1

'DRAMATIC'

The Daily Traveller [Boston] (6 January 1863).
Unsigned.

[Maggie Mitchell in *Fanchon the Cricket*.]

A review first identified and published by Sheldon M. Novick which he refers to as HJ's 'first published work' (*Henry James: The Young Master* (New York: Random House, 1996), pp. 431–3). Novick regards the style and allusions as typical of the novelist's early writing, and, indeed, HJ records this theatrical experience in the winter of 1862/3 when he had been living in Cambridge as a law student; the review he then wrote introduced him, as he says, to 'the profession of literature' (*NSB*, pp. 277–80).

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Miss Maggie Mitchell – This charming comedienne opened at the Howard, last night, in her highly successful character of Fanchon, the Cricket,[1] and enchanted the splendid audience which witnessed the performance by one of the most bewitching and natural of impersonations. Miss Mitchell does not study for courtly attitudes, indeed her slight form is too fragile for that, but she makes the heart and body labor in concordant action; she does not express the throbbings and tremors of emotion, by the recognized rules of declamatory eloquence, but by the guiding impulses of the heart. She leaps upon the stage like the child of nature skipping over the green fields of waning spring, and her face looks flushed with the health of fresh breezes which course over the green mantled fields. She seems to lose sight of the stifled auditory, and plays the most fantastic romps upon the mimic field, relieving herself of the joyous pleasures brimming over the cup which holds the burthen of her artless happiness.

Her whole acting emanates apparently from impulse, and an intuitive perception of the actual sentiment of her character. The wild and reckless scenes of childhood she delivers with the most delicious vivacity and effect,

while the tenderest chords of pathos are exhibited in that untutored sorrow which we might anticipate in a roving child whose life has been encompassed by enjoyments without the pale of society. And the exquisite *abandon* which she throws into every scene and incident of the play is among the most characteristic and entertaining features of her acting. Mr. Marshall[2] has placed this play upon the stage supported by a company of no ordinary ability, and the scenery is, to say the least, exceedingly beautiful and picturesque, conveying a correct and appropriate idea of the chasms, mountains and weird-like prospects of the German forests, and besides greatly enhancing its dramatic effect.

Fanchon has been almost interminably before the most appreciative of New York audiences, with unqualified success;[3] and every Western city has testified to its merits in the most unequivocal manner, and pronounced their favor by most flattering receptions. The play will therefore be presented upon every night of this week.

Notes

1 **Fanchon, the Cricket**: HJ wrote Mitchell an admiring letter and received in return an acting edition of the play (*NSB*, p. 279). The Howard Athenaeum, one of Boston's most famous theatres, opened in 1845, eventually closing in 1953; originally associated with classical plays and Shakespeare, it later moved to burlesque and more risqué entertainment. *Fanchon the Cricket* was one of several performing versions of a German translation of George Sand's tale, *La Petite Fadette* (1848), a variation on the theme of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Maggie Mitchell toured America with this role which made her famous. The novels of George Sand (b. Amandine-Aurore-Lucille Dupin, 1804–76) were highly popular in the nineteenth century; she was also famous for her radical opinions and her numerous liaisons.

2 **Mr. Marshall**: Actor-manager, Wyzeman Marshall (1815–96).

3 **with unqualified success**: Maggie Mitchell began performing the role in 1861; T. Allston Brown records performances at Laura Keene's Varieties in June 1862 (*A History of the New York Stage from the first performance in 1732 to 1901*, 3 volumes (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903), 2: 141), and these continue at a number of venues through to 1888.

2

'THE PARISIAN STAGE'

Nation 16 (9 January 1873), 23–4.
Unsigned.
'From an occasional correspondent', dated Paris, December 7, 1872.
Reprinted in *Transatlantic Sketches* (Boston: Osgood & Co., 1875),
pp. 98–109.

HJ had been touring Europe with sister Alice and Aunt Kate in 1872 before their return to America in mid October. HJ returned to Paris, seeing fellow expatriates R. W. Emerson and James Lowell, and attending the theatre regularly. On 31 November he wrote to WJ that he enjoyed 'a night of Molière recently at the Odéon: the Précieuses Ridicules & the Malade Imaginaire. He was certainly . . . the heartiest & most heroic of humorists' (*CLHJ, 1872–1876* 1: 143). He arrived in Rome, via Turin and Florence, on 24 December 1872.

