Introduction: The golden age of acting

> It *paid* apparently, in the golden age of acting, to sit through interminable evenings in impossible places – since to assume that the age *was* in that particular respect golden (for which we have in fact a good deal of evidence) alone explains the patience of the public.
>
> Henry James[1]

Sometimes the most beguiling face of the Other belongs to our closest neighbour. That, at any rate, has usually been the case with the tangled relations – mutual admiration, mutual envy, mutual distrust – that have always existed between the English and French theatres. Just as the fascination of difference lies in the potential for sameness, so these opposed traditions have observed each other at close quarters and invited each other back home. There were French actors in London as early as 1629; Charles II, who had spent time in Paris, patronised French troupes in the 1660s and 1670s, and although royal hospitality inevitably waned during subsequent reigns, further visits to London took place throughout the 1720s and 1730s. In 1738 there were violent protests when a French company was given permission to open at the Haymarket, and a rather similar situation occurred in 1749 when another French company, backed by David Garrick, tried to establish itself at the same theatre. Again there were riots. Those very first visits had prompted some disquiet at the presence of female performers; later the reasons for protest were economic and political. But continuously volatile relations between two cultures, as well as the financial insecurities typical of all theatre business, only make the number of trips in both directions look all the more impressive.

The eight chapters that make up this book encompass an extended phase in the protracted dealings between theatrical practices that have always been notorious for their formal contrasts. They do so by focusing, in quite precise ways, upon a number of French actresses who appeared in England between the early nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth: a period of time that saw the emergence, the triumphs and the transformations, the

eventual demise of the great Romantic performer, a dynastic line far more narrowly defined than any English tradition, a theatrical transmission that has, in fact, no English equivalent at all. The consistency of theatrical conventions and of play texts were clearly factors, but the Romantic period in France exhibited a complex set of political attitudes at the same time as it mapped out an aesthetic. The Romantic actress became an active vehicle for the expression of history, by turns a contemporary phenomenon, a vision or parody of the past, the living embodiment of lost chances and social cost.

Consequently I pay little or no attention to those other French *artistes* – singers, dancers – who fascinated English audiences over the decades, and I make few attempts to offer broad generalisations about Anglo-French cultural relations. Theatrical reception is always made up of disparate interpretation. If, on the French side, my emphasis is mainly upon the theatrical conditions that determined their initial appearances, on the English one it is upon the way the actresses were seen and felt by individuals, particularly by writers and artists. These responses were, inevitably, extremely various and I have no wish to force a pattern on a whole range of subjective interpretations, allowing simply for a shared historical moment.

On the few occasions when journeys in the reverse direction are invoked, by the English to France, it is usually for reasons of context.[2] Only rarely were the cross-channel visits reciprocal exchanges and there were distinctive and recurring concerns on both sides that were neither intellectually balanced nor historically synchronised. However, the frequency of trips in both directions certainly did increase significantly throughout the nineteenth century. Writing in 1899, Clement Scott, a conservative critic who nonetheless considered himself an advocate of internationalism,[3] was able to announce that, in addition to legendary visits to London by the Comédie-Française in 1870 and 1879,

> without setting foot in Paris, it has been possible for English playgoers, in a course of years, to become familiar with such varied and special talent as that of Rachel and Sarah Bernhardt, Regnier and Lafont, Bressant and Delaunay, of Lacressionère and Geoffroy, of Ravel and Berton, of Dupuis and Baron and Leonce, of Got and Coquelin. Without even visiting the Boulevards, we have been able to discriminate between Aimée Desclée and Fargueil, and Schneider and Chaumont, and Blanche Pierson and Bartet, and Leonide Leblanc and Pasca, and Granier and Judic, and Jane Hading and Réjane, and who shall say how many more representatives who have their little day and disappear?[4]

Arranging these seasons was never straightforward, as Scott well knew. Despite his appreciation of the number of those French performers who,

within recent memory, had been welcomed in England, he wondered how many playgoers

> who, though perfectly familiar with the French play seasons at the old St James's, at the old Princess's, at the defunct Holborn, at the Opéra Comique, at the Gaiety, at the Royalty and the Adelphi, illuminated by Sarah Bernhardt and Coquelin, are aware that in the year 1848 one of the most important companies in Paris, came to London to play 'Monte Cristo' at Drury Lane, and was literally hissed and hooted off the stage by a body of roughs and enthusiasts, who came fully persuaded that English art would be ruined at once and irretrievably if French plays were ever to be permitted at any theatre save the St James's, where they were to be graciously tolerated, but there and there alone. (Scott, 2, 437)

