



LA VIEILLE SOUCHE

A performance by Samuel Rhyner | 2022 - 2023

Have you ever noticed the beauty of a cumulonimbus cloud about to burst into tears? Can you recall the smell of post-rain humus ? When was the last time you caressed a tree, even a dead one ?

In a dystopian far-future, meet *Trebور* (a tree in a pot) and *Robert* (an acrodancer). Intertwined, leaning on one another, these two entities exist in sync, supporting each other throughout the half-hour acrobatic dialogue that is *La Vieille Souche*¹. Minimalistic, absurd, optimistic, auditory and highly physical, the piece places *Robert* and *Trebور* on an equal footing. Following the connecting embrace between the two characters, the audience will go through the collective experience of planting *Trebور* at or around the performance site.

La Vieille Souche is an ode dedicated to life, in all its absurdity, and to the walnut tree at the edge of the garden of my childhood home; a tree who carried my first “cabanes”, the early sorrows of my heart, and who still wears – proudly – the scars of the swing’s ropes.

1. Working title, translates to « The old tree stump ».



THE SHOW

CONTEXT

Close your eyes for a few seconds and try to fast-forward a few centuries, far enough in time that everything you know is obsolete. Take a big breath and, slowly, open your eyes.

Grey is predominant. There is no sign of life whatsoever; broken concrete blocks, fallen walls, ancient remnants of what could have been a skyscraper, or was it a water tower ? The only remainings of life, posing as the symbol for deforestation, which is but one of the many harms that mankind inflicts on nature, are abandoned tree stumps. Depressing ? Maybe, but there is hope.

Take a closer look and you will see how much life there is in a stump. Thousands of insects, larvae, tiny plants, moss, new shoots, mushrooms. Blooming diversity. The perfect example of mother earth's surprising reminiscence.

And as your eyes wander across this imaginary decrepit monochrome landscape of outdated brutalism, *La Vieille Souche* begins.

THE PERFORMANCE A PHYSICAL DIALOGUE

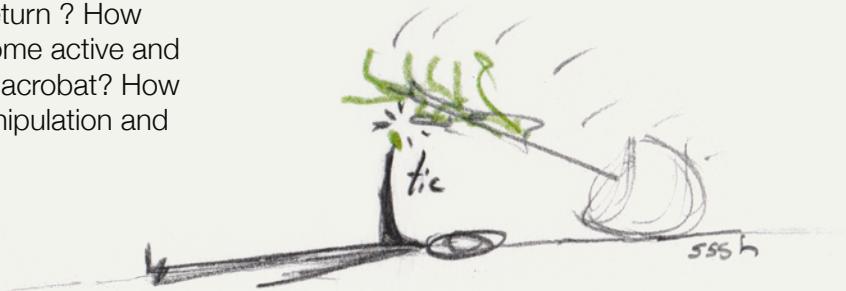
The atmosphere is sweltering. Two characters enter the empty stage, wandering around in this world devoid of life. One is *Trebور* (a common oak tree in a concrete spherical pot), the other is *Robert*. Very sweaty, *Robert* decides to rest. Removing his gas mask, he carefully places *Trebور* on the floor and leans against him.



Bored and desperate, but still caring for his fellow last-standing partner, *Robert* begins a slow conversation with *Trebور*. *Trebور*, who seemed to be but a passive tree at first, now appears to be an active partner, engaging in the dialogue as much as *Robert*. The dialogue subtly shifts from auditory to physical, from an absurd musical exchange of words, cracks and sounds to a dance in which kinetic energy is shared, where both members, as equals, argue with, contradict, agree with, carry, push, pull, roll onto, take care of and listen to each other.

«How far can one go in the physical research of partnering with a non-human partner ?»

How can a tree manipulate a human as much as a human can manipulate it in return ? How can a passive (but alive!) tree become active and physically influence the path of an acrobat? How can one get away from object manipulation and dive into partnering ?



The research around the aforementioned questions, will be addressed using the following ideas:

First, *Trebور* and its pot is about *Robert*'s height and weight, establishing the two of them as equals on the physical level. Hence, it allows *Robert* to sit on *Trebور*'s pot, to carry it, but also to be moved by it as it swings, rolls, and shifts, affecting both *Robert* and *Trebور* physically.



