

## AND...

## THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Dialogue artists-audience with Jean-François Matignon, July 22 at 11:00,  
Site Louis Pasteur Supramuros de l'Université d'Avignon

## NAVE OF IMAGES (screenings)

*Didier-Georges Gabily - Marguerite L.* by Jean-François Matignon (2016),  
July 22 at 14:30, Église des Célestins

## FOI ET CULTURE ENCOUNTERS

with Jean-François Matignon about *The Daughter of Mars*, July 21 at 11:00,  
Chapelle de l'Oratoire

## TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

October 19 - November 19, 2017, Théâtre de l'Épée de bois,  
La Cartoucherie - Paris

***Penthesilée* by Heinrich von Kleist, translation Julien Gracq, is published  
by Editions José Corti.**

## THE DAUGHTER OF MARS

"So many things stir in the hearts of women that are never meant to see the light of day!" On the stage, the Amazon Penthesilea appears. She tells a story that took place long ago, the story of the siege of Troy. There she fought Achilles, who died out of love for her, when the goal of the war was only to take prisoners so that children could be born. Penthesilea and Achilles are dead now. It is there, near the bodies of the two lovers, that she comes back from after the disaster to tell its story. She tells of the history of her people from their origins, of the law of the Amazons, of the last words of her mother Otrera, of her meeting Achilles, a blinding encounter on the battlefield, and of the upheaval it caused and how it led her to neglect her duty. Penthesilea remembers the "shockwave," the bodies struggling in lust, the scorched earth, a vibrant zone of stridency and screeches. Till the end, thanks to the power of words, she will replay this deadly love, under the watchful eye of her confidante and lifelong friend Prothoe. The words of Heinrich von Kleist, translated into French by Julien Gracq, give us to hear the desperate song of a woman torn between the culture that made her who she is and the white hot burn of the first man she ever met.

## JEAN-FRANÇOIS MATIGNON

Jean-François Matignon was in college when he fell in love with the theatre, and shortly thereafter with cinema. His first direction came in 1987 with an adaptation of Fassbinder's *Katzelmacher*, followed in 1988 by Raymond Guérin's *La peau dure* (*Thick Skin*). In 1990, he founded Compagnie Fraction, with which he created over twenty shows based on works by contemporary authors such as Modiano, Genet, Williams, Müller, Peace, and Brecht, and on classics by Shakespeare, James, or Büchner. Directing plays could have simply been a way to report on his own life, but soon Jean-François Matignon started working on a project of total theatre, bringing together a novelistic approach and stage writing. Theatre became a place where the infinitesimally big and the infinitesimally small are constantly talking to each other. At the heart of this approach, this quote by Büchner: "*Man is an abyss, and I turn giddy when I look down into it.*" Jean-François Matignon previously directed three plays at the Festival d'Avignon: Gabily's *Lalla* (*or the Terror*), Stefanovski's *Hotel Europa*, and Büchner and Peace's *W/GB84*. During the 70th edition of the Festival, he also oversaw a tribute to Gabily, a reading of excerpts entitled Marguerite L.

## HEINRICH VON KLEIST

Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) was a German writer, poet, dramatist, and essayist. Like Goethe or Hölderlin, he was part of the early Romantic period in Germany, the most absolute one, which intended to redeem humanity through poetry. His work, panned by Goethe, was only recognised more than a century after his death. Like the great Romantic heroes, he committed suicide after killing Henriette Vogel on the shore of the Kleiner Wannsee in Berlin. On his grave is written this line from *The Prince of Homburg*: "Now, Immortality, you belong to me."

71<sup>st</sup>  
EDITION

In order to bring you this edition, over 1,750 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tirelessly and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.



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#FDA17

# INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-FRANÇOIS MATIGNON

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## How did you come to Kleist's play?

**Jean-François Matignon** : It's been a long time coming. Penthesilea is one of the texts me and my company had wanted to perform for ages, but we had to work on a lot of other projects before we felt ready for the intensity it requires on the stage. If you take a look at Heinrich von Kleist's Little Katie of Heilbronn, for instance, what's interesting is that Penthesilea and Kätchen are like the two faces of Janus, two opposite sides of a single idea. The former is exuberant, intense, frenetic. The latter makes the radical choice of removing herself from the world. Those women are at two opposite extremes. Another aspect of my experience of Kleist is his relationship to death. He died young, cut down by fate at 34. The power of his youth, in spite of his tormented life and his unhappiness in love, make him closer to Penthesilea. She couldn't grow old, either. It's part of who she is: she's burning up. The brevity of those lives, the intensity of their youths, aren't the play's themes, but they are its material. They're like the foundations necessary to the structure of the story.

