

**Pardon My French: an exploration in teaching and learning *or*  
Why I created a one woman show about my life as a French teacher**

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*Imagine this: It's a hot late summer day. I'm in my classroom, unrolling posters of castles. Things are getting started for back to school. My door is propped open. The kids are in the building to pick up their schedules and wandering around finding their classrooms and saying HI! OMG! HI!!! to each other. I can't help but catch their happy: Some kids come to my room and say they've heard good things about me. Some come in and are mad they aren't going to be in one of my classes this year. Some kids come in all stern as if to let me know that they'll be really hard to win over. My favorite are the kids who are all MADAME! OMG I can't wait for your class! I have to tell you all about my summer! Once that happens, I can't wait to start teaching again. The infectious joy that the kids bring into my room before we even get started is addictive.*

*Here's what I do: Every year I get a new brood of about 150 kids to fill up with all of the information and attention and discipline and love that I've got. There's no limit to how much they'll soak up of what I've got to offer. Teaching French is simple. I stand in front of people and coax them to make sense out of funny sounds. Then, the rest of my work revolves around developing positive relationships with my students. My hope each year is to earn their trust as quickly as possible. There's an incredible amount of trust involved in this process, because when I say that pamplemousse really IS the French word for grapefruit, I expect them to believe me.*

Don't we all expect them to believe us? And want to create a welcoming environment where they're willing to make mistakes for the sake of learning to speak a language that we find compelling sometimes beyond our better interests?

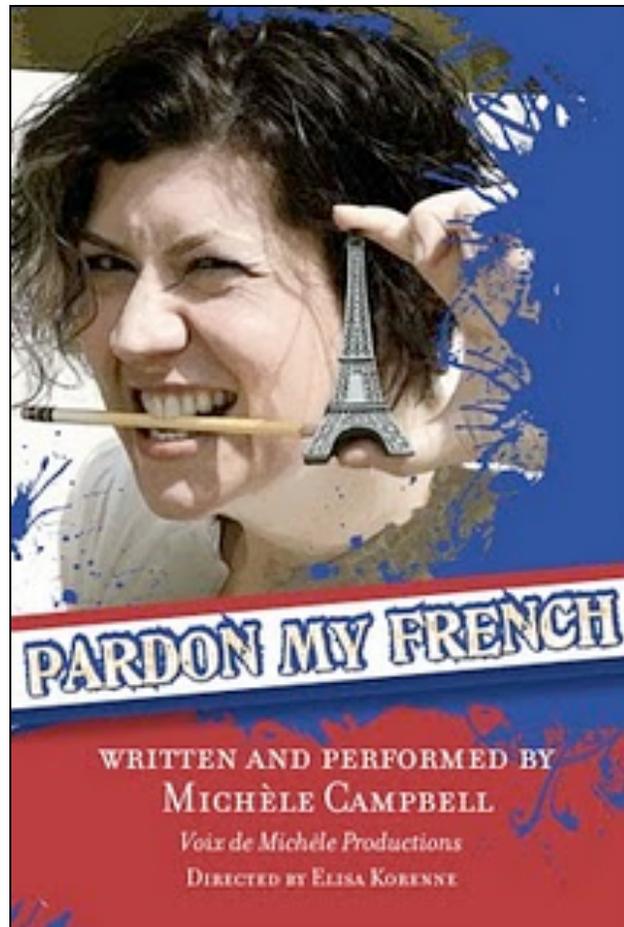
I've been teaching French for Minneapolis Public Schools for 12 years and I have an MFA in Creative Writing: nonfiction from Hamline University. As a mid-career teacher, I needed something that would challenge me creatively and a summer project that would combine my writing talents and a newfound love of comedy performance. So this summer, I wrote and performed a one-woman show for the 2010 Minnesota Fringe Festival.

I used to joke with my family almost everything that happened in my classroom was part of a one woman show, and that I was lucky to have a captive audience every day. Energetic charades to teach vocabulary, doing lessons entirely in French while using ridiculous facial expressions and voices, creating stories out of thin air and acting them out to teach target structures – anything emphatic and enthusiastic is fair game. If you're anything like me, it's more uncommon to have days where you're not making goofy plays on words, grand arm gestures, and funny voices to keep the attention of everyone in the room.

Good language teaching is animated. So even though my theatrical experience was limited to a year of improvisational comedy training and a chorus girl role in *The Pirates of Penzance* when I was a high school student, I felt capable of creating a show that would be able to hold its own in a festival environment. Participation in the Fringe is by random lottery, so I was very lucky to get one of 169 production slots in February.

Deciding how to tell the story of my teaching world was difficult. I decided that my primary purpose would be to send the message that French language instruction, while essential, was not the only thing going on in the room. I don't teach French: I teach high school students. Kids who have lives and needs and opinions that need to be engaged on many different levels. Topics in the show then covered everything from advice I've wanted to give to the lovelorn to funny student quotes to understanding Maslow's hierarchy of needs as it manifests in our students' behavior to a grammatical breakdown of all the ways you can use the word *MERDE* in French. Yes, I did give swearing lessons. And there was also a standardized test that the audience had to take as well as pronunciation practice and lists of all the fun *particularités* that kids bring into the room every day.

Staging, blocking, and rehearsal were my least favorite parts of creating this production. While teaching, we're supposed to wander around the room, have side conversations with our students, and stop talking every once and a while when the kids do their work. During my 50 minute solo performance, I had no such luxury. I couldn't ask the audience to turn to page 73 and do exercise 3a while I checked my lines again. I learned to be ON in a completely different way, and it was very intense. Performance challenged me to be present with a group of people to whom I had no relationship and use instincts I didn't know I had. I felt like my approximately 10,560 hours of teaching experience helped me not bolt for the door out of nerves or throw up on my shoes, but I had to steel myself against the fact that I wanted to tell a story that left me feeling very vulnerable to reactions that might not be positive.



**Pardon My French** played at the Playwrights’ Center in South Minneapolis, a small venue of 73 seats. I had 5 performances scheduled over 10 days. When 63 people showed up to watch the show on opening night, nobody was more surprised than I was! The next four performances sold out and turned people (sometimes dozens) away at the door – and I was even more surprised. To put a cherry on top of the experience, I won the coveted “Best of Venue” slot and got to give a 6<sup>th</sup> performance during the final time slot of the festival. Some of my most enthusiastic audience members were other teachers and former students. They loved how I told the “way it really is” in our classes and many of my reviewers commented that it’s evident that I love my work. Overall, creating a one woman show with my fantastic director, Elisa Korenne, was one of the most exciting and energizing summer experiences I’ve ever had.

NB: See the Fringe Festival website  
<http://www.fringefestival.org/2010/show/?id=1182>