

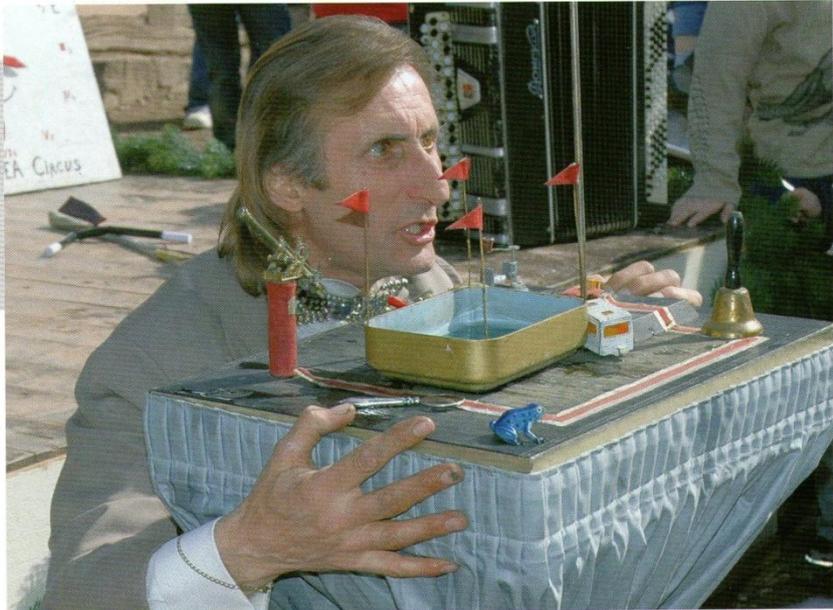
PORTRAIT

▶ Fairground and street artist Gilbert Jakubzyk with a flea circus at the "Jahrmarkt anno dazumal" in Kommern 2010

Amidst the hustle and bustle of the market, people stop, gathering around the accordionist, his fingers running expertly over the keys, performing "Milord" with notable virtuosity. The crowd besieging the accordionist is spellbound, overcome with a feeling of being taken back to the "good old days" of the 1960s and 1970s when there were still true street artists.

Text: Michael H. Faber
Photos: Michael H. Faber,
Archive Gilbert Jakubzyk

▶▶ Seven year old Gilbert brought up in an institution, 1959. At the age of 16: the first photo of Gilbert as automaton



Gilbert Jakubzyk

The street artist with the Polish family name operates under his first name, "Gilbert",

All of a sudden, the accordionist puts down his instrument and simply walks away. But the accordion continues playing the last passage of "Milord", one of those chansons that once helped establish the international fame of that celebrated "Parisienne" Edith Piaf, who died in 1963, and whose melodies are still known even to young people today. The crowd stare at the accordionist briefly before gazing, mesmerised after the "player". Well, a bit of artistic hyperbole there; rather the public starts laughing and enthusiastically applauds! It is not possible to imagine today's German historic markets without the "player" who captivates the public with performances that are to this day quite distinct. The accordion is an ingenious affectation incorporating a harmonious "dramatic composition". What lies behind it is just as simple: Unnoticed by the public, the accordionist selects a well-known chanson via a keypad and plays it on the built in CD player. The accordionist is completely unmusical and was denied a prestigious music conservatory, as he had to fend for himself in his youth. To make ends meet, he developed virtuoso illusions with a minimum of technology and material, which came to make him the most prominent figure among the Paris street artists. Many years later he found his home in Aachen from where he developed his career in Germany. This, no less, is Gilbert Jakubzyk.

