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French Theater in Warsaw during the Reign of King Augustus III

Abstract

This article contains reconstructions of theater playbills from 1762, copied by the author from the originals held at the Załuski Collection (Polish National Library) before it was destroyed in the World War II. The playbills advertise performances by Albani's French acting troupe, which visited Warsaw in 1762 and 1763. In the introduction, the author describes the nature and research potential of these documents. Having served as both programs and advertising pamphlets, they were printed in French and Polish, and listed the title and author of the play, ticket prices, and performance dates, but not the cast. The author argues that by juxtaposing this information with other historical sources, it is possible to reconstruct the repertoire, the way performances were organized, and the conditions in which theater functioned in Poland in that period. The playbills also shed new light on

the theater life in Saxon Poland (1697–1763; reign of the Wettin dynasty). Contrary to common belief, they show that performances of French theatre were organized regularly, and that Albani brought to Warsaw an ambitious repertoire: Molière, Marivaux, Regnard, Destouches, Dancourt, Brueys, La Fontaine, and—for the first time in Poland—Diderot's *Le Père de famille*.

Keywords

French theater in Poland, playbill, theater documentation, theater in Poland 1700–1800

Abstrakt

Teatr francuski w Warszawie za Augusta III

Artykuł zawiera odpisy afiszów teatralnych z 1762 roku, które autor sporządził przed II wojną światową na podstawie oryginałów pochodzących ze zniszczonych w czasie wojny zbiorów Załuskich z Biblioteki Narodowej. Są to afisze francuskiej trupy aktorskiej Albaniego, która występowała w Warszawie w latach 1762 i 1763. We wprowadzeniu autor określa charakter i badawczy potencjał tych dokumentów. Afisze pełniące zarazem rolę programów i ulotek reklamowych drukowane były w językach francuskim i polskim, zawierały informacje na temat tytułu i autora wystawianej sztuki, cen biletów, terminów przedstawień, nie podawano w nich natomiast nazwisk aktorów. Zdaniem autora zestawienie tych informacji z innymi materiałami z epoki pozwala na odtworzenie repertuaru, sposobu organizacji występów oraz warunków, w jakich funkcjonował teatr. Treść afiszów skłania także do rewizji poglądów na temat życia teatralnego w czasach saskich. Wynika z nich, że występy teatru francuskiego miały regularny charakter, a Albani wystawiał w Warszawie ambitny repertuar: Molière'a, Marivaux, Regnarda, Destouchesa, Dancourta, Brueysa, La Fontaine'a, a także – po raz pierwszy w Polsce – *Le Père de famille* Diderota.

Słowa kluczowe

teatr francuski w Polsce, afisz teatralny, dokumentacja teatru, teatr w Polsce w czasach saskich

Amongst the remains of my notes, which had fortuitously survived the destruction of Warsaw, were transcripts of theater posters from 1762. These posters came to light some months before the war during the organizing of the Załuski collection, which was then kept in the National Library, an invaluable part of Polish culture, now lost forever. With the light-heartedness characteristic of many researchers whom the harsh lessons of history still have not been able to teach foresightedness, I then contented myself with only an abridged transcription. Of the ten existing posters, I fully copied only one. From the others, I noted down the title phrases, along with the theatrical information, which I found noteworthy at the time. I put off making an exact copy and record until a better opportunity would come along.

This better opportunity, at least when it comes to the Załuski collection, will never be given to anyone ever again. Fortunately, it seems that I have not caused much harm on the matter with my negligence. Aside from a few inadvertently overlooked details, such as the ticket price change on the poster dated August 15, the transcript is complete. I find these notes to hold rather significant information, for they not only enrich our knowledge of theater from a period nearly unexplored, but they may also lead to a revision of well-established views: the road by which the Enlightenment reached us leads back into the Saxon era in a deeper and broader way than we have been inclined to assume thus far.

To begin with, we have to resort to memory—which always tends to falter—regarding a rather insignificant matter, namely the format of the posters. They were, if I remember correctly, the size and shape of posters commonly used at the time. In those days they also served as playbills. They were more often distributed around coffeehouses and sent out to the houses of the gentry than pinned to walls. They were printed using book fonts on thick, high-quality paper, on a quarto format sheet, and they featured French text on one side and Polish text on the other. In addition to the customary information regarding the play and its author, they included extensive administrative instructions, as is evident in a faithfully transcribed first poster, dated January 21. I did not however make note of whether these instructions were given regularly or not. By contrast, not once did they provide the names of the actors.

Fate, which had saved—until then!—only ten posters, had been fortunate and kind, for it did so, as if it had selected posters throughout the year, in such a way as to enable us to have a better scope of understanding. It saved one poster from January, one from August, two from September, three from October, one from November, and two from December. This allows us to conclude,

with a high degree of probability, that there were many more performances than those shown on the surviving posters. The note on the January 21 poster, stating that the price of a ground-floor box is two red złotys for a performance and 16 red złotys for a month gives us grounds to conclude that the number of performances was eight per month. According to the days listed on the posters, we can determine that there were indeed two performances a week, usually one on Sunday and a second one on Thursday, Friday, or Saturday. This regularity in performances is also confirmed by the December 2 poster announcing Diderot's *Le Père de famille*, for it uses the phrase "Au premier jour" in the French text, and "W następującą Kadencją" (the following Sequence) in the Polish text, indicating that the sale of season tickets obligated the theater to give the announced number of performances.

