



## Key Notes

### Bouchard/March LES FELUETTES (LILIES)

## What Theatre Can Do

by Robert Holliston

**I**t is rare enough in the theatre, rarer still in the opera house, that everything comes together perfectly and we understand: this is what the theatre can do! The kind of performance that, in the words of Dame Edith Evans, makes one *walk several blocks in the wrong direction*.

**Thus I was fortunate to be in the audience** at Place des Arts on May 28, 2016, to see the final performance of Opéra de Montréal's co-production (with POV) of *Les Feluettes*. Many years before, I had rented, watched, and enjoyed the film version of *Lilies*, the play upon which this opera is based.

Although this award-winning movie is (probably) still available for rental at Pic-a-flic, seeing it is no more a prerequisite for understanding Kevin March's and Michel Marc Bouchard's opera than reading Beaumarchais or Dumas fils to understanding Mozart or Verdi. Like *Figaro* and *Traviata*, *Les Feluettes* stands very confidently on its own as a work of art.

**Everything about the performance** was captivating and engrossing – ultimately deeply moving – and the audience responded ecstatically (the *only* word). As the applause began to subside, I chatted briefly with the lady seated beside me, who wondered how a story so drenched in Catholicism would go over in our Protestant western culture. I assured her that we had our fair share of hang-ups.

**First and foremost** – to me, at least – *Les Feluettes* is a story about gay male love at a time when – and in a place where – it

was met with revulsion and hostility. True, there have been other forbidden loves, and many of them have been treated dramatically in plays, novels, musicals, and operas, but each of these resonates within society in its own way; the love between Simon Doucet and Count Vallier de Tilly is very definitely between two men and does not need to stand in for or "symbolize" anything else. *Start with specifics*, advised critic John Simon, *with the personal and the intimate. If this is well enough imagined and felt, you can trust it to become universal by itself.*

**Both composer and librettist** have paid astute attention to detail, to specifics, to the personal and the intimate, throughout *Les Feluettes*. Thus we connect with the characters as people, believe readily in their dramatic situation, and care deeply what happens to them. Assuming (safely, I think) that the majority of the audience that night in Montreal were not gay men, it is clear that *Les Feluettes* did, indeed, become universal.

**Composer Kevin March** has explained his eclectic musical choices: the score contains *quotes from or stylistic allusions to Debussy's incidental music to Le Martyre de St. Sébastien*, – this is actually a crucial plot point – *American ragtime*, *French belle-époque-style cabaret*, *traditional Québécoise folk music*, and *even a 19th-century Napoleonic anthem*.

Each of these choices illuminates something about the time and place of the story, and even the personalities and thoughts of the characters. And of course they are individual dramatic elements in



Étienne Dupuis in the Montreal world première of *Les Feluettes*. Photo: Yves Renaud

March's richly imaginative score, which is beautiful, evocative, and dramatically apt at every turn. And rich also in colour: the composer's orchestration always seems to find exactly the right colour for what is being sung, thought of, felt by the characters.

I'd say that these characters were played by a dream cast, except that these singing actors exceeded my dreams. No Victoria operagoer needs to be told that the entire ensemble was led with deep commitment and expertise by Timothy Vernon. Everything about the production – including direction, sets, lighting, costumes – seemed dedicated to one thing only: the telling, in music, of this great story.

***Les Feluettes* left me tearful and emotionally shattered** but eager to experience it again at the Royal. That night I walked many blocks in the wrong direction, all the while aware that this is what theatre can do!

# The Play's the Thing

## Les Feluettes and the Power of Theatre

**L**ike the play on which it is based, *Les Feluettes* embodies the power of theatre – as an art form that can mesmerize and thrill an audience; as a litmus test for truth; and as a way to express the inexpressible, to re-create memory, to be at once artificial and startlingly real.

**Les Feluettes is a romantic drama** set in a prison, where inmates dramatize a decades-old tragedy to draw out the truth of a devastating love triangle.

The story opens in 1952 with the arrival of Bishop Bilodeau to hear the confession of his old classmate Simon, who has been an inmate for 40 years. But Simon and his fellow prisoners force the bishop to watch as they put on a theatrical performance depicting the events that led to Simon's incarceration.

