

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

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.

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.