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"Isaac Julien Stages a Sci-Fi Epic in a Renaissance Pleasure Palace"

By Jo Lawson-Tancred

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Sheila Atim on the set of Isaac Julien, *All That Changes You. Metamorphosis* (2025) at Palazzo Te. Photo: © Isaac Julien.

Even among Italy's many artistic splendors, Palazzo Te stands out for the unique scale and spectacle of its long suites filled with decorative frescoes. Conceived and executed by Raphael's protégé Giulio Romano between 1525 and 1535, this palatial villa is celebrating 500 years as an exemplar of the ostentatious but playful flair that characterizes the Mannerist style. It is marking the occasion with the commission of a new, time-bending epic by acclaimed British filmmaker Isaac Julien.

Directly inspired by the theme of metamorphosis that was so central to Romano's design—the Renaissance painter drew heavily from the verses of Ovid—Julien's film takes our timeless fascination with eternal transformation and updates it with a futuristic, sci-fi twist. In this way, he reactivates the 16th-century palazzo, revealing its richly-layered, mythological sagas as ripe for reinterpretation.

The ten-screen installation *All That Changes You. Metamorphosis* debuts in the palazzo's newly renovated "Fruttieri" wing on October 3, on view through February 1, 2026. Viewers are guided on a philosophical journey by two space traveling goddesses, played by British actors Gwendoline Christie, best known for *Game of Thrones*, *Wednesday*, and *Severance*; and Sheila Atim, a lead in the 2023 indie *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*.

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Gwendoline Christie on the set of Issac Julien, *All That Changes You. Metamorphosis* (2025) at Palazzo Te. Photo: © Isaac Julien.

On Julien's first trip to Palazzo Te, which was originally intended as a pleasure palace for for Federico II Gonzaga, Marquess of Mantua, it was immediately apparent how the artwork might translate to the big screen. He felt particularly enthralled by a room containing *The Fall of the Giants*, in which scenes of chaos and destruction wrap around the walls and draw the eye up, over the domed ceiling. "I thought, my god, it's like cinema," the artist recalled over lunch at a London hotel. "It's just huge." It was obvious where he would set the film's triumphant finale.

Julien has remained tight-lipped about the film's plot, but the auteur has promised "some surprising elements" and one final "philosophical revelation." We do know that the divine protagonists's journey takes them between Palazzo Te and two other extraordinary architectural feats, each representing different temporalities. One of these is Charles Jencks's unique postmodernist marvel, The Cosmic House in London, and the other is a futuristic spaceship especially designed by Richard Found. As they traverse time and place, the goddesses will also experience shifting identities.

Central to Julien's story are issues of climate crisis and social inequality that have been on his mind since fires devastated Los Angeles at the start of this year. Rather than indulge a straightforwardly apocalyptic narrative, however, the director uses science fiction to imagine a more hopeful, post-anthropocentric future that considers the stake of non-human sentient lifeforms.

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Isaac Julien and Gwendoline Christie on the set of Issac Julien, *All That Changes You. Metamorphosis* (2025) at Palazzo Te.
Photo: © Isaac Julien.

The film's digressive, non-linear approach will be familiar to fans of Julien's previous films, many of which had a similarly liberal attitude towards warping time. Julien's 1989 breakthrough *Looking for Langston* was an instant classic of queer cinema that pulls viewers into the imagined private world of the playwright Langston Hughes and his fellow Black artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Though it was set in the 1920s, the artist has explained that it was really about the AIDS crisis.

The most obvious comparison for *All That Changes You. Metamorphosis* is Julien's *Baltimore* (2003), which is similarly set in a series of cultural institutions—Baltimore's Contemporary Museum, Walters Art Museum, and the Great Blacks in Wax Museum—and features masterpieces of Italian Renaissance art. For Julien, there is always something new to be gained from looking to the past.

"We've tried to say that your teachers are all around you" said Julien, who owes this impulse to the fact that he himself is a professor at U.C. Santa Cruz and is passionate about supporting younger generations. "It's so important to realize that historically, we've been in very complicated, politically ambivalent moments." This is what drove him to revisit the lives of several key historical figures, including Langston, Frederick Douglass and the Italian architect Lina Bo Bardi.

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Sheila Atim on the set of Issac Julien, *All That Changes You. Metamorphosis* (2025) at Palazzo Te. Photo: © Isaac Julien.

The Renaissance, a cultural and intellectual “rebirth,” and the Enlightenment, which privileged reason and scientific thought over traditional authorities like monarchies or religious institutions, were both periods of upheaval that brought about significant societal change. Julien has suggested that we too may have arrived “at a particular post-Enlightenment time, with crises and wars, where ideas of universalism are being challenged.” Old systems that once offered reassurance now feel at risk, suggesting that we may need to prepare for a similar break with the past.

For this bold new venture that looks not only at the present through the lens of the past but also into the future, Julien has channeled the influence of several science fiction heroines, including Donna Haraway, Naomi Mitchison, and Octavia Butler, who previously inspired Julien’s film *Paradise Omeros* (2002). “They were the writers influencing our conversations that have seeped into the work,” he said, reflecting on the process of writing a script for *All That Changes You. Metamorphosis* with his partner and longtime collaborator Mark Nash.

In a project of staggering scope, the ideas of these pioneering 20th-century eco-feminists are reimaged against the dramatic backdrop of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as brought to life by the brush of Renaissance master Giulio Romano. Much like the dramatic fall of the Giants, the stakes of Julien’s inquiry into our precarious ecological future feel terrifyingly high, yet if anything can inspire hope, it is surely this swirl of spectacular art and philosophical revelation.

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