

Compagnie du Miracle

Merci Alice !

by Karen Chataigner



Performance & Writing: Karen Chataigner

Accordion: Marie Paillat / Margault Willkomm

Directed by: Joséphine Hazard

Lighting Design: Zoé Robert

Running time: 1 hour

Ages 12 and up

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The Play

The year is **1915**, and **patriarchy** reigns supreme. How much control do women have over their own bodies? None. **Everything is controlled by men**, and **doctors** claim that **physical activity is lethal to them!** Women's bones are supposedly as fragile as crystal, and the act of running could lead to organ prolapse...

There seems to be only **one option** for women: to **serve men** and keep a clean and peaceful home. Yet a **handful** of them **refuse** to comply with society's expectations, unite, and **reclaim** their **freedom** through the very thing they are forbidden to do: **sports**. One of them is **Alice Milliat**.

As a **highly accomplished rower, footballer and swimmer**, she organizes **women's teams**, defies restrictions and doubles her efforts to **challenge men** at their own game by launching the **first Women's Olympic Games**. But her foremost opponent, Pierre de Coubertin, sees things differently: "**Female Olympics would be impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and improper**. In my view, the true Olympic hero is the adult male individual."

Alice has more than one trick up her sleeve. The **Great War** rages on and becomes her unexpected **ally**, for the men are away! Alice seizes upon the opportunity and succeeds in **establishing women's sports clubs** throughout France. The networks she builds provide her with an **incredible driving force** to assert **women's place in sports**. **Strength lies in unity**, and Alice Milliat proves it! As a pioneering pacifist, she advocates a single value: fairness.

From then on Alice does everything she can to ensure that the ancient Olympic Games finally open their competitions to women. Yet by **confronting** men and their **misogyny**, Alice Milliat plays into their hands, a **dangerous game** indeed... All the more so as her latest detractor, **Sykfried Edstrom**, president of the International Athletics Foundation, is a powerful and ruthless decision-maker. "**I want Alice Milliat and all the rest of it to vanish from the face of the Earth.**"

Freedom comes at a price, and this woman was willing to pay it, by rolling up her sleeves and confronting the authorities to bring about **gender equality** at the Olympic Games, an achievement that took **a century to materialize**, at the **2024 Olympics**.



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Alice Milliat



Born on May 5, 1884 in **Nantes** and deceased on May 19, 1957 in **Paris**, **Alice Milliat** was the first **leading figure** of women's international **sports**. As an **athlete**, she excelled in rowing, but also practiced swimming, field hockey, and football. Alice was a **bold** and **rebellious** working-class woman. She became **president** of the **Fémina Sport Club** in 1915 and was one of the founders of the **Fédération des sociétés féminines sportives de France** in 1917. In 1919, she also became its **president**.

Faced with the reluctance of sports federations to include women in sports, Alice Milliat took matters into her own hands and **founded** the **International Women's Sports Federation** in 1921.

“Women's sports deserve a place in society as much as men's sports do.”

Alice Milliat, May 15, 1917

Women's participation in the Olympic Games became her **greatest battle**, and in the face of repeated refusals from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to allow them to compete, she decided to **organize women's events** herself. The first international women's event took place in Monte Carlo in 1921, and the first edition of the **Women's Olympic Games** was held in Paris in 1922. Between 1926 and 1934, four more editions were organized.

The event attracted more than 6,000 visitors each day in London in 1934. **The success** of these **“Women's Olympic Games”** was so great that the **IOC finally allowed** women to compete in the most iconic sport of the modern Olympics: athletics. The first female athletes took part in the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam.

Alice Milliat was invited onto **the jury** for the athletics events of these Games, where she was **the only woman** amid numerous other male officials.



Alice Milliat, member of the athletics jury at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympic Games.

Although the IOC agreed to organize competitions for women, the organization also seized the opportunity to subordinate women to federations led by men. The International Women's Sports Federation was merged into the International Athletics Federation and eventually ceased to exist.

Alice Milliat **withdrew** from public life, yet she left a **profound legacy** that laid **the foundations for women's sports**. Despite her achievements, she remains an **underappreciated figure** in the history of sports. Several municipalities honor her legacy in their own way and have named streets or sports facilities after her (in Nantes, Bordeaux, Sainte-Luce-sur-Loire, etc.). The Département Loire-Atlantique now has a **Maison des Sports – Alice Milliat**, a powerful tribute to a woman who played such an **important role** in the **history of sports**.

Her Detractors



“Female Olympics would be impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and improper. In my view, the true Olympic hero is the adult male individual.”



“I want Alice Milliat and all the rest of it to vanish from the face of the Earth.”

