Melbourne French Theatre

PRODUCER MICHAEL BULA TELLS **JENNIE SHARPE** THE STORY BEHIND HIS BELOVED THEATRE COMPANY, MFT.

One day in 1977, two uni students walked into a bank. It sounds like the beginning of a joke, and for a moment, Michael Bula really thought it was. He and David Gorrie wanted to open an account for their new French theatre club, but the teller flatly refused.

"We said we'd like to open an account in the name of Melbourne University French Theatre," says Michael (who is also known to many as "Michel"). "The teller said, 'No way!' He said, 'Sorry, there's too many clubs and societies named Melbourne University this, that etc.' So poor David, who was always a bit more artistic and away with the fairies than me, looked very disappointed and was about to walk out of the bank, and I said, 'Stop! What about *Melbourne French Theatre*?' And the teller said, 'You got it'."

The pair chipped in five dollars each. Michael likes to say MFT has made it to "40 years on a ten dollar bill".

It's an extraordinarily long period of time for any independent theatre company. For a non-English language one, it seems particularly incredible. But Michael Bula, who is the MFT's producer to this day (and still treads the boards as an actor every couple of years), says there are countless reasons for his beloved MFT's longevity.

"Melbourne as an audience market is…very faithful, very understanding, very supportive," he says. "We are beholden to no one…We are fiercely independent…and fiercely Melbourne… This city has helped us survive."

Michael is as loyal to Melbourne as Melbourne is to MFT. "We are *Melbourne* French Theatre," he says. "Proud of it!...I remember saying that when we were [touring] Noumea...I said to them 'please, remember this... we are *Melbourne* French theatre.'"

Perhaps Melbourne audiences are so understanding of the challenges involved in putting on French theatre because they're so used to it. Melbourne University began presenting theatre in French in the late 1890's. "Melbourne has a Francophile, and Francophone, link with France that goes back to the gold rush," Michael explains. "We came along as successors to that movement."

As it turned out, Michael and David "came along" at precisely the right time. Just before they founded the MFT, Melbourne University's French Department had to stop producing theatre, thanks to the Fraser Government, "which decided, fortuitously for us, to cut funding to universities...The Department of French had no more money so, after a hundred and something years... goodbye!"

It was a sad day for the University, but not for the Melbourne French theatre scene, or for the Australian theatre scene in general.

Although he is such a proud Melburnian, Michael is also quick to point out that MFT is proudly Australian as well.

"We are always proudly underscoring – this is an Australian theatre company. It's not emulating a company in Paris...That is the beauty of MFT...we have lighting, costumes, set designers etc. most of whom don't speak a word of French, not a word!"

MFT's production of *Lunes de Miel* by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt earlier this year involved no less than 65 people "...and they're all (except for two or three)...volunteers," says Michael.

While MFT always pays its directors, and usually its set and lighting designers too, Michael believes one of the reasons for the company's longevity is "the training... we give to our actors...to our costume people, to our graphic artists...we're self-perpetuating because we always bring in new blood".

As well as contributing to the education of up and coming industry professionals, Michael sees MFT's role as one of audience education too. Audience members can be anywhere from ages 8 to 80, he says. And, while many are French speakers, the majority are more than happy to rely on MFT's excellent English surtitles.

Of the 1,000 people who came to see *Lunes de Miel*, a third were school students, says Michael. In the past, many students have made the transition from audience members to actors, and Michael hopes to see many more working with MFT in the future.

"[That's] the...circle that completes itself – when you can sit in an audience and then become part of what's on stage. I don't know of anything that is as inspiring in French language work than that."

Michael can easily identify with any young French student who is passionate about the stage. "I love theatre – I was drawn into theatre at secondary school." As an Australian with French and Italian origins, ➤➤

THIS SPREAD:

Julie David, Marc Buret and Jo Rittey in Eugene Ionesco's *Exit The King* (*Le Roi se meurt*), 2015

All photographs courtesy of Melbourne French Theatre

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he was also extremely keen to learn French. “French was always currency for our family and that’s why it just charmed me…When I was 11 years old and I started year 7, I walked into my first French class and my life was never the same again…I can still remember that day”.

So it’s not surprising that, nearly 40 years on, this busy lawyer, notary and French translator still finds time to produce a big theatre production each May and a boutique chamber production each September. “I think I’ve got [producing] down to a fairly fine art. Gee, if I haven’t got it down to a fine art by now, where’s the West Gate Bridge or the Pont Neuf? I’ll jump!”

Despite the fact that “theatre has its moments” (Michael has had his fair share of “prima donnas” and “fairly nasty characters” to deal with), it’s clear he won’t be stepping down from his role at MFT any time soon. Whether producing “a well-known Moliere” or “plays that would never be presented in French ever in this country”, Michael is devoted to the idea that “theatre is creativity” and will always get as creative as possible to ensure MFT goes from strength to strength. ⚜

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

James Simpson and Marguerite Milh in Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt’s Lunes de Miel, 2016

Stéphane Vérité, Giovanni Piccolo, Marguerite Ghisi, Charlotte Pradeilles, Marc Buret and Michael Bula in Ray Cooney’s *Funny Money* (*Espèces Menacées*), 2013

Assistant Director Melany De Cockere with actor Laurette Peruzzi for Eugène Labiche’s *Is three really a crowd?* (*Le plus heureux des trois*), 2015

Henry Méra, Agathe Lou, Damien Kenny and Charlotte Chapman in Marivaux’s *Double the Risk in Love* (*La Double Inconstance*), 2013