

"A landmark in the art of theatre?" Le Monde

"A political act of memory" El Pais

A scenic Oratorio

in collaboration with the lawyers and the family Pelicot

THE PELICOT TRIAL

FREE
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VIENNA
FESTIVAL
WIENER FESTWOCHE

Milo Rau & Servane Dècle

in cooperation with the
Festival d'Avignon

PRESS QUOTES

"Insight and Despair" (New York Times)

"Is it up to art today, rather than religion, to give us hope in the final judgment?" (Die Welt)

"A political act of memory" (El Pais)

"Reading performance with tremendous impact" (Tagesspiegel)

"Seven hours of real horror" (APA)

"By transforming a trial into a work of art, Milo Rau and Servane Dècle prove that theater can be a powerful vehicle for change." (Viral Mag)

"A tribute to Gisèle Pelicot." (Libération)

"Milo Rau's seven-hour reading revisits the exposed systemic failures exposed by Pelicot's historic trial and the societal shift she sparked." (Le Monde with AFP)

"Austrian audiences in shock" (France Info)

"Objective, but all the more oppressive for it" (Deutschlandfunk)

"Any woman can become a victim and any man a perpetrator." (Süddeutsche Zeitung)

"A counter-world in which men still find it normal to rape women." (Der Spiegel)

"A stroke of luck for the theater." (Welt am Sonntag)

"Servane Dècle and Milo Rau pay tribute to Gisèle Pelicot with a reading at the Vienna Festival." (nachtkritik)

"The idea behind the performance is to make it possible to experience 'a collective trauma of spending a night together' said Rau." (Morning Chronicle)



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The Pelicot trial is undoubtedly the most publicised and discussed, and also the most symbolic, of our time. As in a sociological study, it shows that in a perfectly normal Western European city – the small town of Mazan in the south of France, close to Avignon – perfectly ordinary men from all social classes and age groups are capable of perhaps the most extreme crime: the repeated rape of an unconscious woman. “Shame must change sides”: Gisèle Pelicot’s decision to make her trial public made her the symbolic figure of a possible turning point. THE PELICOT TRIAL pays tribute to an ordinary woman who became an icon of resistance against the sexual and sexist violences committed by men.

600 trial hours, 51 perpetrators, 20,000 videos and photos shot by Dominique Pelicot, the husband of Gisèle Pelicot, 38 lawyers – to find judgement on more than 200 rapes under chemical submission committed over the course of a decade. It takes a range of sources to allow reflection on what made this possible. Statements, examinations, an investigation file, scholarly commentaries, interviews, video descriptions, tribunes, collages, mails, pleas, expert opinions. And a tapestry of Mont Ventoux overlooking the courtroom, recalling Pelicot’s bedroom view. Like Petrarch climbing that same mountain in 1336, the audience is driven through a mass of material, in a journey that blends history, the present, the home and the world. Over the course of a 4h oratorio, Servane Dècle and Milo Rau paint a picture of an entire era.

ARTISTIC TEAM

Research, text and direction Milo Rau and Servane Dècle
Project dramaturgy Nastasia Griese

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BIOGRAPHIES



Servane Dècle is a performing arts graduate from Conservatoire de Nantes and a former civil engineer from UTC. She is involved in diverse social movements in France and has been living in a commune for seven years. She has been working for several years as a dramaturge with Milo Rau, Simon Roth and Cie Supernovae. Dècle also works as an actress and writes her own plays, such as a monologue to be directed by Clara Hédouin.



Milo Rau, born 1977 in Bern, is the artistic director of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna. The director and author has published over 100 plays, films, books and actions. His theatre productions have been shown at all major international festivals, including the Berlin Theatertreffen, the Festival d'Avignon, the Venice Biennale, the Vienna Festival and the Kunstenfestivalsdesarts in Brussels, and have been touring in over 30 countries worldwide. From 2018 to 2024 Milo Rau was artistic director of NTGent.

