THE THEATER IN FRANCE

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In order to welcome the Comédie Française in New York the Museum is holding an exhibition of the theater in France in Gallery D 6 from October 14 to November 13. The Comédie is lending many of the memorabilia and works of art that it has collected during three centuries. Besides stage jewelry used by some of its greatest actors there will be the most precious sentimental relic of all French theatrical costume—the nightcap worn by Molière when he played the Malade Imaginaire a few hours before he died. The large portrait gallery in the Théâtre Français will be represented by paintings of many stars, chief among them Mignard’s portrait of Molière, the only really living likeness of the founder of the Comédie Française. Ever since the 1670’s, when the theater became a central interest in French intellectual life, it has captivated many of the greatest artists. The present show therefore includes works by Watteau, Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, Moreau le jeune, Daumier, Manet, Degas, Carpeaux, Lautrec, and Vuillard. One could compose the whole history of French painting and sculpture for over two hundred years solely through works inspired by the theater.

The French have the longest unbroken acting tradition in the Western world. Indeed, one must go to the Orient for stagecraft that has acquired so long a training. The Japanese Kabuki theater is only slightly older than the French and flourishes as vigorously today. But, alas, what is much the oldest and subtlest stage tradition of all—the Chinese—seems even now to be coming to the end of its millennial greatness.

In the West, however, no theater can match the French for continuous and consistent achievement. Since about 1670, when Racine and Molière reached their zenith, not a year has passed in Paris without the presentation of many of their major works. Thus what the Comédie Française now brings us is like a pot-au-feu—that
soup forever simmering on the back of the stove, into which the cook tosses the current sausage ends and cabbage scraps and from which she can always ladle out a savory bowlful that combines the tang of today with the richness of many yesterdays.

Anyone spending a winter in Paris can count on seeing the masterpieces of Molière and Racine, together with representative works by Corneille, Marivaux, and Musset, presented with taste, intelligence, and dash. Thanks to the stable, state-supported repertory companies the French know their dramatic literature in its full, long line.

How different is the lot of the English-speaking theater-goer! A London season usually includes a couple of the half dozen popular plays of Shakespeare and a Restoration comedy or two. An American is ashamed to confess how little turns up in New York—and less elsewhere. Even with the vitally important experiment of the three Stratfords one would have to wait a lifetime to see more than one kind of production of upsetting, volcanic works like The White Devil, Coriolanus, Measure for Measure, or Troilus and Cressida. Without being able to experience the lash and stimulus of many of our greatest plays, our playwrights turn perforce to model themselves on the picayune self-pity of Chekhov.

In France the continuous performance of great plays has established the theater as the guardian of the sanctity of the French language, the citadel of the word. Every French schoolboy can recite whole scenes from Molière and Racine as models of a language that he may inflect but must not deform. Language in France has become an article of faith, to be defended in its original purity, and never to be subjected to joking. The constant presentation of French classical dramas does for the French language what universal churchgoing used to do for English by stimulating our ear repeatedly with the manly splendor of our Bible. Now that most of us do not hear the Bible regularly, we have lost the memory of our language and feel perfectly free to maul our English for our diversion—to such an extent that a worn, flat dictionary word can strike the ear more brightly than the latest slang. If we heard Shakespeare oftener we might discover richer fields for romping right in the central classics of our tongue.

The English stage has never really recovered from Cromwell's closing of the theaters from 1642 to 1662. That gap of oblivion swallowed up the practice of the Elizabethan stage and Shakespeare's instructions to his actors. Charles II's producers had nothing to start with except hearsay of twenty years before and the example of France. In France, on the other hand, the theater was not even ruffled by the more drastic revolution. Various causes enabled the French companies to survive all political storms. For one thing Molière's deeply moral comedies made the French stage the defender of decency, not, as in England, its frequent flouter. Thus the French Revolution protected the stage to propagate republican virtue, while the English revolution fought it as an enemy.

In England Queen Elizabeth I was too stingy to support the theater, and the patronage of James I and Charles I was too brief and ended in too loud a calamity to establish any tradition of state subvention. But in France Louis XIV in 1666 housed Molière's troupe in the Palais Royal, next door to their present home in the Théâtre Français, and in 1665 started to pay a steady stipend, which has kept the company going ever since. Fifteen years or more before
this subvention, the troupe had already organized its internal finances on a basis so sound that it has lasted almost unchanged to this day. The company has weathered the centuries as a state within the greater state of France, ruled by its senior members in such a way that each actor shares the profits according to his abilities. By gaining skill he gets a larger share in the profits, and by exerting himself to a finer performance he makes larger profits for everybody. And when he is too old to work he can count on a pension. The members of a company thus accept each other like the members of a family, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. In this spirit Molière and the Béjart family stuck together through their first failures in Paris, through a dozen years of barnstorming in the provinces, and through the gathering glory of their final triumph with court and public.

The group acting of Molière’s company gradually perfected a then unknown precision of fit and finish. As a contemporary remarked, “Never was comedy so well played, or with so much art. Each actor knows how many steps he has to take, and counts his every glance.” Something of this smoothness of interplay has been handed down from actor to actor through the centuries. It has not produced inimitable, startling geniuses like Réjane or Duse, but its lesson is perhaps the more valuable for being imitable.

The disciplined orchestration of Molière’s company and the creation of new great plays raised the French stage in half a century from something little better than a sideshow at a country fair to one of the capital arts of France. As the stage took its permanent and central place the greatest French architects designed theaters and scenery, and the greatest French painters drew on the stage for some of their most memorable work. Thus no other country—not even Italy, the inventor of stagecraft—has recorded the theater with such varied and splendid works of art as those now on show in the Museum.

French and Italian comedians of the seventeenth century, including Molière at the left in the character of Arnolphe in “L’École des Femmes.” Print after a painting of 1671 in the collection of the Comédie Française
Theater in the rue St. Honoré (center) where Molière’s company played from 1661 to 1673, alternating with an Italian troupe. The building was part of the old Palais Royal and was originally Cardinal Richelieu’s theater.

The Crowning of Voltaire, engraving by Moreau le jeune. The Comédie Française paying tribute to Voltaire after a performance of his “Irène” in 1778. Voltaire is in the box in the upper left corner. Dick Fund, 1917

Le Foyer des Artistes, print of 1874 after a drawing by Pelcq. The foyer of the Comédie Française crowded with famous people of the theater and the art and literary world of Paris. Among them are the actors Delaunay and Coquelin the elder; Sarah Bernhardt; Mounet-Sully, tragic actor; Édouard Pailleron, writer of comedies; and Émile Perrin, Director of the Comédie Française. Mignard's portrait of Molière hangs above at the left.