

NEW TRENDS IN THE THEATRE

III—*France*

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ALTHOUGH the French theatre has not been visited by any sweeping revolutionary movement corresponding to the expressionist school of Central Europe or the constructivist impulse in Russia, nevertheless Paris has during the past ten or fifteen years been the scene of numerous experiments and minor innovations that have contributed a great deal to modern dramatic art. Antoine, Lugné-Poe, Rouché, Gémier, Copeau, Cocteau, Dullin, Pitoeff,—these are some of the names in contemporary French Drama.

THE loyalty of the French stage to the traditions of the past is proverbial. There is much in the contemporary theatre of France which has remained practically unchanged for a generation. Standard theatres like the old Porte Saint Martin pursue a policy which shows few signs of progress. Chic little Parisian houses like the Daunou present a series of operettas, light comedies, or farces whose plots change little in character from year to year and whose productions reflect only the superficial changes in fashion set by the couturier and the interior decorator. Sacha Guitry goes on writing delightful if facile comedies, and he and Lucien Guitry and Yvonne Printemps go on acting them with a finish, distinction, and charm which sets them above the rank of mere commonplace popularity but does not create any particularly new precedent in the theatre. There is no revolutionary element in the contemporary theatre of France which corresponds to that represented by Antoine's Théâtre Libre in the 1880's. Nor have French dramatic literature and scenic production been visited by any such sweeping wave of innovation as we see in the expressionistic movement of Central Europe or the constructivist impulse in Russia. Nevertheless the French theatre has undergone great changes in recent years, and to-day these changes are becoming clearly, almost suddenly, evident.

To the period of transition belongs Lugné-Poe's Maison de l'Œuvre, a subscription theatre which has remained experimental, in the laboratory sense, since the days when symbolism became the great vogue of French poetry and drama. Lugné-Poe's importance to the French theatre is twofold. First he has made

the French public acquainted with many important foreign dramatists and actors. At the Œuvre there is a complete Ibsen repertoire, and Strindberg's plays have been exceptionally well presented. Gorki, Hauptmann, Kaiser, D'Annunzio, Wilde, Synge, and Shaw are all represented. Second, in the development of French drama Lugné-Poe's laboratory has been invaluable. Maeterlinck, Bataille, Claudel, Romain Coolus, André Gide, Alfred Jarry, Francis Jammes, Romain Rolland, and any number of other French authors have been given prominence originally by production at the Œuvre.

Back in 1896 the now famous *Ubu Roi* of Alfred Jarry was produced for the first time by Lugné-Poe. This fantastic farce, written by Jarry at the age of fifteen, had grown into a literary myth of great proportions during the years which had elapsed since its presentation. The author had been compared to Shakespeare, Rabelais, Boccaccio; vast sums had been paid for the rare copies of the text. A recent revival by Lugné-Poe and the reprinting of the book cleared away a good portion of this mythical aura and revealed a farce which antedates the Dada movement in being magnificently mad, and presents a parody of Shakespearean tragedy simultaneously with a glorification of untrammelled instincts. There seems little justification, however, for regarding it as a great literary landmark.

The recent production was notable for a sort of "compensation" scheme similar to that advocated by Marinetti in Italy. The stage was built in two levels. Enormous cardboard figures and actors in attitudes of pantomime occupied the upper level, while on the lower level the action of the piece went on, totally dissociated from these pictorial groupings. It was an interesting attempt to correct the relatively false emphasis which normal theatrical production lays upon the doings of a single set of characters.

Of the youthful French playwrights revealed in recent years at the Œuvre, Jean Sarment is the best known to-day. His *Couronne de Carton* and *Pêcheur d'Ombres* are both studies of the sensitive emotionalism of youth and the destruction of its primary idealism in the process of adjustment to life. Sarment may now be said to have arrived in the French theatre, since to his reputation as a *jeune* is now added the official seal of recognition in the presenta-

tion of his sardonic *Mariage d'Hamlet* at the Odéon and his *Je suis trop grand pour moi* at the Comédie Française. Sarment himself has interpreted his principal rôles (except at the Comédie Française), and his insight into the mental reactions of youth is all the more remarkable in that he is very young himself.

