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The first performance of the Théâtre Libre, in March 1887, coincided with the first night of a La Scala tour and the première of an operetta at the Bouffes Parisiens. It is less surprising that most critics chose the Boulevard productions than that four from leading papers made the journey out to the suburbs. These greeted the occasion and particularly the performance of one of the four one-act realist plays performed, *Jacques Damour*, adapted by Léon Hennique from Zola's short story, in Messianic language. *Figaro* ran Fouquier's report on its front page whilst Jules Lemaître, the respected critic of *Journal des débats*, wrote:

So, last Tuesday, at about half past eight in the evening, you might have seen ghostly figures slipping along between the street-booths of Montmartre, carefully picking their way among the puddles of water in the road, around the Place Pigalle, scrutinizing through their eye-glasses the signs at the street corners. No passage; no theatre. Finally, we have recourse to a lighted wine shop and then we enter a steep, tortuous ill-lighted alleyway. A row of cabs is going up slowly in the same direction. We follow them. On each side, dim hovels and dirty walls; quite at the end a dim stairway. We seemed so many 'great-coated magi', seeking a hidden and glorious manger. Is this the manger where the drama, that decrepit old man, that dotard, will be reborn?¹

The acting, the set, the play itself, evidently had power to surprise the critics, but the presence of the searching magi in that dim alleyway and the attention subsequently given in the press was an effect of the cultural moment and of assiduous advance publicity.

The work of French dramatists from Pixérécourt at the beginning of the nineteenth century to Sardou and Dumas fils in the present had been widely translated and had a stranglehold on theatre managements throughout Europe. Similarly, the declamatory acting style, taught at the Conservatoire, the prestigious school of the Théâtre Français, was universally imitated even though, powerfully formal in its great actors, Rachel, Got or Constant Coquelin, it tended in the second rank to bombast, stiffness and what Shaw labelled 'the French actor's peculiar mechanical cadence'.²

Although lip-service was still paid in France to Renaissance drama and the Comédie-Française proudly used the soubriquet *la maison de Molière*, there was in fact very little difference between the subsidized and the more sophisticated commercial theatres in what was actually performed. The repertoire of both had been dominated for thirty years by the work of a small

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group of dramatists: Scribe's dexterous social comedies; Sardou's highly formulaic plots of marital infidelity and reconciliation, and the social-problem melodramas of high finance and upper-middle-class adultery of Augier and Dumas fils who used a *raisonneur*, a sympathetic character, to voice the presumed values of the audience and point the moral. All were versions of the *pièce bien faite*, the well-made play whose plethora of incidents, fourth-act climax and optimistic denouement conformed to a pattern, skilfully reworked through scores of ingeniously varied events. Always glamorous, often titillating, these plays flattered the audience, offering amusement but not imaginative participation. As Henry James wrote, the 'good French play':

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 . . . Prime material was evidently long ago exhausted and the best that can be done now is to rearrange the old situations with a kind of desperate ingenuity. The field looks terribly narrow, but it is still cleverly worked.³

Theatre, the major nineteenth-century entertainment industry had by the 1880s become a profitable area of business speculation, the *pièce bien faite* its standard product.

Stirrings towards change in the theatre, to match those in the novel and the visual arts, were recurrently evident in Paris in the 1870s and 1880s, but they were spasmodic and without continuity. Montigny had worked, earlier in the century, for greater coherence in staging but the attempts were directed, as with Irving in England, towards the staple repertory. Reports of Wagner's innovations in the *mise en scène* did filter into France but although the *Revue Wagnérienne* was founded in 1885, Wagner's operas found public performance only in concert versions. The Saxe-Meiningen Company was never invited to perform in Paris and Ibsen's work was not known.

Attempts at innovation in the drama had foundered on weak texts or hostile audiences. After seeing the 1884 version of Zola's *Pot-Bouille*, Antoine, then a clerk in the Gas Company, had written of his shock at the 'contrast between the book so vigorous and so true and the platitude in five acts served up at the Ambigu by Busnach'.⁴ When there was a powerful text, as with Becque's drama of rapacious bourgeois life, *Les Corbeaux* (1882), the staging had been unsympathetic and the reception even more so. The leading actor at the Comédie-Française, Constant Coquelin, had demanded extensive cuts, including suppression of the whole sequence in which the son parodies his father, and, the play having been withdrawn following a hostile press campaign, the Comédie actors voted not to take *La Parisienne*, Becque's next piece. Performed at the Renaissance (7 Nov. 1885), this play met with

indifference from the public and hostility from the theatre's backers and the entrepreneur there retreated from further attempts at innovation.

