

Time for Évangéline to Rest or Move On?

By: Françoise Paradis



Évangéline: Un histoire d'amour d'Acadie

Evangeline: A Tale of Love in Acadie

Un drame musical/A Musical Drama
Presenté en français acadien et en anglais
Presented in Acadian French and English

Théâtre Marc-Lescarbot
Université Sainte-Anne
Pointe-de-l'Église (Church Point)
Nova Scotia, Canada B0W 1M0

2002 Provincial Winner
Attractions Canada

If you haven't made your way to *Pointe-de-l'Église*, Nova Scotia, in the past eleven summers to see this heart-wrenching dramatization of Longfellow's story of Evangeline, you have missed it. The musical drama, adapted by Normand Godin from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem, **Evangeline**, depicts the sad events of the deportation of Acadians from Nova Scotia in 1755. The performers take us on Evangeline's more than 40-year journey to find her betrothed, from whom she was separated during the deportation. The music and songs give an uplifting wave of energy that balances the depth of fear, sadness, and grief that is experienced by the non-Acadian and Acadian audiences as we become witness to her wanderings, ponderings, hopes, disappointments, and finally resignation. In the end she finds peace in her soul and is rejoined with her lover for their glorious moment of healing their hearts before he expires.

I talked with Denis Comeau, Manager and Normand Godin, Artistic Director, of *les Araignées du boui-boui troupe de théâtre* at *l'université Sainte-Anne* at Church Point to find out if the rumor was true. Both said the fate of **Évangéline** will be decided in the next few weeks by the Board of Directors and community members.

Les Araignées du boui-boui (loosely translated as 'spiders of a messed-up stage') *troupe de théâtre* was created by Jean-Douglas Comeau at *l'Université St. Anne* in 1971. The *Troupe* performed plays by Molière, Ionesco, Tardieu, and Labariche. In 1973, Normand

Godin assumed the position of Artistic Director and introduced a series of plays by French authors, some adapted to Acadian French. Since 1986, the *Troupe* has become best known for its Acadian plays. The *Troupe* has won many provincial, national, and international awards over the years and is best known for its musical drama *Évangéline*, which just completed its eleventh season. *Évangéline* was the provincial winner of *Attractions Canada* in 2002.

Évangéline's inauguration was at the first Acadian World Congress in Memramcook, New Brunswick in 1994. Normand Godin has authored, co-authored, and adapted several plays in the past fifteen or so years. Normand Godin said he wrote the play in response to the need to create a tourist attraction to the community of Church Point. He chose *Évangéline* because she has been a symbol of Acadian identity since her creation by Longfellow in 1847. Godin adapted the play, using Acadian songs and Acadian language to honor and celebrate the Acadian French. It was an occasion to celebrate *le 'bon parler acadien'*; to give it some credibility and nobility through theatre, he said. He wanted to make Acadians, young and old, proud of their language, and wanted them to value their historical and cultural origins. Normand Godin is an Acadian who obviously cares about his people and how they view themselves in the context of an Anglo Acadia. In creating the play, he offered an outlet for Acadians to use and preserve the Acadian French that can be traced back to old France. Godin chose *Évangéline* as a tourist-attracting show to give local Acadians an opportunity to express themselves in a dynamic art form, in their own language that they might value their gifts.

Denis Comeau said the *Troupe* has had financial struggles over the years, but have managed to stay together. *Évangéline* brings in modest revenues as they keep the admission charge low to make it affordable to the community and visitors. They rely heavily on government grants and large private donations to keep the show going. In 2000 they added an outdoor performance that takes the audience on a 2K walk in the woods and along the beach around the university. This is reminiscent of Marc Lescarbot's first theatrical production in North America, *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, which was performed in barges and canoes in the waters of Port Royal in 1606. In 2002 the *Troupe* added an English version of the show on Saturday evenings in response to tourist demand. And now, there is a question of what to do with this wonderful play. The actors are getting older, and perhaps would like a break, or perhaps try something new, or perhaps have some time for vacationing with family and friends during the summer months. It is getting harder to find new actors who are as versatile as these veterans who act, sing, dance, and play musical instruments. A traveling *Troupe* is not financially feasible and near impossible for a group of 25 actors who have other family and job obligations.

Évangéline has been performed 238 times at Church Point and has been seen by over 25,000 spectators, about 90% of whom were tourists. In addition to the home-based shows, the *Troupe* has performed 19 shows in various theatres across Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and in Maine. Their first tour was at the first Acadian World Congress in Memramcook, N.B. in 1994. It's biggest touring year was 1997, the 150 year anniversary of Longfellow's poem. That year, the *Troupe* traveled to the province

of Quebec to do performances at Trois-Rivières and Montreal; the province of Nova Scotia for performances in Wolfville and Cheticamp on Cape Breton Island; and to northern Maine to do a performance at the Centre Culturelle du Mont Carmel in Lille. After taking a year off from travel, in 1999 the *Troupe* traveled to Halifax; and in the following three years traveled to various places in Quebec and New Brunswick. They did not travel in 2003 and 2004. The *Troupe* may have played its last season at *Théâtre Marc-Lescarbot, Université Sainte-Anne*, as well.

Normand Godin has written several dinner-theatre plays that have traveled well, and perhaps a stream-lined, adaptation of *Évangéline*, with a smaller *Troupe*, is in the wings. He is still brain-storming ideas as he does not want to see *Évangéline* abandoned for the same reasons he developed the production in the first place. But his dinner-theatres are being well received on other parts of Nova Scotia as well as in the Baie Sainte Anne area. For the third Acadian World Congress, held in Nova Scotia in August, *Une comédie historique* was very well received. Based on Champlain's journals, Godin's latest play depicts the arrival of Sieur de Monts and Champlain to Nova Scotia in 1604 and portrays the events of 1605 and 1606, leading to the creation of *l'Ordre de bon temps*, an organization devoted to good food and entertainment. The dinner-theatre was presented several times a week in Saulnierville (Baie Sainte-Marie) during the World Congress. Now the play is accepting requests to perform in other communities. Godin said the smaller *Troupe* is more amenable to travel, and perhaps his next project will be to modify *Évangéline* so it is economically feasible to take it on the road.

If anyone is interested in engaging *les Araignées du boui-boui troupe de théâtre* for their community, they can reach Denis Comeau or Normand Godin at Evangeline@ustanne.ednet.ns.ca or at (902)769-2114. CDs of *Évangéline, The Musical*, are available from them or from Françoise Paradis at (207) 929-5454.

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