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Corinne
Masiero

Lucie
Charles-Alfred

Marie-Sohna
Condé

Salimata
Kamate

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Striking the Palace

A film by **Nessim Chikhaoui**
Kool-Shen Abdallah Charki Mariama Gueye

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Synopsis

Eva, 20, joins Safietou, Djaoua, Violette and Simone, a team of chambermaids at one of Paris's finest Palace Hotels. She discovers the poor working conditions of these invisible women, who work tirelessly to keep the high standards of these luxurious hotels, where one night can cost their annual salary. Many are not even employed by the hotels directly but by sub-contractors, and are therefore particularly vulnerable. While on strike to fight against subcontracting and to obtain better working conditions, they come up with a colorful idea : having their own "Fashion Week" in front of the hotel!



Interview with Nessim Chikhaoui

Two years after your first feature, PLACÉS, which drew on your experience as an educator, STRIKING THE PALACE focuses on the fight of a group of chambermaids in a Parisian palace. Once again, it's about people in difficulty. Tell us about the film's genesis.

Alice Labadie, from Le Pacte, was very interested in the “Kellys” movement, the chambermaids in Spain who demonstrated against palaces in 2017, and then in the struggle of the chambermaids at the Ibis Batignolles hotel in Paris who, after twenty-two months on strike, succeeded in 2021 in getting the Accor group to back down by obtaining a significant improvement in their working conditions. In the end, the movement led by the chambermaids at the Park Hyatt in 2018, which resulted in an agreement after 87 days on strike, was also a benchmark. She liked the tone of PLACÉS and suggested I dedicate a film to them. Of course, I said yes. I know these women and they move me. My aunts, who come from Tunisia, did this job, and so did the mothers of my friends. And mine, who wasn't a chambermaid, was a “Little Hand”. These are the people who make me want to do films. So I drew on a multitude of testimonials, not just specific cases, to make a fictional tribute to all chambermaids!

Why did you choose the world of a palace over that of an ordinary hotel?

Socially, I felt it was important that a room should cost ten times the monthly salary of these women. And cinematographically, the discrepancy between the lives of these employees and the glitz of a palace offered fascinating contrasts. One of the women I met lives in a small town near Reims and comes to work every morning at a 4-star hotel in

a classy district of Paris. She explained to me that the commute is exhausting, but that being able to wander around these neighborhoods she'd never visited allowed her to forget, at times, the city in which she lives. In the end, I found this angle very touching and human, and it's what also convinced me to set this film in the world of luxury.

With the character of Eva (Lucie Charles-Alfred), we get straight to the heart of the matter. She's very young, with only modest experience in an Ibis hotel, and finds herself subcontracted to replace a young striker who is fighting with others to get the hotel to stop using this procedure, immediately earning the enmity of her new colleagues...

Subcontracting is the scourge of this profession: women hired under this system (they're called clients) know they can be fired overnight. I won't go into it in the film - it would be too technical - but they have to sign mobility clauses that force them to leave at the drop of a hat to work, sometimes hundreds of kilometers away, to replace someone if need be. And their rights are literally trampled underfoot in comparison with others: no right to meal trays, morning croissants, obligation to wear a different uniform, and so on. It's the same old saying: divide and conquer. Outsourced status has a terrible impact on these workers, most of whom are of immigrant origin, who find it hard to renew their papers in City Halls. The immigration law will make their problems even worse. I wanted to show the differences between external workers and intern workers.

You make Safiatou (Marie-Sohna Condé), an outsider and breadwinner - she has children, her husband doesn't work - one of the emblematic figures of this precariousness. With Aïssata (Maïmouna Gueye) and Violette (Salimata Kamaté), who are constantly at the receiving end of recriminations from their housekeeper Agnès (Mariama Gueye), we sense, despite their different origins and personal histories, a real sisterhood between these women.

The sorority between these women exists, whatever the very different universe from which they come from. They always help each other out. It was important to show that. If anything stands out in this film for me, it's this sisterhood and mutual support. In the world we live in, we're going to need a lot of it.

These women, despite the harrowing moments they go through, remain cheerful, fighters.

