

# Colby



## Colby Quarterly

---

Volume 13  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 3

---

September 1977

## Yvon Deschamps- New Life for an Old Form

Ronald Sutherland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 13, no.3, September 1977, p.165-172

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact [mfkelly@colby.edu](mailto:mfkelly@colby.edu).

## Yvon Deschamps— *New Life for an Old Form*

by RONALD SUTHERLAND

**A** BOUNCY, IMPISH little man called Yvon Deschamps is quite probably the most popular performer in Quebec today. In terms of professional category, I suppose one might say that he is a stand-up comedian, and certainly he can hold audiences spellbound for as long as he likes. He always plays to packed houses, and his two record albums have sold more than 100,000 copies each.

But Yvon Deschamps is much more than a flash-in-the-pan comedian. He is a literary phenomenon (Editions Leméac has brought out a book of his monologues from 1968 to 1973),<sup>1</sup> an exponent of the oldest and perhaps the most influential genre in Canada, and I suspect that it is in literary terms that his true merit will eventually be judged.

In a highly perceptive article called "Le Monologue québécois" (published in *Canadian Literature* 58), scholar Laurent Mailhot examines the work of Yvon Deschamps from the viewpoint of the monologue tradition, at the same time explaining the native significance of the tradition. Mailhot sees the monologue taking firm hold and flourishing in Quebec because of "certains aspects de notre géographie et de notre histoire: l'isolement des rangs et des fermes, la rigueur de l'hiver, la longueur des voyages, l'exil saisonnier des forestiers." He goes on to point out that numerous vital works of literature, including plays such as Barbeau's *Solange*, Maillet's *La Sagouine*, Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs*, are in fact offshoots of the traditional monologue, the standard entertainment of long winter nights in isolated rural communities.

Now it seems to me that Laurent Mailhot may well be on to something, and not only for Quebec writing but for that of the whole of Canada and perhaps also for New England and other areas of the United States. After all, the nights were just as long and cold and the rural communities just as isolated elsewhere as in Quebec. Is it possible, however, that Canadian writers in general are more adept at using the monologue—first-person narration in colloquial diction where mood and often ironic self-analysis and observation are more important than plot—than other literary

*Note:* This essay is part of a book by Ronald Sutherland entitled *The New Hero: Essays in Comparative Quebec/Canadian Literature*, which is scheduled for publication this fall by Macmillan of Canada, Ltd.

1. Yvon Deschamps, *Monologues* (Montreal: Leméac, 1973). Subsequent references to this book will be identified by page numbers in parentheses.

techniques? Does the monologue somehow strike an especially responsive chord in Canadians? In Quebec, as Mailhot suggests, the answer seems definitely to be positive. Besides the plays already mentioned and numerous other dramatic works, there are novels such as Réjean Ducharme's *L'Avalée des avalés*, Hubert Aquin's *Prochain épisode*, as well as André Langevin's *Poussière sur la ville*, which are essentially monologues. But one thinks also of well-known books written in English—Sinclair Ross' *As For Me And My House*, large sections in the work of Hugh MacLennan, Leonard Cohen, Margaret Laurence, W.O. Mitchell, Richard Wright.

On the other hand, American classics such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby Dick* also borrow from the monologue tradition. Perhaps the phenomenon, if indeed it has any significance at all, is North American rather than Canadian. Whatever the case, Yvon Deschamps, the Quebec entertainer, is unquestionably a monologist, and he is breathing new life into an old form.

It has been suggested that since Deschamps uses colloquial Montreal French, or *joual* as it is sometimes called, the great majority of anglophones will not be able to understand him. Certainly when performing on the stage Deschamps speaks rapidly, interspersing his texts with sounds, songs, gestures and ad-libs, making no concessions to standards of accent and grammar other than his own—he is, of course, speaking the language of the working man he portrays. Nevertheless, an examination of Deschamps' monologues in their printed form, despite certain inconsistencies in the texts, reveals that the man himself is reasonably consistent. As in the spoken language itself, words, expressions, phrases are often repeated, and once the reader has mastered a few basic patterns, the diction of Yvon Deschamps is hardly as challenging as would seem at first sight.