The written word proved more successful, for the moment. Whereas melodramatic versions of his novels might not do much to alter fixed ideas in the theatre, Zola's weekly dramatic criticism and his famous essay 'Le Naturalism au théâtre', which addressed a young and radical constituency that included Antoine, Strindberg and many who would become Théâtre Libre writers and actors, did stimulate enthusiasm for reform. With Zola's assault on the French comedy in the early 1880s, 'the trend of the times', as Strindberg would later point out, had begun 'to exert its demands for reform even in the theatre'. A claim to moral regeneration and to a more clear-sighted patriotism than that which characterized the vested interests of the established theatre was implicit in Zola's identification of realist drama with demands for a theatre of scale and simplicity, truth and conflict, comparable with that of Molière and Racine. His journalism, in Antoine's words, 'prepared, educated and emancipated the public'. When, for example, the leading dramatists Augier and Sardou supported the ban on the dramatized version of *Germinal* on the grounds that what was acceptable in the privacy of the novel was not on the public stage, Zola had replied with a battle cry:

those who should be asked are those who press forward, those who bring forward a new art and who need the great air of liberty. Let them come and they will tell you that the theatre is dead if you close it to truth, to satire of the powerful and tears for the humble, to political and social evolution of which the future will be made.

(*Figaro*, 27 Nov. 1885)

It was hardly a coincidence that Ibsen's famous letter to Lucie Wolf, announcing his decision to abandon poetic drama, was written within a year of the publication of 'Le Naturalism au théâtre'. To its first-night audience, the Théâtre Libre seemed to offer the anticipated breakthrough.⁵

It was probably inevitable that the breakthrough should have come, as is so often the case with the innovative imagination, with a figure like Antoine, who was an outsider. He subsequently made much of the chance nature of his enterprise, writing:

The battle already won in the novel by the naturalists, in painting by the impressionists and in music by the Wagnerians was going to be carried into the theatre . . . Here then the field of battle, the occupiers of the place to be won, the troupes ready for a possible assault; but who would coordinate so many scattered elements? Who would give the signal? Quite simply, chance. Without being the least aware of it, I was to become the animator of forces which I did not even suspect.⁶

However timely Antoine's appearance, the Théâtre Libre, far from being a chance affair, was the product of his long-standing excitement about the new achievements in the literary and visual arts and his dissatisfaction with the

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current state of the drama. Whilst he must have been surprised and delighted by, even perhaps afraid of, the massive interest and enthusiasm roused by his work, Antoine was able to recognize the importance of his undertaking and to use the response it generated. From the outset, he described his as a *vrai théâtre* – a professional theatre which for the moment had no money to pay its actors and, bypassing the commercial theatres of the Boulevard, insisted on comparing its achievements with those of the two state-subsidized houses, the Théâtre Français and the Odéon.

One of the huge new class of the *petite bourgeoisie*, Antoine was working between twelve and fourteen hours a day as a clerk in the Gas Company when he opened the Théâtre Libre. He had no direct access to the established literary and theatrical worlds but, as amateur and autodidact, was steeped in the products of both, sensitive to new literary ideas but alert to the need to adapt them to the practicalities of the stage if theatre was to be regained as a lively art. This combination of responsiveness to new ideas and understanding of theatre practice was what set Antoine apart.

Apprenticed at age thirteen to the bookseller Firmin Didot in rue Jacob, Antoine, afflicted by a 'fierce hunger for reading', patched up an education out of the exhibitions at the nearby Ecole des Beaux Arts, the small magazines of the new literary movements of Bohemian Paris and free evening classes. The exhibitions included the work of Manet, to whose 1872 exhibition he returned repeatedly to learn what was at stake; the little magazines included Zola's journalistic battles for Manet's *Olympia*, for the naturalistic novel and against the moribund theatre, and Catulle Mendès' *République des lettres* with its discussion of the novels of Flaubert, the Goncourts, and Zola, whilst the evening classes included Hippolyte Taine's History of Art course where Antoine learned about the importance of the cultural moment in the creation of new art. Antoine was, in other words, educating himself on the theory and practice, the battles for and eventual triumph of the new artistic and intellectual movements: impressionism, Naturalism and determinism. The lesson of his reading, his own experience and the classes he attended was that the new and the truthful in the arts would necessarily achieve prominence but only after a struggle against the status quo. In a *Figaro* interview of 1891, he said that Zola's 'Letter to French Youth' had been his catechism for ten years.

