



HARLEM QUARTET

Based on *Just Above My Head*

By **James Baldwin**

Translation by Kevin KEISS

Adapted for the stage and directed by **Elise Vigier**

@ Jack Carofalo

HARLEM QUARTET

James Baldwin

Direction and adaptation **Elise Vigier**
Translation, adaptation, dramaturgy **Kevin Keiss**

Performed by
Ludmilla Dabo *Julia, Dorothy Green*
William Edimo *Crunch, Joël Miller*
Jean-Christophe Folly *Hall, Red*
Nicolas Giret-Famin *Jimmy, Peanut*
Makita Samba *Arthur*
Nanténé Traoré *Amy Miller, barmaid, Webster, Mrs Reed*
and the musicians **Manu Léonard** and **Marc Sens**

Onscreen **Saul Williams** *Paul Montana* **Anisia Useyman** *Florence Montana*

Artistic collaboration **Nanténé Traoré**
Set **Yves Bernard**
Picture design **Nicolas Mesdom**
Music **Manu Léonard, Marc Sens** and **Saul Williams**
Lighting **Bruno Marsol**
Costumes **Laure Mahéo**
Makeup and wigs **Cécile Kretschmar** assisted by **Judith Scotto**
Technical director **Camille Faure**
Video production **Romain Tanguy**
Lighting production **Manuella Mangalo**
Sound production **Eddy Josse** or **Luis de Magalhaes**
Stage production **Christian Tirole**

Administration **Odile Massart – Les Lucioles**
Production-distribution **Emmanuelle Ossena – EPOC productions**

Produced in association with **Théâtre des Lucioles - Rennes**
Co-produced with **La Comédie de Caen - CDN de Normandie, la Maison des Arts et de la Culture de Créteil, le Théâtre National de Bretagne-Rennes**
Supported by **Institut Français & Région Bretagne, La Chartreuse** – Centre National des écritures du Spectacle, **Face Contemporary Theater** a programme developed by Face Foundation and the cultural service at the French Embassy in the United, financed by the Florence Gould Foundation, the Institut Français and the French Ministry for Culture and Communication, **L'Avant-Scène-Princeton University's Department of French and Italian Theater Workshop, SPEDIDAM,**  
Jeune Théâtre National-Paris

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There are two versions of the performance:

- A musical version > show duration: 2 hrs 30 minutes
- An oratorio version (with no set, film or music / subtitled) > show duration: 1 hr 15 minutes

Contact
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In *Just Above My Head*, Hall Montana remembers and relates the lives of his family and friends, who are part of Harlem's African-American community in the 1950s and 1960s.

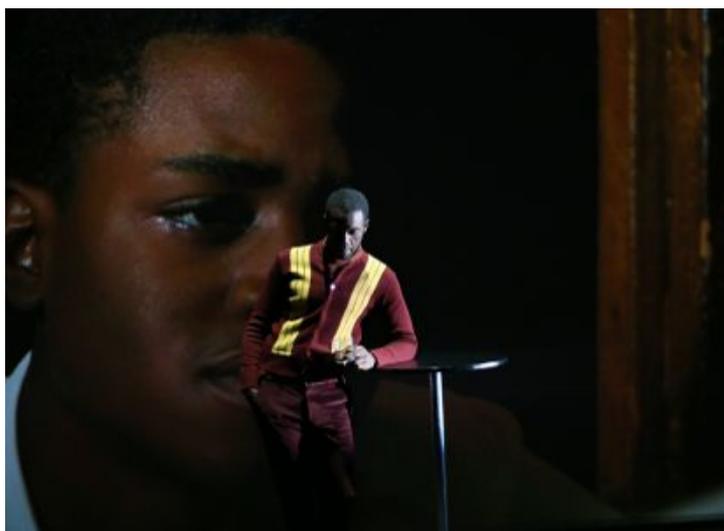
The Montanas have two sons: Hall is preparing to leave for the Korean War; Arthur loves singing gospel with his friends Crunch, Red and Peanut. They meet Julia, a young Evangelist preacher, and her younger brother Jimmy, neglected by his parents. However, a tragic event occurs, which changes the characters' lives forever.

Just Above My Head is Hall's moving tribute to his younger brother, who died aged 39, and his loved ones.