and has certainly a great deal in common with the French chanson star Edith Piaf. She was born in 1915 under the name of Edith Giovanna Gassion as daughter of a Paris acrobat and showman, who performed his tricks on the squares and boulevards of Paris. Her mother soon abandoned her, and the child had to assist her father with his acrobatic performances. At the age of 15 she "went her own way" as a street singer in the rues and seedy quartier of Paris, where she was discovered by a cabaret owner who dubbed her "Piaf", or "sparrow" in Paris slang. Gilbert

also had a difficult childhood. Born in Brussels in 1952, he never knew his father from Poland and was denied by his mother, a barmaid. After his early childhood years under the unloving care of so-called "foster aunts", seven-year old Gilbert went through various schools and institutions in Ghent, Bruges and elsewhere. But wherever





PORTRAIT

On the "Piazza" Beaubourg in front of the Centre Pompidou, Gilbert the automaton besieged by the crowd in the late 1970s

er it was, he did as many "stupid things" as possible – says Gilbert today – for then he was not allowed to "go home" on the weekend. For Gilbert this punishment was a "blessing", as it saved him from the malice of his so-called "aunts".

At 14, Gilbert ran away and hitchhiked to Paris without any documents. On the run, he met an artist who imitated a "robot". This impressed the boy so much that he decided to become an artist. He devoted himself to practice, ultimately developing his very own kind of "automaton man": The human being initially confined to random, jarring movements which then, animated by music, is gradually set into "mechanic" motion, but eventually realises full, fluid movement and true human contact with his surroundings. This artistic device became the signature feature of the young artist, Gilbert. Later on, many a "living automaton" – the young descendants of which present themselves to tourists in many crowded streets and squares in France, and in-

deed in Germany – modelled itself on this kind of "android" performance. From 1991, Gilbert succeeded in gaining a foothold as "automaton" in the Paris street artist scene, where he performed among musicians, jugglers and magicians, and made friends with fire eaters, strong men and escape artists. They called themselves "Saltimbanques", named after the "saltare in banco", continuing the tradition of the "jump onto the small platform" device of the Italian street artists of former centuries. One of the most popular venues of the Paris street artists was the "Boulevard Saint-Germain" in the artist and student quarter of the same name on the left bank of the Seine, well-frequented by tourists. In former times the Saltimbanques had also gathered all around the ancient market halls in the 1st Arrondissement on the right bank of the Seine, in the crowds of marketers, tourists and locals, and after dark also in the haunts of night owls, prostitutes and other 'low lifers'. When Gilbert came to Paris, the legendary market halls had just been pulled down, on the official pretext of the alleys around the halls being too narrow as access roads for suppliers. In actual fact, the demolition of the central market was an unparalleled destruction of one of the centrepieces of Paris life.

Career in front of the Centre Pompidou

Further to the east, in the neighbouring quarter "Beaubourg" in the 4th Arrondissement, a large open space named after the quarter, had resulted from the demolition of whole alleys and streets of run-down houses in the 1930s. After the demolition of the market halls, the spacious car park which had been set up on this "Plateau Beaubourg" for the market's delivery vehicles was no longer needed. The French President of that time, Georges Pompidou, had a huge "Na-



Mistress Sylvia (Sandra Dumas) meets Gilbert the automaton. Scene photo from "Twice a Woman", 1978



Gilbert's first wife accompanies Gilbert as automaton in Paris, late 1970s

PORTRAIT

▶ With his "Saltimbanques" formation, Gilbert presented musical comedies about the life of street artists in a Paris theatre in 1981

▼ Using the props box as a platform, Gilbert presents a music box puppet, Paris in the 1980s



▶ In 1981 Gilbert (behind the car), his wife and their friend Clown Carlos appeared even as far away as in Niger



tional Centre of Art and Culture" built on this plateau, which was to strengthen Paris' position as a cultural metropolis comparable to New York. With the opening of the "Centre Pompidou" in 1977 by Valérie Giscard d'Estaing, the successor to President Pompidou who had passed away four years earlier, Beaubourg became a crowd puller for tourists from all over the world. Attracted by the francs and foreign currencies of the tourists rushing the Centre Pompidou by day, the street artists moved in and selected the area in front of the Centre as their large stage, which they lovingly called "Piazza Beaubourg" in memory of the traditional Italian street artists. The "Piazza" marked the beginning of Gilbert Jakubczyk's career as an automaton man.

