

Melbourne French Theatre With Michael Bula



Melbourne French Theatre is in rehearsals for their latest production *Every Trick in the Book! Le Systeme Ribadier* by Georges Feydeau. Michael Bula, MFT's director and producer has been with Melbourne French Theatre for its incredible 40-year history. He took a moment with TheatreArtLife to tell us about his company, how he works to keep its wheels turning and what he loves about the company.

Melbourne French Theatre Inc. [MFT] has been around for 40 years. How was MFT born and how is French Theatre sustainable in Australia?

MFT was founded in 1977 by myself and Alexander David Gorrie, two aspiring Arts Law students at the University of Melbourne. It was initially a student theatre club of the University, but like Melbourne Theatre Company, it morphed into something bigger and now forms an integral part of the independent theatre landscape of Melbourne, as a non-profit cultural charity in the form of an incorporated association. French Theatre is sustainable in Australia due to the vast French, Francophile and Francophone networks all the way from primary, secondary schools and universities to French associations and as part of the general theatre scene, given that all plays are in French with English surtitles which make them accessible not only to the wider Australian audience but also to hearing-impaired spectators. It is also sustainable by private corporate and charity sponsorship, fundraising and a number of school pedagogical activities such as Courteline, Le Petit Nicolas and Le Petit Prince workshops and performances by school tours.

What kind of considerations go into the choice of plays/performance to present?

This is the conundrum for any independent theatre company. As MFT receives little government assistance except for the Victorian Multicultural Commission, we are obliged to present commercial productions which attract a maximum of the education and adult theatre markets. Other considerations are potential directors who are matched as the best fit for productions, their availability, the availability of casts where the choice is usually from 4 to 8 character roles for budget and organisational purposes, well-known playwrights with some exceptions and of course set, staging, lighting and costume requirements.

What have been some of your most successful plays that you have presented and why do you think they have been popular?

The most successful plays vary from Oscar Wilde *The Importance of Being Earnest* in French to Ray Cooney's works to the classics like *Molière* and *Marivaux* and some in between. First, it is necessary to qualify what is meant by "success". Audience numbers, financial surplus, artistic excellence, media hype etc? The popularity of the successful plays comes from many factors – the magic and privilege of seeing theatre in the French language in this country, the poster and graphic images of the production, the director's vision in the set, costumes, lighting and staging and interpretation, audience support and of course theatre reviews. Some have toured Australia and the South Pacific, not yet France ...



The other success is the accessibility and standard of the translation/adaptation/surtitles work which accompanies each show.

Are your actors native French speakers or is it a combination of French as a first language and learned French?

Our actors hail from France, French-speaking countries and many other countries and of course Australia and non-French backgrounds. MFT is proudly first an Australian theatre company which brings the Francophone family to the forefront providing a bridge between cultures and opportunities in French to actors, production crew, directors and translators in the surtitles area with an invaluable immersion in the French language in the middle of Australia. We can have students of French to native speakers.

How do you integrate with the education systems in Melbourne? Do you also reach out to rural Victoria?

Students from primary to tertiary levels form over one-third of our audiences. MFT would not exist if it did not integrate into the educational system. We have special tours and school activities, without which MFT could not function financially. We have toured rural Victoria with *Courteline* and *Le Petit Prince*, but without funding this becomes impossible.

Getting people off Netflix and down to a theatre is hard enough when you are putting on a play in their own language, how do you get people to come see your work?

We need to create a buzz media campaign for every show. It is a challenge for our media team, as each production is purposefully very different/individual with a change of director, change of cast and production, surtitles and administration teams.

We have longstanding relationships with many French interest groups from the Alliance Française to the French-Australian Lawyers Society to the French-Australian Chamber of Commerce and industry to the French Media such as *Le Courrier Australien* and much more. Radio and press media interviews, an extensive e-bulletin database of more than 6000 addresses and social media as well as a multi-faceted website where secure online bookings can be taken – or contribute to the promotion of each production as well as educational activities. Netflix will never replace participation in the raw magic of live theatre in French in Australia!

Why did you start MFT and what do you like about your role?

I was swept up in the world of French Theatre at the age of 18 by my co-founder's arm-twisting and when bitten, an addict. I founded the theatre at the age of 19 in 1977. I was an Arts Law student and currently manage my International Legal, Notarial and Translation Offices as executive director and producer of MFT which is housed in our building. Theatre and dramatic performance as a professional actor form part of my career and life since the age of 15 as a neat adjunct to my international legal work with the French language. Theatre takes me out of the world of the other professions to another place of creative freedom and expression in French. The interface with actors, colleagues, directors, schools, the audiences and all the organisations and associations is one of the most enriching facets of my life. That is not to say that at times it is not stressful, human psychology difficult and finances constantly worrying. That is the story and place of the theatre and other Arts in this country which have never been properly nourished and supported like they are in France.



What do you see for the future of MFT?

The future of MFT is in presenting successful plays, deepening its relationship with the Universities and schools and developing programs. Theatre workshops and classes for students and adults are also being considered. MFT is a dual of an institution and has been recognised by France but less so by Australia. Response to these questions will no doubt assist in the promotion and consolidation of MFT, its renown and its

future. A tour to France would be the zenith of our journey to go “back” to where it all began but from the Australian viewpoint ...