



Alfred Uhry at the first read-through of Goodspeed's *My Paris*. ©Diane Sobolewski.

*My Paris* was not mine to begin with. The idea came from Charles Aznavour, the renowned French songwriter/performer. He wrote songs for a proposed stage musical about the life of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec back in the nineties. The songs reached Kathleen Marshall, Broadway director/choreographer and winner of three Tony Awards. She was delighted with what she heard and brought the idea to me. Wow! A show about Toulouse-Lautrec with songs by Aznavour! An internationally famous French writer creating songs about the life of the most famous French artist of all? And to be

celebrated director/choreographers in the business? Who wouldn't want to join that team? I said yes right away and got to work.

We all agreed that we wanted the show to express the *joie de vivre* of Lautrec's work as well as the pathos underneath. He was born a titled aristocrat, a duke three times over, but he was also born with a physical disability that caused people to regard him as a freak. He could never fully participate in the raucous, earthy world of Montmartre that he depicted so vividly in his art. He could drink the wine, hear the music, watch the cancan dancers, but he was always set apart. He lived only thirty-six years, but in this short span of time, he managed to bring to life the colorful Parisian world to which he could never quite belong.

My research revealed that Lautrec was obsessed with women—all kinds of women. His physicality denied him relationships with most of them. But there was a one, a beautiful, spirited model named Suzanne Valadon, who provided the things he was starved for and a few surprises in the bargain. He also had to contend with his aristocratic, disapproving Papa and his loving, but smothering, Maman.

Shortly after I became a part of the show, a bulky manila envelope arrived from France. It contained tapes of dozens of songs M. Aznavour had written for the show. The music was exactly right—jaunty, soaring, tender, sad, as the situation demanded. And it didn't sound French. It WAS French! No worries about authenticity here. All the lyrics were, of course, in French. I had two years of high school French, but there was no way I could understand, much less translate, what I was hearing.

Direct translations into English proved to be accurate, but lifeless. What I heard Aznavour singing on the tapes didn't sound like that at all. Clearly an English-speaking lyric writer was needed. And, preferably, one who understood Broadway musicals. There was only one choice—Jason Robert Brown. Jason and I had collaborated before on *Parade*. We worked well together, and we both won Tonys for that show, so we were anxious to work together again. Luckily, Jason came on board. I'm not sure that he knows more French than I do. He says he does and he does a good Maurice Chevalier imitation, but—more to the point—he understood the spirit of Aznavour's words and his adaptations fit both the music and the situations exquisitely.

And now Goodspeed comes into the picture. It's time to get the show up on its feet and see what we have wrought. The Norma Terris Theatre is the ideal place to do it. We believe the audience will experience the world of Toulouse-Lautrec with all its joy and heartbreak and life and vitality. We are excited and hopeful and more than a little edgy. Come and give us a look-see.