



**“From On Stage to in Office: Examining the Success of
Political Actors in Eighteenth-Century France”**

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Over two hundred years after the French Revolution, historians have yet to reach a consensus as to what caused the bloody overthrow of one of Europe's leading political regimes. However, it has been agreed that the French Revolution marked "the beginning of a new world" (O'Brien, "Review: A People's History") in its materialization of a bourgeois public sphere that suppressed individual interests to make room for the debate of public issues (Ravel 3). It is for this reason that eighteenth-century France remains such a fascinating period of history: not only was the French Revolution an uprising orchestrated by the people and for the people, but it succeeded in restructuring the French political system and led to the attainment of equal representation for the average citizen. However, while previous research has focused on the revolutionary policy and legislative changes that occurred during this period, there has been little focus on the involvement of related subject – the political actor.

Eighteenth-century France has been considered the country's Age of Theatre, and French playwrights often used their writing to comment on political, societal, and economic issues (Meeker, "Politics of the Stage"). This distribution of political messages on-stage was also paired with a shift towards

audience interaction that provided the underrepresented public an opportunity to be heard. Author Michael McClellan explains that during this time, theatres served as venues for political ideas to be shared with empowered audiences who then accepted, rejected, or changed these messages ("The Revolution On-stage"). In this way, eighteenth-century French theatre both shaped and responded to public opinion, effectively facilitating a discussion between the people and the government. The intertwining between the political and the theatrical allowed for "theatrico-politico hybrids" that advantaged theatrical training and extended the power of French theatre actors, resulting in performers being elected to high-ranking political and military positions (Friedland 2).

This unique involvement of theatre actors in eighteenth-century politics thus poses an interesting question: why was eighteenth-century France an opportune time for actors to transition into politics, and how were these actors-turned-politicians perceived by the public? By exploring how politics evolved in eighteenth-century French theatre, examining the theatricality of French Revolutionary politics itself, and studying the actions of a selection of French political actors, we can better understand



how the relationship between French theatre and politics set the stage for actors to transition into political roles and how these roles were received by the public.

To begin, it is important to note that eighteenth-century France experienced not just a political revolution, but also a theatrical revolution. Prior to the French Revolution, dramatic performance had proven to be of value because it provided an opportunity to communicate with an overwhelmingly illiterate public (Hemmings 483). However, in the seventeenth-century, John Dennis, an English writing critic, began noticing parallels between French theatre and the French monarchy (Ravel 67). Whereas the impact of theatres had previously been restrained to the public, Richelieu and Louis XIV began efforts to capitalize on the symbolic influence of theatre in court and in the city (Ravel 68), and French theatre soon became seen as an opportunity for high-ranking individuals to impress others (Meeker, "Politics of the Stage").

At the same time, French politicians and government officials adopted a hands-on approach towards theatre in an effort to control public performances (Meeker, "Politics of the Stage"). In the late seventeenth-century, the Crown called for productions, acting troupes,

and audiences to be regulated and supervised (Meeker, "Politics of the Stage"). Playwrights were also forced to produce works that promoted the monarchy and Catholic Church and whose characters were of noble birth (Meeker, "Politics of the Stage"). Additionally, plays were censored to reduce any allusions or situations onstage that might rally the audience, and plays that mocked or attacked public figures or religious beliefs were condemned or delayed (Meeker, "Politics of the Stage").

Although the Crown yearned for plays that "extolled the monarchy and perpetuated the powerful system of privilege," stories such as these did not resonate with average viewers (Meeker, "Politics of the Stage"). Molière's early seventeenth-century work, for example, was supported by Louis XIV, yet was heavily criticized both personally and professionally by Parisian audiences (Leon 452). This public frustration bubbled into the mid-1720s, when audience reception in public theatres started to play a role in "determining questions of taste and repertory" and even impacted productions' financial success (Ravel 102). In 1724, a production of Voltaire's *Hérode et Mariamne*, formerly a crowd favorite, barely finished its evening performance due to audience disruption, eventually forcing Voltaire to withdraw



his work from the repertory (Ravel 128). Author Kimberly Meeker adds that over time, “a system of market values emerged to compete with the tradition of aristocratic sponsorship” and led to a major theatrical shift (“Politics of the Stage”).

