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Pascale Goetschel, *Une autre histoire du théâtre: discours de crise et pratiques spectaculaires, France, XVIIIe-XXIe siècle*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2020. 413 pp. 27€. (pb). ISBN 9782271121455.

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Whether framed as *querelle*, *bataille*, or *maladie*, crisis has long been the defining—and even constitutive—characteristic of French theater. Critics, creators, and entrepreneurs have doggedly linked the French stage and imminent disaster for centuries. Indeed, Jean-Claude Yon identifies this as an incessantly recurring tic in the nineteenth century in his *Une histoire du théâtre à Paris. De la Révolution à la Grande Guerre*.^[1] While Yon makes note of this particularity, Pascale Goetschel devotes her full attention to interrogating the phenomenon in *Une autre histoire du théâtre: discours de crise et pratiques spectaculaires, France, XVIIIe-XXIe siècle*. The results of Goetschel's analysis reshape our understanding of French theater and its development. By focusing on how the rhetoric of crisis serves as the motor driving theatrical production in France, Goetschel offers a history of French theater that is both alternative and supplementary. Her approach is that of a historian, which offers the notable advantage of considering how crisis has been mobilized as the defining feature over the sweep of several centuries, from the late seventeenth century through the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, she is able to consider how the stakes and consequences associated with the draping of crisis in a variety of guises—e.g., decadence, contagion, attack, dupe, competition, dearth—form part of a longer trajectory. Goetschel's methodological choices allow her to highlight the imbrication of artistic, political, economic, and technological imperatives driving theatrical production. She demonstrates the simultaneous consubstantiality and irreducibility of each of these, arguing that while French theater is repeatedly cast as what generates crisis, a closer reading reveals that staging practices and performance practices are born of the articulation of crisis. Hence, French theater owes its very existence to the constant performance of crisis, and this crisis is, or more accurately, these crises are just as much aesthetic, poetic, thematic, and structural as they are political, sociological, financial, and technological.

While the underlying thesis might—as her title suggests—be applied to theater writ large, Goetschel—as her subtitle promises—homes in on the specificity of French theater, offering an integrated overview that avoids the lacunae arising from isolated and siloed accounts of French theater separated according to historical periods. Yet, while taking the long view and describing the evolution of French theater as a practice rooted in crisis as a mode, Goetschel remains ever sensitive to the interest within each of the crises. She is forced to balance these two perspectives, one focused on the forest, so to speak, and the other focused on individual trees. Goetschel accomplishes this by blocking her argument in three sections: a description of the cultivation of

an obsession with the notion of crisis in the early modern and modern period that provides a historical overview (“Genèses: La lente construction d’une obsession”), a close reading of the three moments of crisis as the discourse of crisis is systematized (“Intrigues: La mise en système du discours de crise (années 1890-années 1930)”), and an analysis of how the discourse of crisis shapes perceptions regarding cultural/national identity, new media, politics, and criticism in France (“Clefs de lecture: Sens et contre-sens”).

Goetschel’s first section maps out the progressive development of a veritable obsession with the mode of crisis, examining how the idea of French theater as such originates and develops from alarmist critical rhetoric of threat and its corollary, salvation. She sketches out the various terms used to articulate the danger posed by the theater—decadence, illness, physiological deformation, sterilization—as well as the sources of threat—modernity, Romanticism, popular genres, specific playwrights, theaters, and directors. What stands out in Goetschel’s analysis is the cultivation of an appetite for alarm. She explains how crisis became a marketing and fund-raising strategy, as well as a product to sell for cultural entrepreneurs in the performance and publishing industries. Goetschel underscores how artists and critics used the rhetoric of crisis as they jockeyed to establish their legitimacy and enhance their reputations. What she describes is a vision of French theater as a zero-sum game in which players compete for audience share by aping the role of hero while denouncing rivals as malicious villains. Goetschel links the structure of the French theater, with its limits on the number of theaters and hierarchical differentiation between prestige and popular venues, to the fixation on the rhetoric of crisis, indicating how the discourse on crisis served as the dynamic force driving the industry.

In her second part, Goetschel homes in on the fundamental paradox that the systematic denunciation of a crisis threatening French theater belied the fact that it was thriving. She suggests that the very success of French theater made it necessary to invent a crisis. She looks at the statistics (the number of theaters, evidence for theater revenues, the educational level of performers) that appear to prove the reality of such a paradox. While acknowledging evidence that does point to unequal distribution of success, notably, the economic vulnerability of actresses and actors, especially in music halls, her argument renders the paradox visible. At the same time, there exists a parallel phenomenon of overly successful genres and productions sparking a crisis in taste. Paradoxically, Goetschel demonstrates that popularity undermines prestige, just as it undermines originality. Moreover, she argues, the advent of World War I and the aftermath of the economic crisis in the late 1920s energize the rhetoric of crisis, adding a moral and nationalistic dimension that slips into xenophobia and antisemitism. Yet, in the 1930s, Goetschel identifies growing indications of a real crisis that develops within the performance industry. Goetschel’s analysis evaluates the health of the theater industry at this time by calculating in data for venues like music halls and cinemas along with prestige stages. She also points to the important public debate around renewing and reforming the theater in the 1930s, underscoring the continued symbiosis between the press and the theater.

In the final section, Goetschel considers the intersection between the discourse of crisis and innovation, whether aesthetic, technological, political, or professional. She treats each of these dimensions separately, devoting a chapter to each. Her discussion of experimentation with new technologies and new forms of media and publicity merits particular attention. Here, Goetschel expands our understanding of French theater by considering elements that have traditionally been excluded as “not French theater”—lowbrow genres like pantomime, circus, and music hall, as well as new media like cinema and radio. She points to the importance of experimentation with

non-literary elements, whether gesture, visual effects, or audio in French theater, thus reminding us once more of how assumptions regarding the literary and textual dimensions of a play have tended to obscure the performative nature of French theater by privileging the author and writing. Even in the twentieth century, Goetschel illustrates how the rhetoric of crisis in descriptions of the theater plays on prejudice and fears of violence in order to consolidate the social status quo. She adds particular nuance in these last chapters to our understanding of the complexity of how the notion of crisis shapes French theater and society in the first half of the twentieth century by exposing how the theatrical avant-garde--as opposed to popular media--functions as a conservative force, as a rampart against what is low class or in poor taste. She concludes by suggesting that the force of the rhetoric of crisis tends to become diluted by paradox in the twentieth century despite the continued recourse to the word.

Goetschel's monograph is a treat to read. She has clear fluid prose that allows the reader to focus on her argument. She deftly interleaves archival research on theatrical productions and reception with criticism from the press and pamphlets. The panoramic knowledge of the French performance industry that she deploys here impresses for both its breadth (400 years) and its depth. Her selection of examples and quotations brings the argument to life with precision and verve. The documentation and footnotes attest to her careful contextualization of her facts and argument within the wider scope of scholarship on French theater and performance arts. Indeed, her choice of title pays homage to Yon and positions itself squarely in conversation with his work, inviting readers to dive into the lively and fertile world of current French scholarship on the *arts du spectacle*. Goetschel's book merits quick translation into English to make her work available to Anglophone researchers.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Claude Yon, *Une histoire du théâtre à Paris. De la Révolution à la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Aubier, 2012), p. 20.

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