It was in an endeavor to create a theatrical art as carefully regulated in its visual aspects as were the productions of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes that Jacques Rouché inaugurated the Théâtre des Arts. Rouché was a careful student of the European theatre at large, and in 1910, after a continental journey of investigation less customary at that time than it is to-day, he published his *L'Art Théâtral Moderne*, which has recently been reissued in a new edition. When Rouché began his attempt to put into practice the theories expressed in his book, this conception of a theatrical presentation as a careful synthesis of acting, setting, and costumes was rare enough in France. He called to his aid not the general utility decorators of the commercial theatre, but well known painters like Dethomas, Segonzac, Leprade, Drésa, and Piot, at the same time insisting upon the difference between easel painting and the creation of a stage *milieu*.

His repertoire was varied. St. George de Bouhelier's *Carnaval des Enfants*, the Copeau-Croué version of Dostoevski's *Brothers Karamazov*, *Le Sicilien* of Molière, Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, and *You Never Can Tell*; dramas, operas, ballets, revues were all done with the same controlling interest in presentation. The experiment, because of the usual financial difficulties, lasted only two years. To-day Rouché is Director of the Opera; some of the same painters are associated with him and have changed little in their recognized styles.

The importance of the Théâtre des Arts experiment lay in its voluntary emphasis upon the necessity for unifying all the phases of a spectacle. To-day the Théâtre des Arts is directed by Rudolph Darzens. Here is also a student of the European theatre; and the little house on the Boulevard des Batignolles has never lost some kind of predisposition toward a non-commercial ideal. But the policy has not remained consistent. Occasionally there are productions of special interest; there are also plays by accepted French dramatists of no very startling merit, and sometimes cheap money-getters. The Théâtre des Arts represents no

definite movement in the French theatre as it did under Rouché from 1910 to 1912.

Doubtless the greatest single force working toward the immediate popularization of theatrical reform in France is embodied to-day in the person of Gémier. Here is an actor-director whose close contact with the public since the early days of Antoine, and whose official position as director of both the Théâtre National Populaire and the second state theatre, the Odéon, assures to any reform he may sponsor a reception with the general public which is perhaps out of proportion to the importance of the reforms themselves but is certainly not to be overlooked by those who are watching the advance of new ideas in France.

Gémier, since the days when he was associated with the Théâtre Libre, has worked in regular theatres, music halls, small fashionable houses, experimental theatres, and in almost every conceivable kind of production. He believes thoroughly in the democracy of the theatre and is most concerned with the reconstitution of those national and universal qualities which belonged to the public entertainment of the ancient arena and the mediaeval square. By this token he has liberated himself from the formula of naturalism in *mise en scène* sponsored by Antoine; but there remains something fundamentally inconsistent in Gémier's various ideas of theatrical reform.

In accord with his vision of the theatre as an expression of the community soul he deals often in a free and spectacular movement partaking of pageantry. To this end he some years ago inaugurated a season of drama at the Cirque d'Hiver, in which the manipulation of crowds approximated similar experiments of Reinhardt's. In accord with this also he has eliminated footlights at the Odéon, and united house and stage by means of forestage and steps and the use of *avant-scène* boxes as entrances. On the other hand, Gémier's interest in making the classics accessible to every order of intelligence, and his desire to free these same classics from the hackneyed forms of declamation which have made them dull to the student, has led him into an insistence upon more humanized speech and less artificial gesture. Thus to gain freshness of appeal on the side of *mise en scène* he turns away from naturalism to a freer and more theatrical kind of production; and to gain freshness of interpretation in the classics, he proceeds in

exactly the opposite direction, — toward naturalism instead of away from it.

The failure to attain unity of style which is sometimes attendant upon Gémier's productions is illustrated in a recent revival of *Le Mariage de Figaro* at the Odéon. The artificially elegant, scroll-topped, reversible screens designed by Walter René Fuerst and set up in front of white draperies offered various ingenious combinations for the backgrounds of different scenes. But while the setting was stylized, the acting was decidedly naturalistic, and the result was heterogeneous. A very lively treatment of a classic was the revue-like dramatization of Voltaire's *Candide* by Marches and Vautel, produced in a colorful, fantastic guignol setting, with gaudy grandeur, romantic intimacy, and the post-card picturesque all parodied in a sprightly fashion which threw the satire well into relief.

