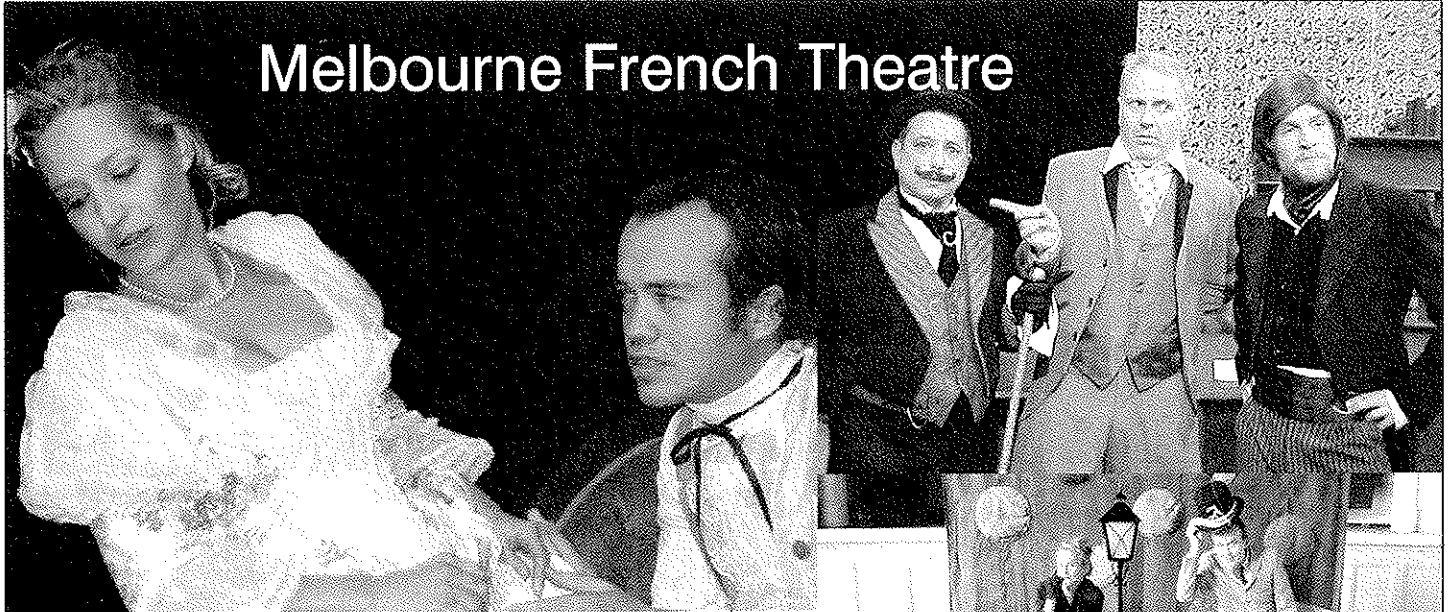


see how they run

a series by Joanne Watt profiling theatre companies

Melbourne French Theatre



Waiting to meet Michael Bula in his beautiful workplace premises – which happen to include a gallery space - feels like a theatrical experience even before a conversation. Fine art, exposed timber beams, objects d'art, sculptures and elegant furnishings give the building a strongly European flavour and a hint of the interests of the people leading Melbourne French Theatre (MFT).

MFT exists to cater to the French speaking community in Melbourne, presenting plays which would otherwise not be performed in the French language in this country. Performers with MFT require fluency in the French language in conjunction with acting ability. Some of the plays are presented entirely in French with surtitles (always manually cued) while others have taken a bi-lingual approach (where both languages are heard).

Currently limited to activities in Victoria, due to their Incorporated Association status, they are an unfunded not-for-profit organisation these days. Although the group previously benefitted from an extended period of French Government support this has been withdrawn in recent years. Commercial activity is held back by the NFP and Inc Assoc structure and the potential for touring and a multi-state presence is not ruled out for future exploration.

Michael Bula is one of the driving forces of MFT, having co-founded the organisation with A. David Gorrie in 1977. Michael Bula has worked closely with several similarly passionate people over the 31 years including Colin Duckworth, Emeritus Professor in the School of Languages at The University of Melbourne, who has worked with translations, adaptations and directing. Michael's role is dominantly as producer with the group having a longstanding policy of engaging the skills of professional directors.

Although in the past MFT has produced up to 4 seasons per year the current pattern of 2 seasons satisfies their subscribers, who enjoy reduced ticket prices and restaurant nights with rehearsed readings and occasional workshops. MFT's subscribers range in age from 20-70 years. Usually the year holds a drama/adult focussed production and a lighter season – sometimes a comedy or a show suitable for younger audiences or simply alternation between a classical and a modern piece. The lighter season engages with French language students and the handful of French bi-lingual schools in Melbourne and wider Victoria.

Although ideally MFT would rehearse and perform in the same space that is not the case as the costs are prohibitive.



Some Melbourne French Theatre productions:
left: "Les Liaisons Dangereuse" by de Laclous, director, Christine Hills,
top: "On Purge Bebe" by Feydeau, director, Michael Bula,
bottom: Le Petit Prince" by Saint-Exupery, Director, Karen Berger.

Performances in recent years have been at the well-appointed 270 seat Collingwood Theatre, for which the City of Yarra subsidise the costs, but when you consider each season requires 2-3 months of 9-12 hours per week rehearsal time the hourly rentals of suitable rehearsal spaces soon build up. Once in the theatre the usual intense period of bump-in and final rehearsals commences.

Their main marketing and promotional tool is the internet, and their previous experience with exploring other venues further from the CBD is that the majority of audience and performers favour the inner Melbourne location.

The seasons are fixed to May and late August/early September – when university and schools are in term time thereby avoiding holiday patches. Every season has a Friday Matinee which is a stated availability requirement at the time of auditioning. These matinees attract bus loads of students and a question and answer forum with performers and directors is available at these daytime shows. There is also a Saturday matinee for the families and seniors.

Currently plans are underway for the 2009 season with 10 plays under consideration – the 6 not chosen will most likely remain on the 2010 and 2011 lists for re-consideration. Michael's main resource is a French publication Avant-Scene (Advanced viewing/sneak preview) which he peruses in search of difficult-to-source French language scripts.

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Michael Bula interviewed by Joanne Watt 27/10/08.