

PRESS KIT

The Palazzetto Bru Zane presents

**PALAZZETTO  
BRU ZANE**  
CENTRE  
DE MUSIQUE  
ROMANTIQUE  
FRANÇAISE

## MAM'ZELLE NITOUCHE BY HERVÉ

OPÉRA DE TOULON (FRANCE)

Friday 13 October 2017 at 8 p.m.

Sunday 15 October 2017 at 2.30 p.m.

THÉÂTRE GRASLIN - NANTES (FRANCE)

Thursday 14, Friday 15, Tuesday 19,

Wednesday 20 December 2017 at 8 p.m.

Sunday 17 December 2017 at 2.30 p.m.



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*\*with the* CHŒUR ET ORCHESTRE  
DE L'OPÉRA DE TOULON

*\*\*with the* ORCHESTRE NATIONAL  
DES PAYS DE LA LOIRE  
*and the* CHŒUR D'ANGERS  
NANTES OPÉRA

**Opéra de Toulon**  
Booking: +33 4 94 93 03 76  
contact@operadetoulon.fr  
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**Théâtre Graslin**  
**Angers Nantes Opéra**  
Booking: +33 2 40 69 77 18  
billetterie@smano.eu  
angers-nantes-opera.com

# CAST

**Vaudeville-opérette in three acts and four tableaux by Hervé**  
**Libretto by Henri Meilhac and Albert Millaud,**  
**First performed at the Théâtre des Variétés on 26 January 1883**

*Musical direction:* Jean-Pierre Haeck  
*Stage direction:* Pierre-André Weitz  
*Assisted by* Victoria Duhamel  
*Scenes, costumes and makeup:* Pierre-André Weitz  
*Assisted by* Pierre Lebon and Mathieu Crescence  
*Lightning:* Bertrand Killy  
*Choreography:* Iris Florentiny  
*Assisted by* Yacnoy Abreu Alfonso  
*Coach master:* Antoni Sykopoulos  
*Floor manager:* Ingrid Chevalier  
*Dresser:* Nathalie Bègue

*\*with the* CHŒUR ET ORCHESTRE  
DE L'OPÉRA DE TOULON (at the Opéra de Toulon)

*\*\*with the* ORCHESTRE NATIONAL  
DES PAYS DE LA LOIRE  
*and the* CHŒUR D'ANGERS  
NANTES OPÉRA (at the Théâtre Graslin)

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

Production Bru Zane France

Coproduction Angers Nantes Opéra / Opéra de Toulon /  
Opéra de Limoges / Opéra de Rouen Normandie /  
Opéra Orchestre national Montpellier Occitanie /  
Residency at the Conservatoire Lully - Ville de Puteaux

Costumes made by Angers Nantes Opéra's workshop



# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

## Pierre-André Weitz

### **Talking about *Mam'zelle Nitouche*, opera by Hervé "As the saying goes"**

- Oh...
- Yes, yes, yes...
- Ho hum!
- Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.
- She really takes the biscuit!
- What's bred in the bone will come out in the flesh!
- She was born to succeed.
- Be careful, appearances can be deceptive...
- There are two sides to every coin.
- A real Sainte Nitouche<sup>1</sup>...
- She has several strings to her bow, you know.
- Double trouble, take it from me.
- She's two-faced.
- Now you're adding grist to my mill.
- It's a mistake to take people for fools, isn't it?
- Or pull the wool over their eyes.
- She's all sweetness and light on the surface, but underneath...
- Yes, yes, yes, why not go one better!
- All that glitters is not gold.
- But there's no smoke without fire.
- Neither black nor white...
- Yes! Now you see me, now you don't.
- She plays her cards close to her chest.
- She's a Mitouche<sup>2</sup>
- No! A Nitouche.
- But that's six of one and half a dozen of the other.
- Is it?
- In short, she's like the curate's egg...
- Like night and day.
- What did I tell you?
- She and him...
- Janus?
- One and the same.
- My goodness!
- Never say never.
- A little angel with black wings.
- She'll meet her match, mark my words.
- You think so?
- Yes, a little bird told me, I'd stake my life on it.
- Still waters run deep.
- Don't bet on it.
- There's no accounting for taste, you know...

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1 A hypocritical woman with a holier-than-thou attitude.

2 Another name for Nitouche.

- Only believe half of what they say about women.
- Half? Which half?
- Yes, yes, snow in November, Christmas in December.
- There's many a slip twixt cup and lip, isn't there? And why does a rolling stone gather no moss?
- Don't change the subject! That's beside the point!
- So to recap, Mam'zelle Nitouche:
- A pretty flower in cow's clothing, a pretty cow disguised as a flower.
- But we've been using sayings, not songs.
- Oh yes, sorry!

Inspiration:

Every afternoon at four o'clock, my granny would have coffee with her neighbour, Madame Creusot, who brought her the previous day's newspaper and, over coffee, to my great delight, they would savour sayings and cakes in peals of laughter.

Sayings and proverbs are to the French language what the Eiffel tower is to Paris and operetta is to Hervé.

