Un SIÈCLE de THÉÂTRE

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Le combat des Lumières

RETRANSCRIPTION

ENLIGHTENMENT "THEATROMANIA"

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Introduction

If I ask you: Who is Voltaire? You reply the author of *Candide*, the *Treatise on Tolerance*, and you'd be right. But his contemporaries would not hesitate to tell you: "Voltaire? He is a playwright, author of the tragedies *Zaïre* and *Mérope*, a man of the theatre". Becoming a man of the theatre is exactly what Diderot dreamt of. Having embarked, a bit despite himself, on the adventure that is the *Encyclopaedia*, he would write two plays, *The Natural Son* and *The Father of the Family* which he placed a lot of hope in, in vain incidentally.

As for Rousseau, let's not forget that he owed his first success, well before *The New Heloise*, to an opera, *The Augur of the Village*, which would triumph on stage in 1753. And in 1758, his breakaway, this spectacular breakaway from the philosophers' clan who were up until then his friends, played out around the question of theatre again in his famous *Letter to M. D'Alembert*. Rousseau responds to D'Alembert who advocated for the opening of a theatre in Geneva where performances were forbidden. Rousseau rebelled against this project in a brilliant and very complex indictment against the moral and social dangers of dramatic diversions.

So, these few examples imply how much the theatre meant in the cultural life of the times. 18th century men passionately loved the theatre. One even spoke of "theatromania", that's to say theatrical folly. So, what was this general enthusiasm for the theatre about?

Part 1 – A large audience

First of all, it's certain that never before had there been as many performances. In Paris, the official theatres competed for innovations to win the loyalty of some 50000 regular theatregoers. But theatrical life was just as dynamic in the provinces as witnessed again by the magnificent theatres in Bordeaux or Besançon, vestige of a time where the theatre was at the cultural heart of the town.

Part 2 – A time of theatrical innovations

Never before had one wrote or performed as many plays and never in so many different directions. They appeared alongside the great genres inherited from the classical period, like comedy and

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tragedy, which were still popular incidentally, and which would even find new life at this time with Marivaux or father Crébillon, for example.

Well, the 18th century innovated and invented hitherto unseen theatrical forms. One enlarged and expanded the rigid spectrum of genres to allow theatrical forms to adapt to new tastes and issues of the time. For a bourgeois audience which asserted itself throughout the century and who needed edifying and moving performances, authors like Diderot and Beaumarchais created intermediary genres like serious comedy and then bourgeois tragedy. One came to the theatre to cry and receive a moral lesson.

But one also went there to laugh, to liberate the most despicable urges and the most subversive desires. For example, outside the great Parisian fairgrounds, among the crowd, on makeshift boards, comic and parodic theatrical genres developed which are destined to make a large fortune. At times burlesque, farcical, sometimes frankly obscene, these popular-inspired shows were placed below comedy. Here, I'm talking about charade, vulgar comedy, pantomime or the first forms of comic opera. These performances were as popular among the lower classes as the middle classes and especially among the aristocrats who came here to slum it.

Part 3 – A period of reflection on the theatre

Finally, never before had one pondered as much over theatrical events. The century invented the first dramatic, modern theories. One questioned oneself over the nature of theatre, the hierarchy of genres, the role of performances in society and on customs, but also on the actor's performance, diction, gestures or even on the place of the spectator. So, earlier I mentioned Rousseau and his *Letter to M. D'Alembert.* Of course, we think of Diderot and his two great theoretic texts, *The Natural Son* and the *Discourse on Dramatic Poetry*; texts which founded a new dramatic aesthetic. Later, incidentally, Diderot would offer an original theory on the actor's performance, this time with the *Paradox of the Actor.*

Part 4 – Enlightenment on the stage

So, if the theatre became, at this point, a subject for thought, in particular in the second half of the century, it's because beyond the formidable space it offered for amusement, philosophers of the Enlightenment created, and this is what needs to be understood, a privileged place to lead their struggle for emancipation. After the crisis and especially the prohibition of the *Encyclopaedia*, the front line between the philosopher's party and their adversaries seemed to move to the theatre. It's here, on stage, that from then on the most aggressive blows and retorts would fly thick and fast.

One example from 1760, a certain Palissot created a play violently anti-philosophical, aptly entitled *The Philosophers* and which caused a stir. Notably we see Diderot, under the name of Dortidius, who figures as a fool whom we ridicule throughout the play. It's Voltaire who'd retort. He retorted immediately through another play, *The Coffee or the Scottish*, in which he'll target Fréron who is also leader of anti-philosophical journalists and the veritable inspiration behind Palissot's play. Fréron is caricatured under the mask of a "wasp", a bad character and an especially conspicuous allusion to the alternative name "Hornet" which Voltaire often gave to his adversary.

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So, we'll conclude this evocation on the theatrical turbulence of this period with a reminder of a big paradox, not that of a comedian but that of our take on 18th century theatre. What remains of this vigour of forms, of these numerous theatrical ideas, of this theatromania, of this theatrical frenzy, in our studies, reading, theatre today? Well, nearly nothing. Between the great Racinian tragedy and the Hugolian romantic drama, only Marivaux and Beaumarchais seem to have got out of the disaster alive. Fundamentally, there's little of this theatromania of the time which we can propose to offer a perspective view on here.

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A WALK AMONG THE THEATRES OF PARIS

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Introduction

According to Richelieu, those in power were suspicious of theatrical performances. Political control over theatre life continued and even tightened during the age of Enlightenment. An age which, incidentally, started rather badly for theatrical performances. In the austere context of Louis XIV's reign, the Italian theatre was closed in 1697 for having performed a show called *The False Hypocrite*, in which Madame de Maintenon, the king's mistress, was ridiculed. One would have to wait until after the king's death for theatrical life to fully regain its regency.

So, I suggest that we now take a walk among the theatres of Paris during the age of Enlightenment. Firstly, in the first half of the century, there were three official theatres in Paris. They received financial support from the monarchy and benefited from a privileged system which accorded them monopoly over a certain style of performance, in other words, which restricted them to particular genres. Strict rules led to competition and tensions between theatres, but more importantly and perhaps paradoxically, theatrical creation.

Part 1 – Opera

Integrated within the Palais Royal, you'll find the opera, the oldest and most prestigious of institutions. It had monopoly over performances including musical ones, which were called "lyrical genres". Here, during the first third of the century at least, one cultivated the great tradition of French Opera. Musical tragedy was an overall performance, compounding a tragedy in 5 acts, the work of a librettist, with musical elements, choirs and dances. Wonder and illusion were used as special effects. Complex machines allowed actors not only to fly in the air, but plunge into the heart of Hell, etc.

Part 2 – French comedy

Moreover, located on the other side of the Seine, in the quarter known today as Odéon, is the Comédie Française. For a long time, it had been housed in the court tennis room on the street known today as rue de l'Ancienne Comédie. In 1782, it would move to a beautiful building built in the style of Antiquity, our actual Théâtre de l'Odéon. Created in 1680, the Comédie Française had monopoly over spoken theatre and, in particular, over the great genres, tragedy and grand comedy. In fact, its main purpose was to preserve this cultural heritage by taking on the classical repertoire.

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Over the course of the century, Molière was performed nearly 8500 times but, little by little, the public got fed up and called for new material. The Comédie Française was known for being a place of innovation with numerous creations. We've been able to count no less than 250 new plays from the first half of the century alone. But creative freedom remained under strict surveillance from those in power through an intermediary, notably gentlemen from the King's chamber, who exercised control over the appointment of actors and sometimes the choice of plays.