Second, because the tree's pot is spherical, movement can be induced in it. The tree is being pushed, it pushes back. It begins to roll and does not stop. Slow oscillations occur, causing a back and forth movement, and the tree transforms into a metronome. The tree carries the human, and the human carries the tree. Kinetic energy is generated, exchanged, distributed, and utilized. The tree moves, is stopped by the human, who then uses the energy to move themselves, returning to the tree and returning the energy to it. The human becomes motionless, while the tree moves and comes back to the human. The whole is a balance, a conservation and an exchange of kinetic energy, shared by the two entities.

Third, through sound. The idea is to create a raw soundtrack : a mix between electronic music and music concrete. Cracks and clicks, synthesized electronic rumbles, sweeps and squeaks, breaths, heartbeats, words... It combines synthesized sounds, amplified sounds (from *Trebor* and *Robert* : footsteps, movements, breaths and voices) and foley dubbing with pre-recorded and distorted sounds.

With the help of Pierrick Bacher (music composer), we will try to give a voice to *Trebor*, offering him a will and a personality.

Reverb and delay are used extensively to heighten the sense of emptiness, loneliness, and absurdity. Although this is a movement piece, music is the primary focus in a few moments, for example the whole beginning of the dialogue, which starts off only with sounds and later on blends with movement, as well as after an intense movement section, when *Robert* takes a break to catch his breath : with a lot of delay, the audience hears the breathing sounds and a few words exchanged with *Trebor*.

The soundtrack becomes the intimate soundscape of the effects of nature and humanity's intertwining embrace.

A directional microphone and a contact microphone hidden in *Trebor*'s pot are used for technical purposes. Microphones are also installed inside the scenography, to amplify the hits, increase auditory intimacy and enhance the audience's immersion.

Preliminary musical tracks that I composed specifically for *La Vieille Souche*:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1FtqOr0AoOXViH7FhL88reYQ26CQjtH6E?usp=sharing>



«NO OBJECT MANIPULATION»

The biggest challenge of this piece is to not fall into object manipulation, but to stay within partnering. It is necessary that both *Trebor* and *Robert* are on an equal footing. *Trebor* carries *Robert* and *Robert* carries *Trebor*. Both manipulate as much as they are manipulated by the other, which brings *Trebor* into an active role. By transporting one another, the two entities learn to understand each other's needs, the way they naturally move, and, slowly, start speaking the same embodied language.



«The show is for everyone»

Given the absurd, minimalist, and demanding nature of this work, which requires concentration and attention from the public, the audience needs to be close to the stage. Movement and sound are the languages used for this piece, making the show understandable for everyone.

Suitable for both inside and outside venues, with a frontal up to three quarters audience, *La vieille souche* suggests an absurd dark intimate atmosphere, which can be created with the audience not exceeding a couple hundred people.

2. Example: <https://youtu.be/XE4jebF3j1o>

CONCLUSION: PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

From the dialogue between *Trebor* and *Robert*, from mutual understanding, stems the possibility for nature to grow. Sometimes through absence and other times through careful caring, nature and humans can only grow optimally and successfully in their environments if they listen to each other's needs, give each other space, and support each other.

We must learn when to interact and play an active role, and when to step back and let natural cycles follow their course. Open exchange and fluid interconnection are at the heart of a healthy and peaceful coexistence, and might have the potential to cure the absurd sense of alienation that life – or ourselves – instills in us.

The power is in our hands, what shall we do with it ?



EPILOGUE - PLANT A TREE

People no longer understand how to live in harmony with nature. In Belgium, more than three out of every four individuals own a garden, but they spend less and less time in it³. In 2021, 75% of Europeans (98% of Belgians!) lived in an urban area⁴.



Nature is being pushed further and further away from the majority of us.

We devote less and less time to caring for our gardens, and even less to caring for nature in general. Everywhere in Belgium, there is a decline in the importance placed on ecology⁵. I read with sadness, but not surprise, that five years after signing the COP 21 agreement, not a single country has made sufficient commitments to limit global warming to two degrees Celsius⁶.

There is no doubt about global warming anymore. We are all aware that drastic action is required, and that action must be taken immediately. However, many people, including myself, feel powerless. There appears to be nothing we can do.

La Vieille Souche being optimistic, a message of hope through action, I came up with the idea of planting a tree, with the help of the audience, at the end of each performance, at the location where the show will be performed. The goal of *La Vieille Souche* is to be appropriate for both theaters and urban areas with little or no nature. In either location, working with the venue, a planting location for the tree will be determined, ideally as close to the performance space as possible.

The common oak, *Quercus Robur*, was chosen for this operation. This tree, as his name suggests, is known for its robustness, particularly in Western Europe. Its longevity can reach up to 1000 years, which contrasts with our ever-accelerating lifestyle and the increasingly common short-term planning (consider skyscrapers built in months and intended to last a few decades versus churches built in decades and intended to last centuries).

