

MY BOX PRODUCTIONS and MARS FILMS present

«YOU JUST HAVE
TO LISTEN TO THEM»

HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

SPEAK UP

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
STÉPHANE DE FREITAS

CO-DIRECTED BY **LADJ LY**

MY BOX PRODUCTIONS AND MARS FILMS PRESENT WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF FRANCE TÉLÉVISIONS AND THE CNC WITH THE SUPPORT OF LA COMMISSION IMAGES ET DIVERSITÉ CGET/ACSÉ
A STÉPHANE DE FREITAS FILM CO-DIRECTED WITH LADJ LY «SPEAK UP» MUSIC BY SUPERPOZE EDITED BY JESSICA MENÉNDEZ AND PIERRE HERBOURG CINEMATOGRAPHY TIMOTHÉE HILST AND LADJ LY SOUND HENRI D'ARMANCOURT AND FLORENT CASTELLANI SOUND EDITING ÉRIC LESACHET
POST-PRODUCTION ABRAHAM GOLDBLAT AND ANA ANTUNES PRODUCED BY HARRY TORDJMAN AND ANNA TORDJMAN WORLD SALES UPSIDE DISTRIBUTION

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SYNOPSIS

Every year at the University of Saint-Denis, the Eloquentia competition is held to decide *"The Best Orator in the 93"*, a reference to the number of the Seine-Saint-Denis *département*. Students following any course can participate, and prepare with the help of professional advisors including lawyers, slammers, and directors, who teach them the delicate exercise of public speaking. Over the weeks, they learn the subtle mechanisms of rhetoric, and will affirm their talents, revealing themselves to others, and above all, to themselves. With this new arsenal, Leïla, Elhadj, Eddy and the others face off in a bid to become the best orator in the 93.

INTERVIEW

STÉPHANE DE FREITAS SCRIPTWRITER AND DIRECTOR

WHY DID YOU WANT TO MAKE THIS DOCUMENTARY?

I wanted to make it as both an activist and an artist. I am the founder of the Eloquentia competition, which I created five years ago with the aim of helping suburban youth to master the art of debate, and to help them gain the self-confidence they need to achieve their dreams. From the beginning of the competition, I'd planned to devote a film to the subject. It was important to keep a record of the experience. These young people, who are stigmatized far too often, have resources that we – and sometimes even they themselves – are unaware of. They all have exciting things to say and do. It was important to keep a record of their work and this also gave me the opportunity to direct my first feature-length film.

YOU YOURSELF ARE FROM SEINE SAINT-DENIS.

And it's that experience which drove me to do this. I grew up in a tough town in Seine Saint-Denis and had a dramatic change in circumstances when I became a professional basketball player. I found myself on the other side of the tracks, in a social environment that was radically different from my own: The people expressed themselves differently, I felt marginalized, isolated. I began to think about this, a thought process that took a long time.

TELL ME MORE.

On the one hand, I was struck by the breakdown of social bonds, and on the other by the explosion of the internet. Everyone went online to unleash their opinions and their rage; everyone appeared to be talking to each other, but in reality, nobody was listening to anyone. I wanted dialogue, I wanted to recreate social bonds.





I gave up basketball to study law, re-joining the classic education system and catching up on what I'd missed. Later, thanks notably to Bertrand Périer, one of the speakers who helps prepare students for the Eloquentia and who coached me in public speaking when I was at university, I took part in public speaking competitions. It became increasingly clear to me that this kind of exercise could help children to become more confident. It's only in having a good command of the words and nuances of a language that we can reach out to others and manage to communicate with them. And from this emerged the idea of a competition, which is one of a group of three wider activities organized under the La Coopérative Indigo label.



ALTHOUGH IT'S AIMED AT ALL YOUNG PEOPLE FROM SEINE SAINT-DENIS FROM 18 TO 30, THE COMPETITION IS BASED UPON A SPECIAL TRAINING PROGRAM.

You don't have to be a student to take part, and each year more than 100 candidates enter with real chances of making the final. However, only students can receive the training. Out of 100 who apply, we select 30. Those 30 begin the competition with an advantage.

WHAT ARE THE SELECTION CRITERIA?

We don't necessarily choose the most competent speakers. Their potential and their motivation comes first. A boy like Eddy, the main character in the film, who was prepared to travel 13 miles every day to come to the university and whose talent was immediately evident, is what we are looking for. But other students from less artistic subject areas can also grab our attention: They come to tackle their shyness and their fear of confronting other people, and we want to help them. You don't see it in the film, but Eloquentia also works to help these young people build a career. From the moment they are selected for the training program, we commit to finding them an appropriate internship for the career they want to have later on.