At the same time, having had, like countless other children, a seat with cherries and *eau de vie* for 50c at his local theatre, the Bataclan in the Marais, having thrilled to Taillade in melodrama and, more unusually, having watched, through the good offices of a neighbour, *La Chatte blanche* from the prompter's box at the Gaité, he discovered a passion for the theatre. This he

fed, once he had started work, by regular attendance at the Théâtre Français, eventually graduating to membership of the claque, leading the applause for 30 sous a night, and to occasional employment as an extra in crowd scenes.

Despite the legend, although disqualified by class, style and financial situation from entering the Conservatoire, Antoine was by no means untrained when he first performed for the Théâtre Libre. He had attended the theatre itself so continuously and so attentively that he patched up a Conservatoire-style training by knowing every major speech in the repertoire and the details of the organization and delivery of every scene by heart. His recitation of these scenes so impressed Marius Laisné, an acting teacher whose public evening course on diction he had attended, that Laisné took him on free as a private pupil. Laisné's other star pupil, Wistiaux, who became Antoine's close friend and the sounding-board for his ideas, would later, as Mévisto, be a founder-member and leading actor of the Théâtre Libre.

There is a long-standing tradition of serious discussion of ideas about theatre in France that has no parallel in England. As part of his own campaign for reform, Zola had cited Diderot's arguments for a more sensuous theatre language and a more realistic acting style. Antoine, by contrast, deeply moved by what seemed to him the totally absorbed acting of Mounet-Sully and the young Bernhardt, was stimulated to define his own ideas at the point where his observation clashed with Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*. When still only sixteen, he wrote to the leading actors of the Théâtre Français asking whether they thought the actor should deliver himself entirely into the emotions of the role or should remain self-possessed on stage, as Diderot had argued. Got's reply, quoted without further comment some twenty years later in the published version of the actor's journal, bears repeating for the clarity with which he reproduces both the matter and the urgency of Antoine's original enquiry:

Was Diderot really right in *The Paradox of the Actor* or, rather, does the actor excite emotion only when he experiences it himself? That is your question is it not?

Well, I would say, neither of these propositions is the truth or, rather, each is true on condition that they are brought together. Let me explain. The actor, like the singer, the instrumentalist, the orator, like all those who intend to work directly on a crowd, the actor must be double under pain of not being, that is to say that at the same time the artist performs and experiences, a kind of reasonable being must remain in him, standing aside, watching the active being and also the audience, and always capable of arrangements, of resourcefulness, and of nuances – a regulator, in short, as they say in mechanics.

So, sir, that is my opinion, and I can only thank you for having chosen me to arbitrate or at least advise in this delicate discussion.

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Although too shy to follow up an invitation from Coquelin to come and discuss the question, Antoine did keep Got's letter and throughout his life would return to consideration of what would be for him, as actor and director of actors, the central paradox of the acting profession: that the role must be thoroughly controlled and rehearsed but that the persuasive actor will lose his or her self-consciousness and appear to become the character.⁷

His correspondence during four years' enforced absence on military service in Algeria reveals his obsessive interest in French theatre. 'What's new in Paris?', he wrote to Wistiaux in February 1880:

I relished your account of *Charles IX* and I am quite of your mind. The play is as fine as it is remarkable; if I remember rightly, there is a scene, that of the King's Council, which is quite masterly . . . I'm also waiting, when you're ready, for details of Sardou's *Daniel Rochat* which, I gather, is on on the 16th. Alas, I guess I shan't see that . . .

I would never have believed that I would feel so deprived at not being able to go to the theatre (I don't know what I wouldn't do to spend a single evening at the Théâtre Français). The other day a third-rate company here gave a performance of *La Tour de Nesles* in which I figured as an extra. (*Correspondance*, p. 34)

But distance also seems to have matured his ideas and, after his return to Paris in 1882, his commentary on the acting and *mise en scène* of the Théâtre Français became notably more critical.

What free time he didn't spend at the Théâtre Français he devoted to acting and directing for the amateur Cercle Gaulois whose members contributed 8 francs a month and performed on Sundays. It is evident from his letters that he had quickly become one of the moving spirits of the Cercle and thought continually about the theatre and his own possible place in it. Years, not just of dreaming and thinking on Antoine's part but of critical watching and rigorous amateur experiment, were behind the production Fouquier and Lemaître came to see in March 1887, at the tiny Théâtre de l'Elysée des Beaux Arts of a prologue and four one-act plays. 'Un préfet', by Arthur Byl, 'La Cocarde', by Jules Vidal, 'Mademoiselle Pomme' by Alexis and Duranty and *Jacques Damour*, adapted from a Zola short story, by Léon Hennique, made up the first programme of Europe's first independent theatre.

