

# CÉLESTE DE CHABRILLAN'S ONE-ACT COMEDY *EN AUSTRALIE*

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This one-act comic sketch with songs about Melbourne in 1853 was first produced at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, on 19 July 1862.<sup>1</sup> No previous Australian productions or translations into English are known.<sup>2</sup>

This manuscript translation of Céleste de Chabrilan's little one-act comedy—her second produced play and first with an Australian setting—came to light purely by chance. Decades after the death in 1994 of Dennis Davison, a Senior Lecturer in the English Department of Monash University, the room that had formerly been used by the Department for theatrical productions was being cleared out, with most of the old papers left in cupboards consigned to the bin. Someone came across a thick exercise book with a black cover and fortunately thought to look inside. On the front was hand-written in white marker: 'En Australie – Melbourne in 1853'; on the inside was a hand-written translation by Dennis Davison of a French play. It was duly passed on to his family, who gave permission for it to be published in *Explorations*, not only because of this review's French-Australian connotations but also because Dennis Davison was the one who first had the idea of starting the publication that became *Explorations*.<sup>3</sup> His interest in early Australian writing also inspired him to found *Margin*, and both publications are still going strong.

Dennis Davison loved music and the theatre. Some readers may remember his small but faithful band of singers and actors who, with the support of his French wife Geneviève, would put on the forgotten plays, songs and poems he had unearthed in the course of his research. When he was translating *En Australie*, Céleste was not as well-known in Australian gold-rush history as she is today.<sup>4</sup> No doubt he intended the play to be performed: the original French text is divided into seven scenes, which he has omitted for ease of reading and acting. His transcription is obviously a fair copy, written on the recto side of the page with spaces left for the songs, and on the verso a few translation queries to be finally decided. The nine songs and one reprise, which would have been one of the main attractions of the piece, have now been

translated by the author and restored to their place in the text, so well rendered by Dennis Davison.

Céleste de Chabrilan's arrival in gold-rush Melbourne in April 1854 was the culmination of an extraordinary year even by the standards of her already extraordinary life. Newly married to Count Lionel Moreton de Chabrilan after years of an on-off relationship and now a countess, she was leaving her scandalous past behind to start again in a distant land as the wife of the first French consular representative in Melbourne. The further away from Paris the better as far as Lionel's aristocratic family were concerned: they were scandalised by this marriage they hoped would never take place and, on the face of it, with good reason. Lionel himself had already been something of a black sheep by keeping dubious company and squandering vast amounts of inherited money. Impulsive and always a gambler, he had already gone to Australia in 1852 to try his luck on the goldfields, needless to say, without success. Céleste, who was at that time a dancer at the Variety Theatre, also had to deal with the legal proceedings for debt still being brought against Lionel. This was the first, but not the last time she was left to cope with his financial disasters. As she was now facing financial difficulties herself, she let herself be persuaded by her lawyer to write her memoirs, which were published early in 1854 under the title of *Adieux au monde* [*Farewell to the World*].<sup>5</sup> This was a step she bitterly regretted once she had accepted Lionel's proposal and they were bound for Melbourne. In fact she tried to stop publication but it was too late. Even so, she kept it from Lionel for as long as she could. To understand Céleste's reactions to Australia, one also has to understand who she was and the life she had lived. How different her experiences of Australia might have been had the details of her past not been known as far away as the Antipodes.

Unfortunately the memoirs arrived here shortly after she did, revealing the whole story of her career from poor illegitimate child to well-known courtesan. As her mother worked as a milliner, Céleste had been left to her own devices, receiving no formal education. Put to work at eleven as an apprentice embroideress, she had a miserable adolescence, due mainly to the drunkenness or unwanted attentions of her mother's lovers. She ran away twice, the first time being given shelter by a young prostitute, but when the brothel was raided, Céleste spent five weeks in Saint-Lazare prison as a girl in moral danger. The moral danger was only increased by two girls she met there, especially Denise to whom she turned when she left home for the second time. Impressed by the

girl's success in a fashionable brothel and longing for a better life, at sixteen she became licensed prostitute n° 3748—another step she later regretted. It would take some time and the influence of Napoléon III's playboy cousin Prince Napoléon to have her name removed from the register.