For example, *qu'est-çe que ca* (what?) will be elided to *quossa*, as in the expression *quossa donne*, the equivalent of English "Whatta yuh get out of it?" or "Whatta they good fer?" *Moé* and *toé* (pronounced "mway" and "tway") are standard *moi* and *toi*. *Il* and *la* are often shortened to *y* and *à*, *puis* to *pis*, the *e* is elided in a number of words (*s'maine* for *semaine*, *p'tit* for *petit*, etc.) and the *r* in others (*autres* for *autres*, *not* for *notre*, etc.). Sometimes the vowels in words like *chercher* and *merde* will be modified so that the words become *charcher* and *marde*. And that's about it. Aware of these devices, the reader with a high school knowledge of standard French ought to be able, I believe, to read Yvon Deschamps. For practice here is the beginning of the first monologue he performed, the one which accidentally launched his career. It is called "Les Unions, quossa donne?"—Unions, Whatta They Good Fer?

Non, mais c'est vrai, par exemple,  
quand tu y penses. les unions,  
quossa donne? Ça donne rien . . .

No, but it's true. fer instance,  
when yuh think about it, unions,  
whatta they good fer? Nothin . . .

c'est vrai . . . On n'a tu une union à shop, nos autes? On n'a pas. Moé, ça fait 15 ans que j'travaille à shop . . . ça fait 15 ans qu'y a pas d'union. Quossa donne?

On n'a pas d'union, pis ça empêche pas que depuis à s'maine passée, on a à s'maine de 54 heures. Pis, on a not congé à Noël ou ben donc au Jour de l'An . . . pis l'été, on a une s'maine de vacances payées. On la prend pas toujours, mais ça fait rien, on l'a pareil . . . Aye, pis moé, ça paraît pas, mais j'fais des s'maines de \$62, \$63, pis déjà avec d'l'overtime, chus t'allé m'charcher \$73 . . . pas clair.

Quand j'ai lâché école à 13 ans, mon vieux père, y était sus son lit d'mort, y dit . . . mon p'tit garçon, j'peux pas t'laisser d'héritage . . . M'en doutait un peu, à vitesse qu'y buvait . . . mais seulement avant d'partir, j'peux t'dire que dans à vie y a deux choses qui comptait . . . une job steady, pis un bon boss. Les maudites affaires d'union, quossa donne, ça? Une job steady, pis un bon boss. Pis. là, y é parti. (p. 19)

it's true . . . Have we got a union at the shop, us? We have not. Me, 15 years I've bin workin at the shop . . . 15 years that we got no union. Whatta they good fer?

We got no union, but that ain't stopped us from getting a 54-hour week, since a week ago. Besides, we got our Chirstmas holiday, or else New Year . . . an' in summer we get a week's vacation with pay. We don't take it all the time, but that's all right—we get it jus the same. An' me eh, it may not look it, but some weeks I make \$62, \$63, an' already with overtime I've picked up \$73 . . . not clear.

When I quit school at 13, my old dad, he was on his deathbed, he says . . . my little son. I ain't got nothin to leave yuh . . . I figgered as much, the rate he usta booze it up . . . but before I go, I can only tell yuh that in life there's two things that count . . . a steady job an' a good boss. That damned union business, what's it good fer? A steady job an' a good boss. An' then, he was gone.

