

## Modulating Popular Culture: Cultural Critics on Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs*

Michèle Martin

Volume 52, 2003

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt52art03>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Martin, M. (2003). Modulating Popular Culture: Cultural Critics on Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs*. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 52, 109–136.

Article abstract

This paper discusses the appropriation of a work of popular culture as a tactic in a politics of cultural hegemony. The work in question, Michel Tremblay's play *Les Belles-Soeurs*, is particularly interesting as it is the first working-class cultural production shown in public in the new Québec of the 1960s, where the Quiet Revolution was in full bloom. After sixteen years of conservative government and Church domination in the cultural domain, the province was led by a liberal government whose members were mostly from the urban petty-bourgeoisie. The field of cultural production changed markedly. The study illustrates a project of cultural critique in newspapers with differing audiences. It reveals the tactics adopted to accommodate and recuperate this irruption of popular culture. It compares the treatment of *Les Belles-Soeurs* by French reviewers in Québec with those in France and with English reviewers in Canada.

# Modulating Popular Culture: Cultural Critics on Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs*

Michèle Martin

la compagnie des deux chaises  
dans  
les belles-sœurs



de gauche à droite : Madeleine Langlois, Christine Olivier, Rita Lafontaine, Mirielle Lachance, Carmen Tremblay, Danièle Lorain, Denise Filiatrault, Juliette Huot, Monique Mercure, Frédérique Collin, Denise Morelle, Pauline Martin, Sylvie Heppel, Eve Gagnier.

*Les Belles-Soeurs*'s cast at L'Espace Pierre Cardin, as shown in L'Espace's programme released for the play in Paris. Missing in the photograph is Odette Gagnon. National Library of Canada (hereafter NLC), Fond Michel Tremblay, 1991-1, Box 1. With the permission of Michel Tremblay.

Michèle Martin, "Modulating Popular Culture: Cultural Critics on Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs*," *Labour/Le Travail*, 52 (Fall 2003), 109-35.

*Modulating Popular Culture: Journalistic Theatre Critics on Tremblay's  
Les Belles-Sœurs*

THIS PAPER DISCUSSES the appropriation of a work of popular culture as a tactic in a politics of cultural hegemony. The work in question, a play by Michel Tremblay called *Les Belles-Sœurs*, is particularly interesting as it is the first working-class theatre production, written in *joual*, shown in public in the "new" Québec of the 1960s. It thus illustrates a project of cultural critique in newspapers that appealed to class- and culturally-specific audiences. Tremblay's play, first produced in 1968 and later translated into more than twenty languages including Yiddish and Japanese, is a work of popular culture, not only because of its object, which is to relate a moment in the everyday lives of fifteen working-class women, but especially for the language it uses. The play was written in *joual*, crude slang characterized by slurred diction, old French words, curses, and anglicisms.<sup>1</sup> The *joual* reproduced in *Les Belles-Sœurs* was the language spoken in Montréal's working-class areas.<sup>2</sup> At the time, the play constituted a counter-hegemonic piece of art and, as such, exposed "polite" audiences to a realistic view of working-class language and culture for the first time in the venue of the theatre.<sup>3</sup> Though other "popular" plays had been shown in Montréal prior to *Les Belles-Sœurs*, these were written in a "respectable," though not necessarily "correct" French language.<sup>4</sup> *Les Belles-Sœurs* was

<sup>1</sup>The term comes from what Lawrence Sabbath defined as "the corruption of the French word for horse": *cheval/joual*. *Montreal Star*, 30 August 1969. It was first used by André Laurendeau in his column. See "Actualité," *Le Devoir*, 21 October 1959. In 1960, Jean-Paul Desbiens took up the term claiming that *joual* was "not a form of French composition but of decomposition of French." See Jean-Paul Desbiens *Les insolences du Frère Untel* (Montréal 1960), 24. *Joual* was later described by Gilles Lefebvre as "the anglicised language of the urban proletariat." See *Le Devoir*, 30 October 1965. More recently, Marty Leforest asserts: "Who can say exactly what *joual* is, as far back as we can go, it has been a vague term, sometimes a holdall in which one packs all that involves a slight difference with the norm, other times it is a label associated with one of Montréal's areas. From the linguistic point of view, no precise definition has ever been able to impose itself." See Marty Leforest, *États d'âme* (Montréal 1997), 46.

<sup>2</sup>In general, however, *joual* is known as the language of the uneducated people and, whatever its content, has the structure of oral language. As such, it is very different from standard French, to the point that Tremblay stated that he "had to write a single sentence ten times before finding the structure of mind of the Québécoises" of his play. See J.C.G., "Plus c'est absurde, plus c'est joual," *Le Petit Journal*, 26 August 1968.

<sup>3</sup>Tremblay's work has now been integrated as a valuable piece of hegemonic culture and is considered an important asset of the Québécois culture.

<sup>4</sup>Gratien Gélinas and Marcel Dubé were already well known in the Québécois population. However, though their heroes and heroines were issued from the working classes, they used "correct" language, though uttered in a manner associated with "decent" working-class peoples. For more information on this and connected issues see Usmiani Renate, *The Theatre of Frustration* (New York 1990); and Usmiani Renate, *Michel Tremblay* (Vancouver 1982).

the first to move such working-class culture into the heart of respectable theatre and, as such, it was the subject of much controversy. The play's striking popularity, however, forced the arbiters of good taste to accommodate it, a classic tactic in the cultural politics analysed since Gramsci as hegemony.

This article is concerned neither with understanding the profound meaning of Tremblay's play *Les Belles-Soeurs* through a detailed analysis of its content and structure, nor with the reception of the play by the Montréal population.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it investigates the way an artistic event belonging to the sphere of popular culture was apprehended by theatre critics in the printed press, and the ways in which the reception by the critics was influenced by the hegemonic culture. To do this, I have used a comparative analysis of the most "intellectual" contemporary newspapers such as *Le Devoir* in Montréal and *Le Monde* in Paris, and the most "popular" newspapers such as *Allô Police!* in Montréal and *France Soir* in Paris. The analysis is limited to the written press coverage of the first public showing of Tremblay's play in Montréal in 1968 and in Paris in 1973.<sup>6</sup> I am using the case of *Les Belles-Soeurs* as an opportunity to discuss the ways the politics of cultural hegemony work in cultural critique, a form of journalism that I have been studying for some years.<sup>7</sup> Relatively little work has been done on the role of journalistic theatre critics in the formation of a hegemonic culture. I raise such issues as the role of newspapers in establishing the value of popular theatre production and the ways in which cultural critics working for different types of newspapers represent the various groups and classes constituting their publics.

Ferenczi, citing Henry Bérenger of the *Revue Bleue*, identifies two general types of newspapers: didactic newspapers, with the mission of educating their public with serious information; and recreational newspapers, with the aim of entertaining their public with trivial and scandalous news.<sup>8</sup> The first type of paper is aimed at an élite audience, while the other targets less educated readers, including sections of the working class. *Les Belles-Soeurs* was reviewed in both types of newspaper in Québec. My expectation was that the play would be attacked in the

<sup>5</sup>Indeed, many studies have been done on Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs* and other plays. None of these analyses, however, are concerned with the relationship between cultural hegemony and cultural critique as a form of journalism.

<sup>6</sup>Between these two events other representations were produced. The play was so popular in Montréal that it came to the stage several times in at least two theatres. It was shown in the Stella from September to December 1968 and from the end of August to December 1969. It also came back to the Rideau Vert's stage in August 1969 and May 1971 with a new cast. From 10 October to 11 November, 32 performances were shown at the Théâtre Port Royal in Montréal to over 26,000 people! Finally, it was translated into English by B. Glassco and J. Van Burek and shown in Toronto in April 1973.

<sup>7</sup>See among other works Michèle Martin, *Victor Barbeau, pionnier de la critique culturelle journalistique* (Sainte-Foy 1997).

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Ferenczi, *L'invention du journalisme en France* (Paris 1993), 215.

educational newspapers and praised in the entertaining press. Despite my awareness of the structure of media ownership in Québec, I expected that market considerations would lead the papers that targeted working-class readers to reflect their own culture back to them in a favourable light. Even the most popular newspapers, however, were intensely critical of the type of culture represented by *Les Belles-Soeurs* and the reception of the play elsewhere differed sharply from my expectations.<sup>9</sup>

A Gramscian framework, which does not attempt a simple base/superstructure analysis of cultural production, seeks to understand the reception of cultural products as an element in an ongoing process of cultural conflict. Such a framework seems best able to come to grips with reactions to *Les Belles-Soeurs*. The framework invites us to focus on cultural critics as intellectuals who work to reconcile potentially threatening or ambiguous meanings with patterns of cultural dominance. So, some additional questions come to mind: How closely is the content of the reviews related to the socio-cultural background of the critics? How does the work of cultural critics relate to the publics targeted by the newspaper? These are important questions since cultural critique may be influential in deciding the success or failure of cultural events, and thus in shaping the terrain of cultural contest.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, it is important not only to inventory how such a popular cultural event as *Les Belles-Soeurs* was perceived by different types of newspapers, but also to discover whether critics from different cultural locations — Franco-Québécois, Anglo-Québécois, and European French — adopted different tactics in taking up this controversial work; tactics emphasising the content or the structure of the play, depending on the background of the critics. The Anglo-Québécois and the French critics were marginal players in the politics of Franco-Québécois cultural hegemony since their opinions reached only a small press readership. Yet, an examination of their reactions serves to deepen our understanding of the particular position taken by French-Québécois reviewers.