This refers to a salutary moment in 1848 when the Théâtre-Historique had been booed off the stage at Drury Lane and pamphlets had been distributed enjoining Britons 'to stand by the British Drama'.[5] The French, it was undeniable, had long made their presence felt simply by virtue of the number of their plays that had ended up, in one form or another, upon the English stage. Yet, as Michael Booth has pointed out, the fact that 'many plays of the time, whether comedies, farces, or melodramas, were taken from the French', does not necessarily mean that the English theatre was moribund or had no identity of its own.[6] The range of dramatic material on offer was wide, the acting often vibrant, and performances must always be related to the local milieu, the expectations of experienced audiences. These make it apparent that the French influence was not always stultifying. The most famous joke against the French neo-classical tradition – Mr Curdle's definition in *Nicholas Nickleby* of the unities as 'a kind of universal dovetailedness with regard to place and time – a sort of general oneness' – occurs alongside Nickleby's own praise of a French piece he has been asked to translate for its 'abundance of incident, sprightly dialogue, strongly-marked characters'.[7] It is true that Dickens had little time for Rachel and the kind of tragedy that she represented, but there were plenty of other French performers whose art he enjoyed immensely.

Performers interpreting their own repertoire in their own language make different and probably greater demands upon an audience than plays which have been translated and adapted for local conditions; and, in any case, my primary concern here is not with plays so much as with players, and very specifically with actresses. (I retain the word 'actress', incidentally, rather than the currently preferred and supposedly neutral 'actor', not because the women lacked power – they were often in control and always influential – nor because they were sexually provocative in ways unknown to men – obviously both sexes can be attractive on stage, and to both sexes – but

because of the language used about them, and the traditions to which they belonged. Performing women were compared with other women, rather than with men.)

It is also true that actresses have suffered from prejudice and even from persecution as well as having been the beneficiaries of occasional privilege.[8] They have been vilified and outlawed for the supposed immorality of their profession; they have been acclaimed for reasons having little to do with their talent; they have had freedoms thrust upon them that other women have been denied – and have then been made to pay a price for an independence they may not have sought. Women on stage have been observed in prurient ways and simultaneously honoured for their uniquely inspirational power. This was overwhelmingly the case with the great French actresses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: a distinguished line of brilliant women courted by writers, admired by their peers, and often scapegoated by their religion. Champmeslé,[9] Lecouvreur,[10] Clairon:[11] it was a uniquely eminent list that had immediately entered legend and to which most later French actresses have had to relate.

Yet for all the achievements of individuals, the English have always been aware that in comparison with their own traditions French acting, both gesture and declamation, appears rigidly codified and ponderously oratorical. This has made heavy demands upon English audiences whilst causing them to be peculiarly sensitive to discrepancies and changes whenever they occur. Add the fact that the same types (*emplois*) recur throughout the classic French repertoire in a quite unEnglish way – *soubrettes*, *ingénues*, *grandes coquettes* and so on – and the challenge of difference becomes that much greater. It is difficult to determine the ease, or otherwise, with which English audiences, even in quite recent times, could grasp alexandrines delivered at high speed or catch the drift of Parisian *argot*, could recognise some subtle variation in character or respond to rhetorical and gestural emphases. In the nineteenth century there was a good deal of cynicism about these interpretative abilities from those who admitted to not possessing them,[12] though translations were sometimes made available at theatres and the professional critics, at least, do seem to have been remarkably well equipped.

All of which ensured that visits by French actresses were anticipated, scrutinised and analysed with unique intensity. Their charismatic influence upon English culture, by no means confined to those who had a professional investment in theatre, has never been appreciated as the long-lasting phenomenon that it undoubtedly was. The actresses provided stimulus for novelists, poets, essayists, artists of every kind, for whom comparisons between past and present, as well as between contemporary performers,

were irresistible.[13] And while these oppositions could sometimes work to restrict meaning, and to stimulate an unhealthy appetite for supposed rivalry between women, a spectator sport of a quasi-voyeuristic kind, they could equally generate flashes of insight and shape new definitions, as one dazzling performance lit up another. Together the French actresses constitute a myth of a golden age of acting – a myth for which we have, as Henry James might say, 'a good deal of evidence'.

