

I Am What I Am

Pirates go for big time with production of
La Cage aux Folles

Pirates Productions has a long tradition of putting on musical shows in Luxembourg, stretching back some 27 years to a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates Of Penzance* (whence the name of the company). At the end of October its production of *La Cage Aux Folles* in the municipal theatre in Esch-Alzette will be its most extravagant show to date. Duncan Roberts talks to director and star Dominique Vitali.

Dominique Vitali is a remarkably relaxed man when we meet, given that he is just weeks away from the opening night of possibly the biggest production ever undertaken by an amateur dramatic society in Luxembourg. He only has himself to blame if the tension gets to him, of course, the show was his idea and he sort of had an inkling that he would end up starring in the production as well.

So, why did he choose *La Cage Aux Folles*? "Because I have twice been involved with a production in Germany, as choreographer and as co-director. I had seen the original in English, and I wanted to do it in the original and give it my vision." He explains that he was disappointed that one of the German shows had portrayed Albin, one of the leading characters, as a parody. "To me that's not what Albin is. He is a tragic character, really. He's funny to other people, but he doesn't see himself as being funny."

La Cage been in Vitali's plans since he wrapped up *Showtime*, the show Pirates put on at the Esch theatre two years ago. "I am very grateful to Pirates," he explains, "because not only is it a big and difficult show, but it's the biggest budget they have ever put into a show. So I really hope we fill the theatre and get some of the money back," he says with a slightly nervous laugh. "They will probably never let me do another one after this," he jokes. So how did Vitali end up playing Albin himself? "We knew that part would be particularly hard to cast for my vision. Pretty early on it was clear I would have to do it if I wanted to go in that direction." Luckily for him, Chris Wilson, who was originally going to be only the stage manager ("a huge job in itself, for a show on this scale," says Vitali), agreed to co-direct with Vitali. "I couldn't have done it without her," he says.

Vitali saw the original play upon which the musical is based once, and says he feels unbelievably lucky because there is not much record of the Paris production - French TV has footage from one scene in its archive and that is rolled out again and again whenever there is an anniversary to commemorate the play or the death of its author Jean Poiret or talk about star Michel Serrault. Furthermore, he sees the musical as being closer to the original play than to the film version, which was a huge worldwide success in 1973. There are scene differences between the play and musical and the film. For in the play and the musical, the dinner goes pear shaped and the ensemble goes to a restaurant, and so the scandal explodes in public, whereas in the film it unravels in private in the apartment. Having said that, Vitali is keen to encourage non-English speakers who have seen the French film to come and see the show.

"They can follow the same story," he explains. As for *The Birdcage*, the American remake of the film with Nathan Lane and Robin Williams, Vitali says it is a good attempt and fine for those who have not seen the French film. "But for those who grew up with Michel Serrault and Jean Poiret and afterwards Ugo Tognazzi [who took over Poiret's role in the film], it's so hard to compare to the original cast."

The original film, released in 1978, was hugely popular in France and in the United States, where for some time it held the record for the foreign film with the highest box office receipts. It was seen as a vanguard film for the acceptance of homosexuals in society, and helped bring the subject into the mainstream. That was in the days before Aids, of course - a subject that made

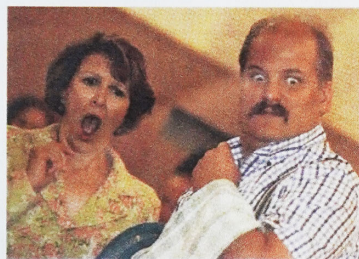


the director of the first Broadway musical of the play, which opened in 1983, tread very warily indeed. Arthur Laurents managed to get his characters through the show without coming even close to a kiss, he was so worried about offending the mainstream Broadway audience. Nowadays, the musical is seen as a great family show with fun and extravagant dance numbers, a great story and fantastically memorable songs. In fact, Vitali is not that keen on viewing the show as political. "I'm not somebody for messages, and when artists or singers or actors, whatever, get too heavy on the message side I am not very happy. You know, I think we are there to entertain; leave messages to others." Nevertheless, he feels that it is fine if the show does bring up the subject of tolerance and acceptance and standing for one's identity. "But the philosophy is packaged in a fun show with really funny lines and great songs, I mean Jerry Herman wrote fantastic stuff," Vitali explains. Herman, who had written huge hits such as *Hello Dolly!*, was almost washed up on Broadway before he wrote the music and songs for *La Cage*, for which Harvey Fierstein wrote the book.



