

Call for Papers

“U.S. Drama, Theatre and Performance at the Festival mondial du théâtre de Nancy, 1963-1983”

One-day symposium
Université de Lorraine in Nancy, France

Date: Friday, March 26, 2027

Initially conceived as a university theatre festival in 1963, Jack Lang's celebrated biennial Festival mondial du théâtre de Nancy grew into a professional theatrical event, with Lang making Nancy a French, if not European, center for global theatre production. The Festival's early focus was on “fringe theatre informed by revolutionary politics” (Looseley, p. 143), a conspicuous movement away from the consecrated “text” of traditional French performance within a formal theatrical space and towards one of gesture and silence and, above all, of corps – both the individual actor's body (as informed by Artaud and Grotowski) but also the troupe's collective performance – on non-traditional stages or even in the streets. It was a radical approach to theatre that meshed well with the revolutionary times that had finally erupted in the spring of 1968.

To enact this manifesto, Lang and his team sought out avant-garde troupes from around the world to showcase in Nancy, turning the city itself into a living theatre of revolutionary dissension. Among those troupes invited from the U.S., Michel Rémy and Jean-Marie Bonnet recall (p. 236), most were of a “politically engaged” theatre that relied on masques and marionettes, a theatre of the “corps” that focused on the actors' body and movements), or a “militant workers” theatre which poked and prodded the nation's political cadres: Perhaps this is the great lesson of the Nancy Festival: it reminds us of the necessarily political dimension of all forms of theatrical expression, highlighting in particular the need to replace the individual performance of actors with collective creation, while also giving importance to the full use of the actor's body. (Rémy and Bonnet, p. 244) Nancy had become as prominent a theatrical center in France as Paris and Avignon, having even been selected to host the 1984 edition of UNESCO's prestigious Théâtre des Nations. But problems both internal (among them Lang's departure) and external (a political sea change in France, and in Nancy specifically) brought an end to the festival, which mutated years later into a festival for Eastern European theatre and beyond.

While several of the U.S. figures that had performed in Nancy as part of the Festival have, for the most part, now been forgotten or marginalized in the annals of theatre history, Nancy did welcome on its many stages important U.S. theatre personalities, such as Joseph Chaikin (Chile, Chile), Megan Terry (Jack Jack), Bill Vehr (Whores of Babylon), and Meredith Monk (recital). But it was the U.S. theatre troupes that received the most acclaim: Robert Wilson's Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds (Deafman Glance), Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre (Fire, The Cry of the People for the Meat, Joan of Arc, White Horse Butcher, etc.), Lee Breuer's Mabou Mines (Animations), Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theater and Godzilla Rainbow Troupe (Turds in Hell), Luis Valdez's El Teatro Campesino (The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa, Actos), and Andy Trompeter's Blackbird Theatre (Poisons).

In the program for the 1981 edition of the Festival, Françoise Kourilsky, the Festival's new director at the time, wrote that, while American art has “largely penetrated Europe,” its focus on the New York avant-garde had been “too reductive” to the detriment of the “roots of more traditional” American art forms. Her promise for the Festival's USA 81 program was to elevate American theatre's presence in France beyond the likes of Robert Wilson or Peter Schumann. The general failure of that USA 81 festival, however, set American theatre's presence in Nancy back more than it had advanced it, with the New York avant-garde largely retaining its central position in the theatre landscape throughout France.

Proof of that centrality can be found on the covers of both Jean-Pierre Thibaudat's and Roland Grünberg's volumes dedicated to the Nancy Festival: an early photograph of the Bread and Puppet Theatre performing on

the world-famous Place Stanislas. The photograph is significant as it represents one of the festival's popular draws prior to 1981, the troupe having performed in Nancy no fewer than six times in the span of Festival's twenty-year run. That it was a U.S. theatre company represented on the covers is also quite a coup since American drama and theatre, in general, had had only sporadic success in France, even before the fateful USA 81 program.

