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Pascale Goetschel and Jean-Claude Yon, eds. *Directeurs de théâtre XIX^e-XX^e siècles, Histoire d'une profession*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, Collection «Histoire de la France aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles», 2008. 253 p. B/W illustrations. 25 €. ISBN 978-2-85944-600-0 (pb.).

Review by Guy Spielmann, Georgetown University.

Overall, scholarly studies on theater are disproportionately biased towards playwrights. While analyses of drama figure prominently on school and university reading lists and get referenced in annotated editions of plays that are studied in literature classes, research on the work of actors—and, for the contemporary period, directors—is both far less abundant and poorly disseminated outside of a narrow circle of professional specialists. The many other «technicians» who make theatrical productions possible are seldom ever considered at all, with the exception of a few celebrated set and costume designers, such as Torelli, the Bibbiena family, Bakhst or Meyerhold.

Therefore, a whole volume dedicated to theater managers does indeed fill a gap, as its editors claim. *Directeurs de théâtre XIX^e-XX^e siècles* gathers thirteen essays originally given as conference papers in 2003-2004 by researchers from a variety of disciplines, some outside of the domain of performing arts (both project leaders Goetschel and Yon are affiliated with the Centre d'histoire culturelle des sociétés contemporaines (CHCSC) at the Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin). Such variety appears to have been indispensable, as the main point to emerge from this collection is that theater managers do not fit neatly into a single profile, even in a given time and place. In fact, as several of the authors emphasize, the term of "profession" uneasily applies to men (and much more exceptionally, women) for whom managing a playhouse and/or a company could be an avocation, a passion, a hobby, a simple pastime or an investment, rather than a career, strictly speaking.

Undoubtedly, the lack of a straightforward job definition accounts for the variety of foci represented in this volume. Some researchers investigate the work of a single manager in the manner of a case study, others deal with a genre or a period in a specific country, whereas two offer survey-style pieces, one of which sketches out an international comparison. Although the title does not clearly reveal it, the scope is limited to Western Europe, and, unsurprisingly, weighed towards France (or, more specifically, Paris), in spite of the editors' obvious effort at incorporating studies on the French provinces as well as other countries. The time span is also restricted, mostly to the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, based on considerations that essentially pertain to French history; in fact, greater consideration is given to the period when France definitively adopted a republican regime (in the 1870s), as the system of privileges and heavy censorship was abandoned, until the immediate post-WWII era, when the creation of state-subsidized "National Dramatic Centers" changed the nature of theater management. Even if a more exact title would undoubtedly have been overly long and awkward, the reader must be made aware that this anthology does remain within bounds narrower than may be expected, a limitation that some of the authors sometimes forget.

The volume most appropriately opens on a survey by Hélène Boisbeau of the legal and sociological background of theater management in France since the Revolution abolished all privileges, triggering off intense theatrical activity under profoundly changed conditions (pp. 13-30). Though limited to

France, this study offers a universally valid reminder that dramatic practice can only be understood in the context of institutional and social strictures; like that of director, the profession of manager—again, supposing that it can be considered as such—did not emerge as a separate, independent activity until the last decades of the nineteenth century, in contradistinction to what playwrights and actors do, a known quantity for twenty-five hundred years. This chapter includes a wealth of factual information that makes it a valuable reference piece.

Hélène Carrère-Saucède also provides a great deal of original facts and figures, but limits her analysis (pp. 31-44) to management of French South-Western provincial small towns in the nineteenth century, where theater company leaders found themselves cumulating the functions of business manager, artistic director, stage director, chief of personnel, and public relations officer. Predictably, these “polymorphous” individuals, many of whom had started out as actors, found it difficult to handle such varied responsibilities with equal success, so that failures and bankruptcies were frequent—a leitmotiv throughout the book—, though Carrère-Saucède cites one Joseph Hermant as a rare example of someone who managed to avoid financial ruin.

Both tone and content shift noticeably in Sarah Meneghello’s contribution (pp. 45-57), which examines the rivalry between privately funded and state-sponsored theater in France in the first half of the twentieth century. The discussion, which reads more like a conference paper than a written article, remains superficial, accumulating a series of short vignettes without reaching a clear conclusion other than the “polarization” after 1959 of a long-standing feud between two approaches to theater, when the creation of a ministry of Cultural Affairs in France formally pitched the “public” and “private” sectors against one another.