"He had three flops in a row on Broadway," Vitali recalls, "and everybody was saying 'he's dead'." The show opened in 1983, slap bang in the middle of the Stephen Sondheim era when what Vitali describes as shows with "very witty songs, very meaningful lyrics, very complex arrangements" were all the rage on Broadway. Yet, *La Cage* scooped five Tonys in 1984, including Best Musical and Best Original Score for Herman, whose acceptance speech, in which he defiantly said there was still a place for the melodic musical on Broadway, is still remembered by Vitali and others.

Perhaps the best-known song Herman wrote for the show is *I Am What I Am*, which was later made a worldwide hit by Gloria Gaynor. But hardly anyone who has not seen the musical realises that the song comes from *La Cage Aux Folles*. "Once you know, it makes perfect sense that it is the main song of the show, but if you had only seen the movie you wouldn't know," says Vitali. He clearly loves the music in *La Cage*. "What was really important for the show was to have a really able musical director [Philip Dutton], someone who understands theatre, who is a great musician who can re-arrange a lot of things. We have a 21-man orchestra with strings and the lot."



"As a soloist it's a joy to sing these songs," Vitali enthuses. Albin's solo songs each contribute to the story of exposition of the characters. Vitali loves singing *A Little More Mascara*, which is about the fact that Albin feels good when putting on his wig and make-up before a show, *La cage Aux Folles*, which describes the cabaret and its customers, *I Am What I Am*, which has become the show's anthem, and the final song, *The Best Of Times*, the message of which is basically *carpe diem*. "It's quite an optimistic show," he concludes.



Duncan Roberts 12.10.2006

PIRATE PRODUCTIONS

Pirate Productions are proud to announce four performances of the smash hit Broadway musical, *La Cage Aux Folles*.

Originally a long-running Paris Boulevard comedy and classic film, this English language version with music and lyrics by Jerry Herman, retains all the sparkle of the French story but adds song and dance and is supported by a 20 piece live orchestra.

Georges and his partner, Albin (stage name Zaza) run a St Tropez nightclub, *La Cage aux Folles*, where the stars and chorus line are mainly men in drag. Georges and Albin have lived happily together for twenty years but today, Georges' son, Jean-Michel (the result of a casual liaison some twenty years before) has news. He has become engaged to Anne whose father is a bigoted politician, Edouard Dindon, and whose sworn aim is to close down all drag clubs.

Georges is dismayed to hear of his son's choice and even more so to learn that Anne's parents are already on their way to Saint Tropez expecting to meet Jean-Michel's father and mother in a conservative family setting. Not only does Jean-Michel want the apartment to

be completely stripped of all signs of Georges and Albin's gay lifestyle, he also demands that Georges tell Albin *not* to be at the dinner party and that his real mother, Sybil should be imported to play the role instead.

Georges finds Albin on the beach and suggests that, as an alternative, Albin should dress up as macho Uncle Al. However, things start to fall apart as they discover that there is more to being macho than simply dressing in a man's suite. The dinner party becomes a disaster when Sybil sends a telegram to say that she won't be coming after all, Jacob the "maid" burns the dinner and Albin suddenly appears, not as Uncle Al but as "Mother" - in full drag!

Georges tries to rescue the evening by moving the party to an exclusive restaurant next door to the nightclub. Things go from bad to worse and build to a hilarious climax as the Dindons try to escape from the nightclub without being seen by the press. Being photographed in a gay nightclub would be acutely embarrassing and destroy his political career.

