



Flying Visits

Nathalie Deguen takes a group of enthusiasts to admire three ‘Green Theatres’ near Paris.

The Green Theatre Network was founded in 2010 to safeguard, promote and animate ‘Théâtres de Verdure’, those unique outdoor places which blend the arts of theatre and landscaping. The Network puts all those who are interested in touch with each other – those who love unusual gardens or watching plays outdoors, and actors themselves. The organisation’s French title is *Réseau Européen des Théâtres de Verdure*, known for short as Resthever.

The Network organises visits to green theatres, and one Sunday morning last October it joined up with APJO, the Association of Parks and Gardens in the Oise, to visit three Théâtres de Verdure in the area just north of Paris. Led by me, as Resthever’s president, and Corine Pinet, president of l’APJO, twenty people, armed with face masks, hand sanitiser and umbrellas, braved coronavirus and a gloomy weather forecast to meet at our first venue.

This was the Potager des Princes in Chantilly, close to the château and its famous stables, where we were met by the Potager’s owner, renowned horseman Yves Bienaimé, who, in 1982, created the Museum of the Horse at Chantilly. In the 17th century, these 3ha (7.4 acres) were once a part of the château’s park and known as the Faisanderie, an area reserved for rearing pheasants. The Prince de Condé, who then owned Chantilly, was a relation of King Louis XIV and could call upon the royal gardeners; so the terraces were laid out by André Le Nôtre and the vegetable garden by Jean-Baptiste de La Quintinie, who was responsible for the Potager du Roi at Versailles.

In 1773 the Faisanderie’s buildings became a pavilion for refreshment; then after the Revolution the property was confiscated and sold as a ‘Bien national’. In the 19th century the park was transformed into a romantic garden and several water elements were added. During the 20th century the site was gradually abandoned, indeed forgotten, until a project to build 58 houses there led to protests by local people and its purchase in 2000 by M. Bienaimé. Since then, he has been passionately involved with the garden and has worked to rehabilitate it in the spirit of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Today, it has regained its lustre and is listed officially as a ‘Jardin remarquable’ (a label granted by the Ministry of Culture to 400 gardens across France). There are terraces, a water jet, cascades, bosquets covered in treillage, topiary and a formal vegetable garden – just as in the 17th and 18th centuries. A zoo attracts families, who can also enjoy an orchestra of Chantilly-breed chickens and a ‘lapinodrome’ for rabbit racing – opened by local people involved in the famous Chantilly horse racing course. Numerous panels explain the background facts in an amusing and poetic way.

For us, the high point of the visit was the green theatre, with its extraordinary setting: a splendid pool, animated by ducks with bright plumage, spanned by a Chinese bridge and framed by greenery which is reflected in its water to create the backdrop.

This gives every performance a unique dreamlike atmosphere: now a heron comes and poses majestically on

Above: A view of the Commanderie at Neuilly-sous-Clermont.



Above: The green theatre at the Potager des Princes in Chantilly.
Below: The property's owner, Yves Bienaimé, inside the theatre.

the edge, now the ducks reply to the actors; sometimes the birds arrive or leave by boat when one features in the production! For many actors, and spectators as well, this is one of the most seductive and romantic theatres anywhere. Our group, too, was charmed – helped by the fact that our umbrellas stayed closed.

Moving on to our second visit, we discovered the green theatre at the Commanderie at Neuilly-sous-Clermont, where we were warmly welcomed by the owners, Philippe and Antoinette Romain, both of whom are passionate about history as well as architecture and garden art. Their property, which dates back to the 12th century, was once a commandery, or district headquarters, of the soldier-monks known as the Templars. Laid waste by wars, it was rebuilt in the 14th and 15th centuries, then, like Chantilly, sold as a 'Bien national' during the Revolution. Today, a chapel survives from the Gothic period, while the main building is endowed with a beautiful Renaissance façade.

It was the aunt of the current owners who created the garden from 1962 in a classical spirit: fine topiary in yew

and box, hornbeam hedges, a maze, clipped limes... And at the end of an allée we come upon the ravishing little green theatre, which has everything! Royal box, orchestra pit, stage, backstage, even those curtains known as legs – and an excellent acoustic, which was thoroughly tested when a member of our group, an actor, made the place resonant

reciting one of La Fontaine's fables. The maze, with its perfectly trimmed hornbeam hedges, was another success. And there were further surprises: a pool framed by dahlias, palisaded fruit trees, carpets of cyclamen.

Before saying goodbye, we ate our picnic lunches under the shelter of the Gothic vaults of the chapel. Not a drop of rain fell – and no matter that there were no toilets. The Templars surely wouldn't

have minded missing out on such facilities.

Our third and last lap took us into the forest of Compiègne, to the Priory of St-Pierre-en-Chastres, near the little town of Vieux-Moulin. A tree brought down by the previous day's storm almost prevented us from reaching our destination, but the brave drivers in our group passed calmly underneath its trunk!



Perched 130m (430 feet) high on top of Mont St Pierre, the Priory offers a superb showcase for the concerts organised by the Festival des Forêts, and it was the Festival's president and a historian who did the honours of the site. And there, not only did we not need our umbrellas but the sun came out and made the colours sing in the surrounding woods!

The priory was originally built in the 9th century by Benedictine monks; then in 1308, on the orders of King Philippe le Bel, Celestine monks were installed there, who prospered and built a fine 'logis' to live in. After the order was suppressed in the 18th century, the site was abandoned and some of its stone used as a quarry. In the 20th century it was taken over by the National Forest Office, one of whose agents lived there with his wife. Then in 2019 it was acquired by the 'l'Agglomération de la Région de Compiègne', a grouping of local communes, and the beautiful ruins of the church were restored.



Several ideas for landscaping the site were put forward and the one chosen was to create a green theatre in the church. The Festival des Forêts, which organises classical music concerts every summer in the forests around Compiègne and Laigue, was tasked with implementing the project. Since 2018 the Festival has been organising concerts in this exceptional setting, while waiting for the completion of the outdoor theatre in 2021/22. Later, the monks' 'logis' will be restored to become the Festival's headquarters – and perhaps, too, a residence for artists in the middle of the forest.

Once again our actor tested the acoustics with some La Fontaine; the audience was thrilled and separated only reluctantly, promising to come back next summer and savour the performances in these three special places. ✨

Nathalie Deguen is founder and president of the *Réseau Européen des Théâtres de Verdure* (<https://www.reseautheatreverdure.com>).



Above: The well-kept topiaried hedges at the Commanderie were much admired by the group.

Right: The ruined Priory of St-Pierre-en-Chastres is a suitably dramatic setting for outdoor performances.