**The play within the play** begins with a flashback to Roberval, Québec, in 1912, and a rehearsal for a school production of *Le Martyre de saint Sébastien* (*The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*). Simon plays Sebastian, who has been sentenced to be executed by his own archers. His friend Vallier plays the archer Sanaé.

Sebastian urges Sanaé to prove his love – to go ahead and kill him so that he may be reborn. As Simon and Vallier rehearse the ardent words, their acting becomes more real, and they kiss. They are interrupted by young Bilodeau, who accuses them of depravity. In the ensuing quarrel, Simon forces a kiss on Bilodeau just as Vallier's mother enters and applauds, thinking she has witnessed a daringly well-acted scene from the play.

**That kiss** has devastating consequences. Simon receives a severe beating from his father, after which he plunges into a more "suitable" relationship with a wealthy French woman on holiday.

Even as Simon and Vallier find their way back to one another, using the words of Sebastian and Sanaé to express their love, Bilodeau's jealous, unadmitted longing for Simon sets in motion the inevitable tragedy.

**The opera is based** on Michel Marc Bouchard's dazzling play, *Les Feluettes: La Répétition d'un drame romantique* (*Lilies, or The Revival of a Romantic Drama*). *Felurette* is a nickname given to Vallier by Bilodeau. The word is a

Quebec expression meaning effeminate, fragile, or overly sensitive.

**The subtitle of the play hints at its hall-of-mirrors structure.** *Répétition* can refer to the reiteration of an experience; the revival of a theatrical production (the play within the play that dramatizes the events of 1912); and the rehearsal of a play (*Le Martyre de saint Sébastien*, the inner play within the play within the play).

**These nested dramas create a mise en abyme** that draws the characters into an abyss of discovery and memory.

The play within the play, the inmates' re-enactment of the past, recalls Hamlet's use of theatre to reveal Claudius' guilt (*The play's the thing Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king*). Simon's dramatic re-enactment is intended to elicit confession, mete out justice, and unearth truth.

The innermost play, *Le Martyre*, becomes a recursive theme, its text a counterpoint weaving through the opera, giving Simon and Vallier the words to uncover and express their love.

**Le Martyre de St. Sébastien** is a 1911 neoromantic play by the Italian Gabriele D'Annunzio, with incidental music by Claude Debussy. D'Annunzio wrote the part of St. Sebastian for the notorious Russian dancer Ida Rubinstein.

The play was a multimedia extravaganza, Wagnerian in length, going on for some five hours of fevered, overwrought poetry, not unlike Oscar Wilde's more lurid outpourings in *Salome*.

Debussy's contribution was about an hour of music, and it is the work's saving grace. His contract stipulated that the play could never be performed without his music. Fortunately, the music is almost always performed without the play, in drastically shortened versions or in a set of *Symphonic Fragments* that Debussy extracted from the score, some of which is quoted in *Les Feluettes*.

Just before *Martyre* opened, the Vatican placed it, along with all D'Annunzio's plays and stories, on its Index of Prohibited Books, and the Archbishop of Paris ordered Catholics to boycott the production. The problem wasn't so much its homoerotic and sado-masochistic elements as the fact that St. Sebastian

## St. Sebastian

**One of the more picturesque** Christian saints, Sebastian is instantly recognizable as a beautiful youth pierced with arrows, palely loitering against a tree or pillar.

Legend has it that he was a Roman soldier and a secret Christian. When the Emperor Diocletian found out, he ordered Sebastian to be shot by archers. Miraculously, Sebastian survived. But rather than play it safe, he harangued Diocletian for his persecution of Christians and was martyred a second time, this time by being beaten to death.

**Sebastian is the patron saint** of soldiers and athletes, long beloved by artists: he found his way into paintings by Botticelli, Rubens, El Greco, Titian, Dali, and many others. Sebastian was one of the few religiously acceptable subjects for depiction of the male nude; he provided opportunities for pious homoeroticism and has long been a gay icon – this despite the fact that the real Sebastian was likely a burly, middle-aged bruiser. The earliest images of him – mosaics from the 6th and 7th centuries – show him fully dressed, with a grey beard, and nary an arrow in sight.

was played by a woman – and, what was more shocking, a Jewish woman!

