Cultural Economies and Urban Divides: How the Festival OFF d'Avignon Shapes and is Shaped by its Host City

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Das Festival OFF d'Avignon prägt das urbane Erscheinungsbild seiner Gastgeberstadt: Um den großen Bedarf an Spielstätten zu decken, entstehen im Juli temporäre Theater, die außerhalb der Festivalsaison mehrheitlich ungenützt bleiben, teilweise aber auch die ganzjährige Präsenz von Künstler*innen begünstigen. Darüber hinaus verstärkt die räumliche Konzentration der Festivalaktivitäten im historischen Stadtzentrum die Trennung zwischen intra- und extramuralen Bezirken. Zur Förderung einer integrativeren und nachhaltigeren Kulturwirtschaft, plädiert dieser Beitrag für gezielte kulturpolitische Maßnahmen, darunter die Subventionierung einer ganzjährigen Nutzung der Festivalinfrastruktur für Künstlerresidenzen sowie die räumliche Ausweitung der Festivalaktivitäten auf extramurale Stadtteile. Zwar operieren nichtkuratierte Fringe Festivals als selbstorganisierende Systeme; gleichwohl sind strategisch eingesetzte öffentliche und private Fördermaßnahmen unerlässlich, um marktinduzierten Ungleichheiten entgegenzuwirken und kulturelle Gerechtigkeit zu fördern.

Festivals physically transform their host cities, being simultaneously shaped by the existing urban fabric. While curated festivals are carefully planned by organisers and policymakers to impact tourism, city branding, economic stability, and neighbourhood revitalisation, non-juried fringe festivals operate as self-organising systems, directed by countless individual decisions from artists, venue owners, curators, journalists, and visitors. This paper examines the non-juried Festival OFF d'Avignon, exploring how it both shapes and is shaped by its urban environment.

In 1966, nineteen years after Jean Vilar had founded the Festival d'Avignon, local theatre artist André Benedetto staged *Statues* at his Théâtre des Carmes without being included in the official programme. Though criticised at the time, this act is now seen as the birth of the fringe festival

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OFF d'Avignon. By the 1970s, theatre curators began scouting innovative productions at the OFF, establishing it as a highly relevant platform for independent artists to showcase their work. Each July, an increasing number of acting companies flock to Southern France to perform on the fringe of the Festival d'Avignon.

In the early 1970s, OFF artists transformed unconventional spaces into makeshift theatres, including pharmacies, grocery stores, schoolyards, garages, cellars, and bistros. They staged shows at the young workers' hub in Champfleury, the social and cultural centre MJC in Croix-des-Oiseaux, and the Club Léo-Lagrange in Monclar.[1] Those unable to rent venues performed in streets and public places, setting up benches, tape players, and projectors. The shows mainly relied on physical acting, which OFF pioneers Alain Léonard and Gérard Vantaggioli described as "the primary material of theatre"[2].

The rising demand for performance venues led the municipality of Avignon connect artist with local proprietors of non-theatrical spaces. Nancy and Patrick Maréchal responded by converting their clothing store in Rue des Teinturiers into an OFF theatre.[3] In the 1980s, they continued operating the clothing store outside the festival season, but later stricter venue regulations made them focus solely on theatre rentals. Today, the Maréchal family operates three venues – Au Magasin, Albatros, and Alibi.

Since the 1980s, landlords have increasingly opened theatres to capitalise on the high demand for performance spaces. Shops, restaurants, and apartments in the city centre have been replaced by theatres that operate in July only and remain deserted during the rest of the year. Year-round operation of all OFF theatres would not be economically viable due to lower attendance. "People from Avignon do not go out in winter,"[4] theatre director Stéphane Baquet observes. Moreover, one should not forget that the population of Avignon multiplies by three in July with an influx of theatre tourists.

According to Kévin Bernard's data collection, the OFF counted 718 venues from 1966 to 2017.[5] Only five venues partook in the OFF for over forty years, while 320 venues already closed after one festival edition, which, Bernard concludes, "gives the OFF an ephemeral taste"[6]. The high number and short lifespan of OFF venues illustrate that the festival's open-access

1 Joël Rumello: *Réinventer Une Utopie: Le Off d'Avignon*, Paris: Ateliers Henry Dougier, 2016, 39.

2 Alain Léonard/Gérard Vantaggioli: *Festival Off Avignon*, Paris: Éditions des Quatre-Vents, 1989, 58. All French quotations translated by the author.

3 Interview with author on August 14, 2020.

4 As cited in Christophe Mory: *Le Roman de La Luna: Histoire d'un Théâtre d'Avignon*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2020, 78.

5 Kévin Bernard: *De La Marge Au Marché. Une Histoire Des Lieux Du « Off » d'Avignon (1959–2003)*, MA Thesis, Avignon: Avignon Université, 2018, 42.

6 Bernard, *De La Marge Au Marché*, 43.

policy tempts many to establish their own theatre, only to abandon it after a few editions.

