CHAPTER 8

Working-class audiences

The underprivileged urban population of pre-revolutionary France was not by any means deprived of sources of more or less innocent entertainment, both at the fairgrounds and at the various commercial theatres that were started up on the northern boulevards of Paris during the last three decades of the *ancien régime*. First Nicolet's theatre, later renamed the Gaîté, then Audinot's Ambigu-Comique and several smaller houses were established here, specializing in a repertory primarily aimed at lower-class audiences and priced in accordance with their straitened means. In addition, there was a long-standing tradition of throwing open the larger, more aristocratic theatres to all comers, free of charge, to mark occasions of national rejoicing. Thus, the royal theatres put on free performances to celebrate the birth of a daughter to Marie-Antoinette in 1778 and again at the birth of heir to the throne in 1785. During the Revolution, as part of their efforts to sustain the morale of the *sans-culottes*, the Jacobins resolved to generalize what had been under the monarchy a very sporadic festivity, and instituted, in August 1793, the enactment of named 'republican tragedies' for which no admittance charge was made, the theatres concerned being promised an appropriate indemnification. These free performances, known as 'représentations de par et pour le peuple', were for a short while of fairly frequent occurrence, the rule being that designated theatres should mount one every ten days (the *décade* having replaced the seven-day week under the new revolutionary calendar); and these continued under the Directory, though no doubt at a reduced tempo. Some indication of their popularity, causing gross overcrowding of the theatres whenever one was announced, is afforded by Charles Maurice's description of an incident he witnessed at a production of Demoustier's *Le Conciliateur* given 'de par et pour le peuple' at the Théâtre Feydeau in 1797. In the course of the evening

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the right-hand balcony, overburdened by eager spectators, gave way or at least

> began to sag in a frightening manner. Instead of leaving, those who were crammed into it clung on to each other or on to the planks that were starting to part; but they continued to follow the actors as though nothing was threatening them. Nevertheless the commotion could not but be accompanied by some noise to which the rest of the audience objected, shouting: 'Silence! Throw them out! One can't hear a word!' The balcony on the left, even more irritated, started to curse the half shipwrecked right balcony, and an exchange of stinging repartees ensued, bringing the performance to a temporary halt.[1]

Fleury, who had the lead part in the comedy, took it on himself to discharge the part of 'conciliator' which he was acting in the play, and succeeded in calming down both sides; his pleas for quiet were finally accepted and the performance completed without further mishap.

The custom continued under the succeeding regime; writing of the celebrations in 1801 which marked the conclusion of peace with England, Lemaistre noted that all the theatres except the Italian Opera were 'thrown open to the public', though his friends dissuaded him from witnessing any of these gratis performances, warning him 'that the attempt would be attended with considerable danger',[2] with reference possibly to the near-disaster at the Feydeau four years earlier. Free performances were put on regularly on 15 August every year from 1802 to 1813 in celebration of Napoleon's birthday; there were others at each of his major victories in the field, not to mention the anniversary of his coronation, his wedding to Marie-Louise of Austria, and the baptism of his infant son in 1811. Etienne de Jouy devoted an essay, dated 4 December 1813, to one of these popular festivities, probably the last of those celebrating the anniversary of Napoleon's coronation.[3] He describes how, at daybreak, crowds begin to collect in front of the walls where the theatre bills were posted. The literate read them aloud,

> sometimes mispronouncing grotesquely the titles of the works to be performed. Each theatre has its own fanciers; but it is above all along the embankments and at the central market that it is delightful to listen to the arguments about the merits of each play, the actors' talents and the preference to be given to the various types of entertainment.

