

# The evening of the premiere

Paul Le Flem et al.

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Who said the theatre was dead in France? This week alone, we have seen several plays of quality performed (what a joy is this return to quality!), in the most varied styles, from tragedy to revue. And after the success of the bitter, moving or harrowing works of MM. Jacques Deval, Alfred Savoir and Paul Demasy, here is a musical comedy by M. Sacha Guitry that is all smiles, grace and fantasy. Sacha Guitry is not the man to change his manner. For him, the theatre remains a place of enchantment, an entertainment, and with *Ô mon bel inconnu*, he and M. Reynaldo Hahn have given us a light, exquisite work, which gained, yesterday, the most splendid success. M. Guitry possesses the most precious quality of them all, which I will call poetic optimism. It enables him to enchant the most prosaic subjects, and to embellish, for our greater entertainment, the dullest realities. For him, a playwright must be, a magician.

Just look at what he has managed to do, as if it were the easiest thing in the world, with the subject of *Ô mon bel inconnu*. What would you imagine lies beneath this romantic title? Anything but a hat shop. And yet Prosper Aubertin, a respectable tradesman, sells hats, assisted by his wife Antoinette, his daughter Marie-Anne and his maid Félicie. Life is not very much fun among all those hats. So the Aubertin family spends its time arguing and getting bored. Boredom is often the beginning of a dream, and the brave hatter begins to dream of adventures. What does he do? It is very simple. He places an ad in a newspaper – ‘Single gentleman seeks soul mate’ – and he receives one hundred and fifty replies. He chooses

one signed by a countess, and arranges a rendezvous with her. But two other replies, one in his wife's handwriting and the other in his daughter's, prompt him to roar with surprise and indignation. Then he thinks it over and is touched. So they are not happy with their fate, either, since they are looking for something else. He therefore answers them – disguising his handwriting – and after an exchange of tender and romantic letters, he also arranges a rendezvous with each of them, as much to confound and play a good joke on them as to demonstrate to them, at little cost, their need to dream. Each of the ladies, including Félicie – for she is the 'countess' – hums and sighs of her 'handsome stranger' on the way to meet him. The rendezvous is not far away: in a villa in the Basque country, which Aubertin has rented for a week. And his three women, who have regained their charm thanks to the hope that the stranger has instilled in them, will meet there. M. Sacha Guitry-Aubertin pulls all the strings of the innocently flirtatious plot with amused dexterity. The owner of the villa, M. Victor-Abel Tarride, leads Antoinette, who is already troubled and resolved to take the plunge, back onto the path of duty, and seduces Félicie himself. That just leaves Marie-Anne, the delectable young girl. Well, it's simple enough to sort everything out for her. She is led to believe that the letters that set her dreaming were written by a charming young man who had noticed her in her father's shop, and the young fellow, advised by Sacha Guitry, whom no one can resist, even makes the trip to Biarritz in order to come to the villa and ask Marie-Anne's father for her hand.

*Étienne Rey*



## THE MUSIC

An exquisite musical atmosphere envelops Sacha Guitry's comedy. Its score is by a master who knows how to combine emotion with the most delicate artistry. The music gushes vigorously forth and charms the listener

with its grace, the fluency with which it follows the volatile action, and a fantasy which doubles that of the characters.

Moreover, this music possesses a distinction quite devoid of arrogance. It retains an Atticism that may be recognised in the finesse of the melodic lines, the piquant vivacity of the harmony and the amused effervescence of the timbres. Right from the prelude, the listener feels that he is guided by a musician untouched by crudeness. Reynaldo Hahn reminds us of the old tradition of French taste, from which we have been distracted by the depravity of recent years.

Emotion does not renounce its rights any more in the music than it does in the play. The emotion is intense at the end of the first act, when Aubertin sings 'Je suis celle que vous cherchez', a number that is almost poignant in its sincerity. A subdued tenderness pervades the duet [*sic*: trio] 'Ô mon bel inconnu', and the duet in which husband and wife discover a freshness of heart that they thought they had replaced, as they got older, by a penchant for amorous adventure.

In the light, sentimental tone, there is a duet, then an air in which, indulging her feelings, the wife, already touched by the years, but still prepared to run the risk of being loved, muses gently on her burgeoning infidelity. In the same vein is the delightful duet where the two young people exchange charming banter before their impending wedding, the conclusion of an adventure pursued by two hearts which passionately sought each other before meeting. But, in this good-humoured piece, there is also cheerful and lively music, far removed from coarse farce. You will recall, at the beginning, the housemaid's song with its cheeky use of words, the brilliant, fizzing trio of the family quarrel, the jovial paraphrases Aubertin is forced to use when he has difficulty making himself understood on the telephone, the amusing number for the owner of the villa, the alluring and mischievous duet between the provocative maid and her lover who, despite the years, is still confident his blood runs warm. Nor do I forget the witty finale, handled with irresistible verve.

The orchestral preludes, ravishing masterpieces, attest to the composer's penchant for the symphonic. The orchestration is lively and skittish.