In contrast, Avignon's growing reputation as "festival city" has attracted artists to settle permanently and establish year-round theatres. Gérard and Danièle Vantaggioli opened the Théâtre du Chien Qui Fume in 1982, followed by Alain Timár's Théâtre des Halles and Serge Barbuscia's Théâtre du Balcon in 1983. Together with the OFF founders André Benedetto (Théâtre des Carmes) and Gérard Gelas (Théâtre du Chêne Noir), they formed the Scènes d'Avignon in 2003. The five theatres, approved (*conventionné*) by the mayor of Avignon, receive public subsidies for year-round projects, including Fest'Hiver, a winter festival for regional artists launched in 2006.

Analysing OFF venues' operating times and business models,[7] I noticed that only subsidised theatres can afford year-round operations. Venues without subsidies struggle economically due to low attendance outside July, coupled with high energy and insurance costs. Most OFF venues remain closed or serve non-theatrical purposes, such as the Dojo training centres Dojo au Centre (Théâtre Le Grand Pavois) and Avignon Dojo 44 (Atelier 44), the sports club Le Théâtre du Sport (Théâtre Carnot), the cinema Le VOX (CinéVox Théâtre), the music club Théâtre Electro (11 Avignon), and various schools like the École Persil-Pouzaraque (La Cour du Spectateur) and the École Louis Pasteur (Espace Alya).[8] Some venues occasionally host theatre-related activities outside July: Au Chapeau Rouge offers theatre workshops and improvisation classes alongside non-theatrical events like English courses and flea markets, while La Scierie provides weekly classes in dance, theatre, yoga, pottery, and computing.

While most OFF artists visit Avignon only in summer to showcase their work, it would be beneficial to use OFF venues for year-round artist residencies. This is already practised at venues like the Théâtre des Doms, funded by the French Community of Belgium, which invites Belgian productions to the OFF and hosts residencies outside the festival. At the *sorties de résidence*, locals are invited to view works in progress and give feedback. This model fosters cultural revitalisation beyond July, offering locals both access to developing productions and opportunities to engage in their creation.

Apart from the temporal concentration of cultural activities in July, the Avignon festivals also reinforce a spatial concentration in the city centre. The majority of OFF venues (89,4% in 2019) are located *intramuros*,[9] the hub of festival activities. Public street performances, colourful posters, theatres on every corner, and the Medieval architecture of the oldtown

7 My analysis draws on data from the 2023/24 season on the venues' websites, conversations with local artists and venue owners, and the monthly brochure *Les Rendez-vous d'Avignon*.

8 The venues use different names for their different functions. Their festival names are stated in brackets.

9 Avignon is defined by its Medieval city wall, dividing the city centre (*intramuros*) from outer districts (*extramuros*).

create a festive, folklore-rich atmosphere. The well-preserved city walls enhance the sense of entering a framed festival space. Tourists and artists arriving at the central train station are immediately drawn to the lively Rue de la République, often overlooking venues like L'Entrepôt, located just behind the train station.

The concentration of OFF venues *intramuros* presents several challenges: high rental fees, small stages, crammed auditoria, limited storage, rapid show turnovers, and intense competition for visibility – all of which affect artists' work and wellbeing. Therefore, OFF artists have repeatedly called for expanding the festival beyond the city walls. As early as 1983, Alain Léonard encouraged festival visitors to explore more remote venues: "Your choice of shows should not be limited to the city centre. Many shows are staged *extramuros* and require only some minutes of transport."[10] However, most visitors prefer the historic oldtown, where venues are within walking distance. Even companies performing *extramuros* parade in central locations like Rue de la République and Place de l'Horloge to attract audiences. In 2005, Alain Brunsvick observed that efforts to "externalise at least a part of the OFF" had little success due to the centralisation of spectators, journalists, and theatre professionals.[11] Nevertheless, Jean-Christophe Dollé believes an exodus "hors les murs" could foster creative freedom, with *extramuros* theatres offering more space for experimental formats.[12]

The concentration of festival activities in the city centre also highlights issues of social in/exclusion among artists and visitors. "Physical and social dimensions are inseparable," Marjana Johansson states, "[F]estivals that physically rearrange the cityscape are also part of social (re)configurations in terms of upholding or disrupting established social patterns, and these practices are further shaped by economic forces."[13] The *intra/extramuros* divide in Avignon reinforces social inequalities among OFF artists: central venues, with higher rents and greater visibility, favour affluent or subsidised companies. Financial resources spent on venue placement and promotion significantly impact acting companies' visibility and, consequently, the economic success of their festival participation, including sold-out shows, reviews, and touring opportunities.

