

His silence speaks volumes

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Page: bb1

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Mime legend Marceau

makes his farewell tour

Even when he speaks, Marcel Marceau pays tribute to silence _ the silence that made him famous, the silence he calls his destiny.

There's no other way, he says, to describe the passion for mime that has made his name synonymous with the art.

"I was born to be a mime _ that's it," Marceau says.

It would be hard to argue otherwise.

Marceau has spent a lifetime using silent movement to "bring to the people the weight of my soul," and he has never, even for a moment, doubted his calling.

Now, as he readies to celebrate his 80th birthday Saturday, the performer is in the midst of a farewell tour that, like his earlier ones, will span the globe from New Jersey to

Greece. He will perform in New Brunswick on Wednesday and in Philadelphia next weekend. "At my age, my flexibility maybe is not the same as when I was 30, 40 or 50 years old, but I have kept my body young," says Marceau, whose lively conversation is spiced with a thick French accent and frequent exclamations of "voilà!"

"The younger generation says, 'It is not possible that this is Marcel Marceau _ it must be his son,' " says the performer, who also teaches at his Paris International School of Mimodrama and heads the Marcel Marceau Foundation for the Advancement of Mime in New York City. "I look half of my age because I have never stoped working."

Marceau was drawn to pantomime as a child of 6 or 8, before he knew there was a name for the expressive style of movement. He performed for his family and for other children at a summer camp run by his aunt, getting his inspiration from Charlie Chaplin and other silent-film stars of the time.

"All the people who saw me said, 'He will be later an actor,' because I made people laugh," Marceau recalls. "In my family, they thought that I would become not a mime, especially, but a theater actor, and I wanted to be this, too."

It wasn't until he reached his 20s and began studying at Charles Dullin's School of Dramatic Art in the Sarah Bernhardt Theatre in Paris that he discovered mime was an art form all its own, with an established "grammar," or set of rules.

A teacher at the school, mime master Etienne Decroux, was the one who "started a complete corporal grammar influenced by great statuary and antiquity, by Michelangelo and also by the French sculptor Auguste Rodin," Marceau says. "Of course, I decided to use it to create myself."

But Marceau wasn't able to start shaping his career until the Holocaust that was raging around him wound down to a flickering threat.

Marceau, whose father was sent to a concentration camp and "never came back," joined the French underground around 1940, fighting "for freedom against the Nazis."

It was then that he chose the surname that would become a household word, changing it from Mangel.

He did it to keep his family safe from retribution, he says, choosing the name Marceau in honor of a general who fought with Napoleon in the French Revolution.

"He fought on the Rhine, and I am born on the Rhine, in Strasbourg," says the mime, who later passed the name on to his two sons and two daughters.

When Marceau's participation in the underground became too visible, putting him in ever greater danger, leaders hid the 20-year-old in an institution for children whose lives had been disrupted by divorce or other "social situations."

He began to perform for the children there, at the same time starting his education at Dullin's school.

But his studies were interrupted when he temporarily left the school to enlist in the Free French Army.

"I fought in Germany, because Paris was liberated but the war wasn't over," he says. "I fought side by side with American GIs, Russians, British and the French."

When the fighting was finally done, Marceau returned to school. Before long, he found his way into a local theater company, where he performed as a mime, using his free nights to build his own troupe.

"I was the first French actor who re-created this art form on stage," he says. "I found a public. They came to see plays, and of course they saw that it was a new art form, and

they liked it."

Marceau revived mime, which had fallen out of fashion around 1920, by combining classical elements of the craft _ including the traditional white face paint _ with a Chaplin-esque telling of stories and fables.

In 1947, he gave a final touch to his personalization of the art by creating the character he now calls his alter ego: Bip.

Named for Pip, a character in "Great Expectations" by Charles Dickens, Marceau's creation was a kind of Don Quixote, he says, struggling with "the windmill of life."

The misadventures of the clown, who is known for his striped pullover and battered, deflowered opera hat, are still a big part of Marceau's repertory.

"An actor, to move people, has to become the people he plays for," the mime says. "Without this character, I would not have touched people."

In his early years on stage, Marceau's performances were often light; one routine had to do with a butterfly, another with a man walking in a strong wind.

He even had a humorous role in Mel Brooks' "Silent Movie," in which he uttered the only spoken word in the film _ "No."

Then, "with time, I realized that the war had affected me," Marceau says, "and when I remembered all this that happened in the past, my art became deeper with age."

Today, Marceau speaks more seriously to audiences with pieces including "Youth, Maturity, Old Age and Death" and a newer exercise, "Bip Remembers," which chronicles

life in the 20th century and delves into some of the mime's personal experiences.

Over the years, Marceau has performed on every continent, and he says he understands why people of all cultures come to see his shows. Mime, he says, is a universal language, that of "life and death and reality and dream."

Those who don't enjoy it, he says, simply haven't seen it done right.

"My work has affected people in all countries, because people are not so different," Marceau says. "They have all (got) souls, they have all (got) hearts, they dream about life and they fight for life. People are people, in the whole world."

Marcel Marceau will appear at the State Theatre, 15 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick, at 8 p.m. Wednesday. Tickets are \$15-\$32. Call (877) 782-8311 or visit www.StateTheatreNJ.org; he will perform at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts' Perelman Theater, 260 S. Broad St., Philadelphia, at 7:30 p.m. Friday; 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, his birthday; and 2:30 p.m. March 23. Tickets are \$30-\$47. Call (215) 893-1999 or visit www.kimmelcenter.org.

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Page: bb1

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