

# **GOOD PRACTICES FACTORY**

February – November 2025

a **COMMON STORIES** project

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CommonLAB 2025 Presentation Day, performance by Emmanuel Ndefo © Jérémy Piot

## COMMON STORIES, THREE YEARS OF THOUGHT, EXPERIMENT, DEEDS, AND DOUBTS IN A TUMULTUOUS EUROPE

### A Conversation with Hortense Archambault and Virginie Dupray

Hortense Archambault, Director of MC93 and initiator of *Common Stories*, and Virginie Dupray, who conceived and is now coordinating the programme, look back on three years of *Common Stories* in today's Europe.

#### EUROPE TODAY

**Hortense Archambault (HA):** What is Europe? Who are Europeans? These were the underlying questions behind the *Common Stories* project, with the challenge, for me, of changing the perception of the norm of the 'typical European'. Performing arts institutions are, potentially, places where this norm can be transformed, even if they are less powerful than the *mass media*. This is therefore where we must act, both in terms of the artistic aspect (Which bodies to show? Which stories to tell?) and the composition of the institutions themselves. Europe has no other reality than that of a utopian project, still under construction. In this sense, it is made up equally of those who were born European, those who have just arrived, and those who dream of Europe and desire it, from near and far. If we look at Europe through a different lens, this dream of creating a common space after such a bloody history, with such diverse languages and beyond nationalism, is not at all obvious. How can it hold together? Can it continue to hold together, in a global perspective of *mondialité* (globality), to borrow a concept from Édouard Glissant? And this in a context that may seem increasingly divided. On the one hand, the climate crisis is forcing us to think transnationally, and awareness of the global nature of humanity's destiny has never been stronger; on the other hand, fascists are trying to sort and select people. Furthermore, the ghosts of the colonial past and the issue of migration continue to haunt the European project.

**Virginie Dupray (VD):** Nationalist rhetoric is nothing new. But it seems to me that what was previously just rhetoric is now becoming a political tool, a way of governing.

Identity fantasies are growing within societies that are, paradoxically, becoming increasingly mixed. Our societies are becoming more fragmented, tensions are rising, and this is accompanied by growing suspicion towards people who do not fit the norm, rising from those who, willingly or not, consciously or not, embody that norm.

#### COMMON STORIES, A PLACE OF TRANSFORMATION

**HA:** The virtue of European cooperation projects is that they give concrete form to abstract desires. This includes the deadlines that bind us, the meetings where we report on our work to each other. This forces us to really try out new experiences, both for our institutions and with a view to sharing them more widely. In the *Good Practices* part of the project, we shared a fundamental question: diversity. And three interrogations to start unravelling that question: What is diversity and how can we understand it? Why do we perceive this issue as radical and not self-evident? And, since we had a feeling that things would take time: What is duration? As we had decided not to be too prescriptive, each of us embarked on a very different process within our own theatre. There were as many paths as there were partners. None of our approaches could be modelled, but they were all inspiring and fed off each other. Moving forward together gave us the courage to tackle this fundamental social issue of racial discrimination. I hope that the documentation we are producing will encourage others to take the plunge themselves, despite the lack of a model to follow.

**VD:** In the initial project as I had imagined it, the actions to be implemented within the framework of the *Good Practices Factory* were more clearly defined. But working remotely with teams who don't know each other on common themes is a pipe dream! Faced with reality – the contexts, desires, operating methods, specifications and methodologies of the teams, or projects already underway – the only thing to do, to maintain meaning for each partner, was to break the mould. And perhaps that is the very nature of this project: how to create bonds, listen to each other, find complementarities, reflect on our own practices and circulation, beyond our differences? This, of course, without creating a model or a ready-made recipe, because that would be dangerous. One of the successes of *Common Stories* is that it has managed to find ways of working together, helping us understand each other and adapting, remotely and without any disruption.

## THE LANGUAGE OF DIVERSITY

**HA:** Working on this issue of diversity for three years has enabled us to find a new language, a new way of telling stories. Words are not neutral, and this is a fascinating challenge for people who work in the performing arts. Should we say 'black' or 'Afro-descendant', 'diversity' or 'difference'? Does the term 'difference' imply the existence of a norm? Internally, this question of the norm has come up a lot. Today, the change in the perception of the norm is accelerating. A revolution in representations and demands is underway, but it is unevenly distributed within society. As a result, I believe that the differences in the definition of this norm have rarely been so great. This is an ongoing issue that we must deal with on an almost daily basis, which was not the case ten years ago. How can we find the right approach, the right tone, the right vocabulary, the right use of words?

**VD:** Many white people, for example, are uncomfortable with the term 'racialised', whereas minority groups often use it to make demands. We need to be able to listen to that. The spectre of race is complex. As a social construct, race has always been there and active, and I believe it will remain so. So how do we talk about it?

In Germany, the use of the word 'race' has been banned in all public texts. But just because we ban a word that scares people doesn't mean that reality disappears. In the same way, I am sometimes shocked to hear grand declarations of global solidarity or 'against violence' in certain theatres that avoid naming anything. Yet recognition comes precisely from naming. From giving a name.

Imagining *Common Stories* also meant accepting that our certainties would be shaken. Most often, we can accept being shaken up when our survival depends on it, or when we have a framework that is solid enough to weather the shock. Institutions have that foundation: a history, a philosophy, an economic base that allows them to accept being jolted by stories, narratives and people who do not come from the same place. For me, that's what *Common Stories* was all about: how we can open ourselves up to the unknown and produce something that transcends discomfort and fear by transforming those emotions into shared energy.



© Julien Pebrel

Hortense Archambault has been Director of the Maison de la Culture de Seine-Saint-Denis (MC93) since 2015, where she has developed a public theatre project open to the city and intended for everyone – a place that constantly re-examines the question of the common grounds. Hortense began her career in the production department of the Festival d'Avignon, before becoming administrator of the Augusto Boal's Théâtre de l'Opprimé in Paris the following year, and then the production administrator of the Parc et la Grande Halle de la Villette public institution until 1999. She returned to Avignon, at first as an administrator, in 1999, alongside Vincent Baudriller, before the duo succeeded Bernard Faivre d'Arcier as directors of the Festival from the 2004 edition onwards. Together, they re-established the Festival team in Avignon and developed the programme in collaboration with different associate artists each year. Their last edition in July 2013 was marked by the opening of the FabricA, a residence and rehearsal space for the Festival.



© A. Fabregat

Navigating between the African continent, France and Portugal, where she lives, Virginie Dupray has been accompanying artists and dreams, writing and implementing projects for over twenty years. Director of Communications at the Centre National de la Danse from 1999 to 2003, she then co-directed Studios Kabako in the DRC alongside Faustin Linyekula until 2020. For the past five years, she has been working more specifically with three powerful women, Nadia Beugré, Dorothée Munyaneza and Marcela Santander Corvalán, and has written the *Common Stories* project with Hortense Archambault, which she has been coordinating for three years. Passionate about the issue of emergence, she has taught or regularly teaches project production and management in the DRC, Ivory Coast, Togo, France and elsewhere.

## TIME AND TRUST

**HA:** I always find people or institutions that seem to have solved all the problems suspicious. We have to accept that real change takes time, that it cannot be decreed, but that we must question ourselves, shake ourselves up, get emotional, get moving – in short, get to work. And we must do it gently, otherwise it won't work.

**VD:** The question of time is indeed essential. Three years is not long. We first need to get to know each other in order to establish the minimum level of trust necessary for any collaboration. The question of scale is just as important. Having supported 25 artists through *CommonLAB* may not seem like much. But for many of them, this experience has really changed the game in a lasting way.

On the institutional level, it was important to embody things, which brings us back to the need to name them. Diversity is not just an idea: it is about faces, names, sometimes difficult trajectories, and people with sensitivities and fragilities linked to their history and their status as emerging and migrant artists. You mentioned gentleness, Hortense, and I would add kindness and listening as well. Providing a trusting environment is essential for welcoming artists who are sometimes in precarious situations, with heavy baggage, and who arrive with a certain frustration towards an institution that has not, until now, identified, recognised, or supported them.

The relationship is complex to enact. But when we manage to resolve misunderstandings, the inevitable frictions and tensions, and clarify everyone's expectations and intentions, it becomes extremely rewarding for both sides.

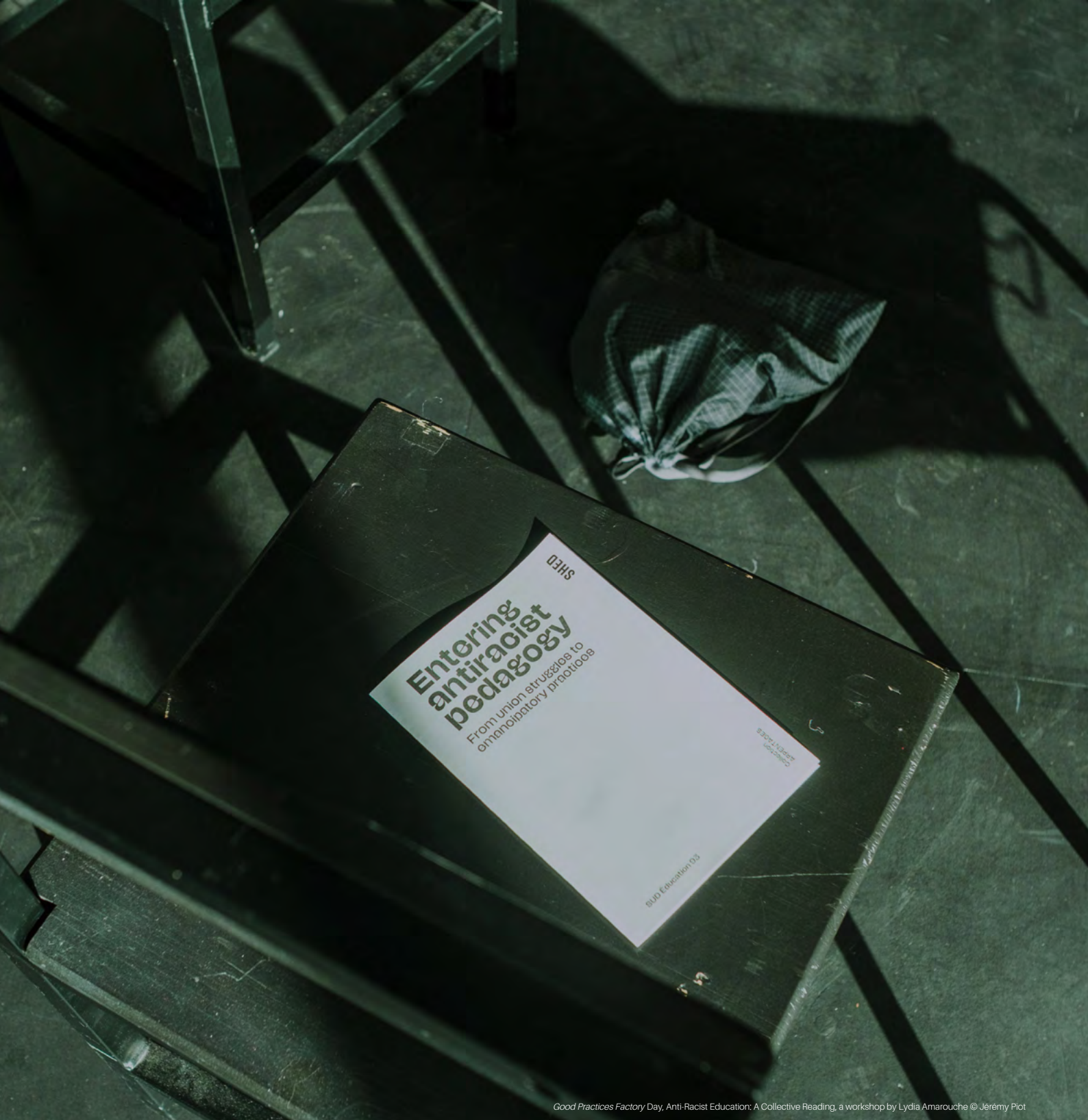
Creating familiarity changes everything and allows us to build over the long term.

