

The Montreal International Anarchist Theatre Festival

An unofficial history

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2025

A longer version of this article is available on the Fifth Estate site at <https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/416-spring-2025/the-montreal-international-anarchist-theatre-festival/the-montreal-international-anarchist-theatre-festival-long-version/>

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. 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 emphasized 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 early 1900s onward, 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



1920s Chilean workers scene from *El Montaje. ¿Quién conoce a Gómez Rojas?*, Teatro Fresa Salvaje (Chile), at 2016 Theatre Festival Photo: Alvaro Pachec

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 1871 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.

The second year, the small collective of anarchist actors, playwrights, and theatre fans sent a callout for plays on social media. Dozens of troupes responded, from Australia to Russia, Africa to South America, the Middle and Far East, and across North America.

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 three times. Other professional troupes such as Le Krizo Theatre from France; Belgium's Chalry Magonza ; Ceetuch Company and Teatro Fresa Salvaje from Chile; Berlin's Tallercito; Theatre La Balancelle from Paris ; Le Grand Asile from Brussels, and many more also participated.

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.

In a city of year-round festivals including theatre, the MIATF was distinct in that it operated with no State or corporate sponsorship. It was self-financed through ticket sales, donations and benefit events. The anarchist programming helped demystify the often maligned and misunderstood word generally vulgarized in the mainstream media.

Each year, many plays 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-fascism 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.

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.

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 pieces had to have a clear artistic vision, be 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."

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.”

They would make the historical link between anarchist theatre, culture, and the anarchist movement, explaining how well-known artists like Cezanne, Courbet, Seurat, Kupka, Pissarro, Frans Masereel and others were attracted by the freedom of expression present in the movement. And, 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.

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 was always an integral part of Montreal's month-long Festival of Anarchy in May. This was 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 book lovers over a weekend.

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, Emilie 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 again bring together the best that this theatre has to offer.

The MIATF ended its glorious run in 2023 with a final performance. If any group 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: **anarchistetheatrefestival.com**

Norman Nawrocki was co-founder and co-artistic director of the MIATF collective. He performed in the festival and wrote and directed plays.



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