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Introduction

Over the long period of time covered in this survey, the theatre represented for the French, to a greater degree probably than for any other nation, a unique focus of collective interest. Down to the end of the nineteenth century no other form of entertainment, engaging the attention of every class of people throughout the length and breadth of the land, had arisen to challenge its supremacy. The one and only purveyor of excitement, amusement and pathos that the mass of the population knew, the theatre was also the one and only escape from their usually laborious and lacklustre existence. Pierre Giffard, in the introductory chapter of an account published in 1888 of the social impact of the theatre in his day, reckoned that 500,000 Parisians attended playhouses once a week, while those who went once a month numbered between a million and 1,200,000. In other words, he concluded, 'the population of Paris lives at the theatre, of the theatre, and by the theatre'. And those domiciled 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 'first night'.

Now the various governments on whom devolved the task of administering the country over this period could not have remained indifferent to the phenomenon. The theatre impinged on the national life at every level, from the highest to the lowest, and those who steered the ship of state could not afford to neglect it; these milling crowds, confined nightly in cramped buildings, required supervision and regulation, as did too the nature and content of the dramatic entertainment offered them. It was Louis XIV who had originally seen the three theatres he took under his protection, the Opera, the Comédie-Française and the Comédie-Italienne, as conferring particular lustre on his reign. He granted them an absolute

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monopoly of the kind of dramatic, musical and terpsichorean works each of them specialized in, turning them into patent or 'privileged' theatres. The machinery of support and control set up by Louis XIV lasted down to the collapse of the *ancien régime*; but from 1760 onwards the system began to be duplicated and to a certain extent undermined by the advent of a new phenomenon, the commercial theatre. It was in 1760 that Jean-Baptiste Nicolet took over a ramshackle hall on the Boulevard du Temple, well away from the centre of affairs but near to where the artisan population of Paris was settled at the time, in which he proposed to provide all the year round the kind of dramatic entertainment sought by the poorer classes who until then had had to content themselves with fair-ground shows which, popular though they were, had the disadvantage of being open only at certain seasons of the year. Nicolet's pathfinding venture was so successful that it was not long before it found imitators, both along the Boulevard and, later, in the grounds of the Palais-Royal; these little theatres were collectively known as the 'théâtres forains', with reference to their distant origin in the fairs. Instead of forming a self-governing company like the Comédie-Française, the actors were hired, employed and fired by managers of a new species, men and women who built or rented their own theatres and engaged the services of occasionally talented but always prolific playwrights to provide them with a varied repertoire; and they prospered as long as they continued to offer their clientèle the kind of amusement that appealed to them. Although hardly anyone realized it at the time, the step taken by Nicolet in 1760 was destined to alter the whole trend of development over the next century and a half. All the theatres that attained prominence in the nineteenth century, the Gaîté, the Ambigu, the Variétés, the Vaudeville, the Gymnase, were modelled on the formula evolved by that mountebank of genius, Nicolet.

The organs of state, in the crumbling monarchy of the time, were divided as to the attitude to be adopted towards these commercial enterprises which, however trivial the entertainment they offered, were perceived as performing a useful function in providing harmless relaxation for the lower orders. The Revolution further enhanced their standing by cancelling the privileges – the monopoly on certain types of play and the financial aid granted by the Treasury – which the royal theatres had enjoyed; from 1791, by decree of the National Assembly, all theatres became purely com-

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mercial enterprises, the artificial restrictions on their number were abolished, and for a short period it seemed as though the state was renouncing all control over the theatres; even the censorship of plays intended for public performance was suspended.

Meanwhile, outside Paris, the situation had been developing a little differently. The representatives of royal authority governing the provinces under the *ancien régime* were impressed by the advantages that might accrue from promoting the growth of an organized theatrical life; with their encouragement, a network of new theatres sprang up in the latter half of the eighteenth century, particularly where troops were garrisoned or where there was a regular passage of visitors from abroad. In the course of the following century, admittedly, the provincial theatre declined steadily in importance. This decay was due to a number of factors, chief among them the political and cultural hegemony of Paris, and the reluctance of the central government to provide funding for these semi-commercial undertakings, which had therefore to rely on subsidies grudgingly accorded by the municipal authorities.