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WORLD TOUR

**18 June 2025 Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen)
Vienna**

**18 July 2025 Festival d'Avignon
Avignon**

**11 October 2025 BoCA - Biennial of Contemporary Arts
Lisboa**

**5 November 2025 TR Warszawa
Warschau**

**9 December 2025 Dramaten Theatre
Stockholm**

**15 December 2025 Guerrilla Festival ne:Bitef
Belgrade**

**5 March 2026 Théâtre de la Concorde
Paris**

**29 March 2026 Judson Memorial Church
New York**

**24 May 2026 Piccolo Teatro Milan
Milan**

**3 June 2026 Bergen International Festival
Bergen**

**8 June 2026 Det Norske Teatret
Oslo**

In March 2026, the book *Le Procès Pelicot. Oratorio en 40 fragments* by Servane Dècle and Milo Rau will be published by Flammarion.

INTERVIEW

WHO ARE WE REALLY?

Servane Dècle and Milo Rau on the hidden side of the Pelicot Case

Interview: Natalie Assmann

N.A.: How did the idea for this evening come about?

M.R.: I have been to the Festival d'Avignon with my work many times. Court cases, trials and processing them in theatre are an essential part of my artistic identity, so I naturally followed the trial closely. After the trial, we realized that no one was addressing this case artistically for the upcoming festival. It just felt wrong to go there in July and not engage with it in any way! So, together with the team of the Wiener Festwochen and the Festival d'Avignon, we decided to make this attempt.

N.A.: The trial itself lasted for over three months. How did you approach this enormous amount of material? You mentioned that it was not allowed to make audio recordings in the courtroom in Avignon.

S.D.: We are working with journalists' notes from nearly 600 hours of hearings. The written records of a large number of reporters were a pivotal and extremely important source for us. Then we started having personal conversations: with journalists, a group of researchers at the Centre Norbert Elias, with one of the trial's public prosecutors, with Mrs. Pelicot's lawyers, Antoine Camus and Stéphane Babonneau, as well as with feminists from Avignon who attended the trial and others. In my professional practice, I am interested in collective knowledge in order to capture the complexity of the issues. Of course, the first thing that stands out are the extraordinary aspects of this case, but we are also interested in its quieter, more inconspicuous facets. We might not be able to fully reconstruct the Pelicot trial, but our goal is to give voice to what happened. As many as four books had already been published a mere three months after the verdict. There is obviously an urge to talk about it. We want to keep alive the story told by this trial. So the reading is a way of establishing continuity.

Dramaturgically, we are taking a concise and analytical approach to uncover the deeper causes of these acts.

N.A.: So, would you describe this as an attempt to reconstruct the case in its entirety – which in itself would already be a political act of remembrance?

M.R.: Exactly! In a way, we are taking the case out of the collective memory and reassembling it for Avignon and Vienna. We decided to stage the reading in a sacred space, as an allegory to the Stations of the Cross, reading the events 'from dusk till dawn'. We deliberately chose a simple format for this evening because in my experience that is the most convincing way to tell this story. It's about disentangling the story from the couple Gisèle and Dominique Pelicot – turning it into a story that belongs to all of us and at the same time to none of us.

N.A.: What does the figure of Gisèle Pelicot mean for the feminist movement in France and for you personally, Servane?

S.D.: By bringing the trial into the public eye, Gisèle Pelicot achieved an unbelievable shift: 'making shame change sides', making the perpetrators accountable. In many trials since then (such as the trial against the ISIS prison guards in France), victims have mentioned how much her courage inspired them. We want to pay tribute to her. But like many other feminists, we do not want to put her on a pedestal. What does a constant emphasis on her exemplary courage mean for those who are affected but unable to speak out publicly? Gisèle Pelicot's lifestyle was frequently described as 'impeccable', essentially using the phrase to distance her from the humiliations she endured. But what if she had not been considered 'impeccable' – if, for example, she had preferred unconventional sexual

practices? What if she had not been the 'good victim'? Would that have made the crimes committed against her any less cruel? I want to question our disturbing need for 'innocence' when it comes to feeling empathy.

N.A.: Our judicial system is built on patriarchal power structures. In practice, this means that gender affects not only verdicts but also the credibility of witnesses and public perception. How do you incorporate this into your work?

