

AND...

INSTALLATION

Five Truths by Katie Mitchell, from July 6, 11:00 to 19:30, Maison Jean Vilar

NAVE OF IMAGES (screenings)

Kristin, nach Fraulein Julie (based on *Miss Julie*) – Katie Mitchell and Léo Warner (2011), July 18 at 14:30, Église des Célestins

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

November 22 to December 2 2017, Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam

Les Bonnes by Jean Genet is published by éditions Gallimard.

DE MEIDEN

Katie Mitchell gives Jean Genet's reflections a European scope by moving his famous postwar maids from Madame's Parisian apartment to the centre of today's Amsterdam, where they become Polish. When their mistress is away, Solange and Claire still play her role, one after the other, imitating her voice and mannerisms, mistreating her and each other... But if Madame wears the clothes and attributes of a powerful boss, there is a clear inversion — in Katie Mitchell's reading, the play becomes more a reflection about patriarchal exploitation than about the domination of some women over others. The deadly fate of the Papin sisters, which inspired Jean Genet's play, now echoes the situation of thousands of women, underpaid economic migrants who lead clandestine lives, crushed by those they have no choice but to depend on. After getting rid of Monsieur by having him thrown into prison, the two maids plot to make Madame, his transvestite partner, disappear as well. Their dangerous game, grippingly suspenseful, soothes their rage, up until the moment it becomes more concrete. Could they really go through with it?

KATIE MITCHELL

After studying literature, British artist Katie Mitchell began her career as an assistant in theatres, including the Royal Shakespeare Company. That's where she directed, upon returning in 1996 from a cycle of residences in Eastern European (and particularly Polish) theatres, Euripides's *The Phoenician Women*, which was enthusiastically received. Her company, Classics on a shoestring, then started creating ever more successful and acclaimed shows, reimagining classics from Greece, Britain, Scandinavia, and Russia and giving them new life through her sense of rhythm and use of music, dance, and video in her directions. Working with the most prestigious British and German theatres, Katie Mitchell has also led projects for television or the opera, and experimented with innovative forms, adapting novels for the theatre and collaborating with her contemporaries such as the writer Martin Crimp or the scientist Stephen Emmott, with whom she created *Ten Billion* in 2012. She first appeared in the line-up of the Festival d'Avignon in 2011 with *Christine*, based on August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, then in 2012 with *Ten Billion* and *Die Ringe des Saturn*, and in 2013 with *Journey through the Night*, an adaptation of Friederike Mayröcker.

JEAN GENET

A source of inspiration and fascination for all those who crossed his path — from Jean Cocteau and Jean-Paul Sartre in the 1940s to Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Lydie Dattas in the 1980s — Jean Genet sanctified the underworld. Abandoned by his mother, he never knew the identity of his father and turned his youth as a delinquent into the inspiration for his novels and poetry filled with thugs, mother figures and love interests turned into saints, and the most carnal debauchery. His plays betrayed his political considerations — the condition of inmates in prison, colonialism, class relations, Nazism, racism — but his engagement was clear throughout his life thanks to his often high-impact acts and articles (*Violence and Brutality* or *Four Hours in Shatila*).

71st
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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INTERVIEW WITH KATIE MITCHELL

What is your relationship to Jean Genet's work, and why did you choose to direct *The Maids*?

Katie Mitchell: My first link to Jean Genet was through reading. The first time I read *The Maids*, I was at university, and I performed the play at the Edinburgh festival with a student company in the 1980s. I played Claire. Or maybe it was Solange? I can't remember. I then returned to it in a production by the Young Vic Theater in London, where I further worked on it in a new version created by British author and Francophile Martin Crimp. *The Maids* and Jean Genet's other plays introduced me to his prose, in particular *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*. I like the combination of his political fierceness, his percussiveness, and his tender lyricism. Like many artists, I'm worried about the great political events that keep happening—massive migrations, Brexit, Donald Trump's rise to power... I don't think that anyone can escape those events as a citizen, but it's difficult to offer responses to them as an artist. I came back to this play for the fourth time in order to delve deeper into the relationship between employers and underpaid immigrant servants. I also wanted to express the male point of view and tackle the question of gender.

Did you choose to take into account Genet's preliminary note, "How to perform *The Maids*?" And in general, what did you decide to do with his many stage directions?

Of course, I studied them, but this time I wasn't as interested by the author's ideas about theatre as by the political structure of the play. So I approached Jean Genet's indications with caution. The first version of the play was staged in the 1940s, and we've moved the action to the Amsterdam of today, so we immediately discarded the stage directions that would have dated the play. Then, by choosing to turn Madame into a transvestite, all the indications about what the maids do to Madame were superfluous, because the process of getting dressed and undressed isn't the same for a transvestite and for a woman. We ended up disregarding most of the original stage directions because our show focuses more on the words used, the relationships between the characters, and their psychology, rather than on Jean Genet's presentation of those elements.

What are the political elements you mentioned?

The political aspect of the play has to do with the oppression of the poor by the privileged, the powerful, and the rich. You could call it the Marxist aspect of the play—at a certain level, it's a fierce attack on the well-off class (including Madame and Monsieur), who use and underpay servants who enjoy only restricted rights, who are powerless; their domineering attitude is such that the servants end up trying to kill their oppressors, before killing themselves. Genet's rage at what happens to the weak in society is one of the powerful recurring motifs in his work. And the weak, it can be servants (like his mother), orphans (which he'd been), or homosexuals (which he was).

Jean Genet is a powerful defender of the rights of the weak, of the "powerless," and in *The Maids*, you can feel it particularly strongly in the rage that drives both women and in Solange's final monologue, when Claire dies in her arms.

By focusing your direction on those aspects, what fate do you give to Claire's, Solange's, and Madame's personal considerations?

The play is of course not only political. But those fates, which seem so personal, are widely spread. You cannot not see political relationships of power in the way urban middle-class families in many societies (in the UK or the Netherlands, for instance) employ thousands of women from other countries of the European Union, like Poland or Romania, but also from developing countries like Brazil, as nannies or cleaning ladies. These women often have no contract, no clear legal status, and their employers pay neither the taxes nor the contributions that would give them access to health care, social security, and paid holidays. They are often paid in cash so as not to leave a trace, which leaves them exposed to being exploited, intimidated, or abused.

For an immigrant belonging to the lower class, is it still as important to "make a name for yourself," as Claire and Solange dream?

Of course, the dream of "making a name for yourself" is important for any immigrant that joins a new society. It means the recognition by all of his or her status as a full-fledged citizen, with rights, that of having a good career as well as of building his or her own identity. The play, by the way, only lets the maids dream of that other life, which remains as distant a dream at the end as it was at the beginning. In fact, you could say that the play is a study in the impossibility for this class of workers to change or to achieve anything. In that sense, it's a very dark play.

Did the characters of Jean Genet's novels and poems inspire the new character of Madame that you've created?

I've read all of Jean Genet's novels and all his poetry, but they aren't the direct inspiration for my decision to turn Madame into a transvestite. I was fascinated by the idea of femininity and masculinity—what does it mean that one of us is a man and another a woman? When the maids play and dress up as Madame, what version of "the woman" are they building? How is that version similar to or different from their own appearance and experience of their femininity? When a man dresses up as a woman, what aspects of himself does he need to add, to subtract, to accentuate, to reduce or develop? Genet's exploration of the questions of identity and gender throughout his work is so subtle and complex that I wanted to find a visual language that we could associate to his verbal and textual exploration of those questions. And there's something else I have to admit: the feminist in me refused to tell the story of a woman oppressing other women!

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