

Capturing the Ineffable: A Tribute to Marcel Marceau

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Presentation

By

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Photos: Start with photo of Marceau on stage at Lec/Dem smiling.

Marcel Marceau was a global artist, an erudite historian, master teacher, incisive mentor and caring friend. He was a great artist whose artistic work developed over the full length of his long life and it was shared globally and understood universally.

Many artists have been inspired and influenced by Marcel Marceau including Johnny Depp, Whoopi Goldberg, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Bill Irwin, Michael Jackson and Steven Berkoff, to name just a few.

Of his own work, Marcel Marceau said “Mime is the art form of making the invisible visible and the visible invisible.” In other words, he performed without props or scenery yet through his mime plays we traveled to French bistros, the open sea, the frontlines of a war and a concentration camp. And through his acting and physicality we saw past the veneer of people’s character and saw into the hearts of mankind.

We (Annette and I) were very fortunate to have met him at a time in his life when he was focused on teaching, with precision, clarity and passion, his technique, acting and mime playwriting styles.

I have had the privilege of knowing and working closely with Marcel Marceau for the past twenty-two years. Many of those times were *the most inspiring* moments of my life and other moments were fraught with challenges, as it is probably with many *great* artists. However, through all of the times, I never forgot how fortunate I really was to have been trusted and challenged by *him* as well as being held as a confidant to his own private concerns and collaborator of aspiring ideas for the future of mime.

His technique brought specificity, elasticity and a refined sense of time to my physical work as an actor and dancer like no other technique or system of working. Plus his keen choreographic and playwriting eye taught me how to create work that can be understood universally.

Today I will share with you a brief history of how I have known him, a portion of what I have learned from him as a master teacher and artist, and how I hope to continue his work in the future.

In 1985 after one of Marceau's performances at the Zellerbach Theatre in Berkeley, California, a friend and colleague of mine, Gregg Goldston, were trying to make it back stage to meet him. Before the show we had sent back a package to him containing a letter of introduction and a brochure of our school, the Goldston School for Mimes. We knew he had trained a few of our students at his new summer seminar in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We thought we had a chance to be invited back stage to meet him. After standing outside the Theatre's Stage Door, with at least fifty other people, a guard came out and announced that Marceau would not be signing any autographs or seeing anyone.

I grabbed my friend's hand and pulled him up to the door. I politely knocked on the door and encouraged the guard to return. He opened the door and repeated, "He is seeing no one!" and went to slam the door. Fortunately my friend stuck his foot inside the door, stopping the door from shutting. "Please, please we know he wants to meet with us. We sent him back a package. Please tell him that Gregg Goldston and Jeanine Thompson are here to meet him." Grudgingly, he walked away. But he quickly returned saying, "He will see you!"

We were ushered back stage, walking past numerous old European touring trucks filled with Marceau's costumes, signs, shoes and many Bip hats. We saw him standing in a small room surrounded by a group of adoring friends. He was still in his white face make-up and costume, speaking beautiful English. After the group dispersed he welcomed us in. He said, "I have heard of your school and I have had many of your students at my American seminars. I am very impressed with how advanced they are in the art of mime. They have strong technique. They have learned well. So, you are their teachers... Tell me, what do you do?"

Thus our relationship began.

Gregg told him the mime techniques that he taught at our school, and I told him that I taught modern dance and acting. He agreed that both of them were very important for mime artists to be trained in. By the end of our conversation, Marceau had invited both of us to be his guests at his upcoming seminar in Ann Arbor. Gregg was invited to participate. I, being new to mime, was invited to watch.

For one week in Ann Arbor I sat on a cold cement floor for eight hours a day. I analyzed every movement Marceau did and how he taught it to his students. By not participating I was able to more clearly see what was important to him about his technique and style. I had the advantage of objectively seeing the differences between what Marceau would do and what the students would do. I learned invaluable lessons by listening to the corrections he made and seeing the adjustments he gave to each student.

Upon noticing my rapt attention to his teaching, Marceau pointed me out to the class and said, "The day the dancer learns the weight of mime – we need to watch out – because they

can do everything else.” That comment served as a personal challenge and fueled the fire that was beginning to burn in my soul for this art form.

My dance training served me by developing in me a discerning eye for seeing minute detail in every movement and a kinetic understanding of how to transition from one move to another. My acting training developed in me a depth of understanding of how Marceau was filling the highly stylized physical forms with characters, thoughts and emotions.

After each day of watching his class I would go back to my hotel room, stand in front of the mirror, and work the material he taught on my own body for hours at a time. Trying to perfect what I was doing by remembering what he was doing while also applying the corrections and adjustments he gave to the students. It was at that time that I realized that Marceau’s work was the crystallization of what I had been trying to arrive at for years by combining modern dance and theatre. In his work, he is expressing the *essence* of character, thought, emotion, environment, space and time in an extremely stylized and poetic physical form.

By the end of the seminar, Marceau was so impressed by the quality of our work that he invited us to his school in Paris, France in order to see what his faculty were teaching. He wanted to know what the differences were between what they were teaching and what we were teaching that enabled our students to advance so quickly. We went to Paris that fall.

Photo: At Marceau’s home

While visiting his school and home in France, we spent many hours discussing the values of both of our schools curriculums and processes for teaching technique and creating work. Our visit to Paris inspired the beginning of many years spent together where in which we produced many of his summer seminars, and he made us demonstrators in his classes and held up our performance work as examples of his mime playwriting styles.