Pierre-André Weitz



# SYNOPSIS

Find soon the whole libretto on the database concerning French Romantic music:  
[bruzanemediabase.com](http://bruzanemediabase.com)

## Act One

Célestin is the organist of the convent of Les Hirondelles by day and a composer of operetta, under the pseudonym of Floridor, by night. He creeps back in from the rehearsals at the theatre of Pontarcy just in time to accompany his pupils in their hymn. The most gifted of his charges, Denise de Flavigny, has (unbeknown to her) been promised in marriage to Fernand de Champlâtreux. Although the girl has discovered Célestin's double identity and is enthralled by his music, she is unaware that the old inspector who has come to question her from behind a screen is actually Fernand. Denise is expected in Paris that very evening, but the Mother Superior has concealed from her that she is going there in order to be married. Under the impression that she is leaving to go to a new convent, Denise persuades Célestin, who has been designated to accompany her, to make a detour by way of the theatre of Pontarcy. She explains that he will be able to attend his premiere while she will stay in the hotel as good as gold – cross her heart and hope to die!

## Act Two

It is the interval at Pontarcy. A jealous quarrel is afoot between Major de Château-Gibus and Corinne, the prima donna, who hotly denies that she is two-timing him with Floridor. Denise arrives backstage. She was hardly going to miss this unexpected opportunity to go to the theatre! She runs into Champlâtreux, who has a habit of frequenting theatrical dressing rooms (and actresses). She introduces herself as a pupil of Floridor. Corinne overhears the conversation. She thinks Floridor wants to offer this young girl a chance to make her debut in Paris. Treachery! Corinne refuses to sing in the second part of the performance and incites the Major to take revenge on his rival. The theatre manager is in despair. Who can save the show? Why, Denise, of course, who knows the score off by heart! Thrust onto the stage, she scores a triumph before the eyes of the bewildered Célestin. They tear themselves away from the bravos in order to catch the night train for Paris, thus escaping, in Denise's case, the ardent attentions of Champlâtreux, who has fallen madly in love with her, and, in Célestin's, the fury of the Major.

## Act Three

### First Tableau

Célestin and Denise (or Floridor and Mademoiselle Nitouche, since she too now has a stage name) have been arrested by a soldier as they fled the theatre through the window and taken in handcuffs to the barracks, where the officers immediately free them, on condition they drink champagne to the success of Nitouche. Célestin is stupefied – as is Champlâtreux, who was going to look for Denise at the station and is astonished to find her singing fanfares in the midst of his comrades. The Major arrives; Célestin and Denise don uniform to try to hide from him, but he is not fooled. Denise has no option but to slap his face and take advantage of the general confusion to decamp with Célestin.

### Second Tableau

On their return to the convent, the fugitives find themselves face to face with the Mother Superior. Denise tells her that she begged Célestin to bring her back as soon as she realised she was to be married. She is prepared to take her vows as a nun. Enter the Major, beside himself with rage. The Mother Superior tells him that Denise is no longer free. The Major retorts that Champlâtreux in his turn has withdrawn his consent; he has fallen in love with an actress! Hearing this, Denise asks to see the young man, convinced that she can bring him back to the straight and narrow. She unveils herself behind the screen, and Champlâtreux finds in her the woman he fell in love with when he saw her on stage. And we see how the theatre is capable of turning marriages of convenience into genuine love matches. All's well that ends well.

# NITOUCHE FOR ALL ETERNITY

## by Pascal Blanchet

Lovers of Hervé who decide to take a stroll through his home town of Houdain (in the Pas-de-Calais *département*) may go to pay their respects at no.36 rue Roger Salengro, where the house in which the composer was born in 1825 is still standing. Having read the plaque piously affixed to these venerable walls, the traveller need only go a few steps farther to reach the corner of rue Jean Jaurès. There one has the surprise of finding oneself face to face with Hervé, or at least with his statue, which rises at the centre of a pretty square that bears his name. The musician, standing behind a music desk, arms raised and baton in hand, is conducting one of his scores. By craning one's neck slightly, one can manage to read the title: *Mam'zelle Nitouche*. Thus, for all eternity, Hervé will conduct this work that remains his best-known, more even than *Le Petit Faust*, his other great success, or the other three instalments of his 'tetralogy', *L'Œil crevé*, *Chilpéric* and *Les Turcs*. Yet it is not a work unanimously approved of by 'Hervéistes', some of whom denigrate it as a score of lesser stature, lacking in those large-scale ensembles that allowed Hervé to give full rein to his talent. Does this relative disdain for a piece that refuses to die have any justification? And has the time come to rehabilitate *Mam'zelle Nitouche*?

### Operetta as autobiography

'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.' It is with these words that Hervé begins a fascinating memoir written in 1881 and entitled *Notes pour servir à l'histoire de l'opérette*. In this manuscript of some twenty pages, while recounting the beginnings of the genre he claims to have invented, Hervé also relates his life. As he does so, he boasts – as modestly as he can – of his successes, and settles some scores – as kindly as he can – notably with his rival Jacques Offenbach, who had died a few months earlier and with whom he is always associated. (Note to the traveller who visits Houdain: on the outskirts of the old town one encounters a rue Hervé, which inevitably intersects with . . . a rue Offenbach!)

