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Introduction

It will be generally conceded that there are three major preconditions for the successful launch of any modern industry: it needs to have identified an assured market of consumers which can be expected to expand over the years; it has to be able to call on a reliable workforce available for employment; and thirdly, it needs to have access to a body of primary producers. The railway industry, which in France entered its period of rapid expansion in the 1840s, provides as good an instance as any of an enterprise embracing from the start these three essential prerequisites for success. The market here consisted of a potentially large number of customers looking for a more rapid, easier and cheaper means of undertaking long journeys which had previously necessitated travel by horse-drawn coach, river barge or coastal vessel; together with a smaller but equally important group of entrepreneurs able to profit from the fast transport of heavy goods in bulk. The workforce originally consisted of the armies of labourers needed to make the cuttings, bore the tunnels, build the viaducts and lay the tracks; and later, of the more highly trained body of engine-drivers, stokers, signalmen, station-masters etc. required for the running of the trains. The primary producers, the third essential requirement, were already present in the men who sank the mines and dug the coal which, before the coming of electric power, was the only available fuel for locomotion.

The same tripod of necessary preconditions was present to support the nascent theatre industry at about the same period. The market here consisted of all those who in their scant leisure hours crammed the theatres at the time, and for whom they represented the only form of mass entertainment available, particularly if one includes the circus, a permanent feature of the Paris theatre scene throughout the nineteenth century. The workforce consisted primarily of the actors and actresses, but also of the instrumentalists needed for the orches-

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tras which were *de rigueur* even in theatres specializing in straight drama; they were supported by a host of underlings of both sexes, far outnumbering those that a theatre today needs to engage. The amount of cutting and sewing, sawing and hammering, painting of scenery, manhandling of furniture, the sheer muscular activity of every description that went on behind the scenes presupposed employment of unskilled or semi-skilled labour on a scale barely imaginable at the time outside an industrial complex. As for the primary product, this was the play, whatever form it took: tragedy, comedy, melodrama, vaudeville (which meant something different in France from what it came to mean in England and America), operetta, military pageant, farce, mime, or fairy play. And every play presupposes a playwright, sometimes indeed two or three working in combination. Thus the theatre industry can be conveniently divided for the purpose of study into three parts, in nineteenth-century Gaul as in that of Caesar's time; this division has dictated the tripartite form our examination of the phenomenon has seemed to require.

The output of new plays in the nineteenth century, a crude measure of popular demand, amounted to little short of 32,000, the figures rising steadily in each quarter of the century. An account written in 1888 of the social impact of the theatre at that time estimated that 500,000 Parisians visited the theatre once a week and that those who went at least once a month numbered between 1 million and 1,200,000. And those living in provincial towns were just as stagestruck, supporting their local theatre as well as travelling up to the capital in ever-increasing numbers to satisfy their craving for the glitter of the footlights and the excitement of a gala performance. The huge expansion in the number of avid playgoers was what formed the basis of the expanding theatre industry, for it permitted ever-longer runs of plays that happened to catch the popular fancy; this development was particularly marked in the second half of the century. Even at the end of the July Monarchy a play that reached forty successive performances before being taken off was deemed to have had a satisfactory run, and Dumas *père* established an equivalence between the age a man might expect to live (60–80 years) and the number of performances a play might achieve before dying of exhaustion, also 60–80. But under the Second Empire and in the first decades of the Third Republic these figures were greatly exceeded, and a play that did not reach its one-

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hundredth performance was considered almost a failure. The record, before the Great War, was held by Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* which, after its Paris opening on 28 December 1897, reached its 1,000th performance on 3 May 1913, making it a positive Methuselah by Dumas's calculation. Such mammoth runs, tedious though the cast might find them, represented for the managers and the financiers who backed them a steady profit undiminished by the expense of new sets or costumes, and the industry boomed accordingly.

