

From Marichette to Rosealba and *La Sagouine* A Genealogy *au féminin* for Acadian Theatre¹

As the organizers of the celebrated booklaunch for *La Sagouine*² must have realized, Antonine Maillet's *Sagouine* can appear as a curious anomaly in Acadian theatre history; indeed, it can appear as an embarrassing reminder of the poverty and unremitting labour which once marked the lives of too many Acadian women. It is true that a theatrical tradition described in terms of a highly educated male élite—Marc Lescarbot, Senator Pascal Poirier, Mgr. Marcel-François Richard or Father Camille Lefebvre—cannot account for a *Sagouine* who is working-class, female, and educated strictly in the school of hard knocks. My essay, however, takes issue with Zénon Chiasson's suggestion that, "le théâtre d'Antonine Maillet demeure un cas à part du théâtre acadien. La dimension de cette oeuvre la propulse dans les rangs du répertoire universel et nous oblige à chercher . . . ailleurs les signes de notre identité théâtrale" ("Fragments" 63). On the contrary, the *Sagouine* is the most brilliant representative of a popular Acadian theatrical tradition which has flourished since the late nineteenth century, as Pierre Gérin and Pierre M. Gérin have suggested.³ This essay seeks to contribute to a more complete understanding of this tradition.

Scholars, notably Jean-Claude Marcus and Roger Lacerte, have explored the rapport between Acadian collegial theatre and the popular, oral domain of *le conteur*, but the dynamism and the persistence of Acadian oral culture have yet, perhaps, to be fully appreciated. Academic accounts have also tended to overlook the fact that whereas the literary theatrical tradition is heavily dominated by men, the oral tradition has included women. The

oversight is not surprising, given that oral traditions and women's lives often escape documentation altogether. With respect to theatre history, it must be remembered that popular activities, theatrical in the broadest sense, are only historicized insofar as they encounter literary habits and institutions. As I shall show, it is precisely through such encounters that a vibrant Acadian tradition of Sagouinesque monologists can be discerned. While performances (apart from those of Viola Léger) are local and occasional, and scripts, if they exist, remain unpublished, this tradition is nonetheless a striking feature of contemporary, popular Acadian culture. Rosealba, the Sagouine of the Baie Sainte-Marie, as she has often been called, is of particular interest both because of the passionate following she inspires in her home community and because of the literary quality of her monologues. Other contemporary Sagouines include Lonice and Françoise, "les deux vieilles Sagouines [sic] de Pombcoup [Pubnico-Ouest]" (*Le Petit Courrier*, le 29 avril, 1976, 1), and Sophie-Anne, "la Sagouine de Chéticamp" (*Le Courrier*, le 20 avril, 1979, 10).

We must ask whether the existence of local Sagouines testifies more to the influence of Antonine Maillet than to that of a prior, or parallel, oral tradition. Certainly Maillet's Sagouine has been imitated; we read, for example, that "La Chandeleur se fête avec Gapi et la Sagouine" in Margeree, Çape Breton, with a photo of two local people dressed up and dancing in old-time costume (*Le Courrier*, le 8 février, 1979, 1-2).⁴ Nevertheless, however brilliant her success, Maillet's character cannot have inspired all the Sagouines in Acadie. Rosealba came on the scene before her, in 1962, although the early Rosealba resembled Maillet's Sagouine less closely than the Rosealba of today.⁵ Other, earlier monologists are comparable: Marguerite à Yutte, from L'Anse-des-LeBlanc; Marie-Marthe Dugas, from Station-du-Petit-Ruisseau; and, a generation before, Fannie Thériault, originally from Rivière-aux-Saumons, who lived for many years in Lower Saulnierville. Suzanne Deveau, "la grande Souqui" of Chéticamp, Cape Breton, is remembered by Anselme Boudreau as a "très bonne conteuse" known to him in his youth (193). Already elderly in 1908, Suzanne Deveau would have been a senior contemporary of Emilie Leblanc, the author of a remarkable series of monologues of which we have considerably more evidence, since they were published, under the *nom de plume* of Marichette. Pierre Gérin and Pierre M. Gérin have brought to light the story of how, from 1895 to 1898, Marichette signed a series of letters to Valentin Landry, the editor of

Évangéline, while her creator, Emilie Leblanc, resided in Chéticamp (Sainte-Alphonse), Clare. Marichette's kinship with Maillet's Sagouine is clearly noted by the scholars who rediscovered her:

Ces lettres sont une mine d'or pour le linguiste, pour l'historien, pour le sociologue, car elles exposent les problèmes de l'instruction, de l'assimilation, du chômage, la corruption politique, le rôle de l'Eglise, la misérable condition et les aspirations de la femme. Le style, la truculence de la langue, les thèmes, la rhétorique de la protestation annoncent la Sagouine. (P. Gérin 38)

It may seem paradoxical that an enterprise which seeks to describe an oral theatrical tradition should take as evidence the non-theatrical writing of a highly-educated, middle-class woman such as Emilie Leblanc. Marichette's literary medium, however, does not so much set her apart as confirm the fact that the female monologists of whom we have any knowledge each signify in some way the complex but fruitful encounter between women, the oral traditions in which women played an important part, and the predominantly masculine domain of higher education.

