
H-France Review Vol. 11 (January 2012), No. 8

Mark Ingram, *Rites of the Republic: Citizens' Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Southern France*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. vi + 238 pp. Maps, production photographs, bibliography and index. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-4426-0176-5.

Review by Judith G. Miller, New York University.

Louis XIV may not have been the first head of France to use the arts to shore up his power. But among the monarchs and emperors, he was the flashiest and the most spectacularly organized. This enduring effort to dress the French nation, whether embodied by the king or by the concept of the state, in the fineries of its culture has proven a constant throughout French history. In his study of arts policy and decentralized theatre in the Fifth Republic, *Rites of the Republic: Citizens' Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Southern France*, Mark Ingram not only asserts the French state's steady focus on the arts in order to express its exceptionalism, but he also describes arts practitioners' unswerving understanding that their work participates in constructing a certain idea of what the French republic is meant to be. The men and women he interviews contend repeatedly that doing art affirms the republican notion of pluralist perspectives, enclosed nevertheless, within a unified political community.

To demonstrate that both the rhetoric and practice of art-making carry out the mission of affirming national unity and state supremacy, while still making room for differences of opinion, Ingram turns to regional theatre, perhaps among the most politically self-conscious of all French arts. For, in the majority of cases and ever since the beginning of the twentieth century, theatre outside of Paris has taken care to define itself as a political actor. In the drive to bring theatre, like education, to the people (from Romain Rolland to Ariane Mnouchkine), French theatre has proclaimed its commitment to effecting change in the political community and in an individual's ability to see where he or she stands in the nation. Paradoxically, this same theatre, most often noisily devoted to social transformation and economic contestation, has also benefited tremendously from the generous coffers of a nation willing, since the late 1940s, to subsidize theatre massively. (In France, an average of 7 percent of the overall budget per year goes to the arts.)

Although Ingram does not address this paradox directly, his astonishment at how well his two model theatre operations stay within the framework of building consensus and promoting a form of republican egalitarianism, all while angrily protesting the political status quo and seeing themselves as agents of change, belies the unavoidable tension of depending on state money to do engaged theatre. The artists who capture Ingram's attention (and clearly his heart) provide distinctive examples of how local theatre companies, through persistence, visionary leadership, and talent, can make a place for themselves as effective cultural workers for consciousness-raising and communal solidarity. However, in so doing, they would also seem to skirt direct confrontation not only with the powers that be but also with some of the more burning issues confronting France today: notably racism and the rapidly changing nature of the national debate on alterity.

Within the six chapters that comprise his ethnographic study, Ingram's first, well-researched one, traces the decentralization movement (that is, the establishing of state-subsidized theatre projects and cultural centers in the suburbs of Paris and the provinces). He thus details the government's involvement in arts policy from the Popular Front to the present. (Here, it might have been helpful to have had more clarity on the role of the French Communist Party.) He argues energetically, as far as his two case studies are concerned, that despite the ever-increasing decentralization and correspondingly ever-greater financial involvement of local governments in arts projects, the goal of theatre work remains coherent: defining (not contesting) the nation through culture.

Having provided the context, Ingram concentrates in chapters two, three, five, and six on alternating a discussion of the work of the Théâtre Rural d'Animation Culturel (TRAC), based in the small Provençal town of Beaumes de Venice but traveling throughout the Vaucluse region, with a portrait of The Friche arts center and its flagship theatre company, l'Entreprise, located in the Belle de mai, a former industrial complex behind the majestic train station in Marseille. The amateur, non-profit, and nomadic status of the first, compared to the professional and urban(e) sophistication of the second, makes for a telling juxtaposition of perspectives and expectations. TRAC brings together local people of all ages to devise pieces or perform plays meant to connect their rural audiences to the land and their particular Provençal history. For example, in a recent production of Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, the company introduced troubadours' songs from the region into the farce. The Friche and l'Entreprise, run by professional artists and arts managers, seek to make a name for themselves on the national arts scene by rejuvenating a down-at-the-heels working-class neighborhood in Marseille. L'Entreprise accordingly produces multi-lingual works to speak for some of the disenfranchised with whom it shares space in the city center.

Ingram's long acquaintance with the TRAC and admiration for their work and the leadership of Vincent Siano, the self-made Italian immigrant who has kept the operation going since 1979, accounts for some of the most compelling and thorough reporting in the book. He sees TRAC's efforts as stemming from the utopian dream of May '68 in which every person can be empowered to structure his or her own culture. Such empowerment breaks down class barriers and educational differences. Ingram shows this dream in action by profiling the company and following TRAC's social network throughout the Vaucluse. TRAC has some fifty members, rotating in and out of performances. It regularly gives around sixty shows a year in some thirty municipalities, often outdoors, always followed or preceded by a ritual meal or cocktail hour with the audience and local sponsors. The company, itself composed of volunteers, provides unpaid internships for administrators, accountants, technical theatre people, and publicists. These jobs frequently lead to long-term employment elsewhere. Thanks to the quality and energy of its cultural agenda, TRAC also enhances the region's reputation as a tourist destination. It thus fulfills its mission as educator and cultural activist.

