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Marceau's mime matchless [Review of a performance by Marcel Marceau at the Milwaukee Performing Arts Center, Milwaukee]

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by Curtis L. Carter

It's incredible! You see the man on the stage tugging at or being towed by a kite string that isn't there. The man is Marcel Marceau. He is a mime, one who speaks the silent language of the heart. Half-way between dance and theater, the art of pantomime speaks through symbolic bodily gestures and expressive portrayals of human joys and sorrows.

As "The Sculptor" Marceau is both a Rodin-like "Thinker" and a Pygmalion maker.

Shaping movements represent the sculptor working. He staggers under its weight as the emerging figure gets heavier and heavier. And we in the audience sink lower into our seats, feeling the illusionary burden as the sculptor-creator struggles under the weight of, and then becomes, his creation.

From a seated position with all bodily extensions drawn into a ball-like shape, Marceau moves into "Creation of the World." This piece is more of a "Think-Piece," Arms unfold slowly, forming an oval shape over the mime's head, and lead into accelerating churning motions.

The churning movements draw on the entire stream of bodily energy which superbly flows into abstract images, symbolizing the channeling of cosmic energy in the creation of the world.

Marceau is a master at characterization. "The Mask Maker" gives us both subtlety and variety of characters. In the first part of this piece we see him in his shop trying on a variety of masks: happy, sad, villain, clown. Later in the piece the happy mask gets stuck on his face, and he cannot pull it off. Marceau achieves a remarkable piece of artistry here.

He manages to express simultaneously two different sets of emotions: through the face we see the happy mask. But through the rest of the body we experience the desperate frustration of the mask maker trying to free himself.

"The Public Garden" catches the essence of some 14 or 15 distinct characters: two gossiping old ladies, a priest reading as he strolls, two lovers, an ice cream vendor, a boy, a man walking or being walked by his dog, and of course the venerable statue in the park.

The art of the mime is precise, complex and not easily simplified. Etienne Decroux, Marceau's teacher, has put the grammar of mime into a code. Marceau builds upon the codified technique, adding new elements which have resulted in a revitalization of an art that once flourished in ancient Greek and Roman cultures.

In the second half of his performance we see Bip, the white-faced character with crumpled gray hat and wavering red flower who is virtually a trademark of Marceau's work. We feel cautious and halting then exuberant as Bip testily advances and retreats on the ice, finally triumphant. We are both sad and amused as he tries unsuccessfully with gun, knife, rope, pills and gas to commit suicide when jilted by a faithless lover; we tense our muscles and try to help as he struggles with an impenetrable leathery steak at the "Society Party." We laugh at his antic satire on the military and then shudder with horror at its debilitating powers as artillery and bombs reduce Bip to silence.

Marcel Marceau was at the Milwaukee Performing Arts Center October 7.