In this context, it is worth recalling that both Antonine Maillet and Viola Léger began their careers as professors at Notre-Dame d'Acadie; both were, therefore, among the first generation of women to have a real impact on the classical theatrical traditions within the colleges.⁶ Antonine Maillet, in *Les Confessions de Jeanne de Valois*, describes the theatre classes held at the first *collège classique* for girls, in Memramcook, New Brunswick, as the professors and students alike immersed themselves in their French heritage and made it their own:

Les images qui me trottent dans la mémoire sont celles d'un François Villon qui bat les pavés de Paris en égrenant les plus beaux vers français; celles de la farce de Maître Pathelin que nos comédiennes montaient comme si la pièce leur avait été dédiée. (184)

Zénon Chiasson points out the accomplishments during the late 1950s of the award-winning theatre company of Notre-Dame d'Acadie, under the direction of Antonine Maillet ("L'Institution" 752-53).

Emilie Leblanc, the creator of Marichette, also studied at Memramcook. "Puis elle était allée à l'École normale de Fredericton, où elle avait eu la chance d'être l'élève du célèbre professeur Alphée Belliveau" (Gérin and Gérin, *Marichette* 39). She must have been impressed with his enlightened views regarding the authenticity of Acadian French, as with the ideas of Pascal Poirier who at that time was publishing his first monographs on the

parler franco-acadien. A writer and an intellectual, Emilie Leblanc lived at a time when women, and perhaps particularly Acadian women, had almost no access to the public world, yet she was a natural leader of the Acadian cultural revival taking place in her generation. She was the only woman to succeed in having her views in support of women's suffrage published in *Évangéline* (Gallant 5). Her upbringing and her education must have given her the sense that a new era was dawning, but a tragic love affair led her abruptly to a brutal encounter with the common lot of women (Gérin 1984). It was after this that she took up her pen to write in the name of Marichette, speaking through the persona, and in the popular idiom of an uneducated woman, as Antonine Maillet would choose to do eighty years later.

As Pierre Gérin remarks, Marichette's use of popular or colloquial language takes on sharp significance in passages treating of politics, myth, or religion, where the subject matter locates her unmistakably in the discursive domain of the educated elite. It is in such passages that her parodic audacity becomes clear: "La belle ordonnance ronflante de la langue classique, dans laquelle se complaisaient les orateurs et les écrivains de cette époque, est brisée, disloquée" (Gérin, "Une Écrivaine" 44). If the violence with which some of Marichette's detractors denounced her writing is thus made more understandable,⁷ we can equally better appreciate from this perspective the contribution Emilie Leblanc made to an Acadian Renaissance which would eventually lead to greater respect both for local varieties of French and for women (Gérin, *Une Écrivaine* 44). Marichette's use of Acadian French is no more folkloric or sentimental than la Sagouine's triple disruption of the classical theatrical traditions which—from the neo-classical masque of Marc Lescarbot to the century of collegial theatre documented by Laurent Lavoie, Roger Lacerte, Jean-Claude Marcus, René LeBlanc and Micheline Laliberté—had elided any representation of women, working-class life, or non-standard French.⁸

Rosealba, too, has evolved through the encounter between popular, oral traditions and those of the colleges and the Church. The first Rosealba performance which I have been able to locate took place around a campfire at the Colonie de la Jeunesse Acadienne (C.J.A.), at the Baie Sainte-Marie in the summer of 1962, the year the camp was first open to girls. On that occasion, Rosealba was played by Sister Thérèse Robichaud, who based her performance on a script written by an unidentified person (Robichaud). Cécile LeBlanc Poirier learned it there, and later performed it herself (Poirier). A

little later, someone, probably a nun, passed the text to Anne-Marie Comeau, who performed it a number of times (Comeau). Michel Thibault heard it as a child, in the spring of 1964, and later, in 1973 or '74, he began to collaborate with Anne-Marie Comeau to recreate Rosealba as an older woman with nineteen children (Thibault, Personal Interview). The Rosealba productions of 1994 and 1995 were collaborations of Anne-Marie Comeau, Michel Thibault, Charlene Déraspe and Marie-Adèle Deveau, and the texts also drew on a series of community interviews. As theatre, Rosealba draws on a wide range of talents and skills, but it is also true to say that the monologues are inspired by an entwining of the oral traditions of Saulnierville Station with the influences of the Church, specifically of *Les Filles de Jésus* in Saulnierville, and with modern educational practices generally. That this influence is characterized in the monologues as both negative and positive—both humiliating and uplifting—underlines the extent to which we are looking not only at instances of influence and education but also at difference and resistance, equally evident in the monologues of Marichette and *La Sagouine*.