The beginning of Deschamps' first monologue quoted above provides a good idea of his method and subject matter. Usually he presents himself as the typical Quebec working man trying to cope with the life around him—his job, the unions, the English, television, sex, movies and so on. But the character is more than just that, much more—he is also the universal little man confronting twentieth-century North America: violence, confusion of values, indirection, prejudices, hatred, war, solitude and rapid change. And since narrator Deschamps is the little man, he also embodies many of the weaknesses and human deficiencies of individuals in our society. The laughter turns in upon himself. Complaining about the horrors of intolerance and prejudice, for example, it turns out that he is unwittingly and hopelessly intolerant and prejudiced himself; “Ouan, mais c'est vrai, l'intolérance, c'est pas tolérable.” (“Yeah, but it's true, intolerance shouldn't be tolerated.”) Then being on the subject, he goes on to list all the other things which should not be tolerated, wondering why we put up with them: “Moé, j'dis, les tapettes, les lesbiennes, les affaires comme ça, on devrait pas tolérer ça dans une société normale, on devrait toute sacrer ça en prison. Toute!” (“Me, I

say, fairies, lesbians, all that kind of stuff, we shouldn't stand for that in a normal society. We oughta slap 'em all in jail. All of 'em!")

As an aside and a typical Deschamps topical dig, incidentally, in the monologue on intolerance he mentions that Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau has passed laws to protect homosexuals and wonders what will happen next. "Pis comme j'connais M. Trudeau," he says, "pour gagner ses prochaines élections, y ben capable de légaliser l'avortement pour les tapettes." ("An' if I know Mr. Trudeau, to win the next election he's quite capable of legalizin abortion for fairies.")

Deschamps, the little-man narrator, is at once abused and abusing, selfish and generous, perceptive at moments but often naive. He is the product of a mixed-up, ailing society. We laugh at him, we laugh with him, we sympathize with him, we detest him, but more often than not we see in him something of ourselves, and it is not always a pleasant experience. If we did not laugh, we might feel inclined to cry.

Sometimes he uses the ignorance and naiveness of his character to give a monologue an ironic twist. "Nigger Black" is a good example:

Nigger black . . . nigger black . . .  
nigger black . . . Moé, quand j'tais  
p'tit, on voyait des nègres, on leu  
criait ça . . . nigger black. Non, mais  
c'est parce que quand on était p'tit,  
on était jaloux des nègres, nous  
autes . . . c'est parce qu'on trouvait  
que y étaient chanceux, eux autes.  
Aye, y étaient toute frisé, y  
avaient pas besoin d'se peigner.  
Y pouvaient pas attraper d'coups  
d'soleil . . . ça paraissait pas quand  
y étaient sales. (p. 37)

Nigger black . . . nigger black . . .  
nigger black . . . Me, when I was a  
kid, we'd see a negro an' we'd  
shout that . . . nigger black. No,  
well it's cause when we was kids,  
we was jealous of negroes, us  
guys . . . cause we figgered they  
was lucky, those guys was.  
Their hair was all curly eh, so's  
they didn't have to comb it.  
They couldn't get sun burnt . . .  
an' it didn't show when they  
got dirty.

And the monologue goes on from there, making the audience acutely aware of the problems that Blacks have to endure in the theoretically liberal metropolis of Montreal.

Deschamps' satire can be poignant and bitter, but it can also be light-hearted, poking fun rather than punching holes. "Le p'tit Jésus" is in the second category, a humorous parody of simplistic religion, the non-thinking acceptance of everything one is told. In many ways it is reminiscent of the speeches of Saint Sammy in W.O. Mitchell's novel *Who Has Seen the Wind*. Retelling the story of Jesus from the point of view of an uneducated and uninformed working man, Deschamps comes up with an ingenious transformation into current language and concepts, again striking out at numerous prejudices and stupidities along the way.