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It is impossible to spend many weeks in Paris without observing that the theatre plays a very important part in French civilization; and it is impossible to go much to the theatre without finding it a copious source of instruction as to French ideas, manners, and characters. I supposed that I had a certain acquaintance with these complex phenomena, but during the last couple of months I have occupied a great many *fauteuils d'orchestre*,[1] and in the merciless glare of the footlights I have read a great many of my old convictions with a new distinctness. I have had at the same time one of the greatest attainable pleasures; for, surely, among the pleasures that one deliberately seeks and pays for, none beguiles the heavy human consciousness so totally as a first-rate evening at the Théâtre Français[2] or the Gymnase.[3] It was the poet Gray, I believe, who said that

his idea of heaven was to lie all day on a sofa and read novels.[4] He, poor man, spoke while *Clarissa Harlowe*[5] was still the fashion and a novel was synonymous with an eternity. A much better heaven, I think, would be to sit all night in a *fauteuil* (if they were only a little better stuffed) listening to Delaunay, watching Got, or falling in love with Mlle. Desclée. An acted play is a novel intensified; it realizes what the novel suggests, and, by paying a liberal tribute to the senses, anticipates your possible complaint that your entertainment is of the meagre sort styled "intellectual". The stage throws into relief the best gifts of the French mind, and the Théâtre Français is not only the most amiable but the most characteristic of French institutions. I often think of the inevitable first sensations there of the "cultivated foreigner", let him be as stuffed with hostile prejudice as you please. He leaves the theatre an ardent Gallomaniac. This, he cries, is the civilized nation *par excellence*. Such art, such finish, such grace, such taste, such a marvellous exhibition of applied science, are the mark of a chosen people, and these delightful talents imply the existence of every virtue. His enthusiasm may be short and make few converts; but certainly during his stay in Paris, whatever may be his mind in the intervals, he never listens to the traditional *toc–toc–toc* which sounds up the curtain in the Rue Richelieu, without murmuring, as he squares himself in his chair and grasps his *lorgnette*, that after all the French are prodigiously great!

I shall never forget a certain evening in the early summer when, after a busy, dusty, weary day in the streets, staring at charred ruins and finding in all things a vague aftertaste of gunpowder,[6] I repaired to the Théâtre Français to listen to Molière's *Mariage Forcé*, and Alfred de Musset's *Il ne Faut Jurer de Rien*.[7] The entertainment seemed to my travel-tired brain what a perfumed bath is to one's weary limbs, and I sat in a sort of languid ecstasy of contemplation and wonder – wonder that the tender flower of poetry and art should bloom again so bravely over blood-stained garments and fresh-made graves. Molière is played at the Théâtre Français as he deserves to be – one can hardly say more – with the most ungrudging breadth, exuberance and *entrain*, and yet with a kind of academic harmony and solemnity. Molière, if he ever drops a kindly glance on MM. Got and Coquelin, must be the happiest of the immortals. To be read two hundred years after your death is something; but to be acted is better – at least when your name doesn't happen to be Shakespeare and your interpreter the great

American (or, indeed, the great British) tragedian. Such powerful, natural, wholesome comedy as that of the creator of *Sganarelle*[8] certainly never was conceived, and the actors I have just named give it its utmost force. I have often wondered that in the keen and lucid atmosphere which Molière casts about him, some of the effusions of his modern successors should live for an hour. Alfred de Musset, however, need fear no neighborhood, and his *Il ne Faut Jurer*, after Molière's tremendous farce, was like fine sherry after strong ale. Got plays in it a small part, which he makes a great one, and Delaunay, the silver-tongued, the ever-young, and that plain robust person and admirable artist, Madame Nathalie, and that divinely ingenuous *ingénue*, Mlle. Reichemberg.[9] It would be a poor compliment to the performance to say that it might have been mistaken for real life. If real life were a tithe as charming it would be a merry world. De Musset's plays, which, in general, were not written for the stage,[10] are of so ethereal a quality that they lose more than they gain by the interpretation, refined and sympathetic as it is, which they receive at the Théâtre Français. The most artistic acting is coarser than the poet's intention.

