



Ahmed comes back

## DISTRIBUTION

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**Text** Alain Badiou

**Director** Didier Galas

**Artistic Collaborators** Jean-François Guillon (scenic design) and Emily Wilson (acting)

**Music** Joël Grare

**Sound Design and Stage Manager** Thibaut Champagne

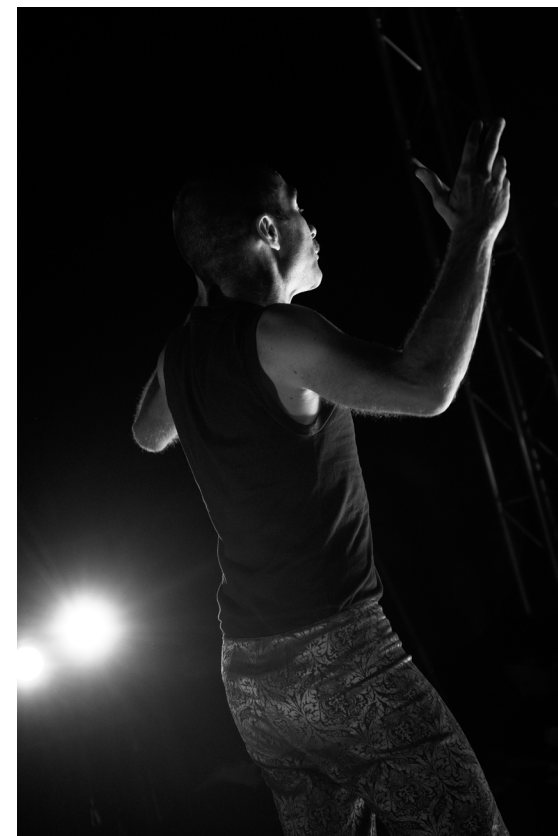
**Lighting** Perrine Cado

**Costumes** Catherine Sardi

**Mask** Erhard Stiefel

**English Translation** Joseph Litvak

**With** Didier Galas



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## INTRODUCTION

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Ahmed is a theatrical character born in France during the 1990s. He wears a mask, and finds his forerunners in the slaves of ancient comedy and the servants of classical comedy. In these comedies, the hero, slave or servant, shows that the people are more tenacious, more courageous, and more intelligent than their masters. The representatives of the people form an alliance with the young against fathers and other figures of power. They triumph by cleverness alone. This is indeed what Ahmed did in the nineties; he was the king of intrigues (*Ahmed the subtle*, in the play of the same name), a master of the theater (in *The Pumpkins*), an angry critic (in *Ahmed Gets Angry*), a philosopher of the housing projects (in *Ahmed the Philosopher*).

And now, here he is, back on the stage. He speaks... he holds forth... This is because the world has grown hard, and because one must know both how to combat its oppressive madness and how to keep an ironic distance. Ahmed indeed needs all his talents, as schemer, actor, critic, and thinker, so that his irony, his scathing portraits, his unflagging comedy, and his meditation, more profound than it seems, might protect him from the evils of our time.

**The play is for all audiences (ages 12 and over), and has a running time of 75 minutes. The modular scenery is designed to be easily transported and can be adapted to all sorts of spaces. The touring company consists of two people: a stage manager and an actor.**



## TEXT

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### Why Ahmed?

“I have always thought that, in the theater, comedy is the genre closest to the real. In particular, it is the closest to those groups who have been dispossessed, to the working class. The hero of ancient Greek and Roman comedies is a slave. The hero of classical Italian and French comedies is a servant, a valet. So who should be the hero of a modern comedy in a country like France? The answer is obvious: an immigrant who arrives there, after a dangerous and difficult trip, sometimes from very far away, hoping, sometimes against daunting odds, to find a place where he can do hard work for little pay. Because he must at all costs try to survive and support his family back home. This hero, for example, is the Algerian Ahmed.

