

LES HOMMES APPROXIMATIFS

PRESS

# SAIGON

Les Hommes Approximatifs • Caroline Guiela Nguyen

Production Les Hommes Approximatifs ; La Comédie de Valence, CDN Drôme-Ardèche

Coproduction Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe ; MC2: Grenoble ; Festival d'Avignon ; CDN de Normandie – Rouen ; Théâtre National de Strasbourg ; CDN de Tours – Théâtre Olympia ; Comédie de Reims, CDN ; Théâtre National de Bretagne – Centre européen théâtral et chorégraphique ; Théâtre du Beauvaisis, scène nationale de l'Oise en préfiguration ; Théâtre de La Croix Rousse – Lyon

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PRODUCTION CONTACT

Juliette Kramer • +33 6 48 03 06 04

[j.kramer@leshommesapproximatifs.com](mailto:j.kramer@leshommesapproximatifs.com)

PRESS CONTACT / COMMUNICATION

Coline Loger • +33 4 75 78 41 77 • +33 6 03 43 77 21

[colineloger@comedievalence.com](mailto:colineloger@comedievalence.com)

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Compagnie les Hommes Approximatifs

Siege social : 11, rue Sabaterie, 26 000 Valence

Adresse de correspondance : c/o Théâtre de l'Elysée, 14 rue Basse Combalot – 69007 Lyon

association loi 1901 / siret: 511 870 628 000 27 / ape: 9001Z

licences: 2-1026587, 3-1026588 / tva intracomunautaire : FR46511870628

## IN THE MOOD FOR “SAIGON”

For her debut at Avignon's International Theatre Festival, Caroline Guiela Nguyen has created a poignant melodrama into the consequences of French colonialism on Vietnam, moving many in the audience to tears.

The night of its premiere, Saturday July 8, *Saigon* went straight to the heart. At the end of the performance, the whole audience rose to give the actors and their beautiful director a standing ovation. At 35 years of age, this is Nguyen's first time at the festival. Among the spectators moved to tears, many no doubt had had their own experience of exile in one form or another.

(...)

This is the way of things in this show, quite different from any other, in which the music of voices blends with that of different languages and ending with the following words: “This is how we tell stories in Vietnam: with many tears.” Deprived of those tears for so long on the French stage, we are very happy to collect them today.

**Le Monde**

## Remembering “SAIGON”

Acclaimed at Avignon and performed by both Vietnamese and French actors, Caroline Guiela Nguyen's new play oscillates across time and space, offering a poignant analysis of the consequences of French colonialism in Vietnam and what has often gone unsaid.

Saigon? It's the name of a Vietnamese restaurant in the 13<sup>th</sup> district of Paris as well as the former name of Hô Chi Minh-City, which everyone still insists on calling Saigon. Its simple evocation immediately conjures up tropical images of war, partly colonized by American pop culture rehashing the armed combats of the 1970s and by doing so partially concealing the collective memory of colonialism and the French debacle in 1956. It is this repressed episode, the consequences of which continue to make themselves felt in the course of the lives it violently altered, that Caroline Guiela Nguyen explores in *Saigon*, a generous melodrama that received on this, its third night at Avignon, a standing ovation just as it did on its premiere.

As the daughter of a Vietnamese immigrant, Guiela Nguyen has devised a play that could be qualified as second-generation, meaning that it is not so much an indictment of colonization per se (though it easily allows us to draw the same conclusions), than an examination of what has been left unspoken and the myths induced by exodus and exile, all of which the descendants have had to cope with as best they can. Distance, whether it be historical or geographical, is a breeding ground of lies – this is one of the most powerfully stated truths in this play of epic proportions. (...)

If this play speaks to all of us, it's firstly through the subtle way that it delves into an episode of national history. 1996, the play reminds us in passing, was also the year undocumented Africans were evicted from Saint-Ambroise church which they had been occupying in Paris, and when the French award for best film went to *la Haine*. Who in France can ignore the fact that here and there we have made a monstrous mess of things, then run away like thieves, and that the consequences of these actions are far from over? But if *Saigon* finally strives towards the universal, it is above all because we are all victims and agents of our family's mythologies, a web of grandiloquent postures, guilty secrets and large holes of silence.

## Libération

## **Caroline Guiela Nguyen: Her home is our home**

*Saigon*, presented at the Gymnasium Aubanel and directed by Caroline Guiela Nguyen – also affiliated to Paris's Odeon Theatre – is the Avignon show bringing audiences to tears.

A show can get you worked up, make you laugh or make you cry. Caroline Guiela Nguyen has no qualms opting for the latter. But although she may elicit a few tears, she also offers her audience a reflection on the legacy of colonialism. In 1956, the French left Indo-China to return to France. Stowed away below deck in those boats slowly navigating towards the port of Marseille could also be found some Vietnamese escaping the communist regime. They would subsequently be baptised Viet Kieu, Vietnamese of the diaspora. The theme of the foreigner is at the heart of this lascivious and captivating saga that stretches from 1956 to 1996, interweaving different life stories.

*Saigon* oscillates back and forth between past and present seamlessly. We meet Antoine whose father was a French army officer and mother his Vietnamese girlfriend. He doesn't speak his mother's language, doesn't get why she seems so distant; she is completely foreign to him. Then there is Hao, who in leaving his birthplace also left behind the young woman he loves. We are won over by Marie Antoinette who opened a restaurant immediately upon arriving in Paris. Through the swing doors of this establishment, every detail of the set stands out: the delicate lace curtaining around the windows, the ceiling fan, a Buddha positioned close to the kitchen counter, a karaoke machine on a small podium. Caroline Guiela Nguyen welcomes us into her culture, her home and invites us to make it ours. She succeeds because her home is open, hybrid, a crossroads between over here and over there. She succeeds because she makes theatre an art of storytelling where each of us can find our own place.