The play in question, however, is an exception and keeps its silvery tone even in the glare of the footlights. The second act, at the rising of the curtain, represents a drawing-room in the country; a stout, eccentric *baronne* sits with her tapestry making distracted small talk while she counts her points with a deliciously rustic abbé; on the other side, her daughter, in white muslin and blue ribbons, is primly taking her dancing lesson from a venerable choreographic[11] pedagogue in a wig and tights. The exquisite art with which, for the following ten minutes, the tone of random accidental conversation is preserved, while the *baronne* loses her glasses and miscounts her stitches, and the daughter recommences her step for the thirtieth time, must simply, as the saying is, be seen to be appreciated. The acting is full of charming detail – detail of a kind we not only do not find but do not even look for on the English stage. The way in which, in a subsequent scene, the young girl, listening at evening in the park to the passionate whisperings of the hero, drops her arms half awkwardly along her sides in fascinated self-surrender, is a touch quite foreign to English invention. Unhappily for us as actors, we are not a gesticulating people. Mlle. Reichemberg's movement here is an intonation in gesture as eloquent

as if she had spoken it. The incomparable Got has but a dozen short speeches to make, but he distils them with magical neatness. He sits down to piquet with the *baronne*. "You risk nothing, M. l'abbé?" she soon demands. The concentrated timorous prudence of the abbé's "*Oh*! *non*!" is a master-stroke; it depicts a lifetime. Where Delaunay plays, however, it is hard not to call him the first. To say that he *satisfies* may at first seem small praise; but it may content us when we remember what a very loose fit in the poet's vision is the usual *jeune premier* of the sentimental drama. He has at best a vast deal of fustian to utter, and he has a perilous balance to preserve between the degree of romantic expression expected in a gentleman whose trade is love-making and the degree tolerated in a gentleman who wears a better or worse made black coat and carries the hat of the period. Delaunay is fifty years old, and his person and physiognomy are meagre; but his taste is so unerring, his touch so light and true, his careless grace so free and so elegant, that in his hands the *jeune premier* becomes a creation as fresh and natural as the unfolding rose. He has a voice of extraordinary sweetness and flexibility, and a delivery which makes the commonest phrases musical, but when as Valentin, as Perdican, or as Fortunio,[12] he embarks on one of De Musset's melodious *tirades*, and his utterance melts and swells in trembling cadence and ringing emphasis, there is really little to choose between the performance, as a mere vocal exhibition, and an *aria* by a first-rate tenor.

An actor equally noted for his elegance, now attested by forty years of triumphs, is Bressant, whose name, with old Parisians, is a synonym for *la distinction*. "Distingué comme Bressant"[13] is an accepted formula of praise. A few years ago comedians were denied Christian burial; such are the revenges of history. Bressant's gentility is certainly a remarkable piece of art, but he always seems to me too conscious that an immense supply of the commodity is expected from him. Nevertheless, the Théâtre Français offers nothing more effective and suggestive than certain little comedies (the *Post Scriptum*, for instance, by Émile Augier),[14] in which he receives the *réplique* from that venerable *grande coquette*, Mme. Plessy, the direct successor, in certain parts, of Mlle. Mars. I find these illustrious veterans, on such occasions, more interesting even than they aspire to be, and the really picturesque figures are not the Comte or the Marquise, but the grim and battered old comedians, with a life's length of footlights making strange

shadows on their impenetrable masks. As a really august exhibition of experience, I recommend a *tête-à-tête* between these artists. The orchestra of the Théâtre Français is haunted by a number of old gentlemen, classic playgoers, who look as if they took snuff from boxes adorned with portraits of the fashionable beauty of 1820. I caught an echo of my impressions from one of them the other evening, when, as the curtain fell on Bressant and Plessy, he murmured ecstatically to his neighbor, "*Quelle connaissance de la scène. . . et de la vie*!"

