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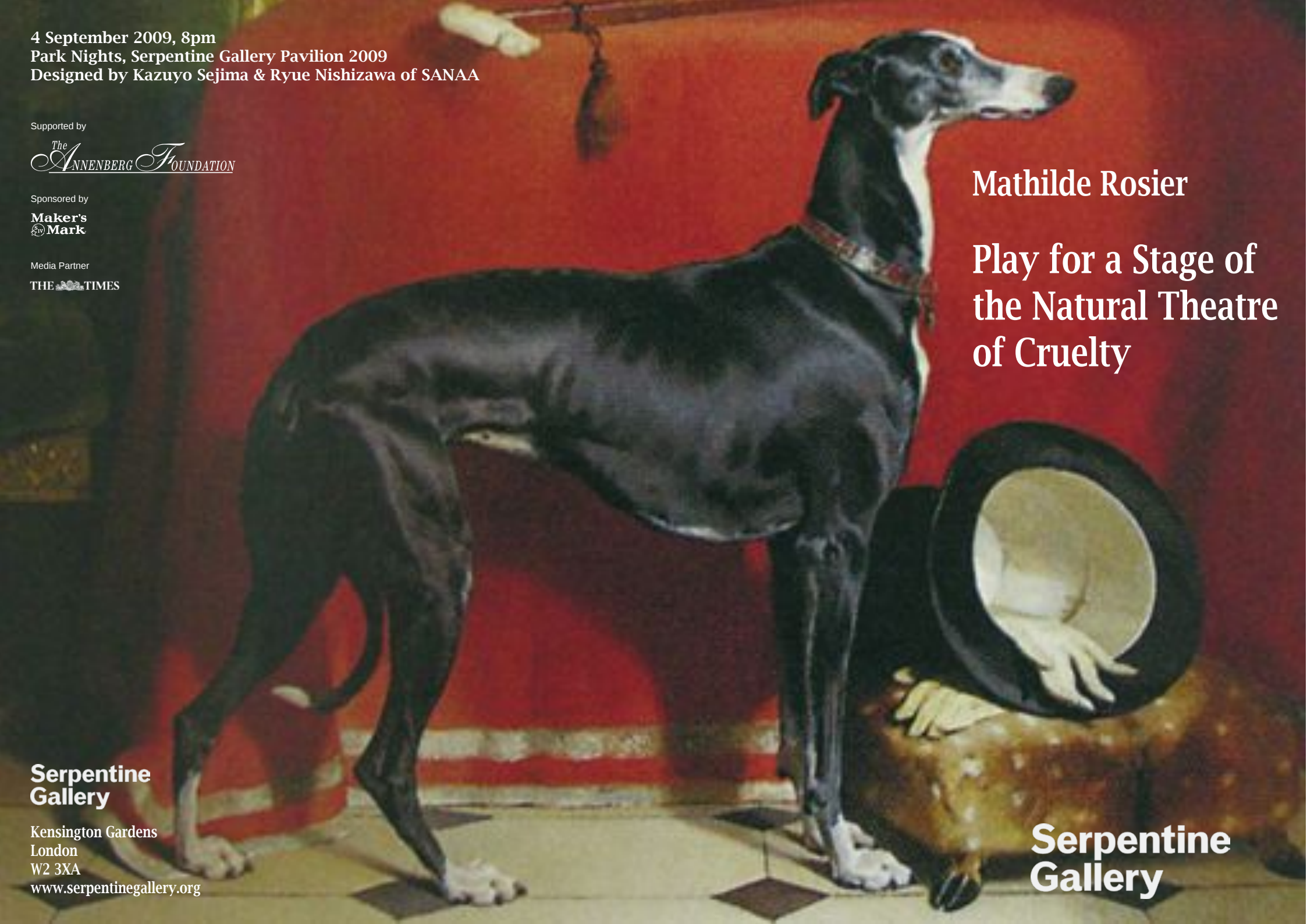
Play for a Stage of
the Natural Theatre
of Cruelty

**Serpentine
Gallery**

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Reveries of two solitary walkers.

Out in the woods beyond the town and its intendent noise and business, two solitary walkers happen upon each other, by conincidence it seems. An awkwardness ensues framed only by the relative silence of the forest. Jean-Jacques has strayed from his usual path in search of a wild orchid growing out of the stump of a tree. There in the shadows is Patapon.

Patapon (*annoyed*): I have not been waiting for you!

Jean-Jacques (*rather reserved*): This reminds me painfully of a day like today, when I was out on a walk and collected flowers in the autumnal hills around Ménilmontan when suddenly a dog attacked me and I lost consciousness.

Patapon (*fretfully stroking his whiskers*): I'm not a dog.

Jean-Jacques (*matter of factly*): A cat is not a dog. But back then, when I returned to life again nothing was as it used to be.

Patapon (*still annoyed*): Well, after all, you regained consciousness?

Jean-Jacques (*engaged*): Yes, though I'm not sure if regained is the right word. Maybe I had not been conscious ever before. Only then I realised our awareness for being is based on the analysis of our relation to things, other beings and events. Without these relations as a permanent part of our self-reflection we are poorly aware, not to speak of being conscious of our place in this world.

