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0521450888 - Theatre and State in France, 1760-1905

F. W. J. Hemmings

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Relations between theatre and state were seldom more fraught in France than in the latter part of the eighteenth and during the nineteenth centuries. The unique attraction of the theatre, the sole source of mass entertainment over the period, accounts in part for this: successive governments could not ignore these large nightly gatherings, viewing them with distrust and attempting to control them by every kind of device, from the censorship of plays to the licensing of playhouses. In his illuminating study, F. W. J. Hemmings traces the vicissitudes of this perennial conflict, which began with the rise of the small independent boulevard theatres in the 1760s and eventually petered out in 1905 with the abandonment of censorship by the state. There are separate chapters on the provincial theatre and on amateur theatricals, while the French Revolution is given particularly detailed attention. Using a wide range of contemporary source material, Hemmings has produced a highly readable and absorbing account of this protracted campaign for the freedom of the stage. This work, complementing his earlier book, *The theatre industry in nineteenth-century France*, will be of interest to students of theatre history, French studies and European culture in general.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press, 1994

First published 1994

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Hemmings, F. W. J. (Frederic William John), 1920-
Theater and state in France, 1760-1905 / F. W. J. Hemmings.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 45088 8

1. Theater and state - France. 2. Theater - Censorship - France.
3. Theater - France - History - 19th century. 4. Theater - France -
History - 18th century. I. Title.

PN2055.F7H46 1994

792'.0944 - dc20 93-4418 CIP

ISBN 0 521 45088 8 hardback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

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Chronology

- 1761 (7 September) Comédie-Française granted letters patent.
- 1762 The fairground Opéra-Comique fuses with the Comédie-Italienne.
- 1764 Having earlier rented a booth on the Boulevard du Temple, Nicolet builds his own theatre there to house his company, Les Grands Danseurs du Roi
- 1769 Audinot opens the Ambigu-Comique on the Boulevard du Temple.
- 1774 Louis XV dies and is succeeded by Louis XVI.
- 1776 Inauguration of the Théâtre des Arts, Rouen.
- 1779 Variétés-Amusantes opens on the Boulevard du Temple.
(25 December) Comédie-Italienne authorized to abandon its repertory of plays in Italian.
- 1780 Comédie-Italienne granted letters patent.
Inauguration of the Grand-Théâtre, Bordeaux.
- 1781 Opening of the Porte-Saint-Martin, initially to house the Paris Opera.
- 1782 Opening of new building (on the site of the future Odéon) for the Comédie-Française.
- 1783 Comédie-Italienne move into their new theatre (the Salle Favart).
- 1784 Opera acquires control of all licences for minor theatres.
Petits-Beaujolais inaugurated in Palais-Royal gardens (closed 1790).
First performance of Beaumarchais's *Mariage de Figaro*.
- 1785 Variétés-Palais-Royal (renamed Théâtre de la République under the Revolution) gives its opening performance.
- 1786 Temporarily dispossessed, Audinot builds a new theatre, with the same name (the Ambigu-Comique) as the old one.

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- 1787 (February) Opening of the Assembly of Notables. Inauguration of Grand-Théâtre, Marseilles.
- 1788 Inauguration of Grand-Théâtre, Nantes. Authorization given for opening of a fourth 'royal theatre', originally to be called the Théâtre de Monsieur, later known as the Théâtre Feydeau (inaugurated 1790).
- 1789 Summoning of Estates General, resulting in establishment of Constituent Assembly. The Bastille is stormed (14 July). Declaration of the Rights of Man (18 August). M. J. Chénier, *Charles IX*, at the Théâtre-Français. Théâtre-Français renamed Théâtre de la Nation.
- 1790 Mlle Montansier opens her theatre in the Palais-Royal.
- 1791 Decree of 13 January abolishing all restrictive licences for new theatres, all monopoly rights on repertoire, and establishing authors' copyright on plays. By clause 6, state censorship is abolished. An important fraction of the Comédie-Française, led by Talma, leaves the company and joins that of the Théâtre de la Rue Richelieu (the subsequent Théâtre de la République). (June) Arrest of royal family at Varennes.
- 1792 (10 August) Legislative Assembly assumes the powers of the monarchy; royal family imprisoned. (20 September) Convention replaces Legislative Assembly. (22 September) Proclamation of Republic.
- 1793 (21 January) Execution of Louis XVI. Overthrow of Girondins (2 June), leading to start of Terror. Closure of the Théâtre de la Nation by the Committee of Public Safety and arrest and imprisonment of most of the company (3-4 September)
- 1794 Censorship reintroduced by the Convention (*arrêté* of 14 May). (27 July) Arrest and execution of Robespierre signals end of the Terror. Members of the Comédie-Française still imprisoned are released, but have no theatre to house them and accordingly disperse.
- 1795 Administrative power passes to the Directory.

