

ASSANGE ODYSSEIA

A FORUM THEATRE PRESS KIT



*« If wars can begin with lies,
peace can begin with truth »*

Julian Assange
Trafalgar Square 8 October 2011

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Sponsors
TNS, TJP, Wau Holland Foundation

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A FORUM THEATRE 2023 . 01 . 24 7 p.m.

Assange Odysseia began with a simple question:
« *Who is Julian Assange?* »

As Julian Assange's story appears to fall into oblivion or evaporate into the image of a controversial figure, it questions, in our eyes, the limits of our democracies. As we dug into his story, we were confronted with unfounded, unproven, prejudiced or false beliefs.

Wikileaks project exposed to everyone state secrets that can be qualified as war crimes, torture and corruption. Yet, this work of transparency deprives Julian Assange of his freedom.

By weighing up the facts against the fantasies, we wanted to understand the reasons for support, rejection and even indifference towards him. All along, we could appreciate the complexity of the political and legal situation, and...

...WE WANTED TO INVITE A DIVERSE
AUDIENCE TO MAKE THIS JOURNEY
WITH US.

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COLLATERAL
MURDER.

Vol 7

Stefano Massini
Femme
non-réeducable

Chelsea
Hanning
LANCEUR SE
D'ALERTE

JA n'est pas seul.
Des procédures ~~complexes~~
"punition".
un projet...
constituent la

À QUOI
SERVIR
WIKILEAKS
projet politique de W.
avance et a moyen

REPRISE
CHRONOLOGIE
DES FAITS

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Who is Julian Assange? This question asked to students in their twenties resonated in a great vacuum. None of them knew who Julian Assange was. Vaguely Wikileaks. 'Ah yes, internet stuff...'

What do you do when a figure of contemporary journalism starts to fall into oblivion? How do you join his commitment with the force of an artistic act?

We, at the initiative of Sahra Datoussaid, came together to create a cultural event linked to the imminent risk of Julian Assange's extradition, would the British courts confirm this decision. We felt the extreme need to talk about him, bring to life the issues at stake in his judicial persecution, and understand what concerns us, European citizens, through him.

Tackling his story and that of Wikileaks means wanting to act in the present time: 'not to be blind in one's century' (Milo Rau), 'to fight our lethargy' (Nils Melzer), to seize our time in the very moment. Not waiting for history to be over but approaching it in the *here and now*.

Through this forum theatre entitled *Assange Odysseia*, we will reconstruct the last twelve years' journey: from the journalistic and political project of Wikileaks with Collateral Murder to the judicial persecution of its editor Julian Assange, via the denunciation of the psychological torture of Assange by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer, to the observation of a *ma-laise* in our democracies.

As Francis Bacon's maxim says, 'Knowledge is power.' By prosecuting Julian Assange, as the US, UK, Swedish and Ecuadorian governments have done, the question arises: what is our capacity as citizens to stand up and speak out against the irregularities that occur in our constitutional states?

The persecution of Julian Assange deprives us of democratic debate on, among other things, the war crimes and corruption that have been revealed. The political project of Wikileaks could be summed up with this sentence: 'Transparency is not an end in itself, but a means to more social justice.' Why target the messenger rather than the message?

We want to open this debate through this Forum, to refocus attention on the issues that this story reveals to us.

To do this, we have called on witnesses to the Julian Assange story, experts on philosophical, legal and journalistic issues whom we meet. We are calling on the public to help us develop the questions and interventions at the heart of the Forum.

We have based ourselves in part on Nils Melzer's crucial book – *The Trial of Julian Assange*, which describes his legal journey step by step – in combination with various extracts from literary works: Kafka's *The Trial*, Gogol's *The Revizor*, Stefano Massini's *Unreducible Woman*, Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes...* to make this topicality resonate differently.

Sahra Datoussaid, Fabien Defendini,
Laeticia Defendini, Léa Siniscalco,
Sarah Siré

”

« When the Assange Odysseia team approached us at the beginning of the season, we immediately grasped the relevance of the questions it raised.

Beyond a partisan debate, the Assange case inevitably brings us back to a societal choice. Our theatres are where stories are developed, where the impetus and openings for imagining and questioning our commitments as citizens are initiated.