Research on how to proceed has led to discovering that it is critical to water the tree for the first two weeks to maximize its chances of survival. Consequently, to give the audience responsibility, to make them aware of nature, and to give them the empowering opportunity to take care of it, they will be asked to return to the planting site with a bottle of water once or twice in the days/weeks following the performance, and water the tree. Of course, the tree that will be planted is *Trebor*. This means that each performance will be with a different tree, making each show a little more unique.

3. <https://www.notrenature.be/article/notre-nature-enquete-les-belges-connaissent-ils-la-nature> 11 July 2022.

4. <https://donnees.banquemondiale.org/indicateur/SP.URB.TOTL.in.zs?locations=EU> 11 July 2022

5. <https://www.gondola.be/fr/news/le-belge-na-plus-trop-la-fibre-ecologique-et-fait-ses-achats-dans-le-low-end-retail-pour-son> 11 July 2022.

6. <https://positiveworkplace.fr/cop-21-2015-2021-quel-bilan-pour-laccord-de-paris/> 11 July 2022

INSPIRATIONS

The absurdist line that exists between our desperate desire for meaning and our acceptance of reality as it is has always fascinated me, both in my own work and in the art that I enjoy consuming.

The absurd defies expectations, shifts perception, and shakes beliefs, which is both triggering and enjoyable for me.

As an artistic movement, it emphasizes the meaninglessness of life, the fact that, sometimes, there simply is no meaning. As a movement, it arose at a time, post-World War II, when humanity was confronted with the impossibility of understanding the meaning of political events and societal conditions, which unfortunately still seems to be relevant today.

«Rather, it forces us to consider our sense of agency, or lack thereof, in our perplexing and incomprehensible world.»

So far, the majority of my work has been within the realm of partnering-work. Working with others is what draws me to circus, dance, and life in general. It facilitates interactions, dialogues, exchanges, and growth. So far, solo work had always seemed sterile to me, but having embraced my strong desire to create, bring to life and communicate my particular, personal artistic ideas, no matter how absurd they may be, I realized that I needed to leave my partnering comfort zone in order to explore the limits of partnering on my own :

«What can be considered a partner ?»



How do I achieve partnering-work with a seemingly passive entity ? How can I push the boundaries of collaborative work as the only human on stage ? How do I turn a tree into an active partnering agent ?

I want to work with *Trebور*, with a tree, because, despite appearing immovable, in its own temporality, a tree is alive and in constant motion. Trees are powerful and noble. They allow us to breathe. To live. But they are also playful: serving as a home for our children's fantasies as well as adults' reflections, they allow us to climb on them, harvest their fruits, read books against, carve, swing from, observe and learn from them.

«Trees care for us as much as we should care for them.»

With *La Vieille Souche*, I am creating an ode to life, trying to capture its absurdity, playfulness, nostalgia and strength. Music is an essential component of this capture. As a thorough listener, but mostly as a composer, I scout the musical field, always looking for and creating music that makes me want to move, music with empowering drones, touching harmonies, or intriguing sounds.

