

THEATRE AND STATE IN
FRANCE, 1760–1905

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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

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 Gaité, 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-

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

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

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.