

D A R K N I G H T S  
D A R K E R V I S I O N S

# NACHTGESICHTER

## VISIONS OF THE NIGHT

by Frank Soehnle

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PRESENTED BY THEATREWORKS AND THE GOETHE-INSTITUT





# CLOWN AND MYSTIC

**M**ax Jacob was born on 12 July 1876 as the fourth child of a Jewish antiques dealer and tailor in Quimper, the chief town of Finistere at the western tip of Brittany. He moved to Paris in 1894 and studied at the city's *Ecole Coloniale* and Faculty of Law. But he soon abandoned a middle-class career in order to devote himself to poetry and painting, a decision that led to a break with his family. After a period struggling to eke out a living as an art critic, he finally made a more permanent mark in a variety of casual jobs of every possible kind.

He was introduced to Picasso in 1901 and three years later showed the young painter his first poems. It was apparently Picasso who advised him to consider the insecurity of a Bohemian life.

Max Jacob's first attempts to write professionally probably date from 1903, when he tossed off two fairytales and his first prose poems within the space of a few months. All were subsequently hidden away in an old suitcase. In 1917, Max Jacob moved closer to his artist friends. As Andre Salmon recalls in his memoirs, these years were notable for their fruitful interplay between painting and poetry. Painters and poets alike turned their backs on the preceding movements in art namely, Symbolism and academic painting, rejecting the realism of academic art with its attempt to reproduce reality, and at the same time, proclaiming their openness to everything new and their ability to perceive an aesthetic dimension in the quotidian and unprepossessing and to make that dimension visible.





Max Jacob soon withdrew into himself and began to take an interest in astrology and the occult, pursuing this new-found enthusiasm to such an extent that, when things became really bleak, he was able to earn a few sous by reading the palms of the women of his quarter. His interest in the occult soon took a religious turn. Of significance here was his reading of the Zohar, an early but important cabbalistic text and, as such, his first attempt to come to terms, not with distorted and secular fragments of ancient religions, but with a teaching derived directly from Judaism. On returning to his room from the Bibliotheque Nationale on the evening of 22 September 1909, Max Jacob was vouchsafed with a vision. Although cabbalistic, ideas almost certainly played a part in it, Max Jacob went to a Catholic priest the following morning and asked to be baptised. The priest sent him packing. Like his friends, to whom he told the story, the priest clearly thought that the poet was simply trying to make fun of him.

The reasons for Max Jacob's vision are largely unexplained, but it is clear that, prepared by his theosophical reading, he was waiting for a supernatural sign at this time. More understandable is his attempt to embrace Catholicism. As a result of an unhappy life, his lack of success, his feeling of menace and homelessness as a Jew, his anxiety states and lack of security, his fear of loneliness and feelings of guilt at his homosexuality, he was predisposed to throw himself into the arms of a church that promised security and support. His attention was drawn to the monastery of Notre-Dame de Sion, which made something of a speciality of converting the Jews. Although received with scepticism, he managed to persuade the priests to instruct him in the catechism and prepared him for baptism, but was naturally disillusioned by the doubts that they harboured towards his readiness to believe.

He was on the point of giving up a second time, when on 18 December 1914, he received a second vision of Christ, who appeared to him at the cinema, wearing a long cloak and protecting his children of his concierge. On 18 February 1915 he was baptised with the name of Cyprien in the Chapel of the Sisters of Notre-Dame de Sion. Picasso was his godfather.

Max Jacob's final years were overshadowed by the persecution to which Jews were subjected from the early months of the German occupation onwards. As early as the autumn of 1940 they were entered in a special list, and soon afterwards the expropriation of Jewish businesses began a process that also affected Max Jacob's brothers and sisters.

A sense of fatalism and the hope that he might be able to help his relatives had discouraged Max Jacob from accepting offers that would have saved him personally. He also seemed to have reckoned for a long time on the influence of Conrad Moricand, who had links with the German authorities. But when friends visited him on 20 February 1944, he gave expression to his sense of foreboding when, following a tour of the Basilica of Saint-Benoit, he entered his name in the visitors' book and added the dates of his arrival in the town and his departure from it: 1921 to 1944.

Four days later, three members of the Gestapo came and took him away. Within days, Jean Cocteau, Andre Salmon and others had taken what steps they could in Paris to have him released.

On 6 March Cocteau received news that Max Jacob's release had been agreed by the commandero commander of the secret police and the SD. But Jacob had died of pneumonia the previous day in the Prison de La Muette at Drancy.





"Nightmares or everybody has the demons he deserves" is a "picture-theatre-project", based on the poems and the biography of **Max Jacob**, a french poet and painter, friend of Picasso, Jew, homosexual, astronomer and victim of the National Socialism.

**Frank Soehnle** is one of the first students of the puppetry-university Stuttgart where new forms of puppet-theatre are searched and created. He has been art-director of the PUPPET THEATRE KARLSRUHE for three years and is leader of the "figuren theater tbingen" since 1991.

The performance tries to melt different theatrical moments (puppetry, acting, material-theatre, pictures) to raise the expression of pure puppetry. It is a theatre-experience for adults.

Puppeteer: Mr. Frank Soenle  
Technician: Karin Ersching

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