

Interview with Frank Samson, Napoleon I

By Benjamin Leclercq for Eriz Moreno

2014

In his spare time, Frank Samson, a 46 years old Parisian lawyer specializing in traffic law, becomes Napoleon I. This military uniforms enthusiast is now the official emperor at multiple history reenactments in France and across Europe. He arranged to meet us on a rainy June afternoon in his office based in the luxurious XVI district, five days after fighting the battle of Montmirail (Marne) and two weeks after that of Waterloo.

How and when did you start to impersonate Napoleon Bonaparte?

I first appeared as Napoleon around 10 years ago, in January 2005. The village of Dinard (Brittany) was celebrating the imperial year and the occasion involved all sorts of events, including reenactments. At that time, the reenactors remained orphaned: Armand Frascuratti, the Corsican who played Napoleon, had retired in 2003. So there was no emperor anymore... For my part, I had been collecting uniforms without being interested in reenactments. It was my costume maker, based in Dinard, precisely, who advised me to make a tour. I appeared as Napoleon on a soiree at the Dinard Casino, with my spouse as the empress, and so the Mayor of Dinard invited me to the big summer reenactment, which became my first encampment (the name given to reenactments): I got adopted.

Why Napoleon?

It is an extraordinary character, with an amazing life story. See for yourself: Napoleon arrives to France in 1779, when he is 9 and doesn't know a single word of French; 30 years later, in 1810, he is a quasi-king of the world, having put his brothers and sisters on all the thrones. This is destiny! And, from my point of view, the only known example of civil, political and military virtuosity. Every discipline has its virtuoso, such as Mozart in music, but as far as virtuosos in various disciplines at a time are concerned, I only know Napoleon. A military genius, and also a civil life constructor. The reform of education, of the Comédie Française, of the Bank of France, were all of his making. Moreover, we are still living the Napoleonic age in France. Finally, Napoleon created his legend to the end. Ousted, deported to Saint Helena, he managed to die as a martyr.

How were you chosen? Why, do you think?

In order to succeed in a reenactment, there must be a general co-optation. What allowed me to be accepted is, above all, the physical resemblance, as well as the uniforms, since everybody who joins, does so with their own costume. I am very demanding. I try to recreate the uniform to a millimeter, I substituted the image of the rosette on the bicorne hat because it didn't have the exact 42 mm... This perfectionism played to my advantage.

Impersonating Napoleon is merely a hobby or something more?

This clearly is a hobby. As a lawyer, I see people with trouble marching... The reenactment is a way of escaping: I play Napoleon Bonaparte just as others play golf.

Did you study Napoleon's gestures and his way of talking?

Of course. I conducted my own research and learnt how to resemble him. He was a very nervous man: for instance, he was constantly stretching the sleeve of his suit. I recreate this kind of twitches. He would also get easily annoyed. On the encampments, I enter with rage and scold the officers harshly. As far as his manner of

speaking is concerned, I learnt some words in Corsican which he used to repeat frequently. Some insults as well, because he could be very disagreeable. "We'll kiss your asses!" that is what he could say about his enemies. Of course, he would address everybody in an official manner. Napoleon hated informality and required large distance from his employees.

Apart from learning Corsican, do you need any other special skill?

Yes, I had to learn to ride a horse. Now I love it and, just as Napoleon loved to do it, I often ride galloping without thinking, in order to leave behind my officers in the field. I also learnt the French quadrille, a dance of that era.

Where do you find information?

I read many testimonies of his contemporaries. The memories of Constant, his manservant, for instance, and the works of historians, especially those of John Tulard, French scholar and historian specializing in the Napoleonic era. Anyway, the literature about Napoleon Bonaparte is immense: there are more books about him than the days which have passed since his death on the 5th of May 1821.

Are you up to date with the latest historical research regarding Napoleon?

Yes, I keep myself informed. We are far from knowing everything about Napoleon. Just a couple of months ago, an order issued by Marshal Ney during the Battle of Waterloo was found: a simple document like this can change the whole image of this battle. Not even the characters in the famous coronation painting by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) have been clearly identified yet.

Has being Napoleon influenced your everyday life? And the time you dedicate to your family, your friends and your work?

Yes, because I tend to make everybody wear uniforms: my wife is the empress, my two sons are the emperor's pages, some of my friends too... My family accompanies me in this adventure.

How much time do you dedicate to this activity annually?

I have dedicated seven or eight three-day long weekends per year to the reenactments. The season with most activity starts in March with the disembarkment in Golfe-Juan and the walk in the direction of Paris.

How is this activity financed?

With my own money. I do not owe any piece of art, very rarely I go to restaurants... I dedicate my money to Napoleon, my principal entertainment.

Do you think that the role of Napoleon has affected your life? Your character, the way in which you express?

No, in fact, no. I only restored his way of organizing work. Like him, I arrange my mails into three piles: the "answered", which doesn't need any particular reaction, only taking notice; the "current", which has to be done during the day, and the "to do," the background work, which requires more time. On the contrary, it's quite the reverse: my work affects my way of being Napoleon. The work of a lawyer consists in speaking and representing: it is useful when you impersonate an emperor.

Had you participated in a similar event before becoming Napoleon?

Never. I didn't even know they existed!

Do you play other roles or have any other function in the reenactments? Any special responsibility?

No, I only know how to be Napoleon. I was another character once: a cuirassier general, because an American Napoleon was already playing the emperor. As far as the possible responsibilities are concerned, I don't take part in the organization; my only mission is to be the carrier of the imperial image.

How did you feel during your first battle?

It just seemed very pleasant: to live the history, be a part of this living painting. Sometimes I am a little nervous, just like recently in Fontainebleau at Napoleon's farewell, when I opened the door and behind it, there were 40,000 people (of public) waiting for the emperor. But it is like an important case in court, the nerves disappear as soon as action begins.

Have you ever met another Napoleon? Do you share your experience with each other?

I met Marc Schneider, the American who was Napoleon for a long time, but now only comes to Europe from time to time. He remains active in the United States, it is actually his occupation: he has a contract with Williamsburg Museum for impersonating great historical figures. And then there is Jean-Gérald Latrocinio, a Belgian whom they call "the double," since he replaces me when I cannot come. It is true that he doesn't have the dimple in the chin, but he does have a beautiful nose... A priori, he is the one to supersede me. He's got less experience, that is why I sometimes had to lend him my old uniforms, medals and give advice.

Is anyone helping you (with materials, guidance, education, etc.)?

My main adjutant is my costume maker, Mr Guinhut, in Dinard. It has been the same person since I started. On the other hand, he is almost a global monopolist as far as the Empire uniforms are concerned. I have four costumes, all of them tailor-made. The most expensive, embroidered by hand, cost me 13,000€.

How long are you going to be Napoleon Bonaparte?

Still a long time, I will abdicate in July 2015, after Waterloo. I am obsessed with the need to comply with the history. Otherwise I wouldn't be Napoleon's age any longer. This is a question of credibility. In that moment, it would be 10 years of me impersonating him: it's very absorbing, my wife and I are going to relax and travel.