

## Arts

And through this distemperature we see/ The seasons alter" – Titania's words to Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may ring eerily true nowadays, but climate change and theatre are far from natural bedfellows. As the COP21 climate conference gets under way in Paris, the talk will be of temperatures, carbon emissions and political measures – all essential to the debate and dramatic in real terms, yet difficult to put on the stage.

Undeterred, a number of directors, playwrights and scientists have sought to weave our climate's bleak prognosis into awareness-raising stage productions. In France, Irina Brook, the British director of Nice's Théâtre National, has turned her personal commitment to the cause into a festival. Réveillons-nous! (Wake up!) runs alongside COP21 over the next two weeks. Brook says she could see no reason not to do it: "There's nothing more important than climate change, yet a majority of people haven't a clue what's going on. It should be headline news every day."

However, practitioners don't agree on the best way to convey this urgency to audiences. Agitprop has a distinguished history – but in an art form that thrives on character-building, tension and release, environmental issues lack obvious protagonists and are much harder to convey than political events. In Nice, productions will run the gamut from straightforward plays to "performance lectures", installations and conferences.

Writer-director David Lescot, whose new work *Les Glaciers grondants* opened



# Weather warnings

Climate change | A theatre director in Nice is staging a festival to coincide with the COP21 conference in Paris – but how effectively does science translate to the stage? By *Laura Cappelle*



Réveillons-nous!, freely admits that climate is an "impossible subject" to tackle. He cites Shakespeare and Chekhov as playwrights who use climate as a rich metaphor, and includes excerpts from *The Winter's Tale* in his play, which transfers to Paris in December. When I visited a rehearsal, Lescot and his cast were still ironing out contrived attempts to pepper dialogue with scientific facts.

Lescot's central character is a journalist, tasked with writing about climate change ahead of COP21, who seeks out a range of scientists and climate sceptics. "It's an image of me when I started, because I knew nothing about climate," he says. To humanise the subject, the breakdown of the journalist's marriage improbably mirrors his research: "Our emotions are like weather. What looks more like a storm than a fit of anger?"

The cast includes Théo Touvet, a 28-year-old performer who took part in oceanography research at MIT and Nasa while still studying for his master's in France. Frustrated with the scientific world's insularity, Touvet left academia to retrain as an actor and circus

performer, his childhood passion. "We know plenty already about climate change – there is no real need to know it with a greater degree of precision," he says. "It's a global problem that mainly needs communicating."

There are, however, inherent frictions between the demands of performance and those of science. Touvet plays a fictional version of himself, enlightening the hero about climate while performing acrobatic moves in a circus wheel; in rehearsal, he was hard at work with Lescot on an umpteenth version of the scene.

"If you're really comprehensive, it's too long, people stop listening," says the director. Touvet, on the other hand, bemoans the necessary loss of detail. "It can be frustrating, because we have to cut so much of the scientific content for rhythm," he says. "It will be a nod, rather than a moment to really learn."

Such issues explain why prominent directors have shunned fiction to put scientists centre-stage instead. In the UK, Katie Mitchell directed *Ten Billion* and *2071* as performance lectures but



Clockwise from main picture: Théo Touvet (in wheel) in *Les Glaciers grondants*; scene from *Les Âmes offensées*; director Irina Brook of Nice's Théâtre National  
Pascal Victor; Fred Lyonnet; Corbis

initially she had attempted other ways to tackle the subject at the National Theatre. "We tried naturalism, with characters, a linear narrative and an end, but those solutions tended to make scenes look like a rather ridiculous American disaster movie. You can dismiss a character talking to you about scientific ideas in a play, but if a scientist is standing there and he's got really strong credentials and authority, it's different."

Ethnologist Philippe Geslin had been looking for ways to broaden the appeal of his research for some time when Macha Makeïeff, director of Marseille's La Criée theatre, suggested that he write and perform monologues about his experience. For Geslin, who founded a

'Our emotions are like weather. What looks more like a storm than a fit of anger?'

laboratory in anthropotechnology in Switzerland, starring in *Les Âmes offensées* proved a way to voice the reality on the ground in Guinea, where he has studied the Susu people for more than 25 years.

Makeïeff worked closely with him on the structure and staging. For scientists, tackling climate change in performance is a way to reclaim a narrative that they feel is shaped by politicians and journalists at conferences such as COP21. "Scientific writing is impersonal," Geslin says, "but Macha wanted me to write about myself, about the seven times I had malaria. . . . The goal is to show the complexity of what we see in the field, to go beyond the story told in the media."

Productions with an educational intent sit more easily on stages in the UK than on those in France, where theatre leans towards conceptual, director-driven work. Brook struggled to find a French writer to collaborate on a new play in Nice. "It's such an Anglo-Saxon thing to write about political events, but in France it barely exists. Where are the young angry playwrights writing about the boys who've been

taken off into the jihad, for instance?"