In *Les Feluettes*, it is noteworthy that a priest in rural 1912 Quebec has his students perform *Le Martyre*. Father St. Michel may live in the boonies (Roberval is 250 km north of Quebec City), but he is clearly *au courant* with the latest European theatrical sensation, and it is surprisingly bold of him to program this forbidden work.

**Les Feluettes is also a new chapter** in opera's long tradition of gender bending. Operagoers are used to mezzo sopranos performing trouser roles, and we're growing accustomed to the strange beauty of a countertenor voice in a masculine leading role. *Les Feluettes* flips the tradition. The entire cast is male (reasonable given that the opera is set in a men's prison and a boys' college). The two female roles are taken by a countertenor and a baritone; each plays a man playing a woman, adding another labyrinthine twist to this fascinating and dramatic exploration of the intricacies of love and theatre.

Maureen Woodall

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# The Artists of Les Feluettes

**M**ichel Marc Bouchard's 1987 play *Les Feluettes* has been produced all over the world and was made into a Genie-award winning movie, *Lilies*.

**POV's Artistic Director Timothy Vernon** had long felt that the play cried out to be made into an opera, and he dreamed of one day commissioning it. **Australian composer Kevin March** came to the same conclusion 15 years ago when he saw the film, was struck by its rich operatic texture, sought out the playwright, and began working informally with him. In 2011 Opéra de Montréal **Artistic Director Michel Beaulac** approached Bouchard about a dream project: commissioning an opera based on *Les Feluettes*. He learned shortly afterward that POV had the same vision.

In a happy convergence, these separate dreams came together. In 2012 POV and Montréal established a partnership to co-commission and co-produce the new opera. Four years later, *Les Feluettes* made its sensational world première in Montreal. And now we are thrilled to present its second staging, in Victoria.

**Michel Marc Bouchard's** more than 20 plays have won multiple awards, been translated into 15 languages, and been produced all over the world; six have been adapted for the screen. *Les Feluettes* is Bouchard's first opera libretto; he is now working on a second, an adaptation of his play *Christine, la reine-garçon* for the Canadian Opera Company.

**Kevin March's** works have been performed in North America, Australia, and Europe. He studied with William Bolcom, William Albright, and Michael Daugherty.

While Kevin has completed three chamber operas, *Les Feluettes* is his first full-scale opera. He has called its musical style *postmodern eclecticism*. One reviewer said it was *as if Debussy and Britten met in Hollywood*. The score draws out the rich strands of the libretto – reflecting it with humour, bittersweet lushness, shimmering romanticism, and striking percussion effects. It flirts with atonality, yet also falls into nostalgic forms of waltz and down-home French-Canadian folk.

And yes, Virginia, there **are** earworms to be found. This is one 21st century opera that may compel you to leave the theatre humming.

*When I saw the film version of Lilies ... it struck me that ... I was hearing a libretto that hadn't yet been set to music, I was watching an opera for which the music had not yet been written.*

Kevin March

**Timothy Vernon** stewarded development of the opera, serving as musical dramaturge, and conducting the world première in Montreal. (He and l'Orchestre Métropolitain were suitably costumed in prison stripes as they performed at the back of the large stage at Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier). Timothy conducts the Victoria performances as well, but from the pit, dressed impeccably in his conductor's attire.

Director **Serge Denoncourt** knows the play well, having directed it twice before: in 2002 at Montreal's Espace Go (winning the People's Choice Masque and Masque for Best Production) and in 2005 in English, at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre. He was eager to take on the challenge of revisiting the work to direct it as an opera.

The set is by the distinguished designer **Guillaume Lord**, with evocative lighting by **Martin Labrecque** and projections by **Gabriel Coutu-Dumont**.

**François Barbeau**, who had created the costumes for the 2002 production of the play at Espace Go, also designed the costumes for the opera. He died in January, 2016, after an illustrious 50-year career.

POV Chorus Master and Associate Conductor **Giuseppe Pietrarroia** is directing the POV chorus. He will also conduct *Les Feluettes* when it receives its third staging, at Edmonton Opera in October, 2017. That production will be directed by **Jacques Lemay**, who appears in the Victoria performances as the dancer.

