

THE CONSERVATOIRE NATIONAL SUPÉRIEUR D'ART DRAMATIQUE (CNSAD)

The Conservatoire national supérieur d'art dramatique is a higher education institution that offers a three-year programme open to diverse artistic and aesthetic disciplines. Claire Lasne Darcueil, its director since 2014, refocused the Conservatoire's teachings on a progressive educational project that invites the students to explore the fundamentals of acting (interpretation, dance, masks, clown, dramaturgy) and to focus on the text. Second-year classes focus more on performance while taking different forms (master classes, exchanges with other schools abroad), while third-year students work with professional directors on creations over seven-week cycles. The 71st edition of the Festival d'Avignon will present shows performed by third-year students directed by François Cervantes, Yann-Joël Collin, and Clément Hervieu-Léger and, for the first time, the work of a student, selected by a jury of professionals: *Juliet, the Beginning*, written by Grégoire Aubin and directed by Marceau Deschamps-Ségura.

JULIET BEGINS

"If our objective is a society that allows happiness, it won't be possible if we don't fight against (...) all oppressions, which begins by knowing them, proving they exist, denouncing them, presenting them on the stage, and taking them apart, piece by piece." – Juliet.

In a city haunted by social inequalities, the King's death triggers a war for succession, a tearing apart of the kingdom, the overexposure of larger-than-life characters... Hamlet, the disinherited son, rebels when Juliet, a young factory worker, loses Romeo, the love of her life. Wounded by systemic oppression, she demands justice... With its Shakespearean bestiary and its stories of reconstruction, *Juliet, the Beginning* revolves around the question of the access to power for women and minorities. Written by Grégoire Aubin, a young author as comfortable with method acting as with cinematic editing, and co-directed by Marceau Deschamps-Ségura, who trained as an actor at the Conservatoire national supérieur d'art dramatique, this epic play was presented to the latter's entire class at the Conservatoire. A work of destabilisation meant to free its authors from text and traditions, this play is, in both form and substance, a motive for challenging social structures. Nothing less.

MARCEAU DESCHAMPS-SÉGURA AND GRÉGOIRE AUBIN

Marceau Deschamps-Ségura, actor and director, and Grégoire Aubin, writer and director, met in a drama class in college. The former enrolled into a classe préparatoire in Lyon before joining the Conservatoire national supérieur d'art dramatique, all the while writing a thesis on Shakespeare and the tension between artistic demands and popular ambition. The latter started working as a writer, screenwriter, and acting coach, studying at the Acting Studio in Lyon and towards a technical degree in post-production in Villefontaine; it led him to a different approach to the story (dramaturgy, screenwriting, editing), which he developed through various formats: short and feature-length films, TV series, novels, graphic objects including a children's book illustrated by Roxanne Bee (*L'Étrange É*). Together, Marceau Deschamps-Ségura and Grégoire Aubin founded the company La Cité furieuse, a place where they could work on the social questions essential to their work. Complementing each other, they have been able to bring new energy to art as a craft and a critical medium. *Juliet, the Beginning* is their third collaboration.

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 GRÉGOIRE AUBIN AND MARCEAU DESCHAMPS-SÉGURA

The title of your play combines an iconic name in the world of theatre and a very powerful idea, that of a beginning.

Grégoire Aubin: Indeed, *Juliet begins* is an epic, political, and social play inspired by the theatre of William Shakespeare and Victor Hugo, but also by the films of Christopher Nolan and the ideas of Valerie Solanas, an American feminist intellectual known for attempting to murder Andy Warhol. Our Juliet is the heroine of a story of initiation. We follow her as she learns about feminism and about other kinds of systemic oppressions, as her desire for insurrection grows and as she learns about social responsibility, which is kind of the backbone of the play. All the other characters revolve around her.

What were the origins of this project?

Marceau Deschamps-Ségura: The idea at first was to stage three of Shakespeare's plays set one inside the other. Then we realised that what we wanted to do was to defend "our ideas" and to base our writing on pre-existing material. *Juliet begins* is the first part of a trilogy. It's a project that was born before I joined the Conservatoire, and that I decided to present to the students' workshop to unite our class around an ambitious text, written in the end for them. There was a real desire to offer every actor and actress an equal role, with a powerful message to defend. We're thinking in particular about actresses, who have suffered a lot from inequalities on the stage, as classic theatre wasn't always in service of female roles. You see the same thing nowadays in artistic and cultural circles (for instance with the absence of women at the head of dramatic institutions), and we wanted to denounce it by rehabilitating the "female role." The text was also inspired by a workshop called *Merely Players*, a reflection on Elizabethan theatre, its codes and staging. We liked to imagine the state of the actor in Shakespeare's England. They didn't have the time to rehearse with their partners, they only knew their own lines and their cues so as to know when to say them during the performance. Sometimes they didn't really know what the play was about. It's something we decided to use when we presented the project.