While Nicole Wild also tackles a very specific corpus, data on managers of the Paris Opéra-Comique between 1801 and 1913 (p. 61-70), her purpose is well defined from the start: identifying the causes for success and failure of the twenty-one men who held the position. Wild demonstrates persuasively that the single most important factor was simply experience, or rather a previous positive experience of running profitably a more modest venture. Here again, the economic dimension appears dominant: a successful manager is above all someone who can keep the business afloat. The author cites one interesting counter-example: Camille du Locle, who lost his shirt and his health running the Opéra-Comique, though many of his bold innovations would eventually redefine this venerable institution in significant ways: this forgotten man introduced into the repertory a work that has since become the opera most often performed overall, *Carmen*.

In the next chapter, Joël Huthwohl and Laure Saveuse-Boulay take an opposite tack by scrutinizing the career of one single manager, Jules Claretie, who ran the Comédie-Française for a record twenty-eight years (pp. 71-86.). This eminently readable and entertaining portrait, however, does not tell us much other than what we knew or suspected: that heading the *Maison de Molière* is a highly political position and one made even more precarious by the formidable staff that one has to manage, a group of actors with a strong sense of legitimacy and self-importance. Claretie seems to have done exceedingly well because he was well-connected in France’s top political and social circles, because he had outstanding diplomatic skills and because, paradoxically, he was not a man of the theater to begin with.

Pascale Goetschel, one of the volume editors, offers the most contemporary assessment by looking at the managers of National Dramatic Centers, a French fixture that reflects both the country’s highly centralized structure and various attempts at “decentralization” between 1945 and 1981 (pp. 87-110.). This well-documented essay manages to bring out the many paradoxes that riddle dramatic activity in France; contradictions between ideals and personal ambitions as well as between noble principles of bringing culture to the people—namely, the people in the provinces—and a resilient reality of Paris-centric elitism. All of this, however, may sound anecdotal to anyone not specifically interested in the French state of affairs, since no other country seems to have developed such a socio-political culture of

extreme centralization, where any significant artistic endeavor must originate in or radiate from the capital city.

With Malincha Gersin (pp. 113-129), we go back in time and back to the French provinces (namely the city of Lyon), in an essay that closely resembles the earlier chapter by Meneghello. Here again we find a profusion of details gleaned from archival work, but little analysis, so that the chapter concludes on a series of questions and directions for future research rather than conclusions. This data, however, appears strongly convergent with what we have read thus far: theater management in nineteenth-century France was an extremely risky venture most often leading to bankruptcy, but the fact that it was also a potential stepping stone to quick social prominence explains that willing and eager candidates could always be found.

By contrast, Geneviève Faye chooses to focus on an exceptionally successful manager, Henry Larochelle, a self-made man who transformed himself from lowly laborer to administrator of a dozen private Parisian stages (pp. 131-141). Larochelle combined a solid business sense with a flair for popular entertainment with serious pedigree (Hugo, Dumas, Verne); the fact that his name is virtually unknown of theatre historians, who have devoted keen attention to his contemporary André Antoine (who, on the other hand, is notably absent from this volume), shows just how scholarship has remained bound to people and forms that seem intellectually important in the here-and-now, while dismissing others that reflect the taste and priorities of audiences from a distant place and/or time.

Roland Huesca similarly proposes a monographic piece on Gabriel Astruc, a Belle Époque wizard of showmanship and self-promotion who restored theater to the status of major social activity it had enjoyed in the ancien régime, though in a resolutely more democratic fashion (pp. 142-165). Among Astruc's many claims to theatrical fame are his introduction of the latest technology in the playhouses he managed, the practice of seating beautiful young women in a specially designed front row (the *corbeille*, which might be translated as "display case"), and booking the legendary *Ballets Russes* at his Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Huesca goes far beyond chronicling Astruc's achievements to put forth a compelling argument on their sociological significance: under his leadership, the playhouse became a kind of temple for "lay spirituality" where audiences could commune in a newly defined culture.

After Huesca's rich article, arguably the strongest in the whole volume, the next chapter by Marie-Ange Rauch (pp. 166-181) is quite a letdown, reading like an extended biographical notice that mostly pertains to the activities of one Jean Darcante as union activist between 1940 and 1960, and to the problems he encountered after the war because of suspected collaboration. Darcante is hardly a household name even among specialists, and his role as manager get only marginal attention here, making the reader seriously wonder about the relevance of this article.

