

**Grégory Gabriel, Elliot Marès**

Changing the Face of French Theatre:  
Rethinking Our Assumptions  
for a Theatre That Mirrors Our Society

[www.polishtheatrejournal.com](http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com)

**Publisher**

**Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw**

**Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw**

**Grégory Gabriel, Elliot Marès**

## Changing the Face of French Theatre: Rethinking Our Assumptions for a Theatre That Mirrors Our Society

At the Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique in Paris (CNSAD), we seek to transform the future face of French theatre so that it reflects the diversity of contemporary France. In this presentation, we explain why and how we have been working to recruit a new generation of actors from minoritized backgrounds and to give them the confidence to go proudly into the professional world. Through taking a 'colour-blind' approach to casting and by centring the voices of minorities within the institution, we seek to give these students the key to open the doors of a still-conservative French theatre establishment.

### **Historical context**

We cannot talk about diversity within a society without acknowledging the history of that society. The colonial past of France, its immigration policy, and the place we have given to certain populations, or rather the place we have not given them, render those groups – called 'immigrants', 'visible minorities', or people from 'minoritized backgrounds' – discriminated against or excluded. The choice of using the notion of 'minoritized' rather than 'minority' is, for us, important to underline that it's not a question of numbers but a question of unequal treatment and a feeling of collective discrimination. We use the term 'people from minoritized backgrounds' to refer to 'groups that are different in race, religious creed, nation of origin, sexuality, and gender and as a result of social constructs have less power or representation compared to other members or groups in society'.<sup>1</sup>

It is a reality that it is more difficult for people from minoritized backgrounds to find a job or an apartment. It is a fact that they are underrepresented in the media, on television, in the movie industry, in the theatre industry – that they have little access to certain professions and are stuck in disadvantaged, underprivileged, and deprived classes. People from minoritized backgrounds might also feel that some professions, neighbourhoods, or schools are not for them. This situation leads to legitimate anger from people who want to be part of society, who want to be represented. Who simply want to exist.

---

<sup>1</sup> I.E. Smith, 'Minority vs. Minoritized: Why the Noun Just Doesn't Cut It', *Odyssey*, 2 September 2016, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/minority-vs-minoritize> [accessed 11 November 2019].

This is an important issue for French society today and a political imperative to give a voice to people who have not had one. Until now. We should stop the denial, stop ignoring the part of our society coming from minoritized backgrounds. On the contrary, in these differences lie the strength, the creativity, and the cultural wealth of our society. In recent years, elite higher education institutions in different fields have sought to find ways to encourage applications from more diverse populations – populations that consider these schools are not for them for geographical, social, and historical reasons.

### **French theatre: an elitist art?**

To speak more specifically of the theatre, in France the theatre remains essentially white and directed by white men. Theatre is perceived as an art form made for and by a dominant white class. The French theatre tradition tends towards literal representation: a woman plays a woman; a black person plays a black person. And if there is no role specifically designed for a black actor or a black actress in the repertoire, there are no black actors in the cast nor on the stage.

In this context, we cannot be surprised if a lot of people walk away from the theatre. The theatre doesn't talk about them, about their stories, and again, they think it's not for them. They don't feel concerned.

In the English-speaking world, thanks to the huge influence of the Elizabethan theatre and Shakespeare, audiences tend to be more prepared to suspend their disbelief, and skin colour does not appear to matter as much.<sup>2</sup> 'All the world's a stage,' the Elizabethan genius posited, but that global stage still remains to be seen in France. In Great Britain, actors of African or Indian origin have played the big and the small roles of the repertoire for a while now. This is not yet the case in France.

As educators, how do we challenge rather than reproduce the dominant structures of society? Theatre is a living, moving, evolving art, like the movement of human diversity. We must break these stereotypes. We must abolish typecasting. This is what we try to do at the Conservatoire. Actors coming from minoritized backgrounds must be given the same esteem and opportunities as the others. It's a question of equality. We just want our school to be a normal reflection of reality. Our goal was not to make sure a certain population got into the Conservatoire. We did not change the auditions to the advantage of some groups. We worked to allow each young person who has the dream, the desire, and the talent to take the audition, to be able to do it, to think 'This is for me, I have my chance, I'm allowed to do it.' The doors are open. This is about being truly a national school.

