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The opening of Antoine's Théâtre Libre (Free Theatre) in Paris in 1887 was one of the founding gestures of the modern theatre. This book investigates Antoine's exploration of the possibilities and limitations of stage realism, his concept of a workshop theatre for new writing and acting, his experiments and achievements in the *mise en scène* at the Théâtre Libre and the Théâtre Antoine, on the classics at the Odéon and in the early silent film. Chothia's study will be of interest to students and teachers of drama, theatre history, film studies and literature.

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DIRECTORS IN PERSPECTIVE

General editor: Christopher Innes

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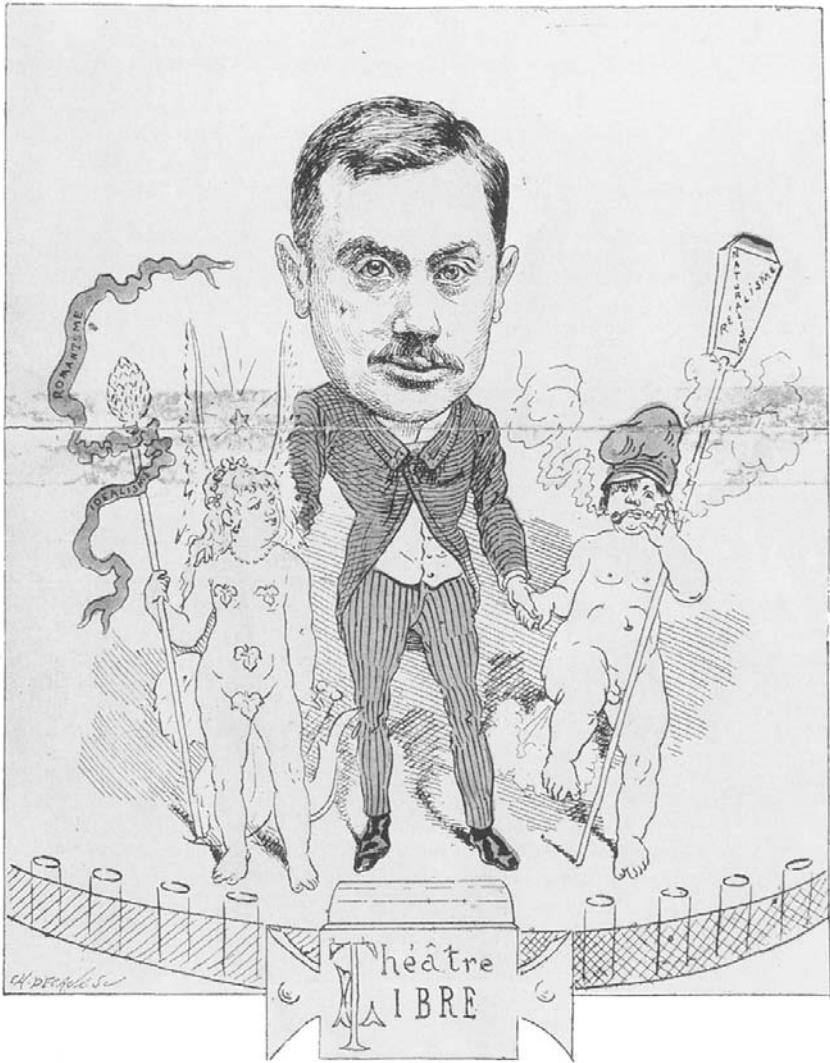
DIRECTORS IN PERSPECTIVE

What characterizes modern theatre above all is continual stylistic innovation, in which theory and presentation have combined to create a wealth of new forms – naturalism, expressionism, epic theatre, and so forth – in a way that has made directors the leading figures rather than dramatists. To a greater extent than is perhaps generally realized, it has been directors who have provided dramatic models for playwrights, though of course there are many different variations in this relationship. In some cases a dramatist's themes challenge a director to create new performance conditions (Stanislavski and Chekhov), or a dramatist turns director to formulate an appropriate style for his work (Brecht); alternatively a director writes plays to correspond with his theory (Artaud), or creates communal scripts out of exploratory work with actors (Chaikin, Grotowski). Some directors are identified with a single theory (Craig), others gave definitive shape to a range of styles (Reinhardt); the work of some has an ideological basis (Stein), while others work more pragmatically (Bergman).

