestured for the audience to leave by passing underneath. Chanting "Free theater" and "Change the world," they followed us into the parking lot, where there were bemused faces — and a noticeable spring in people's step.

The Amandiers also presented a creation looking at 1968 around the world, Sanja Mitrovic's "[My Revolution Is Better Than Yours](#)." It is a wistful, episodic work featuring performers from France, the former Yugoslavia, Russia and Spain; each episode examines revolutions and the backlashes to them.

The performance was framed by the presence onstage of Mohamed Nour Wana, a poet born in Darfur, in western Sudan, who fled war in Libya. With other refugees, he joined students in occupying a university and protesting Mr. Macron's labor, immigration and higher education measures this spring. "These aren't just images for me," he said at the work's conclusion. "It's my reality, and the hope of a revolution I believe in."

In the event, however, the most trenchant reaction to the legacy of 1968 came and went before the actual anniversary. In March, Wajdi Mouawad, the director of the Théâtre de la Colline in Paris, unveiled "Notre Innocence" ("Our Innocence"), a creation spun out of a workshop with students from the National Conservatory of Dramatic Art. The play's plot — which centered on the death of a student — had its weaknesses, but one scene packed more of a gut punch than anything seen recently on the Paris stage.

In it, the 18 cast members, all in their 20s, formed a chorus and slowly recited a text that read like the manifesto of a despondent generation. At one point, they spoke directly to the "soixante-huitards," the crusaders who took part in the events of 1968, "which you keep crushing us with": "You had the revolution, you knew how to share, you had camaraderie, you weren't glued to your phones like us," they intoned derisively. "We don't know anything, haven't done anything, haven't lived anything."

It was an intensely confrontational moment, and several older audience members walked out. Yet it also captured one central difference between 1968 and 2018: the sense of hopelessness that

pervades many of today's protests against Mr. Macron's proposed measures. The film director Romain Goupil, a leader of the student movement in 1968, expressed as much onstage at the Odéon evening: "We lived through a Promethean illusion. Everything could change. Now, people are looking to protect themselves."

Perhaps reckoning with the sweeping utopian visions of 1968 is an impossible task for today's artists. Another period slogan, "Be realistic: Ask for the impossible," now sounds like a piece of vintage, youthful idealism. Yet the sense of disquiet doesn't abate in France. The few audience members who lasted until the end of the Odéon's derailed tribute, well past midnight, were greeted by police officers standing guard outside the theater. Celebrating a cultural revolution under police protection: Here is a paradox for our times. If theater makers don't address it, who will?

Re-Paradise. Directed by Gwenaël Morin. Nanterre-Amandiers, through May 26.

My Revolution Is Better Than Yours. Directed by Sanja Mitrović. Nanterre-Amandiers. On tour (Brussels, Orleans, Lille, Reims) through February 2019.

Notre Innocence. Directed by Wajdi Mouawad. Théâtre de la Colline. On tour at the Teatro Valle Inclan, Madrid, in September.