

Pierre Dac

King of Lunatics

20 April - 27 August 2023

From the 1920s to the mid-1970s, Pierre Dac (1893-1975), genius of the absurd, invented an entirely new comic arsenal that left its mark on French culture. Born into an Alsatian Jewish and profoundly patriotic family, he was mobilised at the beginning of the First World War, during which he was seriously wounded. In the immediate post-war period, he became a singer in the cabarets of Montmartre. In the 1930s, he founded the *Société des loufoques* [The Lunatic Society], invented new forms of radio and created *La Course au trésor* [Treasure Hunt], a game in which listeners took part in a hilarious search for the quirkiest objects.

Pierre Dac was a stubborn critic of the rise of fascism and in 1938 founded the weekly *L'Os à moelle* [The Marrowbone]. From the beginning of the Occupation, he never stopped trying to reach London, where, at the microphone of the programme *Les Français parlent aux Français*, he criticized the Vichy regime and the Nazi occupiers. In the early 1950s, he formed a duo with Francis

Blanche, creating several radio dramas with record audiences. With the revival of *L'Os à moelle* in 1964, Pierre Dac ridiculed the cynicism and mediocrity of the politicians of the Fifth Republic. In 1965, he was even candidate for the presidential election, at the head of the of the *Mouvement ondulatoire unifié* (M.O.U.) ([S.O.F.T.] meaning "United undulatory Movement"). The following year, he played, in a hieratic manner, the president of the court in *The Investigation* by Peter Weiss, at the Théâtre de la Commune in Aubervilliers.

Pierre Dac devoted his last years to writing his *Pensées*. He left a considerable body of work - more than 900 songs, 12 novels and essays, 5 radio serials, several plays, and countless articles, in a style that owes as much to the slang of butchers to the Freudian wit and nonsense of Jewish humour. In more ways than one, Pierre Dac deserves to be considered today as master of the absurd, in the same way as Samuel Beckett or Eugène Ionesco.

André Isaac's early years (1893-1919)

After the annexation of Alsace-Moselle by Germany in 1871, André Isaac's maternal family opted for France and settled in Châlons-sur-Marne (today Châlons-en-Champagne), where they opened a shoe shop. There, Berthe Kahn met and married Salomon Isaac, a butcher from Nancy. The couple had two sons: Marcel, born in 1887, and André, born in 1893. In 1896, the family moved to Paris. Nourished with humour, he grew up steeped in his family's languages Judeo-Alsatian and French, to which they added *louchebem*, the butchers' slang spoken by their father.

After the declaration of war by Germany on 3 August 1914, the two brothers were mobilised and sent to the front. Marcel's death during the attacks in Champagne and the wounds he received in 1915 and 1917 left deep marks on André.

Songwriter in the inter-war period

After his demobilisation in 1919, André Isaac worked in various small jobs before starting in 1922 as a chansonnier at *La Vache enragée*. He adopted the stage name Pierre Dac. His sketches and songs, and especially his considerations on humanity, which he called "Pensées" [Thoughts] in homage to Blaise Pascal, soon established him as a master of the absurd. Pierre Dac was an immediate success in theatres and cabarets, such as *Les Deux Ânes*, *Le Coucou*, *Le Caveau de la République* or *La Lune rousse*. The advent of talking movies offered him a few roles in *Le Fada* by Léonce-Henri Burel (1932), *Le Bidon d'or* by Christian-Jaque (1932) or *Les Deux Monsieur de Madame* by Abel Jacquin and Georges Pallu (1933).

A lunatic on the radio. The invention of a genre

With fellow songwriters, comedians and musicians, Pierre Dac explored the field of absurdist humour, which he dubbed "loufoque" [lunatic, zany], a term derived from *louchebem*. By the end of the 1920s, France had more than thirty public or private radio stations. The TSF entered most French homes. In 1936, Pierre Dac made his debut as a comedian on the air of Radio Cité, a station bought the previous year by the publicist Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet. He invented the first humour programme: *L'Académie des travailleurs du chapeau* [The Hat Workers' Academy]. In 1937, on the Parisian station, he created and hosted *La Course au trésor* and *La Société des loufoques* with Fernand Rauzéna.

