

In The Solitude of the Cotton Fields

Written by Bernard-Marie Koltès

Translated into English by **Judith Graves Miller**

Directed by Roland Auzet

With **Oceana James** and **Tory Vazquez**



©Roland Auzet

**U.S. Premiere October 5 at 7:30 pm and October 8 at 3:00 pm
At NYU Kimmel, (Washington Square South)**

Co-presented by NYU Skirball, NYU Center for French Civilization and Culture, and the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the United States

About the play

In the Solitude of the Cotton Fields is a modern French classic by playwright Bernard-Marie Koltès (1948-1989) that portrays the relationship between a dealer and a client. As directed by the innovative French director and sound artist Roland Auzet, in a new English translation by NYU's Judith Graves Miller, the action unfolds on the steps of the Kimmel Center's Grand Staircase as an intense transaction between conflicting desires for drugs, love, connection, and a sense of existence. In Auzet's production furtive exchanges are overheard by audience members equipped with headphones, allowing spectators to eavesdrop on the intimate, secretive, and transgressive negotiation of the deal.

Roland Auzet's staging and direction offers a radically new reading of the play. Since the action takes place in the street, among crowds, his idea is to stage the play in public places like shopping centers, stadiums, or on university premises. The two characters, originally performed by men, are in this iteration women, adding a level of nuance to the antagonism of the exchange between the dealer and client with a kind of intimacy and softness. By unsettling the expected gendering, it also enables the possibilities of identification to multiply. The two actors walk among passers-by in a public place, where a hundred of spectators become the privileged witnesses of the deal. Walking among other passers-by, they are equipped with headphones that enable them to hear the characters' whisperings and eavesdrop on the intimate exchanges between the client and the dealer, right in the middle of this public space, in the midst of regular activity. Usually, everything stops for the duration of a theatrical performance. Here it's the opposite: everyday life is going on throughout the performance.

The play, a great success in France, was presented at Princeton University, part of *Seuls en scène* Festival in 2016 with the original French cast. The present production is born from the desire to make the play known in the United States using a new English translation and with an American cast.

Some Thoughts on Translating Bernard-Marie Koltès

By Judith Miller, French, NYU, July 2, 2017

While widely admired in Europe, Bernard-Marie Koltès has not had the purchase in the United States that his talent and vision merit. His dark and heady theater pieces take us to an uncomfortable and unfinished world, not the conventional concrete universe of American theater. And he writes in long, complex, lyrical sentences that require both the skill of actors to bring poetry alive on stage and the patience of the audience to accept the mysterious – and often *louche* – exchanges engaged in by his intensely self-conscious characters. Translating Koltès, as I have done, for the Skirball co-production of *In The Solitude of the Cotton Fields*, has meant allowing myself to be inhabited by his rhythms. But I have also been haunted by the sense that translating French theater for the American stage can also often mean betting that the public will appreciate a slightly different esthetic, that audience members will be prepared to listen to the unfolding of a dance of language. Other translators of Koltès have adapted his work to appeal to

what they perceive as the public's "taste". Or they have made sense where Koltès suggests a kind of senselessness that nonetheless becomes understandable as obsession fills the stage space. Koltès builds his universe on a series of transforming images that I have attempted to convey. He asks indirect questions about the difference between men and beasts, about what it means to follow a straight path to a light that magically skews into an inescapable circle, about attempting to clinch a deal without even knowing what the opponent has on their mind. Perhaps this is that enigmatic solitude of the cotton fields – existence conjured up as limitless, thankless labor, or as the blurred beauty of white salt flowers that hides a terrible, imploding violence.

About the author

French playwright and author **Bernard-Marie Koltès** studied at the Théâtre National de Strasbourg's Theatre School where he began writing plays. His life was nomadic.

In 1968, during his first trip to New York City, he discovered the emotional intensity of the city as well as the American gay culture of the time. His New York experience helped inspire the characters and the situation in *In the Solitude of the Cotton Fields*. Koltès' career was closely linked with that of avant-garde director Patrice Chéreau, who produced nearly all of Koltès' major plays, including: *Black Battles With Dogs*; *Quay West*; *In the Solitude of the Cotton Fields*; and *Return to the Desert*.

