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Theatrum Theatri: the Building of a Modern Theatrical Repository

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► **To cite this version:**

Christophe Didier, Elodie Lacroix. Theatrum Theatri: the Building of a Modern Theatrical Repository. THEATRUM LIBRI: Book Printing, Reading and Dissemination in Early Modern Europe, Dec 2021, Vilnius, Lithuania. pp.44-55, 10.51740/dpt.1 . hal-04357104

HAL Id: hal-04357104

<https://hal.science/hal-04357104v1>

Submitted on 20 Dec 2023

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THEATRUM LIBRI

Book Printing,
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Dissemination in
Early Modern Europe

Collection of Articles

Edited by
Milda Kvizikevičiūtė
Viktorija Vaitkevičiūtė

VILNIUS, 2022

Martyno Mažvydo skaitymai

Considered and recommended for publishing as a collection of research articles by the Working Group on Scholarly Activities of the National Library of Lithuania on 16 September, 2022 (Protocol No. 4)

All submitted manuscripts are subject to peer review by two independent, anonymous expert referees

The Publishing was funded by Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania



MINISTRY OF CULTURE OF
THE REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA

Image used for book covers:

Lubieniecki, Stanisław, *Theatri Cometicæ*,
Amsterdam, 1668

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The bibliographical information about this publication is available in the Lithuanian Integrated Library Information System (LIBIS) *ibiblioteka.lt*

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 OPEN ACCESS



DOI: 10.51740/DPT.1

ISBN 978-609-405-227-9 (PRINT)

ISBN 978-609-405-228-6 (ONLINE)

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Theatrum Theatri: the Building of a Modern Theatrical Repository

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Abstract. As representatives of a family of actors and theatre managers in the early nineteenth-century Paris, Pierre-Jacques Seveste (1773-1825), his wife and his sons built a kind of small empire while launching, from 1817 on, several small theatres in the suburbs of Paris (*théâtres de la banlieue*), promoting new forms of popular entertainment quickly named *théâtre de boulevard* (boulevard theatre). The Seveste enterprise, a shareholder company with the name *Société des théâtres de la banlieue*, had its own ‘company library’, a working tool that appears nowadays as a testimony of a quite neglected genre, popular theatre under and just after the Napoleonic era. A part of this library could be maintained as a whole and purchased by the National and university library of Strasbourg in 2017. The collection could already be presented at a former conference (Sarospatak 2019). The ‘Theatrum Libri’ conference was focused on the goals of the ‘collectors’, and tried to make out their purposes while bringing together the collection: did the Seveste consciously build what appears nowadays as a ‘theatre of the theatre’, a kind of encyclopaedia of popular culture?

Keywords: Pierre-Jacques Seveste, Edmond Seveste, Jules Seveste, popular theatre, vaudeville, melodrama, theatre library, theatre companies, entertainment enterprises, nineteenth century.

The theatre was, as we well know, one of the great passions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a noble passion at first, which belonged to the world of the *châteaux* (castles), a passion democratised after the French Revolution and which, from the first decades of the nineteenth century, reached ever wider sections of the population.¹ We wish to illustrate this phenomenon through an example (the library of the *Société des théâtres de la banlieue*, which was active during the first half of the century in Paris) that seems to us particularly relevant to several questions raised by the *Theatrum libri* colloquium: how an archival phenomenon (the accumulation of books) accounts for the part played by the ‘accumulators of knowledge and collectors of books’ in ultimately forming the memory of an institution, which in turn provides us with a ‘narrative of times past’.² If the theatre, as the editors of this book understand it, metaphorically refers to the accumulation of knowledge on a given subject, and, from the sixteenth century onwards almost takes on the significance of an encyclopaedia, then the book becomes a theatre, and by extension so does the collection of books: it is a theatre of knowledge, in which each book plays

¹ On this subject, see our article ‘La naissance du théâtre ‘des boulevards’, ou Comment la banlieue entre en bibliothèque (1780-1830)’, in: *Les bibliothèques et l'économie des connaissances / Bibliotheken und die Ökonomie des Wissens 1450-1850*, edited by Frédéric Barbier, István Monok and Andrea Seidler, Budapest: MTA, 2020, pp. 314-337. The present contribution follows up and completes the study undertaken at the time, particularly regarding the library created by the Seveste family. Regarding the democratisation of shows, the evolution of the public and of genres, see for example the dossier ‘Le mélodrame’, in: *Europe*, Vol. 703-704, 1987, and in particular the article by Pierre Frantz, ‘Naissance d’un public’.

² We quote literally the terms used in the conference’s call for papers; see: <<https://lnb.lt/en/news/6818-call-for-papers>>.

