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French farce alive and well

May 10, 2005



Ooh la la: Cynthia Sica and Dominique Gilbert in *Boeing-Boeing*.

Photo: *Dominic O'Brien*

French theatre offers plenty of laughs, writes Rachel Wells.

Michael Bula was a long-haired uni student in the late 1970s when the razor gang of the Fraser government tightened the purse strings on education funding, and his student French theatre group came to a sudden and tragic end.

Heady with the rush of treading the boards and a passion for the French language, which he was studying at the time, the Melbourne University arts/law student simply "didn't want to see French theatre die". So, in 1977, he recruited a few of his uni mates and co-founded the Melbourne French Theatre.

"We started with just \$10 to our name, but it was really important to us to be able to continue to express and articulate the French culture and bring it alive on stage," he says.

Twenty-eight years on, the company, whose plays are performed in French with English surtitles, is attracting bigger audiences than ever. Bula, a solicitor and French jurisdiction specialist, is still at the helm, juggling the roles of theatre manager, actor and, occasionally, director. "I love it as much as ever," he enthuses.

This week, the company presents its 64th production, the hugely popular French comedy *Boeing-Boeing*. Written by Marc Camoletti in 1960 and brought to the world's attention by Jerry Lewis and Tony Curtis in the 1965 Hollywood film of the same name, *Boeing-Boeing* tells the story of Bernard, a philandering architect who juggles relationships with three air hostesses by taking advantage of their different flight schedules. That is, until the "Super" Boeing arrives, their flight schedules change

and Bernard lands himself in a spot of trouble.

In the tradition of a classic farce, hilarity ensues as Bernard, with the assistance of his old schoolmate, Robert, attempts to keep his girlfriends in the dark about each other.

Bula says the decision to stage *Boeing-Boeing*, directed by Morgan Dowsett, is part of a long-term plan to further boost audiences by mixing modern plays with the French classics such as those of Marivaux and Moliere. "It's about reaching a broader section of the community," says Bula, who notes that attendances have skyrocketed since he introduced English surtitles six years ago.

"In the early days our audience was made up of predominantly French-speaking patrons as well as quite a few students . . . Now, the majority of people who come along to our plays speak very little or no French, but love the French culture," he says.

Bula's quick to add that the theatre still attracts many French speakers from various cultural groups, including French expats, Mauritians, Algerians and Africans.

Boeing-Boeing

WHERE Central Hall, 20 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy

WHEN Today until Saturday at 8pm, plus matinees on Friday and Saturday

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