



Theater

October 5th, 2017

## JAMES THIERRÉE with Ivan Talijancic

James Thierrée is certainly no stranger to the New York theater cognoscenti, and beyond, appearing on stage since the age of four with his parents' company Le Cirque Imaginaire. In spite of his impossibly illustrious pedigree—having Charlie Chaplin as his grandfather and Eugene O'Neill as his great grand-father—the French auteur has carved a powerfully original vision of his own making, creating a body of work centered around phantasmagorically visual and physical spectacles that have been widely seen around the world. I caught up with James in his Paris apartment (via Skype) in early September to discuss his return engagement to the Brooklyn Academy of Music with this latest creation, *La grenouille avait raison* (*The Toad Knew*) to be presented October 12–14. When I called him, he had been rushing home, out of breath, and kindly asked me to call him back in ten minutes—I happily obliged.



James Thierrée's *La grenouille avait raison* (*The Toad Knew*). Photo: Richard Haughton.

**James Thierrée** : I'm home.

**Ivan Talijancic (Rail)**: Oh, good. You know, in these ten minutes, I imagined that you've performed an entire show at your home, with twenty different things – flying through the space, firing up the tea kettle, switching on the computer, and dimming the lights just the right way—

**Thierrée**: [*Laughs*] Well, I'm not touring yet.

**Rail**: So, you are in the “home mode.”

**Thierrée**: Yes, I am. I'm preparing, because we are leaving for Chicago next week to start the last tour of *The Toad*—the show that we're talking about—which will finish in Mexico in a little town called Guanajuato.

**Rail**: I was actually looking at the touring schedule on your website—and wondering if they have been affected by this crazy earthquake that just happened the other day.

**Thierrée**: I have no idea. Guanajuato is a very small town in the middle of the mountains. I think [the West Coast] has been very much affected, I don't know how the rest of the country is doing. I guess we're going to have to get used to these violent events. It's something that we are reluctant to look in the eye. But it seems like it's going to happen more and more.

**Rail:** Yes, well, we did this to ourselves. We better prepare for what's to come, right?

**Thierrée:** Yes. Yes. Like in mythology.

**Rail:** Mother Earth goes: "OK, let me show you..."

**Thierrée:** What's funny is—I just recently learned that Guanajuato means "the mountain of frogs."

**Rail:** No way!

**Thierrée:** So, we will finish *La grenouille avait raison* (*The Toad Knew*)—which is really "The Frog Knew"—on the mountains of frogs.

**Rail:** You couldn't have planned it better.

**Thierrée:** Yes. It's a little sign that is was meant to be.

**Rail:** Well, thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I had the pleasure of meeting your sister [Aurélia Thierrée] earlier this summer and we were talking about you, so it seems this was the year for me to meet the Thierrée family.

**Thierrée:** Yes! Here's another mythology.

**Rail:** You have performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) now so many times it feels like it's practically become a home for your work here in New York. How does it feel to return to perform here?

**Thierrée:** Starting with *La Veillée des Abysses* [*Bright Abyss*], I came with every show. You know, I love to go someplace I've never been and meet new audiences. I don't know how people will react, and the challenge of it is great. On the other hand, to come back to a place, and have this kind of a long-term relationship with a theater and an audience—it's another emotional journey that's quite strong. I like both extremes. Places where I've done every single one of my shows—there aren't that many. I like it. It makes me go into a very reflective mood; I see these walls, the dressing rooms, the stage, and I think about theater history. I think about the long run of an artistic life and the architecture of the place and how it's welcomed so many generations. So, I get into these moods when I come to BAM, I get into the depths of the experience of theater.

**Rail:** Do you feel—because there is a kind of trust and familiarity there—that you are able to take the work a step further?

**Thierrée:** I always work on all the shows until the very last performance, even with those that run several years. There is always this sense that it's a mysterious object that I never fully control or



James Thierrée's *La grenouille avait raison* (*The Toad Knew*). Photo: Richard Haughton.

understand, so I'm always constructing it. I like to come to BAM towards the end of the life of the show because it means we've gone through many metamorphoses and a great deal of re-questioning of the show. Sometimes even performers may have been replaced, and there is again the sense that something has been lived through and that we can come and conclude the conversation with the audience.

