

# James Valcq's one-man show a homage to eccentric composer Erik Satie

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*(Photo: Heidi Hodges)*

In his splendid book on the French avant-garde during the 30 years preceding World War I, Roger Shattuck describes composer Erik Satie as “a musician more heard of than heard.”

James Valcq is trying to do something about that in [“Velvet Gentleman.”](#) a two-hour (with intermission), one-actor show that he created and in which he himself embodies Satie. Under Robert Boles’ direction, it’s receiving its world premiere in a production that opened Thursday night at Third Avenue Playhouse in Sturgeon Bay.

Valcq takes his title from the way Satie dressed: seven seemingly identical velvet suits, one for each day of the week.

Satie cultivated many such eccentricities, and Valcq captures both the studied affectation and the puckish quality that accompanied it. As reflected through Valcq's selection from Satie's voluminous, often aphoristic writing, this musician was nearly always looking at things askance, gently mocking the society in which he lived in an effort to see it new.

Standing at a lectern, Valcq's Satie ruminates on what he loves about animals, before taking a left turn to confess how much he enjoys smoked salmon and beef. He includes directions on interpreting his music such as "like a nightingale with a toothache." At the debut of a ballet for which he wrote the music, Satie joined those catcalling audience members whistling it down.

Not surprisingly, the show's strength is its music, with Valcq on piano or, in one hauntingly rendered moment, using an accordion to play the aching melody of Satie's best-known piece: "Gymnopédie No. 1." Valcq's time at the piano is frequently supplemented by projections featuring Satie's drawings and surrealistic, poetic textual notations to his music. These are particularly fine when used in conjunction with snippets from Satie's "Sports et divertissements," in which Satie chronicles and also sends up pastimes from yachting to tango dancing.

"Velvet Gentleman" honors Valcq's subject by offering us a new way of seeing, whether the object be a lantern, a helmet or Satie himself.



James Valcq portrays composer Erik Satie in "Velvet Gentleman" at Sturgeon Bay's Third Avenue Playhouse. (Photo: Heidi Hodges)

Valcq repeats Satie's playful prohibition, included in the score to a 1914 piece, prohibiting "any person to read the texts aloud during the period of musical performance. Every infraction will arouse my just indignation against the culprit." Valcq gets around this admonition by silently projecting Satie's texts – written directly into Satie's scores – as he plays. It's wonderful. "Sports et divertissements" means much more when, even as Valcq plays the music for a section like "Yachting," we can see a drawing of a spoiled young woman that was created to accompany this music, itself fleshed out by a transcription of Satie's text as written into the score: "I'd rather do something else. Go fetch me a car."

Satie's collaboration with Picasso (as well as Cocteau and Diaghilev) on the controversial ballet "Parade" gets brief treatment in "Velvet Gentleman," while also calling to mind one of Shattuck's perceptive observations in writing on Satie in his aforementioned book on the French avant-garde ("The Banquet Years"): Satie's ability to simultaneously see an object from different perspectives, as presented in multiple compositions taking the same shape, is reminiscent of cubism. "Out of this sameness," Shattuck writes, "comes subtle variety."

On a broader scale, one might apply Shattuck's insight to Valcq's piece, seen as an elaborate series of variations on the theme of Satie. Viewed this way, the drama in "Velvet Gentleman" isn't generated by the passage of time, but rather by multiple perspectives viewed from a confined space: it's as though we're making our way around a gallery room featuring various miniatures by a particular artist, with each piece we see adding to our portrait of the artist himself.