The French as theatre-goers are always more ready to welcome a radical departure in staging when it is not applied to French classics; and they are particularly hospitable to innovations in the production of Shakespeare, whom they are inclined to regard as a wild fantastic genius to whom such treatment can do no harm. Gémier's *Merchant of Venice* is a total rearrangement of the text. It is speeded up in the popular sense by a delirious swirling Venetian carnival and by a violent mob scene at the trial; some of the characters are rewritten; and Shylock, as played by Gémier, becomes the centre of a group of Jewish conspirators instead of the lone representative of an oppressed race. Whatever its faults from an Anglo-Saxon point of view, it is far from being a dead letter, this Gémier version.

One of the most interesting achievements which the Odéon has thus far presented was the production of Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*. In setting, the piece was more expressionistic, in movement and interpretation it was more highly stylized than in the New York production. The central rôle was given a magnificent portrayal by the Negro Genglia, surpassing even Gilpin in the force and beauty of his plastic expression of emotion.

Gémier has now gone through the difficult period of building up a new public without alienating the old; and if his progress is only as great as it has been during the formative process, the Odéon should take the place as a leader in theatrical advancement

which is held by many state theatres in Central Europe. This is all the more important because the first national theatre of France, the Comédie Française, is still to a great extent in the clutches of ultra-conservatism, despite spasmodic attempts to bring it into line with modern movements.

The best all-round realization of an advance-guard theatre project in Paris is Copeau's Vieux Colombier. This remarkable organization has just rounded out its tenth year, yet in spite of the importance of its contribution to French theatrical development its future is in doubt. As it stands at the moment, it is the most complete and efficient theatrical institution which Paris possesses. In the ten years just past Copeau has built up an organization whose unity and clarity of system is particularly unusual in anything like a revolutionary manifestation. It has the elements of inner sufficiency which should contribute certainly to stability and permanence. Administration, publicity, records, photography, construction of scenery and properties; making, fitting, dyeing, and painting of costumes and masques; all electrical and other mechanical work are taken care of on the premises. There is even a restaurant under the same management next door to the theatre. Close by is the school of the Vieux Colombier, probably Copeau's greatest concern in all the activities of the institution. Thus everything associated with the business of theatrical production is handled from within; and in France, where there are countless delays and compromises involved in every business transaction between separate firms, this inner dependence is invaluable.

The weakest factor in the Vieux Colombier as an institution is the theatre itself. It is so small that even constant playing to capacity houses does not insure sufficient income to cover the expenditures of so comprehensive a plant. There is some advantage, of course, in not having too large a house for an experiment like Copeau's; but he is too ambitious to go on with a mere successful intimate theatre. The house is simple and fairly practical, seating about three hundred and sixty. Copeau's great contribution to it is, of course, the construction of his own type of stage. Made of stone, its forestage connecting with the auditorium, equipped with a permanent setting, — a wall, an arch, stairways leading to levels above and below the stage, — which may be

used or concealed at will, it is capable of almost any combination. The architectural background throws the actors always into plastic relief; and the lighting system is excellently planned and efficiently controlled. The general *mise en scène* at the Vieux Colombier is characterized by exquisite precision; yet it is not laborious. If the stage is somewhat severe, it appears as a welcome simplicity and restraint after the tasteless cluttering which we see on so many Paris stages.

The most justifiable charge made against the Vieux Colombier is that its repertoire is not sufficiently varied. This is a vital point in the success, even the usefulness, of an advance-guard theatre. That Copeau's repertoire is open to this charge is explained by the manner in which he has approached the very complex ideal of production. Having created revitalized surroundings for his actors, he next took a group of people and attempted to educate them in a less stereotyped style of acting than the commercial theatre had to offer. For this training he employed largely a classic repertoire. But a theatre cannot consist of a training process behind closed doors, so it was this classic repertoire which was presented to the public.

