

Ed. Note: On May 18, one Dalhousie boy met another on a podium at St. Thomas University in Fredericton. Dr. Tony Tremblay, Canada Research Chair, New Brunswick Studies, and a professor at the Department of English at the university composed and read the citation for Marshall Button (a.k.a. "Lucien" in his hometown) before the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa, was conferred on him by Dr. Michael Higgins, president of St. Thomas University. The text of the citation, which follows, says it all.



Marshall Button, right, accepts his Doctor of Letters degree from Dr. Michael Higgins, president of St. Thomas University on May 18.

Vice-Chancellor, it is a pleasure to present to Convocation Mr. Marshall Button, a distinguished New Brunswick Actor, Wit, Playwright, and Artistic Director.

Mr. Button grew up in the bilingual town of Dalhousie in northern New Brunswick, the son of a Francophone mother and Anglophone father. Like many of his peers, he worked in the local NBIP paper mill to put himself through university. His summers there, however, did not precipitate his leaving or affirm his desire for another class or place, but cemented his loyalties to the people of his town. Rather than see illiteracy and defeat in the men he worked with, he saw wisdom and resilience, the strengths of a people historically marginalized by religion, language, and locale.

A year after receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in Drama at Bishops University, he captured those strengths in the comic character of Lucien, his most enduring creation. Conceived as a two-minute monologue in February 1984 to celebrate New Brunswick's bicentennial, the first full show of Lucien premiered at St. Thomas University in March 1986. Over the last two decades, Lucien has become better known than any other literary character or dramatis persona in the province, one that Peter Gzowski declared "a national treasure."

As a mid-career, suitably disgruntled, low-skilled mill worker, Lucien is the working-class New Brunswick (and Canadian) Everyman. A speaker of two languages, he is proficient in neither. Rather, his tongue is an amalgam of wit and slang, frustration and hope, English and French (what he terms "frenghish/franglais"). He is highly paid and ponderously slow, guardian of the shop-floor virtues of safety, rest, and moderation, all of which must be mastered if one is to endure years of button-pushing, level-checking, spirit-deflating shift work. Under-utilized and unfulfilled, he is left alone for long periods

with his imaginary assistant to ruminate on things metaphysical. While automation has freed him from physical toil, it has not released him from the hard work of self-knowledge, which he pursues in undirected talk. It is this talk that audiences overhear in Marshall Button's shows.

Most important for us, however, is his unique, place-based social gospel. Lucien bridges two linguistic communities (English and French), two cultural divides (Loyalist/Protestant and Acadian/Catholic), and two historically distinct socio-economic realities in the province (the administrative economies of the urban south and the resource-based economies of the rural north). His precarious position atop these social and economic fault-lines embodies the political history of our province, its unequal wealth distribution, and the always real though rarely discussed inequities around language, region, religion, and class. Lucien interrogates these inequities, offering audiences a glimpse into the real meaning of "robbing Peter to pay Pierre," the rancorous slogan popularized in the 1960s to debase Acadian premier Louis Robichaud's Equal Opportunity reforms.

In classic comic fashion (subverting social hierarchy and bastardizing the King's English), Button uses humour as an index of grievance in much the same way as Antonine Maillet does in *Pélagie* and *La Sagouine*. Just as *la Sagouine* uses humour to sustain herself while elbow deep in the dirty water of the rich, so does Lucien's wit sustain him as he does penance on the paper machines. In the end, both are strengthened by their capacity to laugh at what they cannot easily change, and, in so doing, both are unique in displaying the quality of resilience characteristic of many rural, Catholic, working class New Brunswickers. Though they may be without urban educations, these New Brunswickers are not without the wisdom to see clearly through the double-talk of their leaders or the wit to bring them to their knees.

But whereas Maillet gives a voice to the Acadian New Brunswick experience, Lucien gives a voice to the populations that are neither Scots, Irish, Loyalist, Brayon, nor Acadian, but a mix of those by varying degrees. His people count among their ancestors French-speaking Acadian grandfathers who married non-French-speaking Irish grandmothers, and whose children became bilingual by accident of birth not by legislated decree. No one but Marshall Button, through Lucien, has ever spoken for these people or spoken in their tongue. And in that tongue is the endurance of a whole population.

Staged over 1,500 times now for audiences across Canada and the U.S., and recently for the troops in Afghanistan, Lucien is a blue-collar ambassador who is recognized outside the province as a humane champion of the men and women in this country who work in the mills, the mines, and the woods. "The appeal of the play," said Button recently in *The Brockville Recorder and Times*, "is its universal message that to overlook the 'lowly' is to overlook those who through their innocence speak the greatest truths." His pan-Canadian success is evidenced not only in his consistently sold out shows in Gander, Abitibi, Timmins, and other working-class hinterlands of Canada, but also in the number of guest appearances he has made on national radio and television, where he has been a favourite

on Sounds Like Canada, Sunday Morning, Morningside, Royal Canadian Airfarce, and Sportsnet.

And, though, Lucien is indeed a regionally based comic creation situated in northern New Brunswick, his quizzical humanity rescues him from being parochial, proving, as the poet William Carlos Williams wrote, that "localism alone leads to culture."

In presenting Mr. Button for an honorary degree, I am recognizing a uniquely talented artist, a loyal son of northern New Brunswick, a leader in provincial theatre, and a humanist who has celebrated the marvelous idiosyncrasies of his people with warmth, respect, and an abiding affection. If real art, as V.S. Naipaul wrote, hallows place, then Marshall Button's veneration of our New Brunswick home raises his art to lofty status indeed.

Vice Chancellor, I ask that you confer upon Marshall Button the degree, Doctor of Letters, honoris causa.