

Imagine Toi

Inside the mind of a clown By Ruby Boukabou

I first saw Julien Cottereau performing in 'Love Burelsk' Cabaret at The Chat Noir in Carouge, Switzerland, 2005. He was the mime from Paris, known for his years in Cirque du Soleil. His act combined clowning and mime with his personal soundtrack of squeaks, clicks and purrs. Within moments of appearing on stage, he had the audience eating out of his hand. His cute boyish clown character was adorable and his humour universal. Cottereau has arrived in Sydney to perform at The Opera House in *Imagine Toi*, his solo show that recently won him one of the most prestigious theatre awards in France - a Moliere.

What is your first memory of performance?

I was in my father's educational film at 2 years old, naked with my cousin who was 1, with a big lollypop! I remember telling stories to the camera with my body. The way I was interacting with the camera was physical.

Did you naturally go into performance after school?

I wanted to be drummer but school was too expensive. So I went to a tourism school. It had a great theatre class...

What was the moment you decided to follow theatre?

I had a dream that I had Jiminy Cricket - my conscious - on my shoulder... I was walking and crossing people. He said 'do you know these people?' I said 'no'. He said 'stop'. I kept walking. After three times, I stopped. He said 'what do you see?' I saw people in front of a gate, frightened. They were screaming. Behind the gate was a cemetery. He said 'did you see your 20 years go?' I said 'no', he said 'it passed like a day'. I said 'yes'. He said 'ok in 2 days you're 40, in 3 days you're 60, in 4 days you're in front of the gate... But you don't know where you're going, and you don't know the people you're crossing. You don't know anything'. I said 'what do I do?' He said 'cross the field, the open field. Go to the nature'. I said 'ok ok you're right'. I was running, running until a forest. All the trees were concrete. He said 'find a tree you like and sit at the bottom'. So I did and I sat. I'm reading and I feel the tree is reading with me. That's where the dream ended.

The day after, just before Christmas, three months into my [tourism] school, I'm on the third floor and waiting for the teacher who is late. I look through the window and I see a cemetery. I said 'ok I quit'. After the holiday I said 'I have to leave and work but can I stay for the theatre lessons?'

For 6 months I was doing different little jobs while preparing my audition for the national theatre schools.

What was the base of your training at Rue Blanche?

Commedia del' Arte, mask, clown, history of theatre, Shakespeare, Chekov, translation... The philosophy of the school was to create companies afterwards as it trained all aspects of theatre - technicians, admin, set designers, performers...

Cirque du Soleil...?

My clown teacher was the father of Juliet Binoche. He saw me in a show I was doing with friends when I was 21. He helped me. He found me the audition of the replacement clown in Japan for Santimbanco... I felt very excited but also shitty - I was just 22 and replacing a guy with 20 years of experience. I

had not learnt one hour of mime before. I am a clown - I don't have to learn that... but I had a voice saying 'you can be a mime'... so I knew. I put all my heart inside. The shows in Cirque du Soleil can be too perfect. So the clown can be the little thing that's more human.

What is a clown for you?

A clown is a very particular fellow. He's like a combination of a tramp, a child and a wise philosopher. He also has a particular talent to transform tragedy with twists to make people laugh. He's charming with physical fantasy.

Why is a clown important to society?

Because a lot of people are stuck in their own tragedy and they don't know how to be creative with suffering. There's a way to be creative with suffering. To make people laugh. For suffering we have more sense of humanity and living. We're close to the earth and really feeling everything. Clowning is a very nice way to use everything you don't like and to take things that make you suffer and transform them to laughter.

What is it that makes you walk home at the end of the night and say "that was a good show"?

If there's one or two people that laugh so hard that they make the show. They laugh so hard that everybody else laughs... There's a certain quality of grace in the show - for me - but I don't know if it's that for other people... I can be wrong... but when I see people laughing, I can't be wrong. There's a strong emotion, laughing together. There's a transcendence that's happened.

Is that the drug?

Yes. That's life. The feeling that you feel the same. A group of people feeling the same, it's very important. You are part of it.

And you can control the laugh?

To control the laugh can be perverse. Laughing can be painful.

People say clowns are tragic and sad. Is that true or sometimes true?

They're sad when they're alone.

Are you alone?

In the show yes. In life, it's a choice; it's a game with rules. A clown is melancholic when contemplative. I force myself to be in urgency. To be urgently doing something for myself and for people

What's your goal with the show?

I want people to be more nourished. I am using my character to make them think and be more open in their heart and be more in touch with life and realise that life is a miracle, that they're a miracle. [I want people to] know who they are and to take their dreams and make them real - as that is the way to happiness. To be inventive with their life and to be the boss of themselves. Not to be the slave of someone else's will. To laugh. To feel the sense of life. This planet is like a beautiful dream inside a sleeping time of blackness. Can we live differently? Can we be a little more aware of the things around us? We're killing each other for political power. We're killing miracles. It's absolutely nonsense.

Who: Julien Cottereau

What: *Imagine Toi*

When: August 14 - September 1

Where: Playhouse, Sydney Opera House