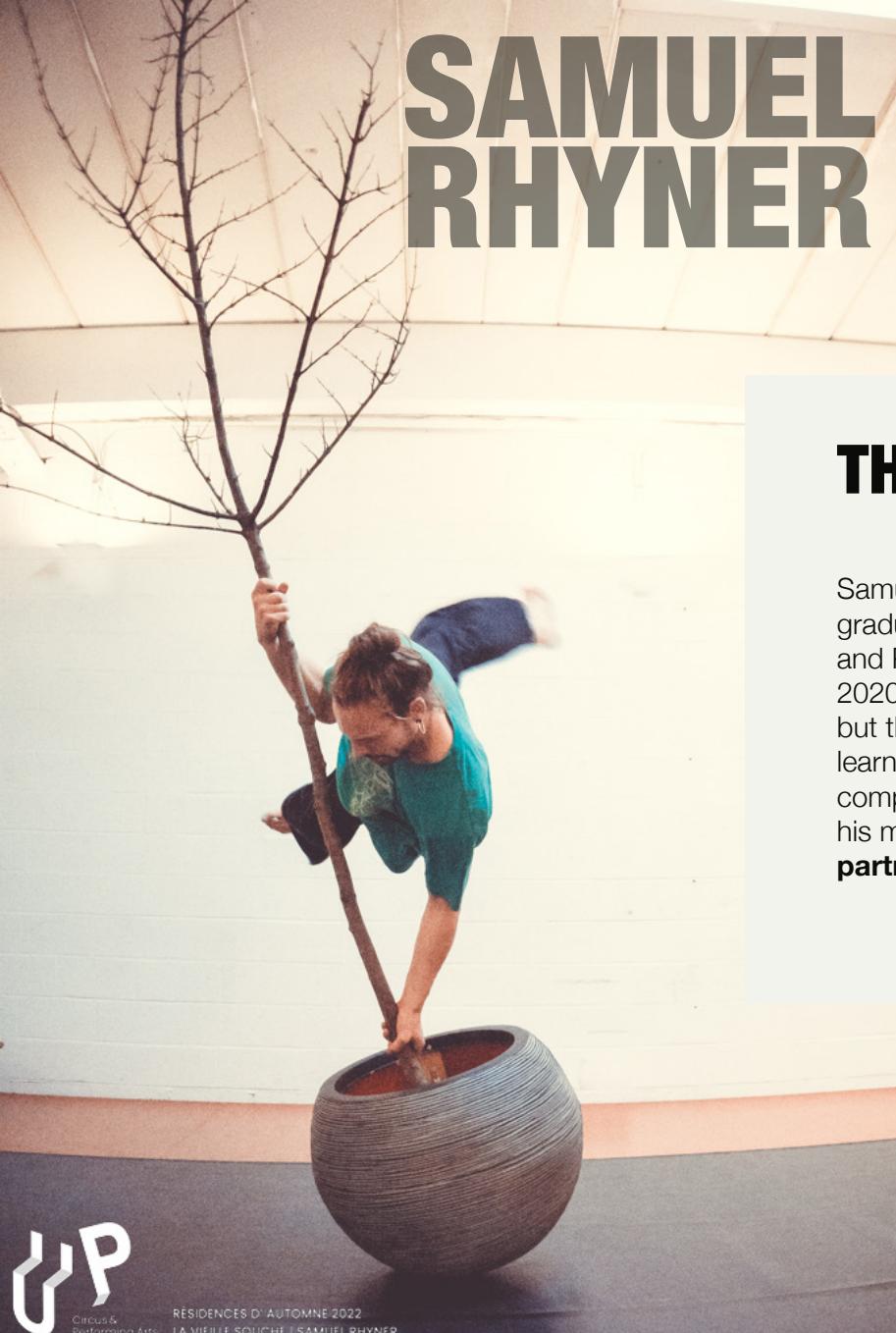
Among the myriad of books, music tracks, performances, exhibitions, movies, talks, discussions, paintings, here is a sample of what inspired and influenced me on the journey which led to the creation of this performance :

Mazùt - Baro d'Evel, Room with a view - Rone and (La)Horde with the Ballet National de Marseille, Moeder - Peeping Tom, Screws - Alexander Van Turnhout, How to welcome the aliens - Ea Eo, Exhibition at Hangar Bruxelles - In the shadow of trees, Telahora - Nicolas Jaar, Rone - Human, Amon Tobin - Lost & found, Tout est magnifique - Jacques, Kulning - Maria Hulthén Birkeland, A Call to Prayer - Estas Tonne and Zola Dubnikova, Like wolves on the Fold - Colin Stedson, fugue en rire - Henry Salvador, El Cant dels Ocells - Rosemary Standley and dom La Nena.

SAMUEL RHYNER

THE ARTIST

Samuel Rhyner is a Swiss circus artist, graduated from the Academy for Circus and Performance Art in Tilburg (NL) in 2020. Interested in movement in general, but thirsty for knowledge, he decided to learn Piano, trumpet, electronic music composition and Cyr Wheel besides his main disciplines : **Acrodance and partnering**.



RÉSIDENCES D'AUTOMNE 2022
LA VIEILLE SOUCHE | SAMUEL RHYNER

During his school time he joined a few projects, including *La Cie Sea* (circus company) with the show « *Un grain* », *La mythe* (collaboration with the visual artist : Erwan Demenga), *(In)Sane* (dance quartet choreographed by Sarah Prescimone), « *Simio Kollektiv* » (partnering collective) and « *On point* » (partnering duet with Cal Courtney choreographed by Piet van Dycke, which is still touring to this day!). He graduated with the solo « [*Silent scream*](#) ».

