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# Portrait of an Artist: An Interview with Madleen Blanc

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Photo: Courtesy of Madleen Blanc · Blanc (left) and her companion show *Gwendolyn the way*.

## Une Voix Transatlantique

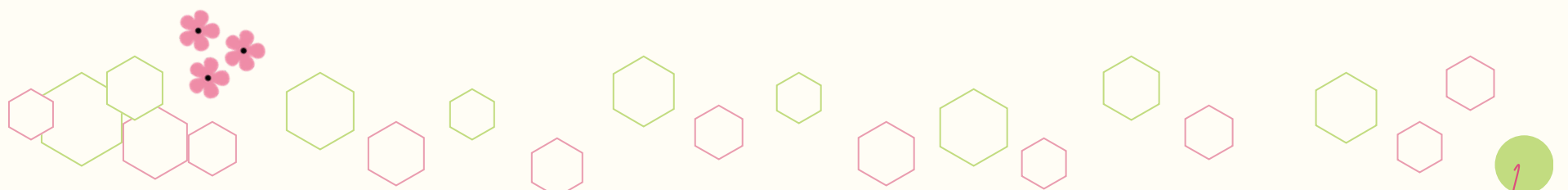
Over spring break, I had the good fortune to catch the final of three shows of *La Soirée des Étoiles*, part of the *Ville des Langues* festival, a multilingual showcase representing a mix of genres and traditions, including the centerpiece: *Gwendolyn, Guerrière des Étoiles*, a Star Wars-inspired operetta composed by American-born multidisciplinary artist Matthew Thurber, brought to life by the efforts of Thurber as well as the other talented members of the international theatre association *Les Voix Transatlantiques*.

In the days following the performances I had a chance to sit down with Madleen Blanc, who, in addition to being the chef at the recently shuttered Avignon institution *Chez Françoise*, is a gifted soprano and was a featured performer in the show, playing the Princess Leia stand-in as well as other memorable roles.

Her cozy apartment is tucked into a quiet corner in the heart of the old city and, in addition to Blanc, is home to a dog, a cat and two teenage daughters.

She welcomes me with an accent and manner so impeccably English that Churchill himself would never have guessed she was born in France. Between sips of Yorkshire tea she tells me how she became involved with *Les Voix Transatlantiques* and we had a chat that felt like chicken soup for the expat soul.

What began as a conversation about the performance gave way to a wider reflection on language, identity, and the small town serendipity that brings artistic communities together. Blanc spoke about her path to *Gwendolyn, Guerrière des Étoiles*, her lifelong relationship with languages, and how singing across cultures has shaped both her artistic and personal life.



## Q: How did you initially get involved with Les Voix Transatlantiques?

So initially I was approached by Matthew [Thurber]. He had already met David McDonald, part of Les Voix Transatlantiques. David's the one that made it possible to produce the show, because you can't produce a show just like that- you have to be under a society. That was originally [Matthew's] issue, because he wanted to produce his show, but he couldn't. Then he happened to meet David McDonald and Helen (Landau) one day at Ephese, and David said, "Look, don't give up. This is what we're gonna do: push. I know this person..." and everything just got sort of put in place.

And with me working at Françoise, I had spoken to him there, because he's also a parent at the school where my daughter goes in Sorgue. So we'd met about a year and a half before on a work day at the school, in the summer when I had just arrived from England. It was August, I had just moved in, and I did two days of scrubbing and cleaning and repainting the classrooms, and Matthew and I were put together on a team-

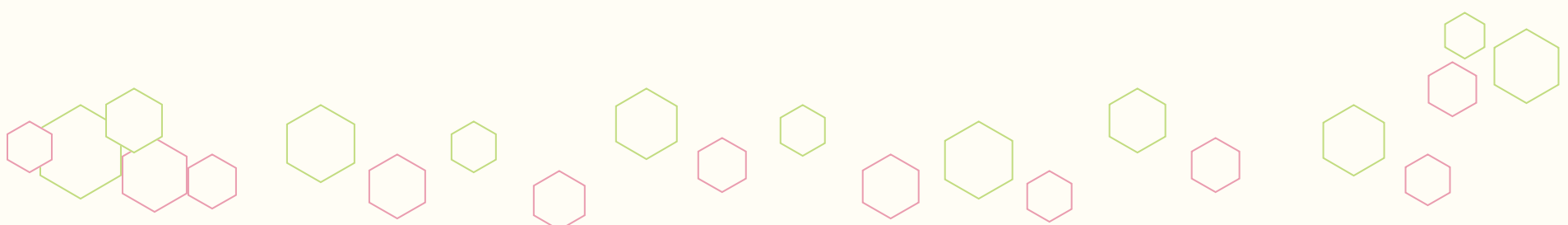
## Q: Nothing to do with being the Anglophones?

Nothing to do with that- well, I don't know! Anyway, we got to chatting, and he was basically my first contact when I arrived here. So moving forward, we would bump into each other, and I happened to slip that I had started singing at the conservatoire, and he said, "Oh, you sing? Great, I'm building a show, and I'll send you a link." Just like that. He sent me a link to his operetta that he had put together, and it sort of struck a chord with me, because the subject was quite close to my heart. I thought, this is ballsy, but it's cool. So I emailed him back, and he asked if I would be up for a sort of audition, just to see where you are with your voice, to see if the voice would fit a character in the operetta, and I said sure, not knowing what I was getting into.