Next he began building up a repertoire of contemporary plays. These he chose, however, in the line of logical succession to the classics he had been presenting: modern comedies in the Molière tradition. The most brilliant examples of this genre at the Vieux Colombier are *Bastos le Hardi* by Régis and De Veynes, and *Il faut que chacun soit à sa place* by René Benjamin. The former is a high form of political satire motivated as to plot by real comedy of character; and the latter is social and political satire again, cast in the mould of fantasy, with Lulli music and other qualities of the *fête champêtre* to charm away the bitterness of its ironic statement. Both these and Goldoni's *La Locandiera* are acted in that measured and distinguished comic style which is the Vieux Colombier's most notable histrionic achievement.

A sort of off-shoot of the Vieux Colombier is Dullin's Atelier. It is not really a branch of the older institution, for its ideals and methods are quite different, but the two have always been closely associated. Dullin's theatre, though it has not always been successful in achieving actual beauty or force in its performances, has shown a much more active interest in building up a new

repertoire, both foreign and native, than the Vieux Colombier. Marcel Achard, Alexandre Arnoux, and Bernard Zimmer are young French playwrights who have been revealed there. Also the Atelier is one of the few places in Paris where experimentation in *décor* is constantly going on.

The most complete expression of the new movement in the French theatre of to-day is in the work of Georges Pitoeff. Pitoeff is a native of Russia, but his repertoire is given entirely in French. He built up a theatre and troupe in Geneva whence he used to visit Paris frequently, and it is practically this organization which he transferred to the Paris Champs Elysées theatre in 1922. Pitoeff is not a great actor; he is dominated by mannerisms which, in spite of the sensitiveness and imaginative qualities of his interpretation, become monotonous with repetition. As a director, however, he has introduced more original ideas to Paris than any of his contemporaries. His wife, Ludmilla Pitoeff, who works with him in translation and adaptation, shares with him the principal rôles. She is particularly gifted in creating an atmosphere of absolute, veracious simplicity, and excels in rôles of unobtrusive tragedy such as we find in Chekhov.

Pitoeff's repertoire is an important factor in his contribution to the French theatre. It includes not only the work of contemporary French playwrights like Lenormand, Duhamel, and Vildrac, but also plays of Chekhov, Andreyev, Tolstoi, Ibsen, Hamsun, Strindberg, Shakespeare, Wilde, Shaw, Chesterton, Dunsany, Molnar, and Pirandello. In this respect his organization ranks with the best of those remarkably international repertory theatres which are the pride of Central Europe.

Molnar's *Liliom* is the most characteristic example of Pitoeff's complete re-creation of a play through his personal interpretation of it. His aim is an expressionistic one, — to dramatize in his *mise en scène* the silence which lay between *Liliom* and any outward expression of his actual self. His settings are chiefly abstract forms and are really painted with light; the scene in heaven is a concrete presentation of the fantasies, grandiose or infantile, which *Liliom* expresses directly or indirectly in the play.

But the production of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is to my mind the supreme example of Pitoeff's gift in dramatic projection. The apparition of the Six Characters,

descending in the back stage elevator, arranged in positions of fixed relationship, like some inevitable family portrait; their appearance and gestures throughout the action, stylized yet terribly alive; and their disappearance, rising out of sight in silence broken only by the elevator itself,—these and the terrific tension and irony of the whole performance give it an almost unbearable dramatic poignancy.

Jean Cocteau, although not working in a theatre of his own, has had as much influence as perhaps any other Frenchman in the advancement of stage art. His association with the Russian Ballet dates before its visit to America in 1916. His *Parade*, glorifying the circus and the acrobat, with Satie's codification of popular tunes, with Picasso's cubistic setting and giant mechanical costumes, produced in 1917, was one of the earliest and certainly an influential revolutionary element in the Ballet repertoire. The very latest season of the Diaghilev Ballet showed one of Cocteau's characteristic developments of contemporary ideas in *Train Bleu*, which he calls a "statue of frivolity" and which displays, in its presentation of the life on a fashionable beach, an interesting use of swift and brilliant acrobatic motifs, combined with an imitation of the fascinating *film ralenti*. In the Swedish Ballet, Cocteau's *Boeuf sur le toit* and *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel* revive some of that exaggerated satiric quality manifested in French magazines like the "Assiette au Beurre" of before the war, and introduces not only the remarkable masques of Jean Hugo, but an important innovation in the delivery of lines through phonographic horns.