L'Os à moelle

In 1938, approached by the publishers Moïse and Nathan Offenstadt, Pierre Dac launched the weekly *L'Os à moelle*, the official organ of the lunatics. As editor, he headed a team composed of Fernand Rauzéna, Jean Marsac, Raymond Schalit, Maurice Henry, Claude Dhérelle, Charley Williams and Robert Rocca, the cartoonists Bugette, Pruvost and Jean Effel, as well as the soap opera writer Roger Salardenne. The 400,000 copies of the first number, published on 13 May 1938, rapidly sold out. The classified ads of Gaston Berger and Ribette were a great success - notably in secondary schools. Very popular, the title was also politically committed, mocking Hitler and Mussolini, as well as the compromises, cowardice, and ineptitude of certain politicians. Publication of *L'Os à moelle* ceased when Paris was occupied by the Wehrmacht in June 1940.

From the “phoney war” to London

January 1933: Hitler came to power in Germany. Progressively, anti-Semitic propaganda became more violent and intense. The airwaves contributed to this, through Radio Stuttgart, from 1936, then Radio Paris from June 1940. The entry of the United States into the war saw a virulent redeployment of anti-Semitic arguments coupled with a criticism of American production allegedly inspired by Jews. Using popular characters from cartoons and animated films (found in *Nimbus libéré*), Vichy pro-Nazi propaganda led a fierce campaign, accusing the Allies and their alleged Jewish ‘supporters’ portrayed in classic anti-Semitic guise, to stop at nothing in order to win. According to collaborationist rhetoric, the Allies would be ready to sacrifice their own their own supporters (in the film, Professor Nimbus and his family) and the civilian population.

Pierre Dac, resistant reporter

In the autumn of 1944, Pierre Dac resumed his shows at the ABC, participated in various galas for the benefit of war victims and married Dinah. In January 1945, he accepted a position as war correspondent for the French Radio Broadcasting Company and was present at the liberation of the Vosges and Alsace, then the German debacle in the Rhineland, before reaching the Tyrol. After the capitulation of Germany, Pierre Dac returned to civilian life. His activity as a member of the Resistance was officially recognised by General de Gaulle; he received the French Resistance medal as well as testimonies of recognition from various groups of Maquisards. He was appointed Knight of the Order of the Legion of Honour in 1946.

The Investigation

When the French version of *The Investigation* (*Die Ermittlung*) by the Berlin Jewish playwright Peter Weiss was premiered by Gabriel Garran (Gabriel Gerstenkorn) at the Théâtre de la Commune in Aubervilliers, in March 1966, Pierre Dac played the role of the president of the court. Weiss’s text is scrupulously based on the minutes of the trial in Frankfurt, from December 1963 to August 1965, twenty-two officials and guards of the Auschwitz extermination camp. The fifty performances of this eleven-song oratorio attracted fifteen thousand spectators. The play was also directed by Peter Brook in England and by Ingmar Bergman in Sweden.

The Free Bone

In 1945, France was preparing its return to democracy. A constitutional referendum was set for 21 October. Pierre Dac, who had distanced himself from the entertainment world, was determined to seize this opportunity. With the help by Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet, he launched *L’Os libre* [The Free Bone] on 11 October, a humorous weekly “for everything that is against and against everything that is for”, which he intended to turn into a political tool that would “mark the decisive turning point in the re-launch of our democratic institutions”. It contained texts signed by, among others René Lefèvre, Jean Nocher, Fernand Rauzéna, joined by Bourvil and a young humourist, Francis Blanche. But due to lack of success, *L’Os libre* ceased publication in October 1947.

The Blanche years

Although it began with a quarrel, his collaboration with Francis Blanche was extremely productive. The two comedians formed the most famous duo of the 1950s, on stage and on radio. Their revues (*Sans issue!* [Dead End], *Chipolata*) and their radio programmes for Paris Inter and then for Europe n° 1 (*Le Parti d'en rire* [The Better Laugh about it Party], *Faites chauffer la colle* [Heat up the glue], *Malheur aux barbus* [Woe to the Bearded], *Signé Furax* [Signed Furax]) were very popular. The sketch “Madame Arnica” became the famous “Sâr Rabindranath Duval”. Around them gravitated various talents: Roger Pierre and Jean-Marc Thibault, Jacques Bénétin, Jean-Marie Amato, Robert Lamoureux, Yves Robert, Louis de Funès, Darry Cowl, Jean Poiret, Jean Carmet, Raymond Devos. In 1960, the duo put an end to its collaboration.

