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Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1999. xi + 256 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$42.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-3544-7. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8014-8541-X.

Review by Andre Spies, Hollins University.

Jeffrey Ravel's *The Contested Parterre* is a work of considerable merit, worthy of a place among the histories of French cultural politics produced in recent decades by Cornell University Press, the most prominent publisher in the field. The book is beautifully turned out. The scholarly apparatus is impressive, and footnotes make it particularly user-friendly. The index is unusually thorough and complete. The map and illustrations complement the text nicely, and they are right there when you want them. I did not detect a single typographical error.

The prose is also commendable, if not brilliant. It was not clear, however, whether Mme. d'Aiguillon or her coachman was "furiously drunk and insolent," (p. 23). The grammar suggests the former, and the context the latter. Nor was it clear who "the tenants of French absolutism" might have been (p. 9). And please let us all agree to nip the neologism "louisquatorzian" firmly in the bud. Microsoft *Word* just redlined it, as well it should. But four or five quibbles in 250 pages is not bad.

Ravel's topic is the *parterre*—the pit—of the privileged theatres of Paris, with occasional excursions to the fairgrounds and the provinces, under Louis XIV, XV, and XVI. The chronological parameters in the title (1680-1791) are a bit misleading, since there is a whole chapter devoted to 1630-1680, and less than three pages on the revolutionary period. Ravel deals with the physical environment of the *parterre*; the social composition of its denizens; their theatre-going experiences, with special emphasis on the enforcement of audience discipline; and their role as representatives of popular and national opinion. The book is based on original archival research, extensive contemporary printed material, and modern works dealing with theatre history and the practical applications of royal absolutism.

For me, the most interesting and important section of the book was the first chapter, "Parterre Practices in Eighteenth-Century Paris." The liveliness of his information, much of it based on primary sources, is magnified by the format in which Ravel presents it. After defining the social composition of this segment of the theatre-going population, the author takes us through the experience of a performance from the spectators' perspective, in sections titled "Outside the Playhouse," "The Curtain Rises," "Participating in the Performance," and "The Curtain Falls." That both the first *cafés* and the first sidewalks in Paris should have grown up around the theatres for the benefit of playgoers supports Ravel's claims for the centrality of the theatrical experience to much of the city's *ancien régime* population. Compiling this data was a formidable and most useful undertaking. It is gratifying to see the *Encyclopédie* consulted as a reference work, instead of as a mere artifact. The author is to be particularly commended for mining the extensive nineteenth-century literature on the French stage, where tedious spadework is rewarded with obscure but indispensable nuggets of information.

Ravel's articulation of the social composition of the *parterre* does not strike me as altogether successful,

however. In the absence of major fires with identifiable victims—the usual recourse of the theatre historian—he uses lists of *parterre* spectators who were detained by the authorities for various kinds of disturbances and of victims of various crimes committed there, mostly petty thefts, who complained to the authorities. He presents his raw data in an appendix, which is such a courageous invitation to the reader to second-guess his categorization that I am almost ashamed to take him up on it. But even granted the enormous difficulties of defining social categories that scholars can agree on, and the even fiercer complications of fitting *ancien regime* social or occupational descriptions into them, there is more that could have been done and done differently.

I would have been curious to learn, for example, about the ways in which the perpetrators differed from the victims. Perhaps the author decided that subdividing his categories even further would have made the samples so small as to be meaningless. There is little attempt to distinguish members of groups active in the struggle for political influence in *ancien regime* France: the *noblesse de l'épée*, *parlementaires* and their clients, *haute bourgeoisie*, and lesser bourgeois types. It should at least have been possible to speculate as to which among these spectators enjoyed noble status. The unfamiliar category of “service classes” seems particularly problematical, both inherently and as a catchall that conflates “*bourgeois de Paris*,” which in this context presumably means *rentiers*, with *seigneurs* and *écuyers* and with the lawyers and procureurs, who might legitimately be thought of as providing services. Lumping clerks and domestics together in one category also elides a crucial distinction between literate and illiterate troublemakers—between the shock troops of pre-revolutionary political agitation and mere *lumpenproletariat*—even if their financial circumstances made them natural allies at times (p.26).

Ravel has no difficulty establishing his case for the heterogeneity and overall social inferiority of the *parterre* audience, at least in comparison with the (presumed) composition of the loges, but this is a disappointing place to emerge from the abundance of data that he has uncovered. One result is that he cannot use social status in any very sophisticated way to interpret the activities and sentiments of the rioters. Another is that there is no baseline from which to draw meaningful comparisons with the statistics presented in the section “Quantitative Aspects of Theatre Policing after d’Argenson” of those who were arrested during a period of particularly severe disturbances.