This hilarious musical comedy will guarantee a wonderful evening's entertainment with its catchy tunes, spectacular dancing and a veritable explosion of glitz and glamour.

La Cage Aux Folles



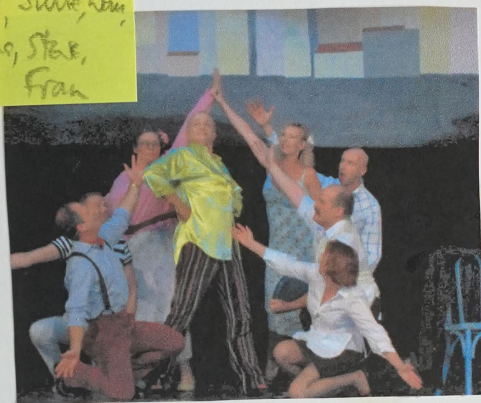
PIRATE
PRODUCTIONS

Théâtre Municipal Esch-sur-Alzette October 25th, 26th, 27th, 28th 2006 8 pm

www.theatre.esch.lu Tickets €20 (under 16 €14)

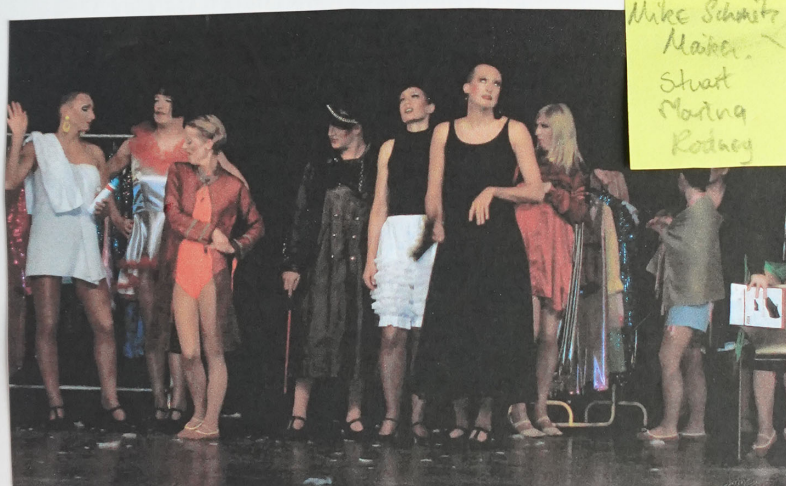


David, Neil, Julie, Ann,
Petrine, Hans, Star,
Fran

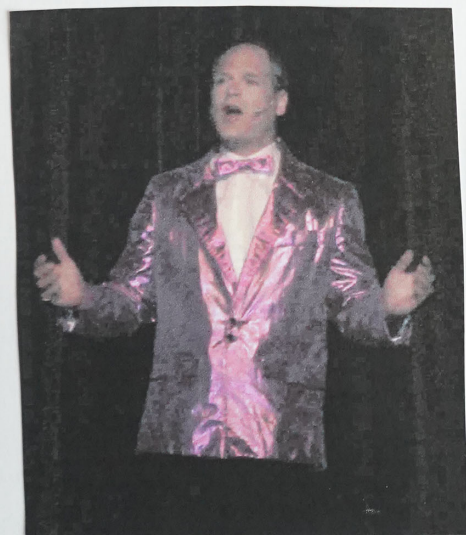


Rodney



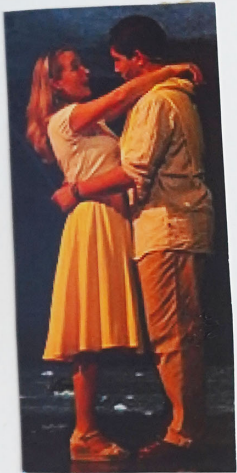
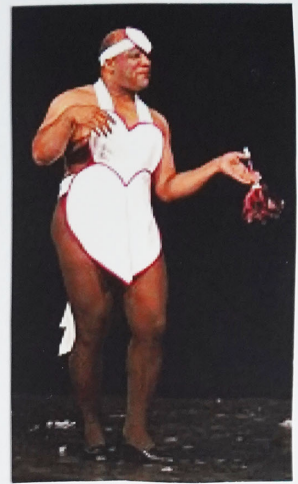