Pierre de Coubertin

The Baron Pierre de Coubertin was born on January 1, 1863, and died in Geneva in 1937. He was a French historian and an educationalist who was strongly influenced by Anglo-Saxon culture and who actively campaigned for the **introduction of sports in French schools**. He played an important role in the **emergence and development of sports** in France in the late 19th century.

In 1894 he revived the Olympic Games of the modern era and founded the International Olympic Committee, which he presided from 1896 to 1925. During this period, he designed the Olympic rings and established the IOC headquarters in Lausanne in 1915.

He was **strongly opposed to women** taking on a prominent role in sports, as he believed that they should be **subservient** and at the service of men. Although he declared: “sports are a source of potential inner improvement for all men, regardless of their profession,” he was **firmly opposed to women’s sports competitions** and refused to compromise. In response to Alice Milliat’s demands, he insisted that the **“women’s role was to crown the winners.”**

Sykfried Edstrom

Holder of the Swedish 150-meter record in his youth, **Sigfrid Edström** founded the International Athletics Foundation (IAAF) in 1912 and **presided** over it until 1946. During his presidency, he fiercely defended amateurism in men’s sports.

Sykfried was a **powerful and influential** figure. During the 1912 Olympic Games, he was director and **vice-president of the organizing committee**, and he established the group that founded the International Amateur Athletics Federation as the governing authority for athletics. As a reward for his efforts, he became the **first president of the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF)** in 1913, a position he held until 1946. He was also elected a member of the IOC in 1921 and remained active in the organization for 31 years.

Sykfried was everywhere, with many people under his command.

He was firmly opposed to the integration of women in the Olympic Games and was particularly **determined to undermine Alice Milliat**, a woman who, in his eyes, had far too much power and determination...

Director's Note

An informative and informed narrative

For the past 20 years, I have been **writing and performing** on stage **to challenge social norms** and the systems of domination they sustain. I am fascinated by human connections, by what binds us together and how societal structures tear us apart through **sexism, racism, and class struggle**. More broadly, I explore the **power dynamics** in **society** and in **sports**.

Dominance doesn't just oppress, it also **erases memories**. So many women have been written out of history...

A question emerged and became the driving force behind my writing: "**When someone is forgotten, does everything she accomplished disappear as well?**"

I began researching **Alice Milliat**, a **remarkable athlete** who sparked a true **revolution** in the world of sports a century ago, yet whom was almost entirely **unheard of**.

I discovered a **singular woman** who **pioneered women's sports**, and I was fascinated. I first came across black-and-white photographs of Alice, and her charisma pierced through the images. **The more I looked at her, the more she seemed to come alive**. A sisterly love at first sight.

I decided to find out as much as I could about her. I met Béatrice Barbusse, a sports **sociologist**, and Florence Carpentier, a **historian** who wrote her doctoral thesis on Alice Milliat.

They became the foundation of my research and my writing. I checked every piece of information with them **to confirm its accuracy**, to make sure I didn't betray Alice's life, to remain as **authentic** as possible... Then one day, Florence sent me articles that Alice had written for *Les Sportives*, a politically engaged newspaper from that era.

Her style left no room for doubt. **Alice went straight to the point**, clearly and uncompromisingly, yet never offensively. I loved it. I took some of her phrases, wove them into my own writing, and watched her come back to life as the blank pages filled up **a co-writing between two centuries**.

In 2021 this work resonated with the inaugural unveiling of the statue of Alice Milliat alongside Pierre de Coubertin's at the *Maison des Jeux Olympiques*. The event organizers invited me to perform my play there. And from that moment on everything fell into place. Alice was sought after by sports circles, community groups, local authorities, and even private companies.

I care so deeply about the show that I invited Joséphine Hazard to direct it, to refine its style and to bring fully onto stage. It became what it is today: a play that shares the life of a woman who is hardly known to the general public.

So I signed it: "**Merci Alice!**"

"**When someone is remembered, everything she did comes alive again at least on stage.**"

Karen Chataigner

Alice Milliat as an apparition

When Karen offered me to **join the project**, the performance already existed in a **light, adaptable form** suited for the spaces in which Karen performed. My **challenge** was to give the play a **new dimension** that would allow it to be staged in other venues, particularly theaters.

Working from Karen's text, I favored a **sober staging**, where the **acting**, the **words** and the **interaction with the audience**, very much present, would be emphasized. The story of Alice Milliat as a tale, that of a spirit who has returned to recall to her heirs the struggle she fought, and that they must not be abandoned.

