

## 2. Antoine and the Theatre Libre

We have seen how in England, and more decisively in Germany, the movement towards stage naturalism was in the first instance a response to the prevailing taste for the 'picturesque' in history, geography, and nature. At its best this was a reflection of the Romantic impulse in the arts, the urge to transcend mundane life through the aesthetic experience; but at its worst it was no more than 'museum culture', the magpie instinct of an acquisitive age. In this movement France led the way; the Revolution broke the austere hold of classicism, and the beginning of the nineteenth century saw the 'pièce-à-spectacle' firmly established on the Parisian stage. In 1830, the tumultuous premiere of Victor Hugo's *Hernani* announced the dramatic triumph of Romanticism and its passion for historical truth, which promised to extend beyond outward appearance to character and behaviour. But the popular demand for *la couleur des temps* remained powerful, and Hugo, de Vigny, Sardou, the elder Dumas and others were ready enough to meet it. Ironically, Alfred de Musset, the one dramatist of the period of unquestionable genius, shunned the theatre after the failure of his first play in 1830 and published his work for reading only. Significantly, it was not until after his death in 1857 that with the rise of realism he gained belated recognition. His masterpiece *Lorenzaccio*, published in 1834, was not properly appreciated until the Théâtre Nationale Populaire revival of 1951; in common with Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* and Büchner's *Danton's Death* and *Woyzeck*, similarly products of the Shakespearian revival in Europe, *Lorenzaccio* is a work that might have changed the course of theatre history had it been recognised in its day for its true qualities. As it was, the Romantic movement in French drama ran its course in fifteen years, bequeathed no plays of consequence to posterity, and did little to alter the shape of theatre practice or the demands of the theatre-going public. As early as 1836, the predominant tone of the century was expressed by Eugène Scribe in an address to the Académie Française:

You go to the theatre for relaxation and amusement, not for instruction or correction. Now what most amuses you is not truth but fiction . . . The theatre

is therefore rarely the direct expression of social life . . . it is often the inverse expression.<sup>1</sup>

Thus spoke the genius of the well-made play, who with his follower, Victorien Sardou, perfected a commodity that sold throughout Europe by precisely matching the demands of the age. The picture is well drawn by John Henderson:

The theatre in the nineteenth century was a reflection of the society in which it flourished. The age of immense economic expansion which followed the Industrial Revolution favoured the growth of a mercantile middle class, and this class demanded for its entertainment a theatre in which it saw an idealised picture of its own qualities, a theatre that was moral, comfortable, and thoroughly predictable—an antidote, in short, to the unseemly noise of the Romantic rebel. When a certain number of bourgeois dramatists perfected formulae for satisfying these tastes the temptation was to produce endless variations of a form that was known to please; and the development of theatrical entertainment into a fruitful commercial pursuit was equally responsible for discouraging innovation. At the end of the century the drama had not only become divorced from reality; it had lost contact with the poetry of life, with artistic values and had become a sterile, mechanical process.<sup>2</sup>

The advent in the 1850's of the 'problem play' by such authors as Alexandre Dumas *fils* and Émile Augier did little to affect the situation; despite their ostensible concern with social problems, the presentation remained diverting, and their attitude implied an affirmation of bourgeois values. Both formal and social equilibrium were carefully preserved, and the demands of the public were respectfully met.

In terms of stagecraft, the well-made play had no need for innovation, since formally it became as rigidly fixed as classical drama. In acting, the cardinal qualities were style, precision, and personality. Of Sarah Bernhardt, the very embodiment of the age, Shaw wrote in 1895:

She is beautiful with the beauty of her school, and entirely inhuman and incredible. But the incredibility is pardonable, because, though it is all the greatest nonsense, nobody believing in it, the actress herself least of all, it is so artful, so clever, so well recognised a part of the business, and carried off with such a genial air, that it is impossible not to accept it with good-humour . . . She does not enter into the leading character, she substitutes herself for it.<sup>3</sup>

But whilst the French theatre degenerated into an after-dinner diversion, the French novel was setting new standards in psychological penetration and the meticulous documentation of modern life at all levels of society. Between 1830 and 1850 Honoré de Balzac completed *La Comédie humaine*, his 'agglomeration of species' which amounted to almost one hundred novels. Similarly Émile Zola's *Rougon Macquart* cycle, completed in twenty volumes between 1869 and 1893, traced 'the natural and

social history of a family under the Second Empire'; it included all his best known works such as *L'Assommoir*, *Nana*, *Germinal*, *La Bête humaine*, and *La Terre*. Under the direct influence of the philosopher, historian and critic, Hippolyte Taine, Zola sought to employ the laws and methods of science in the creation of literature. He embraced Taine's system of *race, milieu, moment* and echoed his slogan 'Vice and virtue are simply products, like sugar and vitriol.'

