Palazzetto Bru Zane revives French vaudeville operetta with an exuberant production of Hervé's Mam’zelle Nitouche

THÉÂTRE GRASLIN - NANTES (FRANCE)
14, 15, 19, 20 December at 8 p.m. 17 December at 2:30 p.m.

Denise de Flavigny Lara Neumann
Célestin Damien Bigourdan
La Supérieure / Corinne Miss Knife
Fernand de Champlâtreux Samy Camps
Le Major, comte de Château-Gibus Eddie Chigrnara
Lorioit Olivier Py
La Tounrière / Sylvia Sandrine Sutter
Le Directeur Antoine Philippot
Lydie Clémentine Bourgoin
Gimblette Ivanka Moizan
Gustave, officier Pierre Lebon
Robert, officier David Ghilardi
Le Régisseur Pierre (alias Pierre-André Weitz)

Chœur d’Angers Nantes Opéra
Xavier Ribes Choir director
Orchestre National des Pays de la Loire
Christophe Grapperon conductor

Pierre-André Weitz director assisted by Victoria Duhamel
Pierre-André Weitz scenery, costumes and makeup assisted by Pierre Lebon and Mathieu Crescence
Bertrand Killy lighting
Iris Florentiny choreography assisted by Yacnoy Abreu Alfonso
Antoni Sykopoulos coach master
Ingrid Chevalier floor manager

Production Bru Zane France
Coproduction Angers Nantes Opéra / Opéra de Toulon / Opéra de Limoges / Opéra de Rouen Normandie / Opéra Orchestre national Montpellier Occitanie
Creative residency at Conservatoire Lully - Ville de Puteaux
Costume made by the Angers Nantes Opéra's workshops
Chœur et Orchestre de l’Opéra de Toulon
musical director: Jean-Pierre Haeck

Palazzetto Bru Zane presents the vaudeville operetta *Mam’zelle Nitouche* directed by Pierre-André Weitz on December 14-20 at the Théâtre Graslin in Nantes. Premiered in January 1883, the semi-autobiographical comedy follows the double-life of a jobbing composer who poses as a convent organist by day and moonlights as a man of the theatre by night. The run will launch the premiere recording of *Mam’zelle Nitouche*. Weitz’s exuberant production evokes the colours and imagery of Hervé’s *Fin de siècle* Paris. An Anglophile, Hervé’s *Mam’zelle Nitouche* is littered with popular English quotations from Shakespeare and English literature and it is likely that his operatic follies were an inspiration to Gilbert & Sullivan.

This continues Palazzetto Bru Zane’s exploration of French operetta and their rediscovery of the works of Hervé, following on from a CD of *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde* (the Knights of the Round Table).

*Mam’zelle Nitouche* recounts the tale of Floridor, a composer whose day job as Celestine sees him teaching the organ in a convent, yet after dark, he descends into the murky underworld of entertainment. His young pupil a nun Denise follows him to reinvent herself as Mam’zelle Nitouche, a fashionable singer. Written for Anna Judic, the star of the day, *Mam’zelle Nitouche* ran continually for over a year earning its lead nearly a million francs, which she invested in the construction of the Hotel Judic.

As Hervé explained:

‘In 1847 I was engaged as a singing actor at the Théâtre de Montmartre, then under the direction of Daudé. I had no salary, and was obliged to furnish my costumes. Fortunately I combined this position with that of organist of the great organ of Saint-Eustache, with a salary of 800 francs per annum; this enabled me to make ends meet.’

Hervé was a huge anglophile, aided by the young Prince of Wales, the good-time royal who enjoyed Paris during the Second Empire before he became King Edward VII. The Prince of Wales adored operetta, and particularly those of Hervé. The Prince encourage the composer to learn the language of Shakespeare and three months later audiences were treated to a performance of his *Chilperic*. Hervé, who had never been satisfied with his French career, wallowed in this adulation from English crowds. The success was followed by *Le Petit Faust*. Following declaration of the Franco Prussian War in 1870, Hervé remained in London, where he decided to stay until peace returned. Once back in France he
presented *The Scottish Throne* to French audiences, inspired by his sojourn on the banks of the Thames.

*Mam’zelle Nitouche* was immortalized on the silver screen in the 30s and 50s, which resulted in coining the expression “Sainte Nitouche”. Weitz’s production will play on the imagery of blue, white and red symbolic of the barracks, convent and theatre.

**Hervé [born Louis-Auguste-Florimond Ronger]**

(b. Houdain, 1825 – d. Paris, 1892)

Hervé, composer, librettist, actor, singer, stage director and opera company manager, is generally considered to be the father of operetta, although this title is sometimes given to his rival Jacques Offenbach, whose career ran in parallel to his.

