THIBAUT JULIAN, *Un théâtre pour la nation. L’histoire en scène (1765-1806)*

Logan J. Connors

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/studifrancesi/54290
ISSN: 2421-5856

Publisher
Rosenberg & Sellier

Printed version
Date of publication: August 1, 2023
Number of pages: 463-464
ISSN: 0039-2944

Electronic reference
Logan J. Connors, "THIBAUT JULIAN, *Un théâtre pour la nation. L’histoire en scène (1765-1806)*", *Studi Francesi* [Online], 200 (LXVII | II) | 2023, Online since 01 August 2023, connection on 18 October 2023.
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/studifrancesi/54290

This text was automatically generated on October 18, 2023.

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REFERENCES


1 In a sweeping study of over 250 plays, Thibaut Julian has uncovered a fascinating «temple de la mémoire» (p. 23) in theatrical productions about France and its history from the late Old Regime to the Napoleonic Empire. The author’s claim is that this diverse dramatic corpus helped build French “esprit national” during a cataclysmic moment which, according to Julian, invaded the fiction on stage to ultimately break the mirror of history that many authors sought to impart in their pièces nationales (cf. p. 271). National theatre was sometimes a vehicle of consensus, sometimes a tool for critique, and it often produced in spectators a «forte charge émotionnelle» (p. 277). This is not a study of one genre, author, political platform, or ideology. National theatre was in no way «un bloc uniforme et stable» (p. 17) which makes analysis of the phenomenon rare among theatre historians owing to traditional generic categorizations and scholarly periodization. But with his compelling close readings, historical contextualization, and reconstructions of performance environments, Julian proves that théâtre national was indeed «un fait culturel massif et durable» (p. 18) with a popular and conflictual history.

2 Julian’s book includes an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction situates the study in France’s turbulent political and theatrical histories at the end of the eighteenth century and justifies the heterogeneous corpus of drames, tragedies, comedies, pantomimes, melodramas, opéra-comiques and more. Chapter one discusses patriotism as an organizing principle in many national plays, most notably, in pro-monarchical works with new emotional regimes such as Pierre de Belloy’s *Le Siège de
Chapter two takes on the stakes and tensions of staging history and historiographical polemics. Here, Julian describes the different temporalities that dramatic authors depicted in national plays from historical works celebrating medieval kings and events to théâtre de l’actualité, in which «le théâtre historique s’apparente le plus à la chronique journalistique et au témoignage» (p. 79). Chapter three untangles different representations of French kings, heroes, and heroines from the early rois faibles to Joan of Arc to the héros plébéiens (cf. the title of Renaud Bret-Vitoz’s L’Éveil du héros plébéien (1760-1794)) of the Revolution. In chapter four, Julian discusses the fait historique and other new genres which surfaced during the years before the Revolution and which saw their heyday, post-1789. Chapter five looks at biographical drama and memorial theatre, including works that «ciblent un épisode marquant de la vie du héros» and connect certain dramatic threads across the seemingly large divide between Old Regime and Revolutionary performance practices. In chapter six, Julian turns his lens from dramatic works and political history to the reception of national theatre and the emotions it sought to engage in spectators. The study ends with a conclusion on the continued fascination and anxiety over theatrical productions about French history, and particularly, French Revolutionary violence.

Un théâtre pour la nation, which grew from Julian’s doctoral thesis, is an excellent example of the erudite but argument-driven theatre scholarship that the Sorbonne has been known for in this century. The book is lucidly written, enviably comprehensive, and theoretically rich. Julian’s careful readings of Rancière’s theories on politics and spectatorship and Paul Ricoeur’s work on memory contextualize eighteenth-century artistic practices in larger and more recent critical frameworks. Julian’s refusal to dismiss Revolutionary théâtre d’actualité as unimportant or aesthetically weak is refreshing, and his final chapter on emotion will help readers better understand the impact of his corpus during a crucial moment in European history.

From this reader’s perspective, any critiques in the book are few and limited in scope. Some readers might find daunting Julian’s analysis of Old Regime works alongside very different plays of the Revolutionary era. He moves quickly from one historical context to another, then back again, then forward again in a thematic (rather than chronological) approach. Julian’s goals in the book, however, justify this trajectory, although more signposting (telling the reader where he is going and why, for example) inside the different subsections would have been helpful. Also, while Julian’s engagement with scholarship outside of France is strong in sections on the Old Regime (especially his readings of works on patriotism by Jay Smith and David Bell) and on French Revolutionary political culture (see Julian’s analysis of Lynn Hunt’s and Keith Michael Baker’s works, for example), one might expect a stronger analysis of international scholarship on French Revolutionary drama and performance, and notably, Yann Robert’s Dramatic Justice (which would help frame Julian’s discussion of reenactment and justice in chapter 6). Julian also passes rather quickly over non-francophone works about emotion and the Revolution (cf., for more information, Sophia Rosenfeld, Thinking about Feeling, 1789-1799, “French Historical Studies”, vol. XXXII, no. 4 (2009), pp. 697-706).

These quibbles are minor and take nothing away from the brilliance of Julian’s study. The book is a masterful examination of an omnipresent yet difficult-to-grasp concept – national theatre – that emerged as a foundational building block of not only future Romantic drama but also of tangible political programs and essential critiques of those
programs. Criss-crossing the histories of drama, performance, political culture, and the emotions, Julian’s book is fundamentally interdisciplinary. It should be required reading for students and scholars of French theatre history as well as for those who work in performance studies, political history, and cultural studies.