



MISTER TAMBOURINE MAN

INTERVIEW WITH KARELLE PRUGNAUD

How did *Mister Tambourine Man* come about?

Karelle Prugnaud: For the past few years, I've wondered about the best way to bring people to the theatre, to bring down the walls around those spaces that can seem frighteningly imposing. In *Léonie et Néolie*, my previous show created for the Festival d'Avignon in 2018, the presence of freerunners onstage had drawn the attention of young people who otherwise wouldn't usually go to the theatre. I think that, afterwards, they may have gone back because a door had been opened for them and they had realised that they just enjoyed it. My desire to make theatre more accessible for all became even more precise with *Mister Tambourine Man*. I wanted to create a space of reunion and daydreaming taken from an everyday life we can all recognise. That's when the idea of the bar came to me. It just felt right. Even if right now it's one of those places where we can't gather, where we can't talk to each other, which has created a terrible collective void and a loss of shared critical thinking. Starting from that location, we tried to find a balance for the show to be a moment of high-quality theatre while remaining accessible. There is on the one hand Eugène Ionesco's writing, with his rich and effervescent language which opens up large poetic vistas, as well as the presence of Denis Lavant, with his aura as a great theatre and cinema actor and his great generosity and human understanding, and on the other the world of the circus, mischievous, familiar to all of us, and source of joy. I like to play with the pretence of a popular, even entertaining world, when it is actually a very complex illusion. The work of Nikolaus Holz on the repurposing of objects is a real science. It's the engineering of failure, which paradoxically requires great precision. It's that synergy that allowed us to create the space of the show here.

This show will be a unique experience in July, as it will be moving from location to location. What does this mean to you?

When we visited Avignon and the surrounding area, we saw a number of unique locations which all come with their own story. The courtyard of the Aramon castle, reception halls where people play the lottery or get married, the Anselme Mathieu school, the Villeneuve arenas, the prison, a dojo... all those venues are the recipients of a memory. The image that comes to me is that of a fair, staying in one location for a few days before leaving a mixture of melancholy and joy behind. The travelling nature of this show reminds me of those moments of magic and dreaming. Moments that sublimate places we no longer see, so caught up we are in our everyday life. We're only passing through, yet we create something, a moment of sharing: a theatre performance. It's also for me a way to pay homage to the choirs, amateur drama classes, and flea markets from my teenage years spent in a village where culture seemed out of reach. It's those experiences and encounters that made me want to enroll in a drama school, to create a company, to become an artist.

You've mentioned your choice of two very different artists. Yet they share an affinity for the figure of the clown.

Yes. On one side you have this misanthropic barman played by Nikolaus Holz. He's playing with the imbalance of his world, trying to keep chaos in check while playing with everything he can get his hands on: glasses, tables, chairs... Everything in his bar is wobbly, and he has to force himself to stand straight like a proper waiter, a social character. But this job is but an illusion, a mask. He hates men as much as he loves music, and more precisely piano music, a passion he hides from the rest of the world. On the other side is Denis Lavant's Mister Tambourine Man. He's a smooth-talker, a barker who goes from town to town to tell stories that aren't his. He's the "first performing artist," in a way, but he also embodies the figure of the stranger. His life of wandering has led to his being outcast. We therefore have a man who hates mankind as a whole and has to stick post-it notes on his forehead every morning to remember how to act in an appropriate manner, and his alter ego, who wants nothing more than to be once again able to speak for himself, to finally be able to tell his own story and exist in the world.

They share a similar anger at what prevents them from existing, the same desire for change. Those two characters also force us to question our understanding of determinism, of what determines whether our careers take off, whether our passions are free to express themselves, whether we are able to reach what we want in spite of social constraints and family pressure. When Mister Tambourine Man enters the bar, they're complete opposites. But little by little they will become like mirror images of each other, eventually becoming interchangeable and realising that they are now part of each other's existence. Through the presence of he "who isn't me," the stranger I carry inside me can shine through and call me towards new aspects of who I am.

Could you tell us more about a key reference in your play: the brothers Grimm' Pied Piper of Hamelin. What does that fairy tale shine a light on here?

We wanted to use a popular tale as a starting point to talk about the story of those two characters, and we chose the *Pied Piper of Hamelin*. At the end of the tale, we learn that two children survived the drowning to which the musician led them. One is lame, the other blind. The lame one is the waiter who's deathly afraid of everyone else and lives in this cave-like bar, while the blind one is the storyteller, now working the trade of his would-be killer. The café is located in the town of Hamelin, years after the disappearance of the children. It's the temporal framework of the play. I like the story of the *Pied Piper* because it explores the question of dispensing justice on one's own behalf, in spite of the risks it can mean for others and the anger it can awaken. When the musician is called on to exterminate the rats in this rich town, he accepts not only to help the villagers, but because they will pay him a salary. Eventually, he realises the town and its inhabitants deceived him, and have no intention of paying him for his work. This lack of recognition, as well as the aversion of the villagers towards him once the "dirty work" has been done, will feed his desire for revenge and lead to his kidnapping the town's children. I like the duality here, between a righteous anger and an inconceivable act. Because he stands alone against the world, he ends up committing an evil crime. Denis Lavant, when he enters the bar, carries within himself the memory of that fairy tale. He wears a long, dirty black coat, likely made of rat hair, within which he hides little bells, the fortune he made going from town to town. And under that he wears an extremely elegant white suit, like a high-rolling card player. He's an adult who refuses to grow up, Peter Pan as a man, condemned and condemning himself to remaining on the margins of society. What will save him, unlike the Pied Piper, is his capacity for wonder, which will also touch the waiter, draw him out of his gloom, and make him want to leave and to reinvent himself. This childhood quest is something that must be preserved, even in adults. *Mister Tambourine Man* is an apology of that freedom. A utopian freedom. To be free, and not entirely determined by the world. This idea of "being oneself" that we must find again to escape that which would rule us. And so we'll travel from town to town to tell that story, to talk to people of their freedom, of the places of their childhood, of their buried passions, and try to make them want to reinvent themselves. It may sound like wishful thinking, but that's what we'd like to bring people.

How will this show travel after the Festival d'Avignon?

I'd like to work with local brass bands which would accompany the spectators to the venue. It would allow us to even more vividly call on the image of the pied piper. I'd also like to work on a photographic project with the locals, inviting them into a mobile studio to pose with an object connected to their passions, a window into those intimate spaces we all carry within ourselves. After we've gone, their pictures will remain, like so many reminders. A way of remembering that we are all masters of our lives, that we sometimes just have to reconnect with our sensitivity to get closer to ourselves and our deepest desires. That's the whole point of theatre for me, to shine a light on lives, and to keep plugging away at those questions long after the show is over, within a spectator's memory.

Interview conducted by Marion Guilloux in February 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach