

# Play

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Love of all things Gallic drives Francophile group to present 76 shows in 33 years

## French go Wilde in play

Theatre | Saeed Saeed

LIKE a character from a classical drama, the Melbourne French Theatre has triumphed over adversity and brought a touch of Gallic charm to Melbourne's arts scene.

When the theatre group takes to the stage tomorrow (Tuesday) night for its interpretation of the Oscar Wilde favourite *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it will mark the 76th production in the company's 33-year history.

Founder and Carlton solicitor Michael Bulla said the theatre group's longevity lay in its members' passion for all things French and its business smarts.

"Some people think because we are volunteers it may not be as serious," Bulla said.

"But when we are preparing for a production, we have up to 60 people working in sub-committees taking care of things like production, set cost, costumes and graphic artists.

"We operate the theatre like a small cultural enterprise."

Bulla, whose law office in Canning St also doubles as the theatre group's headquarters, started the Melbourne French Theatre company with David Gorrie in 1977.

Born to a Franco-Italian family, Bulla immersed himself in the French language and culture and wanted to create space for fellow artistic Francophiles to express themselves.

The early shows were performed exclusively in French to a small but dedicated audience, before the group began translating the dialogue into English through slides shown on 2m-high screens on both sides of the stage.

He said the technological innovation opened the theatre not only to a new English speaking audience, but to non-traditional theatregoers as well.

"We got a great response from the deaf community," Bulla said. "It gave them a chance to attend



Sabrina Manach, Louis Bernard and Julien Monnier in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Picture: MATT MURPHY N45ME101

something they would normally not have access to."

But it has been far from smooth sailing during the group's life.

The theatre came perilously close to shutting its doors in 1996 when the French Government, spurred by a spiralling global financial crisis, decided to cut its 20-year run of arts grants which backed the theatre.

Bulla said the unexpected decision found the theatre cutting experimental plays in favour of

more mainstream productions. He was forced into the role of theatre producer and financed the plays out of his own pocket.

"We are now more careful in what productions we pick because their success helps set up our future work," Bulla said.

"But we didn't pick Oscar Wilde's play just because of his name.

"Due to legal dramas Oscar was driven out of England and came to resettle and die in France. He always had a great affinity with

the French because they accepted him when no one else did."

Bulla said the company was slowly getting back on its feet, with productions stepping up to three plays annually and a tour of Melbourne schools slated for the second half of this year.

He said Australians' enthusiasm for French drama and theatre would ensure the survival of the company.

"The French always explored themes that are universal like

love and politics and history," he said.

"They have this wonderful knack of making ordinary life seem fascinating."

► **Melbourne French Theatre Inc presents *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Collingwood College Theatre, corner of Cromwell St and McCutcheon Way. The season runs from Tuesday, May 4, to Saturday, May 8. Tickets \$12-\$40. Further details: mftinc.org**

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