Introduction

Clare Finburgh Delijani

Modern drama is considered to have originated in France. The first theatre in Europe to be written in the vernacular as opposed to Latin, medieval French theatre flourished around a millennium ago, at the time when *Le Jeu d'Adam* (*The Play of Adam*), the oldest complete European play to be preserved, was performed. Staged in churches, graveyards, town squares and taverns, theatre was integral to civic life in France. A thousand years later it is only a slight exaggeration to say that it is harder to get tickets for the Avignon Theatre Festival, one of the world's largest, than for the Rolling Stones' farewell tour. Not only during the festival season but throughout the year, theatres in France are full. In spite of predictions that first the radio, then television and then the Internet would kill theatre off, 'auditoriums are still full' in the words of Éric Ruf, director of the Comédie-Française, the world's oldest continually performing theatre company (see the interview with Éric Ruf in Chapter 20 in this volume).[1]

For a millennium theatre in France has had an impact well beyond its borders, providing the English language with the medieval word farce, the early modern word role, and the modern term mise-en-scène. The seventeenth-century author and actor-manager Molière, one of the world's most produced playwrights as Martial Poirson remarks in this volume (Chapter 5), is single-handedly responsible for launching European-style playwriting in North Africa, where he was known as 'Sidi Molière' (Fertat, 2013). His reach also stretched to the Middle East where, for example, he featured in the repertoire of Iran's first national theatre (Gaffary, 2008: 945). In the twentieth century the theories of the messianic performer and theorist Antonin Artaud transformed the course of theatre, profoundly impacting the work of the Living Theater, Patti Smith and Laurie Anderson in the United States, Marina Abramovic and Sarah Kane in Europe, Dieudonné Niangouna in Africa. For a millennium theatre has been central to cultural life in France; and theatre has been a significant French export.

This collection of essays seeks to testify both to the vital part theatre has played in French culture for over 1,000 years, and to the genders, ethnicities and classes that have had to wait in the wings of theatres, and of theatre criticism.

Theatrophilia

For nearly a millennium, theatre has constituted a pillar of French public life. This historical overview affords a glimpse of the near dizzying array of forms that theatre in France has taken, one that is brought into broader and sharper focus by the ensuing chapters.

As in other places around the world, the first theatrical performance in France evolved out of ritualistic or religious music, song, dance and narrative (Viala, 2005: 29). The dramaturg and scholar Bernard Faivre opens the encyclopaedic *Le Théâtre en France* by describing a scene that best reflects France's first theatre: 'Three bearded women slowly cross the nave of the church' (1992: 17–19).[2] This is the tenth century. The 'bearded women' are in fact three monks, each holding a palm frond and advancing towards a tomb in a church to meet a fourth monk, who plays an Angel. It is Easter. The men are enacting the *Visitatio sepulchri*, in which the Three Marys visit Jesus Christ's tomb from where, the Angel tells them by showing them it is empty, the Messiah is risen. As Faivre highlights, this liturgical drama included four characters. It contained stylized movements, as the Three Marys advanced slowly as if seeking something. It contained stage properties, namely the palm frond. In addition, the space was dramatized, given that the church nave represented Christ's tomb. Finally, and importantly, an audience, composed of the congregation, was present. The *Visitatio sepulchri* transformed a ritual enacted by officiants who, previously, would narrate a biblical story, into a theatrical event where scenes were acted out (Faivre, 1992: 20). By the end of the fourteenth century, explains Faivre, this single scene would be complemented by others from the Bible including the miracle of the Virgin's immaculate conception, or else by events from the lives of saints, thereby rendering the representation of time and space gradually more sophisticated. Increasingly, liturgical drama would solicit not only the audience's suspension of disbelief but also their emotional investment, as an affective complicity between performers and spectators developed (Faivre, 1992: 25). The scale of these performances accelerated, as discreet acts in churches evolved into large-scale events known as mysteries, the most high-profile being the passion, in which Christ's life and death would be staged. By the sixteenth century

mysteries were lavish and spectacular, cost vast fortunes, took up to a year to prepare, and lasted for days, even weeks.[3]