Several leading novelists turned their hands to the theatre without success: Flaubert's sole effort, *Le Candidat* (1874) was given only four performances; Daudet's *L'Arlésienne* was found too unconventional in structure; the Goncourt brothers wrote several historical dramas that had to wait twenty years or more before Antoine appreciated their qualities;\* Balzac treated the stage more as a means of paying his debts than an opportunity for innovation.

Zola, on the other hand, found his belief in determinist objectivity offended by the falsity of the theatre, and resolved by personal intervention, both in criticism and in play-writing, to effect its reform. In the preface to his first major play, his own dramatic adaptation of his novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1873), he wrote 'I have the profound conviction that the experimental and scientific spirit of the century will prevail in the theatre, and that therein lies the only hope of reviving our stage.' He was to be proved right, but not until fifteen years later, and far more through his inspiration as a theorist and critic than his achievements as a dramatist.

Zola came to the theatre armed with the confidence of a celebrated and contentious novelist. The problem as he saw it was the translation of naturalistic technique into stage terms, of reconciling the scientific objectivity achieved in the novel with the degree of artifice unavoidable in the theatre. 'It would be absurd—he wrote in 1876—to suppose that one can transfer nature to the stage: plant real trees and have real houses lit by a real sun. We are forced into conventions, and must accept a more or less complete illusion instead of reality.'<sup>4</sup>

By this time, the mechanics of illusion on the French stage were as ingenious as anywhere in Europe, but Zola contended that so long as they furnished mere backgrounds they were worthless: 'It is man who should be the sum total of the effect; it is in him that the overall result should be observed; the sole purpose of realistic decor should be to lend him greater reality, to locate him in the atmosphere proper to him.'

Zola was concerned with the forces that shape the lives of ordinary, unremarkable people, but in forgoing the unlimited panorama of the novel, he accepted the need for compression and dramatic impact, and was prepared to emphasise his characters' exceptional traits rather than

\* See p. 31–32 below.

what made them typical. His declared aim in the Preface to *Thérèse Raquin* applies equally to his plays in general:

Given a strong man and an unsatisfied woman, to seek in them the beast, to see nothing but the beast, to throw them into a violent drama and note scrupulously the sensations and acts of these creatures . . . I have simply done on two living bodies the work which surgeons do on corpses.

The fallacy is surely plain: in working on corpses, surgeons do not select only those with abnormalities, whereas Zola depicted his characters and ordered their experiences precisely in order to emphasise their abnormality. This emerged in practice: *Thérèse Raquin* tells of the drowning of the sickly Camille by his passionate wife, Thérèse and her lover, Laurent; the couple then marry, but find their passion turning to hatred under the burden of remorse; they try simultaneously to kill each other, then finally take poison together. There is much that relates the play to the most lurid and improbable melodrama, not least the closing scene in which the paralysed Madame Raquin miraculously recovers the power of speech and condemns the guilty pair. Nevertheless, *Thérèse Raquin* was unprecedented in its depiction of the power of sexuality and of passion seething beneath the surface of idle conversation. Zola enclosed the drama in a single 'dark and humid' room. Here again, theatrical effect took precedence over mere reportage: the room's atmosphere served to heighten the sense of the couple's entrapment, but it had nothing to do with environment in the determinist sense of the word.

The point is made even more clearly by *L'Assommoir* (staged in England as *Drink*), again a play taken from the novel, and adapted for the stage in 1879 by Busnach and Gastineau under Zola's supervision. The grim story of alcoholism amongst the working-class was compressed into nine 'tableaux' of the most detailed realism with, for example, washerwomen washing real laundry with real soap in real hot water, or the perfect representation of the *assommoir* itself, the bar with patrons drifting in and out. Both Zola and the Paris public, who kept the play running for over three hundred performances, were deeply impressed by this exact reproduction of life, yet the fundamental error persisted: in order 'to add some dramatic interest to the play' Zola authorised the strengthening of the theme of jealousy, thereby rendering the tragedy personal and melodramatic and obscuring its origins in social conditions.<sup>5</sup>

Zola's work generally is characterised by a moral indignation at prevailing conditions in society, yet he is reticent in identifying causes beyond the imperfect nature of the human species. He rightly castigated the moralistic sermonising of Dumas *fils* and the other exponents of the 'problem play', but had he stood less rigidly on his principle of scientific detachment and related his case-histories to a wider social reality he might

have found a structure and a dynamic for his dramas which was not merely formal and derived from conventional models.

