

Sir Hervé the Knight Errant sets out to conquer the Bouffes-Parisiens

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*'It is one of my best scores, but the public doesn't always
crown the best things with success . . .'*

Such is the humble view expressed by Hervé in his *Notes pour servir à l'histoire de l'opérette*, a memoir he wrote in 1881 for the dramatic critic Francisque Sarcey. In the course of a long career marked by dazzling successes and resounding flops, the composer had had many opportunities to cultivate a philosophical frame of mind. The above quotation concerns his *opéra-bouffe* *Alice de Nevers*, but he might have said the same of *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde*: *Alice* was a complete fiasco at its premiere in 1875, *Les Chevaliers* received a lukewarm reception when it was first given in 1866. In both cases, we are dealing with works that deserve to be reassessed – Hervé was right!

Yes, these valiant *Chevaliers* who return today from a long exile are worthy of enjoying a rebirth. For the work is a more important one than it may at first seem. Why? Because it constitutes a turning point, not only in Hervé's career but in the history of operetta: with it, the so-called 'Crazy Composer' (*le Compositeur toqué*), who is regarded as the father of operetta, wrote his first full-scale *opéra-bouffe* in three acts, and he intended it for the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens, the stronghold of his rival Jacques Offenbach.

A certain amount of explanation is necessary if we are to understand the reasons why the evening of 17 November 1866, the date of the premiere, has the status of a historic event. We have to go back a little in time, to the early 1850s, when numerous restrictions weighed heavily on the Parisian theatres and on composers. Since the early nineteenth century, only a few theatres had obtained the right to put on musical plays, and those who broke the regulations were

exposed to severe sanctions (as Hervé and Offenbach both found out to their cost). Artists were desperately in search of venues where their works could be performed in public. After years of unavailing supplication at the doors of the Opéra-Comique, Hervé at last obtained permission to open his own theatre in 1853: he was authorised to put on one-act plays with two characters. Offenbach got the same privilege two years later. In the meantime, Hervé had welcomed him into his theatre with *Oyayaye ou La Reine des îles*, a piece of musical buffoonery in which the master of the house was obliging enough to play the leading role himself. Offenbach – who never returned his colleague’s compliment – was subsequently granted various little concessions for his theatre: a third, then a fourth character, a chorus, and finally the right to exceed a single act. He wrote an operetta in two acts, *Mesdames de la Halle*, before making a major breakthrough in 1858 with *Orphée aux enfers*. This ‘opéra-bouffon’, as Offenbach called it, marked the true beginning of the light operatic genre that is generally termed operetta.

During that time, what was Hervé up to? He was faring much less well. While dreaming of having his works performed at the Opéra-Comique, he was working like a horse to keep his theatre going. He had resigned from his post as organist of Saint-Eustache in 1854 in order to devote himself to his art (or rather his arts, since he often wrote his own librettos as well as performing his works and those of others) and he had to feed his four children . . . Here is how the composer described his schedule at this period:

- 1 I wrote the verse, the prose and the scenarios of my works.
- 2 I composed the music for them.
- 3 I orchestrated them.
- 4 I played most of the leading roles in my pieces or other people’s.
- 5 I directed them.
- 6 And, finally, I did all the administrative work, from buying the fabrics to writing the copy for the posters. I won’t even speak of the trips to the Prefecture and the Ministry, not to mention toadying on bended knee to the Censorship Commission, which was already almost as intolerant as it is today...

It is therefore likely that Hervé was suffering from what today we would call a burnout when he committed a crime on 30 August 1856. And his misdemeanour was by no means a trivial one: corruption of a minor, an adolescent boy. An ignominious and highly publicised trial left his personal and professional life in tatters. Thus, at the very moment when Offenbach was throwing off a series of straitjackets, Hervé was rotting in prison. When he was

released, a few months later, he had to start again virtually from scratch, while Offenbach was soaring from success to success.

Far from the agitation of Paris, Hervé travelled through the French provinces, and even North Africa, with a view to letting the fuss die down. When he came back to the capital, it was to wield the baton in a theatre of highly uncertain prestige, the Délassements-Comiques. It was there, in 1862, that he performed his first piece in two acts (rather than one), *Le Hussard persécuté*, an ‘opéra impossible’ of which he wrote both words and music, whose frenzied and eccentric tone heralded the creator who was to take full flight in 1867 with *L’Œil crevé*. He gained an entrée to the Théâtre des Variétés in 1864, at a highly propitious moment, since the ‘Liberté des Théâtres’ was at last proclaimed – in other words, the end of the severe regulation that had stifled all composers’ creativity for more than half the nineteenth century.