Emerging from the twelfth century onwards and in parallel with sacred drama, explains Faivre, profane forms of performance were also staged in churches. Notable among these were the 'fête de l'âne' (donkey festival) and 'fête des fous' (feast of fools) where, in a carnivalesque reversal of social hierarchy, mass would be performed in honour of a donkey; or the humble would be venerated (Faivre, 1992: 30). Whilst these performances were being staged in churches and graveyards, storytellers were hosted in town squares and taverns – buildings dedicated specifically to theatre rarely existed before the end of the sixteenth century. Given that most literary forms, including poems, songs and tales were predominantly oral, audiences would listen to professional storytellers, who usually sang, whilst simultaneously entertaining their audiences with dance, acrobatics and most notably juggling (Faivre, 1992: 38–46). Whereas the first juggler-storytellers were itinerant, princes and nobles began to employ them as official court minstrels. This was the case in Arras in the north-west, which in the thirteenth century was recognized as France's theatre capital (Faivre, 1992: 46). As storytellers became less and less itinerant over the course of the fourteenth century they developed their comedic and satirical monologues into dialogue, which gave shape to emergent farces, in other words to short narrative pieces containing gesture and mime, in which wives cheat on husbands, servants humiliate masters, or the faithful expose priests as corrupt hypocrites.[4] This period also saw the rise of *sotties*, which were short carnivalesque dramas that satirized social vice and political abuse, and were performed by troupes of 'Sots', or fools, mainly in educational colleges.[5]

The chapters in this volume begin when theatre first started to be performed in the vernacular rather than in Latin, at which point the various forms it took grew, multiplied and diversified even further. Until around the fourteenth century, performance had essentially comprised mysteries, passions, miracles (where a character placed in a critical situation is saved by the intervention of a saint[6]) and moralities (allegorical plays intended to teach the moral lesson of Good against Evil), as well as storytelling, ballads, farces, *sotties* and *dits* (short dramatic monologues), and combinations of these genres such as mystery-moralities or morality-farces.

With the introduction of the French language, performance evolved further. As Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès and Estelle Doudet, as well as Charlotte Bouteille and Tiphaine Karsenti state in their chapters in this volume, it is important to remember that French-language theatre itself was a multiple term, given that French was never limited to the borders of the

French kingdom, and was spoken in Switzerland and the Low Countries. Moreover, borders were constantly shifting, as France evolved as a political entity. Finally, before drawing generalized conclusions about a national 'French theatre', local and regional features must be taken into consideration. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, theatre from Paris would have differed considerably from that, for example, in Caen or Toulouse, not least linguistically. *Le Jeu d'Adam*, for example, was written in Anglo–Norman dialect. And theatre in urban centres would have been distinct from that in rural areas (Koopmans, 2008: 13–14). In this collection, therefore, the term 'theatre' must be appreciated according to its manifold manifestations; just as the term 'France' must be understood in a geographically expanded and unstable sense.

Bouteille and Karsenti, as well as Christian Biet in this volume (Chapter 2; Chapter 3) critique the assumption that the period preceding the celebrated Golden Age of theatre, presumed to start in the early decades of the seventeenth century, presented a dearth of activity. In the words of theatre specialist Jelle Koopmans, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed 'an unprecedented boom' (2008: 11). Alongside the continued evolution of mysteries and miracles this period also saw the emergence of a modern secular theatre of individualized characters, often inspired by ancient heroes, who were expected to take responsibility for their actions rather than simply submit to divine predestination (Mazouer, 2006: 7). Bouhaïk-Gironès and Doudet remark in Chapter 1 in this volume that over 600 plays were written in Middle French between the 1430s and 1550s. Moreover, as Bouhaïk-Gironès states elsewhere (2012), even though the number of professional actors increased considerably over the course of the seventeenth century, with around 130 itinerant troupes registered by 1715, recent historiography has challenged the idea that theatre prior to this period was non-professional. Owing to the resources at their disposal and the frequency with which they played, the brotherhoods who performed mysteries and miracles can be considered to have been acting companies.