<sup>9</sup>As we will see later, however, "intellectual" papers, though critical of the language of the play, praised its structure and the actors' interpretation.

<sup>10</sup>Antonio Gramsci in "The Intellectuals," was the first to discuss the relationship between journalists and the process of hegemony in the cultural sphere. See Antonio Gramsci, "The Intellectuals," in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London 1971), 5-25. Much later, Raymond Williams developed this notion at more length. See Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London 1981). Pierre Bourdieu and Louis Chevalier both discussed this relationship in terms of its effects on the popular classes. See Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction, critique sociale du jugement* (Paris 1979); and Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses* (Paris 1984). Finally, some authors speak directly to this issue and discuss it at length. For example, see Christophe Charle, *Les intellectuels en Europe au XIXe siècle* (Paris 1996); Christophe Charle, "Le temps des hommes doubles," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 31 (January 1992), 161-87; and Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, *Criticism and Culture: The Role of Critique in Modern Literary Theory* (London 1991).

I begin with a brief examination of the general politics of cultural hegemony and then consider the question of the cultural critic in the press. I set the scene for the reception of *Les Belles-Soeurs* by briefly discussing Québec's Quiet Revolution, and then investigate how the play was taken up in a variety of venues. I consider a broad sample of reviews of *Les Belles-Soeurs* in the Montréal francophone press, complemented by reviews from Montréal anglophone papers and from the major Paris newspapers.

### *Cultural Critique and Society*

Cultural hegemony is an ongoing process in which certain values, products, and practices prevail, but never in a manner that is total or exclusive. Hegemony must be analysed both in terms of dominant and alternative, or oppositional elements, for it is a dynamic process in which cultural dominance must accommodate continual threats from subordinated cultures, if it is to survive as such. Hegemonic culture is fashioned out of "a dense variety of strong, living popular cultures which provide a space for profound conflict and unstoppable cultural dynamism," to use Martin-Barbero's expression.<sup>11</sup> We may take "the significance of culture as a strategic battlefield in the struggle to define the terms of [social] conflict."<sup>12</sup> In his analysis of the process of hegemony, Antonio Gramsci argues that "organic intellectuals," among them the journalists, belong to the petty-bourgeoisie — either their class of origin or that which they join through education — and thus generally adhere to the cultural values and tastes of the dominant groups.<sup>13</sup> As such, they are seen by Gramsci as mediators between the bourgeoisie and the popular classes, a position in which they can represent the dominant groups in the vernacular. An important part of the work done by "organic" intellectuals is precisely to deal with "threatening" elements from popular culture. A variety of tactics may be adopted: threatening elements may be marginalized, ridiculed, or appropriated and turned back against themselves. I suggest that the work of cultural critique in the press is implicit in the formation of cultural hegemony.

Christophe Charle argues that cultural critique is an "unavoidable" and "indispensable" form of journalism as it constitutes a mediating point between the cultural products offered on the market and "the solidified and digested forms of culture" that influence the social and economic "fate" of the works offered. The critics, according to Charle, are "organisers of success," though sometimes the review of an event is at odds with its success.<sup>14</sup> The reviewers belong as much to the socio-economic as to the cultural domain and are representatives of both, which

<sup>11</sup> Jesús Martin-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* (New York 1993), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Martin-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony*, 74.

<sup>13</sup> Gramsci, "The Intellectuals."

<sup>14</sup> Charle, "Le temp des hommes doubles," 75.

puts them in an ambivalent situation where they are to be loyal to both sides: the artistic and the business groups. Con Davis and Schleifer echo Charle in proposing that cultural critique is "important and powerful in our understanding of ourselves."<sup>15</sup>

In *La distinction*, Bourdieu claims that cultural tastes are influenced, among other things, by the styles of life and material conditions associated with socio-economic positions. It is not by accident that some cultural practices coming from the uneducated classes are intolerable to the cultural élites whose preferences are accepted as legitimate. The concepts of taste and culture are then closely related to the type of education the critics and the targeted readership have received, and to the milieu from which they issue. As we will see later, critics belong to a cultural élite, which is petty-bourgeois in education or origin, and that, as Gramsci pointed out, reproduces the tastes of the bourgeoisie. For these reasons, it seems essential to extend the study not only to various newspapers reaching readers with different social backgrounds — mainstream (didactic) versus popular (entertaining) publications<sup>16</sup> — but also periodicals published within different cultures: Franco-Québécois, Anglo-Québécois, and French papers as a point of comparison.<sup>17</sup>

My own research on cultural critique in mainstream dailies in Québec has shown that the critics' background has an influence on the content of their reviews, an influence the critics often recognize. Cultural critique is the venue for the expression of the reviewer's preferences, which following Gramsci and Bourdieu, represent élite cultural tastes. For instance, Victor Barbeau, a pioneer in the practice of that form of journalism in Québec, was well aware that cultural critique was a subjective form of journalism not constrained by the requirements of political or economic reporting. Barbeau, classically educated and from a petty-bourgeois family, wrote didactic and moralizing reviews that revealed his strong loyalty to

<sup>15</sup>Con Davis and Schleifer, *Criticism and Culture*, 3.

<sup>16</sup>The term "popular press" includes different types of newspaper, from what Jean Hamelin and André Beaulieu call the "family press," like *Le Petit Journal* or *Le Photo Journal* in Québec or *France-Soir* in France, to the "artistic press," like *Echo-Vedettes* and *Sept-Jours* — all easy to read, abundantly illustrated and rather "inoffensive" papers — and the "yellow press," like *Allô Police*, which mostly printed scandalous sensationalist news accompanied by shocking illustrations of murdered victims, prostitution, and the like. See Jean Hamelin and André Beaulieu, *Les journaux du Québec de 1764 à 1964* (Québec 1965).

<sup>17</sup>Usmiani divides the types of theatre critics into two categories: conservative and liberal. See Usmiani, *Michel Tremblay*, 3. According to that division, the conservative critics all deplored the use of *joual* in the play while the radicals' opinions were split between approving and disapproving. I have decided not to use these categories for the following reasons. First, I have not seen such a clearly expressed ideological allegiance among the critics of the papers reviewed. Second, and moreover, Usmiani looks at critiques published indifferently in newspapers and more or less scholarly journals (e.g. *Relations*, *Canadian Literature*), with very few coming from the newspapers, while I am restricting my sample to newspapers only.

dominant cultural practices. He worked hard to silence, or to ridicule popular cultural events and activities, even though these seemed to attract the largest audiences, which shows that the publics are not altogether influenced by the critiques of an event.<sup>18</sup> In fact, on some occasions, the critique has the reverse effect.

Réginald Martel, a well-known critic in Québec who works for *La Presse*, the most widely distributed francophone daily in Canada, asserts that cultural critique gives "an unbelievable space for subjectivity."<sup>19</sup> Martel suggests that apart from such objective information as the name of the author and the title of the work given at the beginning of a review, the whole article consists mainly of one's opinion or point of view on the event covered. As such, this kind of critique does not represent the tastes and activities of all social groups and classes, but mostly that of the critics themselves and by extension their class of origin or adoption by education. Theorists and practitioners recognize both the subjectivity of cultural critique as a form of journalism and its importance as a mediation between the creators-producers and the public. Critics make important contributions to the process of specifying good taste and in deciding the social fate of cultural products, coding them as legitimate or illegitimate. They are in a position to advise people on what culture they should or should not like, or what cultural activities are or are not "for them." This form of journalism plays a role in the formation of a hegemonic culture.

The popular press argued that *Les Belles-Soeurs* was not fit for the enjoyment of its popular audiences. Why was *Les Belles-Soeurs* "not for them?" Did the anglophone and francophone press see things differently? Did the Parisian press agree with the Québécois critics?

### *Historical Background*

In 1968, the Quiet Revolution was in full bloom in Québec.<sup>20</sup> Important changes took place not only in the political sphere but also in the cultural domain. The meaning and duration of the Quiet Revolution are debatable. Strictly speaking, it lasted

<sup>18</sup>Barbeau, who published his reviews between 1914 and 1932, mainly in *le Nationaliste* et *La Presse* — a newspaper targeting a working-class readership at the time — was the pioneer of cultural critique in Québécois newspapers. One may suggest that the mentality of systematically reading cultural reviews in a newspaper was not yet largely developed at the time, especially in the less educated classes, which could have limited Barbeau's impact on the size of the audience for some popular events. But, it may also suggest that, occasionally, critiques have an effect opposite to that intended by the reviewer. For more information see Martin, *Victor Barbeau*.