Philippe Foulquié, the executive director of The Friche operation since its conception in 1992, has not been nearly as successful as TRAC at reinvigorating the cultural scene of his immediate neighborhood. This is not so surprising as the decentralized movement in general has rarely brought more than 2 percent of the working class into its theatres. But Foulquié appears to blame the cultural movers and shakers in Paris for spending too much money on prestige productions there. By associating his operation with theatrical director François Cervantès in 2002, Foulquié would seem to have opted for more direct involvement with the many-faceted and pluri-cultural population of Marseille. Yet Cervantès, as Ingram presents him to us, appears to be more interested in empowering his actors than with reaching out to what was once famously called by militant theatre people in 1968, the "non-public." Through what he calls "embodied modes of being" (p. 165), Cervantès theorizes a form of stanislavskian acting that

asks actors to bring their own lives into their interpretations. He believes this approach also injects energy into his audience.

Departing from this narrative about theatre companies, in chapter four, Ingram studies the results of the European Union's project to name specific cities (here southern French ones) as European Capitals of Culture (ECOC). Both Avignon (2000) and Marseille (2013) have been so named; and while the results of the extravagant Marseille events are still in the planning stages, the Avignon experience proves useful in exposing the blind side of the EU effort. The ECOC are meant to bring money and visitors to selected cities and also to celebrate cultural diversity within Europe. They are certainly not meant to spotlight the cultural vacuum that marginalized communities inhabit within specific countries and cities. The Avignon planners, however, focused several arts projects on Avignonnais deprived of voice, and notably on the Gypsy population. Poor and neglected, despite a long history in the region, the Gypsies expressed their sense of not belonging to the citizenry of Avignon, let alone of France or Europe. Their witnessing informed one of the more memorable theatre projects of the year. By bringing out the lack of a unified identity in Avignon, this particular ECOC experience demonstrated some of the complexities of unifying Europe across exclusively national lines.

Throughout the later chapters, and especially in the final one, Ingram highlights the strains and competing claims on TRAC's and The Friche's evolving identities. These operations now seem to be torn between an ever-greater sense of being European and an identity that belongs more concretely to the newly theorized and economically linked Euro-Mediterranean. One might ask, in light of this, what is happening to each one's commitment to southern France? Because of the new cultural funding policies of the European Union, for example, TRAC has left the Vaucluse on several occasions to travel to rural areas of Hungary, Greece, Ireland, and Italy. It has invited back to the Vaucluse performers from these countries invested in their own traditional cultures. Beholden to funding from Euro-Mediterranean sources, TRAC has also traveled to the Kabylie mountains of Algeria, performing in villages there. Is it possible that the solidarity TRAC practices these days targets ruralism more generally, thus the opportunity of expanding the notion of the Global South? Could this kind of border-crossing become more central to TRAC's mission than promoting the patrimony of the Vaucluse? In any case, TRAC's meaningful and heartfelt exchanges have little to do with the astronomically expensive productions and glitzy transnationalism featured in other recent European and Euro-Mediterranean cultural efforts. Evolving funding structures will obviously play a significant role in this identity conundrum, as both TRAC and The Friche must concentrate before all else on financial survival.

The questions that tie Ingram's chapters together--on belonging and identity, on union and unifying efforts through culture, also suggest his own blindness. He tends to take at face value the rhetoric of the groups he studies. That both TRAC and The Friche scorn "le repli communautaire" (p. xxi, p. 81) (which is equated by various interview subjects to a form of mob-think or to dreaded American multiculturalism) certainly speaks to their unwillingness to confront the current official discourse on French identity. Yet these companies, seemingly paradoxically, also speak out on the need to give voice to the unheard. They even produce work on problems of immigration. Ingram, however, never queries this contradiction. Indeed, among the many ways of giving theatrical voice to those not included in the national grid, Ingram's own example of the theatrical piece on Gypsy life in Avignon, a piece he admires, would appear to run counter to the republican or non-communitarian ideal his model operations seem to champion.

Might it not be possible to interpret what his theatrical test cases actually do as more radical than their ability or willingness to express it--or Ingram's to dissect it? He worries about

President Sarkozy's economic discourse, a privatization and anti-civic strategy that, among other things, combines efficiency in arts administration with targeted immigration policies. Directed at the companies Ingram studies, Sarkozy's arts policies could wreak havoc with their funding. He thus sees Sarkozy's politics as posing a menace to France's "universalist democratic values" (p. 121). But is this not the same universalist rhetoric used by President Sarkozy to defend the moves that would eliminate all together some citizens (or would-be citizens) from the conversation about what constitutes the French republic?

Throughout his study, Ingram's first-person accounts of watching, making, and debating theatre in the Vaucluse and the Bouches de Rhône regions since the late 1970s, when he first exercised his own theatrical talents, enliven his descriptions. He allows the actors and municipal officials to make their own case for the work of the cultural "dis-alienation" they mean to do. He calls this work "citizens' theatre," and his examples and analysis support the impressive attempts by TRAC to fend off the "fatalism of social class" (p. 29). Ingram could have, however been much tougher and more incisive in determining the real contours of the work of The Friche and l'Entreprise in Marseille. The practitioners have charmed him into uncritical approval.

Judith G. Miller
New York University
judith.miller@nyu.edu

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172