

THE METROMANIACS

BY DAVID IVES

ADAPTED FROM *LA MÉTROMANIE*
BY ALEXIS PIRON



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

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*Once again, for Michael Kahn:
The Metromaniacs' perfect host.*

METROMANIA MANIA

Frankly, I fell in love with the title.

Having enjoyed myself enormously in adapting two French comedies of the 17th and 18th centuries for Michael Kahn and the Shakespeare Theatre Company, I was casting around for a third. In the course of reading in and about that period, I stumbled again and again upon mention of an obscure play from 1738 with a superb title: *La Métromanie*. It means, more or less, *The Poetry Craze*. (“Metro” from “metrum,” Latin for “poetic verse,” and “mania” from ... Oh, never mind.) As it happens, Drew Lichtenberg, STC’s omniliterate literary manager, had noticed the title as well: potentially a real find for STC’s wonderful ReDiscovery Series, dedicated to bringing to light classic plays that had remained too long in undeserving darkness. It was via the ReDiscovery Series that Michael and I had developed our two previous happy collaborations, *The Liar* and *The Heir Apparent*.

So I ordered the French text from the Internet and it arrived in a blurry offprint of an 1897 edition with an English introduction by a huffy scholar who heartily disapproved of the play and all its characters. Now I was interested. When I read that the play’s author, one Alexis Piron, had failed to make the Académie française because he’d written a lengthy poetic *Ode to the Penis*, I was *really* interested. And the play’s premise looked like pure gold.

So what kind of play did the Bard Of The Hard-On write?

A very chaste and wonderfully delightful one. Upon inspection, *La Métromanie* turned out to be a farce based on a brilliant idea, if given sometimes to long-winded declamations on Art. Its world is the airy, unmoored, Watteau-ish one that Piron’s contemporary Marivaux would also put onstage. There’s not much like realism in *The Metro-maniacs*. We’re in a levitated reality that’s the exact counterpart of the vernacular, set-in-an-inn comedies the English were writing at the same time. This is champagne, not ale. Since it’s about people who are mad for poetry, champagne is apropos, as is the fact that it’s in verse. To dump this delicate play into prose would be to clip the wings of Pegasus and harness him to a plow.

The play was a lip-smacking scandal in its time, spinning into art what had been real-life comedy. It seems that all Paris had fallen in love with the poems of one Mademoiselle Malcrais de La Vigne, a mysterious poetess from distant Brittany (read: Appalachia). The celebrated satirist Voltaire publicly declared his love for the lady and her great works, only to have it revealed that Mlle de La Vigne was a guy named Paul Desforges-Maillard, very much living in Paris and taking his revenge on the poetry establishment for not appreciating his genius. Needless to say, Voltaire wasn't pleased when Piron's satire showed up (and showed him up). Worse than that for Voltaire, the show was a hit.

Upon reading the play, I found that its premise was indeed comic gold. Its structural mechanics turned out to be something else. Piron was a wit and a poet but not much of what I'd call a *farcifactor*, often all too content to let his characters intone his ravishing couplets without paying much attention to who just exited where, or why anybody's doing anything. Besides those fatal disquisitions on Art, the play had not one but two male leads, a lackluster female ingénue, and, like so many French plays of the period, it simply came to a stop rather than resolving. This is all by way of saying I've fiddled a good deal with Piron's masterpiece in bringing it into English. (This is the first English version ever, to my knowledge, but I'm open to correction.)

When my friends ask me what it's about, I always say that *The Metromaniacs* is a comedy with five plots, none of them important. On the other hand, that's the beauty of the play, its purpose and part of the source of its delight. We go to certain plays to inhabit *a world elsewhere*, and *La Métromanie* is that kind of play in spades. Piron doesn't want plot. He wants gossamer and gorgeousness, he wants rarified air and helpless high-comic passion. A purer world. Characters drunk on language, fools in love with love. In other words, the way the world was meant to be.

Given what's in our newspapers day by day, a few yards of gossamer may be just what the doctor ordered. So gossam on, *mes amis*, gossam on ...

The world premiere of THE METROMANIACS was produced by the Shakespeare Theatre Company (Michael Kahn, Artistic Director; Chris Jennings, Managing Director) in Washington, D.C., on February 9, 2015. It was directed by Michael Kahn; the set design was by James Noone; the costume design was by Murell Horton; the lighting design was by Mark McCullough; the sound design was by Matt Tierney; the original music was composed by Adam Wernick; the assistant director was Craig Baldwin; and the production stage manager was Bret Torbeck. The cast was as follows:

DAMIS Christian Conn
DORANTE Tony Roach
LUCILLE Amelia Pedlow
LISETTE Dina Thomas
MONDOR Michael Goldstrom
FRANCALOU Adam LeFevre
BALIVEAU Peter Kybart
SERVANTS Danny Cackley, Ross Destiche

CHARACTERS

DAMIS, a young poet
DORANTE, a young man in love with Lucille
LUCILLE, a young woman in love with poetry
LISSETTE, Lucille's maid
MONDOR, Damis's valet
FRANCALOU, Lucille's father
BALIVEAU, Damis's uncle

PLACE

The ballroom of Francalou's house in Paris.