The encounter between women, higher education and oral tradition is also evident in the theatre of “les deux vieilles Sagouines [*sic*] de Pombcoup.” Lonice and Françoise are dramatizations of traditional Acadian women. They are played by two modern women, Caroline d’Entremont and Lucile d’Entremont, who see their theatre as a means of educating and entertaining their community while preserving traditional knowledge and skills such as butter-making and weaving (d’Entremont and d’Entremont).

The Chéticamp storyteller known to Anselme Boudreau as “la grande Souqui” was another highly literate participant in oral Acadian traditions. As a young person, Suzanne Deveau read a great deal, and later in her life, although she was visually impaired, she could still recite Molière by heart. Boudreau comments, “Elle ne contait pas seulement des contes; elle racontait presque mot à mot des histoires qu’elle avait lues durant sa jeunesse. Je me rappelle de deux: *Le médecin malgré lui*, de Molière, qu’elle appelait l’histoire de Sganarelle et Martine, et le roman *Un de perdu, deux de retrouvés*, qu’elle appelait l’histoire de Pierre et saint Luc” (193). Insofar as Suzanne Deveau was a storyteller and not, like Rosealba or Maillet’s Sagouine, the dramatization of a storyteller, she seems closer to a predominantly oral tradition. We can only speculate, however, on the paths she might have taken were it not for her disability.

Of the monologists and storytellers whom I am examining in this essay, only Fannie Thériault (b. 3 April 1886) could be said to belong to a truly oral tradition. Curiously, she describes herself not as a *conteuse*, and even less as an actress, but as follows: “moi, je suis une personne qui est intense—je parle beaucoup, je grouille beaucoup, je chante beaucoup” (Thériault). Significantly, Fannie—unlike the others—has no persona but speaks in her own name. In effect, she is closer to the reality which Rosealba and the Sagouine represent, a discovery which suggests that ultimately, one aspect of the oral heritage is this character-type: the poor, old woman who speaks in the idiom of her people. We might say that insofar as Fannie was innocent of this character-type, she was closer to the reality it replaces and recreates. As for Emilie Leblanc, insofar as she animated the character-type, she can be unproblematically placed in proximity to the oral tradition we are tracing.

Antonine Maillet has always described herself as a “conteuse, directement issue d’un lignage de conteurs oraux, j’appartiens à la littérature orale” (1977: 207). She has explained clearly, and René LeBlanc has underlined, the extent to which her work stands at the crossroads of the oral and the written traditions: “je me situe à la jointure de la tradition orale et de l’écriture” (cited in LeBlanc 1985: 58). She has many times insisted on the reality of the Sagouine’s referents. In a 1973 interview with Anne Girard, she delineates the major themes which circulate around the question of her famous character’s origins: first, the question of class (“les gens d’en bas”), and the imperative to give a literary voice to those who have been silenced; second, the reality of the Sagouinian referent which is affirmed on two levels, that of the individual, and that of the type, “parce qu’elle est à multiples exemplaires.” In another interview, Maillet explains that the Sagouine is based on two or possibly three actual women (see Scully). Local tradition at the Baie Sainte-Marie has it that the third model for the Sagouine is none other than Marguerite à Yutte (Belliveau), to whom Antonine Maillet and Rita Scalabrini refer in *Acadie pour quasiment rien* (11). Maillet interviewed Marguerite à Yutte in the late sixties, during the period when she interviewed several other people at the Baie, including Capitain Sullivan, of Meteghan, who was, of course, a model for her character, Sullivan (Muriel Comeau).

Maillet has explained that the Sagouine represents a disinherited class of people, which is clearly the case. In the context of this enquiry into Acadian monologue traditions, however, it is clear that she also re-presents the character-type of the older, working woman who has the vision, energy and

language to articulate reality on behalf of her community, and who therefore enables that community to affirm its Rabelaisian heritage, and laugh. Fannie Thériault, it seems, was in fact that type of woman, suggesting that the type is in one sense an objective referent, and that such women live within the community with a relatively low degree of self-consciousness. Marguerite à Yutte may be another example;⁹ and Antonine Maillet has created several fictional counterparts such as “la veuve à Calixte” in *Mariaagélas*. On another level, however, the type is a consciously-adopted persona which gives permission for some individuals to speak, and to speak freely, about what they know most deeply. Clearly the persona serves as a strategy in this sense for Anne-Marie Comeau, Marie-Adèle Deveau, Michel Thibault and Charlene Déraspe, who become Rosealba; for Caroline and Lucille D’Entremont, who become Lonice and Françoise, and for Emilie Leblanc, who became Marichette. The shared referent and common experience associated with this character-type are responsible for the strong sense of correspondence which unites the monologues of *La Sagouine* with Marichette’s letters and Rosealba’s monologues, and which explains the immediate recognition of connection and similarity experienced, for example, by Anne-Marie Comeau when she was introduced to the letters of Marichette (Anne-Marie Comeau).