THE TEACHING METHODS USED ARE QUITE UNIQUE, WITH CLASSES IN RHETORICAL SKILL, SLAM POETRY AND BODY LANGUAGE.

The teaching program is designed to work on personal development, and is based around four main areas: Introspection, in order to understand the opinion that you want to support against the others; learning to structure your thoughts and to work through logical reasoning; developing your cognitive relationships with the others

(gestures, oral expression, managing stress through breathing etc.) and encouraging active listening among the participants; and developing creativity through writing and performance art.

Bertrand Périer, a lawyer at the Court of Cassation and a professor of rhetoric, is in charge of the first part of the program. Stage director Alexandra Henry focuses on team building by asking the students to take part in theater exercises where they all make idiots of themselves, which allows each student to open themselves up to the others. And by teaching students to write and perform rap and both slam and traditional poetry, Loubaki Loussalat forces them to exercise their brains in a different way: He helps to free them from the mold of the classic education system. Finally, Pierre Derycke, singer and singing teacher, helps them to find their voices as orators, while coaching them to manage stress through breathing exercises. The aim isn't just that they prove to the others what they can do, it's more that they prove it to themselves.

THE TEACHERS WHO WORK WITH THEM ARE ALL VERY DIFFERENT: BERTRAND PÉRIER, FOR EXAMPLE, CAN APPEAR QUITE HEARTLESS. "THAT'S CRAP," HE SAYS OF ONE OF ELHADJ'S ARGUMENTS. HE BEHAVES AS IF HE WAS WITH THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE LYSIAS CONFERENCE, THE TOP MOOT COURT COMPETITION.

They all have different personalities. When I recruited Bertrand Périer, I needed the softer voice of Alexandra Henry alongside him. It's about yin and yang. By using slam poetry or rap, Loubaki uses language that's much more familiar for our young people.

SPEAKING OF THE LYSIAS CONFERENCE, ELOQUENTIA IS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM THOSE TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SPEAKING COMPETITIONS: EVERYONE IS ALLOWED TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES IN THEIR OWN PREFERRED WAY, INCLUDING CLASSIC SPEECHES, THEATER AND SLAM POETRY.

That's part of this desire to encourage personal growth. Everyone should be able to express themselves. To favor one form of expression over another would have excluded certain people from participating, it would discriminate all over again.

COMING BACK TO THE FILM, WHY DID YOU WAIT FOR THE THIRD EDITION OF THE COMPETITION TO SHOOT THE FILM?

Over the years, I was able to observe both the impact of the training on our young people and the strong bonds that formed between

them; they seemed like a real family. At the end of 2013 I met Harry and Anna Tordjman. They were coming off the back of the success of the comedy series "bref." on Canal Plus and were enthusiastic about the project. That said, apart from my work as an artist and a video I directed in the studio for La Coopérative Indigo, I had no real experience as a director. A year before we shot the film, I got to learning the ropes and shot some film here and there during that year's competition, which was run with the help of people from my charity. I followed the students, identifying the highpoints in their experiences, and it was there that I found the energy for the documentary. Before starting to shoot what became SPEAK UP, the film was already written, sequenced, and anticipated. I already had a clear vision, it was there in my mind.

LADJ LY ALSO GETS A DIRECTING CREDIT - WHAT ROLE DID HE PLAY?

He provided me with a lot of support. Once again, I had very little experience. Ladj shared his experience behind the camera, but at the same time gave me full freedom as the director.

FROM THE START, DID YOU HAVE AN IDEA OF THE CHARACTERS THAT WERE GOING TO COME OUT?

By the time we'd finished the recruitment for the year, I had already identified seven. Yet there were still some surprises. For example, I hadn't really noticed Souleïla, Eddy's opponent in the final. All of a sudden, halfway through the filming, she began to show her exceptional talent and we saw her continue to progress until she became the big favorite for the competition.

WERE THE STUDENTS AWARE OF THE DOCUMENTARY THAT WAS GOING TO BE FILMED?

Naturally, we told them about it at the first auditions for the training program. Those who didn't want to be filmed knew they wouldn't be. But, knowing that I had founded Eloquentia, the majority felt confident about it. By chance, the first day of filming took place on 7 January 2015, the day of the Charlie Hebdo attack: While France was shaken with the horror, as terrorists tried to crush freedom of speech, we were shooting a film celebrating expression. We were totally out of step with events, as if we were in a bubble. In front of the camera, their inhibitions disappeared straight away. Thereafter,

I think the film's protagonists felt like a family. We were filming with four cameras to multiply the number of shots and counter shots, with two professional cameramen and two amateurs, themselves students from Saint-Denis and friends with some people in the competition. The students were sure of our good intentions and knew that we respected them.

