

“Something in the Commune has an impact on culture as a whole”

An interview with J. Michael Friedman, co-writer of *Paris Commune*

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World Socialist Web Site: Let's start with your theater company, The Civilians.

J. Michael Friedman: Really, the most basic idea was to start from creating theater out of real life. Specifically, where theater is created out of research or interviews, out of gathering information.

The idea that Steve Cosson wanted to form the company around comes from a company called Joint Stock, a group in London in the 1970s and 1980s that attracted many important playwrights—Caryl Churchill and David Hare probably being the most important. A technique developed in which Joint Stock would get actors together and do very copious interviews on some topic. That was the basis for what we are trying to do. While certainly not all of our shows are as politicized as *Paris Commune*, there is something about interviewing people that automatically politicizes it, even if it's subtly.

WSWS: Remind us why you chose the name The Civilians.

JMF: I think because Steve [Cosson] was interested in vaudeville and forms of entertainment that are theatrical but not necessarily theater. We had looked at a lot of vaudeville names, and “Civilians” is the term given to people outside of vaudeville. But also, it has a political sense of people who aren't in power.

WSWS: Your mission statement is quite thoughtful. It speaks of how it's possible to not only create a drama with ordinary people but also pay attention to history.

JMF: Well, that's what's interesting with *Commune*. We've done four interview-based shows, but in this case, our “interviews” are from research, so that the evidence here began from letters and journals and diaries, posters, accounts and, in this case, songs. Cartoons were particularly useful because you can get a huge amount of information from them. We started with whatever information we could get and as much first-hand evidence as possible.

The most useful for us was material from people who had been there, people who were reporting in the first person. How did these people talk? We wanted to get inside of that. Obviously there's a lot we're written ourselves, but large portions of the piece are right out of people's mouths. The character of Louise Michel certainly, 90 percent of her text is things that she wrote either in her diary or in her letters. She's probably the single best-documented person besides perhaps [journalist and author] Jules Vallès. The debate on night baking, everything they said was actually taken from the records of that debate.

WSWS: Where did the idea for *Paris Commune* come from?

JMF: Like all good ideas, a book I never read in college. There was an article by a New York University professor of comparative literature named Kristin Ross whose focus has been on [French poet Arthur] Rimbaud. She wrote an article about how Rimbaud may or may not have gone to the Commune. He has a missing week, and some people think he

went to Paris, but there's no evidence of it. So that was already interesting, to think of young Rimbaud sneaking away to see the Commune and what that means for his poetry. She also talks about this concert at the Tuileries Palace and what that meant in this moment of French art and literature. I said, “That sounds cool,” and I brought it up to Steve Cosson and he was much better on following it up.

WSWS: Had you know about the Paris Commune before that?

JMF: I knew about the Commune because I've studied nineteenth-century French history, but what I didn't know were the cultural aspects of the Commune. This is certainly something that you don't learn. And I don't think that's surprising. We don't tend to learn the cultural aspects of most revolutions. We don't know the songs and poetry of the American Revolution, which exist if you go and look. Or even of the American Civil War. So I knew the Commune, but not this other side, which is what made it theatrical to me.

WSWS: And you focus in particular on popular music, which really brings to life some of the cultural sensibilities of ordinary Parisians. How did you come to incorporate that as a part of the play? Was that a part of your decision to make it a musical?

JMF: Well, I'm a composer and all of our shows are musicals. We think that it ups the entertainment value, which I think is not to be underestimated, especially if you're trying to deal with such a thorny and complicated subject. It's like a leavening agent. I think it's also because we started from La Bordas at the concert singing *La Canaille*. If you're reading the Commune through this song (and it was really our first piece of evidence), then that takes you quickly to *Le Temps des Cerises* by Jean-Baptiste Clément.

Then we discovered that Clément is part of the government of the Commune, and then you read, of course, that [painter Gustave] Courbet is in the government of the Commune. Then the art and politics come together, but also you start feeling that popular song is important to the Commune as more than just fun.

There are 92 people on the Commune's council and 2 of them are songwriters. Once we got to that point, we felt that the popular song meant something particular in the Commune. Of course, it's right after the Commune that popular music takes a whole new turn with cabaret. Cabaret was invented in the 1870s and really becomes solidified in the 1880s. In the Commune the definitions of these types of art are unclear, what is popular art, what is high art. And certainly Courbet is trying to do that, to confuse genres.

WSWS: The emergence of the modern world...

JMF: Exactly. Something in the Commune has an impact on culture as a whole. Impressionism practically starts the next year. What we now consider modern art happens almost immediately after. It does feel like a break is occurring in European culture.

WSWS: Marx says that. He refers to the Commune starting a new epoch politically, but you could make the argument that that holds true culturally as well.

We're curious about Rosa Bordas. Could you tell us a little more about her?

JMF: I'll tell you, the documentation about certain individuals is terrible. We know that she's called La Bordas, and that she married a Spaniard named Bordas. Originally her name was Rosalie Martin. She might have been English and raised in France, but we just don't know. She became a singer in the café-concerts in the 1860s, and toward the end of the Second Empire, she became quite popular. She was quite earthy and sang songs that were legal, but in such a way as to have populist nuances, like *La Canaille*. There's nothing in the text quite political enough to get you in trouble, but she sang it in such a way as to give it a political flavor.

WSWS: And the song predates the Commune?

JMF: Yes, and we include it because she sang it during the Commune and becomes associated with it. It was written in 1868 by Clément.

