

Rousseau on Arts and Politics
Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert

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Rousseau and the Construction of French Provincial Playhouses

Since I am a historian, I'd like to begin with a chronological observation. As we know, Rousseau published his *Lettre à d'Alembert* in 1758. The *Lettre* forcefully argues that the establishment of a public theater in Geneva would be detrimental to the economic, political and moral structures of the town; by implication, it suggests that other cities should also be wary of immoral playwrights, dissolute actresses, and hedonistic despots who might attempt to impose the corruption of a theatrical, and theatricalized, society upon them. My chronological observation is the following: Rousseau's tract appeared in print in the midst of a huge theater building boom in the French provinces. From 1750 to 1773, twenty-three provincial French cities witnessed the construction of new playhouses. Perhaps as many as a dozen more saw older theaters refurbished or replaced. Although the pace slowed from the start of Louis XVI's reign in 1774 until the Revolution, some of the most important theater architecture of the Old Regime appeared in its last fifteen years, including Victor Louis' Grand-Théâtre in Bordeaux in 1780 and Nicolas Ledoux's Besançon playhouse in 1784.¹

My purpose in this paper is not to claim that Rousseau's treatise prevented or inspired the construction of French provincial playhouses in this period. Rather, I wish to suggest a different context in which we might understand Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert*, that of the cultural politics surrounding the construction of public theaters in the francophone world of the second half of the eighteenth century. We know about the *Lettre à d'Alembert's* important role in the increasingly wide rift between Rousseau and the Encyclopedists; we are aware of the *Lettre's* place in the long tradition of western anti-theatricalism; we are attentive to the vision of separate, gendered spheres articulated in the text.² But Rousseau's jeremiad also arose out of the particular circum-

Max Fuchs, *La vie théâtrale en province au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Droz, 1933), 105-107.

²On Rousseau's anti-theatricalism, see the chapter in Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981); on gender issues in Rousseau, see Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 66-89.

stances that obtained in Geneva, and his work continued to play a role in the city's political upheavals for the next quarter century.³ In the French provinces, public playhouses became a site for the examination of class issues, relations between local, regional, and royal powers, and the merits of state militarization. When seen from this perspective, the quarrel provoked by d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* article and Rousseau's response becomes part of the ongoing political and cultural struggles staged in the public theaters of the Old Regime.

It will be helpful to know a little about the history of the public theater in Geneva as a point of reference. When Rousseau published his *Lettre*, of course, there was no such establishment within the city; Rousseau's essay was prompted by d'Alembert's suggestion that the town fathers construct a public theater; d'Alembert's suggestion, in turn, was prompted by Voltaire, then residing just outside the Republic, who wished to see his dramatic works staged in a Genevan playhouse. By 1762, however, the aristocratic, Voltairian faction within the city had succeeded in erecting a playhouse, thereby winning an important symbolic battle over the 'burgher,' or bourgeois, faction, which had taken Rousseau's anti-theatricalism to heart. But in early 1768, as a constitutional crisis brewed within Geneva, this theater was burned to the ground under mysterious circumstances. Although historians have never determined the cause of the fire, many at the time suspected that a group of the town's burghers had committed an act of arson. Geneva remained without a public theater for the next fourteen years, until a new edifice was constructed in the wake of the aristocratic reaction in 1782 that left the city's noble classes in sole control of town affairs.⁴ Thus the impetus to build a theater in Rousseau's Geneva came in the wake of his book, from the aristocratic classes who sought control of the city's political and cultural life. The playhouse itself became a potent sign of the Republic's turbulent class politics in the latter half of the eighteenth century, as aristocratic, bourgeois and disenfranchised commoner factions sought symbols with which to wage their political battles.

Unlike the Republic of Geneva, however, disputes over public playhouses within the French Kingdom did not yet overtly engage questions of individual political liberties. Instead, debates surrounding these theaters focussed on the relation between the centralizing state and

³For the Genevan background to the *Lettre*, see R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*. Vol I (Princeton, 1959), 111-139; and Franco Venturi, *The End of the Old Regime in Europe, 1768-1776*, trans. R. Burr Litchfield (Princeton, 1989), 340-350.

