In the eve of the troupe's summer tour, the owner and founder of a small circus dies suddenly. In order to save their circus, the troupe members decide to step in and manage the show. However, they soon realize that the circus is not just a business, but a place where they have built their lives and relationships. The story of Marie and Julien, two of the troupe members, is a poignant reminder of the fragility of life and the importance of cherishing the present moments.
Jacques Rivette makes it a synthesis: it’s a magical circle of light, surrounded by banks of empty seats, occupied after nightfall by whispering ghosts closed in by crinkled walls of blue canvas.

Since Paris nous appartenait, the theatre has constituted an acid test for Rivette’s heroines, each novice actor becoming herself through the words of someone else: her role. For the traps of theatrical language, the circus substitutes clown’s masks and acrobats’ death-defying feats: "It’s the most dangerous place in the world where anything’s possible, where eyes are opened and my eyes were opened." Like Lola Montés, fully aware that she risks her life in the ring, Kate (Jane Birkin) must perform the whip number in order to be excused of her grief. "I feel like I’ve had an operation. I’d be used to my sickness, no my grief." Interpreting Rilke’s advice to a young poet, Vittorio, who stages the risky number designed to free Kate of the memory that stops her from living (the tragic death fifteen years earlier of the man she loved), provides one of the keys to the puzzle: "All the dragons in our lives are perhaps princesses in distress asking to be released."

In Jacques Rivette’s oeuvre, the circus becomes the image of the peril that art compels us to confront in order to relieve our fears. Unlike the heroines of Huit Bas Fragile who develop "terrifying games" because "there’s no bigger thrill than fear", Vittorio, the accidental stage director, gives himself the mission of saving princesses.

In this respect, Around a small mountain is an encapsulation or even, to employ an expression rarely used today, poetic art: Jacques Rivette provides his audience with a stunning opportunity, in 84 magical minutes, to experience the existential test that art (occasionally) raises us.

All it took him was a few blue-dyed clothes floating on the surface of a river, a makeshift table where the fruit stands out like a still life, lovers looking for or dodging each other in the undergrowth, a clown looking us in the eye ("All that’s well and ends well") a circus tent framing the trees’ green foliage, a full moon, over the mountains, watching over our dreams. All is well that ends well: as Jacques Rivette allows us to discover today, "it’s art that makes life" and not the contrary.

**Hélène Frappat**

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**JANÉ BIRKIN**


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**SÉRGIO CASTELLITTO**


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*Around a small mountain* casts a “novel, unprecedented, never seen before” light on Jacques Rivette’s oeuvre. The quote is from Vittorio (Sergio Castellitto), a new, Italian incarnation of the mysterious character of guide/savoir/interestress whose mission, as Foucalt, consists in releas-}ing a princess from her spell—in other words, her past or her grief. This gracious, princess, inescapably mourning her late love by a gravestone (like John Wayne talking to his departed wife in *The Wore & Yellow Ribbon*) is Jane Birkin.

Having played the ingénue in *L’Amour par terre* and the great painter’s former model in *La Belle Noiseuse*, Jane Birkin strips bare, in *Around a small mountain*, the enigma of all Rivette’s heroines: confined behind the bars of the Rue de Rivoli in Paris in a moment of distraction snatched from the film’s Cevennes mountains, she brings to mind Anna Karina, imprisoned in a convent in *La Religieuse*, haunted by a mistake she didn’t make, her heart aches like Sandrine Bonnaire’s in *Secret Defense*, madly in love with a ghost, like Pauline (Bulle Ogier) in *Out 1*, she moves like a tightrope walker in a halfway state between life and death, similar to the coma from which Louise (Marianne Denicourt) emerges at the start of *Huit Bas Fragile*.

Yet *Around a small mountain* introduces an unprecedented space-time, which changes the rules of the game: the circus. Despite appearances, the circus isn’t an extension of the theatre by other means.