The audience at the Parisian theatres is indeed often as interesting to me as the play. It is, of course, composed of heterogeneous elements. There are a great many ladies with red wigs in the boxes, and a great many bald young gentlemen staring at them from the orchestra. But *les honnêtes gens* of every class are largely represented, and it is clear that even people of serious tastes look upon the theatre not as one of the "extras", but as one of the necessities, of life – a periodical necessity hardly less frequent and urgent than their evening paper and their *demi-tasse*. I am always struck with the number of elderly men, decorated, grizzled, and grave, for whom the stage has kept its mysteries. You may see them at the Palais Royal,[15] listening complacently to the carnival of *grivoiseries* nightly enacted there, and at the Variétés,[16] levelling their glasses paternally at the lightly-clad heroines of Offenbach.[17] The truth is that in the theatre the French mind *se reconnaît*,[18] according to its own idiom, more vividly than elsewhere. Its supreme faculty, the art of form, of arrangement and presentation, is pre-eminently effective on the stage, and I suppose many a good citizen has before this consoled himself for his country's woes by reflecting that if the Germans *have* a Gravelotte[19] in their records, they have not a *Rabagas*,[20] and if they possess a Bismarck and a Moltke,[21] they have neither a Dumas *fils*[22] nor a Schneider.[23] A good French play is an admirable work of art, of which it behooves patrons of the contemporary English drama, at any rate, to speak with respect. It serves its purpose to perfection, and French dramatists, as far as I can see, have no more secrets to learn. The first half-dozen a foreign spectator listens to seem to him among the choicest productions of the human mind, and it is only little by little that he becomes conscious of the extraordinary meagreness of their material. The *substance* of the plays I have lately seen seems to me, when I think them over, something really amazing, and it is what I had chiefly in mind in

speaking just now of the stage as an index of social character. Prime material was evidently long ago exhausted, and the best that can be done now is to rearrange old situations with a kind of desperate ingenuity. The field looks terribly narrow, but it is still cleverly worked. "An old theme – but with a difference", the workman claims; and he makes the most of his difference – for laughter if he is an *amateur* pure and simple; for tears, if he is a moralist.

Do not for a moment imagine that moralists are wanting. Alexandre Dumas *fils* is one – he is a dozen, indeed, in his single self. M. Pailleron (whose *Hélène* is the last novelty at the Théâtre Français)[24] is another; and I am not sure that, since *Rabagas*, M. Sardou is not a third. The great dogma of M. Dumas *fils* is, that if your wife is persistently unfaithful to you, you must kill her. He leaves you, I suppose, the choice of weapons; but that the thing must somehow be done, he has written a famous pamphlet,[25] now reaching its fortieth edition, to prove. M. Pailleron holds, on the other hand, that if it was before your marriage, and before she had ever heard of you, and with her cousin, when she was a child and knew no better, you must – after terrific vituperation, indeed, and imminent suicide on the lady's part – press her relentingly to your bosom. M. Pailleron enforces this moral in capitally turned verse, and with Delaunay's magical aid; but as I sat through his piece the other evening, I racked my brain to discover what heinous offence Delicacy has ever committed that she should have to do such cruel penance. I am afraid that she has worse things in store for her, for the event of the winter (if a *coup d'état* does not carry off the honors) is to be the new play of Dumas *fils, La Femme de Claude*.[26] Whatever becomes of the state, I shall go early to see the play, for it is to have the services of the first actress in the world. I have not the smallest hesitation in so qualifying Mademoiselle Desclée. She has just been sustaining by her sole strength the weight of a ponderous drama called *La Gueule du Loup*,[27] in which her acting seemed to me a revelation of the capacity of the art. I have never seen nature grasped so in its essence, and rendered with a more amazing mastery of the fine shades of expression. Just as the light drama in France is a tissue of fantastic indecencies, the serious drama is an agglomeration of horrors. I had supped so full of these that, before seeing the *Gueule du Loup*, I had quite made up my mind to regard as an offence against civilization every new piece, whether light or