When his father died, the ten-year-old Florimond Ronger moved to Paris, where he became a choirboy at the church of Saint-Roch. His musical gifts led to his being presented to the composer Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, then at the height of his fame, who gave him private lessons. He was subsequently appointed organist of the chapel at Bicêtre, and it was there that he composed his first small-scale *opéra-comique*, *L’Ours et le Pacha*, for performance at that institution, then still known as a ‘lunatic asylum’. After a few years he succeeded in obtaining a more prestigious organist’s post, at the church of Saint-Eustache. Alongside his functions there, he embarked on a theatrical career, initially as a chorus singer and bit-player in a number of suburban theatres. It was this time that he adopted the pseudonym of Hervé.

In 1847 he composed a sketch called *Don Quichotte et Sancho Pança*, which has come to be regarded as the first ‘operetta’; it was premiered in a small theatre on the boulevard Montmartre, but soon transferred to the more prestigious stage of the Opéra-National, recently founded by Adolphe Adam. Having established himself as conductor of the orchestra of the Odéon, then of the Théâtre du Palais-Royal, in 1854 he opened a theatre on the boulevard du Temple which he called Les Folies-Concertantes, later Les Folies-Nouvelles. Here he presented operettas that he composed himself (among them *Le Compositeur toqué*, *La Fine Fleur de l’Andalousie* and *Un drame en 1779*), but also early works by Offenbach (*Oyaya ou la Reine des îles*, 1855) and Léo Delibes (*Deux sous de charbon*, 1856). Trouble with the law and health problems forced him to retire temporarily, and in 1859 he sold the theatre to the actress Virginie Déjazet, who renamed it after herself.

A great traveller, Hervé then appeared in the provinces as a singer for a while before re-establishing himself in Paris. He now took over the musical direction of the Délassements-Comiques, where he performed a work whose eccentricity made a striking impression on the public, *Le Hussard persécuté*. This was followed at the Théâtre des Variétés by *Le Joueur de flûte*, a one-act *opéra-bouffe* on a subject prefiguring *La Belle Hélène*. *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde*, an *opéra-bouffe* in three acts on a libretto premiered at the Bouffes-Parisiens, is the first of Hervé’s full-length operettas. After this, in addition to working as
conductor at the Eldorado, he became the house composer of the Théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques, where he enjoyed great success with *L’Œil crevé* (1867), *Chilpéric* (1868) and *Le Petit Faust* (1869).

The last two works provided Hervé with an opportunity to launch a fruitful English career, since he went to London to stage them in person. The new works he gave in Paris were less successful (*Le Trône d’Écosse*, 1871; *La Veuve du Malabar*, 1873; *Alice de Nevers*, 1875). In 1878, he played the role of Jupiter in a revival of *Orphée aux enfers* under the direction of Offenbach himself, and then began the cycle of *vaudevilles-opérettes* he composed for Anna Judic, the star performer of the Théâtre des Variétés: *La Femme à papa* (1879), *La Roussotte* (1881), *Lili* (1882) and finally *Mam’zelle Nitouche* (1883). This last piece was based on his own beginnings in the profession, when he was an organist by day and composer of operettas in the evenings. In 1886 Hervé left Paris for London and composed a series of ballets for the Empire Theatre. He returned to France in 1892, producing one final *opéra-bouffe*, *Bacchanale*, shortly before his death on 3 November 1892.

**PALAZZETTO BRU ZANE**

**CENTRE DE MUSIQUE ROMANTIQUE FRANÇAISE**

The guiding principle of Palazzetto Bru Zane – Centre de musique romantique française is the rediscovery and promotion of the French musical heritage from 1780 to 1920 and bring this music to a wider recognition, through research, publishing scores, making recordings, education projects, programming and co-producing concerts and opera productions. Founded in 2009, the Centre combines its artistic vision to high standards as part of the Fondation Bru dedicated to education and heritage.

The centre of operations is at Palazzetto Bru Zane in Venice – formerly Casino Zane, built between 1695 and 1697, nearby the Basilica dei Frari. The Foundation restored the building including the magnificent frescoes by Sebastiano Ricci and have opened up the double-heighted salon as a concert venue for chamber music seating an audience of one hundred. The magnificent coved ceiling bears a fresco of Hercules with Fame and Virtue at its centre. The room is reached via a grand staircase decorated with frescoes.

Over the past 9 years, Palazzetto Bru Zane has rediscovered forgotten works by well-established composers such as Saint-Saëns, Gounod and Massenet as well as presenting music of lesser-known composers such as Hérod, David, Onslow, Méhul and Reicha in its regular series and annual festivals in Venice. Five years ago, Palazzetto Bru Zane established a summer festival in Paris, each year choosing a different composer to focus on. Most recently, it has introduced a new festival in Berlin. It collaborates regularly with the Ravel Academy, Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel as well as many opera houses and concert halls across Europe.

In addition to the digital resources in the Bru Zane Mediabase, Palazzetto Bru Zane also has its own webradio: Bru Zane Classical Radio.
"Palazzetto Bru Zane, dedicated to the rediscovery of French musical heritage from 1780 to 1920, is fast becoming a rival for Opera Rara as a purveyor of luxury editions of little-known operas. This recording of a concert performance is a triumph of scholarship and makes a strong case for the opera.”

bru-zane.com/en/

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