The first soirée: *Jacques Damour* (30 Mar. 1887)

It was Poor Theatre with a vengeance. The Cercle Gaulois had split over Antoine's scheme of presenting new plays, especially plays associated with Zola and Alexis, and its establishment had refused support for the project. Whilst this forced Antoine to find 100 francs rent, a full month's wages, to hire the Cercle's theatre, it also enabled him to draw in actors he respected from the rival Cercle Pigalle and to adopt a new, more resonant, name. The

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perception that practical and rhetorical advantages could be seized even from financial exigency, evident in this initial break with the Cercle Gaulois, is characteristic of Antoine's subsequent approach to theatre management.

The name chosen, the 'Théâtre Libre' or 'Free Theatre', announced intent and, with its echo of Victor Hugo's call for a 'théâtre en liberté', also claimed comparison with the heroic struggles of French theatre in the past. Although, as Lemaître's comment makes apparent, the poverty was not without glamour for the audience, it was real enough for Antoine and his company. Rehearsals took place in a billiard-room whose rent was the price of drinks from the bar below; the stage furniture, from Antoine's mother's living-room, was wheeled across Paris in a hand-barrow, and Antoine himself, despite the demands of his job, wrote and delivered some 1,300 letters in an effort to fill his 349 seats.

Hennique's play only uses the climax of Zola's story about the communard, Jacques Damour, in which Jacques, having fled France following the failure of the commune, returns after the amnesty to find his child is dead and that his wife, believing him drowned, has remarried. The strength of the central scene, in which the haggard Jacques and his bluff and comfortable rival, Sagnard, discuss who is Félice's rightful husband, depends not on physical action or heroic posturing, but on the tension generated when the audience is made to witness a situation in which, for all its emotional intensity, there is no evident right or wrong. The onus of feeling and moral judgement is not borne by a conventional *raisonneur* as in the *pièce bien faite* but weighs directly on the audience.

The impression of authenticity the production gave depended, in part, on the accurate observation and precise placing of appropriate stage properties which were listed carefully on Antoine's script as:

- 2 coffee cups on round table
- bottle cognac on round table
- death certificate in bureau drawer
- some small change on a plate on little cash table
- 1 bottle wine and 4 glasses on buffet
- 1 newspaper with Sagnard

The simplicity and accuracy of setting and costume were thrilling to an audience accustomed to lavish scenic decoration, and Antoine's mother's furniture, solid and worn, gave the set substance and helped convey that central tenet of Naturalism: that environment is character. But equally important was the way presentation of character within environment contributed to the dramatic structure of the play.

Using terms that would become familiar in subsequent discussion of Antoine's work, La Pommeraye noted of the opening scene, in which the lower-middle-class family is discovered at table, that 'this scene of calm, of

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¹ Stage of the theatre, Passage de l'Élysée des Beaux Arts, Antoine's first theatre. The footlight guard is visible across the front of the stage. Commentators claimed that illusion was impossible in such a tiny theatre. (Photo Harlingue-Viollet)

peace and of intimate joy is put before the audience with truth, without trickery and without emphasis' (*Paris*, 4 Apr. 1887). But the significance of the scene derives less from the fact that the on-stage world looks remarkably like the real world than from the way that impression of real, lived lives is used to shape the audience's response to what follows. The impression of everyday domesticity creates a sense of the habitual and secure that Jacques' entrance will destroy.

Although Lemaître claimed that illusion was impossible on such a tiny stage, where people in the audience felt they could reach out and touch the actors, there was widespread comment on the naturalness and on the care and accuracy of the acting. Henry James, who saw the play in London, wrote in the character of Dorriforth in his dialogue 'After the Play':

When the appointments are meagre and sketchy, the responsibility that rests upon the actors becomes a still more serious thing, and the spectators' observation of the way they rise to it a pleasure more intense. The face and voice are more to the purpose than acres of painted canvas, and a touching intonation, a vivid gesture or two, than an army of supernumeraries.⁸

