



Isaac de Benserade penned the first French play to feature a homosexual character in 1634.

French Theater

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Today, in France and Quebec as elsewhere in the western world, gay men and lesbians frequently appear on the stage, in dramas and comedies that explore the complexities of homosexual life. Making visible in public what was once hidden and replacing oppressive stereotypes with a wide range of characters of flesh and feeling, the theater has been and remains an important instrument of liberation.

But far from being a recent phenomenon, the presence of same-sex loving characters in French theater dates back to the seventeenth century, at a time when public manifestations of homosexuality were extremely rare. The plays featuring these strange creatures--*sodomites* and *tribades*, *pédérastes/pederasts* and *gouines* were just some of the names then given to gay men and lesbians--are thus very important sources for the history of homosexual culture.

Cross-dressing Comedies of Errors

Isaac de Benserade's *Iphis et lante*, the first French play to feature a homosexual character, was staged in Paris in 1634. Inspired by one of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, it tells the story of Iphis, a young woman raised as a boy by her mother. All who know her secret are greatly troubled at her deep love for another girl, the beautiful lante. Iphis herself wonders why she has a "heart that nature has fashioned differently from the others," but will nevertheless marry lante in the course of the action.

Lesbian love is here portrayed mockingly, as in the wedding night scene in which Iphis, in spite of her exertions, leaves lante cold. The tone reflects the lenient attitude of the times. Lesbianism is perceived as necessarily imperfect, practiced for lack of something better and thus of little consequence. This attitude, as well as the ending in which Iphis is transformed into a boy by the intervention of the *deus ex machina*, surely explains the lack of scandal the play caused.

This benign view of lesbianism will continue in the French theater until the late nineteenth century, except for a few periods of moral and religious intolerance, such as in 1702, when a scene of cross-dressed women flirting with each other led to the closing of Nicolas Boindin's comedy *Le Bal d'Auteuil*.

Although male homosexuality was condemned forcefully and could be punished by burning at the stake, many comedies of errors were also staged in which cross-dressing males were wooed by other males to great comic effect, as in Louis de Boissy's *La Feste d'Auteuil* (1743) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Narcisse* (1752).

Théâtre de Collège

Male same-sex affection sometimes appeared in school plays. The Jesuits were very keen on having their students perform each year as an exercise to give them poise and train their memories, but this was a controversial practice, as stage actors were seen by many as morally corrupt.

(Actors were excommunicated by the Church and did not have full civil rights until the Revolution. For most of the eighteenth century, they were under the direct rule of the *Gentilhommes de la Chambre* (Gentlemen of the Bedchamber), royal officers who allowed them to escape the constraints of their families and indulge in sexual freedom that did nothing to help their reputation.)

Hundreds of plays without female characters were written specifically for schoolboys, usually inspired by the *Lives of the Saints* or by the Bible, the most popular theme being the story of David and Jonathan. Spectators were sometimes shocked by the homoerotic undertones, so much so that authors such as Father Pierre Brumoy, whose play *Jonathas et David ou le Triomphe de l'Amitié* was performed as far away as Canada in 1776, had to warn in his prologue that the story was about "saintly friendship" and not that which "resides in hearts prone to crime."

Sodomitical Banter and Slander in Libertine Theater

The most fascinating plays of the eighteenth century are erotic farces that directly challenge the notions of sin, crime, and nature that were used to condemn homosexuality. They are part of the large corpus of libertine literature in which the materialistic philosophical reasoning of the Age of Enlightenment is put in the service of sexual liberation.

Although these works were never staged in the public theaters, they circulated widely in manuscript and in underground editions. Only a few were presented in the private theaters of rich and liberal-minded patrons, such as the Duc d'Orléans, the great-grandson of Monsieur, the homosexual brother of Louis XIV.

One of the most provocative is *L'Ombre de Deschaufours* (i.e. *The Ghost of Deschaufours*, Anonymous, 1739). The action is set in the underworld, where the main character, an infamous sodomite burned at the stake in 1726, argues with the ghosts of the policemen of Paris who were specially assigned to the surveillance of parks used as cruising grounds and as hangouts of male prostitutes. Its author was undoubtedly very familiar with an already extensive homosexual subculture.

Other plays, such as *Les Plaisirs du Cloître* (Anonymous, 1773) and *L'Esprit des Moeurs au XVIIIe Siècle* (Mérard de Saint-Just, 1789), have outspoken characters who defend homosexuality by listing famous homosexuals, such as Socrates, Alcibiades, or Julius Caesar; by evoking civilizations that gloried in a practice unjustly seen as a vice; or by simply stating that "all tastes are in nature: the best is the one we have." Behind this outrageous banter is a clear intent to challenge prejudice.

