

Marshall Button created the character Lucien in 1984 as a two-minute skit during New Brunswick's bicentennial celebrations.

Button had no idea what he had created at the time, but after performing thousands of shows across Canada, receiving the Order of New Brunswick, and being awarded an honorary degree from St. Thomas University, he has an inkling of what Lucien means.

Button's understanding of Lucien, though, is not based solely in his role as the creator of this affable character, but arises out of his awareness of how Lucien connects with people through his wit, humorous misunderstandings and wisdom.

But who is Lucien, really? At face value, he is a mill worker prone to armchair philosophizing, offering quick opinions, and making sly remarks whose theories about the world and linguistic bunglings have made audiences laugh from coast to coast.

Lucien's perspective on life is different from Button's, but there are many fertile cross-pollinations where the lines between creator and created are slightly blurred.

Growing up in Dalhousie, New Brunswick (think Northwest of Bathurst), Button was affected by the French and English roots of his community.

When people in Dalhousie found out that "Canada was officially being made a bilingual nation, we naively thought it was the same in the rest of Canada as it was in Dalhousie. 50% English and 50% French." When he later went to places like Quebec city or Moosejaw, Saskatchewan, he discovered the "truth" of bilingualism.

In his home life, there was more than just the combination of French and English, as his family had a "mixture of Newfoundland wit with French Canadian storytelling." The quick Newfoundland barb reminded Marshall not to take himself too seriously, while Lucien's talespinning displays the strengths of a French Canadian raconteur.

Writ large in the life of Dalhousie was the New Brunswick International Paper Mill, which ran the full length of the main street. Button describes it as an "imposing, gothic-like structure," where "you didn't really know what was going on in there, but it could eat you alive like a Willy Wonka factory."

Mystery and all, the mill was the economic engine that drove the town, as it built homes for workers, owned the nicest hotel in town, and was central to every aspect of town life.

But Button was aware of the price paid by the workers, as he says, the mill "took care of people, but they expected their souls in return."

Button worked for several summers at the mill while attending college, and Lucien bears the traces of this blue collar industrial working environment.

Lucien's blue collar wisdom is informed by small town assumptions, but there are deeper cultural associations that he connects with in his comic commentaries.

The opinionated mill-worker and "Blue-Collar Philosopher" from New Brunswick returns with a hilarious tale of smelt fishing gone awry.

Written and performed by Marshall Button.

LUCIEN: HELTER SMELTER

Saturday, March 26/11

Button has noticed that "New Brunswick is a place where people have an easy time laughing at themselves. In fact, they kind of relish it."

There is a "complete willingness to be self-deprecating and to poke fun at themselves," and then when others do the same, "they laugh along with them."

Lucien is an indicator of happiness because, for Button, "how much people are willing to have a laugh at their own expense" speaks to the "liveliness, optimism, and life of a place."

Lucien is funny both because of his own insights and an unwitting willingness to be the butt of a joke. Button feels, "There is a place within all of us where we recognize the limits of knowledge" and we say things and then we think, "'Oh man, you don't know what you are talking about.'"

Being able to laugh at the limits of what we know is a real virtue. Plus, it makes social gaffs a lot easier to handle.

Lucien will arrive in St. Catharines in *Helter Smelter*, a performance that explores global warming and ice foe existentialism with signature hilarity and insight.

Button explained that a "confederation of shanties" springs up every winter in Dalhousie for ice-fishing. Some of the shanties are heated, have stereos, and electricity provided through generators. They often become the site of a "trial separation" because a man will "spend every spare moment at his shanty and his poor wife is wondering if she will ever see him again." Button adds quickly, "But she may be hoping she never sees him again."

The smelt caught on these epic, often nocturnal fishing adventures feature prominently in northern New Brunswick gatherings where Button says, "you have a big feed of smelt." And they taste so great because "the effluence from the mill and sewage from town makes for a perfect tasting fish."