<sup>2</sup> Fabienne Farge, 'De la (non)diversité sur les plateaux' [(Non)diversity onstage], *Le Monde*, 22 September 2015, [https://www.lemonde.fr/scenes/article/2015/10/14/analyse-theatre-sur-la-non-diversite-sur-les-plateaux\\_4788871\\_1654999.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/scenes/article/2015/10/14/analyse-theatre-sur-la-non-diversite-sur-les-plateaux_4788871_1654999.html) [accessed 11 November 2019].

### **Recruiting a new generation of actors from minoritized backgrounds**

Let's be clear: actors in the French theatre are mostly white nowadays. The Conservatoire is partly liable for having trained generations of white actors from privileged backgrounds for many years.

Things changed when Claire Lasne-Darcueil was named the director in 2013. Her idea was clear: changing the face of this school, 'normalizing' rather than diversifying the school, means including students from minoritized backgrounds and making them visible.

In the early 2000s, each cohort generally included one or two black or North African students. With the arrival of Lasne-Darcueil, the number of students from minoritized backgrounds increased significantly. There are eight black students in the class of 2022. How do we recruit a new generation of actors?

#### **Information and communication to promote an artistic career**

Changing the face of the Conservatoire has meant changing the media image of a white, upper-class, elite drama school. As mentioned above, a lot of people from minoritized backgrounds don't take the auditions because they think that the school is not for them, they are not part of this culture, and they are not desired. They are less likely to consider a career in theatre than the white middle-class or upper-class population.

One of the first things the Conservatoire did was to communicate our policy. Communication was one of the key elements for the transformation of our school and the diversification of candidates.

To reach a younger audience, the Conservatoire, thanks to the Fondation Culture et Diversité, took part in an initiative to promote careers in theatre in deprived suburbs. A prospectus explained to the young people concerned all the ways to access these careers. We usually go and promote this prospectus with one or two actors from the schools involved.

The Conservatoire has also created a specific diploma, with all the other national art schools. The concept is simple: a student goes and works with a secondary-school class during a year on an artistic project or event. Last year, a student from the Conservatoire worked on a play every week with students from a deprived suburb.

Claire Lasne-Darcueil gave a lot of interviews explaining her ambitious project of changing the face of theatre. She reminded future candidates that the Conservatoire is open to everyone and free like other universities. To achieve this, she needed people from minoritized backgrounds to apply to the Conservatoire and be successful in auditions.

#### **Specialized preparatory classes**

To apply to the Conservatoire, candidates must have attended theatre classes or practised as an actor for at least a year. In France, there are a number of schools specializing in preparing students for entry to national drama schools. A lot of those schools are private and expensive. This often excludes working-class populations from applying. There are also local conservatoires that are free of charge but are selective and often inaccessible to students in poorer regions.

In 2015, the Conservatoire established a partnership with a local conservatoire in one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the northern suburbs of Paris to create a high-quality preparatory class. The candidates who can't afford a private school get a high level of preparation for all the national schools' auditions without paying tuition fees. The result was encouraging: in 2016, of the thirteen prep-class students, three entered national drama schools. In 2017, the same result.

These results led the Conservatoire to participate in the creation of a new prep school in the southern suburbs of Paris. It's also important to note other regional initiatives such as the Limoges prep school for students from France's overseas territories in the Caribbean and Polynesia, which are traditionally underrepresented in the Conservatoire and in French theatre in general. This year the Conservatoire received four students from these territories. The fact that students from minoritized backgrounds have access to an elite French theatre school is widely known and gives strength and encouragement for more and more students to audition.

### **Scholarships as a tool for giving students financial support**

Economic and social issues are really important if you want to bring diversity to your school. At the same time, if you include students from working-class backgrounds in your school without giving them the financial support to study, you risk creating lucky students who can't take advantage of their luck.

The Conservatoire decided to give financial support to every student who needs it. Some of our students already received a scholarship from the state, but it's not enough to live in Paris, one of the most expensive capitals in Europe. Theatre studies are intensive, particularly in the third year, and often don't leave students much time to work alongside their studies.

Thanks to all these initiatives, 50% of our students are now scholarship students from working-class backgrounds, 17% are international students, and more than 50% are not from the Paris region. Today, three cohorts of students work together and look like what France is today: more diverse.

The students from minoritized backgrounds are not there because they are black, Asian, or Arab, but because they were the best among the candidates.

Once you create equal access to this school, how do we create a place where all students can be free and proud of being who they are? How do we challenge rather than reinforce the historical representations of minorities?

### **Centring the voices of students from minoritized backgrounds within the institution**

In 2018, the Conservatoire launched a charter on equality in order to prevent and fight discrimination and harassment that students can be victims of or witness. Every teacher, every member of the administration, and every student has to sign it. As with any agreement, everyone has to be involved in the charter if it is to be a success.

The charter outlines principles of anti-discrimination, but also actions for the year. In 2018/2019, we created a phone number that any student

can call in case of sexual harassment, and gave candidates the option to audition as non-binary.

One of the aims of the charter was to create an anti-discrimination group that students who consider themselves to be victims or witnesses of racism, homophobia, or any other form of discrimination can refer to.

This group is independent from the leadership team and includes students from each cohort. The group is an essential part of establishing a safe space where students from minoritized backgrounds can talk freely, without any judgment or questioning of their experiences. The students have the opportunity to express any concerns about a text or any remarks they consider problematic. They have direct access to the director and the head of studies.

The other main element to create a safe space is to challenge typecasting, and to rethink our representations of minorities in theatre.

### **Challenging typecasting: colour-blind casting**

For many years, the excuse for not giving roles to actors from minoritized backgrounds was their lack of training. But now that they are trained, we often say that the role was not 'created' for them. In its charter, the Conservatoire declares that race, physical appearance, or gender should not determine the ability to play a role. This notion of colour-blind casting is well known in the English-speaking world, but took time to be introduced in French theatre.

Last year, Hamlet was played by two students: Mohamed and Megan. Their ethnic origin or gender was not an issue and was not underlined in the direction. In another play, Joan of Arc, a national symbol typically evoked by extreme right-wing parties, was played by a dwarf and God by a black male student. Their appearance was never questioned or underlined in the play. They are actors. They can play who they want and be proud of who they are.

It's important for us to give the students a way to express themselves and their ideas. That's why in October, students from the second year are given four weeks to produce their own plays, and every year, students from the third year can propose a play which they can direct. These plays were all interesting, and have questioned the notion of casting. One of the plays, which spoke directly about common representations and conditions of overweight people and people with dwarfism, received a prize at the last Spoleto Festival.

This 'racism by omission'<sup>3</sup> does not mean being invisible only on stage, but also in the story we are telling. That's why we try to call on playwrights or authors who challenge our way of thinking, our national history, and our perceptions of minorities. This year, Kouam Tawa, a Cameroonian playwright, will write a play for the students. In the past, we have invited playwrights such as Wajdi Mouawad.

It's not always easy to challenge artists, because we risk interfering with their artistic freedom. This notion of challenging typecasting and being

<sup>3</sup> Françoise Alexander, 'Othello joué par un blanc: le théâtre français est-il raciste?' ['Othello played by a white man: Is French theatre racist?'], *Le Monde*, 16 October 2015, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/10/16/pas-de-noirs-sur-scene-le-theatre-francais-est-il-raciste\\_4791000\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/10/16/pas-de-noirs-sur-scene-le-theatre-francais-est-il-raciste_4791000_3212.html) [accessed 11 November 2019].



exemplary on this question is a goal we are working towards. But let's be honest: we as an institution, and French theatre more generally, still have a long way to go if we want to overcome stereotypes and historical representations that affect minoritized groups.

### **Diversity in theatre: a utopia?**

We had the somewhat naive and utopian dream that our school could represent French society in all its normality. Its diversity. And on many levels this has been a success. The school has changed, particularly its physical appearance.

But there are still challenges and misunderstandings, and a level of unintentional discrimination linked to the weight of history, the weight of representations, roles, and repertoire. The classical French repertoire is neither equal nor balanced in terms of representation of the diversity of the world, even in terms of gender. Our imagination can be limited by historical representation. White supremacy and class domination are based on a fundamental injustice. There is little we can do to erase this history, and there is little use in feeling guilty about this. But we can change the future.

We can take actions to avoid being racist and to avoid being trapped in a certain way of thinking. Very few directors or teachers are even aware that they can be locked in a mindset. We all need to question our assumptions without guilt or shame. In spite of the tools that we use, in spite of our efforts and our attention, some students at the Conservatoire feel uncomfortable, misunderstood, or illegitimate due to their ethnic origin, but also due to their social identity, their sexuality, and other aspects of their being.

This naturally causes anger on their part. We have to understand it, and we have to be able to hear it.

In the world outside the Conservatoire, some students are told that they are in the school for the wrong reasons: to fulfil a quota, or by positive discrimination. When we go out into the world, we also sometimes hear people saying, 'Now you have to be black to be a student at the Conservatoire.' This is not true, and we have to challenge this idea, which creates a lot of pain and misunderstanding. This is an insult to our juries and to the talent of the students.

We are on the right path. This change is correct and necessary. We might also easily think that the Conservatoire is somehow exemplary, a model in this field, and that we have built a kind of shelter in this brutal world. And we would be wrong. There is still a lot to do.

When we were invited to this Change Now! conference, we invited a black student to come with us so she could tell you about her experience at the school. She refused our invitation and wrote a strongly worded email explaining her reasons. All the black students we asked to come with us refused for the same reasons.

They felt they could not represent a school where, in spite of our efforts, they continue to suffer from discrimination and provocation from other students and from their teachers. They think that our school, even if it is changing, is only at the very beginning of this process. And the price they have to pay is hard for them.

What are we talking about? Microaggressions.

Microaggressions are small acts or remarks that make people from minoritized groups feel insulted or treated badly because of their race, gender, weight, or disabilities, even though the insult may not have been intentional.

For example, a teacher who mixes up the names of two black students during the whole year. This may seem insignificant, meaningless, but it's not. Or a teacher who, for no apparent reason, asks a black student to play the bongo drums during a scene. It may seem insignificant, meaningless, but it's not. Or another teacher who tells a black student that she is 'limited' as an actress, and when she asks 'Why?' says 'Guess.' It may seem insignificant, meaningless, but it's not. She does not want to be 'limited'. She wants to be able to play any role; that is the reason she wanted to be at the school.

It seems unimaginable that students or teachers could be so openly racist. And of course, they are not. Or at least not *intentionally*. Here is the key word. Not *intentionally*. It is much more unconscious – and therefore more insidious – than that.

This is why we have to question the limits of our imagination, which have been defined by our own personal history. We have to try to be more aware of the story, and of the sufferings of others, and to try to understand that what might be a meaningless remark for one person might be an act of violence for another.

Yes, we are on the right path, but we still need to go further. Our school will be a shelter when we are no longer talking about minorities or diversity, but when it represents the world in all its reality. Our school is changing, but what about the professional world?

### **In spite of discrimination, the keys are changing hands**

Our students are afraid of not working. All of them. But particularly those who come from non-traditional or minoritized backgrounds. Peter Brook, who is not French but works in France, or Ariane Mnouchkine, are almost the only directors who bring together actors from all over the world and from different backgrounds.

Apart from them, in France today, very few roles are given to actors coming from diverse backgrounds. Even black characters are most often played by white people. Black actors mostly play drug dealers, refugees, servants, maids, or jihadists. They are trapped in typecasting.

This may be hard to admit, but many often still consider that black and minority ethnic actors are not good enough to play the roles of the theatrical canon and to cope with the difficult and sophisticated language of Molière or Racine. This is wrong.

Black actors are trained and ready to play these roles. But they don't end up finding a job. This regularly creates controversies, and there is an understandable feeling of exasperation among minority ethnic actors. In Paris, in March 2019, during the rehearsals of a play by Aeschylus, some of the actors were 'blackened up'. This caused a huge controversy in the world of French theatre.<sup>4</sup>

4 Sylvie Chalaye, 'Eschyle à la Sorbonne: pourquoi condamner le blackface?' ['Aeschylus at the Sorbonne: Why condemn blackface?'], *Africultures, les mondes en relation*, 18 April 2019, <http://africultures.com/eschyle-a-la-sorbonne-pourquoi-condamner-le-blackface>



Many students and anti-racist organizations protested against a performance they considered to be racist. They wanted the performance to be cancelled, and protested in front of the theatre. The Minister of Culture decided to allow the performance to go ahead and sent police to the theatre, in the name of artistic freedom. During the final performance, however, the blackface makeup was replaced by masks.

Why is blackface a problem? Sylvie Chalaye, a professor at the Sorbonne, co-director of the Research Institute for Theatre Studies, and a specialist in representations of black people in the theatre, gives some keys to help understand the problem.<sup>5</sup>

We should not forget that the practice of blackface comes from an American racist tradition, born at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the southern states. It was used by white people to imitate black people and demonize or deride them. It was a way to make fun of their appearance, their language, their gestures, and their clothes. And it was a way to accuse them of all kinds of problems: laziness, carelessness, cowardice, sexual obsession....