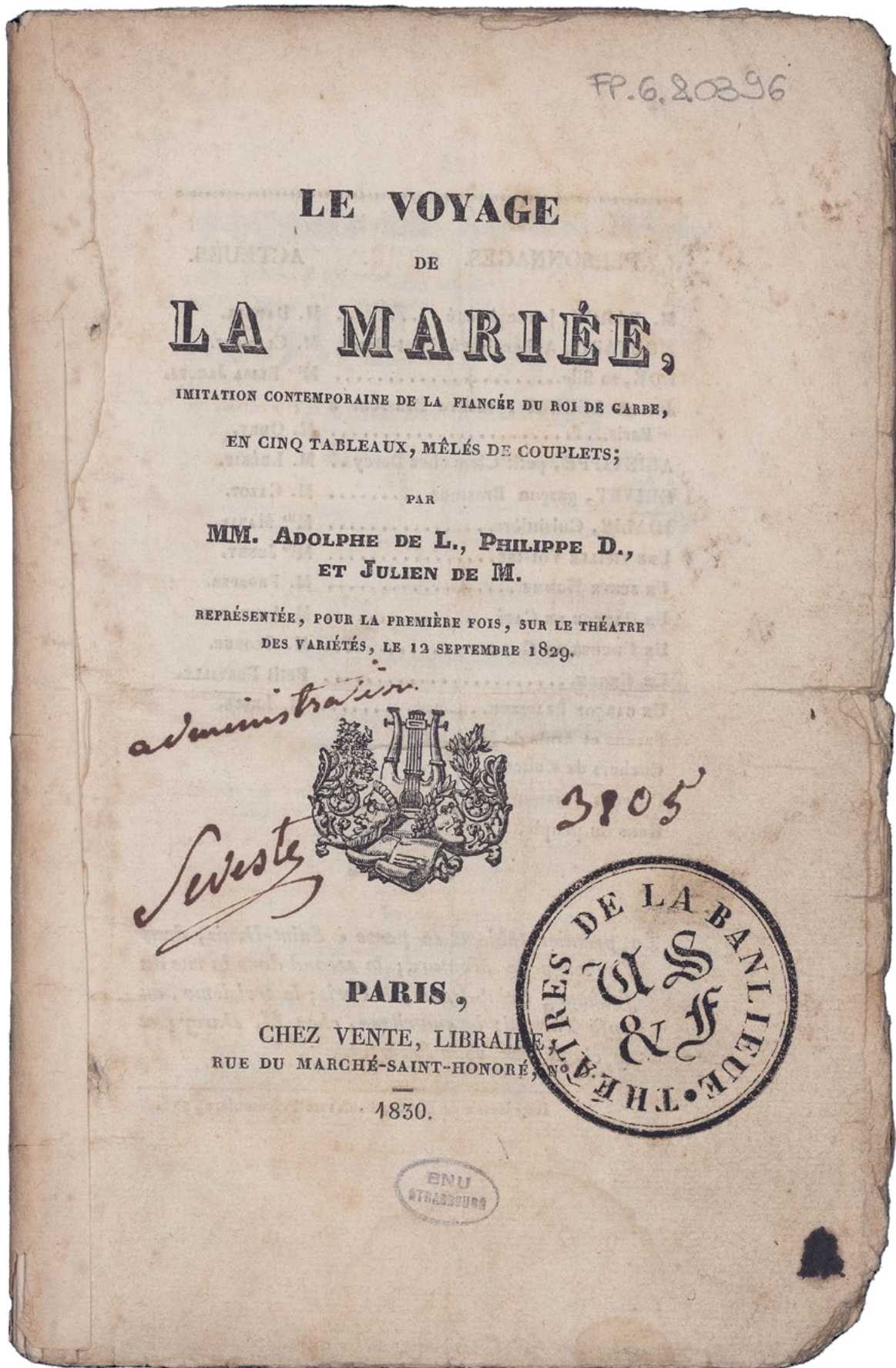


Fig. 1. *Le voyage de la mariée*, Paris: Vente, 1830. A book with a mark of ownership (coll. BNU)

its part, and the collector is in a way the director of the play. In the present case, we shall see what a very singular collection of works... of theatre has to say to us, constituting, we believe, a 'theatre of the theatre' (*theatrum theatri*).

This collection, now in the possession of the National and University Library of Strasbourg and referred to as the 'Perchellet collection' (after its former owner),³ has been reassembled and has revealed the memory of what was an important entertainment company in the first half of the nineteenth century, thanks, in particular, to the material elements found within the books (provenance and ownership marks, handwritten annotations, etc.). This book collection emerges as a particularly representative reflection of its time, a period in which a popular form of theatre, the *théâtre des boulevards*, was developing in Paris. How this 'accumulation of knowledge' was built up, what it also tells us about the diffusion of the new theatrical forms which it reflects, is what we shall now tell.

While the history of the French theatre in the nineteenth century is well known, including its popular dimensions,⁴ the same is not necessarily true of the life of the private companies that worked in the 'secondary' theatres. Furthermore, the history and fate of their libraries is, in our knowledge, an area where sources are scarce, as we will see further on: private theatre companies rarely left us their libraries, as is the case with the *Société des théâtres de banlieue*. What it can tell us (in what way it is a 'theatre of the theatre') is all the more interesting. But first, let's start from the beginning.

The Birth of a Theatrical Enterprise

In 1817, a Parisian actor named Pierre-Jacques Seveste (1773-1825) obtained from King Louis XVIII the privilege to run all the theatres of what was then called the *banlieue* (the suburbs, formerly outside the Paris wall, today part of the *arrondissements* of the capital): Belleville, Montmartre, les Batignolles, Montparnasse.⁵ He then set about building small wooden theatres (Sèvres in 1817, Montparnasse and Montmartre in 1819, Belleville in 1825), and later permanent ones (Montmartre in 1822).

He died in 1825. His widow and two sons, Edmond (1799-1852) and Jules (1803-1854) carried on with his work and in 1826 set up a shareholder company in commandit under the corporate name of *Veuve Seveste et fils*. The two sons, as owners of the privilege, became associate directors and their mother was the manager. They built the theatres of Saint-Cloud (1827), Grenelle and Belleville (1828) and Batignolles (1838). The privilege was regularly extended until Jules, the last of the two brothers, died in 1854.⁶

Thus emerged a small entertaining enterprise called *Société des théâtres de la banlieue* (Suburban Theatre Society). Part of their 'economic model' was to use students and novice actors (either from the provinces or from the conservatoire) who were paid little or nothing and for whom it was a chance of learning under real conditions. The Montmartre theatre was thereby often called the *Théâtre d'élèves* or *Théâtre Seveste*. This name also held true for the other theatres.⁷ The theatres in the suburbs thus became

³ See Didier, Christophe, 'La naissance du théâtre 'des boulevards'...', p. 314.