**HA:** Indeed, the articulation of *Good Practices* and *CommonLAB* – identifying, supporting and welcoming these 25 artists into our homes – has been very important. I feel that it has accelerated the artists' careers and saved them time.

I am also very touched by the fact that they have created an artistic community that is completely beyond our control. If *Common Stories* had been just that, it would have been great. But it also invited us to take a critical look at our practices, to rethink the way we produce, programme and communicate. Until then, the MCg3 had done little work on emerging creation. It also raised new questions of a social, psychological and even mental health nature. I don't know if this is linked to our societies' resistance to change, but some artists arrive very wounded. They are extremely sensitive to behaviours that might seem insignificant to us. We need to be aware of this and try to move forward anyway, without letting this completely paralyse us. The trust you mention, Virginie, allows us to name violence, both suffered and committed. Being able to say and hear that a gesture or a phrase was violent, even if that was not the intention, helps everyone. Together, we delve into the substance of a possible shared narrative.

Interview by **Aïnhua Jean-Calmettes**, October 2025





Good Practices Factory Day, Anti-Racist Education: A Collective Reading, a workshop by Lydia Amarouche © Jérémy Piot

# THE GOOD PRACTICES FACTORY IN BOBIGNY

Since 2024, the MC93 GPF group has been developing a series of actions to raise awareness about racism-related issues within its team.

The main objectives are to raise team awareness about the roots and manifestations of racism and to identify problematic behaviours and comments in professional contexts, while providing concrete tools for recognising and fighting discrimination and promoting an open and constructive dialogue on these sensitive issues.

In order to reach these goals, MC93 has chosen to call upon guest speakers (artists, authors, activists...) specialised in the fields of anti-racism and social sciences to conduct presentation sessions, followed by open conversations. MC93 employees were invited to participate, without obligation.

## ACTIVITIES IN 2025

Three sessions took place at the MC93 in 2025:

### → Meeting with Léonora Miano on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2025

(22 people attending)

Drawing on her book *L'opposé de la blancheur* (*The Opposite of Whiteness*), Cameroonian author Leonora Miano deconstructed the historical notion of 'whiteness.'

### → Meeting with Prisca Ratovonasy, on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025

(16 people attending)

A diversity and inclusion consultant, an author, and a podcast producer, Prisca Ratovonasy provides support on issues of diasporic identity and the representation of minority groups in the performing arts. She also served as Soa Ratsifandrihana's external perspective on these issues in the show *Fampitaha, fampita, fampitana*, presented at the MC93 in September 2024.

### → Meeting with Lydia Amarouche and Houyem Rebai on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2025 (20 people attending)

A founder of the Co-prisme association, a curator and a publisher, Lydia Amarouche introduced the participants to the book *Entrer en pédagogie antiraciste* (*Entering Anti-Racist Education*), published in 2023 by Shed. She was in conversation with Houyem Rebai, schoolteacher and co-author of the book.

As a second phase, the MC93 asked Lydia Amarouche to design an anti-racist training for all MC93 employees. In April-June 2025, the GPF representatives met several times **Lydia Amarouche** to implement a training programme. The implementation of training for the team is part of the MC93 commitment to create an exemplary professional environment where everyone feels respected and valued. It is an essential step to ultimately contribute to the individual development of the teams and strengthen MC93's position as a socially responsible organisation.

On the 8<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2025, the workshop *Understanding and Acting on Everyday Racial Discrimination* raised awareness of the mechanisms of racial discrimination, ranging from cognitive biases to stereotypes and microaggressions.

Through socio-historical contextualisation, theoretical tools, and practical exercises, the workshop offered keys to identify and act on everyday racial discrimination, whether in the context of collective projects, interpersonal relationships, or professional relationships involving hierarchical factors. Participants were encouraged to develop a critical stance, to be vigilant about their own biases, and to acquire strategies to respond to discriminatory situations.

The whole MC93 permanent team participated, on a compulsory basis this time.

At the participants' request, a follow-up to the first workshop is being considered to offer practical tools for addressing discrimination and managing conflicts. The creation of an in-house group on racist issues is also discussed, and anti-racism measures could be included in the MC93's internal rules.

Finally, the GPF Bobigny group organised the *Good Practices Factory Day* on 24<sup>th</sup> of October 2025 at the MC93 as part of the final *Common Stories* annual meeting. The day brought together representatives from the six GPF groups, as well as teams from the MC93, and the eight *CommonLAB 2025* artists.

The day was divided into two parts, with two participatory workshops in the morning, each participant choosing freely which one they wanted to attend, and a presentation of the actions carried out in 2025 in the afternoon.

Designed and led by **Aminata Labor**, artist and researcher, the first workshop, *Representation in Programming – Case Studies and Challenges*, showed how programming choices on stage reflect broader dynamics of equity, representation and institutional accountability. Drawing on real-life situations from the performing arts, the workshop identified the conflicts and tensions at play around issues of representativeness in programming – the presence (or absence) of non-white artists in artistic programmes –, the distribution of resources, and the institutional communication strategies.

Led by **Lydia Amarouche**, an independent researcher and editor (see interview p.10.), the *Anti-Racist Pedagogy – A Collective Reading Workshop* began with a collective reading of the introduction to *Entrer en pédagogie antiraciste* (*Entering Anti-Racist Pedagogy*) and a guided discussion to show how race and racism manifest themselves in cultural and educational institutions.

The afternoon was devoted to presentations of the activities carried out in 2025, as well as a three-year review of the six GPF groups operating in Bobigny, Brussels, Lisbon, Cologne, Stockholm and Warsaw.

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## Who?

The *Good Practices Factory 2025* Bobigny was led by :

**Hortense Archambault**, General and Artistic Director, MC93 | **Margault Chavaroche**, Director of Audiences, MC93 | **Elsa Mahi**, Production Manager, MC93 |

As well as the MC93 teams | Documentation: **Aïnhua Jean-Calmettes**

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Good Practices Factory Presentation Day © Jérémy Riot

## LOOKING BACK OVER THREE YEARS WITH *GOOD PRACTICES FACTORY* AT THE MC93

by Hortense Archambault, Director, Margault Chavaroche, Head of the Audiences department, and Elsa Mahi, Production Manager, MC93

Looking back on the talks and workshops we organised with thinkers from different disciplines and perspectives we realised that together we gained a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

To understand today's assessment, let's briefly review the context that shaped our approach three years ago. Within our team, not everyone possessed the same depth of knowledge or firsthand experience when it came to issues of racism. This disparity made the topic especially sensitive, as discussions inevitably touched upon the personal histories of those who have been directly affected. Such conversations carried the risk of confrontation, particularly between individuals whose lived experiences were marked by racism and those who, perhaps unconsciously, denied its existence. In some cases, those who did not experience racism could feel defensive or personally attacked when the subject was addressed, further complicating the possibility of an open and honest dialogue.

Based on this observation, we felt it was essential to train our entire team on the subject. The GPF process is about showing that racism should not be seen merely as an individual issue, but rather as a systemic problem – a tool of capitalism that influences all our economic relationships. Recognising racism as a system requires collective resistance, especially today, as we face an increasingly harsh and violent political climate.

### **Here are the assessments we draw from the meetings that took place between October 2024 and June 2025.**

Opening the GPF series of talks with Pankaj Tiwari allowed us to address the political issue of North–South power relations through an artistic perspective. This conversation introduced the subject in a gentle manner, yet the informal nature of the approach did not contradict the strong political message of Pankaj Tiwari's artistic work.

In January, Léonora Miano's work, *L'opposé de la blancheur* (*The Opposite of Whiteness*), facilitated an examination of racism from a historical and scientific perspective. The methodology outlined by the author provided a consistent factual foundation, allowing us to reach the same level of information and to clearly understand the origins of the system in which we live today. Combining both casual and historical approaches, this gradual learning process helped the team engage with greater confidence in the following more 'radical' interventions by Prisca Ratovonasy, Lydia Amarouche, and Houyem Rebai.

We use the term 'radical' because the aim was to highlight the responsibility of institutions in the mechanics of systemic racism. While this analysis is far from new, there are still few spaces that promote it. These approaches can therefore potentially shock or destabilise because they are not self-evident to everyone – indeed, as long as this knowledge is suppressed, it will never be self-evident – and may encounter various forms of censorship and/or repression.

The training course *Understanding and Acting on Everyday Racial Discrimination* took place in September, over three sessions, to enable all permanent MC93 employees to participate and to encourage discussion in small groups.

By offering keys to identifying and acting on racial discrimination and drawing on the study of several texts, Lydia Amarouche invited participants to develop a critical stance and to be more vigilant about their own biases.

This valuable training course gave team members the opportunity to discuss real-life cases from their own experience and gain practical tools for reflection. Several participants expressed their desire to continue with a second training session that would focus more on developing a toolkit for taking concrete action in situations of racial discrimination.





Good Practices Factory Presentation Day © Jérémy Piot

## COMMIT OR NOT COMMIT?

Elsa Mahi, Production Manager at the MC93, has been an active member of the *Good Practices Factory*. She shares with us her doubts at the beginning of the programme, and how she decided to take the plunge and become actively involved in the group..

‘To be honest, five years ago I wouldn’t have considered joining this cycle’s design team. Back then, I was concerned about facing exploitation and experiencing numerous microaggressions. The challenges of being a Black production manager in France’s public theatre scene is not a non-issue. Considering our conversations over the past three years, I likely don’t need to spell out why. These apprehensions explain why I absolutely refused to join the first internal meeting on radicalism and diversity at the MC93 in June 2023. I had a feeling from the start that the meeting wouldn’t go well, which turned out to be true. Later, when I was formally invited to join the GPF group at the end of 2023, I felt a cold anger because I knew my selection was based on my difference. However, it would have been problematic for this project to be led entirely by white people.

So, I decided to accept, thinking it was time to move past my passive resentment toward others’ behaviour around me. Discussing these topics can be difficult without knowing if others share your perspective, but having an official role made me more comfortable speaking up. The recognition of this issue within our walls gave me protection and, for the first time, let me express myself freely. Now, I feel people are a little bit more mindful of their words and actions.’

## TO INTERVENE IN SEVERAL AREAS AND AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

A Conversation with Lydia Amarouche

Invited to host one of the GPF meetings in Bobigny in June 2025, Lydia Amarouche also designed the workshop *Understanding and Acting on Everyday Racial Discrimination*, which was attended by all permanent MC93 employees in September. Finally she led the workshop *Anti-Racist Education: A Collective Reading* on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025 during the *Good Practices Factory Day* at the MC93.

At the heart of the GPF approach in Bobigny, she emphasises how important it is to intervene in several areas and at different levels in the fight against discrimination.

How does your work as an editor relate to the training courses on discrimination that you run?