From that time on, any theatre could perform music, and none of them was going to let the opportunity slip by. Hervé immediately scored a big success with *Le Joueur de flûte*, a one-act operetta on a subject from Antiquity that foreshadowed another one – for Offenbach, never far behind, in his turn put on *La Belle Hélène* at the Théâtre des Variétés, thus embarking on a cycle of major *opéras-bouffes* in three acts, all of them crowned with success. There followed, at the same theatre, *Barbe-Bleue* (1866), *La Grande-duchesse de Gérolstein* (1867), *La Périchole* (1868) and *Les Brigands* (1869). In his *Notes*, Hervé declared, perhaps with a hint of paranoia: ‘Offenbach, who took a dim view of my entering the Variétés, suddenly quarrelled with the Bouffes-Parisiens and came to offer *La Belle Hélène* to Cogniard [director of the Variétés].’ It is true that Offenbach had been having difficulties with the management of the theatre he had founded after giving up its directorship some years earlier in order to devote himself to his composing. But that hardly mattered to him, in the end, since he was soon reigning over almost all the other theatres of the capital. In addition to the Variétés, he gave the Théâtre du Palais-Royal another enduring hit, *La Vie parisienne*, before trying his hand once more at the Opéra-Comique with *Robinson Crusoë* (as if to make up for the failure of *Barkouf* in 1861), while preparing an extravaganza (*grande féerie*) for the Châtelet, which was never finished.

Hence, ironically enough, all that was left for Hervé was the Bouffes-Parisiens, now deprived of its founder. In engaging him for *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde*, the management of the Bouffes was looking for a substitute for its house composer. The commission to Hervé occasioned much discussion; expectations were high, as is shown by an article by Henri Moreno, published in *Le Ménestrel* six months before the premiere: ‘This composer [Hervé], gifted with rare verve

and facility, is exactly the man who is needed at the Bouffes; and perhaps it is due only to a whim of chance that he does not occupy the most cheerfully in the world the place that someone else has so effectively taken over in the field of comical music' (6 May 1866). Hervé himself seems to have been conscious that the stakes were high when he wrote to the vaudeville artist Siraudin in the summer of 1866 to refuse a libretto that the latter had offered him: 'I have had successes with one-acters and I'm looking forward myself to seeing what I can do in a work in three acts.' By having a work staged at Bouffes, Hervé was getting closer – at least geographically – to the Opéra-Comique, whereas previously he had always worked outside the centre of Paris. A whole new public that did not frequent the Folies-Nouvelles or the Délassements-Comiques would have a chance to discover him.

Did the management of the Bouffes-Parisiens ask Hervé to 'do an Offenbach'? The medieval subject, at any rate, recalls that of Offenbach's *Barbe-Bleue*, successfully performed at the Variétés from February 1866; and Merlin's announcement of an absurd competition in Hervé's *opéra-bouffe* seems like an imitation of Offenbach's Popolani, who does the same in *Barbe-Bleue* (with, in both cases, 'une demoiselle en loterie', a maiden as a prize). Act Three of *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde* also features a situation close to that in *Barbe-Bleue*, with characters on the run who conceal themselves among their enemies. The piece itself, a very skilfully constructed vaudeville, presents adventures similar to those experienced by the heroes of Labiche: the cuckolded husband, the flighty wife, the deceptively naïve girl . . . It is the costume that constitutes the main difference, summed up by Félix Clément in his *Dictionnaire des opéras*: 'The parody, the antithesis, the vulgarity of the details, which contrast with the nobility and grandeur of the names and the social status of the characters.' A number of witticisms and droll situations punctuate the abundant dialogue, even if the critics of the time complained that the text of Chivot and Duru lacked wit and remained content with a humour based almost solely on anachronisms. This device, decried by some, is in fact a classic one, as Francisque Sarcey reminded his readers:

Long before this – on 13 June 1792, if you please – came the first performance at the Théâtre des Variétés of *Le Petit Orphée*, book by Citizen Rouhier Deschamps, new music by Citizen Deshayes, ballet by Citizen Baupré-Riché. This was a true operetta. The chorus sang to Orpheus:
Ah! le pauvre époux!
Il se plaint de coups
Qui frappent son âme.
Trop heureux époux,

