

## **Spartacus Chetwynd**

**Interview by Claire Bernstein at the Villa Arson**

**The Fall of Man ; a puppet extravaganza**

**Claire Bernstein:** Can you explain to us why you adopted the name Spartacus?

**Spartacus Chetwynd:** Spartacus is referencing a slave rebellion against Rome and I think it's 17 BC, around that time, and it's because of his work in forming huge solidarity with a group of people, and then eventually it failed, and he was crucified, and I'm relating to him.

**CB:** In his article for Frieze in May 2007, Tom Morton mentions your "*utter commitment to the quixotic and the plain silly*". Can you comment this sentence of his: "*Chetwynd's art is nothing if not about pushing idle thoughts as far as they'll go*"?

**SC:** Quixotic's good, that's referencing Don Quixote, and his battle with the windmills, and his sort of being drawn to the overromantic of being a fool, and I can understand that reference, and the rest of the sentence is too long for me to remember...

**CB:** "*Chetwynd's art is nothing if not about pushing idle thoughts as far as they'll go*". How do you feel about the "idle thoughts"?

**SC:** I don't know. I'm just trying to think, I think it means that you're allowing your imagination to come through. I think it's OK.

**CB:** Can you tell us about the "troupe" that you work with? Who are they, how did the collaboration start, and who has the ideas?!

**SC:** the troupe is a group of people I've worked with for the last ten years, fifteen years, and these are two of them, this is Shwooky, Martina Shwooka, who's an artist in her own right, and this one is Gaby, who doesn't need anymore of an introduction, and they're all people that are normally some people that I've met from dancing and some people that I've met through the art world, through art college, and then I've asked them to do a project and they've really enjoyed it so they've kept going for the other ones, and some people have been in an audience and I've asked them to join in - so it's just growing very organically.

**CB:** Do you feel closer to the theatre, the world of the performing arts, or to a form of performance art inspired historically by the visual arts?

**SC:** Hmm... I feel closest to the world of theatre and it'll probably be early theatre, medieval theatre, and early Christian plays like when classical culture wasn't so dominant, when Roman and Greek plays weren't ... but the church would put on more like morality plays.

**CB:** You studied anthropology. Are you inspired by local traditions and social rituals, like carnivals, both pagan and religious? Are those an influence in your performances?

**SC:** When I studied anthropology - I know exactly the answer to that question: the best influence I can cite is a French ethnographic film maker called Jean Rouch, and it was a specific film I saw when I was 19, and it's called *Le maître fou*, and I'm probably pronouncing it wrongly, but it's the mad priest; and it's incredible, it's about a group of men who perform their own ritual, and I took it literally and I started doing performances after watching his film.

**CB:** In your interview for the Tate Modern you call your performances "*bottled mayhem*". What do you mean by that?

**SC:** Hmm... "Bottled Mayhem" is a reference to the Marx Brothers, and it's like the idea of when you're watching a Marx Brothers film and they're really irreverent against any kind of form of officialdom and they just burst out as if they've like been in a bottle and it's been unbottled and uncorked and they rush around the room doing gymnastics and causing crazy mayhem, and I was thinking that in the art world everything becomes a product, everything you do even if it's a gesture, like Yves Klein's leap into the void, everything's become a product; and so with the performances I do, they're like a form of "*bottled mayhem*" because they've become a product, because they're part of the art world.

**CB:** What do you expect from the spectator? What reaction, or what interaction, would you like to provoke?

**SC:** It's not really provoke, provoke might be too strong a word; but I'd like the audience to feel as included as much as part of the performance as the people

doing the performing, so that there's no separation between spectacle and spectator.

**CB:** How do you know a performance is successful? When is it a flop?

**SC:** I know when a performance is successful when no one has hurt themselves through the whole evening, and everyone feels like they've really had a good time.

**CB:** Historically speaking, performance is often considered to derive from movements such as *futurism* or *dadaism*. And these artistic movements were extremely provocative, and they were aimed at conservative and bourgeois values. Do you think it is still possible today to provoke the public to the same degree, to create scandal in the context of an art exhibition? Do you feel concerned by this issue? In other words is our society comparably conservative? Does the public still need to be mistreated?

**SC:** It's a long sentence! I understand the question. I'd say that I have a consistent positive belief in the way that human nature works, and codes work; I really believe that even though there's some sort of form of official layer, that there's an underneath, counterculture, coming through and that this is a pattern that will go on forever. So even if it's happened before, it will continue to happen, and that you shouldn't lose like any faith, that there will always be something interesting and maverick and irreverent coming through, even when - just perpetually it will continue to change. And as an answer to that question there will be a necessary provocation to shake up a necessary establishment, always. It'll be fun.

**CB:** Do you ever use the same scenery twice, or parts of a scenery? What do you usually do when you're finished, do you throw it out?

**SC:** Hmm...difficult question. I'd quite like to throw these two away ! I'd quite like to put them in the bin. But I feel a small amount of responsibility, and I think I'll re-use the costumes and sets as long as it makes sense to do the performance again. Otherwise they could be burnt.

**CB:** So in other words you only use it again if you do the same performance again. And do you find it interesting, or relevant, to exhibit the leftover scenery from a performance? That's the theme of this particular show.

**SC:** Leftover, to show it, like this exhibition?

**CB:** Right.

**SC:** Tricky. Relevant's a big word. It depends what it's relevant to. Maybe it's really important to exhibit the props and costumes from a live moment, because during a live moment, only ten people, or maybe fifty people, get to see the

performance, and then you think you've included them, you think that everyone's been able to see it and it's been really fun, but actually, lots of people hear about it afterwards and feel really left out. And so if they can see the costumes and the props, sometimes it's sort of a good way to include them in the moment that they didn't see.

**CB:** Are you frustrated not to have been able to stage a performance in the context of this exhibition? I mean, isn't that what you usually do?? Stage performances?

**SC:** Don't feel frustrated, feel very satisfied and happy to be given opportunity to exhibit something that would seem to be throw away in a permanent exhibition, in a serious art exhibition. And the performances, I think they're meant to be more for the street culture or for night clubs. And so actually it's quite hard to do performances in big museums, and galleries.

**CB:** And so what do you wish to convey by your intervention here at the Villa Arson, in the particular context of this show?

**SC:** What do I want to get out of the intervention?

**CB:** Yes, since you're not going to be doing a performance, and you're just going to be showing things that are usually not shown afterwards, what is it that you think you could convey by this, anything special that you can't convey in the performances themselves?

**SC:** Yes, got it. So, a sense of the moment that happened in the performance.