Part 3 – Italian Comedy

Finally, located on the right bank, in the Montorgueil quarter, was the Italian Theatre whose troop, in 1716, had taken over one of the oldest auditoriums in the area, the Hotel of Bourgogne. Both the Comédie Française and the Italian Comedy found themselves in stiff competition with each other, so much so that the Italians progressively abandoned their own language in favour of plays spoken entirely in French.

The Italian play is distinguishable through two essential traits. Firstly, its repertoire originated from artistic comedy with noteworthy characters such as Arlequin, Colombine, Pierrot, Pantalon, as well as its pre-established frameworks which took on a deeper, very visual and gestural concept of the acting style. The second characteristic trait is a much more varied range of comic register which can be found in Italian comedy, ranging from Marivaux's subtle intrigues to the crudest of slapstick comedies.

Part 4 – Comic Opera and the fairground

Moreover, for a good part of their repertoire, the Italians were in direct competition with the fairground which developed around two big Parisian annual fairs. It was a second, non-official version of theatrical life. This fairground universe, which was originally based on acrobatic performances, tumblers of all styles, was quickly dominated by Comic Opera whose repertoire, very free in tone and form, mixed singing, opera and play. It's the comic part that denotes what's related to theatre. Faced with the success of comic theatre, regular theatres resisted as much as they could. The Opera chose to negotiate allowing acrobats, by means of royalties, the right to sing and dance.

The Comédie Française tried by all manner of means to prohibit or limit performances. Over a time, acrobats were limited to silent performances, for example. As for the Italians, they finished by collaborating with the Comic Opera in 1762. In 1782, the troop moved into a new building, which has today been aptly rebuilt on the Italian's boulevard. Incidentally, it was in the same quarter of boulevards in which, as of 1759, a number of private theatres began to be built, benefiting from a sort of new tolerance in the second half of the century. As such, from three theatres at the time of the Regency, the number rose sharply to 15 at the dawn of the Revolution.

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WITHIN THE THEATRE: STAGE, AUDIENCE, PERFORMANCE

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Introduction

Let's now enter the theatre. It is 5 o'clock, the time when most performances usually start and we get ready in the evening to witness, as was common, two successive performances; one longer show followed by a shorter one with comic undertones. So how were you seated in these auditoriums?

Part 1 – In the stalls

Well, if you belonged to the lower classes, you were sat in the stalls; the lowest part of the audience. Until 1782, you'd be standing and packed tightly in amongst a rowdy and extremely diverse crowd. The cultivated middle class stood alongside the lower classes. They were especially outspoken. Incidentally, they would often take over the show. It was quite common for the performance to be disrupted by jeers and taunts from the stalls.

The success of a performance, therefore, depended entirely on the attitude of this hot-headed crowd. By the bye, numerous attempts were made by actors to win over the audience to their cause by buying off a part of the audience so that they'd applaud their performance or even boo that of their adversary. This well-established scheme, which everyone resorted to from Voltaire to Beaumarchais, was called "cabal".

Moreover, this lively audience in the stalls was also often very receptive to the civilising mission of the play, at least that's what philosophers would have us believe. In the article "Parterre" in the *Encyclopaedia* for example, Marmontel hails the spectators who have been saved from the corruption, taste and judgement which reigned above, that's to say in the boxes where the aristocrats were seated. More often than not, the aristocrats came to the theatre and the opera to be seen, to hold court.

Whatever it be, the atmosphere in the audience, which was consistently electric throughout the duration of the performance, has nothing to do with the solemn silence which is commonly found in our theatres today. Let's now take a look at the architecture of the auditorium.

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Part 2 – Poorly-adapted spaces

In the first half of the century, before the construction of new theatres, rooms were often used which dated from the 17th century. Certainly, reconfigurations were made, but the acoustics were bad, there was only partial visibility and the light was gloomy. The set-up of the room, often rectangular like at the Hotel of Bourgogne, was poorly adapted to performance conditions. The clear separation between stage and audience that we know today did not exist.

On stage, right where the actors were performing, spectators were sat on benches, conforming to a tradition which dated back to the time of Corneille. These seats, which incidentally were the most expensive, were occupied by aristocrats who'd engage the crowd when they were not interfering with the actors' performances. They would also disrupt the set-up of theatrical illusions, which were called out for by philosophers and playwrights like Voltaire then Diderot who were seeking believability, realism and new dramatic effects. By the bye, they would win their case in 1759 with a reform which finally got rid of spectators on stage. The path was soon cleared for new dramatic devices.

As such, in the second half of the century, architects and engineers began looking at ways to integrate this new concept of dramatic space into the design of the room itself. They were sketching trapezium-shaped, horseshoe-shaped, eclipse-shaped rooms but, above all, it was the semi-circle which took hold in the last decades of the century, like here, at the Besançon theatre conceived by Ledoux. Here, the democratic and grandiose imaginary world of the classical amphitheatre is married with the civic design of the theatre glorified by the Enlightenment.

Because fundamentally, and this is what we'll take away in conclusion, the auditorium is like a microcosm of society which reproduces social organisation within the Ancient Regime. The aim of the architect, therefore, is to preserve the contradictory balance between the egalitarian ideal held by the classical reference and the subtle class hierarchy of social order. At Besançon, going back to our example, the architect Ledoux has mastered the balance, notably by combining the idea of boxes, which imitate hierarchy, and that of layered tiers which are incidentally relegated to the upper layers of the auditorium.

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SOMEWHERE BETWEEN CLASSICAL LEGACY AND NEW PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES: TRAGEDY'S SUCCESS

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Part 1 – A lack of understanding

FB: Hello Renaud Bret-Vitoz. You're an expert in 18th century playwriting and tragedy. So, let me start by asking you the devil why we're no longer studying these plays today, why we no longer know anything about these works, why we're no longer performing these tragedies which played such an essential role at that time?

RBV: The lack of knowledge in this genre stems from a misunderstanding, sadly shared by the wider public, as well as the people in theatre. According to the wider public, these plays are unoriginal, too formal in comparison with the previous century, and deemed unpassable in terms of tragic focus and simplicity. What's more, the style is seen as impure when compared to the alexandrine verses written by the noble Racine. Among the people working in theatre, there are several critics who still compare these plays with the classics, strictly speaking, only to draw attention to the genre's decline in popularity.

As for comedians, they believe that 18th century verses are laboured, less melodic and even difficult to speak. And yet, it is the contrary. Subjects and themes are original and bolder when it comes to criticising political policies when compared to how they were in Racine's time; verses are less elegiac and certainly closer to versed prose, but with real lexical and stylistic daring, like neologisms, incongruous metaphors or eloquent pauses which interrupt the verse, leaving a place for ineffable emotion, like in Voltaire's famous verse: "Zaïre, you're crying".

One must not, therefore, judge these plays under the same light as what came before, but rather according to their progressive emancipation when compared to the rules laid down by Aristotle and also according to poets' taste for the unexpected, the audacious, even provocative literature.

Part 2 - Racine and Corneille's legacy

FB: If tragedy is still a well-liked, well-respected genre in the 18th century, it is in large part thanks to the glorious legacy of the classics and classical tragic models. So, what are these great models exactly, these well-known figures such as Corneille, Racine, of the theatrical world and in the dramatic creation of the Enlightenment?

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RBV: Plays by Corneille and Racine continued to be performed regularly during the 18th century but for more diverse reasons than are evident today. Aside from poignant plays such as *Phèdre* or *Andromaque*, *Athalie*, which would only be performed in public from 1716 onwards, is considered as the model for theatrical tragedy which was extremely popular in the 18th century. It was often accompanied by theatre scores, choirs and sumptuous decoration for big ceremonies, like the opening of the theatrical season or a royal marriage. The great tragedian playwright Lekain, taught by Voltaire, particularly liked Corneille and reinterpreted him in his own way throughout his career, by reducing, for example, the static, rhetorical debates in *Nicomède* in favour of action, and by favouring plays with dramatic acting style like in *Rodogune* or *The Death of Pompey*.