Patapon: So since then you're aware of your place in this world?

Jean-Jacques: Since then I long for solitude. All I want is studying my inner self and analyse my relations to the outer world.

Patapon: Being alone with yourself necessarily entails thinking a lot about yourself.

Jean-Jacques: Solitary introspection leads to eccentric inquiries. When I'm on my own and without any distractions or disturbances I can truly say that I am what nature has wanted to make me.



Patapon (*rather to himself*): Idealism and Narcissism are often seen walking hand in hand.

Jean-Jacques (*unimpressed*): Society may have certain advantages, but it inevitably drives people to hate each other when their interests are opposed. It is based on the mutual exchange of seeming services but in reality ends up mounting a malignant play. Maybe that's why I find an increasingly buoyant taste in solitary walks in the fields.

Patapon: Aimlessly strolling around.

Jean-Jacques (*apologetic*): No, not aimlessly at all. I make myself useful through botany. The precise language of science enables me to combine wandering around with a methodically regulated approach.

Patapon: Reading nature like a formula?

Jean-Jacques: I rather like to read nature as romantic poem, but I would like to know the order of the rhyme. If my idea of nature is that of a precarious requiem for the cruelties of life, I would like to know the score.

Patapon (*convinced*): For singing my song I rely exclusively on the power of my imagination!

Jean-Jacques (*equally convinced*): Imagination relies on concepts. Like the beauty of the flower that needs the reasoning of the botanist to be fully recognised.

Patapon: This is the terror of classifying everything, ranging, rating and sorting it into boxes.

Jean-Jacques: The element of terror is necessary to all recognition.

Patapon: Do we always have to know if it is one or the other?

Jean-Jacques: Only by drawing distinctions there might come something like a startling realisation, a shocking cognizance.

Patapon: And is there no understanding without fear?

Jean-Jacques: Fear will give you an idea of displacement. It is the irritation of an image as a diversion, an extension towards another world, which is nevertheless the same. And where for a brief moment, just before vanishing, you could see truth.



Patapon: Playing with fear and gaining truth in return?

Jean-Jacques: Playfully creating tensions between our inner and outer worlds, placing our souls in landscapes of desires.

Patapon (*distracted by the hoarse cries of ravens in the field*): I wish I had a mirror.

Jean-Jacques: What do you think happens if you walk through a mirror?

Patapon: I enter the space behind the mirror.

Jean-Jacques: Is this a space or just the idea of a space?

Patapon (*without thinking*): What difference does this make?

Jean-Jacques: The answer to the question if the double in the mirror is an extension of your self or it is a being on its own. Sometimes I am standing in front of a window at night, looking at my reflection in the glass and watching it fade away in the early hours until the light of the new day has killed it.

Patapon (*teasingly*): Or you killed it just by watching it too closely so it couldn't steal away in an unconscious moment.

Jean-Jacques (*seriously*): It is unconsciousness that kills. I wonder if, by being conscious of ourselves, we could possibly shift the limits between one person and another, one object and the other?

Patapon: Does being conscious not mean to enhance the borders between yourself and the world, to become convinced of your singularity?

Jean-Jacques: The idea of singularity is the pre-condition for an ardent believe in the possibility of sharing a mutual view on this world. We can agree to be different but still to stand next to each other watching the world from the same point of observation.

Patapon: You will never be me!

Jean-Jacques: But I might see what you see. Hear what you hear. And together we'll see images and hear sounds creating an environment as an expansion of their space of speculation. We'll be watching a phenomenon in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility merely created in our heads.

Patapon: Sounds like you're talking about a play. I just wonder on which side of the curtain we are?



Jean-Jacques: It's a strangely familiar ritual, a play that teaches by being played not by being watched. A ceremony where the space for spectators merges with stage and back stage and the position of the viewer is admittedly a rather fragile, precarious one, aware of the vulnerability and instability of the given situation but otherwise powerful, too in finding a grip on the props and sets provided.

Patapon (*diffident*): Props and sets for what?

Jean-Jacques: To understand about the capacity of cruelty and still believe in the potential of compassion and beauty.

Yelping hounds drown out the conversation. The following silence is divided by gunshots. While Patapon jumps up onto the birch tree next to him, Jean-Jacques is too irritated to move at all. Dogs are passing by, followed by horses carrying men. Sounds and movements are whirling around. The hunt has begun.

When the shoot has passed Jean-Jacques is sinking into seat at the foot of the birch tree. With an elegant jump Patapon lands again next to him. Both are listening to the fading sounds of venery. Silence being restored in the forest the conversation continues.

Patapon (*disgusted*): What brutes!

Jean-Jacques (*still agitated*): The passion of the hunted and the cruelty of the hunter in a danse macabre of graceful uncanniness.

Patapon (*musings*): You sound as if there was a certain appeal?

Jean-Jacques: Physical and psychological violation moving with compassionate elegance are dangerously attractive.

Patapon (*mocking*): And consciousness is defeated?

Jean-Jacques (*seriously*): Only the conscious mind can make the decision to act cruelly. Without awareness, the ability to distinguish, even the most violent act remains in a way innocent. If at all it is beastliness not cruelty and follows instincts rather than ideas.