At noon every workplace is deserted; reckless of what they lose in wages in satisfying their desire to attend a 'free performance', the

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people start forming queues two hours in advance in front of the theatre of their choice. Jouy emphasizes that, contrary to what one might expect, the biggest crowds gather before the 'privileged' theatres advertising opera or classical tragedy; but these were art forms that working-class people never saw except on such occasions and their curiosity was whetted by the prospect of witnessing, at least once in their lives, what the rich take pleasure in and pay large sums to enjoy. In front of the Théâtre-Français 'the crowd is immense, heaving and pressing up like the waves of the sea . . . The doors open; the ocean does not flood the docks at Cherbourg with greater violence; the mob invades in an instant the courtyard, the staircases, the corridors, the pit and the boxes.' The normal appearance of the auditorium is totally changed; instead of the fine ladies with their fans and the elegant dandies accompanying them, one sees bonneted fruit-sellers, market porters wearing their grey hats, coalmen and barbers besprinkled with the detritus of their trade. They sit where they can, this one in the other's lap, a dozen or more crowding into a box meant to accommodate four or six at the most; the noise is terrific, with everyone shouting, whistling, stamping. But as soon as the curtain is raised, absolute silence is restored as if by magic; if anyone were to break it, he would be instantly expelled.

The audience on those days of 'no charge for admission', by the very fact that it can seldom afford to go to the theatre, brings to bear on the performance a concentration of attention that nothing can disturb, a keenness of judgement that nothing can blunt. Taken separately, not one of the individuals composing it could perhaps have understood a single line of *Zaïre*;[4] but this mass of men, as unenlightened the one as the other, like a pile of damp hay that ignites spontaneously in a loft, is suddenly endowed with a warmth of sentiment and a purity of taste which permit it to discern all the beauties of the work and to appreciate all the efforts of the actors.

Jouy's impression, in this last respect, was amply confirmed by Talma,[5] who admitted that

such an audience brings out the best in me. You should come along to one of those free admission days, you would see how it responds to every hint, how it applauds at all the right places, how warmly and with just the right measure. It grasps every nuance, nothing escapes it; it is nature in the raw, if you will, but it is nature, and if the actor is truthful, the working-class audience, which is truth personified, responds immediately.

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The tradition of free performances was kept up for a few years during the reign of Louis XVIII, and the account given by Mme de Bawr in her memoirs confirms everything Jouy had said respecting the chaotic scene before the curtain rose and the utter silence that fell as soon as the players were seen on stage. The anecdote she proceeds to tell illustrates to perfection the mixture of appreciation and mystification created in this rather special audience by the works sometimes offered at that period by the senior theatre – works designed for a very different public composed of the cultivated aristocratic theatre-goers of the *ancien régime*; it shows too how terrified the actors were at heart of the lawless audience before which, exceptionally, they were called on to perform. Curiosity had led her to attend a revival at the Comédie-Française of an old tragedy by Belloy, and having watched the first two acts she decided to pay a social call on Mlle Mars in her dressing-room. Suddenly a frightened actor appeared at the door, interrupting their conversation with the news that by some mischance the third act had been entirely skipped. 'They're on the fourth act now, they're going to think we're trying to make fools of them, in which case we're all lost.' The party crept downstairs, trembling, and stood in the wings. The fourth act was being listened to with the usual rapt attention, 'the fifth act was played through just as peaceably; at last the curtain fell, the spectators broke into applause, not having noticed, thank heaven, that they had not been served up with the whole tragedy'.[6] The furious riot, which the actors seriously thought would break out if the rabble discovered they were being shortchanged and which might easily, as they imagined, have led to the theatre being burned down, had fortunately been averted.

Probably because of the deep-seated unease felt by the governing classes in France at this period, confronting a discontented proletariat suffering wage-cuts and layoffs as the industrial revolution gathered pace, free performances for the working class seem to have been discontinued later in the Restoration and were not resumed under Louis-Philippe. After the 1848 revolution J. P. Lockroy, newly appointed administrator of the Comédie-Française, had the idea of reviving them, but with a difference: instead of the doors being open to all comers, with the inevitable result that everyone who could squeezed in, free tickets up to the maximum number the theatre would hold were drawn by lot and distributed to the lucky ones at the various city halls. George Sand, reporting on the first of

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these occasions, stressed how well behaved the audience was. 'Not a single apple core or bit of orange peel was left in the boxes, not a sound was heard while Corneille's lines or Molière's were being declaimed: nothing but a religious silence, a gentleness of manners, a delicacy in the applause such as could be looked for in vain elsewhere.'[7] The programme was concluded by a recitation of the Marseillaise by Rachel; after which a young workman, carrying a bouquet for which a collection had been taken among his mates, mounted the stage and begged her respectfully to declaim once more the final verse. Unfortunately only two of these free performances could be organized that year before the political horizon darkened again.

