



Terces

JOHANN LE GUILLERM

Man-machine magic



Oonagh Duckworth

Gezien op 14 juli 2026

Festival Villeneuve en scène in het
kader van het Festival d'Avignon

A thin grey pigtail, matador-like trousers, a bare chest beneath a flowing tailcoat: this Tim Burton-esque figure stands alone. Unsmiling, concentrated, he folds a sheet of paper into an aeroplane and launches it. It's something we've all done and it's how 'Terces' by Johann Le Guillerm, the figurehead of French contemporary circus, begins. In his world, less is much, much more.

02 AUGUSTUS 2026

Obsessed to the extent of geekiness with how stuff fits together, Le Guillerm describes his performance as his "Laboratory in a Circus Ring". 'Terces' is an anagram of 'Secret', the name of two of Le Guillerm's previous performances

(‘Secrets 1 and 2’), large chunks of which are resurrected in ‘Terces’, assembled in different sequences and augmented with new material. But *Terces* also means to plough the land for a third time to render it more friable. In English, incidentally, it is also the third canonical hour, 9am, and a call to prayer. Inferred and interlinking meanings are part of Le Guillerm’s stock-in-trade.

Redefining circus

Le Guillerm was among the first intake of students in 1985 to attend the prestigious *École nationale supérieure des arts du cirque* (ENSAC) in Châlons-en-Champagne. Although he specialised in tightrope walking and clowning, he quickly departed from traditional circus and started redefining the art form as anything done in ways that “aren’t done, are no longer done or have never been done before”.

A big top, a circus ring, and a show set out in *numéros* are the only elements of traditional circus that remain. Within these surrounds, Le Guillerm’s poetic brand of mechanics in motion unfolds. Without a drum roll or a theatrical “ta-da”, into the ring come intricately hand-crafted machines, one after the other, with no other apparent purpose than to be beautiful and intriguing. They propel themselves forward. Their hesitant motion comes from subtle shifts in their internal workings: sloshing liquid tips a giant spirit level whose weight sets wheels in motion, or slinky-like chains descend from high to low overturning funnels shaped vases.

Bent wire figurines illuminated by circling fires create shadows that unmistakably convey coitus. Even the suspended spotlights, manipulated like marionettes by two technicians perched in the big top where traditionally the trapeze artist would stand, become part of the choreography, as do floor-level lights that shuttle in and out on ropes and pulleys. The works of Peter Fischli and David Weiss — or perhaps Wallace and Gromit — come to mind, but Le Guillerm’s staging, without a hint of cuteness, glam or glitter, lends a gravitas that verges on the ecclesiastical.

Body and machine

Despite the virtuosity of these elegant and aesthetic contraptions, it’s when Le Guillerm inserts his own body into the structures or “architextures” that he builds before our eyes, that magic, metaphor and man converge. One of the most memorable sequences begins when piles and piles of books are flung into the ring. Le Guillerm, having lodged pencils in varying folds of his body, behind ears, between forearm and lower arm, between chin and shoulder, proceeds to stack the books higher and higher in two columns. Gradually we see him shunt the stacks off-kilter, and before the inevitable topple, he shins up and wedges himself between them. A perfectly stable arch of books stands before us with his sinewy body as the keystone — an image to savour.

Today his meticulous and tireless tinkering with the materials and models that shape our world feels redemptive.

Again, with deep seriousness, Le Guillerm confronts a life-sized game of Mikado and, engaging the help of two equally focused stagehands, he coaxes them into a concertina-like ladder before rethreading them into a scaffolded, spiky dome. With no ropes or bolts holding anything together, just carefully aligned tension, Le Guillerm, still agile at 57, swings himself onto the dome. Here we let out a

gasp. He stands atop, victorious, at the summit of his art.

Although pleasure, entertainment and wonder are still very much part of the experience, there's an undeniable poetic meta-message in the precarious and fragile beauty of the balancing act between man, motion and machine. It is impossible to ignore, especially when you're watching *Terces* during the Avignon Festival in a heat wave where temperatures are 35°C at midnight and forest fires are raging all around. Le Guillerm may no longer be considered brand-new, but today his meticulous and tireless tinkering with the materials and models that shape our world feels redemptive.