Within the aegis of "ACTiF," a four-year research project on U.S. theatre in France financed by the French ANR governing research body (grant N° ANR-23-CE54-0011), a one-day symposium is being planned for 2027 to revisit and re-evaluate the presence of U.S. troupes that performed at the Nancy Festival. The Festival's archives are located in Nancy at the city's Archives Municipales and Bibliothèque Stanislas, and in Caen at the Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC). Housed within these three main archives is a treasure trove of documents (business minutes, letters, contracts, programs, posters, press clippings, etc.) related to various U.S. productions that were given in Nancy, productions which have still received scant critical attention in both French and English scholarship on U.S. theatre. U.S. diplomatic archives, on the other hand, remain largely unexplored but could help determine U.S. cultural diplomacy's agenda in France throughout the Festival's two decades of activities. The present symposium is looking to address this lacuna by gathering together scholars of U.S. theatre around the world to re-examine the presence of U.S. theatre in Nancy.

Proposed Directions:

Without claiming to be exhaustive, contributions may address, among other topics:

- case studies devoted to specific artists or companies (for example, Robert Wilson, Mabou Mines, Bread and Puppet Theatre, the Ridiculous Theater, El Teatro Campesino, etc.);
- analyses of programming strategies and curatorial policies;
- quantitative approaches based on programming data;
- investigations into the dynamics – or lack thereof – of circulation (financial, diplomatic, institutional, logistical) of performances;
- studies of critical and public reception, in both the French and the U.S. press (if the Festival was mentioned at all on the other side of the Atlantic);
- interviews with programmers, administrators, or cultural intermediaries;
- examination of the Festival's pedagogical achievements through its university theatre initiative (e.g., CUIFERD).

The symposium (and the book that will evolve from it) aims to bring together historiographical, aesthetic, political, institutional, and socio-economic approaches in order to better understand how the Festival has contributed to shaping a particular image of U.S. theatre in France – and, more broadly, how it fostered transatlantic exchange dynamics between the two nations.

Resources Available for Scholars:

Part of the "ACTiF" research agenda was to digitize the Festival's extensive archival collections in Nancy and in Caen (programs, brochures, press kits, administrative documents, letters, etc.). Researchers interested in the project may, subject to a commitment to contribute to the symposium, be granted temporary access to these digitized resources to conduct their research work.

Submission Guidelines:

Scholars wishing to express interest are invited to submit: a provisional title; a 300–500 word abstract outlining the proposed approach, including a few bibliographical references; and a short biographical note. Papers can be written in English or in French. Submissions should be sent to John S. Bak (john.bak@univ-lorraine.fr) and François Doppler-Speranza (francois.doppler-speranza@univ-lorraine.fr).

Deadline for submission: September 30, 2026.

Select Bibliography

Brecht, Stefan. *The Bread and Puppet Theatre*. 2 vols. London: Methuen, 1988.

Bredin, Jean-Denis, and Jack Lang. *Éclats*. Paris: Simoën, 1978.

Copfermann, Emile, Bernard Dort, and Françoise Kourilsky. "A Conversation on the Eighth Nancy Festival." *Theater* vol. 4, no. 1 (1973): 110–16.

Graves Miller, Judith. *Theater and Revolution in France Since 1968*. Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1977.

Grünberg, Roland, and Monique Demerson. *Nancy sur scènes. Au carrefour des théâtres du monde*. Nancy: Festival mondial du théâtre de Nancy/Ville de Nancy, 1984.

Jotterand, Franck. *Le nouveau théâtre américain*. Paris: Seuil, 1970.

Kourilsky, Françoise. *Le Bread and Puppet Theatre*. Lausanne: La Cité, 1971.

Looseley, David. "Jack Lang and the Politics of Festival." *French Cultural Studies* vol. 1 (1990): 5–19.

_____. "The World Theatre Festival, Nancy, 1963-88: A Critique and a Retrospective." *New Theatre Quarterly* vol. 6, no. 22 (1990): 141–53.

Rémy, Michel, and Jean-Marie Bonnet. "La présence américaine au Festival mondial de théâtre de Nancy." *Revue française d'études américaines*, "Les Théâtres de l'Amérique/The Theatres of America" vol. 10 (Oct. 1980): 235–47.

Zand, Nicole. "Révélation du Bread and Puppet au Festival de Nancy." *Le Monde* 25 Apr. 1968, 13.