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Rahul Markovits, *Staging Civilization. A transnational History of French Theater in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021. 364 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0813945545; \$37.50 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-0813945552.

Review by Elisa Cazzato, Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

Staging Civilization is a richly documented and attentive study demonstrating the complexities and the multifaceted cultural perspectives behind the spread of French professional theater in eighteenth-century Europe. Neatly summarized in the foreword by David A. Bell, this book is “a model of transnational history” (p. ix). Firm in its use of cultural theory, it offers an intriguing and composite methodology connected to studies of literary transfers, histories of migrations, and theories on court culture and diplomacy. A set of four table-appendices with quantitative references is helpful material accompanying the body of the book.

As a premise to the two parts composing the volume, the author clarifies the notion of “French Europe” and its historiographic evolution. This performs the function of an Ariadne’s thread guiding the overall interpretations in the book. “French Europe” is defined as the Voltairian assumption of a civilized European space permeated by French language and by the spread of French cultural products. In this theorization, the link to France as geographical space differs from the limited notion of homeland-*patrie* and evokes instead an open process of cultural evolution, according to which, “frenchification” stands for civilization. Therefore, every willing man (including the “savage”) able to improve and cultivate himself could potentially join civilization and evolve into a Frenchman (pp. 5-9).

Through the lens of professional French-language theatre, set up as a marker of French cultural export, Markovits guides the reader in the transition from a metaphorical “cultural empire” to a policy of cultural imperialism (p.9). In his analysis, public theater is navigated both as an object of investigation and as a research method. Compared to other French cultural products, such as works of art, books, salons, and other forms of sociability, public theater represented a political object which circulated as results a of political decisions, social encounters, and diplomatic arrangements.

Instead of embracing the paradigm by which the diffusion of French theatre culture as a unidirectional phenomenon from France to the main European capitals of spectacle, Markovits decenters the sources and broadens the spectrum of the possibilities by including geographic areas (such as Stockholm, Parma, Mantz, Brno, Turin, and Genoa) often considered more

peripheral. Markovits also adopts and emphasizes the points of view of those who introduced French theater in these cities and courts in a phenomenon that he metaphorically defines as “radiating influence” (pp. 10-11). This approach avoids focusing on a blurred and all-embracing “European scale” of influence, where the specificities of each city influenced are lost in the broader picture of French cultural export (p. 11).

To reveal the multifaceted contexts and socio-political situations in which French theater was established, Markovits approaches his analysis on a “case-by-case basis” (p. 11). He uncovers individuals, situations, and peculiarities that made the introduction of French theater in a given context the result of specific causes and effects. Precious documents, confidently navigated, are for example those related to the theatrical agents Charles-Simon Favart in Paris and Giacomo Durazzo in Vienna. Despite the familiarity of the scholarly community with these sources, the author invites another level of detail by disentangling the sources from the perspective of the individual and by focusing on the socio-political circumstances in which these documents were produced. Of course, French theater in Europe has been engaged from multiple angles in a vast plethora of scientific subjects. Markovits’s method manages to bring innovation and delight, by recasting French theater as a historical object possessing unity on a European scale.

Part one of the book, *French Theater and the European Courts* focuses on the ways in which French theater settled in the princely courts of Europe, giving proper attention to the financial aspects of this cultural investment. The opening to this section (chapter one) is a recognition of the European cities hosting a permanent French troupe and other cities where itinerant troupes performed regularly. A second distinction is established between court cities and the non-court cities. Charts and maps illustrate the analysis and facilitate the reader's understanding.

Particularly remarkable is chapter two. Referring to Daniel Roche’s scholarship on the “culture of mobility” in the modern era,^[1] Markovits unpacks the various reasons for which French actors migrated away from their homeland (p. 32). These reasons encompassed objective motivations (conditions of employment and state of the market, for example) as well as subjective ones. The author identifies “push” factors that led actors to depart, and “pull” factors that attracted them towards a specific destination (p.38). Particularly convincing is the distinction between “migration of discontinuity or rupture—in which immigrants invested emotionally in the space of the host country—from migration of continuity—in which the country of origin remained the frame of reference, and the space of the host country was only a means to an end” (pp. 38-39). Contracts, tour management, salaries, and financial conditions of French actors in the European space are clearly taken into analysis, as well as other factors, like the status of the actors’ civil rights outside the Gallican space and consequently, the social consideration to which actors could aspire across Europe. Through an evaluation of the role of theater agents, ministers, and specialized diplomats (like the references to the Chancellor Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz), this chapter outlines the recruitment system of French actors in “French Europe” (a term the author uses throughout the study) and connects it with the political sphere. The method adopted by the author to uncover and contextualize stories of migration, and therefore to reconstruct pieces of cultural life, may be beneficial also for studies engaging with other theatre professions.

Using Norbert Elias’s *History of Manners* as a point of departure, chapter three analyzes the performance of French repertoire in the European courts, specifically in Berlin, The Hague, Vienna, Stockholm, and Parma, with extension discussion on the logics of adaptation.^[2] Markovits approaches the circulation of French repertoire not just in terms of reception/fortune

of a specific genre, but also as an indicator “of the political and social uses to which French theater was put” (p.74). Due to the risk of raising a barrier, the linguistic aspect of theatre circulation is a crucial issue well considered in this chapter. As the author points out, French spectacle, however, was not only textual, but comprehensive of a “silent” part made up by ballets and stage settings crafted by artists that, not unlike the actors, were frequently migrants. Unfortunately, the silent (and ephemeral) part of French theater in “French Europe” is here (understandably enough) only mentioned, but it may constitute a starting point for a further investigation with this same research method.