He also co-created the company *Les Payenkes Utopistes* with Saphia Loizeau and created and toured with the shows « *Bonne Question !* » (2018, partnering duet), « [*O-zero*](#) » (2019, partnering and musical duet) and « [*Hug*](#) » (2020-2022, partnering and musical duet). After graduating, he joined Compagnie Hors Surface on the show « [*Entre deux mondes*](#) » as an acrodancer, composed the soundtrack of the art exhibition « *Lumitériales* » by Laurie-Anne Jaubert, joined the circus-dance company Circumstances with the show « [*Exit*](#) » directed by Piet van Dycke, and joined the show « *Rocking* » directed by Paul Van de Waterlaat.

Having worked and working in different projects as co-creator, performer, composer, acrobat, acrodancer or interpreter, he now embarks on a solo path with « *La vieille souche* ».

RESEARCH AND CREATION PLAN

SUMMER 2022

Preliminary fabrication of prototypes

5 days: Samuel Rhyner
In Samuel's home atelier (Schaerbeek, Belgium)

Preliminary sound harvesting, and sound pre-research

5 days: Samuel Rhyner
1 day with Pierrick Bacher (music)
In Samuel's music studio (Schaerbeek, Belgium)

FALL 2022

Movement pre-research and experimentations with prototypes

11 days: Samuel Rhyner
1 day: Franka Tremblay (Dramaturgy)
1 day: Piet van Dycke (Choreography)
In Miramiro (Gent) and de Ruimte (Leuven)

Fabrication of the definitive pot, definitive scenography

10 days: Samuel Rhyner
10 days: Martin Baarda (Scenography)
In Martin's atelier (Antwerp, Belgium)

Technical sound installation and experimentations

4 days: Samuel Rhyner
In Up circus & performing arts (Brussels)

2023

Movement research with definitive tree pot

10 days: Samuel Rhyner
1 day: Piet van Dycke (Choreography)
In Mira miro (Gent, BE) and Panama pictures ('s Hertogenbosch, NL)

Choreography creation

20 days: Samuel Rhyner
2 days: Piet van Dycke (Choreography)
1 day: Franka Tremblay (Dramaturgy)
In Circuswerkplaats Dommelhof (Neerpelt, BE) and in Up circus & performing arts (Brussels), other locations to be determined.

Music creation

20 days: Samuel Rhyner
5 days: Pierrick Bacher (music)
1 day: Franka Tremblay (Dramaturgy)
Location to be determined (see potential partners)

Concluding the creation (light design and finishing touch)

5 days: Samuel Rhyner
5 days: Bart Verzellenberg (light design)
1 day: Franka Tremblay (Dramaturgy)
1 day: Piet van Dycke (Choreography)
In Circuswerkplaats Dommelhof (Neerpelt, BE)

Rehearsing and polishing the piece

5 days: Samuel Rhyner
1 day: Will Blenkin (Photography)
1 day: Franka Tremblay (Dramaturgy)
Location is to be determined

AUTUMN 2023

Dutch Première in Festival Circolo (to be confirmed)



COLLABORATORS

Oak tree : Trebor Quercus Robur
Dramaturgical advice : Franka Tremblay
Choreographic advice : Piet Van Dycce
External eyes : Adele Didelez, Saphia Loizeau, Samantha Cunningham, Myriam Jarmarche
Prototypes ceramics advice : Frédéric Barman
Musical advice : Pierrick Bacher
Scenographic advice : Sammy van Den Heuvel
Scenography building : Martin Baarda and Luc Cauwenberghs
Light design : Bart Verzellenberg
Costume advice : Menno Boerdam
Photos : William Blenkin

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

For collaboration and residency opportunities, the following institutions and performance spaces have been or will be contacted :

Théâtre Les Halles (Sierre, CH), Le Spot (Sion, CH), Centre culturel du Brabant Wallon (Court-Saint-Etienne, BE), PERPLX Circuswerkplaats (Kortrijk, BE), Latitude 50 (Marchin, BE), Korzo (den Haag, NL), Circolo (Tilburg, NL), Pro Helvétia (CH), Pour-cent culturel Migros (Valais, CH), culture Valais (Valais, CH), fondation Parallèle (St-Maurice, CH), fondation CMA (CH), société suisse des auteurs (CH).

WITH THE SUPPORT OF

Circ'UIT (BE), deRUIMTE (Leuven, BE), Mira miro (Gent, BE), Circuswerkplaats Dommelhof (Neerpelt, BE), UP – Circus & Performing Arts (Brussels, BE), Tent (Amsterdam, NL), Les Payenkes Utopistes (CH), Panama pictures ('s Hertogenbosch, NL), Etincelles de Culture (Valais, CH), Cirklabo (Leuven, BE)



PRACTICAL INFORMATION

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