For all its shortcomings, the production of *L'Assommoir* at the Théâtre de l'Ambigu in 1879 did more than any other single event to bring naturalism to the attention of the French theatre public. Both through his critical writings and through the staging of his work, Zola did much to widen the horizons of the theatre for dramatists and directors. In his authoritative study *Zola and the Theatre*, Lawson Carter writes:

Whereas the romantics had rebelled against the stereotyped mould of classicism, the naturalists rebelled against stereotyped formulas of morality and rhetoric which frustrated efforts to bring a greater measure of truth to literature and the drama . . . Zola's doctrine, dependent upon the alliance of science and literature, was in a sense merely a primitive expression of modern naturalism, which has discarded his scientific pretensions. Yet the alliance was necessary in its time. The scientific spirit was needed to regenerate literature and the drama, and to free them of conventions and taboos. To Zola belongs the credit for this temporary, yet fertile, mating.<sup>6</sup>

For all the eloquent passion of Zola's critical writings and all the furore created by his plays in the theatre, the crucial breakthrough was not achieved: in the boulevard theatres the stage-director remained answerable to his backers and took risks at his peril, whilst the attitude of the state theatres is accurately conveyed by the celebrated remark of Jean Perrin, director of the Comédie-Française: 'I need no new authors. A year of Dumas, a year of Augier and a year of Sardou is enough for me.' The fact that *L'Assommoir* got put on and then succeeded was due in no small measure to the name of Zola. Unknown dramatists of whatever talent could draw on no such credit, and so were forced to write in a manner calculated to please if they were to stand any chance of performance. The need was for a playwright's theatre: a theatre that would protect the right to fail, was talented enough to guarantee serious standards, yet small enough to function without the aid of capricious benefactors or mercenary backers. This is precisely what came into being in Paris in 1887, the prototype of all the free, independent, art, studio, basement, fringe and lunchtime theatres, which have since initiated most of the advances of any consequence in twentieth-century drama.

At the age of twenty-nine André Antoine worked as a clerk with the Paris Gas Company. A frustrated actor who at eighteen had been rejected by the Conservatoire, he belonged to the Cercle Gaulois, one of several amateur dramatic societies that functioned in Paris. Their work was safe and unexceptional, until Antoine was given the idea by an aspiring dramatist of putting on an evening of unperformed plays. In no time, Antoine found himself with a complete programme of one-act plays, including an adaptation by Léon Hennique of a story by Zola called *Jacques*

*Damour*, first published in 1880. Due largely to the presence of Zola's name in the programme, the venture was taken up by the press and it was widely publicised. The immediate effect was ominous for Antoine and his friends: alarmed at the scale of the project and the scandal attaching to Zola's name, the conservative Cercle Gaulois took fright and withdrew all support save the hire of its theatre in the Passage de l'Elysée-des Beaux-Arts in Montmartre, which was owned by the society's president. The simple wooden building had no foyer and seated an audience of 343. But this primitive venue was evidently to the liking of the initiates who found their way there. The eminent critic Jules Lemaitre reported 'One could shake hands with the actors across the footlights, and stretch one's legs over the prompter's box. The stage is so small that only the simplest scenery can be set up on it, and so near the audience that scenic illusion is impossible.'<sup>7</sup> For the setting of *Jacques Damour* Antoine borrowed the furniture from his mother's dining room, and pushed it to the theatre in a handcart. Denied the use of the stage until the performance, Antoine rehearsed his company in a billiard room behind a nearby café; for this concession Antoine had to agree to buy drinks in the café at each rehearsal. Obligated by the Cercle Gaulois to find a different name to cover their disreputable undertaking, the new company settled on Théâtre Libre.

After rehearsals graced by the attendance and good will of Zola and other like-minded writers and critics, the inaugural programme was given a preview before an invited audience on 29 March 1887 and a single press performance the following night. Of the four one-act plays in the programme, only *Jacques Damour* was successful. Antoine played the title role of the exiled communard who returns home to find that his wife, believing him dead, has remarried. It was a personal triumph for Antoine, and one critic was moved to declare 'If the naturalist theatre produces many plays like this one, it can rest easy about its future.' Due to two other premières on the same evening, few critics were present, but those who were reported favourably. A week later, the illustrious national theatre, the Odéon, requested the play, having rejected it only a few months previously. Through this alone the existence of the Théâtre Libre became validated and a pattern established for the years to come.