A noteworthy exception is La Manufacture: Theatre director Pascal Keiser moved *extramuros* after artists criticised his *intramuros* venue as too small for contemporary creations.[14] In 2005, La Manufacture opened an

10 Alain Léonard: "Édito Du Programme Du OFF 1983", 1983, BnF Maison Jean Vilar: PFAO-1983(0).

11 Alain Brunsvick: "Avignon – Scènes d'Avenir: Rapport d'évaluation, d'analyse et de Propositions Portant Sur La Partie off Du Festival d'Avignon", in: *Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication*, 01.2005, 19, https://www.vie-publique.fr/files/rapport/pdf/054000279.pdf (10/02/2025).

12 Interview with author on July 24, 2019.

13 Marjana Johansson: "City Festivals and Festival Cities", in: *The Cambridge Companion to International Theatre Festivals*, ed. by Ric Knowles, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 54–69, here 57.

14 Interview with author on July 27, 2020.

OFF theatre at a welfare facility in Saint-Chamand, where the larger space allowed for a stage measuring 14x10m (compared to 7x8.5m *intramuros*) and rehearsal rooms. Since 2008, they annually convert the Patinoire, an ice-skating rink *extramuros*, into a third OFF venue with a 13x14.5m stage, seating for 180 spectators, and 16m^2 of storage per acting company (compared to 4m^2 *intramuros*). "Here, we can create working conditions that cannot be found in the city centre,"[15] Keiser explains. To attract visitors, La Manufacture offers a free shuttle bus from the city centre. Their strong programming, media outreach, and free transport draw both spectators and *programmateurs*. However, these benefits come at a cost: La Manufacture charges high rental fees, making it accessible only to subsidised acting companies.

L'Entrepôt, based on a different business model, began in 1982 as an amateur theatre association led by Michèle Addala in the *extramuros* working-class district of Monclar. Her company Mises En Scène uses the space for year-round projects aimed at "bringing together the population in their diversity and breaking cultural, social, and personal isolation."[16] Several of my interviewees view L'Entrepôt as a pioneer for socially-conscious practices at the OFF. The venue resists the festival's neoliberalisation by scheduling fewer performances and offering more relaxed working conditions. In 2019, it hosted 4.4 performances per day with an average of 84.6 minutes for set-changes, compared to the OFF average of 6.3 performances and 52.9 minutes. "We don't follow the same logic and mission as most OFF venues," Addala argues, "but we are recognised in the festival landscape."[17] L'Entrepôt stands out for local engagement, year-round projects, diverse artists and audiences, community building efforts, and collective performance space.

The City of Avignon aims to counterbalance the temporal and spatial concentration of cultural activities. In 2000, when Avignon was awarded European Capital of Culture, the study prepared for the European Commission stated:

> There was a strong desire to increase cultural tourism and reinforce the reputation of Avignon, secured by the famous theatre Festival of Avignon, as an important cultural city. With their catchphrase 'Avignon – a permanent show' it was hoped that the cultural year would bring visitors all year round.[18]

15 Interview with author on July 27, 2019.

16 Cie Mises en Scène: "Le Projet. Porter La Rumeur Du Monde", in: *Mises en Scène*, https://www.misesenscene.com/projet/ (10/02/2025).

17 As cited in Thomas Corlin: "Avignon: L'Entrepôt, Un Théâtre Du Off Né d'un Projet Socio-Culturel", in: *Culture Matin*, 25/07/2022, https://www.culturematin.com/production/lieux-residences-locaux-repetition/avignon-l-entrepot-un-theatre-du-off-ne-d-un-projet-socio-culturel.html (10/02/2025).

18 Robert Palmer: "European Cities and Capitals of Culture – City Reports: Part II", in: *Kulturserver*

Initiatives like the annual winter festival Fest'Hiver serve as a counterpoint to the peak season in July. Bruno Portet from the Avignon city council explained in our conversation on 17th of November 2023 that the city provides project-based funding for year-round cultural activities. Projects scheduled in July are rarely funded unless they are located *extramuros* and target audiences far from the city centre.

The Festival OFF d'Avignon demonstrates how a non-juried fringe festival both shapes and is shaped by its urban environment. First, the OFF physically transformed the cityscape through the construction of ephemeral theatres to meet the high demand for performance space in July. Second, this urban transformation also affects the cultural landscape year-round: on the one hand, by leaving behind underutilised festival infrastructure and, on the other hand, by making Avignon attractive for artists to settle permanently. Third, the OFF reinforces socio-spatial divisions: the concentration of festival activities in the city centre, which offers visibility and economic success, exacerbates the *intra/extramuros* divide. Fourth, fostering a socially inclusive and sustainable cultural economy (during and outside July) requires concrete policy measures. These include subsidising the year-round use of abandoned festival infrastructure for artist residencies and expanding festival activities to *extramuros* districts to encourage experimental formats and reach new audiences. While non-juried fringe festivals operate as self-organising systems, targeted subsidies by public and private institutions are essential to counteract market-driven inequalities and promote socio-economic balance.

Graz, 08/2004, 89, https://kultur.graz.at/pdfs/2003_archiv/european_cities_and_capitals_of_culture_study_for_the_european_union_palmer_augus_2004_part%20II_english.pdf (10/02/2025).