⁴ See for example Brazier, Nicolas, *Chroniques des petits théâtres de Paris*, Paris: E. Rouveyre et G. Blond, 1883; Wild, Nicole, *Dictionnaire des théâtres parisiens (1807-1914)*, Lyon: Symétrie, 2012; Warnod, André, 'L'ancien théâtre Montparnasse', in: *Masques. Cahiers d'art dramatique*, Paris: Rieder, 1930; Chauveau, Philippe, *Les théâtres parisiens disparus: 1402-1986*, Paris: Éd. de l'Amandier, 1999; Baude, Michel, 'Un théâtre populaire: le théâtre du Montparnasse d'après le journal inédit de P. H. Azais', in: *Romantisme*, 1982, Vol. 38, pp. 25-32.

⁵ On the history of this privilege, see Didier, Christophe, 'La naissance du théâtre 'des boulevards'...', pp. 317-318.

⁶ The Seveste company was established by the public acts of 26 and 27 June 1826. The company was 'the owner of the exclusive right to give dramatic performances in the district of the Préfecture de Police'. The privilege was renewed for the first time in 1830, for a period of fifteen years. See [Recueil factice d'articles de presse et de documents sur les frères Seveste et leurs théâtres, 1817-1841], BnF RT-1488. In the same collection, it is reported that the Seveste brothers, administrators of the suburban theatres, issue the second series of actions, created in 1826, from their various theatres (in *Pandore*, 18 November 1827).

⁷ See, for example, the entries in the documents contained in the collection [Répertoire de pièces représentées sur le Théâtre d'Élèves Seveste, 1825-1827], BnF REC-243; on Montmartre, see [Recueil factice d'articles de presse et de documents sur les frères Seveste et leurs théâtres, 1817-1841], BnF RT-1488.

a necessary step for actors arriving from the provinces in order to get noticed and then be able to perform in the ‘big’ Parisian theatres.⁸

Montparnasse, Montmartre and Belleville had a permanent drama company: two touring companies played in the other venues, sometimes performing several shows per night in different locations (we have noted the expression *galères à Seveste* (the Seveste galleys).⁹ Lastly, the Seveste directed some theatres themselves (Belleville, Montparnasse, Montmartre, Grenelle), but delegated the others to administrators. As for their repertoire, it encompassed almost all of the genres, not only the usual tragedies and comedies but also those that were in vogue at the time and attracted spectators, particularly in the more working-class districts: *opéra comique*, vaudeville and melodrama.

At the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century, the period, as we have said, of the rise of the theatre as a mass leisure activity, including for the working classes, the adventure of the Seveste constitutes the history of one of the very first entertainment enterprises in the modern sense of the term.¹⁰ It is indeed representative of the evolution of the world of theatre in Paris, which was already the setting for the *Comédie humaine*: a world of companies run by directors and shareholders, which had to be profitable and therefore had to attract the public by all possible means. This role of pioneering entrepreneurs was acknowledged by their peers, as shown in the speeches given at the death of the last of Pierre-Jacques’ two sons, Jules Seveste: they are said to have created ‘this great enterprise comprising all the theatres around Paris, that became a practical school for first attempts’ from which many talented actors emerged.¹¹ The ‘dramatic network’ with which the Seveste ‘surrounded Paris’ is mentioned, forming ‘a rich artistic cradle’ and whose ‘offspring’ are sometimes called ‘the pride and future of our first theatres’. The two brothers are referred to as those whose ‘singular destiny was to see the dawn of all the great talents and to help bring them to light’. And it is also added that, ‘for many years they directed these student theatres from which so many dramatic celebrities have emerged.’¹²

The Seveste Entrepreneurs and Notables

It is therefore not surprising to find the Seveste, who became public figures, in other prominent positions in the Parisian theatrical life. In 1848, Edmond Seveste became ‘agent in charge of administering the Comédie-Française’ up until the appointment of Arsène Houssaye; the venerable institution still holds his portrait.¹³ In 1851 he was granted the privilege of running the *Théâtre-Lyrique* (formerly Opéra-National), of which he was director in 1851-52. His brother Jules succeeded him in this position in 1852.¹⁴

Both the Seveste brothers were notables of Montmartre – they were part of the commission set up in

⁸ So did the famous comedian Mélingue. See Didier, Christophe, ‘La naissance du théâtre ‘des boulevards’...’, pp. 319, 326.

⁹ Didier, Christophe, ‘La naissance du théâtre ‘des boulevards’...’, p. 319; see also [Recueil factice d’articles de presse et de documents sur les frères Seveste et leurs théâtres, 1817-1841], BnF RT-1488.

¹⁰ Bertrand, Dominique et al, *Le théâtre* (Collection: Grand Amphi Littérature), Paris: Bréal, 1996. For a more complete bibliography, please refer to our previously mentioned publication.

We won’t cite here the very abundant bibliography on this pivotal period in the history of French theatre. Let us limit ourselves to quoting Féret, Romuald, ‘Le théâtre de province au XIXe siècle: entre révolutions et conservatisme’, in: *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 2012, Vol. 367, pp. 119-143; Chauveau, Philippe, *Les théâtres parisiens disparus: 1402-1986*, Paris: Éd. de l’Amandier, 1999;

¹¹ Quotes from *Discours prononcés sur la tombe de M. Jules Seveste, directeur du Théâtre-Lyrique, le lundi 3 juillet 1854*, Paris: Typographie Morris et Comp., [s.a.], BnF LN27-18907.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.* See also [Recueil factice d’articles de presse sur les Seveste, 1841-ca 1871], BnF RT 1397; [Recueil factice d’articles de presse et de documents sur les frères Seveste et leurs théâtres, 1817-1841], BnF RT-1488.