Antoine had not dared to look beyond the single programme and was taken unawares. In his memoirs he writes, 'I did not have the slightest plan of becoming a professional actor or director, and I should have laughed indeed if anyone had predicted to me that we were going to revolutionise dramatic art.'<sup>8</sup> Two months later, a second programme comprising two more new plays was given two performances to invited audiences, mostly from the artistic world, and this time a full complement of critics. The main item was a three-act verse comedy by Émile Bergerat called *La Nuit bergamasque*, derived from Boccaccio and built round

traditional *commedia* characters. Far more interest was aroused by the one-act sketch, *En famille* by Oscar Méténier, which preceded it. It was a vivid and authentic account of life in the Paris slums, centering on a description of the guillotining of a friend of the family. It was uncontrived naturalism, which owed nothing to traditional conventions, and it moved the august critic Sarcey to comment 'Perhaps this is the theatre of the future. I hope to have gone before it arrives'. One particular innovation worth mentioning was the rejection of foot-lights and the complete lowering of house-lights during performance: unprecedented in France, if familiar enough at Wagner's Bayreuth and elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

Thanks mainly to the sensation caused by *En famille*, the response to the evening was enthusiastic and Antoine could think realistically of a full programme for the following season. Taking his life in his hands, he resigned from the Gas Company and even refused an invitation to join the Odéon Theatre as an actor.

To safeguard its artistic freedom and to protect itself against the censor it was vital that the Théâtre Libre remain a subscription society. After a summer spent delivering thirteen hundred prospectuses by hand, Antoine had just thirty-seven subscribers and huge bills to meet, but after the reopening in October the number swelled to over three thousand. These sensational events were more than the modest Cercle Gaulois could stand, and the Théâtre Libre was forced to move right across Paris to the Théâtre Montparnasse in the Rue de la Gaité. Thus, after just three programmes, Antoine was in a position to hire and fill a theatre of some eight hundred seats.

Antoine always insisted that the Théâtre Libre was not simply a naturalistic theatre, but literally 'free', and dedicated to all unperformed drama of whatever genre. Over the years his repertoire embraced farce, melodrama, historical pageants, verse drama, mime, even a shadow-play; but most representative of the theatre's style was the *quart d'heure*, the brief one-act 'slice of life', inaugurated by *En famille*, which belonged to the genre called *comédie rosse*. The term *rosse* is untranslatable but it implies, in the words of one critic, 'a sort of vicious ingenuousness, the state of mind of people who have never had any moral sense and who live in impurity and injustice like a fish in water'.<sup>10</sup> Typical was Jean Jullien's *Serenade* staged by Antoine as part of his second programme in Montparnasse. The play concerns a complacent bourgeois husband who accepts that his wife and his daughter share the family tutor as their lover; at the end of the play he welcomes the tutor into the family as his son-in-law, with no indication that this will change the situation in any way.

The advantages of the *quart d'heure* were several: its simple, episodic form helped Antoine to develop an intimate style of natural acting; it enabled him to devise programmes containing the work of young aspiring

dramatists alongside full-length plays by established authors, whose names would ensure public support; it could be staged with a minimum of resources, and fostered the development of behavioural naturalism in writing which focussed attention on the motivation and interaction of character rather than external physical details; finally, it exposed the needless contrivances and complications of the full-length formula play. Strindberg, who closely followed developments in France, acknowledged his debt to the *quarts d'heure* staged by Antoine, and wrote a stronger himself, such as *Pariah*, *Simoom*, *Playing with Fire* and *The Stronger*, before he arrived at his 'new formula' with *The Father* and *Miss Julie*.

At the same time, Antoine took every opportunity to stage major full-length works. The sensation of the 1887-88 season was his production of Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness*. In this tragedy completed in 1886 Tolstoy gives a vivid account of Russian peasant life in the grip of drink, ignorance, superstition, and avarice. Tolstoy based the play on an actual murder case in the Tula Province and so authentic are the play's setting and dialogue that the tragedy emerges as the inevitable outcome of a brutal existence. On publication in Russia the edition of 200,000 copies sold out immediately, and the play was promptly banned from performance by the Tsarist censor. Thus, Antoine's production on 10 February 1888 was the world première. It was also the first of a series of foreign plays that enhanced the reputation of the Théâtre Libre and opened up the French stage to new and vital influences. This was a task that was to be performed by the independent theatre movement in every country, making repertoires multi-national as they had never been before.