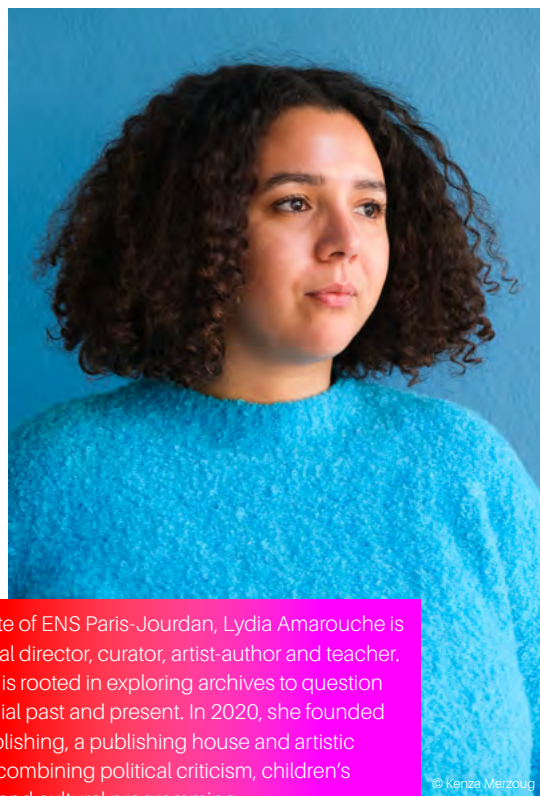
**Lydia Amarouche (LA):** The idea behind Shed Publishing was to carry out editorial work based on the struggles and archives of the field, to formalise the tools, knowledge and reflections of trade unions and collectives to circulate them. This practice gave us the impetus to think about other means of action, to intervene in other areas, particularly in professional contexts. The idea of developing support and training formats had been on my mind since my sociology studies. I am interested in transmission and educational contexts. In addition to publishing modules and writing workshops, I teach courses on diversity issues in artistic and cultural projects at Aix-Marseille University. I train students to view their projects as potential levers for social change, so that issues of inclusion are not considered as an afterthought. When workshops on gender-based and sexual violence began to develop a few years ago, I felt it was essential to include a section on racial discrimination. It was at the intersection of all these issues that Johanna Celli and I founded Co-prisme in 2023.

Do you think education and awareness-raising are more effective levers than legal tools in the fight against discrimination and oppression?

**LA:** From a strategic point of view, the most effective approach is to intervene in several areas and at different levels. Some of the training courses I run focus on short-term action, at the level of everyday life and biases in interpersonal interactions. This scale should not be overlooked, because discrimination has an impact on the health and trajectories of individuals, particularly people of colour. Raising awareness is already a first step. I adapt the training courses I run to the context, the people I am addressing and their level of knowledge, but I always broaden the scope with socio-historical perspectives. I talk about the history of slavery and colonialism – that of France, because every society has its own history of othering. I make connections between texts such as the *Code Noir*, the *Indigenous Code*, and the decrees on the census of Jews, to gain an insight into racialised legal systems, and I use maps to show the extent of the two French empires... This allows us to move away from a moral view of racism and place it in the context of power relations, over a long period of time and on the scale of state policy. I also always talk about the legal framework – the 26 criteria of discrimination prohibited by law, employers' obligations – and existing remedies – the Human Rights Defender, trade unions, specialised law firms. The law remains a benchmark, both in society and in the workplace. Despite its limitations, when it comes to racial discrimination and sexual and gender-based violence, it is still very difficult today to prove that a crime has been committed and secure a conviction. These issues remain hugely taboo. Sometimes, people leave these workshops feeling a little stunned or angry. I then encourage them not to stop there, but to continue the work through some form of activism or union involvement to bring about more profound changes in society. But that's where my role ends; the next step must be a personal one.

Do you think that the moral framing of issues of discrimination and racism is still predominant in France?

**LA:** Historically, this has been the case, particularly since the 1980s with paternalistic approaches to racism that focus on moral condemnation without addressing the political dimensions. Truly combating racism requires more than a change in attitude or individual perception of one's colleagues, but a profound transformation of our institutions and our relationship to the world. Conversely, I could criticise contemporary French political anti-racism for sometimes minimising everyday stereotypes and inter-individual dynamics. I think it is important to remember that these scales are intertwined and that the structural dynamics of racism are also embodied in individuals.



A graduate of ENS Paris-Jourdan, Lydia Amarouche is an editorial director, curator, artist-author and teacher. Her work is rooted in exploring archives to question the colonial past and present. In 2020, she founded Shed Publishing, a publishing house and artistic platform combining political criticism, children's literature and cultural programming. She teaches at Aix-Marseille University and joined forces with Johanna Celli in 2023 to found Co-prisme, an organisation dedicated to combating discrimination in the workplace.

© Kenza Mezouag

What methods do you use in your training courses?

**LA:** I begin by establishing a framework for participation: confidentiality of exchanges, and respect for opinions – not everyone comes from the same place and does not necessarily have the right vocabulary or the right words – and zero tolerance for discriminatory remarks. After the socio-historical overview I mentioned, I focus on the professional environment in which I work and its specificities, drawing on the sociology of controversies. Regarding theatre, I draw on the collective book *Les damnés de la scène*, edited by Maxime Cervulle and Bérénice Hamidi. I return to moments when specific issues and themes of racial discrimination emerge but also positions and divisions in perspectives. The case of Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B*, for example. Once we have gone through all this, the participants work in groups on practical cases. Finally, there is a feedback session with guided questions.

The practical cases are a pretext for sparking conversation, ensuring that people can talk to each other and discuss their biases and their experiences. Conversely, at certain moments, I deliberately leave no room for discussion. When discussing socio-historical issues, I don't want to leave room for interpretation or debate. These are facts – a history that has had lasting effects that are still evident today in various aspects of life. When I go back to the sources, I am very careful to do so in a somewhat detached, dispassionate manner, without pathos or accusation.

When it comes to discrimination, does the cultural sector have any particular characteristics?

**LA:** Beyond the fact that, more than elsewhere, questions of representation and narrative arise, there is a recurring bias of false consensus. There is a presumption, for example, that we are all on the same political side. When conflicts arise, all of this falls apart: not everyone has the same history, the same position, the same perception of conflicts, discrimination or violence. That's why I encourage participants to take a step back, not to assume that their colleagues will necessarily think the same way they do, and I encourage management teams to organise working sessions to review situations, compare points of view and define responses to problems that may arise.

You said that your workshops can cause shock and anger. How do you handle that?

**LA:** These reactions most often come from white people who are taken aback, whereas the situations described are almost commonplace for many racialised people. I try to allow space for shock to be expressed, but to redirect it towards reflection and action. There are ways to tackle these issues head-on, even if we are said to be 'unaffected'. When we witness discrimination, racist comments or inappropriate remarks, we can start by supporting the person who is experiencing them, showing that we are there, that we have noticed what has just happened, and act as a shield. Being attentive and not leaving racialised people alone in these situations are extremely important, because there is already a lot of loneliness in these environments where, by definition, they are in the minority. This is not yet action, but it is already a first step out of shock.

It seems to me equally fundamental to accept that there are limits to understanding oppression when you do not experience it first-hand. I try to encourage participants to strike a balance between these two attitudes: recognising that they may not have a 360° view of the issues, but still trying to sharpen their gaze, educate themselves, stay informed and face up to their own biases. Issues of discrimination concern everyone.

Interview by **Aïnhua Jean-Calmettes**, October 2025





Justices by Clément Papachristou © Marin Driguez

# THE GOOD PRACTICES FACTORY IN BRUSSELS

Keen to create a new creative, stimulating and supportive environment within the theatre, the Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles (Théâtre National) chose to start with its teams to develop a reflection on the values of diversity.

In 2023 and 2024, several consultations within the teams on the issue of diversity were carried out and documented by **Safia Kessas**, journalist, documentary filmmaker and member of the *Common Stories* Advisory Committee, and **Laurie Hanquinet**, professor of sociology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Their aim was to assess diversity at the Théâtre National and formulate a series of recommendations.

Shared in October 2024 the recommendations addressed four main points:

- Communication within and between teams,
- In-house working relationships, especially between the different departments,
- Diversity-focused recruitment policies,
- A safer and better working environment.

## ACTIVITIES IN 2025

These recommendations led to a series of actions in 2025. Over a few months, significant changes in team practices have been noted.

### Recommendations on communication and in-house working relationships

- Set up discussion spaces for team members.
- Encourage a more collaborative, participatory and flexible work organisation, adapted to each department's specificities.
- Create dedicated moments for employees to share doubts and concerns with senior managers and human resources officers.



## Actions implemented

The Théâtre National, with the support of Viavectis, an external consultant specialising in cultural change through creativity and cooperation, has carried out an in-depth programme addressing the issue of interrelations within the structure.

Quality relationships often allow a better understanding of the project, while preparing for the conception, development and implementation of measures to enhance in-house diversity, on and around the stage. Using theoretical tools, role-playing exercises and working groups, new avenues for establishing more positive and participatory corporate cultures have been identified.

An internal newsletter has been created to report on in-house activities and daily life, as well as team changes within the Théâtre National.

In the future, designated ‘trusted individuals’ will be trained to serve as relays with the senior management.

## Recommendations on diversity-focus recruitments

- Encourage individuals from underrepresented gender or cultural groups to apply.
- Feminise certain departments.

## Actions implemented

- Job ads now state: ‘The Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles welcomes all and supports diversity and inclusion, regardless of background.’
- Job descriptions use inclusive language (as does all theatre communication). Candidates’ CVs are anonymised before being reviewed by the recruitment committee.

The first effects are already being seen: several women have joined the technical team.

## Recommendations on the work environment

- Establish a permanent structure within the Théâtre National’s organisational chart, bringing together members from various departments to report bottlenecks to management and oversee the development and monitoring of the diversity plan.
- Develop training and accompany collective initiatives within the Théâtre National.

## Actions implemented

- The Green Team, whose missions embrace the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals, has enacted new projects, including the installation of a accessible shower in one of the theatre’s dressing rooms.
- Théâtre National staff has been offered different trainings and activities, including a sign language training (9 staff members), a session related to issues raised by the artistic programme, an invitation to attend the *Fighting Racism in the Cultural Sector* conference on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2025 (8 staff members).
- Finally, staff training on the prevention of violence in the workplace and feminist self-defence will be provided by the non-profit organisation Garance, in connection with Laurene Marx’s show, *Portrait de Rita*.

## Recommendations for audiences

- Develop more active forms of participation.
- Establish new partnerships with associations.

## Actions implemented

The Assemblée du National is a project launched this season by the PR department. The idea is to give a voice to the theatre’s audiences. People from diverse backgrounds can join performances and rehearsals, as well as collaborate with the PR team on round tables and other events.

New partnerships have been established with:

- Associations and educational institutions to listen attentively to the needs of specific audiences. It includes a long-term project with a school for the hearing impaired and a partnership with the non-profit organisation Audioscenic to set up an audio-described session of Mohamed El Khatib’s show, *Israel & Mohamed*.
- The world of education. In partnership with the Université libre de Bruxelles, spontaneous artistic activities with Z&T have been developed.

## Recommendations on accessibility

Create a more accessible environment for staff, artists and audiences with disabilities. On-line accessibility information, clear mapping and signage of venues, access ramps, accessible seating and toilets, sign language interpreters, audio description, among other features, were mentioned.

## Actions implemented

- Establishment of a working group composed of representatives from all theatre teams to improve the accessibility of the building (in conjunction with, among others, the non-profit organisation L’architecture qui dégenre).
- Increase the number of PRM<sup>1</sup> seats in the three auditoriums.
- Translation and technical support for deaf and hearing-impaired people.
- Creation of quiet spaces for the audience.
- Increase the number of ‘relax’ performances.

Besides, the Théâtre National is producing and co-producing shows with artists with disabilities, including in 2025, *Justices* by Clément Papachristou, an associate artist of the Théâtre National, shown as part of the Festival des Libertés, and *La vieille dame et le serpent* by Nicolas Mouzet Tagawa, presented as part of the Kunstenfestivaldesarts.

