

IN THE GALLERIES Tom Benner's
'Call of the Wild' roars in Fredericton S3

THEATRE InterAction Children's Theatre
Company launches its 10th season S5

salon

Le phenom

New Brunswick poet, publisher and translator Serge Patrice Thibodeau isn't just a leading literary light in Acadie – he is one of the best writers in 'la francophonie.' Period.
Story by Thomas Hodd S4



PHOTO: COLE BURSTON/CANADAEAST NEWS SERVICE



Author Serge Patrice Thibodeau at the Dieppe Arts and Cultural Centre in front of a sculpture by Moncton's Raymond Fortin. PHOTO: COLE BURSTON/CANADAEAST NEWS SERVICE

Surging forward

With his translation of 'The Journals of John Winslow,' Serge Patrice Thibodeau adds to his remarkable resumé. Story by Thomas Hodd

In a small, vibrant café in downtown Moncton, Serge Patrice Thibodeau blends right in with his wire-framed glasses and fitted, black sweater-jacket. The café is a popular hang-out for Acadian artists.

After 20 years of living abroad, Thibodeau decided to return to his native New Brunswick. But it wasn't because the award-winning Acadian poet wanted to retire here. Far from it.

"It's not just a question of economy," Thibodeau says. "My quality of life doubled. There's also less distractions."

Thibodeau came back in 2005 to become writer-in-residence at the Université de Moncton. That same year he became editorial director at the Acadian publishing house Éditions Perce-Neige. In 2008, he added publisher to his title. Since taking over management of Perce-Neige, he has overseen the publication of more than 40 titles. Thibodeau also published several of his own poetry collections during this time, including the Governor-General's Award-winning *Seul on est*, and most recently a translation of the major Acadian historical document *The Journals of John Winslow*.

It's an impressive resumé. More impressive is how he got there.

Serge Patrice Thibodeau was born in Rivière-Verte, a small town about 15 kilometres south-east of Edmundston. He grew up in a house with four brothers and two sisters. His father was a trucker. He learned from an early age about the importance of language and identity, and what it took for an Acadian in the 1960s to flourish in an English-language majority.

"My parents encouraged us to learn English well, better than native English speakers," Thibodeau says. "But not one word of English was allowed to be spoken in the house."

Thibodeau's parents didn't have much formal schooling, but they pushed their children to excel at school and were strict when it came to homework.

"Every Saturday morning," Thibodeau remembers, "we went to the library. Our parents would drop us off for the day – they even gave us money for lunch. You could do that in those days," he laughs.

During his teenage years, Thibodeau discovered the work of Quebec modernist poet, Hector de Saint-Denis Garneau, the symbolist

poet Paul Verlaine, and the French Renaissance poet, Pierre de Ronsard. Thibodeau felt a particular connection to Ronsard, whose poems often included Acadian words.

After high school, Thibodeau pursued post-secondary studies at the Université de Moncton, Edmundston campus. Two years later he transferred to Laval, in Quebec City, where he began studying for a bachelor's degree in literature and linguistics.

"It's normal to leave," Thibodeau tells me. "Rivière-Verte is right near Quebec. The U.S. border is also nearby."

It was also during this period that Thibodeau had his first taste of the world outside of Canada. In 1976, he travelled to Africa and the Ivory Coast. After abandoning his degree at Laval, Thibodeau returned to work in various jobs throughout New Brunswick. But the memories of Africa were strong, and his spirit was restless for adventure.

Thibodeau decided to embrace the traveller's lifestyle by working only long enough to pay for his international excursions. And he did it by working as a waiter. Thibodeau visited Palestine and Israel in 1981-'82, and participated in an archaeological dig. Then in 1985 he went to Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. He did a second trip to Israel in 1993, and visited Jordan several times during the 1990s.

Not only was travelling abroad exciting, it was also a source of inspiration for Thibodeau. "I would take copious notes while away, then complete my writings when I returned to Canada," Thibodeau says.

