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Life is a Cabaret: Exploring the *bas-fonds* with Dominique Kalifa

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For Americans, the word “cabaret” evokes a glammed-up Liza Minelli can-can kicking at the Kit Kat Club or the exuberant feathered fantasy of Baz Luhrman’s *Moulin Rouge*. But Dominique Kalifa’s *Les bas-fonds* (2013) brought us back to the cabaret’s less savory origins in nineteenth-century Paris and its underworld filled with “des bouges, des taudis, des corps avachis dans des cloaques qui sentent la crasse et l’urine” (p. 9). The sordid dens and dance halls that populate Kalifa’s study of a social imaginary cross the boundaries between history and literature, reality and fiction. *Le Lapin Blanc*, for example, situated on the Rue aux Fèves in the labyrinthine Île de la Cité, served as shady meeting-point for the characters of Eugène Sue’s 1842 *Les Mystères de Paris*, but after that novel vaulted to popularity, the proprietor of the cabaret encouraged literary tourism by plastering its walls with illustrations of Rodolphe, Fleur-de-Marie, and le Chourineur, while also (according to rumor) hiring harlots and thugs to play their roles in a mercenary example of life imitating art imitating life (p. 209). In Kalifa’s wide-ranging analysis, the world of the cabaret takes on moral, religious, and sociological meanings stemming from its topographical literalization of the “*bas*”-*fonds*: “à Paris, les pires lieux sont ceux dans lesquels on s’enfonce. Les tapis-francs sont des ‘cabarets du plus bas étage’, comme l’antre de Bras-Rouge, le *Cœur saignant*, bouge souterrain des *Mystères de Paris*, ou le *Trou-à-vin* des *Mendiants de Paris*, une ‘caverne,’ une ‘salle basse’” (p. 33). These cellars with their smoky vaults may have hosted only low-lives at the start of the century, but by the *fin-de-siècle* they served as theatrical scenes for social slumming, through an odd touristic practice known as the *tournée des grands-ducs*, the “Grand Duke’s Tour.” Kalifa describes the titillating plunge into places of ill repute by a voyeuristic upper class eager to rub elbows—safely—with thugs, pimps, and whores in their “authentic” habitat.

The *tournée des grands-ducs* is one of four “*scénographies*” that Kalifa brings to life in *Les Bas-fonds*. (The other three are taxonomical lists, the motif of the disguised prince, and poetic flights of fancy.) In the spirit of those scenarios, I’d like to share four scenes from the past seventeen years, when I was happy to call Dominique a colleague and a friend:

Scenario #1: In a large, modern conference room at the Université Montpellier, I sit near other scholars invited in 2013 by Dominique Kalifa and Marie-Ève Thérénty from countries around the world—including Canada, Brazil, Hungary, Russia, Spain—to present research on the global circulation, borrowings, and adaptations of Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris*. We are listening to the third or fourth speaker being introduced at the front podium when suddenly a young woman from the back stands up and strides forward, calling out “Bonjour, Chourineur!” A young man stands and answers “C’est toi, la Goualeuse,” while the rest of us start to smile as we recognize the dialogue from Sue’s first pages, when his characters prepare to enter the ill-famed

tapis-franc. A third actor, playing Rodolphe, joins the first two and their scene continues, off-script from the conference's official program, a surprise gift from our organizers and the university's talented theater students. After the session, we take a *pause-café*. And though most of us had not known each other beforehand, this live theatrical flash-mob experience has brought us together in a shared sense of fellowship and *connivence*, as though we ourselves were now chatting in a snug cabaret instead of a campus *cantine*.

Scenario #2: Around 2005, I think, I was in Paris with my family when Dominique told me that he and his wife wanted to show me and my husband an "authentic" cabaret in one of the city's less-touristed areas. Though not exactly a Grand Duke's tour, it was a fun night out in a spot I never would have found on my own, with simple fare, wine we found "*buvable*," and live entertainment by chanteuses and poets. The most memorable part of the evening, however, was a comedic audience-participation act by a mime who had studied in clown school—and who pulled my red-faced, good sport of a husband onto the stage to play the role of an American cowboy armed with an invisible lasso evaded by the clown's ridiculous horse moves. Laughter, and again theater, pulled us out of the quotidian; the walls of the cabaret could have been those of a century earlier.

Scenario #3: Years later, when Dominique learned that I was also interested in the fin-de-siècle cultural phenomenon of the *danse apache*, he shared sources and resources with his typical generosity. We exchanged e-mails, sent each other literary or sociological citations, and delighted in watching video clips from old movie scenes featuring this violent dance meant to mimic the moves of a pimp beating his whore. Dominique cites a number of these films in *Les Bas-fonds*, including Yves Mirande's *La tournée des grand-ducs* (1910), Feuillade's *Vampires* (1915), Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), and Lewis Seiler's *Charlie Chan in Paris* (1935). When I wrote about the frame-breaking "criminal choreographies" of the *danse apache*, I was directly inspired by Dominique's fascination with the process by which the gestures of back-alley thuggery had become stylized and staged in the setting of the low-life cabaret.

Scenario #4: June 2013. An invitation arrives as an attachment in my e-mail inbox. It announces: "For the first time in Paris! The Farouche Players will perform—in English—a light comedy in three acts by Noël Coward, at the Théâtre de Nesle." And who will be in the acting ensemble of this theatrical production? Dominique Kalifa! Dominique, who was willing to learn new languages in order to connect more directly with global audiences of his scholarly talks. Who, like Fantômas, could shape-shift across any number of roles: serious academic and member of the Institut Universitaire de France, eager tourist in a small midwestern American town, sophisticated world traveler and down-to-earth friend, committed actor in a comic play performed for the fun of it in Paris's 6th arrondissement. "La vie est courte, et j'aime bouger!," Dominique wrote to me once. That zest for movement, activity, and constant discovery came through in everything Dominique did, whether he was traveling the globe or entertaining local audiences in the cabaret-like space of the Théâtre de Nesle.

Dominique was a guide for so many of us into other spaces and historical moments. But unlike the profit-driven men who guided late-nineteenth-century voyeurs through sordid sites in the *tournées des grands ducs*, Dominique approached those spaces with empathy. In *Les bas-fonds*, he muses on the motivation behind a historian's study of vice, crime, and poverty. Is it

phantasmatic projection? Dubious fascination? “Ai-je fait ici,” he asks, “la part trop belle au sordide, à l’abject, à l’envers de la société, les plaies de l’humanité, les hideuses machines qui font mouvoir ce monde?” (p. 376). Always the humanitarian, Dominique was careful to remind us that behind the social “imaginary” was an ugly reality of suffering and poverty for generations of disenfranchised, marginalized people. But it was through the imaginary that sordid horrors could be transformed by an *esprit carnavalesque*; “De leurs racines populaires, [les bas-fonds] ont conservé la dimension carnavalesque de monde à l’envers” (p. 65). Rather than leave us in the muck of the underworld, Dominique gave us access to its flip side: he chose the performativity and playfulness of a *joyful* cabaret.

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