

A nativity play - but not as you know it...

Christmas celebrations often come with a local flavour but Provence is especially known for its strong traditions – not least a nativity play called the *pastorale* which incorporates local characters. Report by **OLIVER ROWLAND**

IN RURAL Provence, and even in southern cities like Marseille, locals are passionate about keeping old Christmas traditions alive.

So important is the festive season in Provence that *santons* – small crib figures representing the Holy Family and provençal villagers – are one of the best-loved local crafts. The name comes from provençal *santoun*, meaning “little saint.”

Cribs are set up in churches and homes from Saint Barbara's day (*la Sainte Barbe*) on December 4.

It is also on this day that children plant wheat from the year's harvest in little dishes. If it sprouts well this is a good sign for the next year's crops. On Christmas Eve the shoots are cut and placed in the crib before the baby Jesus is placed in his manger, which is traditionally after the *gros souper* Christmas Eve meal with its 13 desserts and midnight mass.

This fascination with the nativity in Provence extends to two “live” retellings: the *crèche vivante* (living crib) and *pastorale*.

The latter is a nativity play – but a far cry from the British primary school play. It moves the scene to Provence and includes a cast of local characters whose antics have nothing to do with the biblical tale.

One troupe, Lei Viè Pastourèu, has been performing since 1920 in Miramas between Arles and Aix-en-Provence and in other locations in the Paca region and Languedoc-



A santon shepherd struggles against the mistral wind

Roussillon. It performs the *Pastorale Maurel*, written in 1844 in Provençal.

Cast member Patrick Colombo, who plays the First Shepherd, Nicolau, said it is the oldest *pastorale* play. “Maurel, a Marseille tradesman, wrote it, no doubt helped by the local priest – who didn't want his name put to it,” he said. “There have been a lot of others since. The tradition of cribs was already very well-established in Provence and he had the idea of bringing the santons to life.”

They are sometimes performed in churches but most usually in community centres or in theatres, Mr Colombo said. In days gone by every village did one, sometimes as

an activity for youths from Thursday out-of-school clubs with the priest, called the *patronage*, or otherwise with all ages of villagers.

Crèches vivantes are simpler and are usually performed in church, he said. “There are people in costume like the santons, sometimes with living animals. They are there in adoration before the baby with the ox and ass and Provençal characters like the fisherman and knife-grinder but they do not speak. People can pass by and see them – like a crib, but alive.”

The *pastorale*, on the other hand, is a full-blown play. The *Maurel* lasts three-and-a-half hours – but it keeps people's attention and no one leaves, Mr Colombo said.

“There's a lot of comedy. The texts are funny and there is slapstick humour, with characters like a farmhand who stutters or another one who is scared of everything.”

“Then there is the Bóumien – Provençal for the French *Bohémien* (gypsy) – who represents evil and the old system of values which will be replaced by the arrival of the Christ. One farmhand tries to be brave by waiting for the Bóumien and his son to turn their backs, kicking him up the backside, then pretending not to have done anything when he turns around...”

“There are lots of moments like that but the fourth act is serious because that's where everyone arrives to pay homage to Jesus. There are miracles

– a man who went blind when his son was stolen, recovers his sight and recognises that the Bóumien's son is the one who was taken from him. The stammerer speaks normally.

“There are moving and tragic parts as well as the funny ones – like when an old man who comes to pay homage thinks of his life and how he's not always been good.”

Mr Colombo said even non-Provençal speakers appreciate the play – a lot of the comedy and short exchanges are easy to follow and there are a lot of songs. “It's part of our tradition, that at Christmas time you go and see the *pastorale* – from Christmas to Epiphany and among the hundred or so groups, they mainly perform in Provençal. You lose something if it's translated – it's one of the rare moments when you can listen to Provençal live, not just read it, and people come for that.”

Plot descriptions and translations into French are available on the troupe's website and there are French language introductions to each scene when the play is performed.

About 50 people are involved, all amateurs, Mr Colombo said. “You could spend your whole life in the troupe – from playing Jesus, who is sometimes a real baby, to the old man. There are four speaking roles for children and often the same ones play them for a few years – some have had Provençal classes, others learn phonetically. Then there are angels, who don't speak.”

For those daunted by Provençal, the Audibert *pastorale* is the best-known one in French. Its story is similar, with such far-fetched scenes as one in which the Bohémien drowns the shepherd Chichourlé for denouncing him as the Devil's son – but he is found by fishermen living inside a big fish. One cast member performing it with the Lacydon theatre in Marseille, Claude Grandou, has been doing it for 50 years. “I'm the old prophet now, but I've done the fisherman, the Miller, the knife-grinder, even the old lady Simounette, who's traditionally played by a man...”

“We have done it since 1904 – though the actors have changed! People come every year, it's part of the heritage.” A lot of the play is sung like an operetta, he said. The arrival scene is one of the most memorable. “Everyone brings their offering or sings a song to the Holy Family. It's the most important part.”

■ Lei Viè Pastourèu will be performing in Moissac-Bellevue (Var) on December 8 and, in the Bouches-du-Rhône, at Miramas on January 6, Château-Gombert on January 19 and Lambesc on January 27.

See www.tinyurl.com/pastorale-play

The Théâtre du Lacydon's version in French will be performed at the theatre in Marseille on Sundays throughout January and on Saturday 23 (see www.tinyurl.com/pastorale-audibert).



Pastorales involve a whole cast of provençal village characters



The Bóumien is the baddie of Maurel's pastorale play



This scene at the table brings to mind the famous card game scene in Marcel Pagnol's film *Marius*