

Two musketeers, men of the people

PARIS. A mulatto girl on a white horse; hundreds of prancing, declaiming actors in multi-colored period costumes; a quartet of caped, plume-hatted cavaliers; a slow, torch-lit evening parade up la rue Soufflot to meet President Jacques Chirac at the Pantheon, resting-place of France's geniuses. It was one of the nation's grand, ritual moments. Cherishing common memories reconciled the irreconcilable: left, right, young, old, everybody.

The girl symbolized adventure novelist Alexandre Dumas' mixed-race Caribbean ancestry -- a timely symbol of France's recognition of multiculturalism. The actors were a kaleidoscope of his unforgettable characters. The cavaliers: the Three Musketeers plus d'Artagnan. The Count of Monte Cristo also appeared with cape and sword, and, stumbling after him, the Man in the Iron Mask. But sewn onto the casket's purple funeral cloth was the musketeers' thrilling motto: "One for all, all for one."

Earlier this year France honored Victor Hugo, Dumas's friendly rival. Now, to the dismay of élitists and delight of ordinary Frenchmen, Chirac plucked Dumas from famous obscurity. His decision to transfer in grand pomp the author's bones from his village resting-palace at Villes-Cotterêts near Paris to the Pantheon -- whose colonnaded dome echoes London's St. Paul's Cathedral -- was typically *chiraquien*: instinctual, defiant of orthodoxy, close to the people.

Chirac may be many things -- impulsive, mercurial, a loose cannon to some. A tricky, even shady politician to others. But he acts with heart and mind in tandem. A born politician, a flesh and blood improv-actor, he follows an unerring, indeed irresistible, urge to do as he feels.

Like the macho power-seeker he is, he is "often wrong, but never in doubt." In 1997 he lost parliamentary power after impetuously dissolving the National Assembly to win more seats. Then last spring, with breath-taking luck and skill, he parlayed a hair-raising first-round setback into overwhelming victory.

To see Chirac up close is to touch a whirlwind. Once I was in a tiny TV studio with him and about 15 others. His passion and high-risk grandiloquence commanded all eyes, if not ears. After the show, Chirac glad-handed us all. His restless energy, pro-politician's locked-on-your-eyes conviction and megawatt smile may not have revealed utter sincerity, but certainly a man hard to hate.

A favorite Chirac stage is agricultural and high-tech fairs -- both specialties of his beloved southern department of Corrèze (the satellite-carrying Ariane rocket, TGV fast trains, and airliner giant Airbus all have a footing there). With the farmers Chirac plays the violin of traditional France; with the techies, he's France's pied-piper leading the world into the future.

With every audience and occasion, he seems to ring just the right bells. Even if these clash with the dogmas of his hero, Charles de Gaulle.

De Gaulle denied France was responsible for persecuting Jews during the Second World War. That, he claimed, was the fault of a collaborationist Vichy regime which (though legally handed power in 1940) did not really count as France. Chirac, in a bold and principled 1997 move, made a dramatic public apology to the Jews at the Vélodrome d'Hiver where their parents had been herded for deportation.

De Gaulle also forced back to Algeria and throat-cutting slaughter thousands of Harkis – North African soldiers loyal to France during its 1954-62 colonial war there. Chirac recently apologized to the Harkis too, promising to improve the condition of their descendants in France.

De Gaulle denied decent pensions to France's African colonial cannon-fodder during two world wars. Chirac is hinting at improving their pensions.

Dumas is a perfect case of Chirac's correcting an historical injustice. The orthodox view of France's elite was long that Dumas was not a true Frenchman, but a half-breed. So Chirac put the mulatto girl on the horse.

Intellectual snobs dismissed Dumas as a mere scribbler... because millions read his books. Chirac said no: Dumas, whom we all read under the bed-covers as children, belongs with the greatest writers: his 250 novels, reprints (not to mention countless film remakes) make him the most widely-read Frenchman in the world. Former Chinese President Jiang Zemin reveres the *Count of Monte Cristo*.

At the top of the hill on this three-block-long street of student marches, the Pantheon shone under klieg-lights in the early-evening darkness. Thousands surrounded the imposing shrine whose chiselled motto proclaims that here a "grateful homeland" entombs its "great men."

Chirac, tall and gaunt in black raincoat, greeted his writer-hero with these words: "Alexandre Dumas! With you, it is childhood, its hours of reading savored in secret, emotion, passion, adventure and panache that enter the Pantheon."

The loose cannon who fires straight into the hearts of ordinary Frenchmen had done it again.