## Promote diversity on stage

Contexts have been developed to open up to urban cultures, coming from minority groups in Brussels that propose both aesthetic and political projects questioning the Eurocentric art gaze. This includes Temps fort *Urban Dance Caravan*, the *MàD – Les mots à défendre* Biennale, *Slam* with Joëlle Sambi or *Stand Up* with Yousra Dahri and Z&T.

The Théâtre National has ventured out to non-dedicated venues like the Maison Gertrude, an art Centre in a retirement home (read more p.16).

<sup>1</sup> People with Reduced Mobility

## Who?

The *Good Practices Factory 2025* Brussels was led by :

**Safia Kessas**, journalist, filmmaker, member of the *Common Stories* Advisory Committee | **Laurie Hanquinet**, Professor of Sociology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles | **Isabelle Collard**, Head of Public Relation and Cultural Mediation, Théâtre National | As well as the Théâtre National Human Resources team



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## **ABOUT ACCESSIBILITY**

### A Conversation with the Théâtre National Team

During the workshops/discussions on diversity led by Safia Kessas and Laurie Hanquinet with the Théâtre National teams, the subject of accessibility often came up.

The Green Team, a working group composed of representatives from different departments of the Théâtre National working on sustainable development objectives, and working groups bringing together members of various teams took up certain issues.

When asked about accessibility, what has been done and what remains to be done, several members of the Théâtre National team testify to the progress made in their daily work and the projects that still need to be carried out...

‘To make the programme accessible, we have worked within our department and in collaboration with the audience relations department to compose in FALC<sup>1</sup> for audiences who may not have all the codes or tools to read the texts in the brochure. The website has also been reviewed in terms of accessibility – for example by adhering to a certain nomenclature and hierarchy and trying to include all the necessary tags.

Internally, if we were to welcome a person with a disability into our teams, it would be impossible to do something generic. We would need to know the specifics of the person’s disability in order to try to “erase”, in the best sense of the word, their disability, so that there would be no difference between them and other employees.

For me, the building is not inclusive, even for a so-called “able-bodied” person. Architecturally speaking, it is not welcoming. These large foyers with staircases in the middle make you want to leave! Nothing was planned to accommodate people with specific needs. For the moment, we are doing some DIY, which is being taken care of by the technical team to make it more welcoming.

Our institution needs to ask itself these questions, and there is still a lot of work to be done. The Théâtre National is like a small company, and if we don’t do the work where we have control, we won’t be able to do it across the board. We need to go further, even in the way we discuss these issues internally. We need a structure, an overall plan and a real commitment from all the teams and management to move forward.’

**Benoît Henken**, Communication Department  
(Communication-Mediation working group)

‘Two seasons ago, following the staging of *Péplum Médiéval*<sup>2</sup>, a show featuring both disabled and able-bodied performers, we received feedback from supervisory staff who were concerned about the arrival of slightly different groups in the theatre. But we also received feedback from a mother who came with her disabled son and was happy to be able to take him. Following this experience, we decided to introduce ‘relax’ performances. We leave the lights on a little, the doors open, and people can come and go during the performance. We looked into what was being done in Switzerland and England, and today we can see that this approach has really brought lots of new groups to our theatres. Even if it still requires a lot of work on the ground.

Accessibility is also a question of the formats offered and the programming. I think we still need to find the right balance between programming and accessibility. In terms of our communications, we use FALC<sup>1</sup> as an accessibility tool for community organisations. We also have the option of providing audio descriptions at the request of groups that come to us. There will be one this season. However, we do not have any sign language performances this season. This requires a lot more work upstream. In terms of the building, there is not really any space for pushchairs or families, even though not many children come to the theatre except during our *À la scène comme à la ville* festival. We do not as of yet have any changing tables, for example. These are improvements that could be made. We have received training on the issue of disabilities, and the theatre staff have been trained in sign language.

When we talk about accessibility, there is always the question of individual freedom: Do I have to identify myself as a person with a disability, or should everything be done to make me feel comfortable? That’s what inclusivity is all about. We’re on the right track, even if we’re not there yet.’

**Yannick Duret**, Audience Relations Department  
(Communication-Mediation working group)

‘It’s quite incredible that when the building was constructed in 2004, no thought was given to accessibility. For example, we don’t have any toilets on the second floor. There is very little disabled access in general. We didn’t have any real accessible seats at the Théâtre National. So, we had to define these seats or carry out the necessary work to be able to fit them in. In the main auditorium, we defined four accessible seats and in the small auditorium, two. We had to remove seats, including in the Studio, where we can now accommodate three people with reduced mobility. These changes were made last season. Staff have access to showers for people with reduced mobility, but there are not any on every floor. As for the artists, a budget has been allocated to build a shower for people with reduced mobility via Passe-Muraille<sup>4</sup>, with whom we have established a partnership. An accessible dressing room will be equipped with both amenities and a bathroom. These changes will be completed before the end of this season.

Audio description, on the other hand, is not systematic. It is organised by the production company. There are a few instances of it every year. However, we do have a closed headphone system in all three auditoriums, which allows people with hearing impairment to access the show. This system has only recently become operational. There are three sets of headphones per auditorium.

With Pierre Thys, the programme is becoming increasingly open, both in terms of artists and audiences, which requires even more adaptations. We have to find ways to accommodate as many people as possible. On a technical level, we regularly discuss these issues of accommodation for staff and external visitors, particularly every month at the CPTT<sup>5</sup> meetings.’

**Cédric Otte**, Technical Department  
(Technical-Reception working group)

‘In production, we are supporting and welcoming more and more artists with specific needs. This involves, for example, finding a hotel with accessible rooms, renting specific equipment, ensuring that care-givers and personal assistants are taken care of, and booking specialised taxis. I have repeatedly insisted on installing an accessible shower and toilet in the dressing rooms, which will be done this season.

Within the Green Team, which addresses both environmental and well-being issues, we discuss these matters, but they need to be raised with management. There are many of us in this theatre, and we need to find a forum that brings together not only the thinkers but also the decision-makers. When you look at the productions we put on in terms of inclusivity, it is essential and urgent to address these issues. And I feel that there is a desire to move things forward.’

**Inès Mayol**, Production Department  
(Green Team)

<sup>1</sup> Easy to read and understand, in French Facile à Lire et à Comprendre

<sup>2</sup> A show directed by Valérien Guillaume and written by Olivier Martin-Salvat

<sup>3</sup> People with Reduced Mobility

<sup>4</sup> Created in 1998, Passe Muraille is an organisation that provides training, advice and facilitation in the process of including people with disabilities.

<sup>5</sup> Committee for Prevention and Protection at Work





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## MAISON GERTRUDE, A LABORATORY FOR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

by Émilie Garcia Guillen

At the Théâtre National, the process of setting up *Common Stories* crossed paths with another initiative: the creation, led by the Théâtre National and director Mohamed El Khatib's company Zirlib, of an art centre within a nursing home. This approach resonates with the issues addressed by *Common Stories* and opens new avenues for reflection.

Invited by the Théâtre National, Émilie Garcia Guillen spent time at the Résidence Sainte-Gertrude before the art centre project began. She recounts...

In 2021, following research conducted in a French nursing home for a show exploring the emotional lives of elderly people, Mohamed El Khatib came up with the idea of opening an art centre in a nursing home. The aim is to integrate art and the relationship with artists into the daily life of the place on a long-term basis. As an artist associated with the Théâtre National, the director is developing a similar proposal for Brussels. In December 2023, after more than six months spent looking for partners and subsidies, the operation was officially launched. Between the end of 2023 and spring 2025, artist residencies were organised to build up the art centre's collection, inaugurated in 2025 under the name Maison Gertrude and located within the Sainte-Gertrude residence.

Two artists were chosen from among the artists associated with the Théâtre National by Mohamed El Khatib, artistic curator of the project, in consultation with the management of the Théâtre National, alongside two other French artists with whom he had already collaborated in healthcare settings. Four museums in Brussels and Wallonia also played a role as partners by proposing visual artists. Over a period of three years, the ten artists worked *in situ* during residencies, immersing

themselves in the life of the place and involving the residents to varying degrees. Thus, the collection of personal stories and memories became the raw material for some of the works, while others drew on the expertise of the residents, as well as that of caregivers for the creation of collective works. The establishment of the art centre required significant work on the scenography and spaces, several of which were redesigned to promote comfort and conviviality. Far from being confined to a specific location, the works are scattered throughout the building, creeping into public spaces, but also as close as possible to those traditionally devoted to professional and domestic activities. Since May 2025, visitors have been able to discover the art centre during tours organised twice a month, guided by members of the Théâtre National and residence team, including professionals and residents.

To understand the scope of the project, it is necessary to outline the characteristics of the Sainte-Gertrude residence. This nursing home, which is part of the CPAS' of the City of Brussels, is located in the heart of the Marolles, a working-class neighbourhood close to the city centre with a unique history marked by a strong social and cultural identity. The residence



accommodates 122 residents and is spread over five floors. Its population does not fit the usual profile of nursing homes: it is mainly male and young (around 65 years old). People in precarious situations, who have had particularly difficult lives and low levels of education, are over-represented. Furthermore, the residence is notable for its liberal approach: the rules and constraints are much less strict than in many nursing homes, and openness to the outside world is an essential part of the institution's philosophy.

How does this experience of the art centre echo the perspective of *Common Stories*? At the heart of the project is the question of the relationship between cultural venues and those who are rarely seen in theatres. A large proportion of the residents of the Sainte-Gertrude residence correspond to socio-economic and cultural profiles that are rarely seen in theatres, but also rarely represented on stage or within the teams of cultural institutions. This approach fully reflects the way in which a theatre addresses the issue of diversity and the place it gives it in its activities.

However, there are several elements that differ from the usual approach to this issue. Maison Gertrude marks a threefold shift. The Théâtre National is venturing beyond the performing arts, as the project focuses more on the plastic and visual arts. The aim is not to welcome audiences to the Théâtre National: on the contrary, the institution is investing in another venue that does not belong to the cultural world. Finally, the art centre intends to build a permanent and tangible collection, in contrast to the ephemeral nature of interventions that may take place during more traditional mediation activities. While Maison Gertrude does indeed confront diversity, we are moving away from the perspective of the *Common Stories* project: The diversity in question here is not on stage, nor in the auditorium, nor in the team. And it is perhaps by starting from this question – Where is the diversity in the art centre project? – that a fruitful reflection can arise, in dialogue with the perspective of *Common Stories*.

Indeed, diversity at the Sainte-Gertrude residence is not to be found in the 'audience'; there is no question here of working with potential audiences to raise awareness about theatre. Nor is it intended to take place on stage. While the encounters with residents that have inspired various works in the collection have brought to light voices and experiences that are often invisible, the art centre's objective is not to mobilise documentary and sensitive material for the possible creation of performances.

In short, 'diversity' takes the form of otherness, which the Théâtre National team and visitors to the art centre encounter as soon as they open the door of the retirement home. Suddenly, in this art centre, whose boundaries with the living quarters are porous, 'diversity' transforms into a multitude of encounters with many other people, each unique and different – the elderly, the poor, the vulnerable, the lonely, whom we meet as we wander through the art works and corridors, but also the professionals who care for them on a daily basis. If the encounter with the body, the voice and the presence of the other are at the heart of the work of performing artists, but also of the institution that organises the encounter between them and 'the people', then the art centre project takes on its full meaning in this 'theatre of relationships' so dear to Pierre Thys, which organically permeates all the activities of the Théâtre National, from creation to dissemination and mediation.