His final play, *Roberto Zucco*, premiered in Berlin in 1990. He died from complications due to AIDS in 1989. At the time of his death, Koltès was considered to be one of the most important young voices in French theater, and an heir to the legacy left by post-war non-naturalistic playwrights such as Samuel Beckett and, especially, Jean Genet.

He is now considered one of the most important French playwrights of the 1980s and has been so thoroughly accepted into the canon that many study him for the baccalauréat exam. Koltès is frequently performed throughout Europe and his plays have been translated into more than 36 languages.

About the director

Roland Auzet, percussionist, composer, and stage director, defines himself as a "stage writer." He has won numerous prizes, including first prize in the International Competition of Contemporary Music of Darmstadt, Germany (1990); and an award from the Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet Foundation (1991).

In 1999, he formed the Act-Opus-Compagnie Roland Auzet. With Act-Opus, Auzet was artist in residence at the Espace des Arts, National Theater of Chalon-sur-Saône (2005 to 2011), where he created works associating theater, music, video and electronics. From 2011 to 2014, he was the artistic and general director of the Theatre de la Renaissance in Oullins, France, a theater

dedicated to theater and music. There, he created many performances in co-production with French national theaters and opera houses.

Auzet has worked with artists such as Iannis Xenakis, Pierre Boulez, Andre Boucourechliev, Luc Ferrari, Irvine Arditti, Claude Helffer, Steven Schick...

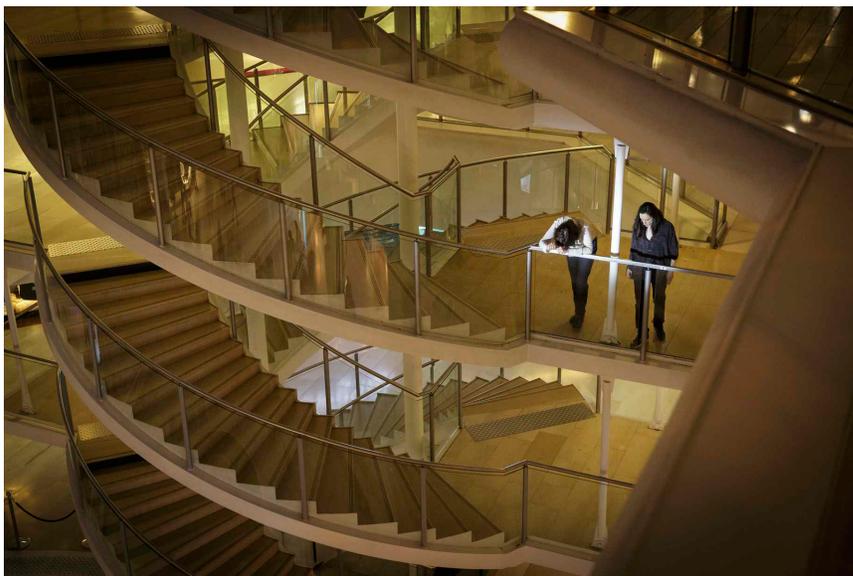
Recent creations include: *Histoire du Soldat* with Thomas Fersen (2012), *Aucun homme n'est une île*, text by Fabrice Melquiot (2013), *Steve V*, a multimedia opera based on the life of Steve Jobs, coproduced by the Opera de Lyon (2014), *In the Solitude of the Cotton Fields* with Anne Alvaro and Audrey Bonnet (2015-16); *Ninet Inferno* (From "The Sonnets" by Shakespeare) in Barcelona (2015), with Pascal Greggory, Mathurin Bolze and the Barcelona Symphony and Catalonia National Orchestra; *Terrace on the Hill* (with Watan Tusi) at the Taiwan International Arts Festival (2017).

About the translator

Judith Miller is Professor French and Collegiate Professor at NYU New York and Affiliate Professor and former Dean of Arts and Humanities at NYU Abu Dhabi. She has published widely in the field of French and Francophone Theater, both text and production.