We would also met up with him while he was on tour to have dinner together, discuss his show and our current work; and perhaps most intimidating, and yet most deeply fortunate, he privately directed my solo performance works. He was always very respectful and appreciative of the art forms of modern dance and acting and he nurtured, challenged and strengthened what I was bringing to his style of mime with my styles of acting, dancing and choreography. He said to me, “You first learned my grammar, like a musician, and now you have made it your own. This is very interesting and very well done.”

Since I began to teach at The Ohio State University in 1994, we have produced four residencies with Marcel Marceau. These have included master classes, his solo evening performance, lecture/demonstrations, motion capture of his signature movements and primary solo works, and documentation of his solo’s that had not previously been recorded.

Description and demonstration of his classes:

Marceau divided his seminars and residencies into two sections: 1) technique, and 2) performance and critique of student's mime plays.

Photo from class:

The morning class would often begin with exercises created by his teacher, Etienne Decroux. This would include inclinations, rotations and transtations and balances of weight. This work prepares the person to do mime similarly as the dancer's barre strengthens them to dance. For the rest of the morning Marceau would focus on techniques that he developed, including hand gestures, whole body expressions of characters and emotions, and adagios that developed multiple skills for expressing a topic or theme. All of his work was geared towards finding the essence of a movement, thought, time or environment, which would communicate universally to an audience.

Photo from lab class:

His afternoon class was handled more as a playwriting laboratory, where residency participants would perform their mime plays and Marceau would critique the clarity of the playwriting and performance of the work. Marceau was always caring and respectful of the risk that the person took to stand up before him to share his or her work and receive his feedback. He knew how delicate the artistic spirit was yet he also knew that he could not lie, especially when it came to whether or not something was understood as mime.

In order to clarify a point within his critique, Marceau would often bring to the students attention what had already been developed in dance, theatre, music or the visual arts in addition to the importance of knowing world history and culture in order to make strong, artistic, universal choices. It was at these times that I was stunned, realizing how well educated and how well read he was on so many different topics. He truly was an erudite historian who taught the value of knowing history along with the value of artistic clarity.

Examples from his technique class include:

Each of these exercises are focused on physicalizing the distinction, the essence, that each action embodies:

Hand Gestures: geometric hands, water, birds, butterfly, holding a glass: of water, high tea, milk, beer and schnapps.

Character Marches: Pride/Vanity, Compassion/Pity, Lust/Love, Jealousy/Envy.

Adagios: Youth, Maturity, Old Age & Death, The Flower, Water.

Group Exercise: Teach them some hand gestures and character marches, such as: water, birds, and butterfly; and Pride/Vanity, Compassion/Pity, and Jealousy/Envy.

Show photos from his performances:

Examples of his playwriting:

Pantomimes of Character, (Bip based on the main character of Charles Dickens book

“Great Expectations”, Pip, is the stories idealistic protagonist. The main character is in a specific environment/place, situation and conflict. There will almost always be humor even in his deepest tragedies.

“The Mask Maker”

“David and Goliath”

“Bip Commits Suicide”

“Bip Remembers”

Pantomimes of Style

These works are much more abstract, time is often compressed or elongated, and metamorphosis is key, meaning there is a process of one thing transforming into something else.

“Creation of the World”

“The Hands”

“Youth, Maturity, Old Age and Death”

Group Exercise: Have them create something based on the idea of metamorphosis: human, plant, or animal.

In Closing:

Mime is not an ancient art form. It is a codified art form from the 20th Century with its own grammar. It is an art form that was inspired by Marceau’s teacher, Etienne Decroux, and it was developed and shared throughout the world by Marcel Marceau.

It is not to be confused with what the harassing individual on the streets might be doing while wearing white face make-up. However there are many great mime artists who are street performers. Would anyone take a couple of ballet classes and then stand on the street and demand to be respected and paid as a ballet artist? Would anyone take a couple of violin lessons and then stand on the street and demand to be respected and paid as a violin artist? For some reason many people do this with mime. Perhaps it is the joy and seduction of mime’s seemingly easy illusion work that is to blame: the wall, the rope, the knife, the love letter and the endless array of facial grimaces that all try to pass as mime.

But I contest that mime is a high art form, deserving of respect and appreciation. An art form that we as actors, teachers and playwrights can learn a great deal from, for example, how mime arrives at and physically expresses the essence of a thought or action; how mime compresses or elongates time; and the magical nature of metamorphosis.

Marcel Marceau was a magnificent artist, exquisitely well-read, brilliant thinker, historian and artistic theorist. Who always expressed that our work as artists is vitally important in the world today, knowing what is going on in the world and through out history. It is imperative that voices of change are heard today through out the world. It is possible through art to create a voice that might not otherwise be heard, a voice and message that travels directly to the heart of mankind.

For the future: It is my plan to continue to deepen my understanding of the scope and essence of Marcel Marceau's technique and choreography of his mime plays in order to refine my teaching, performing, directing and choreographing. It is my hope that we will develop a rich resource of user-friendly materials of his work, and other important mime artists from around the world, in the Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research Institute at The Ohio State University. I hope to include stories from students, friends and family that provide insight into the brilliant, global master artist, mentor and friend, that is – Marcel Marceau.

Closing photo.