**Rail:** Having seen your productions myself, I have a sense that you are taking the audiences on these phantasmagorical journeys and you're creating these beautiful worlds that, on one hand, are strange, but then, on the other hand, one feels they can get lost in them. Where do you find the inspiration for these images? You have been making work now for quite some time, and I am wondering if you've developed a particular practice or creative ritual, so to speak, or whether it changes from project to project?

**Thierry:** When you said that you can get lost, I assume you mean the feeling that you're never quite sure exactly what the whole thing is about—people both praise me and blame me for that. Sometimes, reviewers say: "we didn't understand anything" or "it's just not written well enough," or the opposite reaction: "we just love to take the ride and accept it as an experience." It is a sensorial experience more than a theatrical experience. It *is* a journey. I like to be in that place—it's my place, my nest.

I always choose at one point to destroy the very precise idea I had at the beginning of the work, where I told my crew what the show would be about, and what the characters would be, and what relationships they would have. Maybe it's just my link with circus and with entertainment in the very primitive sense, but I always think: "what the hell, I like this idea, I'm just going to put it in and it will get absorbed by the spirit of the show." It's both my weakness and my strength, and I accept it. As years went by, I thought maybe I should develop that and take responsibility for it even further—to be at this weird crossroads between something that has meaning and something that has absolutely no meaning, that is supposed to be experienced as a moment of playful and raw theater.

**Rail:** You've developed the mastery of knowing what can't be known.

**Thierry:** Yes! And I like to break the line into fragments, to make the work very rich and to work on the rhythm of things more than the relationships, rather than trying to know exactly what the story or the profound meaning of the show might be. I like to get lost. Especially considering that I'm on stage 99% of the time, it's a concrete physical and emotional experience, and I love the feeling of being lost in that dream. I get depressed if I feel like it's a children's story, which is what I initially told people when I started with *The Toad*—I said it was about siblings who were kept in a confined environment with this mysterious object hovering above their heads. It was a little story I was telling, and I stopped talking about it because I felt people were asking too many questions after the show about the story—they felt they had to follow that line and try to stitch it together. When I lost that, when I took it away, then it became something else.

**Rail:** You start with a very concrete idea—for *The Toad*, it was that family story that gives you a clear sense of direction, but then you are allowing yourself to go wherever that road takes you. It's almost as if you were wandering through a forest, it's more of an intuitive journey.

**Thierry:** Sometimes I feel that the beginning and the end of my show is always a door to the next show because I am the character they all had in common over the years. I feel like I'm just jumping from one room to another. It always starts and finishes on an open field, and in the middle you have

the infinite possibilities of interaction. I'm sorry, you must be very confused!

**Rail:** Not at all! I'm a director myself, and I embrace the philosophy of working where I may go someplace with my work and I don't need to know everything—it's more about intuition. That's my favorite way of approaching the work because the minute I say, "Oh, I know this," I feel like I killed it. It's dead.

**Thierry:** Yes, yes, yes. You used the word "intuition"—that really speaks to me. I would say that I move along with intuition and work on different aspects of the show and make the brushwork more and more defined, but, maybe, I never really know the final painting. I mean, I just never dare to look at it.

**Rail:** You also want to leave room for your audience in that dream, right?

**Thierry:** : Exactly. The problem is, if you impose your dream on others, they just look at it with polite distance, as a poetic object. But if you leave things open and if you are authentic in the way you embody the theatrical experience, then people can project whatever they want.

**Rail:** You invite them in.

**Thierry:** Yes. Some people will need to be taken somewhere with lots of specific indications, so they may be frustrated by my work. Others tell me stories when they come and see me after the show, and I listen to them with astonishment because I do not understand what they saw. They will tell me a story that was never in my mind, but that makes me happy.

**Rail:** You have a young child yourself. Do you feel like there was a connection there, with the family theme, that potentially prompted you to go in this direction?

**Thierry:** That idea was the seed that reassured me when I started to think about the show. My answer could be that, for me, everything is family. If I build a theater company and I bring actors with me—usually small groups—and we'll spend the next three or four years together, for me this is always linked to the fact that I worked with my family and that maybe I want to recreate small groups that have very strong ties. That is why I took away the story—it was almost too obvious. I worked more on the differences between the characters; in the show that you'll see in New York, they don't look like family anymore. They are just thrust together in that situation, in their desire to escape that confinement, to find solutions together for lost communication with logical thought and logical activities. I like that situation—people who are together and have time to really create a world because they have nothing else to do, they can only stay in that place. Maybe it's also a metaphor for the life in theater and how I see it: as enrollment into some kind of religion where you spend all your time in dark rooms rehearsing and sweating—sweating a lot, especially in my shows. I get to recreate some other kinds of families and, in a way, I'm more interested in that than in the direct frontal subject of my family, because then it would be just like looking in the mirror.

