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SHAWN WEN

A Body Later On

On the need for the school

On his second tour of America, Marcel Marceau found street mimes trapped in imaginary boxes on every corner.

A journalist asked Marcel Marceau what he thought of the copycats. Marceau responded, "It's better than mugging people."

A journalist asked Marcel Marceau why most Americans hate mime. Marceau responded, "That's because most mimes are lousy."

Marcel Marceau said, "A great artist in mime has pupils with whom he works regularly, often throughout his whole life, and who in turn carry on the traditions they have learned from their master. But sometimes, when the mime gets old and dies, and his pupils have become very few, the art fades into obscurity. We have to wait for a great new artist to arrive to carry on the tradition and add his own work of advancement."

The Marcel Marceau International School of Mimodrama no longer exists. The building still stands on rue René Boulanger. A dance studio expanded into the performance space.

Marcel Marceau said, "I knew I would die one day. I didn't want people to say, 'Oh, he was the only mime in existence.'"

He lobbied the French government for ten years to build a mime school. Thirteen times, he asked for an audience with President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.

He said, "Either France will give me a subsidy or I will go to America. France owes this to me."

Two American universities offered to fund the mime school. In 1978, France gave him two hundred thousand dollars.

He said, "If it had been done in America, it would have been two million. I would have said yes, but I am a masochist."

Marcel Marceau gave interviews on the history of mime, the importance of mime. He appeared on talk shows. He wrote chapters and forewords to books. He recorded an album. His crusade, his obsession, was to prove that mime was an art form unto itself. He tired of the questions: *Why didn't you go into traditional theater? Why didn't you go into dance?*

He said, "Mime needs perfection. When you're in a play, fifty percent is the genius of the actor, fifty percent is the genius of the author. When a mime is not perfect, you see nothing."

On giants

“David and Goliath.” He is at once the boy and the giant. His transitions are so seamless, you almost believe they appear onstage at the same time.

Director: Marcel, it’s beautiful.

Marceau: I made two or three mistakes but fortunately you didn’t see them.

“Bip Goes on a Date,” but his love interest is a giantess. But but but. You know loveliness and size cannot coexist. He dances with an invisible ghost twice his height.

There’s a moment when you think the love story between the amazon and the waif stands a chance. But she grows and grows, her massive body crowding him out of his own apartment.

Next act.

On new mimes

Marcel Marceau had sympathy for Michael Jackson. He saw in Michael Jackson something of himself.

“Michael has the soul of a mime,” he said.

What is this soul of a mime? What is this soul that belonged to Marcel Marceau and to Michael Jackson and to all actors who stand onstage making gestures?

“The soul of a mime is a complex one, part child and part artist, part clown and part tragic figure.”

“I’ve seen Michael on TV for years, and I think that he is a poet. But now he is in the tradition of French poets like Verlaine and Rimbaud because his subject is the lost childhood.”

On December 4, 1995, Michael Jackson was promoting his HBO special at the Beacon Auditorium. His career was at its pinnacle.

More than ten years before, he modeled the moonwalk after Marceau’s “Walking against the Wind.” And ever since, he has been turning his focus, ever so slowly, away from the voice and toward the body. Two days later, he would collapse from exhaustion. But that night he faced the reporters.

One yelled, “Are you still married?”

Another, “Say hello!”

Michael Jackson gave them all the same response: silence.

Instead, he brought out a mime to speak for him.

Marceau announced, “For the first time, the King of Mime would work with the King of Pop.”

They were two men on stage with whitened faces and agile bodies. Held under a beam of bright light, Michael Jackson performed the invisible box routine. A metaphor for both their lives.

The journalist Neal Strauss agreed with Marceau. He also thought that Michael Jackson was transforming into a mime. He wrote: “After Mr. Jackson’s collapse, a medical technician said there was so much make-up on his face that medics had to lift his shirt to check his complexion.”

“Marcel Marceau is honored by those who draw on the Marcel Marceau style of mime to create their own work,” said Marcel Marceau.

He pushes against the floor, to make it look as if he is pushing against a heaviness in the air. The fabric stretches over his torso, clinging to juts of bone, so that a hollowness makes itself known. This body is composed of absences and devotions. The clothes don't constrict. They wrap around his sinewy limbs like skin. They fit better than his own loose skin. His costume is smooth like a porpoise. The attached red rose is a dorsal fin.

On darker performances

Marcel Marceau said, “When I started, I hunted butterflies. Later, I began to remember the war and I began to dig deeper, into misery, into solitude, into the fight of human souls against robots.”

In “The Trial,” he scurries back and forth across the stage. He is defendant, prosecution, defense, judge, jury, and all the witnesses. The prisoner arrives in chains. The attorneys yap manic speech. The jurors deliver a guilty verdict. And the judge’s face glowers without forgiveness.

