

The Montreal International Anarchist Theatre Festival (Long Version)

An unofficial history

Norman Nawrocki et al

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Despite being one of the most misunderstood political ideologies of our times, anarchism has a long and beautiful history of developed political thought, well-organized and vast social movements, and a rich culture of art, literature, film, music, and theatre. Non-commercial, non-bourgeois, anarchist theatre. Well beyond any off-Broadway and off-Fringe. Intoxicating anarchist theatre, steeped in freedom and equality, humanity and hope for all.

At the beginning of the last century, renowned anarchists like the American, Emma Goldman, and the equally respected Russian, Peter Kropotkin, strongly advocated for a politically conscious theatre and its radical potential, referring to the plays of Ibsen, Gorky, Tolstoy, Wilde, Erich Mühsam, Voltarine de Cleyre and Louise Michel. They emphasised that theatre was an ideal medium to communicate ideas, aspirations and underground dissident political opinions, with the focus on content rather than form. Buenos Aires, already a hotbed of anarcho-syndicalism and working class organizing from the 1900s onwards, boasted not one but a dozen anarchist theatre troupes then, as did revolutionary peasant movements across Russia and Ukraine.

Anarchist oriented surrealist theatre flourished in Europe in the 1920s onwards inspired by the fiery work of brilliant French writers like Antonin Artaud, Benjamin Péret, Tristan Tzara and others. Provocative performances took place in cafes, bars and theatres across the continent and beyond. In the 1960s, Vermont's celebrated Bread and Puppet Theater staged huge anti-Viet-Nam war processions and pageants in the streets. In the 1990s, Montreal's anarcho-cabaret rebel news orchestra, Rhythm Activism, produced radical theatrical community cabarets across Quebec to promote the rights of tenants and the poor.

More recently, the Montreal International Anarchist Theatre Festival / *Le Festival International de Théâtre Anarchiste de Montréal* (MIATF) continued this radical tradition with its annual celebration of contemporary and historic anarchist-inspired theatre. A small group of theatre-loving anarchists started it in 2005. They decided that the city's claim as the hotbed of anarchist cultural activity in North America needed some incendiary theatre to reinforce it. Thirty of them gathered in a local punk rock bar to read and perform extracts in both French and English from six anarchist plays from 1880 to 1980. Plays like *L'ami de l'ordre* (The Friend of Order), by George Darien, about the Paris Commune, and *Land and Liberty* by Ricardo Flores Magon about the

Mexican Revolution. The event, ‘Rebel Words / *Les mots rebelles*,’ the city’s first-ever celebration of bilingual anarchist theatre, set the stage for the larger annual international festival.

In the years that followed, the MIATF would receive major media attention in the city’s daily English and French newspapers and radio. The prestigious *Le Devoir* lauded its intriguing anarchist programming, underlined the affordable tickets, and called it, “two nights of intense theatre, one in English, one in French.” According to the Montreal newspaper, *Voir*, the MIATF grew into, “The little festival that pulls off miracles,” especially for enticing internationally renowned groups like The Living Theater to come.

For the second year, the small dedicated collective of anarchist actors, playwrights and theatre fans devised English and French application forms, produced a poster, started collecting donations from among friends to reserve for expenses, and sent a callout for plays on social media:

“The Montreal International Anarchist Theatre Festival, the only festival in the world dedicated to anarchist theatre, is currently seeking plays, monologues, dance-theatre, puppet shows, mime, etc., in English, French and other languages, on the theme of anarchism or any subject pertaining to anarchism, i.e. against all forms of oppression including the State, capitalism, war, patriarchy, etc.

“We will also consider pieces exploring ecological, social and economic justice, racism, feminism, poverty, class and gender oppression from an anarchist perspective. We welcome work from anarchist and non-anarchist writers.”

Dozens of troupes responded, from Australia to Russia, Africa to South America, the Middle and the Far East and across North America. Among them, award-winning professional troupes backed by glowing press reviews who had performed in major theatre festivals, but also local student and amateur groups.

As stated in the MIATF application form, the budgetless festival couldn’t pay airfare for international troupes or other long-distance transportation costs, nor provide visas, but it did guarantee comfortable accommodation, local transportation and a per diem for artists from outside Montreal. Plus, limited but quality production resources, a minimal but professional technical staff, and a guaranteed responsive audience. Despite this, many troupes considered participation in, “The world’s largest and only international anarchist theatre festival,” as we liked to joke, important enough that they raised money to pay their own way to Montreal.

In total, the eighteen year long all volunteer undertaking presented over one hundred and twenty acts, almost as many troupes consisting of hundreds of performers, and drew several thousand attendees curious to experience this new unfamiliar genre of theatre.

