

## AND...

## SHOWS

with the students of the Conservatoire national supérieur d'art dramatique

*We'll have everything*, Christiane Taubira and Anne-Laure Liégeois, July 8-23, Jardin Ceccano

*Claire, Anton and Them*, François Cervantes, July 17-19, Gymnase du lycée Saint-Joseph

*Juliet begins*, Grégoire Aubin and Marceau Deschamps-Ségura, July 23-25, Gymnase du lycée Saint-Joseph

## TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

– October 6 - 8, 2017, Théâtre de Suresnes-Jean Vilar

– March 22, 2018, TDC Théâtre de Chartres

*L'École des femmes*, *La Critique de l'École des femmes* and *L'Impromptu de Versailles* by Molière are published by éditions Pocket and Hachette.

## IMPROMPTU 1663

*Impromptu 1663*, or, *Molière and the uproar over The School for Wives*, is first and foremost a date that could have remained forgotten in the history of theatre and political satire. Molière, attacked from all sides after presenting *The School for Wives*, went on the offensive by teaching his opponents a real lesson in two steps. He responded by writing and directing *Critique of the School for Wives*, followed by *The Impromptu at Versailles*. When the theatre battles the world of theatre using theatre... It's a simple enough trick: in *The Impromptu*, Molière stages the rehearsal of a play before its performance in front of the King. Molière plays his own role, surrounded by his whole troupe. In *Critique of the School for Wives*, however, he dramatises the end of the performance and the argument between members of the audience enthralled or revolted by the play they just saw... Two more stunts to add to those the playwright keeps coming up with to respond to his contemporaries' attacks and reflect their own jealousy and malice back at them. Intertwining those two plays, director Clément Hervieu-Léger asks the students of the Conservatoire national supérieur d'art dramatique to perform what looks a lot like their reality: the life of a troupe, the anxiety of rehearsals, and the pressing need to get onstage... and to defend the modernity of the language of the classics.

## CLÉMENT HERVIEU-LÉGER

Clément Hervieu-Léger has had a unique career. He was scouted while studying at the conservatoire of the 10th arrondissement in Paris, quickly abandoned his law and political science studies, and after fruitful artistic collaborations, joined the Comédie-Française in 2005. Parallel to his work as an actor, he also collaborated with Patrice Chéreau. He co-founded the Compagnie des Petits Champs with Daniel San Pedro in Beaumontel and created l'Étable, a centre for cultural activities in a rural environment. With the Comédie-Française, Clément Hervieu-Léger directed Molière's *Critique of the School for Wives* and *The Misanthrope*, followed by Marivaux's *Le Petit Maître Corrigé (The Beating of the Young Master)*. For the opera, he directed Cavalli's *La Didone* and Mozart's *Mitridate*. Clément Hervieu-Léger teaches drama at the dance school of the Paris Opera. He co-wrote the book *J'y arriverai un jour (One day I'll make it)* with Georges Banu. In 2014, he wrote his first play, *Le Voyage en Uruguay (The Trip to Uruguay)*. The audience of the Festival d'Avignon previously saw Clément Hervieu-Léger in the role of Gunther von Essenbeck in Ivo van Hove's direction of *The Damned*, presented in 2016 in the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes.

## MOLIÈRE

On 26 December 1662, Molière and his troupe performed *The School for Wives*. The play led to an outcry from many of his contemporaries. Writers like Boursault or Visé wrote pamphlets against him, accusing him of "not making theatre:" *Zélinde* or *Le portrait du peintre (The Portrait or a Painter)*. Faced with an ever-increasing number of detractors, Molière spent most of 1663 coming up with a response. With *Critique of the School for Wives* and *The Impromptu at Versailles*, Molière invented a new form of theatre, and proved the effectiveness of his best weapon: drama. The mise en abyme allowed him to rebuff his most determined enemies, and the king ruled in his favour, granting him a pension of 100 pistoles....

71<sup>st</sup>  
EDITION

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#FDA17

# INTERVIEW WITH CLÉMENT HERVIEU-LÉGER

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**Why did you choose to base your work on Molière's *The Impromptu at Versailles*?**

**Clément Hervieu-Léger:** I've often noticed, while watching graduation shows, that the topic or pretext to the story was a group of young people fresh out of school gathering in a country house to rehearse. It's a way to talk about an ensemble, to find room for everyone. This idea of the group, this principle of the rehearsal, Molière understood them beautifully when he wrote *The Impromptu at Versailles*. I therefore decided to start with that text to tell of how difficult it can be to be a group of actors, to have to perform together even if we know one another well, and thus to evoke the vagaries inherent in belonging to a troupe, a company. It was also an opportunity to tackle in a very concrete way the question of the history of theatre. When you're a young actor, you always feel that theatre begins with you. I think it's important to make them work on this classic repertoire to which I'm very much attached, and which can sometimes be perceived as outdated, as something people don't really want to tackle.

