

H-France Review Vol. 19 (March 2019), No. 35

Philippe Bourdin, *Aux Origines du théâtre patriotique*. Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2017. 502 pp. €29 (pb). ISBN 978-2-271-08950-2.

Review by Jeffrey Ravel, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The theater of the French Revolution has emerged as an important site of interdisciplinary study over the last generation. Previously neglected by literary scholars as an insignificant interlude between the Neo-Classical and Romantic stages and ignored by historians who had not yet taken the cultural turn, the repertory, troupes, and audiences of the revolutionary decade were long under-studied. A 1966 work, *The Theater of the French Revolution* by the eminent American theater historian Marvin Carlson, offered an able introduction to the travails of the Comédie-Française troupe in Paris during the turbulent 1790s. But the book provided no guidance to the rest of the capital's newly unregulated theatrical scene, much less to that of the provincial or colonial stage, or to thespian efforts in the theaters of war across continental Europe. Works in the 1970s and 1980s by Mona Ozouf, Marie-Hélène Huet, and Lynn Hunt on the politics of revolutionary spectacle suggested new ways to think about the relevance of the stage for revolutionary political culture as a whole. In the early aughts, books by Paul Friedland and Susan Maslan focused specifically on the actor-spectator relationship after 1789 as a metaphor for power relations between revolutionary politicians and the citizens of the newly constituted French nation. Meanwhile, Francophone and Anglophone scholars including Robert Isherwood, Michèle Root-Bernstein, Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval, Dominique Quéro, Lauren Clay, and Rahul Markovits, turned their attention to the minor spectacles of the capital, to private theatricals, and to theatrical life outside Paris and elsewhere in Francophone Europe before the Revolution. These studies, and many other noteworthy contributions, alerted scholars to the insights that a multi-faceted approach to the French theatrical past might offer. [1]

Aux Origines du théâtre patriotique, by historian Philippe Bourdin, incorporates many of these perspectives to provide a panoramic view of the French stage in its political, social, economic, and aesthetic contexts in the 1790s. *Professeur d'histoire moderne* at the Université Clermont Auvergne and *Directeur du Centre d'Histoire "Espaces et Cultures"* at that institution, Bourdin is the author or editor of over three dozen works on the history of eighteenth-century and revolutionary France. In the last fifteen years he, his collaborators, and their students have turned their attention to the history of the French stage in the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, producing important monographs and edited volumes that have studied the theater in the *massif central* and looked broadly at issues of genre, staging, reception, criticism, and censorship in the Francophone and European theatrical world in the years around 1800. [2] In addition, Bourdin has directed an *Agence nationale de la recherche*-funded project,

THEREPSICORE, whose purpose was to create a documentary database on the provincial theater during the Revolution and the Empire focused on geographical networks, the construction of careers, and the post-1789 theatrical repertory.^[3] *Aux Origines du théâtre patriotique*, therefore, benefits from the author's deep engagement with unknown or under-utilized archival sources, as well as from an ongoing dialogue with the recent historiography of the eighteenth-century French stage.

In his introduction, Bourdin states: "...il y a indubitablement un théâtre spécifique à la Révolution française, 'patriotique' d'abord, 'républicain' ensuite, expérimentale et éphémère certainement, dans l'urgence idéologique ou financière toujours..." (p. 48). He thus alerts the reader that the book will consider the politics of the revolutionary stage alongside its economics and its claims to artistic innovation. Not surprisingly, this broad perspective does not lend itself to a linear narrative of the theatrical history of France in this period. Bourdin does not wish to be confined to a particular genre, author, troupe, set of spectators, critical tradition, or institutional practice. Rather, he wants to range broadly across all these categories to link developments within the playhouses to events beyond their walls. To accomplish this goal, he divides his material into five sections that concentrate on the stage as a revolutionary catechism in the early years of the Revolution; political and social themes found in the plays; political and literary biographies of three representative playwrights from 1789 to 1799; analyses of amateur performers, directors, and backstage workers during the period; and finally theatrical criticism, state administration, and stage "cultural imperialism" during the Napoleonic period (p. 427).

