

# AMERICAN THEATRE

JULY/AUGUST 2013 THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

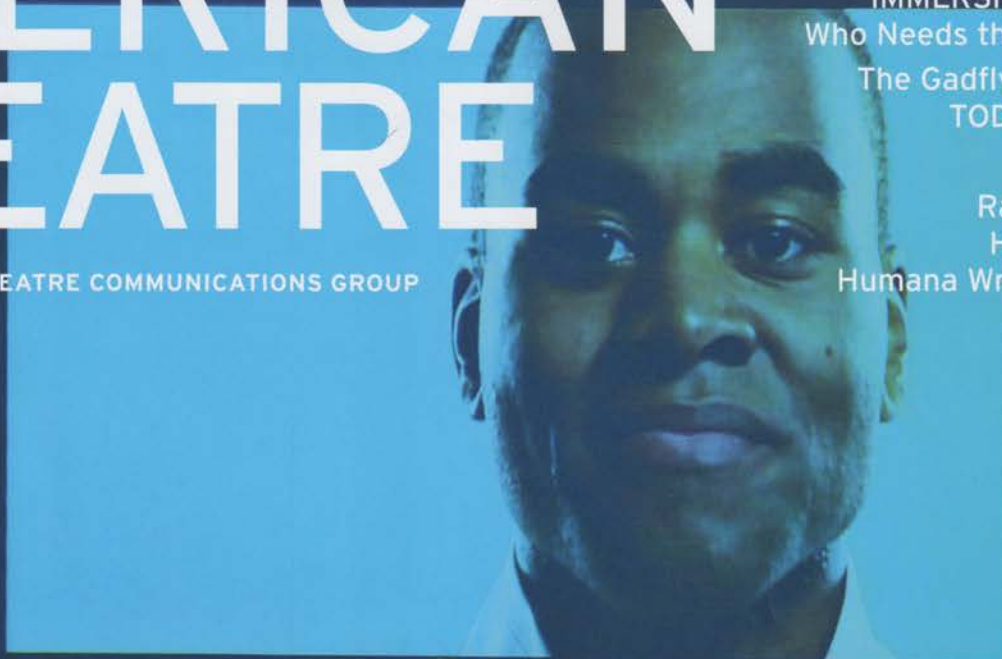
The Complete Text:  
Ayad Akhtar's DISGRACED

IMMERSIVE DRAMA:  
Who Needs the 4th Wall?

The Gadfly Role Suits  
TODD LONDON

**PLUS:**

Rajiv Joseph,  
Headwaters,  
Humana Writers Speak



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Hiam Abbass stars in *Phèdre les oiseaux*, in France.

COMPILED BY NICOLE ESTVANIK TAYLOR

### France, Morocco, Palestine, Israel

**PHÈDRE LES OISEAUX:** The Phaedra myth has been told many times. Euripides titled his play *Hippolytus*, after Phae-

dra's stepson, whose rejection of her love seals his doom. The 17th-century French dramatist Jean Racine called his piece *Phèdre*. Eugene O'Neill took the theme of desire for his headline (and set the story under New England elms).

In *Phèdre les oiseaux* (*Phaedra the Birds*), French dramatist Frédéric Boyer is interested in "the terrible song of our own banality." He imagines the title figure speaks to us in the present day, reclaiming and reframing her own story. The tale's spanning of time and cultures is matched by the itinerant nature of director Jean-Baptiste Sastre's staging. Debuting in France in early 2012, the production has traveled to several nations (including a recent U.S. stop in Los Angeles). In each country, the lead actress, Hiam Abbass, plays opposite a different Hippolytus, beginning with Sastre himself in France, and a new chorus (the "birds" of the title) drawn from each community. The Palestinian Abbass, who was raised in Israel and is a longtime resident of France, has delivered the title role so far in French, English and Arabic. For an autumn tour to Palestine and Israel, she will speak the poetic text in Hebrew. (Different actresses have been cast to play the role in Italian and German.) "I don't feel it's exported material from French culture," says Abbass. "It is a creation and a learning process within the community."

The result is a telling that belongs neither to Greece, nor to France, nor to America—nor even to Phaedra so much

## CUBAN HOSPITALITY

BY ERICA NAGEL

**WHEN OUR TOUR BUS PULLED** over into the tall grass of the Cuban countryside, at first I thought: "Maybe we're breaking down." The road had become dusty and narrow as we'd left behind the Soviet-style bungalows in Cumanayagua. Moments later, our cohort of U.S. theatre folk was greeted by an enthusiastic parade of professional theatremakers and community participants, led by José Oriol González, the founder and director of Teatro de los Elementos. Oriol (as he prefers to be called) wore a black T-shirt emblazoned with the English words "Dissent Is Patriotic." Later, when we met with the ministry of culture in Havana, an official told us, "Oh yes. Oriol is very seductive. Soon he will have us all wanting to move to the countryside to live on his farm."

Teatro de los Elementos was founded in 1990 in the tradition of Cuban *Teatro Nuevo*, based on principles of collectivism, social justice and of creative collaboration between professionals and amateurs. The most famous example of this genre is Teatro Escambray, founded in the 1960s by theatremakers who had trouble reconciling Havana's professional scene with the revolutionary ideals of Marxism, including glorification of the *guajiros*, or farmers in the countryside. Like all professional theatres in Cuba, Teatro de los Elementos

is fully funded by the Cuban government.

A little girl in an orange bathing suit blew a long note on a conch shell and our tour began. We followed a winding path deep into the farm, past children of local farmers posed like statues, some costumed as famous revolutionaries. We were charmed by an impeccably precise physical performer with a life-sized Charlie Chaplin puppet. We met designer Alfredo Sánchez, whose intricately découpaged chairs and paintings of political and religious figures featured prominently in their current outdoor production of *Uncle Vanya*. We visited the on-site home, complete with chicken coop, of Yaine de Castro, the director of the company's youth program, who told us, "*Mi casa es su casa*." And we spoke with Oriol and performer Betsy Medina about the company's history and repertoire, including a piece from the late 1990s that spurred policy changes to protect the civil rights of those living with AIDS. Later we saw Betsy and her colleagues practicing theatre games of mirroring and zip-zap-zop. A fellow delegate whispered to me, "Actor training is actor training is actor training."

Our final stop was a thatch-roofed wooden structure, where the actors demonstrated the Playback technique they often use to make work, creating impromptu physical and sound-based pieces based on stories we shared with them about our trip. Afterward, we all shared



A performer greets visitors to the farm of Teatro de los Elementos.

coffee and fresh fruit juices, and we joined our hosts and local teenagers in a joyful dance party.

The visit to Teatro de los Elementos was a shining example of something I experienced repeatedly during my eight days in Cuba: exceptional, generous, and seemingly effortless hospitality to an audience. As our bus departed, I jotted down, "*Mi casa es su casa*. Let's make that true for our audiences too."

Erica Nagel is director of education and engagement at New Jersey's McCarter Theatre Center. She traveled to Cuba in late March with TCG's Cuba Exploratorium trip for World Theatre Day. Visit Teatro de los Elementos at [www.teatroloselementos.cult.cu](http://www.teatroloselementos.cult.cu).