¹⁴ See *Discours prononcés sur la tombe de M. Jules Seveste...*, BnF LN27-18907. Here again, the ‘four years of success’ of Jules Seveste’s administration are praised, for having been able to find ‘successful plays, talented artists to perform them and spectators to applaud them’. It should be noted that in this case too, the Théâtre-Lyrique was dedicated to the promotion of young musicians, the development of whom it was supposed to encourage.



Fig. 2. *Les maris ont tort*, Paris: Masson, 1813. Book with an inventory number (coll. BNU)



Fig. 3. *L'avocat Patelin*, Paris: Barba, 1816. Mention of the Montmartre theater (a book intended for this theater?) (coll. BNU)

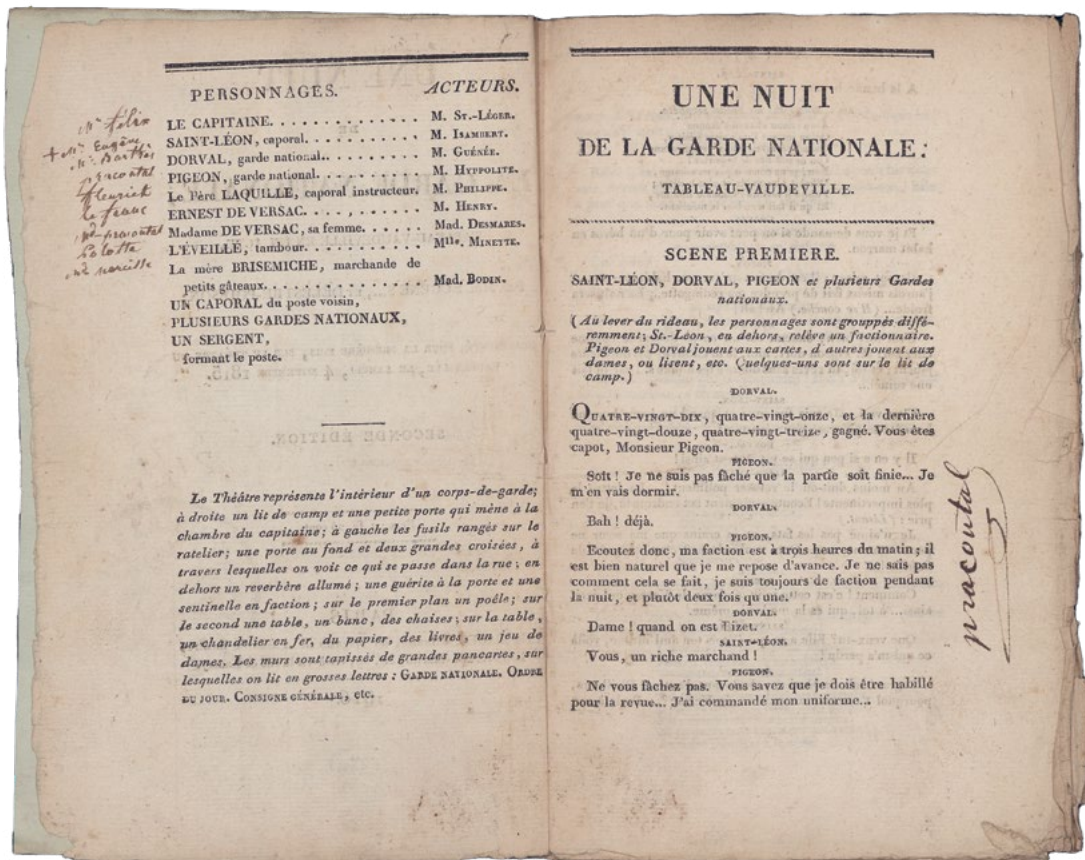


Fig. 4. *Une nuit de la garde nationale*, Paris: Fages, 1816. Handwritten list of actors (coll. BNU)

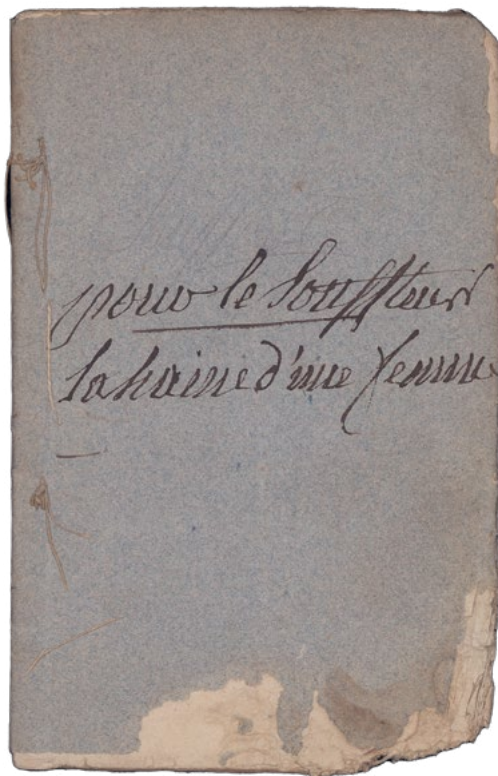


Fig. 5. *La haine d'une femme*, Paris: Pollet, 1824. Mention 'For the prompter' (coll. BNU)