The period immediately following this era was dominated politically and socially by the Wars of Religion (1562–98) – a civil war in which Catholics and Protestants fought for religious and political dominance, drawing literally millions into the bloody conflict. For theatre historian Alain Viala, the fact that French communities were no longer unified by one religion and a single culture of mysteries, miracles and moralities, provided the dynamism that propelled what today is often celebrated as the Golden Age (2005: 45).[7] For his part, Biet in this volume (Chapter 3) believes that the hyperbole and bloodbath displayed on stage as a result of these wars thrust French theatre

into modernity in technical rather than ideological ways. Theatre-makers were now concerned less with the sacred and more with the aesthetic: how exactly can abject torture and violence be represented on stage? As well as producing masterpieces which are now central tenets of the French canon, the greats of this period, namely Jean Racine, Pierre Corneille and Molière, discussed in detail in the chapters by John D. Lyons, Poirson and Jan Clarke (Chapters 4–6 in this volume), participated in theatre's move into the first purpose-built structures. Inside, theatre was reserved for a social elite, and now divorced from 'the people' (Mazouer 2002: 411). Biet explains how even in the *parterre* – the area of the auditorium in front of the stage where audience members stood – tickets could cost two days' wages for an artisan (2016: 303). The high point of French theatre was also its most exclusive.

Despite the perception that theatre during this time was divided strictly into tragedy and comedy, these genres were joined by a variety of forms including courtly *ballet de cour* (dances designed to illustrate the harmony and unity of the nobility, which revolved around the monarch).[8] Moreover, beyond the three royally licensed theatres – at the time these were the Comédie-Française (which from 1680 onwards enjoyed the *privilège*, in other words a monopoly on text-based theatre which other theatres were prohibited from staging); the Théâtre-Italien which had had a permanent residence in Paris since 1640; and the Académie royale de musique, informally known as the Paris Opera – a wealth of theatre activity including comic opera, mime and circus developed in fairgrounds, (as Guy Spielmann describes in Chapter 8 in this volume). Between the 1670s and 1760s *foires*, or fairground theatres, which had evolved out of the juggling-storytelling as well as the farces of earlier centuries, and which now featured acrobatics, tightrope walking, animal and magic shows, operetta and sketches – some satirical – were extremely popular with enthusiasts from across Europe, as well as with all social classes who, in Viala's words, came to 'mix with the riffraff' (2005: 68).[9]

From around the 1710s to the end of the Ancien Régime *théâtre de société* (amateur performance), whose most famous 'star' was Louis XVI's wife Marie Antoinette, who would amuse herself by dressing up as a shepherdess, dominated French cultural life. Indeed, *théâtre de société* enabled women, largely prohibited from contributing as authors or directors to institutionalized theatres, to play an active role as theatre-makers. *Théâtres de société* occupied by far the largest portion of theatrical activity during the period: in Paris alone 160 were recorded (Corvin, 2008: 574) and the term 'theatromania' appropriately describes the era. Since these amateur dramatics were a domestic activity they evaded the attention of the powerful censorship bureau, and did not require the *privilège* in order to include spoken text.[10]

A century later amateur performance, known after the French Revolution as *théâtre d'amateurs*, counted among its famous participants André Antoine, whose Théâtre-Libre (founded in 1887) gave rise to naturalism (Hemmings, 1994: 4–5). From the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century amateur theatre was promoted and supported by political parties, trade unions, schools – particularly during the 1960s – and even faith-based institutions. Despite a decline in amateur theatre in the last decades of the twentieth century, today there are still over 1,700 amateur groups operating across France, under the umbrella of the Fédération nationale des compagnies de théâtre amateur et d'animation.

