

A Reflection on *Euphrate* and French as a Language of Radical Presence

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More than two hundred people attended *Euphrate* by Nil Bosca on May 16 at On the Boards - a theater I have long admired for its boundary-pushing and international programming. Presenting a play in French at this iconic venue was itself a milestone I want to highlight and celebrate. Since 1978, On the Boards has championed the kind of work that brings together audiences with a common taste for unfamiliar stories and languages, seeking to be challenged and surprised by these echoes from different parts of the world.

Besides being mission-driven and community-oriented, AF Seattle also shares with On the Boards the belief that art can be viewed as a practice and a language that unsettle through their vicinity with generative, creative ambiguity, and that the quest for meaning is always something cultivated together, in a theater venue or a classroom, between strangers who are present for each other at a particular point in time. For us, being both a language and a cultural center, it has been so rewarding to be able to offer immersive cultural experiences in French in Seattle, not only for our students, but also for the larger community of Francophiles who do not necessarily take our classes, or for the numerous French and Francophone expats nostalgic for the sounds of their homelands.

The performance was preceded by a workshop at the University of Washington on May 15, led by Stanislas Roquette, the director of the play and an actor himself, alongside actress Nil Bosca. The setting was the perfect counterpoint to what would follow - intimate, process-oriented. Going back and forth between French and English, Stanislas guided UW students and faculty through exercises designed to cultivate what he saw as a way of "*thinking with the body*". One of his phrases has stayed with me: "*le corps est un cerveau différent*" - "the body is a different brain", as I had to fight against all my inhibitions and move my own body in the middle of a circle of people I had never seen before.

Exposed, my vulnerability shed a new light on Rimbaud's "*Je est un autre*" ("I is an other") a famous quote that was mentioned at the workshop and stayed with me during the following day as I was watching Nil's outstanding performance of *Euphrate*, the multiple characters she played so perfectly, her use of different accents, body posture and the rudimentary, yet essential props and pieces of clothing, like skins she smoothly changed into, under our mesmerized gaze. I still wonder how she was able to master the art of metamorphosis with such ease, as if it were something we were born to do, this

continuous back and forth between all the characters who have formed us: mothers, fathers, cousins, teachers, and artistic idols.

Nil Bosca performed her semi-autobiographical play with a talent and humor that caught the audience off guard. Her movements were sleek, disconnected, fluid, hypnotic even. They amplified the text and supplemented language where words were irrelevant. We all related to *Euphrate* precisely because at its heart, it is a story about belonging and longing: not only for roots, but for one's truest self. Nil's character navigates the quest for her Turkish origins in France, wrestling with a father she doesn't fully understand, and discovers, after numerous career *détours*/detours - through a hilarious Sufi dance sequence (yes, a mystic experience can be *drôle*, funny and efficient, according to this script) - that she wants to become an actress, after eight years of trying to be a doctor, a biologist and a therapist.

The Q&A with Nil Bosca and Stanislas Roquette was a genuine conversation, blurring the divide between the stage and the audience. Our community asked our special guests about education, about the ways institutionalized schooling in both France and the United States builds or fails to build *l'estime de soi* (self-worth), grit, the courage to discover one's own voice. They also asked about how to live with one's own hyphenated identity in a world that has been increasingly losing its complexity, about theater as a space where these interrogations are safe, or even about theater as a practice of healing.

I want to take a moment to think about who was in that audience: everyone who completed the artist's energy and art, who applauded, laughed and leaned forward in the dark. AF Seattle teachers, staff, volunteers, longtime students, and supporters like Bettina D. and the Biernacki family, whose children Nicholas and Sophie have been taking classes at the Alliance Française since they were young. Megan Kiskaddon, the Executive Director of On the Boards, UW faculty colleagues Maya Smith and Jeffrey Fracé, community leaders across Seattle's cultural landscape, high school teachers with their students. Francophone local artists Barbara Earl Thomas and Suze Woolf, French photographer Pierre Folrev and his spouse, as well as many more close friends and supporters. Each of them contributed to the success of the Seattle performance of *Euphrate*. Moreover, echoing a discussion I recently heard on NPR, showing up to support local nonprofits has in itself become a form of activism against the pull of the screens and the algorithms that have been narrowing our daily lives.

Our collaboration with On the Boards continues: in February 2027, we will co-present *La Vie Secrète des Vieux*, by the remarkable Mohamed El Khatib, a production I cannot wait to share with our community. Until then, keep on showing up for each other, at concerts, plays, exhibits and independent film screenings. Being present and participating in the cultural life of our city has become more vital than ever. It's not a passive act, it's embracing resilience, while cultivating the proverbial "*joie de vivre*".