S.D.: Countless sexual and sexist stereotypes were reproduced in the courtroom and in media coverage. Even in the face of video footage, many of the accused denied having raped Gisèle Pelicot. I think it is crucial to acknowledge the sheer banality of these crimes and to shed light on the culture that enables these acts. Many in France demanded that this trial be seen as a symbolic case against 'the patriarchy'. However, the justice system cannot pass sentence on an entire society. These men are responsible for their own actions, not for all the sexist and sexual violence committed by men on a daily basis. In the end, it was just a trial against 51 men within the patriarchy.

M.R.: From a sociological or philosophical perspective, this case is like an unintentional empirical study on the omnipresence of the patriarchy and rape culture that infiltrates all of our lives – despite decades of awareness campaigns, increasingly strict laws and the success of #MeToo amplifying the voices of victims. It's as if we are saying, well, we have now shed light on this part, but there is still another part – one that remains completely hidden. And that part remains unchanged.

S.D.: Yes, the Pelicot trial is not just a marginal footnote. In one of her articles in *Le Monde*, the journalist Héléne Devynck quoted Virginia Woolf likening patriarchy in the home to fascism in the world. Obviously, the patriarchy does not remain confined to the home. It operates in the world and within the self – even in men who suffer from self-destructive masculinity. It is therefore a fundamental part of our domestic structure. Given the rapid rise of neo-fascism in the world, this statement serves as my compass for this work. Today, masculinism and neo-fascism are growing hand in hand – the continuity is apparent. As long as the patriarchy continues to destroy lives, as long as men seek power through domination, fascism will grow. I don't believe that the patriarchy is any easier or simpler to combat than fascism, but as an artist, activist and woman, I feel that the contemplation on the Pelicot trial points to a core issue of our time.

N.A.: To demonstrate that sexual violence is not an isolated incident, Virginie Despentes describes how she became a victim of gang rape at the age of 17 in *King King Theory*. Pelicot made her case public for similar reasons. From a feminist perspective, the question arises whether speaking about rape invites sensationalism or voyeurism – and to what extent it can unintentionally be retraumatizing. How do you handle the partly very explicit and detailed descriptions of the rapes in this work?

S.D.: During the trial, it was apparent that most of the accused were unable to view a woman as a subject, not an object. They made no distinction between sex, sexualized violence and rape. They constantly justified and defended themselves during questioning. Therefore, I believe it is very important not to omit these statements, as they reveal attitudes held by so many people in our society. Gisèle Pelicot is not just a victim but also a survivor of patriarchal violence.

N.A.: From an activist perspective, it is often criticized that the depiction of violence normalizes the actual act of violence for a privileged audience. How do you respond to this criticism?

M.R.: The depiction of real events has always been somewhat problematic. This concerns not just the depiction of sexualized violence, however, but of violence and trauma in general. There are questions that inevitably arise when violence is brought to the stage: Why is violence being portrayed? Who watches it? And for what reason?

I've made pieces with children about paedophilia, and of course there was a concern there that there are paedophiles in the audience who are there to see the children. It's a paradox: by speaking about pornography, we are simultaneously producing pornography.

In the specific case of Pelicot, however, there was so much support from the family and the people involved – more than I've ever experienced in any of my previous works. So, politically, I think we are doing the right thing. Psychologically, it is certainly challenging.

N.A.: Since the Pelicot case, there have been discussions about changing the legal definition of rape in French law so that the absence of the victim's consent becomes the central criterion. According to what is known as the 'Only Yes Means Yes' principle, sexualized violence would be considered to have occurred if any participant did not explicitly give their consent. What is your view on these discussions?

S.D.: What we saw in the Pelicot case is historic in its own way. 51 out of 80 men were indicted and held accountable. The underlying issues, such as male dominance, rape culture and patriarchy, were not addressed. It is an exceptional case that unfortunately turns out to be quite ordinary. Scholars call this type of crime 'ordinary opportunity rape'. The perpetrators all live within fifty kilometres of the Pelicots' home. Just think about it: this happened within such a small radius. Many of them didn't even know the definition of consent. I think the modification of the law you describe has some advantages but also carries risks that I don't want to go into here. What the story of Gisèle Pelicot clearly shows is that while it is important to tighten laws, that does not suffice to drive societal change.

