

Pierre Quillard

‘On the Complete Uselessness of Accurate Staging’

Quillard, Pierre. ‘De l’inutilité absolue de la mise en scène exacte.’ *Revue d’Art dramatique*, vol. 22, 1891, pp. 180-183. [Translated by Dan Rebellato]



Sir, In the 15 April issue of *Revue d’Art Dramatique*, your contributor M. Pierre Véber, with carefully ironic impartiality, reviewed the performance at the Théâtre d’Art, on Friday 27 March.² He briefly refers to one aspect of what we attempted that evening, in *The Girl with the Severed Hands*: a complete

² Pierre Véber, 'Au Théâtre d'Art', *Revue d'Art Dramatique*, vol. 22, 1891, pp. 115-17. This was a review of a performance by the Théâtre d’Art, a Symbolist theatre company, that included a number of short plays including Quillard’s *The Girl with the Severd Hands*.

simplification of the dramatic means.³ Please permit me a little space to set out in greater detail and without obscurity the innovation in staging I attempted. The *mise en scène* must depend on the dramatic system adopted, and since symbols there are, the *mise en scène* is the sign and symbol in itself.

Nowhere is the inanity of Naturalism more clearly apparent than in the theatre. Think of the splendours of the Théâtre Libre. Time and time again, on that stage, we've watched Monsieur Antoine die a death with perfect artistry (for want of a better word);

men and women, whores and pimps have had the most banal conversations there and made the crudest remarks,

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³ The passage to which Quillard seems to be responding is: 'finally, Mr Quillard's experiment may be summarized as follows: a complete simplification of the dramatic means; a narrator, placed at the corner of the proscenium, describes the stage, the setting and the action. The main focus is on poetic language. Theatre as such disappears entirely, to make way for a series of declamations in dialogue form, a kind of decorative poetry.' (*ibid.* p. 117) [my translation].

just like real life; each statement, on its own, was truthful and the author might have heard them spoken to caretaker, his lawyer, or to passers-by or to any similarly dull, grey person you like. But this dialogue demonstrated nothing at all about how one character differed from the next or what constitutes in him the specificity that distinguishes one isolated individual from another isolated individual. To create the complete illusion of life, they thought it would be clever to build [p. 181] scrupulously accurate sets, real fountains babbling centre stage and meat dripping blood on the butcher's counter.⁴ And yet, despite the meticulous care with which the whole exterior of things is represented, the drama was lost and bewildering and the illusion entirely lacking. The truth is that Naturalism, by which I mean the use of specific facts, trivial and arbitrary documents, is the very opposite of theatre.

The whole of drama is above all a synthesis: Prometheus, Orestes, Oedipus, Hamlet, Don Juan are creatures of a general humanity, in whom a single-minded and commanding passion is embodied with extraordinary intensity. The poet has breathed supernatural life into them; he has created them by force of language, and set them off across the world, pilgrims in eternity. Dress them

⁴ On 20 October 1888, Antoine staged Giovanni Verga's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Fernand Ices's *The Butchers* and his decisions to create a working fountain for the Verga and to hang real meat in the butcher's shop set for the Ices attracted both admiration and ridicule

in tattered smocks and if Aeschylus or Shakespeare has crowned them, they will be kings, and their invisible ermine robes will shine forth joyously, if they shine brightly in the verse. A universe unfolds around them, sadder or more magnificent than our own, and the shabby backcloths of the travelling circus become a dream architecture that the poet places in the mind of the willing spectator. *The word creates the scenery and everything else.*

So what's left for the stagehand to do? All that's needed is for the staging not to disturb the illusion in any way and to

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do that it should be as simple as possible. I write the stage direction 'a marvellous palace'; even if a scene-painter were somehow to represent it using the

most intricate artfulness they possess, the effect produced by all that trickery will never amount to 'a marvellous palace' for anyone; in each person's soul these words will evoke a particular, personal image, which will be in conflict with any crude scenographic representation; far from aiding the free play of the imagination, painted scenery damages it. *The set must be a pure ornamental fiction that completes the illusion with lines and colours analogous to the drama.* Generally, a backdrop and some moveable drapes are all you need to suggest the infinite multiplicity [p. 182]

of time and place. The spectator will no longer be distracted from the action by noises in the wings, or an incongruous prop; they will give themselves up completely to the will of the poet and see, each according to his or her soul, terrible and enchanting figures and imaginary worlds that none but he can enter; the theatre will be what it has to be: a chance to dream.

This aesthetic is by no means new, indeed it is as old as history. In the first act of *The Recognition of Sakuntalā*, on a motionless chariot, the driver mimes the passion of a race; the horses, he says, *‘thrust the air apart, their wake / Is thunder; in our tracks*

they leave for dust / The very dust they

*raised . . .*⁵ for those willing souls who were present at the traditional recitation of this ancient

masterpiece, this was

undoubtedly a more perfect illusion of a wild chariot ride than those sophisticated Parisians got, sitting in the

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⁵ I have quoted these lines from a modern translation of this millennium Sanskrit play by Kālidāsa, *The Recognition of Sakuntalā*, trans. W. J. Johnson, World's Classics, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 7–8. The play was eventually performed at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in December 1895.

Variétés watching the horses of *Paris Port de Mer*;⁶ the latter know perfectly well that it's nothing more than ingenious stage machinery, but the former wouldn't even have contemplated such childish artifice. We need only recall Greek theatre and its masks, or the bare stage of classical tragedy. These are similar ways in which well-informed spectators used to engage with the drama: why would they not give themselves up, now as they did then, to this more sacred art when they happily put up with most wretched contrivances of boulevard farce?

At least for one night, the audience did not object to the lack of a set: listening to and rightly applauding Mme Rachilde's *Madame la Mort*;⁷ although the characters were *contemporary*, so one might have expected some confusion or surprise; but they existed, *in themselves*, over and above their particular time and its trivialities, with such autonomy that no one noticed how unusual the middle-class dining room was in which they moved; for everyone, the stage perfectly represented the sombre, black-draped smoking room in which Paul Dartigny dies, so vividly did the

⁶ *Paris Port de Mer* was a spectacular theatrical revue by Henri Blondeau and Hector Montréal which opened at the Théâtre des Variétés in March 1891 and included a celebrated staging of a horse race.

⁷ Mme Rachilde's *Madame la Mort* [Lady Death] was performed on the same evening as Quillard's *The Girl with the Severed Hands*. Its central character is Paul Dartigny.

dialogue drape funeral veils over your face and deepen the mysterious and sacred shadows around you.

To assert that all future drama should be like this [p. 183] would be childish arrogance. But it is reasonable to say that in this kind of art form - in which the poet shuns all stage trickery, disregards all extraneous devices, uses only the word and the human voice - the work stands naked, stripped of make-up, showing immediately its intrinsic goodness or its original sin. Perhaps this kind of honesty is arrogant, but nothing is without risk.

Be assured, sir, of my complete comradeship.

Pierre Quillard