In “Bureaucrats,” a visitor walks through an office labyrinth. He is an innocent outsider. He meets one useless drone after another. It is a maze peopled with zombies.

And then, on faded video, our performer struts under the backdrop of a crescent moon. He is a sculptor chiseling at a statue. In earnestness, he hammers until there is nothing left.

On the connective tissues

“I don’t mime to look nice or cute. It must be tense.”

Collagen fibers
Braided, banded, packed
Coalesce and coalesce
Into macroaggregates, into fascicles and tendons
These little bundles of string tie muscle to bone
They stretch and spring
Tear, inflame

“The more I play now, the better I feel in my muscles, in my control.”

Ligaments are elastic
Under tension, they lengthen
The body stretches
Supple joints flower

“Do you make them laugh under the belt, or do you make them laugh with an idea? The best is laughter through tears, a laugh that hurts.”

Cutaneous
Of the skin
The nerve endings react
To heat and cold
To touch

“The more I play now, the better I feel in my muscles, in my control.”

I am the pant legs
I am the pant legs
I flare
I never hug the ankles
I bloom out

On his own

He claims that he cannot tell his fans apart. French, American, Vietnamese—all people defined by their adoration for him.

He says they laugh and cry at the same moments. With a flutter of his fingers, he reaches in and pulls out the same sigh. He sees the onlookers, the gigglers and sighers, the criers—all from behind the shadow of a hand.

His hand, with all its particulars. Each line, bulge, and groove—defined. They tell the story of a man. This man.

The fingerprints are proof he is only a man.

But he wanted the universal. He wanted commonality across people. He said he searched for truth. But what if that was just him?

What if all people were not the same? Only he was the same. From France to America to Vietnam. He had not found the formula for the end of suffering. No formula to cook up empathy and understanding. He had only found a formula for himself to follow.

On Anne

Anne Sicco was a nineteen-year-old fan who wandered into Marcel Marceau's dressing room. He was approaching fifty.

First Camille was born. They married. Then Aurélia was born.

In old photographs, Anne was slender in a white tiered dress. Her blonde hair was tied in a long braid.

In time, she came to teach experimental theater at Marceau's mime school. For years, they kept residence in Paris. In the evenings he read, listened to music, and painted, speaking little to Anne.

Anne said, "It's a silent sort of exchange."

Anne. Perhaps the only one who understood.

Anne said, "He has silent cries."

She's smiling from behind a camera. Her lens pointed at the leathery face of an old man.

She was more interested in looking at him than in looking at herself.

Anne: she had the same name as his mother.

Anne, who gave birth to daughters.

In 1984, they divorced.

In 1985, she stopped teaching at the school.

In 1986, she founded her own company.

After a long journey, Pip returns only to see that Estella has aged. She is thinner, sadder. Loose wrinkles hang where her hard scowl once was. What was all that energy spent for? Women are not worth striving for. The reward is too fleeting, and then the reward is too much.

He said, "My personal life has been very difficult. I have been married three times. They all failed. It's hard to be a family man in my position. When you're traveling all over the world you can't have your wife wait-

ing for you, like Penelope. Now one of my ex-wives is teaching in my school in Paris. We have become very good friends. In this sense, my life is not a failure.”

In interviews, he referred to her as his *former wife*. Why then did the obituary notices print “Survived by his wife Anne Sicco Marceau”?

Their younger daughter Aurélia was about to go onstage when she heard that her father had died. Anne was the director. She canceled the performance.

Anne said, “Je ressens une immense douleur.”

She said, “C’était un homme qui me fascinait.”

“Nous sommes tous bouleversés.” We are all shocked.

On work

In interviews, Marcel Marceau often said that if he had not been an actor, he would have become a painter.

a dialogue

The painter in me mocks the actor.
“We are the same,” the actor cries.
“We are not,” the painter replies.
The actor would like to continue the discussion,
But the painter will not.

The actor can only inhabit his shell.
His shell himself his shell
It bends
It folds and stretches
It takes the shape of whatever
More putty than flesh
But it is nonetheless a shell
Its grooves and ridges deepen with time.

The actor
Says, “I make the visible invisible.”
Says, “I make the invisible visible.”
Will such shape-shifting make the shell stiffen and crack?

My actor does not believe in limits.
But he knows they are there.
“We work with what we have,” he says.
He starves the body, then he nourishes it.
He folds it up and packs it into a suitcase wherever he goes.
Then, in the dressing room, he smooths the wrinkles and puts it on.

He kisses the body late at night.
He caresses it and makes promises.
One more try, my actor says to my body.
The little mistakes may have been invisible to you. But I see them.

One more.
One more.
My actor believes in precision.

My painter does not see a wobble as a tumble, though the actor disagrees.
The painter's hands are filthy, dripping with ink.