M.R.: Essentially, this brings us back to our Congresses this year. It is always problematic for a society when it attempts to address structural issues only through the installation of laws. So while we are dealing with criminal law here, we are in fact facing an anthropological question: Who are we really? Can we ever become human on this planet – can we ever be humane? This makes me think of Peter Weiss's oratorio *The Investigation*, which is essentially about demystifying the Holocaust. He described ordinary people doing things they knew were wrong, but doing them anyway. In that, I see a parallel to the Pelicot case.

The interview was conducted on 16 March 2025.

SEVEN ESSENTIAL HOURS AT THE LIMIT

Milo Rau, artistic director of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen), has previously staged actual trials as documentary theatre on several occasions. He has now turned his attention to the most sensational court proceedings of our time: the trial for the serial rape of Gisèle Pelicot

Jakob Hayner

It is almost four o'clock in the morning and the last stragglers are leaving the church to step onto its forecourt. The Pelicot Trial lasted seven hours. Seven hours that described how Gisèle Pelicot was drugged and raped by her husband for years, how he had offered her to other men to be raped like a piece of meat, recording everything on photographs and videos. Seven hours with the perpetrators' excuses, aggressive defences or denials.

Seven hours of looking for where to place the blame – the men, their childhoods, society. Seven hours at the limit of tolerability, one of the most shattering experiences theatre can offer. Seven essential hours. Director Milo Rau and dramaturge Servan Dècle have described their journey to the heart of darkness, which was performed at St Elisabeth Church as part of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen), as 'a tribute to Gisèle Pelicot'. The hymnals provided throughout the church are called Praise the Lord – not something that springs to mind in the light of these crimes. Only the stations of the cross that are depicted in paintings on display in the side aisles seem to come close to the suffering of Gisèle Pelicot. In the audience, some slump down and fall to their knees in a prayer position over the course of the evening – as if they were asking (in vain?) to deliver us from evil. Or does it nowadays fall to art rather than religion to give us hope in the final judgement?

A church is the appropriate setting for this performance, as is evident not least from the fact that the phrases of religion keep offering refuge. 'I was sacrificed on the altar of perversion' are the words chosen by Gisèle Pelicot. She is revered as an icon by many people throughout the world, like an early Christian martyr and saint. Her exemplary call for shame to change camps has given others the strength to speak about their own suffering: other women who have been raped, but also victims of torture by Islamic State. Yet, Dominique Pelicot also referred to her as a saint and a goddess while he titled the videos 'my whore': that ancient myth of women as whores and saints.

We have to pass through three acts (or circles of hell). Dècle and Rau, who has staged theatrical trials before, viewed and condensed vast amounts of material to develop a dramatic arc that draws the audience ever deeper into the tragedy. Everybody has their say: Gisèle Pelicot, her family and lawyers, Dominique Pelicot, the fifty other defendants and their lawyers, a group of anthropologists and those they interviewed in the public sphere, experts, journalists, trial observers, activists. It is a horrific mosaic of many voices that does not succumb to garish and sensationalist voyeurism, but keeps focusing on the overall picture with unrelenting precision: it is seeking insights instead of pornographic violence.

The performance is accordingly stark, comprising readings from documents that are largely from the trial, which took place last year in Avignon, or from the public discourse as well as media reporting about it. The individual speakers step up to the lectern, their faces are transmitted in large format via video on a screen. It is a convincing decision, because any attempt at imagery would probably have gone awry. That words alone dominate the scene is in itself an attempt at coming to terms with the events. It is an attempt to find a language for the unspeakable. It is an attempt at negotiating that which has negated all negotiation by violence. Language is the work of hope – the hope of fleeing terror of legendary proportions.

Is it possible to explain what happened in the small town in Southern France at the foot of Mount Ventoux? The fact that the Marquis de Sade (still the one to give his name to the word sadism) once had his castle in Mazan is no more than a detail for fans of the Gothic. All the men who came to the house Gisèle Pelicot loved, those who walked into the room in lilac pastel shades to rape the unconscious woman together with or in front of Dominique Pelicot – the woman who would eventually have been his wife of five decades – were all local. They included the neighbour who said hello at the bakery. Until this day, it has not been possible to identify every one of the men on the videos. Only fifty were put on trial and all were found guilty.