Part 3 – Voltaire and the revival of tragedy

FB: Apart from classical legacy, Enlightenment tragedians gave the public renewed enthusiasm. What did this revival consist of?

RBV: Firstly, the revival can be found in the subjects and themes addressed, thanks to new Enlightenment ideas and to the diversity of historic sources. The historic tragedy concentrated on largely unknown horizons such as those of America, the Orient as a whole, China, India and even Japan, and even periods in time considered less prestigious than the Antiquity, like the Middle Ages with its troubadour-styled tragedies, such as *Adélaide du Guesclin* or *Tancrède*. Every one of these plays outlines, in its plot line, a peculiar law or an old or different political system to be debated, analysed.

Tragedy, therefore, is steeped in political and philosophical themes which were abound at the time; limitations of the monarchy, abandonment by the upper classes, a crisis of aristocratic ethics but also religious radicalism and tolerance, civil equality in the history of humanity and the arts. Moreover, tragedy, heavy influenced by opera, its main competitor, adopted many technical and decorative advancements of the century and even experimented with original scenographies like a tripartite stage, set changes, fantastical apparitions in Voltaire's *Sémiramis* and physical acting styles in *William Tell* or *La Veuve du Malabar*.

Part 4 – Tragedy after Voltaire

FB: With the death of Voltaire in 1778, a page is turned in the story of philosophical tragedy. However, am I not right in thinking that tragedy found a new breath of life thanks to the French Revolution? What do you think, Renaud Bret-Vitoz?

RBV: By exploring subjects largely ignored by the wider public such as official history, Voltaire had numerous fans like Saurin or Lemierre who had been active since the 1760s and who continued to innovate in the footsteps of this great man. They pulled ideas for situation tragedy from paragraphs or simple notes, from the *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*, a piece of work written by Voltaire which revolutionised historical writing. This scholarly curiosity and a taste for the dramatic and graphic largely fed the production of tragedies after 1778.

Moreover, from 1789, with Marie-Joseph Chénier or even Gabriel Legouvé, political speech as well as egalitarian and liberalising social issues at the outbreak of the Revolution came to the forefront, even if they were already addressed through plebeian characters in the role of a tragic hero; a hero without

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nobility, rank or fortune, often simple soldiers, slaves or shepherds who had passed through tragedy since the 1730s.

During the Revolution, the Antiquity made a comeback and the character of the tribune of the plebs in Roman tragedies and that of lawyer in a courtroom were the direct inheritors of this new heroism. The public speaker, under a secularised and familiar form, sometimes of very low social standing, became a reoccurring, tragic figure which, in turn, inspired the righter of wrongs character in the melodrama and heralded certain social traits of a romantic and idealistic hero.

FB: Thank you Renaud Bret-Vitoz for this overview which gives us a better idea of the vigour and creativity driven by tragedy during the age of Enlightenment.

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TRAGEDIAN VOLTAIRE: THE *ZAÏRE* EXAMPLE

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Part 1 – *Zaïre*'s charms

FM: Hello Pierre Frantz, you're a specialist in 18th century theatre and incidentally you recently gave an edition on *Zaïre*, a tragedy by Voltaire that you've chosen to speak to us about today. So, to start off, we really want to ask you why you chose *Zaïre* from among the other thirty tragedies that Voltaire wrote?

PF: Voltaire was someone who was really passionate about tragedy. His contemporaries saw him as one of the four great tragic poets of modern times, along with Racine, Corneille and Crébillon. It is his play *Zaïre* which notably aroused the keenest admiration among whole generations. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, who we all know felt a stubborn hatred towards Voltaire, even wrote that: "Of all the tragedies of the theatre, no other shows with more charm the power of love and the empire of beauty".

This tragedy, neglected today, even forgotten, demonstrates, more than any other dramatic work by Voltaire, a perfect balance between romantic poetry and philosophy. Our age should find food for thought in a play which opposes the Christian and Muslim worlds, the Islamic world; a play which recounts to us the tragic love story of a Muslim man and a noble Christian woman.

Part 2 – The creative context of *Zaïre* the play

FM: So, before coming to the play's plot, can you briefly remind us of the creative context of this tragedy?

PF: Voltaire gained himself a reputation ever since his first tragedy *Œdipus* in 1718. It's a great tragedy that was often played in the 18th century, practically disappearing only in the 19th century. Voltaire reinterpreted, in his own way, the myth of Œdipus by giving it a modern, philosophical meaning. In this play, we can decipher a young writer's feelings of revolt and incomprehension when faced with the idea that a man can be guilty without being fully aware of his actions, that's to say when faced with a Christian awareness of guilt. However, in this first tragedy, the love plot was not easily linked to the tragic action and that's one of the reasons why this play probably no longer attracts much attention today.

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Theatrical works that followed would know lesser success that the first and Voltaire's career as a man of letters continued along other paths, paths in parallel with this same period at the beginning of the 18th century. He was punished for several plays written in verse, which were libertine and irreverent, and then his quarrel with the knight of Rohan made a great racket. Voltaire was forced to exile himself for a time in England. He discovered Shakespeare, which he'd import to France among the first, before reacting very vigorously later, in the 1760s/1770s, against what he called "English taste".

It's true that it was also a time where France knew many military defeats against England and that Voltaire made himself the spokesperson of national French taste and rejected this English taste. However, *Zaïre* bears the mark of Shakespeare and we can sometimes conjure an Othellian influence on this tragedy's plot. It was towards the end of the month of May 1732 that Voltaire launched himself into writing *Zaïre*, which he'd finish feverishly in 22 days, and his play was performed on 13 August 1732 at the French Comedy.

Part 3 - Plot

FM: So, Pierre Frantz, what is *Zaïre*'s plot?

PF: Well, Voltaire truly opened up French tragedy which had, up until then, been devoted to subjects pulled from the Antiquity. It opened this tragedy up to national subjects, to subjects pulled from medieval chivalry. It placed the action of this tragedy in Jerusalem at the time of the Crusades and Saint-Louis. The holy city had fallen back into the hands of the Muslims. The old sovereign of the Frankish kingdom, Lusignan, finds himself captive, like numerous other knights in Jerusalem.

A young sultan has just taken power. He is called Orosmane; he is in love with one of his captives, Zaïre, who he wants to make his wife and queen in the more modern sense of the word. She reciprocates his love. We discover very quickly in the second act, in a very, very moving throwback, that Zaïre is a Christian slave brought up under Islamic laws but that she is Lusignan's daughter and sister of the young knight Nérestan, who was once freed by Orosmane, and who returns to France to fetch a ransom.

Under Zaïre's well-meaning influence, the chivalrous sultan accepts to free 100 knights. The old Lusignan learns that Zaïre confesses the Christian religion and he makes her swear to keep her family tie to him a secret. The father and son, appalled at the idea that their daughter and sister could marry a Muslim, forbid her to marry this sultan. They pressure the young girl into being secretly baptised.

And even with everything ready for the wedding, Zaïre suddenly refuses to marry the man she passionately loves and respecting her faith, does not give him any explanation. Jealous, crushed, Orosmane, following the discovery of an ambiguous letter, kills his lover over a misunderstanding.

Conclusion – A tragedy with a social or political message?

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FM: So to conclude, we understand by listening to you how much the theme of religion is at the heart of Voltaire's remarks, even at the heart of the philosophical message put forward by the play, and we have for a long time justly reproached Voltaire for writing these tragedies with a social or political message. When reading *Zaïre*, how do you think this link between philosophical message and purely dramatic poetry is made?