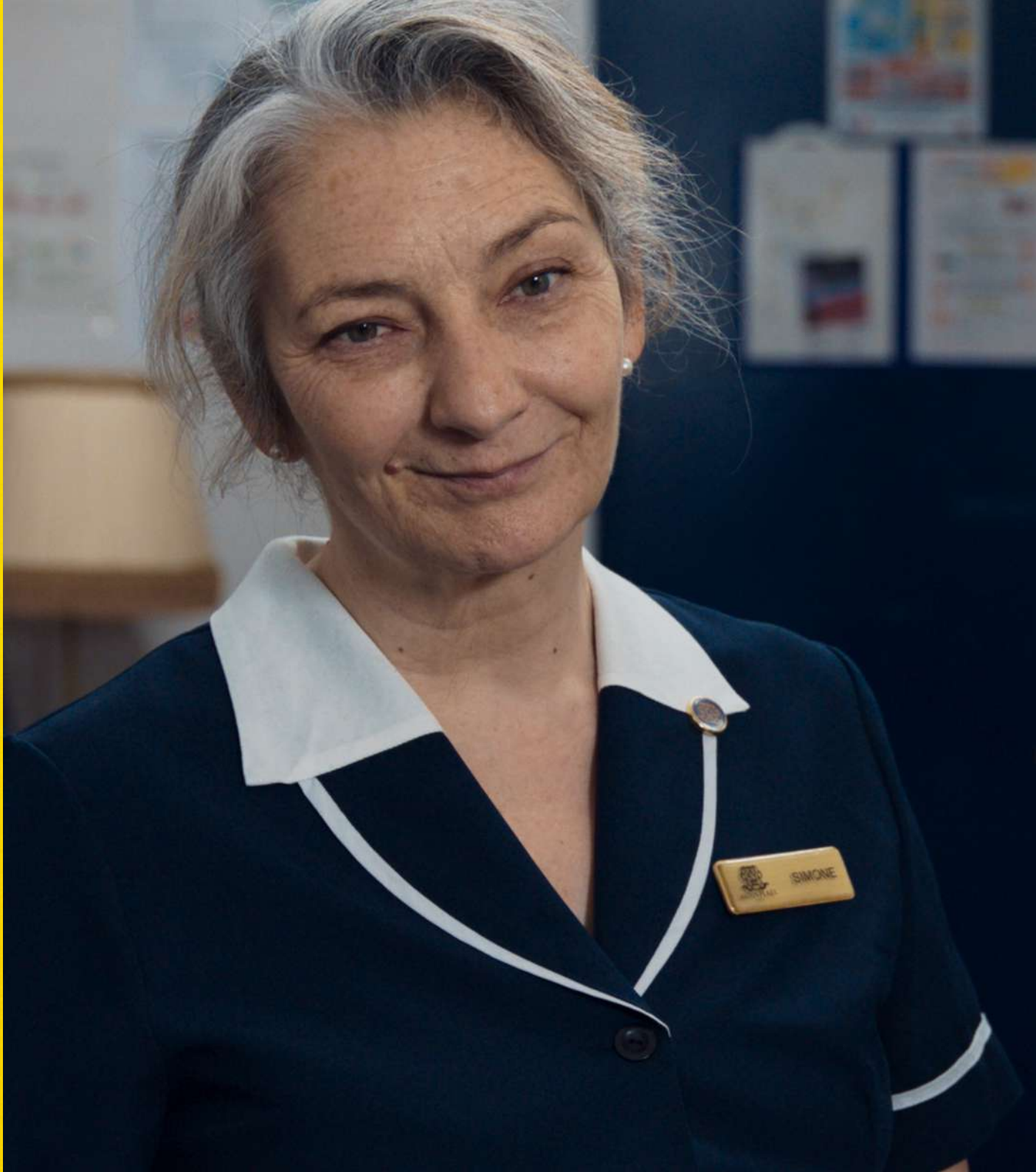
Above all, I didn't want to fall into the trap of stigmatization. The film should not - could not - be leaden. On the contrary, I wanted it to be very sunny. In the course of my research with strikers and union representatives, I was struck by one thing: “What kept us going during the movement,” all the people I spoke to told me, “was laughing, singing and dancing. When it's raining and cold and you're depressed, you're tempted to give up. But if you sing with your friends, if you make yourself something to eat with them, and if there's life to be had, it gives you the courage to keep going.» I wanted to convey this joy in the struggle. I'd already realized this with PLACÉS: we say a lot of things with laughter and good humor. In fact, the movement was also publicized for its jovial mood, which differed from “traditional” strikes.

At the time, Rachel Keke was at the head of the movement. Did you meet her?

