



**NAME:** Michael Bula  
**FOUNDED:** Melbourne French Theatre  
**AIM:** to change French stereotypes

## interview

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# French schtick and no berets in sight

By KAREN MURPHY

■ OH la la! In a modern twist on a decades-old plot, an increasing number of French people are finding us sexy.

According to Michael Bula, founder of the Carlton-based Melbourne French Theatre (MFT), at least 10,000 French nationals now call Melbourne home.

Some, he says, were brought here through work, some via youth visas and others through the timeless allure of cross-cultural l'amour.

"There are many people here who love all things French ... and more people from Melbourne are buying French property because they have fallen in love with the French way of life," Bula says. "But also now there are more French here than ever before – Australia is seen as a very sexy destination for young people from France."

Not only has the mutual attraction boosted local audiences but also the Gallic skill-base upon which the independent theatre can call.

"A few years ago, the Australian and French governments signed a co-operative agreement providing for a mutual youth visa," Bula explains.

"That is great for international relations and great for us because we have people helping us now who have studied painting at a French art school, or who wish to act or have other skills to assist us."

Michael Bula's lifelong love of the French language has been the key to his working life since 1977 when he founded the MFT as a student at Melbourne University.

An international lawyer, he is the honorary consul-general of Senegal, is legal adviser to the French embassy, speaks five languages and was decorated by the French Government in 1998 for his legal and cultural services to France.

He is also an actor and director and is fiercely proud of the independent theatre that produces the works of such French literary luminaries as John-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Jean Cocteau.

"The MFT is the oldest and longest-running French theatre company in Australia and the only one under the patronage of the French ambassador to Australia," Bula explains.

"We are unique because we are not just here to present French plays

written by French playwrights, we are about celebrating the French language from anywhere in the world.

"This means parts of Canada, north African countries such as Morocco and Tunisia, Pacific Island nations like New Caledonia and Vanuatu, Caribbean countries including Martinique and Mauritius, even Vietnam and Lebanon."

The MFT has presented more than 65 productions either entirely in French (with surtitles) or in a bilingual format.

"Despite what some may say, French is not a dying language – it is spoken by millions of people around the world and is greatly treasured.

"The French were stereotyped in Australia for a long time but thankfully we are moving away from that now ... a Frenchman was always portrayed as a guy with a baguette, wearing a beret, riding a bicycle.

"The MFT, over almost 30 years, has played a big part in changing those perceptions."

The MFT's next production, *On Purge Bebe*, is at The Open Stage in Parkville from late August.

**Tickets:** [www.mftinc.org](http://www.mftinc.org)