**Rail:** Speaking about family and about sweating: if I'm correct, you have been performing since the age of four, so one could say that you've grown up and that you indeed live on the stage. Your productions are highly acrobatic and extremely strenuous on your performers' bodies as well as your own. After nearly four decades of performing, how do you keep up with the demands of this work?

**Thierry:** I can resolve one problem by hiring younger and even younger people as I get older—I can compensate for my own evolution. But as I move forward, the more acrobatic, explosive,

competitive physical activities have subsided. The work is always physical but I'm not interested in impressing the audience with acrobatic skills. I think Cirque du Soleil does it very well, or Alvin Ailey. There, you get extreme skills. Nowadays, I am more interested in serving a human idea, a human situation, and pushing it into the physical extreme. As soon as it becomes pure physical craftsmanship—I feel like I did that already and I don't have to prove myself.

I've adapted a lot, and I love that. I've lived many little deaths, because when you're an acrobat and a bit of a dancer, you have to accept cycles and deaths of certain skills that you will not get back because you cannot flip-flop around forever; you can do it for about ten to fifteen years and then you have to stop. I've always listened to my body, to see where it was and what was the next evolution, so I could transform and make it interesting again. And that conversation with the different kinds and ages of the body is really something that fascinates me, and makes me look forward to the next twenty or thirty years even. I see how one can minimize. I started on trapeze and acrobatics, then I could move to smaller things. It's infinite. The more you mix theater with simple movement—even just hand work—an idea can become much stronger than an extreme physical stunt. But that speaks a lot about that place where my family has been dwelling, which is these crossroads. We were never someplace definite, we were always in that blurry, in-between place. We've never been circus people, we've never been theater people or dance people—we're a bit of all that. It could have been a catastrophe, and yet we've managed to establish a connection with the audience inside that fog.

**Rail:** You come from a family of performance makers—it's in your blood. You carved out this vision that is very unmistakably yours, but at the same time I'm wondering: what is the relationship between your work and previous theatrical traditions you've been exposed to? Do you feel like they have influenced what you're making, or is it more of a response or an evolution?

**Thierry:** We were talking about coming to the theater where you've established a relationship with that audience, and thinking about where you come from and whether you are repeating yourself or reinventing yourself. Are people coming to get the same thing, or can you propose something new, something that will be a bit of a challenge for you, but will take you away from what they've been used to? The best option for me is to never think about it. Otherwise, if I started thinking about it, then it would be endless—like a whale, I could get deeper and deeper and contemplate the water and then go even deeper and then it's all just water, and you still have to swim.

**Rail:** Or else, you drown.

**Thierry:** You have many different choices. I am a man of movement, and I like movement in thought and in relationship to your own history. I feel this ship I've built is made of many different things that I embrace, and I've always felt good about it. I saw my parents having a great deal of freedom inventing ideas. My father would just take any silly object and present it to the audience with charm, and they would just love it and laugh. I didn't understand why people laughed at my father because I didn't understand his humor when I was very small, but I saw that anything was possible if you connect in an authentic way with the audience. You could propose them almost anything, because the relationship was almost more important than the proposal. And I saw my mother developing her costumes, her strange beasts—I spent my entire childhood observing people work with great determination on the spark of an idea, and I just continued. I didn't feel like I was copying, I just felt like it was a great propulsion tool. I have moved on and I see that my work is different from theirs, and I also see all the influence that it might have inside it. It makes me feel good, because I've traveled all my life, and it's complicated with roots. When you are always on the move, you can find roots in the continuity of things. That is reassuring.

**Rail:** As is the case with many of your shows, *The Toad* has been directed, designed, scored, and performed by you with a few other people. That is a tall order, but you pull it off quite impressively.

**Thierry:** This is the first show where I have scored most of the music. Usually I use pre-recorded music that I mix together in different ways.