She has also translated some 20 plays (including works by Hélène Cixous, José Pliya, and Olivier Kemeid) and most recently a novel, *The Restless*, by Guadeloupian author Gerty Dambury, due out in January 2018 with The Feminist Press. In addition to a 2017 anthology of plays by Koffi Kwahulé (*In and Out of Africa*, University of Michigan Press), she has published *French and Francophone Women Playwrights* (an anthology) with The University of Michigan Press and a study of Ariane Mnouchkine, the director of The Théâtre du Soleil (currently being re-edited with Routledge.) She is currently working on translations of plays from Francophone Africa for a project that will trace the development of African theater from the 1960s to the present.

A scenography based on a reflection on intimacy within the public space



©Christophe Raynaud de Lage

Bernard-Marie Koltès' text is buzzing with rhetoric and retraces the progression of the body and of discourse on the periphery of social ties, of the desire and the

rapport with the city. It can only take place in an agora, in a circle, where the private meets the public space. The scenography of the project is built upon the dealer and the client's desires.

Public areas are characterized by a tension between predictable and unpredictable, between confidence and instability, whether bad or good and with uncertain results. Koltès' text speaks of this "in-between." A site like a mall or a supermarket is the perfect place for the deals expressed by the two characters.

Besides, the project questions the role of today's public spaces: they could appear extremely secure or disconnected. The headset enables us to access this site-specific situation; it offers everyone the possibility to create his or her own path within the public space. This is what the project is.

Notes on music scenography

Since 2007, *La Muse en Circuit*, Centre National de Création Musicale has been developing headphone concerts.

Conceived as an extension of what German-speaking people call "*Hörspiel*", literally "play for the ear", headphone concerts mix radio art and intimate sound theater thanks to an extremely accurate listening and musical dramaturgy constantly renewed by electronic sound synthesis and processing.

Voice has always been a key element of headphone concerts. Whether taking the form of words, songs or just breath, vocal sounds have been sung, spoken and recorded.

The musical scenography for Roland Auzet's project with *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields* was created from a common will to explore the exceptional details of a sensitive and careful listening.

About the actors

Oceana James (The Dealer) is theater artist/writer/actor and dancer and educator. She has previously worked with the French Cultural Services (Night of Philosophy, Stage readings) and has most recently worked with other artists such as Sibyl Kempson and Paloma McGregor. Her solo piece, *For Gowie: The Deceitful Fellow*, was shown at The Brick this summer and was previously shown in the Virgin Islands and at Dixon Place here in the City. *For Gowie* will be set to premier in Flensburg, Germany and in Copenhagen, Denmark in October and November respectively.

Tory Vazquez (The Client) w/Richard Maxwell/NYCPlayers: *Isolde*, *Early Plays* (w/The Wooster Group), *Das Maedchen*, *People Without History* (dir. Brian Mendes), *Caveman* (Soho Rep). With Elevator Repair Service: *Gatz*, *Shuffle*, *The Sound and The Fury* (*April 7, 1928*), *Cab Legs*, *Total Fictional Lie*. TV: "The Good Wife" and "Late Night with Conan O'Brien". Director: for NYCP: *I came from There I am Here Now* and *The Second Wedding of Yasmin Blessing* to

Jeff Jackman, Jr., Wrestling Ladies, The Florida Project (PS122), and Isabel (Dixon Place).
Vazquez is the lead teaching artist for The Kitchen's education program at Liberty High School for Newcomers.

For the New York performances: Roland Auzet has been assisted by **Dee Beasnael**

Credits

The production and performances of *In the Solitude of the Cotton Fields* are made possible thanks to the support of the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the United States, FACE Foundation, La Muse en Circuit, Compagnie Act-Opus, and NYU-Center for French Civilization and Culture.

Additional co-sponsorship by the Department of **NYU Tisch Dance** and the Department of **NYU Steinhardt Educational Theatre** for the presentation at NYU SkirballIn France, Compagnie Act Opus is supported by the Ministère de la Culture – DRAC Auvergne Rhone Alpes and Region Auvergne Rhone Alpes

Contact information

Compagnie Act opus
<http://www.actopus.fr/>
Véronique Felenbok, Administration, Production

veronique.felenbok@yahoo.fr

International projects: Inès da silva: ines_dasilva@yahoo.fr
Tel +33 6 84 48 36 32