<sup>19</sup>"Autour des mots des autres," *La Presse*, 14 November 1993.

<sup>20</sup>The expression "Quiet Revolution" was used for the first time by a journalist of the Toronto daily *Globe and Mail* to describe "the changes which occurred in Quebec after 1960." It was soon after appropriated by francophone journalists. See Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher, and Jean-Claude Robert, *Histoire du Québec Contemporain. Tome II: Le Québec depuis 1930* (1979; Montréal 1989), 421.



from 1960 to 1966, a period during which the Liberal government of Jean Lesage brought important reforms in order to "modernize" the structures of Québécois society. The Liberal members, drawn mostly from the francophone petty-bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie, defended a nationalist position that required a change in the relations of power with the federal government and on the international political scene. This Liberal government whose slogans were: "C'est le temps que ça change" and "Maîtres chez-nous," replaced a conservative government led by Maurice Duplessis who was in power from 1944 to 1959, and made substantial efforts to break the remaining links between church and state; to reform the educational and health systems; and to nationalize such natural resources as electricity.<sup>21</sup> It was accompanied by important social reforms put forward by the federal government in the 1970s

The neo-liberal politics of the government in power created social conditions favouring the loosening of the moral restraints exercised by the right-wing alliance between Church and the Duplessis government.<sup>22</sup> New political and cultural movements emerged. On the political scene, the nationalist position adopted by the government soon divided the new francophone élite. A strongly nationalist strain appeared whose influence on the cultural domain was important, and a variety of nationalist parties and groups became active. Among them were the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ), a group whose bombing campaign was meant to be a message to the effect that Québécois people had stopped being subservient to the English and French establishment and were taking control of their economy, politics, and culture. Many of their earlier activities raised the sympathy of a large portion of the francophone population in Québec and increased the level of its national consciousness and cultural particularities. During the same period, other nationalist movements were formed: Mouvement de libération populaire (1965); Ralliement national (1966); Mouvement de souveraineté association with René Lévesque (1967); and the formation of the Parti Québécois (1968), which came to power eight years later.<sup>23</sup> The period of the Quiet Revolution was one of dramatic nationalist activity in which the questions of language, national identity, and culture were central issues. What language? French. What French language?

<sup>21</sup> Duplessis, who died in September 1959, was replaced by Paul Sauvé who died a few months later. The leadership of the Conservative Party was then taken over by Antonio Barrette who finished the mandate as premier.

<sup>22</sup> Many members of the Union Nationale government of Duplessis were from rural areas, while members of the Liberal government came from the petty-bourgeois and bourgeois francophone classes. For more information see Linteau, Durocher, and Robert, *Histoire du Québec*, 808.

<sup>23</sup> The Parti Québécois emerged from the transformation of the *Mouvement de souveraineté association* into a political party led by René Lévesque, who became premier of Québec from 1976 to 1985.

Culturally, Québec was in full efflorescence and the petty-bourgeoisie had a firm grip on the cultural and educational spheres. The majority of people with influence either in the political or cultural domains were members of that class and, as such, had a classical education based on the learning of ancient Greek and Latin, of élite French literature and theatre, and classical music. Many were trained as lawyers, doctors, professors, journalists, and the like. The educational and cultural systems were under their influence and, not surprisingly, promoted and encouraged the teaching of élite culture.<sup>24</sup> The debate over the language issue started in the mid-1960s. Earlier, a book entitled *Les insolences du frère Untel*, in which Jean-Paul Desbiens, a French teacher, denounced the state of French language in the Québécois school system, aroused, among the élites, many concerns about proper French — *le bon parler français*.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the first regulation related to this issue, Bill 63, passed by the Union Nationale government of Jean-Jacques Bertrand in 1969, was a weak law, in the sense that it was counting on people's good will to use French in society. It incensed nationalist opinion, an opinion now actively expressed in cinema, theatre, literature, and music.<sup>26</sup>

Urban popular culture appeared in new forms and venues from the mid-1960s. I am thinking particularly here of Robert Charlebois' rock show called *L'Ostid'sho*, which just preceded the coming of *Les Belles-Soeurs* and used the same dialect.<sup>27</sup> In the domain of theatre, however, most authors were still writing plays that either adhered to the local tradition of realistic theatre, or attempted to adopt some characteristics either of the American theatre or of classical and modern European theatre.<sup>28</sup>

Michel Tremblay took a completely different approach. Born in 1942, in a working-class family very similar to those illustrated in his work, he was a scholarship boy to a classical college. He was chosen, with 30 other pupils who had just finished their primary school, by the city of Montréal as one of the best students of the city, and his fees were paid by the Québec government.<sup>29</sup> After three months, he

<sup>24</sup>For more information on this and connected issues see Linteau, Durocher, and Robert, *Histoire du Québec*; and Catherine Pomeyrols, *Les intellectuels québécois: Formation et engagement* (Paris: 1996).

<sup>25</sup>Desbiens, *Les insolences*, 23-26. According to Desbiens, some of the members of the élite (politicians, curates, etc.) were also speaking *joual*.

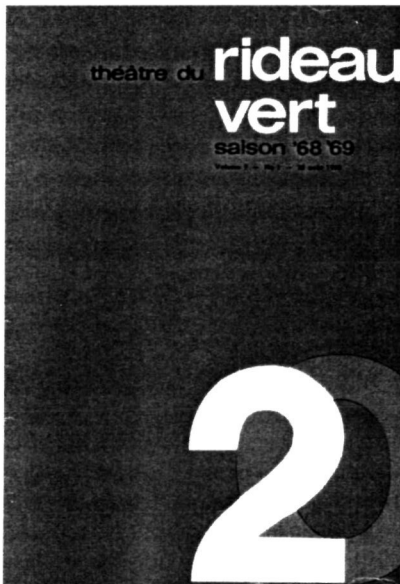
<sup>26</sup>Linteau, Durocher, and Robert, *Histoire du Québec*, 604.

<sup>27</sup>The name *L'Ostid'sho* came from the *joual* language, which is full of oaths and anglicisms. In correct language it would become *hostie de (ostid') show* (sho).

<sup>28</sup>Usmiani identifies these three completely distinct tendencies in theatre plays in Québec at the time. According to him, theatre playwrights felt then obliged to adhere to one of these traditions. What made Tremblay's work so original, he argues, was that he borrowed from each of them. For more information on this and related issues see Usmiani, *Michel Tremblay*, 15.

<sup>29</sup>At the time, working-class children did not usually go beyond primary school, mostly because education was not free. They left school as soon as their parents permitted them to, namely as soon as they could earn some money to help with the family's subsistence. It was only in 1961 that a provincial law was passed requiring compulsory attendance until the age

dropped out, unable to stand the fact that he was repeatedly reminded that he was part of an élite. He then registered at the *Institut des arts graphiques* and began to write. He won his first award in 1964, when he presented his one act play, *Le train*, to the *Concours des jeunes auteurs de Radio-Canada*.<sup>30</sup> His stage career began with his play *En pièces détachées*, presented on television in 1966. Yet, a year before, the members of the committee of the *Festival d'art dramatique du Québec* had refused to consider his work *Les Belles-Soeurs* for their contest in which only élite culture and "correct" French were acceptable.<sup>31</sup> Tremblay's work could be shown in non-serious cultural spaces such as on television, but had no legitimacy at such a cultural event as the Festival of Dramatic Art. In March 1968, *Les Belles-Soeurs* was read at an alternative theatre, *L'Apprenti Sorcier*. Several of Tremblay's friends, actors and producers, attended the reading. One of them, quite popular at the time, Denise Filiatreau, an actress and a friend of the owners of the *Rideau Vert*, a venue for high culture, was enthusiastic about *Les Belles-Soeurs* and convinced her friends to give Tremblay a chance to present the play at their theatre. They accepted on the condition that she play in it, which she did. This play marked the birth of a type of urban Québécois theatre, which, years later, was integrated to the hegemonic culture in Québec, as a theatre of liberation.



Cover of the *Rideau Vert*'s programme for 1968-1969. NLC, Fond Michel Tremblay, 1987-1, Box 1. With the permission of the designer, G rald Zahnd.

of fifteen. For more information see Linteau, Durocher, and Robert, *Histoire du Qu bec*, II, 660.

<sup>30</sup> "Il montre ce qu'il voit," *Perspective*, 20 December 1969.

<sup>31</sup> Usmiani referred to this festival as "The Dominion Drama Festival." See Usmiani, *Michel Tremblay*, 30.

