

Melbourne French Theatre goes high-tech

by Laurent Boulanger

For the past 24 years, The Melbourne French Theatre has been part of the Melbourne theatre scene. In spite of its 50 plays over three decades, and its national and international touring, not many Melburnians are aware of its existence.

Michael Bula, co-founder and current Executive Director of the MFT, has been with the theatre from day one and is still excited about every play produced. The May season of Molière's *L'avare*, staged at the Mechanics Institute of Performing



Michael Bula and Valérie Fimat-Faneco in *Le Père Noël est une ordure*.

Arts Centre in Brunswick and directed by Henry-Claude Méra, saw Michael on stage once more, this time in the role of Maître Jacques against rival characters played by both amateur and professional actors, including French-Australian actor Laurent Boulanger, Canadian-Australian actor Andréa Onofrio, and visiting Frenchman Aurélien Mondon in his first stage appearance. The play also featured innovative 'surtitles' for those whose French is not fluent.

Michael Bula explains: "The surtitles - over rather than under - were first introduced as a prototype and experiment by me in October 1999 to maintain market share in a very tough economic and arts climate where French theatre does not have a high enough profile. They work on the format of Powerpoint slides projected by video to a screen and operated by a laptop. They can take literally months of work, not in the Powerpoint aspect, but in the policy and choice of their content. They have increased audiences due to the fact that they allow for greater accessibility to shows."

The MFT has toured 4 times with great acclaim to Canberra by special invitation of the French Ambassador to Australia. The production of *Le Père Noël est une Ordure* toured to the inaugural Adelaide French Festival in November 2000. In 1991 MFT was entered on the Register of Cultural Organisations administered by the Department of the Arts in Canberra.

One to two productions are mounted each year being mainly theatrical plays either entirely in the French language or in bilingual (French/English) form. But with the opportunities that digital technology can offer, what's in store for the MFT tomorrow?

"MFT in 10 years from now will be 34 years old and fully IT and virtual," says Michael Bula, "and will present plays and their film/video digital versions for a world audience. Core work will always be the presentation of plays, and I would like to see it with a permanent home as an Oceania French Theatre Institute supported by the French Government."

The MFT team is always happy to hear from people interested in being involved with its productions for now and the future. And you don't necessarily have to speak French to join the fun.

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