

Jean-Marc Chaput pioneered inspirational speaking in Quebec. His lasting popularity arises from the simplicity of his message



MARCOS TOWNSEND THE GAZETTE

Jean-Marc Chaput, a longtime Quebec inspirational speaker, will be holding four shows at the Place des Arts next month. His message is that people should live with more passion and worry less about what others think.

# Get your hands dirty

DON MACDONALD  
THE GAZETTE

**A**lmost 1,000 people pack into a Laval auditorium on a freezing spring evening to hear a 73-year-old grandfather tell them to take a hard look at their lives.

The grandfather is Jean-Marc Chaput. He prowls the stage in shirt sleeves, challenging members of his audience to grab life before it slips through their fingers.

For the last 34 years, Chaput has given inspirational speeches like this one to the public and to companies. But his message is far from the usual goal-setting and pos-

itive-thinking bromides offered in self-help books and motivational seminars. Chaput is more subversive than that.

"Stop believing that life is reasonable and that everything should be done reasonably," he shouts at the crowd. "Life is not reasonable. Life is mad."

For the last seven months, Chaput has been touring the province with a two-hour show called *Politically Incorrect*. Largely unknown to English Canadians, Chaput is a beloved figure in francophone Quebec, where he pioneered inspirational speaking and now draws sell-out crowds at Place des Arts and Quebec City's Grand Théâtre. He also makes be-

tween 100 to 150 presentations to companies and associations each year.

With a patch of thinning grey hair and a warm smile, Chaput is an engaging speaker who draws a broad spectrum of ages to his shows. His voice rises to a shout and falls to a whisper. He tells jokes, recounts anecdotes and reads from newspaper clippings to illustrate just how absurd life can be.

People and companies are afflicted by the same malaise, he argues. They suffer from a fear of risk and a lack of passion for what they're doing.

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A company like **Cirque du Soleil** didn't begin with a business plan and government subsidy, he said. It started with a dream, hard work and the passion of its founders.

"Our ancestors didn't start by creating structures and committees," he said during an interview. "They got their hands dirty building a boat or working a piece of land. These days, we want a government subsidy."

"No. You take your two hands and you work."

Chaput argues that too many people are fixated on security, comfort and keeping up with the Joneses. They spend their money on expensive home-improvement projects and paying off big, shiny cars. In the meantime, they fritter away their lives waiting for retirement in jobs they hate.

Chaput also rails against planning, goal-setting and rule-making. There are no guarantees in life, he tells his audience. Plans "should be made in pencil," loved ones should be cherished

daily, and vacations and special occasions seized.

To illustrate his point, he tells a touching story of a condemned man telephoning his family from the World Trade Centre on Sept. 11, 2001.

Chaput became one of Quebec's first motivational speakers out of necessity in 1970 when the failure of his company left him penniless, with five children to feed.

At the urging of his wife, he began to make presentations at companies and then, in 1978, began to tour the province with the first of six public shows with such titles as *Réussir au Québec*, *Le Champion*, *C'est Toi and Fais-Toi Confiance*. He has spoken before as many as 50,000 people at motivational rallies in the United States, with such industry giants as Tom Peters, Zig Ziglar and Joe Girard.

Motivational speaking came late to Quebec, but it's now big business just as it is in the rest of the country and especially in the United States.

That's where the self-improve-

ment movement got its start in the early part of the last century, with the writings and lectures of such figures as Dale Carnegie, Napoleon Hill and Norman Vincent Peale. These days an army of ex-athletes, former military officers and business executives – more than 4,000 by one count – compete on the motivational speaking cir-

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Jean-Marc Chaput, speaker

cuit in the United States in what has become a multi-billion-dollar industry.

But Chaput resists comparisons to figures like Carnegie or motivational guru Tony Robbins.

"People aren't critical enough," he said. "They imagine that if I take this pill I'll be motivated every morning. When the guy

tells me he's going to give me the seven keys to happiness ... (I ask) there aren't eight? There aren't four? How did you arrive at seven?"

"Fourteen ways to succeed in sales. Good grief! The danger of all this motivation and parapsychology is that we forget about common sense."

Motivational speakers have traditionally been used by companies to fire up sales teams. But increasingly, they are also booked to speak to managers, marketing personnel and other staff, especially in organizations facing a lot of change, said David Larose, business-development director at Orizon, a Montreal firm that books speakers.

Quebecers tend to "prefer someone who is more human, more down-to-Earth and less 'Go! Go! Go! You can do it!' – like you see in the United States," Larose said. "Clients here in Quebec like touching stories and speakers who have accomplished something."

Chaput fits the bill.

He made a big impact on em-

ployees of **Groupe Tremca**, a manufacturer of concrete products in St. Jean sur Richelieu, where he did a full-day session last month with executives, sales and administration staff.

"It got my people thinking," Tremca president Éric Caron said. "One day doesn't change everything, but it encouraged our people to take stock of what's important to them. To ask: Why am I here? What do I like about it? What don't I like about it?"

Chaput traces his popularity to the simplicity and the heartfelt nature of his message. And he insists he has left a lasting mark on many who have heard him, including some who have quit their jobs after listening to him.

"All human beings ask themselves questions. I say things that are so simple and try to bring people back to the basics. I ask people the 'whys' of life."

Jean-Marc Chaput appears at Place des Arts May 7, 8, 28 and 29

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