

A taste of France in Carlton

Theatre group's Gallic flavour

By Fiona O'Doherty

DAPPER raconteur and knight of the French Republic Michael Bula stands in the doorway of his maisonette sporting a replica Napoleonic pistol.

The scene seems so very French, but we're actually in Carlton at the Melbourne French Theatre company co-founded by Bula almost 26 years ago.

The former Princes Hill Gallery on Drummond St is also Bula's office and has been the theatre's home for the past 16 years, although rehearsals take place in a North Fitzroy hall.

Bula and fellow Melbourne University law student David Gorrie, who is no longer involved in the running of the company but is a regular audience member, founded the company within the university's French department in March 1977.

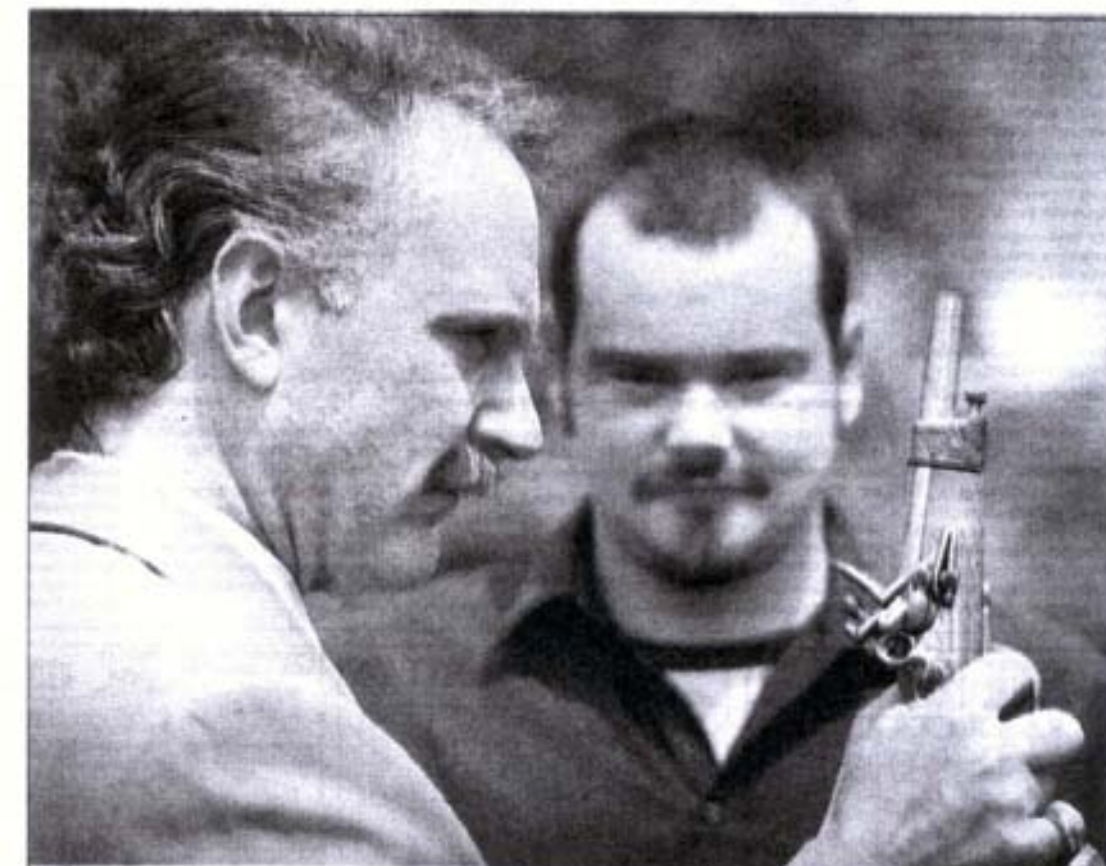
"Then we left uni and we took the theatre with us in a little suitcase. It followed us in our careers. A few of us became lawyers," Bula said.

"It was with me and whoever my employer was — they had to suffer the theatre being run there from a shoebox in their office," he laughed.

The company stages two productions a year for audiences including school students, people from French-speaking countries, Francophiles "and, of course, your avid theatre-goer who loves theatre but who might not speak French," Bula added.

Not speaking French is no handicap as each performance includes English subtitles using a laptop computer and screen.

Bula said the company was the only Australian theatre company to receive a grant from the French



Melbourne French Theatre founder Michael Bula takes aim with director Morgan Dowsett.

Picture: ANDREW HENSHAW NCSME/136

Government. Businesses, both French and Australian, and individual sponsors also contributed financially.

The company has toured regional Victoria, interstate and to French-speaking countries including Vanuatu and New Caledonia.

In 1998, Bula, of French and Italian background, was made a knight of the French Republic for services to French language and culture — an honour that rendered the ebullient Bula uncharacteristically speechless.

"I was actually lost for words. It was the best kept secret in the French community of Australia," he said.

The company's next production, to be staged in May, will be directed by Carlton resident Morgan Dowsett who was born in Geneva to Australian parents, schooled in French while speaking English at home and recently spent three years working for New York French speaking company the Ubu Repertory Theatre.

Auditions for *La Tête Des Aubes*, (which translates directly as *The Head of Aubes* but has been renamed *Travesties of the Guillotine* for Melbourne audiences), are this weekend at the Mark St Hall, North Fitzroy.

For more information, call 9349 2250.