After a short time she gained the attention of a rich admirer, the first of many wealthy lovers, which allowed her to rise from prostitute to glamorous 'demi-mondaine', with lovers ranging from musicians to dukes. She also branched out into the world of performance entertainment, first of all as a dancer at the Bal Mabille, a popular outdoor dance hall. There she earned the nickname of 'La Mogador', which she then adopted as her professional name.<sup>6</sup> She became quite well-known as La Mogador and began to mix in more artistic circles. She would meet Alexandre Dumas *père*, who became a lifelong friend. From the dance hall she went on to a dancing role at the Beaumarchais Theatre, to bareback horse riding then chariot racing at the Hippodrome. At twenty she was one of the best-known performers in Paris, still being kept by lovers, some of considerable wealth and importance. Liaisons with two aristocrats in particular introduced her at last to Parisian high society. There were, however, lows as well as highs in Céleste's career. After breaking a leg in a chariot race and finding herself with no income, then learning of the deaths of two friends, she also tried to kill herself. Courageous and enterprising though she was, she sometimes fell prey to depression or nervous prostration.

Céleste met the charming Count Lionel de Chabrillan for the first time in 1847, and it was he who rescued her from a later suicide attempt, setting her up in a small property near his in Châteauroux. The relationship too had its ups and downs, with Lionel in search of a rich wife to support his extravagant lifestyle. After many absences, break-ups and reconciliations, with Céleste refusing his proposal once, the second time she accepted, and this is where her first set of memoirs, *Adieux au monde*, come to an end. Céleste and Lionel de Chabrillan were finally married in London before setting sail for Melbourne early in 1854, accompanied by a maid and her adopted daughter Solange.

The difference between elegant high life in Paris and gold-rush Melbourne, only nineteen years old and still composed largely of muddy roads, tents and small wooden buildings, must have come as a rude culture shock. Her undoubted ingenuity and energy did not take the form of roughing it in the British pioneering spirit, although she did have to put up with difficult living conditions as the consulate was for some time a four-roomed house in

St Kilda. Her reputation having preceded her, Céleste was either shunned by polite society or briefly visited out of curiosity. This meant that she had a great deal of time on her own, which she used to try and make up for her lack of education. She found it very difficult and began to write. This came much more easily to her. At the same time she seems to have kept an informal kind of diary, noting at irregular intervals the dreadful weather, social and commercial news, life at the consulate, problems of the French in Melbourne, the diplomatic and colonial milieus, balls (to which she was usually not invited), fashion, public events like street boxing and a hanging, country trips to hunt kangaroos or see the mines in Ballarat, and the theatre, including Lola Montez. Writing purely for her own interest, she says what she thinks and, under the circumstances, it is not surprising that her comments are often highly critical of the colony. There was indeed a lot to criticise. However, comparing her descriptions of events with newspaper reports, her personal views are often more disparaging, dramatic, and definitely more flattering of Lionel.<sup>7</sup> Although she acknowledges his faults, the relationship evoked here through the description of their lives and letters is a love story that runs through all of Céleste's account of her time in Australia.

Céleste's impressions were eventually published as her second and last set of memoirs, *Un deuil au bout du monde* [lit. *A Bereavement at the Ends of the Earth*], but not until 1877, twenty years after she went back to France.<sup>8</sup> They cover her time in Australia, her return to Paris late in 1856 (mainly to sort out Lionel's affairs once again), the publication and success of her novel *Les Voleurs d'or* [*The Gold Robbers*], written in Australia.<sup>9</sup> They end with Lionel's death in Melbourne in December 1858 after falling ill on the journey back to Australia from leave in France. Given her situation while in Melbourne and the death of her husband at the other end of the world, it is not surprising that Céleste will often call the country 'maudite Australie' [accursed Australia] in her novels and plays. Indeed, the material first gathered and noted while she was in Melbourne would be used in various forms during those twenty years before being published in full as *Un deuil au bout du monde*.

As Céleste outlived Lionel by fifty years, the basic information about her literary, theatrical and private life from 1859 onwards comes from her biographers, primarily *Vie et aventures de Céleste Magador, fille publique, femme de lettres et comtesse (1824-1909)* by Françoise Moser, written in 1935.<sup>10</sup> Moser had acquired fifteen exercise books containing Céleste's unpublished

diaries covering the period 1859-1907 which were 'covered with handwriting that was so individual and energetic, so dismissive of the reader's needs or of spelling, revealing both in its untidiness and impetuous style, the "très grande dame" and the prostitute.'<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, these tantalising notebooks have not been available since, and consequently the major biographers who followed her, Haldane, Richardson and Leclercq, have necessarily relied on Moser's material to a greater or lesser extent.<sup>12</sup>