They were resumed, however, under the Second Empire: regularly on the birthday of Napoleon I from 1853 onwards until the last in 1869, and for certain special thanksgivings, such as the birth of an heir to the throne. These free performances were always held in the afternoon and in the absence of the claque. The repertoire at the Comédie-Française usually consisted of well-tried classics, *Phèdre*, *Andromaque*, *Le Médecin malgré lui*, etc.; but occasionally a new play was tried out and evoked applause or hissing exactly as if it were being performed in front of the usual select audience. The practice continued after the fall of the Empire; only the date of the regular annual performances was changed, from 15 August to 14 July, and in addition certain notable events of importance to the new republic were commemorated in this way, such as the death of Hugo, solemnized by a free performance of *Hernani* by the Comédie-Française on 7 June 1885, the centenary of the summoning of the Estates General for which the Odéon offered *Le Mariage de Figaro* (5 May 1889), and a revival of Voltaire's *Mort de César* by the Comédie-Française on 22 September 1892 to mark the centenary of the First Republic. Free performances of works thought eminently suited to a working-class audience were also occasionally put on at the request of authors who, needless to say, waived their royalties for the occasion: Zola and Busnach persuaded the directors of the Ambigu and the Châtelet respectively to open their doors to a non-paying public for special performances of *L'Assommoir* (14 April 1879) and *Germinal* (28 April 1888).

These free shows, popular as they were, never of course came anywhere near satisfying the insatiable demands of the working-class population of Paris for dramatic entertainment. They were always

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special occasions, allowing the plebs the chance otherwise denied them of entering the august theatres normally frequented only by their 'betters' and of watching the cream of the acting profession who, by all accounts, exerted themselves to the utmost for this unusual but invariably appreciative audience. But for ordinary, day-to-day purposes the lower classes relied, down to 1862, on the chain of little theatres situated along the Boulevard du Temple, in accordance with a tradition which had lasted a hundred years. The working-class audiences here consisted not of factory-hands, too poorly paid in any case to afford visits to the theatre, but of the skilled artisans whose workshops were scattered over the area to the east of the Rue Saint-Denis, together with small shopkeepers and pensioners able to spare the price of an occasional cheap seat out of their meagre annuities.[8] The Boulevard du Temple had, of course, altered considerably in character since its heyday in the years immediately preceding the French Revolution. The numerous side-shows, cafés, and public gardens had largely disappeared, and in the nineteenth century it did not differ greatly from any of the other boulevards of Paris. Under the July Monarchy 'the hovels that used to cluster round every theatre disappeared; the wine-shops, the brasseries, and the open-air stalls were replaced by imposing houses and elegant cafés . . . The orange-sellers were installed behind commodious tables, protected by huge red awnings from the sun by day and the rain by night.'[9] Some things never changed: the vendors of liquorice water or roast chestnuts were still active, as too the girls offering cakes and apple-tarts to people in the queues who now, courtesy of a caring municipality, no longer had to stand in the rain but could shelter under a convenient canopy. At nightfall, the Boulevard du Temple was still one of the brightest spots in the city, thanks to its numerous street lamps and well-lit shops, cafés and theatres.

> The Parisians gravitated there spontaneously, unconsciously, drawn by the brilliance as the moth to the lighted candle and in obedience to man's invincible horror of the dark. Every evening a cheerful, excited, busy or loitering crowd criss-crossed on the broad terrace, arm in arm or dreaming by themselves, idly sauntering or pursuing love-affairs, and jostling the actors in the crowd who established in this way a tie with their audiences for whom they were never strangers.[10]

Seven theatres were strung along the Boulevard du Temple – eight if one included the Porte-Saint-Martin at the extreme end