Each of the five sections of the book is vividly written, and many contain new information, suggestive quantitative analysis, and interesting biographical vignettes. For example, the section entitled "Le Théâtre sous la Terreur, nouvelle école du Peuple?" features an extensive numerical breakdown of 239 plays premiered in Parisian theaters between September 1793 and July 1794 at the height of the Terror. Almost half of these plays were one-acts, and half of all the new creations were comedies, which indicates a continuing emphasis on entertainment and diversion in the theater, rather than a commitment to political commentary.^[4] On the other hand, Bourdin identifies 160 of these 239 plays as "les plus militantes" (p. 95), or plays with an obviously politicized theme, such as denunciations of the Old Regime, glorifications of republican martyrs, or works preaching republican morals. Of these 160 plays, over a quarter were performed more than thirty times, and they were distributed more or less evenly among the twenty-two public theaters in operation during the Terror, which indicates that the playhouses also kept current events in mind when programming (pp. 95-111). These statistics suggest that a more nuanced approach to the repertory during the Terror is justified; both escapism and political relevance sold at the box office, and playhouse entrepreneurs had to be responsive to the audience's desires.

Bourdin complements extended statistical analyses with deeper consideration of case studies. In the third section of the book, "Trois auteurs patriotes," he focuses effectively on the lives and works of three playwrights who had fleeting success during the Revolution but have faded from view. Louis-Benoît Picard (1769-1828), who survived the revolutionary maelstrom, wrote 26 plays during the decade of the 1790s, four of which were performed over one hundred times on Parisian stages between 1792 and 1795. He was thus an important producer of patriotic plays through the Terror, after which he pivoted to works with less overtly political themes. Bourdin notes, however, that one of his last plays, *Médiocre et Rampant* in 1798, inspired an 1803 Weimar adaptation by Friedrich Schiller that was revived in 2004 in Marburg. Perhaps, Bourdin suggests, Picard tapped into themes that had enduring relevance. Philippe Antoine Dorfeuille (1754-1795),

his second case study, was less fortunate. Like Picard, he was both a playwright and an actor, but unlike Picard he was also a revolutionary activist who participated in the bloody suppression of the federalist revolt in Lyon during the Terror. When the political winds changed after Thermidor, he found himself imprisoned in Lyon, where he was executed along with other terrorists in May 1795. Bourdin suggests that he was “sans doute le plus représentative d’une carrière et d’un art réinventé au service d’une cause politique” (p. 221). A wicked parodist, his plays attacked both the clergy and the aristocracy. During the Revolution he produced such biting works as *La Sainte Omelette, ou Le Père Polycarpe*, and *Lettre d’un chien aristocrate à son maître, aristocrate aussi, et fugitif de Toulouse*, both of which Bourdin reproduces in full. Bourdin’s final example, an obscure writer and theatrical entrepreneur named Briois, “dit de Belleroche,” passed from writing moralizing *divertissements* before the Revolution to overtly patriotic works such as *La Prise de Toulon* in February 1794. After Thermidor, however, Briois had to tone down his Jacobinism. *Le Fermier d’Issoire*, written in 1795, foregrounds the economic concerns of the virtuous peasant. The work features a denunciation of agricultural speculators and expresses nostalgic regret for a lost republican virtue that he contrasts with the emerging age of Directorial corruption. Taken together, these three biographical and dramaturgical portraits provide depth to the more quantitative passages in the book and point to the complex relationship between artistic production and political upheaval in the revolutionary decade. There are few straightforward narratives in the 1790s, Bourdin seems to say, but a return to the archives and a sympathetic reading of the plays helps us understand the immediacy of the dilemmas faced by theater artists who were also citizens of the new, uncertain republic.

