

# MAC NORTON

## THE HUMAN AQUARIUM

By Ken McNaughton

A French vaudeville performer adopted the stage name *Mac Norton*, supposedly after the bodyguard of Mary Queen of Scots (1542-1587). He started out as a singer, but developed such an unusual act that for the rest of his life he was called *The Human Aquarium* [1].

**Figure 1. French poster advertising Mac Norton's show, where he drank 50 glasses of water brought to him by waiters, then regurgitated the water, together with various aquatic creatures he had swallowed.**



Claude Louis Delair was born in Lyon, France, in 1876. Around 1892, when Claude would have been 26, the Moulin Rouge in Paris introduced a sensational vaudeville act by a Marseille native called Joseph Pujol [1, 2]. Joseph Pujol was born in Marseilles in 1857. Soon after he left school he had a strange experience while swimming in the sea [3]. He put his head under the water, held his breath and felt an icy cold penetrate his rear end. When he ran ashore he was amazed to see water pouring from his anus. In the army, to amuse his friends, he found he could suck up water from a pan into his rectum, then project it out several yards. He became a professional baker and with remarkable control of his abdominal muscles, entertained his customers from behind the counter by imitating musical instruments—inhaling air into his rectum and controlling the release using his sphincter muscles.



**Figure 2. Joseph Pujol, the fartologist, in concert.**

He debuted his talent on stage in Marseilles in 1887 and took it to the Moulin Rouge in 1892. His act involved emulating sound effects of cannon fire and thunderstorms—even the San Francisco earthquake—as well as playing “O Sole Mio” and “La Marseillaise” on a flute-like instrument through a rubber tube in his anus. His audience included Edward, Prince of Wales, King Leopold II of Belgium and Sigmund Freud. Ian Macnaughton (1925-2002), the Glasgow-born actor—who directed and produced *Monty Python's Flying Circus* for television and the team's first film *And Now for Something Completely Different*—made a short movie in 1979 about Pujol called *Le Pétomane*. His stage name combines the French word péter, “to fart,” with the “-mane/-maniac” suffix, which translates to “fartoholic.” The profession is also referred to as “flatulist,” “farteur,” or “fartiste.”

However it is a misconception that Pujol actually farted on stage, since there was no release of intestinal gases from the anus. There was another French entertainer around this time whose name also would have suited Pujol. His stage name was *Dranem* [4]. He was born Armand Menard in 1869 in Paris and took the name *Dranem* as an anagram of Menard. He was a singer and music-hall comique troupier and a stage and film actor.

**Figure 3. Dranem, the French singer and music hall comique troupier and stage and film actor, around 1910.**



Claude Louis Delair started his career in vaudeville around 1894, at the same time as *Dranem*. He appeared as *The Lillois* at the Bataclan, a café concert built in 1864 in Paris, with a café and theatre on the ground floor and a large dance hall on the first level. It was here that Maurice Chevalier had his first successes. Delair started as a singer, but changed his name to *Mac Norton*, since he was interested in Scottish history, and developed his act as *The Human Aquarium*, which he pursued until 1950. This act consisted of swallowing gallons of water, which he could regurgitate at will. He also swallowed fish, turtles and frogs, regurgitating them alive. The act lasted between 17 and 20 minutes. He would get waiters from the institution, or extras dressed as waiters, to line up fifty glasses of water, which he would swallow one by one, something like 15 liters in all (4 gal). Then he would calmly smoke a cigarette, to show the fluid had been swallowed and did not bother him. He would joke with the audience and announce he would do a “fountain.” This could be a delicate stream of water in which he would wash his hands, or a strong shower gush—either without apparent effort.

Next came the Aquarium. From a bowl he would withdraw five frogs and six goldfish, all alive, and swallow them one by one. Another cigarette would follow and another chat with the audience. Then, one by one, in a well defined order, he would regurgitate the animals, still alive. He could keep frogs and turtles alive for more than two hours, but goldfish a little less because of the temperature of his body. He took his act all over Paris and France, Brussels, Antwerp, even in front of Nicolas II in Tsarist Russia. He went to South America in 1915 or 1916, but not to North America because of objections by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He performed in Britain as late as 1950, at the age of 74, and died in 1953.



**Figure 4. Sketch of Mac Norton about to swallow a frog by Valere Novarina, French playwright, writer, painter and photographer in the 1970s.**

I was first alerted to *Mac Norton* in a compilation [5] by Barry Humphries, the Australian comedian, satirist, Dadaist, artist and character actor who performs all over the world as Dame Edna Everage, the “average” superstar Melbourne housewife whose success far above her station so often casts her colleagues and

contacts in an unflattering light. This above article has been constructed from Ref. 1, which draws heavily on Ref. 2, an article in French on the Website of the Université de Napierville, Quebec, Canada that I read in French with the help of Webster's French-English Dictionary and also created a rough English translation on my computer.

As a curious post-script, in the year 2000, Jan Bondeson, a physician, published a 300-page book called "The Two-Headed Boy and Other Medical Marvels" [6]. In the last chapter, "Cat-eating Englishmen and French Frog Swallowers," on the last page, there are five photographs of Mac Norton, and the last paragraph is all about him.

#### REFERENCES

1. [http://www.showhistory.com/mac\\_norton.html](http://www.showhistory.com/mac_norton.html)
2. [http://www.udenap.org/personnalites/mac\\_norton.htm](http://www.udenap.org/personnalites/mac_norton.htm)
3. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le\\_P%C3%A9tomane](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_P%C3%A9tomane)
4. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dranem>
5. Humphries, Barry, "Bizarre," Bell Publishing Co., New York, 1965.
6. Bondeson, Jan, "The Two-Headed Boy and Other Medical Marvels," Cornell University Press, 2000.

#### COPYRIGHT

This work is copyrighted and may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any medium without written permission from Ken McNaughton, 3778 College Avenue, Ellicott City, MD 21043; phone/fax: 410-418-9340; [kjmcn@comcast.net](mailto:kjmcn@comcast.net) (23 June 2010).