Since Lionel had left Céleste practically nothing, she had to set about reinventing herself once more to earn a living and help support her daughter and ageing mother. Lionel's family pressured her to give up her name and title, but she steadfastly refused. As a result they persistently used their influence with publishers, journalists and theatre owners to thwart her efforts. Nevertheless she would go on make her name if not her fortune as a writer, actress and theatrical producer. In this respect Australia served her well, as several of her works are set wholly or partly in this country. She mentioned her creative writing for the first time in her diary entry for 9 January 1856 while still in Melbourne: 'I no longer go out; I write a good deal. I have revised a novel about gold robbers a dozen times.'<sup>13</sup> On her return to France in November 1856 she lost no time in finding a publisher for this novel, *The Gold Robbers*, which came out in May the following year. Knowing that Lionel had been granted leave again and should arrive soon, she was convinced that she needed 'fame, money and heaven knows what else besides. I was mad... In two months I wrote six bad plays, *Miss Pervel* [sic]<sup>14</sup> and *The Emigrants*,<sup>15</sup> not to mention *Sappho*,<sup>16</sup> which has just been published.'<sup>17</sup>

News of the Australian gold rush had reached Europe in 1852 and there was considerable interest in exotic places such as the Antipodes, especially when presented in a racy, melodramatic tale that includes travel, love—both mutual and unrequited—heroism, violence and death. In *The Gold Robbers*, the good doctor Iwans takes his family, including two daughters, to Australia to make a better living for them, but trials and tragedy await them. Although the plot and characters are fictitious or exaggerated, the setting in Melbourne and the diggings at Ballarat, and the details of day-to-day life in the colony are not far from the truth. In many respects Melbourne was indeed a wild place at that time. What is more, *The Gold Robbers* would appear to be the first novel set in Australia written by someone who had actually spent a significant amount of time there.

Despite the Chabrillans, and thanks in no small part to Alexandre Dumas *père*, the book was a great success. Céleste includes several newspaper reviews in *Un deuil au bout du monde*, the most interesting and glowing being by Dumas himself, who gave his opinion of two new books that day, *The Gold Robbers* and *Madame Bovary*.<sup>18</sup> They were given equal serious attention. The novel was so popular that Hubert de Castella wrote his *Australian Squatters* partly to counteract Céleste's negative impressions of life in Victoria.<sup>19</sup> Many of the criticisms in *The Gold Robbers* can also be found in *Death in a Distant Land*, often in almost the same words. This is not surprising: although they were published twenty years apart, they were both written while Céleste was in Melbourne. Some of these comments also appear in the dramatised version of *The Gold Robbers* (1864) and one of her first produced and published plays, the one-act 'vaudeville' *En Australie [In Australia]* (1862).<sup>20</sup> Whether this is one of what she called in hindsight 'six bad plays', we don't know.

After the great success of *The Gold Robbers* in 1857, Céleste published a novel a year between 1858 and 1861 but none of them did very well. (Only *Miss Pewel* has any Australian content, and that is very slight.) Besides, the Chabrillans were trying their best to boycott all her work and she could no longer find a publisher for her novels in serial form. When she turned to Dumas once again, he suggested that she try the much easier task of dramatising her novels, especially *Les Voleurs d'or*. Her attempt was not good. In the end Dumas rewrote it himself but left it under her name, although this was hardly an advantage, since the Chabrillans persuaded several theatre directors to refuse it.<sup>21</sup> Her rather impulsive solution was to sell her house, lease a theatre, les Folies-Marigny, and become a director herself. It soon failed, but between 1862 and early 1864 six of her one-act comedies or operettas were put on at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, often with her taking a role under the stage name of Madame Lionel. One of these was *En Australie*, which she staged and published under her full title of 'Mme La Comtesse LIONEL DE CHABRILLAN' in defiance of Lionel's family.

This little 'vaudeville' has no pretensions to being anything other than an entertainment and as such is closer to slapstick and farce than standard comedy. There is mistaken identity, two characters unknown to each other groping around in the dark, slapstick in the form of one character sitting down on a nail, comic argument, recognition and reconciliation, all interspersed and happily ended with comic song. At the Champs-Élysées there were usually

three short plays of this kind performed in an evening: a combination of comedies and operettas.

Céleste composed quite a lot of poems and songs during her career, and no doubt enjoyed the musical side of *En Australie*. Her words are either put to popular tunes or set to music by various minor composers. She probably dashed the whole play off fairly quickly and with some relish, partly as a vehicle for her own acting talents. There are only four characters: the ironically named Fortuné, formerly a young grocer, Rosalba the landlady of a very primitive dwelling, played by Céleste, Pierre a sailor who has jumped ship, and the minor part of a policeman. His hopes of inheriting from an uncle dashed, Fortuné is persuaded to sell up and come to find adventure in Australia by a so-called friend Jean Rolland, who offered to look after his money and then decamped. Unlucky at the mines, Fortuné now finds himself with little money and looking for a room, which Rosalba sublets to him while the former tenant, Pierre, is away. All this is revealed in an establishing long speech enlivened by a song, the rest of the play consisting of snappy dialogue and short asides.