Théâtromanie was not restricted to France's borders and spread across its colonies, notably to the Caribbean where dramatic traditions imported from France were often combined with the performance contexts of the enslaved population (Leichman and Bénac-Giroux, 2021: 4–5). Specialist in Caribbean theatre Julia Prest's *Theatre in Saint-Domingue, 1764–1791*, an online database of performances in colonial Saint-Domingue – now Haiti – has enabled an appreciation of the impressive range of the repertoire in the early modern Caribbean.

The French Revolution's reaction to theatre, as Sanja Perovic's chapter charts (Chapter 9 in this volume), was dual. On the one hand, owing to theatre's associations with the Ancien Régime and its exclusivity, the revolutionaries mistrusted it. On the other, they saw plays as a tool with which to induct new citizens into the newfound democracy, and theatre became a utopian and didactic celebration of the virtues of the new Republic. Perovic notes that, thanks to the abolition of the *privilège* by the new National Assembly in 1791, all citizens could now enjoy the equal right to establish theatres and stage plays. During the revolutionary decade over 90,000 performances took place in Paris alone, where up to 35 new theatres were established. Across the country, another forty were also built. Rather than plays in the conventional sense, the National Assembly opted for what, Perovic remarks, might now be recognized as 'live art'. Inside theatre buildings, these were participatory events; outdoors, they took the form of vast 'fêtes': revolutionary festivals, which philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau had argued were morally healthier for the general public than stage plays. The Festival of the Federation (Fête de la Fédération), staged on 14 July 1790 to celebrate the first anniversary of the Revolution, included thousands of participants taking part as extras alongside political personalities such as Robespierre, in an event that took on the grandeur and scale of Roman pageantry or major medieval mysteries: against a backdrop of gigantic sets, the vast cast moved together to symphonic musical

compositions.[11] Whilst rupturing the monarchical history of court theatre with civic participation, revolutionary performance also further diversified France's rich tradition of live spectacle (see Bourdin and Loubinoux, 2004; and Poirson, 2008).

Despite the fact that the *privilège* was reimposed by Napoleon in 1806 (it was definitively lifted in 1864), restrictions could not stifle the growth of theatre. Whilst in the seventeenth century 2,000 plays had been recorded, during the eighteenth this number rose to 11,500 (Corvin, 2008: 573). Theatre continued to multiply both in terms of quantity, and variety. Just when the fully commercial *foires* were in decline, the fairground showman Jean-Baptiste Nicolet converted a hall on Paris' Boulevard du Temple into the Théâtre de la Gaîté, and indoor commercial theatre was born. According to F. W. J. Hemmings, theatre in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France represented 'to a greater degree probably than for any other nation, a unique focus of collective interest' (1994: 1). Until the end of the nineteenth century, declares Hemmings, 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 theatre's supremacy (1994: 1). To give an idea of the scale of this commercial industry, by the middle of the nineteenth century Parisian theatres staged a vertiginous array of genres examined in detail in chapters in this book by Roxane Martin (Chapter 10) and Florence Naugrette (Chapter 12), including the *drame* (which emphasizes the individual's moral responsibility in the face of tragic misfortune whilst incorporating comedic elements that ridicule vice, ending happily, as would a comedy, rather than a tragedy); romantic melodrama (a form deriving from French *pantomime*, with its exaggerated emotions and stock characters[12]), *féeries* (fantastical plays, also deriving from *pantomime*, which present a moral tale in which poignant stories are conveyed by typecast characters via dance and special effects), vaudeville (light comedies of loosely connected scenes including speech, song and dance), music hall, cabaret, puppet shows, magic, circus acrobatics, erotica and, towards the end of the century, avant-garde poetic theatre, performed in independent Left Bank venues. In the early twentieth century cabaret became a home for avant-garde performance and, as Cristina De Simone recounts in Chapter 13 in this volume, in the 1950s and 1960s cabaret theatres sprang up in bars, cellars and garages, where jazz made space for sound poetry. Not to be forgotten were colonial exhibitions, where objectified, exoticized and often maltreated people from the colonies were paraded both for the general public's delectation, and to highlight the vastness and dominance of the French Empire (Bancel *et al.*, 2008).