Yes, shortly before she became a member of parliament. Her help was invaluable. Tiziri Kandi and Claude Levy, from the CGT HPE (National trade Union center in France), were also very helpful to H el ene Filli eres and me - H el ene with whom, as with PLAC ES, I wrote the screenplay. They put us in touch with several chambermaids and shared a lot of anecdotes about this world. I was very moved by her reaction after showing her the film. She couldn't believe we'd been able to create so many real scenes and situations. For example, the story about the croissants I created to mark the difference between internal and external, she was stunned because she hadn't told me about it, even though it was exactly the same in her day. In the end, she said to me, "You have to base it on a true story!»

In addition to the hostility of the women Eva first encounters on her arrival, there's also the hostility of Simone (Corinne Masiero), a somewhat surly 60-something who has been assigned to act as Eva's reference, and who is not at all inclined to turn the tables. A colorful character.

She's tired. After so many years of work, her body is giving out, her joints are aching - I drew a lot of inspiration from my mother when writing this. Simone is afraid of retirement, of unemployment. She's been cleaning these rooms for so many years: what's going to make her wake up in the morning if she loses her job? The prospect of retirement evokes a kind of small death for her. If she's not an "outsider", then she's also alienated by her professional activity, which denies her any future prospects that aren't linked to the professional world. Fortunately, the future will prove to her that life doesn't stop at work.



Simone has two jobs. One at the palace and the other in a gym. Up to now, she's never had a minute to herself. You get the feeling she couldn't get by without it. Despite her fatigue and anguish, you don't make her a victim either. More like a warrior. Quite reactionary, though.

Simone is against anything that might jeopardize the hotel and its smooth running. It's a speech that can be heard too. And when Corinne accepted the role, I accentuated her reactionary side. "Stop pissing people off with your leftist stuff" coming from Corinne Masiero, who's known for her diametrically opposed outings and commitments, I thought it was pretty funny.

Between Eva, the new one, and Simone, the old one, are bound to hit it off... to the point where the latter will end up influencing the fate of the first.

At first, it's easy to pigeonhole Simone category. In fact, she's a good girl; she's got a temper, and you can't be bothered. We've all known people like her you don't like at first, but you end up getting along and helping each other.

A nod to PLACÉS, Eva (Lucie Charles-Alfred), like Emma in your first feature film, is a child from the ASE. And, like many of them, she is evicted from the social hotel where she was living, on her eighteenth birthday.

I really wanted to go back to Lucie, to make a sort of sequel to the character she played in PLACÉS, and to remind us of the dry exaltation to which young people from the ASE are still all too often subjected to. When I read the script, an actress I had met for the casting thought it was her story I was telling. She had just been kicked out of her home. Proof that the problem still hasn't been solved.

PLACÉS was already a choral film. Now you're with this spirit...

Despite all the difficulties that I had already experienced with «Placés» and the writing of a choral film, I felt it was once again the most coherent way to tell this story! For me, all the characters are equally important. For the hotel and for each other.

Tell us about the casting.

Lucie was the obvious choice because she struck me in PLACÉS and I wrote the script with her in mind. Hélène Fillières was quick to mention Corinne Masiero's character in «Louise Wimmer», by Cyril Mennegun. I'd never seen the film, but I loved it and immediately sent an e-mail to Corinne. It was very important to me that the actress who was going to play Simone has convictions. I told her straight out, «I need someone with a strong commitment. I'm committed, I'm politicized, but I don't necessarily go to demonstrations or post angry tweets every day. My commitment is to get this message across in the film.» I was thrilled when she agreed. Simone's character could only be interpreted by her.

The most difficult part of the casting process concerned the other characters. Initially, I wanted to recruit real housekeepers - I thought it would be more authentic and it was also a way of honoring them. It turned out to be too complicated. The acting had to come first, and it just wasn't there. But it was important to us that real women who had led the struggle should be involved in the film - there are several extras, and some are in the fashion show. So, with Manon Le Bozec, my casting director, we looked for professional actresses for the roles: Marie-Sohna Condé, who comes from the theater, brought us this dramatic and powerful side thanks to her theater experience. She blew me away during the tryouts, and I was certain she'd be perfect as Safiatou, a character inspired

by Rachel. I was a little worried because she had a week's performance at the theater during a very important shooting week. I'd been advised to maybe think of someone else, but I didn't want to. I didn't want to, because for me it was her and nobody else.