Beginning in the mid eighteenth-century, artists, playwrights, and authors began creating works that better represented public demand, allowing more political and polarized theatrical content to become available (Friedland 55). Unbeknownst to the Crown, political theatre also made its way into the aristocracy: during the 1750s and early 1760s, “radical assertions” were juxtaposed against “innumerable expressions of loyalty and devotion,” and character dialogue from nobility became less reliant on abstract political models and more focused on accurate French history (Friedland 58). The incorporation of politics in theatre quickly escalated, and from 1751 until the start of the Revolution, soldiers were placed in Parisian theatres in an effort to maintain control of an increasingly hostile public (Ravel 164).

This transition period not only transformed the content and performance of theatrical works, but also altered the purpose of French theatre. Meeker explains that later in the

century, bourgeois dramatists such as Denis Diderot, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, and Louis-Sébastien Mercier shifted to viewing theatre as a “didactic medium” that allowed them to educate the public on moral issues (“Politics of the Stage”). As such, plays altered from aristocratic themes to moralistic comedies and tragedies that stressed realism over fantasy and integrated characters of varying economic backgrounds (Meeker, “Politics of the Stage”). Mercier wrote lines that aimed to “influence political or social sentiment,” Beaumarchais used satire to demonstrate “the abuses of the political system,” and playwrights across France structured their works to incite societal change (Meeker, “Politics of the Stage”). The new purpose of theatre, these playwrights believed, was to appeal to the masses and “be more accessible to common contemporary interests,” a revolutionary approach that made the government increasingly wary (Meeker, “Politics of the Stage”).

Prior to 1789, only three Parisian theatres – the Académie de Musique, the Comédie Française, and the Comédie Italienne – were officially recognized by the French government (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”). Unfortunately, this relationship forced main-stage productions to emphasize the

values of the Crown and made venues of an “ambiguous legal position” more susceptible to censorship or governmental attack (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”). As the start of the Revolution neared, some public productions, such as a 1770 performance of Mercier’s *Le Déserteur*, began to take risks by incorporating propaganda to incite political debate (Meeker, “Politics of the Stage”). The Crown, sensing unrest, surrendered any hope of sponsoring its own propaganda and instead maintained the defensive approach of editing political theatrical content (Meeker, “Politics of the Stage”). Soon, critics who had already found issue with the country’s political system began attacking the theatre system as well, arguing that the monarchy’s continued control of theatrical venues was “artificial,” “outmoded,” and “kept other entrepreneurs from succeeding” (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”).

In mid-January 1791, a year and a half into the French Revolution, the National Assembly passed legislation to “free” the theatres (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”). The world of French theatre transformed almost immediately, as anyone with funds could open a theatre without fear of government interference or censorship (McClellan, “The Revolution On

Stage”). Unfortunately, because the reforms of 1791 benefited the commercial interests of playwrights, this enjoyment was short-lived (Ravel 223). Plays began to “pander to the least common denominator of taste,” a decision that increased the number of theatre closings (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”). In an effort to regain control of the stage, theatres were redefined as “venues of public instruction” and thus subject to governmental supervision, but after the Attack on the Tuileries and the subsequent fall of the monarchy in August 1792, all theatres were temporarily closed (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”).

As the Reign of Terror increased radicalism within the government, French theatre underwent another large transition in terms of police surveillance and demand for revolutionary opera and drama (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”). The newly formed government was uninterested in productions that distracted publics from the task at hand, so the National Convention passed legislation that required regular performances of plays that represented the values of the Revolution and its defenders (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”). The laws cautioned that any theatres that produced plays in an attempt to “revive the shameful

superstition of royalty” would be closed and its directors arrested and punished (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”).

In response, playwrights produced works that were even more political, this time embracing a genre known as *pièces de circonstance*, or occasional or topical works (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”). Dr. Mark Darlow, a professor of eighteenth-century French theatre and opera at Christ’s College, elaborates that *pièces de circonstance* are “concerned with making explicit connections with the world which is represented and that of the audience” and thus seek to portray realism (390). As a result, these plays were often French military or current event dramas that supported the Revolution and its radical government (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”). Some, such as Jean-Louis Laya’s 1793 *L’Ami des lois*, focused on politicians’ attempts to manipulate the people and included exaggerated characterizations of politicians (Maslan 38). Others, such as Louis Benoît Picard’s 1793 *La prise de Toulon*, incorporated direct references to and speeches from current political leaders (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”).