*Tu n'as plus de femme,
Que ton sort est doux!*¹

(Francisque Sarcey, *Le Temps*, Chronique théâtrale, 'La formation des genres', 25 July 1881)

Reading the description of the set at the start of the libretto, one also thinks of *Orphée aux enfers*: exactly as in *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde*, posters prominently displayed on elements of the decor at once establish the rules of the game and the style of humour that will prevail. In Offenbach: 'Aristaeus, honey manufacturer, wholesale and retail, warehouse on Mount Hymettus. / Orpheus, director of the Orpheon of Thebes, lessons at monthly and individual rates'; in Hervé, 'Castle of the Lord of Rodomont. / Bill stickers will be fined. / Merlin II, wizard, successor to his father. – Boarding school for young ladies, family education. / Mélusine, patented enchantress, without Government guarantee. – Stock clearance sale. – Big reductions'.

Aside from these questions connected with the aesthetic of the piece, the reasons for its lack of success may perhaps be found elsewhere. As an article of 1872 (written when the work was being revived at the Folies-Dramatiques) pointed out, the situation of the theatre posed a problem: 'Staged for the first time at the Bouffes-Parisiens by a faltering management that was risking its last remaining funds, inadequately performed, *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde* had obtained only a lacklustre reception' (Vert-Vert, 'Chronique théâtrale', *Les Modes parisiennes*, 16 March 1872). If there were casting problems, they certainly did not concern the performer of the role of Duchess Totoche, Delphine Ugalde, a seasoned singer who had been a star of the Opéra-Comique right from her debut in 1848, then of the Théâtre-Lyrique in the 1850s. She abandoned these official institutions for the Bouffes-Parisiens in 1861, and was even to become its co-director with her husband, François Varcollier, when the founder left. A contralto with impressive vocal resources, she created, among others, the role of Roland in *Les Bavards*, in which Offenbach wrote cadenzas for her that go up to top D flat. Hervé is scarcely less demanding, assigning her an air bristling with formidable runs, 'parodying the Italian style', to quote the score. Indeed, the composer indicates that this number 'may be omitted, having been composed with an eye to the exceptional talent of Madame Ugalde'. Hervé was writing for a first-class troupe and was aware that he could ask a great deal of his performers while at the same time promoting his ambitions as a composer.

¹ Ah, the poor husband! / He complains of blows / That strike at his soul. / O fortunate husband, / You no longer have a wife: / How happy is your fate!

This desire to demonstrate his skill perhaps explains the prominence of virtuosity throughout the score. The singer of Mélusine also has to negotiate redoubtable intervals and difficult high notes. In the finale of Act Two, she and Totoche are required to sing coloratura at high speed for several pages in a row; Hervé magnanimously offers the singer of the role of Angélique the option of joining in with her two colleagues if she fancies doing so – and if her resources allow her to. Médor also has his quota of top notes and must reach a top D in certain cadenzas. The singer playing Rodomont needs to possess excellent diction, for his extended rage aria in Act One ('Mon œil est assez vif') unleashes a torrent of machine-gun syllables recalling the rapid delivery required of buffo basses in Italian opera. One might also mention the instruments of the orchestra, which (in the original version at least) are required to show great technical prowess. For example, straight away in the Overture, the flute is called on to warble like a real coloratura soprano, and it must execute a further bravura number in the Introduction to Act Three. The Prelude to Act Two is assigned to the clarinet, which in its turn must play a veritable audition piece. Such demands were uncommon in works of this type (as is proved by a comparison with those of Offenbach, which are much more reasonable) and may explain in part why the operetta was not staged more frequently, notably in the provinces, where the theatres very often lacked well-trained troupes capable of meeting them.

The cast was therefore faced with quite a challenge, and perhaps it was not up to the task. The only precise reproach we know of was addressed to the performer of the role of Rodomont: Hervé had engaged Joseph Kelm, his old sparring partner from the time of the Folies-Nouvelles, whose outrageous hamming may well have sat ill with the acting of the members of the company of the Bouffes. Be that as it may, many critics in 1866 praised several numbers in the score, for example Delphin Balleyguier, in *La Semaine musicale* dated 22 November, who asserted: 'The music of M. Hervé is more real music than that of M. Offenbach... The refrain for the knights, a sort of comical Marseillaise, will soon be taken up by all of Paris, and the ballad "Isaure était seulette" can be repeated in every drawing room without making mother or daughter blush. M. Hervé takes good care of his orchestra, and his overture is full of vigour.' Others even suggested that the music was a little too well made, among them Albert de Lasalle in *Le Monde illustré*, for whom 'the score of *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde* displays pretensions to seriousness that are out of place. People will cite the *ariette* sung by M^{lle} Castello [Angélique], the entr'acte charmingly performed by the flautist of the orchestra, and an air whose details are cleverly pointed by M^{me} Ugalde; but it would appear that the music as a whole, which

lacks laughter, is ill suited to the burlesque tone of the words' (1 December 1866).

