



Raucourt, Françoise (1756-1815)

by Linda Rapp

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Eighteenth-century French actress Françoise Raucourt became a favorite of Queen Marie-Antoinette. Widely admired for her talent and beauty, Raucourt never made a secret of her lesbianism. During the final years of the doomed monarchy, she lived openly with a series of lovers. After suffering through the French Revolution, she eventually became director of Napoleon's imperial theaters in Italy.

Raucourt was born in Paris on March 3, 1756, and christened Françoise-Marie-Antoinette Saucerotte. Her father, François Saucerotte, was a strolling actor. While on tour in Lunéville, he met and married Antoinette de La Porte, who worked for a noble house there.

Disappointed in his own theatrical career, Saucerotte early on began training his daughter as an actress, in hopes that she would find the success that had eluded him. She debuted at the age of thirteen at Evreux in the castle of Godefroy-Charles-Henri de Bouillon, Prince of Turenne, a patron of the arts who often had troupes of actors perform at his residence. He suggested that the young actress change her name to Raucourt after one of his family's ancient holdings.

Raucourt first appeared with the Comédie-Française in December 1772, playing the title role in *Didon* by Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan. The sixteen-year-old actress was acclaimed for her beauty, her enchanting voice, and her grace and assurance on stage. Within three months she was given full membership in the company.

Raucourt's performances gained her many admirers. Among them were Madame Du Barry; tycoon Nicolas Beaujon, who organized a lottery for her benefit; Madame de Phalaris, who was a former mistress of the Regent and who also had affairs with women; and the Marquis de Bièvres, who gave her 12,000 pounds, allowing her to become financially independent of her family.

Raucourt had an affair with Bièvres but soon became enamored of opera singer Sophie Arnould. The relationship ended badly, however, and two male friends represented the women in a duel. The Marquis de Villette, who championed Raucourt, then had a liaison with her, but the couple eventually went their separate ways, he with a male lover and she with a woman, Jeanne-Françoise Souque.

Raucourt and Souque lived lavishly and soon fell into debt. In 1776 they fled to Germany to escape their creditors. A few months later they were able to return to France with the assistance of the Prince de Ligne.

Raucourt rejoined the Comédie-Française. Her performances greatly impressed King Louis XVI and especially Queen Marie-Antoinette, who became her benefactor. Raucourt's beauty and work on stage also earned her the admiration and patronage of the Prince d'Hénin, who in 1785 conferred upon her a generous lifetime income.

While Raucourt was able to live openly as a lesbian in the theatrical and court circles of her day, she also experienced hostility and jealousy. Libelous pamphlets claimed that she participated in female orgies and

was the head of a society of man-hating lesbians, *la Secte Anandryne*, a group that never existed.

During the French Revolution, which erupted in 1789, Raucourt remained faithful to her royal patrons. She moved in counter-revolutionary circles, but it is unclear how active a role she took in their political intrigues.

Along with a number of other members of the Comédie-Française, Raucourt was imprisoned in 1793 for lack of loyalty to the principles of the Revolution--which was considered a crime against the Republic--and on suspicion of being in correspondence with Royalists abroad. In the wake of the *coup d'état* of 9 Thermidor (July 27) 1794, however, the actors were released.

While in prison Raucourt met and fell in love with Henriette Simonnot de Ponty, with whom she would spend the rest of her life.

Under the new regime, the Directory (1795-1799), Raucourt was named director of the Théâtre Louvois. In 1803 Napoleon appointed her director of the imperial theaters in Italy.

Raucourt retired from the theater in 1814. She died in Paris on January 15, 1815. On the day of her funeral, the pastor of Saint-Roch church refused to admit her body, but the assembled crowd took up the coffin and forced open the church doors, demanding that the requiem mass take place.

After Raucourt's death, her brother helped arrange for de Ponty to receive a lifetime income from her estate and to assume the lease of the couple's home, the château de la Chapelle-Saint-Mesmin, according to his sister's wishes.

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