It is a matter of dispute whether the coming to power of Napoleon proved ultimately of net benefit to the theatres. True, he had a strong personal interest in raising their standards; but at the same time he was wary of the potential for subversion which in his view they might represent. He began by re-establishing the old system of state subsidies for a limited number of privileged theatres in the capital; later, he drastically restricted the proliferation of the commercial theatres by closing down the majority and insisting that none of the others should operate without a government licence. This reversion to pre-revolutionary controls was further reinforced by the appointment of certain court officials to supervise the state-supported theatres, as had been customary under the *ancien régime*, and by the reinstatement of preventive censorship whereby the state asserted its right to examine, modify or prohibit whatever plays it was proposed to enact on the public stage. The monarchy, when it was finally restored in 1815, made very little change in Napoleon's dispositions regarding the theatres: the state continued to subsidize the royal theatres, to issue licences, on a slightly more generous scale, to new commercial theatres and to keep a careful watch, via the censorship bureau, on what was permitted for public performance. The 1830 revolution tried to do away with preventive censorship and to revert to the practice which had grown up under

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the First Republic of forbidding only such plays as were seen to divide audiences and provoke dangerous excitement; this more liberal policy lasted only until Fieschi's attempt on the King's life in 1835 provided the excuse for reintroducing censorship in all its former rigour.

The licensing system, open to all kinds of abuse especially under the July Monarchy, was finally done away with by Napoleon III in 1864. Thereafter the state continued in France, as it does down to this day, to subsidize theatres considered to be of national importance, leaving the others to multiply, compete and experiment with different types of play as they wished. Various factors, notably a long trade depression together with competition from a cheaper form of entertainment, the *café-concert*, led to a so-called crisis in the theatres in the 1890s which was in fact little more than a levelling off in the expansion of the industry; but the theatre by and large retained its attraction as the one and only spectator art available to the masses as well as to the intelligentsia until the cinema eventually displaced it in the 1920s. Our survey ends in 1905, which was when the last weapon of control left in the hands of the state, the censorship of plays, was finally relinquished after a protracted struggle: in that year a majority in the Chamber voted against sanctioning the usual item in the budget to provide for the censors' salaries. Thus the long and chequered history of state intervention drew to its close.

It remains, however, to examine the one field of dramatic activity in which the state hardly ever meddled and consideration of which we have accordingly deferred until the end: this was amateur dramatics, which had attracted all classes of society at every period, providing an outlet for those who enjoyed acting in private but had neither the talent nor, perhaps, the ambition to appear in public. Marie-Antoinette could not resist the temptation to dress up and act on a private stage, and neither could the lady of fashion or the labouring man in the nineteenth century. Nothing shows more clearly how widely *théâtromanie* had permeated the French nation over this long period of time, for amateur theatricals were quite as popular in the provinces as in the capital. Since the state could hardly interfere in what was essentially a domestic activity, none of the repressive controls it exercised over the public stage could apply in this domain. Amateur theatres escaped, in particular, the attentions of the censorship bureau. Some took advantage of this to put on plays verging on the indecent, though more often in the

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eighteenth than in the nineteenth century; but the loophole did eventually permit André Antoine, when he founded the Théâtre-Libre in 1887, to produce plays with disturbing social implications which might never have been tolerated at any other theatre, for Antoine, who did not charge for admission 'at the door', could claim exemption from the rules governing public theatres, which included the obligation to submit the text of plays to the censorship bureau. His example was followed by others and led shortly to the formation of the experimental or avant-garde theatre which was so influential in the first half of the twentieth century. This fruitful development, however, owed nothing to state initiative, which did not re-emerge to any considerable extent until after the Second World War, with the generalization under the Fourth Republic of the notion of the theatre as a public service deserving of financial aid and encouragement from the state. But that is, as they say, another story and one that lies well outside the chronological parameters of the present study.

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CHAPTER I

The royal theatres of the 'ancien régime'

In the course of his extensive peregrinations around France over the years between 1787 and 1790, Arthur Young found little to delight him and much to dismay him. Agriculture – his principal concern – was in a piteous state, and the constitution-mongering during the early years of the Revolution boded ill; nevertheless, he never had anything but good to say about the Comédie-Française and the new theatre into which the company had moved a few years before, which occupied the site of the present-day Odéon theatre. The circular shape of the auditorium struck him as ideal, both as regarded ability to see and to hear; after so splendid a building, he asked, 'how can anyone relish our ill-contrived oblong holes of London?' On 18 October 1787, having witnessed a performance of Piron's *Métromanie*, he declared:

