When asked recently why mime had gone out of fashion, Marcel Marceau replied briskly that mime hadn’t - only bad mime had. Master of the form since he trained in the late 1940s, Marcel Marceau is the Bill Gates of mime. He virtually owns the franchise and his work still defines it. Unfortunately his imitators are legion - sniffing flowers, palming along windows, losing their balloons, doing all that sad clown stuff.

Watching Marcel Marceau performing solo at the age of eighty we must remember that he single-handedly revived White Pierrot mime from the nineteenth century. Of course there was Chaplin and Keaton and the whole of silent cinema, but Marceau brought mime back to the stage with a career that has spanned every continent and made him a household word on the planet.

Marceau’s program is as established as the repertoire of the Comedie Francaise. The first half, Pantomimes of Style opens with that modest little number The Creation of the World. His hands are extraordinarily graceful and expressive as he shapes birds and fishes and tubers rising from the primordial ooze. Some of it is unfathomable - not surprising perhaps, Genesis is an ambitious project. The Public Park follows, populated with gendarmes, children licking ice cream, old women knitting and old codgers leaning on their canes. It is charming, but sometimes repetitive, as is the Bird Keeper, morphing startlingly in its final moments into the escaping bird itself. Then, in less than five minutes, he recreates the Ages of Man from the vitality of Youth to the Last Gasp, all to the strains of the Pachelbel canon.

The character of Bip is Marceau’s trademark, in white matelot pants, striped shirt and grey bib, topped off with a flower-sprouting hat. Bip Tames Lions, he also Travels by Sea, with Marceau wonderfully evoking the intimate connection between sea swell and antiperistalsis. The Street
Musician is an audience favourite, Marcel playing air violin with witty musical synchronisations. The Suicide sketch is warmly comic and life affirming, and the Mask Maker is a tour de force of those Marceau facial gymnastics.

Marcel Marceau is a frail figure on stage now and, of course, has much less of the vitality of his heyday. But alone in the spotlight with his dexterity and pierrot sentimentality, he captivates an attentive and fond audience. His two highly credentialled assistants also took an ovation. It is a pity their part in the show is confined to holding up placards for the master.