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Pierre Jourda, *Le Théâtre à Montpellier (1755-1851)*. Presented by Michel Bideaux. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, SVEC 2001. x + 268 pp. Appendices, glossary, bibliography, and indices. £45 / FF450 / Euros 78 (pb). ISBN 0-7294-0702-0.

Review by Jeffrey S. Ravel, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In 1940 Pierre Jourda (1898-1978) occupied the Chair of French Literature at the University of Montpellier. A recognized specialist on the sixteenth-century noblewoman and writer Marguerite de Navarre, he also had published on nineteenth-century French Romanticism. Like many other European scholars during the Second World War, however, he found that the difficult circumstances of the war years forced him to alter his research agenda. Confined to Montpellier for the duration of the Occupation, he undertook an archivally based study of local theatrical history from the construction of Montpellier's first permanent theater in 1755 to the end of the Second Republic. Influenced by the publication in the 1930s and 1940s of Max Fuchs' pioneering works on French provincial theater history, Jourda spent the war combing through local records in search of information about the stage scene from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries.[1] He had completed a manuscript by the end of the war but never saw it through to publication during the immediate post-war period, nor did he return to the project during his lifetime.

The book under review, therefore, began as a project restricted by the rules of German wartime occupation but is now presented as a contribution to scholarly discourse within French academic circles and as an inspiration to those outside the *hexagone* who study the nation's cultural history (p. 1). It has been placed in print by an Oxford-based institution known internationally for its rich, often quite specialized studies of eighteenth-century French topics. It is, in short, an orphan of the Second World War that has found a home of sorts in today's much altered academic world, where old definitions of "local," "national," and "international" are increasingly unclear. The reach of the Voltaire Foundation will ensure this long-dormant work an international audience, but what will its readers learn from this detailed, tightly limited study of a century of French provincial theater? What do we hear when we listen to this voice speaking to us from occupied France about the headaches of theater administrators and the pleasures of theater audiences in the provinces up to two centuries earlier?

Jourda divided his study into two parts: a brief section devoted to the theatrical history of Montpellier from the mid-eighteenth century to the Revolution and a much lengthier section, comprising over eighty percent of the text, focused on the ups and downs of the city's theater from 1789 to the middle of the next century. The paucity of sources explains in large part the brevity of the prerevolutionary section. Two chapters, one devoted to the construction of the playhouse in the early 1750s and the other to issues of repertory, personnel, finances, and critical response, allow Jourda to present the scanty archival material in a straightforward, objective fashion. His template is that created by Fuchs in his magisterial work on the provincial theater during the Enlightenment. The author is frank about the limitations of the departmental archives and prerevolutionary periodicals that constitute his major source of information. While these materials provide fragmentary evidence regarding box office receipts and the generic composition of the spectacles provided for the Montpellierites in the final decades of the Old Regime, they are too incomplete to provide any significant nuance to the picture of eighteenth-

century provincial theater established by Fuchs or expounded upon by authors such as Henri Lagrave and Martine de Rougemont writing subsequent to Jourda.[2]

Occasional sallies cribbed from periodical reviews, which become more extensive and informative in the 1780s, offer tantalizing insights. One witty 1787 critic offered up a “recipe for a good, modern tragedy” that included exotic virgins, heroes who roared like lions, multitudinous armies, and exploding volcanoes or rivers over-running their banks. These ingredients, and many others mixed in, combined to make the “modern tragedy”, and proved that “of all the follies humans were capable of committing, that of writing stage plays was the worst” (p. 28). This comment hints at the presence of a lively literary scene in prerevolutionary Montpellier, but Jourda’s text never leaves the confines of the playhouse and the periodical press to give the reader a larger sense of the role played by the theater in the cultural life of Montpellier during the Enlightenment. The work of Daniel Mornet and others had already posed questions about the experience of literate French subjects in provincial academies, coffeeshops, salons, libraries, and other spheres of sociability, but Jourda’s text makes no effort to situate the theater in this pre-1789 context.