It is worth noting, too, that to a significant extent the monologists share the subject matter of Acadian daily life from a woman’s perspective. Maillet’s *Sagouine* and Rosealba, in particular, describe life during the depression, when many people lived on the threshold of subsistence. Rosealba gives a comic description of this period in the following monologue from the 1994 spectacle, “Rosealba nous parle”:

J’avions point de welfare dans mon temps. Si tu pouvais point t’occuper de toi-même t’allais à la Poor House. Nous autres fallait que ça raguernit et rien que tu tires là-bas. C’t’affaire de recycling, là ... ce n’est pas les Anglais qu’ont commencé ça! Ça fait des années que je raccommode, que je rapièce, que je raguerne pour épargner! J’en ai lavé des sacs à scallop pour faire des lavettes ou des caneçons. J’en ai teindu de la cottounade avec du jus de bettes pour faire des rideaux. J’ai même fait des chemises avec des sacs de farine, quand j’pouvais en trouver qui étaient encore faits de butonne. Y avait un des enfants qui était assez gros—je crois que c’était Nastasse—. Pour une chemise pour lui ça prenait deux sacs de 100 livres. Une de ces chemises ça dit PURITY en avant et ROBIN HOOD en arrière. Il était faraud de ça! Y savait point quoi ça disait. Y pouvait point lire. (Thibault and Déraspe)

Rosealba's monologue communicates not only the economies and life-skills of a leaner time, but also the humour that sees her through. She has a sweeter personality than the Sagouine. Maillet has commented that, "la Sagouine est une révolutionnaire sans aigreur contre l'injustice qu'elle reconnaît. Elle est debout mais elle accepte son rôle. C'est ce qui fait à la fois sa grandeur et sa misère" (Royer 47). Rosealba, too, is "sans aigreur," but she is perhaps less revolutionary and certainly not as grand. Indeed, she can seem quite childish, yet her observations are often profound.

Curiously, she is less accepting of injustice. This can be seen in the 1995 monologue which recalls her brother who died in the war (Thibault and Déraspe). Of his induction, she explains, "A c'te temps là on avait besoin de passer des tests pour savoir si t'avais assez de compernure pour aller te battre." When she accompanies him to Halifax on the train, she wonders "pourquoi c'qu'on célébrait de même pour envoyer nos hommes se battre dans les vieux pays . . . se faire estropier." These comments, delivered quite innocently, are initially comic. However, when the letter announcing her brother's death arrives, the monologue ends in searing empathy with "Mamme [qui] pourrait jamais accepter ça." The silence which follows in effect reframes Rosealba's earlier remarks about the war, first seen as slightly ridiculous, but now recognized as an outbreak of unacceptable violence within the social order. Rosealba also expresses anger at other injustices: when her son loses a job as a Bingo caller because he doesn't know English—"there's no E in BINGO!" (English in the original)—or when she herself, as a young girl, misses her confirmation basically because her family was so poor. As Michel Thibault notes, her anger is both astute and comic. "Through the laughter run . . . poverty and tragedy. Her innocent comments convey such a strong social message" (Thibault, Telephone Interview). The Sagouine recognizes herself to be "une citoyenne à part ençère (ce qui est moins gros que la part 'entière')" (Royer 47). Rosealba does not express this class consciousness, although her monologues overflow with details of daily life as a poor member of a minority culture. The world she projects is, for the most part, whole and warm and funny. As the cliché would have it, she is rich in the things that matter most.

Behind the figures of Marichette, the Sagouine and Rosealba, we discern the intelligence, strength and humour of Acadian women. Acadian working- and middle-class women prior to the mid-twentieth century performed a tremendous amount of work daily, as Anselme Boudreau explains

in his chapter on “L’ouvrage des Femmes”: “Autrefois, à Chéticamp, les femmes travaillaient bien plus que les femmes d’aujourd’hui” (130). Among other tasks, such as working for the church and educating their children, they produced wool fabric by hand, beginning with the care of the sheep; and from this they sewed and knitted; they made quilts and carpets for their large families. In addition to helping with the farm labour, harvesting and plowing, for example, they grew large kitchen gardens, and put aside and stored all kinds of food; they took care of pigs, chickens, and cows; they milked, and made cheese and butter, sausage and headcheese; they washed all the clothing and bedding by hand, and they scrubbed their houses, floors and walls; they made soap; and of course they cooked, washed dishes, and bore many children. It is astonishing that in addition to all this, some women found the time and the energy to play the violin or the organ,¹⁰ or to read widely.

Yet they did. Suzanne Deveau, for example, was married to Polite à Marine LeBlanc, a man whom Boudreau describes as “pas très . . . industriel” (193). Susanne raised her four sons in extreme poverty; at the time that Anselme knew her, she did not have a home of her own but lived and eventually died in the homes of others. One of her sons was somewhat lacking in “comper-nure”—to borrow a word from Rosealba, who has the same problem with her son Thaddée—but the other three went on to become well-educated and successful. Unfortunately, all three moved to the United States. In her old age, Anselme would read to her, and Souqui, in exchange, would tell him stories that sometimes went on for days. While some women played music and others made beautiful quilts, many, like Suzanne Deveau, turned to an art which could be practised at the same time as domestic work—talking.