While *Aux Origines du théâtre patriotique* brims with similar insights and juxtapositions, it also raises interesting questions. Thermidor provides a clear rupture in Bourdin’s narrative of a patriot theater. Before July 1794, the national stage, as Bourdin presents it, was primarily devoted to patriotic, increasingly radical narratives; after that moment, playwrights, directors, and entrepreneurs increasingly hedged their bets, both for political and commercial reasons. But a public, counter-revolutionary culture also existed before the fall of Robespierre. Laura Mason, for example, has shown that popular music was deployed to rally partisans of many political stripes during the 1790s, and a royalist rump of actors broke off from the Comédie-Française in 1793 to perform a more conservative repertory of works.[5] One wonders about the counter to “patriot” plays throughout the decade, and the distinct chronology of a patriot theater presented in this book. Bourdin also downplays the Tocquevillian implications of his research. He signposts 1791, the year in which the National Assembly abolished theatrical privilege, allowing anyone to open a public playhouse in the nation, and he also notes the imperial decrees in the 1806–07 period that re-established state control over theatrical venues and genres. *Aux Origines*, focused most tightly on the period from the Bastille to the early Directory, emphasizes the ideological role of the stage in Revolutionary political culture. Another way to think about the theater history of the quarter century from 1789 to 1815, however, is to suggest that by the Bourbon Restoration, government control of the stage had become more bureaucratically efficient and comprehensive in Paris and the provinces than it had been at the end of the Old Regime. A focus on theatrical patriotism from 1789 to 1799 highlights the powerful political emotions of the moment, but it may not tell us everything we wish to know about the liberty of the stage as it passed from the Old Regime to the nineteenth century.

Notwithstanding these issues, this welcome book from Philippe Bourdin will take its place as an essential exposition of the richness and complexity of French theatrical culture in the time of the French Revolution.

NOTES

[1] Marvin Carlson, *The Theater of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); trans. *Le Théâtre de la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); Mona Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire, 1789-1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); Marie Hélène Huet, *Rehearsing the Revolution: The Staging of Marat's Death, 1793-1797* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Lynn A. Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Susan Maslan, *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy, and the French Revolution* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Michèle Root-Bernstein, *Boulevard Theater and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984); Robert Isherwood, *Farce and Fantasy: Popular Entertainment in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval, *Le Théâtre de société: un autre théâtre?* (Paris: Champion, 2003); Dominique Quérou, ed. *Théâtre de société du comte de Caylus: comédies jouées au château de Morville (1738-1740)* (Reims: Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne, 2015); Lauren Clay, *Stagestruck: The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and Its Colonies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Rahul Markovits, *Civiliser l'Europe: politiques du théâtre français au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2014). For a lengthier review of this historiography, see Jeffrey S. Ravel, "Des Définitions aux usages: L'Historiographie du théâtre français au XVIIIe siècle," *Parlement(s): Revue d'Histoire et Politique* 2012 (H.S. 8): 39-52.

[2] Philippe Bourdin and Gérard Loubinoux, eds. *La scène bâtarde: entre Lumières et romantisme* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2004); Philippe Bourdin and Gérard Loubinoux, eds. *Les arts de la scène & la Révolution française* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise-Pascal; Vizille: Musée de la Révolution française, 2004); Philippe Bourdin and Françoise Le Borgne, eds. *Costumes, décors et accessoires dans le théâtre de la révolution et de l'empire* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2010); Cyril Triolaire, *Le Théâtre en province pendant le Consulat et l'Empire* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2012); Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, Philippe Bourdin, and Charlotta Wolff, eds. *Moving Scenes: The Circulation of Music and Theatre in Europe, 1700-1815* (Voltaire Foundation, 2018).

[3] <http://therepsicore.univ-bpclermont.fr/>

[4] Such a statistical analysis supports the argument made by Emmet Kennedy a number of years ago in which he claimed that the revolutionary theater served as an escape from the intensity of revolutionary politics for most Parisians; Emmet Kennedy, et al., *Theatre, Opera, and Audiences in Revolutionary Paris: Analysis and Repertory* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

[5] Laura Mason, *Singing the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

Jeffrey S. Ravel
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
ravel@mit.edu

Copyright © 2019 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 redistribution/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