Performers came from Chile, Italy, the Philippines, Germany, France, Belgium and across North America, including First Nations acts. Bringing New York’s legendary The Living Theatre to Montreal for the first time caused a media frenzy and sold out a five hundred seat venue over two nights. Vermont’s acclaimed Bread and Puppet Theatre came not once, but a few times. Other professional troupes from abroad such as Le Krizo Theatre from France; Belgium’s Chalry Magonza ; Ceetuch Company and Teatro Fresa Salvaje from Chile; Berlin’s Tallercito; Théâtre *La Balancelle* from Paris; Le Grand Asile from Brussels, and many more also participated. These were cutting edge performers and playwrights, renowned in their own countries, but introduced to North American audiences for the first time through the MIATF.

As a bilingual, English/French province, plays were presented in either language, but also in other languages with translated projected scripts.

Each edition of the MIATF was dedicated to either single or groups of anarchists contemporary and past or to movements, current and past where anarchists were involved. And appeals for solidarity with political prisoners or striking workers or students were shared. And always the upcoming anarchist bookfair was pitched as a great place to learn more.

Among the single dedications were ones for: Abel Paz, a former Spanish anarchist from the CNT-AIT (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*, a Spanish anarcho-syndicalist trade union confederation and the *Asociación Internacional de los Trabajadores*, an international federation of anarcho-syndicalist trade unions); Franklin Rosemont, poet and co-founder of the Surrealist movement in the US; Lee Bortolotti, a dedicated supporter of the MIATF, and his father, Art (who knew and worked with Emma Goldman); Judith Malina, the renowned co-founder with her husband Julian Beck of the anarchist troupe, The Living Theater; Anna Delso, a former member of the Spanish anarchist/feminist *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women).

The 2012 festival was dedicated to striking post-secondary students in Quebec, who organized the largest mass civil disobedience movement in Canadian history. The MC said: “We dedicate this edition of the festival to everyone who has been arrested, or beaten this past year in all the social turmoil, during and after the student strike and social revolt, and in the ongoing protests. The increased repression in Montreal these past years, is now completely open and more intense than ever. But as anarchists, all of us continue to resist.”

In this city of year-round festivals including theatre, the MIATF was distinct in that it operated with no State or corporate sponsorship but was self-financed through ticket sales, donations and benefit events. It presented a concentration of socially engaged theatre unseen elsewhere. The anarchist programming helped demystify the often maligned and misunderstood word generally vulgarized in the mainstream media. Each year, successive acts were socially responsible, and many addressed critical issues of the day from anarchist perspectives: gentrification, evictions and resistance; anarcho-syndicalist union battles; feminism and sexism; anti-war statements; sex work; and social media critiques. But also, anarchist history from Haymarket, Chicago, to the Makhnovist movement in Ukraine; the anti-fascist movement; the story of Sacco and Vanzetti in the US; Guantanamo; Japanese anarchism; the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, and more. Much of the work centered on the experiences of the oppressed of the world and movements towards freedom.

Comedy, tragedy, marionettes and puppetry, mime and circus, rap theatre and poetic theatre, musical theatre –all was welcome, including a choir of local anti-poverty activists with their own band singing revolutionary songs.

What kind of theatre did the festival actually program?

- There was always a new piece by either the Montreal-based Anarchist Writers Bloc or its individual members to look forward to. “Every two months, above the city’s Anarchist bookstore ‘L’Insoumise,’ in the intimate 3rd floor space of the anarchist library (DIRA), the furniture is rearranged, a curtain is hung, the lights are dimmed, and an MC welcomes the audience to yet another underground anarchist cabaret of music, poetry, literature, theatre and performance art. Tonight’s piece is a peek into what one might find at one of these typical anarchist cabaret nights,” was one memorable production;

- Bread and Puppet Theater performed visually stunning work, like their anti-prison show, *Photographs of My Corpse: A Puppet Service for Guantanamo*. “Intensely dramatic, slower paced, exquisite moments of movement, meticulously executed, challenging comfort levels in the audience, daring the audience to empathize, to share the pain, the agony, the abuse suffered by the

unjustly imprisoned. As much as it was about Guantanamo, it could address the situation of anyone incarcerated anywhere. The texts were actual interrogation documents and an inmate's poem. A small papier-mâché population first re-enacted the interrogation process and then witnessed three cases of torture on three oversized puppets;"