Then one day we met at the conservatoire and tried it out, and he said, "Your voice is perfect for that role," and gave me a whole load of music folders, and he said, "There you go, this is your role." I was like, wow, okay- let's go for it. It was amazing going back to things I had done before, but also Matthew does the Werbeck singing, which is a technique of singing that's completely different. Doing classical singing, as you know, we learn how to project our sound, our voice, but Werbeck singing is much more internal and more about vibration, and the experience of singing just becomes completely different. So that was great, because it was not just a show, it was a show and a new technique, another dimension- you could even say it's a bit spiritual.



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**Q: In the context of the Ville des Langues festival, there were a lot of different languages in the show. Can you say a bit about your background with singing in different languages? Was that something that you had been interested in, or had studied before moving to France?**

So I was born in France in a French family, and believe it or not, I was absolutely rubbish in languages. Completely rubbish, absolute zero. But when I was 14, I moved to Germany and stayed there for a few months. I sort of completely immersed myself in the language, and when I came home, something had just completely turned around with regards to languages. I was able to speak German, not completely fluently, but I was able to organize sentences and have a proper conversation with people with sense and meaning.

And I was like, wow, this is amazing.

From that moment on, that sort of turned things around. I did my whole schooling in the Waldorf School, which is a German school, and in the older classes we did a drama all in German. I was incarnating a man-

I still remember it shocked me. They strapped my chest to make me look flat, and that's always been a problem for me, because I was always quite blessed in that area! So it was totally different, I had to be a really masculine German guy, and I had a really long text to learn. I did that, and then a few bits in English, but not too much, because it was still really complicated for me.

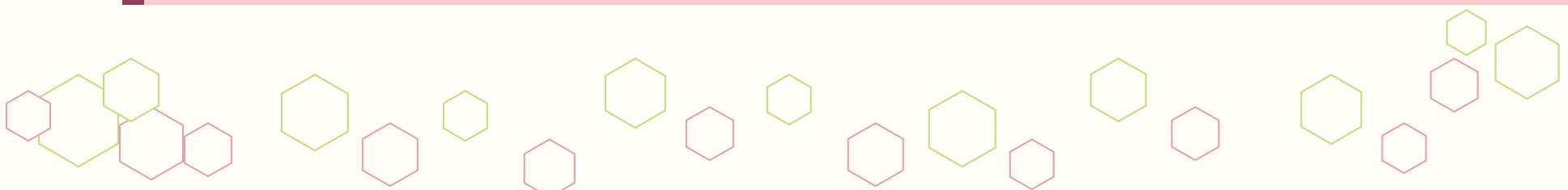
Then I moved to England when I was 17, and again, because I had learned German, my ear had changed. Your ear picks it up like a melody, and your brain makes sense of sounds. It really helped me to understand one language and then to open up to another. I think the more languages you learn, the easier it becomes, because your brain has got a gymnastic quality that just picks things up. But it's all in the sound- there's just something about it that you can't explain, really.

So when I moved to England, I learned English by living and working there. Then my kids' dad- he's South African-speaks Afrikaans. And this is when it really did something for me. With me knowing German, English, and French, I already had three languages under my belt, and then I went to South Africa, where they all speak Afrikaans. I was like, "Oh my gosh, I understand what they're saying! I don't know that language, but I understand what they're saying."

I realized that actually languages are just like a melting pot of all the languages together, and it was just brilliant. I still remember how amazed I was about that.

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and your brain makes sense of the sounds.



**Q: Do you think for you as a performer, having been involved in all of these productions in different languages, does it make it easier if it's in a different language, because it's already like putting on a role, or does it make it more difficult?**

Oh, no, it doesn't make it more difficult. I bloody love it! To have different languages that I can speak and I can express myself in. Obviously, there are certain languages that you make more sense in, or you're more sensible to, but generally speaking, each language brings on a certain character. Even for me personally, I always say that I'm pretty funny in French, but I'm much funnier in English. Because I think you are a different person depending on the language you speak. You incarnate a different personality when you speak a different language.

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Photo: Courtesy of Madleen Blanc · Blanc and the cast of *Gwendolyn*.

**Q: It's so interesting that you say that you're funnier in English, since so many people say that the language that it's easiest to be funny in is your native language.**

I always say to French people jokingly, “You think I'm funny? It's just a shame you can't speak English.

You'll never get how funny I am in English.

And so humble, too.”

## Q: Do you have a favorite language to perform in, to sing in?

I love English- obviously, I love English. However, I went to a concert last Sunday- all the poems and songs of Jacques Prévert performed by Francis Gott, who was playing one of the actors (in La Soirée des Étoiles). And when he sang the songs, it was just amazing- it made me rediscover French language and poetry, and the absurdities of life. It was co-written with Kosma, and the music accompanying those texts was just so moving, and it has a different dimension to it. I think each language has got its own specificity of what it can give, and depending on how you feel inside- if you do opera in German, for example, that could be quite hard, but also it has so much power, like a machine, but then if you take an opera in Italian, it's so extravagant, it's so colorful. I think it depends on each person- it's the language of the heart, isn't it?

I think for me personally, the language of my heart is English, because it is where I can express most of my feelings.

## Q: Do you have any final reflections now that the show is wrapping up?

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I just want to do some more. Bring it on.

The language of my heart is English.

Avignon will miss Chez Françoise, but Blanc may already have moved on to her next professional project: wedding planning. In the TCMN master, we study cultural transfers and mediation; she lives it.



Photo: Rachel Brodie · Blanc relaxing in her element at home.

### AUTHOR CREDIT

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**Bio:** Rachel Brodie is a sometime teacher and all-the-time learner at Avignon University.

**Pronouns:** she/her

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