The body of the book details the various disturbances generated by the *parterre* in the privileged theatres and the attempts of the Bourbon monarchs to impose discipline on the audiences by armed force. The least interesting sections belabor the organizational details of this network, as in Chart I, “The hierarchy of theatre discipline from Louis XIV to 1751,” which situates “exempts” (what they were exempt from is never explained) in an intermediate position between the lieutenant-general of police and guards and spies, with the king at the top. More apposite to Ravel’s argument are the descriptions of the riots that he has uncovered from the files of the examining magistrates. On the surface, it looks as if drunken soldiers and other rowdies—the author calls them “hooligans” (p. 87)—took over the theaters periodically and disrupted performances. The police intervened more and more effectively over time, but their power went to their heads until eventually they became instigators of the violence.

But the author finds these altercations to be politically significant inasmuch as the “King’s subjects expressed discontent with the monarchy through their cries, gestures, and collective actions; and the Crown, through its network of spies and other policing agents, paid close attention to what these dissatisfied individuals said and did” (p. 6f.). The *parterre* “transgressed the hierarchies of royal authority” (p. 91), and heavy-handed repression of *parterre* exuberance made audiences increasingly aware “of the government and its determination to create an official culture” (p. 98). This argument is plausible overall, and some of what Ravel has to say is convincing. He makes an effective case that promotion of patriotic plays played a prominent role in the formation of French national identity (pp. 196-200), and that in resisting the authorities during the 1770s, the *parterre* adopted the rhetoric of liberty that was ubiquitous at this time (p. 218). Much of the rest of the evidence seems over-interpreted to me (most egregiously on p. 209, or in the references to a “quota system” on pp. 142 and 150), but

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readers will have to judge for themselves.

The theatre historian might expect to find support for a political interpretation of *parterre* behavior in an analysis of the motivations or occasions for these disruptions. There are occasional references to riots for or against certain performers and hints of cabals for or against certain playwrights, but this is not the kind of case that Ravel wants to make. Ultimately, his argument rests on the idea that “random” (p. 134) disruptions of the royal theatre were *ipso facto* so many challenges to absolutism. There is some evidence—not a lot—that contemporaries looked at it this way. In the 1720s, for instance, one of the guards remarked that such brawls show “a lack of respect for the Opera house which belongs to the King” (p. 144). Ravel suggests that some sort of ideology was implicit in the concept of the privileged theatre: “a spectator in the capital was aware that playwrights had to tailor their scripts to the needs of a *troupe* that had to answer to the government before it had to answer to the paying audience member” (p. 98). But this raises more questions than it answers.

If, as Ravel claims, the police “confronted a public that claimed an aesthetic, commercial, and above all political right to veto the performance onstage” (p. 186), I would like to know which ones they wanted to veto and why. Why might there have been cabals against Racine (p. 91, n. 61) or Voltaire (p. 58)? Why didn’t the *parterre* like Saint-Foix’s *La Colonie*? What were the changes in *Sophonisbe* that evoked their displeasure (p. 63)? What was their reaction to *Beaumarchais*? Chapter three, “Parterre Becomes an Actor,” is the only one in which Ravel looks at what transpired on stage. One section of the chapter features a *Comédie-Italienne* piece with a character named “Parterre” (pp. 104–6), and another explains the failure of Voltaire’s *Mariamne*. Two other sections look at ways in which the *Comédie-Italienne* and the fairs evaded the restrictions on spoken French dialogue. This chapter is most interesting and persuasive. Otherwise, Ravel resolutely avoids numerous opportunities to relate the audience’s reaction to the content of the plays that they supported or rejected.

Perhaps I am straying perilously close to the illegitimate kind of review that criticizes the author for writing his book, instead of a different one that the reviewer would have liked to read. It is true that I would expect an account of the *parterre* based on, say, Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical concerns to be more productive than one not exactly informed by but taking its departure from Habermas. Engaging and contributing to the literature on the assertion of royal absolutism in various public spheres and on the consequent frustrations that led Louis XV (supposedly) to exclaim “if I were lieutenant-general of police, I would ban *cabriolets*,” is of course a perfectly legitimate, even fashionable undertaking. But readers should be advised that the bulk of Ravel’s book is more closely related to studies about the extension of social discipline to contested spaces such as the marketplace or army barracks perhaps than to the concerns of theatre historians. The latter will find the material in chapters one and three more rewarding.

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