Never heavy. Each timbre is deployed with charm, with a tact that reveals the musician and the artist of refined taste. One wants to let oneself be enfolded in the incisive subtlety of this instrumentation; one loves this landscape in sound, so skilfully delineated with a typically French touch. The restful limpidity of the tones goes hand in hand with the transparency of keen textures, respectful of the voices, adding vivacity and lustre to the style.

These merits were fully brought out by the excellent orchestra of the theatre, under the precise, expressive and lively direction of M. Marcel Cariven. In the second act, Reynaldo Hahn himself conducted, and was acclaimed by a captivated, charmed audience.

*Paul Le Flem*



#### THE PERFORMANCE

This musical comedy, in which M. Reynaldo Hahn alternates between what may be called pure music and sung fantasy, needed to be performed by a troupe with flexible vocal skills, while the author's text called above all for actors.

It was therefore necessary to compose a mixed company and to make felicitous compromises. M. Aquistapace, who had proved to be an excellent actor in his previous creations, but had had to retain all his qualities as a singer in them, was at precisely the right moment in his career to be the ideal interpreter of the affable Aubertin. He plays him with an alert temperament and great finesse and sensitivity, a sensitivity expressed more especially in the sung passages. He has adjusted remarkably well to the music of the score, and to the way one must sing the end of the first act in subdued tones, making light of the difficulties of the theme – which he modulates in a manner, I would say, half-spoken, half-sung – and, at the same time, of the words, which carry all the weight appropriate to an act

finale. We meet him chiefly as an actor in the second act, where he does not hesitate to underline the hint of vaudeville in certain aspects of the work. He is perfect at expressing moderation and paternal emotion in the third act. His vocal range remains wide, and he does not force his voice except at deliberately parodic moments; his diction is clear, discreetly dominating the orchestra. He achieved great and well-deserved success in his twofold role as singer and actor. It was obviously more to the actor than to the singer that the management addressed itself when asking M. Abel Tarride to play the role of the owner of the villa in the third act. M. Tarride, who once sang music by Claude Terrasse, courageously called upon such operatic memories as his vocal cords may have preserved, and is excellent in his light duets. His smiling bonhomie and his authority enable him to draw a very pleasing portrait of Monsieur Victor. M. Guy Ferrant possesses elegance, an attractive timbre and a sense of spoken and sung comedy well suited to his role as a stubborn lover. M. P. Vyot is warm and likeable; he has the diction required particularly for the sung parts of his role. M. Numès  *fils*  is extremely funny in the bit part of a resigned shop assistant given to surly repartee. Of M. Koval's voice, there is nothing to be said, since he plays the role of a mute. It is only at the end of the piece that he has two or three verses to sing, from which he emerges as one might expect; in any case, they do not present the slightest musical difficulty. His mute character is expressed in gestures and grimaces. If he is not terribly comical, let us acknowledge that this is not the artist's fault.

The revelation of this matinee was the voice of Mme Suzanne Dantès. Her performances in the many leading parts she has created have already established her as one of our most agreeable actresses. Now she has proved herself to be a singer too, with a pretty light-soprano timbre and a vocal ease that earned her much applause. She sings the air [*sic*: trio] 'Ô mon bel inconnu' delightfully and gives full value to the other sung parts of her role. Mlle Simone Simon's voice is restricted in volume, but of undeniable quality, and she uses it with great grace. What she does is intelligent, while remaining very young, very fresh, very much in character.

Her acting is no less amiable. Mlle Arletty uses her distinctive comic style and amusing voice to characterise Félicie, the maid with an inviting temperament and lively, cheeky banter. Nevertheless, she is equally at ease in the ensembles and pleasantly details the numbers she has to sing, alone or in company. These three singing actresses do not betray the composer in any way.

The sets are very innovative, attractively modern in their structure, with entrances and exits contrived by way of the staircases, most gratifying in effect. The decoration of the hat shop seen in one passage is rigorously accurate. That of the villa in Biarritz is luminous in its bright hues and no less precise, a setting appropriate to the highly ingenious action.

*Armory*

[The hats for the operetta *Ô mon bel inconnu*, at the Bouffes-Parisiens, were supplied by the House of Léon. Léon also installed the hatter's shop.]



#### THE ELEGANCIES OF THE PLAY

In the first act of *Ô mon bel inconnu*, Suzanne Dantès and Simone Simon do not wear theatrical robes but delightful garments, elegant without ostentation, which help to create a perfect atmosphere. Mlle Dantès's robe is made of white crepe de chine with satiny green tartan stripes. Simone Simon's is in shantung printed with multicoloured polka dots. Both are fresh, cheerful, chic and designed by Poirier.

*Clorinde*





Above: The breakfast scene in Act One of *Ô mon bel inconnu*.

Below: Simone Simon and Guy Ferrant in Act Three.

J. Gana Collection.

En haut : La scène du petit-déjeuner à l'acte I d'*Ô mon bel inconnu*.

En bas : Simone Simon et Guy Ferrant à l'acte III.

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