
H-France Review Vol. 18 (December 2018), No. 230

Jessica Wardhaugh, *Popular Theatre and Political Utopia in France, 1870-1940: Active Citizens*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xvi. 357 pp. Bibliography and index. \$89.00 U.S. ISBN 978-1-137-59854-7 (hc); ISBN 978-1-137-59855-4 (eBook).

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Jessica Wardhaugh's *Popular Theatre and Political Utopia in France, 1870-1940: Active Citizens* covers performances staged throughout France, by groups from across the political spectrum, over the course of the entire Third Republic. The scope of such a project is ambitious, particularly given the archival nature of much of the research upon which the book is based. The popular performances considered here do not include mainstream or avant-garde bourgeois theatre, or *café concerts* (p. 11). Rather, its corpus is composed of plays that explicitly tried to encourage active citizenship, though playwrights' understandings of what that entailed could vary a great deal according to their political views. What all of the productions considered here have in common is that, "whether inspired by political integration or subversion," they "sought in theatre an experience of transcendental community" (p. 17).

The shape that such popular theatrical productions took could be very different, according to whether communists or Catholics, anarchists or royalists, were putting on the show. To take this into account, the wide-ranging study of mostly neglected plays that Wardhaugh has carried out "privileges the concept of theatre as a dialogical space in which conflicting and converging identities were explored and negotiated" (p. 9). It is very much to the author's credit that she has managed to analyze such a range of productions while remaining attentive to the particularities of their ideals, and the ways that they overlapped or came into tension. Wardhaugh's overview of the theatrical scene is complemented nicely by an edited volume that came out shortly after her book did, Olivier Bara's *Théâtre et peuple. De Louis-Sébastien Mercier à Firmin Gémier*.^[1] The third and fourth section of Bara's collection include essays that intersect productively with Wardhaugh's analysis, suggesting that the questions raised by *fin de siècle* and early twentieth-century theatre are particularly compelling in our current moment.

Wardhaugh's first two chapters rehearse the history of various efforts to organize state patronage of popular theatre in France, covering initiatives ranging from subsidies for production, to banning the sale of alcoholic beverages in theatres, to ensuring that Parisian plays made it to the provinces. Most of these projects started from an assumption that access to high culture was a self-evident good. Working from this idea, Catulle Mendès and then Firmin Gémier proposed itinerant national theatres that would cater to "the people." The conceptions behind such projects are revealing, even if some of them were never brought to fruition. Wardhaugh shows, for example, that the architect Alphonse Gosset promoted a plan for a Théâtre de la République that included a semi-circular auditorium, because, unlike the theatre at Bayreuth, such a format increased audience members' awareness of each other's presence, which was considered to be a specifically French priority (p. 42).

Audience inclusion was one of the larger challenges facing popular theatre initiatives in domains that

extended beyond the architectural, too, for top-down national efforts did not necessarily draw crowds. Reformers (including some of those arguing for an architecture specific to the French experience of theatre) did not see all German theatrical practices with a jaundiced eye. In fact, several of them favored a model of subscription-financed theatre that was practiced in Germany as a promising way to promote greater community involvement, an outcome much desired by the regional theatres considered in chapter three.

The first of these, the Théâtre Antique d'Orange, had a Roman amphitheater for a stage, which it promoted as a Mediterranean manifestation of French theatre's classical heritage. Wardhaugh uses Orange, along with examples from Brittany, Bussang, and Poitou, to demonstrate that "regional and national allegiances succeeded in achieving a peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence" (p. 72), though Breton theatre was more troubled by debates over whether its tradition was separate from the French one than Orange's productions were, whether because of Brittany's Celtic heritage or its close association with the church. Wardhaugh nonetheless makes a convincing case for its inclusion in her set of regionalist-yet-republican open-air theatres. If Orange looked to antiquity, and Brittany to folklore and the church, in the Vosges, it was the mountains that played a situating role in Maurice Pottecher's Théâtre du Peuple in Bussang. Unlike some of the other founders of regional theatre, Pottecher came to his theatre from a relatively successful Parisian career, which allowed him to make the Théâtre du Peuple a tourist destination, both regionally and nationally. In Poitou, Pierre Corneille, who founded a Théâtre Populaire Poitevin after a disappointing lack of success as a playwright in Paris, did better as a regionalist poet and director than he had in the capital. Like his counterparts in Orange, Brittany, and Bussang, he found that there was sometimes more Parisian interest in regionalist theatre than there was in the efforts of individuals who came to Paris from those regions.

After chapter three's tour of theatres from different parts of France, Wardhaugh turns to an array of theatrical projects from a range of political positions, some of them marginal, for the rest of the book. Her presentation of these initiatives bears out her observation that "radical ideas of the people [are] much clearer and more powerful than those of the republican centre" (p. 4). This is demonstrated sequentially, with chapters on Catholic, anarchist, communist, and royalist right-wing theater. While the interplay between regionalist and republican loyalties informs all of chapter three, allegiance to political or religious principles governs the productions covered in chapters four through seven.

Catholic theater, in contrast to the theatres of chapter three, benefited from the greater national structure and reach of the church, which not only provided ready-made audiences and troupes on the manageable scale of parish *patronages*, but also had a rich preexisting stock of stories to represent. On a national scale, the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne (J.O.C.) was, in some contexts, a competitor to the communist party when it came to advocating for "working-class agency and dignity": it counted 90,000 members in 1938 (p. 177), and staged mass spectacles by Ghéon and Chancerel, who were inspired by the work of Jacques Copeau, of the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier.