- A Montreal Filipino cultural group, *Sining Laya* (Arts for Freedom), formed to support the fight for rights for domestic workers said, "We want to create an expression of resistance campaign against the exclusion of domestic workers in Quebec from workmen's compensation for injuries suffered on the job. This project's objective is to support the advancement of this specific struggle for all domestic workers in Quebec." Their theatre piece was a powerful portrayal of that experience;

- Nicolas Mourer from the Paris troupe, *La Balancelle*, staged *Je viens de la solitude, une soirée avec Armand Robin* (I come from solitude, an evening with Armand Robin), profiling the life of the renowned anarchist poet from Brittany. Robin was a translator of other anarchist poets, a member of the French Anarchist Federation and an activist who died in 1961 in a psychiatric institution;

- Trees That Talk was a Montreal theatre collective that presented *No Way! No Way!*, a series of tableaux and monologues by anti-fascist women anarchists from 1920s to today, across Europe and in the US;

- *Peter & Emma's Café, An Operetta*, was an online presentation by the Against Again Theatre Troupe of Taiwan in Cantonese with English subtitles. It was based on a fantasy situation of Peter Kropotkin meeting Emma Goldman in Taiwan and deciding to set up an Info-Shop Café/ Bookstore where visiting political exiles could meet;

- *Women Strike! 1919-2019: The Winnipeg General Strike*, presented by Montreal's Babushka Theatre, portrayed a cast of unknown Winnipeg, Manitoba immigrant and black working women from 1919 who were involved in the six week long general strike of 35,000 workers that shut Winnipeg down.

The MIATF hoped to encourage the growth of anarchist theatre both locally and worldwide. To encourage both professional and amateur playwrights to delve into anarchist history and practice or its ideals for inspiration and turn it into relevant theatre for today. Anarchism is often associated with protests and being in the streets. But the festival also showed the importance of creativity for anarchists today and historically. A fact easily overlooked by the general public, especially because of mainstream media's hyper sensationalized reporting of anything perceived to be 'anarchist.' The MIATF wanted to demonstrate that anarchists today can also produce good inspirational theatre for a theatre-loving public.

The festival also strived to provide affordable, accessible theatre for all, not just those with money. Ticket prices were deliberately kept low, from ten dollars to the final fifteen dollars bargain for a night with sometimes five or six different acts. Mainstream contemporary theatre is already priced out-of-reach for the many and has little relevance to their lives. The MIATF searched for pieces that had a clear artistic vision and were accessible and well produced. The emphasis was to showcase good theatre, even if it wasn't professionally produced nor dependent on expensive technological smoke and mirrors. The stress was on content, not form. Each year, the MIATF also aimed to program a balance of visiting troupes and locals, professional and amateur to support home-grown talent.

Artists were always encouraged to "take risks, ask important questions, and explore the realm of creativity." The MIATF provided a platform for theatre that would otherwise not be acceptable

in traditional theatre venues because it was either “too political” or “not professional or commercial enough.”

Always present was the idea to introduce a theatre loving non-anarchist public to anarchist ideas through theatre. This was accomplished by booking a range of theatrical productions, from simple solo pieces to more highly produced numbers that incorporated dance, multiple costume changes, innovative mobile sets, live music and singing, ingenious projections, audience interactions and more.

Each year, the venue included tables of anarchist literature. MCs or special guests spoke between acts about anarchism, the theory and the practice and the historical context for the festival. An MC might begin the program by describing anarchism as “a collective movement for personal liberation,” explaining, “that none of us are free until all of us are free. Free from an oppressive economic system called Capitalism. Free from sexual harassment. Free from discrimination of all kinds, from exploitation at work. Free from power outside of us ...” They would describe where and how anarchists work in everyday life—everywhere! As teachers, community organizers, call centre staff, cooks, nurses, baristas, truck drivers, etc. They would make the historic link between anarchist theatre, culture, and the anarchist movement explaining how well known artists like Cezanne, Courbet, Seurat, Kupka, Pissarro, Frans Masereel and more were attracted by the freedom of expression present in the movement. And also how being creative helps people realize their potential, how it is empowering, and takes people out of their daily life and shows them another way to live.

Sometimes the festival organized theatre workshops facilitated by visiting troupes about historical theatre or practical theatre techniques. Audience members were always invited to meet and greet members of the troupes post shows. The long group conversations often continued in local bars.

The core volunteer collective of the MIATF numbered only a few people including the original two co-founders. Additional volunteers were recruited to help with feeding and lodging performers, transporting them, helping find, fix and assemble props, and assisting with the lighting, publicity, translations, and organizing fundraisers with local artists to help defray festival expenses.

