

DARK CIRCUS

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"Come on, come all, be unhappy!" This message echoes through the streets of a black and white city whose inhabitants come to the circus to get sadder. In the centre of the dark circus tent, a sinister ringmaster introduces a series of ever more tragic acts. The Dark Circus is the negative genesis of the joy brought by the circus of our collective childhood. Born within Pef's mind and handed over to STEREOPTIK, it proves entertaining, thanks to a caustic cruelty reminiscent of ancient gladiatorial games. However, a juggler, as unlucky as the acrobats, trapeze artists, and tamers who've come before him, drops a red ball out of his hat. It turns out to be the discordant note, the flashy touch of colour everyone was secretly waiting for. The unavoidable destiny of this circus is upended. Magic enters the ring, finding its place alongside the virtuosity of Romain Bermond and Jean-Baptiste Maillet, who animate instruments, puppets, and shadows. Thanks to the film that is created under their eyes by the drawing and music, the audience once again feels the wonder that fills the hearts of children when they hear a drum roll.

The show will premiere on 19 July at the Chapelle des Pénitents blancs, Arignon.

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. Just as in *Stereoptik*, *Les Costumes trop grands* (*Costumes Too Big*), and *Congés payés* (*Paid Vacation Time*), *Dark Circus*'s 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.

PEF

Born in 1939, Pierre Elie Ferrier has worked as a journalist, as a perfume salesman, and as a racecar test driver, before publishing his first book, dedicated to his grandmother, who he claims held even weirder jobs (*Me, My Grandmother...*, 1978). A writer and a cartoonist, this rambler whose first love is for the wind and clouds uses the pen name Pef for the many books he writes. In 1980, he created the now wildly famous Prince de Motordu, the hero of a series of children's books filled with puns and other linguistic stunts. In 2014, Gallimard published Pef's second book for adults.

INTERVIEW WITH STEREOPTIK

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 preoccupations?

R.B.: 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.

J.-B.M.: 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.

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

J.-B.M.: 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?

R.B.: 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.

J.-B.M.: 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.

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

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

R.B.: 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?

R.B.: 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.

J.-B.M.: 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.

AND...

YOUNG AUDIENCES AT THE PÉNITENTS BLANCS

- *Riquet* by Laurent Brethome, from 4 to 8 July
- *notallwhowanderarelost* by Benjamin Verdonck, from 12 to 16 July

CINEMATOGRAPHIC TERRITORIES

- Screenings for younger audiences, 7-25 July at 10:30 am / Utopia-Manutention
- Workshops: first steps in cinema animation (7-12 years old) from 8 to 23 July at 02:00 pm, Conservatoire du Grand Avignon

YOUTH GUIDE

The Youth Guide offers a list of all the artistic and cultural events aimed at children and teenagers: shows, encounters, screenings and workshops for the youngest. It is available at the Cloître Saint-Louis, on the website and at the main venues of the Festival.

TOUR DATES OF *DARK CIRCUS* AFTER THE FESTIVAL D'AVIGNON

- 8-9 October 2015: Tandem Théâtre d'Arras
- 12-16 October: Le Passage, Fécamp
- 23-24 October: Le Grand Bleu, Lille
- 2-6 November: Scène nationale 61, Alençon
- 13 November: Festival La Roche-Posay
- 17 November: Théâtre des Quatres Saisons, Gradignan
- 19 November: L'Agora, Boulazac
- 26-27 November: Théâtre Roger Barat, Herblay
- 7-10 December: Théâtre de Saint-Nazaire
- 15 December: Espace Jean Vilar, Ifs
- 17-22 December: Théâtre Jean Arp, Clamart
- 5 January 2016 : Espace Saint-Exupéry, Franconville
- 13-15 January: L'Onde, Vélizy-Villacoublay
- 16 January: Pôle culturel d'Alfortville
- 19-20 January: Espace Germinal, Fosses
- 21-22 January: Théâtre des Sources, Fontenay-aux-Roses
- 17 February: Tempo Culturel, Craon
- 18-19 February: Théâtre Gérard Philipe, Champigny-sur-Marne
- 14-15 March: Scène Watteau, Nogent-sur-Marne
- 17-18 March: L'Agora, Evry
- 10-11 April: Théâtre de Cachan
- 14-15 April: Fontenay-en-Scènes, Fontenay-sous-Bois
- 20-21 April: AME, Montargis
- 22 April: Espace Ligeria, Montlouis-sur-Loire
- 23 April: L'Astrolabe, Orléans
- 10-11 May: Théâtre des Bergeries, Noisy-le-Sec

#STEREOPTIK #DARKCIRCUS

69th
EDITION

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In order to bring you this edition, over 1,750 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tirelessly and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.