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which was, however, never a predominantly working-class theatre. The oldest of them was the Gaîté, the theatre originally built by Nicolet and, in spite of its name, specializing in the nineteenth century in sombre melodrama. Audinot's Ambigu-Comique, burned to the ground in 1827, had been re-erected on a different site the following year, and next in line on the boulevard now stood the Folies-Dramatiques, which like the Gaîté showed melodrama but more often musicals. Then came the Funambules which owed its immense popularity almost entirely to the mime of genius, Deburau; the Cirque-Olympique, alternating between military pageants and fairy plays; and two more recent foundations, the Théâtre-Historique and the Délassements-Comiques, the first intended originally for Dumas's historical dramas but turning later to comic opera, and the second owing its prosperity to its energetic director Léon Sari, later to inaugurate the imperishable Folies-Bergère. Finally there was the diminutive Petit-Lazari, where the plays had the oddest titles, like *The Philosopher and the Bed Bug*, where they played blind man's buff in the pit while waiting for the curtain to rise, and where audience participation was a recognized feature of the entertainment.

A member of the audience, sitting in the pit or the upper gallery, would shout out some rude comment; the actors on stage would reply, using the vilest slang; this would be followed by reciprocal threats and a cross-fire of invective which delighted the assembly, who would often fill the same part as the chorus of antiquity, until the authorities intervened, though always cautiously.[11]

The Boulevard du Temple was commonly referred to as the Boulevard du Crime, a sobriquet not intended to reflect on the morality of those who frequented it, but given in consideration of the immense quantity of bloodshed and mayhem on its seven stages, particularly on those where the melodrama ruled supreme. Read today in cold blood, the text of most of these thrillers that held the working-class stage in the first half of the nineteenth century would strike us as more comical than terrifying; they were nothing like as hair-raising as the inventions of André de Lorde and his associates at the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol in the first decade of the twentieth century. Nevertheless they presented an extraordinary spectacle, which it was necessary to witness, as Jules Janin wrote,

sitting in the middle of the pit, surrounded by bareheaded, panting women and aficionados in workmen's overalls, at the peak of the furious consump-

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tion of apples, gingerbread, barley-sugar, beer and exclamation marks. This crowd has to be heard, the performance has to be seen to be believed. On the stage, theft, prostitution, gambling, informers, police, the executioner, the guillotine; below, men and women eating and gawping.[12]

They were so drawn into these horrors that they sometimes made no distinction between the actress and the persecuted heroine she portrayed, or between the actor and the bewhiskered villain he impersonated. 'Vice is vice on the boulevard', commented Thackeray approvingly:

and it is fine to hear the audience, as a tyrant king roars out cruel sentences of death, or a bereaved mother pleads for the life of her child, making their remarks on the circumstances of the scene. 'Ah! le gredin!' growls an indignant countryman. 'Quel monstre!' says a grisette in a fury. You see fat old men crying like babies, sucking enormous sticks of barley-sugar.[13]

It was not unusual for the villain to have to slink away at the end of a performance by the back door; even so he might be tracked through the streets to his lodgings by the hostile spectators, so incensed they would on occasion relieve their feelings by hurling a brick through his window. 'The lower orders', wrote Eugène Mirecourt in 1843,

give themselves up body and soul to the fascination of the drama; they follow the plot anxiously as it unfolds. You see them, with necks outstretched and mouths gaping: not a word do they miss, not a syllable; they shudder at every turn of events and weep at the conclusion. They take everything for real with a frightening naiveté.[14]

Hence, of course, the complete silence that fell as soon as the curtain rose, something that so astonished observers at the Comédie-Française when a free performance was given; they thought they were behaving with extraordinary respectfulness, while in fact they were doing no more than what they were accustomed to do on the boulevard.

These seven theatres aforementioned were so located that the audiences became more and more exclusively working class as one moved from west to east along the Boulevard. Juste Olivier described the Gaîté as 'a theatre such as one might find in the provinces, with the difference that the better-class people are seldom to be seen there. The fat, jolly ladies filling the front galleries looked to us to be shopkeepers, rolling in the aisles and fanning themselves with the

