

Poet in plaster is helping to restore the Pantages

By Leslie Scrivener
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Jean-Francois Furiere is a judo champion in France. His family's architectural art business was flourishing; his customers were Saudi Arabia's oil minister Sheikh Yamani and members of the Saudi royal family. They lived on the French Riviera, and Furiere was sometimes called upon to be a bodyguard to stars and starlets at the Cannes Film Festival.

It seemed a sun-kissed existence — the sea, snorkling, a certain amount of fame, glamour, family tradition — so why did it end?

"Father is greener," says Furiere. "I always had a dream of coming here. When I was a teenager, I heard about the incredible land, the size of the continent, nature. I was attracted by the differences.

'Just home'

"Only after I came to Toronto did I realize the French Riviera was glamorous. To me it had always been just home."

Home is Toronto now. He has transported his family business, young but flourishing, from Cannes to a cavernous studio off Eglinton Ave. E. At 33, he's intense, muscular and powerfully built, yet suffering from an aching back. His sweatshirt's covered in plaster dust, his employees, pale and powdered with dust, work on huge molds. Hung on the rafters are bits of history, molds and patterns that are part of the 40 tons of archives he brought from his father's studio in France two years ago. Bee-thorn's death mask rests on a shelf. Three graces dance on a bas relief.

Furiere is one of the master craftsmen working on the \$17 million historical restoration of

the Cineplex-Odeon's Pantages Theatre on Yonge St. He's doing business at the turn of the century of the plaster work, the delicate ornament in the style of the 18th century English architect, Charles Adams.

Furiere's part in the project includes the great dome over the theatre which was sliced through the middle when the theatre was divided into the small cinemas of the Imperial Six, the entrance foyer, the ceiling under the balcony and two huge (25 feet long) lacy grilles on either side of the stage. These grilles, once in a ruined state, are decorated with towering nymphs and will be gilded to look just as they did when the theatre opened in 1920. Balmer Architectural Art Inc., Furiere's employer for seven years, is also working on the Pantages restoration. The theatre is to open with the Phantom *Of The Opera* in September.

There's an increasing demand for plaster decoration in Toronto these days. People want to smarten up their plain rooms with bits of moulding at the ceiling, column capitals, even domes. In the architectural world it's no longer a crime to ornament a room, so designers add plaster cherubs, hollow-eyed Greek busts, masks and light valences. New rooms look old, but more interesting; old rooms look more stylish and finished.

One customer commissioned Furiere to recreate a Tuscan entry hall (the plaster will look like antique stone) in a condominium at Yonge and St. Clair. Another client is thinking about using his vast frieze of fighting Amazons, nearly three feet high and eight feet wide, repeated again and again around a room to make 120 feet of women warriors and battling Greco-

Roman soldiers. It's a Third Century B.C. sculpture and his grandfather, who started the business at the turn of the century, made the mold.

Furiere was born in Algiers, a mix of French, Italian and Spanish blood. His grandfather started the business in Italy then moved it to North Africa. He grew up cleaning the shop, casting small rosettes or cornices.

Seven years of fighting ended when France granted Algeria independence in 1962; in those years 250,000 people were killed. Half of the European population fled during fighting, the Furiere's left with two suitcases the day before independence.

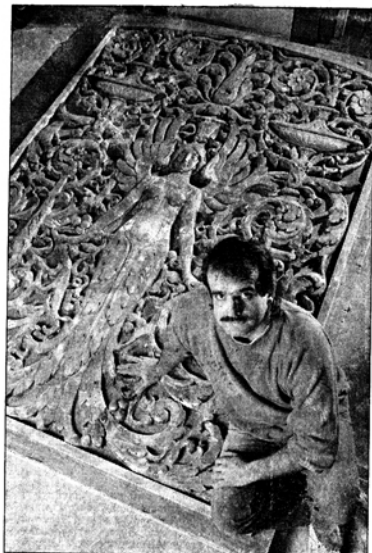
'Fresh wound'

"My father told me always to expect that anything can be taken away from you. He was philosophical, but it was a fresh wound in his heart," he says softly. He was a national judo champion at 17 and his face was on posters around Cannes. He worked as a bodyguard and bouncer during the film festival and during the festival of fashion. It was his job to keep wily photographers out of the models' dressing room.

"You have no idea how many naked bodies I've seen. Every year, women were getting undressed to get attention on the steps of the festival hall."

He studied law, deferring to his father's wishes, but preferred to work in the family business. "My father had amazing connections," he says. For Sheikh Yamani's house near the Swiss border, they designed a series of six domes, with 5,000 ornaments, each handpainted. For a daughter of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, they decorated a dome over a swimming pool with up to 20,000 ornaments.

It was his wife Sylvie who



MASTER CRAFTSMAN Jean-Francois Furiere fell in love with Canada on his honeymoon; returned later with his wife to open the family plaster business in Toronto.

brought Furiere to Canada. They went to Niagara Falls on their honeymoon. Furiere returned on his own for six weeks to examine Canada "with a clear head" and they moved here in 1980. They have three daughters.

Furiere returned to France to help his ailing father on a large project. They packed up his studio, were happily planning for his father to come to Canada and see his business transplanted, but 26 hours after Furiere

left France, his father died.

His first studio in Canada was in the basement of their Don Mills home. Now with a staff of 11 craftsmen Iconoplast Designs occupies a 5,000 square foot studio on Vanderhoof Ave.

Furiere works seven days a week. "But that will stop someday," he says wistfully, surveying the frieze of Amazons, and the clutter of art and history around him.