After describing the birth and early years of Jesus, Deschamps tells how he attempts to gather around him a "grosse gang." But Jesus annoys people, especially since he insists on talking about his father all the time—"mon père par ci, mon père par là, mon père a faite ci . . ." Then the monologue continues:

## RONALD SUTHERLAND

169

C'est pas pour ça qu'le monde l'aimait pas. Le monde l'aimait pas, premièrement, ben c'tait un Juif, et pis he, à part de t'ça, y avait une grande barbe, t'sais, fait que y pouvait pas rentrer n'importe you . . . Et pis, lui y aimait ça porter les ch'veux sus é z'épaules . . . fait que presque toutes les troubles y passaient sus l'dos. Ben c'est surtout parce qu'y avait une manie ben fatigante . . . énervante . . . y ramassait des grosses gangs, t'sais . . . pis là ça marchait dans é rues . . . pis, on va changer ci, pis on va changer ça, le monde haïssait ça. Dans c'temps-là, le monde comprenait pas—c'tait pas comme aujourd'hui. Y comprenaient tellement pas qu'le grand prêtre en chef, un moment donné, a dit: pus d'marchage dans é rues en gang . . . en plein Dgérousaïem . . . J'te dis qu'c'est grave, ça.

Ça fait que quand Jésus-Christ a vu ça, y a emmené sa gang sus une colline pour parlementer. Ça fait que y a monté sus une grosse roche, y dit: Les gars, finies les folies! Pierre, viens ici, pis Jean-Jacques, ferme-toé, pis écoute. Pierre, tu es Pierre? L'aute y dit oui. Pierre, tu es Pierre—vous l'avez dit ça—Ben laisse-moé parler, m'a t'sacrer une claque. Pierre, tu es Pierre, et Pierre qui roule n'amasse pas mousse. Non mais de toutes façons, l'aute a pas compris, parce que y en un qui parlait en hébreu, l'aute parlait en paraboles. (pp. 69–70)

Jesus goes on to explain to the disciples that they should love one another, despite the fact that “la loi était pas passée” (“the law hasn't been passed”). Then he tries to outline the policy of turning the other cheek:

A partir d'aujourd'hui, si quelqu'un vous tape, han, au lieu d'vous r'venger, vous allez leur demander de vous taper encore!

That wasn't why people didn't like 'im. People didn't like 'im, first, well he was a Jew; an' then besides that, he had a big beard, yuh know, which meant that he couldn't get in to jus anyplace. An' then he liked that, wearin his hair down to his shoulders . . . which meant that all kinds of bothers landed on his back. Well mostly it was cause he had a very annoying habit . . . nerve-wrackin . . . he used to get together big gangs, yuh know . . . then they'd march in the streets . . . they was gonna change this, they was gonna change that, and people hated that. In those days, people didn't understand—it wasn't like nowadays. They didn't understand so much that the big chief priest at one time said: no more marchin in the streets in gangs . . . in the middle of Jeruslum. I say it's a serious business, that.

So when Jesus Christ saw that, he took his gang up a hill to figger things out. So he got up on a big rock an' he says: You guys, no more fun an' games! Peter, come here, an' John-James, shut up an' listen. Peter, are you the Stone? The other he says yes. Peter, are you the Stone?—Yuh just said that—Well lemme talk, will yuh, or I'll smack you one. Peter, you are the Stone, an' a rollin stone gathers no moss. No, well anyhow, the other guy didn't get it, cause one of 'em was speakin in Hebrew an' the other was speakin in parables.

From now on, if somebody clobbers yuh, eh, well instead of fighting back, yuh're gonna ask 'em to clobber yuh again!

Les gars étaient pas d'accord—  
c'tait pas des canajens français,  
ça, c'tait des Juifs.

The guys didn't agree—  
they weren't French Canajuns,  
those guys, they was Jews.

Deschamps ends the monologue by discovering the reason why Christ's birthday is no longer celebrated the way it should be—the problem is that it falls during the Christmas holidays, when everyone is busy. But the infallible Pope refuses to change the date, so if people “aiment mieux vivre comme des païens” (“would rather live like pagans”) “ben y ont rinque une affaire à faire” (“well they've got only one thing to do”) “qu'y prennent leur pilule” (“swallow the pill”).

