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For Immediate Release:

## Punk Women Cure Hysteria, Start a Riot, and Leave Hospital in Ruins

*Taffety Punk presents a world premiere, set in a 19th Century house of horrors, also known as a hospital for women.*

### La Salpêtrière

by Kelsey Mesa

Directed by Danielle A. Drakes

**Where:** Capitol Hill Arts Workshop (545 7th Street SE, Washington, DC 20003)

**When:** Sep 28 — Oct 14, 2023

**Price:** \$15 — Tickets available at [www.taffetypunk.com](http://www.taffetypunk.com)

Taffety Punk is thrilled to announce the world premiere of a new play by **Kelsey Mesa**. The eponymous 19th-century French hospital, **La Salpêtrière**, gained notoriety as a treatment center for the that most specious of maladies: hysteria in women. The patients were often subjected to brutal demonstrations of their treatments that were open to the public. These treatments sometimes included repeated punches to the ovaries, or an abusive hypnosis spectacle.

In Mesa's breathtaking new play, we meet **Yvette**, a new patient, who wakes in the hospital completely unaware of how she arrived. Yvette meets other patients who help her endure the degrading practices employed by the hospital's doctor. Meanwhile, Yvette discovers a latent inner power which emboldens her and her fellow patients to start a revolt against the hospital to reclaim their lives. *La Salpêtrière* is a story that is both heartwarming and heartbreaking. It draws humor from the absurd realities of the past to deliver a magnificent tale of inspiration for all.

Company member **Danielle A. Drakes** directs this poignant and timely play in the Black Box theatre at the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop. With a cast of four, Ms. Drakes takes on the inherent tragicomedy at the heart of the play with **Fabiolla da Silva** as Yvette, the new patient and hero of the play. Ms. da Silva is joined by Yihong Chen (Didi), Danny Puente Cackley (Le Docteur) and Taffety Punk company member Kimberly Gilbert (Antoine).

Playwright Kelsey Mesa was inspired to write the play after reading about the hospital's gruesome history, saying, "La Salpêtrière—or, Hôpital Pitié-Salpêtrière as it's now called—has been a gunpowder factory, a women's prison, an asylum, and hospice, and one of the locations of the September Massacres; it was also the hospital where both Josephine Baker and Princess Diana died. The historical facts surrounding this hospital and its centuries-long treatment of women are absurd and grotesque." Reading Sady Doyle's book, *Trainwreck: The Women We Love to Hate, Mock, and Fear...and Why* (which has a chapter about the famous hysterics of La Salpêtrière), led her to hunt down Asti Hustvedt's *Medical Muses: Hysterics in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. "I kept having to put the book down to laugh or cry or both. Eventually, some very theatrical images started materializing in my mind, so I thought it would make for a good play. I wasn't exactly sure where the story would go, but the characters kept guiding me deeper and deeper to the heart of it, and further and further to the end."

A company member of Taffety Punk, Mesa workshoped the play through the company's Generator program, which artistic director Marcus Kyd describes as "an internal artistic combustion engine." Generator workshops kept the company members working during the pandemic when theatres were closed to the public. Various company members had a hand at the different roles over a couple years. This spring, the company held a workshop reading to give the play its first public airing, and played to a packed house.

Actor **Fabiolla da Silva** has been with the play for the better part of the year, as she also played Yvette during the final workshopping process. “This show offers audiences an unexpected adventure with a lot of sass, ridiculousness, and gut-punches,” says da Silva. “This script offers such a ride! Kelsey has done such a beautiful job at creating well-rounded characters that live under very insane circumstances. Just when I kept thinking things couldn't get any wilder, they did.”

An important and timeless story, Mesa's play brings to life the struggles of these women who were treated so poorly, while it celebrates the strength and resilience of the human spirit. She says, “I hope it speaks to anyone who has ever felt gaslit by our patriarchal society. You're not crazy, the system is absurd.”

*La Salpêtrière* opens at the **Capitol Hill Arts Workshop** (545 7th Street SE, Washington, DC 20003 – two blocks from Metro's Orange/Blue Line stop at Eastern Market) on Saturday, Sep 30 and runs through Saturday, Oct 14 on Wednesday and Thursdays at 7:30pm, and Friday and Saturdays at 8:00pm. There are two half-price previews on Sep 28 and 29 at 7:30pm. There is an additional Monday night (industry night) performance on Oct 9 at 7:30pm, and there is one matinee on Saturday, Oct 7 at 2:30pm. In keeping with Taffety Punk's promise to keep ticket prices low, tickets are \$15, available at <https://www.taffetypunk.com>.

**This show runs 90 minutes** without an intermission.

Featuring company member Kimberly Gilbert (Antoine), with Fabiolla da Silva (Yvette), Yihong Chen (Didi), Danny Puente Cackley (Le Docteur). Curiously, Ms. Gilbert and Ms. da Silva have both won Helen Hayes Awards for separate portrayals of Marie Antoinette — Gilbert in David Adjimi's *Marie Antoinette* at Woolly Mammoth directed by Yury Urnov, and da Silva in Lauren Gunderson's *The Revolutionists* at Prologue Theatre, directed by Jessica Lefkow. *La Salpêtrière* is directed by company member Danielle A. Drakes. Lights designed by Elijah Thomas. Costumes designed by Johnna Presby. Movement, Fights, and Intimacy Direction by Lorraine Ressegger. Sound designed by Marcus Kyd. Stage Manager: Jenna Keefer.