Hemmings cites an account published in 1888 by the journalist Pierre Giffard on the social impact of theatre in the nineteenth century. Giffard claims that out of a population of approximately 1,000,000 Parisians 500,000 attended a playhouse once a week, and around 1,000,000 tickets were sold every month, prices having fallen to a relatively affordable level, thereby massively democratizing the art. Giffard concluded, 'the population of Paris lives at the theatre, of the theatre, and by the theatre' (Hemmings, 1994: 1). Whilst Hemmings does not provide statistics for theatre-goers in the rest of France, he testifies that across the country the population was just as 'stagestruck', frequently travelling to the capital to visit shows.[13] Theatrophilia thus 'permeated the French nation over this long period of time' (Hemmings, 1994: 1).

By the end of the nineteenth century, when the commercial *boulevard* theatres were filled with bourgeois *drames* by Victorien Sardou or Alexandre Dumas the younger, or with comedies and vaudevilles by Eugène Labiche or Georges Feydeau, all of which flattered the lifestyles, family values and mores of the governing bourgeoisie, the art had come to be considered either the preserve of a privileged elite, or else a frivolous form of entertainment.[14] Moreover, the rise of competition among commercial theatres again pushed up ticket prices which, from the latter decades of the nineteenth century, had become as unaffordable to the general population as back in the seventeenth century. All this induced the theatre advocate Maurice Pottecher (1867–1960) to declare that French theatre was 'anaemic and corrupt' (quoted in Abirached, 1994: 25). A number of public figures opted to rescue theatre from itself by casting it as a public service, and in 1895 Pottecher founded the Théâtre du Peuple in Bussang in eastern France. His initial gesture towards a popular theatre, an idea first promoted by the French Revolution, was followed by the pioneering initiatives of stage director Firmin Gémier (1869–1933), who sought to bring theatre to the largest number of people; and of the influential writer Romain Rolland (1886–1944), who advocated for theatre to become 'a new art for a new world' (quoted in Rouyer, 1994: 274). France's first theatre for 'the masses', the Théâtre National Populaire (TNP), was founded in Paris in 1920. This vast 3,000-seat auditorium at the Palais du Trocadéro in Paris (rebuilt as the Palais de Chaillot in 1935) was inspired by the utopian socialist goal of the Université populaire, which upheld the humanist, progressist belief that education and the arts could be democratized by taking high culture to the inhabitants of working-class districts and provincial areas which had formerly been deprived of access. The intention was to make art, rather than products for consumption; to decentralize theatre

so that not only Parisians but citizens across the country could see high-quality productions; and to democratize access to this new popular theatre with subsidized prices, group tickets, amenable programme times, cheap cafeterias, and transportation. These policies were intended to enable 'a dramatic communion' between members of the French population, in the words of theatre theorist and former head of theatre at France's Ministry of Culture, Robert Abirached (1994: 26).

After the First World War, theatre was displaced by cinema as the form of entertainment for the masses (Hemmings, 1994: 4). However, with a significant boost from the state after the Second World War theatre rallied, and ticket sales increased twenty-fivefold, whereas cinema attendance rose by a multiple of only fifteen (Hobson, 1978: 5). Since then, despite repeated warnings over the course of the second half of the twentieth century of theatre's demise, the French industry has continued to be one of the largest and most vibrant in the world. To give just one example, in 2005, in a given evening one could choose from among 156 shows in Paris, whereas 2 decades earlier this number was 97 (Roques, 2008: 7). Given the competition from a massive profusion of other entertainments both within the home and across France – television streaming services and tourism being the most notable – it is surely impressive that theatres are, in the main, full. Moreover, rather than being eclipsed by new technologies, as Martin's and De Simone's chapters show, theatre has always been quick to embrace them, examples including the diorama in the nineteenth century and tape recorder in the twentieth. In the twenty-first century, as Ruf explains in his interview (Chapter 20 in this volume), streaming is being used to roll out live and recorded productions to millions of people beyond the 300,000 audience members per year who attend the Comédie-Française in person.