In 1986, Thibodeau moved to Montreal. There he continued his love of travel, paying for his trips abroad by working as a waiter in upscale French restaurants, eventually working his way up to assistant maître d'hôtel. He also took courses toward a master's degree but never finished.

It was in Montreal that Thibodeau established himself as an award-winning poet and essayist. His first poetry collection, *La septième chute*, appeared in 1990 and won the Prix France-Acadie. His second collection, *Le cycle de Prague* (1992), won Quebec's Prix Émile-Nelligan and was nominated for the Governor General's Literary Award.

Other prizes soon followed. Thibodeau's essay *L'appel des mots* (1994) won the Prix Edgar-

Lésperance. A year later his collections *Nous, l'étranger* and *Le quatuor de l'errance* won the Grand Prix du Festival international de la poésie de Trois-Rivières, awarded by Quebec's largest literary festival.

Then, in 1996, Serge Patrice Thibodeau became the first Acadian poet to win the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry – beating, among others, Herménégilde Cléon's critically acclaimed collection *Climats*.

In the span of six years, Thibodeau had won an award for almost every one of his published books.

"He's a phenomenon," says Raoul Boudreau, an expert in modern Acadian poetry at the Université de Moncton. "To have won so many awards in such a short time is unheard of. He is an important literary figure, not just for Acadie but as a French-Canadian writer in the francophone."

Since returning to Moncton, Thibodeau has continued his award-winning ways. In 2005, he won the Prix littéraire Antonine-Maillet-Acadie

MANY ACADIANS HAVE A DISTORTED SENSE OF THEIR HISTORY. MY OWN PERCEPTION OF THE ACADIAN PEOPLE HAS BEEN ONE OF STUBBORNNESS. BUT AFTER DOING THIS PROJECT, I UNDERSTAND MUCH BETTER WHERE THAT ACADIAN RESILIENCE COMES FROM."

SERGE PATRICE THIBODEAU

Vie for *Que Repose*. Then, in 2007, Thibodeau won his second Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry for *Seul on est*, which Goose Lane published in English in 2009 under the title *One*. The translation was also nominated for a Governor General's Literary Award.

Jo-Anne Elder, who translated *Seul on est*, sees Thibodeau's contribution to Acadian identity as both a writer and publisher. "He plays such a huge role in New Brunswick culture," she says. "He's the rock solid, and his dedication to promoting the region makes Acadian literature all the richer for it."

As a testament to his ongoing dedication to Acadian culture, Thibodeau has just published the first complete translation of *The Journals of John Winslow* (*Journal de John Winslow à Grand-Pré*, published by Perce-Neige). It's a key document in Acadian history: Colonel Winslow was responsible for overseeing the deportation of the Acadians in 1755 from Grand-Pré, N.S.

"It was my first translation project," Thibodeau confesses. "And I gave up when I first saw it." He shows me his working copy of the

translation. The photocopied pages are almost obscured by a series of multi-coloured highlights, colour-coded tabs and scribbles along the marginalia.

"There's a lot of research," Thibodeau tells me. "It's not just about translating the words. It's literary archaeology."

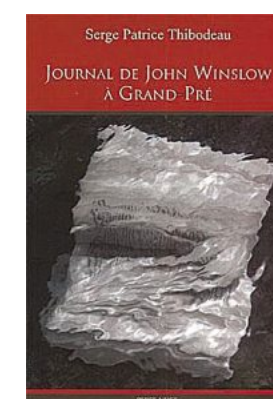
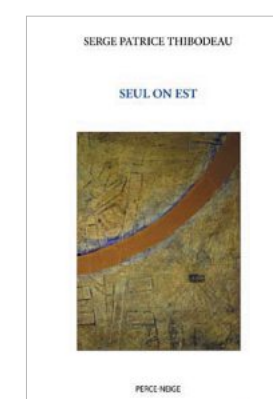
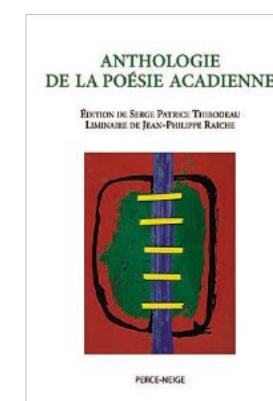
The book is filled with footnotes, several annexes and a comprehensive index. But it's not just for academics. In fact, Thibodeau dedicated the book to his 82-year-old father, a retired trucker with little formal education.