For hi-res photos, go to: <https://www.taffetypunk.com/press/>.

**Taffety Punk Theatre Company** is the resident company at Capitol Hill Arts Workshop. Founded to establish an actively collaborative company of actors, dancers, and musicians, the company has been at the forefront of theatre innovation, presenting groundbreaking productions that inspire audiences and introducing new playwrights and stories to the stage, new works of choreography, and new compositions of original music. Through its artist-nurturing Generator program Taffety Punk has a rich history of developing original works that challenge theatre norms. Generator projects that have realized full production include the widely celebrated dance plays *suicide.chat.room*, *Fragments of Sappho*, and *Enter Ophelia, distracted*; as well as the world premieres of Liz Maestri's *Inheritance Canyon*, and Lindsay Carpenter's *Our Black Death*, and the newest of these: Kelsey Mesa's *La Salpêtrière*. Over the years, Taffety Punk has garnered numerous accolades and recognition for its work and, in fact, won the very first John Aniello Award for Outstanding Emerging Theatre Company from the Helen Hayes Awards. The Washington Post declared the company “The most vital of the city's small troupes.” The company's all-female ensemble, the Riot Grrrls, have repeatedly delighted audiences delivering impassioned productions of classical plays while empowering women in theatre. The Bootleg Shakespeare is a widely celebrated event the company hosts with the partnership of the Folger Theatre providing the most exciting night of theatre anyone could ask for: an entire Shakespeare play rehearsed and performed in a single day. The company has released albums by its company members and their tangential bands, most notably the indie rock sensation Beauty Pill, the musical home for two Taffety Punk Company Members: composer Chad Clark and singer Erin Mitchell Nelson. Taffety Punk's music catalog is available on all streaming platforms and via [taffetypunk.bandcamp.com](https://taffetypunk.bandcamp.com) where LPs and singles can be ordered. As Taffety Punk Theatre Company moves forward, it remains committed to its mission to ignite a public passion for theatre by making the classical and the contemporary

exciting, meaningful, and affordable. The company is excited to continue its legacy of excellence and making the greatest theatre for the lowest price.

**Kelsey Mesa** (Playwright) Directing credits include *Fefu and Her Friends* at the University of Maryland, College Park; *Crimes of the Heart* at Catholic University; *The Pavilion*, *The Magi*, and *Wish List* at the Hub Theatre; and *Othello*, *Antigonick*, *She Rode Horses Like the Stock Exchange*, *Riot Grrrls*, *The Trojan Women*, *Charm*, and *dREAMtRIPPIN'* at Taffety Punk Theatre Company. She has also directed for The Inkwell, The Source Festival, Rorschach Theatre Company's Klecksography, Young Playwrights' Theatre, the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, and Theater Alliance's Hothouse New Play Development Series. Kelsey is a company member at Taffety Punk Theatre Company, as well as the Manager of KCACTF and Theater Education at the Kennedy Center, where she is the Resident Director of the Kennedy Center Directing Intensive. She's an alumna of Directors Lab North. In 2021, Kelsey received the Kennedy Center Gold Medallion, recognizing contribution to the teaching and production of theatre, and to the development of KCACTF. Kelsey grew up in Miami, FL and is a graduate of Northwestern University.

**Danielle A. Drakes** (Director) is a multi-faceted theatre professional with extensive experience in performance, directing and arts administration. A company member with Taffety Punk Theatre Company, she recently directed Lise Bruneau's narration of Shakespeare's epic poem *Lucrece* to be released early in 2024 as an audiobook. She has also acted for Taffety Punk in the Riot Grrrls productions of *Trojan Women*, and *Othello* in which she played the title role — both directed by Kelsey Mesa. Even more recently, she directed two world premiere productions: *The Wilting Point* at Keegan Theatre and *Ghost/Writer* at Rep Stage. She developed and directed Paige Hernandez's solo shows *Paige in Full* and *Havana Hop*, both continuing to tour nationally and internationally. Professionally, her work has earned her Helen Hayes Award nods for outstanding direction. Additional professional credits include The Kennedy Center and Ford's Theatre, where she originated the role of Elizabeth Keckley in *History on Foot* (recipient of the Helen Hayes, The Washington Post Award). Danielle has dedicated her career to using theatre as a tool for envisioning a more empathetic and equitable society. As an actor, she blends living history with social impact. As an artistic doula she has supported artists on their creative journeys from idea to execution with care. She is a member of Actors' Equity Association and the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. She received her BA in Theatre from Goucher College and MFA in Acting from The Catholic University of America. Currently, Ms. Drakes is splitting her time between the stage and the classroom as an assistant professor of theatre arts at Towson University.

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