The politicized plays of the French Revolution were successful at

inciting debate, but as play content became more radical, audience behavior became more unpredictable. Not every citizen agreed with the new reign of government, and the Government of the Directory was forced to begin controlling public opinion (McClellan, “The Revolution On Stage”). By the turn of the century, monitoring of play content had effectively switched from the aristocracy to the newly founded Revolutionary government, but unlike previous years, audience members maintained their individual political identities when viewing productions (Maslan 41). Dr. Susan Maslan, an early modern French literary and political history professor at the University of California-Berkeley, notes that “These audiences declared their right, not to rampage and attack, but rather, to exercise popular censorship,” demonstrating the public’s desire and ability to regulate themselves (41). In essence, the theatrical medium during the French Revolution assisted in furthering public demand for representation and demonstrated the strong relationship between eighteenth-century French theatre and French Revolutionary politics.

But it was not merely theatre that became politicized, but also politics that became theatrical. Literary critic and historian Marie-Hélène Huet explains

that the French Revolution utilized theatricality in politics with the hope that it would “make the people into an audience that could be disciplined and repressed ‘by means of the spectacle’” (qtd. in Maslan 29). The concept of spectacle was utilized politically as well, from the staging of debates to the content of political speeches. Much like campaigning or lobbying, politics was not merely telling the audience, but convincing them, an art form that the theatre had been using for hundreds of years.

Theatricalization in politics was apparent by looking at the architecture. Dr. Paul Friedland, a French Revolutionary historian and professor at Cornell University, notes that “The phrase political stage was no mere metaphor during the Revolutionary period,” as the various halls in which the National Assembly met and debated were constructed like theatre venues, with each location more theatrical than the last (181). Though political venues are often arranged for the benefit of the politician, the theatricality of politics impacted the internal setup of arenas in that it prioritized the audience over the politician. In 1787, the king came to inspect one of the earliest structures and was stunned by the inclusion of spectator boxes on the sides of the hall

(Friedland 181). Although the boxes were removed due to the king’s demand, when the Estates General met at the Hôtel des Menus-Plaisirs two years later, the boxes had reappeared and were joined by amphitheaters on the sides that allowed for even more audience seating (Friedland 181).

Aside from aesthetics, one of the most prominent examples of theatricality in French Revolutionary politics was the way in which debates were conducted (Friedland 180). Starting in the latter part of the eighteenth-century, English viewers of French political debates began commenting on the “disorderly” appearance of both politicians and spectators (Friedland 180). However, French observers argued that the apparent chaos onstage was not due to a lack of rules, but rather, the use of rules that were ill suited for politics (Friedland 181). Because French Revolutionary theatre audiences were highly engaged and interactive, similar forms of audience communication carried over to the political stage. Friedland writes that in January of 1790, the magazine *Mercure de France* commented on a particularly unruly audience that had continuously interrupted a politician’s speech with loud whistling – a common expression of displeasure primarily utilized in the theatre (181).

In fact, it was the spectators who often insisted on bringing theatrics and spectacle into the field of politics. Maslan furthers that during the trial of Louis XVI, Bertrand Barère, the President of the National Convention, demanded viewers remain silent and outlawed audience applause and murmurs (27). However, the spectators were not so easily contained, and their gallery participation eventually resulted in Barère shouting, “Silence! Leave the applause for the theater” (qtd. in Maslan 27). Over the course of the revolution, these audience responses approved or denied political decisions, suggesting that the commentary French audiences voiced in the safety of the theatre increased their confidence to hold politicians accountable in the real world (Maslan 27).

In order to accommodate such demands, politicians needed to become more engaging, a change that opened the door for entertainers and actors. Some accounts claim that many deputies of the National Assembly partook in acting classes, while others took the easier route of planting audience members in the gallery to applaud their speeches (Friedland 182). Rhetorical skills were also of great importance, and the oratorical abilities of many politicians gained the favor of both political and theatrical

critics. Mirabeu, for example, was recognized as one of the greatest orators of the time due to his ability to balance both politics and theatrics (Friedland 182). But despite being a prominent politician, Mirabeau was also questioned for his ability to utilize spectacle (Friedland 183). Friedland explains that the public struggled with how to identify him, questioning, “Was he a great representative of the nation, or a great orator? Did one admire his speeches for their content or for their delivery?” (183).