The street artists first arriving at the Piazza in the morning marked their venues by setting out their "mats". According to an unwritten law of the scene, those coming later had to observe these markings. Nobody risked claiming an already marked area. The "occasional artist" appearing at the Piazza every now and then had to perform respectfully "in the second row". If the "regular artists" liked their performances, they were allowed to stay. If not, a Saltimbanques "spokesman" told them, in blunt terms, that they had better push off. This was by no means a gang or a kind of mafia that controlled the Piazza. The regular Saltimbanques from

Beaubourg had rather formed a kind of "council", which supervised the quality of performance presented at the Piazza, saw to it that there were not too many similar performances, and prevented an unregulated expansion of the number of artists. If however, the council considered that a "newcomer" enriched the programme, he was accepted into the scene, allocated a site and safeguarded against infringements of his site's markings. Once the artists had marked their sites, they could wait for the day, enjoying coffee and croissants in one of the many bistros nearby. Gilbert had the advantage of having rented a flat close to the piazza, and therefore was always one of the first to stake out his "territory". The artists began to perform at the piazza at 10 a.m. Even before the Centre Pompidou opened its gates, tourists formed long queues. Those waiting enjoyed the diversion provided by the street artists and readily pulled out their purses. Whenever Gilbert the "Automaton" performed, he was immediately besieged by some 150



PORTRAIT



Artists from the group "Saltimbanques du Paradis" in front of the stage front designed by Gilbert

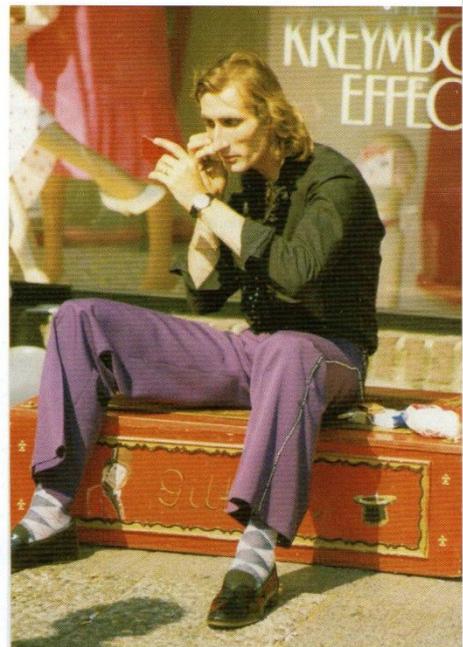
spectators, which is proven by a picture taken from Gilbert's flat. Gilbert used a ventilation tower on the piazza as a setting. With one performance after another lasting only three minutes each, Gilbert was able to entertain several thousands of spectators, and took coins by the kilo back to his apartment nearby. The street artists also liked to perform in pairs. The "Automaton" with his jerky movements for example, was often accompanied by a barrel organ, played by Gilbert's friend Claude Reboul, the best fire-eater at the piazza, who made it into the Guinness Book of World Records with his 7-metre flame. Performances as a pair had a big advantage, as one of the artists could go around with his hat, while the other performed. And as the spectators wanted to watch the performance to the end, nobody left the site, when the hat approached. When the Centre Pompidou closed in the evenings, Gilbert and the Saltimbanques moved on to the Saint-Germain district, where they performed a little longer and celebrated in one of the many bars afterwards.