Antoine's concern with authenticity made him reject the play's existing translation and commission a new one, engaging a Russian consultant to check the details of dialect. It was the first time that a word-for-word translation, as opposed to adaptation, of a foreign text had been staged in France. Similarly, although forced to adapt the settings from available stock, he was able to obtain costumes and 'real Russian objects' from the emigré community. Impressed though the audience was, it is unlikely that externally *The Power of Darkness* compared with the standards achieved at Meiningen. Even so, the *Revue des Deux Mondes* commented 'For the first time a setting and costumes truly borrowed from the daily customs of Russian life appeared on the French stage without comic opera embellishments and without that predilection for tinsel and falsity that seems inherent in our theatrical atmosphere.'<sup>11</sup> But what assured the production's spectacular success was the total conviction of the acting by a cast headed by Antoine as the old peasant Akim and including two clerks, an architect, a chemist, a travelling salesman, a wine-merchant, a dressmaker and a book-binder.

Such was the interest aroused by *The Power of Darkness* that Antoine

was persuaded by the Russian community to give for the first time a performance for the general public, which was followed by three more in Brussels. By the close of the season Antoine had put on seventeen new plays and established an international reputation for the Théâtre Libre. In February 1888 *Le Figaro* wrote 'The Théâtre Libre has become a Parisian institution, not because of an idle whim of fashion, but because it responds to a desire of the public, a desire in the field of drama, to branch off from the beaten tracks where tradition has driven its ever deeper ruts.'<sup>12</sup> Yet despite this recognition and despite packed houses for every performance of *The Power of Darkness*, Antoine was, as he was always to be, deeply in debt.

In the summer of 1888 the Théâtre Libre moved again, this time to the Salle des Menus-Plaisirs, a theatre in the centre of Paris on the Boulevard de Strasbourg. Antoine planned a season comprising eight evenings of previews, eight first-nights before subscription audiences, and twenty-five public performances. The disadvantage of the new theatre was that, with a total of seventeen productions to mount, there was no longer a stock of scenery on which to draw. Commenting on this, Antoine wrote 'More and more, discussions over our presentations are turning from the values or the tendencies of the work given to questions about interpretation or setting. There has been more debate about such matters than I would ever have thought possible.'<sup>13</sup> This seems to indicate quite clearly that Antoine's search for scenic truth proceeded from the heart of the drama rather than from any fascination with external effects. In July 1888 he saw the Meiningen Company on tour in Brussels and recorded his impressions in a long letter to the critic Sarcey. He found much to admire in their work, notably the carefully rehearsed crowd scenes and the capacity of the actors to play oblivious to the audience, with back turned if need be. These points he resolved to emulate, but at the same time he found plenty to criticise, in particular 'the garish and oddly designed settings', the 'foolishly rich' costumes, the lighting effects, 'often striking, but handled with epic naivete'. The acting he found 'adequate and nothing more'.<sup>14</sup> Two productions in the first season on the Boulevard de Strasbourg reflected the influence of the Meiningen on Antoine, both of them being seen by him as 'revivals of the historical play through the methods of the realistic school'.

They were *The Death of the Duke of Enghien* by Léon Hennique and *The Motherland in Danger* by the Goncourt brothers. *The Death of the Duke of Enghien* was presented in December 1888. In three tableaux, it was a factual account of the pursuit and arrest by Napoleon's agents of the counter-revolutionary Duke of Enghien, and his court martial and execution at Vincennes. William Archer wrote: 'It is an attempt to put an historic episode on the stage in its unvarnished simplicity, without any

involution of plot or analysis of motive.'<sup>15</sup> What distinguished it from the *grands spectacles* of the Romantic period was the complete absence of grandiloquent heroics and costume for costume's sake. Like the Meiningen, Antoine's actors wore *clothes* that emphasised their characters and their situation in the drama instead of conforming to the picturesque image in the popular imagination. Thus the clothes of the Duke and the Princess de Rohan emphasised the misery of their exile, whilst Napoleon's envoy wore a simple frock-coat instead of a general's uniform'.<sup>16</sup>

The most spectacular aspect of the production was the lighting. In the final tableau Antoine used candle-light alone, with the house in complete darkness. During the cross-examination of the Duke the actors were seen as little more than silhouettes. When the court retired to consider its verdict, the prisoner fell asleep, slumped at a table. A soldier returned, roused him and led him outside. The stage was left empty and a volley of shots was heard. William Archer commented '... nothing is left to the imagination but what it claims as its right - for it must be remembered that the most thrilling spectacle in real life will not move us save through sympathetic imagination.'<sup>17</sup>

Archer had seen the Théâtre Libre when it visited London for a week in February 1889. As well as *The Duke of Enghien*, the programme at the Royalty Theatre included *Jacques Damour* and *En famille*. Whilst the public response was sympathetic enough, the critics were mostly patronising or simply uncomprehending; *The Times* described Antoine's theatre as 'the happy hunting ground of the ultra-realistic or fin-de-siècle dramatist who specially affects the horrible and the revolting'.<sup>18</sup>

Antoine himself was keen to gain as much experience as he could from his stay. When the company returned to Paris, he remained in order to see Irving's production of *Macbeth* at the Lyceum. He thought little of Irving himself and made no comment on Ellen Terry, but he was deeply impressed by the settings and, in particular, the lighting effects which seemed to him beyond the dreams of the Parisian stage.<sup>19</sup> His comments are typical of his own modesty and open-mindedness, and at the same time indicate the relatively slender resources available to his own company.