Generally speaking, those directors who have contributed to what is distinctly 'modern' in today's theater stand in much the same relationship to the dramatic texts they work with, as composers do to librettists in opera. However, since theatrical performance is the most ephemeral of the arts and the only easily reproducible element is the text, critical attention has tended to focus on the playwright. This series is designed to redress the balance by providing an overview of selected directors' stage work: those who helped to formulate modern theories of drama. Their key productions have been reconstructed from promptbooks, revues, scene-designs, photographs, diaries, correspondence and – where these productions are contemporary – documented by first-hand description, interviews with the director, and so forth. Apart from its intrinsic interest, this record allows a critical perspective, testing ideas against practical problems and achievements. In each case, too, the director's work is set in context by indicating the source of his ideas and their influence, the organization of his acting company, and his relationship to the theatrical or political establishment, so to bring out wider issues: the way theater both reflects and influences assumptions about the nature of man and his social role.

Christopher Innes

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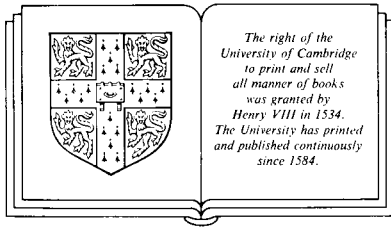
Contemporary cartoon by Desiré Luc commenting on Antoine's eclecticism. He is shown as the promoter of Romanticism and Idealism as well as the Naturalism and Realism for which he is now remembered. The latter figure is represented wearing the cap of liberty and without the conventional fig leaf. (*Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui*, no. 341)

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for Mary and Gordon

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Preface

The opening of André Antoine's Théâtre Libre in Paris in 1887 marked the beginning of the independent theatre movement. It introduced the idea that change and innovation in drama and theatre would come from avant-garde theatre groups which had consciously set themselves apart from mainstream theatre, represented by the Boulevard, Broadway or London's West End.

Antoine's importance for subsequent theatre derives from his theatre work: his practical exploration of the possibilities and limitations of stage realism and the innovation and sometimes the excesses in acting and *mise en scène* that resulted. But, perhaps even more, it derives from his underlying idea that there ought to be a *théâtre d'essai*, a workshop theatre, where new plays and performance methods might be tried out regardless of their commercial prospects. This idea caught the imagination of theatre people abroad as well as in Paris and led with remarkable speed to the founding of the Théâtre Libre in Brussels, the Freie Bühne in Germany and the Independent Theatre in London, whilst, at home, the numerous rival ventures that were spawned began the process of continual revolution and counter-revolution which has characterized subsequent alternative and avant-garde theatre movements. The very term 'avant-garde' was introduced into dramatic criticism, in the early 1890s to describe the work of the Théâtre Libre and its symbolist rivals.¹

The Théâtre Libre made its stand in the name of artistic integrity and against the profit motive. It became the home of ensemble acting and of plays which were true to experience and took risks. The closest analogy, and one to which Antoine himself repeatedly returned, is with the work of Courbet and Manet who, some two decades earlier, found an audience despite the hostility of the art establishment by exhibiting their paintings independently in *salons des refusés*. But whereas the new painting needed a single exhibition space and the new fiction a single sympathetic publisher, the new drama needed the whole paraphernalia of a theatre which could provide appropriate acting and *mise en scène* before it could hope to find its audience. It needed a new and different kind of theatre establishment. Believing that the 'wider public' had been sold short by commercial theatre and would value challenging new drama if given the chance, Antoine opened the Théâtre Libre in Montmartre, a location that provided an audience of artists, writers and Bohemians who were both interested in experiment and prepared to

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demonstrate their interest by subscribing for a season's tickets in advance.