Mike Schmitz
Maiken
Stuart
Marina
Rodney



Marina
Mike L
Rodney
Blathraid
Stuart
Lydia





Deidre
Tina
Blathnaid
Rodney
Andrea



back
Rodney, Carolina
Dom ? Micheal
Front
? Maria, Mike
? Deedre



“What legend told and rumour has promised” said silver jacketed Georges, “we now bring live to our stage” and Cage aux Folles was up and running in Esch’s Theatre Municipal, courtesy of Pirate Productions. There had been plenty of rumour and a hint of legend, and we were all agog.

And, appropriately, we duly goggled.

Immediately at the costumes - from the befeathered, besatined and bespangled chorus line (five o’clock shadow hidden with make-up) to the flamboyantly stylish dresses of the show-in-a-show’s star, Zaza. This threatens to be the swansong of Luxembourg theatre’s costumier of choice, Fay Wolstencroft; if so she is retiring undefeated.

It’s also difficult to imagine Dominique Vitali, who played Albin, who in turn plays Zaza, ever being defeated. I’m not sure if Albin/Zaza is supposed to be the central character, but Dominique made him/her such in the belting tradition of Ethel Merman and Rosalind Russell. He was of course over the top, but this was a night for over the top. Even further over was Randolph Melton Jr, Albin’s butler-turned-maid, a scene stealer probably unmatched since Lassie came home.

David Mittel, Albin’s partner Georges, last played Fred in ‘A Christmas Carol’, unbelievably so, given the way here he exuded all the smooth urbanity of Gene Barry, the role’s creator, in succeeding in being more than a foil to Albin.

Everyone in the show performs. Mittel also acts, successfully projecting a bittersweet sense of genuine devotion to Albin. Plotwise, Albin is the one hard done by, asked to move out of his home so that Georges’ son Jean-Michel can pretend he has an acceptably bourgeois family. Yet here it was Georges, forced into an act he himself sees as betrayal, that one felt sorry for. Some feat.

Otherwise the stars of the show were the chorus, five cross-dressing, seven straight. Dancers are hard to find in the amateur theatre, but these had been whipped into near-perfect shape by Alison Kingsbury (puzzlingly entitled only assistant choreographer) through routines from tap (the kind that keeps one foot on the floor at all times) to Lido-style parades via the odd snippet from Swan Lake.

Bluebells they were not. The corps of the Bolshoi they were not. But neither of those are going to turn up in a seedy nightclub on the Riviera: this chorus might well.

The minor characters were all competently carried off: Clara Barker’s Jacqueline being particularly convincing. For Guillaume Borkhataria and Isabel Thépin as the would-be marrieds (“Our baby’s getting married...where did we go wrong?”) one can only have the same sympathy one always had for Zeppo in the early Marx Brothers films: they weren’t what people were there for.

In a final compliment of a long list, the direction – Dominique Vitali in tandem with Chris Wilson - was completely unobtrusive.

Ultimately, Cage aux Folles, despite its Broadway run and six Tony awards, fails to be a great musical because it has no great songs. Albin made the most of what there is, including I Am What I Am, but Georges (who did well with the best songs: Look Over There and Song on the Sand) suffered from mike overload when he tried for fortissimo, as did Jean-Michel. It hints at under-rehearsal with the orchestra and the electronics.

The 27-strong (really) orchestra was impeccable under Philip Dutton’s direction: for a sense of the lavishness of the show bear in mind the original show boasted only one more instrument than this.

Do Pirates have any money left?. Can we dream of Gypsy with Dominique to reassure us that everything is coming up roses?