My painter's brow sweats and I allow it.
Sweat won't ruin make-up that took an hour to apply.

He is not careless, exactly.
He does not need to be militant.
If the hairs of his brush flay out, if the paint dries in its tube, if the palette
chinks, if the canvas tears
He gets another.

Still, my painter is jealous.
He would often say to whomever,
If it were not for the actor, it would have been me.
The attention. The accomplishment.

My painter is wrong.
The actor is jealous, too.
He wants tools.
An arsenal of artillery
Smearing surfaces upon surfaces.
But the actor's brush is not a brush.
The actor's brush is his face, his hands, his limbs, and his chest.
He cannot dabble.
He can only inhabit.

My painter is a poltergeist.
He can walk away from the painting.
When he leaves, he disappears for days.
Months.
The world passes by in his absence.

My actor clings.
Man sticks around.
Does what I do.
When I feel thirsty, his hand lifts the glass to my lips.

When I knock into the table, he takes the bruises onstage.

He knows the painter's life is easy.
To fill canvases
To add and add and then to add
Rather than to be and be and be
To send works out into the world
And rest.

He thinks of the paintings
Left to fight on their own

I'm not sorry. *You should be sorry.* I'm not sorry.
The actor did not take the role of father.
I am not the best father.
Two hundred shows a year.

The daughter to the father—
And where were you, Daddy?
Being there is enough. I was there.
Where?
Elsewhere. Better than dead.
Not so.
Better.
No.

One
One looks at oneself in the mirror
Half-dressed
Undressed
Pale
One looks at the circles under one's eyes
And one cannot imagine white make-up caked upon one's skin
One cannot imagine that in half a day, one will be onstage
One puts one's hats in the drawer
One hates the clutter
Father son actor painter
One imagines all the roles one must play
And one thinks to trade it all in for Bip
One for all
Bip
An exaggeration for all men
One thinks that the world's audiences got it wrong
Bip is not comic
Bip is tragic
How would Bip perform as one?
One
In the mirror
One
Without make-up
One
Who isn't ready for the day

I am not afraid that the audience will crush me
Though, sometimes they threaten
A wall of heat
Of flesh and breath
They laugh and cry in unison
They ask for top form
I am not scared of little demands
One man can hold off a thousand
One baited animal
In the gladiator stadium
One can command a crowd

But remember. Time is material. You can feel it. Time erodes your skin, like wind and rain.

Onward from a childhood worshiping the silent films, time has carved a singular trajectory for him. The mime has never been anything but a mime. Seconds and minutes are an arbitrary measure of time. The mime keeps count in heartbeats and breaths.

After decades, he is weathered.

On aging

“There is always something rather sad about any performing artist who fails to realize that his career is over, but Marcel Marceau is riding on his name and past achievements to such a degree that one’s patience and pity is beginning to run out.”

Does aging give us wisdom? Does it make us stubborn?

A correspondence from the brain: The signals are lost in a neuron forest. Water floods into the organ’s grooves. But the mime continues to perform.

“[E]very action is grossly overplayed, every facial expression exaggerated and the humor is at least fifty years out of date. The characters cannot even read a newspaper without looking like rabbits chomping grass.”

Brain cells bloom. Brain cells go wild. A fistful of brain cells scatter in the wind.

“For me two hours of Marceau is like being trapped in a bar with an accomplished raconteur who insists on telling endless shaggy-dog stories.”

Bip is a child hunting butterflies. He joyfully runs from one end of the stage to another with an imaginary net, chasing after a bug.

Bip is an old man hunting butterflies. His exaggerated movements are heavy with sentiment. He tries to capture the butterfly in his hands, but he misses. You can see the dismay written on his face.

Marceau came up with the butterfly routine in a movie theater when he was fourteen. At the end of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a butterfly flutters over the barrel of a soldier’s gun. As the young man reaches over the trench to touch the butterfly, he reveals himself to an enemy sniper.

Of course, cat and mouse is a game with consequences. Finally, Bip catches the butterfly. It dies in his hands as he tries to hold it. He brings it to his ears as if listening for a heartbeat.

Body of an animal is a heat engine. Death is a planned demise. The heart's a force-pump, growing bigger and slower as we age.

Routine

A fetus curls. Its body blooms like a flower. It takes the first weak steps and looks up at the sky with fear and wonder. It becomes a he. He rises up to march. His first steps are timid and slow. Slow. His body rises. His back straightens. His chest inflates. The force of air fills his lungs. His steps are graceful and robust. But this lasts only minutes. Strength is not the bulk. It is not even half. He slows down. The body tenses. The steps stir. He stagnates. The mouth becomes twisted. His eyes turn blank. The walk becomes a crawl, and he curls up again. The body shrinks and his face grows dark. At the moment before the stage light goes dim, death perfectly resembles birth.