The last part of the volume is devoted to managers in other European countries: Germany, Austria, Great-Britain and, rather unexpectedly, Portugal. Christophe Charle takes a comparative approach between managers in three capital cities (Berlin, Vienna and Paris) that definitely stand out as major centers of theatrical activity in the second half of the nineteenth century (pp. 185-205). Although the subject matter may seem dry at first, Charle makes a number of astute observations, such as the fact that even highly successful managers have remained neglected by literary history, when they did not also distinguish themselves as formal innovators; or that managers tend to be remembered mostly for their failures, such as not appreciating the work of a playwright who would later earn universal praise, passing up masterpieces or "exploiting" actors. They found themselves victims of "that great discursive genre of the nineteenth century, hatred of the bourgeois class, of which they became repressive incarnations in their role as mediators between authors and audiences, or as representatives of commercial interests and mediocre taste, against artistic innovation" (p. 186, translation mine). As a matter of fact, this comparative study brings out so many valuable points that, in my opinion, it should have been placed at the beginning of the volume. Among the most provocative findings is a clear

acknowledgement of social and geographical discrimination at work in France in the recruitment process and career trajectories of major theater managers.

With Claude Ayme, we take once again the biographical path; the evocation of D'Oyly Carte (pp. 207-220) is quite entertaining and rich in anecdotal content pertaining to the activity of Gilbert and Sullivan. But D'Oyly Carte's great achievements, in this case, appear to have stemmed entirely from his prescience in putting the legendary team under contract, which does not clarify the qualities that make an outstanding theater manager in general (the same could be claimed of Col. Tom Parker, who "discovered" Elvis in 1955). Crediting such men with a superior "flair" or a great "nose" for talent comes short of producing an explanation that one expects in a scholarly study, however.

Graça Dos Santos' chapter veers much further off-topic by sketching out a panorama of Portuguese theater under the long rule of dictator Ernesto Salazar (pp. 221-241). This rambling, often repetitive and awkwardly written text makes little contribution to our understanding of the profession of theater manager, other than belabor the point that it is a position potentially fraught with political risk, as evidenced by the joint careers of Rey-Colaço and Roblès-Monteiro. This couple, combining the functions of troupe leader, actor and director, suffered from censorship, yet became to be regarded as representatives of official, state-approved theater, and as such ended up being shunned by new generations when Salazar's repressive regime finally fell in 1974.

The few pages of conclusion (pp. 243-247) that close the volume reiterate how difficult it is to define the profession of theater manager, and how difficult it was to possess all at once the many qualities required to make a success of it. This suggests much greater complexity in the workings of a theater enterprise, as various roles and functions appear not only intertwined, but intertwined in ways that change from one troupe to the next. Separation between the business side and the artistic side may be complete here, nonexistent there.

The reader of *Directeurs de théâtre* may well reach the end of the volume with a somewhat muddled impression and some unanswered questions. It is notoriously difficult to fashion a smoothly unified and balanced book out of a set of conference papers; here, it seems as if the various authors wrote their respective articles under different guidelines. Some obviously try hard to present data, findings and analyses in a manner that can have general validity, even when proceeding through a single case study; some seem content to remain at a purely anecdotal level, and others write as if a narrow topic were of universal relevance and interest. In spite of the fact that this volume was produced in France and mostly by French scholars, the often unacknowledged focus on France becomes an issue when presenting situations and analyses that rely on specific French laws or customs, without the question being raised as to what obtained in other countries. On the other hand, one may wonder why one of the longest (and also among the weakest) pieces is devoted to Portugal--not a crucially important place in the development of contemporary theater, to put it mildly--whereas no mention is made of Italy or Russia, for instance.

Such quibbles hardly overshadow the fact that there is much valuable information to be found in *Directeurs de théâtre*, of the kind rarely seen in mainstream theater studies. Boisbeau's survey of legal history should be standard reading for any course on modern French drama, and Huesca's chapter on Gabriel Astruc offers a most incisive analysis of the role that an exceptional manager--yet one who is not a self-professed artist or a visionary director--can play in the theatrical enterprise. I would have loved to read a companion piece on P. T. Barnum's career and the influence of such men on the contemporary notion of "spectacle."

It must be said in conclusion that this book, despite its somewhat uneven and Franco-centric nature, does make a most welcome contribution to the study of theater as social practice. It makes us aware of a considerable volume of data that have remained largely unexploited, but which, when brought to light

and aptly analyzed, can drastically change the way we regard theater by rectifying the distorted vision of an “art” that primarily involves playwrights and actors. Managers provide a crucial interface between the universe of dramatic creation, which often functions self-referentially in a “bubble,” and the larger universe of society and public life. Not an easy task indeed, and definitely one that deserves greater respect and greater scholarly attention.

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Guy Spielmann
Georgetown University
spielmag@georgetown.edu

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