NATIONAL SPECULATIONS

Underpinning the cross-channel journeys, alongside a wish to entertain, to inspire, and to impress, there was invariably the hope of financial profit and political advantage.[14] We begin in the post-Revolutionary, post-Napoleonic period, when mutual curiosity was exceptionally lively, but even then there were still strong precedents lingering on from the previous century.[15] On the two occasions (1751 and 1763–4) when he had made extended stays in France, David Garrick had been anxious to meet with the great of the literary and theatrical worlds, an ambition he had achieved. And while he may have felt ambivalent towards French theatre, this did nothing to prevent him from planning for reciprocal arrangements between London and Paris, collaborating with Jean-Louis Monnet of the Opéra-Comique in 1749. Monnet made an initial arrangement with John Rich of Covent Garden for two performances a week. This fell through when Rich backed off, fearing the degree of anti-French sentiment in London. At Garrick's suggestion, Monnet then moved to the Haymarket. What followed was determined more by matters of politics than of theatrical taste: a divided audience made up of pro- and anti-French factions, accusations of disloyalty directed at an MP who had supported the project, fighting in the streets, the intervention of the Lord Chamberlain bringing the season to a halt, eventually Monnet's arrest.[16] Nevertheless, the friendship between Monnet and Garrick survived these disasters and Monnet is to be seen as a pioneer. More than a century later, in 1911, he was being invoked as 'an early impresario, a fore-runner of those cosmopolitan managers who have, since his day, led troupes of comedians from Paris to London, New York and the ends of the world'.[17]

Just as Garrick, with his distant French ancestry, was probably bi-lingual and unquestionably well read in the history and theory of French theatre, Hippolyte Talma, his opposite number in terms of theatrical reform, could claim to have been brought up in partly in London.[18] As a boy, he visited London theatres and acted with an amateur company composed of French residents. In the 1780s Lord Harcourt, his friend and benefactor, even

mooted the idea of a London branch of the Comédie-Française that would specialise in the classic French repertoire. This came to nothing but it did give Talma an entrée into Parisian theatrical circles and he eventually joined the Comédie himself in 1787, later becoming a determining figure in its complex fortunes during the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods.

Prolonged hostilities inevitably put a halt to any further plans for exchanges between England and France, although there was a short break in 1802, following the Peace of Amiens, when it was possible to visit the continent once more.[19] After Waterloo, French performers were back in London in relative strength, though they were for most part culled from popular Parisian theatres such as the Vaudeville. There were regular weekly events organised by aristocratic ladies at the Argyll Rooms, where short plays – farces, one-act comedies, the occasional Molière – would be delivered in the original before music and the dancing of waltzes and quadrilles that went on until one or two o'clock in the morning. These subscription evenings, attracting a Society clientele, were extremely well attended: on one evening in 1819 some '400 fashionables' were reported to be present.[20]

By comparison with the Argyll entertainments, the series of recitations from French classics eventually given by Talma and Mlle George at the King's Theatre in the summer of 1817, though brief, stands out as a special event. The pair were not only famous stars but they had led highly charged political careers, which made their presence in London notable as a symptom of changing diplomacy as well as a matter of theatrical interest. Despite the considerable courtesies paid them (private boxes for John Philip Kemble's *Macbeth*), the times were still felt to be sensitive. Invited to speak at Kemble's grand farewell banquet Talma, in the heat of the festive moment, proposed a toast wishing 'success to the British Nation, and to the British Stage', a gesture much appreciated by those present – although he had subsequently to explain it away to his compatriots.[21]

At the same moment as a changing political climate allowed French performers to come to London so the English, as Fanny Kemble was to put it, began 'as they have since continued, in increasing numbers, to carry amazement and amusement from the shores of the Channel to those of the Mediterranean, by their wealth, insolence, ignorance and cleanliness'.[22] Naturally, when in Paris the English headed for the theatres. Sir Walter Scott, in the capital in 1815, declared that 'he never received greater pleasure from any theatrical exhibition' than from a performance by Mlle Mars.[23] William Charles Macready, there in 1822, also delighted in Mars: 'Nor was her voice her only charm: in person she was most lovely, and in

grace and elegance of deportment and action unapproached by any of her contemporaries.'[24]

Although there were French actors in London in the 1820s and, although seeing Mlle Mars continued to be one of the recommended experiences for English tourists in Paris, it was not until late in the decade that she eventually appeared in London, at the King's Theatre in 1828. She returned in 1832, this time to Covent Garden, brought over by an adventurous but badly organised actor now turned manager, Pierre Laporte, but there were rows about money and Laporte apparently ended up out of pocket.[25] In general, both English managers and French *artistes* would look to make a sound profit from a London season,[26] although the possibilities inevitably reflected organisational changes on the French theatrical scene.