Our two theatres are joining forces to offer you an impromptu series of meetings, workshops and forums and to try to identify what Julian Assange might be called. »

Renaud Herbin, TJP's director
& Stanislas Nordey, TNS's director

A cultural event

The unique occurrence makes this Forum a cultural event in its own right. When we proposed this project to Stanislas Nordey and Renaud Herbin at the beginning of the 22/23 season, we were aware of the extreme speed with which we had to work, given that this cultural proposal was directly linked to the political and judicial situation of Julian Assange.

It is pretty rare to have the opportunity, as cultural project leaders, to work on situations that are happening in the present time. Because of its production dynamics that are particularly extended in time, the cultural space makes it challenging to embrace the present. Sometimes for good reasons, when we need to have the necessary distance to have a better analysis of the situation, but also and too often for wrong reasons, when it is a question of informing public opinion on issues of primary importance.

The legal situation faced by Julian Assange raises profound questions about the power relations that are being established more and more gradually in the place given to the work of information.

As artists, citizens, voters, and members of civil society, we needed to retranslate this reality without necessarily aestheticising it excessively or transcribing it in a strictly militant way.

We seem to have found this balance in the form of the Forum Theatre. On the one hand, we are replaying the question of the theatre at its origins, where—as early as Aeschylus' *The Eumenides* or Aristophanes' *Wasps*—trials were staged. On the other hand, we are echoing the contemporary dynamics of the desire of each and every one of us to participate in the city's affairs.

In doing so, we are aware of opening the door behind which the artistic experience found itself confined from the moment it felt the need to free itself from the production of mass art to nestle in the autonomy of the work of art. Although this autonomy was necessary for a long time, it now leaves most creators feeling politically, socially and/or environmentally powerless. Despite an ever more determined commitment, it would seem that the work of art, to paraphrase Guy Debord, has '*moved away in a representation.*'

With this theatrical proposal, which is more of a device and a visual performance than a theatrical performance, we wanted to preserve this relationship with reality. We wanted to be on par with Wikileaks, to '*write history in the present time*' (Geoffroy de Lagasnerie). This is the thread we propose to join, both to the public and theatrical structures.

It is, therefore, quite naturally with the tools of performance art, as Richard Martel talks about it in his book *L'art dans l'action*, that we have been led to trace the narrative thread of our Odyssey based on a script. The script is a canvas from which we construct a possible course of the event to which we can refer at any moment but whose framework remains sufficiently open for the audience to interact in order to make the event together.

To do this, we had to communicate with the public as quickly as possible to draw up the set of questions we would have to answer collectively. These workshops are open to schools of journalism, public service and law, as well as to the

respective audiences of the TNS and the TJP, both spectators and professionals in the performing arts.

In parallel, we have invited key witnesses to help us make sense of this story. In this back and forth, we want to give shape to an active, creative and challenging community to open the space of imagination to something other than a sinister media-judicial narrative.

Julian Assange never wanted to become this icon of free speech. He ensured that he always cared for and protected the people involved in the public revelations he transmitted through Wikileaks and the collaborative and investigative work he did with the most significant international newspapers.

Today, we have to allow this story to take a turn to mean that this case is, above all, ours.



Who is Julian Assange?

Julian Assange is an Australian-born journalist, computer scientist and cyber activist. He is known as the founder, editor and spokesperson of [WikiLeaks](#), a multinational media organisation that publishes 'classified' or otherwise restricted documents from anonymous sources.

In 2010, following revelations about US military and diplomatic activities in Iraq and Afghanistan, Assange found himself at the centre of an international political-judicial case that deprived him of his freedom. Initially placed on probation, he took refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy in London from 2012 to 2019. He is since incarcerated in the high-security prison of Belmarsh. This detention has lasted for 12 years and has been considered, since 2015, as arbitrary by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ([Opinion n°54/2015](#)).

Since 2018, the United States has requested his extradition following the issuance of an indictment for various charges, including those related to the highly contested Espionage Act ([see](#)

[the indictment](#)). However, the trial that would take place there would not allow any certainty as to his fairness and would make him face a sentence of up to 175 years in prison, during which ill-treatment and torture would not be excluded. This is effectively a life sentence that cannot be carried out and, by accepted human rights standards, constitutes inhuman and degrading treatment.

