

DARK CIRCUS

STEREOPTIK



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Premiere Festival d'Avignon 2015

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DARK CIRCUS

STEREOPTIK

Created and performed by Romain Bermond and Jean-Baptiste Maillet
Based on an original story by Pef

Artistic collaborator: Frédéric Maurin

Stage Manager : Arnaud Viala and Frank Jamond

Production and Administration: Emmanuel Magis and Clémence Pierre

Premiere Festival d'Avignon 2015

Production : STEREOPTIK

Coproduction : L'Hectare scène conventionnée de Vendôme, Théâtre Jean Arp scène conventionnée de Clamart, Théâtre Le Passage scène conventionnée de Fécamp, Théâtre Epidaure/Bouloire-Cie Jamais 203.

Support from : Théâtre de l'Agora scène nationale d'Evry et de l'Essonne, L'Echalier/Saint-Agil, Théâtre Paris Villette, MJC Mont-Mesly Madeleine Rebérioux/Créteil.

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Length : 55 minutes

Suitable for all ages, from 8+

DARK CIRCUS

“Come for the show, stay for the woe” is the motto of the morbid circus at the centre of STEREOPTIK’S latest piece. *Dark Circus* is the result of a collaboration between Pef, author and illustrator of « The Prince of Motordu » and numerous other children’s books, and Romain Bermond and Jean-Baptiste Maillet of STEREOPTIK. A chance meeting 9 years ago blossomed into a friendship, and from this friendship grew the desire to create something together.

Dark Circus represents two firsts for STEREOPTIK. It is the first time the company will work from a script, and the first time words will be spoken on stage—a down-at-the-heels rocker of an emcee has the honour...

In this sad circus the catastrophes pile up, one number after another. The trapezist crashes to the ground, the animal trainer is devoured by his lion, the human cannonball never returns from outer space. Luckily there’s a clumsy juggler to breathe a little colour into the proceedings.

If the circus is dark, the tone is light. Music and images accompany the action and the story is laced with poetic moments and a healthy dose of irony: “Come for the show, stay for the woe.”

The ink drawings that provide the backdrop for *Dark Circus*, thick and black, resemble photographs in their use of light and contrast. The various techniques used onstage create images of extraordinary beauty and inventiveness. Here, the visual magic of the theatre meets the childlike wonder of the circus. Before our eyes, an urban landscape of buildings and streets transforms into a crowd-filled tent. Lit from above, a drum set becomes a runway to the stars, the neck of a guitar morphs into a stern animal trainer. A few flicks of an eraser and a wild horse is liberated from the ring, spreading poetry in his wake.

Maïa Bouteillet - translation Hillary Keegin

STEREOPTIK

Created in 2008 at the same time as the eponymous show, STEREOPTIK brings together Romain Bermond and Jean-Baptiste Maillet, both visual artists and musicians. Based on a score they build and write together, every one of their shows is built under the eyes of its audience, live. Theatre of shadows, of objects and puppets, silent films, unplugged or electronic concerts, fairy tales and cartoons are so many fields and genres whose boundaries STEREOPTIK likes to play with. At the heart of the many forms of art that appear on the stage is one principle: to show the audience the technical process that leads to the apparition of characters, of scenes, of a story. The audience is free to let themselves be carried away by the images and stories projected onto the screen, or to see in detail what leads to the movement of the cartoon on the screen, how ink creates a silhouette on a transparent background, what instrument is used to bring it to life. Visual, musical, and without text, STEREOPTIK's creations arouse curiosity and wonder in audiences of all ages and all nationalities.

BIOGRAPHIES

ROMAIN BERMOND

Romain Bermond's passion for the visual arts bloomed in childhood. He took a perspective drawing class at a young age, which led him to specialize in visual arts already as a high school student in Paris. There he met two masters, Isabelle Labey and Fabien Jomaron, who guided him in his studies. He then went on to earn his bachelor's in fine arts from the Visual Arts Faculty in Paris, and participated in his first collective exhibit at the Nouvelle Ecole du Montparnasse. On this occasion, he met Horacio Garcia Rossi, an Argentinian kinetic art painter, who then became his mentor. Soon after, Romain Bermond exhibited his work in several Parisian sites, in particular at the Gabrielle Laroche gallery and the Guigon gallery, and he participated in numerous art events in France and abroad (SLICK, Nuit blanche...). Alongside his work in theater as a set designer, scenographer, or musician, he developed an interest in percussion and Afro-Cuban music, and thus began to study with great names such as Miguel Gomez, Anga Diaz, and Orlando Poleo. He thereby joined several different groups, Cuban music orchestras, and brass bands.

JEAN-BAPTISTE MAILLET

Jean-Baptiste Maillet began his musical studies at the age of seven in conservatories in Chatillon and Yerres, and in the regional conservatory in Saint-Maur-des-Fossés, where he studied composition and percussion, as well as piano. He was also a student at the American School of Modern Music in Paris for four years, where he diversified his techniques to include arranging, and discovered jazz, quintet writing, brass, and big band. His eclecticism was apparent from the very start of his career, with projects in chanson française, brass band, electro, in addition to circus and film music. He has shared the stage with internationally renowned musicians such as Clyde Wright (singer from the Golden Gate Quartet), David Walters, Cheptel Aleikoum, Les Yeux Noirs, Jur (cofounder of the Cridacompany), and Florent Vintrigner from La Rue Kétanou.