PF: *Zaïre* is a play, a tragedy which undeniably bears the mark of Enlightenment's philosophy. Marriage between a Christian woman and a Muslim man, between a noble French woman and an Arab is, of course, unimaginable. And yet, Voltaire gave Orosmane all the knightly qualities, all the qualities which are associated with a noble knight, not only a medieval knight but a nobleman of the 18th century. Rejecting the tradition of a harem, Orosmane wants to make Zaïre his only wife. He wants to reign more wisely that the other Western monarchs of the 18th century do. In short, it is he who embodies the spirit of the Enlightenment. If he kills the young girl, it's a tragic move done blindly, it is also driven by the coalition of as much Muslim as Catholic conservatisms.

As for religion itself, in the play it is not a religion that is portrayed like a revealed religion. Zaïre says religion is a local custom, it is linked to education. As for virtue, Orosmane could emulate all the crusading Christians around him. So fundamentally, the dramatic construction of tragedy reveals a thought which is active in religious tolerance. This thought inextricably mixes itself with the love story of Zaïre and Orosmane.

FM: Well, thank you Pierre Frantz for your clarifications and remarks on the tragedy which played such a big role at the time, and which is still, and maybe especially today, of a topicality as burning perhaps as the passion of these two lovers.

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FROM SERIOUS TO VULGAR HUMOUR: COMIC FORMS

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Part 1 – Comedy in the 18th century

FM: Hello Sophie Marchand, you're an expert in 18th century theatre and you're going to talk to us about the changes, the transformations in comic forms during the age of Enlightenment. Well, we know all about the importance of Molière's legacy in theatrical production. In this context, to what extent can we talk about a comedy in the 18th century?

SM: Certainly, the age of Enlightenment inherited Molière's comic model which was given sanctuary through the creation of the Comédie Française and which was, right from the off, perceived as Molière's home. But the 18th century was not satisfied, as we'd often like to believe, with reproducing the same comic model as the 17th century, essentially dulling it down. While some playwrights like Destouches, or even Piron in his *Métromanie*, modernised characters by incorporating new looks, numerous other writers listened to proposals for new forms, motivated by the challenge of making an efficient weapon out of comedy to paint the truth and reform customs of the time. The originality of comic forms put forward by the age of Enlightenment is not to be underestimated, although many pieces of work from this period have been forgotten about today, often unjustly.

Part 2 – New forms of comedy

FM: Can you tell us a bit more about what precisely these new forms of comedy were?

SM: Well, what characterises links between the 18th century and comedy is firstly a broad examination, an aesthetic but also a moral and ideological examination, which would end up having an impact on all the thinkers of the time, notably Voltaire and Rousseau, giving rise to trials of new plays on stage like the *Letter to M. D'Alembert* by Rousseau, published in 1758, but also numerous metatheatrical prologues. Metatheatrical prologues were introductions to plays in which characters produced a speech and a personal reflection about the play.

Some writers called for a reform in the comedy genre as early as the 1720s. They were reacting to two things. Firstly, the cynical and immoral downward spiral of comedy at the end of Louis XIV's reign, as evidenced by plays such as *Turcaret* by Lesage or *The Residuary Legatee* by Regnard, who

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proposed, citing Lesage's words, "ricocheting the most pleasant trickery in the world with characters more perverted than the last." 18th century theatre, rather 18th century comedy was also reacting to another downward spiral, the invaluable and snobbish spiral which held comedy accountable to the cold and aristocratic surveillance of intellect.

FM: What was it that fundamentally drove these writers to critique comedy?

SM: The comedic process ultimately aims for laughter, which had been considered up until then as inseparable from the genre, but which seemed at the time morally unacceptable. Marmontel, the playwright and encyclopaedist, encouraged the banishment of this vulgarity from the theatre which should instead be a school for honesty. As for Rousseau, he suggested that pleasure taken from comedy was founded on a vice in the human heart so, with that in mind, the more a comedy is agreeable and perfect, the more its effect is deadly to our way of life.

Also, philosophical playwrights believed, in contrast to Marmontel, that it was without doubt more advantageous to switch from feeling perverted deference to philosophical pity for the villain. They took it upon themselves to liberate comedy from comic surveillance. It was about inventing an exemplary form of comedy, which would arouse an emotional connection which, at the time, was called "interest"; a form of comedy which preferred the delicate smile of the soul to contorted laughter.

This moral form of comedy would target not only the most foolish of vices but would also contribute to the improvement of customs. Its sponsor would be Terence, a Latin playwright, a disillusioned man, who was called in to offset Molière's model. Writers like Voltaire, Lachaussée, Chamfort, Fagan stepped into the breach and provided the Comédie Française with some of its most successful works of the period which spanned from 1715 to 1750.

FM: So how would you describe this new comedy of the time?

SM: Contemporaries speak of a serious, moral and sensory comedy. It is the detractors of the genre who speak of “sorrowful comedy” or of “Romanesque comedy”, a fusion of Romanesque tendencies and comedy. Until the 1760s, the sensory formula, which had itself been influenced by Marivaux's aesthetic form and the creation of the tragedy, would help to contribute to the fast-moving circulation of middle-class values and views of the world to the wider public as well as to support the Enlightenment struggle against prejudice in favour of truth.

Conclusion – A place of laughter

FM: So, in this context, could we say that the 18th century turned its back on comedy for good?

SM: Absolutely not. It is one of the characteristics of the period which looked to bring opposites together. The public, who cried over Voltairian tragedies or became emotional while watching Lachaussée's sensory comedy, was eager for more slapstick. They made fun of Italian Comedy which

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had then fallen behind the times with its moral plays. The genre of dramatic parody developed in the 18th century and achieved great success. Many people were detractors of this comic evolution, pleading for a return to the old ways of doing humour and to Molière. Beaumarchais himself, who wrote tragedies, would achieve his first successes by claiming to have resurrected true comedy, comic truth.

From the 1760s, street theatres would attract crowds of a sociological mix by performing parodies, Janot's risky use of toilet humour, like in *Les Battus paient l'amende* by Dorvigny for example and, under the revolutionary government, the mischiefs of rude Madame Angot. Finally, theatre in revolutionary times was inclined to present itself as only being serious and political. And yet, at this time, on the contrary, it was light-hearted comedy and Comic Opera which were selling out.

FM: Well, thank you Sophie Marchand for this overview of comedy during the Enlightenment which has allowed us to get a better grasp of the major issues.

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THE GAME OF LOVE AND CHANCE BY MARIVAUX

Fabrice MOULIN, Lecturer in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University

Christophe MARTIN, Professor of Literature, Paris Sorbonne University

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Part 1 – An Italian plot

FM: Hello Christophe Martin, you are a specialist of the work of Marivaux and you have also taught in Nanterre. Today you're going to talk to us about *The Game of Love and Chance*, a play that Marivaux created in 1730 for the Italian's Theatre. It is undoubtedly the most famous piece in the entire Enlightenment repertoire. First of all, can you just remind us of the plot of this play?