The theatres themselves, especially after 1864 when the government abandoned the policy adopted under the First Empire of artificially limiting their numbers, multiplied likewise: by 1882 the eleven theatres operating in Paris in 1828 had grown to twenty-three, and the total revenue had risen from 4,789,000 francs to 20,168,000 francs. Nor did this imply any drop of income through keener competition, since the average earnings of each theatre had more than doubled at a time of fairly steady prices. The theatre was a valuable source of external revenue, contributing to the growing prosperity of the country by attracting foreign visitors. Moreover, it was largely a one-way traffic: few Frenchmen were prepared to undergo the discomforts of a Channel crossing for the sake of visiting the Haymarket or Covent Garden, whereas the British, together with Russians, Americans, Germans etc., all made a point, on visits to Paris, of frequenting the Comédie-Française and sampling the delights on offer at the numerous other famous theatres along the boulevards. The high reputation enjoyed by French acting can be measured by the fact that permanent companies putting on plays in the French language were established at every important centre in the so-called civilized world during the nineteenth century, from Cairo to New Orleans and from Lisbon to St Petersburg; by the mid-century it was reckoned that no fewer than 343 actors and actresses from France were working on secondment abroad. Similarly, the prestige of modern French dramatists was confirmed by the well-attested practice of foreign playwrights who would take their works, 'adapt' them and put them on without reference to their originators and mostly without their permission. Jules Claretie recalled seeing at the Princess's Theatre in the 1860s a play called *The Streets of London*, which he recognized to his astonishment as having been lifted lock, stock, and barrel from Brisebarre and Nus's *Les Pauvres de Paris* (1856), with an identical plot, identical scenes, only the names of characters and places anglicized. But there was little that could be

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done about such barefaced robbery except to wonder at the evident lack of originality among the degenerate descendants of Shakespeare and Sheridan.

Contemporary writers on the French theatre were well aware of its mushrooming growth, and not all saw this as cause for rejoicing; for industry, even in the age of the railway and the Paris World Fairs of 1856 onwards, was considered in France as situated at the opposite pole from art. Already Theophile Gautier, himself a poet as well as a drama critic, observed a little ruefully, a few years after the July Revolution, that the theatre had become 'nothing more today than an industrial enterprise, like a factory for extracting sugar from beetroot or a bitumen company with a registered capital of a million francs'; while under the Second Empire, the Goncourt brothers, entering the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin by the back door to attend a rehearsal, noted their impression of being in the midst of an industrial complex, lost in a 'seething mass of extras, sceneshifters, workmen, all rushing about as in an immense mill, a prodigious factory'. Nor did the similarity end there, for when theatres closed wholesale, as happened in 1848 and 1870–1, literally thousands were suddenly thrown out of work and left to beg, borrow or starve, exactly as were works' employees when a downturn in trade had to be met by massive layoffs.

Towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries it was already becoming apparent that the period of industrial expansion in the theatre was tailing off. For various reasons – the demand for shows involving lavish and sometimes extravagant sets, the ever-higher fees exacted by star performers – an evening at the theatre became for reasons of cost more an exceptional indulgence than a weekly habit. Competing forms of amusement or spectacle – the singers and *diseurs* at the *cafés-concerts*, screen actors in the early silent films – offered cheaper entertainment, and the stage forfeited its mass appeal. The theatre industry, however, did not so much collapse as shrink from being big business to being what was called 'show business', a more inventive but perhaps a more inverted form. A new generation of major dramatists replaced that of hack writers for the stage not just in France but everywhere in Europe and America; the producer came at last into his own; the acting profession became unionized and its younger members were sometimes tempted away into films; theatres and opera houses everywhere were converted into cinema halls, the

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rowdy audiences of gas-lit auditoriums were replaced by the politer gatherings of our day. New art forms emerged appropriate for a new century, and new conditions had to be created for the drama to continue to flourish.