Cocteau is the sponsor too of much else that is modern in the Swedish Ballet. But he has not confined his work to ballet. His *Antigone*, produced in a primitive Picasso setting of crude blue at the Atelier, with the composite voice of the chorus coming through a black phonographic disk, is a simplification of the Greek tragedy which preserves with unusual exaltation of style its elements of overwhelming force, in a measured ceremonial. And most brilliant of all Cocteau's contributions to the contemporary stage of France is his adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, given recently in the Soirées de Paris at the Cigale. This is a condensed version, staged like a ballet, with a stylization of manner, a precise and exquisitely regulated sublimation of the

play's content absolutely foreign to Shakespeare, especially in the early stage of his dramatic development to which *Romeo and Juliet* belongs. It is a fine re-creation of the essence of the legend from a new point of view, and results in an intense concentration of effect. It would have been worth doing if for no other reason than to introduce the original and distinguished costumes of Jean Hugo, who uses, throughout, the high Renaissance ruffs to set off heads and faces, gives most of the actors white gloves to emphasize their gestures against a dark and schematic background, and lends an extraordinary delicacy to the contours of the body by following the curves of arms and legs in the men's costumes with an inset of color lighter than that of the rest of the costume, like those luminous effects we see in the figures of certain woodcuts. Cocteau, too, aside from his active work in the theatre, has wielded a good deal of influence through his epigrammatic writings on the subject.

In connection with Cocteau, we are brought to a realization of the enormous part which ballet has played in the present state of the French stage. The ballet organization of the French Opera can claim no great distinction, but the developments of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, in many respects the most epoch-making of all stage manifestations of recent years in Europe, have centered in Paris, and French painters and musicians have been inextricably bound up with its progress from 1911 to the present day. And the Swedish Ballet, which in spite of its shortcomings in the technique of the dance has brought out much that is new in contemporary French music and painting, is essentially a Parisian institution.

Altogether, Paris is a vastly more interesting centre of theatrical production than most Americans suppose. This is not to be credited, of course, strictly to the activities of French dramatists, but to the international scope of its interests and the general cosmopolitanism which is evident in all its artistic manifestations.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VOTING

WHAT are the bases of our political opinions? What are the real motives behind our votes?

The Editor asked these questions and two authors, in making their replies by way of these two sardonic articles, prick the bubbles of some cherished popular illusions.

According to Mr. Kent the popular intelligence to which American politicians are so fond of making sonorous appeals, simply does not exist. The vast majority of those who vote, vote blindly with their party. The so-called independent voter, votes under compulsion of prejudice, emotion, and propaganda. We vote against things and candidates, not for them. We choose between evils; and almost invariably prefer mediocrity to greatness; indeed, a really great man has small chance of being elected President of the United States.

According to Mr. Powell any man who enters politics is forced, by the rules of the game, to abandon his intellectual integrity and to aid in the creation of those fictions with which we delude ourselves. Just now, farmers are in fashion, and to be successful in politics we must be able to milk a cow and stack a hayrick, — at least in newspaper pictures.

I — SCARE 'EM

FRANK KENT

“**I** HAVE an abiding faith in the intelligence of the American people.”

Beyond question, as that dear old declaration is the most familiar, it is also the supreme piece of American political balderdash. For a hundred years it has been part of the oratorical equipment of political candidates great and small, and there seems no reason to doubt it will continue so for a hundred years to come. From Presidents to precinct executives, it has been and is the favorite formula with which to appeal. The sincere and the insincere, shallow demagogues and great statesmen alike deliver themselves of it with the unfailing air of having uttered an original conviction. In the political campaign just ended, all three of the candidates for President and all three of the candidates for Vice-President proclaimed it as their belief at different times, under different conditions, but in language almost identical. Not only that, but there was scarcely a candidate for Congress or the Senate in any State who did not do the same thing.