Gilbert was not only one of the best street artists at the piazza, he also resolutely stood up for his male and female colleagues. Several times, the city authorities tried to ban the street artists from the Centre Pompidou. The police repeatedly searched the Saltimbanques and frequently arrested street artists simply for having no identification, lacking evidence of permanent residence (hardly any artist had a permanent address). When Gilbert succeeded in enforcing the authorization of street art in front of the Centre Pompidou in four lawsuits against the city authorities, his colleagues officially elected him as "President of the Paris street artists". Time and again, agents and organisers came to the piazza searching for artists to contract for bars and discos, company and advertising events, or festivals. Street artists without a permanent residence also benefited from Gilbert's little flat near the piazza. Above his apartment, Gilbert had an office with a telephone – and that was most im-

portant in times without mobile phones – where inquiries for artists were received, negotiations were held and performance confirmations arrived. As a result, Gilbert's home evolved into the agency for the Saltimbanques from Beaubourg, and Gilbert became their agent. Gilbert tried to offer artists "as a package", to put artists together for programmes and to persuade organisers. Under Gilbert's management, a troupe of artists was formed from the Beaubourg street artists, into which he also integrated other friendly artists: "Les Saltimbanques du Paradis". Gilbert chose the name of the artist formation in memory of the poetic cinematic masterpiece about the milieu of travelling theatre artists that Marcel Carné had shot from 1943 to 1945, during the chaos of the Second World War: "Les Enfants du Paradis" (Children of Paradise), which under the title of "Kinder des Olymp" had been considered as a classic in Germany for some time. Gilbert however, who was always in the sights of the artist agents at the piazza, was to make his debut in a feature film: In 1978, he was engaged by the Dutch director George Sluizer as "Automaton" for the cinema film production "Twice a Woman", which was shown in the cinemas in 1979. Even though Gilbert had only a cameo part, he was in the "cast" next to famous actors such as Bibi Andersson and Anthony Perkins. In the same year, the German director Ivan Steiger shot the film "Mr. Roboter", with and about Gilbert, for the theme show "Mechanik des Lebens", or "Mechanics of Life" in the ZDF series "Spielwiese", or "Playground", which introduced the automaton artist to Germany.

1979: Up until this year Gilbert had already captivated more than

Make-up break during a street performance in the Dutch city of Apeldoorn, 1985



PORTRAIT



Gilbert in 1988



artist from the Paris street art scene, satirized the living conditions of the street artists and their problems with the authorities. After a successful première

one million spectators with his automaton performances and had met a lot of celebrities. During their visits at opening exhibitions and events at the Centre Pompidou, many of the famous were captivated by Gilbert, talked to him, and paid tribute to him; such as Princess Anne from England, the chansonnier and actor Charles Aznavour and, naturally, also the French President of that time, Jacques Chirac.

Gilbert – The Director

At that time, Gilbert had long since stopped performing at the piazza in front of the Centre Pompidou. Many French companies engaged him for performances in their advertising campaigns, and discothèques booked him for special night shows. The very successful and lucrative "automaton life" was no longer enough for Gilbert though. In 1981, together with his friend "Carlos" (a clown and illusionist) who, by the way, did not come from the Paris street artist scene, Gilbert developed the comedy musical "Jugglers – or a day in Paris". This play, the various acts of which featured many a musician and

in Paris, the musical was shown under changing titles at many venues in France and also in Germany during the following years. It is said to have still been shown in the Aachen region in the early 1990s under the title "Lili from Montmartre".

Ten years after its opening, the novelty of the Centre Pompidou had worn off, the rush of tourists had clearly slackened, and Piazza Beaubourg had noticeably emptied. The street artists who Gilbert had met on his arrival in Paris and who he had "lived" with at the piazza for many years, had moved on. Some of them ended up in towns on the Côte d'Azur, where they entertained the holiday guests on the beach boulevards as fire-eaters, acrobats and clowns. Others retired or completely disappeared from the scene. Gilbert himself had recognized the signs of the times already in 1984, and had left France and moved to Aachen. The developments at Beaubourg and, above all, the increasing number of company engagements in Germany had induced him to take this step. After all, one of the largest German confectionery distributors was based in Aachen, and had already engaged Gilbert for the national and in-

