

In the light of *The Supermale*, a novel by Alfred Jarry which isn't quite as well-known as his plays, actor Olivier Martin-Salvan discovers aspects of Papa Ubu that put in doubt the comical naivety that is usually seen as his primary characteristic. A dark cruelty, a tendency to abrupt explosions of violence, and an outrageous sexuality give less joyful features to the man-child that is Papa Ubu. In *Ubu on the Mound*, Alfred Jarry recycles the action of *Ubu Rex* in a denser form, denying his characters any psychology. The brainlessness that reigns in the play led plastic artists Clédât & Petitpierre to create a radical setting: an aerobics room. The leotards worn in this setting, the bright lights, and the mind-numbing music that plays in gyms cleverly draw a parallel between pointless physical exercise and Ubu's determination to gain power. Endlessly repeating the same gestures and taking part in pageants to climb a podium or win a medal seem to be motivated by the same urge that drives Papa Ubu to commit crime after crime to hang on to whatever power he has. The audience, surrounding the stage as if it were a boxing ring, watch every detail of the rise in power of a dictatorship that, as grotesque as it may be, frighteningly brings to mind character flaws that are all too common.

The show will be premiered on 7 July, 2015, Salle polyvalente, Saze.

OLIVIER MARTIN-SALVAN

Olivier Martin-Salvan joins in 2001 the école Claude Mathieu and begins his career as an actor. He soon begins working with Benjamin Lazar (Molière's *The Bourgeois Gentleman*), Jean Bellorini and Marie Ballet (Joseph Stein's *Fiddler on the Roof*, Valère Novarina's *The Imaginary Operetta*). With Valère Novarina, he appears in *The Unknown Act* in the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes in 2007, then in *The True Blood* and *The Flying Workshop*. In 2008, Olivier Martin-Salvan meets director and playwright Pierre Guillois, with whom he begins collaborating on a number of plays, notably *Le gros, la vache et le mainate* (*The Fat Man, the Cow, and the Mynah Bird*). Recently, he co-wrote and played in *Bigre*, a burlesque melodrama, which was created at the Quartz in Brest. A catalyst for the teams he works with, Olivier Martin-Salvan remains first and foremost an actor, even when he takes part in the conception of a show, such as with *Ô Carmen*, a comic opera directed by Nicolas Vial, Benjamin Lazar's *Pantagruel*, or *Strawberry Cream Puff*, presented with Kaori Ito in last year's Sujets à vif. Since September 2014, he has been a partner of the Quartz, Brest's national theatre.

ALFRED JARRY

Born in 1873 in Laval, the original and sometimes scandalous Alfred Jarry (who died in Paris in 1907) developed the character that made him famous through a number of plays: *Ubu Rex*, *Ubu Cuckolded*, *Ubu in Chains*, and *Ubu on the Mound*, which mock the greed, the selfishness, and the foolishness of the potbellied dictator. In the novels he wrote in parallel, like *Love in Visits*, *Messalina*, or *The Supermale*, the father of pataphysics absurdly pushed human characteristics to the point of automation, creating puppets whose lives were nothing but excess when it came to power, to the appetites of the flesh, or to transgressing the social order.

Ubu sur la butte and *Ubu roi* by Alfred Jarry are published by éditions Gallimard in *Ubu*, collection Folio

INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIER MARTIN-SALVAN

How did you come up with the very powerful scenography you chose for this version of *Ubu*?

Olivier Martin-Salvan: Clédat & Petitpierre, the show's scenographers, created this world dominated by rhythmic gymnastics. This quirky proposal soon surprised us, and almost got out of hand: the atmosphere it created intuitively gave our work a jolt. The mats on the floor, the foam props, and the leotards worked on an unexpected number of levels, which led to the creation of an entire body language. Papa Ubu is a man-child. This scenography allows for a certain cruelty, and out of what looks like children's games are born very practical gestures and great images. But it's an unconscious process; on a surface level, all you see are clear, delineated actions, but there is something else behind. It also echoes the idea of itinerant theatre, the idea that you have to create theatre with next to nothing, in locations that weren't designed for it. With three ribbons, you can make a boat appear. To create a world with little dramatic means is what I always aim to do. This quadrifrontal stage also works very well for guerrilla theatre. It puts the audience very close to the birth of the dictatorship that happens in the centre, as in a small stadium. Here, the audience sees the actors in the reality of the light, of music, of the *zentaïs** of the world of aerobics. A very intense, very physical acting style allows us to create a sort of hammy tragedy. The tyrant appears here in everyday life, and it is through details and snide remarks that we understand that someone is establishing their power.

How do the figures of the “man-child” and of the “dictator” come together within the character of Ubu?

Ubu tells us how the thirst for power of spoilt children manifests once they have become adults and how it drives them crazy, to the point of causing war. What is both moving and frightening is that Papa Ubu is like trapped. He's a spoilt child who wants power, but there is nothing mean about him. His cruelty is innocent. Even when he kills the nobles, the magistrates, and then the soldiers, you can tell he's not deriving any perverse pleasure from it. The decisions that lead him to kill everyone around him are very simple. Ubu is a dictator like any other: a prisoner of his urges, he makes mistakes because “he has to,” “I have to” trample the past to find my place; “I have to” destroy sculptures in Iraq to impose my vision of history... At every single level, you'll find Ubus. It's terrible. In this show, what we are hoping to do is to go beyond the well-known image of Papa Ubu as a fool, with a bell on his head, repeating in his deep voice, “Horn-belly, I am unhappy.” What I see in this play is the birth of a dark world. Papa Ubu is attracted to power, he seizes it, but soon enough all he has left is the fear he'll lose it. What is fascinating is this unquenchable desire to rise, this impossibility ever to step down, and this determination to dominate in spite of the disappointment you feel once you get to the top. I would compare it to the instinctive relentlessness of lions, who will never let a carcass go.