# les belles soeurs

---

comédie en 2 actes de Michel TREMBLAY

mise en scène André Brassard  
décor: Réal Ouellette  
costumes: François Barbeau

---

## *Distribution*

*par ordre d'entrée en scène*

Linda Lauzon	Odette GAGNON
Germaine Lauzon	Denyse PROULX
Marie-Ange Brouillette	Marthe CHOQUETTE
Gabrielle Jodoin	Lucille BELAIR
Rose Ouimet	Denise FILIATRAULT
Lisette de Courval	Hélène LOISELLE
Yvette Longpre	Sylvie HEPPELL
Des-Neiges Verrette	Denise De JAGUERE
Thérèse Dubuc	Germaine GIROUX
Olivine Dubuc	Nicole LEBLANC
Lise Paquette	Rita LAFONTAINE
Ginette Ménard	José BEAUREGARD
Angéline Sauvé	Anne-Marie DUCHARME
Rheanna Bibeau	Germaine LEMYRE
Pierrette Guérin	Luce GUILBEAULT

---

*L'action se passe à Montréal de nos jours*

---

*Il y aura un entracte de 15 minutes*

---

Cast of the *Belles-Soeurs*. As printed in the *Rideau Vert*'s programme for 1968-69. NLC, Fond Michel Tremblay, 1987-1, Box 1. With the permission of Le Rideau Vert.

The main characters of the play were working-class women, a group never before highlighted in Québec theatre. The gathering of fifteen women in the kitchen of a working-class apartment to glue one million grocery stamps that one of them had won in a contest into booklets, is the pretext for the action. The play describes the everyday urban life of francophone working-class women of different ages, the eldest 93 and the youngest about 18. They were seen to be locked into their own fates, with no possibility of escape, some at home, others, the youngest, in menial jobs or "immoral" occupations such as prostitution. Tremblay himself asserted that he only wanted to describe the milieu, social and cultural, into which he was born and raised by these women whom he loved. They were living in a world where people spoke *joual*, the language in which the play was written. In short, *Les Belles-Soeurs* is a tragi-comedy about working-class women's repressive and oppressive lives.

Tremblay consistently claimed that the world he described in *Les Belles-Soeurs* was the only world he knew. The play, however, was clearly social criticism. Tremblay often asserted he wanted to show the misery of the majority of Québécois caused by the English and French establishment, which exploited and oppressed them, especially the clergy. Yet, his accounts of his own intentions were

ambiguous.<sup>32</sup> They seemed to be a mixture of personal feelings, critical views of society, and efforts to manipulate press releases. His accounts of the play might have influenced the tone or content of some of the reviews it received. For instance, in the interviews he gave in Paris, he insisted on his intention to give economically and socially dominated women a voice. Incidentally, more reviews in Parisian than in Montréal papers were concerned about the fact that the play was about the miserable living conditions of working-class women in Montréal.<sup>33</sup>

As we will see below, the critiques focussed on one or more of the following aspects of the play: content/language, content/representation, or form/structure.

### *Reception*

There were 26 reviews of the play across 3 francophone mainstream dailies: *La Presse*, *Le Devoir*, and *Le Soleil*; 7 francophone weeklies: *Le Petit Journal*, *Photo-Journal*, *Échos-Vedettes*, *Sept Jours*, *Allô Police*, *Perspective*, and *Digeste Éclair*; and 2 anglophone dailies: *The Montreal Star* and *The Montreal Gazette*. Since I examine the reaction to the first public production of Tremblay's play in a mainstream theatre in Montréal, I have limited my sample to the newspapers that covered the event in that city. The data from Parisian newspapers covering the first public showing of the play in Paris complete the corpus. The ten reviews examined come from five "serious" dailies: *Le Monde*, *L'Aurore*, *Le Figaro*, *Combat*, and *La Croix*; and one "popular" widely distributed daily, *France Soir*. Because, as I explained earlier in the paper, cultural critique is largely a subjective form of journalism, it is necessary to look at the social background of the critics. I have identified them through biographical works and literary dictionaries, by interviews with those not listed in these works, and also through some profiles of female journalists.

The discussion on hegemony and cultural legitimacy might lead us to expect that the mainstream dailies would either condemn the play, or appropriate it to make it acceptable, or legitimize its place in the dominant culture, and that the popular weeklies would acclaim it because, finally, someone was representing their readers' culture at the theatre. I have found, however, that this was far from being the case.

<sup>32</sup> Many studies, which have been done on this and other plays written by Tremblay, attempt to analyse the "real" meaning(s) behind the actual content. Tremblay himself was never clear about this issue and has given explanations varying according to the interviewer, the place where he was interviewed, and the time at which it happened. See for instance: Claude-Gingras, "Mon Dieu que je les aime, ces gens-là!" *La Presse*, 16 August 1969; Jacques Larue-Langlois, "Il montre ce qu'il voit," *Perspective*, 20 December 1973; Jean-Claude Trait, "Tremblay: le joual se défend tout seul," *La Presse*, 16 June 1973; Unsigned, "Michel Tremblay dialogue avec le public parisien," *Le Devoir*, 3 December 1973.

<sup>33</sup> In the 1970s the economy of Montréal was declining and the rate of unemployment was increasing. The first to be hit were women, especially those belonging to the lumpen proletariat, who had to live on low wages, in insecure jobs, and cramped accommodations.

*Les Belles-Soeurs in Montréal*

Three critics reviewed the play in *Le Devoir*. Jean Basile's critique was mostly about the content of *Les Belles-Soeurs*, though he briefly mentioned that the structure of the play was "efficient" and that André Brassard's direction "magnificently" served its purpose.<sup>34</sup> He claimed that the play was a work of art. At the level of representation, he asserted that it was an intelligent and critical view of Québec society, which described "that" world with fairness and acuity. As for the language, he pointed out that the use of *joual* was inevitable since it was the language of "these" people, a brutal expression of their alienation. So the play was a picture of "a people." He indiscriminately used the concept of people as a class, as a mass, and as a society. André Major's critique was entirely devoted to the language used in the play.<sup>35</sup> Though he did not approve of it, he suggested that it was "a necessary tool to make people aware of their nauseating cultural condition so they can vomit it up once and for all." One would rather not see "the evidence of our degeneration," he added, but Tremblay's play was collective consciousness raising, difficult but necessary for the people to improve themselves. The third review in *Le Devoir*, that of J.P. Du Mesnil, was the most negative.<sup>36</sup> The title foretold what was coming: "Quand le joual bave au Rideau-Vert (Slobbering *joual* at the Rideau-Vert)." He complained about Tremblay's idea of "so stupidly attempting" to represent the habits and activities of the urban area where he was born and raised. "Why this sad relentlessness to always underline the baser instincts of our race?" he complained. "Have we then only faults?" He strongly objected to the language used in the play stating that it was "simply disgusting." So, Major's and du Mesnil's reviews in *Le Devoir* accepted *joual* as reflecting the state of the language of "Québécois people" as a society, or even as a nation and, in the circumstances, considered it as essential to render the play more realistic, while condemning its use as a national language.

In *La Presse*, Martial Dassylva made much the same points except with respect to the language.<sup>37</sup> He asserted that it was wrong to present *joual* as the national language of Québec, and that in so doing Tremblay broke an unwritten convention of drama writing, and transformed the play into an illegitimate cultural event. All these critics seemed to detach themselves from Québécois society in their reviews, a phenomenon that was not observed in my study of Victor Barbeau.<sup>38</sup> This pioneer

<sup>34</sup>"Une entreprise familiale de démolition," *Le Devoir*, 30 August 1968.

<sup>35</sup>See "Un exorcisme par le joual!" *Le Devoir*, 21 September 1968. Other articles by the same reviewer with similar arguments: "'Les belles-soeurs' en français? Non merci!" *Le Devoir*, 26 September 1968; "À joual donné (il faut quand même) regarder les dents," *Le Devoir*, 14 November 1969.

<sup>36</sup>"Les lecteurs nous écrivent/Quand le 'joual' bave au Rideau-Vert," *Le Devoir*, 24 September 1968.

<sup>37</sup>"L'amour du 'Joual' et des timbres-prime [sic]," *La Presse*, 29 August 1968; and "Le nouveau réalisme (?) Des 'BellesSoeurs' [sic]," *La Presse*, 14 September 1968.