The biggest obstacle that *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde* had to overcome was the competition – but not the one in the work's libretto. The public was elsewhere in the month of November 1866: first and foremost at the Opéra-Comique, where Ambroise Thomas's *Mignon* was at the height of its success. The critic Albert de Lasalle even admitted that he had not seen *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde*, having preferred to go and hear the coloratura of Philine ('Je suis Titania la blonde') rather than that of Duchess Totoche. Audiences also thronged to the Palais-Royal, where Offenbach was enjoying a triumph with *La Vie parisienne*, the piece everyone wanted to see, an *opéra-bouffe* with a difference, based on contemporary characters and not mythological or historical heroes. Louis Roger, in *La Semaine musicale*, summed up the theatrical situation at that moment: '*Mignon* is a great success; *Freyschütz* [at the Théâtre-Lyrique] is a great success; . . . *La Vie parisienne* is a great success. But *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde* merely drags out its run with heavy gait.'

In presenting a farce on a legendary subject, Hervé and his collaborators came up against two difficulties: a section of the critics (and of the public) had already tired of parodic pieces on themes from mythology and history (Offenbach had enjoyed a mixed reception when he tried to reproduce the success of *Orphée aux enfers* with *Geneviève de Brabant* as long ago as 1859), while certain purists continued to scream sacrilege. The same people who had denounced the profaners of Greek mythology (in *Orphée* and *Hélène*) were in full cry once more when they saw the heroes of the Round Table ridiculed: 'Sad! Sad! Operetta has killed the gods, has killed the heroes, has killed the barons of the Middle Ages, and this evening, at the Bouffes-Parisiens, it is preparing to kill the knights of the Round Table. Lost forever to the respect of the population, Médor, Amadis, Lancelot, Ogier and Renaud! Lost like the beautiful Angélique and the fay Mélusine!... A curse on you, M. Hervé! A curse on you, M. Duru! A curse on you, M. Chivot!' (X. Feyrnet, *Le Temps*, 18 November 1866).

In spite of the censors, the *opéra-bouffe* genre would continue to flourish, but moving away from literal parody of ancient subjects. Offenbach showed the way with satire of contemporary morals (*La Vie parisienne*) or military authority (*La Grande-duchesse de Gérolstein*), or by trying his hand at a new type of *opéra-comique* (*La Périchole*). Hervé, for his part, followed his individual path by giving still freer rein to his zaniness, so personal in character, in what we might call his 'Tetralogy of the Folies-Dramatiques' (the theatre where he took up residence from 1867 onwards): *L'Œil crevé* (1867), *Chilpéric* (1868), *Le Petit Faust* (1869) – his most lasting success – and *Les Turcs* (1869) – his most

neglected masterpiece. Hervé was his own librettist in the first two of these; for the last two, he sought the assistance of Hector Crémieux, one of the authors of *Orphee aux enfers*, with the collaboration of Adolphe Jaime.

The question of the libretto appears to be a key factor in the survival of a work. Where Offenbach could count on the genius of his librettists Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, Hervé very often could trust only to himself. His triple talent as author, composer and actor-singer, far from giving him an advantage, seems unfortunately to have done him a disservice. He even disowned those talents at one stage, when he wrote to Émile Perrin, director of the Opéra-Comique: ‘I have completely abandoning singing, which I used as a means of getting my music performed. I went off on the wrong track, and I have gone back to the right one, I think, by returning to my old remit as a conductor and deciding that from now on I will busy myself exclusively with composition’ (letter of 30 January 1862). But he soon went back on this resolve in order to play the principal roles of *Chilpéric* and *Le Petit Faust*...