"He read it right away," Thibodeau says. "He was very angry when he finished. It's an important document, but it's not easy for Acadians to read."

Thibodeau isn't kidding. The journals include correspondence from Winslow as well as other officers and are sometimes difficult to digest. While reading the text, you get a sense of the callous treatment of the Acadian people, as well as Winslow's frustrations as he tries to carry out his duty to arrange the deportation.

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JO-ANNE ELDER



Indeed, in the midst of our conversation a tall, grey-bearded man in his 60s strolls over to our table and stops in front of Thibodeau.

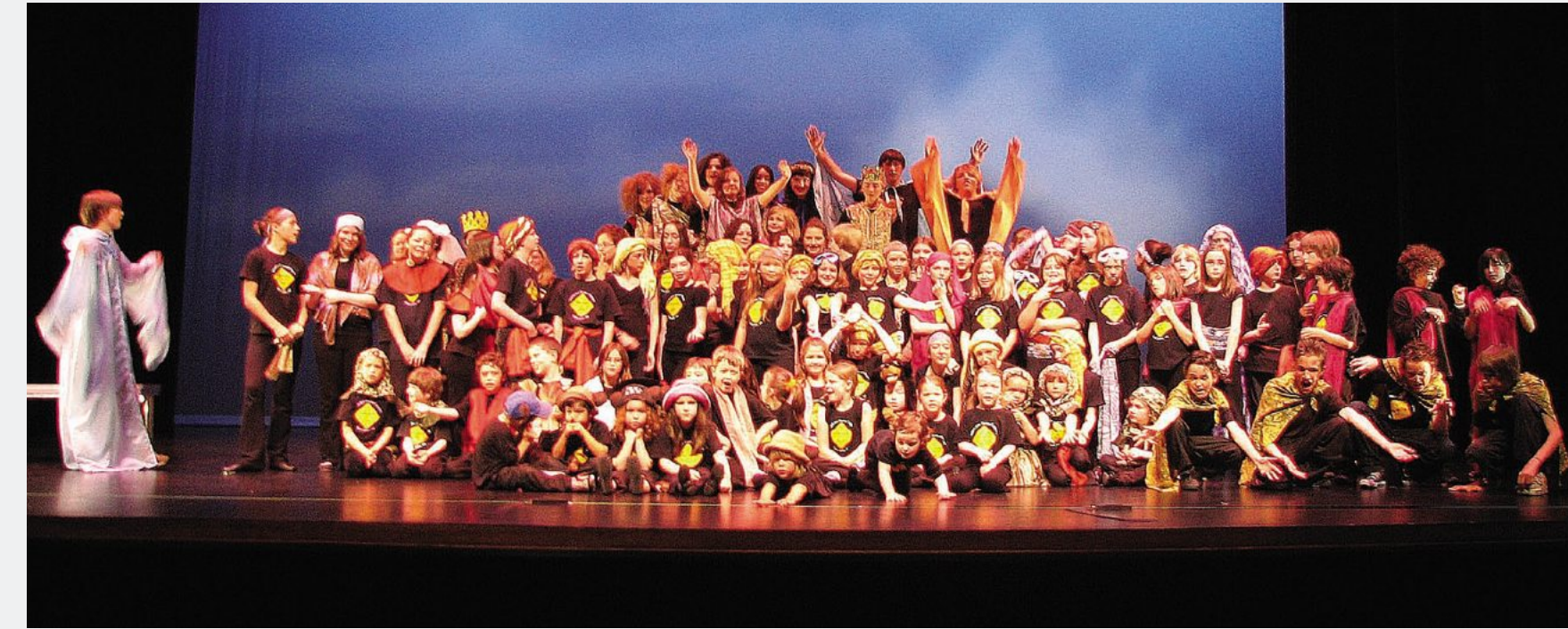
"I read your John Winslow," he says. Then he paused, as if trying to control his emotions. "J'en ai des questions (I have questions)."