The anarchist theatre whose analysis makes up chapter five is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the most splintering of the approaches that Wardhaugh considers. Encouraging audiences not to vote, so as to assert their individualism, as anarchist theatre was known to do, is a less federating move than efforts to promote the dignity of workers. Wardhaugh demonstrates, though, that the anarchist movement, and those who wrote theatre for it, were less isolated than they might appear, with directors such as Louis Lumet connected with other artistic and political currents in addition to anarchism. After Lumet's work with the Théâtre civique, for example, he was a founder of *Art pour tous*, an initiative in favor of the democratization of art, so even as anarchist theatre provided "a powerful riposte to state initiatives" (p. 220), its figureheads also initiated some projects that proved to be recuperable by republican structures.

While anarchists differentiated between citizens and voters, the communist theater covered in chapter six emphasized the distinction between citizens and supporters of the current regime. One of the great virtues of Wardhaugh's approach to popular theatre is that it reveals such continuities, contrasts, and

overlaps between the various groups being surveyed. For anarchists and communists, the term citizen stayed positive, even as the groups sought, in differing ways, to alter the actions and opinions that citizenship implied.

If anarchist theater could give rise to democratizing initiatives, despite the apparent contrasts with their political line that this entailed, communist theatre, too, had fertile crossings with a range of political groups, and with religious-style gatherings. There were sometimes even explicit signs of support between Catholic and Communist groups. At one of the grand Catholic spectacles of the 1930s discussed in chapter four, the members of the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne arrived at the Parc des Princes to find “a banner from PCF militants announcing that ‘The Communists salute the members of the JOC’” (p. 182).

A common interest in workers’ well-being made fellow-travelers of the PCF and the JOC, at least where spectacular transcendence was concerned. The year after being greeted by the PCF’s banner, the JOC staged a similarly vast Catholic workers’ diptych of productions called *La Joie du travail* and *Le Sens du travail* at the Parc des Princes. If the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne’s and the Parti Communiste Français’s spectacular agendas were sometimes compatible, Wardhaugh suggests that this was in part because emotion, not specific forms of understanding, was what was encouraged in such stagings. Outside of this realm, some might strike while others prayed, but within le Parc des Princes they could agree on the virtues of productivity and community as practiced by everyone from the florist from Nice, who participated in the drama, to the carpenters who had built the onstage altar.

Chapter six, “The Art of Revolution,” examines a range of socialist and communist approaches to theatrical outreach. Romain Rolland’s *Théâtre de la Révolution* is studied within a context that includes everything from efforts to produce revolutionary drama for popular audiences, to agit-prop-inspired impromptu theater, built from the demands of strikes in progress. The interwar *Fêtes du Peuple*, which took inspiration from Rolland’s work, were collective choral and orchestral performances organized by Chennevière and Doyen. In hopes of creating a space in which art might begin to take over the role of religion, they mobilized thousands of amateur working-class musicians in performances, several of which were dedicated to *la commémoration des morts* after the first world war.

If music, and its relationship to sacral community is surprisingly formative in left-wing theatre, humor may be the unexpected ingredient in the right-wing theater studied in chapter seven. Wardhaugh’s first book was about such theater in the 1930s, and this is evident from the depth of her treatment of the *Camelots*, royalist right-wing activists, who fought in the streets of Paris and staged parodic plays. Like the other political persuasions considered, the right-wingers created *spectacles coupés*, comic reviews that used parody extensively to undermine the political realities that they staged. Ominously, such plays also engaged in increasingly rampant anti-Semitism in the 1930s. The right-wing equivalent to chapter four’s *La Joie du Travail*, or Romain Rolland’s *Le Quatorze Juillet*, was a series of *Fêtes de Saint-Jean* in 1938 and 1939, which also included participation from members of the working class, often children. While the plays of the right had less institutional support under the Popular Front than their left-wing counterparts, Wardhaugh points out that another reason that they are less known is that interwar socialists and communists considered workers to be inherently of their political persuasion, and thus failed to take right-wing popular theater seriously, an intellectual habit that has persisted until recent years. Work that has been done on the rise of fascism, for example, misses some of the ephemeral, but revealing productions that this book covers. While scholars working on the first decades of the twentieth century do rely on *L’Action Française* as a source, they rarely consider its theatre in enough depth to trace, as here, the way a 1907 parody of Aristophanes’s *The Clouds* was both part of classical revival and a reactionary take on the ruling government.

It is a measure of how compelling this book is that sometimes one chafes a little at its author’s judicious approach. Contrasting perspectives are frequently joined with a turn of phrase that begins, “Equally...” And yet, by allowing her diverse range of evidence to sit together, rather than pushing it into

arguments that might force interpretations, Wardhaugh leaves space, both for fascinating continuities—between Pujo’s version of Aristophanes, the boxing lessons the *Camelots* took, and their anti-Dreyfus actions, for example—and for potent details. The frustration that the book’s tendency to juxtapose sometimes causes is more than compensated for by anecdotes like the one about 1930s recruiters for right-wing children’s summer camps, who noted which of the apartments they visited had *L’Humanité* in their mailboxes. The children recruited from such families to attend *Travail et Loisirs* camps, were also among those who performed in the Fêtes de Saint-Jean. Happily, *Popular Theatre and Political Utopia* gives us both telling vignettes and a broad overview of theatre that sought collective transcendence during the Third Republic. By doing so, it sheds light on a vast realm of performances that is rarely mapped out in works this comprehensive or this richly researched.

NOTES

[1] Olivier Bara, ed., *Théâtre et peuple. De Louis-Sébastien Mercier à Firmin Gémier* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017).

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ISSN 1553-9172