In this context, it is worth noting that the most exuberant exploit mentioned by Fannie Thériault during her interview was performed during a “quiltine” of women working together to clean the Saulnierville Church:

On faisait une quiltine pour laver l’église, et p’is, y avait une chaise pour prêcher, là, vous savez.

[Quelqu’un dit]: “Qui ce qui va laver la chaise?”

Bien, c’est Fannie qui va laver la chaise.

Père Castonguay [s’est dit]: “Je vais aller me cacher dans la sacristie parce qu’elle va faire quelque bassesse.”

J’ai monté dans la chaise, j’ai commencé à décrier les vendeux de grog, p’is, mon ami, j’la contais ça d’long et d’travars . . . Quand j’ai bien fini là, quand j’ai commencé à laver la chaise, il a sorti de là-dedans . . . (Thériault)

This spontaneous celebration of popular theatre reveals several noteworthy characteristics. The first is the fact that it occurs within the context of communal work. As was often the case, the work was gender-specific; here, the women are working together to clean the Saulnierville Church. In the story of Louise à Dan, below, it is the men who are working together in the woods. Second is the fact that the church occupies a central place in the culture. Third, and bearing in mind that Fannie was a well-known bootlegger, we note the presence of parody. It is a very gentle parody, however, since apparently not even the priest was offended.

In Louise à Dan's story, the parodic element is equally delicately posed; in fact, the occasion could just as well be described as a "messe blanche," the sincere celebration of church ritual in the absence of a priest:

J'étions à Darthmouth à logger p'is du temps de la messe tous les dimanches avant-midis, Freddie à William disait le chapelet. Je nous mettions tous de genoux, parce que je pouvions point aller à l'église. Je savions pas où était l'église. Après dîner ils allions su' un nègre à Preston s'acheter un gallon de bière p'is ils amenions ça à la camp. Y boivions ça et Dan disait à Freddie de nous faire un prône. Freddie allait dehors . . . y avait des buches . . . C'te gars-là pouvait prêcher. Les hoummes allions dehors demi grogués . . . Ils arrachions leurs calottes de su' leur tête . . . et ils écoutions Freddie. (Louise à Dan Comeau)

Parodic imitation of the "gens d'en haut" has always been the prerogative of the "gens d'en bas," and such is the case here. These two parodies, however, have their end not in revolution, but in laughter.

A parodic element is more evident in the monologues of Rosealba than in either Marichette or the Sagouine, perhaps because live theatre lends itself more easily to parody than the written word or the radio monologue. Mime, mimicry and dance are masterfully handled by Anne-Marie Comeau who, as Rosealba, easily slips from one persona to another. For example, during the 1995 monologue on the Festival Acadien, she recalls the visit of Princess Margaret to the Baie Sainte-Marie, and then, simply becomes her:

Croiriez-vous que je me souvonne du Premier Festival en 1955? J'm'en souvonne par rapport que c'était l'année que Princesse Marguerite de l'Angleterre avait venu.

[Rosealba devient Princess Mar.: chapeau-tiara]

"So nice to be here among you loyal Acadian subjects.

"I just adore your purée de râpure.

"Je suis très contente d'être ici en cette occasion de fierté, de festivité, de loyauté, de bonté et de Red Rose thé . . .

Elle n'avait pas vraiment dit ça mais c'est de-même que j'm'en souvonne. (Thibault and Déraspe)

There is also, in Rosealba, a good deal that is not parodic but is simply funny and familial, representing the kind of talking that mothers do with their children. Indeed, Michel Thibault has suggested that for him, his mother is a primary influence in the creation of Rosealba:

Les histoires que je raconte, ce sont des histoires que j'ai entendues de ma mère. . . . Le sens de l'humour de Rosealba, c'est le sens de l'humour de ma mère. Ma mère était très comique. Elle faisait rire tout le monde . . . elle pouvait beaucoup, beaucoup rire. . . . On n'a jamais eu beaucoup d'argent. Ma mère économisait, nourrissait ses enfants, mais en même temps elle réussissait à monter quelque chose de solide; elle voyait l'importance du village, de la famille. . . . C'est ironique, mais ma mère ne saura jamais jusqu'à quel point elle a participé aux monologues. (Thibault, Personal Interview).

The important family context is typical of oral tradition.

Anne-Marie Comeau, too, recalls storytelling as a family activity:

Ma mère me contait des histoires, beaucoup. Mon père itou me contait des histoires de tchèmes, du diable qui venait à des *games* de cartes, des *bootleggers*, toute de quoi qui faisait peur. Des histoires, on en avait tout le temps . . . chez nous. Je me souviens de ces *gatherings* icitte, puis je faisons des boules de *fluff* et du *fudge*, puis ça parlait . . . j'avions un poêle à bois et des lampes; j'avions point de lumière . . . ma mère n'avait pas le temps de s'assire et conter des histoires: elle avait onze enfants. . . . ma mère [contait] des affaires qu'ils faisions quand elle était jeune, c'était plus comique; Mamme n'avait point de peur, point de tristesse. (Anne-Marie Comeau)

Anne-Marie Comeau grew up in a family with strong oral traditions. Both parents participated, and it is interesting to note the different styles of each: whereas the father told the stories which are usually classified as "contes," the mother told tales which were more anecdotal and domestic and less highly structured. Her stories would be easier to break off and to pick up again, as the rhythm of the day permitted. Her stories would more resemble monologues, transmitting important but not necessarily breathtaking information about the family and the extended family, the kind of genealogy which is still the bread and butter of conversations at the Baie Sainte-Marie today. Rosealba participates as a matter of course in this community activity, and Antonine Maillet has immortalized it, not so much in the character of the Sagouine, but in that of Pélagie-la-Gribouille. The maintenance of family histories is part and parcel of the work of the *conteuse*.