Over and above the mine of information and anecdotes they contain, one is tempted to see also in these *Notes* of Hervé the embryo of what was to become *Mam'zelle Nitouche* two years later. At the time of the work's premiere, in January 1883, all the critics without exception took pains to mention two things. First of all, that the librettists had followed rather too closely the plot of *Le Domino noir*, an *opéra-comique* by Daniel-François-Esprit Auber that was still well known at the time, and which depicts the nocturnal flight of a girl from the confines of her convent. And secondly, that the subject of this *vaudeville-opérette* (as the new genre was dubbed) is drawn from an episode of Hervé's youth, a detail that all these journalists agreed in finding piquant and which seems to have contributed substantially to the success of the piece. A century and a half later, the reference to *Le Domino noir* seems remote to us, but the situation of an organist who is also a 'closet' composer of operettas has retained all its savour.

Hervé wrote his *Notes* in response to a question he had been asked by the eminent theatre critic of the newspaper *Le Temps*, Francisque Sarcey. The latter had just embarked on a series of articles dealing with 'the formation of genres' and wanted to begin with operetta, 'which we have had the singular good fortune to see being born, thriving, enjoying extraordinary prestige, then waning and being absorbed into the genres that were fixed before it and from which it had emerged', he said. This was in July 1881: Offenbach had died in October of the previous year, and the articles published at the time of his death frequently mentioned that he was the father of operetta.

This statement must have infuriated Hervé, who was convinced that he himself had written the words and the music for the first work in the genre, a sketch of 1848, *Don Quichotte et Sancho Pança*. This piece, subtitled 'tableau grotesque', starred the actor Désiré, 'short and fat', and Hervé himself, 'tall and thin', he writes in his *Notes*, before adding in peremptory fashion: 'Thus *Don Quichotte* was the first operetta; and, I may say, it received a solemn

consecration at the Opéra-National.’ But Sarcey places the beginnings of the genre a few years later. According to him, the accolade of ‘first operetta’ belongs to another work by Hervé: ‘It is from *Le Compositeur toqué* rather than *Don Quichotte et Sancho Pança* that we should date the first manifestation of operetta’, he declares in his article. He probably means by this the appearance of a certain openly mocking, satirical and parodic spirit that is not found in the traditional *opéra-comique* (*La Dame blanche*, *Le Pré aux clercs* or . . . *Le Domino noir*!).

*Le Compositeur toqué* remained so obstinately memorable that its title (The crazy composer) became Hervé’s nickname for the rest of his life. In this sketch in a single act, the public of his day could see him play Figolet, a presumptuous, incompetent and penniless composer. With the help of his imbecilic servant Séraphin, Figolet wants to play the audience his grand symphony, *La Prise de Gigomar par les Intrus* (The capture of Gigomar by the invaders), which contains the majestic ‘Chant du Mississipi’ (*sic*). This provides the pretext for a succession of clownish antics, puns and gibes, in which we see Figolet pulling lamb-chop bones out of the piano and striking the keyboard with his feet.

A dozen years or so later, Hervé had another opportunity to play a dotty musician. He took the role of Cabocini, a variant of Figolet, in a large-scale comic revue for which he wrote the music, *La Liberté des théâtres*. This was in 1864, and the years that followed witnessed the zenith of *opéra-bouffe*, the name given to full-length operetta in three acts (or more), with extensive use of chorus and dancers and involving parodic or satirical dimensions. Offenbach went from triumph to triumph: *La Belle Hélène* (1864), *Barbe-Bleue* and *La Vie parisienne* (1866), *La Grande-duchesse de Gérolstein* (1867), *La Périhole* (1868) and *Les Brigands* (1869). Hervé, following the trend, began his own series of large-scale *opéras-bouffes* with *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde* (1866). There followed *L’Œil crevé* (1867), *Chilpéric* (1868), *Le Petit Faust* and *Les Turcs* (both 1869). But these successes occurred in a somewhat remote venue, the Théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques, whereas Offenbach was performed in the centre of Paris, chiefly at the Théâtre des Variétés. At this time theatres were territories that composers sought to conquer, as one may observe in reading Hervé’s *Notes*, which use a warlike vocabulary to describe the situation: ‘Meanwhile Offenbach conquered the position at the Variétés . . .’