In June 2022, the British government approved the extradition request. Julian Assange remains in prison in Belmarsh pending the outcome of the appeal proceedings.

'The Assange case is the story of a man who is being persecuted and abused for exposing the dirty secrets of the powerful, including war crimes, torture and corruption. It is a story of deliberate judicial arbitrariness in Western democracies that are otherwise keen to present themselves as exemplary in the area of human rights. It is a story of wilful collusion by intelligence services behind the backs of

national parliaments and the general public. It is a story of manipulated and manipulative reporting in the mainstream media for the purpose of deliberately isolating, demonising, and destroying a particular individual. It is the story of a man we have scapegoated.'

Nils Melzer, *The trial of Julian Assange. A story of Persecution*, Verso Eds, 2022, p. 3



The Forum Theatre

Why Odysseia?

The judicial persecution suffered by Julian Assange can be told as an Odyssey, that is, a travelogue, a long-distance adventure during which the main character often loses but resists a lot and, above all, ends up going home. It is the story of a survivor. This odyssey is also ours, an odyssey of the rule of law, of slow deterioration. Still, we hope, in the end, for a vital awakening of our institutions to save the foundations of democracy.

We do not equate Assange with Odysseus, so we do not use the term Odyssey literally. It is not the character that interests us but the very principle of the epic in which he is caught. This epic tells more than himself than his own story, and that is what we want to talk about: What does Julian Assange mean?

The epics

As in The Odyssey, we will formalise our journey through the Forum by means

of epics. Theoretically, the Odyssey comprises 24 epics, but we will leave it to History to write the last chapters.

The 20 epics are divided into four themes:

Wikileaks and the new Prometheus, The punishment of the state apparatus, The Foundation of the Rule of Law, and The King is naked.

Each theme is composed of several songs: a song can be a poem, an interview with a witness to history such as Rafael Correa (president of Ecuador from 2007 to 2017), or Jennifer Robinson (Julian Assange's lawyer), experts such as Geoffroy de Lagasnerie (philosopher and sociologist), Julien Pieret (director of the Centre for Public Law at the ULB), and Françoise Tulkens (Belgian judge at the European Court of Human Rights from 1998 to 2012), as well as interventions prepared by part of the public before the Forum.

The idea is to bring together different approaches, interventions and perceptions.

The Chorus

We are sensitive to the origins of theatre as well as to the origins of democracy...

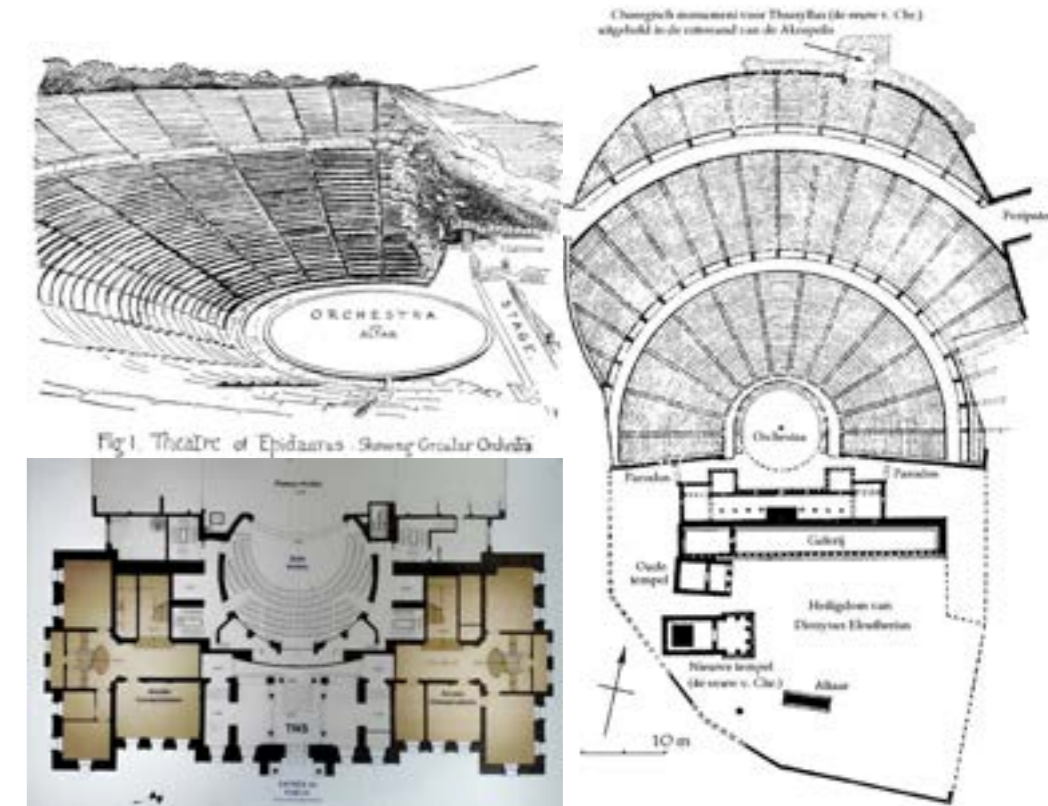
The chorus represents the assembly of citizens, women, and older men, according to the needs of the story-telling of the ancient plays. Here, we want to create a chorus composed of our evening assembly: witnesses/experts, team members and spectators. This chorus of citizens will be placed on chairs at the front of the stage on the garden side to create the place of the witness, on the edge between the audience and the stage. This is where the audience's performative role will be played; a chair will be dedicated to this intervention: they will be invited to join the choir, in turn, to take a text and read it at a dedicated moment.