Rosalba is a good part for Céleste. She is still reasonably young but hard-bitten, having been abandoned by a husband who took all her money. And he turns out to be none other than the bane of Fortuné's life, Jean Rolland. Rosalba can be both tough and coy as the situation demands. After Pierre returns to his room in the dark and there is a mix-up about bags of gold dust, he finally shaves off his beard, and who should he be but the cousin who inherited from their old uncle. With the last rousing chorus, a reprise of the feature song, the three of them decide to leave together, shake the dust of wretched Australia off their feet for good and return to France, 'Land of happy days, Land of plenty, Land of love'. This is the only song that also appears in *The Gold Robbers*.

Céleste was a true woman of the theatre—actor, dancer, singer, director, manager and playwright—but undoubtedly a better performer than a dramatist. Dumas told her that she wrote too quickly and let her imagination run away with her.<sup>22</sup> As a playwright, one-act comedies and operettas were definitely her forte. *En Australie* gives us a good idea of how she wrote for the theatre, as there are not really any signs of a more sophisticated or professional dramatist having been involved. One has to admit that the example of *En Australie*, and the other plays put on at the Champs-Élysées show how adaptation of something as long and complex as her novel the *Gold Robbers* was beyond her capabilities as a dramatist.

The main interest of the play for us is in the fact that Céleste is presenting Australia on stage for the first time, even though the dramatisation of *The Gold Robbers* had already been rewritten by Dumas. As *En Australie* is a comedy bordering on farce, exaggeration is not only permissible but expected. Strange to say, the comments about the country made by Céleste's characters when expressed singly are scarcely more damning than elsewhere in her works. The climate (only three months of decent weather), the price of food (the price of a single egg), the dreadful food in general, rent (a room or a house) are specified here and in her memoirs. When these details are accumulated for comic effect, as in some of the songs, the effect is heightened.

*The north wind will always burn,  
The plague of mosquitoes is a war you can't win,  
And one page I'd better turn  
Describes all that devours your skin. (Repeat)*

There are certainly more derogatory generalisations in this play. The most outstanding one is about the women. In the description of her visit to the diggings Céleste notes in her memoirs that the women work like the men, but here not only do the women have wrinkled prunes for faces but, as Rosalba remarks, 'In this country the womenfolk are only admired if they are as hefty as the men. [...] They saw down the trees, they chop the logs, they groom the horses—and when they want to relax, they do the laundry and the cooking'. (Not that husband-beating Rosalba is any advertisement for French womanhood.)

No such words are necessary to describe the housing in Melbourne. The stage set speaks for itself: the scene represents a room with torn wallpaper, a door, a sash window (the French consider sash windows very inferior), a very low iron bed, a wine crate as a bedside table, two others as chairs; a large packing crate open at the side as a table, plus a jug and mirror. To add insult to injury the crates serving as chairs still have nails in them and the ceiling is only a kind of canvas awning that lets in the bad weather. The rent for this 'bachelor apartment' is of course exorbitant.

On the lighter side, Céleste's first impressions of shops selling everything from tools to high fashion also find an echo here. In her memoirs she remarks that they sell 'dresses made from antique moiré, York hams, ladies' hats, miners' boots, candles, perfumery, pickaxes and children's toys; they even trim beards'.<sup>23</sup> In *En Australie* Rosalba, who was a 'marchande de

modes' in Paris, has to sell her hats by auction. She describes this as 'a shop where you have to shout yourself hoarse to buy York hams, miner's boots, wood-stoves, Chester cheese—and bottles of perfume.'

There is little place here or in *The Gold Robbers* for what Céleste's memoirs describe as amusing or even enjoyable, such as horse riding in the country or the theatre. To inspire laughter and tears, these comedies and tragedies concentrate on everything that offended, annoyed and depressed the French consul's wife in Australia. Leaving behind celebrity and an enviable social life, caught in a kind of no-man's-land between the polite society of Melbourne that shunned her and a rough, often violent general population, then having her husband die there, it is no wonder that Céleste called Australia a dreadful, accursed country. Added to that were the shipping disasters and tales of woe from those who sought help at the consulate. Crimes and disasters like shipwrecks, drownings and fires seemed to happen every day: 'Good Lord, what a country! I constantly feel the world is coming to an end.'<sup>24</sup>