"Julia was a nine-year-old girl; I was eighteen. I did not know that she would leave the pulpit, turn into a whore and then, the mistress of an African chief, in Abidjan. I did not know that we would become lovers, and that she would become one of the pillars holding up my life. I knew nothing about Arthur, who was then eleven, and less about Jimmy, who was then seven, who would become Jimmy's last and most devoted lover. Who could know that then? Beneath the face of anyone you ever loved for true—anyone you love, you will always love, love is not at the mercy of time and it does not recognize death, they are strangers to each other—beneath the face of the beloved, however ancient, ruined and scarred, is the face of the baby your love once was, and will always be, for you. Love serves, then, if memory doesn't, and *passion*, apart from its tense relationship with *agony*, labors beneath the shadow of death."

These events play out against a background of gospel songs, the civil rights movement, violence and sex.

James Baldwin's sensual writing style is punctuated by poignant gospel lyrics. It takes us right to the heart of Harlem, a world of love, religion and suffering. His poetic novel has become a classic tale of human destiny.



STATEMENTS BY THE DIRECTOR AND DRAMATURG

Not many people are present in time of trouble—if you doubt me, I dare you: to get in trouble (Hall, speaking about Jimmy)

I read this book a long time ago and it had a real impact on me. It became part of me, like some books do. Because it speaks of love, violence, and fraternity. And of family – the group of people we live with. Love defies definition but is always there – in disappearances, in bodies, in music, and perhaps in freedom. Now I want to adapt the book for the theatre.

To adapt *Just Above My Head* for the theatre, we must follow in the quartet's footsteps by visiting Harlem. This means listening and capturing – literally – songs and memories, while attempting to grasp the stories they tell us today and how they can be used on stage.

I thought about how this story could be told: The narrator, Hall, walks us through his memory, through his history, like a city. He takes us on a tour of his brain.

I thought about a very simple set that would facilitate the transition between speech and music. Surrounded by a projection surface, it would allow us to perform in the privacy of a room. This white "sheet" could also be a window overlooking the city, the streets and the neighbourhood.

I thought about Jonas Mekas' films *Lost, Lost, Lost* and *Walden*. A room, a scene, a canvas, a frame (for the disappearance or for love).

A family film, a Super 8 film - the image fades, the grain fades. A childhood film. Childhood.

I asked Nicolas Mesdom to film and edit these images with me.

Documentary images (streets, churches and people – today? Images could be filmed during the research phase, the reconstitution phase, the New York phase – New York and Harlem as seen from France).

What also interests me in the book is the way it tells or recreates a memory. At one point, there is a real need to recreate or tell the story. Hall starts telling it for his son, so that his son knows that his uncle Arthur was a black man, a musician, and a homosexual, and that he was a good guy.

ELISE VIGIER

It makes me think of something Mallarmé once said: we must "bestow purer sense on the phrases of the crowd". To me, this is exactly what Baldwin's characters do. They seem to be wandering aimlessly, but they are actually fighting to create meaning – to create consistency where there is none. They are the first to be worried or surprised at the fragility, beauty, strengths and failures of human beings. Nothing is moral. Everything is thought provoking, especially love – the way we love ourselves and the way we love others. But also how we perceive time, chance, destiny and the fascinating powers of memory, which ceaselessly tries to hold onto everything, to understand.

We follow the thread created by the confused and complex memory of Hall, the narrator in *Just Above My Head*. Through him, we discover the stories of his younger brother Arthur, as well as Julia and Jimmy. Around this quartet form other quartets, including Arthur's band the *Trumpets of Zion*, Hall's family quartet with his wife and children, and his childhood quartet with his parents and brother.

During this strange period of mourning, when time appears to be suspended, memories resurface. The past constantly invades the present – the events that made these people who they are. Their first times – all of them.

These events are seen from Hall's perspective – what he knows and what he has learned. He revisits his past armed with his present knowledge. He shows his affection for the people he has loved. He has learned to understand them, but only after their deaths.

Their desire to live and love in the face of opposition provides a glimpse into a chapter in the life of black Americans. Baldwin's language, political commitments and worldviews are especially interesting. They are those of a black American man who loves men in the 1960s.

KEVIN KEISS

FROM THE PAGE TO THE STAGE

Harlem Quartet is about love and memory.

It is about a boy's love for his younger brother, a young gospel singer's love for a young musician, a father's love for his children, a girl's love for her father and brother – love in all its forms.

It tells the story of Harlem in the 1960s and 1970s through Hall Montana, a boy mourning his younger brother, and four children who strike up a friendship in the 1950s.