Through the *Common Stories* programme, the Théâtre National has chosen to work on the relationship to diversity as experienced by its teams. In this respect, the art centre is a living experiment, an ongoing laboratory testing the relationship with the other and with the multiple. For the theatre teams, it provides an opportunity for encounters that constantly take unexpected turns. Thus, relationships of familiarity are formed between the theatre team and the nursing home team.

Residents visit the Théâtre National or form friendships with artists, sometimes blurring the lines between 'artists' and 'participants' in the project. Mediation, conceived at the Théâtre National as a practice of meeting on equal terms, has shaped the production: the artists first created bonds before imagining works.

Through very concrete and sometimes trivial situations, the art centre constantly raises new questions: Who is the artist, the professional, the audience, the subject, or the object of cultural action? To what extent should we accept that the singularity of some, supposedly the recipients of the actions, disrupts the norms of others, the bearers of the projects? What should be done about 'undisciplined' behaviour in response to the works? How can we accommodate the needs, desires and interests of all parties, and the possible friction between them – and why? For Géraldine Maes, coordinator of the nursing home's paramedical staff, the answer is simple: 'As long as there are emotions, there is life.'

Is this not something of the existential ambition of theatre? The radical nature of the project is thus affirmed in this gesture, which reconnects with the roots that sustain the desire for theatre. The art centre is also based on the idea of radical equality: for all partners – artists, residents, theatre and nursing home staff – these are 'first times' being played out, where everyone is on the same level.

The particularity of the art centre, with all the fragility that characterises it in view of the displacements that found it and that it generates, perhaps lies in this uncertain experience of overflow, in this testing of risk and tolerance to overflow by a cultural institution that is taking a gamble on decentring itself.

[For more information](#)



Émilie Garcia Guillen is a social sciences researcher, currently a research fellow at the Association des Centres Culturels and a lecturer at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. She works more specifically on the cultural sector. She also co-directs the online cultural media outlet La Pointe. Invited by the Théâtre National, she spent time at the Sainte-Gertrude Residence and has written *Un Centre d'art dans une maison de repos. Quelle drôle d'idée. Quelle idée drôle. (An Art Centre in a Nursing Home. What a Strange Idea. What a Funny Idea.)*, an article in which she describes the world of the home and its residents.



## THE GOOD PRACTICES FACTORY IN LISBON

In dialogue with UNA, Culturgest continues its reflection on anti-racist artistic and educational practices, which should lead, in the near future and under the impetus of UNA, to the creation of *the Anti-Racist Manual for the Arts and Education* (AMAE). This collective and interactive process, open to a plurality of voices, bodies and imaginations, culminated in a workshop on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025.



## ACTIVITIES IN 2025

On September 20th, 2025, the workshop *Manual Antirracista para as Artes e Educação: Que Caminhos Tecemos e que Rumos Faltam Cuidar* (*Antiracist Manual for the Arts and Education: What Paths Have We Woven and What Directions Still Need Attention?*) was held at Culturgest. This was the third and final meeting of a cycle organised by UNA – Black Union for the Arts, in partnership with Culturgest and part of the Creative Europe project *Common Stories*, co-funded by the European Union. About 40 participants joined the workshop.

The session began with a body awareness exercise led by **Iris de Brito**. Afterward, participants discussed the history behind the manual that UNA has been developing since 2020, aiming to make it a transformative and representative tool for their work. The group then moved on to activities centred around collective imagination and sharing, followed by a conversation about future plans and how to ensure the manual remains sustainable.

Topics addressed included:

- The deconstruction of the concept of a manual, not only as a book-document, but also as something that embodies the knowledge we carry in our bodies,
- The consideration of manual, embodied practices and the concept of orature, recovering oral traditions and intergenerational transmission, and questioning the centrality of written Portuguese,
- The inclusion of other languages – such as Bantu – in the manual's construction, to make other forms of expression present,
- The evocation of other collective experiences, some traditional including mutual aid, circle practices, sewing, weaving, and play that reinforces the intergenerational, accessible, and autonomous nature of the proposal,
- The emphasis on a temporal dimension: the importance of doing without rushing, where the duration of the educational or artistic gesture becomes an essential part of the knowledge itself.

A practical exercise in collective construction was also carried out using A4 sheets of paper, allowing all participants to imagine proposals for the format and content of the AMAE. At the end, a collective publication was created by assembling the pages of all the participants in the session.

This third workshop consolidated the cycle initiated by UNA and Culturgest, within the framework of the European project *Common Stories*, reaffirming that education and art are political acts. By proposing the creation of a collective and experimental manual, participants positioned themselves within a movement that goes beyond conventional institutional logic, reclaiming imaginaries, ancestral practices, and radical proposals for social transformation.



Workshop by Iris de Brito © Lilliana Coutinho

Founded in April 2021, **União Negra das Artes** (UNA) defends the specific interests of Blackness in the cultural sector, considering the historical continuities of colonial racism that maintain deep asymmetries and hinder the creation, fructification, access, production, programming, and, consequently, Black representation in the artistic sector in Portugal. The main objectives are the promotion, increase, and strengthening of Black representation in the Portuguese artistic field, as well as the recognition and appreciation of the intangible heritage of the Black population in Portugal.

[For more information](#)

## Who?

The *Good Practices Factory 2025* Lisbon was led by:

**Dori Nigro** and **Melissa Rodrigues**, artists and educators, UNA members, programmed by **Mark Deputter**, General and Artistic Director, CG | **Raquel Lima**, UNA member, member of the *Common Stories* Advisory Committee | **Lilliana Coutinho**, Head of Conferences & Debates Programming, CG | **Carolina Mano Marques**, Executive Assistant and Head of European Projects, CG

# TOWARDS AN ANTIRACIST MANUAL FOR THE ARTS AND EDUCATION

## Looking Back over Three Years of Collaboration between UNA and Culturgest

The result of collective and intersectional thinking developed by UNA since 2020, the process surrounding an *Anti-Racist Manual for the Arts and Education* (AMAE) arose from the urgent need to unsettle practices, discourses, and structures that perpetuate racism in the fields of art and education.

Inspired by Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Autonomy and bell hooks' critique of the separation between mind and body in educational spaces, this manual is envisioned as a hopeful, critical, and transformative tool, committed to social justice and the appreciation of alterity.

A living object-process, the AMAE does not aim to replace other manuals, but rather to open plural and collaborative paths for antiracist practices in the arts and education.

Several steps and actions have been developed since 2023.

In October 2023, the first public moment of reflection on the AMAE took place at Culturgest, within the conference *Reframing Authority and Authorship in the Arts*, curated by **Raquel Lima**.

Led by **Dori Nigro** and **Melissa Rodrigues**, the workshop *Antiracist Lines for Art/Education: Weaving Past, Present and Future* drew upon Frantz Fanon's metaphor of a bridge to explore the construction of new possibilities for dialogue and action.

In November 2024, the cycle continued with a second workshop, *Caminhanti é Caminho / Caminho di Caminhanti: Routes of Care in the Practice of Performing Arts in Portugal*. It explored the notion of care as a holistic and multidimensional practice, essential to the creation of a manual that is also a gesture of care.

Finally, on September 20th, 2025, the third and final *Good Practices Factory* workshop was held. *Anti-Racist Manual for the Arts and Education: What Paths Have We Woven and What Directions Still Need Attention?* consolidated the collective process of building the AMAE. This meeting featured **Dori Nigro**, **Íris de Brito**, **Melissa Rodrigues**, **Nádia Yracema**, and **Raquel Lima**, and included body-based dynamics, collective imagination exercises, knowledge sharing, and concrete proposals for the manual's format and content.

### Principles and Methodologies

The AMAE is conceived as an expanded manual, incorporating oral practices (orature), embodied knowledge, diverse languages (including Bantu languages), and collective experiences such as mutual aid, circles, sewing, weaving, and playfulness.

The deconstruction of the traditional idea of a manual is central, proposing an accessible, intergenerational, autonomous, and playful object.

Its construction is informed by theoretical and practical references from African and diasporic thinkers, including Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Oyeronke Oyewumi. It is also shaped by Amílcar Cabral's, Paulo Freire's and bell hooks' transformative pedagogies, as well as inspired by artistic and educational projects such as *Ululu*, an artistic project by Raquel Lima, *Migrando*, a book without words by Mariana Chiesa Mateus, *Rádio das Crianças Pós-Dramáticas*, a radio project by Pyromanya, and *Escutas Mais Velhas*, a podcast by Sueli Carneiro and Neca Setuba.

It's about inspiring emancipatory pedagogical and artistic practices that break with authoritarianism and value autonomy, as well as radical imagination and social justice.

The limits of traditional schooling – often marked by structural racism and a lack of encouragement for critical awareness – were discussed, along with the urgency of alternative formats for cultural mediation.

The financial sustainability of the project is also at the core of this reflection.

This manual is not an endpoint, but a continuous process of listening, creation, and transformation.

A possible dream. A utopia in the making.







© Anusha Tyson

# THE GOOD PRACTICES FACTORY IN STOCKHOLM

To implement the *Good Practices Factory* in Stockholm, several programmes have been set up, particularly the Conscious Competence Provision programme addressing the management teams of the Riksteatern (RT). Launched in 2024, this programme is continuing in 2025. Head of the theatre and Artistic Director, Dritëro Kasapi, reviews these developments on page 22. 2025 has also shed light on children's rights through a Children Rights and Perspectives Training programme.

## ACTIVITIES IN 2025

In Spring 2025, the RT human resources department continued its training programme for all theatre managers, as part of its work on equality and diversity.

In June, for two full days, the 28 RT managers gathered to work on issues related to equality and diversity. Guest speakers included psychologists and researchers, equality strategists, a trade union communications officer and an associate professor of education at Stockholm University. Several tools and supports were explored, including a checklist designed to guide the setup of activities, ensuring that considerations of equality and diversity were incorporated and aligned with RT's mission and policies.

Children's rights were in the spotlight in 2025 through several workshops, conferences and training courses. This programme aligns with RT's dedication to advancing understanding of children's rights and encouraging greater involvement of children and young people in the performing arts. In Sweden, the RT is often children and young people's first point of contact with the performing arts, and this comes with great responsibility.

Through a dialogue with **Sylvia Carlsdotter**, an expert in children's rights, the aim was to raise awareness among all RT teams and to train 27 children's rights strategists within the RT. Adopting a child- and youth-centred perspective in the performing arts is to acknowledge that young people are active participants in culture, not simply as the audience of tomorrow. Children and young people discover the world with their own unique curiosity, creativity and emotional lens. Taking their perspectives into account means that artists and institutions must challenge established norms, broaden the scope of artistic exploration, and re-assess the relevance of narratives in rapidly changing societies.

Listening to young audiences also means encouraging them to trust their own creativity and vision to imagine and transform their environment and society, particularly in terms of equality, fairness and accessibility.

## Who?

The *Good Practices Factory* 2025 in Sweden was led by:

**Anusha Tyson**, Cultural Development Strategist, RT | And all the managers and the CEO of RT Theatre Department, Dance Department, Workshops and Design Studios, Sales and Communication, Finance and Operational Support and Human Resources Departments

# THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS EUROPEAN DIVERSITY: THERE ARE MULTIPLE DIVERSITIES

A Conversation with Dritëro Kasapi

Head of theatre and Artistic Director, Dritëro Kasapi looks back on three years of questioning, experimentation and action around 'diversity' on and off stage, in dialogue with the other partners of *Common Stories*.

What lessons have you learned over these three years?