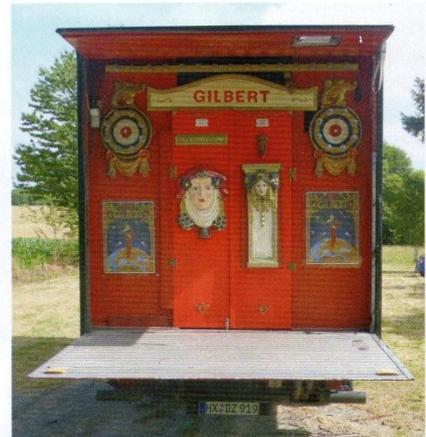


A photo taken at Gilbert's country residence of his caravan and props wagon, sometimes also used as a stage



38

MIAMCS & PARK Reviews



PORTRAIT



◀ Gilbert at the
"Jahrmarkt anno dazumal"
in Kommern 2010

international product promotion for some years, and even provided him with a residence in Aachen. Gilbert was also regularly contracted by German car dealers, department stores, shopping centres and the Federal Post Office. A number of times Gilbert was engaged for the Internationale Tourismus-Börse (ITB), the "Travel Industry Show" in Berlin, and in between he presented the new Playboy Girl in Wiesbaden. He was engaged to help in the organisation of city and street festival on the island of Borkum and in other places. Together with well-known friends from his Paris days he performed his Saltimbanques cabaret programme at the theatre near the Killesberg in Stuttgart. In addition to his appearances throughout Germany, he was also frequently engaged – solo as "Automaton" or together with artists from his Saltimbanque scene – in Belgium, the Netherlands and France. Other engagements also took him to distant countries such as Turkey, Israel, and once even to Niger, where Gilbert and his friend Clown Carlos were engaged to create high spirits among the African heads of states in a luxury hotel in the Nigerian capital, on the occasion of a summit conference! But even in Niamey, the capital of Niger, the artists could not help going out in the streets to entertain the public. When Gilbert pettified himself into an automaton on a camel market and Carlos presented his white-painted face with the red clown's nose, the public ran away from them as if they had seen demons. If Gilbert happened to be "idle" at home, he performed in pedestrian precincts in his new home town of Aachen, and in neighbouring Dutch towns. Initially he had some trouble with the city authorities though, which authorized public music per-

formances but banned artistic performances, as these were not considered to constitute "cultural enrichment". However, Gilbert succeeded in persuading the former Aachen Mayor who he had once 'captivated' while performing in the street, to lift the ban.

Gilbert – Fairground Artist

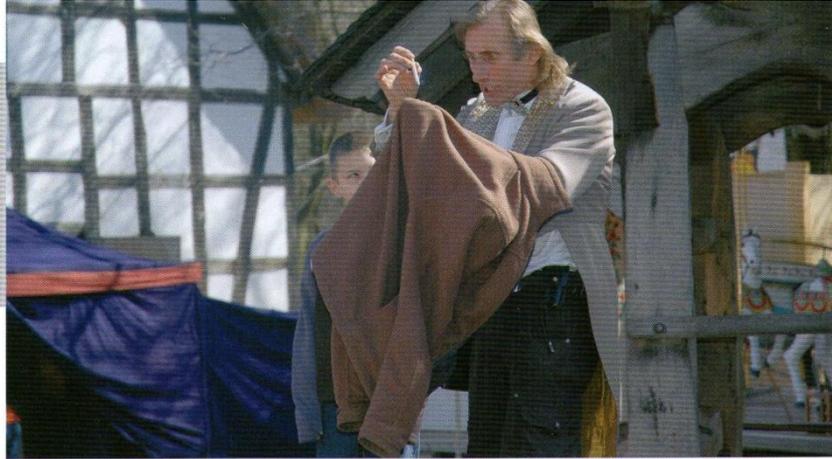
In the early 1990s, Gilbert had a big success with his comic street artist revue "Lili von Montmartre" in the Rhine open air museum in Kommern. Moreover, ever since the museum contracted him to present his automaton act at the first "Jahrmarkt anno dazumal" in 1995, Gilbert has been an indispensable fixture of this museum event, where he was discovered by many an organiser who had then begun to put together historic markets modelled on the Kommern event – including Bernhard Paul from Roncalli, who had been contracted by the Aachen city authorities to thoroughly redesign the nostalgic market in the suburb of Kornelimünster. Right up until the present, Gilbert has been engaged for every German nostalgic market that attaches the utmost importance to quality. While Gilbert's first market appearance had still been focused on the automaton act, Gilbert offered a 20 to 30 minute street cabaret highly suitable for historic markets, put together from classic street artist acts as early as his second market appearance in Kommern. Fire-eating or conjurer's

