

## Class Action



at nap time, Touitou believes that a child is never too young to develop an appreciation for quality goods. “Even if you grow up to be an accountant, it’s better to be surrounded by beautiful furniture than by ugly furniture,” he says.

A.P.E. began taking shape last summer, when Touitou and his wife, Judith, were looking for a school for their daughter Lily, now three. State-run French preschools, with their 30-to-1 student-teacher ratios, were out; Judith lobbied for a private Catholic school in their Left Bank neighborhood, but Jean, who was raised in Tunisia by Jewish parents, has, as he puts it, “a big philosophical problem with monotheism.” Ultimately he and Judith teamed with Géraldine Lefebvre (the director of Lily’s day care center at the time) and two other associates to launch A.P.E. in a space that Jean had been renting on rue Cassette. Several kids followed Lefebvre from the day care center to the new school, whose 25 slots have been filled.

Though it was designed by architect Laurent Deroo, the man behind A.P.C.’s edgily minimalist boutiques, the space is packed with primary colors and makes all the appropriate concessions to its function. “This is a nursery school, so you can’t just put in a concrete floor because it looks good,” says Touitou, a wry and soft-spoken 56-year-old who delivers most of his comments with a world-weary half smile. Deroo installed several multi-function built-ins, such as plywood closet doors that double as climbing walls, to encourage the kids to use objects in innovative ways. A satellite space, opening around the corner this spring, will serve as the school’s arts workshop, with a mini stage for concerts and plays.

Not surprisingly, the school has already caught on with fashion-forward parents: Mathias Augustyniak, of the influential graphic design duo M/M (Paris), has enrolled his two-year-old daughter, and Touitou has hired M/M to create what Augustyniak calls a “visual toolbox” for the school—a series of shapes and colors that the kids will use to make toys or projects of their own. “Education is really a problem in France,” says Augustyniak. “It’s a system that tries to make everyone the same, instead of appreciating differences. Jean is doing something really adventurous here.”

One activity that won’t be on the syllabus at A.P.E. is a kiddie runway show. Even with his clothing label, which he founded in 1987, Touitou has never been big on fashion shows or ad campaigns, instead positioning the company as a kind of cult antibrand. And his philosophy about clothes, that they shouldn’t overshadow the individuality of

the wearer, parallels the educational philosophy at A.P.E., which cultivates a dynamic of independence that allows the students to learn to be themselves. (There are no mandatory activities and very few strict rules.) Still, for Touitou, “civilizing” the kids—teaching them the right ways to live among others—is key. He’s convinced that the Montessori method, with its emphasis on freedom and self-empowerment, is often taken too far and has resulted in generations of overly enabled children who grow into neurotic adults. “Montessori has kept a lot of shrinks in business,” says Touitou.

Another big problem, he feels, is overindulgent parents who believe their kids can do no wrong. “You hear about the stereotypical Jewish mother, but since the Sixties, all mothers have become like that,” says Touitou. “Even the fathers have become Jewish mothers. It’s awful.” Still, he thinks that plenty of children have talents that go unnoticed and regrets that his own parents weren’t more attuned to his inner rock star. A late bloomer on the music front, Touitou built a recording studio at the A.P.C. headquarters in 1998 after launching his own record label; his crowd of friends includes many style-setting music and film types, such as Jarvis Cocker and Roman Coppola.

A.P.E. is expensive by French standards: One year’s tuition runs about \$16,000, while state-run preschools are free. Touitou feels a little guilty about this, but he points out that A.P.E. employs only top-tier teachers (one for every five to eight students), and that the real-estate costs are high. He eventually hopes to open additional branches in more diverse neighborhoods. (Touitou, who has two older children from a previous marriage, is the kind of dad who drags his teenagers on vacation to India to demonstrate that not everyone is lucky enough to grow up in a large apartment near Saint-Sulpice.)

Those who know Touitou view the school as one of his characteristically savvy, forward-looking ventures—a project that others will someday try to copy. (“Jean is like a good chess player who’s always a few moves ahead,” says Augustyniak.) Touitou says he sees it as a way to “build something solid that might last longer than fashion.” When describing his overall outlook on life, he uses the French word *désespéré*, which means something between “despairing” and “hopeless.” Given the current state of the world, he says, “I think it’s only by attempting to create something beautiful that you manage to have a bearable existence.” Whether it’s with his clothing designs, his music projects or the new preschool, he says, “I’m trying to do that.”

—CHRISTOPHER BAGLEY

From top: An artist at work at A.P.E.; Jean Touitou at the school with his daughter Lily.



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