CM: The framework for the plot is built on the classic canvas of the Italian Theatre of the symmetrical disguise of masters and valets. A young girl, Silvia, hesitates before marriage, fearing to become one of those unhappy wives she often sees around her. Worried about the husband that her father has intended for her, she decided to disguise herself as a maid in order to observe the promised, Dorante, to see his merits for herself.
Mr Orgon, the good father accepts that Silvia and her maid, Lisette, exchange roles, but the future husband had the same idea and uses the same tricks to observe his future wife under the mask of her valet. The fake Burgundian falls in love with the fake Lisette, which does not herself remain insensitive to the charms of the young man. The two servants, Arlequin and Lisette, like each other in their disguises. They do not dare to believe in their luck, and they get drunk on their supposed good fortune. The masters, on the other hand, face the prejudices of birth, and Silvia, above all, faints upon discovering her attraction to the one she thinks is a valet. Mario, her brother, and Mr Orgon take pleasure in pushing her into a corner and observing her confusion.
At the end of Act 2, the tension is at its height and Dorante finally confessed her identity to the false Lisette. "Well, I wonder what I would have done if it hadn't been Dorante" admits Silvia, who is happy to finally see clearly in her heart. But she decides to keep her mask on to have the satisfaction of getting Dorante to offer her a wedding under her maid's disguise. She achieves her goals while the valet and maid reveal their true social status to each other and console each other in the laughter of their disappointment.

Part 2 – The Birth of Love

FM: So how is this play, whose plot you have just summarised, emblematic of Marivaux's theatre?

CM: In that it clearly shows the breakaway of the Marivaudian comedy both from the dark model of the comedy of morals, illustrated by Lesage or Regnard, and from the Molieresque tradition. In classical comedy, love was most often a given before action. On the other hand, the Marivaux's theatre captures lovers at the moment of a birth of love and focuses on the violent shake up that this birth causes. It is this shake up that Silvia is afraid of at the beginning of the comedy. The birth of love arouses resistance in the Marivaudian subject, which can be formulated in terms of fear. The love of a third party almost always appears as a disruptive element that weakens an initial balance.
The Marivaux's theatre is therefore one of resistance, no longer to family but to love. In the schemes of classical comedy, the love of young people was opposed to an external obstacle, the tyranny of a parent or guardian. Very often in Molière's work, the father organises a marriage contrary to the wishes of the child, who loves elsewhere. And the child opposes the father's project with the help of the servants. On the contrary, Mr Orgon does not intend to use coercion. Silvia will remain free to

choose. *The Game* is therefore exemplary of the phenomenon of internalisation that characterises Marivaudian dramaturgy.
The young people's feeling of love is no longer in conflict with a law that oppresses them but with itself and this internalisation of the conflict, necessary for the development of any dramaturgy, is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable characteristics of the Marivaudian comedy. Marivaux himself said: "Among my confreres, Love is in quarrel with what surrounds it, and ends up being happy, despite the opponents; to me, it is in quarrel only with itself, and ends up being happy in spite of itself."

Part 3 – Disguise

FM: So, this disguise between master and valet, as you said, is a traditional resource of Italian Comedy. How does Marivaux give this process a new scope?

CM: It is precisely because love is the occasion for a trial and no longer a conflict that it can become in itself the essential dramatic springboard for Marivaux. This dramaturgy leads Marivaux to confront his characters with a new world that provokes a shake-up that reveals them to themselves. Silvia and Dorante believe that they can master the mechanism of the test by using a disguise that protects them from the new subject proposed to them. But very quickly, it appears that they are the subjects of a test. Admittedly, the idea of double disguise cannot be attributed to Mr Orgon, but he seems to have immediately integrated it into the matrimonial project he conceived. And the outcome of the game to which he consents is probably not as unpredictable as one might think. As Mario suggests, their hearts cannot fail to warn young people of what they are worth, because the decoy to which Silvia succumbed in Act 3, and with her many spectators of the comedy, consists in thinking that the maid's mask, in essence, neutralises social determination, allowing Dorante to access her true being. In the end, the young girl thinks she is loved for herself since it would be despite her disguise as a servant that Dorante proposes to her.
But in reality, it is rather thanks to her maid's clothing that Silvia exercises such a power of fascination on Dorante. He marvelled at discovering virtues and charms in a simple servant that he might not even have noticed in a lady of nobility. Conversely, if Dorante's spirit surprises the young girl, it is because she thinks he is a servant. Thus, under the clothes of a valet and a maid, all the gains of their education and all the features of their environment, everything turns to their personal advantage and are perceived as qualities of their own.

Part 4 – "Playmakers"

FM: So, in this system of double disguises, the playmakers, Mr Orgon the father, Mario the brother, are called upon to play a decisive role. So how exactly do we understand the function of these characters?

CM: The most obvious role of Marivaudian playmakers is undoubtedly to accelerate theatrical dynamics and lead to a confession. But their most essential function is elsewhere. The playmakers ensure the conversion of the Marivaudian subject to desire. In short, they ensure a process of acquiescence to the subject they have been designated. In the fabric of desire that is any Marivaux's comedy, the machinist's work consists in following the genesis of the feeling of love, in allowing to untie the tight connections that usually hide the behaviours and naturalise them. Its action as prime contractor offers, in short, an exercise in the analytical decomposition of desire and makes it possible to measure in particular the violence it exerts on the subject.

FM: Many thanks to Christophe Martin for his insights into this play, one of the great innovations of which, as we have well understood, is to bring the essential part of the theatrical action into the interiority of the characters.

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THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

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Alain SANDRIER, Professor in French Literature, University of Caen

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Part 1 – A singular success

FM: Hello Alain Sandrier, together let's take a look at *The Marriage of Figaro* which is without a doubt the great comic success of the age of Enlightenment; a success which, incidentally, has never been replicated since. However, it is not the most representative of plays, nor the most representative of comedies of the Enlightenment. So how can this paradox be explained?

AS: Yes Fabrice. What a success and a success which effectively remains singular. Beaumarchais, who did not consider himself as a writer by profession but rather an amateur playwright, wrote this masterpiece following a rather complex process where he shifts from his initial theoretic ambition to plumb the depths of an approach which was not his. Before anything else, he wanted to put himself in Diderot's shoes and win renown for the "dramatic serious genre" as he called it, and that's how he made his way onto the French Comedy stage in 1768. But after several mixed successes, he converted to comedy with *The Barber of Seville* which would bring him great success and necessitate a renewed vision of comedy, even if Molière's influence was far from being forgotten as this play could be seen as brilliant variation of *The School for Wives*.

The novelty that he provided is in the rhythm and dramatic discoveries that we must look for. The articulacy of characters, great comedians on their own, Figaro as well as the Count Almaviva who would make an appearance here, comic situations of misunderstanding pushed to a degree of unbelievable virtuosity and then also, not without scandal, the pleasure of music and song, although the French Comedy would do everything to not be confused with Comic Opera which was a speciality of this mix.

In short, Beaumarchais pushed French comedians in their corner by attempting to bring back, these are his own words, "our fathers' frank gaiety". There is something very astute and opportunist in Beaumarchais. He made it seem like he was there to restore Molière's simple pleasure of comedy and revive it and in fact, he put comedy on a new path, quicker and which little by little revealed its true potential.

Part 2 – Aesthetic and political

FM: So precisely, what does this novelty consist of, which would be the characteristic of the world of *The Marriage of Figaro?*

AS: It is with *The Marriage* that Beaumarchais's originality is indeed acclaimed. Everything is a step above the first comedy, more speed, more characters, and also more intertwined plots, so much so that we end up with a monstrous play with an impressive number of scenes and many pieces of bravery, like this famous monologue by Figaro, a real challenge that has literally amazed the contemporaries.

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It is a new policy, and which shows a rather original, critical ambition, by implying the opposition between the master and the valet, around Suzanne for whom they compete. Beaumarchais manages to slip into this rule of love stories with rather clearly libertine connotations, the bitterness of social antagonisms. Figaro is the spokesman for the frustrated among this society of order that is the Ancient Regime. In this way, a form of political dimension emerges, yet it flows perfectly into the comic game to the point of being unnoticed.