The story unfolds, and **Alice Milliat comes to life**, interacting with the audience and leaving room for the audience's imagination. I combined Karen's original historical costume with elements of sportswear, emphasizing suggestion over illustration. A small space is carved out on stage to suggest **the living room of Alice Milliat's** modest apartment, where she may have devised **her strategies against the hegemony of men's sports**.

Music also plays a vital role in the performance. On stage, the actress is accompanied by an accordionist. A collaborative musical and physical dialogue unfolds between Alice and the musician, who might be Marie Houdré, Alice Milliat's close friend, along with all the girls and women for whom she fought. Together, they playfully punctuate Alice's story and give life to the various — sometimes grotesque — characters who marked her journey. **The lighting design further enhances the interplay of appearances orchestrated by Alice and her partner**.

The **minimalist scenography** allows space for the **fleeting yet intense presence** of Alice Milliat, full of wit and **emotion**, as she returns from beyond the grave for the audience **to embrace her story and never forget it**.

Joséphine Hazard

The company

La Compagnie du MIRACLE was founded by Joséphine Hazard and Robin Egloffé in 2020.

Bound by a shared desire to create an organic and generous form of theater, they place the versatile performer at the heart of their artistic vision. Thus, they set about writing *“Le Misanthrope à l’Elysée,”* laying the foundation for their venture.

In 2021, Karen Châtaigner joined the company to create her play *“Merci Alice!”*. Author and actress of the play, Karen is accompanied by Joséphine Hazard as director.

Through political, artistic, and feminist reflections, the company pursues its desire to question the world with the power of humor and the delicacy of poetry.

With a touch of irony, the company’s name hints at the scale of their dream: to emerge against all odds, beyond the ordinary, in a way that defies explanation.



Biographies

Karen Chataîgner - Actress and Author

Karen Chataîgner was born in Alsace, and her **energetic personality** always compels her to aim straight for her goals. At the age of 20, she began **acting** in **improvisational theater**. After eight years on stage, in 2010 she relocated to **Belgium** and ventured into extended improv formats: one theme, one hour. She performed with **various companies** and, at the same time, studied gesture with the CIRA and took various courses in body movement (Betinna Neuhaus) and burlesque gesture (Jean Claude Cotillard).

In 2012, she was struck by a strong **desire to speak** out about her place as a woman and **the dynamics of domination**. She took up drama classes and, during a workshop on the works of Wajdi Mouawad, met the actress and director Joséphine Hazard. At the same time, she launched her solo career, wrote two shows, "*Ça pique !*" and "*Changez pas trop,*" in which she spoke openly about her life as a lesbian, denouncing social norms and their consequences.

Driven by her ambition to **expose inequality**, in 2015 Karen began performing wherever audiences could be found. Beyond theaters, she performed in **workplaces, community centers, and institutions**. Theater became a **platform for debate** and for discussing the constraints on our **freedom** in a different way. She continued to refine her **perception of society** through her performances across **France and Belgium** until 2020.

Her desire to develop her style and dramaturgy led her to collaborate with **sociologist** Béatrice Barbusse and **historian** Florence Carpentier to **write and portray Alice Milliat**. Actress and accordionist Marie Paillat joined her in 2022. Karen asked Joséphine Hazard to stage the play and Zoé Robert to design the lighting.

Her new solo show, "*Merci Alice !*" is **the result of a long collaborative process** involving history, theater, and music.



Marie Paillat - Actress and Accordeonist

Multi-talented artist Marie Paillat studied performing arts at the **Strasbourg Conservatory**. She has been performing as an **actress** since 2015 with theater companies such as *La Mesnie H*, *La Compagnie des Rives de l'III*, *LesANGES Nus*, and *Le Veilleur*, exploring both classical and contemporary repertoires as well as various collaborative writing processes.

She regularly lends her voice to voice-overs projects and has studied dubbing and narrative audio. Her love of language also led her to study literature for several years alongside her stage work, thereby refining her perception and understanding of texts.

She broadened her stage experience by creating **short pieces for cabarets** and participating in productions at the **Opéra national du Rhin**, where she worked with **various directors** and drew inspiration from **dancers and musicians**. She was introduced to the **accordion at the Conservatory** and continues to play her instrument, accompanying several projects with her music.

In recent years, she has also sought to develop a **physical and choreographic language**, training in aerial silks and dance theater in **Paris** and Strasbourg.

Bringing all these experiences into dialogue by contributing to works of diverse artistic forms is central to her artistic vision. This also enables her to lead theater workshops that are rich in interactions between several forms of artistic expression. She joined Karen Chataîgner's project with **the desire to share her passion for theater, music, movement**, and for everything that **art allows us to achieve as human beings**.



