

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

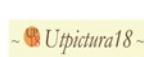
Moreover, located on the other side of the Seine, in the quarter known today as Odéon, is the Comédie Française. For a long time, it had been housed in the court tennis room on the street known today as rue de l'Ancienne Comédie. In 1782, it would move to a beautiful building built in the style of Antiquity, 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.