<sup>38</sup>Martin, *Victor Barbeau*.

of the journalistic cultural critique included himself with the audience, the more so when he was extremely critical. Though Claude Gingras timidly suggested a year later when he reviewed the play in *La Presse*: "Didn't we all come from there after all?"; he quickly added, like the other critics, that the use of the *joual* was a useful didactic device for uneducated peoples.<sup>39</sup>

In the "popular" press, the critiques were harsher in the Franco-Québécois than in the Parisian newspapers,<sup>40</sup> except that of *Le Petit Journal* and *Digeste Éclair*,<sup>41</sup> written by Jean-Claude Germain, himself a writer using popular language, though not *joual*.<sup>42</sup> This did not prevent him from saying that, with *Les Belles-Soeurs* mirroring their lack of culture and making them conscious of it, Québécois had no excuse anymore to refuse to improve their national culture. Germain assessed Tremblay's play as a nationalist message for the improvement of the nation. Rémi Trudel, in *Photo-Journal*, was rather condescending: "It suffices, he said, to have hired three or four talkative cleaning ladies to see the realism of Tremblay's characters."<sup>43</sup> Yet, he believed that the play had a didactic function for the popular classes and should help to improve the "national destiny." But to be effective, he said, "we have to convince women to go and see it," as if the whole "national destiny" of Québec depended entirely upon women's culture. Ingrid Saumart, in *Échos-Vedettes*, said that *Les Belles-Soeurs* constituted an accurate portrait of "Québec people" as a subordinated nation by a misogynist.<sup>44</sup> She nonetheless ended her review with a short paragraph where she acknowledged the talent of the playwright, of the director, and of the actors.

But the most critical review was that of Mimi d'Estée in *Allô Police*, the most sensationalist of the weeklies.<sup>45</sup> She concentrated her critique upon the content of

<sup>39</sup>"La vérité cruelle des 'Belles-Soeurs'," *La Presse*, 21 August 1969.

<sup>40</sup>Jean-Claude Germain, "Les Belles-Soeurs: une condamnation sans appel," *Le Petit Journal*, 8 September 1968; R.T. (Rémi Trudel), "Des Belles Soeurs [sic] pas belles à voir!" *Photo Journal*, 11 and 18 September 1968; Claude Jasmin, "Parlons 'Belles-soeurs [sic]' et scénographie [sic]," *Sept-Jours*, 14 September 1968; Unsigned, "Un reflet de notre société," *Sept-Jours*, 14 September 1968; and Mimi d'Estée, "Les belles-soeurs [sic]," *Digeste Éclair*, 13 October 1968.

<sup>41</sup>"'Les Belles-soeurs' un événement capital," *Le Petit Journal*, 10 March 1968; "Denise Proulx: c'est pour elle que Tremblay a écrit ses 'Belles Soeurs' [sic]," *Le Petit Journal*, 25 August 1968; and Unsigned "Michel Tremblay: Le plus joual des auteurs ou vice versa [sic]," *Digeste Éclair*, 13 October 1968.

<sup>42</sup>The popular language is characterized by some of the expressions it contains (words of old French, some anglicisms, etc.) and by the pronunciation which, though different from formal language, is not vulgar. For example, it does include curses or "dirty" words.

<sup>43</sup>R.T., "Des Belles Soeurs."

<sup>44</sup>Ingrid Saumart "'Les Belles Soeurs [sic]' tient presque du chef-d'oeuvre," *Échos-Vedettes*, 7 September 1968.

<sup>45</sup>Mimi d'Estée, "Les belles-soeurs [sic]," *Allô Police*, 13 October 1968. We can see that it took a little while before she decided to attend the play.

the play and the language Tremblay used. In addition to the reflections made by the other critics on the "abominably coarse language," she complained that the play was "a big public trial condemning the élites who have kept Québec in darkness" and that as such, it "should be presented on television even in the most remote corners of the province so that Québec people would be ashamed of themselves and would change their attitudes." She accused the dominant classes of social negligence, saying that "the people are vulgar because the élites did not educate them the way they should have." As a result, "these women," raised and living in poverty, and who most certainly were a part of her readership, were "irremediably condemned" to another kind of poverty, "more terrifying than the first one," that of the mind: "Nothing in the world could cure these unfortunate women of their mental anaemia, which they will transmit to their children as natural values." D'Estée blames Tremblay for being part of "those young people who are touched by the language they learned on their mother's knees, and sincerely believe that they would betray their natural character in using correct and universal French." She mentioned neither the quality or the structure of the play, nor that of the direction or of the interpretation. D'Estée's harsh critique is particularly interesting as she published it in a racy tabloid dominated by juicy scandals and gruesome murders aimed at a "lumpen" audience. Cultural reviewers such as d'Estée were turning the play back against the same class of people that had been described with great affection in *La Presse*.<sup>46</sup> As organic intellectuals, the critics were defending élite culture: Gramsci's hegemonic process at work. Despite criticism directed at the élites for failing to educate the masses, popular cultural creativity was turned back against itself: its triumph was proof of its failure.

Notwithstanding their negative comments aimed at the representation of Franco-Québécois society in the play, all reviewers in Montréal newspapers, except Mimi d'Estée and Martin Malina, made some positive remarks about the play itself, some acclaiming the structure of Tremblay's play as a work of art, others the author as a genius or the quality of artistic interpretation. One of those was Jean Garon's critique in *Le Soleil*. He even praised the use of *joual* as "an instrument, [which] stripped of caricature and morale," constituted a reference for the working classes as it "portrayed the characters as realist representatives as well as individual members of a collectivity."<sup>47</sup> Even Martial Dassylva, who had nothing much positive to say about *Les Belles-Soeurs*, did not end his critique without briefly mentioning that Tremblay deserved some respect for his "eye for observation," Brassard for his direction, and the actors for their interpretation. His praise, however, came only after he had denounced what he called Michel Tremblay's "préciosité vers la bas [populist affectation]," namely the use of *joual* and all that it included in terms of oaths, bad words, and the like, as a means of writing.

<sup>46</sup> Claude-Gingras, "Mon Dieu que je les aime, ces gens-là!" *La Presse*, 16 August 1969.

<sup>47</sup> Jean Garon, "Les Belles-soeurs' [sic], une production de grand mérite," *Le Soleil*, 31 August 1968.



In all papers except the three critiques in the *Montreal Star* and the *Montreal Gazette*, the characters, the situation, and the language of the play were readily associated with the Québec nation.<sup>48</sup> It was the Québécois people as a mass who had to improve and decide whether or not they wanted "to better their situation," as Jean-Claude Germain put it in *Le Petit Journal*.<sup>49</sup> In that context, the critics were laudatory on the basis that the play constituted a didactic tool: people must see it, recognise their faults, and try to better themselves. Except for one review by Lawrence Sabbath in *The Montreal Star*, all the critics associated working-class culture with national culture and insisted on its shameful condition.<sup>50</sup> In some of the reviews, the fault for the disastrous state of Québécois culture was laid at the door of the élite, which did not pay attention to the less privileged classes and let them live in their intellectual and cultural misery. But even when the élite was singled out, the message clearly indicated that each individual was responsible for the improvement of his/her own situation.

There were some differences among the reactions to the play in various types of press in Montréal, especially in the anglophone paper *The Montreal Star*. One reviewer, Martin Malina, seemed to misinterpret the class-oriented activities of the women characters in the play, saying: "The pretensions of these would-be-bourgeois ladies begin to seem more pathetic than the playwright intended and the jokes at their expense, meeting no resistance, fall flat."<sup>51</sup> His critique took the play to be meant as a true comedy, and he thought that Tremblay had blown it, because some passages were not funny at all. Here is an example of the so-called two solitudes!<sup>52</sup> The other English-language review by Lawrence Sabbath was insightful.<sup>53</sup> Though he also read the play as a comedy, he stated that the work had universal characteristics as it described the living conditions of working-class people in urban areas and that it could be situated anywhere where there were "untutored, uncultured multitudes who make up the slum east-ends of cities all over the world.... It now possesses the stature of a Canadian classic." Sabbath was the only Montréal reviewer to mention the universality of the play.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup>Martin Malina, "'Les Belles Soeurs'[sic]/Rideau Vert opens new season with Michel Tremblay [sic] play," *Montreal Star*, 29 August 1968; Lawrence Sabbath, "Tremblay's Comedy at le Rideau Vert," *Montreal Star*, 29 August 1968; Unsigned, "Theatre [sic] du Rideau Vert opens new season with Les Belles Soeurs [sic]," *Montreal Gazette*, 29 August 1968.

<sup>49</sup>Germain, "Les Belles-Soeurs: une condamnation sans appel."

<sup>50</sup>Sabbath, "Tremblay's Comedy."

<sup>51</sup>Malina, "Les Belles Soeurs'/Rideau Vert."

<sup>52</sup>This expression was evoked by the Anglo-Canadian writer Hugh MacLennan to represent the relationship between the two "founding" cultural groups of Canada: French and English.

<sup>53</sup>Sabbath, "Tremblay's Comedy."

<sup>54</sup>The many languages into which the play has been translated and the prestigious awards that it has received confirm his insight. See *Théâtre Québécois: Ses Auteurs, ses Pièces*.

Ideological and cultural differences also demarcated reviews written by men and women. Three women, who wrote reviews in *Le Devoir*, *Allô Police*, and *Échos-Vedettes*, insisted on the terrible oppression of women and their incapacity to escape, although none of them addressed the dimension of social class.<sup>55</sup> They were the only Franco-Québécois critics who underlined the fact that the play revealed women's oppression, although they also ended their reviews by extending the fate of women to all Franco-Québécois. The most important difference, however, was observed between francophone critics in Montréal and reviewers in Paris.

