

# FRENCH MORNING

## ENGLISH EDITION

### "Donogoo", by Jules Romain: Willing Absurdity

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Photo: Donogoo By Jules Romain Translated and Directed by Gus Kaikkonen Cast Ross Bickell Mitch Greenberg George Morfogen

Jay Patterson Paul Pontrelli Dave Quay Douglas Rees James Riordan Megan Robinson Kraig Swartz Scott Thomas Brian Thomas

Vaughan Vladimir Versailles presented by The Mint Theater Company; Dress rehearsal photographed: Sunday, June 1, 2014; 7:30 PM

at Mint Theater, New York, NY; Photograph: © 2014 Richard Termine. PHOTO CREDIT - Richard Termine

If one ever wondered where Mel Brooks might have gotten his inspiration for "The Producers," look no further than Jules Romain's hysterical "Donogoo" at New York's Mint Theatre.

This delightful, rarely produced comedy, which Le Figaro hailed in 1930 as "a complete triumph" (and whose success incidentally saved the Théâtre Pigalle from demise) flips absurdity even further on its ear than Mr. Brooks ever did.

#### WHERE WHAT WHEN

MINT THEATRE COMPANY  
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[minttheater.org](http://minttheater.org)  
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The early-20th-century French playwright, who by the late 1930s was among the most prolifically produced, joyfully doles out this farce, allowing surreality to become reality by turning his story on the world's most immutable force—man's unquenchable greed.

So relentless is everyone's desire to exploit a town (which doesn't exist) that it's actually willed into existence.

This non-entity called Donogoo gets its start when a French geographical scholar Le Trouhadec references it in his magnum opus. In his attempt to gain admission to the venerable Academies des Sciences, it's discovered Donogoo is but a figment of Trouhadec's imagination. But how to prove otherwise—with almost Marx Brotheresque zaniness that takes jabs at all professions concerned—is this Screwball comedy's tale.

Along the way, the story takes us over Parisian bridges, and into cafes, studies, metro and train stations, and steamships, from Paris to Marseille, Saigon, San Francisco, Rio de Janeiro, and yes, eventually to Donogoo. The itinerary outlined in the playbill makes one wonder even before the lights go down for the first of 23 "Tableaux" how the modest 100-seat theatre will pull off such travels.

Under the creative direction of Gus Kaikkonen, who also translated the play, the Mint has pulled off perhaps its most imaginative production to date, projecting various venues against multi-faceted stage walls to capture and move between locales as seamlessly as the moving pictures.

But it does film one better when ostensibly two-dimensional, sometimes cartoon images—from standing globes, espresso steamers, to public telephones and movie screens—suddenly become animated upon an actor's touch.

The nearly 50-character script is played deftly by a troupe of just 13. The most compelling, Ross Bickell's Margajat—the smooth-talking Madoff-like banker who sniffs out the tall tale being sold him even before the protagonist can fully spew the words—propels the story by giving the scam legitimacy to take off.

The lead character, Lamendin, is played by James Riordan with almost Alan Rickmanesque drôle, but not quite. His occasional whining is off key. But let that go, along with his abrupt transformation from disillusioned loner to master of ceremonies, which suspends belief. No matter though because that's exactly what this entire production does in keeping with the best of the Mint's screwball tradition.