Thibodeau doesn't mind. He wants his book to get people talking, to challenge their understanding of Acadian identity.

"Many Acadians have a distorted sense of their history," he tells me. "My own perception of the Acadian people has been one of stubbornness. But after doing this project, I understand much better where that Acadian resilience comes from."

If Thibodeau's own achievements as an international award-winning writer, translator and publisher aren't proof enough of the spirit of Acadian cultural resilience, I don't know what is.

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'East of the Sun, West of the Moon,' 2005, had 180 kids onstage at Imperial Theatre. PHOTO: SUBMITTED PHOTO

Cacophonous creativity

For 10 seasons, Saint John's InterAction Children's Theatre Company managed the controlled chaos of hundreds of kids. This week that energy comes together again for its production 'Robin Hood: The Panto.' Story by Kate Wallace

It was supposed to be a temporary project. The 25-member children's theatre group Kate Elman-Wilcott started in a Saint John church basement in 2001 was just something to keep the director, actor and new mother occupied while her husband returned to school.

The Saint John native had no intention of permanently relocating to her hometown – she thought it offered little for the young and creative.

As a student in the theatre program at Dalhousie University, she spent her summers back home working for the tourism department. "I'd be telling tourists about Saint John, all the great things, but for me at 20, I didn't feel like there was anything here."

When Wilcott's husband's job training was over, so too would their Port City stopover come to an end.

Or so they thought.

It was a simple, but revelatory question put to Wilcott by the mother of one of her first students – "well, why don't you start something?" – that changed everything.

"I thought, why do I need to move to Toronto, where this is already going on, or Halifax, where I had already done this?"

So they stayed. In the nine years since, Wilcott has built that early group of pint-sized performers into the InterAction Children's Theatre Company.

Now in its 10th season, it has more than 200 members aged 3 to 18, a number that doubles during the summer, and grows by more than 150 with its My School outreach program. It offers recreation classes, conservatory acting training and advanced study. The company stages at least three shows a year, many original productions written by Wilcott, at Imperial Theatre.

I THINK IT GIVES ME A LOT OF OPPORTUNITIES. IF I WASN'T WITH (INTERACTION), MY THEATRE WOULD BE BEING THE COOKIE IN THE SCHOOL PLAY."

VERONICA KERRIGAN

While there are other children's theatre troupes in the province, "we're novel because we're not affiliated with a regional theatre," Wilcott says. "The big difference here is we are an entity on our own."

On Thursday, the company opens *Robin Hood: The Panto*. A traditional British holiday form, a panto injects a fairy tale with pop culture references, pop music, audience participation and men in drag.

Last weekend, the company's multi-purpose room was crammed with about 50 people working on various aspects of the show. While cast members were fitted for costumes, sewing machines hummed away and volunteers painted props.

"That's an exaggerated version of what normally happens," Wilcott says. Controlled chaos is standard.

As she tells parents, "Nothing is ever going wrong here," despite what might appear to be low-grade bedlam at times.

Creativity isn't tidy or quiet, Wilcott says. It can't happen without a little disarray.

That freedom to run a little wild is what first drew Veronica Kerrigan, one of InterAction's original members, to theatre, at

age four. She had tried ballet the year before but it wasn't for her.

"I absolutely hated it, even at three," she says. "They made me stand still for too long."

Her first show was *Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*.

"I was kind of jealous because I wanted to be the pig," she says.