TIME

Spring, 1738.

PRONUNCIATIONS

Francalou: *Fraynk-a-loo*
Lisette: *Lee-zett*
Mondor: *Mahn-dorr*
Damis: *Dah-mee*
Dorante: *Dor-ahnt*
Baliveau: *Bal-a-voe*
Meriadec: *Mair-ya-deck*
Peauduncqville: *Po-dunk-veel*
Bouillabaisse: *Bool-yuh-bezz*
Comédie: *Ko-may-dee*
Française: *Frahn-sezz*
Melpomene: *Mel-pom-a-nee*
St. Sulpice: *Sann-syool-peece*
Stumm: *Shtoom* (i.e., "keep it quiet")
Monsieur: *Meh-syoor*

NOTES TO THE ACTORS

Parenthesized dialogue indicates an aside to the audience.

For scansion, the words “poet” and “poem” sometimes count as two syllables, sometimes one, depending on the verse. Ditto “didn’t,” “isn’t,” and “even.” “Poetry” is sometimes two syllables, sometimes three.

By the way: *have fun*.

Metromaniac. n.

A person addicted to poetry, or to writing verses.

*(From Latin metrum, poetic meter +
Greek mania, madness.)*

THE METROMANIACS

ACT ONE

Spring, 1738. The ballroom of Francalou's house in Paris, most of it concealed right now by a show curtain. Francalou and Lisette enter through the audience.

FRANCALOU.

A fanfare! Good! To spark the celebrations.

LISETTE.

It's touch and go. There could be complications.

FRANCALOU.

But what about our *show*? The stage is set?

The actors and musicians, they've all met?

LISETTE.

Yes, sir.

FRANCALOU.

All right, then. Curtain up, Lisette!

LISETTE.

You said you wanted something magical ...

(Lisette opens the curtain, revealing a "wood" of painted trees and a couple of "rocks." A full "moon" hangs over it all.)

FRANCALOU.

I love it! *Yes!* What's more theatrical

Than this: an artificial sylvan wood

Where yesterday my Paris ballroom stood?

These trees, this Eden sprouting from parquet —

A perfect setting for my humble play!

LISETTE.

You've got some dappled shade, bright-fading moon.

FRANCALOU.

It just wants fawns with pan-pipes playing a tune.

My guests, now, and my daughter, they'll go where?

LISETTE.

I thought we'd put the audience out there. (*Points to audience.*)

FRANCALOU.

Brilliant! They'll stroll in here, digest, relax —

And we'll serve up *The Metromaniacs!*

Of course, I only wrote it for a laugh.

But here and there's a joke, a paragraph,

A rhyme or two I might not call un-juicy.

What a choice welcome-home gift for my Lucy!

LISETTE.

She won't be shocked to see herself portrayed?

And played by me, monsieur?

FRANCALOU.

Well, you're her maid!

Who else could send her up with such finesse?

LISETTE.

You know she likes to wear that rosy dress?

I forged a copy that will make us *blur*.

In costume, sir, I swear you'll think I'm her.

FRANCALOU.

You'll do her languid slouch, the drawl, the twirl?

LISETTE. (*Twirling a lock of hair.*)

You mean "*Whatever, Dad ...*"?

FRANCALOU.

Yes! That's my girl!

With luck, by seeing herself she'll come alive,

Re-find her natural energy, revive!

LISETTE.

Maybe if Lucy didn't read all day ...

FRANCALOU.

The remedy's right here! This very play!

My comedy will cure her foul ennui,

Make her the hurricane she used to be!

What's all her indolence but ignorance

That life's for laughing and that we're its jests?

Maybe she'll find a mate among my guests.

A hundred men might warm her virgin winter.

LISETTE.

You might find someone.

FRANCALOU.

I?

LISETTE.

A willing printer.

For, sir, with all the poems and plays you write —

You scribble all day long and half the night!

FRANCALOU.

The Muses have bestowed on me an itch.

LISETTE.

If you could just get published ...

FRANCALOU.

Oh, that's rich! (*He laughs.*)

LISETTE.

Monsieur? Hello? Do I detect some glee?

FRANCALOU.

Yes, but the laugh's on this, Lisette, (*Shows magazine.*) not me.

Parnassus, our top literary rag.