Hence these *Notes* by Hervé, stimulated by Sarcey’s articles, appeared at a crucial moment in the history of operetta. While the Opéra-Comique presented increasingly serious works (*Carmen* in 1875, *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* in 1881, *Lakmé* in 1883, *Manon* in 1884, and so forth), genuine light and cheerful *opéra-comique* was performed on the boulevards, with Charles Lecocq (*La Fille de Madame Angot*, 1873) as its leading representative, followed by Robert Planquette (*Les Cloches de Corneville*, 1877) and Edmond Audran (*La Mascotte*, 1880). The old masters of *opéra-bouffe*, Hervé and Offenbach, adjusted to this situation as best they could, but both of them were well aware that a page had been turned. In those years, Offenbach wrote *Madame Favart*, which relates the adventures of one of the founders of *opéra-comique*, Charles Favart. With *Mam’zelle Nitouche*, Hervé seemed to go even further, writing a work based on his own life, that of the inventor of the operetta genre, so that the man and his œuvre merged to a large extent. And in so doing, he ‘conquered the position’ at the Théâtre des Variétés once and for all. Though his old rival was wreathed in the posthumous glory of *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* (premiered to triumphal acclaim in February 1881), Hervé wished at least to conserve the title of ‘father of operetta’ . . . And *Mam’zelle Nitouche* was to help him win that last battle.

### **Anna Judic, the divette of vaudeville-opérette**

*Mam’zelle Nitouche* is therefore the most accomplished example of Hervé’s final manner, a genre that was no longer called *opéra-bouffe* or *opérette* but *vaudeville-opérette* (or sometimes *comédie-opérette*). Hervé’s first biographer, Louis Schneider, writing some thirty years after the composer’s death, sums up the situation of music in France after 1870:

Vaudevilles-opérettes corresponded to a mood of the period in which [they] appeared and also to an evolution in the composer's career. The time was past when an audience could allow itself to yield to unbridled fantasy, to the extravagant imagination of a librettist or a composer; war had cast its veil of mourning over French minds; no one could forget 1870 nor the horrors that had grieved 1871; it was almost the done thing not to extol, indeed to condemn the unrestrained gaiety of the Second Empire. Hervé, like Offenbach, like every creator of light music, was the victim of this changed orientation; both men had long sought to renew their genre, without wishing to adopt the formula of Lecocq, which was no more than a rehash of the old opéra-comique.

Throughout the 1870s, Hervé looked for a new identity. He persisted in presenting *opéras-bouffes* in his former style, thereby suffering a number of resounding flops, notably with *Alice de Nevers*, premiered a few days before *Carmen*, the last time he took the risk of playing the triple role of author, composer and actor. Not until 1879 did he enjoy a new hit, with *La Femme à papa*, given more than 200 times at the Théâtre des Variétés.

That work inaugurated a cycle that also includes *Lili*, *Mam'zelle Nitouche* and *La Cosaque*. Sometimes added to this list is *La Roussotte*, a collaborative work of 1880, which also contains numbers by two other composers, Hervé having written the most outstanding. The first point all these pieces have in common is that they starred the singer and actress Anna Judic, whom Hervé praises highly in his *Notes*:

*I composed for the Variétés the music of La Femme à papa, a three-acter on a text by A. Millaud and Hennequin, in which M<sup>me</sup> Judic brought me great success with her marvellous interpretation of the 'Chanson du colonel'. Then, in La Roussotte, a piece by A. Millaud, Ludovic Halévy and H. Meilhac, she earned me almost equal success with 'Pilouitt!', which she asked me to write for the work at the last moment. [These two songs] gave me a chance to prove once again that my verve and fluency had not run out.*

As we shall see, Hervé owed a great deal to this veritable star of the 1870s and 1880s. Born Anna Damiens in 1851 into a family with theatrical connections, she made her debut aged seventeen at the Eldorado, a *café-concert* where Hervé was resident conductor. This pretty and intelligent woman rapidly came to specialise in a repertoire of naughty songs, ranging from the suggestive to the extremely bawdy, which she performed with great tact and wit, qualities that were to distinguish her throughout her career. While still very young she married a man called Judic, but quickly forsook him for the journalist and author of *vaudevilles* Albert Millaud, one of the future librettists of *Mam'zelle Nitouche*. They formed a long-lasting couple which Émile Zola used as the basis for the Mignons in *Nana* (Blanche d'Antigny, the *demi-mondaine* and star of Hervé's *opéras-bouffes* before the Franco-Prussian War, served as the model for Nana herself). It was at the Eldorado, in 1869, that she played the role of Méphisto in a parody of *Le Petit Faust* entitled *Faust passementier*. But after that Anna Judic became one of Offenbach's muses. She created successively the parts of Princess Cunégonde in *Le Roi Carotte* (1872), the title role in *Bagatelle* and Marietta in *Madame l'Archiduc* (1874), Dora in *La Créole* (1875) and Prascovia in *Le Docteur Ox* (1877).

By a curious twist of fate, during that period Hervé tended to write for Hortense Schneider, who had been Offenbach's great interpreter in the 1860s. But the two pieces Hervé conceived for her enjoyed no more than a *succès d'estime*. Admittedly, they were eccentric *opéras-bouffes* in the 'old' style, *La Veuve du Malabar* (1873) and *La Belle Poule* (1875). After these relative failures, Hortense Schneider retired from the stage. Anna Judic then became the only singer who dared to revive La Schneider's great Offenbach roles: *La Belle Hélène* in 1876 and *La Périhole* in 1877 (she only tackled *La Grande-duchesse de Gérolstein* fairly late in her career, in 1887).