**Historically speaking, 1663—the year *The Impromptu at Versailles* was published—isn't just any other year for Molière.**

In 1662, after the creation of *The School for Wives*, which was a smashing success, Molière found himself the target of a campaign of protest. His detractors accused him of not making theatre the way one should. Of doing away way too easily with rules, with the canons of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and above all of holding up an unbearable mirror to his audience. He could have responded with a preface or a letter, but he decided to respond with theatre. When he published the play during Easter Week, he announced that he would present a short play in one act as a response to his critics. Thus were born *Critique of the School for Wives*, created in June, and *The Impromptu at Versailles*, in October, a second response to his opponents. He would never mention the controversy again. If those two plays may seem minor today, they nonetheless represent a real revolution in terms of dramaturgy. Take their relationship to actual time, for instance: there's no ellipsis, nothing happens offstage, everything is said onstage. No major action, only words. And within those words appear relationships that are much subtler and with much more at stake than first appears. We're already in a system of *mise en abyme* of theatre. It's a vision you'll find later in Pirandello. By responding to the criticism of his play, Molière invented new rules. The controversial and political aspect of his plays would from then on remain at the heart of his theatre. He put theatre at the centre of intellectual debate, and provided an illustration of the key relationship between theatre and society. What matters to me is to show those young actors and actresses how much of that legacy is theirs, then to question them about the performance of the actor. Because Molière asks the question of naturalism in what is a true letter to actors. In the 1600s, performances were very much exaggerated and codified, both in tragedies and comedies. Molière decided to break away from stereotypes to come as close as possible to the people. We'll also try, with our modernity, to ask the question of naturalism.

**What makes you want to perform this classic repertoire?**

Some of the classic authors have survived through the centuries because they still manage to tell us about ourselves, with great sharpness. How do those authors continue to question us, including through the beauty of their words? In this case, there was an even greater question: that of the relationship to theatre of these young people who are about to enter professional life. Molière just so happened to provide me with the most concrete way to do that. When people asked Vitez "Why direct classic plays?" he would answer: "Because it is essential to work on social memory." Classic texts can play a powerful role because they belong to all of us, they're our history. That's what Molière's detractors couldn't bear in 1663: they hadn't anticipated that theatre could play that role.

**Do you think there's a need to make theatre nowadays?**

Jean-Louis Barrault had this beautiful phrase about the experience of theatre, that is, for both its performers and its audience. He said: "Theatre is the experience of our human community." We need it, now more than ever. To illustrate that idea, I want to tell you a personal anecdote: I once wrote a text called *Le Voyage en Uruguay (The Trip to Uruguay)*, a show meant for places that aren't necessarily intended for theatre. It was my response to people saying "Theatre isn't for me." A woman came to see the play, and the next day she told me: "I couldn't sleep at all last night. I went through the whole journey in my head again. I didn't know you could travel without moving." She later attended some of the company's other shows. In a way, theatre had become accessible for her. It had opened up possibilities. That woman, who'd waited a long time before coming to the theatre for the first time, no longer hesitated to come. If we can manage to make people travel without moving, then we're right to be making theatre.

**How do you reconcile laughter, this need for theatre, and the engagement of artists?**

The experience of theatre can also come from laughing together. I don't necessarily think that you have to create plays that explicitly talk of politics to be politically engaged. To make people laugh in its highest acceptance, that is, a laughter that brings together in intelligence, in the ability to laugh of ourselves, that's necessary. What's beautiful in Molière is that he makes us laugh, sometimes reluctantly, because he forces us to face our worst instincts as a group, then in the next second he moves us deeply. All that allows us to build ourselves together. I make theatre for the group. It just so happens that I also like to lead projects. The French tradition of the *metteur en scène* most often means that an actor is chosen among all the actors to become captain of the ship. It's a huge responsibility. What I like about *The Impromptu* is the way it shows that directing is a serious thing. It means making decisions that impact a whole team. To go onstage is an exhilarating experience, but also a very violent one; it's a great experience of solitude, even though you're surrounded by a group. No one forces you to go onstage, and yet it's a matter of life or death. For the actor waiting in the wings, it's an absolute imperative, and it is the director's duty to consider that imperative.

— Interview conducted by Marion Guilloux and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach