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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

## Private theatre performances

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### Mots-clés

Aesthetics

Community

Entertainment

Taste

Theatre

### Résumé

Society theatre was a highly prized activity during the eighteenth century, especially in France. In salons and estates, both grand and modest, people of the same society and social stratum engaged in amateur theatre. Private theatre performances were a practice in which worldliness and aesthetics intersected, inextricably linked with sociability. In exploring the practice, this entry will evaluate the role of worldly connivance in the constitution of collective taste.

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Performing plays in one's home was not specific to the eighteenth century, but it is during this period that the fashion was at its peak. In the 1730s, the whole of France was completely enamoured of the theatre. Dominique Quérou has described it as a veritable *théâtromanie*, an 'Abderite fever.'<sup>1</sup> Not one manor was without its improvised stage or private theatre. Works from the traditional repertory as well as texts created for the occasion were acted out. Players proceeded unconcernedly from room to stage, the makeshift actors then seamlessly reverting to guest status. Sociability was clearly at the heart of society theatricals: it was not just about making theatre, but about doing so surrounded by one's peers, in a complex interlacement of worldly, social, and aesthetic complicity.

Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval observed that society theatre was 'amateur, aperiodic, and (with rare exceptions) unprofitable,<sup>2</sup> a practice so polymorphous as to be nearly undefinable. Though it is all but impossible to document the theatricals of the lower classes, we know that members of every social stratum participated in this fashionable pastime. Society theatre was as prized in aristocratic circles as it was in bourgeois homes.

The originality of this practice lay in its break with the production methods of traditional public theatre: any member of society could be called up to the stage during a given performance. The show itself was a form of entertainment during which everyone played a role, whether as actor, author, or spectator.

It was worldly entertainment *par excellence*; society theatre was an activity perfectly adapted to sociability. Voltaire and Madame Denis, for example, offered a sumptuous feast to the spectators following the performance of one of the playwright's tragedies at Ferney.<sup>3</sup> The French literary critic Fréron<sup>4</sup> described a day in the life of the duc d'Orléans, with the performance of a comedy organised following a hunt. The two activities were of a rank in terms of entertainment, both part of the essential panoply of distractions for noble lords seeking escape from boredom.

What mattered most was the idea of community: the sharing of tears and laughter where, for the length of a performance, all social differences were abolished. The duchess du Maine, the duc d'Orléans, the marquise Émilie Du Châtelet, and the comte de Clermont, to name but a few, all played roles that did not perhaps befit their stations, but they did so with a liberty that surprised and sometimes even embarrassed their spectators.<sup>5</sup> Yet this apparent equality was ephemeral, lasting only as long as the performance. In theatrical societies, social hierarchy otherwise remained firmly established. Songwriter Charles Collé complained that nobles sometimes had writers create plays for which they took credit; in his *mémoires*, he describes how the nobles in question regarded those who provided them with such entertainment with contempt. This is a far cry from a world united around theatre in fellowship and joy.

Conflict did indeed exist, even between peers, who might view a performance, applaud it loudly, and then exchange a barrage of criticisms in their letters to friends and family members. Mme de Staal-Delaunay was one such. During a visit to the duchesse du Maine, she told Mme du Deffand that Émilie du Châtelet had, in a performance of Voltaire's *Le Comte de Boursoufle*, 'so perfectly and extravagantly executed her role, [that she] took real

pleasure in it,'<sup>6</sup> yet took every opportunity in her letters to stigmatise the marquise for how she carried on when with Voltaire: 'They wish neither to play nor to take walks,' Madame de Staal complained. 'They hold no value in a society where their learned writings are of no relevance.'<sup>7</sup> Conversely, also following a visit to Émilie and Voltaire, Léopold Desmarests, Mme de Graffigny's lover, commended the charm of the marquise, but later poured scorn in a letter to Devaux about her performance in *Zaïre*: 'Madame Du Châtelet soullessly vomits her lines, never varying her tone, punctuating each metrical foot of every verse.'<sup>8</sup> Clearly, the practice of society theatre was part of the tacit codes of sociability: just as it was impossible to openly criticise certain forms of unseemly conduct in society, it was unthinkable to explicitly express a negative comment on someone's play-acting, as might have been done for a public performance. But there was no rule against conveying such sentiments in writing, and nothing united people more than a little epistolary calumny.

Beyond whatever differentiated each group, there was indeed one thing which united the members of theatrical societies. They all shared a love for the theatre—they were familiar with official theatre, the repertoire of the Comédie-Française in particular, which they sometimes performed privately, but also with that of the Académie Royale de Musique—, and this shared culture could be found in the works performed on society stages. This was particularly noticeable in the burlesque shows that were staged. Judith Le Blanc has demonstrated how in *La Fête de Bélesbat*, in which Voltaire participated, the melodies were largely parodies of Lully's own compositions.<sup>9</sup> Certain forms specific to society theatre, such as pageants (burlesque entertainment inspired by the shows announcing fairground entertainment), were richly steeped in popular cultural references, ranging from parodies of well-known operatic melodies, such as in *Le Doigt mouillé* (Ruimi 443–445), to excerpts from Voltaire's tragedies inserted into comedies.<sup>10</sup> This added another layer of connivance between spectators, but also between the spectators and the actors.

Guy Spielmann has studied this idea of 'double connivance',<sup>11</sup> and even considers it to be the only valid criterion by which to recognise society theatre: it is this phenomenon, the merging of theatre and sociability, that is at the core of private theatricals.

Society theatre was thus not merely worldly pleasure or 'fashionable entertainment',<sup>12</sup> as Dominique Quéro has stated, it was a space where new tastes could find expression, and where new forms of theatre could be explored. Society theatre was essentially a testing ground for the dramatic arts.

1. Dominique Quéro, 'Les théâtres de société de la duchesse du Maine', *Les Plaisirs de l'Arsenal. Poésie, musique, danse et érudition au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Garnier, 2018), p. 394. Quéro borrowed the expression from a comedy by Paradis de Moncrif entitled *Les Abdérites*, in which the characters play with frenzy.

2. Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval, *Le théâtre de société, un autre théâtre ?* (Paris: Champion, 2003), p. 11.

3. Voltaire's letter to the d'Argentals, 8 March [1762], D10366: 'But what to do with three hundred people standing outside in the snow at midnight after the end of a show? Why, we invited them all to supper, and then we bid them all to dance. It was an entirely well-turned affair (une fête assez bien troussée).'

4. Fréron to d'Hemery, 12 October 1753, cited in Jennifer Ruimi, *La Parade de société, une forme dramatique oubliée* (Paris: Champion, 2015), p. 519.

5. For example Saint-Simon's scathing criticism of the duchesse du Maine, which Roland Mortier analysed in 'La cour de Sceaux, les écrivains et la duchesse du Maine,' *La Duchesse du Maine (1676–1753): une mécène à la croisée des arts et des siècles* (Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 'Études sur le XVIIIe siècle', volume XXXI, 2003), p. 11-22.
  6. Mme de Staal-Delaunay, du 27 août 1747, D 3567.
  7. Madame de Staal-Delaunay to the marquise Du Deffand, Sceaux, Tuesday, 15 August 1747, D3567.
  8. Desmarest to Devaux, [13 February 1739], in *Correspondance de madame de Graffigny*, ed. J. A. Dainard (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1985), vol. 1, p. 318.
  9. Judith Le Blanc, 'Voltaire parodiste ou la dramaturgie musicale de La Fête de Bélesbat', *Revue Voltaire* (n°13, 2013), p. 42.
  10. Voir la citation détournée de Zaïre dans *Léandre étalon* de Collé, par exemple.
  11. Guy Spielmann, 'Scènes 'publiques' et scènes 'privées', essai de redéfinition', *Espaces des théâtres de société. Définitions, enjeux, postérité* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2020), p. 102.
  12. Voir le titre de l'ouvrage de Dominique Quéro, *Les amusements à la mode. L'essor des spectacles de société dans la première moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: PUPS (à paraître)).
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## Citer cet article

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## **In the DIGIT.EN.S Anthology**

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Letter from Elie Fréron to D'Hemery ([1753](#)).

Letter from Mme de Staal (15 August [1747](#)).

[Letter from Mme de Staal \(1747\)](#)

[Letter to D'Hemery \(1753\)](#)

[Voltaire to D'Argental \(1762\)](#)