Anna Judic was one of the most potent singers of the late 1870s. And so, when she decided she preferred spoken comedy to singing, the complaisant director of the Théâtre des Variétés, Eugène Bertrand, who would refuse nothing to the woman who brought him full houses, staged *La Femme à papa* for her, a piece in which she did indeed sing much less. What Hervé does not say is that Bertrand had initially asked Offenbach to write the music of *La Femme à papa*. When his eternal rival disdainfully refused, the task fell to Hervé, who was perhaps less fussy, having already written many lightweight ditties for the *café-concert*, and moreover having once been music director at the

Palais-Royal, where *vaudevilles à couplets*, pieces akin to this new genre, were a regular part of the repertory.

Hence Hervé owed his final successes to a whim on Judic's part and to Offenbach's refusal. *La Femme à papa* and *La Roussotte* were followed by *Lili* (1882) and *Mam'zelle Nitouche* (1883), both of which ran for at least 200 performances. The originality of the *vaudeville-opérette* genre was soon exhausted, however, and in 1884 the failure of *La Cosaque* marked the end of a cycle for Hervé, as Judic left the Variétés to return to her Offenbach lead roles. For example, she revived *La Belle Hélène* in 1889, just in time for the Universal Exposition, thus enabling tourists to visit both a novelty, the Eiffel Tower, and an established classic, M<sup>me</sup> Judic.

While Judic was encoring and double-encoring her numbers throughout the period of the *vaudevilles-opérettes*, Hervé was far from remaining inactive, but was finding it hard to find a new recipe for success. On the one hand, despite repeated flops, he persisted in cultivating the genre of the fantasy *opéra-bouffe* that he had popularised with *L'Œil crevé*. First came *Le Voyage en Amérique* (1880), which was poorly received for various reasons, especially the very incongruous idea of parodying *La Marseillaise*; then it was *Les Deux Roses* (1881), whose life was even shorter than that of the eponymous flower: two performances! A further attempt was *Le Vertigo* (1883), again dotted with parodies that made nobody laugh. Indefatigably, he also tried his hand at *opéra-comique* in the style of Lecocq, with scarcely greater success: *La Mère des compagnons* (1880), so uncomical that it even features moments of melodrama. This was followed by *La Marquise des rues* and *Panurge* (1879), which Hervé himself unabashedly and wittily describes as 'duds' in his *Notes*. Expanded revivals of his old hits, including *Le Petit Faust* in 1882, roused a little more interest but added nothing to their author's glory. Try as he might, *Mam'zelle Nitouche* was destined to remain Hervé's last big success.

### **A good story to make theatrical history**

If *Mam'zelle Nitouche* functions successfully, nowadays as when it was written, it is because it offers a solidly constructed story with interesting characters. Such is not the case with many works of the period, which suffer from a weak or at any rate imperfect libretto. Hervé, like most of his colleagues, had difficulty in finding really accomplished texts. It was not for nothing that for a while he wrote his own librettos (notably *L'Œil crevé* and *Chilpéric*). The last he penned himself, *Alice de Nevers* (in 1875), was however a total fiasco that was booed off the stage.

The great *opéras-bouffes* of the 1860s are effective in spite of their imperfections, for Hervé's extravagant imagination transcends them. But since such eccentricities were no longer popular after the War of 1870, he had to find something else. He only managed to do so with the series of *vaudevilles-opérettes*, which give primacy to a well-made plot, to the detriment of the music. Hervé's two biggest and also most lasting successes are both founded on very well-constructed plots: on the one hand *Le Petit Faust*, a story borrowed from Goethe and remodelled by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré (the librettists of Gounod's *Faust*) and subsequently by Adolphe Jaime and Hector Crémieux (the librettist of Offenbach's *Orphée aux Enfers*, another high-quality parody); on the other, *Mam'zelle Nitouche*, based quite simply on the composer's own highly eventful life.

*Mam'zelle Nitouche* also benefits from an essential contribution by Henri Meilhac, the inspired librettist of several immense successes of French opera and operetta, a man whose words and ideas are still to be heard and seen all over the world today. Along with Ludovic Halévy, he wrote all Offenbach's great works of the 1860s, but also Bizet's evergreen *Carmen* (1875). Massenet's *Manon* (1884), written with Philippe Gilles, proved to be another permanent fixture in the repertory. One may enumerate at least two further hardy perennials of the operetta genre that sprang from his fertile and sparkling wit: *Die Fledermaus*, after *Le Réveillon* (again with Halévy), and *The Merry Widow*, based on *L'Attaché d'ambassade* (written alone for once). The spectators of 1883 may barely have remembered the fact, but Meilhac, in collaboration with Charles Nutter, had written *Vert-Vert* for Offenbach. The dramatic structure of *Nitouche* closely parallels that *opéra-comique*, in which a young man leaves the girl's boarding school where he lives in Act One and finds himself obliged in Act Two to replace a tenor . . . This resemblance to a work by an 'enemy' cannot have displeased Hervé. At any rate, the libretto of *Mam'zelle Nitouche* clearly contains a potent dose of Meilhac's genius, that very special spark he brought to every text he touched.