We have taken up the principle of the sculpture *Anything to say?* by Davide Dormino and Charles Glass, i.e. to leave an empty chair, accessible at any time, for the spectator.

We also thought of Marina Abramovic's performance, *The artist is present*, where the artist left an empty chair for the spectator to sit in front of it in a confrontation with the artist's gaze.

The public

A group of about twenty people whom we met during the workshops will accompany us to prepare three types of interventions: questions from the floor addressed to the witnesses/experts, interventions with pre-prepared content and accompaniment of the team during the evening. For the wider public who wishes to get involved during the evening, we have planned a performative and inclusive device based on previously chosen texts.



The lights

In its epilogue to The Trial of Julian Assange, Nils Melzer describes: *'Even in the darkest room, the light of a single candle is enough to enable everyone to see; Julian Assange has lit such a candle with his work. He has exposed crimes, abuse and corruption that had been concealed behind a curtain of secrecy. It was only a brief glimpse behind the curtain, but sometimes one glimpse is enough to change our entire worldview'* (The Trial of Julian Assange, p. 333).

We want to echo this light. Active audience members will be made visible in the auditorium by a light device. This is a way of saying that we do not want to let the darkness take hold and that each of us, in turn, and from where we speak, can bring this light to bear on the events.

'It is up to us not to let the fireflies disappear. To do this, however, we must

assume the freedom of movement, the withdrawal that is not withdrawal, the diagonal force, the ability to bring out bits of humanity, the indestructible desire.

Therefore, we must, in withdrawal from the kingdom and the glory, in the gap between the past and the future, become fireflies and thereby reform a community of desire, a community of emitted lights, of dances despite everything, of thought to be transmitted. To say yes in the night crossed by lights, and not to be satisfied with describing the no of the light that blinds us.'

Georges Didi-Huberman, *Survivance des lucioles*, Éditions de Minuit, 2009.

This text by George Didi-Huberman responds to Pasolini's implacable text on the disappearance of fireflies in the face of the blindness caused by institutionalised fascism in Italy. Today, Pasolini is dead, assassinated, but Julian Assange is still alive.

The screen

At the centre of the stage will be a slightly raised screen on which various video elements will be shown: interviews we have conducted with personalities who will not be able to attend on 24 January and archive documents.

The desk

On the court side, there will be a podium for the guests of the Forum, who will thus be standing in front of the audience, facing some of the spectators' prepared questions to replay the witnesses' questioning like a hearing during a trial. These rhythmic interventions allow us to work on the frontality of these moments, as if we, the spectators, had to judge the case.