What kind of men are these? Their ages range from 22 to 67 years, they are from different social classes and professions. They are described as loving family men, as inconspicuous, in short: average members of society. 'Everybody in Avignon knows someone who knows one of the defendants', wrote Manon Garcia, the author of the feminist book *La Conversation des sexes*. Mediocrity rather than monstrosity? Healthy offspring of the patriarchy rather than sick men, as the activist slogans claim? Yet almost a third of the perpetrators themselves experienced sexual violence during their childhoods, including Dominique Pelicot, who was raped at the age of 9 and forced to commit a rape when he was 14.

A psychiatrist explains the gruesome recidivism: women become victims again, men perpetrators. Also, what about the two thirds who had no such traumatic experiences? The psychiatry expert speaks of self-centredness and emotional detachment, enhanced by internet pornography. Where sexual phantasies are only lived out alone in front of a computer, others are objectified via technology, as the theory goes. 'The other's consent does not count.' Is that the source of the notorious rape culture? Or would we have to speak of rape nature, of biological evolutionary empathy blockers in the most brutal of all animals, the human?

One conservative newspaper wrote that the rapes of Gisèle Pelicot are the 'symptoms of a deeply sick society' and this seems uncontroversially accepted almost throughout all political camps. The painful but essential aspect of The Pelicot Trial is that it does not determine a cause, but instead presents a range of theories. Thus Dominique Pelicot started committing the rapes after his existence as a real estate agent had been destroyed in the real-estate crisis and he had become unemployed. 'I wanted to break her', he said about his professionally more successful wife during the trial. The psychiatrist calls it an attempt to regain control of his own life by means of brutal violence.

Did Dominique Pelicot, the 'monster of Mazan', as he was called by the media, seduce others to do evil? That is what some of the defendants said, claiming they had been trapped, deceived and manipulated. Dominique Pelicot refutes this, saying that all defendants had certainly known what they were doing: 'They were my accomplices.' Some even let him teach them 'chemical submission' and raped their own wives. In the end, most defendants said that they had never intended to rape anyone. And only one single perpetrator said it as it is and answered his victim: 'I will bear the shame.' It really is 'putting cowardice on trial', as Gisèle Pelicot says.

One man takes the stand who did not accept Dominique Pelicot's offer to rape his wife in 'payment' for garden work. He says he felt uncomfortable because the woman had been rendered unconscious with tablets. This man recalls the minimum that was available to all men: to decide. However, during that decade of suffering for Gisèle Pelicot, whose inexplicable blackouts almost drove her mad, there was not a single man among them who reported anything, not even anonymously. In the end, Dominique Pelicot was uncovered when he was caught upskirting women in a supermarket without their knowledge. The police found twenty thousand files of the rapes on his hard drive.

'My world broke down', said Gisèle Pelicot after it had emerged that her husband had at the same time been her tormentor. Together with her children, she burnt the photo albums in the garden. And for her grandchildren, she turned the name Pelicot from a symbol of cowardly violence into a symbol of courage. It is a recoding, like that already attempted by Carolina Bianchi at the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) with her angry indictment *The Brotherhood*, another evening about rape. Milo Rau's *The Seer* also asked how to escape violence and the images of violence, taking the example of a victim of Islamic State. We will not find the answer in the theatre, but the theatre can at least help us face up to what is needed. Thus The Pelicot Trial will be shown at the Festival d'Avignon in an abbreviated version next month.

In the very final scene, The Pelicot Trial leaves the courtroom and the surroundings, even the present day. We take a literary walk to the top of Mount Ventoux, which is depicted on a wall hanging in the court room. It is a description by Petrarch, the best known ascent of the mountain, which is still considered a foundational text of the humanist resurgence in the Renaissance. Never forget to contemplate yourself, it says. These are the words that accompany us into the night, which is at its darkest in this hour. But is that not also the time when daylight is nearest? Indeed, daybreak is drawing up on the horizon like a strip of hope despite everything that we experienced during these deeply unsettling seven hours.

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