Another vein of pamphlets and plays aims at satire if not slander by revealing the homosexuality and debauched lives of playwrights, actors, and actresses. Already in *La Fameuse Comédienne* (Anonymous, 1688), the great Molière was pictured as having an affair with his protégé the actor Baron--not an unlikely accusation in view of Molière's close friendship with the famous musician Jean-Baptiste Lully, who was well known as a sodomite.

During the French Revolution there was an outburst of such attacks not just on the theater world (*Les Variétés Amusantes*, Anonymous, 1791, *Les Coutumes Théâtrales*, Anonymous, 1793, *Les Pantins des Boulevards*, Anonymous, 1791) but also on the aristocracy, especially the queen who is accused of lesbianism in *La Journée Amoureuse ou Les Derniers Plaisirs de M[arie] Ant[oinette]* (Anonymous, 1792). Such satires periodically reappear well into the twentieth century.

Théâtre Libre and Fin-de-Siècle Extravagance

Even though homosexuality ceased to be a crime in France in 1791, the police and judicial apparatus cracked down on it with unprecedented vigilance at the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, using morality and decency laws to oppress homosexual expression of all kinds. For the next hundred years only one play, Balzac's *Vautrin* (1840), will have a homosexual character, and his

homosexuality is so cryptic as to be far from obvious to most spectators.

In 1891, however, homosexuality returned to the public eye, due to a series of public scandals--including raids on baths, arrests in lavatories, trials of literary works such as Baudelaire's lesbian poems, etc. that made it impossible to ignore.

A group of young artists led by André Antoine had recently founded the cooperative Théâtre Libre to experiment with new forms and controversial themes. They had promised their friend Gabriel Mourey that they would produce his lesbian drama, *Lawn-Tennis*, but upon reading it, they considered it too risky and dropped the project.

More daring was the actor Édouard de Max, whose career also began in 1891. He specialized in roles of decadent emperors, such as Nero and Heliogabalus, and went so far as appearing almost naked on stage in Jean Lorrain's *Prométhée* (1900). Praised by some as the greatest actor of his time and attacked by others in virulently homophobic reviews, his private life was no secret.

Édouard de Max was as extravagant as his friend Sarah Bernhardt. He surrounded himself with a court of young homosexual artists whom he patronized. André Gide wrote his homosexual play *Saül* for him in 1898, but no theater would produce it until 1922. Another promising artist whose career was launched by de Max is Jean Cocteau.

In 1908, a third young artist, Armory (pen name of Carle Lionel Dauriac), wrote a mildly satirical comedy titled *Le Monsieur aux chrysanthèmes* whose main character is a blend of Oscar Wilde, Jean Lorrain, and Édouard de Max. Armory hoped that de Max himself would play the title role, but he refused.

In spite of difficulties finding a lead actor, and fears that the police would ban the play as they had recently banned Colette's lesbian pantomime *Rêve d'Égypte* the previous year, this first frank depiction of homosexuality on stage in many years proved a great success, opening the way for the future.

A Brief Golden Age

The period between the two World Wars was an age of homosexual militancy in Europe. But whereas this movement was politically organized in Germany, in France it was centered in the artistic world.

There was an explosion of literature dealing with homosexuality, most of it forgotten today except for the works of Proust and Gide. The number of gay and lesbian plays on the French stage during this period is astounding. Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* was adapted for the theater by no fewer than three playwrights, including Cocteau. Wilde's tragic life inspired Maurice Rostand, the flagrantly homosexual son of the author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, to write *Le Procès d'Oscar Wilde* (i.e. *The Trial of Oscar Wilde*, 1935). Its success led Rostand to write another play on the homosexual writers Rimbaud and Verlaine, which was not as well received.

The most famous play of the times is by far Édouard Bourdet's *La Prisonnière* (i.e. *The Captive*, 1926; revived in 1935 and 1950), the story of a young lesbian who tries to escape her true nature by marrying. Although criticized by Rostand and others for the portrayal of the main character as too neurotic and tortured, most gay and lesbian spectators strongly related to this drama and found hope in the fact that at the end of the play the heroine leaves her husband to go back to the woman she loves.

Not all portrayals of gays and lesbians were sensitive. Bourdet himself went on to write a biting satire on the fad of homosexuality in high society, *La Fleur des pois* (1932). Even after his death, de Max continued to be lampooned in *Sardanapale* (1926), as was his protégé Jean Cocteau in *Les Grands-Parents terribles* (1939).