**Rail:** How do you balance—or, to use a circus term, juggle—all of these different hats during the creative process?

**Thierry:** It makes it simpler, in a way, because for me it's all one thing—I'm after a certain feeling for the show. And that feeling will be accomplished through sets, lights, the music, and the actions. And if I can grow that from the middle of my chest, I feel like the body of that show becomes one. For me, it's about getting closer to that initial spark which made me think: "Ok, let's do a new show." I didn't do that many shows in twenty years—I did six, because I toured a lot and because I never thought that I was a creator of shows, that I was there to produce one after another. I always loved performing in them, and every time I thought, "Maybe this is the last show"—I didn't know what would happen next. It's always connected to that desire as a performer to live an experience with other performers, to work with certain kinds of people. Once you have that spark and you want to be faithful to it, it makes sense. I'm not saying I will always do that, maybe I will try other approaches in the coming years, because anything that is too solid and too immutable becomes scary. When things are too strong, and you know that you've got your recipe to build something, there's an anguish that comes with that. With *The Toad*, the fact that I did the music was just a way to make it even more personal. I think that people who enjoy this work, they come for that personal touch. Maybe they come for the visuals and the movements, but I think what makes them really moved by the piece is the intimacy of it.

**Rail:** Everything is connected, so to speak.

**Thierry:** Yes. You don't feel like it's a superb professional teamwork. You are seeing both the strong points and the weaknesses of the person who directed the piece. Now, it doesn't mean it should be like this for everybody, but for me it's been a way of creating something solid. Otherwise, I have a tendency to go in so many different directions that it can become insoluble, almost untouchable. This way, you can go to the end of that idea, you don't make any concessions, you really save that little tune you've got in your head and sing it the way you feel it, the way you remember it. It's an interesting way of writing.

**Rail:** How much time did you have to create this show?

**Thierry:** I always work more or less in the same way. Basically, it's a year-long process. I start by putting down drawings of the set on paper and start having an idea of what kind of people I would like to work with. And then I work with my team to construct things, and we try little systems because we don't give our set to anyone, we just build it ourselves—so we have to invent the mechanics of it. We have to be simple because we are not airplane engineers.

**Rail:** And you have to tour!

**Thierry:** Indeed, it has to be dismantlable, and it has to be charming in a way that the simplicity will be part of the atmosphere of the show. I love to show the audience the mechanics of it. I think theater is really the place where you can show the construction of art, and that construction is part of the result you will see on the stage. Then comes the moment where all these ingredients, all these

little experiences have accumulated, and we go into rehearsals and we have three months. For about eight months we develop and try things, but I don't have the whole artistic team with me. Then, the last three months we come together, and we build and rehearse at the same time. The set is not built before we rehearse—things get built around us as the actions get more concrete. With *The Toad*, I would also bring the music. It's a very exhausting process, because three months for that much activity is a rather small amount of time—it means everyone gets very tired and very intense. But then they have stories to tell their children when they get older. And when people are not happy in the company or they feel that we work too much, I always remind them that. I just say, well, let's go through that difficult moment, let's hold on and let's see where it goes. I guarantee that, one day, you will be happy to tell the story of that moment when you were feeling worn out and that it was just not normal to stay up so late, but you will be happy to tell that story. You will have lived through it, you will have not given up, and maybe you will have not gotten the comfort that we all wish for, but we cannot get it, so we must do something extraordinary.

**Rail:** Circling back to the beginning of our conversation, this show will be your fifth engagement at BAM. As you said before, you are dealing with an audience where many of the people will know your work. What can they expect this time?

**Thierrée:** The same guy. Same ol', same ol'! That could either be a good thing or a bad thing. I think *The Toad*, in a way, circles back to my first show. When I was making it, I wanted to get back to that feeling, working with a small group of people, and I felt this show would be a different way of saying what I was saying with my first piece. Of course, even if you try to say the same thing twenty years later, it will end up being an entirely different story, because you are not the same person. Basically, I'm just eluding your question. [*Laughter.*] I have no idea what they can expect.

**Rail:** It will be a surprise.

**Thierrée:** It will be a surprise. And I want to reassure them by saying that it will be a surprise for me too.

*La grenouille avait raison (The Toad Knew)*, by James Thierrée Compagnie du Hanneton, runs Oct 12–14 at BAM Howard Gilman Opera House. For tickets and further information, visit [www.bam.org](http://www.bam.org).

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#### CONTRIBUTOR

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IVAN TALIJANCIC is a founder and artistic co-director of WaxFactory, a New York-based interdisciplinary art group. He is currently completing his first feature film, *416 MINUTES*, and regularly writes on dance for London-based *Bachtrack*.

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