

# 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

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 10<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 primacy of the scene, the primacy 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.