

## OBITUARY

### Thespian Paul Buissonneau was 'major force' in Quebec arts

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Sometimes when she and her husband strolled the streets of Montreal, Monik Barbeau would hear people call out, "Picolo! Picolo!" They were hailing her partner, Paul Buissonneau, whom they recognized as the fictional character – part clown, part harlequin – he had played in a children's television show on Radio-Canada in the 1960s. The affectionate greetings were common, Ms. Barbeau said, even though he had not played the part for many years.

As an actor, director and author, Mr. Buissonneau helped shape Quebec theatre from the beginnings of the Quiet Revolution to the 21st century. He was a co-founder and, for 30 years, artistic director of Montreal's Théâtre de Quat'Sous. He popularized theatre, created a trend-setting company and helped launch careers of formidable Quebec talents including Michel Tremblay, Louise Forestier and Robert Charlebois.

Mr. Buissonneau, who died in Montreal on Nov. 30 at the age of 87, of kidney failure after a long illness, "was a major force," said Eve Payette, an arts reporter for Radio-Canada. "He influenced a whole generation of artists."

Paul Buissonneau was born in Paris on Dec. 24, 1926. His father died when he was 4 and his mother passed away when he was 15, leaving him in the care of his older sister during the Second World War. Young Paul went to work immediately, scavenging for coal in the bitterly cold winter of 1941 under Nazi occupation, and selling shoes that he made himself in Parisian street markets. He sometimes entertained customers by singing and dancing on tabletops.

"He learned as a child how to take care of himself. He was extremely resourceful," Ms. Barbeau said. He provided his own intimate, comically sardonic account of his childhood in his 1991 autobiography, *Les comptes de ma mémoire*.

He began his professional career just after the war ended, when one of his shoe customers encouraged him to join an itinerant troupe performing on makeshift stages in destroyed buildings.

His first move into show business came with a French choral group, *Les Compagnons de la Chanson*, which earned international acclaim backing famed singer Édith Piaf. Mr.

Buissonneau, whom Ms. Piaf affectionately called "Paul-o," was the youngest member of the chorus.

In October of 1947, Ms. Piaf made her New York debut, with the choral group in tow. As Mr. Buissonneau recounted in a 1983 Radio-Canada interview, she insisted that Les Compagnons sing with her in the United States.

"She said, 'Children, I can't make it there alone. I'm not going to America without you.' She was capable of great tenderness, but she could also be very harsh," he recalled.

Mr. Buissonneau visited Montreal while touring with Ms. Piaf in 1948. He fell in love not only with the city, but also with a Québécoise, Françoise Charbonneau, whom he married and with whom he later had a son, Martin. After living for a short time in Paris, the couple returned to Montreal in 1950. Mr. Buissonneau found jobs where he could, such as working in a record store.

He got his big break when he met the city's director of parks, Claude Robillard, who wanted to develop cultural programs for Montrealers. In 1952, he hired Mr. Buissonneau for a theatrical venture that would leave its mark on generations of Quebeckers. With Mr. Robillard's encouragement, Mr. Buissonneau created La Roulotte, a travelling outdoor theatre.

"This was a fabulous concept in popular culture," Eric Jean, a Montreal theatre director, said of the still-operating program. "It brought theatre into parks. It introduced underprivileged children to the arts."

La Roulotte launched Mr. Buissonneau's prolific, multifaceted arts career.

In 1956 he co-founded Théâtre de Quat'Sous. Originally a touring theatre company, in 1965 Mr. Buissonneau found a place that became its first permanent home – a former synagogue in Montreal.

Théâtre de Quat'Sous grew to be an icon in Quebec theatre, providing a venue for playwrights such as Mr. Tremblay, who launched a number of his works there including *En pièces détachées* (In Parts), *A toi, pour toujours, ta Marie-Lou* (Forever Yours, Marilou) and *Hosanna*. Mr. Buissonneau was open to the particularities of Québécois French, including the extravagant joul of Mr. Tremblay and his contemporaries.

"He brought a discipline to theatrical production, but he did not impose a style," Ms. Payette said.

As the company's artistic director, Mr. Buissonneau also made his mark by staging L'Osstidcho, an iconoclastic 1968 pop revue that showcased singers such as Mr. Charlebois and Ms. Forestier.

Mr. Buissonneau was renowned for his rigour as a director, and his sometimes volcanic temper.

"He could be quite tough. Some actors never came back for more. Many others did, because Paul pushed them to their best work. He was full of fire," said Mr. Jean, current artistic director of Théâtre de Quat'Sous, who first met his predecessor a decade ago and collaborated with him when the company opened at its current home in downtown Montreal.

While Mr. Buissonneau forged a career at the forefront of adult theatre, he also entered many Quebec living rooms as Picoles, his clown creation for the Radio-Canada TV show La Boîte à surprise, an after-school variety program that ran from 1956 until 1972.

"Picoles and La Roulotte were perfect for him. Those projects were very Paul Buissonneau," said Montreal director Mathieu Fontaine, who made a film about Mr. Buissonneau in 2012.

After leaving Théâtre de Quat'Sous in 1984, he continued his stage work, directing acclaimed productions of Ionesco's *The Chairs* in 2000 for Théâtre du Rideau Vert and Molière's *Les précieuses ridicules* in 2003 for Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. He also acted in the award-winning Quebec films *La Conciergerie* and *Le P'tit Varius*.

Along with his sometimes fiery temper, Mr. Buissonneau was known for his sense of humour.

In 2012, he invited people to his own "funeral" with a "Notice of non-death." The event was filmed by Mr. Fontaine for a television documentary, *Un p'tit dernier pour la route* (One last little one for the road). The production had to shift gears when Mr. Buissonneau fell ill with diabetes and kidney disease. The film crew followed him to hospital and documented his alternately harrowing and humorous escapades, under the watchful eye of a life-sized Picoles puppet.

With his health somewhat restored, the filmmakers then accompanied him to his apartment – where he married Ms. Barbeau, his partner of more than 30 years. The film ended with an ersatz wake at Théâtre de Quat'Sous which included an appearance by Mr. Buissonneau via Skype.

He leaves his wife; his son, Martin; step-children Annik, Martin and Catherine; and five grandchildren.

In 1965, Mr. Buissonneau was honoured with an Emmy Award for his Radio-Canada television production of *The Barber of Seville*; in 1998 came the Governor-General's Lifetime Artistic Achievement Award (Theatre); and in 2001 the Prix Denise Pelletier, one of Quebec's top artistic awards. In 2010, his adopted city recognized his contribution to the arts with a mural, at the corner of Ontario and Beaudry streets, featuring Mr. Buissonneau.