G. A.: What interested me in writing this play, beyond its obvious political dimension, was both the dramaturgic challenge and the work of the actors and actresses during the performance. Every actor and actress is autonomous in his or her research for his or her character. From that, we followed a strategy borrowed from method acting, building the characters' stories, thinking about their goals, confronting them to those of the other protagonists once onstage.

M. D-S.: Just like Shakespeare used to do, the staging of the stories and of the characters is anchored in the theatrical codes of our time, which we play at destabilising—hence the important dialogue with the films of Christopher Nolan, who borrows heavily from Shakespearean dramaturgy himself. We came up with the idea of having a great theatre tournament within our story, in order to create a *mise en abyme* with excerpts from Shakespeare's plays, allowing us to open a window towards the Elizabethan past as well as to shine a light on the context of our own creation.

Can you tell us more about the way you direct the actors and deal with the space of the stage?

M. D-S.: There is no direction, strictly speaking. What I mean is that the writing is already the foundation of how we'll direct the actors and actresses. We want

the space of the stage to be empty of décor and full of realities and actors and actresses. We're aiming for a feedback effect: fiction and reality collide, respond to each other, amplify each other. The heart of our work doesn't reside in aesthetic choices but rather in the involvement of the actors and actresses onstage. During the creative process, the roles rotated: one of the actresses would take another's role, and vice versa. It allowed them to truly make the text theirs. On the stage, we'll see the result of this work of fermentation.

G. A.: It gives actors and actresses the "authorisation" to imagine a relationship to performance detached from the text as sacrosanct. They won't be there only to say lines they know by heart, but also to explore what they're living on the stage. The idea, before the project was accepted by the Conservatoire, was to free ourselves of economic constraints so as to be able to perform the text anywhere. So that nothing could prevent us from making theatre. We like to tell ourselves: "We'll see what we have available, and make do with that." We really want to use the real, and whatever's at hand. It echoes the way Shakespeare worked. If society were to collapse and the world to turn into Mad Max, we could still perform our plays...

Beyond that wish to free yourselves from time and from economic realities, there is a very strong context to your work, which is full of references to movements and modes of thinking.

M. D-S.: It's true, firstly there's the question of visibility. That is, to break away from the universalism of the habits of theatre, which make style more important than substance. To make a text readable and invite all audiences to discover it. *Juliet begins* is about systemic oppressions that we all have to face in society. This question of social taboo is a very powerful one that echoes questions we all, potentially, ask ourselves. What we want to analyse, in detail and with lucidity, are the motives for insurrection against social structures. We want to inject critical and radical thought where ignorance and shortsightedness, whether they are deliberate or not, are frequent and dangerous. We also want to study, with as much goodwill as possible, the denials and pretexts that excuse those oppressions, perpetuate privileges, and feed a relationship to the other at once unequal, distrustful, and antagonistic, whose repercussions cause real damage, socially speaking. Our goal is also to question the alliance of the learned and the popular in theatre.

G. A.: It may seem surprising, but I was inspired for this play by Nolan's *Batman* trilogy. On the one hand you have the blockbuster aspect, very dynamic and festive, and on the other you have the "intellectual" reflection of the film d'auteur. It's similar to what Marceau said about the learned and the popular. You have, on the one hand, a powerful social dimension, with characters who break away from society to ask for rights, and on the other a fight between concepts. To come back to Nolan's films, archetypes like the Joker or Batman represent Chaos or vigilante Justice. They are symbols, beyond identities. The heroine of *Juliet begins* tends to become a symbol: because she withdraws from the oppressive systems of society, she becomes a thinking subject who begins to embody her own ideas. Whether it be the cause of feminism or post-colonialism, insurrection, terrorism, or money, all those themes are embodied in turn by the characters. We end up with an ideological fight. You'll find that in Nolan, in Shakespeare, in Hugo. In the end, we always come back to the same stories. We came up with the structure for this play within our company, *La Cité furieuse* [The Furious City]. Right from the start, we wanted to tackle problems that had to do with the social body. To me, art is education for adults.

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