Maïmouna's humor, joie de vivre and eccentricity made the role of Aïssata a real treat. The character wasn't exactly written that way, but that's why I chose her. I knew she'd take the character elsewhere, and that's what good actresses know how to do. Her personality makes the character unforgettable! I knew Salimata from her roles in QU'EST-CE QU'ON A FAIT AU BON DIEU and EN PLACE with Jean-Pascal Zadi. She has a real comic power and at the same time a tenderness that makes you adore her straight away. But she's also capable of real dramatic power, as in Alice Diop's SAINT OMER, and I'm very keen on this balance between fun and seriousness. Then came Kool Shen, the former rapper from the group NTM, who plays the trade unionist. I didn't want an actor who could play the cliché trade unionist, or an actor who had already seen himself in this kind of role. I wanted it to stand out. With his depth, Kool Shen brings a lot of gentleness to his character: while he frames these women and accompanies them, he never puts himself above them. I was really glad he accepted, because I've always loved the protest side of him during his career as a rapper. He was the spokesman for suburban youth. It made sense to ask him.

Last but not least, the young Abdallah Charki and Eva Huault, whom I'd spotted in a short film, are a real asset to the film, with their lightness and carefree attitude, while still playing it straight.

How did you prepare such a group in advance?

We had them meet informally to see how they all worked. They immediately started talking to each other. It worked out nicely. Instantly.



Did you and H  l  ne Filli  res have any films in mind during the writing and preparation stages?

H  l  ne and I have different film cultures. H  l  ne's is very specialized, she's very close to French auteur cinema, and other cinema for that matter, whereas I don't know anything about it. I've been bottle-fed Pierre Richard films and American films from the 1990s/2000s. That's why it works so well between us.

But honestly, for this film, we didn't have that many references. I'd seen a couple of documentaries - Denis Gheerbrant's ON A GR  V  , and Thibault F  ri  's LA R  VOLVE DES FEMMES DE CHAMBRE. I refused to watch    PLEIN TEMPS by   ric Gravel, or OUISTREHAM by Emmanuel Carr  re: I didn't want to be influenced negatively or positively. In the end, the only reference that remained was James Cameron's TITANIC: because of the scene where Leonardo Di Caprio's character, who lives in third class, discovers the splendors of the dining room when he's invited to lunch by Kate Winslet's character. For us, this scene represented the shock Eva feels when she first discovers the suite she's going to have to clean.

This shock is one of the contradictions that chambermaids face on a daily basis. We sense that they are both deeply proud and respectful of the world of luxury in which they live, and at the same time torn by their own condition.

They are proud to be here. "The palace elevates you", one of them told me. You feel part of this world and so, in the end, you respect it. They take on the codes and, at the same time, feel mistreated. The film doesn't insist too much on

this; one sentence is enough to make this conflict clear. My dream would be that, at the end of the film, viewers would feel like leaving a tip for these women they never see.

This hiatus is all the crueller because, unlike Eva, who is young and can still change her career path, these women have no choice. They only do it so their children don't have to. They all dream of a better future for their children. If you ask any of these women who have been working in a hotel for forty years what they would advise an eighteen-year-old girl to do,» Rachel Keke told me, «They would all say: 'Go! We're lucky in France to have training. Get out of here!»

As strict as she is towards the staff - no croissants for day students, no Christmas dinner - you don't make a scarecrow out of the character of Agn  s, the housekeeper...

It was interesting to show the weight of the hierarchy, which I had to simplify a lot because there are so many levels on reality - the pressure of someone who is under enormous pressure herself; and it was also exciting to show that this character, of African origin too, is perfectly aware of what her subordinates go through. She's probably been through it herself. The point was not to stigmatize her. She's a human being and I'm not a sanctimonious person. In fact, it was interesting to show that when it gets tough, Agn  s must pitch in. She's not just a watchdog. When one of the chambermaids calls her because she's found ducks in a suite, she too sets off in pursuit of the fowl. No one else will do it for her. It stays down there.

Someone told me that when Will Smith proposed

to his wife, he asked them to line the elevator to the bedroom with rose petals. It's romantic, very poetic. But who picks them up? Always the same people!

You seem very empathic / human...

Yes, I think that's why I became an educator. It's a job that has left a deep impression on me. And I try never to be moralizing or guilt-tripping. Humans are full of contradictions. And among these contradictions, the role of husbands seems to play a major role. They don't seem to be very supportive of their wives. Safiatou's husband, for example, is initially resolutely against the strike...

During these strikes, many husbands were in fact asking their wives to fall in line, often on behalf of the hotels. But they continued to fight.