I send them poems and they do what? They gag.

LISETTE.

Didn't they call you...?

FRANCALOU.

"A rhyming ignoramus."

What they and you don't know — is that I'm famous!

Now keep this mum. No idle scuttlebutt.

LISETTE.

Monsieur, these two lips are epoxied shut.

FRANCALOU.

Justice! Oh, my revenge has been so sweet!

Each week, *Parnassus* runs a lyric tweet

From a strange poetess in distant Brittany.

She's caused a firestorm with her far-out poetry.

A "genius," all our biggest brains concur.

Well, how's this for a laugh? Lisette, *I'm her.*

LISETTE.

This woman?

FRANCALOU.

With a pen-name that's ideal.

I write as "Meriadec de Peauduncqville"!

And it's all garbage! Tripe! Is it not sad
Some Breton cretin could become a fad?
Her greatest fan's *Damis*, a poet-fool
Who every issue bathes himself in drool.
And *this* week, oh, Lisette, you're going to crow,
Damis asks for my hand in marriage.

LISETTE.

No!

FRANCALOU. (*Reads from Parnassus.*)

*"Mad Shepherdess, you have ewes, I have rams,
Should we not couple flocks — and epigrams?
Wed me and lo! how high my heart has leapt!"*

So what do you think, Lisette? Should I accept?

LISETTE.

That's up to you. Or, *ewes*. But while we're blathering
The party's started and your guests are gathering.

FRANCALOU.

Yes, yes, and I've a million things to do.

(*Mondor enters.*)

MONDOR.

Excuse me, sir, is your name Francalou?

FRANCALOU.

Just ask Lisette, she'll help you. Toodle-oo!

(*Francalou exits.*)

MONDOR.

"Lisette," is it? And you're his aide-de-camp?

LISETTE.

You are...?

MONDOR.

Mondor! Valet and gifted scamp!

Among my talents being a knack for kissing.

LISETTE.

And you're here why?

MONDOR.

My master has gone missing.

He should be here, according to my dope.

LISETTE.

Your boss's name?

MONDOR.

Damis. You know him?

LISETTE.

Nope.

But wait. “*Damis*” ... that somehow rings a bell ...
MONDOR.

And then there’s always me.

LISETTE.

Nice try.

MONDOR.

Ah, well.

(*Lisette starts out. He heads her off.*)

But hey, before we wave and say ciao bella,

Consider this: Am I a lucky fella?

To find myself here in this ritzy house

With you, a maid who’s made to be my spouse?

LISETTE.

A maid who’s made for richer men than you.

(*Starts out again.*)

MONDOR.

This *is* the home of Monsieur Francalou...?

LISETTE.

It is.

MONDOR.

He’s got an only child?

LISETTE.

That’s right.

MONDOR.

She just got home from college?

LISETTE.

Late last night.

MONDOR.

You’re putting on some kinda play, or show?

LISETTE.

A set, a moon, some painted trees. Hel-LO!

MONDOR.

There’s fireworks? Dinner? Dancing? All that jazz?

Plus bachelors, to add to the pizzazz?

LISETTE.

A hundred suitors, each one hot to be here.

MONDOR.

This is the place! My master’s *got* to be here!

THE METROMANIACS

by David Ives

adapted from *La Metromanie*

by Alexis Piron

5M, 2W (flexible casting)

Mistaken identity, misplaced ardor, and a fight for true love ensue in this adaptation of Piron's classic 1738 French farce. Would-be poet Damis has fallen in love with the works of a mysterious Breton poetess, not knowing that she is really Francalou, a middle-aged gentleman. Meanwhile, Damis's non-literary friend Dorante has fallen in love with Francalou's daughter, Lucille, who mistakes her new suitor for her favorite poet — Damis! Add to the chaos some scheming servants, pseudonyms, and disguises, and there is much to untangle before love-plots are resolved and a happy ending found in this French farce. With his sparkling wit and brilliant sense of comedic timing, David Ives brings a new shine to this lost classic.

"[An] ingenious resurrection of an obscure 18th-century French comedy. ... almost criminally enjoyable ... David Ives, the master adapter and cutup artist ... is plainly turned on by Piron's frisky, competitive wordplay and high-octane mixups. ... The language is golden ... The mixups are so deliriously complicated that you worry you'll never keep them straight, but Ives's self-aware characters helpfully see to it that you do."

—**The Washington Post**

"Ives is a master magician. ... Piron's play was written in response to an actual event involving Voltaire. Although Ives doesn't satirize a contemporary figure, his sense of the anarchy that arises when people don't know who they are is spot-on."

—**TheaterMania.com**

Also by David Ives
ALL IN THE TIMING
THE LIAR
VENUS IN FUR
and others

DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC.

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