Moser does not mention *En Australie* specifically but Hamel says that it was one of three plays by Céleste presented at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées that had a modest success.<sup>25</sup> *The Gold Robbers* was put on at last in 1864 in a lavish production with a large cast and realistic goldfield sets including horses and carriages. The working-class theatre in Belleville was well chosen: Céleste may have been a countess, but the audience recognised her as one of its own. The first night was a hit and Haldane writes that 'it was the proudest moment of her life, the fulfilment of her struggle and her career.'<sup>26</sup> Céleste toured with the play in France then Belgium and Holland, earning enough to buy a house with the profits. In 1872 she toured again with a lecture tour of Belgium. The audience no doubt expected something spicier as her reputation inevitably preceded her, but what they got was a talk on her life and travels in Australia. Works based on Australia would continue to be published at various times in her long life, for example *Les Deux Sœurs émigrantes et déportées* finally in 1876 and her Australian memoirs in the following year. Céleste de Chabrillan's view of life in *En Australie* may have been grim, but this dreadful country would not only provide her with income but it also became an integral part of her life, her persona. And perhaps most important of all, it made her a writer.

## Notes

- 1 The play was published in Paris in the same year, 1862, by Cosson.  
 2 Dennis Davison's manuscript, p. 2.  
 3 See Colin Nettelbeck, 'ISFAR: A Recollection', *Explorations*, n° 40, June  
 2006, p. 18.  
 4 Once her Australian memoirs, *Un deuil au bout du monde*, were translated,  
 excerpts and pictures have found their way into gold-rush exhibitions, both  
 permanent and temporary, such as the one in Castlemaine.  
 5 *Adieux au monde*, Paris, Locard David et de Vresse, 1954. Another edition  
 was brought out by the same publishers in 1858 under the title of *Mémoires  
 de Céleste Mogador*. The third and last edition of her memoirs appeared in  
 1876, also published in Paris by Librairie Nouvelle.  
 6 Mogador is the North African town bombarded by the French in 1844. A  
 dancing partner joked that it would be easier to defend this town than stave  
 off Céleste's many admirers.  
 7 See Patricia Clancy and Jeanne Allen, *The French Consul's Wife: Memoirs  
 of Céleste de Chabrilan in Gold-rush Australia*, Melbourne, Melbourne  
 University Press, 1998.  
 8 *Un deuil au bout du monde, suite des mémoires de Céleste Mogador*, Paris,  
 Librairie Nouvelle, 1877, referred to hereafter as *Death in a Distant Land*.  
 English quotations from these memoirs will be taken from Clancy and Allen,  
*The French Consul's Wife*.  
 9 *Les Voleurs d'or*, Paris, Michel Lévy, 1857. This was translated by Lucy and  
 Caroline Moorehead as *The Gold Robbers*, Melbourne, Sun Books, 1970.  
 10 Françoise Moser, *Vie et aventures de Céleste Mogador, fille publique, femme  
 de lettres et comtesse (1824-1909)*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1935.  
 11 Moser, p. 7.  
 12 Charlotte Haldane, *Daughter of Paris*, London, Hutchinson, 1961; Joanna  
 Richardson, *The Courtesans: The Demi-monde in Nineteenth-century  
 France*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1967; Pierre-Robert Leclercq,  
*Céleste Mogador, Une reine de Paris. Biographie*, Paris, La Table Ronde,  
 1996.  
 13 Clancy & Allen, p. 147.  
 14 *Miss Pewel*, Paris, A. Bourdilliat, 1859.  
 15 *Les Deux Sœurs émigrantes et déportées*, Paris, C. Lévy, 1876.  
 16 *La Sapho*, Paris, Michel Lévy, 1858.

- 17 Clancy & Allen, p. 191.
- 18 *Monte-Cristo*, 28 May 1857, p. 96. The reviews are quoted in Clancy & Allen, pp. 180-183.
- 19 Hubert de Castella, *Les Squatters australiens*, Paris, Hachette, 1861. Translated by C. B. Thornton-Smith, *Australian Squatters*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1987.
- 20 Mme La comtesse Lionel de Chabrillan, *En Australie*, vaudeville en un acte, Paris, Cosson, 1862.
- 21 See Alexandre Dumas and Reginald Hamel, *Les Voleurs d'or*, Montreal, Stanké, 2006. Published as a play by Dumas on a text of Céleste de Chabrillan. Not wanting to trust Céleste's word alone, Hamel uses textual analysis to show that it is typical of the famous dramatist's writing. Céleste freely admits in her unpublished memoirs that he rewrote it. If she was not telling the truth, it would be more to her advantage to hide that fact.
- 22 Moser, p. 183.
- 23 Clancy & Allen, p. 89.
- 24 Clancy & Allen, p. 145.
- 25 Hamel, p. 187.
- 26 Haldane, p. 208.