THEY ARE ALL TAKING VERY DIFFERENT PATHS.

That's very important to me: The media portrays this diversity either very rarely or very poorly. When I filmed Leïla, this young girl of Syrian origin who wears a veil and is an activist for a feminist collective, I said to myself that her words give food for thought in a society that is often very quick to caricature or demonize.

YOU FOLLOW EACH OF THE KEY PROTAGONISTS IN THEIR LIFE OUTSIDE THE COMPETITION.

We needed to get out of the class to breathe. It gave us the opportunity to film some more poetic moments and to show that the suburbs can be very different from one area to another. You can't just sum it up with images of big blocks of social housing. There are forests in the suburbs, like at Corcy where Eddy lives with his parents; and residential areas with little houses like Souleïla's house. I like to mix up these different elements, and I wanted these contradictions to also be manifest in the aesthetic of the film, which changes regularly from a very minimalist style to something lighter.

EDDY, THE HERO, IS LIGHT-YEARS AWAY FROM THE STEREOTYPICAL IMAGE OF SUBURBAN YOUTH. HE LIVES CLOSE TO NATURE, WORSHIPS HIS FATHER AND IS WILLING TO SPEND SIX HOURS A DAY ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT TO GO AND STUDY AND ACHIEVE HIS DREAM OF BECOMING AN ACTOR.

He's an incredible kid. The more you get to know him, the more you realize the wealth of potential he has. These were hidden talents I wanted to bring to light; kids that are both normal and exceptional. The story of Elhadj, who continued his studies while living in the street after his apartment block burnt down, is also extraordinary.





THE WAY THESE YOUNG PEOPLE OPEN UP ABOUT THEMSELVES AND THE SOCIETY THEY LIVE IN DURING THE COURSE OF THE TRAINING PROGRAM IS PROOF OF A VERY POSITIVE STEP BEING TAKEN. WE NEVER SEE A SENSE OF DEFEATISM ON THEIR PART.

When I started this film, I knew that I was going to ask them about four clear points: Their story and their ambitions; the way they see the news and the challenges of living together as a society; the message they wanted to send out; and finally, what they expected from the competition. It seemed to me that this approach allowed us to show a new, relevant side of the suburbs. In this way, I feel I've made something realistic and relevant.



THERE ARE ALSO SOME VERY FUNNY MOMENTS IN SPEAK UP; FOR EXAMPLE, THE SCENE WHERE ALEXANDRA HENRY ASKS THE STUDENTS TO ACT OUT A COUPLE'S ARGUMENT BY USING JUST THE NAMES OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES. OR THE SCENE WHERE SHE ASKS THEM TO CREATE AN UNLIKELY SOUND MACHINE.

As well as her breathing exercises, these are sessions that she repeats each year. They help the group to bond by getting rid of any notion of ridicule. As somebody who took part in these sessions before filming them, I was aware of their comic potential.

ONE SENSES THAT THE JUDGING PANEL'S DELIBERATIONS WERE LONG AND COMPLICATED. WHAT CRITERIA WERE USED TO CHOOSE THE BEST ORATOR?

The form of the speech often influences the panel, but the principle is to focus on the content of the candidate's arguments. If they can convince the panel – or the audience – it doesn't really matter whether they use Alexandrines, slam poetry or sketches.



WHAT ARE YOU EXPECTING FROM THE RELEASE?

SPEAK UP is being released right in the middle of the French presidential elections, a period of focused debate. I hope that watching the film in the cinema will make people think and open up dialog between them. I hope people can get behind the idea of peaceful cohabitation and realize that "Yes, we can have different views on life and still manage to talk to and understand each other." I don't think that's a utopian idea. Beyond that hope, I would like to prove that there are young people in the suburbs who are willing to make a real effort to gain qualifications, live their dreams, and have a voice that counts in our society.

BIOGRAPHY OF

STÉPHANE DE FREITAS SCRIPTWRITER AND DIRECTOR

Stéphane de Freitas is an artist and director. His work deals notably with the idea of “bringing opposites together”, since he himself was brought up in a family of Portuguese origin in Seine-Saint-Denis and experienced a dramatic change of circumstances as a teenager, finding himself thrown in the deep end of Paris’ chic western neighborhoods.