Earlier in the century a licensing system operated in Paris whereby individual theatres were allowed to specialise in particular forms. So, for example, at various times the Variétés, the Vaudeville, the Gymnase and the Palais-Royal were permitted to stage vaudevilles, while the Porte-Saint-Martin, the Gaîté and the Ambigu-Comique offered melodrama. In time these rigid demarcations broke down and the eventual abolition of the licensing system in 1864 led at first to a burst of classic plays in boulevard theatres, but this was short-lived: 'as even the Comédie-Française was discovering at the time, there were more lucrative works waiting to be put on than the classics'.[27]

Inevitably business fluctuated, despite the general increase in theatrical activity. A commentator writing in 1889 compared the present situation in Paris which, despite the large number of theatres, seemed to be lacking in energy, to 1832 when, although there were only five state-supported and eight commercial or boulevard theatres, the sheer quantity of plays staged was overwhelming.[28] A modern historian notes the overall growth that followed 1864: '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'.[29] The figures are complex and hard to judge but it does seem clear that the Parisian theatres saw a steady increase in profits in the course of the century, some of it due to the tourist trade, and that this bottomed out in the early 1880s. That same pattern of growth and slump may be reciprocally reflected in the regular appearances of French performers in London; stars could easily find material ripe for export among all the diverse theatrical activities of their home town and turn to their London seasons as a useful source of additional earnings in the event of a downturn.[30]

The first figure to make major profits through the wholesale importation of French performers was John Mitchell, a Bond Street ticket agent, whose clients included Queen Victoria herself.[31] Mitchell's entrepreneurial skill lay in his creation of a stylish Society event. In 1842 he took possession of the St James Theatre in King Street, an elegant new building that had been raised on the site of an ancient inn some seven years earlier. Even before Mitchell's time the programme at the St James had had a French inflection: a new farce, *The French Company*, staged in 1835, had a character purporting to be a star of the Comédie-Française and in 1836 Jenny Vertpré, already a popular London performer, was in residence with a permanent company that invited established French stars to join it for short engagements. The repertoire included *Tartuffe* and *Le Mariage de Figaro*. Success with more home-grown products was limited: *The Village Coquettes*, a comic opera by Charles Dickens and John Hullah, ran for a mere twenty nights, and in the later 1830s there was even recourse to the kind of animal acts which had proved so successful at Drury Lane. But French ballet and German opera did well and when Mitchell took possession of the theatre he capitalised on this precedent by inviting more foreigners and by instigating a series of annual seasons that ran for some twelve years, causing the St James sometimes to be known simply as 'The French Theatre'. Among French actresses, Plessy, Rachel (who had made her English début at Her Majesty's in 1841 but who appeared for Mitchell throughout the 1840s right up until her last London performance in 1855), Déjazet, Vestris, Doche, Rose Chéri, all starred at the St James; among French actors: Perlet, Bouffé and Lemaître.

Mitchell's French seasons took place early in the year and such was his theatre's prestige that they attracted a formidable Society audience. As the *Morning Post* was able to proclaim in 1845:

> Here fashion plumes its wings for more enlarged re-unions – the coteries, freed from the confined limits of the *salons* of the country mansion, now rejoice at the sight of the painted canvas – the real now gives place to the artificial – and fine ladies and fine wits, and MPs and captains on leave, breathe more freely in the gas-freighted atmosphere of the theatre, than in the halls decked with freshest flowers – the wit of the stage and *l'esprit* of the actors save the necessity of personal effects – and infinite is the profit of the exchange. The announcement of the French Plays is to London what the dove was to the ark – the various orders essay to leave their hum-drum domesticity, and rush to Mitchell's Library to secure stalls and boxes. Bearded precursors, like the pioneers of the Imperial army, precede the *troupe*, and give 'note of preparation'; while fresh relays of myriad bonnet-boxes rejoice the various streets and outlets of St James's Square.