Maillet's Sagouine and all of her sisters are central to the evolution of a theatrical identity in Acadie. Belonging wholly neither to the collegial nor to

the popular camp, they are able to elicit response from an unusually broad spectrum of society, as James de Finney as shown with respect to *La Sagouine* (26, 27). This response has also, he argues, an important social function, in that “la rencontre du public et de l’oeuvre a permis de réunir et de valoriser esthétiquement des fragments d’une culture populaire sous-estimés jusqu’alors” (41). Bearing these insights in mind, and remembering that the *Sagouine*, *Rosealba* and other *Sagouines* are contemporary, popular phenomena, let us return, in conclusion, to the scholarly accounts of Acadian theatre history. The importance of oral tradition to Acadian theatre history has been noted. Roger Lacerte, in 1978, emphasized that the theatre of the classical colleges was preceded by amateur theatre in the parishes, and in 1980, Jean-Claude Marcus argued that the ancestor of Acadian theatre is the art of storytelling. These discoveries were prompted, at least in part, by the necessity to resolve the apparent contradiction between the assertion—made by René Baudry, Pascal Poirier and others—that the Acadians are a theatre-loving people, and the fact that Acadian theatrical tradition, in the accepted sense of a native dramaturgy and a consistent and professional theatre, begins about 1960. Jean-Claude Marcus suggests a generous interpretation of theatrical activity which takes as its key element an “échange d’émotions entre acteurs et spectateurs” (634). In this light, Acadian theatre can be seen, he argues, as a rich and ongoing tradition. In the same vein, Roger Lacerte suggests that we interpret the expression, “tradition théâtrale” in a broader sense than usual.

Lui qui ne fut par le passé ni jamais assez nombreux ni assez stable ni assez riche pour bénéficier de troupes permanentes de professionnels mais qui a néanmoins toujours eu un goût prononcé pour le spectacle comme pour le conte, la légende, la chanson, enfin, pour toutes les formes de littérature parlée, orale, populaire. (119)

Lacerte distinguishes between the “théâtre de société” and the “théâtre d’école” (127), commenting that the Acadian classical colleges have a solid theatrical tradition which goes back to the 1850s and which is preceded and paralleled by amateur traditions based in the communities. Local theatrical and variety shows held to raise funds for the parishes and schools are too numerous to count (127).

Marcus also distinguishes between theatre in the parishes and theatre in the colleges and convents. Local theatrical events, described as “séances dramatiques et musicales,” or “soirées récréatives,” should be envisioned, he argues, as a somewhat structured and enlarged extension of “‘la veillée,’ qui

dans l'ancien temps, réunissait, au cours des longues soirées d'hiver, les membres d'une famille et leurs voisins" (635).

Citing Père Anselme Chiasson, who writes in his history of Chéticamp of the repression of dancing as an acceptable social pastime, and of its replacement by "des parties de cartes, de jeux de société, des chansons, des contes et des histoires drôles" (210), Marcus makes a critically important formulation:

En Acadie, plus qu'ailleurs, l'ancêtre de l'acteur est le conteur. Pour capter et conserver l'attention de son public, le conteur se devait de rendre son "histoire" . . . dramatique, et déployer pour ce faire certaines techniques qui, sans qu'il en eût conscience, ressortissait à l'art dramatique. (635)

Marcus places this oral tradition in a chronological context: in the 1870s, with the development of Acadian national consciousness and the founding of such important institutions as the *collèges classiques* and *L'Assomption*, domestic traditions declined and were replaced by developing national institutions which reflected the structural transformations of Acadian society.

De familiale qu'elle était, la "veillée" devient paroissiale, et l'on quitte peu à peu la cuisine pour aller s'ébaudir ou pleurer, le plus souvent les deux, à la salle paroissiale, à celle de la C.M.B.A. (Catholic Mutual Benefit Association), de la Société des Artisans Canadiens-français, ou plus tard de l'Assomption, etc. L'époque du conteur décline, celle du théâtre s'amorce . . . (637)

Both collegial and community theatrical traditions, in other words, are indebted to the powerful oral tradition of the conteur, which accounts for the fact that in the newly formed theatrical academies, both the faculty and the students were sufficiently at ease in a theatrical idiom that they were regularly able to supplement the French repertoire with original compositions. Scripts, however, were rarely published and the literary imperative to preserve texts was even more neglected in the domain of community theatre, of which little is known because no texts have survived.