> the more I see it, the more I like the French theatre; and have no doubt in preferring it to our own. Writers, actors, buildings, scenes, decorations, music, dancing, take the whole in the mass, and it is unrivalled by London. We certainly have a few brilliants of the first water; but throw all in the scales, and that of England kicks the beam.[1]

True, great actors and actresses, 'brilliants of the first water', could be seen in London at the time Young was writing: notably of course Sarah Siddons and her brother John Philip Kemble; but the point Young is making here is that the Comédie-Française was much more than a chance grouping of talented players. Its customs and regulations ensured the permanence of a traditional style which, inherited from Molière and perfected by succeeding generations, had already lasted for more than a century. Supported, morally and financially, by the monarchy, it could be regarded as a theatre dependent on the state and reflecting the pomp and power of the state. It was, moreover, a patent theatre, whose exclusive right to perform what were considered at the time to be the finest exemplars of dramatic

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literature was enshrined in law. As for the players, even Bachaumont, who in his annals habitually wrote of them contemptuously as *histrions* (mountebanks) and of their company as *le tripot comique* (the comedians' bawdy-house), nevertheless acknowledged that 'the Comédie-Française possesses the most accomplished actors in Europe'.[2] Its reputation in every continental capital as far afield as St Petersburg was indeed unassailable; and in the course of the eighteenth century the universality of French as the language of polite society owed as much, perhaps, to the lofty reputation of the Comédie-Française, attended devoutly by every educated visitor from abroad, as to the widely read works of the writers of the Enlightenment who, in a few cases, were also the authors of the tragedies and comedies it produced on its stage.

Its earliest beginnings can be traced back to October 1658, when Molière's company was granted permission by Louis XIV to produce plays in the Théâtre du Petit-Bourbon, part of the Palais du Louvre. After the death of their actor-manager in 1673, the group merged with another, and the joint company moved to the Théâtre Guénégaud in the street of that name. Then, in 1680, a further fusion was effected by royal command between this company and another playing at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and from this ordinance of Louis XIV dates not merely the foundation of the Comédie-Française but also the launching of what had been a purely commercial, private-enterprise theatre on to the boundless sea of state patronage. The terms of the *lettre de cachet* of 22 October 1680, addressed to the Lieutenant-General of Police,[3] make it clear that Louis XIV, in organizing the merger between the two rival companies, intended to centralize theatrical activity in the capital instead of having it dispersed and impoverished by being spread too thinly; and, by an additional clause 'forbidding all other French actors to establish themselves in the city and suburbs of Paris without an express order from His Majesty', he tried to ensure that the company should never need to face competition in the future. It was to this fundamental act that the jurists representing the Comédie-Française implicitly or explicitly referred in the conflicts that arose from around 1770 onwards with the new private-enterprise theatrical establishments that had started to make their appearance in the capital over the previous decade.

In order to place the new royal theatre on a firm financial footing, Louis XIV further granted the company an annual subsidy of

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12,000 *livres*. Even before 1680, his generosity towards the actors of Molière's company had been demonstrated by the allocation of smaller grants: 6,000 *livres* in 1665, raised to 7,000 in 1670. The increased subsidy continued to be paid, by him and his successors, with periodic adjustments to take account of the rise in prices, down to 1790. There were occasional delays, due to the depletion of the treasury, but the total sum always arrived eventually to replenish the coffers of the Comédie-Française and to be distributed, according to an agreed formula, to the actors and actresses of the company. Although they always depended far more on their box-office receipts than on this state subsidy, it was none the less a useful supplementary source of income and had the effect of turning them to a certain extent into servants of the royal household, Comédiens du Roi as they came to be called, that is, the King's Players.

For the next eighty years, the company continued to rely for its existence in law on the various edicts issued by Louis XIV. But in 1761 it was deemed desirable to give it the status of a legally established society, which was done by the granting of letters patent on 22 August, duly registered by parliament on 7 September. A little before this, in June 1757, Louis XV had approved a constitution consisting of forty statutes; this had the effect of codifying and in some cases improving on certain customs that had grown up in the course of time to regulate both the internal affairs of the society and its external relations with others, notably with the authors who wrote for it and the suppliers and contractors with whom it had business dealings.

The internal organization of the company, dating back in its essentials to Molière's time, was basically democratic, each member holding a share, that is, a financial stake in the enterprise. A resolution dated 3 April 1685 had fixed the number of these shares at twenty-three and this number remained unchanged over the years, though each share was subdivisible, and only a player of the first rank would be allocated, by general consent, a *part entière*, a full share. Normally the company needed about seventeen actors and twelve actresses to function adequately; junior members were awarded a half-share or some other fraction, so that the total of twenty-three shares remained constant.