Tell us about the scene in the parade when the strikers try to get the attention of passers-by. Is it fact or fiction?

The Park Hyatt ladies had come up with the idea. We obviously gave it a more cinematic dimension. Like many things in the film, it was just a line in the script. It became a very important sequence, very joyful but also very difficult to shoot - a hundred extras in the streets of Paris in a difficult-to-find location... In fact, that day we were scared because a demonstration had been announced and we were shooting on the planned route. We didn't know who was demonstrating. It turned out to be a demonstration for the regularization of undocumented workers. When they saw us, they thought we were really on strike.



So they came up to us and sang and danced with the team. It was a magical moment. Where did you shoot the palace scenes?

In the only hotel that agreed to host us - the Bristol - which has the great advantage of not subcontracting its employees. STRIKING THE PALACE takes a bit of a swipe at palaces, but the aim is first and foremost to denounce the prejudice suffered by these women caught up in this outsourcing: in addition to the serious penalties they suffer, they completely lose any sense of belonging to the company. It's completely demotivating.

Getting back to the sets, that was one of the difficulties of the film: there were a lot of them, and we were turned down a lot. We shot the basement of the Ferrandi school, the parade in front of Crédit Lyonnais... It was a far cry from the unique decor of the PLACÉS house.

You didn't have the same cinematographer as for PLACÉS...

He wasn't available, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise. When I started shooting PLACÉS, I knew that Christophe Offenstein was a very experienced and well-known director, so I didn't feel like telling him how to direct.

I directed the actors, but didn't dare interfere too much with the technical side of things. This time, I was much more in the action, directing. I made my mark. I wanted it to be a bit like a documentary, but at the same time a fiction. I wanted it to move and be alive.

A lot of things changed thanks to the actors. From anecdotal scenes on paper, many of them helped flesh out the subject. They brought an enormous amount to the film.

Some scenes - the cleaning in the rooms, the fashion show - are reminiscent of real choreography...

That's true. I was lucky enough to have a team and actors who were patient and professional. For each sequence, we'd try out some things in staging, then tried out others, and when we felt it was the right one, we'd go for it. It was all very instinctive, like most of the things I do.

What was the editing process like?

It's a stage I really enjoy. I had a lot of time - sixteen weeks. It's wonderful to find the right balance, the right mix of each character. I also worked with another editor, Sarah Ternat. She happened to be very good friends with Célia Lafitedupont, with whom I had edited PLACÉS, and they worked together. They speak the same language.

The pressure of a second feature film is always strong. Did you feel it?

You know that everyone is more or less waiting for you, and that your first film may have been a lucky shot. The surprise of the first film is gone. In the end, I'm really proud of this film, in which I've managed to put so much of myself into a subject that's not necessarily my life, and to show these faces that we talk about so much in the news, without really knowing who these people are.

If you had to describe your tone?

To make light scenes collide with others that are deeper than they seem. Just life.

Nessim Chikhaoui, Director

DIRECTOR

2024 STRIKING THE PALACE

2022 PLACÉS

WRITER

2024 STRIKING THE PALACE

2022 PLACÉS

2021 LES TUCHES 4 by Olivier Baroux

2018 LES TUCHES 3 by Olivier Baroux

2018 LE DOUDOU by Philippe Mechelen and Julien Hervé

2016 LES TUCHES 2 by Olivier Baroux





Cast

Corinne Masiero Simone
Lucie Charles-Alfred Eva
Marie-Sohna Condé Safiatou
Salimata Kamate Violette
Maïmouna Gueye Aissata
Kool Shen Thierry Bonneau, unionist
Abdallah Charki Ali
Mariama Gueye Agnès Simon





Crew

Director	Nessim Chikhaoui
Screenplay	Nessim Chikhaoui Hélène Fillières
Producer	Alice Labadie Matthieu Tarot
Production Manager	Jean-Jacques Albert
First assistant	Stéphane Manaranche
Director of Photography	Jean-Marc Fabre
Editor	Sarah Ternat
Original Soundtrack	Denusmaker
Sound	Thomas Guytard Caroline Reynaud Jean-Paul Hurier
Production Design	Fanny Stauff
Casting	Manon Le Bozec
Costume Design	Carole Gérard
Location Manager	Didier Carrel
Script	Jeanne Fontaine-Sarda
Extras casting	Léonie Baillon
Make-up artist	Sarah Mescoff
Hair	Géraldine Lemaire
International sales	Le Pacte