If Marcus is prescient in noting that behind the Acadian taste for the theatre we can discern the presence of *le conteur*, he is hasty in assuming that the storyteller faded away, as he implies, in the 1860s. After all, as Zénon Chiasson has demonstrated, it would be another hundred years before Acadian literary dramaturgy would get off the ground; another one hundred and ten years until *La Sagouine*. Antonine Maillet herself makes the claim—cited by Marcus—that prior to 1960, "la tradition littéraire en Acadie est presque uniquement orale" (636). In fact, when Marcus suggests a chronological movement from the kitchen to the parish hall, he inadver-

tently points to a larger reality: the Acadian elite may have been busy rebuilding Acadie, but the kitchens remained, as they still do, and kitchens are the locus of family life and the traditional domain of women. The *conteur* is still in the kitchen, the *conteur* may be a *conteuse*, and Acadian oral traditions are still in dialogue with the classical theatrical traditions of the educated elite.

The entire matter can finally be related to the predominant and most difficult issue facing Acadian culture today: the question of language. As Pierre Gérin remarks of Marichette, the use of a popular, colloquial language has significant symbolic value: “comme les femmes, le parler franco-acadien a été confiné dans les cuisines et les basses-cours. C’est avec elles qu’il en est sorti” (Gérin 44). Gérin is describing the world of the late nineteenth century, but—with respect to the location of the *parler franco-acadien* if not with respect to that of women—the situation remains virtually unchanged one hundred years later. It is perhaps to the endurance of this popular language that we can attribute the astonishing survival of the oral traditions which are embodied in it. In this sense, from the perspective of theatre history rather than from the perspective of linguistics or of politics, Acadian French can be freshly perceived as the difficult treasure that it is, the irrepressible music of a people.

NOTES

- 1 This paper is based on research carried out within the framework of *Hommage à Rosealba*, an action-research project dedicated to researching and supporting popular theatrical traditions at the Baie Sainte-Marie, and to discovering as much as possible about the Acadian monologue tradition. The research project is described more fully in the *Humanities Research Fiches*, No. 11, 1995, published by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities. Many people have supported this project and its goals; in particular, Marie-Adèle Deveau contributed enormously both to the research and to the 1994 and 1995 *Rosealba* performances. The Explorations Programme of the Canada Council, the Cultural Affairs Department of the Government of Nova Scotia and Université Sainte-Anne all provided funding. Thanks are also due to Anne-Marie Comeau, Michel Thibault, Muriel Comeau, René LeBlanc, Normand Godin, Jean Daigle, Père Anselme Chiasson, Murielle Comeau, Neil Boucher, James Quinlan, Gérald Boudreau, Harley d’Entremont, Martine Jacquot, Edwin Doucet, Marcel Weaver, Raymond Gaudet, Sylvestre Muise, Jean-Louis Belliveau, Chris Meuse, Imelda Amirault, James de Finney, Willemine Mathieu and all of the wonderful people who gave interviews.
- 2 *La Sagouine* was launched at the Université de Moncton, in 1971. Alain Pontaut, in “Les Sortilèges de la Sagouine,” describes how Viola Léger, in the character of the Sagouine, quietly scrubbed the floors, breaking anonymity only when she stood up to deliver the

- opening monologue of Mailliet's text. "Comme surprise, mais pas dérangée, par les invités, une femme de ménage, que sans doute on avait oublié de chasser, frottait le plancher et déplaçait son seau. Elle osait même adresser la parole aux notables ainsi réunis. . . . [I]l avait . . . fallu quelque temps pour que les invités s'aperçoivent qu'il ne s'agissait pas d'une pauvre égarée dans ce lieu distingué parmi l'élite du savoir et de la société, mais qu'ils venaient de rencontrer la vedette de ce brillant lancement" (7-8).
- 3 La Sagouine, "n'était pas tombée du ciel. Toute une tradition la préparait de longue main, discrètement" (*Marichette* 13).
 - 4 The pervasive influence of Antonine Mailliet's *La Sagouine* can be seen, for example, in the fact that during the 1970s, the French-language weekly *Le Petit Courrier de la Nouvelle-Écosse* (a.k.a. *Le Courrier de la Nouvelle-Écosse*) featured some twenty-two articles, interviews and photos of either Viola Léger or Antonine Mailliet in connection with *La Sagouine*.
 - 5 For a more detailed discussion, see Susan Knutson, "The Evolution of a Community Archetype: A Look at the Origins of Rosealba," and "Interview avec Michel Thibault."
 - 6 The acquisition of a Bachelor of Arts Program at the convent Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur, in Memramcook, in 1943, followed by the founding of Notre-Dame d'Acadie, in 1949, meant that the classical course of higher education as offered in the French-Canadian institutions of the period became accessible to women for the first time, and after this point it is impossible to speak of an elite theatrical tradition which is exclusively male (Couturier Leblanc 575; Gallant 17-24.)
 - 7 "[L]es fameuses lettres . . . furent si mal reçues par la soi-disant élite que la malheureuse auteure finit par renoncer à écrire" (Pierre Gérin, 39).
 - 8 Acadian theatre had a noble beginning: a neo-classical masque, composed in alexandrines, staged on the waters of the Annapolis Basin on 14 November 1606, to honour the return of Sieur de Poutrincourt to Port Royal. Composed and directed by Marc Lescarbot, a young Parisian lawyer and Acting Governor of the Habitation (in Poutrincourt's absence), "Le Théâtre de Neptune" was staged and performed in an exclusively masculine world and was, of course, written in Parisian French.