In ancient and classical theater, the comic hero presides over complicated intrigues, creates strange and amusing situations, and supervises the victory of love and of free minds over conservatism and oppression. In order to do these things, he may assume disguises and play all the roles of the social comedy.

This is also what Ahmed does, in very different situations, which are those of the four plays from the tetralogy of the 1980s : *Ahmed the Subtle*, directly inspired by Molière’s play, *The Trickeries of Scapin*; *Ahmed Gets Angry*; *Ahmed the Philosopher*; and, finally, *The Pumpkins* [*Les Citrouilles*], directly inspired by Aristophanes’s play, *The Frogs* [*Les Grenouilles*].”

**Alain Badiou**

## TEXT

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### **Why Does Ahmed Come Back?**

“Ours is a period of crisis for an oppressive and exhausted capitalist society. Foreigners are treated with suspicion, arrested, deported. They die by thousands trying to cross seas in fragile and overloaded boats. Ahmed came back with them, and, from his solitude and his clandestine condition, he observes, he narrates, and he comments.

All the aspects of the everyday lives of foreigners without papers are reviewed, commented on, and sometimes raised to the level of a philosophy of the present. Ahmed, who is in a sense everybody, but also nobody, creates a universal spectacle out of language itself.

He speaks about the history of the poor, about strange and scorned proper names, about xenophobic secularism, about fights, about the status of women, about nighttime searches of people’s houses by the police, about the sudden event and the endless wait, about the social need to go forward masked. And he does all this while keeping a fierce distance, a passionate conviction devoid of all dogmatism. He speaks at the level of the real, but also with the force of great Ideas.

Ahmed, this proud “migrant,” this clandestine passenger of the actor Didier Galas, is finally coming back to us, behind the mask that makes him heir to the slave, the servant, and the Algerian worker. But this mask also makes him become, in the brilliance of his hidden power, this “anybody,” this “nobody” in particular, who is the hero of a future humanity without borders, or walls, or races or nations--a humanity that will bring out, in each of us, its demand to be constituted by women and men practicing the elementary duty of equality everywhere.”

**Alain Badiou**

## STAGING THE PLAY

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Above all, there is Alain Badiou's text, conceived as a formidable comic and reflexive machine. There is also Ahmed's mask, sculpted by Erhard Stiefel. At once powerful and complex, this mask possesses unprecedented force; it is an extraordinary tool for the actor.

We have decided to situate *Ahmed Comes Back* in a timeless and essential scenic ritual. Theatricality, here, is constituted by the body of the actor, outfitted with nothing more than a mask and a costume. Everything turns on this body and its ability to reveal all the comic, witty, and seditious sides of this project. Depending on the performance space, the scenic apparatus consists of boards or of adhesive tape delimiting the space of the play. The lighting is minimalist. The sound engineer and stage manager can be seen on the stage; he stands on the right side of the stage. Music is sometimes used to mark transitions and to accompany the dance sequences.

Each performance is based on a celebration of the present that dares to harmonize movement, emotion, diction, and thought. The mask, that precious cathartic instrument, frees the audience from having to worry about the person behind the character. The actor disappears. Thus, every bodily variation foregrounds the audacity of the text. When Ahmed declares that he has become a door, the spectators end up in effect seeing a door. Acting with a mask summons an extraordinary physical presence, a presence that reveals thought and meaning.

Our staging invites each spectator to let himself go, to let himself be surprised by laughter in order to grasp his own thinking. The goal is to provoke a light and joyous exercise of reflection, a pragmatic experiment with what theater can do, a practice in which everyone becomes (a little bit) passive in order to change something in himself, in the present moment.

The space of the play is imagined as open and adaptable, depending on the context. The actual environment of the performance is not hidden or disguised, but, on the contrary, affirmed as a basis of a scenic construction that is renewed each time. Light-weight and minimal design elements (a small portico, large drawings on paper, confetti) are used in keeping with the physical arrangement of the particular space in which the piece is being performed.