The Closet, Schoolboy Love, Existentialism

Many French plays of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s are reflections on self-hatred and on the impossibility of breaking out of the closet. In Roger Martin du Gard's *Un Taciturne* (1932), the main character commits suicide when he realizes his homosexual nature, the same resolution as in Paul Vandenberghe's prisoner of war drama *Printemps perdus* (1954). In Julien Green's *Sud* (1953), the hero's failure to communicate his true feelings leads him to seek death in a duel with the young man he loves.

In Quebec plays of the 1940s and 1950s, homosexuality is revealed as the root source of cynicism and evil in some characters, as in Jean Després's *La Cathédrale* (1949) and Yves Thériault's *Le Marcheur* (1950). A more open attitude emerges in Marcel Dubé's Freudian drama *Au retour des oies blanches* (1966), in which the character Robert's life is destroyed by a scandal that pushes him back in the closet, where he tries in vain to find the woman who will save him.

The most important work of the 1950s, the schoolboy drama *La Ville dont le Prince est un enfant* (1951) by Henry de Montherlant, was only produced years after publication in spite of numerous and repeated offers by dozens of France's best theaters. The potential for scandal, as well as the inclusion of easily recognizable autobiographical elements in the play, frightened the scrupulous and deeply closeted author, who refused production rights until 1967.

La Ville... is a poignant picture of a love triangle between two boys and a devoted but devious schoolmaster who fears that his favorite pupil will be corrupted. The play asks whether loving or renouncing love in the name of morality is the better course of action.

Another schoolboy drama is Marie-Claire Blais' *L'Exécution* (1968), an exploration of a murder committed at the behest of an amoral boy who convinces his lover to act as proof of his devotion. The existential view of homosexuality that pervades this work had already been illustrated in two earlier plays, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos* (1943) and Jean Genet's *Haute Surveillance* (1947). Both picture homosexuality as a choice implying a rejection of conventional morality.

Men and Dresses

It is sometimes difficult to decide whether plays that present effeminate homosexual men cater to stereotypes, even when they present original and sympathetic characters. In André Roussin's *Les Oeufs de l'autruche* (1948), a popular comedy about a father's difficulty in accepting the homosexuality of his 18-year-old dress-maker son, the audience unreservedly takes sides with the son.

In the same way, the tender humanity of Albin, the drag-queen character in Jean Poirot's *La Cage aux folles* (1973), easily pierces through his make-up to win the hearts of spectators.

Explorations of sexual identity and its relation to gender roles go deeper in Michel Tremblay's *Hosanna* (1973), which provides a glimpse into the life of a bitchy drag queen who is more manly than the leather biker she is hooked up with.

AIDS, Liberation, Feminism and Family

In the last thirty years, many playwrights came out of the closet and went beyond the themes of social and self-oppression to explore other issues.

In France, AIDS was devastating to gay theater, carrying away three major playwrights, but it was also a stimulus to some extraordinary work.

Copi (pseud. of Raúl Damonte), the biting cynic author of such plays as *L'homosexuel ou la difficulté de*

s'exprimer (1971), left an appropriate testament with the deathbed comedy *Une Visite inopportune* (1988).

Jean-Luc Lagarce will long be remembered for his poignant picture of a dying son's last visit to a family he can no longer communicate with in *Juste la fin du monde* (1990).

Bernard-Marie Koltès, considered by many the greatest French playwright of the end of the twentieth century, continues to have plays such as *Dans la solitude des champs de coton* (1986) and *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* (1977) staged all over the world.

In Quebec, feminism as much as lesbianism was the subject of *La Nef des sorcières*, (Collective authorship, 1976) and *La Terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc* by Jovette Marchessault (1982).

In a sure sign that liberation was making inroads towards social acceptance, the passionate love stories of René-Daniel Dubois' *Being at home with Claude* (1985) and Michel Marc Bouchard's *Les Feluettes* (1988) had universal appeal and commercial success, in spite of having gay male characters who were alienated marginals or dreamers.

In the 1990s a more assimilationist trend emerged, with "ordinary" gay characters confronted with aging, the raising of children, and other mundane preoccupations. The best example of this trend is the work of veteran Michel Tremblay, including his television series *Le Coeur découvert* (2003, adapted from his novel of 1986).

With the social acceptance of gays and lesbians and the legal recognition of their relationships making rapid progress both in France and in Quebec, the source of dramatic inspiration previously found in alienation, persecution, and marginality is running dry. Even the coming out story, unique to homosexual theater, is now little more than matter for a farce, as it is in Steve Galluccio's *Mambo Italiano* (2000), an enormous hit on the Quebec stage.

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