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Antoine, as Jacques, demonstrated a capacity (that would become famous) for holding a dramatic silence and for drawing audience response by sheer bodily control. La Pommeraye had seen no 'professional actor who [had] composed character, face, clothes, bearing, allure, gesture, expression, better' than Antoine, 'all were true and gripping'; Paul Alexis wrote in *Cri du peuple* that, 'as well as his perfect diction, he has SILENCES which transport the whole theatre' (10 Mar. 1887), whilst for the actor Charles Mosnier, who first saw this production when it toured to Nancy:

The vision of Antoine on the threshold nailed me to my seat. I will always remember the life-likeness of his slow arrival. I recall that his silences were held a long time and as to his expression . . . when he began to speak between his teeth, what truth, and what beauty.
 ('André Antoine', vol. 1, p. 35)

This matter of the held silences is germane to discussion of Antoine's work as director. In a period of cavalier adaption of plays, one of Antoine's most firmly held beliefs was in the integrity of the dramatist's text. He held that the director's task was the interpretation of the dramatist's imagined world for the theatre. Accordingly, he made few alterations to Hennique's or to any other dramatist's script. The small changes he did make, however, which usually involved simplification of a climactic moment and the use of silence and gesture, contributed importantly to the intensity of feeling and to the stage-worthiness of the play.

At the end of *Jacques Damour*, the shallow Sagnard, full of bonhomie now the problem is resolved in his favour, presses Jacques first to a meal and then, when that is refused, to a drink. Antoine cut Jacques' lines here and emphasized the gulf of experience that separated him from the other characters by playing him as scarcely able to speak before the ruin of his dream of a domestic haven. The conviviality of the family, by contrast, is emphasized when they relax back into their habitual attitudes. The version Antoine played ends like this:

SAGNARD: To you! (*They drink in silence*)
 BERRU: Good, this wine! Hey, Damour?
 VOICE OF PAULINE (*outside, calling*): Mummy! Mummy!
 FELICE: Just coming.
 DAMOUR: (*putting his empty glass on the table*): So, goodbye everyone.
 CURTAIN

By cutting Jacques' actual departure and the family's polite farewells at the door, with which Hennique had ended his script, and by finishing instead with a fast curtain on the line, 'Voilà, adieu tout le monde', which, in the French, is worryingly double-edged, Antoine confronts the audience with the raw emotion and empty future of the loser.

The great paradox of Antoine's career, that the first exponent of

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playwrights' theatre was the creator of director's theatre, is already apparent in this opening production. The argument is that if the play is to live on the stage and be completely coherent, someone must take control of all aspects of production: casting, setting, lighting, stage movement, must, that is to say, replace the co-ordinating function of the old stage-manager by the interpreting function of the modern director. In acting as interpreter, the director cannot help but interpose his own imagination between those of the audience and the playwright.

The second soirée: *La Nuit Bergamasque* and *En famille* (30 May 1887)

If his opening night awoke literary Paris to recognition of a new talent, Antoine's second experimental evening proved that the Théâtre Libre was no mere firecracker and Antoine, for all his protestations to the contrary, no wide-eyed innocent caught up in a current he could not resist. Clearly, he realized from the outset that choice of programme was crucial in creating and sustaining the curiosity and allegiance of an audience.

Despite press interest, the enterprise could have foundered after its first initiative. The wealthier Cercle Pigalle, indeed, put on their own rival evening of advanced plays with some success in May 1887 but, having no further programme planned, soon faded from the competition. Antoine, by contrast, set about finding new scripts. Rejecting proffered work from Byl and Vidal, authors of the unsuccessful plays of the first soirée, he approached the writer Bergerat, who was a journalist and a well-respected poet. Charmed that the adventurous new company whose work had created such a stir wanted the play the Comédie-Française had refused, Bergerat gave Antoine his verse comedy *La Nuit Bergamasque* for the second soirée and became a loyal supporter. It was an adroit move because not only did Bergerat's name, comparable with Zola's in its claim to seriousness, promise to stimulate the attention of the press but, being a verse comedy set in a fantastic oriental world, the play presented a dramatically effective contrast, for actors and audience alike, with *Jacques Damour* and with the raw one-act prose play, *En famille* by the unknown Oscar Méténier, with which it was to be paired.

The programme made the claim to eclecticism that Antoine would continually reaffirm in the face of critics who labelled the theatre as naturalist, and established a practice to which he would largely hold of combining in a single programme the famous with the unknown, the relatively safe with the risqué, the lyric with the realist, the full length with the one act. The inclusion of Bergerat also enabled Antoine to develop the analogy between his own work and that of Manet for, as well as presenting new work, his theatre