Unaware of the social norms of his new surroundings, his suburban way of speaking proved a hurdle he had to clear before becoming accepted.

Stéphane de Freitas is the founder of La Coopérative Indigo, a non-profit organization which aims to rebuild social bonds and get people from different social backgrounds to spend more time together.

It was this association that started up the Eloquentia programs in 2012 in Seine-Saint-Denis, which have since spread to various other universities throughout France, such as Grenoble, Limoges and Nanterre.

Stéphane wanted to write and direct this film in order to put the spotlight on suburban youth, their humanity, their intelligence, and the many different paths of these people we rarely hear from in the mainstream press or on prime-time TV.





WHAT IS "ELOQUENTIA"?

In a society where social dialog and freedom of expression are fast disappearing, public speaking and a culture of civic debate in its true sense are activities that in fact play a very small role in traditional French education.

So it was in Seine-Saint-Denis, one of the most stigmatized areas of France where young people are often victims of prejudice, that La Coopérative Indigo began its work in 2012 by starting the first free public speaking competition, open for all youths in the 93: Eloquentia. A teaching program for public speaking, it is aimed at young people to get them to express their ideas, assert their values and develop self-confidence, whatever their socio-professional background. Lessons are given by professionals from various sectors (lawyers, actors, drama teachers, HR managers, teachers etc.) before the students take part in public speaking competitions, where all forms of expression are allowed, from a classic speeches to rap, slam poetry or traditional poetry.

Today, Eloquentia has moved into secondary schools, colleges and universities, in the Paris region and elsewhere. Combining public speaking with culture and education, the Eloquentia programs promote a profound respect of free speech, tolerance of all opinions, and civic responsibility. Officially recognized as being in the general interest, the aim of these teaching programs is to use public speaking to help with individual personal development and thus promote a harmonious society where everyone is respected.

PRODUCERS' NOTE

HARRY TORDJMAN AND ANNA TORDJMAN PRODUCERS

When we met Stéphane, he soon told us about a dream, one he'd had for several years: To rebuild the bonds between people.

At the time, he'd just started up his non-profit, La Coopérative Indigo, whose activities were all aimed towards this objective. One of these activities was the creation of Eloquentia, a new kind of public speaking competition at Paris 8 University in Seine-Saint-Denis. His idea was to bring top Parisian lawyers into the suburbs to bring together two worlds which normally never meet. We found the idea and his approach fantastic.

Particularly in a time where social bonds are breaking down, it is very rare to see such a humanist initiative, so we quickly joined La Coopérative Indigo and agreed to produce and develop the association's audiovisual projects, including a film about the Eloquentia competition.

During the first two years, we decided not to shoot it for various reasons.

The first was that we didn't want to just parachute in there in the suburbs with our cameras, to film the areas like others had before, hastily but leaving a lasting trace.

Secondly, we wanted the opportunity to observe the training program and the competition so we could get a clear idea of what the powerful moments in such an adventure would be. This long-term process also gave us some legitimacy for the young people we were filming, who have a negative view of TV as a media where many reports don't really do justice to what life is like in the suburbs and what the young people who live there are like.

We therefore decided to set up a system that would allow us to film discreetly and to follow the third year of this adventure over a

period of several weeks. From the preparation for the competition to the profiles of the different candidates, we endeavored to remain non-intrusive observers. The big challenge of the film was to make sure that the protagonists forgot that the camera was there, so that we could document what their day-to-day life was really like.

As producers, we also thought it necessary to give Stéphane a lot of support in directing his first film, to go with the expert guidance of his co-director Ladj Ly. We were therefore present for every day of filming and we followed the editing process very closely, with the help of two talented editors: Jessica Menendez and Pierre Herbourg.

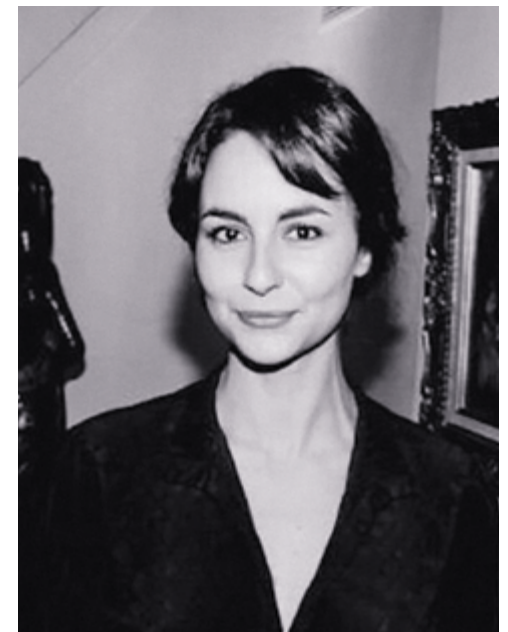
It's also a first for us as producers. My Box Productions mainly produces comedies ("bref.", "Bloqués", "Serge le Mytho" for Canal+), and SPEAK UP is our first documentary.

