

French theatre company looking for a new home

For 40 years, Theatre francais de Toronto has put the accent on excellent performances

Oct 25, 2007 04:30 AM

RICHARD OUZOUNIAN
THEATRE CRITIC

For Guy Mignault, 40 is the new 20.

The Artistic Director of Théâtre français de Toronto may be helping his organization celebrate its four-decade anniversary this season, but his thinking and plans are definitely light years younger in their approach.

Every long-running arts organization has its ups and downs, but when the bright-eyed Mignault took over TFT 10 years ago, things were surely at a lower ebb than they are now.

"When I first arrived," Mignault admits, "we had a deficit and were only presenting three plays a year. Now we are doing five plays for adults, two for youth, two for teenagers and the word 'survive' has been removed from our vocabulary. We prefer 'flourish' instead."

And flourish is what they're doing. Since instituting English subtitles several seasons ago, audiences have gone up 20 per cent. And a new, edgier style of presentation (as witnessed by their upcoming production of *Le Misanthrope*, scheduled to open this week) has broadened their audience base considerably.

"We used to be considered a middle of the road company," concedes Mignault, "and I guess we still are for some people. But a lot of work has grown much more audacious and that's bringing in the people under 40."

Things have changed a lot from that day in 1967 when it set up shop as Theatre du P'tit Bonheur. It moved from Broadview and Danforth to Adelaide Ct. before finally settling in the space at Berkeley St. they've used for many years.

Artistic directors have included John Van Burek (twice), Eugène Gallant and Diana Le Blanc, under whom the organization changed its name to Théâtre français de Toronto and earned a highly reputable eight Dora nominations in 1992.

Mignault's eclectic approach has been part of TFT's success in recent years, doing "zappy" versions of French classics; bringing in great artists like Viola Leger; commissioning works on the local urban scene and – most memorably – putting together a series of popular musical revues that have packed the houses and even won Dora Awards for 1998's *C'était un p'tit Bonheur* and the 2005 touring show *Est-ce qu'on ne pourrait pas s'aimer un peu?*

"I'm very proud of what we're doing right now," boasts the ebullient Mignault. "We have a little edge, we do something with a bit of *je ne sais quoi*. We're totally unique.

"Richard Greenblatt came to see one of our productions last year and got so excited. `Look at you, he said, `you're doing real theatre!'"

Only one thing would make Mignault's happiness complete.

"We need a home of our own. Our offices are in a medical building in the west end of town; our theatre is owned by Canadian Stage; and we rehearse wherever we can. Someday we'd like to have it all under one roof."

He then smiles confidently and adds: "All the stars are lining up right now and I know we might have to wait until our 50th anniversary, but it will happen!

"And when it does, the words `Théâtre français de Toronto' will be written in neon lights!"