▼
TV shooting in Aachen 1984:
Gilbert presents his small
travelling exhibition about
the history of street artists
in front of his mobile stage



PORTRAIT

▶ "Would you like to have a small or a large hole in your jacket?" asked Gilbert at the "Jahrmarkt anno Dazumal" in Kommern 2010



INFO

Together with Didier Pasamonik, Gilbert has documented the history of the street artists in the Paris district of Beaubourg in a book edition of unique pictures, which unfortunately has so far only been published in French. The pictures from the "Piazza Beaubourg" in this *Kirmes & Park Revue* feature were taken from this book, and come from Gilbert Jakubczyk's picture archive. Didier Pasamonik, Gilbert *L'Automate: Beaubourg. Les années saltimbanques*. Paris 2007, ISBN 978-2-3500-0208-8. For further information on the artist: www.saltimbanque.de ■

tricks; no matter which traditional act Gilbert presents, they always differ from other artists on the scene, giving every single act a unique dramatic composition that humorously involves the public. In just a couple of years, Gilbert developed a varied market show unique to this day, including among other acts, an animation programme for children, conjurer's tricks also for adults, an execution act in which a spectator from the public, together with carrots, is split into two pieces on the guillotine. Whenever Gilbert makes animal figures with balloons for young visitors to his programme, the act proves to be a sensation, differing substantially from the similar acts of most other modern artists. It goes without saying that every young visitor always proudly succeeds in blowing up their presents themselves; the little elongated animal figures inflating into a "queue pompon", ending with a poodle like tail. With his unique esprit, Gilbert turns every act, however trivial, into a sensation. His phenomenal rhetoric, his language – a mixture of French, Flemish and German – captivates the public. Another animal and loyal companion was added to Gilbert's market programme a few years ago; namely "Fifine", the bold lady flea from Paris, who presents record-breaking spectacles, interrupted now and then by her jumping into the hair of a spectator, whereupon her circus director chases her down and returns her to the acrobatic show. The act, in which Fifine – accompanied by encouragingly shouting spectators – performs a triple salto mortale from the breath-taking 50-centimetre tower into a water basin, producing a water fountain on contact with the water, is evidence of Gilbert's unbeatable quality as a flea circus director. His unique way of presenting sensations with "minimalist" props is what captivates the public: the diving platform is nothing but a broken off telescopic car aerial, the basin a discarded tin lunch box, the fountain triggered

by a pair of small bellows, and Fifine is fictitious, as Gilbert has never been accompanied by living fleas.

The act Gilbert is currently developing and perfecting at his country house in the village of Saint-Mexant in central France during the scarce breaks in his tour schedule is as minimalistic as efficient. At his new adoptive home, where he ended up two years ago due to his new true love for a woman artist, Gilbert has presented the first experiments with his "Petoman-Show" on YouTube: Accompanied by profound explanations of how every single person can prevent the ozone hole from growing, Gilbert demonstrates the use of intestinal gas produced naturally in the body for power generation. This requires a piece of old plastic hose, through which intestinal methane gas is vigorously sucked up through the nose and then blown through the mouth onto a piece of aluminium foil that has been secured onto a safety pin. The success of Gilbert's experiment requires only one further requisite: a disposable lighter ignites an explosive flame on the fumigated aluminium foil. ■