Antoine's receptivity to the ideas of other directors was demonstrated a month after his return from London when he staged *The Motherland in Danger* by Edmond and Jules de Goncourt on a scale and in a style much indebted to the example of the Meiningen, and with chiaroscuro lighting effects reminiscent of Irving's *Macbeth*. Like *The Duke of Enghien*, which Hennique had dedicated to the Goncourt brothers, *The Motherland in Danger* was more a series of tableaux (in this case, five) than a coherent drama. Completed in 1867, it had been refused by the Comédie Française because its glorification of the Revolution made it unacceptable during

the conservative reign of Napoléon III. Though published in 1873, it had never been staged, and it was left to Antoine to present it in celebration of the centenary of 1789. His production excelled in milling crowd scenes, for which he employed two-hundred meticulously schooled extras, in its pictorial beauty and its historical accuracy. However, the play's interminable dialogues were not redeemed by their documentary exactitude, and robbed the action of all dramatic tension. Furthermore, the critics pronounced Antoine's company 'inadequate for the noble genre', a verdict that reflected exactly the prejudicial attitude towards style that Antoine was seeking to break down. Ironically, it seems to have been a view of the production shared even by the arch-naturalist Edmond de Goncourt himself.<sup>20</sup>

Following the usual subscription première, twenty-five public performances were planned for *The Motherland in Danger*, but attendances were poor and it was repeated only five times. So yet again, after a costly production Antoine was left with a heavy deficit. It was not to be his last attempt at mass spectacle, but for the present the Théâtre Libre's programmes reverted to a more familiar formula. In May 1890 Antoine once again introduced a major foreign dramatist to the French stage, this time Ibsen, with a production of *Ghosts*.

By now, the success of the Théâtre Libre had led to the formation of independent theatre groups elsewhere in Europe. The first was an experimental theatre founded by Strindberg in Copenhagen in March 1889 for the performance of his own plays. It closed after only four performances. Of far greater significance was the the Freie Bühne, which opened in Berlin in September of that year under the direction of Otto Brahm. To open his campaign for the 'new theatre' he too chose *Ghosts*, already staged by the Meininger in 1886 but still banned from public performance in Germany.\* Similarly, when the Independent Theatre (sub-titled 'Théâtre Libre') under J. T. Grein opened in London with *Ghosts* in March 1891, it succeeded in drawing attention to itself with the predictable rumpus provoked by what *The Times* described as 'the lugubrious and malodorous world of Ibsen'.

Antoine was familiar with *Ghosts* at least as early as the summer of 1888, when he mentioned it in his letter on the Meininger to Sarcey. However, he delayed two years in bringing it to the stage for two reasons: firstly, as Francis Pruner suggests, he was anxious for the critical furore aroused by the publication in 1889 of the French translation to abate at least to the point where a performance would not be dismissed out of hand; secondly, he was dissatisfied with the available text and took the trouble to commission a reliable new version for which he obtained Ibsen's

\*See pp. 19-20 above.

authorisation. In both respects, he revealed his characteristic concern for the interests of the author rather than the quick *succès de scandale*. This same concern, in fact, led him to make his one error of judgement in the production: anxious to secure the French public's indulgence for the forbidding Norwegian dramatist, and in particular to avoid provoking religious antagonism, he cut the part of Pastor Manders so much that it lost all coherence and several critics even accused the actor of rendering unpleasant the one *sympathetic* character in the play.