On the occasion of *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde*, in any case, in order to look serious – and perhaps also to work less and concentrate on the music – Hervé benefited from the assistance of two librettists who, without having the genius of Meilhac and Halévy, were nonetheless talented writers, as witness their numerous hits with all the most successful composers of the day. Henri Chivot and Alfred Duru were still at the start of their collaboration, which was to yield its ripest fruits some years later with *Les Cent Vierges* (music by Lecocq, 1872), *Le Grand Mogol* and *La Mascotte* (music by Audran, 1877 and 1880), and *Madame Favart* and *La Fille du Tambour-major* (music by Offenbach, 1878 and 1879), to name only the best-known titles. Nevertheless, one guesses that the indefatigable – or incorrigible – Hervé took a significant part in the work even when he did not sign the libretto. On this subject, his generally well-informed first biographer, Louis Schneider, quotes Crémieux’s rejoinder to Hervé when the latter brought him some lines for *Le Petit Faust*, advising him to modify them if necessary: ‘What do you expect us to change? You write the verse and the *couplets* better than we do ourselves!’ (*Le Petit Marseillais*, 22 June 1925). It is in that very same *Petit Faust* that one finds the grandiloquent lines placed in the mouth of the dying Valentin as he heaps reproaches on his sister: ‘L’honneur est comme une île escarpée et sans bord, / On ne peut plus rentrer quand on en est dehors’ (Honour is like a steep island without a shore: / You can’t get back inside it when you’re outside’). One is tempted to see this as a comic invention of the authors. Yet this severe distich is not a product of Hervé’s pen, but that of Boileau (*Satires*, X). And before ending up in the later work, in 1869, it had already been sung by Duchess Totoche in *Les Chevaliers de*

la Table ronde. Hervé must have been attached to this phrase, since his own honour had been given a rough ride at the time of his trial in 1856, and the Opéra-Comique must have seemed to him like the steepest of islands . . . When he revised *Les Chevaliers* for the revival of 1872, he removed the distich, by that time too closely associated with *Le Petit Faust*, whose success continued unabated.

Hervé is therefore always, at least to some extent, the author of the librettos he set to music. Among his specific stylistic traits, one notices his persistent – and very amusing – habit of addressing the audience directly, in an offhand manner that verges on effrontery. Thus Rodomont stops the action on his first entrance, while the other characters freeze, and moves downstage towards the audience to ‘begin a lengthy digression’, as he says. One often encounters asides in the theatre of this period, but this manner of radically knocking down the fourth wall is Hervé’s alone. Similarly, further on, Rodomont seems to be giving the audience the recipe for a good operatic finale: ‘Jubilation and sadness: let us mingle these twin sentiments with artistry!’ Chivot and Duru were to write many more librettos in their long and fruitful career but were never to go as far with other composers. Did Hervé prompt them to write specifically for him, or was he himself responsible for many of the lines?

The device of comedy in music that Hervé employs most frequently in his works consists in a wide variety of ruptures of tone. At several points in *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde*, he installs a mood comparable to that of a serious operatic work, then suddenly shatters it by means of a surprise, the abrupt appearance of an element completely out of place in the atmosphere he has just created. Nothing is so evocative of the serious genre as the recitative, grandiloquent or elegiac, expressing lofty sentiments, which can then be demolished with a word or a familiar expression. Take, for instance, the moment when Roland, right in the middle of a hitherto entirely respectable recitative, suddenly comes out with the line ‘Que vient faire ici ce crampon?’ (What’s that leech doing here?) when he sees Mélusine. Or the grand concertato of the Finale to Act Two, the music of which, for the space of a few bars, would not disgrace a Verdi finale – ‘Il connaît le mystère / Et surprend mon secret / Évitions sa colère . . .’ (He knows the mystery / And has found out my secret; / Let me avoid his rage . . .) – but is at once contradicted by the offhand ‘. . . Et faisons notre paquet’ (. . . and scarper). The same technique is at work in the *Romance* sung by Totoche, one of the score’s big hits (it was encored, and commented on by the critics), where the music sounds like one of the real *romances* that Hervé also wrote (such as *Le Temps des roses*), but the unseemly words (‘If not for your husband, at least do it for your family!’) completely shatter the illusion. It is rather like seeing an artist

painting pretty Mona Lisas and then amusing himself by immediately adding a moustache to them.