Most of the original cast from the Montreal première are joining us for the staging in Victoria. **Étienne Dupuis** and

**Jean-Michel Richer** reprise their roles as young Simon and Vallier; **Gino Quilico** is Old Simon, with **Gordon Gietz** as Bishop Bilodeau and **James McLennan** as Bilodeau's younger self. **Aaron St. Clair Nicholson** is the Countess, with **Daniel Cabena** as Lydie-Anne. **Claude Grenier** is Simon's father Timothée, and **Patrick Mallette** is Baron de Hüe. Making his debut in the role of Father St. Michel is **Normand Richard**.

Maureen Woodall



Scene from Montreal world première of *Les Feluettes*. Photo: Yves Renaud

## Discover more about *Les Feluettes*!

Visit our website

[www.pov.bc.ca/feluettes.html](http://www.pov.bc.ca/feluettes.html)

## Detailed synopsis, artist bios, music, video, and resources

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# Events

## COMMUNITY EVENTS

### INSIDE Opera with Robert Holliston

Sunday, April 9, Two sessions: 10 am and noon.

Phillip T. Young Recital Hall, UVic.

Robert and guests present an introduction to *Les Feluettes*.

Bring your friends. Free event. Free parking.

RSVP by April 6: 250-382-1641 or [rsvp@pov.bc.ca](mailto:rsvp@pov.bc.ca).

### Sense of Occasion

Thursday, April 20, 6:30 pm, East Lobby, Royal Theatre

Pre-performance reception to celebrate the opening night of *Les Feluettes*. Gourmet finger foods and wine. Space is limited. Dress is festive. \$35 per person.

Reserve with payment by April 13: 250-382-1641.

## DONOR RECOGNITION EVENTS

### President's Circle Working Rehearsal

Saturday, April 15, Royal Theatre

1 pm Coffee and cookies

1:15 pm Composer Kevin March discusses *Les Feluettes*.

2 pm Sitzprobe.

For members of the Impresario Circle and President's Circle.

Invitations have been sent by mail. RSVP by April 10.

### President's Circle Stage Door Party

Sunday, April 23, 2 pm, Royal Theatre

An onstage celebration with members of the principal cast of *Les Feluettes*. Invitations will be mailed to members of the Impresario Circle and President's Circle.

### Bravo Society Garden Party Sunday, May 14, 3 pm

A garden party reception and recital with soprano Rachel Fenlon. Invitations will be mailed to members of the Bravo Society.

### Producers Private Concerts with Robert Holliston

Sunday, June 18, 4 pm, OR Monday, June 19, 7 pm

Wingate Studio.

A salon-style concert with a glass of bubbly and music by Robert Holliston and guest. Invitations will be emailed to all donors.

### Event Information:

[www.pov.bc.ca/calendar.html](http://www.pov.bc.ca/calendar.html)

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Donors & subscribers who don't have internet access may request a mailed copy of *Keynotes* by phoning the POV office at 250-382-1641.

## LES FELUETTES

April 20, 22, 28, at 8 pm

Sunday, April 30, at 2:30 pm

Royal Theatre

Pre-performance  
lobby lecture

1 hour before curtain

## BAUMANN CENTRE EVENTS

RSVP to 250-382-1641 or [rsvp@pov.bc.ca](mailto:rsvp@pov.bc.ca)

The events below take place in Wingate Studio at the Baumann Centre, 925 Balmoral Road, Victoria.

Everyone welcome. Donations gratefully accepted.

### Opera Motifs Tuesday, April 11, 12:30 pm

A Guide to Gay Opera: Robert Holliston explores operas that tackle gay subject matter. Brown bag lunches welcome. Tea and coffee served.

### Master Class Monday, April 24, 7 pm

Baritone Gino Quilico (Old Simon in *Les Feluettes*) coaches young singers, with Robert Holliston on piano.

### Lunchbox Opera Tuesday, April 25, 12:30 pm

*A Sanctuary in Song*, a captivating recital of 20th century English and Canadian songs with countertenor Daniel Cabena and pianist Tatiana Vassilieva. Brown bag lunches welcome. Tea and Coffee is served.

## A Historic Evening

Saturday, May 20, 6 pm

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