

STAGE REVIEW

# A passionate 'Paris Commune'

By **Don Aucoin** | GLOBE STAFF    SEPTEMBER 22, 2012



CAROL ROSEGG

**Sam Breslin Wright, shown with Nina Hellman, plays Le Pere Duchene, a character personifying the goading views of a rabble-rousing pamphlet of the period.**

At one point in “Paris Commune,” a defiant shout issues from a formerly beleaguered French baker who has been swept up in revolutionary fervor: “Let Paris write a fresh page in the book of history!”

The Civilians bring that page to life in “Paris Commune,” a passionate and cleverly constructed if occasionally draggy and didactic work that is now receiving its world premiere at the Paramount Center Mainstage, presented by ArtsEmerson.

Helmed by Steve Cosson, the artistic director of Civilians, based in Brooklyn, N.Y., “Paris Commune” revolves around an 1871 insurrection during which workers rose up,

took control of Paris and declared a new government that became, in part, an early experiment in socialism.

“Imagine it happening today: the liberation of the poor,” says one of the show’s narrators, in one of the show’s politically pointed moments.

But the Paris Commune lasted just two months before harsh retaliation from the French government exiled in Versailles. Government troops recaptured Paris; thousands of communards were killed in battle or executed.

The impact of that devastating denouement is effectively dramatized in “Paris Commune,” as is the buoyant idealism of the early, flag-waving, song-singing days of revolution. Far less absorbing is the talky middle section when the communards are in charge, and the poetry of revolution yields to the prose of governance.

“Paris Commune” represents the third visit by the Civilians, a self-described “investigative theater” troupe, to ArtsEmerson in the past couple of years.

“In the Footprint: The Battle Over Atlantic Yards,” which played at ArtsEmerson in January 2011, was built on interviews with people involved in a mammoth development proposal in Brooklyn. To create “You Better Sit Down: Tales from My Parents’ Divorce,” which was performed at ArtsEmerson in October, members of the Civilians interviewed their own parents about how they fell in and out of love, then played them onstage, speaking their words.

The script for “Paris Commune,” by Cosson and Michael Friedman, draws from memoirs and contemporaneous accounts of the revolt. The cast narrates, enacts, and comments upon the events of 1871. Some characters are real-life participants in the Commune, such as the fiery teacher Louise Michel (Jeanine Serralles), while some are fictional but representative of the embattled citizenry, such as the aforementioned



CAROL ROSEGG

**Jeanine Serralles in ArtsEmerson's production of "Paris Commune."**

baker (Daniel Jenkins), who before the revolution must work through the night, and his wife, a seamstress (Aysan Celik) who had to prostitute herself so the family could afford to eat.

The dressmaker (Kate Buddeke) for whom the seamstress works is the embodiment of tsk-tsking bourgeoisie. She sighs that she is “resolved to endure this absurd insurrection. I trust it will not be long. This ‘Commune’ surely will not last.” Harboring the opposite hope is the raucously profane Le Pere Duchene (Sam Breslin Wright), a character who personifies the goading views of a rabble-rousing pamphlet of the period. “It is not enough to have starved us, to have covered us in blood, now he wants us to pay up,” he says of the French president. “For six months we haven’t made anything, we haven’t sold anything. How are we supposed to pay up? . . . We won’t pay!”

Alexander Dodge’s versatile set features two large structures that double as kiosks on which handbills and posters are plastered and pulpits from which characters can speak. In one clever touch, “Paris Commune” blends a “Brief History of Labor” with the history of the Can-Can while the cast energetically performs the latter.



CAROL ROSEGG

**Aysan Çelik (foreground) in "Paris Commune."**

Framed by a concert in the Tuileries Palace on the last night of the commune, “Paris Commune” features music of the period that includes “Les Temps des Cerises (The Cherries of Spring)” and “La Semaine sanglante (The Bloody Week),” both written by Jean Baptiste Clement, who was a member of the Commune’s council.

Early in “Paris Commune,” the baker remarks that memories of the Commune live on in the songs written by Clement and others, then adds: “And words. Words too survive.”

*Don Aucoin can be reached at [aucoin@globe.com](mailto:aucoin@globe.com).*