The decades following the outbreak of the Revolution provide Jourda with fuller documentary remains and more extensive and often competing periodical coverage of the Montpellier theater. The remaining eight chapters of the book based on this material treat a series of more fully-documented topics over the two generations from 1789 to the middle of the nineteenth century. Each of these chapters is a self-contained essay in which Jourda presents in chronological order all the archival evidence he has found on a specific subject. These subjects include “public administration of the theater,” “finances,” “the public,” and so on. This approach has its merits, in that it allows Jourda to present a full picture of his archival findings on each theme. A chapter entitled “*Organisation du théâtre de Montpellier*,” for example, is based on a serial examination of ten rental agreements for the town theater between the municipality and entrepreneurs from the 1790s to the 1840s. Another chapter on the entrepreneurs themselves presents a table of the two dozen or so men who served in this capacity in the first half of the nineteenth century and then proceeds to narrate what is known from the archives about the careers of each one. A discussion of “the troupe” relies on archival evidence and periodical anecdotes to attempt a reconstruction of the town’s theatrical personnel over six decades and to extrapolate information about the repertory (comedy, tragedy, lyric opera) that these performers were capable of presenting.

The interpretation throughout is cautious. Jourda is acutely aware of how much data has been lost, and how many qualitative perceptions never were recorded, in Montpellier’s theatrical past. Typical of this approach is a laconic comment found after a discussion in which he attempts to establish the frequency with which certain plays were performed in the period: “*Il serait agréable, et facile de tirer des conclusions de ces statistiques. On ne s’y risquerait pas. D’abord, parce qu’elles ne sont pas complètes. Ensuite, parce que leur interprétation serait des plus délicates: il conviendrait, pour cela, de tenir compte d’éléments dont on ne peut pas toujours apprécier la valeur*” (p. 176). While this comment and the chapter structures outlined above enhance the credibility of the author as a critical analyst of historical materials, their restrained interpretive stance also frustrates the reader who would like to know more about the social, cultural, and political context in which the Montpellier playhouse opened its doors for over sixty years. There are tantalizing documentary hints that point to the social functions of the theater, as when an 1820 newspaper critic comments that the profession of actress is an “*honnête bourgeoise, une manière d’épicière féminin qui vend ses chansons comme un autre sa canelle...*” (p. 148). Jourda concludes that the profession of the performer was becoming *embourgeoisé*, and that if the performers who played on the municipal stage were not in effect public functionaries, they at least were salaried employees who became angered when they did not get paid (p. 150). But these insights are not fully integrated with others about the town government’s determination to support the municipal playhouse, the financial straits faced by all municipal theaters in the first half of the nineteenth century, or the public’s conflicting demands upon the director and performers.

It may be that the multiple social and cultural functions of the theater, the fragmentary nature of the institution's archival remains, and the longstanding pull of formal literary analysis on theater scholars make historical synthesis difficult in the field of theater history. A more recent book, F.W.J. Hemmings' *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France*, also consists of a series of more than a dozen stand-alone essays on topics such as "audiences," "the acting profession," and "the profession of playwright."^[3] It may also be that Jourda knew he would need to complement his wartime soundings in the departmental archives and libraries with research in the relevant Parisian depositories. The National Army archives at Vincennes contain rich collections relating to the administration of Old Regime provincial theaters that kept officers and soldiers occupied, and the records of the Comédie-Française and various state ministries contain letters and reports related to many aspects of the provincial theatrical scene in France. Jourda's honest accounting of his local sources would have profited from an equally searching appraisal of the Parisian records, an investigation he was obviously not at liberty to undertake in the years when he pursued this study.