WSWS: This concert seems to have powerful significance. A few hours after it, the Versailles troops burst into the city, and Rosa Bordas declares herself one of the people.

JMF: Well, that was already in the song, but obviously saying it publicly during a revolution means something. For any song, context is everything. Saying that in a café-concert during the Second Empire means one thing, but if I say it after we've taken over the city and killed people and are trying to forge a government, it obviously has a completely different connotation.

La Bordas actually didn't get in a lot of trouble after the Commune, unlike Courbet and many other figures. Cabaret singers were very clever at surviving. They read the political climate well. What Rosa Bordas's actual political views were we will never know. It's like reading Edith Piaf's politics or getting too upset about Maurice Chevalier's politics, which were abhorrent. These people sort of float and have gotten used to getting by. I don't want to say they should be absented from responsibility, but they're gypsies of a sort.

WSWS: Who organized this concert at the Tuileries?

JMF: Louise Michel, in fact. It was a benefit for the Society for the Protection of War Widows and Orphans.

WSWS: Do we know how large the audience was?

JMF: We don't, but our estimates, based on the size of the Tuileries and gardens outside, tell us that there were fewer there than were killed in the next week.

WSWS: What struck us about the play is that it's partisan, but there is nothing tendentious about it.

JMF: Well, that's what we hoped for. We did realize in earlier versions of the play where we were playing our hand less than we wanted, that we could make it clearer that we had a point of view. One of the joys of using evidence in a play is that we present material, which then acts on its own. If you hear Louise Michel speak and feel differently about what she says than I do, tell me and maybe you'll change my mind. We've had audience reactions that make us look again at something in the show, and what it means to us changes.

WSWS: Yes, so many of the films that have been made on Iraq, from our point of view, have been lifeless.

JMF: Taking a point of view these days is hard. It's interesting: if we had performed this to an audience in 1968, it would have seemed to be about...how can a revolution succeed? How does it go wrong? How do you make a revolution?

But now, to me the question is, why is the idea of making a revolution impossible?

Columbia students are not going to chase the mayor out of Manhattan and set up a new government. That is impossible to imagine. I find it really complicated. This now seems like a fairy tale almost, of a totally

other time.

WSWS: Why is it being made, though?

JMF: Well, as the economy collapses and the war goes on in Iraq, the question will be if a revolution in the class sense is no longer possible, then what?

WSWS: History is not over.

JMF: History is not over. Fukuyama, it turns out, was wrong. But the question is, if history is not over, and everything is awful, then what? The positive question of the Commune was, if everything is this awful, and your life is this awful, then what? In their case the answer was, take the cannons and see what happens. We are asking at what point is it that you do something.

WSWS: You not only have the music of the time in the play, but you also have Courbet. What do you think he represented in the Commune, and what does his presence in the play mean?

JMF: He got in big trouble for what he did during the Commune, and that trouble in some ways overshadows what he actually did there. It think it's important because the premier artist of the moment is directly involved in political things. There is [painter Jacques-Louis] David in 1789, of course, and France is lucky that way. Courbet was a better artist than he was a politician, and it's a tragedy that he doesn't just get politics. The tragedy with David is that he becomes complicit with all sorts of horrors.

For us, Courbet's involvement is a beautiful moment where we ask what does art mean to politics and what does politics mean to art. For Courbet it ends badly, but there is a brief moment of possibility. Isn't it amazing when the leading painter in France becomes a part of this revolution? He asks what the attitude of artists should be toward each other. Could there be a union of artists, and what would that mean?

WSWS: There were many outstanding figures in the commune. Why did you decide to focus on Louise Michel and Elisabeth Dmtrieff?

JMF: These were politicized figures who took the stage best, and that comes from watching audiences react. And it worked out well because Louise is an anarchist and Elisabeth is a proto-communist. People with strong opinions are mostly on the fringes of the Commune, even when they occupy positions of leadership. It was people who wanted things changed that really drove the thing, which is why we have the baker and his wife.

WSWS: How well do you think the audiences knew the Commune before they saw the show?

JMF: I couldn't give a percentage, but people as a rule think they've heard of it. It's easy to get confused because there were so many revolutions in France. And 1848 is also a workers' revolution, so American audiences may not know which one this was.

I'm more amazed that in France, while the French have heard of it—it's not like it's not taught in school—it has been disappeared. All the monuments to the Commune are just outside the legal limits of the city of Paris. There is a Louise Michel metro stop, but it's just outside what used to be the walls of Paris. There's a museum to the Commune, but it's in Saint-Denis, and it's called the Museum of Saint-Denis. I don't want to say it's just a problem with the Commune either. The anniversary of 1968 is so confusing to everyone.

WSWS: How did the audience react in New York?

JMF: The reaction at the Public [Theater] has been fantastic. It was the first time we felt like people really followed the show, followed both what the events were and what we were trying to do with the events. Politically, it goes from people who know a lot about the Commune and had an emotional or political investment in the events to people who knew nothing and had a response to the entertainment that in the end makes the political message come through.

Not so much in New York, but we've had over the five years of the play criticism that it's too much like a history book on stage. Well, I've read history books that are engaging, moving, articulate, complicated and

thrilling. So if we're like a bad history book, then, yes, that's a problem. But if we can be like a beautifully created and edited work of history, then that's fine. You'd never criticize a play by saying it's like a novel. Our goal is to create a piece of non-fiction on stage that's still theatrical.



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