Therefore, if we were to take into account only the months evidenced by the playbills, we could make an assessment of an additional forty-eight performances. Arguably, there were probably more. The off-season break usually took place during Lent and the summer months, when the court members dispersed to their country estates. Therefore, it would be fair to add another twelve to sixteen performances, raising the total to somewhere between sixty and sixty-four shows. This, in turn, would authorize us to draw a conclusion of considerable importance—that the performances of the Royal Comedians were not casual appearances, proving the existence of a permanent theater.

This hypothesis is also supported by other types of materials. Among the archival documents published by Karyna Wierzbicka, in part one of *Materiały do historii teatru warszawskiego* (The Materials for the History of the Warsaw Theater), we come across *Bilans nieszczęsnej komedii francuskiej w Warszawie 1762* (The Balance Sheet of the Unfortunate French Comedy in Warsaw 1762). It is a desperate cry for aid . . . financial aid. The director of the French troupe, J. F. Albani, appeals to the generosity of "the most distinguished people in the country," whom he put his trust in when undertaking the organizational role of the theater. Now, facing ruin, he reckons that he would have "offended their nobility" if he had not resorted to the generosity of gentlemen and ladies worthy of the highest esteem. The balance sheet gives us some additional and important details. In it he presents the income and expenses, and notes that in 1762 the theater played in two periods—from January 18 to March 11, and from April 13 to December 16. If we were to assume that the performances were given regularly, their number could be even higher. But this also tells us that the troupe was still in Warsaw the following year, at least until spring. Top of the list of problems that were "causing ruin" was the expenses related to the arrival and departure of actors, as well as those spent on the carnival celebrations of 1763.

Whether regular performances were also given that year is unfortunately impossible to determine from the balance sheet. It seems that this is something that poor director Albani no longer had the stomach for. A letter dated September 15, 1763, addressed to August Moszyński, the theater's caretaker and organizer, also under the succeeding king, testifies to the complete collapse of the French troupe's director's spirit. Stripped of his theatrical and personal assets, hunted by creditors, dragged before the courts, Albani begs the Pantler of the Crown to intercede with the judges, for the sake of his "poor wife and unfortunate children." The fact that about a year earlier, the same director Albani, still full of enthusiasm, had submitted a perfectly sensible proposal for a new theater is also quite revealing. The building, whose construction was to be financed by the state treasury, would, after a decade, come into the possession of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This proves, by all means, that Albani was once quite an enterprising man.

With such scant materials at our disposal, can we dare ask, what *kind* of a permanent theater he ran? The image sketched by these meager pieces of information is intriguing, and somewhat surprising. The playbills list eighteen plays. Only one of these plays, namely Dancourt's *Le Chevalier à la mode* (The Knight à la Mode) is mentioned twice. The fact that comedies appear only once indicates on the one hand that foreign theater attracted a rather small audience, and on the other a far richer repertoire than that listed on the posters, for it is difficult to suppose that fate, with all its benevolence, would have wished to preserve for us only those titles of plays that did not recur.

When reading these titles, we, who are used to recognizing the Saxon era as a period of cultural decline, are struck by the unexpectedly high level of repertoire. The royal troupe is clearly trying to select plays in such a way as to showcase what had won lasting recognition in French theater during that time. Molière is represented by two great comedies—*Tartuffe* and *The Learned Ladies*—and Marivaux by *The Game of Love and Chance*—his most riveting play—as well as the witty, and to all outward appearances Molièresque *School for Mothers*. Of works by the post-Molière-period writers, the most outstanding are Jean-François Regnard's *Le Légataire universel*, Philippe Néricault Destouches's *L'Irrésolu*, Dancourt with *Le Chevalier à la mode*, and Palaprat and Brueys's *Le Grondeur* (*The Grumbler*). We can see this extreme concern for literary value even in secondary plays, something not often seen in court theaters elsewhere in Europe, not even in Paris. The rarely performed *Le Florentine*, by the great fabulist Jean de la Fontaine, co-written with the actor Champmeslé, could serve as an example. Other short comedies uphold this fact, for both Marc-Antoine Legrand and Louis de Boissy still enjoyed a lively reputation at the time, especially

outside of France's court theaters. Besides, Legrand has a unique claim to being remembered at the Warsaw court, as an actor at the theater of King Augustus the Strong, having been associated with Warsaw for several years at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The repertoire generally does not differ from that of the Comédie Française, the royal theater in France at the time. Maybe the only difference is a more carefully curated selection of plays. We could even see a certain desire to compete with the "the world's premier stage" in the work of our Royal Comedians, and nevertheless grant them some degree of self-determination, so very difficult to obtain when one competes by emulation. In the selection of new comedies, attempts at gaining some independence can also be found, towards which the French bourgeoisie was making an increasingly strong push, both in the arts and power. Pierre-Claude de La Chaussée's *La Gouvernante*, from 1747, does so in a rather English *esprit*, full of affectionate and tearful manners. Diderot's *Le Père de famille*, from 1758—a true sensation in these posters!—has a distinct goal in reconstructing the entire theater in a bourgeois fashion, at least in theoretical terms. By including these two plays, the theater's repertoire takes on a separate meaning. It clearly outlines the kind of theatrical program that our Enlightenment will soon come to embody. During the various years of its feverish activity, almost all the plays given here will soon enter the stages, only now in Polish.