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PART I

The Audiences

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CHAPTER I

Going to the theatre in the nineteenth century

Before any theatre-goer fixes on where he is to spend his evening, he will probably want to know what play or plays are to constitute the entertainment at the theatre he proposes to visit. From the end of the seventeenth century onwards, the most usual means of informing the public about forthcoming theatre productions was by posters affixed at certain recognized sites throughout the city. In Paris these posters or playbills were of a standard size, printed in black on differently tinted paper: originally green for the Comédie-Française, pink for the Comédie-Italienne, and yellow for the Opera. Different shades were used by the minor theatres, but white paper was generally prohibited: a decree issued on 22 July 1791 by the National Assembly and still in force reserves black on white for notices issued by the authorities.

These theatre posters, at any rate down to the fall of the Empire, had little to do with publicity as the word is understood today. Their discretion and modest dimensions struck a British traveller in 1814 as being 'perhaps the only thing in Paris calculated to make an Englishman blush for the opposite practice of his country. It is a mortifying contrast to the impudent quackeries and lying pretensions which, in all the varieties of a large and small letter, are blazoned on the handbills of our two national theatres.'[1] But a change occurred under the July Monarchy, when a master printer named Morris, having achieved a virtual monopoly of the theatre poster business, started the fashion for advertising plays in large print on the size of paper known as columbier, destined for display on a number of cylindrical pillars which the municipality of Paris, in return for a suitable payment, allowed him to erect all over the city; the 'colonnes Morris' are to this day a familiar feature along the streets and in the squares of Paris. Other speculators obtained other concessions: the right to fix frames on the doors of cafés and shops

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displaying gaudy advertisements for the latest hit, to brighten up blank retaining walls with placards, to paste them on the sides of omnibuses, to hire the unemployed as sandwich-men to walk the streets with advertisements fixed to their backs and chests, as was done notably as part of the publicity campaign for the dramatization of Zola's *Nana* in 1881. Alphonse Lemonnier, writing towards the end of the century,[2] reckoned that the manager of any self-respecting theatre needed to set aside at least 50,000 francs a year for publicity purposes.

For all that, a certain innate conservatism and pride in the appearance of the capital city kept these developments within bounds. In 1880 a visitor from the United States commented particularly on French restraint.

> There are no 'mammoth bills' to be seen in Paris; no 'streamers', no 'guttersnipes' [narrow posters for pasting on curbstones]; none of the pictorial printing which is the pride of an enterprising American speculator . . . Instead, the bills of all the theatres, of a given size prescribed by law (about 15 inches broad by 30 inches high) are printed together and displayed on posts in the principal streets and boulevards, as well as on an occasional dead wall.[3]

But Brander Matthews did not venture outside Paris; in the provinces it was a very different matter, 'a luxuriance of multicoloured placards, crude lithographs, of ridiculous and often misleading posters . . . Paper of all the colours of the rainbow is stuck profusely everywhere on monuments and shopfronts, making a nauseating and depressing display.'[4] And even in Paris, towards the end of the century, posters began to incorporate illustrations of the more important moments in a melodrama. Eye-catching pictorial posters, which first made their appearance midway through the nineteenth century, were sometimes works of art in their own right, destined to become collectors' pieces: Jules Chéret led the way here, followed later in the century by Toulouse-Lautrec and Steinlen, both of whom worked as much for the *cafés-concerts* as for the theatres. In the first years of the twentieth century, the 'mammoth bills' that Brander Matthews had thought confined to New York began to make an appearance in Paris. 'Theatre posters have, over the last few years', wrote Adrien Peytel in 1917,

> taken on an even greater importance. Their dimensions are constantly on the increase; the names of stars in heavy type can be seen a mile off, while

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the identity of the dramatist is hidden underneath the title of the play, where it has not been omitted entirely. The portraits of fashionable actors adorn the walls everywhere and there are constant troublesome disputes about the size of print used for the name of each player. The theatre, like all commercial enterprises, has fallen victim to an acute publicity crisis and actors are suffering, like so many others, from that incurable disease, self-advertisement.[5]