Even the limited capacity of the St James proved to be an asset:

Its size secures its exclusiveness, and imparts to it rather the air of a distinguished family performance than that of a public theatre – and we confess that when we weigh the large sums paid to the *artistes*, and the innumerable contingent expenses of such an establishment, so confined in its limits, we are greatly astonished at the courage and perseverance of the manager. The programme is singularly rich in names of Parisian dramatic celebrity; the company has been selected with great judgment, and the appearances of the stars have been so arranged that a succession of variety is secured. As each of the *celebrities* has a peculiar style, and the dramas have been written for their especial interpretation, a positive excellence in the principal character and in the ensemble may be with safety reckoned upon.[32]

That same year, 1845, Mitchell arranged for Macready and Helen Faucit to appear in *Hamlet* in Paris, and for a time he had plans to establish there a sister theatre to the St James, though these never materialised. The Rachel seasons remained his greatest triumph; so proud was Mitchell of his association with the actress that he presented the Comédie-Française with a portrait of her to hang in its galleries.[33] In 1854 Mitchell retired from the St James, but foreign entertainers and French companies continued to appear at theatres through into the 1870s, including one run by Raphael Félix, Rachel's brother. At the turn of the century the St James prospered under the patrician rule of the actor-manager George Alexander before becoming notable for a time as the home of thrillers and other more lightweight diversions. It is at least historically apt that it should have been there that, more than a century later, in 1951, the Renaud-Barrault Company would take up a brief but impressive residency featuring Edwige Feuillère, and in 1953 that the same theatre would host a visit from the Comédie-Française. My final chapter places the great success of Feuillère amidst a renewed bout of francophilia brought on by the cultural deprivations of a European war in which the French had been seen as allies.

Following on from Mitchell's pioneering stint at the St James, the most ambitious manager in the business of importing French stars in the latter half of the century was John Hollingshead, who ran the Gaiety Theatre (itself based on the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris) between 1868 and 1886. Once again, it was a highly entrepreneurial venture, as Hollingshead makes quite clear in his various autobiographies, where he likes to refer to 'speculations' that were his own 'and no one else's'.[34] The Paris Commune of 1871 had caused some members of the Comédie-Française to flee to London, where they had made a substantial impression; Hollingshead's greatest coup was to bring the company over in its entirety in 1879. Even if the visit did fire an idealistic movement for an endowed theatre in England, the 1879 negotiations 'were conducted in a purely commercial spirit. Whatever worship

of art there may or may not have been in the transaction was discreetly kept in the background on all sides'.[35] Hollingshead's invitation was at first resisted by the then Director of the Comédie, Emile Perrin, who feared that if the company left Paris it would jeopardise its state payment of some £10,000 a year. In the event, Perrin was able to accept because its Paris home needed large-scale redecoration, which would in any case involve closure of the theatre. The London season therefore suited everyone. Perrin, 'a gentlemanly merchant', says Hollingshead, was obviously a skilled bargainer and he demanded that the company be paid in advance week by week over the six-week season. Hollingshead recouped by doubling the normal seat prices; he could at least be sure of a full house on the evenings when Sarah Bernhardt was due to appear. These were so popular that a black-market system was in operation – from which, of course, Hollingshead claims not to have benefited. Even so, the financial details that he provides reveal the tremendous impact that Bernhardt's presence had upon attendance figures and make it even less surprising that she should have left the Comédie soon after her London triumph. Not that Bernhardt was the first star, by any means, to have chafed against the restrictions imposed by the national company. Both Rachel and Plessy had done so, making their London appearances all the more financially pressing and, with luck, rewarding. Having spotted a market opportunity, Hollingshead brought Bernhardt over in 1882 and by the following year he could boast that he had organised ten seasons of French plays.

Back in the 1840s the St James had found success as the London home of French drama partly because of Mitchell's deliberate policy of inviting performers of many kinds, a pattern followed later by other managements, who imported individuals and companies from the whole spectrum of Parisian theatres: *vaudevilles* from the Variétés, farces from the Palais-Royal, controversial modern melodramas from the Gymnase. By the 1860s, when inferior French companies looked for a London season, Hollingshead was able to remind them that 'English people and especially Londoners, are almost as familiar with the best performances in Paris as the Parisians themselves'.[36]

The English could certainly be critical – even, or perhaps especially, when they visited the Comédie-Française at the theatre in the rue de Richelieu. The acknowledged prestige of an ancient house did little to alleviate mixed feelings, in which respect and alienation were combined.[37] When Hollingshead found himself being taken around 'The First Theatre in Europe', he was initially struck by 'the stage-entrance and the porter's lodge very lofty, clean and quiet; very unlike the dismal and dirty dens