To preserve the novel's poetic power, the theatrical adaptation focuses on certain passages and scenes, creating sequences that cover three periods in time: the present, incarnated by Hall; the past, where flashbacks take over the stage; and a period where past and present coexist, made possible through theatre.

The underlying theme is memory. The play is like a journey through several different periods of time. In the present, Hall remembers the past, which includes the memories he has been told by other characters (Jimmy, Julia and Arthur). The audience is caught up in this movement to different times and places. Harlem in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s unfurls before their eyes, showcasing part of American history. For Hall, the act of remembering is a way of understanding the myths surrounding his brother. Hall puts together the pieces of his brother's life so he can pass on his memories to his children and the audience.

This trip back in time awakens thoughts and feelings in Hall, some of which are subconscious. With each level of memory, he bares more of his inner self.

Our aim is to make the audience feel rather than think as it navigates its way through these different memories.

Memory is active, creating a path through the city, the story and Harlem itself. Hall, the book's narrator, will also narrate on stage, guiding the public from one memory to the next.

Baldwin used language that was sensual, poetic, mundane, dense, rhythmic and unique. To fully convey this diversity, Kevin Keiss will retranslate the English text into French.

"What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it – at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change."

James Baldwin

16 October 1963

A Talk to Teachers, New York City
"The Negro Child – His Self-Image"



THE AUTHOR

James Baldwin was born in Harlem, New York in 1924. All his life, he fought against the racism and discrimination experienced by African-American and homosexual communities in the United States. As a pacifist, he became one of the key figures of the civil rights movement, taking a stand alongside Martin Luther King.

James Baldwin was born in the poor neighbourhood of Harlem in 1924. As the son of a pastor, he was the eldest of nine children and began preaching at 14. As he wrote in *Notes of a Native Son*, "I began plotting novels at about the time I learned to read."

When Baldwin was 15, he met the artist Beauford Delaney, who became an example for him. In *No Name in the Street*, he said that Beauford was "the first walking, living proof, for me, that a black man could be an artist."

Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village at 17. In the mid-1940s, he began writing articles and essays for magazines such as *The New Leader*, *The Nation*, and *Partisan Review*.

Horrified by racism and homophobia in the United States, and afraid of succumbing to hatred, Baldwin fled to France in 1948. It was there that he finished writing *Giovanni's Room*, his first critically acclaimed novel. This marked the beginning of a productive career writing novels and essays, where his desire for justice was expressed through anger, and where his best art became a form of protest.

He returned to the United States during the civil rights movement, taking a stand alongside Martin Luther King Jr, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier and others.

Baldwin was a pacifist, but interested in more radical movements, as seen in his friendship with Malcolm X.

Baldwin's poetical style and depth of analysis make him a true visionary, whose work remains relevant today.

Baldwin died on 1 December 1987 in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, where he had lived for several years.

I'm involved in something rather dangerous: I think it's always dangerous for a writer to talk about his work.

I don't mean to be coy or modest; I simply mean that there is so much about his work that he doesn't really understand and cannot understand — because it comes out of certain depths concerning which, no matter what we think we know these days, we know very, very little.

It comes out of the same depths that love comes or murder or disaster. It comes out of things which are almost impossible to articulate. That's the writer's effort. Every writer knows that he may work 24 hours a day, and for several years: without that he wouldn't be a writer; but without something that happens out of that effort, some freedom which arrives from way down in the depths, something which touches the page and brings the scene alive, he wouldn't be a writer.

James Baldwin
"Words of a Native Son", *Playboy*, 1964

THE ARTISTIC TEAM

DIRECTION AND ADAPTATION

ELISE VIGIER

Elise Vigier studied at the École du Théâtre National de Bretagne drama school. In 1994, she created the Théâtre des Lucioles actors' collective with other students from her year. Since 2015, she has been an associate artist with the Comédie de Caen – National Drama Centre in Normandy.

She directed *L'Inondation* by Zamyatin (2001) and helped produce *Copi – Un portrait* (1998) and *La Tour de la Défense* (2005) with Marcial Di Fonzo Bo and Pierre Maillet.

In 2014, she and Di Fonzo Bo co-directed an original text by Martin Crimp, *Dans la république du bonheur*. She and Di Fonzo Bo have also directed three plays by Rafael Spregelburd – *L'Entêtement* (2011), *La Paranoïa* (2009) and *La Estupidez – La Connerie* (2007) – and three plays by Copi – *Loretta Strong*, *Le Frigo* and *Les Poulets n'ont pas de chaises* (2006).