## Could you describe Penthesilea? Do you see her as a modern figure of femininity?

She's modern in that she is a young woman torn between her passion for Achilles and the law that guides her. As a reminder, she's the queen of the Amazons, she grew up in a community devoid of men. For Penthesilea, Achilles is like a nuclear explosion. Kleist describes her as blushing from her hair to her breasts. That man is a stab of emotion on the battlefield, and she is like "flooded," overwhelmed. Yet she has to fight him so that her people's law can prevail, the same law that says the Amazons have to mate with prisoners of war, and thus allows her to pick Achilles. She decides to go all the way with him, and kills him. As for Achilles, he was ready to surrender out of love for her. Penthesilea is a woman who refuses the very idea of negotiations. She's terrifying and heartrending. She's a great romantic figure, a memory of tragedy, a revolt. Her passion is questioned by the group. She tries to stand her ground as best she can.

## How do you represent the battlefield on the stage?

The battlefield as described by Kleist is a landscape. On the stage, it's a place of vestiges. The testimony of a catastrophe. "Here," something took place, something happened. We're in a place of brutality, where the struggle between Achilles and Penthesilea took place. The ground will be metal, the entire space of the stage arid and dry. The sun and light play a very important part in this play. Light blinds, the sun exposes. I've noticed I often come back to the idea of war. It's a landscape within which our stories bloom. It allows us to tell of what makes human relationships worthwhile. War is also like a negative portrait of this young woman who is always at a maximum level of intensity. She can't channel the revolt within her. It seems to me that her violence is a way for her to express this immense feeling of personal injustice. She can't reach a place of accomplishment. Next to her, Achilles looks almost like cannon fodder. He's a fantasy, an object of passion, and the battlefield becomes the place of an apparition.

## How did you adapt Kleist's play?

I wanted to tell a love story so demanding and intense that it would be like a deflagration. What I needed first was for the audience to hear the poetry in Kleist's language and the radical nature of this encounter. We selected a number of excerpts from the text, avoiding most of the details about the siege of Troy. So when the play begins, the war is already over. A woman comes onstage and tells the story of the Amazons. She begins a process of reactivation of the stage. For the story to happen again, we need the power of her word. And the power of her story, which is at the same time a form of belief, allows the story to begin again. One of our ideas was to have two Penthesileas on the stage: the one who tells the story, who has flashbacks "from before the catastrophe," and the one that goes through her encounter with Achilles again in a very intense manner. Telling the story that way then allowed us to pick the most intense moments of the text, its poetic marrow.

## What does that mean specifically for *The Daughter of Mars*?

I wanted there to be two aspects that echo each other. On the one hand, you have the world of Penthesilea, the world of a woman, her portrait. On the other, the world within which the story takes place. It's at once the exploration of a tempest in a skull and an investigation of open spaces. We want to reach the universal by talking about that woman's personal story. What we want to question is this desire for a poetic revolt that can't ever take concrete form. To desire something she can't have puts our protagonist in a place where, if she can't make her desire a reality, she can position herself existentially against the brutality of the world. The space of the stage will be divided into two distinct parts: on one side you'll have the world of the Amazons (which is chaotic, a place of ruins and luxuriant nature). It's the side of mystery and femininity. In the play, Kleist mentions the rose festival, the moment when the Amazons mate with their prisoners. There will be traces of this bacchanalia, which isn't actually one in the proper sense of the word. On the other side will be the world of war, which is also the place where Achilles and Penthesilea meet. One thing I absolutely wanted to talk about is the theme of the misunderstanding. When Penthesilea wakes up after one of her fainting episodes, she thinks she's bested Achilles, which would allow him to survive. But she's mistaken. She then has to fight him to the death to respect her people's law. She's stuck between those two worlds, and that's where her strength fails her.

## When looking at the writers you've adapted so far, would you say that Kleist's play is part of a cycle, or does it stand on its own?

It will probably lead us elsewhere, though we don't know quite where yet. It's been a while since I'd adapted a dramatic text. I wanted to tackle a work with a powerful language that would be the foundation of a show. I wanted the audience to hear something that would be different from the racket that's going on around us. The play actually opens with the word "listen." It's my way of saying that it's important to talk about art and culture, that it's not ridiculous to "listen" to love stories. I'm still convinced that sensibility and poetry can change the world.

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