It was an entertainment made by white people for white people. Today this practice is formally forbidden and condemned in the United States. Race is not a costume or a disguise. Black is neither a role nor a job. An identity cannot simply be translated and reduced by makeup, and often outrageous makeup. It is a way of denying the humanity and the individuality of a human being.

And ancient practice does not justify anything. What the Greeks did in their time will not be received the same way in the twenty-first century. Old practices are not automatically legitimate. We must be able to reconsider them in the light of the experiences that humanity has gone through since that time, such as slavery, colonization, and immigration.

Transforming a white actor into a black one with makeup to play the role of a black man is deeply inappropriate today. Even if it's without any racist intentions. And if, in the interests of realism, it seems important to have a black person in the role, you have to call on a black actor or actress. And we must stop saying to black actors that there are not enough black characters in the repertoire to justify the fact that they aren't working. In the theatre, the real challenge is to tell human stories that we all share, outside of an appearance which is not 'essential'.

Coming back to the Conservatoire, let's not forget that many of the leading actors, film directors, and theatre directors come from our school. The students of the Conservatoire will make tomorrow's theatre, at least in France.

In this sense, the keys of the theatre are changing hands. We are in the process of handing the keys to some new populations. The performances are going to change, the stories are going to change, the audience is going to change. Theatre will talk to the world and about the world.

To sum up, here is a very short text from Antoine Vitez, who is always a light to follow in the darkness:

Because theatre is a force field, a very small one, but one where the whole history of society is represented. In spite of its smallness, theatre serves

---

[accessed 11 November 2019].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

as a model to people's lives whether they are spectators or not. A laboratory of human behaviour, a conservatory of gestures and voices, a place for experimenting with new gestures, new ways of speaking – as dreamed of by Meyerhold – to change the common man, who knows?<sup>6</sup>

### Works cited

- Alexander, Françoise, 'Othello joué par un blanc: le théâtre français est-il raciste?' ['Othello played by a white man: Is French theatre racist?'], *Le Monde*, 16 October 2015, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/10/16/pas-de-noirs-sur-scene-le-theatre-francais-est-il-raciste\\_4791000\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/10/16/pas-de-noirs-sur-scene-le-theatre-francais-est-il-raciste_4791000_3212.html) [accessed 11 November 2019]
- Chalaye, Sylvie, 'Eschyle à la Sorbonne: pourquoi condamner le blackface?' ['Aeschylus at the Sorbonne: Why condemn blackface?'], *Africultures, les mondes en relation*, 18 April 2019, <http://africultures.com/eschyle-a-la-sorbonne-pourquoi-condamner-le-blackface> [accessed 11 November 2019]
- Farge, Fabienne, 'De la (non)diversité sur les plateaux' ['(Non)diversity onstage'], *Le Monde*, 22 September 2015, [https://www.lemonde.fr/scenes/article/2015/10/14/analyse-theatre-sur-la-non-diversite-sur-les-plateaux\\_4788871\\_1654999.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/scenes/article/2015/10/14/analyse-theatre-sur-la-non-diversite-sur-les-plateaux_4788871_1654999.html) [accessed 11 November 2019]
- Smith, I.E., 'Minority vs. Minoritized: Why the Noun Just Doesn't Cut It', *Odyssey*, 2 September 2016, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/minority-vs-minoritize> [accessed 11 November 2019]

### ABSTRACT

Grégory Gabriel, Elliot Marès

#### **Changing the Face of French Theatre: Rethinking Our Assumptions for a Theatre That Mirrors Our Society**

At the Conservatoire national supérieur d'art dramatique of Paris, we seek to transform the future face of French theatre so that it reflects the diversity of contemporary France. In this presentation, we explain why and how we have been working to recruit a new generation of actors from minoritized backgrounds and to give them the confidence to go proudly into the professional world. Through taking a 'colour-blind' approach to casting and by centering the voices of minorities within the institution, we seek to give these students the key to open the doors of a still conservative French theatre establishment.

**Keywords:** theatre school, emancipation, blackface, acting, racism.

<sup>6</sup> It's from Antoine Vitez but I don't know where it comes from