Patapon: I'm full of ideas!

Jean-Jacques (*smiling*): Maybe that's why your kind is sometimes considered cruel.

Patapon: But I don't calculate the means to the end.

Jean-Jacques (*still smiling*): Because cruelty withstands logical understanding. It's not a recipe, where effects are all foreseen and intended.

Patapon: But it is a concept?

Jean-Jacques: It is. A concept that enters the mind through the skin. By shifting or even overriding the distance between you and the other - and thus making it all yours.

Patapon (*more to himself*): In a cat's eye all things belong to cats.

Jean-Jacques: Ah, mon petit connaisseur! Cruelty is not to swallow, to incorporate the other.

Patapon: But instead?





Jean-Jacques: It is trying to lift the veil of our usually guarded perception.

Patapon: We might not be amused by what we see behind the veil.

Jean-Jacques (*insisting*): We do not try to amuse!

Patapon: So you are deliberately attempting to shatter the guards of perception?

Jean-Jacques: Indeed, it is an attack! A staged attack using a language halfway between thought and gesture. With compassion and beauty, magic and *réverie* providing mythical content backstage.

Patapon: My eyes would need to be wide shut to join this play. What if I'd rather not want to explore those frictions.

Jean-Jacques (*engaged*): We all are already in the middle of it.

Patapon (*doubtful*): This is an absurd setting.

Jean-Jacques (*getting excited*): We will need absurdity to enter the play! Absurdity and similarly self-conscious and doubting narrators telling stories they know nothing of.

Patapon: Where coherence is faltering, absurdity takes over so it all makes sense again?

Jean-Jacques (*insisting*): Reduction to absurdity is a shortcut method for checking the validity of arguments. When the stage stops being a playground and instead grows into a landscape of ideas, absurdity becomes a violent force breaking up fronts.

Patapon (*gingerly*): And we're just coincidentally placed in that landscape, in between the fronts?

Jean-Jacques (*soughing*): Thou shall not believe in coincidences!

Patapon: Why not?

Jean-Jacques: Because coincidence is an excuse, it's like the flip side of fate. Just another word for predetermination resisting order. Aimless gestures deriving from an unknown schedule of some kind of master plan beyond our knowledge or influence.



Patapon: I would doubt most human actions or thoughts are prudently based on a plan?

Jean-Jacques: Admittedly, rather often we are facing an apparently aimless assembly of actions in a state of ignorance, until suddenly the possibility of a direction, a final destination appears in the distance. But that's the way to move outside the boundaries of matter and mechanism. And even if we don't know where we are going to, the decision to walk is a deliberate and conscious one and not coincidental.

Patapon (*musings*): But which way I ought to go from here depends a good deal on where I would want to get? Still, if I don't care much where I'm going to, then it doesn't matter which way I go.

Jean-Jacques (*astonished*): Maybe you are related to the Cheshire Cat?

Patapon (*astonished by himself*): There are situations where I'd like to know how to disappear gradually.

Jean-Jacques (*dreamily*): Like seeing myself slowly vanishing within the mirror.

Patapon (*insisting*): All you need to find is the way beyond the mirror!

Jean-Jacques: To find this way would mean to find a way to the almost forgotten landscapes that are usually shut off and locked.

Patapon: Maybe you should allow your dreams to take over from your so-called consciousness!

Jean-Jacques: Maybe. Maybe not. The structure of narrative in dreams is interesting, the seamless transition, the abrogation of causal relations. And surely the stage is a place for such particular and peculiar moments that can effect views into endless landscapes of memory.

Patapon: Like a gate that opens?

Jean-Jacques: More of a back door, I'd guess.

Patapon: You're not afraid to enter through the back door?

Jean-Jacques: Not if the expectation is that of a weird version of uncanny visions anyway.



Patapon: You're making me feel uneasy.

Jean-Jacques (*soothing*): Only to provoke you! The stage shall be working as a facilitator of controversy. The communion of consciousness and dream by treating, revealing and showing the *mise-en-scène* as a set for movements in a narrative of fragments and fractures, thus allowing us to see things we could not perceive otherwise.

Patapon: But why would the reproduction of reality on a stage facilitate your and my eyes to see each other and the world around us differently?

Jean-Jacques: The stage is not about representation but about invention, it is not giving us a reproduction of what we call reality, but rather constructing a reality that is yet to come.

Patapon (*almost about to break into song*): The future is unwritten!

Jean-Jacques: Utopia is a non-place, I know. But contradictions lead us the way to visionary reality. Travelling either way, to a distant future or into a deep past, both will change our perception of the present.

Patapon (*aghast*): But then on stage reality would seem to fade on the edges.

Jean-Jacques: And in the stables we might need to consider the ground underneath our feet less defined and stable than we usually prefer to think.

Again they are silenced by a flow of colours and sounds when on the main road a caravan whirls by. Men on horses, surrounded by hounds, passing in rows of laughter and whine. Trumpets sounding the death-haloo. The men are carrying the body of a stag. It's antlers have 12 points. The hunt is over.