The content of political speeches thus came under consideration when distinguishing a political actor from an average politician. Because politics and theatre was so closely interwoven, the awe and spectacle of watching a politician speak sometimes outweighed the value of what he or she was commenting on. Though some would think that actors’ training would make it easier for them to appeal to audiences, traditional politicians and orators were criticized for prioritizing theatricality over rhetoric. To sound convincing, some politicians utilized abstract theories in their speeches, and others faked intense enthusiasm about topics that were so dull an average audience could not decipher what was actually occurring (Gay 665). Peter Gay, an Emeritus Sterling



Professor of History at Yale University, furthers this claim with the story of Edmund Burke, an orator who attacked a fellow speaker's speech as being "full of false philosophy and false rhetoric" that was intended to permeate weak minds (qtd. in Gay 664). Even French critic Hippolyte Taine found issue with politicians' flimsy claims, stating "All is mere show and pretence... It is not a difficult job; the phrases are ready-made to hand," suggesting that politicians' speeches were laden with theatrics (qtd. in Gay 665).

The use of political spectacle combined with the inclusion of politics in theatre set the stage for French actors to take their skills to the political arena. Though average politicians were certainly effective public servants, actors were advantaged in that the French Revolutionary public – essentially another theatrical audience – desired a political show. For decades, actors had been portraying politicians onstage, sometimes even performing snippets from actual political speeches, so when the world of politics later began valuing the reaction of the spectator more than the argument of the debater, actors knew how to work the audience. However, by the end of the Revolution, spectators were no longer passive and quiet, but highly critical of the messages being presented to

them. As such, it is important to consider how these actors' political roles were perceived by the public.

It has taken years for scholars to understand the significance of French dramatic actors in eighteenth-century politics. In explaining the opportune timing of the French Revolution, Friedland writes, "The Revolution had given birth to a world in which actors mixed familiarly with politicians and in which the political and the theatrical intermingled to such a great extent that neither was properly distinguishable from the other," contending that it was this occurrence that permitted a relationship to develop between politicians and dramatic actors (Friedland 168). Friedland's 2002 book *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* further examines this connection through a collection of accounts of French actors' transitions into politics.

One of the most famous examples of an actor turned politician comes in the form of Collot d'Herbois, a successful dramatist and playwright who joined the Jacobin Club early in the Revolution (Friedland 172). Despite being elected to the National Convention, serving on the Committee of Public Safety, and assisting in the overthrow of Robespierre, Collot was often accused

of being heavily reliant on theatrics and was considered nothing but “an actor pretending to be a politician” (Friedland 172). In fact, when he was eventually tried for plotting to destroy a federalist rebellion, most of the pamphlets and evidence against Collot argued that his plan had been motivated by revenge for being booed offstage at a theatre near the rebellion a number of years prior (Friedland 174).

Similarly, Jean-François Boursault-Malberbe, an actor and director of the main theatre in Marseille, was also suspected of involving himself in politics for personal reasons (Friedland 177). When Boursault began his political career, he was named an elector of the city of Paris and quickly moved up to “supplementary” deputy to the National Convention (Friedland 177). However, unlike Collot, Boursault later relinquished the deputy position and returned to manage the Théâtre Molière, choosing instead to focus his efforts on producing politically neutral plays (Friedland 177). But despite never attaining the same political status as Collot and later returning to a nonpolitical life, Boursault was still said to have fooled the audience by performing in character on the political stage and prioritizing theatrical training over reason (Friedland 177).

Accusations of theatrical rhetoric were also launched against Claire Lacombe, an actress known as one of the co-founders of the Revolutionary political organization *La Société des citoyennes républicaines révolutionnaires* (Friedland 178). Lacombe’s political career began in 1792 when she gave a political speech on the Legislative Assembly platform that proved to be so successful it was quickly ordered for publication (Friedland 179). Although she was well known for her rousing speeches, Lacombe’s eloquent speaking also received strong criticism and she was eventually jailed in 1794 (Friedland 179). Upon being released over a year later, Lacombe once more returned to a life onstage in the safety of the theatre (Friedland 179).

The last example Friedland provides of an eighteenth-century political actor is Fabre d’Eglantine, who achieved success as a playwright and performer (Friedland 175). Fabre engaged in politics early in the Revolution, acting as secretary of the Cordeliers Club in 1790 and deputy of Paris to the National Convention in 1792 (Friedland 175). Unlike other actors turned politicians, Fabre continued to work in the theatre world while he served in office and wrote numerous plays that were well-regarded (though one of his works was reported to have been booed offstage by an



unimpressed audience) (Friedland 176). But like Lacombe, Fabre was later arrested for his role in politics on the grounds that he “trafficked his opinion as representative of the people” (Friedland 176).

