

Valcq's 'Velvet Gentleman' Will Haunt Third Avenue Playhouse Stage, Audience

By [Zach Jaeger](#), [Peninsula Pulse](#) – May 19th, 2017



The Velvet Gentleman features sketches and writings by composer Erik Satie, as well as a sampling of his piano music performed by actor and playwright James Valcq. Photo by Len Villano.

Much has been said of the mysterious eccentric of the French *avant-garde*, Erik Satie. The outrageous and the humorous blend to form a portrait of a man not wholly believable and yet intriguingly brilliant. Curiosity will lead you to James Valcq's depiction of Satie in his one-man play *Velvet Gentleman*. Showings began at Sturgeon Bay's Third Avenue Playhouse (TAP) on May 18.

Valcq's play takes us into the world of one of Western music's most bizarre characters, offering a glimpse into the mind of the famous Parisian composer. Valcq will star as the man notorious

for wearing nothing but grey velvet suits for 10 years (he had one for each day of the week), for his collection of 100 umbrellas, and for claiming to only eat food white in color.

Satie (1866-1925) is remembered as one of the first Western composers to eschew the seriousness and bombast of the Romantics in favor of an increasingly modern sound. In his time as a salon musician, Satie wrote countless miniature piano pieces, many of which poked fun at his more dramatic contemporaries. In some of his better-known “joke” pieces, like his collection *Embryons Desséchés (Desiccated Embryos)*, Satie mimics a typical ending of a romantic piece – a crashing, emphatic arrival upon the tonic chord – but repeats it to the point of hilarity.

While scoffing at the establishment, Satie was at the forefront of the modern musical and cultural thought of his time. His concept of *musique d'ameublement (furniture music)* can be seen as a precursor of ambient music, or music which was meant to be background noise; Satie and his avant-garde comrades once scolded the audience of an opera when they chose to remain seated and listen quietly to intermission music which he had composed.

Valcq, a Broadway veteran who now serves as co-artistic director at TAP, had been drawn to Satie from a young age.

“I just thought it was one of the most beautiful things I’d ever heard, at 11 [years old]. I still do,” said Valcq of Satie’s most popular collection of piano pieces, the three *Gymnopédies*, in which gorgeous, yearning melodies are set atop gentle harmonies. The *Gymnopédies* have made their way into American culture, appearing in Hollywood in Wes Anderson’s *The Royal Tenenbaums* and the documentary *Man on Wire*, among others.

Velvet Gentleman will be akin to the gentleman it portrays: at times ludicrous, other times subtle and delicate, but always persuasive.

“[Satie] was somebody who had the vocabulary and syntax of a Rhodes scholar and the heart and mind of a capricious child,” said Valcq.



James Valcq, co-artistic director of Third Avenue Playhouse, plays the role of Parisian composer Erik Satie in the one-man play *Velvet Gentleman*, written by Valcq and on stage through June 4. Photo by Len Villano

Audience members may notice that this will take the play outside of traditional storytelling, but, as Valcq said, “that’s the kind of theater we like to do here, where the audience is drawn in in some way, shape or form. It is very much an interactive experience. We like to engage the imagination.”

That dissonant mixing of bizarre and beautiful is the essence of Erik Satie as far as can be known; his efforts to distance himself from the cultural establishment drew him away from the norm in every way, but his sharp wit and beautiful compositions bely a truly masterful creative mind.

“It can be delightful – and crazy-making – to spend time with a person who’s a little loopy,” concluded Valcq.

If Satie’s legend is any sort of predictor for the content of *Velvet Gentleman*, then viewers of the play are sure to be amused, if not captivated, by Valcq’s performance.