serious, of which the main idea should not be *pleasing*. To do anything so pleasant as to please is the last thing that M. Dumas and his school think of. But Mlle. Desclée renders the chief situation of M. Laya's drama – that of a woman who has fancied herself not as other women are, coming to her senses at the bottom of a moral abyss, and measuring the length of her fall – with a verity so penetrating that I could not but ask myself whether, to become a wholesome and grateful spectacle, even the ugliest possibilities of life need anything more than rigorous exactness of presentation. Mlle. Desclée, at any rate, was for half-an-hour the most powerful of moralists. M. Laya, her author, on the other hand, is an atrocious one. His trivial *dénouement*, treading on the heels of the sombre episode I have mentioned, is an insult to the spectator's sympathies. Even Mlle. Desclée's acting fails to give it dignity. Here, as everywhere, an inexpressible want of moral intelligence is the striking point. Novel and drama alike betray an incredibly superficial perception of the moral side of life. It is not only that adultery is their only theme, but that the treatment of it is so singularly vicious and arid. It has been used now for so many years as a mere pigment, a source of dramatic color, a *ficelle*,[28] as they say, that it has ceased to have any apparent moral bearings. It is turned inside out by hungering poetasters in search of a new "effect" as freely as an old glove by some thrifty dame intent on placing a prudent stitch. I might cite some striking examples, if I had space; some are too detestable. I do not know that I have found anything more suggestive than the revival, at the Gymnase, of that too familiar drama of the younger (the then very youthful) Dumas, the *Dame aux Camélias*.[29] Mlle. Pierson[30] plays the heroine – Mlle. Pierson, the history of whose *embonpoint* is one of the topics of the day. She was formerly almost corpulent – fatally so for that beauty which even her rivals admitted to be greater than her talent. She devoted herself bravely to a diet of raw meat and other delicacies recommended by Banting,[31] and she has recently emerged from the ordeal in sylphlike slenderness. This result, I believe, "draws" powerfully, though it seemed to me, I confess, that even raw meat had not made Mlle. Pierson an actress. I went to the play because I had read in the weekly *feuilleton* of that very sound and sensible critic, M. Francisque Sarcey,[32] that even in its old age it bore itself like a masterpiece, and produced an immense effect. If I could speak with the authority of

Dr. Johnson,[33] I should be tempted to qualify it with that vigorous brevity which he sometimes used so well. In the *entr'actes* I took refuge in the street to laugh at my ease over its colossal flimsiness. But I should be sorry to linger on the sombre side of the question, and my intention, indeed, was to make a note of none but pleasant impressions. I have, after all, received so many of these in Paris play-houses that my stricture seems gracelessly cynical. I bear the actors, at least, no grudge; they are better than the authors. Molière and De Musset,[34] moreover, have not yet lost favor, and Corneille's *Cid* was recently revived with splendor and success.[35] Here is a store of imperishable examples. What I shall think of regretfully when I have parted with the opportunity is not the *tragédies bourgeoises* of MM. Dumas, Feuillet,[36] and Pailleron, but the inimitable Got, strutting about as the *podestà*[37] in the *Caprices de Marianne*,[38] and twitching his magisterial train from the nerveless grasp of that delicious idiot, his valet; and Delaunay murmuring his love notes like a summer breeze in the ear of the blond Cécile; and Coquelin as Mascarille,[39] looking like an old Venetian print, and playing as if the author of the *Étourdi*[40] were in the *coulisse*, prompting him; and M. Mounet-Sully[41] (the ardent young *débutant* of the *Cid*) shouting with the most picturesque fury possible the famous sortie:

"Paraissez Navarrins, Maures, Castillans!"[42]

To an ingenuous American the Théâtre Français may yet offer an æsthetic education.

Notes

1 ***fauteuils d'orchestre***: Stall seats 'did not make their appearance, even in the most luxuriously appointed theatres, until the middle of the century, and then possibly only in response to the increasing number of visitors from London who demanded them' (F. W. J. Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 42). In the 1875 reprint of the essay the phrase becomes 'orchestra chairs'. Theatre conditions at this time (and notably in Paris) were often unpleasant, overheated, cramped and lacking fresh air.

2 **the Théâtre Français**: Founded in 1660, the French national theatre was now housed at the Salle Richelieu, 6 rue de Richelieu. Associated with Molière, Racine and Corneille, and informing the dramatic reference of *The Tragic Muse* (1890), it served habitually as a touchstone of excellence for HJ.