To surprise his audience, Hervé also enjoys playing with the words, sometimes repeating them to the point of giddiness (the ‘gar’gar’gar’gar” rapped out by Rodomont in the air mentioned earlier, first in quavers then in semiquavers, ends up resembling an onomatopoeia illustrating a particularly vigorous bout of gargling). The words are chopped up purely for pleasure, notably in the successful *Ronde* at the end of the first act, ‘Jamais plus joli métier / Ne fut dans le monde! / Que celui de cheval, que celui de chevalier’ (Never was there a finer trade / In the world / Than that of a horse, that of a horseman), or with a variant in *Mélusine’s couplets*, when Médor sometimes repeats the ends of his partner’s phrases with surprising results:

Mélusine: Qui pourrait dire?
Médor: -rait dire?²

Later in the same number, Médor sings an astonishing onomatopoeic line, ‘Tra la la you piou’, which caricatures some not easily identifiable instrument (further on there is an imitation of the bass drum with a heavily accented ‘boum boum boum’). These syllables are even more amusing when they accompany a sinister allusion: ‘. . . dont il mourut! [Of which he died!] Tra la la you piou!’ There are other instances of this, like Rodomont’s terrifying ‘tri la ti ta ta, tri la ti ta ta’. But Hervé’s favourite onomatopoeias are certainly those that imitate the Tyrolienne or yodelling song. Every time the opportunity presents itself, the composer allows his characters to ‘drop out’ of the action, suddenly abandoning the situation to launch into unbridled cries of ‘tralala-itou’ featuring shifts of vocal register, from low to high. This style of song, originating in mountainous regions, which seems intended to recall Germany – rather than Switzerland – will almost be appropriate to the situation in *Le Petit Faust*, where a certain patriotic trio – the ‘Chant du Vaterland’ – has recourse to valiant refrains of ‘trou la ou la ou’. But it is completely out of place (and thus hilarious) in the finale of *Les Chevaliers*, after mock-glorious words, for the characters to utter ‘Laitou! Laitou! Trou la la!’ One might note in passing two more charming penchants of Hervé’s, his taste for incorporating the staging in the score (the ‘one, two, three . . .’ up to ten in the *Ronde des Chevaliers* are marked: ‘Shouted, and accompanied by gestures conveying knightly and comic movement’) and his deliberately mangled prosody: ‘la table ron-on-de’, with the two ‘on’ strongly accented. Hervé pulls all these strings to disorientate his listener and subvert the plot, bringing it to the brink of fragmentation, indeed chaos: he reveals the

² The repetition of the end of the original innocuous ‘Who could say’ is heard as ‘raidir’, ‘to stiffen’.

fictive nature of the narrative, whereas in Offenbach the comic element is used to add spice to the plot, without compromising the illusion, the evasion of the spectator.

Hervé must have had faith in his score, for he offered a new version of it to the public in 1872. There was much praise for the cast, headed by M^{me} Sallard in the role of Mélusine: a highly skilled singer, scarcely inferior to M^{me} Ugalde. The role of Rodomont was assigned to the excellent Milher, one of Hervé's favourite performers, who had already shone as Gérômé (*L'Œil crevé*), Ricin (*Chilpéric*) and Valentin (*Le Petit Faust*). In the role of Médor, Hervé's son Emmanuel Ronger (who used the stage name of Gardel-Hervé) also garnered his share of the plaudits. Another notable member of the cast was the variety artist Mathilde Lasseny, who offered a new characterisation of Duchess Totoche. Hervé knew her well, having written the role of Fleur-de-Bruyère, alias Chapotarde, in *Le Hussard persécuté* for her ten years previously. The indiscreet Hervé even tells us in his *Notes* that she had been his mistress in the early 1860s before throwing him over: 'A rich banker having offered her an investment superior to mine, after some slight hesitation she decided to sacrifice the B flat to the banknote of the man of the south.' She made a stage comeback in 1872, bringing with her a slight whiff of scandal that was very welcome to the promoters...

Will our ironic era, as fond of parody as it is of the Middle Ages (one might instance the continuing success of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*), eager for musicological discoveries, give Hervé's *Chevaliers* its chance? There have been plentiful examples of happy surprises in the exploration of forgotten repertoires; for a start, all those works of Offenbach that were badly received for the wrong reasons, connected with the political climate – one need look no further than the most recently revived, *Fantasio*, the premiere of which suffered from the proximity of France's defeat at the hands of Prussia. Hervé's zaniness, his extravagance and his excesses, could nonplus his contemporaries; they might well appeal to today's spectators, who are much more inured to that sort of thing. Then we could hear new versions of his best-known works (the historical recordings, delicious though they are, are insufficient), or else rediscover *Les Turcs*, already mentioned above, *Le Trône d'Écosse*, or even *Alice de Nevers* – all works that fell victim to unfavourable circumstances, and in which Hervé believed he had produced a masterpiece. And who knows – perhaps Hervé was right again?

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