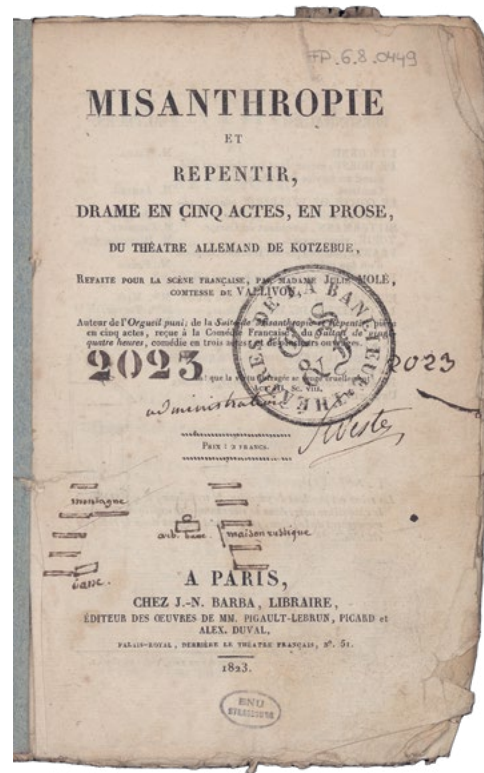


Fig. 6. *Misanthropie et repentir*, Paris: Barba, 1823. Handwritten indications about stage design (coll. BNU)

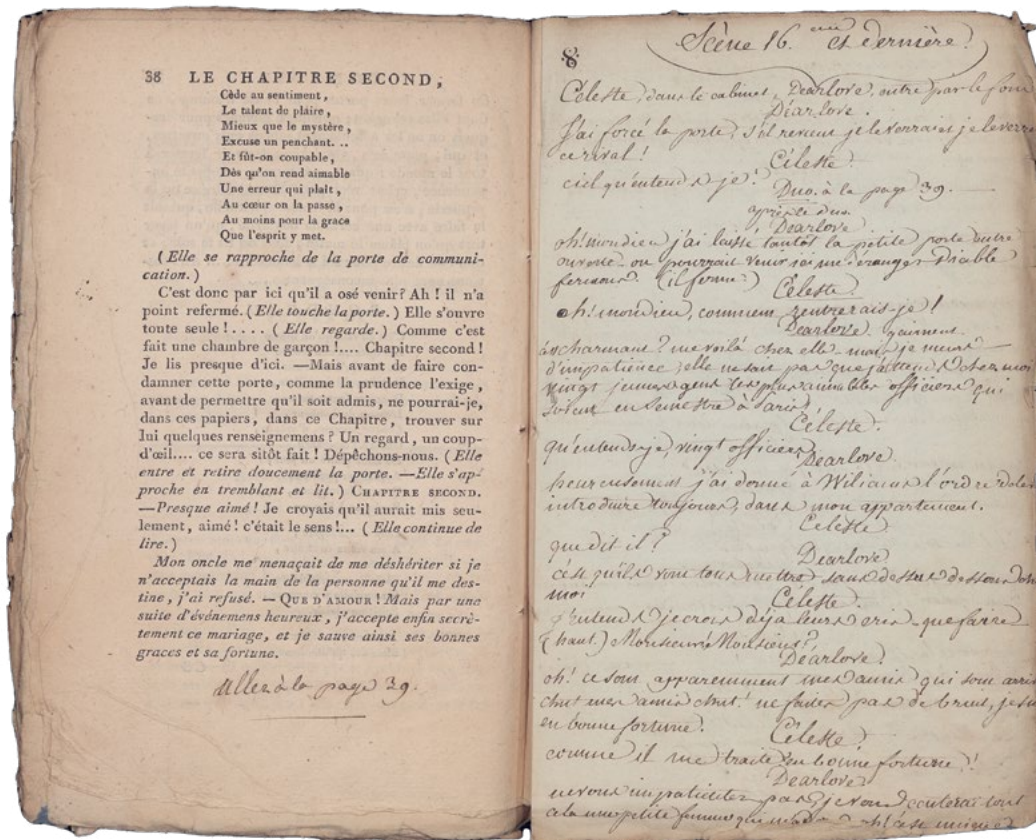


Fig. 7. *Le chapitre second*, Paris: Vente, An VII. Handwritten corrections and modifications (coll. BNU)

1837 to supervise the construction of the future town-house. Jules was a captain in the National Guard, and Edmond was a knight of the Legion of Honour.¹⁵

Some publications testify to their prominent position. For instance, Edmond Seveste, who was considered as early as 1839 to take over the direction of the Théâtre-Français, published a text that year entitled *De la situation du théâtre français, et des améliorations à introduire dans son administration*. The defence of their privilege made them frequent many official commissions as well as publish memorandums.¹⁶ When Jules died in 1854, the speeches given at his grave by various personalities (Baron Taylor, the composer Adolphe Adam, etc.) were published, summarizing the feelings inspired by the Sevestes, who were clearly acknowledged notables.

Edmond's funeral in 1852 had already been mentioned in the newspapers, which insisted on the presence at the church of many personalities from the world of entertainment and that a mass with music by the composer Adolphe Adam had been performed on this occasion.¹⁷ In addition, Edmond's son, Didier Seveste, was also a well-known actor and a resident of the Théâtre-Français. His death following the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 was also reported in the newspapers.¹⁸

Let us add that Edmond, like Jules Seveste, wrote plays, either alone or in collaboration, probably to provide suitable material for their students' theatres for which they were often destined.¹⁹

What exactly is left of them today in our collective memory? Admittedly, their name is not unknown to specialists (to whom we ourselves are indebted), but the tangible traces testifying to their action are minimal: a portrait of Edmond at the Comédie-Française, already mentioned, a street in Paris and a plaque in Montmartre on their former theatre, now the Théâtre de l'Atelier. However, and this is what matters to us here, we still have their working library.