Whether the problem is one of the ephemeral nature of the theatrical past or one of Jourda's lack of time or opportunity to pursue Parisian research and push his analysis further, a reader today reaches the end of this work yearning for a more contextualized thesis. *Le Théâtre à Montpellier* provides an accurate, scholarly report on the contents of the local archives. But the book gives little clue as to how this research might resolve some of the large questions about French politics, culture, and society posed by its findings. The book's final chapter, titled "*La Crise du théâtre*," contains the author's only effort to render such a solution. Here Jourda enumerates the symptoms of the "crisis": rapid turnover of directors, neglect of the theater by social elites, uncontrollable audience behavior, inconsistent and uninspired performers, declining box office receipts, higher overhead for salaries and productions. These problems, he claims, added up to a "crisis" in the world of Montpellier theater in the first half of the nineteenth century.

But the invocation of "crisis" implies a prior or a subsequent period of fiscal stability and artistic achievement, a kind of thespian utopia that has never existed in France or within any other national theatrical tradition. Audiences and administrators complained about drunken and inattentive performers in the eighteenth century, and the state sought ways to fund the chronically deficit-ridden national theaters long after 1850. Far more interesting is the ambivalence contemporaries displayed towards the municipal stage, as Jourda notes (pp. 226-8). While the newspapers constantly registered dismay at the tedium and poor quality of Montpellier productions, they also overflowed with proposals to remedy the situation; the state of affairs had grown intolerable, yet the civic pride and social nature of the town made it unthinkable to close the playhouse doors for good. Actors, administrators, and audiences in Montpellier from 1790 to 1850 muddled along, occasionally reveling in the excitement of an unexpectedly enchanted evening of theater, more frequently regretting the many and overlapping shortcomings that plagued this fragile and complex artistic enterprise.

What distinguishes this particular period of Montpellier's theatrical history is a sense of the growing pains of the theater as a medium of entertainment. The courtly and elite patrons who had supported the French-language stage from the period of Louis XIV to the Revolution could no longer be counted on to patronize this particular provincial theater after 1800; the town's bureaucrats, merchants, and laborers were not entirely comfortable with the role of theatrical patron in their absence. But to say that this moment of social and cultural transition constituted a "crisis" is to miss an opportunity to articulate the interesting, complicated interplay of social distinctions and aesthetics that is always at work in the theater. Jourda ultimately implies that the crisis of the early nineteenth-century stage was one in which the municipal playhouse failed to live up to the standards of French culture that helped to define the nation after 1789. The reader is certainly entitled to wonder if the author's perceptions of crisis were not heightened by the difficulties he and his compatriots lived through in the first half of the 1940s.

NOTES

[1] Max Fuchs, *La Vie théâtrale en province au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Droz, 1933); and Max Fuchs, *Lexique des troupes de comédiens au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Droz, 1944).

[2] Henri Lagrave, et al., ed. *La Vie théâtrale à Bordeaux des origines à nos jours. Tome I: Des Origines à 1799* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1985), devoted to one of the most important and well-documented provincial theater towns in eighteenth-century France, provides the fullest study we currently possess of an eighteenth-century French provincial theater, its performers, its audiences, and its larger cultural context. Martine de Rougemont, *La Vie théâtrale en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1988), 279-96, updates Fuchs' 1933 work. See also the essays, images, and bibliographies in *Le Siècle des théâtres. Salles et scènes en France, 1748-1807* ed. Pierre Frantz and Michèle Sajous D'Oria (Paris: Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, 1999), esp. 93-193. Lauren Clay, a Ph.D. student at the University of Pennsylvania, is completing a dissertation that promises to expand our knowledge of the administration, cultural politics, and gender dynamics of the French provincial stage in this period.

[3] F. W. J. Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). While each of Hemmings' essays provides well-grounded insight into a specific aspect of the theatrical past, the author provides only a five-page introductory synthesis, in spite of the book's provocative title. In fairness, one should note that Hemmings' companion volume, *Theatre and State in France, 1760-1905* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) does attempt a synthetic view of state efforts to "administer" the Parisian stage over a century and a half.

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