She has landed some plum roles since, including the Prettiest Munchin Girl in *The Wizard of Oz*, Tiger Lily in *Peter Pan* and the Crazy Lady in the *Saint John History Mystery*.

"I think it gives me a lot of opportunities. If I wasn't with (InterAction), my theatre would be being the cookie in the school play," the Grade 8 student at Barnhill Memorial says. "Everyone has a role. Even if you're just a tree, you're an interesting tree."

She's never gotten stage fright. "I actually find it quite thrilling. You get a giant rush. Some people are daredevils – I like going on stage."

In *Robin Hood*, Kerrigan plays a Bar Belle, a feminist pub wench. Children's theatre needn't be childish, Kerrigan says.

"You can have mature roles played by kids when they're not in Hollywood."

The panto is the latest in a series of firsts that have marked the company's growth, a development that shows no signs of slowing as InterAction outgrows its 3,600-square-foot space on Bentley Street.

The school's philosophy is simple: "Acting is based on honesty, and it is based on understanding people," Wilcott says. "We spend a lot of time on the idea of empathy in terms of understanding character but also understanding each other in life."

This ethos honours what she learned from her late mother, Anne Elman, who



From left, Ben Peterson, Blake Allen, Isaac Taylor and Garrett Dixon rehearse 'Robin Hood: The Panto.' The show opens Thursday at Imperial Theatre. PHOTO: CINDY WILSON/TELEGRAPH JOURNAL



From left, Ashley Vautour, Hannah Martin, Marley Caddell and Sadie Donahue, members of the InterAction Children's Theatre Co. PHOTO: CINDY WILSON/TELEGRAPH JOURNAL

exercises and that really, really helped me out a lot," Vautour says.

At CBC he'd have four minutes prep time. "You can't rehearse everything, so with those improv skills you can fake it till you make it. I took those skills that Kate taught me about keeping face, she called it, of thinking on the fly, and thinking on my feet. That brought me really far on-camera."

While the training was strong, InterAction was about fun, first and foremost. "I just remember laughing my head off. Certainly, it was something you went to and put a lot of effort into, but you wanted to be there," Vautour says. "That was the No. 1 thing: you wanted to be at InterAction."

Closer to home, some members have found professional opportunities in Saint John, including corporate film projects, and voice work. For those kids considering higher education or a career in theatre, InterAction's Advanced Performance Company offers pre-professional training. Audition requirements are the same as at the National Theatre School: hopefuls must present a classic and modern monologue, and a song, and members are expected to treat it like a job.

Wilcott's goal isn't to churn out working actors, though.

"There's no star system," she says. "It's about the kids, it's not about getting a Gap ad."

A collective creative attitude informs all aspects of InterAction's operations. There aren't official understudies, although young performers do get called upon to

fill roles from time to time.

In 2007, less than an hour before the company's final show of *The Sound of Music* took the stage, there was a minor catastrophe.

Wilcott was headed to the green room when she passed one of her young charges. He looked stricken.

"I'm going to get some ice. It's going to be OK," he said.

"What's going to be OK?" she asked. "If you don't know, I'm not going to be the one to tell you," he said, scurrying off.

"I had to take the longest walk of my life," Wilcott says.

Backstage, performers were quietly tending a boy who was to play a von Trapp son until he fell and hit his head. He obviously needed to get to hospital.

Wilcott asked him to get out of his costume. Turning to a young girl about the same size, she told her she was going to have to step into the role.

"She said, 'I don't know his part,'" Wilcott says.

"I said, 'It's *The Sound of Music*, of course you know the part!'"

In between scenes, the other actors gave the last-minute fill-in quick rundowns of the lines and blocking. The audience was none the wiser.

"This is Project Management 101," Wilcott says. "Whatever gets thrown at us, when that curtain goes up, we'd better have a show." ❧

Kate Wallace covers the arts for the Telegraph-Journal. She can be reached at wallace.kate@telegraphjournal.com.