The idea of the season subscription, indeed, besides securing Antoine's theatre, was an important enabling factor of the modern theatre. Through it, Antoine demonstrated that theatre, whether called free, alternative or fringe – the labels change but the idea remains – could survive, albeit precariously, even without rich and powerful patrons such as sustained the Saxe-Meiningen Company and Wagner's theatre at Bayreuth. It was immediately imitated and developed by Otto Brahm at the Freie Bühne, would be crucial in the work of the Old Vic Company and is a mainstay of the Royal Court now. Susan Glaspell, writing of the Provincetown Players' subscription list some thirty years later, would note:

The people who had seen the plays and the people who gave them were adventurers together. The spectators were part of the Players, for how could it have been done without the feeling that it came from them, without the sense of them there, waiting, ready to share, giving – finding the deep level where audience and writer and player are one.²

The significance of the independent theatre movement for twentieth-century drama can hardly be overestimated. Every major dramatist since the 1880s has found a stage through the work of just such a company as Antoine's. Not only did the organization and achievement of the Théâtre Libre inspire the earliest of these – the Freie Bühne (Hauptmann), the Irish Players (Yeats, Synge, O'Casey), the Stockholm Intimate Theatre (Strindberg), the Moscow Art Theatre (Chekhov), the English Stage Society (Shaw, Galsworthy and Granville Barker) – through them, it provided the essential idea for subsequent companies such as the Provincetown Players (O'Neill) or Devine's English Stage Company at the Royal Court in the 1950s. Playwrights' theatres all, devoted to new writing and complementary new performance methods, they have worked outside and independently of the commercial mainstream and private patronage.

Whilst Antoine's importance as an initiator is widely recognized, the extent of his informing ideas and the theatre practice itself are not well known outside his own country.³ This is partly the penalty of having initiated so many practices which have subsequently become commonplace in our theatre but it is also because, in contrast to directors such as Stanislavski, Craig or Brecht, Antoine left no sustained analysis of his practice, no equivalent of *My Life in Art*, *On the Art of the Theatre* or *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. Antoine's published writings, *Mes souvenirs sur le Théâtre Libre*, . . . *sur le Théâtre Antoine*, *Le Théâtre de 1870 à nos jours*, are anecdotal, informative about people and events but tantalisingly short on particular aspects of *mise en scène*. The ironic fact is that precisely because theatre is a performance art, whatever the quality of those performances, it is ephemeral except where the printed word survives to speak to subsequent

generations so that the estimate of the achievement depends, in the long run, rather more on what survives in writing than on what was once done. Like Burbage and Macready, Antoine has become little more than an honoured name, his enterprise shrunk back to a few moments which thrilled and drew the largest headlines. These have survived, available to meet the needs of quick passing reference, so that the work is characterized by the real fountain on the stage, the actual beef carcasses hanging in the stage butcher's shop or the spectacle of Antoine's back, habitually turned to the audience.

The nature and effect of Antoine's innovation on a number of fronts crucial to subsequent European drama and theatre practice cries out for exploration and I have drawn on Antoine's letters, press statements and the five manifestos he published between 1887 and 1894, on his notes and sketches in the prompt books of certain plays and on photographs, contemporary accounts and his journalism of the 1920s and 1930s to piece together my account of some of his most significant productions and to delineate, if not a coherent theory, at least some of the most significant ideas underlying the working method. I would hope to identify some of the aspects of the practice which made the work compelling to contemporary commentators and to draw attention to the power and some of the inherent contradictions of realism, the style particularly associated with Antoine and, many would claim, still dominant, if in dilute form, in the theatre today.

It was originally my purpose to try to supply something of this need for information in relation to the Théâtre Libre alone, but it became increasingly apparent as I explored the material that, far from stopping with his bankruptcy and withdrawal from the Théâtre Libre in 1894, Antoine went on to three further phases of theatrical activity. First, at the Théâtre Antoine, he demonstrated that a repertory theatre could survive, could flourish indeed, on the Boulevard *and* become famous for its ensemble acting, its attention to *mise en scène* and as a training ground for writers, actors and régisseurs. Then, as director of the Odéon, he created a national theatre for France, where he demonstrated that with imaginative staging and programming the serious subsidized theatre could reveal the vigour and immediacy of the great works of the past and successfully revive the less well known as well as introducing new and foreign plays into the repertory. Finally, as the director of eight silent films, his encounters with the new medium helped to shape the development of cinema in France. I discuss some of the innovations and hazards of these later years in the second half of this book.

The importance of theatres such as Antoine's has lain not in their longevity but in the intensity of their brief activity and the opportunities each made available to a new generation of writers, actors and audiences. The intensity and opportunity apparent in the four successive areas of Antoine's work as a director is the subject of this book.

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JKC