*The text of «Ahmed revient» has been published by Actes Sud (late June, 2018).*

# AHMED COMES BACK

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## How the English version, « Ahmed comes back », was created ?

Admittedly, when *Ahmed Comes Back* was first performed in France, it was not so easily received, for both good and less good reasons.

First of all, it should be noted that an undertaking like this one—involving an actor holding forth, with or without a mask—requires a great deal of fine-tuning “in public” before the show finds its ideal shape. It must be performed many times in order to find the right balance between the text and the non-verbal elements of the show, as well as the right combination of mockery, laughter, and narrative; only when these objectives been achieved is it possible to perform with the calm necessary for a the play to deliver the pleasure of interaction with its audiences. It is true, then, that, at the first performance, we had not quite arrived at the optimal conditions for performing the show.

But there is another, more complex reason. It is that the text advances a virulent critique of the country of the declaration of human rights (France) and of its fragile secular, republican, (anti)racist (un)certainities. To be sure, it does so with humor, but it does so nonetheless. A text with this ambition requires that the rhythm of performance and the mechanism of laughter be perfectly controlled; any glitches (of which there were some) cause resistance among the audience (especially, of course, on the part of “native-born” French people, good republicans, etc.). There was even ridiculous and exaggerated criticism unleashed against Alain Badiou. The same thing, by the way, happened twenty-five years earlier, when *Ahmed le subtil* (*Ahmed the Subtle*) was first performed at the Cloître des Carmes. This pattern bears thinking about.

But let us not dwell on it here. We indeed decided to move on, not to fixate on the negative reaction, so as to go beyond it—to reach the point where one can advance constructively, and where the show works best. And we must admit that our awareness of certain limitations of the provincial French cultural world gave rise to the idea to perform the show elsewhere, in another culture and language. We had only to agree to travel and to transform ourselves. In this case, we were able to do so thanks to a combination of favorable circumstances, and especially to our discussions with the translator, Joseph Litvak. Our decision was to do the show in English, the universal language—just as Ahmed himself is the “universal representative of true humanity.”

## AHMED COMES BACK

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From then on, a new phase of the project began. The first challenge was to go over certain nuances of the translation with Joseph Litvak; the next was to learn the text in English. These daily lessons involved a rethinking of the play, which in turn allowed us to refine its themes, to overhaul its structure, and to abbreviate it significantly. We were also working within a limited budget, which ended up having a very positive effect on the show by making it unusually light and portable. We were thus able to perform on empty stages with only ten or so large-scale drawings, a costume, a mask, and a few additional accessories (everything fitting into a suitcase weighing twenty kilos), and a touring team that consisted entirely of two people : an actor and a technician-designer-stage manager-sound engineer-props person and trusted confidant (all in one person) : Jean-François Guillon.

This is how *Ahmed Comes Back* was presented for the first time in India, in Auroville, then in Pondicherry (Tamil-Nadu). Our interaction with the audience lived up to our most enthusiastic expectations; laughing spectators, endowed with humor, intelligence, and a clear sense of self-mockery; Badiou's text struck home. Each performance even ended with a standing ovation. Then, the coronavirus arrived, with all the sheltering in place that it necessitated, and we had to postpone the performance that had been scheduled at Ashoka University in New Delhi.

We are currently preparing a second Indian tour, as well as a tour of the United States, to be conducted in the coming seasons. Of course, the French version, given a new energy thanks to the English translation, continues to be available for performance on French stages.

First performed in March 2020, in the Kalabhumi amphitheater in **Auroville, India**, *Ahmed Comes Back* has also been presented at the Indianostrum Theatre in **Pondicherry, India**.