In order to fill gaps due to retirement or death, the shareholders (*sociétaires*) occasionally needed to admit to trial membership a new actor or actress who, if after a year he or she proved satisfactory,

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could proceed to the status of probationary membership; they were then known (confusingly) as *pensionnaires*,[4] which implied no more than that they were hired by the company at a fixed annual rate (2,000 *livres*) for a limited period – two years maximum. At the end of this period they were either admitted to the ranks of the *sociétaires* or else turned away to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Such at any rate was the situation in the eighteenth century, though it was varied subsequently. In the 1760s the *pensionnaires* were few in number compared to the *sociétaires* – no more than five or six at any one time – though again the proportions were to alter quite considerably in later times.

Theoretically at least, the affairs of the society were in the hands of a small steering committee (*comité directeur*) of six or seven *sociétaires*, meeting weekly. The general assembly, consisting of the totality of the *sociétaires*, was a purely consultative body meeting once a month. The organizational framework might thus suggest that the Comédie-Française was at this period a self-governing body, a democracy functioning within an autocratic state which sponsored it. But if they ever enjoyed this paradoxical liberty, they had foregone it by 1764, when Charles Collé noted in his diary that the Comédiens du Roi had 'fallen under the cruellest of despotisms . . . Formerly, they did not labour under this servile subjection; they governed themselves, as in a republic; no one meddled in the business of the Company . . .'[5] And Collé, in the same breath, names the usurpers: the First Gentlemen of the Bedchamber.

These four powerful noblemen, appointed to their office simply on account of their high rank and standing at court, had little to do with any bedchamber except that of whichever actress they chose to favour for the nonce. Their functions in regard to the Comédie-Française were never defined; but as the actors were the King's servants, and as the King had many other preoccupations, it was perhaps thought necessary that he should delegate the business of supervising their activities to this quartet of lackadaisical and voluptuous aristocrats. They never, of course, attended the committees and assemblies of the *sociétaires*; that would have been beneath their dignity; but they delighted in drawing up regulations and laying down the law. Thus, in 1712 they ordered the actors to accept without argument whatever part they were assigned in a new play, and to present themselves on the dot for rehearsals; they forbade them to engage in personal quarrels with each other when in

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committee or to raise any business that was not on the agenda. No matter was too trivial to occupy their attention; one would have thought they were devising codes of conduct for mischievous schoolchildren. It would indeed have been, as Collé called it, the cruellest of despotisms – except that these regulations largely remained a dead letter, since the Gentlemen were too indolent to oversee their enforcement. Nevertheless, their right to promulgate 'disciplinary regulations' was confirmed in one of the articles of the constitution of 1757.

Since members of the royal family only rarely came to Paris for an evening at the theatre, the Comédie-Française, together with the two other royal theatres, the Académie de Musique (the Opera) and the Comédie-Italienne, were expected to depute their best actors and singers at certain times in the year to entertain the court at Versailles or Fontainebleau. These visits took place during the hunting season in the autumn and winter, the three companies taking it in turn to perform: Tuesdays were devoted to tragedy, Wednesdays to the opera, Thursdays to comedy and Fridays to light opera. The duty of ensuring that no hitches occurred in these constant moves, which involved the transport of scenery as well as actors, dressers, etc., devolved on an official known as the Intendant des Menus: one might say, the Steward of the Minor Diversions of the King.[6] In the period we are concerned with, this functionary was a certain Denis-Pierre-Jean Papillon de la Ferté, and among his other duties was that of representing the Gentlemen of the Bedchamber at the meetings of the committee of the Comédie-Française; he acted as a channel of communication between the two parties, conveying the grievances of the players to their superiors and endeavouring to present the superiors' decisions to the players in such a way as to cause as little offence as possible: no easy task, as many a passage in Papillon's journal shows. His entry for 5 May 1772 affords an exemplary instance of the Comédie's resentment at the petty interference of the Gentlemen. The dispute was, on the surface, quite futile; it arose from the actors' decision to dismiss a wig-maker in their service. Under the *ancien régime*, wigs were part of the normal stage costume for all plays, whether tragedy or comedy, and quite irrespective of the historical period in which the action was supposed to take place. Julius Caesar appeared with his head surmounted by an enormous powdered wig; as often as not, this wig would be crowned by a helmet or hat with plumes; at the Comédie-

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