In 2002, she began working with Frédérique Loliée on a project called *Duetto*, which was performed at several festivals in France and Italy. This performance took its final form in 2007 with support from author Leslie Kaplan, who transformed it into *Toute ma vie j'ai été une femme*. Between 2010 and 2012, she continued her partnership with Frédérique Loliée and Leslie Kaplan. She co-directed a European project based on the play *Louise, elle est folle*. In 2013, she produced a new text by Leslie Kaplan, *Déplace le ciel*. In June 2015, Elise and Frédérique directed *Mathias et la Révolution*, an adaptation of Leslie Kaplan's latest book, with students from the École du Théâtre du Nord.

As an actress, she has mostly worked under Di Fonzo Bo, Maillet and Bruno Geslin. In 2015, she performed in works by Brigitte Seth and Roser Montlo Guberna – *Esmerate! (Fais de ton mieux!)* – and Pierre Maillet – *Little Joe – Hollywood 72*.

In 2004, she co-directed her first film script, *La mort d'une voiture*, with Bruno Geslin. This mid-length film was selected for the Brest European Short Film Festival, won the jury prize at the Lunel Mediterranean Cinema Festival and won a quality award from the French National Centre of Cinematography (CNC). In 2010, she produced a documentary entitled *Les femmes, la ville, la folie (1. Paris)* as part of a European project.

In 2016, Vigier and Di Fonzo Bo directed *Vera*, an unpublished text by Czech author Petr Zelenka, with performances by Karin Viard, Pierre Maillet, Di Fonzo Bo and others. In January 2018, she and Di Fonzo Bo also began touring a performance for children based on Georges Méliès's *M comme Méliès*.

TRANSLATION, ADPTATION & DRAMATURGY

KÉVIN KEISS

Kevin Keiss is a young dramaturg and playwright. He was born in Paris in 1983.

He is a graduate of the Sorbonne University and ENS, where he obtained a PhD in Classical Literature (Latin and Ancient Greek). He also obtained a Master's degree as a dramaturg and director at the Strasbourg National Theatre School (*École du Théâtre National de Strasbourg*). He teaches Latin grammar and style at Paris 7 and Bordeaux 3 Universities.

Over the past few years, he has worked with: David Géry, *L'Orestie*, Aeschylus, Charles-Éric Petit, *Notre Dallas*, Jean-Pierre Vincent *Grand'peur et Misère du Ille Reich*, Brecht, *Woyzeck* de Büchner, *Les Suppliantes*, Aeschylus as a translator as well with Bernard Chartreux, Amélie Énon *Et la nuit sera calme* written by Kevin Keiss inspired by *Les Brigands* de Schiller, Théâtre de la Bastille, Picolo Teatro de Milan, Festival International Premières, Nest CDN de Thionville (2010-2013), *Rien n'aura eu lieu* written by Kevin Keiss, TNS (Théâtre Public 2011), Julie Brochen *Dom Juan*, Molière, Kouhei Narumi, *Three sisters*, Chekhov (National Theater of Tokyo), Renaud Triffault, *The Seagull*, Chekhov, Sarah Lecarpentier *20h50, le film c'est vous*, Lucie Bérélowitch *Lucrece Borgia*, Victor Hugo, Nora Granovsky, *Chien Femme Homme*, Sibylle Berg (Vidy Lausanne), *Guillaume Tell, le soulèvement* written by Kevin Keiss.

He has acted in *D'amour emporté*, by Roxane Palazzotto, and *Troyennes, Les morts se moquent des beaux enterrements*, a text he wrote and translated based on Euripides which was directed by Laëtitia Guédon.

He regularly works with the director Maëlle Poésy: on *Purgatoire à Ingolstadt* by Marieluise Fleisser, *Candide si c'est ça le meilleur des mondes* inspired by Voltaire, and *Le Chant du Cygne* and *L'ours* by Chekhov, performed at the Comédie Française.

Last January, he was accepted for a residency at La Chartreuse, Centre National des Écritures du Spectacle, for his new play project *Ceux qui errent ne se trompent pas* with Maëlle Poésy.

He is a founding member of the Traverse collective, a group of seven young playwrights who met at La Chartreuse.