What kind of society does this predominance of sports lead to?

There is a general feeling of resignation, of moroseness, that encourages everyone to just accept the status quo. The king exercises, so everyone

exercises. This sport works very well with the idea of brainlessness that permeates the play, but also society at large. Nowadays, people often say that they need to “empty their minds,” without wondering when exactly one fills one’s mind. Those small competitions revive what is at stake at two different levels: that of the position of the actors, and of the ongoing play. We are not using *Ubu* as an excuse to do gymnastics; we chose this aesthetics so that it could serve the play. With those costumes and those gestures, bodies themselves necessarily become like events. It looks inherently funny, which forces us to be vigilant. We create breaks by introducing mysterious moments as well as songs, and we use those and the “putsch blues” atmosphere to establish a strange sense of seriousness that lets the unease at the heart of the play shine through.

How do sports become the place where struggles for power take place?

Sports, in some countries, have picked up where military service left off as a tool for standardisation and patriotic propaganda. I have a background in high-level sports—I used to play rugby at a near-professional level—I have seen how you can create super-civilians. I have chosen to turn the *b* of *Ubu* around in the title of our show, and it isn’t a gratuitous gesture. It’s a reference to the extensive use of palindromes in Jarry’s work, but it is also a visual nod to Russian, and everything it entails. Turning the *b* around is my way of announcing that this is a Russian show, with the worldview gymnastics breed and this chilling aspect of the world of sports as social success. Of course, one can work to improve one’s body, but only art feeds the soul. It is art that gives us the best tools to access the most concrete pleasures: words, thinking, and the encounter with the other.

Does playing in locations not intended as theatre venues, or away from the centre, create a challenge?

Olivier Py gave me *carte blanche* by asking me to create an itinerant show for this year’s Festival d’Avignon, which came at the exact moment when, on tour, I was starting not to feel the effects of decentralisation anymore. I think that we need to give a more important place to actions performed in the periphery of shows, and put them back at the centre. Often, artists want their shows to create a change in the audience; I want to transform them utterly. To give people the courage to enter a theatre when they still might think that “it isn’t for them,” we have to promise them an incredible experience. I’m not talking about shocking them. It’s much more subtle than that. Of course, I want people to laugh, but laughter must be the first line of soldiers you send to breach the wall. Once that is done, you can go deeper, reach essential things. I always think about audiences in the present tense. Audiences need to give a lot so they can receive in response. Going to the theatre shouldn’t make you forget about your day, it should make you rethink your whole life. It is through these kinds of actions that we can make people understand that the theatre isn’t just an idea, that it’s a “cultural good,” “important for society;” it is a lively discussion with a friend, it can save your life.

Interview conducted by Marion Canelas / Translation Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

**zentai*: japanese term for a skin-tight garment which covers the entire body.

AN ITINERANT SHOW

Founded in 1947 as a product of cultural decentralisation, the Festival d'Avignon has decided to change its own dynamics and to go beyond its own physical and symbolic borders. Following its first tour outside the walls of Avignon and the success of Nathalie Garraud and Olivier Saccomano's *Othello*, *Variation for three actors*, itinerant shows are back with Olivier Martin-Salvan's *Ubu*. Fifteen locations draw a new map, invite you to take to the road, and bring the Festival d'Avignon closer to its local population:

- July 7: Salle polyvalente de Saze
- July 8: Salle Roger Orlando à Caumont-sur-Durance
- July 9: Espace Culturel Folard à Morières-lès-Avignon
- July 11: Concession BMW-MINI-Foch Automobiles
- July 12: Salle des fêtes La Cantarello à Roquemaure
- July 13: Salle La Pastourelle à Saint-Saturnin-lès-Avignon
- July 14: Festival Contre Courant - île de La Barthelasse à Avignon
- July 15: Centre pénitentiaire du Pontet*
- July 16: Pôle culturel Camille Claudel à Sorgues
- July 18: Éclats de Scènes - Cultures itinérantes Salle Frédéric Mistral à Sarrians
- July 19: Cour du Château à Vacqueyras
- July 20: Espace pluriel La Rocade - Centre culturel La Barbière à Avignon
- July 21: AFPA au Pontet*
- July 22: Place de l'Orangerie à Sauveterre
- July 23: Salle Jacques Buvarand à Boulbon

*No tickets are available for these shows

AND...

THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Profession: performer, with among others Olivier Martin-Salvan with the magazine *Théâtre/Public*

10 July at 03:00 pm, Site Pasteur de l'Université, free admittance

TOUR DATES OF *UBU* AFTER THE FESTIVAL D'AVIGNON

– from 28 to 30 July 2015 at SortieOuest, Domaine de Ravanès, Thézan-lès-Béziers

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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.