The piece had a fine cast for its premiere. Aside from Judic, it was the actor Baron who got the juiciest pickings in

the part of Célestin-Floridor. One is amazed to discover that José Dupuis had refused such a golden opportunity. This old troupier – who had been Pâris in *La Belle Hélène*, Fritz in *La Grande-duchesse de Gérolstein* and Piquillo in *La Périchole* – had made his debut in Hervé's theatre in 1856 (as the composer does not fail to point out in his *Notes*) and had enjoyed another big hit in *La Femme à papa*, playing a double role (the eponymous Papa and his son). We do not know the reason why he refused, but Baron, another old-timer who had played a great deal of Offenbach (Grog in *La Grande-duchesse*, the Carabinier in *Les Brigands*, Urbain in the second version of *La Vie parisienne*, in 1873) and a little Hervé (the Baron des Trente-six Tourelles in *Le Trône d'Écosse*), took full advantage of his chance and made Célestin-Floridor one of his best roles.

Among the factors in the work's success, one must mention the presence of nuns. It would seem that putting sisters on stage always manages to raise a laugh (unless they suffer the horrible fate of Francis Poulenc's Carmelites, of course). This enthusiasm has lasted down to our own time, as witness the more recent successes of films like *Sister Act*, or the stunt-pulling nuns in the 1960s films of the popular French comic Louis de Funès. Operetta frequently has recourse to them. But no other operetta heroine goes as far as Denise de Flavigny in *Mam'zelle Nitouche*, who masterminds her own escape and finds herself first in a barracks, then in a prison. Instead of the Musketeers in the Convent (*Les Mousquetaires au couvent*), we have here the Convent Girl in the Barracks ('La Couventine à la caserne'), an altogether rarer occurrence. All these tales of parlours and wimples took on a special resonance in the France of the early 1880s, when the Minister of Public Instruction, Jules Ferry, had just put through a law requiring religious congregations to request an official authorisation, in the absence of which they would be expelled from French territory. Some communities refused to submit to this and left the country. The newspapers of the time speak of 261 monasteries and convents closed and 5,643 religious expelled. Was this a laughing matter? At least it was a singing matter . . . and, whatever one's views, nuns were a topical subject.

But, setting aside convent girls and sisters, the most original character in the work is still Célestin-Floridor, a serious organist by day and composer of frivolities by night, as Hervé had been in his early days. By allowing his librettists to concoct a scenario from his life, he ended up with one of the best librettos he had ever had on his hands. In a strange paradox for one who dreamt of writing genuine *opéras-comiques*, the *vaudeville-opérette* did not provide scope for all his ideas of musical grandeur to flower: no large choral ensembles, no sophisticated finales, no three-section arias with recitative, cantabile and cabaletta. On the contrary, the score of *Mam'zelle Nitouche* stands out for its remarkable economy of resources. In total contrast to his large-scale *opéras-bouffes* of the 1860s, in which Hervé enjoyed multiplying the musical incongruities, for instance by launching his delightful yodelling songs at the most solemn moments or setting the most mundane phrases to hair-raising coloratura punctuated by outrageous cadenzas, here all the most surprising musical moments (the irruption of sacred or military music) are as it were written into the libretto and called for by the situation.

Right from the dashing Overture, which deserves to be heard more often in the concert hall, Hervé shows his flair by presenting four of the most striking numbers in the score. First the 'Duo du soldat de plomb' (Tin soldier duet), supposedly taken from the operetta written by Floridor in this *vaudeville-opérette* by Hervé (are you still following me?), which contains one note to be sneezed, one to be meowed and another to be barked, in addition to one of those strings of words and onomatopoeias with which Hervé had always enjoyed peppering his texts ever since *Le Compositeur toqué* ('Et trine, trine, trine / Atchigne, aboum, atchicapouf / Orrr . . . niff!', sings Fignolet in 1854; 'Miaou! Miaou! Miaou! / Crrr! Futt! [barking like a dog] Oa! Oa! / Ra badabla, badabla, badabla', sings Floridor in 1881). The princess in this tale 'gives birth to a platoon' (just as the nuns in the 'Chanson du colonel' bring into the world '800 troopers ready for battle', the fantasy of a Frenchman of the Third Republic dreaming of a strong army to prepare for the return match with the Prussians).

Hervé places after this the 'Invocation à Sainte Nitouche': this title<sup>1</sup> might have conjured up a certain irony, but the melody soars and hovers with a sweetness that would not have disgraced a service at Saint-Eustache. Will we find out one day that Hervé used a genuine hymn that he had written in his younger days? It would be surprising: one will vainly seek examples of recycling anywhere in his output. The tempo quickens somewhat with the next theme, the 'Chanson de Babet et Cadet', another tune destined for a successful career, full of delicate fiorituras redolent of the eighteenth century. Here the librettist rewrote the verses of *La Surprise nocturne* by the songwriter Charles Collé (1709-83). But this was not the first time Meilhac had quoted an author of the previous century in an operetta: the 'Letter Song' from *La Périchole* paraphrases a passage of *Manon Lescaut* by the Abbé Prévost. The Overture comes to a fizzing conclusion with the score's other hit number, the 'Légende de la grosse caisse' (Legend of the bass drummer), a somewhat spicy tale that Anna Judic was capable of telling with the utmost refinement, featuring a refrain with astonishing words ('cric, crac, cuillère à pot, bidon su'l'sac et sac su'l'dos . . .'), a brief throwback to the verbal eccentricities of which Hervé had been so fond in his earlier works.