### *Les Belles-Soeurs in Paris*

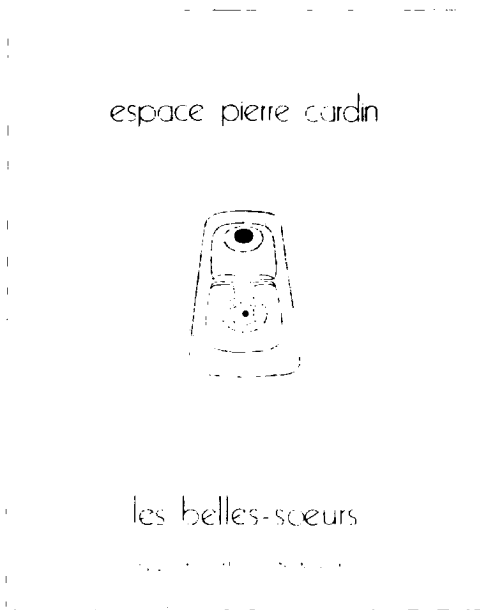
In 1972, a theatre director in Paris wanted to produce *Les Belles-Soeurs* in a French theatre. What political and cultural conditions would awaken the French interest for such a popular cultural event coming from Québec? In the early 1970s, in France, the Right was firmly in power with Georges Pompidou as Président de la République, a leader who did not discourage innovation in cultural creation. Moreover, with the rise of nationalist activity, Québec was beginning to attract the attention and sympathy of sections of the French public, especially intellectual and artistic groups. Still, the Left, generally known as rather lukewarm in supporting Québécois nationalist movements, exerted control over funded theatre in France so that when the play was shown, it appeared in a private theatre. L'Espace Cardin was *mondain branché*, as the stylish cover of the programme shows (see figure 4), very fashionable for a select group of people claiming to appreciate alternative art, on the margins of the mainstream theatre circuit. As such, it was a place where unusual cultural events could be shown.

To bring his play to Paris, Tremblay needed funding, but he was initially refused by both the Canadian and Québécois governments. The then provincial minister of culture, Claire Kirkland-Casgrain,<sup>56</sup> said that she preferred theatre plays

*Répertoire du Centre d'Essai des Auteurs dramatiques* (Montréal 1990). It is important to note, however, that his critique was written when the play was shown again about a year later in Montréal. He had time to think about its implications. Still, other reviewers could have taken the opportunity of seeing the play again, a year later, to revise their critique.

<sup>55</sup>Saumart, "'Les Belles Soeurs [sic]' tient presque du chef-d'œuvre." D'Estée, "Les belles-soeurs [sic]," and Renée Rowan, "Le monde troublant des Belles-Soeurs," *Le Devoir*, 22 August 1969.

<sup>56</sup>When the play was first shown in Montréal, a Union Nationale government led by Jean-Jacques Bertrand was in power in Québec. When Tremblay attempted to obtain some money to bring his play to Paris, a Liberal government led by Robert Bourassa had been in power since 1970.



Cover of L'Espace Pierre Cardin's programme released for the *Belles-Soeurs* in Paris. NLC, Fond Michel Tremblay 1991-1, Box 1.

written in correct language and that she could not subsidize a play written in *joual* to represent Québec in Paris.<sup>57</sup> Tremblay got some funding from the federal government a year later,<sup>58</sup> and *Les Belles-Soeurs* was produced in Paris' L'Espace Pierre Cardin from 22 November to 8 December 1973, with a largely different cast from that of the Rideau Vert.<sup>59</sup> The play was well advertised (see figures 5 and 6) and favourably received by the public as well as by the critics. All Parisian reviews underlined the difficulty of understanding the language of Tremblay's play, some mentioning that the programme of the play needed a glossary.<sup>60</sup> Most of the Pari-

<sup>57</sup> Kirkland-Casgrain's comments were published in the rubric "Opinion," *Le Journal de Montréal*, 24 March 1972.

<sup>58</sup> When the funding was refused the first time, 83 Québécois artists wrote to Mitchell Sharp, the then Secretary of State, to protest against the government's decision and to support Tremblay. This may explain why Tremblay's play obtained funding to go to Paris a year later. For more information see Maurice Lemire, ed., *Le dictionnaire des oeuvres littéraires du Québec. Tome IV, 1960-1969* (Montréal 1978), 92-98.

<sup>59</sup> Only four actors remained from Rideau Vert's cast, and they did not play the same characters.

<sup>60</sup> It is worth noting that, according to three Québécois critics posted in Paris, the language was not a problem for the Parisians who could not understand every word, but enough to follow the story. See Louis-Bernard Robitaille, "'Les Belles-Soeurs' à Paris: c'est la fin du folklore," *La Presse*, 8 December 1973; Michel Vais, "Les Belles-Soeurs à Paris: quand l'ogre est conquis," *Le Devoir*, 10 December 1973; and Albert Brie, "Encore 'les Belles-Soeurs'!" *Le Devoir*, 29 December 1973.

sian critics also reproduced at least some passages of the play to show their readers its "folkloric" aspect,<sup>61</sup> and/or to identify its language as a dialect.<sup>62</sup> Yet, only *Le Monde* drew a parallel with the Parisian *argot*, the language used by some popular classes in Paris.<sup>63</sup> The others qualified *joual* as the "typical" Québécois language, spoken by the majority.<sup>64</sup>



Advertisement published in *Allô Paris*, a weekly publication entirely devoted to listing all entertainment offered in Paris during the following week. NLC, Fond Michel Tremblay 1991-1, Box 1.

<sup>61</sup> J.J., "Les Belles-Soeurs de Montréal à la mode Cardin," *Le Figaro*, 19 November 1973.

<sup>62</sup> Henry Rabine, "A l'Espace Pierre-Cardin, les Belles-Soeurs de Michel Tremblay," *La Croix*, 9-10 December 1973. There is a very tenacious myth among French people that the language that Québécois people speak is not French, but some sort of dialect. However, the structure and the grammar of the language spoken in Québec and in France are the same, albeit some expressions and the pronunciation may be different. We should then talk about a different accent rather than a different language. Though it is a fact that a portion of the popular classes speak *joual* in Montréal, as a portion of the Parisian population speaks *argot*, *joual* should no more be associated with the whole Québécois people than *argot* with the whole French people.

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Cellard, "Les Belles-Soeurs, quinze femmes du Québec," *Le Monde*, 25-26 November 1973.

<sup>64</sup> François-Régis Barby, "Théâtre québécois chez Cardin," *Combat*, 17 November 1973; Patrick De Rosbo, "Les Belles Soeurs [sic] de Michel Tremblay," *Combat*, 27 November 1973; Pierre Julien, "Paris va découvrir les ménagères québécoises [sic] et leur langage: le joual," *L'Aurore*, 19 November 1973; J.J., "Les Belles-Soeurs de Montréal à la mode Cardin"; Rabine, "A l'Espace Pierre-Cardin."



Publicity column in a street of Paris advertising Michel Tremblay's play. NLC, Fond Michel Tremblay 1991-1, Box 1. With the permission of Agent Goodwin.

Most Parisian critiques gave a more or less lengthy summary of the play, something many did not do in Québec. The reviews of the play itself went from one extreme to another. For some, the play was just about a bunch of women sticking grocery stamps in booklets while gossiping and insulting each other;<sup>65</sup> and for others, it was a social study of the popular classes in Montréal, and more specifically a study of the fate of women living in difficult conditions.<sup>66</sup> Still, for most, it was a political statement about Québec liberation and sovereignty, as Michel Tremblay stated in his Parisian interviews. Though most reviewers stressed the "local flavour" of the play, a few recognized its universal aspects, linking it to the conditions

<sup>65</sup>Rabine, "A l'Espace Pierre-Cardin.