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cheap fans on sale for six *sous* in the theatre itself.'[15] The Folies-Dramatiques, before 1834, was typically working-class: cheap, dirty, and always jam-packed. 'Even in the summer months they crowded in, gasping with the heat but enjoying every moment; nobody dreamed of making an outing to the country for a breath of fresh air after their day's labour ... They never troubled themselves with what was on the programme, that had no importance at all: they were off to the theatre and that was that!'[16] But in 1834 Frédérick Lemaître's hilarious satire *Robert Macaire* attracted a different audience: everyone wanted to see it, 'all Paris crowded into its narrow, smoky hall to applaud vigorously this eccentric work, which the customary public of the place failed to understand and would occasionally hiss. Since then, the Folies-Dramatiques have always kept something of Robert Macaire.'[17] The repertoire became less crude, attracting a predominantly middle-class audience, while its former patrons drifted away to the Funambules and the Petit-Lazari. By 1842 the Folies-Dramatiques had been transformed, its balcony resplendent in white and gold, the benches in the pit no longer covered with grey cloth but with well-stuffed scarlet velvet; and the prices reflected this metamorphosis. 'The best society of the Marais and the suburbs have conferred lustre on this theatre', wrote Gautier at the time; 'you get looked at askance if you turn up in a jacket; in a workman's overall you would not gain admittance. It's gloves everywhere in the balcony and front boxes, the audience making it a point of honour to sit nowhere else; the pit is practically empty.'[18]

The reputation of Jean-Gaspard Deburau, spread by hearsay and newspaper reports, drew the very best of Saint-Germain society to the Funambules; but the working-class admirers of the marvellous mime refused to desert their theatre in face of this invasion by the 'nobs', so that every evening the audience presented a mingling of the classes such as was rarely seen in any Paris theatre. It was, as Janin wrote,

> a confusion of lace and unspeakable rags, of velvet and filthy workmen's overalls; the scent of ambergris at odds with a strong smell of garlic, sprays of camellia brushing up against chip bags, the satin shoe alongside the clog; here, patches and stains, there the virgin white of an immaculate glove; the artisan's horny mitt alongside the delicate hand of a duchess. At the same moment you could hear the soft murmuring of those gently mocking voices and the hoarse shout of a tipsy man.[19]

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Probably Janin is allowing his pen to run away with him in this passage, and the picture he draws must not be taken too literally: the pricing policy, at the Funambules as elsewhere, would have ensured a partitioning of the classes rather than a fusion. But it was a theatre which the poorer people persisted in regarding as strictly their own, and where the better-dressed were allowed only on sufferance. While waiting for the entertainment to start,

> woe betide anyone who dared to direct an impertinent lorgnette on to those picturesque groups, clustering and hanging dangerously from the railings of the balcony! Woe betide the ridiculous costumes that ventured to display themselves in a front box, or any spectator who too obviously flourished a scent-bottle before his nostrils! Innumerable sarcastic shouts, an impetuous hurrah, animal cries, an unbelievable luxuriance of imagination would soon have put an end to the slightest breach of manners.[20]

Deburau was the magnet that attracted these interlopers from another world; but the great Pierrot was theirs alone, sprung from the people and playing for the people. However little attention they may have paid to the curtain-raiser, when the orchestra struck up the air which announced the mime, a religious hush gripped the entire audience. At the Funambules, the only actor heard in dead silence was Deburau, who never uttered a word. Such was their respect for him that if a stage-hand made a sound behind the scenes they yelled for quiet. One evening, some reveller ventured to imitate a donkey's braying when Deburau made his appearance. 'In less than no time, the unfortunate fellow's cap and overall were torn to pieces; he was passed from hand to hand like a parcel to the door of the pit, where an enormous kick in the rear sent him flying.'[21]

The Funambules, the Délassements-Comiques, and the Petit-Lazari at the east end of the Boulevard du Temple constituted the three playhouses that the working classes had marked as peculiarly their own; at the Petit-Lazari it was considered imprudent to venture inside unless one was wearing the dress of one's trade, the stonemason's overall or the mud-bespattered garb of the street-sweeper. If for any reason displeased with the performance, the audience never had the least compunction in venting their dissatisfaction, but whereas at other theatres a violent outbreak of whistling and catcalls would suffice to call an actor to order, at the Petit-Lazari such expressions of disapproval would have been regarded as altogether too tame. Banville recalls how, during the July Monarchy

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when Bonapartism had numerous adherents among the lower classes, one actor had the misfortune to parody Napoleon the Great. The allusion was immediately understood and violently resented.