The length

The event will last two hours. A cocktail reception will follow to facilitate the exchange of ideas after the session. We will start the Forum at 7 p.m. and close it at 10:30 p.m. after the drink.

The recording

The Forum will be accessible to both French and English-speaking audiences on two separate live broadcasting channels so that anyone interested who is not in Strasbourg can take part in the event. We are collaborating with the team of *Les indépendants* for production on the occasion of this performative evening. We want to keep a trace, to multiply the access to the event, to allow us to spread its history.

"An institute of history(ies) and documentation"

For us, this Forum is a place for constructing a narrative, *'an institute of history(s) and documentation,'* to quote the director Milo Rau, whose work has inspired us.

We do not claim to be neutral or exhaustive, and we have no intention of substituting ourselves for the state or international justice system that will deal with his case.

It is a challenge to go beyond the strictly political and/or legal framework in order to do artistic work which is, moreover, in phase with current events. The difficulty is to deal with a situation that is taking place in the present time and whose political and judicial outcome is not yet known. Creating a Forum for Theatre seemed to us the most obvious solution.

At the crossroads of documentary theatre and the Court of Opinion, our Forum attempts to open a public debate through a device where witnesses and experts are invited to share their expertise and testimony with the public, who are invited to actively participate in the process of rigorous investigation and evaluation of the situation.

Call for participation

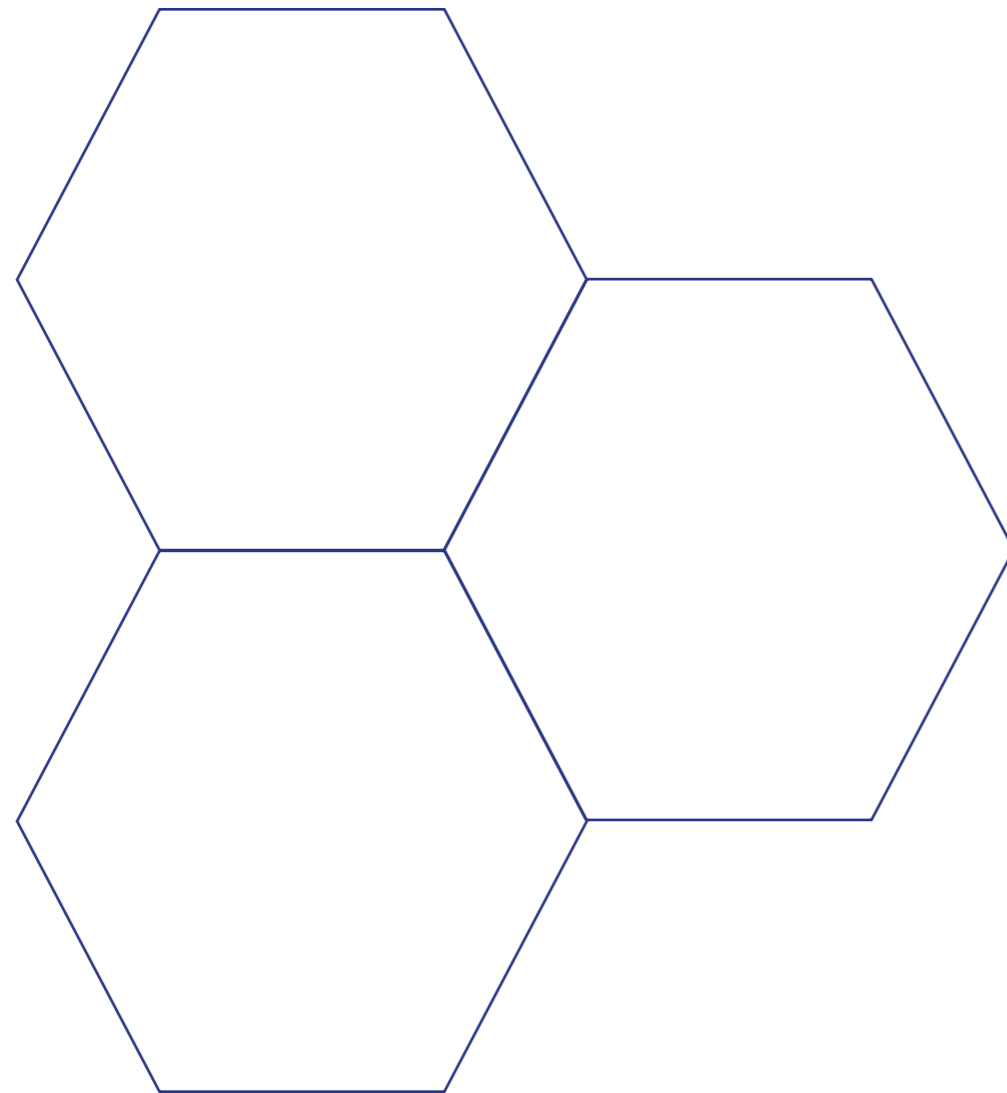
We are calling on the public to attend our presentation session on the Forum and the situation of Julian Assange on Friday, 9 December, in the TJP's foyer of the Grande Scène.