<sup>66</sup>Julien, "Paris va découvrir les ménagères québécoises [sic] et leur language"; Unsigned, "Les Belles Soeurs [sic], drôle et méchant," *France Soir*, 24 November 1973; Cellard, "Les Belles-Soeurs, quinze femmes du Québec."

of working-class people in most cities of industrial countries.<sup>67</sup> Finally, some asserted that the play represented the "birth of Québécois theatre."<sup>68</sup>

All but three Parisian critics, even those who had few positive remarks on the story, stressed the high quality of the production, praising its original structure, its imaginative direction and the skilful acting by the fifteen women comedians.<sup>69</sup> All reviewers recommended that their readers see it, for various reasons: some because it was a folkloric piece of culture<sup>70</sup> or something bizarre and strange worth the effort; others because it achieved a certain artistic excellence.<sup>71</sup>

### *Modulating Popular Culture*

While the unexpected position taken by the Franco-Québécois press was mainly related to the popular press' support of élite culture as legitimate and the rejection of working-class culture as illegitimate, Parisian reviews were aiming in quite another direction. For reasons of their own, the "serious" newspapers were supportive of Tremblay's play, despite the popular subject and the language (*joual*), which they did not despise as much as most Québécois critics did. Still, they adopted a condescending tone. The political element behind that condescension was different from that provoking the outrage noted in Franco-Québécois reviews. The French Empire, or more precisely its cultural élite, not directly involved in the nationalist struggle but sympathetic to its cause, was looking at its old colony with indulgence about its faults, such as the use of a "dialect" by the people. The distance associated with their role of "strangers" may also have helped the critics to concentrate on the artistic aspects of the play — its structure, its direction, and its interpretation — in regard to its universal qualities. As Georg Simmel explained, a "stranger," being close to and remote from a crowd at the same time, can see things that other members more involved in the larger context can not.<sup>72</sup> The French have tenaciously imagined the Québécois as a people with a common culture in both senses of the

<sup>67</sup>Unsigned, "Les Belles Soeurs [sic], drôle et méchant"; Dominique Jamet, "A l'Esprace Cardin, les Belles-Soeurs de Michel Tremblay," *L'Aurore*, 24-25 November 1973; Cellard, "Les Belles-Soeurs, quinze femmes du Québec"; Jean-Jacques Gautier, "Les Belles Soeurs [sic] de Michel Tremblay," *Le Figaro*, 1-2 December 1973.

<sup>68</sup>Julien, "Paris va découvrir les ménagères québécoises [sic] et leur langage"; and Jamet, "A l'Esprace Cardin, les Belles-Soeurs de Michel Tremblay."

<sup>69</sup>Those three (*Combat*, 19 and 27 November 1973, and Louis Macorelles, "Une pièce: Les Belles-Soeurs, le joual de Michel Tremblay," *Le Monde*, 8 December 1973) only described the story of the play.

<sup>70</sup>In this meaning, folkloric means *passé*, instead of popular.

<sup>71</sup>J.J., "Les Belles-Soeurs de Montréal à la mode Cardin"; and Rabine, "A l'Espace Pierre-Cardin."

<sup>72</sup>Georg Simmel "The Stranger," in Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (Toronto 1950), 402-8.

word — as the culture of the majority and as the culture of the popular.<sup>73</sup> This may explain why the language used in Tremblay's play neither surprised nor offended them, since they knew it as the language spoken by the majority of francophone people in Québec: idiosyncratic, folkloric, and close to old French, as one nostalgic reviewer pointed out.<sup>74</sup> Finally, as Barbara McEwen noted, to succeed in Paris, the Québécois playwrights must show a certain artistic originality in delivering texts based on a Québécois' way of life, at the same time similar to and different from the French.<sup>75</sup> *Les Belles-Soeurs*, with its audacious language and its original structure and direction, was responding to such exigency.<sup>76</sup>

In contrast, Montréal critics gave very little space to either the structure, the direction, or even the story of the play itself. They were too preoccupied with a social critique of the Québécois society portrayed in the play, a society that they seemed to discover for the first time and that did not fit their petty-bourgeois notion of culture.<sup>77</sup> Most critically, the play was conveying a negative representation of the family. In a community where the traditional family was still viewed as a strong and solid basis of society, Tremblay's play forced the critics to be aware of nasty, ugly, even cruel sides of family life. As Usmiani pointed out: "Nowhere perhaps has [the institution of family] been treated with such devastating cruelty as in the *maudite vie plate* chorus [at the beginning of the play] ... an ode ... to the emotional impotence engendered by family living."<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the critics were the more distressed since they all confounded class culture with national culture and social alienation with national alienation. In that context, Tremblay's play was a window into a popular world usually safely ignored.

So why such a short-sighted position from the part of Franco-Québécois critics? There is no doubt that the nationalist ideology, at one of its highest points in the intellectual and cultural *milieux* of that time, had something to do with it. In the period of the Quiet Revolution, many Franco-Québécois, including members of the

<sup>73</sup>This belief about Franco-Québécois culture is clearly and repeatedly present when one reviews part of the 19th-century printed press in France. It began to change, especially among the political and cultural élites, with a more modern representation of Québécois people in France toward the mid-1970s.

<sup>74</sup>J.J., "Les Belles-Soeurs de Montréal à la mode Cardin."

<sup>75</sup>Barbara McEwen, "Au-delà de l'exotisme. Le théâtre québécois devant la critique parisienne, 1955-1985," *Histoire du théâtre au Canada*, 7 (Fall 1986), 134-48. Though linked to the issue discussed in this article, McEwen's paper has a much broader object of analysis, being concerned with the representation of Québécois theatre in Paris from 1955 to 1985. Tremblay's play constitutes only a small part of her study.

<sup>76</sup>Usmiani's note on Tremblay's adoption of characteristics belonging to three traditions, as mentioned earlier, may explain Tremblay's success in Paris in terms described by McEwen.

<sup>77</sup>Montréal was not different from other big cities. Most people from the petty-bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie had a tendency to ignore the living conditions of the other, less privileged classes.

<sup>78</sup>Usmiani, *Michel Tremblay*, 24.

government, took up the reality of English capitalist exploitation and turned toward their own identity and nationality. Because of its theme, the misery of the working classes, *Les Belles-Soeurs* forced the critics to confront, not necessarily consciously, their own vision of the Québec of the time, that of an idealized society peacefully based on traditional values. In this sense, Tremblay's play appears as a wonderful laboratory for the analysis of the critic as a representative of the *imaginaire collectif*. Yet, the critics' "imagined community" of Québec, to use Benedict Anderson's words, which actually cut across the boundaries of different types of newspapers, was more suggested than explained.<sup>79</sup> In fact, the way critical reviewers conceived their role toward the public was never explicitly expressed in their commentaries. They suggested such things as "this is a consciousness raising play for the people," or "the people have no more excuse now not to improve themselves," and made other judgemental statements of this sort. Still, their discourse was that of a superior assessor, with the power to distinguish good from evil, the beautiful from the ugly, giving these notions absolute values and supposing that they were consensual and hegemonic. In this moral reading, the evil was comprised of poverty, ugliness, and *joual*. Montréal critics described these realities as totally external to them. Implicitly, they proposed a model of their own educated petty-bourgeois class as that which needed to be adopted by the whole society: only a proper level of education could lift the people out of their untenable culture, to use Pierre Bourdieu's words.<sup>80</sup>

Tremblay's play was indiscriminately applauded by Franco-Québécois critics for its dramatic values and for the author's perceptive eye, but also and especially because of its educational value for the masses. Critics hoped that the play would make Québec people aware of their lack of legitimate culture and force them to respect the ideas, values, practices, and standards of the dominant classes. This intervention was certainly part of the formation of a hegemonic culture in Québec; the reviews promoted a "spontaneous" consensus as to what should be the national culture.

Yet hegemony is a notion constituted as much of resistance and coercion as of consensus. Tremblay's theatrical representation was part of this process as it was an irruption of the popular and the oppositional into the space of elite culture. The reaction of the Québec critics was to appropriate the play on the terms of that culture, transforming its resistant property into a moralistic quality: a lesson in the due subordination of the people who had been the very source of inspiration of the play and who represented a part of the readers of newspaper reviews. The popular culture described in Tremblay's play was legitimate only as a mark of its own inferiority. But why did critics from very different types of press adopt the same point of view? Why did reviewers of the popular tabloid, for instance, adhere so readily to the

<sup>79</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Community: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1991).

<sup>80</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction, critique sociale du jugement* (Paris 1979).



dominant values? What was it that produced a consensus in the entertainment and the educational press? It is then necessary to go beyond the critiques themselves and to look at the critics' social backgrounds if we are to answer these and other questions.

### *Social and Educational Background of the Critics*

The critics writing for the Montréal newspapers, including those working for popular weeklies, had a similar educational background. They were raised and educated in the values of the petty-bourgeois class, and very much so.<sup>81</sup> Jean-Claude Germain from *Le Petit Journal*, Rudel Tessier from *Photo-Journal*, Claude Gingras from *La Presse*, and others, attended classes at one of the classical colleges (*Petits Séminaires*) operating in each medium-to-large Québécois town.<sup>82</sup> These confessional institutions provided a traditional education with Latin and Greek, and the reading of classic French literature. Mimi d'Estée from *Allô Police* was in a different situation. Her family was of petty-bourgeois background and culture, if not economic status. She had to quit school after grade nine and earn a living after her father died in the early 1920s, but she, like some others in her situation, was self-taught and became entirely supportive of the élite culture. Yet, her slightly *déclassée* situation might have forced her to accept work at a publication commonly regarded as a "trashy" tabloid.<sup>83</sup> We are thereby placed in a conjuncture where the owners or editors of popular weeklies, targeting working-class, popular, and less-educated readerships, hire reviewers wholeheartedly adhering to élite cul-

<sup>81</sup> As were the French critics. Author's interview with Jean-Pierre Bacot. Bacot worked as a cultural critique in Lyon, France from 1972 to 1982. The formation of the Québécois journalists was reconstituted from different sources including, as was mentioned in the part on methodology, Réginald Hamel, ed, *Dictionnaire des auteurs de langue française en Amérique du Nord* (Montréal 1989); and Simonne Monet-Chartrand, *Les pionnières québécoises et regroupements de femmes d'hier à aujourd'hui* (Montréal 1994). Also, some bits and pieces discovered in articles written by the journalists reviewed here, and finally, interviews to fill the gaps produced by the preceding sources.