One could feel as it were a storm gathering in the auditorium; suddenly the thundercloud burst; there was a furious whistling and numberless projectiles of the most varied kind, from smoked sausages to apples, descended like hail on the actor's head, more dishevelled than King Lear's. Two policemen entered to restore order; but a moment later they had disappeared, vapourized like two drops of water falling on to a red-hot metal sheet. What had happened in reality was that they had been stuffed under the benches, from which their vague complaints could be heard in the darkness, and from which they would not have emerged until the day of judgement had not a squad of municipal guardsmen, helmeted and with drawn sabres, arrived in the middle of the uproar to evacuate the hall after taking it by storm.[22]

These theatres were not only dirty and ill lit, but tiny too. At the Petit-Lazari the stage was so low that the actors had to crouch down as they made their entry, and if they exited on the far side, since there was no way of crossing behind the back curtain, they emerged on to the boulevard and re-entered the theatre by the stage door. The maximum capacity at the Funambules was only 500, and it was always full since a seat in the gods cost less than a newspaper or a loaf of bread; those who could not get in at the 6.30 p.m. performance on high days and holidays could always try for the second, at 9.0 p.m.

The Boulevard du Crime lasted down to 1862, when it fell victim to Haussmann's grandiose plans for clearing the slums and driving handsome new arteries through Paris. This inevitable sacrifice to the requirements of modern town planning had long been anticipated; even under the July Monarchy it was rumoured that the city authorities were contemplating a realignment and straightening of the Boulevard which would necessarily involve the destruction of most of the 'workers' theatres', some of which dated back to the beginning of the century. The Théâtre des Funambules gave its closing performance, a lengthy pageant in mime entitled *Les Mémoires de Pierrot*, on 17 May 1862, and on 14 July following, demolition began. Under the Second Empire, 14 July was no longer celebrated as a national holiday; but the choice of date could not but be regarded as ominous. 'On 14 July 1789, the people stormed the Bastille and demolished it stone by stone, dealing its first gigantic sledgehammer blow against "the rampart of tyranny". On 14 July

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1862, tyranny counterattacked, seizing the people's Boulevard du Temple and destroying this rampart of gaiety and amusement.'[23] Most of the theatres disappeared for ever: the Gaîté and the Cirque-Olympique were relocated, the remainder became rubble, to the poignant regret of certain sentimentalists. 'Where are the snows of yesteryear?' asked Vizentini in 1867, listing all the little playhouses that were now but a cherished memory. 'Anyone who talks nowadays of the former Boulevard du Temple passes for an old buffer opposed to progress and urban sanitation; the general public could not care less.'[24] But the faithful, ragged, turbulent audiences had to look elsewhere for their nightly entertainment, and they could find it only in theatres – some of them new, like the enormous Théâtre du Châtelet – which no longer catered exclusively for a working-class clientèle.

Meanwhile, as the luxurious new apartment houses rose either side of the broad new boulevards, the factories and workshops where the proletariat found employment moved further out from the centre, and the theatres that had been built in the outlying suburbs acquired a new importance as neighbourhood places of entertainment. The oldest of these dated back to the second decade of the century. It was in 1817 that Louis XVIII had granted to one Pierre-Jacques Seveste the exclusive right to establish theatres beyond the inner city boundary. Seveste owed this favour, it was said, to the macabre chance that his grandfather had been gravedigger at the cemetery where the remains of Louis XVI had been interred; the old man's reminiscences remained in Seveste's memory and, at the Restoration, he was able to indicate to the authorities where the dead monarch's bones could be located and exhumed. In 1819 he opened the first of the suburban houses, the Théâtre de Montparnasse; this was followed by the Théâtre de Montmartre in 1822. At his death in 1825 the licence, passing to his widow, was further exploited by his two sons, Edmond and Jules, down to 1855 when Henri Larochelle bought them out; by 1867 there were eight suburban theatres, scattered round the outlying districts and managed by Larochelle and three associates.

In this year Jules Claretie devoted his theatre column for 16 September to a roundup of the audiences to be found at the suburban theatres, from which it is clear that they inherited many of the characteristics of the now vanished working-class theatres on the Boulevard du Temple. At Montparnasse, the audience was

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packed like sardines, noisy and excited during the intervals, filling the auditorium with a warm reek, with the buzz of crowds in the streets on public holidays, then suddenly falling into a religious silence as soon as the curtain twitched before rising. An audience of workmen and clerks, all eyes glued on the stage, the best audience anywhere, easily moved to applause, laughing at everything and nothing and thoroughly amusing themselves for their money.