We wanted to put a spotlight on a wonderful, lively and brilliant group of young people.

We wanted to show them in a fond light, without artifice.

We didn't think we were going to be quite so moved by the reality of their lives, or become so attached to all the people we met during this adventure.

We emerged changed people from this experience.





CAST THE STUDENTS



LEÏLA ALAOUF

A literature student and feminist activist in the “Les femmes dans la mosquée” (Women in the Mosque) collective, she plays an active role in various different charitable organizations besides her studies. Of Syrian origin, Leïla also wants to denounce the abuses committed by the Assad regime. When we asked her why she signed up for Eloquentia, she confidently told us that she wanted to have a “voice that counts”.



SOULEÏLA MAHIDDIN

Souleïla is a psychology graduate who plays an active role in numerous theater and social projects. After her adventure with Eloquentia, Souleïla joined the theater department of the Toulouse Conservatory. She will play, among others, a role in one of the plays created by the artistic director. Souleïla is currently doing a Civic Service program, where she gives French lessons to asylum seekers and teaches the inhabitants of poorer neighborhoods about recycling and sustainable development.



EDDY MONIOT

Eddy was born to a French father and a mother of Tunisian origin. His family, tired of living in social housing, moved out to the open countryside and a village named Corcy in the Aisne département. Every morning, he walks over 6 miles to the nearest train station to get to the University of Saint-Denis. His dream? To become an actor.



ELHADJ TOURÉ

Elhadj was born into a large family of Egyptian and Guinean origin. After his block of council flats burned down, he was forced to live on the street while he continued his studies. He now lives in an estate not far from the university, where he is doing a master’s in sociology. Aware of the power of the spoken word and the emotions that it can convey, he now wants to speak out to condemn what he had to live through: The eviction of entire families who find themselves forced to live on the street.

And of course, not forgetting the other students: Yacine Ait Khelifa, Ouanissa Bachraoui, Franck Bikpo, Houda Chnabri, Thomas Dedessus Le Moutier, Camélia Kheiredine, Kristina Marcovic, Johan Youtchou, Hanane El Mokhtar, Jeremy Diaz, Kiss Sainte-Rose, Thomas Luquet, and the rest.



CAST THE TEACHERS



BERTRAND PÉRIER

A lawyer at the Court of Cassation, Bertrand Périer teaches rhetoric at France's most prestigious universities. He was motivated to teach in Saint-Denis out of a desire to share his passion for classical rhetoric with the students, to dispel any fears and remove the inhibitions that they often have about it, to show them how enjoyable it can be, and to educate them on its importance in the modern world.



LOUBAKI LOUSSALAT

A big name on the slam poetry scene, where the spoken word is employed with creativity and freedom, Loubaki initiates students into slam poetry during the Eloquentia training program. He leads a writing and performance workshop in the course of which he reviews the rules of the art form, in order to use them, or reject them! For Loubaki, they aren't "compulsory", but they must serve the idea and the message that each student wants to convey.



ALEXANDRA HENRY

A director and a talent scout, Alexandra leads the program's theater workshops. The aim of her sessions is to allow each student to express their human nature through diverse theatrical or public speaking exercises. By creating a culture of care among all the students, Alexandra works to reinforce the students' self-confidence, notably in public-speaking situations.



PIERRE DERYCKE

A singer and singing teacher, Pierre Derycke has developed vocal techniques that he applies to the spoken voice. By helping the students to discover their own potential, he helps them to find their voice as an orator: When well-pitched, it can carry far with little effort and is sufficiently flexible and developed to convey all the various emotions that the candidate will cover during their speech. And it's not just the voice but the whole body which is explored; posture, facial expression, and feelings, all to make the best orator possible.

CREW

A DOCUMENTARY	
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY	Stéphane de Freitas
CO-DIRECTED BY	Ladj Ly
A PRODUCTION BY	My Box Productions
PRODUCED BY	Harry Tordjman & Anna Tordjman
EDITING WITH	Jessica Menéndez Pierre Herbourg
CAMERA	Ladj Ly Timothée Hilst
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