



THE DOUBLE

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The last time I saw my neighbor he was keeping his hand in, working on the place du Tertre in Montmartre. It was just a few days before Christmas. One of those winter days when you have to keep moving if you don't want to freeze on the spot. He appeared undeterred by the icy temperature. He was standing motionless in the middle of the crowds on his poor man's pedestal, a small roughly-hewn wooden cube, in front of which a saucer filled with a few coins was laid out to attract passers-by. Disguised as Mrs. Doubtfire, plastered in lipstick and foundation and sporting an imposing blonde wig, he had adopted the pose of the affectionate but severe nanny, hands on hips and a smile on his lips.

Alain Poudensan is the "official" look-alike of American actor Robin Williams. "*The world's one and only*," as he points out. But he is not merely a double. First and foremost he is an "actor".

His job is to impersonate the actor's roles in *Hook*, *Jumanji* and *Good Will Hunting*, in a one-man show he first put on some years ago. He plays in out-of-town discos, suburban shopping malls and Parisian nursing homes. From time to time he gets a call from one of the television channels. One day I came across Alain at the foot of the stairs, dressed in a suit with a bow tie, a drenched stage costume under his arm. He had just come back from a recording of the *Mur infernal* [Infernal Wall], a game show on one of the cable channels, targeting a fairly limited audience. The principle is straightforward. A wall advances towards the candidate, who has to go into contortions in order to fit into a hole drilled into the wall. If he fails, he has to pay the price: the unfortunate loser is thrown head first into a swimming-pool. Alain is proud of his television appearances. He recites them as though they were awards: *Ça se discute* [It's Debatable], *Champs-Élysées*, *La Grande Nuit des sosies* [The Night of the Great Impersonators]...

He talks passionately about his work. As soon as he embarks on one of the hundreds of anecdotes he keeps permanently up his sleeve, he goes into overdrive, throwing himself into his own unique version of mimes and sound effects. "*Shortly after the film Jumanji came out, I was wandering around Los Angeles with a friend. I went to the Paramount studios where the film had been shot. I drove up to the main entrance in an open-top sports car and the guy on the gate let me in because he thought I was Robin. On set I kept telling the technicians that I was only the actor's French look-alike but they wouldn't believe me. They just kept saying 'Stop winding us up, Robin!'*"

He is certainly the spitting image of the American actor. Same small stature, same graying hair, same square face with a wide forehead and broken nose. Alain has even gone so far as to imitate the voice of the French actor who dubs Robin Williams in his films. You never know who he really is or who he's playing. Alain constantly plays to the gallery, peppering the most serious and everyday remarks with jokes that don't always hit their target, and in which the humor is often dated. With him conversations soon turn into stand-up comedy acts. Like the day he stopped me as I was coming out of our building and broke into a lengthy imitation of Mrs. Doubtfire. "*You're not going out without a coat, are you, sonny? In this cold? You'll catch*

your death... Wrap up now!"

He lived on my floor for just over a year, until a few days ago, but moved because he found the apartment too dark. On his door he had hung a little board; on it was written "*Stage Door*". In his eyes, it goes without saying that he should live in the 18th arrondissement of Paris, between Pigalle and Montmartre. "*This is where all the artistes, actors and entertainers are based*" he assured me, as though we were still living in the 1980s. "*There's a tradition of showmanship here.*" Alain belongs to the world of the night and of show business, a world that gets by as best it can, existing or attempting to exist although we scarcely notice it. A world made up of thousands of people whose talent is often debatable and whose careers are studded with highs and lows.

Now aged 54, Alain Poudensan became Robin Williams' look-alike in 1994, the year *Mrs. Doubtfire* came out. "*Everyone was talking about the movie. I went to see it by myself, one very cold evening in Paris. While I was waiting in line, people started looking at me and whispering 'It's Robin Williams.' They asked me if I was really him. I replied that I was but added in very poor English that I was there incognito. I started signing autographs and once we were inside and the movie had started, people kept on looking at me. I left very quickly because I was beginning to feel uncomfortable. I repeated the experience one more time after that and people had the same reaction.*" From that day on, he decided to give up the life he was leading and concentrate on honing the similarities, determined to make the most of this unexpected gift. Making the most of someone else's fame to create his own.