The following day, Saturday, 10 December, we will organise two workshops, the first from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and the second from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

During these workshops, we will work more specifically on the informational and narrative issues of the Forum to determine the essential questions that will feed the reflection of our witnesses/experts and allow the documentary account of 'our Odyssey' to progress.

The purpose of these three meetings on 9 and 10 December is to set up a voluntary group of about twenty people who will accompany us in the process of working on different levels of investigation (legal, informative, dramaturgical, aesthetic...)

We ask this group to participate in the Forum on 24 January at the TNS by asking questions and/or sharing reflections/interpellations with the invited witnesses/experts, or by assisting the team in order to ensure the smooth running of the event.



Example of a participatory workshop

On the place of journalism today - Proposal -

This workshop aims to identify points of interest for the students to include in the analysis and/or research work during the Forum.

In Nils Melzer's book, we have identified several passages that we can work from.

1. 1. The major media outlets

They have been partners of WikiLeaks. They published the leaks in 2010, which made headlines in 2010 and 2011. Today, what are they writing about the Assange case? How do they position themselves? What can we infer from this?

Références bibliographiques :
N. Melzer, « *The Trial of Julian Assange* », p.293
[Éditorial du Monde du 25 février 2020](#)
« *Julian Assange ne doit pas être extradé aux Etats-Unis* »
« *'Le Monde' soutient Julian Assange comme la corde soutient le pendu* » de [Laurent Dauré](#) in Julian Assange, *Le Combat du siècle pour la liberté d'in-*

former, 2020
« *Un appel de journaux en faveur de Julian Assange publier n'est pas un crime* » in [Le Monde, 28 novembre 2022](#)

2. 2. The power of words

In his book *The Trial of Julian Assange*, Nils Melzer describes the work of the Ecuadorian embassy after the change of presidency to show Assange in a negative light, of which the British press relaid some aspects. What interests us here is the difference in the reader's perception between word and image and, thus, the power of suggestion and persuasion of the headlines even if we have 'no proof'. P193. What do you think of these methods?

3. 3. What future for investigative journalism?

WikiLeaks and JA have published sensitive documents with the help of media outlets such as *Le Monde*, *Der Spiegel*, *The New York Times*, etc. In the evidence Nils Melzer gives us, no one before Julian Assange "had ever been charged under the Espionage Act for merely publishing sensitive documents" (*The Trial of Julian Assange*, p. 231)

In the past, journalists had published the same type of documents without being convicted: e.g. the Pentagon Papers in 1971 or the Watergate case.

This raises questions about the very future of the journalistic profession:

Is this intimidation? Is it a limitation on the work of journalists? A danger for the future of our society? Why do we talk about the fourth estate of the press? What is the function of journalists?

4. Secrecy of sources - Public interest

In the conception and organisation of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange has always emphasised the absolute necessity of source protection. Melzer's book demonstrates several examples of his ethical attitude towards this foundation of journalism.

But could we take a look at the ethics of journalists? What are the essential points necessary for the proper conduct of journalistic work?

Based on which actions, can we define what we do as journalism?

Sahra Datoussaid

Trained as a lawyer, she practised criminal law and asylum and immigration law as a researcher and lawyer at the Brussels Bar before changing direction. While studying drama, she co-founded the feminist association Fem&L.A.W. She now devotes herself entirely to her artistic projects.