In the end, she commissioned Italian playwright Stefano Massini, who caused a stir in France with his *Lehman Trilogy* and who considers climate to be as political an issue as the fall of Lehman Brothers. His new play *Terre Noire*, due to premiere in January, explores another avenue for fiction: Massini focused on the true story of a South African farmer who sued a pesticide company for a piece of land that he felt had been stolen from him. The Théâtre National's website takes pains to state it won't be "didactic", which says much about French resistance to the notion. (Massini claims that all his works are didactic.)

The odds may be against theatre making an impact when many look to it for pure entertainment or lofty artistic goals, but directors who take climate change seriously are ready to take their chances. Like Mitchell, who stopped flying entirely after working with scientists, Brook hopes it can provide a wake-up call: "It's a way of going through the senses for a subject that people see as very specialised. As long as things stay coldly intellectual, there's not much change that happens."

*'Réveillons-nous!'*, Théâtre National de Nice, to December 13, [ttn.fr/fr/festival-reveillons-nous](http://ttn.fr/fr/festival-reveillons-nous)  
*Les Glaciers grondants*, Théâtre de la Ville, Paris, December 4-18, [theatredelaville-paris.com](http://theatredelaville-paris.com)

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## THE LIFE OF A SONG

### WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the BBC was a notoriously squeamish organisation, often banning records because of their "offensive" content. In 1972, for instance, Paul McCartney's "Hi, Hi, Hi" was removed from playlists because of its references to sex and drugs. In the same year, however, something much stronger slipped past the BBC's censors: Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side". Despite references to male prostitution, transvestism, oral sex and drugs, the song was not blacklisted. These were innocent times, and perhaps the BBC's commissariat simply didn't understand what Reed was referring to when he sang (albeit in a mumbly delivery) about "giving head" (though the line was cut for the US release).

The song was a worldwide hit (helped by the fact that "Perfect Day" was on the B-side) and the subsequent album *Transformer* transformed Reed's profile, leading to a resurgence of interest in his old band the Velvet Underground, and in their patron Andy Warhol and his Factory. "Walk on the Wild Side" is Reed's memoir of his years at the

Factory, with its cast of characters from Warhol's "superstars" who appeared in his films *Trash* (1970), *Flesh* (1968) and *Heat* (1972). "Candy", for instance, was transgender actress Candy Darling, who had made an earlier appearance in Reed's Velvet Underground song "Candy Says" ("Candy says . . . I've come to hate my body"). "Little Joe" was Joe Dallesandro, the athletic, oft-naked star of Warhol's *Flesh*. The "Sugar Plum Fairy" was an amalgamation of characters who were essentially drug delivery men.

Before *Transformer*, Reed had been at a low ebb. He had left the Velvet Underground in 1970 and released a solo album (featuring Rick Wakeman on keyboards) which sold poorly. Meanwhile in 1972, David Bowie's

career was taking off and everything he touched seemed to turn to platinum. Bowie had long been an admirer of the Velvet Underground – he played their song "White Light/White Heat" in his shows, and had referenced them on the sleeve notes to his *Hunky Dory* album. Bowie and his guitarist Mick Ronson were hired to produce Reed's *Transformer* at Trident Studios in London.

The session for "Walk on the Wild Side" began at 10am on a Monday, and among the musicians was veteran session bassist Herbie Flowers (also, incidentally, the co-writer of Clive Dunn's 1970 novelty hit "Grandad"). Flowers came from a jazz background and was accustomed to improvising; he came

up with the unforgettable bassline on his double bass, then overdubbed it on his Fender fretless electric 10 notes higher to achieve the sweet, slinky sound, accentuated by the way the two basslines move in opposite directions. The session fee was £12 but Flowers got £17 because of the overdub. It took about 20 minutes.

These days no musician would talk about "coloured girls" ("And the coloured girls go . . .") but in 1972 this was acceptable parlance. Curiously, however, the three singers who provided the backing vocals were three white English women who went under the name of the Thunderthighs; the following year they sang "Sha-na-nana-push-push" on Mott the Hoople's hit, "Roll Away the Stone".

"Walk on the Wild Side" has been covered or sampled by a handful of artists. In 2012 the British-Canadian collective the Flowers of Hell released an atmospheric version which, intriguingly, featured Reed's earlier – and less lubricious – lyrics from a demo recording. In 2014 the funk-metal-rap band Tackhead recorded a muscular rendition. Most famously, it was sampled in 1991 by A Tribe Called Quest; their track "Can I Kick It?" casts the bassline in a deliciously slinky groove over which they deliver a rap that, with lines such as "Come and spread your arms if you really need a hug", can, in rap terms, be best described as a Walk on the Wild Side.

David Cheal



Above: Lou Reed, c1970, and right, the record of 'Walk on the Wild Side', made in 1972 – Getty



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