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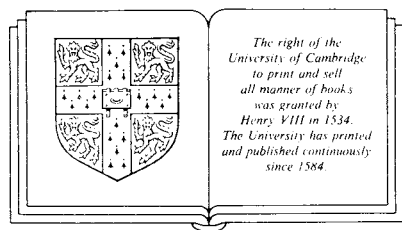
# *Modern French Drama 1940–1990*

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DAVID BRADBY

*Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies, University of London*

SECOND EDITION



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## Preface

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The transformation of the French theatre between 1940 and 1990 has been colossal: there have been changes in styles of acting, directing, writing, stage design, and a massive redistribution of resources away from Paris towards the provinces. Before the last war, almost every significant event in the life of the theatre took place in Paris. By 1990 there were over one hundred well-established theatre companies working permanently outside Paris. Before the war, a new play normally received its premiere in an unsubsidised, privately-owned theatre in Paris. By 1990 a new author was just as likely to have his work performed in a publicly-owned, state-subsidised theatre in Caen or Strasbourg, Marseilles or Villeurbanne. Before the war, with the notable exception of Artaud, the theatrical avant-garde displayed austere literary or poetic tastes and was content to be an elite. Since the war, it has welcomed the most diverse influences: Brecht and the *théâtre populaire* movement, Strehler and Dario Fo, Grotowski, the Living Theatre, Bread and Puppet, Bob Wilson and many more.

Some of the changes that were to come had been foreshadowed in the inter-war years. The work of the art theatres between the wars had shown a tendency to move away from the naturalist theatre style towards less realistic forms, and a few companies had shown an interest in community theatre. But the influence of Marxist theory, the importance of Brecht and the development of Epic theatre in France were as unexpected as the rapid expansion of the decentralisation movement. Equally unanticipated was the emergence of the New Theatre of the fifties and its world-wide influence, followed by the division of the theatre world into 'absurdist' and 'political' camps. This symbolic division, an expression of the real gulf still dividing Paris from the provinces, was bridged in the best work of the sixties and seventies. New forms of theatre were created in which the social concerns of the Brechtians combined with the atavism of the Artaudians to achieve entirely new dramatic effects.

Developments in theatre practice over this fifty-year period have been accompanied by startling developments in theatre criticism, partly in response to new methods of dramatic construction, partly following the advance in sociology, anthropology and structural linguistics. Sociological criticism has shown that the meaning of a drama is not simply generated by the play text, but also by the place of performance, the type of building, the relationship between the stage and auditorium, the class composition of the audience. An increased awareness of the controlling socio-cultural factors influencing any production,

## *Preface*

and of the essentially political nature of theatrical activity, has in turn helped to influence dramatic experiment, especially experiments with unusual playing spaces not confined to theatre buildings.

Criticism of the Structural Linguistic School has complemented sociological insights by showing how plays communicate by means of non-verbal signs. Roland Barthes and his followers have analysed the codes of signification at work in the rituals of theatre-going and have promoted the techniques of demystification, which were adopted by many dramatists of the sixties (though decried by others). This school of criticism has provided a new way of theorising the relationship of signs to reality in the theatre, showing that its specificity lies not in imitating reality, but in developing conventions that may *signify* reality. This has led to a rich and subtle exploration, by both critics and creators, of the familiar modes of representation previously taken for granted. It has produced a lively awareness in French theatre circles of the close relationship between ideology and dramatic form.

This book deals only with published plays, concentrating on those whose performances have been documented in secondary literature. Before the war, a playwright expected that his play would be judged by readers as much as by theatre-goers. But more recently, playwrights have tended to write specifically for performance, taking the view that the complete realisation of their work is to be found, not on the page, but on the stage. Several have benefited from a close relationship with directors or theatre companies and some have worked as resident playwright to the company that has performed their plays. In extreme cases, such as the plays of the Théâtre du Soleil, the text of the play has not been written down at all in the conventional sense. For this reason the accounts of particular productions given in this book are combined with interpretations of the plays that allow for the construction of different performance possibilities, showing where there has been a fruitful interplay between critical methodology, playwriting and theatrical practice.

Much of the most original work in the French theatre since the war has been apparent, not in new plays, but in new approaches to the classic repertoire. Shakespeare, especially, has taken on a new lease of life in France as a result of productions stressing material and historical conditions and employing a physical and gestural acting style. The outstanding pioneer of this new approach has been Planchon and, since he is also an important playwright, his career is traced in some detail in this book. As well as its intrinsic interest, Planchon's work provides a unique opportunity for studying the point at which the arts of acting, directing and writing intersect.

For references, the author-date system has been used. This means that there are no footnotes and the reader should consult the bibliography at the end of the book for the source of a quotation. The bibliography is divided into two sections: Section 1: authors and practitioners; Section 2: critics and theatre historians. Under each author or practitioner is a list of cross references to critics that may be found particularly helpful. Where direct quotation is made from a French source, the translation into English is my own.

## *Acknowledgements*

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