**Dritëro Kasapi (DK):** What I have learned – both as an individual and as a director – is that public cultural institutions across Europe face the same challenges: How can we remain relevant and useful to society and to the audiences we welcome? How can we ensure that the stories, points of view, and perspectives we present also speak to audiences who do not necessarily frequent our venues? We share this desire to meet the expectations of a wider audience and to open our stages to broader artistic horizons. By multiplying the types of experiences offered there, we would like to mirror what life in Europe is like, whatever that may mean.

Nevertheless, these issues vary depending on our specific national situations, our demographic realities and the prevailing local discourse. When it comes to 'diversity', the discourse in our different countries can take very different directions. Sometimes, this discussion has not even begun! So, while we may have a lot in common in theory, our '*common stories*' may really turn out to be very different. This does not mean that we do not share any common history across borders, but that France and Sweden will not have the same common narratives as Poland and Sweden, for example.

These three years have led me to much more clearly formalise the idea that there is no such thing as European diversity: There are multiple diversities – geographical, historical, cultural, class, gender – and how they are intertwined depends on local contexts. In Sweden, for example, we do not have the same colonial history as France: Colonisation outside our borders lasted for a shorter period of time and took more indirect forms. Within our own territory, however, the colonisation of indigenous peoples was characterised by extreme violence. Furthermore, unlike in France, we are only just beginning to talk about this sombre chapter in our history. It is not a high political priority.

How have you been able to learn from each other, despite these fundamental differences?

**DK:** For me, the learning process has been about breaking down the myth of the universality of the concept of diversity. This is very important, because it teaches us that we need to work together, not around universal categories that do not exist, but based on our common specificities. Now, when we support artists, we can gauge the relevance of their work in relation to our national context, but also in relation to that of some of our European colleagues. And *vice versa*.

It has also taught us to see the works of artists supported by our partners as a gateway to understanding the countries in which they were created. Artistic strategies, the themes addressed, the discourse surrounding a work, practices, and definitions of the audience tell us a great deal about the society in which they were forged. They also hold up a mirror to help us understand our own society.

Why did you choose to include the issue of children's rights to work on diversity?

**DK:** In Sweden, it is a legal obligation under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to consider children as citizens and individuals in their own right, with their own emotional lives and rights, and to guarantee the integrity of those lives by protecting them from dogmatic interference by adults.

A few years ago, when the State finally decided to sign it, after having long refused to do so, we decided to take it seriously.

How can we take children's perspectives into account in all aspects of our work, and not just in the artistic dimension? We should not forget that integrating 'children's perspective' into the creative process is a long-standing tradition in Sweden. As early as the 1970s, the theatre community, led by playwrights like Suzanne Osten, grappled with these issues head-on, inviting children to follow and participate in the work process from a very early stage. Today, all university theatre programmes offer courses on these practices.

To ensure that all these ideas and skills are more widely infused within our organisation, we have developed a six-month training programme. This involves very practical and concrete aspects – not placing coat racks too high, for example – but also more complex issues, such as rethinking our entire communication strategy so that children feel that this institution is also for them. We work with children from all over the country, and for some, RT is the first cultural experience they have.

How have these three years of GPF changed your practices in concrete terms?

**DK:** In terms of programming, this project has enabled us to broaden the sphere of artists with whom we are in contact. It has reinforced our conviction that we need to dare to present the work of artists who are at the very beginning of their careers. In terms of practices, we have confirmed the fundamental importance of the long term, particularly in artistic support. Through *Common Stories*, European organisations have joined forces to support the development of artistic projects over the longer term, which has been extremely valuable for creators, wherever they are in their process. Committing ourselves to continuity and finding partners to make this possible if we cannot do it alone, have become essential for us. This issue of the long term is not only important for artists: It is just as important for audiences.

How are the diversity of artistic projects, teams, and audiences linked?

**DK:** This is an extremely complex question, one that we have been discussing ever since I became artistic director six years ago. Theatres are part of an ecosystem that includes the theatre community as a whole, the sphere of education and audiences – those who come, and those who do not come but whom we would like to reach. So, I come back to the basic mission of RT: To be relevant for everyone and everywhere.

The simplest part of this puzzle is undoubtedly what happens on stage: the question of representation. However, when it comes to those who hold the power to decide what is shown on stage – directors, choreographers, and artistic leaders – the diversity within this group is far less evident. And yet we are a little more advanced on this issue than some of our European partners.

It gets even more complicated when we go behind the scenes. Because the technical and production standards of theatres are sometimes not at all suited to certain projects. Some artistic practices, because they come from other traditions and other ways of thinking, do not fit into the boxes. This can lead to misunderstandings and friction with the teams. How can we inject diversity and flexibility into the production process as well? This is expensive and very complicated for institutions that operate according to a set of processes, protocols and laws.

It requires a complete change of mindset. The worst thing is that in ten years' time, everything we are learning now will be obsolete. We will have to review everything again. So, it is not a question of learning, but of creating a system that allows us to put knowledge into practice at the very moment we acquire it. And thus, be able to constantly adapt.

And what about audiences?

**DK:** Our conclusion is that it is difficult to diversify audiences when teams are not representative of the diversity of a society. Moreover, it is impossible to reach specific audiences if teams do not know how to communicate with them, or if they lack understanding of their references, cultural contexts, habits, and patterns of cultural consumption.

Who comes to the theatre? Who has access to these resources and who does not? Who are we excluding? If we do not make the absent visible, we will continue to labour under the illusion that we are addressing everyone. Having this critical relationship with ourselves is our democratic duty.

How do you see the future?

**DK:** One question keeps nagging me: How can we continue these reflections without falling into clichés? Over time, the vocabulary of diversity has become predictable and clichéd, losing its meaning.

Perhaps we need to change our approach. Rather than repeating that diversity is important, we could reflect on what is happening around us, on the people around us, and, based on that, ask ourselves what stories we want to tell. We need to invent a new way of talking about these realities.

And I believe that now is the time to do so, because the political situation is particularly turbulent and requires us to reposition ourselves, redefine the values we defend and name the forces – political and cultural – that oppose them.

Interview by **Aïnhua Jean-Calmettes**, October 2025



© Sören Vilks

Head of RT, Dritëro Kasapi is a theatre director and artistic leader with over 25 years of experience. Combining bold vision with strategic leadership, he has strengthened and transformed institutions such as Kulturhuset Stadsteatern and Gottsunda Dance & Theatre. His work, which often addresses identity, power, and modern society, makes him a significant figure in Swedish and Scandinavian theatre.





Sorcières / Kimpa Vita by DeLaVallet Bidiefono @ Pierre Gondard

# THE GOOD PRACTICES FACTORY IN COLOGNE

Since 2023, africologne (AFC) has been implementing a self-reflection process on its activities and positioning, as well as on its methodologies around the questions of diversity, in dialogue with other local cultural institutions, including the Orangerie Theatre.

Two concrete results are the writing of a Code of Conduct for teams, artists, and audiences, implemented during the festival in June, as well as a series of awareness workshops with the Orangerie Theatre this Fall.

Moreover, the 2025 edition of the festival deepened the dialogue with the Cologne's afro-descendant communities. Yaël Koutouan, curator of the new africologneLOCAL format, tells us more about the process page 25.

## ACTIVITIES IN 2025

In April and May 2025, AFC focused on the development of guidelines and a Code of Conduct for its biennial festival that took place in June.

In collaboration with community organisers, activists, mediators and director of the Theodor Wonja Michael Library, Glenda Obermuller, the AFC team developed a Code of Conduct that was displayed in the festival venues and shared with festival teams, guest artists and collaborators. It aimed at ensuring a respectful working environment during the festival. It is also a flexible tool that can be adapted by other cultural partners in Cologne and beyond.

On June 6th, 2025, **Glenda Obermuller** led a workshop for the AFC team on how to protect guest artists, staff and audiences from racist aggression and create safer spaces. Fourteen participants developed response strategies for racist incidents. The workshop took place a few weeks after far-right disruptions at a partner venue. In each festival location, a designated person was responsible for conducting dialogue in the event of conflict.

To conclude the year and in collaboration with Orangerie Theatre, a three-day series around culture, diversity and accessibility took place on October 14<sup>th</sup>, December 1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

Led by Charlott Dahmen and Amy Zayed, the first day introduced the participants to the 'basics' of inclusion and accessibility in the cultural sector, including statistical and legal foundations, term definition and modelling of hinderance. The second workshop, conducted by Nils Rottgardt and Dodzi Dougban, explores the 'Aesthetics of Access', a method to integrate means of accessibility in the artistic process. It shows that accessibility practices do not just remove barriers but also serve the artistic process.

The last session is an online qualification programme for theatre makers in Cologne focusing on Public Relations and Communication led by Un-Label e.V.

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### Who?

The Good Practices Factory 2025 Cologne was led by:

**Gerhardt Haag**, Managing Director, AFC | Kerstin Ortmeier, Co-Director, AFC | **Marie Deuffhard**, Co-Director AFC | **With: Dr. Sarah Youssef**, Artistic Director, Orangerie Theatre | **Andrea Bleikamp**, WEHR51 | **Simon Eifeler**, Bridgeworks | **Janna Huttebraucker**, Bridgeworks | **Ines Langel**, Orangerie Theatre | **Lisa Lehnen**, Overhead Project | **Laurenz Leky**, Theatre im Bauturm | **Glenda Obermuller**, Theodor Wonja Michael Library | **Bernd Schlenkrich**, Theatre im Bauturm | **Andrea Tedone**, Comedia Theatre



# LISTENING TO THE AFRODIASPORIC COMMUNITIES IN COLOGNE

## A Conversation with Yaël Koutouan

One of the collaborators of the *africologneFESTIVAL*, Yaël Koutouan curated *africologneLOCAL* in 2025, a new programme entirely dedicated to the African diaspora in Cologne. She tells us more about the process and what such a platform means for African communities there...

First of all, how did you meet the *africologne* team?

**Yaël Koutouan (YK):** As part of African Futures Cologne 2023, a major city event, I interviewed artists invited by *africologneFESTIVAL*. I really enjoyed the atmosphere as it's the only festival in Germany that invites so many African artists and members of the African diaspora. For once, we were seen and welcomed, and that very special feeling stayed with me. A few weeks later, I contacted Gerhardt Haag and Kerstin Ortmeier<sup>1</sup> because I really wanted to be part of it. Later, when I spoke with Marie Deuflhard<sup>2</sup>, she mentioned the idea of curating a local programme, and I jumped on it!

Is being welcomed and seen something you have felt with other art institutions in Cologne?

**YK:** I feel that many institutions use diversity as part of their own promotion – claiming they are diverse, that everyone can work there or is welcome – but if you take a closer look, you realise that nothing has really changed.

Being welcoming isn't about inviting a few people from the diaspora to participate in a programme and then leave. It's about listening, opening yourself to sometimes difficult conversations, and understanding, for example, that in Cologne the Black community is very diverse – encompassing different perspectives and realities that are rarely shown in their complexity. That's something I wanted to address with *LOCAL*.

There are many invisible barriers that prevent people from entering a theatre or an art gallery. So, it's not only about saying, 'Our doors are open.' Some buildings are intimidating, and people feel they are not meant for them. Language is another barrier. More generally, I believe institutions should make the effort to meet communities where they are, in their everyday contexts, rather than expecting them to come and visit.

In general, over the past four or five years, would you say there has been a positive shift in how art institutions reach more diverse audiences and projects?

**YK:** It's much more polarised. On one hand, there's the rise of right-wing movements, with some institutions becoming increasingly conservative; on the other hand, there are people and organisations actively resisting.

For me, it's about identifying people and spaces you can work with – and what I've learned is that you can't do that without addressing politics.