This extraordinary initiation was followed by a silence of almost two hundred and fifty years. In the words of Laurent Lavoie, "avant le 'Grand Dérangement' de 1755, les Acadiens vivaient paisiblement, défrichant leurs terres et se rencontrant pour fêter certains anniversaires et événements particuliers; après la déportation et pendant une centaine d'années, c'est le néant" (452).

The documented tradition begins again in the mid-1850s, in Memramcook, N.B., where l'abbé François-Xavier Lafrance opens the Séminaire Saint-Thomas. In 1866 the Seminary is incorporated into the Collège Saint-Joseph, directed by Père Camille Lefebvre; this first Acadian *collège classique* is joined in 1874 by the Collège Saint-Louis at Saint-Louis-de-Kent, N.B.; in 1890 by Collège Sainte-Anne, in Pointe-de-l'Église, N.S., and in 1899 by the Collège du Sacré-Coeur at Caraquet, N.B. As Laurent Lavoie, Roger Lacerte, Jean-Claude Marcus, René LeBlanc and Micheline Laliberté have documented, the colleges, and the theatrical academies they fostered, regularly invited the public to enjoy theatrical performances, tragic and comic, in French and in English—sometimes as often as five times during the academic year. Lacerte celebrates the century-long tradition of collegial theatre while lamenting the failure to survive of many original scripts written by both students and teachers. "Les Acadiens de Philadelphie" (1875) and "Les Accordailles de Gabriel et Évangéline (Saynette Champêtre)" by Senator Pascal Poirier;

“Scène Acadienne à Rogersville,” by Mgr. Marcel-François Richard; “Subercase,” by Père Alexandre Braud (1903), and “Le Drame du Peuple Acadien” (1930), by Père Jean-Baptiste Jégo, have been preserved: these texts are strongly nationalistic and often nostalgic in tone. All of these scripts use exclusively the French of the Academy.

Until the 1940s, in the boys’ colleges, all of the participants in theatrical events were boys or men. Even the female roles were eliminated from plays taken from the standard repertoire, and the creators of a certain “Vercingétorix,” which was performed at the Collège Sacré-Coeur in 1906, reportedly denied permission to a French director who wished to stage their play in Paris, because he wanted to introduce female characters. “[L]es auteurs refusèrent,” comments Laurent Lavoie, “sans doute pour éviter la ‘pollution morale’ causée par la présence maléfique de la femme” (454). The author of “Subercase” manages a misogynist allusion to the feminine sex which contradicts everything that is known about Acadian women:

Forts les corps! Forts les coeurs! et viriles les âmes!
Purs de toute souillure, allez laissant aux femmes
Les larmes de faiblesse et jusqu’au dernier jour
De votre vie, aimez à dire avec amour
Ce double cri qui doit rester votre devise:
Vive la France! L’Acadie et l’Eglise!
(cited in Lavoie, 453)

Pascal Poirier is noteworthy in that his surviving plays include female characters. On the other hand, they were written and performed after he had left Collège Saint-Joseph. “Les Acadiens en Philadelphie” was performed in Ottawa, in 1875.

- 9 René LeBlanc refers to Marguerite à Yutte as “la Rosealba de son temps,” noting that she performed at Christmas concerts, picnics and parish halls from one end of Clare to the other, and that her monologues, which were extremely funny, dealt with daily life and were delivered in the French of the region (LeBlanc, 1997). Charelle Saulnier reports that according to her father, Fidèle Thériault, Marguerite à Yutte knew everybody, was a match-maker, and a genealogist (a *défricheteuse de famille*) (Saulnier, 1997). Nadine Belliveau adds that Marguerite was somewhat *moqueuse*, and that the location of her family home, adjacent to the general store and the road leading down to the wharf, allowed her to keep an eye on affairs in her village. Nadine’s impression is that Marguerite did not create a distinct persona for her monologues: “il n’y avait pas de décalage entre le personnage dans la vie quotidienne et le personnage sur l’estrade” (Belliveau, 1997).
- 10 *The Courier*, October 16, 1975, carried two photos of such women: the first page features Madame Lydie Melanson, who at 91, “joue encore son violon avec confiance”; Madame Eva Melanson, an accordion player, is also featured (15). The paper covered another remarkable woman, Mme. Elizabeth Fournier (née Deveau), of Saulnierville Station, photographed at 91 years of age with her axe and the wood she has cut (Robicheau).

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