

THEATRE

TheStar.com | Theatre | A lifelong French connection



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

"I see older audience members I played to as a kid," says Godin, a TFT fixture throughout its 40 years.

Robert Godin made a career out of French theatre in Toronto, where he fits in better than in Quebec

Apr 17, 2008 04:30 AM

RICHARD OUZOUNIAN
THEATRE CRITIC

If there really is a fountain of youth, then Robert Godin must bathe in it every morning.

The 61-year-old actor has been performing with Théâtre français de Toronto throughout its 40-year history, but he still has the infectious enthusiasm of a lad right out of theatre school.

"I look out in the audiences," he says on a break from *Et si on chantait* (a.k.a. *Shall We Sing?*), the closing show of TFT's 40th season, "and see older audience members I played to as a kid. And then I turn around and look at the young people acting with me and I feel part of a giant chain of theatre that stretches through my whole life."

If you're a TFT regular, you've seen the ebullient Godin illuminating everything from those frothy revues artistic director Guy Mignault whips up to the more substantial classical comedies the group also produces with panache.

"I call my career M&M," he jokes, "musicals and Molière."

But there's more to Godin than that. His 40-year history with Théâtre français de Toronto, through all of its various names and venues ("I've played in every one of them," he says proudly), has made him a vital part of the organization.

He travels to schools around the GTA to prepare them for the student matinees they will attend, works as a telemarketer to ensure TFT's faithful subscribers will return every season, and – in general – acts as a goodwill ambassador for the company.

"I love this group and I would do anything for it," swears Godin of Toronto's only francophone theatre. The irony is that Godin is one of the most anglo of all francophones you've ever met.

He was raised in Rosedale in a 25-room mansion, with everyone speaking impeccable French, courtesy of his grandfather, who ran a successful casket factory and moved here from France during World War I.

"My grandfather was the president of the Toronto Cricket Club," laughs Godin. "Can you get any more WASP than that? And I went to St. Michael's Choir School, which is where I began singing before going on to the Royal Conservatory."

How *raffiné* and ultra-français was Godin's upbringing? He tells this story at his own expense.

"I went to Quebec in the 1970s thinking I'd find my roots, but I was wrong. I felt like an outcast. I was in a production of *Pygmalion* and they had translated some of the lines into joul, the Quebecois slang.

"When it came my time to say the line, I mispronounced it and I heard one performer say to another, 'He's an English guy. He wouldn't know.'"

Since then, Godin has spent most of his time in Ontario, appearing at Stratford or in other English productions as well as his ongoing and much-beloved work at TFT.

"You know," he says reflectively, "at the age of 61, it's not so much about the career any more. It's things like watching the younger performers and getting all teary-eyed about the next generation.

"At the 40th anniversary gala, I sang Jacques Brel's translation of 'The Impossible Dream' and I thought, yes, this is right, this has been the life I wanted to lead."

Just the facts

What: Et si on chantait... (with English surtitles)

When: Apr. 23 through May 10

Where: Théâtre français de Toronto at the Berkeley Street Theatre Upstairs, 26 Berkeley St.

Tickets: \$24-\$46 at 416-534-6604