And it has often been pointed out that it is the aristocrats themselves, who are also great theatre lovers, who have the most fun at the time of Figaro's corrosive flights against the wealthy, in which they obviously refuse to recognise themselves. Beaumarchais, this author who is not one of them, this social climber, has almost unconsciously mapped the mythology of class resentment when he intended above all to revive a genre as sclerotic as society itself was, paralysed by conventions that hinder all innovation.

In this way, Beaumarchais became at the same time the social vehicle of claim and the agent of aesthetic subversion. Figaro, the character, this unattached being, is the symbol of it, of course. But women in particular are the vehicle for it. From this point of view, the tirade of Marceline, Suzanne's ex-rival who finally discovers herself, in a rather improbable way, Figaro's mother, is emblematic.

It is both a plea against the injustice suffered by women in a society where everything is done for the benefit of men, but it is also a truly aesthetic scandal since this moving flight breaks with the comic register and borders on drama, so much so that the actress refused to interpret it, to Beaumarchais' great dismay, who regrets it in the preface.

Part 3 – Comic recipes

FM: But then, apart from this political dimension, which you have highlighted in part, what is the concrete recipe for this comic success? Where did it come from? Can you give us some examples?

AS: Beaumarchais is not understood if we do not see, behind the apparent ease of writing, a know-how acquired through hard work; an approach that is ultimately artisanal and very humble. Beaumarchais dreamed of being a theoretician, but he is above all a practical, pragmatic man. He undoubtedly has a sense of scene, rhythm, sense of effect, comic too, comic of words and gestures. That is why he is a great inventor of the dramaturgical dimension. With the Cherub's scene hiding in the armchair in the first act, he invents a new depth of stage space.

This is what critics have called "the third place", i.e. the ability to dig from within the multiplicity of places likely to shelter the action and its developments. And that can only be invented if we have a perfect awareness of the spectacular dimension, the awareness of the stage as a place of imaginary production. You must be a theatre practitioner, sensitive to bodies, their movements and voices. All this is what makes Beaumarchais's magic, but it is not spontaneous magic. Beaumarchais has been searching for it for a long time.

It must be said that the play has a very long genesis since it was banned for several years. Begun in 78, it was not officially represented until 1784. Beaumarchais campaigned for its representation by reading it, submitting it in its different versions, to the censors. And every time, he listens to the comments and advice of actors, spectators of his private readings, or other practitioners such as Sedaine, for example. And what is wonderful is that we have the trace of this very laborious genesis.

For example, before 1781, we know that the opening of *The Marriage* was not done on this brilliant and so commented stage between Suzanne and Figaro, measuring their bedroom, but in music and songs with Cherub and Don Bazile, the count's squire and music master. Obviously, Beaumarchais agreed to sacrifice this musical exhibition which perhaps too much resembled that of *The Barber*, and which diverted attention from the beautiful novelty of *The Marriage*, namely the importance of the female roles for which Suzanne is obviously the symbol. Even if it costs him, he who loves good words

and good tunes so much, he knows how to thwart his own tendencies to aim for a more accomplished dramatic effect. Beware of the impression of spontaneity that emerges from reading. This whirling game has been carefully crafted and precisely designed and, if necessary, finely chiselled.

AS: Well, let's conclude on this expertise as a Beaumarchais craftsman. It is true that he puts comedy on the rails of the beautiful machines of the 19th century in the style of Feydeau, for example. Thank you, Alain Sandrier, for these insights.

BOURGEOIS TRAGEDY

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Introduction

Bourgeois tragedy, what is also called "serious genre" or simply "tragedy" is a pure product of the Enlightenment, invented by philosophers. It was conceived to help in their efforts and, more generally, to propagate the values of a social class, the middle class in particular, whose economic and social ascension was going to find perfect expression in these tragedies. Proof that it was first a philosophical instrument, tragedy existed as a theoretic object. It was Diderot's brainchild. I'm thinking of the *Discourse on dramatic poetry* and the *Conversations on The Natural Son,* texts from 1757 and 1758, which serve as models for this genre.

The deep scar left by tragedy on literary history is owed much to its theoretical workings than the plays themselves, whose success in the eyes of the public spanned a period of barely 30 years, from 1757 to the Revolution. Looking back over *Mélanie* by La Harpe, *The Indigent* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier or even *The Philosopher Without Knowing It* by Sedaine, which would you say is the masterpiece of this genre?

Part 1 – Reviving the theatre

Bourgeois tragedy did not, however, emerge from Diderot's head as a fully developed genre. It was the result of radical ambition of a part of the public, who felt that traditional genres had been played until death and who cried out for a revival of theatre. Comedy had lost itself among mundane frivolities. Tragedy sank in the cold and unyielding deep. One like the other left the spectator indifferent, only getting from him, I quote Diderot, "superficial emotions".

The theatre was chastised, by Diderot mainly, for its artificiality, its old formula, the twists, the anagnorisis, the asides, everything made worse by the stiff and pompous performances by actors. That's without even mentioning the material conditions of the auditoriums; poorly adapted spaces, wobbly stages, etc. Yet, one aspired for the truth, the natural and spontaneous. The performance must allow for illusion so that the spectator may identify himself with the characters so as feel real emotions. So, let's have a look at what this new genre was like.

Part 2 – An intermediary genre

Well, it's first defined by its intermediary position in the genre hierarchy, somewhere between comedy and tragedy. From comedies which made fun at the expense of debauchery, it rejected the tone, but borrowed the characters' inferior social statuses. From tragedy which conveyed the misfortunes of heroes, it abandoned the heroic frame but conserved the seriousness of intrigue.

The plot, let's talk about that. Tragedy immerses us in the intimate world of the middle-class family at a time when it is shaken by a domestic tragedy; a family conflict, conjugal setbacks but also professional boredom, bankruptcy, etc. The suffering felt by these characters, to which the spectator can easily relate, provokes emotion; emotions which no longer fall under dramatic catharsis involving terror and pity, but which are perhaps stronger, more effective since they are relatable. They are in tune with the daily life of the spectator. Finally, this emotion is the perfect catalyst for a moral conveyed by tragedy through the triumph of virtue.

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Part 3 – A shake-up in playwriting

Such an ideological programme encouraged a complete overhaul in classical playwriting. Of course, there was little influence over verse writing, since tragedy preferred prose. Stiff, comedic characters who were defined by their character, Harpagon's greed, for example, had their social conditions substituted. Louis-Sébastien Mercier demanded that ordinary people were shown on stage. He went as far as push for a textile worker, a labourer, a journalist. Finally, tragedy pushed back the limits on performance. Decor made way for the meticulous reconfiguration of real places; a sitting room, a bedroom. The actor often described them in long stage directions, in the style of painting descriptions.

As for acting, which was traditionally exaggerated or stylised, it would be replaced by the need for something more natural. Body language, what Diderot called "pantomime", became a fundamental component of playwriting since it conveyed emotion more directly. The spectator's emotion, to better understand it, can be described through art. In particular, a painting which Diderot often came back to when he strived for emotional silence, body language and setting; when he strived to give his scenes an artistic flare.

I invite you, therefore, to have a look at a painting, one by Greuze, a friend of Diderot, which perfectly captures all the major characteristics of a bourgeois tragedy. In a modest interior, a family. Interweaving gestures emphasise relationships. This family is pulled apart by a misfortune. The son, on the right, abandons his home to enrol in the army. His father curses him, but in turn curses the heroic values of a tragedy, like military prowess, which the painter will bring into conflict with filial values to teach us a lesson. Incidentally, it is not the distant feelings of horror and pity that the painter is looking to provoke, but he wants us to engage our brains, as well as those of the father, mother, daughter and son. All of the connections between tragedy and spectator can be found here.