Du côté d'ailleurs

Pierre Dac did not only use his art of the absurd to the theatre or radio, but he also tried his hand at writing novels. In 1952 he wrote *Du côté d'ailleurs* [On the Side of somewhere else]. The 400-page book was published in April 1953 by André Martel. It tells the story of the strange journey of two reporters from the newspaper *Mardi huit heures* sent on a mission to Autrelieu, the country's capital, *Du côté d'ailleurs* plunges its readers into a fable where the strange and the absurd compete with the comical.

From lunatic to philosopher

A bitter zany, disgusted by the cowardice of the horrors of the Occupation and the collaboration, disgusted by Nazi barbarism, Pierre Dac was reluctant to make people laugh in the same way - his humour darkened. He radicalised his commitment to the anti-racist cause and against anti-Semitism by publishing a series of articles in *Le Droit de vivre*, the organ of the LICRA. His texts, notably “Du droit d'être un salaud”, express his disgust.

The revival of *L'Os à moelle* in 1964-1965 testifies less to his attachment to the zany spirit than to his contempt for opportunism and the political and intellectual mediocrity and intellectual mediocrity of the elites. His candidacy presidential election in 1965 at the head of the *Mouvement ondulatoire unifié* (M.O.U.) parodied political rites. *Les Pensées*, which he published in 1972, appealed to a new generation and consecrated his vision as a “philosopher”.

Pierre Dac today

Pierre Dac died in Paris on 9 February 1975. During his lifetime, in 1972, the town of Meulan in the Yvelines dedicated a square and a statue to him. Today, a dozen streets bear his name, particularly in Châlons-en-Champagne, his birthplace, in Paris and in Nancy. Without him, Coluche, Pierre Desproges, the Guignols and many French humourists would probably never have existed. But with the disappearance of Francis Blanche, Jean Yanne or Pierre Desproges, the legacy has faded.

The image of Pierre Dac is present on the Internet, but the two or three sketches that capture the majority of “views” represent only a tiny part of the artist's trajectory. It is rather through his texts such as the anthology *L'Os à moelle*, the Radio London broadcasts, the novels and the *Pensées* that we can now measure that we can now measure the extent of his work.

The man behind the comedian

Pierre Dac's archives contain hundreds of photographic portraits. These show an elegant man, concerned with his appearance, whether he is dressed in a dressing gown or a suit, controlling his image. But Dac was also an introverted person, carrying deep wounds, which would lead to a lasting depressive state after 1945 and four suicide attempts at the end of the 1950s. Solitary and melancholic, he was faithful in friendship, even if he mixed little with his fellow chansonniers and comedians. He was devoted to his second wife, the actress and resistance fighter Dinah Gervyl, he converted to Catholicism and married her religiously in 1954.

The schmilblick and the biglotron

The mystery remains: what is the "schmilblick" and what is the biglotron? The definitions of the two are similar, but while the latter appeared in the soap opera *Bons baisers de partout* in 1966, is a contraction of "bigleux" and "synchrotron", the former, coined in the early 1950s, could be a juxtaposition of the Yiddish terms *blick* ('look') and *schlemiel* ('idiot'). The word, thanks to Pierre Dac, entered the language to designate a "thing". In 1969, Guy Lux launched a television game show inspired by the sketch "Le Schmilblick", which Coluche would later parody.

Publication

The catalogue of the exhibition
Pierre Dac. Du côté d'ailleurs
Co-publication mahJ - Gallimard
192 pages, 29€
On sale at the mahJ bookshop

mahj.org

Bookshop

A large choice of works by
and about Pierre Dac, the
collection of stationery
illustrated with his thoughts
and the schmilblick" bag..

Soutenu par



With the support of



In media partnership with



#ExpoPierreDac