France has more international theatre festivals than any other country. These include one of the world's premier festivals in Avignon (1947–), as well as the Festival d'Automne in Paris (1971–); the Festival Mondial des théâtres de Marionettes in Charleville (1961–); the Festival des Francophonies in Limoges (1984–), which showcases companies, productions and authors form the French-speaking world, as discussed in Judith G. Miller's chapter in this volume; the Festival international de théâtre de rue in Aurillac (1986–), which hosts street performance; and Mimos, the international mime festival in Périgueux (1982–). To give an idea of the popularity of these festivals, in July every year 100,000 people attend around 250 shows in the official Avignon Theatre Festival alone, and the fringe, known as 'le off', founded by André Benedetto's Nouvelle Compagnie d'Avignon in 1947, offers another 1,000 shows (see Wallon 2016 and 2022).

In France's Caribbean territories, the Festival de Fort-de-France (1971–) in Martinique has enabled audiences to enjoy the works of world-famous artists including Jean-Marie Serreau and Ariane Mnouchkine from mainland France, or Wole Soyinka from Nigeria.

The definition of French theatre provided by the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du théâtre* declares, 'France is undoubtedly the country where the theatrical fabric has never slackened, so to speak: each era, each literary school, each current of thought is punctuated by plays, which are often masterpieces' (Corvin, 2008: 571). Equally, Frank Evrard begins *Le Théâtre français du XX^e siècle* by writing, 'twentieth-century French theatre displays an astonishing richness and variety' (1995: 5). Sylvie Roques, for her part, starts *Théâtres d'aujourd'hui* by describing modern French theatre as 'a proliferation of different aesthetic forms, which indicates the effervescence of this medium' (2008: 5). The glittering display of genres treated across the pages of this volume demonstrates that these critics' claims to the exceptionalism of theatre in France are not without substance: mysteries, passions, miracles and moralities; storytelling, juggling and other *foire* performance; *sotties*, farces and comedy; neo-classical tragedy; nineteenth-century vaudeville, melodrama and *féerie*; naturalist drama; avant-garde performance; sound poetry; art installation and many other forms. Some of these are theatre *stricto sensu*, containing actors portraying fictional roles based on a playscript; others are performance in a far more expanded sense. Many are treated in this book.[15]

Theatre history would oversimplify the French story, were it to draw a linear trajectory from ecclesiastical liturgies to mysteries, from juggling to farce, from medieval miracles to neo-classical theatre (Koopmans, 2008: 11). As Biet's many writings highlight (for example, 2015), the boundaries between these perceived genres are porous, and periods, genres and subgenres have often been coeval, mutually influential and interpenetrating. His, and Bouteille and Karsenti's chapters in this volume illustrate how sixteenth-century tragedy constituted both a Renaissance inspired by the newly adopted Athenian models of tragedy and comedy, and a continuity of older French forms such as mysteries and farces. Biet also argues in his chapter in this volume, that theatre in the sixteenth century was highly influenced by spheres beyond the arts, including the pulpit, lawcourts and scaffold. For her part, Naugrette argues in her chapter that, far from constituting a radical or singular movement, nineteenth-century romantic theatre belongs in a genealogy linking back to neo-classical drama, and forward to late nineteenth-century naturalism and symbolism. Martin's chapter indicates how melodrama, the *féerie* and vaudeville were quintessentially hybrid genres, enabled during the French Revolution by the experimental merging