The preponderant reaction to *Ghosts* varied between boredom and confusion, though the agony of the closing scene was powerful enough. Recalling his own performance as Oswald, Antoine writes: 'I... underwent an experience totally new to me - an almost complete loss of my own personality. After the second act I remember nothing, neither the audience nor the effect of the production, and, shaking and weakened, I was some time getting hold of myself again after the final curtain had fallen.'<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the confusion of the French critics, two foreign visitors were deeply impressed. George Moore, the English naturalist writer and critic wrote:

Antoine was superb in the part of Osvalt. The nervous irritation of the sick man was faultlessly rendered. When he tells his mother of the warnings of the French doctor, at the moment when he loses his temper at her interruptions - she seeks not to hear the fearful tale - Antoine, identifying himself with the simple truth sought by Ibsen, by voice and gesture, casts upon the scene so terrible a light, so strange an air of truth, that the drama seemed to be passing not before our eyes, but deep down in our hearts in a way we had never felt before. 'Listen to me, mother. I insist upon your listening to me,' he says, querulous already with incipient disease. And when comes the end of the first act, when the mother, hearing the servant-girl cry out, goes to the door, and seeing the son kissing the girl, cries, 'Ghosts, ghosts!' what shall I say, what praise shall we bestow upon a situation so supremely awful, so shockingly true?<sup>22</sup>

The Swedish poet and active propagandist of Scandinavian literature, Ola Hansson, was impressed by the authenticity of Antoine's performance:

His portrayal, both in its general conception and in all its incidental details, was altogether convincingly Scandinavian - to such a degree that as a Scandinavian I needed to look around at the theatre surroundings and the audience to remind myself that I was not at home in some familiar, native setting. Yet in the actual manner of his portrayal Antoine revealed himself as the representative of true Gallic naturalism. His body, his clothes, his movements, his gestures, even the way his hair was combed, were all those of a Scandinavian at home; yet the transparent, clear simplicity with which these qualities were conveyed was wholly Gallic in nature. There was a lucidity such as one observes in nature in

late Autumn when the leaves are rotting in the woods and the scent of death hangs over the fields; it was a clarity as gentle yet as unremitting as death.<sup>23</sup>

Interpreting Hansson's poetic imagery and reading the rest of his lengthy appraisal, one gets the impression of a performance that observed every naturalistic detail yet was vividly expressive of the play's inner poetic meaning. Antoine himself felt sufficiently encouraged to return to Ibsen the following year with a production of *The Wild Duck*. To judge from the few impressionistic reports that survive, it seems to have posed even more insoluble problems than *Ghosts*. Having come to terms at length with naturalism, the public and critics were now being led a stage further into the realms of symbolism. Their response on the first night at the Théâtre Libre was, literally, to quack like ducks, though by the end they fell silent and received the final act in admiration, if somewhat puzzled.

But despite the coolness of *The Wild Duck's* reception, Antoine, like Duke Georg and Otto Brahm in Germany, had brought Ibsen before the public eye, and over the next five years twelve further plays by him were staged in various theatres in Paris. In order to stave off the ever-present threat of bankruptcy the Théâtre Libre undertook a number of extensive tours around France and to Belgium, Holland, Italy and Germany. In the course of these *Ghosts* was among the most successful productions, and altogether was given over two-hundred performances.

The 1891-92 season was given over entirely to French plays, but in 1893 Antoine resumed his policy of introducing significant works from the foreign avant-garde. In January of that year he gave three performances of *Miss Julie*, the first production of Strindberg in France. At that time, Strindberg had received little recognition as a dramatist: apart from his own short-lived attempt to found an independent theatre in Copenhagen, the Freie Bühne had staged *The Father* with moderate success in 1890 and had given one single public performance of *Miss Julie* in 1892 that provoked such vehement protests that it was immediately dropped from the repertoire. Some years earlier Strindberg had sent Antoine his own French translation of *The Father*, but despite his professed enthusiasm for it, Antoine had never succeeded in accommodating it in his repertoire. Evidently, he had his doubts too about *Miss Julie*, for he describes it in his *Memoirs* as 'a curious play by Strindberg' (November 1892). However, he took the trouble to have Strindberg's lengthy preface to the play translated and distributed in advance of the premiere to his subscribers and the critics. It was a curious decision, since Strindberg had written it five years previously, and most of the innovations that he advocated had by now been achieved by Antoine and his followers elsewhere. It also proved injudicious: Antoine neglected to date the piece, and the French critics didn't take kindly to being lectured on the current

state of the theatre by a mere Swede (though Sarcey believed him to be Norwegian), and objected to Strindberg's criticism of the 'over-simplified view of people' in the great Molière.