<sup>82</sup> In the 1950s, which was about the time when the Québécois critics had their secondary education, every family who wanted their sons to get a good education sent them to one of the numerous *séminaires* (classical colleges) of the province. A bright boy belonging to a "honourable" family too poor to pay for the fees (these *séminaires* were private institutions) had sometimes the good fortune to have his education paid for by the parish, or the provincial government as was the case of Michel Tremblay. Some families with modest incomes, especially those living in rural areas, and obliged to pay boarding fees, had to deprive the other members of the family to save enough to send at least one of their sons to one of these institutions so that he could make it to the petty-bourgeois classes.

<sup>83</sup> She was the only critic with a very low level of formal education. In such a small world, it would be impossible for the others not to know about it. In addition, she was working for the most "trashy" newspapers of the Montréal market. These two particularities placed her in a situation where she appeared "below," so to speak, her fellow reviewers.

ture. This creates paradoxical situations: the critic of *Le Devoir*, the newspaper of the élite *par excellence*, mentioned the vulgarity of the language central to *Les Belles-Soeurs* only in passing while the reviewer in *Allô Police*, a paper clearly targeting the popular classes, overtly criticized the language used by most of its readers. It appears as though d'Estée, somewhat *déclassée* in her lack of formal classical education and, as a *Allô Police* writer not entirely part of the hegemonic elitism common to the other critics, seemed obliged to be more severe in her judgements to make up for such "shortcomings."<sup>84</sup> The process of hegemony thus works at varied levels: between critics and readers; and among the reviewers from different papers. As for the French critics, most of the journalists of the newspapers reviewed were petty-bourgeoise intellectuals with a degree either in *Lettres* or in *Sciences politiques*.<sup>85</sup>

The portrayals of Québec society presented by the cultural critics in all the Montréal francophone newspapers studied, whatever the class of the readership they were targeting and the size of their distribution, seem to be baked from the "same flour," as Molière would say. A monolithic Québec was presented, whose social structures consisted of a vast uncultured mass — often called "French-Canadian people" — guided by a group that was rarely explicitly named: the élite, to which the critics thought they belonged. *Les Belles-Soeurs*, because it described the "other" classes, to paraphrase de Beauvoir, forced the critics to adopt the role of representative of a new Québécois identity, a liberal petty-bourgeoise image, resulting from the Quiet Revolution. For Jean-Claude Germain it was a theatre of liberation. But for other reviewers, recently promoted to the Québécois élite through their education, *Les Belles-Soeurs* was also the theatre of *déchirement* (soul searching) between the working-class culture of their origin and the petty-bourgeois culture to which they belonged by their education and occupational or career experiences.

### Conclusion

This study raises a number of questions about literary critique as a form of journalism influencing the social fate of cultural products and the process of formation of a hegemonic culture. Of course, some people never read cultural critics in newspapers, or even read the press at all, they too, are a part of the process of hegemonic culture.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, for a newspaper to be part of this process, it is essential that the paper be read by a significant portion of a community, which, in turn, responds in a variety of ways. As such, the Anglo-Québécois and French publications can not belong to the process of formation of a Franco-Québécois culture since the

<sup>84</sup>This is a situation not unknown to psychologists and is often described in their works.

<sup>85</sup>The name of the domains of study in France is rather different from those in Canada. *Lettres* would be the equivalent of English studies and *Science politique* of Political Economy.

<sup>86</sup>This is altogether an issue with which this paper is not concerned.

anglophone papers are read very little by francophone people and European French publications even less so. It follows that the reviews in which the universality of Tremblay's play was most stressed, as well as the nationalist interest behind it, could not significantly influence the formation of a francophone culture in Québec. Nevertheless, they may have had an indirect impact in that they were undoubtedly read by at least some of the critics working for francophone newspapers, and may have influenced their writing. Moreover, they were important in comparative terms, facilitating understanding aspects of the Franco-Québécois critique.

What did the critics from different cultures say? This study shows an important gap at the level of interpretation of the play between the Franco-Québécois and the Parisian critics. The nationalist ideology sustaining the critiques of the former prevented them from stressing the universality of the theme of Tremblay's play and the originality of its structure. The play was too close to what educated critics were ashamed of in their society. The only way to be positive about the play was to see it as an exercise in illumination, an aspect never mentioned in the French and Anglo-Québécois papers. Consequently critics sided with the dominant culture, giving substance to Gramsci's claim that the "organic" intellectuals' intervention in public is generally subservient to the dominant classes' ideas and values, meant to prevent the practices and values coming from the popular classes from threatening those of the élite.

Though the francophone critics in Montréal undeniably took part in the formation of Québécois people's taste and consciousness, their position did not allow struggles against dominant forces to be part of that process. The reasons were two-fold: first, the structure of media ownership in Québec did not permit interventions from outsiders (except perhaps for letters to the editors). This means that the popular, less-educated, working-classes targeted as readers had no space to express their own opinions and tastes, though they must have been very different from those of the élite, if we believe Bourdieu's assertion that the concept of taste is closely related to the type of education one receives. Second, the cultural critics who had a voice in the press did not represent these classes. Indeed, they did quite the opposite and supported the ideas and values of the dominant culture.

These questions deserve to be pursued, since they involve the notion of hegemony, which essentially entails different forms of resistance and opposition. Yet, the notion of hegemony of cultural politics does not account for the vacuum encountered in the Franco-Québécois entertaining press, in terms of cultural preferences and practices opposing the dominant forces. How can there be pressure from working-class culture in the printed press if the popular press industry uses petty-bourgeois critics to convey dominant culture, ideas, and values? These reviewers not only do not represent the tastes of the popular classes, but find them intolerable, even disgusting. There exists no voice in the printed press from the less-educated groups that are not part of and do not adhere to dominant cultural ac-

tivities and practices. Simple market considerations can not explain this historical process.

Hence, this examination of the critical response to Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs* raises questions about the newspaper editors' intentions. Why hire élite critics in the popular press? Perhaps it makes sense in ideological terms. Most of the owners and/or editors of the entertaining press are people who have found their way up the petty-bourgeoisie ladder. If not entirely bourgeois, these cultural entrepreneurs are invariably involved in integrating the values of the dominant classes with the popular groups of society. It would follow that such figures hire petty-bourgeois critics to educate the popular classes culturally, the very classes from which they have emerged are thus never far from prominence. The rest of the paper could remain profitable with content that would attract the masses.<sup>87</sup> Critics would then represent the educational aspect of the entertaining papers' content and become the cultural legitimacy of a publication that otherwise would appear as a total cultural waste. Still, it does not make sense in financial terms. Are not the editors of popular weeklies afraid that they will lose their readership if the critics keep telling their readers that they are a bunch of uncultured, unwashed, and primitive people?

*I would like to thank the Editor and the anonymous reviewers of Labour/Le Travail for their valuable assistance in revising this paper, as well as Bruce Curtis for the useful comments he made on an early version. This paper would not have been possible without the contribution of Béatrice Richard who gathered an important part of the Canadian data. The research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.*

<sup>87</sup> It is difficult to say whether or not the popular classes read the cultural reviews in newspapers. Yet, given the immense popularity of Tremblay's theatre across classes, and particularly among less educated peoples who did not generally patronize the theatre, we can assume some level of popular involvement in the presentation of *Les Belles-Soeurs*, and given that many reviewers strongly advised them to attend the play. One has to assume that at least some members of such popular classes read theatre critiques, the others being informed either through other means of communication or by word of mouth. This last method of information would correspond to the two-step flow model developed by Lazarsfeld and Katz. See Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence. The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* (New York 1955). We have to remember that cultural critique was not part of electronic programming at the time, except as an insignificant portion of the news. So, the influence from the reviewers would necessarily come from the written press.

CANADIAN MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

Eh. Colour.  
Chinook. Hoser.  
Mickey. Pogey.  
Muskeg.  
Deke. Poutine.

We have our own language.  
We have our own magazines.

Look for this icon at newsstands or  
subscribe online to hundreds of magazines  
on every conceivable topic.



[genuinecanadianmagazines.ca](http://genuinecanadianmagazines.ca)