Every Saturday at Liberty Theater, the old ways take center stage

Weekly radio show completely French

By Angela Rozas

EUNICE — Barry Jean Ancelet is telling a joke. It has something to do with being a judge in a sauce piquanté contest, something about how hot the sauces were.

About half of the crowd at the Liberty Theater understand, and laugh. For the rest, those who can’t understand Ancelet’s smattering of staccato, thickly accented half-words and phrases, the punch line is forever a mystery.

That’s because almost all of “Rendez-vous des Cajuns,” the weekly show at the Liberty, is delivered in Cajun French, a dialect understood by few outside of Acadiana and a foreign tongue even to some Cajuns. But the language is a key element of the show, which for the past 14 years has drawn local residents and some tourists to downtown Eunice on Saturday evenings for a 90-minute blend of indigenous music, humor and conversation. The show reaches an even larger audience via its live broadcast on KRVS-FM in Lafayette and Lake Charles.

Billed as the Cajun version of “A Prairie Home Companion,” but without some of the worldliness of that public radio feature, the show unfolds at 6 p.m. sharp on the stage of a renovated movie theater with a dance floor and 500 wooden chairs.

“Bonjour, mes amis!” Ancelet, the host and a professor of history and French culture at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, proclaimed at the start of a recent show. A medley of Cajun French tumbled from his mouth as he waved his arm with a flourish to the parting of the heavy maroon curtains, and Donald Fontenot et les Cajuns de la Prairie, a group of mostly middle-aged musicians from Kinder, immediately rumbled into its set.

Dancing in a thick accent, the singer, Donald Fontenot, pumped a three-button accordion to lead the band through “Grand Mamou Waltz” and “The Two-step de Balfa.” Dancers, mostly elderly couples plainly dressed in jeans and cotton shirts, turned, twisted, swayed and swaggered across the sloping pine dance floor squeezed between the band and the front row of spectators.

“This is one of the best places to dance around,” Paul Dardeau of Ville Platte said, jaunting off the dance floor after one number. “A place like this is unique. That’s the only thing to call it.”

The locals come for the music and the conversation. The tourists come because the setting feels authentic, like a real Cajun dance hall and, unlike some more well-known spots, because local residents are there.

Not just for tourists

Ancelet said he and several colleagues conceived “Rendez-vous des Cajuns” as a way to promote and preserve authentic Cajun culture.

“One of the things we were concerned about was doing it in the culture’s own terms. Not commodifying it only for tourism,” said Ancelet. “It was one of the reasons why I insisted on doing this in French in the early goings. I wanted to make sure we were helping to support something, and not put another nail in the coffin of something we were allegedly trying to promote.”

On stage, he sticks to a simple formula: Introduce the band, let the band play, make small talk with the audience and just let the program roll.

“The interviews I do on the air, live, in front of God and everybody, are totally unprepared. I’m no David Letterman,” Ancelet said.

“I have no idea what’s going to happen. I have no idea if I’m going to get into a world of trouble or feel the fool,” he said.

Ancelet also sneaks in bits and pieces of Acadiana’s history, using the program as an introduction to Cajun culture.

It’s a tactic he calls “guerrilla education.”

For all generations

Conducting the show in the native tongue has consequences, because a show of hands on a typical night usually means a 50-50 split of French speakers and non-French speakers. That leaves non-French speakers with a choice of sitting silently through the show, or asking those who understand for a translation. This sort of forced integration can be a benefit to everyone.

“It creates a conversation that would never have happened otherwise,” Ancelet said. “Though I’m never too sure how I’m being translated out there.”

Ancelet’s jokes are not side-splitters. But he delivers them in French, and that’s one of the charms of the show for the Cajuns in the audience.

“You can go other places and hear the good music and see the dancing, but this is smoke-free and we’re back home on time,” said 72-year-old Ollie Harman, sitting next to her husband, Ray, near the back of the theater.

The couple, from the town of Branch, both speak French and have been coming to “Rendez-vous des Cajuns” for 10 years. They used to dance the night away. Now they take their grandchildren to hear the music.

That’s what it’s all about, Ancelet said.

“Here, a kid — a 10-year-old kid — can see his grandma and grandpa loving this. He gets to dance with his mama, or dance with his grandma,” Ancelet said. “And he might say, ‘This is OK. I like this. Every one in a while, I’ll listen to it. That’s OK.’

Still, even an activist such as Ancelet doesn’t paint a rosy picture for the future of Cajun culture.

“This is not enough. This is important. It fuels a lot of pride, a lot of cultural resurgence, but it’s not enough,” he said. “Until we find a way to restore the language and to restore the culture’s ability to perpetuate itself in its own terms, this will disappear.”

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