

## Developing cultural activities in Lunel - an encounter

Joel Moysan is the Adjoint de la Culture on the Conseil Municipal de Lunel. He's the one who organises all the art exhibitions and the concerts. He's a dapper, affable man, a retired economics teacher, who's to be seen immaculately suited, pressing the flesh and smiling broadly at most events. He has been friendly towards us, and has said how much he appreciates seeing us around, participating. We, in our turn, have let him know how much we enjoy the huge variety of exhibitions the town puts on.

I went to see him to discuss a programme of orchestral concerts proposed by our friend, musician and conductor David Austin, as well as a few questions and ideas of our own.

M. Moysan, always smiling broadly and peppering his discourse with "Je vous explique...", said that apart from budgetary considerations, his job of promoting the arts in Lunel was difficult because the town is not rich, and has not a substantial educated middle class. They don't turn out for concerts seen as too serious, or indeed, anything perceived as difficult. He was pleased with what David proposed because it was "populaire". He also talked about his latest headache: in order to attract grants from the region, he has to line up with their current priority, which is the promotion of modern art. How to do this in a way that will attract the public, yet not be intimidating?

My questions about how we might promote and administer concerts on our own initiative - for example, we know a number of professional artists in England whom we might be able to entice here to perform - were easily dealt with (although probably not so easy to achieve!) I then said I had a much more delicate matter to explore: given that the North African community form a substantial minority in the town, why was it that their culture was unrepresented in the town's artistic programme? What about, for example, using an exhibition of Arabic, Hebraic and modern calligraphy, perhaps using some of the resources of the archives in the town's historical library collection, the Fonds Medard, as a toe in the water?

He became immediately much more serious. He thought Lunel was still living in the nineteenth century, and one had to understand that successive waves of immigration - first Spanish, then Italian, then from North Africa, and now from Eastern Europe - had scarcely been assimilated, given that France itself had only recently, in historical terms, emerged as a relatively unified nation instead of a nation of isolated agricultural regions loosely connected to the larger industrial centres. In addition, the pride in the struggle to free the country from the stranglehold of the Church, and the 1902/4 declarations of a lay Republic, meant that overt signs of religion (such as traditional Muslim dress) were seen as a threat.

The laicity of France is a deeply held principle. He told me that when one talked about the North African community, one was lumping together Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians, Lebanese etc who actually did not get on. "Believe me!" He also told of the

difficulties there had been over the proposal to erect the totem (it was erected and unveiled last year) to the Jewish settlement of the Middle Ages, something which Lunel seems proud to acknowledge but not to celebrate publicly. Many on the council thought it a bad idea which would stir up unrest. He felt that England was far ahead of France in its approach to multiculturalism, and that beneath the trappings of a modern, up-to date society, people in general were still in the past. We agreed that strong identification with one's local area was something good about France, but also sometimes led to a blinkered approach. He thought it might still take several generations for a more integrated society to emerge. What he would like to see would be more projects in schools: in a given class, one had children from all social classes and nationalities. If one could give them experiences of working together, without distinction, then one might progress.

M. Moysan is not a Lunellois, he explained. He is from the south-west, where, he claimed, things are worse than here. The Mayor of Lunel is, however, Lunellois, and more immersed in the Town's traditions. M. Moysan said that he was valued by the Mayor because he was not steeped in Lunel cultural attitudes, and brought broader views to the Council. In addition, there was also the electorate to consider. A head-on approach to presenting aspects of other cultures might not be what he was elected for. I replied that this, in my view, showed a lack of courage, if he believed in it. He agreed it might look like that. However, his vision of a diverse yet mutually tolerant society was one that could not be realised quickly. *Festina lente*, I said, but then had to translate.

The end result was that I was encouraged to go to a particular voluntary organisation where he thought there might be someone with knowledge of calligraphy, and start there. He was not closed to the idea of an exhibition per se, it seemed.

As I left, he said how rare it was in his working life to have a discussion such as we had just had. People came in and asked for this, that and the other, but he rarely had any good conversations!

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June 2008