There is, of course, a good deal of black humor in Yvon Deschamps' monologues, when he talks about the treatment of the aged, for example, or in “Cable TV,” which dwells upon people's fascination with the morbid—bloody violence, crime, fatal accidents and the like. Generally he moves from the particular to the universal, launching a monologue around some personal matter or a current issue in Quebec. “Le p'tit Jésus,” as we have seen, dramatizes the trend since the 60's away from subservience to the Church. Another piece, “Histoire du Canada,” reflects the current propensity among scholars and historians to debunk traditional concepts of Canadian history.

The monologue begins by Deschamps commenting on a history book which his son has nipped from school. He leafs through the book, *Histoire du Canada*, as he progresses, referring to page numbers from time to time:

Ça commence très bien.  
Histoire du Canada, ça commence,  
ça commence tu suite. là on ouvre  
le couvert . . . bon, ça commence.  
C'est des Français de France qu'en  
commencé ça. R'marquez qu'c'est  
toujours des Français de France  
qui commencent toute. Ben pas  
toujours. Mais c'est toujours  
l'impression qu'ça donne quand  
c'est eux-autes qui l'expliquent,  
en té cas. Ça, c'était des Français  
de France qui sontaient en France.  
Ça, c'était dans l'temps qu'y  
restaient un peu là-bas. Ça  
fait que y en avait une gang  
qu'était là, y en avait une gang  
qu'avait pas de job steady.  
Ça fait que y en a un qui r'garde  
les autes, y dit: Comme qu'on a  
pas de job steady, pourquoi s'qu'on  
fait pas comme les autes qu'ont pas  
de job steady, pourquoi s'qu'on  
s'en va-pas-t-au Canada? Les autes  
ont dit: C't'une bonne idée qu't'a là.

It starts out good, the  
History of Canada, it starts,  
right away, right where yuh open  
the cover . . . good, so it starts.  
It's some French of France that  
starts it all. Notice that it's  
always some French of France  
that starts everythin. Well not  
always. But that's always  
the impression yuh get when  
they's the ones explainin it,  
in any case. It was some French  
of France that lived in France.  
That was when there was still  
a few of 'em over there. It  
happened that there was a gang  
of 'em there, there was a gang  
that didn't have no steady jobs.  
So one of 'em looks at the others  
an' he says: Since we ain't  
got no steady jobs, why don't  
we do like the others that ain't  
got steady jobs, why don't  
we go to Canada? The others said:  
That's a good idea yuh got there.

Là moé, j'vous parle dans l'temps que les jobs icitte, y en avait. Ah oui, ça, c'est ben avant M. Bourassa, on é à page deux à peu près. Fait que les gars sont partis de dlà, sont arrivés icitte, à page trois. Sont arrivés moé j'pensais qu'y étaient arrivés dans l'boutte d'la Gaspésie, des affaires de même, mais en le r'lisant, j'me sus-t-aperçu que je m'étais trompé—sont arrivés à Montréal direct. Oui, c'é écrit sus à page trois, sont arrivés par le pont Jacques Cartier. Oui, là y ont descendu la rue Delorimier . . . non, ça c'est pas écrit, mais crime, c'est un one-way, y avaient pas le choix. (pp. 147–148)

Now me, I'm talkin to yuh about a time when there was still jobs here. Oh yeah, that was a long time before Mr. Bourassa; we're on page two about. So the guys left there an' arrived here, on page three. I usta think, me, that they arrived somewhere around the Gaspé, or somethin like that, but readin about it again I could see that I was wrong—They came to Montreal direct. Sure, it's written on page three, they came over the Jacques Cartier Bridge. Sure, then they came down Delorimier Street . . . no, that's not written, but cripes, it's a one-way, they didn't have no choice.

The French meet “une gang de sauvages,” and they are struck with terror. But the French are no fools. They bring out large mirrors, and since the Indians look terrifying, when they see their own reflections in the mirrors they terrify themselves. “Non, mais ça, c'est normal,” says Deschamps, “parce que ça fait toujours peur la première fois que tu te vois tel que t'es.” (“No, but that, that's only normal, because yuh're always frightened the first time yuh see yerself as yuh really are.”)