Examples such as these demonstrate that despite producing tangible results while in leadership positions, public opinion towards and perception of political actors was mixed. Some believed that actors who transitioned into politics did so out of a lust for power and that the period’s reliance on spectacle allowed actors to get by “with an aura of illegitimate and dangerous theatricality” - essentially, that the theatricality of French Revolutionary politics unfairly advantaged dramatic actors over those with more qualifications (Friedland 198). Furthermore, some actors seem to have made questionable decisions that could have been perceived as internally motivated or prioritized theatrical performance and spectacle over reliable and trustworthy content.

It is likely that the disapproval towards political actors was a result of the political and theatrical transition France underwent in 1750, in which public expectation of actors shifted from representation to representation (Kroen 1100). Before 1750, actors were expected to “embody” their roles, and politicians,

to remain transparent in relation to the people (Kroen 1100). After 1750, the responsibility of theatrical believability shifted to the audience, and the connection between political representatives and their constituents disappeared (Kroen 1101). By the time actors began to transition into politics, the skeptical French public believed that actors could only be performers because they were unable to distinguish understanding from copying and thus lacked the knowledge to support a political position (Ravel 227).

Public skepticism thus played a large role in eighteenth-century politics. As French politics and theatre became increasingly intertwined, actors and politicians began facing the same audience – the theatre audience. As French Revolutionary theatre took on the new role of a political forum, audiences were encouraged to learn, critique, and interact in ways that had previously been frowned upon. As a result, when the world surrounding these theatregoers revolted and became more radicalized, this newfound confidence carried over to the political arena and produced spectators who were more comfortable with calling out politicians when they made grandeur claims. However, it is important to note that eighteenth-century France was known for tension,



paranoia, and impulses that often ended in bloodshed, making it likely that at least some of the skeptical allegations against political actors were exaggerated or false. Additionally, many of the claims against political actors attacked their methods of delivery and internal motivations, and without further evidence or accounts from the actors themselves, it is difficult to know whether any of the accusations had basis.

Yet even political actors who demonstrated credibility and capability faced skepticism and criticism from the public. Friedland notes that regardless of their political role, actors who attempted to make the jump into the political arena were “lambasted by journalists and pamphleteers who were quick to unmask these migrations as evidence of both the insatiable political ambitions of dangerous clowns and the inherent theatricality of the Revolution itself,” leaving little opportunity for actors to demonstrate their competence (170). Furthermore, Gay contends that the French Revolution’s best political rhetoricians both talked and acted, suggesting that French Revolutionary politics itself may have been more than mere spectacle (664). If applied to political actors specifically, this could mean that French actors who successfully navigated the transition from the theatre to

the political stage were aided by substantive knowledge just as much as the actors. In other words, while theatrical training may have made it easier for actors to enter the world of politics initially, spectacle could only get a person so far: at the end of the day, skeptical constituents wanted answers. Furthermore, because the rhetorical and persuasive skills of actors and politicians were so tightly interwoven, it is likely that theatre actors who did manage to succeed in politics likely did so for good reason.

Eighteenth-century France marked an influential theatrical and political period that has yet to be fully explored. In a theatrical sense, the eighteenth-century saw a shift towards the inclusion of more political themes in plays, and both actors and playwrights were more inclined to produce work that caused audiences to react and critique rather than passively accept. Politically, the French Revolution encouraged the use of theatrical spectacle, producing theatre-esque political venues that could accommodate engaged constituents and inspire public officials to converse with the audience instead of talking at them. However, while this interconnectedness did make the political world more accessible to dramatic actors, public perception of political

actors was mixed. Additionally, while skeptical eighteenth-century audiences may have made it more difficult for actors to distinguish themselves as knowledgeable politicians, this skepticism also made it more difficult for incapable actors to trick or manipulate their way into long-term political success.

The political theatrics of the French Revolution can still be seen today in the form of public debates, audience interaction, and political spectacle. Although the events during and leading up to the Revolution continue to be debated amongst scholars and historians, it can be agreed that eighteenth-century France displayed one of the most radical transformations of theatre and politics ever seen. The events of the French Revolution thus reveal that both politics and theatre play a monumental role in shaping society, and only by exercising the two equally will a nation be able to thrive.

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