The Renaissance of a Library

How did this accumulation of books, this 'archival phenomenon', come to be with us? Truth be told, by a stroke of luck. Jean-Pierre Perchellet, an already mentioned Strasbourg academic, who died suddenly in 2017, left his entire library unclaimed following his death (he had no heirs). In this library there was, in particular, a collection of about 800 pamphlets and 350 bound works, all printed mainly between 1760 and 1830. These were predominantly first editions of period plays.²⁰

The collection of brochures is especially coherent and several details caught our attention when we started processing them:

- Most of the books bear unmistakable marks of ownership (the 'Seveste' signature and systematic mentions of the 'Administration').
- The presence of inventory numbers and coarse cardboard bindings point not to a bibliophile's library, but to a utilitarian one (the words '*Pièce de l'administration*' or '*Bureau*' that sometimes appear are more than explicit in this respect).
- The names of the theatres can be read on some of the covers (for example Montmartre), which

¹⁵ See *Inauguration de la nouvelle maison commune, à Montmartre* [Signé: Séveste, aîné, mai 1837], [Paris]: impr. de P. Cordier, 1837; BnF LK7-5082.

¹⁶ *De la situation du Théâtre-Français et des améliorations à introduire dans son administration*, Paris: impr. de Ph. Cordier, 1839, BnF RT-2097; on the defence of the privilege, see also *Mémoire pour la société Seveste...*, RT 1488 and also *Courrier des théâtres...*, RT 1397.

¹⁷ On Edmond's funeral, see *Le Nouvelliste, journal de Paris*, jeudi 4 mars 1852; on Jules', *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, 21, 1854, pp. 226-227.

¹⁸ See [Recueil factice d'articles de presse sur les Seveste. 1841-ca. 1871], BnF RT 1397.

¹⁹ Thus *Amaglia, ou la fille du diable*, drame... 'performed for the first time at the Théâtre Montmartre' in 1836 (BnF RF-35099), or *Christophe et Lubin*, vaudeville comedy... 'performed for the first time at their student theatre' in 1825 (BnF RA4-1445). It should be noted that in several of these plays, a 'Mme Séveste' plays the leading female role.

²⁰ See Didier, Christophe, 'La naissance du théâtre 'des boulevards'...', pp. 314-315.

can mean that this is the repertoire intended for this theatre.²¹ Elsewhere, the names of the actors appear either on the covers or next to the list of characters. These lists are sometimes handwritten and all these elements may have been part of their work material.

- Other copies are explicitly designated as being for the 'prompter' – with mentions such as 'For the prompter' or 'Good for the prompter'. These notes remind us that censorship, still at work in these post-revolutionary years, could result in texts being modified at the last minute, which involved cutting or adding changes to the printed text.
- In fact, handwritten notes abound on a number of plays: corrections, modifications, additions or changes to texts, either directly on the printed page or on small slips of paper stuck to the same page, details, as we have said, about the casts, sometimes pieces of information about stage design and directing, or about musical parts.
- Sometimes, a handwritten visa, clearly issued by the Home Office, testifies to the fact that censorship services (which were established in 1806) had read the play.
- Sometimes there are also dedications from authors to the Seveste.²²

What conclusions can be drawn from this? First of all, let us remember that the *Société des théâtres de banlieue* had a specific administration. This is what one of the texts explicitly states (*Cache-cache, ou La fiancée de Berlin*, a one-act vaudeville, by M. Théaulon; performed for the first time in Paris at the Théâtre d'Élèves directed by MM. Séveste, on 29 May 1827). At the bottom of the page listing the actors, we can read 'S'adresser, pour la musique, à l'Administration de MM. Seveste, rue Beauregard, n. 15' (For the music, contact the administration of MM. Seveste, Beauregard Str. 15). Furthermore, it is more than likely that this administration had its own working library, corresponding to the repertoires it allocated to its various theatres, and that it is a part of this library, from one of the main entertainment companies of its time, that can be restored here, at least in part.

It is indeed a reconstitution: the cataloguing of the collection and its integration into the collective catalogue of French university libraries revealed that a collection similar in volume was deposited at the *Théâtrothèque Gaston Baty* of the University of Paris 3.²³ The reasons for this dispersal (the Parisian part was also deposited by Perchellet, without it being known why he gave up only half of his collection at the time) will probably remain unknown for ever, but the fact remains that 'the Seveste library' once again exists, that a digital transfer would make it possible to study in more detail, by reconciling mentions of origins, remarks and notations, or by allowing collections to be identified (for example, all brochures bearing the mention of 'the administration').

The Library as a *Theatrum Theatri*, a Mirror of the Literary Activity of the Time in the Minor Genres

All the plays of this collection belong to a repertoire nowadays completely forgotten, but which was the most popular from 1800 to 1830. The two genres in vogue were melodrama and vaudeville. In these small suburban theatres they took precedence over the great classical genres of comedy and tragedy.²⁴ The titles that the *fonds* provides us with for the year 1827 (one year after the foundation of the company *Veuve Seveste & fils*) offer a rather representative sample: a melodrama (*Cartouche*), a vaudeville (*Lami*

²¹ Some plays, as we have seen, were specifically written for particular venues, and in particular Montmartre (see footnote 19).

²² On all these aspects, we refer to the developments in our article cited above, Didier, Christophe, 'La naissance du théâtre 'des boulevards'...', pp. 320-323.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 314, footnote 1.

²⁴ Thomasseau, Jean-Marie, 'Les larmes de Margot', in: *Europe*, 1987, Vol. 703-704 (dossier 'Le mélodrame'), introduction of the *Europe* issue already mentioned in footnote 1.

