

LES HOMMES APPROXIMATIFS

CAROLINE GUIELA NGUYEN

SAIGON

PRESS

REVIEW

EXTRACTS

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SAIGON © Jean-Louis Fernandez

Move over Ivo van Hove: Europe's hottest theatre directors

The Belgian director has blazed his way into the British theatre scene. Who's next? A French marathon man and an Austrian politico among others

Caroline Guiela Nguyen (France)

[Saigon](#) set Caroline Guiela Nguyen apart. Since its premiere last year, it has zipped around Europe non-stop, festival to festival. At home, it won its writer-director a second Molière award nomination.

Staged in a replica Vietnamese restaurant, the four-hour piece swung between Saigon in 1956, as French colonialists shipped out post Dien Bien Phu, and Paris 40 years later, as Vietnamese exiles faced the prospect of returning for the first time. Nguyen made that trip at 16, with her mother, but Saigon was not straightforwardly autobiographical. It grew out of two years of research with her cast, and the show swam with ghosts, grief and dreamy nostalgia as it kept various storylines spinning like plates.



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Saigon directed by Caroline Guiela Nguyen. Photograph: Anne-Christine Poujoulat/AFP/Getty Images

That's a mark of her beginnings – not only as a sociology student, but in reshaping literary classics for the stage. Having first worked with novels, including a two-parter that chucked *Madame Bovary* into today's world, her company, [Les Hommes Approximatifs](#), changed tack, focusing on overlooked stories and underrepresented lives. She began collaborating in prisons with [Joël Pommerat](#) and, in her shows, started to focus on the scars left by colonialism. Her shows have a gorgeous, unreal aesthetic, but the language is radical too: by refusing surtitles for multilingual shows, Nguyen pushes against old hierarchies and privileges.

Men Dominate French Theater, but Talented Women Abound

PARIS — A story of a fictional 16th-century female painter. Greek war walls of Troy. A couple engaged in an eerily morbid sexual transaction France’s colonial rule over Vietnam.

Ms. Duras famously grew up in French Indochina, but aside from her, few French artists have grappled with the legacy of France’s colonial rule over this region of Vietnam. Enter Ms. Guiela Nguyen, who wrote and directed “[Saigon](#),” currently installed at the Odéon-Théâtre de l’Europe, where she is an associate artist.

This poignant saga follows interconnected characters from Vietnam in 1956, as the last French troops prepare to depart, to Paris in 1996. Performed in a mix of French and Vietnamese, it makes plain the intimate pain wrought by colonial arrogance, culture clashes and exile.

As Marie-Antoinette, the cook who runs the Saigon and Paris restaurants in which the story unfolds, the diminutive Anh-Tran Nghia gives an especially mighty performance. “That’s how stories are told in Vietnam — with a lot of tears,” Ms. Guiela Nguyen concludes wistfully. More of these hidden stories remain to be unearthed, and women may well take the lead.

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 Hồ Chí 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 13th 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.

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 13th 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.



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 13th 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.



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.



SAIGON © Jean-Louis Fernandez



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OTHERS PRESS EXTRACTS

A work that is as intelligent as it is human, conceived by a genius of the same ilk as Ariane Mnouchkine.

— **La Repubblica** (Italy)

It is a beautiful story that is told to us, at first sight incidentally, but in fact with a particularly precise and incisive psychological realism. Caroline Guiela Nguyen is one of the great young talents on the European theatre scene.

— **Süddeutsche Zeitung** (Germany)

The three hours of love and suffering in SAIGON are heart-warming. Scenes lovingly conceived and powerfully performed.

— **Volkskrant** (The Netherlands)

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, 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** (France)

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

— **Mediapart** (France)

And the result works like a charm. Although the eleven characters, in the restaurant room recreated on stage, bear the scars of their broken destinies, they have not given up hope of one day being reunited with a lost love or seeing again a familiar face. Saigon elegantly interweaves strong emotions and an infectious longing for life

— **Paris Match** (France)



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TOURS

SAIGON

— 2021/2022

from 14 to 16 April
— Domaine d'O – Montpellier

from 22 to 24 April
— Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II- Lisbonne

— 2022/2023 SEASON

(in progress)

— PREVIOUS TOURS (2017-2020)

2017

La Comédie de Valence, CDN Drôme-Ardèche, festival Ambivalence(s), — 71e Festival d'Avignon — MC2: Grenoble — Comédie de Reims-CDN

2018

Odéon, théâtre de l'Europe — CDN de Normandie-Rouen— Théâtre Dijon Bourgogne-CDN— La Comédie de Valence, CDN Drôme-Ardèche — Théâtre de la Croix Rousse-Lyon— Schaubühne – Berlin (Germany)— CDN de Besançon — Théâtre National Bretagne – Centre européen théâtral et chorégraphique – Rennes — Centre dramatique national de Tours – Théâtre Olympia — Festival Theater Formen – Braunschweig (Germany) — Holland Festival -Amsterdam (Pays-Bas) — Poly Theater – Beijing (China) — Magnificent Theater Oriental — Arts Center – Shanghai (China) — The Ingmar Bergman International Theatre Festival, Stockholm (Sweden) — Institut Français du Vietnam, Hô-Chi- Minh Ville (Vietnam) — Festival Romaeuropa, Rome (Italy) — Festival Sirenos, Vilnius (Lituany)— Festival Teatr, Minsk (Belarus) — TNS, Strasbourg — Théâtre du Beauvaisis – Scène Nationale de Beauvais — Le Grand R, La-Roche- sur-Yon — Théâtre de Cornouaille – Scène Nationale de Quimper — Le Théâtre – Scène Nationale de Saint-Nazaire — TNBA, Bordeaux

2019

Théâtre National de Madrid (Spain) — Théâtre Angoulême – Scène Nationale — Théâtre Lliure , Barcelone (Spain)— Théâtre La passerelle – Scène Nationale de Gap— Scène Nationale de Sète et du Bassin de Thau — La Filature – Scène Nationale de Mulhouse — Le Grand T, Nantes — Le Liberté – Scène Nationale de Toulon — Théâtre de l'Archipel – Scène Nationale de Perpignan — Scène Nationale d'Albi — La Crieé – Théâtre National de Marseille — Théâtre d'Esch (Luxembourg) 2019 Territory Festival, Moscow (Russia) —Theatre Olympics, Saint Petersburg (Russia)—Thalia, Hambourg (Germany) —L'Onde, Vilézy-Villacoublay —Le Carreau, Forbach

2020

ASIA TOPA, Melbourne (Australia)

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La Région
Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes



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