Thus the evening was blighted before it began, and the audience's humour was not enhanced by the two worthless items that made up the triple bill with *Miss Julie*. In his *Memoirs* Antoine writes '*Miss Julie* made an enormous sensation. Everything stimulated the audience - the subject, the setting, the packing into a single act an hour and a half in length of enough action to sustain a full-length French play. Of course, there were sneers and protests, but it was, after all, something quite new.'<sup>24</sup> To judge from the first-night critics, there was little but sneers and protests: they speak of 'this latest bout of tiresome silliness', 'international pornography', 'an irritating evening with a wind of insanity blowing from the North', 'an adulterous mixture of Zola and Ibsen'. Even some writers who were associated with the Théâtre Libre suggest that the audience made little effort to comprehend Strindberg's blend of naturalism and symbolism. Francis Pruner rightly observes that even *Ghosts* had been ill-received at first; but the fact remains that whereas *Ghosts* survived to receive over two-hundred performances, *Miss Julie* was never staged publicly at the Théâtre Libre, and was given only two further invitation performances on tour. By now, the continual struggle for survival was causing Antoine's energies to flag. After a finely orchestrated production of Hauptmann's vast social drama *The Weavers* in May 1893, he began to look for ways of winding up the company. Further foreign tours were undertaken to balance the books, but October 1894 found Antoine and his company of fifteen stranded in Rome and hopelessly in debt. He extricated himself somehow, but at the cost of turning over the Théâtre Libre to another management under which it survived until 1896.

After a time Antoine took over the Théâtre de Menus-Plaisirs again and, renaming it the Théâtre Antoine, continued his policy of promoting new writing. In 1906 he was appointed artistic director of the Odéon, where he worked until 1914. After that he gave up the theatre for the cinema, making a number of screen versions of books by Hugo, Dumas, Zola and others. For the last twenty years of his life he was a respected film and theatre critic. He died in 1943 at the age of eighty-six.

When Antoine founded the Théâtre Libre in 1887, his principal aim was to provide a stage for new and unperformed drama. When he visited London in 1889, he said in an interview:

The aim of the Théâtre Libre is to encourage every writer to write for the stage, and, above all, to write what he feels inclined to write and not what he thinks a manager will produce. I produce anything in which there is a grain of merit, quite irrespective of any opinion I may form of what the public will think of it, and anything a known writer brings me, and exactly as he hands it to me. If he

writes a monologue of half-a-dozen pages, the actor must speak those half-dozen pages word for word. His business is to write the play: mine to have it acted.<sup>25</sup>

In his seven years at the Théâtre Libre Antoine put on 111 plays, most of them previously unknown in France. The care he took over their selection and presentation, his refusal to capitulate in the face of critical onslaughts, and his determination to educate rather than pander to popular taste all support his claims as a *playwright's* director. Certainly his greatest successes were achieved in the field of naturalism, and he never ceased to acknowledge the support and inspiration of Zola, but above all, he showed the world what a theatre could do when freed from the constraints of custom and profit.

### 3. The Symbolist Theatre

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On 24 August 1890 the eminent critic of *Le Figaro*, Octave Mirbeau, announced the arrival of a new dramatic genius. He was the little known twenty-eight years old Belgian poet, Maurice Maeterlinck, and his brief tragedy *La Princesse Maleine*, was described by Mirbeau as 'The most inspired work of our time, the most extraordinary and the most unaffected, comparable with, and - dare I say it - superior in beauty to all that is finest in Shakespeare.' In fact, Maeterlinck was not nearly so obscure as Mirbeau claimed, but his extravagant eulogy had its effect and the Paris avant-garde theatre hastened to stage *La Princesse Maleine*. As we have seen, Antoine was in no way bound in his loyalty to naturalistic drama, and he soon announced the inclusion in his repertoire for 1890/91 of Maeterlinck's brief, heavily significant tragedy of corrupt kings and queens, acted out in towers, passages, and forests.

However, by February the following year Antoine seems to have had second thoughts; in his *Memories* he writes '... I really don't have the materials, costumes, settings, or actors at hand to do [*La Princesse Maleine*] ... The truth is that I don't think that this would suit the nature of the theatre, and I would be undertaking a venture which would only betray the author.'<sup>1</sup> Antoine's work had barely reached its zenith by 1891, but his reluctance to meet the challenge of Maeterlinck indicates his limits, and points to a shift that had already overtaken the arts at large and was now to affect the theatre, tardy as ever in its response to innovation.

In France the Symbolist Movement came to its peak in the decade following 1885, but its influence extended throughout Europe and can be traced beyond the First World War. In the Introduction to *The Heritage of Symbolism* Maurice Bowra writes 'Seen in retrospect the Symbolist Movement of the Nineteenth Century in France was fundamentally mystical. It protested with noble eloquence against the scientific art of an age which had lost much of its belief in traditional religion and hoped to find a substitute in the search for truth.'<sup>2</sup> But it was not so much the theory of Naturalism that the Symbolists rejected; rather, it was the tawdriness of bourgeois life, the lack of higher values, that the Naturalists