

Philippe Quesne

A theatre director, scenographer and visual artist, Philippe Quesne is regarded as one of the most original and distinctive figures in contemporary European theatre. He studied at art schools in Paris: École Estienne (graphic design) and École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (scenography). During the first ten years of his professional career, beginning in the mid-1990s, he worked as a scenographer for theatre and opera productions, as well as exhibitions at contemporary art museums.

During this period, he collaborated with directors including Florence Giorgetti, Olivier Besson and Robert Cantarella. His artistic language was particularly shaped by his engagement with the dramaturgy of Philippe Minyana, Noëlle Renaude and Michel Vinaver—writers who challenged traditional dramatic structures, realism and the hierarchy of theatrical means.

In 2003, Quesne founded the independent company Vivarium Studio, making his debut with *Le Démangeaison des ailes* (2003). In the following years, he created a series of performances that became part of an established international repertoire, including *Des Expériences* (2004), *D'après nature* (2006), *L'Effet de Serge* (2007), *La Mélancolie des dragons* (2008), *Big Bang* (2010) and *Swamp Club* (2013). He also published four original booklets exploring the relationship between humans, nature and art: *Actions en milieu naturel* (2005), *Petites réflexions sur la présence de la nature en milieu urbain* (2006), *Thinking About the End of the World in Costumes by the Sea* (2009) and *Bivouac* (2011).

From 2014 to 2020, he served as director of the prestigious Nanterre-Amandiers National Drama Centre (CDN Nanterre-Amandiers) near Paris, transforming it into a vibrant centre for residencies, education and artistic experimentation. Productions he created there included *Le Théâtre des négociations* (2015, in collaboration with sociologist Bruno Latour), *La Nuit des taupes / Welcome to Caveland* (2016) and *Crash Park, la vie d'une île* (2018). He also collaborated on other artists' projects, designing the sets for *Hate* by Laetitia Dosch (2018), *Le Théâtre et son double* by Gwenaël Morin (2020) and *Cascade* by choreographer Meg Stuart (2020).

Quesne regularly directs and creates installations abroad, including in Japan (the project *Anamorphosis*, 2013, featuring actresses from Seinendan), Belgium (the children's production *Next Day*, 2014, created with Campo) and Germany (including *Caspar* Western Friedrich, 2016, in Hanover; *Farm Fatale*, 2019, at the Munich Kammerspiele; and Debussy's opera *Usher* at the Staatsoper in Berlin). In 2019, he represented France at the Prague Quadrennial, winning the main award in the Countries and Regions section for his installation *Microcosm*.

After completing his term at Nanterre-Amandiers in 2021, Quesne reactivated the independent company Vivarium Studio. His recent acclaimed works include a staged version of Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (Wiener Festwochen, 2021), the science-fiction performance *Cosmic Drama* (Theater Basel, 2021), the actor-free installation *Fantasmagoria* (2022), and the retro-futuristic performance *The Garden of Delights* (Festival d'Avignon, 2023), inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's famous triptych and celebrating Vivarium Studio's 20th anniversary. Since summer 2022, he has also served as artistic director of the *Ménagerie de Verre* in Paris. His most recent productions are *Vampire's Mountain* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg, 2025) and *Spooky Paradise* (Volksbühne, 2026).

A formative experience of great importance to Quesne was seeing Tadeusz Kantor's performances as a teenager. His encounter with the work of the Polish master left him with a lasting sensitivity to theatre's materiality, the particular status of props and the presence of objects on stage as subjects in their own right.

Vivarium Studio

Founded by Philippe Quesne in 2003, Vivarium Studio is a unique theatrical laboratory whose aesthetic derives directly from the metaphor contained in its name. A vivarium—a glass enclosure in which one observes the unhurried lives of animals within an artificially recreated ecosystem—serves here as a model for theatre.

The stage becomes a glass terrarium, often physically separated from the audience by a glass “fourth wall”: a microcosm in which people and objects coexist organically. Scenography and its constituent elements exist on an equal footing with performers, blurring the boundaries between nature and artificiality.

Quesne’s theatre deliberately rejects the primacy of literary text and traditional drama. The creative process is based on intuition, associations and ensemble improvisation around initial images, sculptures or engravings. Words emerge organically from specific situations and are spoken quietly; often, spoken dialogue is replaced entirely by captions projected onto the walls of the display case. This frees performers’ bodies from the need to reproduce a text, allowing them complete freedom of presence and action.

The action is radically pared back, and stage time flows naturally, without traditional climaxes or sudden plot twists. A distinctive Beckettian humour prevails, alongside an atmosphere of melancholy—understood as an attitude towards the world, an attempt to escape the immediate and transient in order to preserve what is fragile, marginalised and threatened by the passage of time.

The protagonists of Quesne’s performances are ephemeral, vulnerable communities—astronauts, rock musicians and middle-aged superheroes—who build utopian refuges to protect themselves from inevitable civilisational or ecological catastrophe.

vivariumstudio.fr