

**ASIA TOPA**  
JANUARY — MARCH 2020



ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE PRESENTS

# SAIGON

CAROLINE GUIELA NGUYEN AND  
LES HOMMES APPROXIMATIFS

AUSTRALIAN EXCLUSIVE

**12–15 MARCH**

ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE

3 hours 20 minutes, including interval

Performed in French and Vietnamese with English surtitles

**Text** Caroline Guiela Nguyen with the whole artistic team

**Director** Caroline Guiela Nguyen

**Cast** Dan Artus, Adeline Guillot, Huỳnh Thị Trúc Ly, Lê Hoàng Sơn, Maud Le Grevellec, Nguyễn Phú Hậu, Nguyễn Thị Mỹ Châu, Pierrick Plathier, Tô Thị Thanh Thu, Trần Nghĩa Ánh, Trần Nghĩa Hiệp

**Artistic Collaborator** Claire Calvi

**Set Designer** Alice Duchange

**Lighting Designer** Jérémie Papin

**Costume Designer** Benjamin Moreau

**Sound and Music Designer** Antoine Richard

**Composer** Teddy Gauliat-Pitois

**Dramaturgy and Surtitles** Jérémie Scheidler and Manon Worms

**Translators (Vietnamese/French)**

Nguyễn Đức Duy, Tô Thị Thanh Thu

**Intern Dramaturgy** Hugo Soubise

**Light Design Assistant** Sébastien Lemarchand

**Sound Assistant** Orane Duclos

**Assistant Director** Paola Secret

**Stage Manager** Éric Guillaumot, Serge Ugolini

**Light Design Manager**

Samuel Kleinmann-Lebourges

**Dresser** Julienne Paul

**Production, Administration** Juliette Kramer, Elsa Hummel-Zongo

**Press, Communication** Coline Loger

**Production** Les Hommes Approximatifs

**Executive Producers** La Comédie de Valence, CDN Drôme-Ardèche

**Co-producers** Odéon théâtre de l'Europe, MC2: Grenoble, Festival d'Avignon, CDN de Normandie-Rouen, Théâtre national de Strasbourg, Centre dramatique national de Tours – Théâtre Olympia, Comédie de Reims-CDN, Théâtre National de Bretagne – Centre européen théâtral et chorégraphique, Théâtre du Beauvaisis, Scène nationale de l'Oise, Théâtre de La Croix-Rousse-Lyon

Financially supported by Région Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Conseil départemental de la Drôme, Institut français à Paris

**Other sponsors** Institut français du Vietnam, Université de Théâtre et de Cinéma de Hô Chi Minh-Ville and of La Chartreuse, Villeneuve lez Avignon – Centre national des écritures du spectacle

Caroline Guiela Nguyen is Associate Artist at the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, at the Schaubühne in Berlin and is also a member of the Artistic Collective attached to the Comédie de Valence Theatre-National Centre for the Dramatic Arts, Drôme-Ardèche until May 2020. The company is associated with the Comédie de Reims Theatre.

Les Hommes Approximatifs Theatre Company is registered and supported by the French Ministry of Culture (DRAC Auvergne Rhône-Alpes), the French administrative region of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes and the City of Valence. The company is funded by the Conseil Départemental de la Drôme [Drôme county council]. The company also receives financial backing from the French Institute at Paris for foreign tours.

Supported by Ambassade de France en Australie.

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### Pre-Show Q&A

Saturday 14 March

6pm-6.30pm

Playhouse Circle Foyer

**Speakers:** Assistant Director Paola Secret, actors Dan Artus and Maud Le Grevellec

**Moderator:** Beverley Wang





Photo: Jean-Louis Fernandez

## EXPLANATORY NOTES

### By Vincent Kouters

The 38-year-old French theatre director Caroline Guiela Nguyen's play *SAIGON*, a mosaic-like narrative about love, suffering, exile and France and Vietnam's shared history, elevated her to national prominence in France. *SAIGON*'s premiere was at the Festival d'Avignon in 2017, where it was critically acclaimed by the press. Nguyen's sixth piece was described as 'disturbing', 'hypnotic' and 'heart-breaking'. This pioneering work caused a stir in the French theatre world.