## GENESIS OF THE PROJECT

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### **Didier Galas, Alain Badiou and Ahmed, a long-lasting relationship**

Didier Galas met Alain Badiou during the first production of *Ahmed le subtil* (*Ahmed the Subtle*).\* This was in 1994 at the Comédie de Reims. Following up on the success of *Ahmed le subtil*, Alain Badiou wrote *Ahmed philosophe* (*Ahmed the Philosopher*), inspired by Didier Galas's improvisations. First performed in 1996, that play was performed more than two hundred times in the following years. Later came *Ahmed se fâche* (*Ahmed Gets Angry*) and *Les Citrouilles* (*The Pumpkins*), first performed in 1996 and 1997 respectively.

In 1998, Didier Galas left the Comédie de Reims to go to Japan, where he studied Noh, the classical Japanese dance-drama. There, in Kyoto, he staged *Ahmed soliloque* (*Ahmed Soliloquizes*, a collection of excerpts from *Ahmed philosophe*), his first work as a director.

Didier Galas worked with Alain Badiou again in 2015, directing the first production of Badiou's version of Plato's Republic, which was performed at the Avignon Festival with students from the École régionale d'acteurs de Cannes et Marseille and a group of amateurs. On January 16, 2017, Alain Badiou celebrated his eightieth birthday as well as the final session of his seminar on "The Immanence of Truths". Didier Galas's gift to him was a performance of *Ahmed soliloque*. This experience inspired both Badiou and Galas to renew their acquaintance with the timeless figure of Ahmed, bringing him back into the world of today.

\*The character of Ahmed was created as the result of a collaboration among Alain Badiou, Christian Schiaretti, Erhard Stiefel, Didier Galas, and the entire team at the Comédie de Reims.

REHEARSALS

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## TOURING SHOW

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**First performed in July 2018**, as an itinerant show at **the Festival d'Avignon 2018**, *Ahmed revient* has also been presented in the following places :

2018 : La FabricA, **Avignon** ; La Passerelle, Scène Nationale de **Saint-Brieuc** ; Théâtre Jacques Brel, **Pantin** (in collaboration with the La Commune National Dramatic Center, **Aubervilliers**)

2019 : Théâtre de **Rungis** ; La Comédie de **Reims**, National Dramatic Center ; Collège des Bernardins, **Paris** ; National Dramatic Center of the Indian Ocean-Théâtre du Grand Marché, **St. Denis de la Réunion** ; **Pfalzbau Festival (Germany)**

2020 : Le Parvis, scène nationale de **Tarbes**, Pyrénées

**Co-producers** : Avignon Festival, Théâtre du Fil de l'Eau (Pantin), Théâtre de Rungis.

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**With help from** the Villa Mais d'Ici (Aubervilliers), the Commune National Dramatic Center, Aubervilliers  
Residence at the FabricA, Avignon Festival

## AHMED'S REPRESENTATION

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## WHO ARE THE HAUTS PARLEURS ?

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We are **The Hauts Parleurs (The Loudspeakers)** and we consider the future with a commitment to sharing the present. We are a research and production center founded by **Didier Galas** (actor-director) and **Jean-François Guillon** (visual artist).

In our work, we always present a positive interpretation of the world. We make many connections between literature, the visual arts, and the arts of the theater. Our aim is to go to the heart of things by means of simplicity at the level of acting and graphic minimalism at the level of scenery. We see poetry, politics, and philosophy as the driving forces of meaningful speech—speech that is resonant, witty, visual, or musical, always embodied. That is our fundamental aesthetic.

Our workshop is a laboratory for collective research; when younger artists join us, this laboratory turns into a site of teaching and learning. Our political and artistic commitment comes from our lives as citizens, and we always see our projects as acts of popular education and shared knowledge, in which humor and farce often play a central role. That is who we are.