Among the other noteworthy numbers in this remarkably inspired score are two *rondeaux*. In the first, known as 'Talents d'agrément' (A young lady's accomplishments), the heroine Denise de Flavigny relates her life in the convent: the English lesson gives Hervé the chance to write a very convincing jig (helped perhaps by his prolonged sojourns in England, where he enjoyed a busy career after 1870), while the German class inspires a Schubertian ländler. In the second, subtitled 'Escapade', Denise relates her flight from the hotel room to the theatre in an implacably rhythmic patter song. Aside from these two bravura pieces intended to show off Anna Judic's talents, the third elaborate passage of music is the skilfully handled Finale of Act One, with the unexpected return of the 'Tin soldier' theme right in the middle of a noble deploration. The finales to the second and third acts, by contrast, are limited to brief sections of incidental music, as was the custom in *vaudevilles-opérettes*.

The angelic side of things is covered by a Chorus of Convent Girls, a well worked-out Prelude for organ and an Alleluia with harp accompaniment (Anna Judic took a crash course of lessons on the instrument in order to play it on stage herself). The latter hymn, which Louis Schneider rightly called 'a true melodic gem', would not seem out of place in a picturesque country church. In all this music there is no hint of irony, unless it be the supreme irony that these numbers are almost too good to be true and that one does not see the difference between what is intended seriously and what is a sendup.

The only more typically 'Hervean' moment in the score is provided by the Couplets of *Brigadier* (Corporal) Lorient, torn between the conflicting desires of pleasing his soldier father and his draper mother. One suspects there may be another autobiographical echo here: Hervé's father had been a soldier in the army of Napoleon and his mother a laundress. In what amounts to a sort of *aria di sorbetto*, Lorient is given a spoken interruption, one of Hervé's specialities, as well as a comical vocalise of the kind he had often thrown into his more eccentric works of the past.

There remains, perhaps, a subtler biographical dimension (is it even conscious?) that commentators of the time did not mention – maybe they did not dare. Yet how can one fail to notice that the plot turns around the corruption of a minor? In 1856, Hervé had been accused of a crime of this sort, and convicted after a trial, disastrous for his career, in which he protested his innocence. On his return from more than a year in prison, he wrote works featuring unsettling trial scenes (like the one that concludes *Le Hussard persécuté*) or unjust imprisonments (like the sentence inflicted on Alexandrivore, the hero of *L'Œil crevé*). The teenage boy of 1856 is replaced by a more mature convent girl in 1881, but both are thoroughly forward characters who, if Hervé's account is to be believed, beg the composer (Florimond or Floridor) to take them under his wing in order to help them escape. In the role of Célestin, a light tenor part he could have sung on the stage, with an 'extravagant costume' and long hair (later shaved off in the barracks . . .), one may see a reflection of Fignolet, the original 'compositeur toqué'. Hervé seems to cry out his innocence one last time, through the mouth of his avatar. Thus, in the first tableau of Act Three, when Célestin finds himself 'playing the violin' with his pupil, he reproaches her: 'It's not my fault if we're here now. It's your fault, yours . . . all of this . . . It's your fault!'

1 A 'Sainte Nitouche' (Saint Never-Touches) in French is a hypocrite, someone who appears to radiate strong religious and moral principles but is in fact not what he or she seems – like Denise, the convent girl who appears in musical comedy. (Translator's note)

### **Nitouche, ripe for revival . . .**

While Hervé's other titles gradually disappeared from theatre programmes, *Mam'zelle Nitouche* enjoyed numerous revivals in the course of the twentieth century, before its fortunes waned too – the fate of many operettas of the same period. In a rare occurrence for operetta, the work was adapted for the cinema not once but twice, and not by minor talents, since the first version (1931) starred Raimu in the role of Célestin-Floridor, and the second (1954) had Fernandel in the same part. And the rarity was combined with another, for the first film was directed by Marc Allégret and the second by his brother Yves.

One need only type 'Nitouche' on YouTube to gain access to the widest possible range of versions, sung in several languages, notably those of central and eastern Europe – such has remained the fascination for this resolute girl who decides to take her destiny in hand and this secretive musician incapable of asserting his true nature. Hervé could not have foreseen the Internet or file-sharing sites, but he would certainly have been pleased to know that we are still talking about him today. After all, this is how he ended his *Notes*:

*Conclusion. I don't know to what extent these notes will serve the history of operetta; but in any case, they can always serve to write the history of their author – supposing that the public ever feels the need to know it.*

Hervé can carry on conducting in peace in his little square in Houdain: his *Notes* have served the history of their author so well that they stimulate us to listen to his musical notes today, as well as vouchsafing him the title of father of operetta in the eyes of posterity. And the œuvre they inspired makes it well worth our while to set aside certain prejudices and open our ears once more . . .