Based on real events where large floes of ice have broken free and

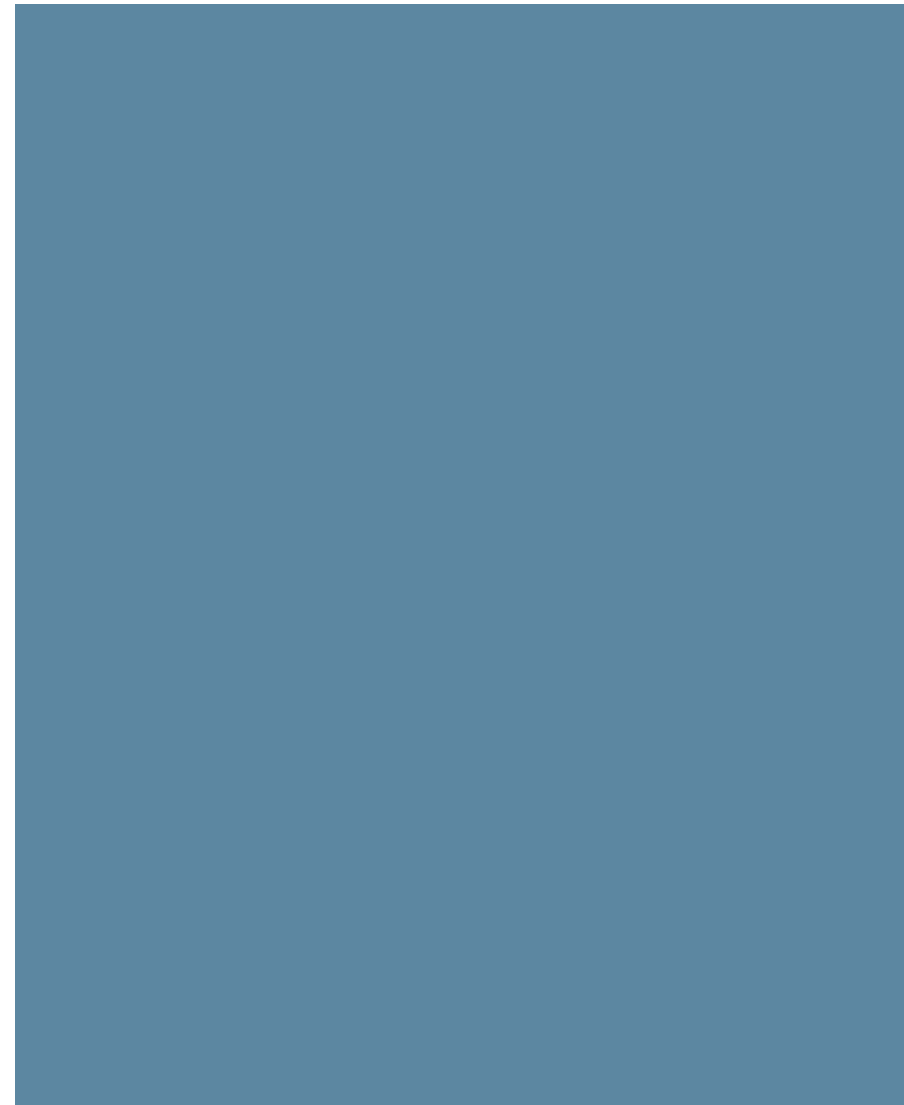
taken a shanty or two floating off with them, *Helter Smelter* has Lucien face up to what could be "his last hour on earth." Although there were initial concerns that the topic was too heavy, Button has noticed that many of the best laughs come at the darkest points in Lucien's journey.

When he is out in the world, sometimes Button wonders, "What would Lucien do?"

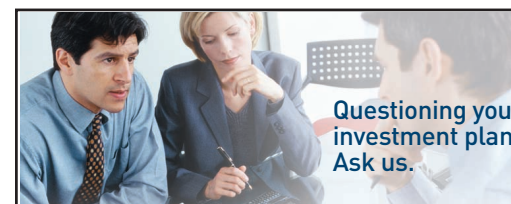
After years of Button's touring and performing, Lucien has become a part of the Canadian landscape and is, as Peter Gzowski said, "a national treasure."

As Lucien pontificates on the meaning of life from a ice floe, you won't have to be reminded to laugh, but remember that when you are laughing, it is because you see a little bit of Lucien in yourself. And that is a great thing.

Written by Jon Eben Field.
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