

Before Cottereau

Text by Sunteck Yao (performer of corporeal mime)

All clowns are looking for one character in their lives, a character that takes a lifetime to refine. There is no other way.

In 1974, the 24-year-old mime Marcel Marceau created Bip the Clown. Based on Pierrot, a stock clown character of Commedia dell'Arte, Bip wore a white face, black-ringed eyes with teardrops, red lips and a beflowered hat. The birth of Bip led Marceau to go further from (or even transcend) the total theatre of his mentor Jean-Louis Barrault, and the enrichment of body sections of Étienne Decroux, the father of modern corporeal mime. Bip reconnected with the grassroots nature of the clown character of Commedia dell'Arte and set the tone for Marceau's artistic direction. Bip began to appear in Marceau's works, taking on the roles of bird catcher, lion tamer, tango dancer, and mask maker. The different roles were embodied in one character. Bip became a prototype of Marceau's, or even an actor of flesh and blood who breathed and created on stage and in life.

In the 1920s, the era of silent film was coming to an end. The silent comedic performance of Buster Keaton had created a series of unique, vivid characters of joy and sorrow on the big screen. Deeply influenced by Keaton, Marceau created the persona of Bip on stage more than 20 years later, through which he elevated the creation of illusion and the everyday in the body in pantomime. He took clown pantomime beyond France to the international stage where it became widely popular. The popularity of Marceau echoed that of Charlie Chaplin in silent film, as both created a distinct icon that only they inhabited. We cannot say Marceau personified any character he played. In retrospect, we see Marceau only ever playing the character of Bip. That is what's precious about Marceau — he spent his whole life refining one character whose lifetime and experience covered the understanding of pantomime of most people. Mime Marceau was one.

With the passing of Marceau, clown pantomime (versus corporeal pantomime) practically reached its end as a form. Yet Marceau left behind a more important legacy: his (and that of countless artists from the last generation) pure dedication to art. For the later generation, many of Marceau's mime exercises like touching the invisible wall, pulling the rope, walking up and down the stairs, and walking have become standard training. It is no longer meaningful to duplicate these exercises in performance. The important topic for all performers of clown pantomime is to find the character that only belongs to them, and to refine this character endlessly.

On this note, it is interesting to observe the artistic journey of French mime clown Julien Cottereau. From Cirque du Soleil to children's theatre and his own work, the styling of Cottereau's characters has evolved from a child's bow tie along with a red hat and suspenders, the clown with a red nose, to the simple-cut outfit that denotes maturity in *Imagine-toi*, the solo work he has been touring in the past few years. These changes reflect Cottereau's clown journey. Just as the title of *Imagine-toi* suggests, a blank piece of paper may be anything you see; if you cannot see it, imagine it.

In *Imagine-toi*, Cottereau creates fantasy objects with his hands with a similar flair as Marceau's bird catcher's. At other moments he bursts into frantic yet precise dance movements, and weaves a sonic landscape with the flawless sound effects he creates with his mouth. Cottereau takes the audience's breath away, manipulating their imagination with his every move. The spontaneous interaction with the

audience stems from the clown's experience of observing people over time, and his feeling the warmth, emotion and gestures of people by entering the audience. Cottureau not only stirs the audience's imagination but merges it into his own rhythm. The sparks of spontaneous imagination and illusion fly, on stage and off. They are in Cottureau's grasp and they shimmer with artistry.

Today clown pantomime takes on many manifestations. Some are incorporated into the new circus with stage objects and props installations; others appear in different kinds of theatre and film. There are also imitations of Marceau's work. Yet none have broken the walls of the maze. There are those like Cottureau, an artist who is dedicated to the beauty of the creation of body illusions. A mime who spends his lifetime searching for, colluding with and questioning the clown that is his and to get close to him.

Translated by Nicolette Wong