### Recent Productions by the Hauts Parleurs :

- *La Vertu Héroïque (Heroic Virtue)* - 2017
- *La Vérité sur Pinocchio (The Truth about Pinocchio)* - 2015
- *Rabelais versus Nostradamus* - 2014
- *Kotaba No Hajimari (The Invention of the Word)* - 2014

### Forthcoming Projects :

- *L'Escroc Divin, celui qui (se) joue des tours (The Divine Crook, Who Plays Tricks [on Himself])* musical trio based on Winnebago stories)
- *Rien ne va plus (No More Bets, third part of the Rabelais Triptych)*
- *M.M* (performance on masks, tradition, and cultural transmission)
- *Sur le champ (Here and Now, original adaptation of the Bhagavad Gita)*



## BIOGRAPHY

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### Didier Galas

A former student at the Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique in Paris, Didier Galas received his training from, among others, Claude Régy, Mario Gonzales, and Bernard Dort. For the next several years, he acted under the direction of Philippe Clévenot, Aurélien Recoing, Jacques Rivette, Ludovic Lagarde, Claude Régy, Christian Schiaretti, and Patricia Allio. A few years later, he continued his education in Japan and China. His contact with Eastern theater would have a particular influence on his work as a director.

Having lived in Asia and in South America on numerous occasions, he first performed *Monnaie de singes* (*Funny Money*) at the Avignon Festival in 2000, and this led him into explorations of the figure of the comic servant: *Le petit (H)arlequin* (*The Little [H]arlequin*, 2001) and its Chinese and Japanese versions (2005 and 2010 respectively), followed by a choreographed version, *Trickster* (2010), and a musical version, *aïlòviou* (2013). He has also adapted and directed works by Miguel de Cervantes, Witold Gombrowicz, and especially François Rabelais: *Devoir est vertu héroïque* (*Duty Is a Heroic Virtue*, 2006), *Paroles horribles et dragées perlées* (*Horrifying Words and Sugar Pearls*, 2007) and *Parlaparole* (*By Way of Speech*, 2012). He spent many years working in Japan, where he performed *Kotoba no Majimari* ("The Invention of the Word") in September 2014. He also recently collaborated on the staging of the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, and directed Alain Badiou's *Plato's Republic* at the Avignon Festival in 2015.

His association with the visual artist Jean-François Guillon resulted in a new name for the company: The Hauts Parleurs. Since its founding, he originated (in 2015) *La Vérité sur Pinocchio*, which will be performed at the Auditorium of the Louvre, among other venues. In collaboration with Jean-François Guillon, he directed two plays: *Rabelais vs Nostradamus* (2014) and *La Vertu Héroïque* (2017), the first two parts of a triptych on the work of François Rabelais.

In Amsterdam, Didier works with Katrien van Beurden on subjects combining contemporary wars and traditional masks. Didier Galas teaches acting with masks at the École Régionale d'Acteur of Cannes and Marseille. He frequently helps organize masterclasses on improvisation throughout the world.



## BIOGRAPHY

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### Jean-François Guillon

After studying at the School of Beaux-arts in Paris, Jean-François Guillon developed a sculptural technique focusing on the “underside” of writing. In 1994, with Pierre Ardouvin and Véronique Boudier, he founded the exhibition space “À l'écart” in Montreuil; in 1997, with Jean-François Courtilat, he opened the Ipso Facto gallery in Nantes. In 1999, he received funding for the first exhibition of the Délégation aux Arts Plastiques, and throughout the first decade of this century, he continued his experimentation with the written word: aleatory visual poems, minimalist constructions, conceived for exhibitions or on-site projects.

He also continued to do work in photography on the sign in urban space, halfway between signage and poetics (Choses lues, “Things Read,” published by Manuella Press, with text by Olivier Cadiot, 2008). His work has been shown recently in the Contextes gallery in Belleville, at the 19 arts center in Montbéliard, and at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, where he designed the sets for “Parade,” an exhibition about toys.

He also works in performance, mixing gestures, signs, and objects in space. These performances seek to open up imaginative possibilities by means of “thinking in acts,” with words and movement, without abandoning a certain burlesque style. They were recently presented as part of Philosophy Night at the School of Beaux-arts in Paris, and at UNESCO in 2018 and 2019. In 2021, his work may be seen at the Devinière (the Rabelais Museum) in Chinon, as part of the ACT(e)s residency, and at the Jean Cocteau Cultural Center in the town of Les Lilas. Finally, since 2017, he has been the set designer for the shows performed by Didier Galas.