THE PHILOSOPHER WITHOUT KNOWING IT BY SEDAINE

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Introduction

"Here's true taste. Here's domestic reality. Here's comedy". This is how enthusiastically Diderot reacted to the first performance of *The Philosopher Without Knowing It* by Michel-Jean Sedaine on the 2nd December 1765. If this play, subtitled "comedy", like *The Father of the Family* incidentally, could please Diderot, it's because it's filled to perfection with all the criteria of a bourgeois tragedy just as he had theorised a few years before.
Sedaine himself relates how the idea of a serious comedy – he was writing fairly minor plays – came to him in response to a sickening attack by Palissot, a man of letters, enemy of philosophers, against the encyclopaedists, in his play *The Philosophers*. *The Philosopher Without Knowing It* was conceived, I quote, "to reconcile the public with the idea of the word philosopher". A promising introduction. So, what is the subject of this drama exactly?

Part 1 – Exposure

We're in the house of the respectable merchant Vanderk. Papers, bank bills indicate his economic profession to us. The family is celebrating Sophie, the daughter's marriage. But right from the first scene, Victorine, the foster sister, Antoine's daughter, Antoine being Vanderk's right-hand man, hurries along the unhappiness which looms over the family. Vanderk junior, a naval officer, a soldier but son of a bourgeois – it's thanks to his father that he has this profession – would be getting ready to dual at dawn with another young soldier.
The tragedy is discretely and progressively announced in a long exposure covering the first two acts in which Sedaine displays perfect mastery of playwriting. Here, he distils a body of evidence through Victorine's worries, Vanderk junior's evasive presence and his confused monologue in Act 2 Scene 3 where he loses him temper with the fate which will strike him on his wedding day, and where he demands quite darkly, it would seem to us spectators, honour as well as filial and class solidarity. "Traders! Traders! This is my father's status!" He cries, "I'll never accept this degradation." There are lots of subtle, dark touches in this happy scene of a bourgeois household on the eve of a marriage, especially as the idea even of the dual, which is an outstandingly tragic and noble motif, contrasts violently with the bourgeois cabinet or salon.
Finally, in contrast, it is to be seen since this long exposure holds another surprise in Act 2. Are we really in a bourgeois home? Vanderk junior learns from his father, who still ignores the dual that's being prepared, that he is from an aristocratic line. Vanderk is in fact a gentleman, who in his youth was forced to take a job, that's to say make a living from working, namely that of a merchant which was an emblematic activity of the bourgeois class, and this came to pass following a dual over affairs of the heart and honour which involved his future wife, the mother of the family. The start of Act 3 forms the crux of the tragedy.

Part 2 – The crux

It's dawn in the house, the young man who wanted to leave in secret to resolve his quarrel cannot find his keys. His father awakens and the young man tells him everything. He attests to wanting to defend

his father's job and the bourgeois class which has been insulted by the young aristocrat. Without a word said, the father lets him leave and remains alone on the stage, expressing his sadness as a father in a quandary over the law's voice which prohibits the dual and the voice of honour.

Part 3 – Dramatic tension

The last two acts, which focus on kindness over the outcome, complete the portrait of this noble father, but with control and restraint. He must dissimulate his pain from joy. Then he must reason with Antoine, who wanted to step in to prohibit the dual. Vanderk, however, asks him to secretly witness his son's fight and if the young man should die, to come knock on the door three times.
Finally, apogee of sublime in truthfulness, this devastated father still fulfils his obligations by paying a bank bill without interest or benefits to a quite arrogant gentleman, Monsieur Desparville, whose visit was announced right at the beginning of the play. It's a really simple scene, extremely deep and tragic, and one which commanded attention at the time. At the same time as the three fatal knocks are heard at the door, and while Vanderk, who suppresses his emotions, is in the middle of counting out the money for Desparville, we understand that Desparville is none other than the father of the other young man involved in the dual. So how does this play end?

Part 4 – The outcome

Well, its outcome will be a happy one, as indicated incidentally in the subtitle "comedy". The son is not dead but, in a gesture which oversteps aristocratic prejudice, he turns the dual, with his apologies, into a reconciliation and a promise of friendship. Father and son Desparville join in the bourgeois wedding celebrations with as much naturalness as the family who is in fact noble. So, to conclude, let's bring together three elements which contribute to the success of this drama.

Conclusion – A successful tragedy

First, its perfect playwriting structure. Sedaine respects and makes good use of the unity of place, time and action. Next, Vanderk's character, which embodies both the sensitive and emotional father, and the merchant, a figurehead of the bourgeois imagination, which is treated here with enormous finesse and tact. Finally, the quite complex and ambiguous closing message of the play, which offers a deep reflection on the structure of social classes.
It is genius to having made the celebration of business heard from the mouth of a born aristocrat who owes everything to it, including his nobility which he is able to buy back. "In an age as enlightened as this, declares Vanderk to his son, what nobility gives cannot be removed". As for the question of the dual, it allows for the limits and contradictions of a character to be brought out. Vanderk remains fundamentally a prisoner despite the codes of honour of another age. *The Philosopher Without Knowing It*, explains Sedaine, is a man of honour who sees all the cruelty of a terrible prejudice and who yields while wailing.

CONCLUSION: THEATRE DURING THE REVOLUTION

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Part 1 – A free theatre

"Tragedy roams the streets". Here's what the playwright Ducis says, a witness to many years of revolutionary upheaval. And actually, during this short period, ten years which felt like an age, theatre and political life of the town formed what can only be described as one of the same places. As such, in the chaotic paroxysms of history, the Revolution may have fulfilled the Enlightenment dream of reuniting the stalls and the agora, of confounding the spectator and the citizen. One thing is certain and that's the Revolution would provide an extremely favourable context to theatrical development. The stage was extremely popular. We can count more than 1,500 published plays and no less than 40,000 performances in 10 years.

Firstly, revolutionary legislation liberated the theatre. As of 1791, the old system of privileges and monopolies shared between the Comédie Française, the Opera and the Italians was abolished. For then on, any citizen could open a theatre and perform plays with a relative freedom of repertoire. In 1792, 35 theatres covered Paris; the majority were regrouped in Palais Royal quarter, nowadays called Palais Egalité, and on the boulevards. The Revolution equally liberated dramatic creation by abolishing censorship, although surveillance, even the repression of theatres, was reintroduced during the Terror. Finally, actor and writer benefited from full recognition. Confined to the fringes of society during the Ancient Regime, the comedian became a citizen in their own right, even a national hero like Talma, who had a veritable cult dedicated to him. As for the playwright, the Revolution would recognise the rights he had to his own work.

Part 2 – Theatre and politics

Under the Revolution and then the Directory, theatrical life was directly linked to intense political life. Dramatic performances took place without one being able to separate them from civic formalities charged with a new, secular sanctum invented by the Revolution. Celebrations, cults to the great men. Never would the political view of the theatre be so transparent.

This was not a problem since a good number of big characters from the Revolution, whose names still ring a bell in our minds today, were in fact actors or dramatic writers: Collot d'Herbois, who sat on the Committee of Public Safety, Fabre d'Églantine or Olympe de Gouges. Adopting ideological trends, troops and theatres formed and reformed themselves in function with political orientations. As such, the French theatre, ex-Comédie Française, divided into two groups: The Reds, revolutionary partisans, who founded the Theatre of the Republic, and the Blacks, favourable to the royal family, who created the Theatre of the Nation, the Odéon of today.

Part 3 – The reign of tragedy

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As we can imagine, from this marriage of theatre and politics, tragedy is the first to benefit. At a time where the entire existence of individuals seemed to be enveloped by eloquence and shaken by action, tragedy imposed itself again as the genre par excellence. It allowed for the translation of contemporary ideological problems whose foundations were old. On stage, one often looked to reproduce the austere grandeur of David's paintings. "I'm becoming Roman", says Talma, the great actor of the day, who would become famous with his ancient-styled acting and his toga costume in *Brutus* by Voltaire, reprised with great success in 1790.