# WHO IS HERVÉ?



## **Hervé [Louis-Auguste-Florimond Ronger] (Houdain, 1825 - 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 (*Oyayaye 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.

# ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHIES

## Jean-Pierre Haeck *conductor*

After studying music at the Conservatoire in Verviers, his home town, and classical languages, Jean-Pierre Haeck continued his training at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Liège, from which he graduated with diplomas in conducting, percussion, trombone, tuba, music history, harmony and psychopedagogy. He is a specialist in the music of Jacques Offenbach.

In 1994 he founded the Ensemble Orchestral Mosan, becoming its music director. At the same period he was assistant to the music director of the Opéra Royal de Wallonie on productions of *Norma*, *Tannhäuser*, *Aida*, *Nabucco*, *La traviata*, *Falstaff*, *Turandot*, *Madama Butterfly* and other operas.

Since 1995 he has appeared as a guest conductor with numerous orchestras and conducted a wide range of opera, operetta and music theatre. From 2002 to 2006 he was principal guest conductor of the Orchestre Philharmonique de Liège.

In 2013 he was appointed to the Board of Directors of the Palais des Beaux-Arts de Charleroi, and in 2014 he conducted Charles Lecocq's *Ali Baba* at the Opéra Comique in Paris.

Since 2009, alongside his conducting career, Jean-Pierre Haeck has also composed for symphony orchestra and wind band and produced orchestrations. These pieces are published by HaFaBra Music and distributed and performed throughout the world. Among the works he has orchestrated are Offenbach's *Fables de La Fontaine*, Christine's *Dédé*, Chabrier's *Scènes champêtres*, and *Comptines* (children's songs).



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# Pierre-André Weitz

## *stage director*

Pierre-André Weitz first appeared on stage at the Théâtre du Peuple in Bussang when he was ten years old. He remained there, acting, singing and making and designing sets and costumes, until he was twenty-five. In parallel with this he studied architecture in Strasbourg and took courses at the Conservatoire d'Art Lyrique there. During this period, he sang in the chorus of the Opéra National du Rhin.

In 1989 he met Olivier Py, all of whose sets and costumes he has designed since that date. This decisive collaboration led him to a conception of scenography in which set changes have dramaturgical significance and are regarded as a choreography of space. He has produced more than 150 stage designs for the theatre or the opera house since the age of eighteen with such directors as Jean Chollet, Michel Raskine, Claude Buchvald, Jean-Michel Rabeux, Ivan Alexandre, Jacques Vincey, Hervé Loichemol, Sylvie Rentona, Karelle Prugnaud, Mireille Delunsch and Christine Berg. He directed the Palazzetto Bru Zane production of Hervé's *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde*.

His experimental approach to space and time has prompted him to appear as a musician or author in a number of productions. In Gluck's *Alceste* at the Opéra de Paris, he drew all the décors in real time for three hours, thus asserting a pictorial aesthetic of the ephemeral; a metaphor of music itself. The first production he directed in Strasbourg was another experiment with space and time, in which he performed Olivier Py's *La Serinette* three times in a row in three different stage layouts and three different aesthetics created with twenty scenographers. He thereby proved that scenography can change the meaning and the essence of a work without betraying it. He has taught scenography for twenty years at the École Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Strasbourg.



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# THE OPERETTA IN CONTEXT

## CDs



*Mam'zelle Nitouche* by Hervé  
Choir and Orchestra of the Opéra de Toulon  
Jean-Pierre Haeck, *musical direction*  
PALAZZETTO BRU ZANE  
Release date: end of 2017



Extracts from *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde* by Hervé  
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## POCKET BOOK



***Hervé par lui-même***  
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To invent a musical genre is not enough to achieve immortality.

Louis-Auguste-Florimond Ronger, known as Hervé (1825-92), a composer of crucial importance for the history of French music, provides a cruel illustration of this adage. Though he was the true father of the operetta genre, which he established in the mid-1850s, he was completely overshadowed by his great rival Jacques Offenbach (1819-80). In spite of several sporadic and likeable attempts to do so, no one has yet managed to deliver him from this relative anonymity or, above all, to make his music properly known. This short study aims, through the use of his own words, to revive interest in the work of a figure who has long been best known for his nickname 'le compositeur toqué' (the crazy composer). A gifted writer, Hervé – like Wagner – often penned his own librettos, in which he sometimes depicted himself; but he was also the author of articles and memoirs, including the fascinating 'Notes towards the history of operetta'. In addition, he wrote numerous letters, sometimes to newspapers but more often to theatre managers. This correspondence, seldom if ever quoted by his biographers, presents precious contemporary insights into the life of a mid-nineteenth-century composer; it also sheds new light on the life of Hervé, in whom we are surprised to discover an anxious personality longing for recognition. Readers of this dossier will come to realise that Hervé, the so-called 'crazy composer', was in reality – as he says himself in an astounding letter – 'no sillier than Wagner or Verdi' . . .



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