At Belleville, much the same: 'it's the same public one found for the old melodramas of the Boulevard'. There were, however, some inexplicable paradoxes. Claretie noticed a curious contrast between audiences at the Batignolles and at Montmartre, two theatres in close proximity which alternated repertoires week by week. At Montmartre they responded readily to modern drama, and seemed to appreciate the 'advanced' work of Augier, Sardou, and Barrière, which they much preferred to the outdated melodrama in which, conversely, audiences at the Batignolles revelled. 'It was much the same difference as one used to observe between audiences at the Folies-Dramatiques and the Ambigu-Comique', he commented; not, however, a class difference, since those who attended both suburban theatres were the same blend of middle-class folk, 'quiet to the point of being more or less passive', and the working class, 'turbulent and easily excited'.[25]

Another feature common to the small local theatres and the extinct working-class theatres on the Boulevard du Temple was that the audiences habitually combined the pleasures of the table with those of the spectacle, instead of eating their evening meal first and seeing the show afterwards as happened elsewhere. This was something that struck Justin Bellanger forcibly when he began his acting career at the Gobelins. The working-class family would invariably arrive carrying a basket of provisions; at the interval, the goodwife would 'calmly share out, to her brood first of all, then to her husband and herself, the portion of victuals due to each. The meal generally consisted of garlic sausage or assorted delicatessen. It was washed down in the course of an excursion to the nearest wineshop, after which they resumed their seats and fell to applauding the actors frantically.'[26] The solitary spectator, the young unmarried worker, would take his seat 'carrying a loaf of bread under his arm. Then, at the interval, he would find, stationed along the pavement, women selling hot broth such as are encountered early in the morning at the approaches to the markets. He makes his meal al fresco, dipping his

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bread into a steaming bowl of bouillon.'[27] It was not so much that they needed constant sustenance as that the two classes had different eating habits: the bourgeoisie was accustomed to sit down twice a day to a substantial meal, the workers tended to subsist on more frequent snacks.

By the beginning of the twentieth century some of the older suburban houses had become very run down, to some extent no doubt in consequence of competition from the *cafés-concerts*. The Belleville theatre had degenerated into a veritable fleapit, still gas-lit, the approach steps worn down, while inside 'everything breathes decrepitude, dilapidation, melancholy, from the greasy pass-out tickets soiled by twenty thousand dirty hands to the cracks in the ceiling and the scored, faded imitation leather of the benches'. The audience was correspondingly lack-lustre, the men

> ragged, down-at-heel, with a scarf wound round the neck to replace the absent shirt, their hands and faces smeared with soot, arriving just as they were after their hard day's labour, looking for a bit of relaxation. And the women take hardly more trouble. Apart from the occasional hussy provocatively got up in the hope of a pickup, the rest are dreadful, with crumpled blouses and skirts badly hitched up, the flabby flesh of their anaemic faces scored with premature wrinkles, with tangled, ill-combed hair and pitiful eyes, distressful, angry, and frightened.[28]

But even the slum-dwellers and outcasts must have needed what amusement they could buy for the few pence they could spare.

Over the years 1903–5, alongside this ruinous theatre in the suburb of Belleville, a second 'working-class theatre' called the Théâtre Populaire sprang up in the same district, running a series of weekly performances and showing a different play each time. The hall it used was large, able to accommodate between 1,000 and 1,200 spectators; prices, ranging from 25 centimes to a maximum of 1 franc 50, were well within the reach of the working-class population of the area. The object of the director, Berny, was clearly not to make money: he wanted to provide his audiences with a more elevated repertoire than that normally offered them. He opened on 19 September 1903 with Romain Rolland's drama of the French Revolution, *Danton*; over the short period during which the Théâtre Populaire was open, it put on plays by Rostand, Octave Mirbeau, Ibsen, and Hauptmann. Works were selected according to whether they satisfied Berny's three desiderata, formulated as follows: '1, to provide relaxation, both physical and moral; 2, to provide a source