Before becoming a full-time look-alike, Alain, who comes from Lille, had tried his hand as a cook and salesman. His beginnings as an actor were far from easy. His physique closed more doors than it opened. So it was farewell to a movie or theater career and hello to cabaret. But he still needed to make a name for himself in a world that was no longer drawing the crowds. Before he could put on his own show, Alain had to cross some fairly gray areas. To make ends meet, he appeared in a number of pornographic movies. His disconcerting similarity was a godsend to scriptwriters who had run out of ideas. But he prefers to draw a veil over that part of his life. Not because he is ashamed, he insists, but "*because it was all a long time ago.*"

Nowadays Alain is a showbiz contract worker. He lives comfortably enough, without lacking for anything but without extravagance either. He used to share his apartment in the 18th arrondissement with a tall, courteous and discreet Englishman, with impeccably-styled hair and a dog who always wore a little woolen coat. I never saw Alain entering or leaving the apartment with a woman. "*It's not easy to share the life of a look-alike*" he confided to me one day with a heartfelt sigh. Witness the woman he had "*known*" but who left him because she couldn't stand his obsession with "*Robin*".

The very first time we met Alain told me he wanted to leave his present apartment in order to move into a large houseboat on the Seine – a dream he would refer to every time we met on the corridor but which he had to give up in the end because it was too expensive. The actual purchase, the monthly mooring fees, the insurance policy that had to cover water damage, the upkeep, repairs, heating bills... In just one year as his neighbor, I became an expert on the topic.

I seldom went inside his apartment. But often enough to take in the vast red velvet sofa that adorned his lounge. Subdued lighting, tawny shades, deep-pile carpets... By the time he invited me one day into his bedroom to see his stage photos I was feeling a little uneasy. And there, on the wall above his bed, between the most prestigious has-beens of the Nineties, a poster of "*Robin*" held pride of place.

Alain knows his model off by heart. Not a single detail of his movies or career has escaped him. He has met the actor three times, once during a radio broadcast, then in a television studio and finally at the Cannes Film Festival. "*It was incredible. When he recognized me, he came up and said 'It's my French buddy. Come on, let's have a photo shoot.' I met him by chance in a hotel, we were dressed the same way. My hands were clammy and my heart was pounding.*"

Alain Poudensan – stage name "*Alain Robin*" – doesn't attempt to dismiss the problem of confused identity. The depersonalizing attitude of others, the feeling that he has usurped a stranger's existence, the fact that he

earns his living by assuming the talent of a double: he has experienced all these through his look-alike persona. A gift but also a burden that according to him can make you “lose your mind”. *“To start with, the similarity was doing my head in to such an extent that it took up my whole life. I was too involved in the character. My friends told me I was no longer myself. The movie Podium (in which he plays his own character) really illustrates this confusion. I didn’t know who I was any more in this game of true and false, real and imaginary.”*

Finally it was down to Huguette – *“The queen of the look-alike world”* as he rather mysteriously puts it – who helped Alain get rid of his identity problems and pointed him in the right direction. *“Nowadays I’ve got it sorted. There’s me, Alain Poudensan, my model, Robin Williams, and the character I act on stage, Alain Robin, not to mention the roles I play such as Mrs. Doubtfire.”* He tosses off the sentence in a rapid, nonchalant manner, as though he’s rehearsed it thousands of times before. *“I no longer pretend I’m Robin. I always introduce myself as his double and refuse to claim that I’m the real thing. I’m proud to say that I am Alain and just look like Robin.”* But the two overlap easily. When he is talking, Alain cannot help changing his voice, moving and putting on an act, as though the borderline between his natural identity and his stage character is likely to become blurred at any moment. He admits that he always hesitates before signing autographs: *“What am I supposed to write? Alain, Mrs. Doubtfire or Robin Williams?”*

He doesn’t divulge anything about friends or family. One day however he did let slip that he got on very well with Whoopi Goldberg, Bruce Willis and Sean Connery’s look-alikes. When they are by themselves they call each other by the names of their models. *“We’re always pleased to see each other when we get together for a look-alike event. We’re like one big happy family, there’s a great sense of kinship. Every look-alike is unique because he brings that little extra something.”* These charitable sentiments don’t prevent him, however, from seeing things as they really are. *“I can’t say ‘tomorrow I’m going to put my feet up’ as well-known actors and actresses do. But at the same time I can’t play the look-alike every day because I’m only a character. It’s exhausting.”*

Almost dispossessed of his own personality at times, Alain owes much of his life to his model, whose career has been on the wane for the last few years. *“I’m worried about what tomorrow may bring. Robin isn’t doing enough filming nowadays and when he does make a movie, it’s no good. Now I just hope he’ll finally get round to making Mrs. Doubtfire 2, so that we can get back on track.”*