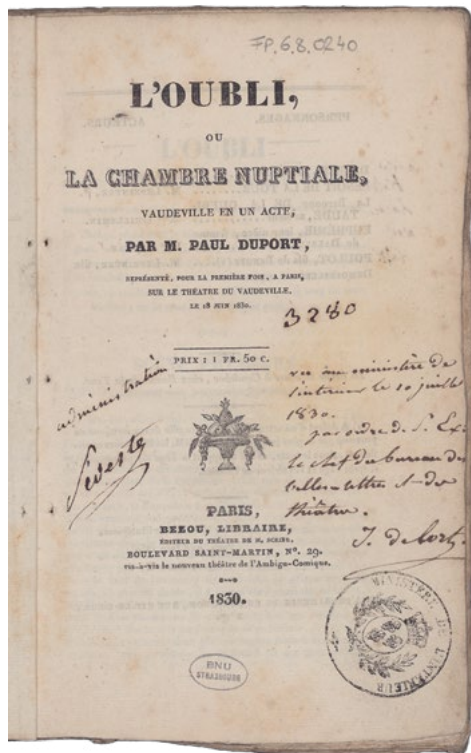


Fig. 8. *L'oubli ou la chambre nuptiale*, Paris: Bezou, 1830. Handwritten visa from the Home Office (censorship services; coll. BNU)

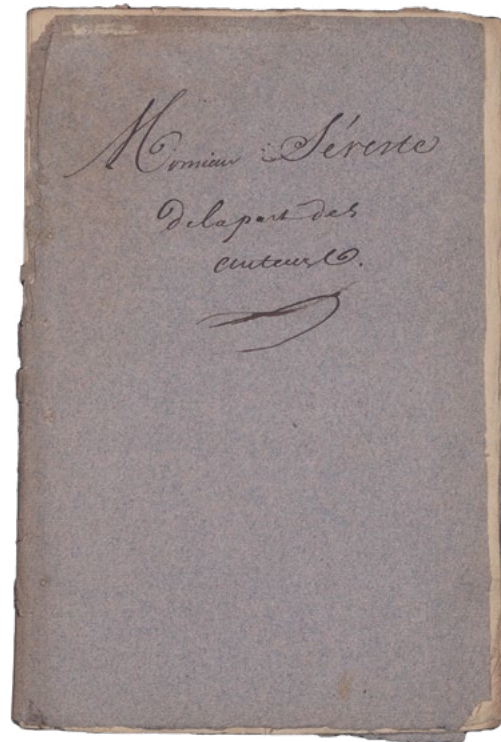


Fig. 9. *Le jour des noces, ou la lettre initiale*, Paris: Huet, 1824. Dedication from authors to Seveste (coll. BNU)

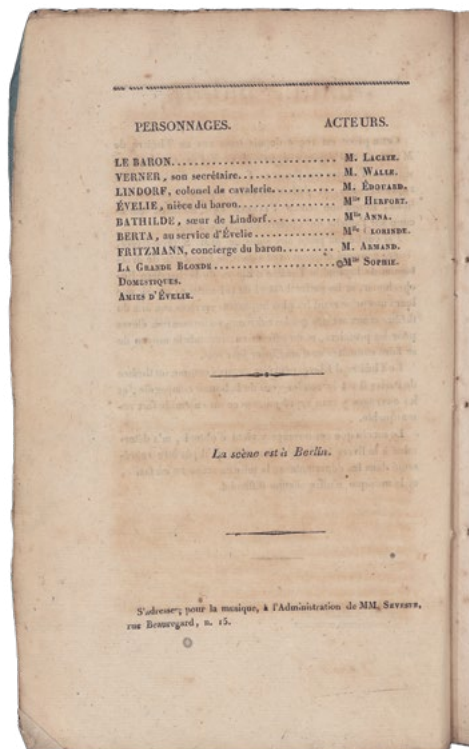


Fig. 10. *Cache-cache, ou la fiancée de Berlin*, Paris: Barba, 1827. Mention of the 'administration' of the Seveste company (coll. BNU)

Bontems – Our Friend the Goodtimes), a comedy with verse (*Héloïse ou La nouvelle somnambule* – Héloïse or The New Sleepwalker), a comedy (*Riche et pauvre* – Rich and Poor) and no less than twelve vaudeville comedies with evocative titles such as *Cinq heures du soir, ou Le duel manqué* (Five O'clock in the Evening or the Missed Duel), *La fiancée de Berlin, ou Le jeu de cache-cache* (The Berlin Fiancée or the Game of Hide and Seek), *Le mari de toutes les femmes* (The Husband of All Women), *Clara Wendel, ou La demoiselle Brigand* (Clara Wendel or Miss Sharpie), *Le mari par intérim* (The Interim Husband) or, lastly, *Les deux élèves* (The Two Pupils).

These plays are often of little literary value, made for short-lived success and rarely performed more than once on the same stage. Although they were published, it was probably mostly for the use of theatres and companies as working tools. They were occasionally reprinted when the authors had been successful, but more often than not they were forgotten after a few performances. Most of the authors have fallen into oblivion. Hence we are dealing here with the material that has become relatively rare. Preserving and transmitting this type of collection is actually more difficult, as it depends on the type of corpus itself (that of ephemeral literature): a rapid process, quickly written, quickly consumed... quickly discarded? The mere figure of more than 1,300 vaudevilles written between 1815 and 1830 gives an idea of the scale of the phenomenon and its limited place, almost two hundred years later, in our collective memory.²⁵

There are not many collections of this type of literature today, unlike the great religious, literary or philosophical bodies of work that line the shelves of all public heritage libraries and many private libraries. Even without discussing established collections, the presence of the plays and authors that make up this repertoire is rather scarce in today's library collections.²⁶

The *fonds* is also interesting for the history of the theatre: for instance, the markings left by actors inside the plays refer to the triumph of the actor in the nineteenth century. Likewise, the irruption of the *mise en scène*, which can also be seen in certain details (such as the stage sets), points to the specificity of vaudeville and melodrama, a theatre of effects that requires technical innovations to move the spectator.²⁷

Ultimately, the collection also bears witness to the link between authors who write plays adapted to the latest trends and entertainment entrepreneurs who build up their repertoire according to the preferences of the audience. This is illustrated by handwritten dedications to the Seveste that authors left inside the plays. But this link is also sometimes quite explicit: for example, in the foreword to *Cache-cache* in which the author writes that he has 'entrusted [his] play to the care of Messrs. Seveste frères' and states that 'the success that this work has just obtained [at the student theatre] [has] convinced [him] to publish it'.²⁸ Considering that many other plays were specifically written for the *théâtres d'élèves* set up by the Seveste they thus appear as prescribers, as those who motivated the printing and the making of a book that would contribute to save a play from oblivion. They were direct participants in the creation of an 'archive' which, without them, would probably not have been created in the same way. Therefore, it can be said that they have contributed to the creation of their own printed 'theater', a mirror of a genre and of an era. For this reason, it seems to us, one may speak of a *theatrum theatri*.

