



Patti Caplette and Gilles Paquin are bringing Franklin the Turtle to a Parisian stage

## Child plays

### BIO

**Gilles Paquin**  
Age 55  
Education  
Drama, University  
of Winnipeg  
First job  
Window design  
at an Eaton's  
in Winnipeg

Gilles Paquin knows the rewards of entertaining kids. After 30 years of promoting rock concerts and managing artists at the helm of his Winnipeg-based production company, Paquin Entertainment Group, in 2003 he formed Koba Family Entertainment, a live-theatre production company that targets children between the ages of 2 and 6 and their parents. For the past five years, he and his wife, artistic director Patti Caplette, have been developing stage shows built around such kid favourites as Caillou, the Backyardigans and Little Bear. Their productions have toured North America, South Korea, Lebanon, Barbados and the United Arab Emirates. In 2007, the company grossed over \$2 million from performance and appearance fees and merchandising sales. Now, Paquin is raising the stakes with his first foray into continental Europe. This fall, the company will set up shop in Paris, where Franklin the Turtle and his friends will make their European debut, performing 43 consecutive shows at the 3,000-seat Grand Rex theatre. There is a lot riding on the run's success, including the chance for Koba to stage long-term performance runs in other European centres.

—STEPHEN CLARE

### Why is Paris your first step into Europe?

We studied the European market in depth before we made any decisions about going over there. In the same way our trips to Korea, the Caribbean and the Middle East served almost like trial runs for our business model—in that we were able to assess what worked and what needed fine-tuning on the road—we'll gauge the Western European market from this Parisian expedition. Also, the character of Franklin the Turtle is a big deal in Paris. This is very much a turning point. Ideally, we'd love to have long-term and even permanent productions in some places while touring smaller productions.

### How does Koba compete in a sector dominated by such U.S. giants as Disney?

While there are a number of established companies in the market, few have looked

## THREE WAYS TO CARVE OUT A THEATRE NICHE

**EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED** "There are variables that make it essential to be prudent with funds. Poor weather conditions, a strike or performers coming down with a bad flu bug can cause performance cancellations and impact profit margins," says Paquin.

**KNOW YOUR DEMOS** "Be target-specific. If your core audience is three- to four-year-olds and their parents, be sure to build a production and make merchandising available that's appropriate for that age group."

**GO WHERE OTHERS FEAR TO TREAD** "Don't be afraid to look beyond the traditional North American market. There are lots of places out there that your competition will not visit. But get a property that fits that market."

seriously into taking their shows outside North America. Like any business, being competitive involves finding or creating a niche and then doing it better than anyone else. In our case, we saw that live children's theatre was an emerging opportunity, especially in non-traditional markets where there was no one doing these kinds of productions on this scale. Given the immense popularity of these characters, we knew kids would connect with them. Then it became all about refining the offering: What can we do better? How can we streamline expenses without sacrificing the quality of productions? What other opportunities can we develop within the business model?

**What's the main challenge of the business?** Bringing the ideas to life can present all sorts of logistical issues. Developing everything—from script and dialogue to music, stage props and lighting—is the most time-consuming part. Then the business challenges follow: raising capital, partnering with promoters, piecing together travel itineraries and obtaining work visas all require tremendous attention to detail. And the sheer expense of taking these productions on the road has risen significantly, now that the costs of transportation, security and insurance have gone through the roof.

### How has this industry changed?

Expectations today are much higher, especially among young people. Consumers today want everything on demand, meaning that they can hit a button, flick a switch or click a mouse to find what they want any time. An entertainment company like ours, even though we cater to a young audience, is no longer competing only with other similar businesses. We are up against an entire sector—movies, music, television, video games, computers, sporting events, live concerts.

### How do you set your ticket prices?

That depends on where we are performing and what's involved in putting

the production together. As a mid-market producer, our goal is always to keep things accessible to our audience without sacrificing performance quality. That being said, our ticket prices have been rising over the past couple of years as audience expectations have grown. And in a bigger city, though crowds are considerably larger, things like advertising costs and per diems for the performers are much higher. For example, in Paris, tickets are as high as €27 [\$43] for premium seats because our costs are significantly higher than they would be in smaller markets.

### What's the hardest part about touring?

Aside from the usual wear and tear that travelling takes on our performers, the barriers of language and culture present all sorts of challenges, particularly with contractual issues and equipment logistics. We learned these things the hard way with the first series of shows in South Korea. We were under the impression that the promoter there was going to cover all the costs of shipping the production to and from Seoul. While they did pay our way there, we ended up footing the bill to make our way home because we didn't fully understand the terms of the contract. Now, we make it a point to read and translate all of the fine print to ensure we are covered. In France, we have a promotion company that shares the advertising costs and venue risks.

### The Rex theatre is quite large. How do you expect to fill it for 43 straight shows?

That's a very good question. There is always some kind of financial guarantee and insurance with live performances, so we are covered. That being said, there is always a risk involved when you undertake something of this scale. However, given both the large local population in Paris and the high autumn tourism numbers, it's a safe place for us to start wedging our way into the European market.

—WITH FILES FROM DENISE BALKISSOON



## In the ditch

Last November, it looked as if a welcome cash infusion would put Toronto video-game developer Pseudo Interactive back in the driver's seat. The company had just signed an \$18-million (U.S.) deal with publisher Eidos Interactive to produce a game called Carmageddon.

Founded in 1995, Pseudo specialized in "car combat" games, which combine driving and shooting. As the independent studio sped from contract to contract, it swelled to 80 staff by mid-2007. Pseudo was counting on the Eidos project to meet its \$1-million monthly payroll.

But Eidos's parent company, SCi Entertainment Group, was bleeding money. As part of a restructuring, SCi decided to focus on hit game franchises such as Tomb Raider. That meant pulling the plug on 14 projects—including Carmageddon. Unable to line up enough other work, Pseudo laid off its entire crew this past April.

Warren Currell is a Markham, Ontario-based consultant to the video-game industry. He says Pseudo emptied the tank by keeping too many staff between projects. But he thinks its fatal mistake was failing to create a must-have product in what has become a hit-based business.

The company got stuck in a car-combat rut, according to former employee Dave Feltham. Pseudo co-founder David Wu concurs, acknowledging that it was a mistake to keep flogging a genre with average sales of just 50,000 units per \$70 game. The developer's independent streak may have cost it, too—last year it turned down a \$20-million takeover offer. As for Pseudo's final contract, Wu says Eidos didn't reveal how dire things really were until it was too late. "This is the way all business works. No one warns you about bad news." —NICK ROCKEL