It takes place in the kitchen of a Vietnamese restaurant in Paris's 13th arrondissement, an area with many immigrants with a Chinese, Vietnamese or Korean background. A large cast of characters passes through the restaurant – various generations of Vietnamese and French – each with their own story which is somehow related to the French history of Vietnam or the Vietnamese history of France. Times, as well as locations, are intertwined in the performance. One moment it is 1956, when the French withdrew from Vietnam, another moment it is 1996, when the US embargo on Vietnam was lifted, allowing Vietnamese people to return to their country.

Nguyen says, in an interview with *French Cheek Magazine*, that *SAIGON* comes from her need to tell stories that are not included in the classical

repertoire. "It was a long process. Having directed several classical stage texts, I realised in 2008 that some stories and people were absent in French theatre. I wanted the sound of the whole world to be heard in our work and had the idea that some voices were missing.

"That is why I founded company Les Hommes Approximatifs ('The Approximate Men') with several like-minded people in 2009. Since then we have been looking for stories that say something about who we are today and who these people are who are not represented in theatre."

To prepare for *SAIGON*, Nguyen went looking for stories and testimonies of and about Vietnamese refugees. Many hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fled their country after the defeat of the French troops in Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and also after the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975.

Nguyen made several trips to the country, staying in Ho Chi Minh City, which was still called Saigon in French colonial times. She heard stories and languages there that she had not heard before. Nguyen – who grew up in the Var, a French department on the Mediterranean sea – was so impressed by all the people she met and by Ho Chi Minh City that she started to write then and there.

Each actor was given the text to read on the first day of rehearsals. “This text isn’t the final text. The actors have each shown how their own language sounds, and what their own way of speaking is. For example, actress My Chau speaks French, but it isn’t her native language. She uses it very differently to Pierric Plathier, for whom French has always been part of his life. That’s why I carried on writing with the actors during the rehearsal process, based on what they said. The text I wrote is just the foundation. It is in a sense the subtext of *SAIGON*.”

The city plays a major role in the performance. She grew to love it during her stay. “Ho Chi Minh City is full of stories about migration and exile. Almost all families have absent relatives, who often live thousands of kilometres away. This absence creates fiction, because memories become myths and lies, and thus fiction. There is always someone being mourned. Our performance is precisely about this feeling. Melodrama is ubiquitous in the daily life of the Vietnamese. Karaoke is extremely popular there, and every one of the songs is about exile, love and nostalgia. A permanent presence of nostalgia and pain is perceptible in Ho Chi Minh City, most probably because it is a wounded city; a city haunted by a spirit. This spirit is called Saigon.”

She emphasises that *SAIGON* is not an autobiographical story. Nonetheless, Vietnam has a special place in her life. “That’s because I’d never been to Vietnam in the first 15 years of my life. It was only in 1996, the first year in which the Viet Kieu, the overseas Vietnamese, including my mother, were able to return to their homeland, that I went there. Before then I ate Vietnamese food every day, but never learnt the language. I invented my own history of Vietnam in France. As a result, the first time I went to Vietnam, I was completely overwhelmed and stayed in my room for two weeks. Everything seemed so strange to me. That was when I knew I had to make *SAIGON*.”

*This article includes material from an interview with Caroline Guiela Nguyen by Myriam Levain for Cheek Magazine, published on 8 January 2018. Reproduced with thanks to Holland Festival.*



Photo: Jean-Louis Fernandez



Photo: Jean-Louis Fernandez

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIETNAM

The country we now call Vietnam has had many rulers and conquerors, and so has had many different names. Between about 500 BCE and 10 CE different ethnic groups ruled in the Red River delta, which the Chinese collectively called Lac Viet. Vietnam only attained independence in 939 AD. There were several Vietnamese dynasties until the Tay Son uprising broke out in 1771. Nguyen Anh was one of the few rulers to survive this rebellion. With the help of the French, he regained power and he proclaimed himself Emperor Gia Long in 1802. He promised the French all sorts of trade privileges in exchange for military aid. These promises amounted to little in practice. In 1858, France decided to invade the country. Vietnam became a French colony in 1887.

Anti-colonial resistance gradually intensified from that moment, especially later under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. The country was dominated by Japan during World War II, but shortly before Japan's capitulation in 1945 Ho Chi Minh called for a revolt. He declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This enraged the French, who tried to expel Ho Chi Minh on their return. Only after an eight-year guerrilla war did France finally accept defeat. Vietnam was divided into two states at

the Geneva Conference in 1954. The communist North was led by Ho Chi Minh, and South Vietnam, which had close ties with the United States, was led by Ngo Dinh Diem.