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of spiritual energy, sustaining and inspiring the soul; 3, to enlighten the mind, awaken thought, and show how to see and judge oneself and others.'[29]

The idealism that informed Berny's thinking can be traced to an initiative launched by the *Revue d'art dramatique* in 1899, when it offered a prize of 500 francs for the best proposal for a working-class theatre. The prize was won by Eugène Morel, who visualized a new theatre, 'less refined than that of the élite but with none of the vulgarities associated with the theatrical fare served up to the lower classes'.[30] It would need to be subsidized by the state, in order to provide low-cost seating, though Morel was not in favour of giving completely free performances which would simply transform it into an evening version of the municipal libraries. Behind these ideas one can detect a certain hostility to the avant-garde theatres of the time and their repertoire of baffling symbolist works; and also, more importantly perhaps, the fear that the unthinking masses, unless they could somehow be indoctrinated by contact with ideologically sound (i.e. republican) works of dramatic art, would remain at the mercy of the gutter press which had shown itself so successful in arousing ignorant chauvinism and anti-Semitism at the time of the Dreyfus Affair.

The movement for a 'people's theatre' eventually foundered over the difficult question of finance. If the state were to subsidize the venture, it would be in its power at any point to reduce or cut off the subvention if the repertoire ventured beyond the ideological parameters it could tolerate. If finance were sought from left-wing organizations, the same thing could happen; and besides, the leaders of the socialist party were reluctant to allocate resources to a cultural experiment when the priority was to campaign for a social and economic transformation of the country. So Berny's experiment, so well-meaning, had to be abandoned after a couple of years: the theatre had been, in spite of the low entry charge, only one-quarter filled on average. He attempted unsuccessfully to sell the idea of collective subscriptions to the trade unions; however sympathetic they may have been, they preferred understandably to reserve their limited funds for more essential purposes. A similar fate awaited other innovators. A former actor at the Théâtre-Antoine, H. Beaulieu, opened a new theatre on the Avenue Clichy in the Batignolles district, which was a neighbourhood not primarily working class; he soon discovered that the bourgeoisie would not attend unless they

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could reserve seats, as was by now common at other theatres, while the working classes fought shy of a repertoire which included plays by Sudermann, Hauptmann, and Emile Verhaeren; within a year Beaulieu was forced to close his doors. Adrien Bernheim was not much more successful with his awkwardly named 'Œuvre des Trente Ans de Théâtre' which had two distinct aims: to provide pensions for actors who had worked in the theatre for at least thirty years; and to introduce the labouring classes to the French classics. He had noticed that in spite of improved transport, workers and their families were reluctant to make the effort to attend the 'national theatres' where these works could be seen performed by experts; his idea was to take a trained company drawn from the Odéon and the Comédie-Française to various working-class neighbourhoods where they would present the classics, Molière, Racine, Beaumarchais and the rest, in whatever premises proved available in the district.

The movement, taking these various forms, lasted barely a decade. By 1905 it had collapsed, though the proliferating experiments had aroused considerable interest, even attracting Zola's notice before his untimely death; one of his plans for future implementation had been to write a series of some dozen plays dramatizing the different problems facing the Third Republic since its foundation thirty years earlier. 'There are complaints', he noted, 'that there is no theatre for the people. Why not create it?'[31] The epitaph on the movement was written by Jean-Richard Bloch in a lengthy essay entitled 'Le Théâtre du peuple: critique d'une utopie', published in the review *L'Effort* in June 1910. He argued here, echoing Zola, that all attempts at interesting industrial workers in the theatre were doomed, since no plays were being written by and for that class. He still had hopes this might happen; but a proletarian art 'will have no connection with the drama as it exists at present. It will be written specially for it . . . The working classes will provide it themselves, or they will never have it.'[32] But, by 1910, the working classes were in any case beginning to desert the theatre, abandoning it to the middle classes which had dominated it for so long; they had discovered a new medium, for it was at this time that the earliest cinemas, in darkened halls, showing flickering films where it seemed to be perpetually raining, were beginning to spread like wildfire throughout working-class districts in Paris and the provinces.

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