The monologue continues, touching upon the exploitation of the Indians, the Conquest and various other events of the past. The tendency toward xenophobia in French Canada does not escape Deschamps' jabs:

Parce que nous autes, les Canayens-français, si on a une qualité, c'est pas sûr encore, mais si on n'a une, c'est ben celle d'aimer tout le monde. On haït pas parsonne.

J'parle du vrai monde là, pas les Anglais. Non, ça, ok, les Anglais, on les haït, ça c'est correct. Les Français aussi. Les Pollocks, les Italiens, les Russes, les Américains, les Chinois, les Japonais, les Tchecoslovaques, les Cubains, bon, les nègres, et pis, bon, les Hindoux. Mais à part de ça, à part de ça, on aime tout le monde. (p. 155)

'Cause us, French Canajuns, if there's one good thing about us—which ain't sure yet—but if there is one, well it's that we love everybody. We don't hate nobody.

I'm speakin 'bout real people now, not the English. No, ok, the English, we hate 'em—that's all right. The French too. The Polacks, Italians, Russians, Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Czechoslovakians, Cubans, right, Negroes, an' then, right, the Hindus. But outside of that, outside of that, we love everybody.

Actually, Quebeckers, among whom Deschamps is so popular, certainly bear the brunt of his satiric thrusts. He hits hard and often, and seldom does he pull his punches. At the end of “Histoire du Canada,” he gets around to the October Crisis of 1970:



Pis en octobre 70, vous vous en rappelez pas d'octobre 70? La grosse crise d'octobre? Qu'on souffrait toute dans not sécurité? Ça a veut dire qu'on shakait dans nos culottes. Bon. Crime, on n'osait pus sortir dehors tellement qu'on avait peur. Y en a-tu un Anglais qu'y s'en é aperçu? Pas un maudit. A fallu encore que ça soye des Canayens français: M. Drapeau, M. Bourassa, M. Trudeau, qui s'aperçoivent qu'on avait peur. Qui passait la loi des mesures de guerre, pour nous aider. Qui nous envoient l'armée pour nous protéger. Qui mettent le plus d'monde en prison pour qu'on soye tranquille. N'importe qui, envoie, en masse. Bon. Bang. Bang. Y a pas un Anglais qu'aurait faite ça pour nous autes! Non, ben m'a vous dire rinqu'un affaire. Douglas, pis Stanfield à Ottawa, c'est des Anglais, ben ces écoeurants-là, y étaient contre la loi des mesures de guerre. Faut qu'y nous haïssent assez! (p. 160)

Then in October 70, yuh don't remember October 70? The big October Crisis? When our security was all messed up? Meanin that we was shakin in our breeches. Right. Cripes, we was so afraid we didn't dare go out any more. Was there an Englishman that noticed? Not a damned one. Once again it had to be French Canajuns, Mr. Drapeau, Mr. Bourassa, Mr. Trudeau, that notices that we was afraid. That was passin the War Measures Act to help us out. That sends in the Army to protect us. That puts the the most people in prison so's we can feel calm. Anybody, round 'em up, the works. Right. Bang. Bang. There ain't an Englishman that woulduv done that for us! No, an' I'll tell yuh jus one thing. Douglas, then Stanfield in Ottawa, they's English, them damned rotters, they was against the War Measures Act. They mus really hate us!

Yvon Deschamps, thus, is more than a mere entertainer. His monologues are indeed funny, but they are also loaded with a great deal of perceptive commentary—on contemporary affairs, on society, on human nature and on the human condition. Obviously it is too soon to make a pronouncement on the literary merit and durability of Deschamps' work. Will its splashes of the universal be able to sustain that which is strictly topical and dated? Already he has imitators. Will the ancient form of the monologue now take on new life, encroaching upon the preserves of poetry and fiction, yet at the same time reaching the masses of people who generally ignore "serious" literature?

*Université de Sherbrooke*  
Québec