⁴Palmer, 118-136.

local authorities, or the role of government in providing 'public services' and assuring 'public security' in these buildings. In other words, the theaters served as a vehicle for exploring, and contesting, the absolutist state's obligations to its subjects. In the French provinces, there were at least four sources from which the demand for a provincial playhouse might originate. In the case of a regional commercial center such as Le Mans, a coterie of private investors might form a joint stock company to construct and maintain a municipal theater. In a successful Atlantic port city with international trading connections, such as Nantes, the municipal government might undertake the construction of a major theatrical edifice in the name of civic pride and the need to entertain foreign merchants and traders. In towns with large military garrisons, such as Brest, Dunkirk, or Lille, the military itself might underwrite the construction of a playhouse in order to distract unruly officers and soldiers not away at battle. And finally, in cities which housed important administrative institutions of the central state, such as Bordeaux, a powerful royal official with a Parisian sensibility for the stage might single-handedly succeed in imposing a playhouse on a recalcitrant group of town fathers. In some of these four types of playhouse patronage, the private, the municipal, the military, and the royal, voices also arose in an effort to block the foundation of a public theater.

Le Mans provides an interesting example of private speculation on playhouse construction. Prior to 1776 traveling players visiting Le Mans worked under trying circumstances: a building designated in 1730 to house theatrical performances was rented to a tax collector in 1736 and transformed into a salt warehouse, with the result that passing troupes were consigned to a makeshift stage underneath the town marketplace. In 1775, however, a group of 107 investors purchased stock in a plan to construct a modern theater which would, among other things, have a floor capable of being raised to the level of the stage in order to create a ballroom. The list of investors in this new playhouse contained the names of nobles, royal judges and tax officials, lawyers, doctors, merchants, and entrepreneurs; in short, the local elite who might be counted on to emulate the Parisian culture denounced by Rousseau.⁵ Under the terms of their association, the playhouse would become municipal property upon the death of the final investor. Thus in the case of Le Mans, the new playhouse represented not the triumph of an aristocratic faction over a bourgeois faction, but rather the determination of the town's administrative, commercial, and professional elite to finance theatrical activity.

⁵Jean Quénart, *Culture et société urbaines dans la France de l'Ouest au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1978), 493.

Further, it is significant that these investors chose to act in the absence of any guidance from municipal officials; it may even be the case that the presence of this theater enhanced the economic life of the city, rather than corroding it as Rousseau had argued.

The instances of theaters established purely through private speculation, however, were fairly rare in the provinces in the second half of the century; most towns could not put together as broad-based a coalition of investors as the Le Mans group, and few private individuals were prepared to assume the financial risk involved in the construction and leasing of a playhouse. But the pressure on municipal and regional officials to provide a theater competitive with that found in other towns grew throughout the period; as one historian of the provincial stage has remarked, the theater was often seen in the provinces by this time as a 'public service' which the municipality felt obligated to provide to its residents.⁶ In Nantes, urban officials began to address this issue as early as 1761, three years after the publication of the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, when the town architect envisioned a plan to create an urban complex consisting of a marketplace, a concert hall, and a playhouse. Although this proposal did not come to fruition, and several other privately financed ventures in the 1770s also failed to produce a theater, both the municipality and the royal intendant acknowledged the need for a permanent playhouse by the early 1780s. After some disputes between the municipality and the intendant over the location of the proposed structure, the town officials borrowed 300,000 livres in 1784 in the name of 'le bien public' to begin construction. The new theater, one of the finest built in the French provinces prior to the Revolution, opened its doors in 1787; Arthur Young remarked in 1788 that it was 'twice as large as Drury Lane, and twice as magnificent.'⁷ In the case of this major maritime trading center, the construction of a handsome new playhouse symbolized the city's claim to commercial prominence, and it also stood for the local government's determination to provide a full array of public services to its increasingly wealthy citizens.

In the French naval outposts and military garrisons of the period, the question of public service overlapped with that of military necessity in uncomfortable ways. In Brest, for example, an important naval installation on the western tip of Brittany, the naval commander argued that a theater was necessary in order to 'deflect men's tastes from

⁶Fuchs, 49.