What's happening globally – the genocide in Gaza, for example – deeply affects what we do on a local level. Everything is connected. I can't promote diversity and anti-colonial values while working with institutions that are not willing to acknowledge different perspectives and conversations that allow complexity. It is concerning, because there aren't that many of us in the cultural scene, and funding in Germany keeps shrinking. So, there's a real need to share resources – but there are also lines that cannot be crossed.

How did you approach the curation process for *LOCAL*?

**YK:** I approached it by listening – by trying, learning, and, of course, failing sometimes!

I started by talking to as many people as possible from the Cologne's African diaspora, asking what they would like to see, and what they felt was missing. I also asked: What does community mean to you? What should be done to connect communities?



Yaël Koutouan studied theatre studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Her research interests lie in the fields of race and postcolonial studies. She is currently researching German postwar history and the so-called 'occupation children' for a performance project by Simone Dede Ayivi, supported by the Künstler\*innenhaus Mousonturm. Koutouan has been writing as a freelance author for Theater der Zeit since 2023 and is a member of the jury for the 2026 Berlin Theatertreffen.

Since 2025, she has been a freelancer at Team Timster (Kika) and is responsible for curating the *africologneFESTIVAL LOCAL* programme.

Yaël Koutouan is also involved with DAKO e.V., an organisation for refugees and migrants in Cologne.

Food and music came up first! So, we invited Malaikas Soul Food to do the catering and developed *Jam Sessions* to create space for artistic exchanges between the festival's international guests and Cologne-based artists.

The *Open Stage* call allowed us to reach children and young people, aged 20–30, an audience the festival hadn't quite reached before. Many of them also attended and enjoyed other shows in the festival.

What are the next steps?

**YK:** We've applied for funding to develop certain activities over the next two years, outside the festival frame. I'd like to continue the *Jam Session* and *Open Stage* formats throughout the year.

The *Sketch and Connect* activity – where people are invited to draw and exchange with visual artist Nando Nkrumah – will also continue.

We'd like to keep working around food by organising community cooking events that connect people across generations. It's about highlighting cooking practices that are not celebrated or experienced here – practices passed down to younger generations. I'd also like to open these cooking events to political discussions, for instance about how cooking relates to community.

I also feel that art is a good way to address issues within the community that can't always be discussed directly – like queerness, for example. There is an active Black and Queer Collective in Cologne, but queerness is still totally taboo for many of our parents. Through art, there are many ways to say things and gently offer different perspectives.

<sup>1</sup> Gerhardt Haag and Kerstin Ortmeier co-founded and are co-directing the *africologneFESTIVAL*.

<sup>2</sup> Marie Deuflhard is codirecting the *africologneFESTIVAL* since 2025.

For the first time, the festival displayed a Code of Conduct in each venue – the result of a reflection by several Cologne art organisations as part of the *Good Practices Factory*. How did the audience react?

**YK:** A lot of people were surprised, sometimes irritated. But all reactions were important as the goal is really to question the audience about their own position and practices. There is the white gaze, for example – the way people look at racialised bodies, Black bodies here, and how they receive narratives coming from different backgrounds. The white gaze is a European practice, something you grow up with without realising it – but it can also be unlearned. That's why Amina Wolter and I wrote *An Invitation to Critical Art Observation*, which was displayed at the entrance of the exhibition space.

Interview by **Virginie Dupray**, October 2025

**Code of Conduct**

**Für ein respektvolles Miteinander auf unserem Festival**

Auf unserem Festival teilen wir Raum, Geschichten und Erfahrungen. Wir als Team befinden uns in einem kontinuierlichen Prozess der strukturellen Veränderung und wünschen uns ein Miteinander auf Augenhöhe.

**Wir erkennen an:**

- Historisch bedingter Rassismus ist in Deutschland nicht aufgearbeitet und wirkt oft unbewusst weiter: in Sprache, Blicken und Handlungen
- Diskriminierung und Rassismus existieren auch hier

**Verhaltenserwartungen**

- Wir begegnen einander mit Respekt, wir hören einander zu und zeigen Bereitschaft zur Selbstreflexion
- Rassistische, stereotype oder abwertende Aussagen und Handlungen sind nicht geduldet – auch nicht als „Witz“ oder vermeintlich „gut gemeint“
- Wir vermeiden Fremdbezeichnungen (z.B. das N-Wort, „farbig“), sondern nutzen Selbstbezeichnungen wie „Schwarze Menschen“, „afrodiasporische Menschen“, „BIPOC“ oder „People of Colour“
- Die Perspektiven von Betroffenen werden ernst genommen – ohne Relativierung, Erklärung oder Abwehr.
- Wer auf diskriminierendes Verhalten hingewiesen wird, hört zu, übernimmt Verantwortung und vermeidet Abwehrreaktionen

Wiederholte oder schwerwiegende Verstöße können zum Ausschluss von der Veranstaltung führen.

Personen aus unserem Team, erkennbar an den **orangenen Warnwesten**, sind jederzeit ansprechbar

Danke für Euren Beitrag zu einem solidarischen Miteinander!

Euer africologne Team

## AN INVITATION TO CRITICAL ART OBSERVATION - ART IS AN ATTITUDE

by Yaël Koutouan & Amina Wolter

We share below the text displayed at the entrance to the exhibition space of the 2025 africologneFESTIVAL.

The performances and installations you are about to experience as part of this festival are more than just art. They are lived history, acts of resistance, remembrance, spiritual practice, and visions of a future built on justice.

They engage with questions of identity, vulnerability – and the possibilities of healing.

As a spectator, you are invited to witness these intimate, powerful moments.

This invitation is a privilege – and it comes with responsibility. Decolonisation doesn't begin on stage. It begins with your gaze. Art is not neutral. Art is an attitude.

### On the White Gaze

The term white gaze describes a specific perspective: a mode of perceiving art, culture, and bodies from the Global South or of Black people through a white, often unconscious, normative lens. This way of seeing is not neutral.

It has historical roots in colonial practices like human zoos, where Black bodies were turned into objects of white curiosity and superiority. The white gaze doesn't just target art – it targets people: their bodies, their voices, their forms of expression.

It assumes that white people get to define how Black bodies are read, where they belong – and where they don't.

### What Can We Do About It?

The good news: The white gaze can be unlearned.

We invite you to reflect:

- What am I used to seeing?
- Which images and narratives feel familiar – and why?
- Where do my expectations of 'aesthetic value' come from?
- What do I not see – and why?

African and Afrodiasporic art is not exotic or 'other.'

It is present, political, complex, and multifaceted – with its own language and depth.

This display is part of our festival practice. Please read it.

Reflect on it. Carry it with you.



© Patrycja Skwierczyńska

# THE GOOD PRACTICES FACTORY IN WARSAW

From January to September 2025, TR Warszawa (TRW) expanded accessibility for diverse groups, launching initiatives for people with visual or hearing impairments and supporting the training of new access officers in the arts.

In 2025, the TRW team also initiated a reflection project and a set of actions focused on mental health. On page 28, Helena Świegocka and Katarzyna Parzuchowska-Tercz discuss how cultural institutions can support individuals recovering from a mental health crisis.

## ACTIVITIES IN 2025

Implemented actions included:

- Ten performances with audio description, preceded by a tactile tour of the set design. Participants could enter the set, touch the props, learn about the topography of the stage, making it easier to imagine what is described live by the audio description narrator.
- Eight performances with subtitles for the deaf.
- Six performances of the play *eP*, a co-creation between deaf poet and performer Adam Stoyanov, directors Agnieszka Jakimiak and Kuba Krzewiński and actress Monika Frajczyk.

Furthermore, TRW has brought together a group of children from the Children's Home with a programme of workshops and events, as well as a group of young people on the autism spectrum who regularly attend theatre workshops to strengthen their social skills.

TRW has partnered with local cultural organisations, such as Warsaw's Pomost Association for Friends and Families of People with Mental Disorders, to support programmes for individuals with mental health issues. Individuals discharged from psychiatric hospitals after extended stays were invited to attend meetings, theatre tours, discussions and convivial moments to accompany their transition back to home, family life, or professional environments.

In July 2025, the project *Teatr od Pierwszego Wejrzenia – (po) zdrowienia* (*Theatre at First Sight: Greetings*) was launched in partnership with Nowy Teatr and the eFkropka Foundation. The initiative invites individuals recovering from a mental health crisis or diagnosed with mental illness to join cultural activities. The programme involved eight participants diagnosed with mental illness and eight other participants who collaborate in pairs and groups. The programme's objective is to address self-stigmatisation among individuals with mental illness and stigmatisation by others, demonstrating that participation in social and cultural activities is possible for everyone. How can we prevent mental disorder from becoming the prism through which those diagnosed define themselves or are defined? After an introductory day, the following sessions proposed workshops, discussions and performances, all while enjoying good food.

All activities are free of charge. The project will run until December 2025.

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### Who?

The Good Practices Factory 2025 Warsaw was led by:

**Helena Świegocka**, Project Manager, TRW | **Katarzyna Batarowska**, Supporting Specialist, Theatre Pedagogy and Accessibility Department, TRW | And other members of the Accessibility, Technical and Production teams at TRW



# ABOUT THEATRE, CULTURE AND MENTAL HEALTH

## A Conversation with Helena Świągocka and Katarzyna Parzuchowska-Tercz

How can culture and theatre support people experiencing a mental health crisis? How can we create spaces in which participation becomes part of the recovery process? These are some of the questions explored by Helena Świągocka, Accessibility Leader at TR Warszawa Theatre, and Katarzyna Parzuchowska-Tercz from the eFkropka Foundation<sup>1</sup>.

**Helena Świągocka (HS):** For a long time, I have been designing theatre activities aimed at engaging diverse groups of people, especially those whose access to culture is limited, or who are underrepresented.

At some point, I took part in *Kiosks of Care* – a course on mental health for cultural staff from Warsaw, organised by the Society of Creative Initiatives 'e'. It is where I first heard about the eFkropka Foundation<sup>1</sup> and the Open Seminars on Philosophy and Psychiatry Foundation, and where I met you. After this, I started reflecting on how theatre could link with the health sector to help (re)place the recovery process in a social context – one that would complement treatment and accompany this often very delicate return to society for people who have experienced mental crises.

**Katarzyna Parzuchowska-Tercz (KP-T):** Indeed, when I think about mental health, I see three pillars of wellbeing: relationships, interests, and contact with the world. Relationships teach us how to feel close to others and how to coexist; they make us feel that we belong. Interests help us grow and allow us to do things for ourselves, not for others. And the third pillar is contact – with nature and with culture. When discussing mental health, we usually emphasise the importance of connecting with nature, while culture is rarely mentioned. Yet culture can help healing. Taking part in theatre events, watching performances, and discussing them all have a deep impact on our mental health. Culture gives us a language to describe what is difficult and offers a space in which we can articulate it together.

**HS:** This is how I see theatre. The project *Teatr od pierwszego wejrzenia – (po)zdrowienia* (*Theatre at First Sight – Greetings*)<sup>2</sup>, led by TRW in collaboration with the eFkropka Foundation and Nowy Teatr, was imagined for people experiencing a mental health crisis.

Before the project was launched, TRW collaborated with the group Pomost to propose a guided tour of the theatre to people who had recently left a psychiatric facility.

I remember asking them whether they wanted to leave their bags in the cloakroom that would be locked or take them with them. I gave them a choice. To me, it felt like a basic question, but to them, it was a significant moment. It turned out that they were usually told what to do, like, 'Leave your things here and let's go', but here they were able to decide for themselves. For some of them, their bags were everything – a symbol of safety. It was a simple, yet deeply meaningful gesture.