Long before Peytel, Alphonse Lemonnier too had argued that the actor's vanity was chiefly to be blamed for excessive promotional displays on theatre bills. He tells the story of Laferrière, who had it written into his contract that his name should be given priority over all others; when Hostein wanted Frédérick Lemaître to star in a revival of Dumas's *Henri III et sa cour*, he pleaded with Laferrière to waive for once his legal right. The actor was obdurate. Frédérick, amused, told Hostein to let the effeminate matinée idol have his way; after all, he said with a shrug of his shoulders, 'ladies first!'[6] Another director, Koning of the Gaîté, having been so unwise as to sign contracts with several actors promising each that his name should receive top billing, solved the problem by printing them all in a circle. Yet another, faced with ultimatums from Bocage and Mlle George who were acting together in *La Tour de Nesle* at the Porte-Saint-Martin, managed to avoid a damaging dispute by persuading them to take it in turns: one week Bocage's name would be printed first, the next Mlle George's. Various more or less ingenious attempts were made to bypass the difficulty: alphabetical order, order of appearance on the stage, etc., but none was altogether satisfactory. The rule adopted by the Comédie-Française gave rise to least dispute: actors taking part in a given play were listed in order of seniority, the *sociétaires* coming first (and, most ungallantly, the men preceding the women) and the *pensionnaires* after them. This had the occasional odd result, as when a superannuated duenna whose name had been all but forgotten by the public figured on the playbill above the leading *comédienne* of the day. But it had the advantage that every *sociétaire* could look forward to heading the list, if only a year or so before his or her retirement.

Having decided, on the basis of posters, newspaper publicity or verbal report, which particular theatre offered attractive entertainment most likely to please them, the majority of theatre-goers would set out on foot to arrive in good time. Ticket offices as a rule opened half an hour before the performance was due to start; but if the show

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was a popular one, it was advisable to present oneself well in advance to join the queue that may have begun to form long before the sale of tickets had started.

For the greater part of the eighteenth century, queues were unknown in Paris, while in the provinces they seem not to have started making their appearance until the middle of the nineteenth. Before then, except for the fortunate few who had rented a box in advance, it was a matter of joining in the general scrimmage when the ticket office opened, risking having one's ribs crushed before even reaching it. The first occasion on which an attempt was made to control the crowd occurred apparently in 1787, when the erection of a double line of fences introduced some order among the would-be spectators of Beaumarchais's opera *Tarare*. Queuing in other contexts, outside bakers' shops for instance, became customary during the Revolution; the earliest use of *la queue* in this sense was recorded in 1794, and passed into the English language much later (1837, according to the *OED*): it was a neologism clearly unknown to the American John Sanderson, who published his guidebook to Paris a year later. 'They admit the spectators to a French theatre in files of two between high railings, and under the grim and bearded authority of the police, which prevents crowding and disorder; and whoever wishes to go in, not having a seat provided, "makes tail" as they call it, by entering the file at the rear.'[7] Queuing may have been originally enforced by the police rather than by theatre managements, less to prevent disorder than as a precaution against the numerous pickpockets that used to prey on the swirling theatre crowds of former days.

Most theatres, if not all, had two ticket offices situated not inside the building, as was customary in London, but at openings in the external walls, with a policeman always in attendance, an arrangement of which Francis Blagdon thoroughly approved: 'by this plan, however great may be the crowd, the entrance is always unobstructed, and those violent struggles and pressures, which among us have cost the lives of many, are effectually prevented'.[8] The longer of the two queues was always found at the window where tickets for the cheaper seats were issued; this was as might be expected, but it constituted a social differentiation which aroused occasional bursts of indignation among sympathizers with the working class, who denounced the queue as a barbarous invention without, however, suggesting other means of dealing with the problem it was intended

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