Biographies

Joséphine Hazard - Director and Actress

Joséphine Hazard first pursued literary studies in Lille, completing **hypokhâgne and khâgne** preparatory classes. During her **Master's degree in Theater Studies** at Paris 3, she trained at the Studio Muller in Paris before entering the COP at the **Strasbourg Conservatory**.

She became a **professional actress** and has been **performing** for several years with **various companies** (*la Mesnie H, la Lunette Théâtre, La Soupe Cie, Théâtre de l'Homme inconnu*) in classical, modern, and contemporary plays (Molière, Shakespeare, George Tabori, Thierry Simon, Magali Mougel, etc.).

She began **directing** by assisting Olivier Chapelet on the production *ADN* in 2019 and directed the a staged reading of "*Habitem Eternam*" by Caroline Leurquin in 2020 for the *Festival des Actuelles* at TAPS in Strasbourg.

In 2020, she **co-founded the Compagnie du Miracle** and launched its first production: "*Le Misanthrope à l'Elysée*." She is also the author of the play "*Mesdemoiselles Molière*," directed by Emma Massaux in 2022.

Her work as a **performer extends** to workshops she leads for **various audiences**, from children to adults, and where she shares her passion for **acting and the joy of performing**.



Zoé Robert - Lighting Designer and Technician

Zoé Robert trained as a **lighting stage manager** for live performance at the **CFPTS** (Professional Training Center for Performing Arts Techniques) and graduated in 2019.

She then studied at the **TNS** (Théâtre national de Strasbourg) and graduated in 2022. During her five years of post-secondary education, Zoé collaborated with **various artists** and technical teams. She began as an intern assistant to **Marie-Christine Somat** with the lighting design for "*D'un rêve*" by Salia Sanou, then worked in **stage management** for "*Toutes leurs robes noires*" by Antoine Hespel, and also assisted **Pascal Laajili** on the lighting design for "*La Petite boutique des horreurs*" directed by Valérie Lessort and Christian Hecq.

Since 2022, Zoé has worked as a lighting designer and stage manager on **several contemporary** and **socially engaged theater** projects, notably handling the lighting design and stage management for "*Merci Alice !*" (written by Karen Chataigner and directed by Joséphine Hazard), as well as "*Vivarium*" directed by Fred Cacheux, and "*Le Combat du siècle n'a pas eu lieu*" by Juliette Fribourg and Shane Haddad.

Each August, she also contributes to the productions of the Pampa collective during their outdoor contemporary theater festival. Zoé regularly works as a **general stage manager** for various productions, **coordinating** and **overseeing technical aspects** to ensure the performances run smoothly.



Biographies

Margault Willkomm - Accordeonist

Margault Willkomm began playing the accordion in 2004. She chose to focus on **stage management** and **sound design**, first studying at the **DMA** in Nantes and then at the **National Theatre School of Strasbourg** (TNS). Alongside her studies, she continued her instrumental practice.

Since 2021, she has been exploring various aspects of sound creation, combining projects in which she composes original sound pieces with others where she performs live on stage. Her work is centered on delicacy and sonic precision, immersing the audience at the heart of the performance.

Her compositions may be **musical** or more **abstract**, incorporating sound effects and everyday sounds.

She joined “*Merci Alice!*” in 2024, and her **powerful performance deepens the emotions** on stage.



Victoria Dockter - Distribution & Production Manager

Victoria Dockter is the **company's production, booking and development manager**.

She has been working for **three years** with the creative team behind the play “*Merci Alice!*”, which she has **promoted regionally, nationally and internationally**.

She has already accompanied the play on tour at the Théâtre de la Contrescarpe in Paris ahead of the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, in Sarajevo and Banja Luka with the French Institute of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and at the Spazio Teatro No'Hma in Milan during the Milano Cortina Winter Olympic Games...



In the Press

L'Humanité

“On stage, Karen Chataîgner delivers an **outstanding performance**. She conveys her determination to the audience, **smiling** as she types furiously on her typewriter. The accordion, echoing the clatter of the keys, **vibrates increasingly** and sets the **rhythm** for every pulse of the show.”

Télérama Sortir

“**Accordionist** Margault Willkomm and actress Karen Chataîgner **breathe new life** into the forgotten story of a **long battle** for equality.”

ALSACE

“Karen Chataîgner’s words are **humorous** and **poetic**, and they strike like uppercuts.”

DNA Derrières
Nouvelles
d’Alsace

“With **humor, tenderness, and rhythm**, the show commemorates the **victories of women pioneers** and their countless opponents.”



“Karen Chataîgner’s **beautiful, intense, and vivid writing** and performance are a **source of true delight**.”

PA PRESSE
AGENCE
la lettre économique et politique de PACA

“A **powerful performance**, proudly honoring the memory of a fighter.”

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