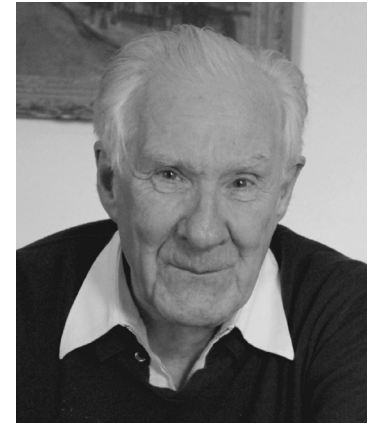


## BIOGRAPHY

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### Alain Badiou

Born in 1937, in Rabat, Morocco, Alain Badiou studied philosophy at the École normale supérieure, and graduated at the head of his class in 1960. At the ENS, he met Althusser, Canguilhem, and Lacan. He also became involved in the opposition to the war in Algeria. Appointed Professor of Philosophy in Reims, then at the experimental university of Vincennes (Paris 8) from its founding in May 1968, he devoted himself to the Maoist project into the 1980s. During this period, as a fellow traveler of the director Antoine Vitez, Alain Badiou focused on writing for the theater (his plays include *L'Écharpe rouge* (*The Red Scarf*), among others). In 1988, he published a philosophical summa, *L'Être et l'événement* (English translation: *Being and Event*, 2005); its sequel, *Logiques des mondes* (English translation: *Logics of Worlds*, 2009) appeared in 2006. He was named Professor at the École normale supérieure in 1999, and Professor Emeritus in 2004. His work is vast and diverse, comprising novels, plays, philosophical essays (*La République de Platon*, 2012; English translation: *Plato's Republic*, 2013), books on politics (*De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom ?*, 2007; English translation: *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, 2010), and on mathematics (*Éloge des mathématiques*, 2015; English translation: *In Praise of Mathematics*, 2016). A towering figure in the French intellectual landscape, Alain Badiou is also renowned throughout the world.



## PARTNER THEATERS OF THE HAUTS PARLEURS

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The TNB in Rennes (where Didier Galas was an associate artist from 2010 to 2013), Le Bateau Feu - Scène nationale de Dunkerque (where Didier Galas was an associate artist from 2007 to 2012), Les Passerelles in Pontault Combault (2018), TNBA in Bordeaux (2017), Théâtre-Scène Nationale de Mâcon (2017), L'Agora d'Évry (2017), La Scène Watteau in Nogent sur Marne (2016), the TNP-Villeurbanne (2015), La Passerelle-Scène Nationale de Saint Brieuc (2015), La Nef-Manufactures d'Utopie in Pantin (2015), the Théâtre du Fil de l'Eau in Pantin (2015), the Avignon Festival (Sujets à vif, 2008, and Alain Badiou's La République de Platon, 2015), the Louvre Museum, Paris (2014 and 2015) and the Louvre Museum, Lens (2012 and 2016), The Rayon Frais Festival in Tours (2014), the Gekken workshop in Kyoto and the Bird Theater in Tottori, Japan (2014), the French Institute (African Tour, 2011), the Fondazione Teatro Piemonte Europa in Turin (2011), the Spectacles Vivants at the Pompidou Center in Paris, the Théâtre de la Cité Internationale in Paris, the Fondation Cartier, the Théâtre de la Coupe d'Or in Rochefort, Bonlieu-Scène nationale of Annecy, the Théâtre Molière-Scène nationale de Sète et du bassin du Thau, La Passerelle/Gap-Scène nationale des Alpes du Sud, Le Phénix-scène nationale de Valenciennes, the Comédie de Reims...

## CONTACTS

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