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## Paul Vergès, from Senate to stage

Nicknamed "God of the earth" the senator from Reunion Island inspired "Chin", a Creole opera.

### Opera

From our Special Correspondent in Reunion

The coincidences of history, both large and small, are sometimes mischievous: on Saturday October 1<sup>st</sup>, senator Paul Vergès, 86, will chair the historical first assembly of a Senate which now has a left-wing majority. That same evening he will be, on the stage of the Jean-Vilar theater at Vitry-sur-Seine (Val-de-Marne), the hero of the first opera from Reunion Island, *Chin*, performed for the first time in mainland France.

On May 13 we met Paul Vergès at the headquarters of the newspaper *Temoignages*, on Reunion. An elderly man in shirt sleeves, simple and affable, who talks fast in a monotonous voice and stops in front of one of the portraits of the legendary "Doctor Papa", his father, Raymond Vergès, founder of the newspaper in 1944, and the following year of the Republican Committee for Democratic and Social Action before becoming a communist politician.

Seeing the frail figure it's hard to imagine, despite the visual acuity, Chin the Red, hero of an opera produced by Vollard Theater in 2010 and first performed on May 11 at the Gramoune-Lélé auditorium in the town of Saint-Benoît. For it is definitely the son of Raymond and brother of the lawyer Jacques Vergès, nicknamed "Chin" or "le Chinois" {the Chinese man} in his youth because of his Asian origins, who accomplished a revolution in 1955 by allying himself with the sugar producer René Payet to save the Quartier Français factory (in the opera they're called Mr Roger and Bel Air factory respectively).

*"We were complete opposites: he was Catholic, far right-wing and had been Petainist mayor of the town of Sainte Suzanne. He was also an enemy of my father against whom he'd stood for election in 1936, accusing him of taking refuge in Indochina to escape the Great War, remembers Paul Vergès. But he was also a visionary agronomist who had modernized his factory and offered the planters better conditions than the others. He was in debt to the point of having placed himself in receivership. Then the banks, in collusion with his competitors, had conspired against him, denying him any loan whatsoever so that he would become bankrupt."*

Composed like a thriller, Emmanuel Genvrin's libretto tells how Paul Vergès, then the young Secretary of the Reunionese Federation of the French Communist Party, enlisted in the Free French Forces at the age of 17, made an alliance with Payet to create a defense committee for the factory. *"All the workers were members of the CGT trade union, so they were united"*, enthuses Paul Vergès. *"From July 18-29, we held large rallies all over Reunion to mobilize small and medium planters and labor unions. On the day of the creditors' meeting at the Commercial Court of Saint Denis, the Prefect announced on the radio that it was postponed until August 5. The banks fell into line: a period of seven years was granted to refund debts, accompanied by an un hoped-for loan at 3.5%!"*

The factory safe, Paul Vergès, alias "the God of earth", then won the 1956 parliamentary elections,

transforming three years later the local Federation of the French Communist Party into the Reunionese Communist Party (PCR).

Becoming an "opera character" is just one more trial for Paul Vergès, sentimental questions aside. In fact the old man did not really appreciate that the libretto relates an affair - pure invention, he says - between Chin and Micheline Payet (Elisabeth in the opera), the boss's daughter. Moreover, torn between the bourgeois White woman and Heva the activist, Chin, who sleeps with both of them, ends up fleeing with the young Afro-Indian worker. "*Chin will reawaken the memories of the older generation and teach the younger ones their history*", stresses Paul Vergès. A story that takes on particular importance on this island where "*51% of the population live below the poverty line*", at a time when "*the European system has resulted in the closure of 12 out of the 14 sugar factories on the island*" and when only 5000 planters remain compared with 23000 at the period when the opera was set.

It's precisely this social and cultural reality of Creole history based on slavery and colonialism that the librettist and director Emmanuel Genvrin, who arrived on the island in 1979 to create Vollard Theater, has strived for thirty years to put into words, music and pictures. His credo? "*Create a Reunionese theater*" at odds with the formatted productions that come from mainland France, and the populist Creole shows created especially for local audiences.

With *Chin*, co-written with the composer Jean-Luc Trulès, Vollard Theater goes to a new level. The music and 57 participants of the opera, sung in French and Creole, are a microcosm of Reunionese society, blend classical, maloya (Afro-Malagasy former slave music), Creole, Asian and Indian melodies, symphonic orchestra instruments as well as the Chinese violin (erhu). As for the musicians, they come from mainland France, Reunion, Madagascar, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and also China (the title role is performed by Heng Shi). The opera's end leaves the mixed-race child of Elisabeth and Chin by himself: "*Heir of both sides, and of a long history, he is the uncertain future of Reunion*," affirms Emmanuel Genvrin.

**MARIE-AUDE ROUX**

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***Chin*** by Emmanuel Genvrin and Jean-Luc Trulès. Jean-Vilar Theater at Vitry-sur-Seine. October 1<sup>st</sup> at 9pm, October 2 at 4pm.

Phone (+33) 01 55 53 10 60. Tickets from €5 to €12.50. [Theatrejeanvilar.com](http://Theatrejeanvilar.com)