But revolutionary tragedy equally pursued the renewal initiated by the times by getting its subjects from national history, like *Charles IX or the Saint-Barthelemy* by Marie-Joseph Chénier, one of the great tragedians of the time. Through the plot of Catherine de Medici to massacre the protestants, Chénier denounces absolutism of kings. Finally, tragedy even glorifies the great figures of the nation, past but also present, like Voltaire, many times celebrated on stage for his fight for tolerance in the Calas affair, or Marat, exalted as a martyr in several plays after his assassination.

Part 4 – Theatre fabricates opinion

The theatre, fully engaged in the upheaval of revolutionary events, followed current affairs. Moreover, it contributed to the development of event and opinion, from day to day, like the press. We witness, therefore, the development of a whole multitude of historic and patriotic plays, often composed in the moment, that portrayed the storming of the Bastille, on the 10th August, or again the patriotic war.

Part 5 – Melodrama

The theatre embraced events and the new competition between the auditoriums that allowed it to survive, and above all, it adopted the public's changing tastes and volatile sensibilities. Among the multiple genres and subgenres which flourished or persisted, we remember melodrama. This form was the inheritor of the playwriting aspirations of the Enlightenment and was destined for a bright future. It really is the form which was at the junction between Enlightenment's theatre and the announcement of what would be the backdrop for theatre in the 19th century. This very popular genre is characterised by the search for dramatic effects, that's to say ways of provoking strong emotions.

By what means? Well, there's first the primate of the scene, the primate of gestures and action on the spoken word, which is limited to its direct and emotional aspects. Next, it's a gripping plot, a virtuous victim pursued by evil persecutors. The understandings, misunderstandings, battles, violence punctuate the action which heads towards the triumph of good over evil. Everything in a thrilling setting; tunnels, hiding places and cloisters. Incidentally, we'll find this same setting in the roman noir, or in the imaginary world, of the Marquis de Sade, who was a romanticist and playwright. Everything happens as if the civic dream of the Enlightenment, bright as a well-lit room, came to an end on stage at the back of a sordid hiding place, without the scenic triumph of virtue being able to remove it completely.

DIDEROT PASSES COMMENT ON GREUZE

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Fabrice MOULIN, Lecturer in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University

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Reading by Colas Duflo and Fabrice Moulin.

1765 exhibition.
“Finally, I saw it, a painting by my friend Greuze, but it was not without some difficulty. His work continues to attract a crowd. A father has just paid his daughter's dowry. The subject is moving and I feel overcome with pleasant emotion just looking at it. The composition is very beautiful. That's surely how it must have been.
There are twelve figures. Each has its place and does what they should. They come one after the other, undulating and pyramid-like. I laugh at these circumstances. However, when they meet by chance on a canvas, without the painter having thought of introducing them, without sacrificing any of them, they please me. On the right is a lawyer sat in front of a little table, his back turned to the spectator. On the table, the marriage contract and other papers. Between the legs of the lawyer, the youngest child. Then by continuing to follow the composition from right to left, the eldest daughter stands, leaning against the back of her father's armchair. The father is sat in the armchair. In front of him, his son-in-law stands and holds, in his left hand, the purse containing the dowry. The bride-to-be, also standing, delicately holds her fiancé's arm, the other is being held by her mother who is sat next to her. Between the mother and the betrothed, a younger sister, standing and hanging onto the intended, with an arm thrown over her shoulders.
Behind this group, a young child stands on tip toes to see what's going on. To the side of the mother, in the foreground, a young girl is sat with some pieces of bread cut up in her pinafore. To the far left in the background and far from the scene, two servants stand and observe. On the right, a pantry full of conserves makes up the background. In the middle, an old arquebus hangs on its hook. Then, there's a wooden staircase leading to the floor above. In the foreground, in the empty space left by the figures, near the mother's feet, a chicken guides its chicks to where the little girl is throwing bread. There's a bowl of water and, on the edge of the bowl, a chick, beak in the air, to allow the gulp of water he just drank to go down. That's the general set-up.
Let's come to the details. The lawyer is dressed in black, colourful stockings and trousers, a coat and band, a hat on his head. He seems to be a bit wily and contentious, well suited to someone of his profession. He has a kind face. He listens to what the father has to say to his son-in-law. The father is the only one who talks. The rest of them listen and remain silent. The child between the lawyer's legs acts exactly like what any young boy would in that situation. Without showing any interest to what's happening, he looks at the scribbled papers and traces his fingers over them. We can see feelings of pain and jealousy in the eldest daughter, who's leaning against the back of the father's armchair, since she has been side-lined by her younger sister. She has her head in one of her hands and looks at the engaged couple with curiosity, anger and wrath.
The father is an old man of 60, grey hair, with a handkerchief wrapped around his neck. He's a gentleman. The arms stretched out towards his son-in-law, he speaks with an open heart. He seems to say: "Jeannette is sweet and wise. She will make you happy, mind you do the same" or something on the importance of marriage duties. What he says is surely moving and honest. One of his hands we can see is tanned and brown, the other one white, that's down to nature's elements. The fiancé is an agreeable fellow. He has a tanned face, but we can see he has white skin. He stands a little towards his stepfather. He pays attention to the discourse. He seems to be earnest and wonderfully dressed without overselling his rank.
I'll move onto the other characters. The painter has given the bride-to-be a charming, decent and reserved face. She is dressed beautifully. The white pinafore says she could not do better. There is a little bit of luxury in her embellishments, but it is an engagement day so that is true of everyone. The

charming girl does not stand straight, rather there is a delicate and soft bend in her body and in all her joints which fill her with grace and truth. She is pretty, in fact rather very pretty. We see nothing of her chest. But I bet there's nothing there to hold it up and that it supports itself. Had she had shown more to her fiancé, she would not have been decent enough. Had she had shown more to her mother or father, she would have misrepresented herself. She has an arm folded over that of her future husband and her fingertips fall softly to touch his hand. That's the only sign of tenderness she gives him, and perhaps that's without being aware of it herself. It's a subtle addition from the painter.
The mother is a good country woman who's close on 60 years old, but still has her health. She is also smartly dressed. With one hand, she holds her daughter's upper arm, with the other, she holds the arm just above the wrist. She is sitting. She looks at her daughter from the bottom up. She feels some pain in leaving her daughter but the match is a good one. Jean is a brave boy, honest and hard-working. She does not doubt that her daughter won't be happy with him. Joy and tenderness are mixed in the mother's physiognomy. As for the younger sister who's standing next to the bride-to-be, embracing her and resting her head on her breast, she is an interesting character. She is really angry to be separated from her sister; she's crying. But this does not put a downer on the composition. On the contrary, it is rather touching.
There is taste and good taste in having put together this picture. The two children, one of which is sat next to the mother amuses herself by throwing bread to the chicken and her young family, while the other stands on tip toe and cranes the neck to see, are charming, but especially the latter. The two servants standing at the back of the room, casually turned towards each other, seem to talk of behaviours and faces: "when will our time come?" And the chicken who's leading her chicks towards the centre of the room, has five or six babies, like the mother, at who's feet she's looking for bread, has six to seven children. The small girl who throws the bread and feeds them, I have to admit all this is charming propriety, from the scene taking place to the setting and characters. What a poetic stroke of genius.
It is the father who draws most attention. Then the husband or the fiancé, followed by the betrothed, the mother, the younger or older sister, depending, of course, on whomever looks at the painting. Next, the lawyer, the other children, the servants and the background, proof certainly of a good disposition."

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