ARTISTIC COLLABORATION

NANTÉNÉ TRAORÉ

THEATRE

- 2015** > The *Penthésilée d'après Kleist* project, directed by Catherine Boskowitz
- 2013/ 2014** > **CAHIERS D'HISTOIRE** by J. Plya / directed by J. Bissila/ Ph . Delaigue
- 2012** > **AFROPÉENNES** by Léonora Miano / directed by E.Doumbia
- 2011** > **TERRE, CRI, TREMBLEMENT** written and directed by Guy Régis
- 2009/12** > **MOI, FARDEAU INHÉRENT** written and directed by Guy Régis
- 2009/10** > **FRANCE DO BRASIL** by Aristide Tarnagda / directed by E.Doumbia
- 2008/09** > **EXIL 4** by Aristide Tarnagda / directed by E.Doumbia
- 2007** > **PRIMITIFS ABOUT CHESTER HIMES** / directed by E.Doumbia
- 2006/07** > **BÉRÉNICE** by Racine / directed by Catherine Boskowitz
- 2006** > **BLUE-S-CAT** by and directed by Koffi Kwahule
- 2005 / 2006** > **MÉDÉE** by Seneca / directed by Nadia Vonderheyden
- 2004** > **MADAME JE VOUS AIME** by E. Minoungou / directed by H. Meda
- 2003** > **TRACTEUR** by H. Müller / directed by I. Bonnaud.
- 2002** > **L'INTRUS** by JL. Nancy / directed by N. Klotz
- 2001**>**L'INNONDATION** by E. Zamiatine. / directed by E. Vigier.
- 1999** > **AMBULANCE** by G. Motton / directed by J.P. Brière.
- 1998** > **INTROÏT** based on the texts of Médée / directed by D. Lebert.
- 1997** > **BINTOU** by K. Kwahule / directed by G. Garran et P. Nzonzi.
- 1996** > **GIBIERS DU TEMPS** written and directed by DG. Gabily.
- 1994** > **PASSAGERS** based on the texts of L. Calaferte / directed by F.Fuster
- 1994** > **DES CERCUEILS DE ZINC** by S. Alexeivitch / directed by DG. Gabily.

THE LUCIOLES

A collective of actors

www.theatre-des-lucioles.net

Les Lucioles have existed since 1994. Its founding members are all actors from the School of the Théâtre National de Bretagne in Rennes: **David Jeanne Comello, Pierre Maillet, Philippe Marteau, Frédérique Loliée, Valérie Schwarcz and Elise Vigier.**

Pierre Maillet is an associate artist with the Comédie de Saint-Etienne and the Comédie de Caen. **Elise Vigier** is an associate artist with the Comédie de Caen-CDN de Normandie, where she is involved with the theatre's management, and an associate artist with the Maison des Arts de Créteil. **Valérie Schwarcz** is a permanent artist with the Théâtre des Illets-CDN Montluçon.

UPCOMING performances

ONE NIGHT WITH HOLLY WOODLAWN / H. Woodlawn / Pierre Maillet, Howard Hugues, Billy Jet Pilot – May 201
LE BONHEUR (n'est pas toujours drôle) / R.W. Fassbinder / Pierre Maillet – January 2019
PETER PAN / Rob Evans / Philippe Marteau – 2019-20

2018	Le Bonheur (n'est pas toujours drôle) R.W. Fassbinder / Pierre Maillet January 2019 : Comédie de Caen One night with Holly Woodlawn Pierre Maillet June 2018 : Les Plateaux Sauvages - Paris En attente Antonio Tarantino / Frédérique Loliée January 2018: La Paillette - Rennes	2013	Déplace le ciel Leslie Kaplan / Elise Vigier & Frédérique Loliée November: Théâtre de Cavaillon Simon la Gadouille Rob Evans / Philippe Marteau December: Rennes
2017	Harlem Quartet James Baldwin / Elise Vigier November 2017: MAC Créteil Le Chaos peut être un chantier Leslie Kaplan / E. Vigier & F. Loliée September 2017: Cerisy	2012	Le discours aux animaux Valère Novarina / David Jeanne Comello & Gabriella Méroni April: Festival Mythos - Rennes La nuit juste avant les forêts Bernard-Marie Koltès / Philippe Marteau March: Théâtre de l'Aire Libre – St Jacques de la Lande
2016	La Cuisine d'Elvis Lee Hall / Pierre Maillet October 2016: Théâtre de Saint-Etienne	2011	L'entêtement by Rafael Spregelburd / Marcial Di Fonzo Bo & Elise Vigier July: Festival d'Avignon Louise, elle est folle Leslie Kaplan / Elise Vigier, Frédérique Loliée March: Maison de la Poésie - Paris
2015	La campagne Martin Crimp / David Jeanne Comello November 2015: Théâtre de Guingamp Little Joe – Hollywood 72 based on the film <i>Heat</i> by P. Morrissey / Pierre Maillet February 2015: Comédie de St Etienne	2010	Plus qu'hier et moins que demain based on work by G. Courteline and I. Bergman / Pierre Maillet March: L'Archipel – Fouesnant
2014	Dans la République du Bonheur Martin Crimp / Elise Vigier & Marcial di Fonzo Bo June: Les Subsistances - Lyon	2009	La Paranoïa by Rafael Spregelburd / Marcial Di Fonzo Bo & Elise Vigier October: Théâtre National de Chaillot – Paris
2013	Little Joe – New York 68 based on the films <i>Flesh and Trash</i> by P. Morrissey / Pierre Maillet November: Le Maillon - Strasbourg		(More information: www.theatre-des-lucioles.net)