Peace was short lived in South Vietnam, however, as various groups vied with Diem for power. On top of that the Americans were fearful of North Vietnamese communism. In 1964 the Vietnam War started – the bloodiest period in the history of the country. Millions of soldiers and civilians were killed. The United States withdrew its troops in 1973 and Ho Chi Minh's followers took control of the entire country in 1975. North and South were reunited as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. An unstable period ensued, in which everyone thought to have pro-American ideas was sent to a re-education camp. This caused many Vietnamese to flee their country (often in rickety boats). Almost a million people managed to reach another country, but several hundred thousand drowned in their attempt to flee. Economic reforms since the 1980s have enabled the country to flourish. The Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) have been able to return to their country since 1996.

*Reproduced with thanks to Holland Festival.*



Photo: Jean-Louis Fernandez

## CAROLINE GUIELA NGUYEN

Caroline Guiela Nguyen has written and directed for the stage and screen. Her works display a passion for both fiction and realism, which she explores conjointly by bringing together amateur and professional actors coming from different social, geographic, cultural and spiritual horizons, so that, in her own words, “different worlds should meet and together we try to invent a common space”.

Her singular devising process involves letting the story emerge directly from the work she undertakes with her actors. Though she has both feet securely anchored in the real, she insists that the greatest strength we possess today is our imagination: what would become of us if we were no longer able to imagine what being human meant?

Caroline started out as a sociology student before joining the drama school attached to the Théâtre National de Strasbourg. In 2009, she created her own theatre company, Les Hommes Approximatifs, which today includes Alice Duchange (set design), Benjamin Moreau (costumes), Jérémie Papin (light design), Antoine Richard (sound design), Claire Calvi (associate artist), Manon Worms (dramaturgy) and Jérémie Scheidler (video, dramaturgy).

Their work, drawing on their own life stories, gives centre stage to bodies and histories that the theatre has generally paid little attention to. Each new project leads them into new worlds, and new actors come directly out of these worlds. Les Hommes Approximatifs have shared the stage with new actors in works including *Se souvenir de Violetta* (2011), *Ses Mains*, *Le bal d'Emma* (2012), *Elle brûle* (2013), *Le chagrin* (2015), *Mon grand amour* (2016) and *SAIGON* (2017).

Since 2015, Caroline has collaborated with the playwright-director Joël Pommerat and his company Louis Brouillard, as well as with Jean Ruimi on the creation of new performances at the Maison Centrale d'Arles Prison, including *Désordre d'un futur passé* and *Marius*.

In 2016, along with Alexandre Plank and Antoine Richard, she wrote *Le Chagrin (Julie et Vincent)* for the public radio station France Culture as part of its *Radiodrama* programme. It was awarded the Prix Italia celebrating new works for the radio and the Grand Prix de la Société des gens de lettre, both in 2016.

*SAIGON*, her company's most recent show, was well received at the Festival Ambivalence(s) organised by the Comédie de Valence Theatre, where it premiered, and later at the 2017 edition of the Festival d'Avignon, before touring internationally. *SAIGON* was nominated at the Molières, the principal French theatre award ceremony, in three different categories ('best production in a public – subsidised – theatre production', 'best visual creation' and 'best living French author') and won the Georges Lherminier Prize awarded by the Association Professionnelle de la Critique de Théâtre, Musique et Danse ('best production created outside Paris'). Caroline was also awarded the SACD's Best New Theatre Talent prize in 2018 (Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques). She had previously been nominated at the Molières in the category of 'best staging' for *Elle brûle*.

She is currently working on a new dramatic cycle with her company Les Hommes Approximatifs, *FRATERNITY*, *Fantastic Tales*, out of which three new works are planned: a film shot with inmates of the Maison Centrale d'Arles Prison; and two theatre projects in close collaboration with partners such as Odéon - Théâtre de l'Europe and the Schaubühne Theatre in Berlin, as well as further afield in France and Europe.

Caroline is currently associate artist at the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, the Schaubühne Theatre in Berlin and, until May 2020, is a member of the Artistic Collective attached to the Comédie de Valence - CDN Drôme Ardèche Theatre. Les Hommes Approximatifs Theatre Company is an associate company at the Comédie - CDN de Reims Theatre. Caroline was nominated for the honour of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Ministry of Culture in 2016.



Photo: Olivier Metzger

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