It was in a brass band that Romain Bermond and Jean-Baptiste Maillet met. Together, they designed their first show in 2008, *Stereoptik*, which was a huge success with their audiences and with curators. This was the beginning of the STEREOPTIK company, which, since 2011, has crossed the globe with four shows and an exhibit in its repertoire. Their most recent show, *Dark Circus*, premiered at the Festival d'Avignon in 2015 and has since been performed on many international stages (London International Mime Festival, Wiener Festwochen, Zürcher Theater Spektakel, Festival Romaeuropa, Hong Kong Arts Festival...). This show has toured far and wide in prestigious settings. With support from the French Ministry for Culture and the Centre-Val de Loire region, STEREOPTIK is now a partner of the Théâtre de la Ville de Paris and the Hectare, a state-funded theater in Vendôme.

Interview Romain Bermond & Jean-Baptiste Maillet

Who does what when you are working on a show, then during the show itself ?

JBM : We are both visual artists and musicians. Romain is more of a cartoonist, I'm more of a composer, but we share all creative duties on our shows. We come up with the musical and visual aesthetic of a show together; same with its structure, the different elements that make it up, the transitions. Onstage, even if I do manipulate the puppets, one of us draws, the other does the music. That being said, it's not quite as clear-cut in Dark Circus, because some instruments play an active part in the scenography and in the story. At some point, the snare drum comes to represent the circus ring, and the electric guitar becomes a character.

During the show, do you play characters in the story, or are you instead trying to disappear ?

RB : Neither. We are always visible. The entire show revolves around the idea that people can see us perform it. We build the sets beforehand, compose the music, direct the story and come up with the events. Then, in front of the audience, we re-build the whole thing together and animate it. We don't try to hide, but we are not characters within the show, either. We are extensions of the puppets and drawings. Our existence onstage depends on them, we move, we act based on their needs. We are not aware of the potential beauty or of the meaning of our movements; the audience might enjoy them, or find them interesting, but we are focused on practical questions, on adjustments, on camera changes, on changes in rhythm, in the sound.

JBM : The contrast between what people see us do and what appears on the screen is at the heart of our approach. Even if the image we produce is striking, its only interest for us lies in the fact that people can see us produce it. The result does matter, of course, but it's how you get to that result that is spectacular. Our work isn't a performance in the sense that it is improvised, but it is one in the sense that it's all done in the present, by us alone, in full view of the audience.

RB : Every scene is like a test of skill, performed without any safety net.

What was your relationship to the text Pef gave you ? Did working on a story written by someone else make you change your method ?

Romain Bermond : For our previous shows, we had start with a much vaguer story, which we would adapt based on the techniques we came up with. It was through the methods we used and the drawings that appeared that the show came to be, that its themes took form. For Les Costumes trop grands (Costumes Too Big), we had written a story first, but it changed because of the constraints of the stage, in particular because of our choice not to use spoken language in our shows. For Dark Circus, Pef gave us a beautiful text, with a clear, precise story, but without any specific stage directions. We could do whatever we wanted. It was up to us to figure out how the actions he described would take place onstage.

Jean-Baptiste Maillet : This text is a great starting point to work on a story written by someone else. Pef is a writer and cartoonist. He has written books that were illustrated by others, and vice versa. That is the kind of relationship we have with him. He gave us a story that we then had to complete, to develop the way we wanted. That freedom was both a source of joy and a challenge.

Had you asked Pef anything in particular when it came to the themes or structure of the text ? How does it echo your préoccupations ?

RB : We just told him we wanted him to create a poetic, fantastical world. We had talked about doing something together for a while, but we knew nothing about this allegory of the genesis of the circus before he gave it to us.

JBM : This circus story could be part of our universe, because it's clear that our shows have to do with childhood. We only work with simple things, things everyone has in their home; charcoal, pencils, felt-tip pens, paper, cardboard, etc. Our shows are about creativity, which also belongs to childhood. Teenagers stop drawing or playing music to focus on so-called more important activities. Everything that belongs to the field of creation and expression is often left behind. To see adults who still do those things probably reminds people of their childhood. People often tell us, "It's magic," the way you'll say it of something in your everyday life that is simple but that seems amazing.

Do you identify with any specific category of the performing arts— theatre of objects, puppet theatre, performance ?

RB : It's only after the fact that our shows were described as belonging to puppet theatre, by outside observers. People who knew what they were talking about looked at our work, and we discovered the work of other puppeteers—"real" ones—, who had received an actual training and were much more talented than we were in this particular field. At first, we went straight to matter, without any theoretical training. We didn't have any theoretical knowledge about animation, either, or about video. . I never received any training to do what I do today. There isn't a school in the world that prepares you for such a protean approach, actually. We don't want to put a label on it. The more we can play, the more propositions we can make, the more different universes we meet... and the more we are happy.

Everything you do is so concrete, yet isn't it a way to escape the real world?

RB : What we are interested in is the world of the marvelous, the circulation of an emotion that erases the border between the audience and us, that brings us together. Which is why we don't want to talk about things like fear, weapons, worry, etc., all those themes that surround us and are systematically called upon.

JBM : What we are proposing is to share a poetic moment, without making any demands. We want to help people escape reality, to offer them something that is different from what they see when they turn on the news, even to go in the opposite direction, not because we think we can change reality, but as a way to remove ourselves from it.