

A success that spans the two solitudes

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Guy Mignault, artistic director of Théâtre Français de Toronto, has to be the most welcoming theatre manager in the city. There he is, at the top of every performance, enthusiastically greeting the audience, offering heartfelt thanks to the sponsors and reminding us all to turn off our cellphones with a comic turn. His most recent shtick was to stop his little curtain-raiser to answer an embarrassing ring from his own phone. The caller? Supposedly it was Governor-General Michaëlle Jean calling to RSVP for the company's 40th-anniversary gala to be held tonight at Casa Loma. Maybe it's thanks to the ever-ebullient Mignault, who not only administers the company and directs a few shows every year but also regularly takes to the boards, that the Théâtre Français de Toronto (TFT) is facing a very healthy middle age, with an expanded playbill, rising ticket sales and a balanced budget.

Or maybe it's just the surtitles.

Two years ago, at the suggestion of one of his board members and following the lead of the Canadian Opera Company, Mignault instituted English-language surtitles for some of the French-language company's performances. The response was instantaneous: Some in the French community accused the TFT of selling its soul to the devil, but in the rest of the city, unilingual friends and spouses suddenly found they could tag along with francophone theatregoers for an evening of Molière or Tremblay in the original. Even the occasional deaf patron shows up.

Today, ticket sales are up 20 per cent; the company can boast about 1,000 subscribers, a number it last saw 15 years ago; and, for the first time, people of influence in Toronto have heard of the TFT, the largest French-language theatre in Canada outside Quebec.

"Our studies showed most anglophones in Toronto did not know the Théâtre Français existed," Mignault said in a recent interview in French. "When we did the first night of surtitles ... we did more in one night for the recognition of TFT among Toronto's anglophones than we had in our previous 37 years of existence," he added with a laugh.

Mignault is often laughing. He has a convivial personality and he plays front man for the TFT like one of old actor-managers of the British stage. A board member once suggested he shouldn't run the TFT as though it was his personal company, but Mignault, who used to own his own summer theatre in Quebec, could only shrug his shoulders. "The theatre is like my living room," he says. "It's not megalomania; it has to work that way."

Mignault, who had occasionally worked with the TFT when he was still based in Montreal, arrived in Toronto in 1997 with no intention of staying. The theatre was looking for a replacement for the much-respected Diana Leblanc, but despite being in a bit of a career funk, Mignault was planning to say no thanks and return to his comfortable house in Montreal. And then, he got chatting and a new excitement overtook him.

"At 49," he said, "what do you do? Buy yourself a big TV and a La-Z-Boy, or take on some challenges? I embraced the challenges."

His interviewers had not bothered mentioning that the company was carrying a \$100,000 debt on a \$500,000 annual budget. "It was a six-month honeymoon, followed by two years of hell," he said. "I discovered there were some skeletons in the closet."

Leblanc's six-year stint in the 1990s produced some artistic triumphs, but, like lots of arts companies in the years of the Ontario Conservatives' funding cutbacks, TFT was suffering. Leblanc was forced to mount ever smaller and smaller seasons and subscription audiences were in decline.

Of course, the TFT had suffered lots of ups and downs over its 40 years. The Théâtre du P'tit Bonheur was founded by a group of enthusiastic amateurs in 1967. Toronto director John Van Burek started working with the company in 1970, established its first full seasons and took it professional in 1973. It celebrated its 20th anniversary by changing its name to the more transparent Théâtre Français de Toronto.

That same year, however, it was forced out of its then home in Adelaide Court when the other two companies in the complex went bust, and it has been dreaming of a permanent home ever since. It performed briefly at Harbourfront's du Maurier Theatre before TFT's own financial troubles forced it out of that venue too. Since 1989, it has performed in the upstairs space at Canadian Stage's Berkeley Street headquarters, but its offices are across town on Dundas Street West and its rehearsal space changes from year to year.

When he arrived, Mignault promised that the company would celebrate its 35th anniversary in a new home. He has since realized that was naive (a recent plan to move into the Distillery District fell through). Still, the theatre's board is committed to finding a home within the next decade.

Apart from real estate, the conundrum for all its artistic directors has been the same: how to program a playbill for a company that is very small with an audience that is very broad. Like Toronto's small but diverse French-speaking community, TFT's audience is composed not only of franco-Ontarians and transplanted Quebecers and Acadians, but also francophone Europeans and Africans and other immigrants whose second language is French rather than English.

Mignault's approach has been populist. He continues to program the new Quebec plays that have always given the company its artistic profile, but the boisterous

productions of Molière draw the crowds. Last year, *The Miser* - with surtitles, of course - broke previous box-office records.

Meanwhile, Mignault, whose company is also benefiting from a growing demand for French-language education and activities in the city, has expanded the playbill to nine shows from three, including four specifically for young audiences. He has added more co-productions with other francophone companies from across the country and tries to include material that acknowledges Toronto's diversity. This winter, for example, playwright Glen Charles Landry will unveil a version of the Don Quixote story that opens on the Toronto subway.

Mignault, the Montrealer who didn't plan to stay, recently bought a house in the Danforth neighbourhood and has no intention of leaving this multicultural metropolis. In 2006, when TFT's production of *The Miser* won a Masque, Montreal's annual theatre award, for best production from outside Quebec, he visited his old hometown to accept the prize and brought along a message: "I said, 'I invite you cordially to come and visit *la francophonie Canadienne*. You'll see some remarkable things are going on. Contrary to the old beliefs, Toronto isn't boring at all.'