Through the examples of Vienna and Parma, the concluding section of part one (chapter four) elucidates the research questions that guided this first part of the book: Why was French theater financially and politically supported in European courts? Attending French theater outside France, could represent a “social dynamic of distinction, linked to the recompositions of imperial aristocratic identity in the eighteenth century” (p. 101), but it also embodied values of obedience, legitimation, and cultural development. Besides making clear these crucial aspects, this chapter gives the author the chance to outline how, especially during the late 1750s, to the late 1770s, French theater outside France did not prevent the rise of national theaters and national key theater figures, like Gotthold Ephraïm Lessing in Germany and Vittorio Alfieri in Italy.

Part two of the book, *From the Army Theater to Cultural Imperialism* focuses on diplomatic and military practices and traces how army theater adapted to cultural imperialism. Useful definitions of “gallant theater” and “soft power” are provided in chapter five (pp.130-131), since these are recurring theoretical tools employed to navigate the diplomatic and military use of French theater overseas, with specific reference to Geneva, Brussels, and Hanover in the second third of the eighteenth century. The author outlines how outside France, gallant theater was an important part of diplomatic pomp, which therefore required a lavish apparatus. Subsequently, the chapter details how theater was employed to manifest royal glory and “soft power” and used as an instrument for military discipline (p. 130). This is convincingly explained through the reconstruction of the vicissitudes linked to the figure of Marshal Maurice de Saxe and to the dissemination of comic opera in the Austrian Netherlands in the 1740s as well as with the other cases (Geneva and Hanover) presented in this chapter.

The theatrical context of Geneva under Voltaire’s intellectual influence and the dispute around Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Lettre à d’Alembert* are the premises for chapter six. The author attends to “the way [the dispute] was initially rooted in the political, social, and cultural context of the Geneva” (p. 166), such as the city's lack of sociability and “the socioeconomic antagonism between the ‘rich people,’ who regularly attended the theater, and the poor, who were excluded from that mode of entertainment” (p. 198). The chapter underlines the complexities of French cultural imperialism, using theater as an instrument of civilization and cultural domestication.

The author returns to the policies of theatre acculturation and their links with political control, this time concerning the Revolutionary and Imperial periods. Considerably fascinating is chapter seven, built around the noted figure of the French theatre entrepreneur Mademoiselle Montansier during the stay of her troupe in Brussels (1792-1793). As with Durazzo, Montansier is a rewarding figure for scholars of French theatre. Here, Markovits focuses on her correspondence with the Minister of Foreign Affairs Pierre Lebrun and characterizes these letters as “writing to power” (p. 210), highlighting the intricate balance between the needs and wills of theater entrepreneurs and authorities’ expectations. Owing to her transformation from a

figure of the ancien régime to a key protagonist of the Revolutionary theatre, Montansier deserves such careful historical examination. In the context of this book, her activities in Brussels offer a “snapshot, from the point of view of the theater entrepreneurs of the transition from the European dissemination of French theater in the Age of the Enlightenment to the new configuration produced by the military expansion of France” (p. 223).

This conversation follows in chapter eight, the last section of the book, but from the perspective of the acculturation process in the annexed departments following the Treaty of Campo Formio in 1797. With some similarities with the gallant theater, which reflected the king’s power (as analyzed in chapter five) before the Revolution, French identity was re-associated with gallantry and military value. Additionally, French theatre overseas was an indicator of public opinion in the annexed states. Particularly interesting is the case of the territories occupied in the Italian peninsula where French theatre experienced sharp phenomena of resistance that led to movements of cultural nationalism (as outlined in the case of Piedmont). The author concludes the chapter by stating that “the example of theater underscores the cultural dimension of the imperial project and the conviction, profoundly rooted among the French administrators, that spectacles ought to serve as instruments of acculturation. The many texts from police officials, the military, and prefects attest to the power the French attributed to theater” (p. 253) Recent scholarship more oriented in studies of theatre history, dance, and musicology (which includes publications by Annelies Andries, Katherine Astbury, David Chaillou, Vincenzo De Santis, Clare Siviter, Thibaut Julian, and Cornelis Vanistendael among others)^[3] has provided significant contribution in highlighting the key role that theater played in shaping consensus during the Napoleonic era. For future developments on this very topic, expertise from these fields of studies would be a useful resource.

Markovits’s book is remarkable, built on a solid research methodology. It suggests how French theater can be approached as an open field of historic research, not only concerning its aesthetic significance, but for its cultural and socio-political implications. This book opens multiple research paths, enabling additions to the state of the art and to potentially include disciplines like dance and stage design, which too often stay outside the boundaries of the political investigation.

NOTES

[1] Daniel Roche, *Humeurs vagabondes*, (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 859–921.

[2] Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

[3] A growing body of scholarship on this point includes works by Annelies Andries, “Uniting the Arts to Stage the Nation: Le Sueur's Ossia (1804) in Napoleonic Paris”, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 31, no. 2-3 (2019): 153–87; Katherine Astbury, Mark Philp (eds.), *Napoleon’s Hundred Days and the Politics of Legitimacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); David Chaillou, *Napoléon et l’Opéra. La politique sur la scène 1810–1815* (Paris: Fayard 2004); Thibaut Julian and Vincenzo De Santis (eds), *Fièvre et vie du théâtre sous la Révolution française et l’Empire* (Paris: Garnier, 2019); Clare Siviter, *Tragedy and Nation in the Age of Napoleon* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020); Cornelis Vanistendael “La Ville et la Cour se Mêlèrent – Napoleon’s Propaganda Quadrilles (1793–1813),” *Dance Research* 40, no. 2 (2022): 183–205.

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