Concluding Remarks

Libraries of theatrical companies are not so numerous. In France, the most famous is the one of the *Comédie-Française*, which contains books, manuscripts and archival documents.²⁹ It is interesting to note the presence of a 'prompter-secretary' (*secrétaire-souffleur*) whose function in the preservation of the

²⁵ Figures from *Le théâtre...*, Paris: Bréal, 1996.

²⁶ Didier, Christophe, 'La naissance du théâtre 'des boulevards'...', p. 328 and following.

²⁷ Didier, Christophe, 'La naissance du théâtre 'des boulevards'...', pp. 326-328; see also 'Le mélodrame', in *Europe*, 1987, Vol. 703-704.

²⁸ Théaulon, Emmanuel, *Cache-cache; or La fiancée de Berlin, comédie-vaudeville en un acte*, Paris: Chez Barba, 1827. Access at: <<https://archive.org/details/cachecacheorlaf00thau/page/n3/mode/2up>>.

²⁹ See Guibert, Noëlle, 'La bibliothèque-musée de la Comédie-française', in: *Musées et collections publiques de France*, 1995, Vol. 207.

archives is not negligible: it was he who noted down the cast distribution, and most of the manuscripts of plays kept today at the *Comédie-Française* are copies of the prompter.

The prompter had a similar role in the Seveste administration, where he was in charge of the library, as the *Almanach des spectacles pour 1828* tells us.³⁰ Today, however, the collections that do exist are more the work of private collectors rather than company or enterprise archives: for example, the famous collections of Auguste Rondel, now kept at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, or that of Gaston Baty in the *Théâtrothèque* mentioned above. The *fonds Seveste-Perchellet* is all the more important as a company library. If today the reconstituted library is indeed a collection, it should not be forgotten that the Seveste were not collectors, but that their purpose in accumulating these works was strictly professional. It is unlikely that they thought of their library as a collection to be bequeathed as such to posterity. This collection of pamphlets is above all a testimony to their activity, which enabled them to rise in society.

Of course, the fact that this library (at least part of it) has reached us raises questions, as it would have been logical for it to be dispersed once its use was over. This touches on the mystery of its origins (we do not know how or where Jean-Pierre Perchellet bought it). Whatever the case, we are indeed in the presence of narratives of the past created by personal or institutional archives.

The Seveste collection highlights the role as (unconscious?) knowledge accumulators (in this case not really book collectors) of its owners, who can be considered as systematisers and sorters in forming a personal or institutional archive. This accumulation of books – and of the related knowledge – creates a kind of archival phenomenon with various elements (handmade remarks, annotations, property marks, details, inscriptions, illustrations, etc.), which can be seen as tools creating a narrative as well as results of the historical circumstances.

A corpus like this one might be considered as the *lieu de mémoire* (realm of memory) of the time. The words of the literary critic Wolfgang Menzel are worth recalling here: ‘The dominant literary character of a nation emerges much more clearly from the great mass of novels [we will add here: and plays] than from the rare creations of the geniuses, which are merely the exception. Major geniuses lead the way, masses show us where we are.’³¹

As an ultimately rather rare testimony to a quite neglected genre (popular theatre), one can indeed speak of a *theatrum theatri* in the sense that the organisers of the conference wanted to give to this term: a sort of encyclopaedia of theatrical activity in Paris in the nineteenth century, at a time when theatre was becoming one of the most popular types of entertainment among increasingly large levels of society. We are well aware that in the valorisation of the archives of the performing arts, ‘the richness is not only due to the intrinsic value of the plays, but to their diversity and to the possible connections that can be established later on.’³² Collecting materials that have been used, making available for analysis the notes of company directors, stage directors and actors, in short all the paratext that sometimes makes up the main interest in a publication (the works in the Perchellet collection are very rich in this respect), is also a way of underlining the role of book owners in the accumulation of knowledge.

Translated by Élodie Lacroix

³⁰ Didier, Christophe, ‘La naissance du théâtre ‘des boulevards’...’, p. 321, footnote 11.

³¹ Quoted by Steinecke, Hartmut, ‘Die fürstliche Bibliothek Corvey. Perspektiven ihrer wissenschaftlichen Erschließung’, in: *Die fürstliche Bibliothek Corvey: Ihre Bedeutung für eine neue Sicht der Literatur des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1992, pp. 233-242.

³² Here we quote Radermecker, Vincent, ‘En matière d’art du théâtre, quelles archives, pour quelle vie, au sein d’un organisme vivant ou d’un centre d’archivage?’, in: *Les collections des arts du spectacle et leur traitement*, edited by Nicole Leclercq, Kristy Davis, Maria Teresa Iovinelli, Bruxelles: P.I.E.-Peter Lang S.A., 2012, pp. 27-43.

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The Seveste and their theatre business have never been the subject of any specific studies. The information we do have about them can be found either in more generic histories of the theatre or in collections of articles or press cuttings which have been mentioned here along with their reference numbers at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. As for the library of the *Société des théâtres de banlieue*, the present article and the one we have previously published in 2020 (see below) are, to the best of our knowledge, the only ones to have examined it.

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