### **France Culture**

## **AVIGNON 2017 : A BOMBSHELL CALLED “SAIGON”**

“In a hypnotic mood not unlike the kind emanating from a Wong Kar-Wai film, Caroline Guiela Nguyen unfurls a sentimental fresco against the backdrop of the Indo-Chinese war. In the the 13<sup>th</sup> district of Paris the ghosts from 1956 Saigon mingle with the exiled and their descendants from whom they have desperately tried to conceal their wounds and regrets.

At once shaken and fascinated, the audience rediscovers on stage – in a delicate presentation that is never showy, making great use of the ellipse – an often neglected slice of our colonial memory with its accompanying horrors of human sacrifice and wrecked lives, namely the Indo-Chinese war, a defeat – a few years prior to the one in Algeria – that we speak so little of. (...) Caroline Guiela Nguyen resuscitates the dead, convokes their ghosts. In Marie-Antoinette's restaurant, several Vietnamese actors – young or more elderly, more or less skillfully – perform and sing with great tenderness this tale of separation, exile, abandon and solitude. The effect is gripping and profound, probably because it is a simple story told simply, without grandiloquence or violence, with no unnecessary drama or passion, just sad, desperately sad. And magnificent.”

**Télérama**

## **TEARS OF SAIGON AT THE AVIGNON FESTIVAL**

The audience at the Avignon Festival remained on their feet a long time after the end of the performance of "Saigon" applauding the troupe of French and Vietnamese actors. They had just spent close to four hours in a Vietnamese restaurant listening to their moving and tearful stories.

The play oscillates between two periods: 1956, the year of departure – one month aboard a ship for Marseille, the Vietnamese escapees below deck in the hold, the French in the cabins – and 1996, the year when the Vietnamese government granted the exiles permission to return following the lifting of the American embargo. In this restaurant, the destinies of ten or so characters are interwoven, crossing back and forth between the two dates.

(...) Listening to their stories, we discover with stupefaction how little we know today about French Indo-China, the tragedy of 1956 and the fate that awaited those exiles who, in some cases, experienced the same camps that would be later used to intern the harkis (Algerian soldiers loyal to the French). The "Viet kieu" – Vietnamese diaspora – in their single-minded determination to fit in mostly didn't recount their past lives, not even to their children.

(...) To devise this show, Caroline Guiela Nguyen collected testimonies from both countries, France and Vietnam, and cast around ten actors. (...) Infused with different atmospheres and memories, the play exudes a poignant nostalgia, taking its time to relate the broken lives of these exiles. (...) This small troupe of actors, some of whom were recruited in Vietnam, succeed in recreating this small world of exiles haunted by a city that no longer exists.

A Vietnamese restaurant will never look the same again.

**AFP**

# AVIGNON FESTIVAL : DRENCHED UNDER THE TEARS OF “SAIGON”

It couldn't be avoided – one day Caroline Guiela Nguyen had to try and unearth the traces of Saigon under Hô Chi Minh-City. Together with her company, *Les hommes approximatifs*, she has brought back “Saigon”, a show of great simplicity that can be listened to like a love song, read like a novel or watched like a film. A theatre show that multiplies experiences of exile, a romance on unforgettable omissions.

Wonderful productions, unforgettable shows – and *Saigon* is one of those – give rise to joy and delight, but as their memory fades on the journey home, when we find ourselves alone again, then begins the delicate sadness linked to forgetting. Everything was perfect, we want to retain every moment and already it is beginning to disappear, memories pull apart. In its own way, *Saigon* speaks about that process, how being separated from a loved one or one's homeland opens a gulf that can never again be closed, a deep wound that never heals.

The play convokes historical events in deliberately disordered fashion, but everything is there: Indo-China under French colonialism; the newly independent Vietnam after the defeat of the French at Diên Biên Phu in 1956; the departure of the French and those Vietnamese who could get a visa; the arrival in France and subsequent events; the Vietnamese enlisted by France to come and work in armament factories in 1940, which then passed into German hands before they were destroyed in Allied air-raids, taking the lives of a number of these men who spoke little French or rather speaking it with their words; 1996, the year when the old exiles were finally granted permission to return to their homeland. *Saigon* evokes all of that by fragment and allusion, in disordered times, and never by long speeches. The situations are always concrete.

(...)

After several excursions to Vietnam and in the 13<sup>th</sup> district of Paris with a small group of her loyal actors (Caroline Arrouas, Dan Artus, Adeline Guillot, Pierric Plathier), Guiela Nguyen wrote a book as a sort of working document that on the first day of rehearsals she gave to the four professional French actors and seven part-time Vietnamese actors, living in France or recruited directly over there: Thi Truc Ly Huynh, Hoang Son Lê, Phu Hau Nguyen, My Chau Nguyen thi, Thi Thanh Thu Tô, Anh Tran Nghia, Hiep Tran Nghia. This creates a wonderful overlapping of languages and accents, accompanied from time to time by over-titles. We don't always understand everything, the French language is sometimes given a severe wrench, and that's exactly how it should be, giving us a much better insight into what it's like for these people torn between two countries and two languages. (...) What I distinctly remember is the last word of the play before the lights suddenly go out like during a power cut, and that word is “tears”. As Georges Didi-Huberman has shown in one of his most recent books, tears are also arms for revolt.