⁷Quéniart, 491-492; Arthur Young quoted in John Lough, *France on the Eve of the Revolution: British Travellers' Observations, 1763-1788*, (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1987), 96.

gambling, drinking and quarreling, and to provide an education.' When neither the royal government nor the town provided funding for the theater, he secured approval for a playhouse that would be financed by monthly deductions from the pay of the sailors and their officers. These deductions were less, he argued, than what each Breton family 'would pay a French teacher' to provide language lessons to their son. The new theater, completed in the late 1760s, became the property, and the headache, of the Navy; in 1771, a new Naval Intendant discovered that over 55,000 livres had been diverted from naval operations to sustain the theater.⁸ The Kingdom's army garrison towns proved equally resistant to demands for theatrical construction. In Dunkirk in 1775, a coalition of merchants, priests, lawyers and doctors successfully opposed a plan conceived by the military and put forward in the name of the municipality to establish a theater that would have disrupted the town's only promenade and disturbed the tranquillity of local hospitals. The Army suspected that the local parish priest had mobilized the opposition to the theater under the usual religious pretexts, but the King's Council in Versailles stood by the Dunkirk coalition, and the Army abandoned the project entirely when the same coalition thwarted plans for an alternative construction site.⁹ Also in the North, in Lille, where the theater was kept open year-round to meet the needs of the military and civilian population, the town was entirely exempted in 1785 from any financial responsibilities for the new theater. In effect, the royal edict authorizing the construction of the new playhouse cited the threat posed to public safety by the old wooden theater with its insufficient exits, but did not assume that the municipality was responsible for securing the safety of an audience drawn in part from the military installation.¹⁰ In the military towns, then, the response to proposals for theater construction was mixed. In some instances, as at Dunkirk, the opposition successfully defeated plans for playhouse construction. In other cases, as at Brest and Lille, the municipality managed to avoid financial obligations; even so, in these towns the theater joined with the garrison as a daily reminder on the urban landscape of the centralizing state's power to intervene in local affairs.

Residents of Bordeaux, a site which benefitted from both the

⁸Quéniart, 490-91; Fuchs, 98.

⁹Fuchs, 92-94.

¹⁰Fuchs, 100, 102, 147. An English visitor to Lille towards the end of the century noted that 'the officers are ordered to attend merely to keep them out of mischief.' (Lough, 211.)

commercial expansion of the Atlantic trade and the growth in royal administration, fared worse in playhouse politics than their counterparts in the military towns. Most scholars of the eighteenth-century theater know Bordeaux primarily for the opulent theater opened in 1780 under the direction of the Maréchal de Richelieu, governor of the province and royal administrator of the Parisian theater as well. But the stage history of the town in the several decades prior to the completion of Victor Louis' playhouse also holds interest for this inquiry. Up to 1739, Bordeaux's theatrical life had consisted of a dozen or so ambulatory troupes who played on an irregular basis in the town's provisional wooden playhouse. In 1739, however, the municipality constructed a theater of stone, and four years later a sedentary troupe was established to perform in this theater. This troupe also obtained exclusive rights over the performance of spoken and lyric drama in the province from the regional governor and the Opera in Paris; from this time forward, tensions manifested themselves between the local Bordelais authorities, who claimed policing power over the theater, and the central powers, who asserted their right to license public performances. These conflicts escalated in 1755, when the Maréchal de Richelieu became governor of Guienne, the province in which Bordeaux was situated, and began his thirty year tutelage of the Bordelais theatrical scene. The most important date in this period is not the completion of Victor Louis' playhouse, but the establishment of a permanent troupe by Richelieu's decree in 1760. This troupe was founded as a joint venture among nine of Bordeaux's leading lights; their ranks included Richelieu, two town councilmen, two parliamentary judges, a high-ranking naval officer, and the Polish and Prussian consuls. Control of the theater had slipped away from the municipality to a conglomerate of directors assembled and controlled by Richelieu, a representative of royal power.¹¹

On the surface, this arrangement appeared to satisfy all parties; it found a balance between municipal, commercial, foreign, and royal interests, and it created a spectacle capable of providing entertainment to an increasingly prosperous and pleasure-seeking Bordelais society for most of the year. Indeed, an apologist for Richelieu published the following panegyric in 1778:

'The government's actions were wise. M. de Richelieu, a sage administrator, realized that Bordeaux needed a sedentary spectacle, and that,

¹¹Henri Lagrave, et al., *La Vie Theatrale à Bordeaux des origines à nos jours*, vol. I (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1985), 191. The eighteenth-century history of the Bordeaux stage is summarized in Henri Lagrave, 'Les Structures du théâtre dans la province française: le cas exemplaire de Bordeaux,' *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 192 (1980), 1423-1431.

