

# Christmas is for columnists: please give generously

[Henry Ergas](#) December 24, 2020



A sign of the times on Christmas Eve in Paris. Picture: AFP

It was three weeks before Christmas when the dreaded telegram arrived. I refer, dear readers, to 40 years ago, when I was not only young and gay (as we used to say in that more innocent age) but, best of all, in Paris.

Postmarked Melbourne, the cable was from Mavis. For those of you who are purists, Mavis (who is unfortunately no longer with us) was not really my aunt; but she came as close to an aunt as I was going to get. And as far as aunts go, she was, I always felt, the model PG Wodehouse had in mind when he wrote Aunts Aren't Gentlemen.

You know, the type whose greeting, conveyed by phone, evokes mastodon bellowing to mastodon over the din of the primeval swamp, and who thinks nothing of gargling with broken glass before descending

for breakfast. But she looked out for me, and the bonds of affection unite what distance would sever, as Shakespeare would undoubtedly have said, had he thought of it.

In this case, the bonds had been honoured by dispatching every month or so one of those onion-paper aerograms that were invariably hard to read, as the ink seeped through the page. But it's the thought that counts, and the smudges — not to mention the wine stains — added a touch of authenticity.

The authenticity was desperately needed because the contents were the fruits of a lively imagination. They had to be. Mavis was Victorian, in every sense of the word, and believed Paris was a place where one could, and should, improve one's mind.

What that meant was a steady diet of the great plays — Corneille, Racine, a spot of Moliere — interspersed with lashings of opera. And when a soupcon of divertissement was in order, the odd Beckett, or even the occasional belly-splitter from Brecht.

Wise advice, for sure. But not wise enough to lure me out of the Action Christine, which, as well as endlessly screening the films of the Nouvelle Vague, was merely a hop, a skip and a jump from dives where a handful of francs bought a cheering glass of Chateaux Plonk, some passable jazz and the right to inhale several months' worth of Gauloises at every sitting. None of which got in the way of penning detailed reports on the latest from the Comedie Francaise and the Opera Granier, complete with vivid portraits of audience, venue and performers. Toss in a sprinkling of the avant-garde — Boulez's post-serial music, or a reading by Oulipo — and the next missive was good to go.

Happy days. But then the telegram sank in. "Arriving 20th 8pm Gare du Nord", it read; "21st, 22nd and 23rd theatre. Then opera. Depart Boxing Day."

Weaker souls would have crumbled. Not yours truly. Wasting no time, I seized the latest edition of *Le Monde* and consumed its theatre column like a man downing a cold beer in the desert. Highly recommended was a play opening at the Theatre de Chailot on the very day theatre was first required.

Hailed as a masterpiece, *A Tomb for 500,000 Soldiers* sounded quite the thing. Moments later found me at the box office clamouring for the best seats.

When the appointed hour arrived, everything seemed in order: the foyer was abuzz, eager crowds milled about and scalpers plied their honest trade.

Yet cooler heads might have feared that fate was about to play one of its cruel tricks. We were, in effect, the only people not dressed in black leather from head to toe. Moreover, rather than the usual assortment of weedy Parisian intellectuals, the audience, all exceptionally muscular and with metal chains gleaming off their leather outfits, looked better suited to venues one scarcely dared read about.

It was, however, too late for second thoughts. Brushing aside any hesitations, we took our seats in a theatre that was literally quaking with anticipation.

The lights went down. The curtain went up. And then it all happened. Out stepped nine strapping young men, naked as the day their mothers made them. What followed — as the action reached what might fairly be called a climax — involved a blur of grunts, groans and body parts that can hardly be described in a family paper. Rising from its seats, the audience roared; sinking into her seat, Mavis gasped; and my heart sank with her.

There was no escape. Trapped in the middle of a tightly packed front row, it was an interminable 90 minutes before we were finally released into the

brisk night air.

As a certain froideur descended on our little party, I should have learned my lesson: never trust a newspaper column. And I should have known that what seemed like trifling vices can send you spiralling into a life of crime.

Who would have thought that one could be a respected member of society one day and a columnist for *The Australian* the next? How right was Heraclites when he warned, over 2000 years ago, that “much learning does not teach understanding”.

But rest assured, dear readers, you are dealing with a reformed man. I had planned on an agreeably debauched senescence, spent in a state of pleasant and continuing dissipation, unburdened by the weight of expectations.

Instead, as soon as the jingle bells sound, I begin to fret over the Christmas Price Index, which every year calculates the cost of purchasing the complete basket of goods and services listed in *The Twelve Days of Christmas*.

“What price partridges?” I cry — “Give me a quote on drummers drumming, pipers piping, lords a-leaping, ladies dancing and maids a-milking, or give me death.”

Fortunately, the CPI has barely budged, remaining, for the complete basket, a highly affordable \$142,000. At that modest cost, Australian families should have plenty left for those small acts of charity that bring a warm glow all year around.

May I recommend the Prime Minister’s Benevolent Fund for Distressed Columnists, which can be reached at this address? Remember, every bit helps.

Remember, too, to have a great Christmas and the peaceful, prosperous and healthy New Year we so desperately need. Readers such as you make writing a column the greatest of privileges.

Ultimately, the life of a column, like that of each of us, lies in going forward, grasping opportunities, pursuing that endless questing spirit. Where it failed, I apologise. Where it succeeded, I'm grateful. And should you need theatre advice, don't hesitate to ask. After all, what could possibly go wrong?