Fabien Defendini

He is a member of the curators' platform Komplot and collaborates with Elsa Poisot, Virginie Strub, Adeline Rosenstein, Ayelen Parolin, Emilie Maréchal, Véronique Boudier, Carole Louis, Michael Grébil, Sarah Siré, Agostina d'Allessandro, Michael Hottier, and Aurélien Oudot. He has worked as a director of the Compagnie Thor with the choreographer Thierry Smits and the curator Antoine Pickels. He was responsible for the exhibition Zo veel Many Trees / Abattre with the creators' collective in LaVallée. He is currently working on developing the non-profit organisation Pola, which is committed to realising cultural events in line with the problems of the contemporary world.

Laetitia Defendini

She has collaborated with various artists and actors of the performing arts, Jérémie Bossone, Thierry Smits, Emilie Maréchal, Sarah Siré, Natalie Yalon, Iannis Heaulme, Stijn Kuppens, Stijn, Tcha Limberger, Celso y Frana, Alain Braulio, Samuel Dellicour, Michaël Grébil, Maria Jose Parga, as well as with structures: AKDT, Supervlieg, Carthago Delenda Est, De Pianofabriek, Poésie Parcours, Festival Troubles, Cours Florent, Cie Thor. She directed short films, music videos and commercials, as well as the theatrical feature film Les Enivrés by Ivan Viripaev, directed by Sarah Siré in 2021.

Raphael Rubbens

He graduated in stage design in Brussels and works as a stage designer, technician and lighting designer. Lighting design for Fanny Brouyaux, Raphaëlle Bruneau, Myriam Van Imschoot, Javier Suarez, Agnès Dru, Claude Schmitz, Stéphane Arcas, Manah Depauw, Catherine Bay, Leslie Marschaelk, Sarah Siré and Mélanie Rullier—Set designs for Clinic Orgasm Society, Raphaëlle Bruneau, Transquiquennal, Leyens, Claude Schmitz, Claire Gatineau, Cinéma Nova and City Min(e)d—Tech-

nical realisations for Kris Verdonck, KunstenFestivaldesArts and Médecins Sans Frontière (Brussels), the creation of articulated mannequins for Gisèle Vienne and the design and realisation of sets for the feature films by Martine Doyen and Güldem Durmaz.

Léa Siniscalco

After studying law and economics in Toulouse, Léa worked for several years at the Belgian law firm Daldewolf. At the same time, Léa continued her acting training at the Cours Florent in Brussels where she met Sahra Datoussaid and assisted Sarah Siré as well as other teachers and directors. As an actor, she participates in various artistic projects in film and on stage and teaches theatre to teenagers. She has recently started working with Pola asbl on the production and communication of its projects.

Sarah Siré

Director of VILLA by Guillermo Calderon, The Intoxicated by Ivan Viripaev, The Two Character Play by Tennessee Williams, Knives in the Chickens by David Harrower, The Three Sisters or Adaptation of Loss by Anton Chekhov. She collaborated on the writing of An

Irish story by Kelly Rivière and the direction of Tigrane by Jalie Barçilon. She is working on a dissertation on Karl Polanyi's work, The Great Transformation. She is a teacher at the Cours Florent in Brussels. She acted in Les murmures de l'Ombre by Mélanie Rullier, Les gentils by Olivier Ringer, Poumpo by Anthony Tueni.

Noémie Van Cauwelaert

After a master's degree in sociocultural animation and permanent education, she trained as an acting filmmaker at the Beatriz Flores Silva workshop. Today, as a final-year student at the Cours Florent Brussels, she is expanding her training by taking courses in contemporary dance, hip hop and singing. In addition, she works at the Marni Theatre on cultural mediation projects.

& Frank Barat

Author and film producer. He was the coordinator of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine from 2008 until 2014. He is the co-founder of BARC Productions, a film production company, created in Brussels. He has edited books with Noam Chomsky, Ilan Pappé, Ken Loach and Angela Davis. He was part of the founding team of the Festival Ciné-Palestine in Paris and the Palestine with Love festival in Brussels.



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