Since the Théâtre des Lucioles was founded, it has been based in Rennes. The company is supported by the Brittany *Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles* (regional cultural affairs office), the Conseil Régional de Bretagne and the Ville de Rennes.



@Tristan Jeanne-Valès



@Tristan Jeanne-Valès

Theatre: *Harlem Quartet*, full of life and soul

This adaptation of James Baldwin's novel defends the sensitive themes dealt with by the American author.

It takes a lot of nerve to adapt *Just Above My Head*, African-American author James Baldwin's masterpiece, for the stage. Director Elise Vigier did it, and did it well: the result is excellent and a welcome contribution given today's extremely sensitive racial issues. After premiering at the Maison des Arts de Créteil on 9 November, *Harlem Quartet* was performed in Bruz, near Rennes, for the Brittany national theatre festival. For one night only, on Thursday 23 November, it will be played at the Avant-Seine de Colombes, before beginning a tour that deserves to be longer.

It is a pleasure to discover, or rediscover, Baldwin's voice: his powerful, almost biblical cadence; his organic, full-bodied writing; and his immense love for his characters. The first of these is Hall, the narrator. The year is 1973, and Hall's brother, Arthur, a gospel singer turned soul star, has just died at age 39 in the toilets of a London nightclub (...)

(...) Vigier, with help from dramaturg, translator and adaptor Kevin Keiss, has transformed the 700-page novel into a three-hour performance full of life, body and soul, just like the original text. Her stage direction is simple, but effective. In the darkened theatre, sliding panels open and close, creating spaces and surfaces where images – filmed by Vigier and her team in Harlem – and archive documents are projected. And then there is the music, which plays a key role in the story. American poet and slammer Saul Williams has composed the score, which features deeply moving original music, excerpts from sound archives and traditional songs.

Above all, Vigier has brought together an excellent group of actors. Ludmilla Dabo (Julia), Jean-Christophe Folly (Hall), Nicolas Giret-Famin (Jimmy), Makita Samba (Arthur), William Edimo and Nanténé Traoré bring the story to life with feeling and talent. They express a generous, wounded, and flamboyant sensibility, not a technocratic preach on "diversity". It is this sensibility that makes the issues of race and homosexuality universally relevant.

More information

DOCUMENTS AVAILABLE

Pièces Démontées – tools for teachers (in French)

<http://crdp.ac-paris.fr/piece-demontee/piece/index.php?id=harlem-quartet>

France Culture – “*Les matins du samedi*” programme – special guest (in French)

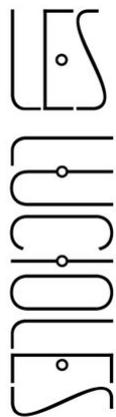
<https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/linvite-culture/elise-vigier>

France Culture – “*La Compagnie des auteurs*” – programme on James Baldwin (in French)

<https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/la-compagnie-des-auteurs/james-baldwin-44-lexhibition-des-mots>

Recording – *Harlem Quartet*, a film by Greg Germain of a play by Elise Vigier, broadcast on Sunday 8 April 2018 on France Ô (in French)

<https://www.france.tv/france-o/multiscenik/458831-harlem-quartet.html>



LES LUCIOLES

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France

www.theatre-des-lucioles.net