Throughout the life of the festival, a series of fundraising cabarets were organized to help replenish the MIATF funds, but also to invite and assess new talent for potential pieces, have colleagues test new material, and begin festival promotion. Closing party fundraisers also helped wrap up each festival. But box office revenues covered most of the operating expenses. The shortfall was made up either by the organizers or donations from supporters.

From the start, the MIATF has always been an integral part of Montreal’s month-long Festival of Anarchy in May. This is a wild, far-ranging celebration of anarchist art, film, music, poetry, literature, and partying organized by diverse small groups culminating in the annual Montreal Anarchist Bookfair, the largest anarchist event in North America drawing thousands of booklovers over a weekend. The MIATF would always schedule it’s one to three night long program in the week preceding the bookfair, to encourage early out-of-town visitors attending the bookfair and allow theatre participants and supporters to learn about and visit it.

The selection process for each year of the festival was always a challenge. Sifting through applications that were often incomplete, sorting through proposals that were often poorly presented, trying to decide about scripts that were unfinished, pieces that had never been produced, or were impossible to imagine on stage. Then arriving at a consensus determined just as much by

practical considerations as well as political. The main questions arose each year: What is anarchist theatre, what is not? What fits the festival mandate, what does not? What was programmable with limited means, what's not? The MIATF collective undertook rigorous evaluations of each submission. The application form asked for completed scripts and filmed performances of pieces submitted to help the jury process, but without these essentials, sometimes pieces were dropped. Debates about submissions sometimes lasted days.

Decisions were also influenced by information in each application form. The MIATF could never host a troupe of thirty performers and technicians from across the ocean for example, even if the submission was fantastic. Nor were there funds to fly in an equally incredible but smaller show from far away. Any troupe that needed a few hours set up and strike time was out of the question, since the restricted budget only allowed same day access to the venue beforehand for a limited time. Troupes couldn't rehearse the day or week before in the venue. It was unaffordable. And given that there were multiple plays each night to set up and strike from the stage, the transitions between acts had to be minimized. But, if an entire program was finally agreed upon, if all the acceptance letters were sent out with official invitations and extra documents to help the troupe secure travel funding at their end, if all the details were finally in place, no one could predict in the final weeks or sometimes days, pre-festival, cancellations because of illness, or denied travel visas, or a failure to secure enough travel funds.

Often it was a question of timing. The nightly program was often divided into approximately two one hour parts plus an intermission. Short theatre pieces in the first half; longer ones after. Sometimes it was all French language plays one night; all English another. Or combined. It depended on program flow and balance, content variety, set up time and lighting demands. Lights could only be set up once before the evening started and had to work for each act. They couldn't be changed between acts since they were fixed above the audience a few rows from the stage. The day of the show, each act was given between thirty to sixty minutes for blocking, sound and light checks, and setting up props on stage, depending on how many acts. It was a tight schedule between a 2pm load-in and a 6pm finish time before doors opened at 7pm for a 7:30pm showtime, but everyone always made it work.

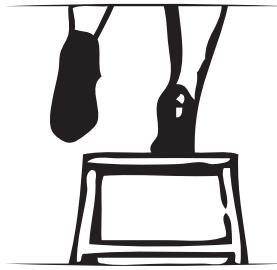
Among the stellar artists—anarchists and sympathisers—who worked on the festival posters, post cards and promotional material were Philip Caron, Maurice Spira and David Lester, who also designed the festival logo.

But despite all the time and effort devoted to promoting the festival, it always seemed to be "word of mouth" that attracted the most audience members. Not the intensive social media campaign. Nor the always engaging posters. Nor the thousands of post-cards distributed city-wide. Nor efforts to get mainstream and alternative press and radio plugs. Non-anarchist theatre goers attended mostly out of curiosity and because of the cheap ticket prices. The cheapest in town well below the admission of regular theatre venues. Remarkably the festival closed without a deficit.

We're proud to say that some of the early performers and playwrights who collaborated with us during the eighteen years (like Joseph Shragge, Caileigh Crow, Émilie Monnet, etc.) went on to win prestigious national arts and theatre excellence awards honoring their work. Other global artists who also generously contributed their talent and time to the MIATF keep the tradition alive by continuing to produce groundbreaking anarchist theatre. One day, another festival with the same spirit will once again bring together the best that this theatre has to offer.

The MIATF ended its glorious run in 2023 with one final edition. If anyone is interested in starting another anarchist theatre festival, the collective members would be delighted to speak with them. See the online archive of the MIATF at: **www.anarchisttheatrefestival.com**

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Norman Nawrocki was one of the co-founders and co-artistic directors of the MIATF collective.
He also performed in the festival and wrote and directed plays performed by others.

theanarchistlibrary.org