furthermore, the town was well-equipped to support it thanks to the numerous residents and visitors overflowing its limits. In a town like this one, the theater is an indispensable necessity. What would merchants do after a day of speculative work if they did not have this outlet to distract themselves from the boredom of a provincial evening filled with idleness? Seduced by the theater's attractions, they will soon give themselves over to pleasure, above all when it is a question of providing relaxation for minds preoccupied with commercial calculations. Out of all the possible recreations, surely that of the theater is the least expensive, as well as the most innocent'.¹²

The argument reads much like d'Alembert's polemic in favor of a Genevan public theater. The theatrical enterprise organized by Richelieu was central to the life of a commercial city like Bordeaux; it would attract and entertain traders, would be easily self-sufficient in a town as wealthy and populous as Bordeaux, and provided the most morally uplifting style of entertainment and relaxation for the town's residents and visitors.

Yet in spite of Richelieu's administrative prowess and the supposedly perfect fit between the town and the spectacle, voices opposed to the public theater also made themselves heard throughout these decades. The most significant source of discontent was the town council, known in Bordeaux as the *jûrande*, which thought that Richelieu's activities in this sphere had reduced the town to a policing agent without control over its internal affairs. The conflict came to a head in the struggle over the Grand-Théâtre, which Richelieu insisted on building as a sort of megalomaniacal monument to himself, and which the *jûrats*, or town councilors, opposed due to its expense and, implicitly, due to Richelieu's unilateral actions. A 1776 tax designed to finance the theater drew the following remonstrance from the local Cour des Aides to the King, written only two years before the panegyric quoted a moment ago: 'Your Majesty knows that the Bordeaux theater is being built at the expense of the town, but he might not know that the enormous cost occasioned by this work horrifies the town residents.... This is an edifice of scandalous luxury, certainly disproportionate to the extent of the town and the interests of those who inhabit it. This is a project that will swallow up millions. It is the principle cause of Bordeaux's exhausted revenues. This is where they want to throw money seized from the poor! And why, if all funds are exhausted, revert to such destructive taxes? Why not go to the origins of the problem, and suspend this

¹²Corbun, *Le Voeu de l'humanité ou Lettre sur les spectacles à Bordeaux* (Bordeaux: Pallandré aîné, 1788); quoted in Lagrave, et al., *La Vie théâtrale*, 170. My translation.

voracious project for a while, or at least slow down construction?'¹³

Here, then, was a viewpoint diametrically opposed to Richelieu's apologist. Just as Rousseau might have done, the magistrates predicted that the construction of a theater in Bordeaux would lead to the town's financial ruin; Bordeaux was ill-equipped to construct and sustain a theater of this magnitude. In order to sate the luxurious appetites of a few wealthy citizens, the poor were driven to misery and the city to the brink of fiscal collapse. Thus Bordeaux's Grand-Théâtre, like so many of its provincial counterparts in the second half of the eighteenth century, assumed a symbolic importance beyond its immediate theatrical functions. The needs of the absolutist state and the anxieties of the local community clashed in public exchanges over the value of the project, while the local identity of this eighteenth-century port city and administrative center came into question.

The preceding review has, I hope, demonstrated the variety of issues at stake when local and royal administrators, theatergoers, and anti-theatricalists began to debate the merits of the public theater in the second half of the eighteenth century. The case of Geneva is unique in this history in that the pro-playhouse and anti-playhouse factions formed largely along class lines which were also dictated by the constitutional struggles the Republic experienced in this period. It is also intriguing in that each faction was directly informed by writers and texts that fed into the widely publicized debates surrounding the publication of the *Encyclopédie*. But it is not necessarily different than debates on the merits of the public theater that one finds at this time in the French kingdom, in spite of Rousseau's claims for the particularity of his beloved hometown. Everywhere in the Francophone world, and indeed elsewhere in the West as well, arguments over the role of the theater in the political, economic, and moral life of towns and nations served as a pretext to examine larger issues regarding the centralization of the state, the rights of the individual, and the responsibilities of citizen and state to each other. We already know that Rousseau took aim at much more than the theater in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*; the eighteenth century ramifications of this polemic become sharper when we place it the context of debates that public theater construction occasioned in the French provinces.

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¹³Quoted in Lagrave, et al., *La Vie théâtrale*, 177. My translation.