**KP-T:** This shows how much power lies in small details. For people in recovery, the sense of control and the freedom to decide for themselves are often crucial. I'm not sure whether you have any experience with psychiatric facilities, but treatment in such facilities is a very particular experience. Being admitted to hospitals is sometimes necessary, it can provide a sense of safety and support. But how you feel there depends on the people around you: who works there, what the atmosphere is like, and whether the medical staff have the time and the energy to truly be present with their patients.

I noticed that after a few hospitalisations, something in me broke. I had lost my sense of agency. I had stopped seeing myself as someone who deserves respect and is able to make her own decisions. When you are diagnosed with a mental illness, it suddenly becomes clear for the system that: 'We'll take care of you. We know what's best for you.'

To come back to the bags story, for someone with such an experience, being able to decide for herself or himself where to leave her or his belongings is truly special. Such a simple gesture can help restore a sense of agency. It's the same when you ask people how they would like to be addressed – for people in recovery it's an acknowledgement that their voice matters. This is what we mean by agency. It's something that is often missing in interactions with the institutions. In hospitals, government offices or social welfare centres, there is a fixed protocol, a way of treating those who come there. Culture, however, should be different.

**HS:** Then we come back to the question on how cultural institutions can support the recovery process, given that they are not therapeutic facilities and that we, as employees, are not healthcare professionals. As mental health crises have become significantly more prevalent, we would like people who experience them to feel part of the community. But how can we approach this wisely? How can we offer support without taking responsibility for something beyond our qualifications? How can we create a space that is open and safe for everyone – for recovering people, for employees, and for other participants, all of whom have their own boundaries?

**KP-T:** Teachers often face situations they are not fully prepared for. They are not therapists, and yet they have to respond. That is why every school adopts – or at least should adopt – appropriate procedures for dealing with difficult situations: a kind of 'psychological first aid'.

I believe theatres should implement something similar to equip employees with the knowledge of what to do when someone feels unwell or when a crisis occurs. We learn how to react when someone faints, so we should also know how to respond when someone experiences intense emotions. It helps foster an atmosphere of safety for everyone – you don't have to wonder whether to call an ambulance or leave the person alone. You know exactly how to respond.

When I was part of the Crisis Theatre at the Wola Community Centre, and later at the Stokłosy Community Centre, I also noticed how important space is. It should not only be neutral, but also familiar – a place associated with safety and curiosity. Some participants came there for the first time with the thought that these community centres were places for 'smarter, more educated people.' But when they heard that this event was for them, they felt encouraged to come. Over time, they began to feel at home there. They had their own lockers and cups, and they knew the staff. The head of the community centre often came to rehearsals and made sure we had everything we needed. Nothing extraordinary: a glass of water, the right room temperature, a smile, but it made a huge difference.

<sup>1</sup> The eFkropka Foundation acts against stereotypes, changing perception about mental illness, spreads knowledge about mental health among various professional groups, creates spaces for people who are experiencing or who have experienced mental crises to exchange and advocate for themselves.

<sup>2</sup> The project is based on the social innovation *Teatr od Pierwszego Wejrzenia* (*Theatre at First Sight*) created by Magdalena Szymczak and Helena Świągocka at the Nowy Teatr.

Instead of being labelled as ‘the others’, ‘the weird ones’, or ‘the ones in recovery’, we were simply a group of people creating something genuine together.

As time went on, our relationships deepened even further. If I were to describe it in one word – it was home. It was warm, welcoming, and gave us a sense of belonging.

**HS:** In a community centre though, it’s maybe easier to build close and sustainable relationships and a sense of belonging. People know one another and live nearby. A theatre, especially one like TRW, functions a bit differently. Our audiences include not only people from across Warsaw, but also visitors from other parts of Poland and even from abroad. They come to see a show, and then leave...

**KP-T:** Yes, but things might change – thanks to the very projects you implement. Theatre is becoming increasingly interested in its audiences. You create programmes aimed at diverse groups and have begun to ask who your visitors really are. It’s a huge shift – from elitism to inclusivity. Today, theatre is becoming a meeting place. People can talk and have coffee after the show or take part in a debate... Theatre is no longer a closed sanctuary of culture where you have to dress up, but a space for dialogue.

**HS:** Exactly. Theatres are increasingly seen as places that ‘sell’ experiences rather than tickets. It’s all about emotions, relationships, and shared moments. The performance doesn’t end with the final scene. What matters is what comes before and after. These changes have become even more visible thanks to social media. Viewers leave comments and share their reactions. This helps us build relationships that didn’t exist before – based on emotions and shared experiences. When I look at all this from the perspective of cooperation between the cultural and health sectors, I see enormous potential. Theatre can support the recovery process and help people reintegrate into society. Where therapy ends, culture should begin, because theatre gives something the healthcare system cannot: a sense of belonging; of being part of the world.

**KP-T:** For a person in recovery, leaving the house alone is a huge step. Theatres or community centres could serve as safe stops on the road from hospitalisation to returning to everyday life. In hospitals, patients are often encouraged to organise outings – to theatres, museums, galleries. They have to call, ask about tickets, opening hours... It’s not only a practical exercise; it also teaches independence, responsibility, how to plan things, and it comes with the joy of reconnecting with the outside world. Let’s not forget about pleasure! Culture is not only a form of support, it’s also a reward. But in Warsaw, a theatre ticket is quite expensive. That’s why public institutions, funded by taxpayers, should care about accessibility, including the financial one. And this sense of closeness changes everything. When you know people who live with different challenges, when you understand what they have to face, you stop being afraid. They are no longer ‘them’, they become part of ‘us’.



Coordinator of the Prevention Team at the Psychiatric and Addiction Prevention Clinic in Wolski Hospital, Katarzyna Parzuchowska-Tercz is a trainer, mental health prevention specialist and art therapist. Having personally recovered from schizophrenia, she now supports others on their path to recovery. Head of the Mazovian Recovery College, she works with the OSFP Foundation and the eKropka Foundation and is also a member of the Council for Persons with Disabilities at the Ombudsman’s Office.



A theatre educator, actress, and theatre scholar, Helena Świągocka works as an accessibility leader within two Warsaw theatres: Nowy Teatr and TR Warszawa. She designs and facilitates processes of change in cultural institutions that focus on broad accessibility for diverse social groups. She also creates performative projects with groups of amateur artists.

# (RE)SOURCES

Each GPF group sent references of books, articles, films, podcasts that have been fuelling their reflections over the past few months...

This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a bedside, heartfelt bibliography: words, thoughts, images from which to build, expand, face doubts too, but always move forward...

## PICK OF THE MC93

### To Read

*Comment parler du racisme aux enfants ?*, Rokhaya Diallo,  
On ne compte pas pour du beurre, 2025

*La couleur des rôles – Enquête sur la division raciale du travail actorial*,  
Maxime Cervulle and Sarah Lecossais, Le Bord de l'Eau, 2025

*Terres et Liberté – Manifeste antiraciste pour une écologie de la libération*,  
under the direction of Fatima Ouassak, Les liens qui libèrent, 2025

*Mécanique du privilège blanc ; comment l'identifier et le déjouer ?*  
Estelle Depris, Binge Audio, 2024

*S'aimer la Terre : Défaire l'habiter colonial*, Malcolm Ferdinand,  
Seuil, 2024

*Le dérangeur : petit lexique en voie de décolonisation*, Collectif Piment,  
Hors d'atteinte, 2020

*The Equality of Human Races: Positivist Anthropology (De l'égalité  
des races humaines : anthropologie positive)*, Anténor Firmin,  
Mémoire d'encrier, 2005

## PICK OF THE THÉÂTRE NATIONAL WALLONIE-BRUXELLES

### To Read

*La riposte*, Laurence Rosier, Payot, 2025

*Universalisme*, Julien Suaudeau and Mame-Fatou Niang, Anamosa, 2022

*The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha, Routledge, 2012

*Art in Common (L'art en commun)*, Estelle Zhong Mengual, Routledge, 2024

## PICK OF CULTURGEST

### To Read

*A terra dá, a terra quer*, Antonio Bispo dos Santos, Ubu & Piseagrama, 2023

*Pequeno manual antirracista*, Djamilia Ribeiro, Companhia das Letras, 2019

*Colonização, quilombos modos e significações*. Antonio Bispo dos Santos,  
Instituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia, 2015

*Water Eyes (Olhos d'água)*, Conceicao Evaristo, Pallas, 2014

*Pedagogy of Autonomy: Necessary Knowledge for Educational Practice  
(Pedagogia da autonomia: Saberes necessários à prática educativa)*, Paulo  
Freire, Paz e Terra, 1996

*Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks,  
Routledge, 1994

*For an Afro-Latin American Feminism*, Lélia Gonzalez, organised by Flávia  
Rios and Márcia Lima, Isis Internacional, 1988

## PICK OF THE RIKSTEATERN

### To Read

*The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences  
of Theatre*, Matthew Reason, Trentham Books Ltd, 2010

*Theatre for Early Years: Research in Performing Arts for Children from Birth  
to Three*, under the direction by Wolfgang Schneider, Peter Lang, 2009

*Theatre for Children and Young People: 50 Years of Professional Theatre  
in the UK*, under the direction by Stuart Bennett, Aurora Metro, 2005

### To Watch

*My Life as a Courgette (Ma vie de courgette)*, Claude Barras, 2016

*The Spirit of the Beehive*, Victor Erice, 1973



## PICK OF TR WARSZAWA

### To Discover

*Young Design 2025 - Instytut Wzornictwa Przemysłowego*, organised by the Polish Institute of Industrial Design.

[To visit here](#)

### To Read

*The Anxious Generation. How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, Jonathan Haidt, Penguin Press, 2024

*What is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being? A Scoping Review*, Daisy Fancourt & Saoirse Finn, 2019

*Aging Well Workbook: CBT Skills to Help You Think Flexibly, Manage Anxiety and Depression, and Enjoy Life at Any Age*, Neil A. Rector and Julie Erickson, Trade Paperback, 2023

### To Watch

*Just Hear Me Out (Posłuchaj, co chcę ci powiedzieć)*, Małgorzata Imielska, 2024

*Taste of Cherry*, Abbas Kiarostami, 1997

*The Velvet Queen (La panthère des neiges)*, Marie Amiguet and Vincent Munier, 2021

## PICK OF AFRICOLOGNE

### To Read

*Staging Blackness. Representations of Race*, Layne, Priscilla and Lily Tonger-Erk in *German-Speaking Drama and Theater*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2024

*Allianzen – Kritische Praxis an weißen Institutionen*, Elisa Liepsch, transcript Verlag, 2018

*Diversifizierungsprozesse in der Kinder- und Jugendtheaterfestivalszene*, Dr. Özlem Canyürek, Darstellende Künste & junges publikum, 2023

*On Being Included. Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Sara Ahmed, Duke University Press, 2012

*Schwarzes Wissen, weiße Sehgewohnheit Oder Ich würde mich auch mal über einen fundierten Verriss freuen*, Simone Dede Ayi in *Theaterwissenschaft postkolonial/dekolonial. Eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme*, under the direction of Azadeh Sharifi and Lisa Skwirblies (Hg), transcript Verlag, 2022

*'You End Up Doing the Document Rather Than Doing the Doing': Diversity, Race Equality and the Politics of Documentation in Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 30 n°4, Sara Ahmed, Duke University Press, 2007

## PICK OF THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

### To Read

*De minuit à minuit*, Sara Mychkiné, Le bruit du monde, 2023

### To Watch

*The Tree of Authenticity (L'arbre de l'authenticité)*, Sammy Baloji, 2025

*Souleymane's Story*, Boris Lojkiné, 2024

### To Listen

*Frantz Fanon l'indocile*, written by Anais Kien, produced by Séverine Cassar, France Culture, 2020

[To listen here](#)

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February – November 2025

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