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- 1799 Bonaparte overthrows the Directory, replacing it by a Consulate with himself First Consul.
The Comédie-Française regroups, using henceforth the theatre in the Rue Richelieu (formerly the Théâtre de la République), their previous building having burned down.
- 1802 Napoleon grants the Comédie-Française an annual subvention; state subsidies also allocated to the Opera and the Opéra-Comique.
Peace of Amiens between France and Britain, lasting till May 1803.
- 1804 (2 December) Napoleon crowned Emperor.
- 1805 Napoleon abandons preparations to invade England but defeats combined Russian and Austrian armies at Austerlitz.
- 1806 By an imperial decree of 8 June, no theatre to be established in future without government authorization; the repertorial monopoly of the three state-supported theatres, ended by the decree of 13 January 1791, is reasserted.
- 1807 By the decree of 29 July, the number of theatres in Paris permitted to remain open is reduced to eight.
- 1808 (15 June) Odéon opened, as a fourth state-supported theatre, under the name Théâtre de l'Impératrice.
- 1810 Having divorced Joséphine, Napoleon marries (11 February) Marie-Louise of Austria.
- 1812 Closure of the Porte-Saint-Martin, which had reopened as the Jeux Gymniques in 1810.
In June, Napoleon launches the Grande-Armée against Russia; 15 October, he signs the Moscow Decree, fixing the organization of the Comédie-Française.
- 1814 (30–31 March) Allies enter Paris. Napoleon abdicates and is banished to Elba. Louis XVIII restored to the throne.
(26 December) Reopening of the Porte-Saint-Martin.
- 1815 Napoleon lands in France, retakes Paris, but is finally defeated at Waterloo and banished to St Helena.
- 1816 By an *ordonnance royale* of 14 December, Napoleon's earlier dispositions regarding the state-supported theatres are confirmed with minor modifications.
Permission given for the Funambules to open on the Boulevard du Temple.
- 1819 First season of the Théâtre des Italiens (les Bouffes).

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- 1820 Poirson obtains licence to open the Gymnase-Dramatique in Paris.
- 1821 Opening of the (short-lived) Théâtre du Panorama.
- 1822 Opening of the Théâtre de Belleville, first of a chain of theatres in the suburbs of Paris.
(16 September) Death of Louis XVIII, succeeded by Charles X.
- 1824 (8 December) Decree on the theatres, urging municipalities in the provinces to subsidize local theatres.
- 1827 (1 March) Inaugural evening of the Théâtre des Nouveautés (closed 27 December 1831).
- 1829 (10 February) First performance of Dumas, *Henri III et sa cour*, at the Théâtre-Français.
- 1830 (25 February) First performance of Hugo, *Hernani*, at the Théâtre-Français.
As result of July revolution, Charles X abdicates and is succeeded by Louis-Philippe. Suspension of the state censorship of plays.
- 1832 First outbreak of cholera in Paris empties the theatres.
- 1835 (28 July) Attempt on Louis-Philippe's life results in repressive measures (the September laws), one of which was the reimposition of dramatic censorship.
- 1847 Inauguration of Théâtre-Historique.
- 1848 February revolution in Paris: Louis-Philippe abdicates, a provisional government headed by Lamartine takes over.
(6 March) Rescinding of September laws of 1835 incidentally abolishes dramatic censorship; but licensing system for theatres continues.
(23 June–15 July) All Paris theatres close as fighting breaks out in working-class districts, but are subsequently compensated by the state for loss of business,
(10 December) Louis-Napoleon elected president of the new republic.
- 1849 Arsène Houssaye imposed as government administrator on the Comédie-Française.
Council of State circularizes playwrights as to whether all controls on theatrical repertoires should be lifted.
- 1850 (30 July) Dramatic censorship re-established.
- 1851 (2 December) Louis-Napoleon carries out *coup d'état* to change the constitution. Hugo and others go into exile.

- 1852 Dumas *filis*'s *La Dame aux camélias* has its first triumphant run at the Vaudeville.
(2 December) Napoleon III proclaimed Emperor.
- 1862 Demolition of the theatres along the Boulevard du Temple as part of Haussmann's plans to modernize Paris.
Erection of the Châtelet and the Théâtre-Lyrique (later the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt).
- 1864 (6 January) The so-called 'freedom of the theatres' is established by decree. The licensing system is abolished; there are to be no limits on the number of theatres operating; any individual may open one and produce what plays he wishes – but the state retains the right to examine, modify or forbid the showing of any play.
- 1867 Record numbers of theatre-goers attracted to Paris by the World Exhibition that year.
- 1869 (May) Opening of the Folies-Bergère.
- 1870 (19 July) France declares war on Prussia. After French defeat at Sedan (1 September) Napoleon III abdicates and a republic is proclaimed in France (4 September).
(19 September) Siege of Paris begins. Nearly all theatres close down, many being used as casualty stations.
- 1871 (28 January) Paris capitulates and armistice with Germany is signed.
(26 March–28 May) Rule of Commune.
Comédie-Française gives series of performances in London (1 May–8 July).
- 1879 Second visit of Comédie-Française to London, playing at the Gaiety; company includes Sarah Bernhardt, Sophie Croizette, Coquelin and Mounet-Sully.
- 1885 (29 October) Violent attack by Zola in *Le Figaro* on the whole principle of dramatic censorship, in connection with difficulties made over a stage adaptation of *Germinal*.
- 1887 (30 March) Antoine opens the Théâtre-Libre.
A disastrous fire at the Opéra-Comique, causing the deaths of several hundreds of spectators, impels the government to impose better safety regulations at all theatres and hastens the replacement of gas by electric lighting.
- 1891 Parliamentary commission of inquiry into the working of the censorship: its recommendations not translated into law.

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- 1894 (April) Antoine abandons directorship of Théâtre-Libre.
1905 After a long campaign inside and outside parliament, the Chamber finally refuses to vote the money necessary to pay the censors' salaries, and the censorship bureau is accordingly disbanded.