It is also worth considering that there must have been a lot of people attending the performances at the old Operalnia, blazing a trail for change, and who in a couple of years would rally around the reformative camp. Through the collective fond memory we have of them, our interest in the theater that shaped them grows stronger within us.

A theater historian will also find value in the ticket pricing information. From it he or she can decipher the shape of the audience, even in the oldest of our free-standing theater structures. We know the layout of the Operalnia quite well from the found building plans. But the information about the open "circus" hall in the center, furnished with benches behind it, with the ground floor seating on the sides, with four floors of boxes, will satisfy once again the hunger our imagination, forced for much too long and much too often to feed on conjectures. It will also be somewhat stirred by a minor but significant feature of customs. The poster for January 21 announces in a rather firm tone that "it will not be dignified to enter in livery, nor even for a fee." The theater is evidently trying to defend its dignity against this mob of *hajduks*, cossacks, forays, and lackeys, who more for grandeur than for its service are being dragged along by the gentry. Kitowicz's description of such behavior among servants during performances, wonderful in its imagery, justifies this ordinance

to the point. Too bad it failed to hold up. The firm tone quickly changes to a plea—“we entreat all of you to order your servants to behave modestly.” From further history of the Polish theater, we learn that this request will not have effect for years to come.

And finally, a matter put off deliberately. To more accurately answer the question thrown out into the open of what this theater was really like, it would be necessary to address a matter fairly untouched here, i.e., to study the performances themselves, starting with the accounts on the actors of Albani's troupe. However, this would require more extensive studies given our conditions. Perhaps someone from the growing group of young theater historians would be willing to undertake such a task?

Playbills'

1. Les Comédiens Du Roy Représenteront Jeudi le 21 Janvier 1761² *Le Jeu de l'Amour et du Hazard* comédie en trois actes suivie du *Piece Magnifique* en deux actes.

On prendra au Cercle 9 Florins, Les premiers quatre Bancs derrière le Cercle 6 Florins, Sur le Parterre 3 Florins, Dans les Loges sur le Parterre 6 Florins ou la Loge entière par Représentation 2 Ducats, et par Mois 16 Ducats, Dans les Loges au première Etage 9 Florins, ou la Loge entière par Représentation 3 Ducats et par Mois 24 Ducats, Dans Les Loges au seconde Etage on paye comme dans les Loges sur le parterre, Au troisième Etage 2 Florins. Qui ne veut pas s'arrêter à la porte pour prendre des Billets, peut en avoir dans la maison où demeure de Sn. Albani dans la ville au marché, dont le Caissier en donnera de neuf heures du matin jusqu'à deux heures après midi.

NB Dans chaque Loge on placera six personnes. La Comédie se commencera à cinq heures. Defense à la livrée de ne point entrer même en payant.

The Royal Comedians will present on Thursday, January 21, 1762 *Le Jeu de l'Amour et du Hazard* a comedy in three acts with a following spectacle called *Piece Magnifique* in two acts.

Charges will be 9 zlotys in the Circus, 6 zlotys in the first three [!] benches behind the Circus, 3 zlotys in the Ground Floor, 6 zlotys in the Boxes on the Ground

¹ Original spelling and punctuation are retained.

² The year 1761 is undoubtedly a mistake, the Polish text of the same poster states 1762. All the other posters also date from this year.

Floor, and the whole Box for a month will be 16 zlotys, 9 zlotys in the Boxes on the first Floor, and the whole Box for a month will be 3 red zlotys, and for the month 24 red zlotys for the Boxes on the second Floor will be paid as well as for the Boxes on the Ground Floor. On the third floor 2 zlotys.

Those who do not want to wait at the door while collecting tickets can get them in P. Albani's house in the City Market, where the cashier will give them out, starting from the ninth hour in the morning, until the second in the afternoon.

NB There will be six people to each Lodge.

The comedy will begin at the fifth hour.

It will not be dignified to enter in livery even for payment.

2. Le Comédien [!] Du Roy Représenteront aujourd'hui Dimanche 15 Août 1762 *La Gouvernante* comédie en Vers et en cinq Actes de la Chaussée suivie de *Florintin* [!] comédie en Vers et en un Acte de la Fontaine.

The Royal Comedians will present on Sunday, August 15, 1762, *The Governess* in verse in five Acts by la Chaussée, additionally *Le Florentine* in verse in one Act by de la Fontaine.

3. Les Comédiens du Roy Représenteront aujourd'hui Dimanche 5 septembre 1762 *Le Chevalier à la mode* Comédie en prose et en cinq Actes par Mr. Dancourt suivie de *L'Amour diable* comédie en Vers et en un Acte de Legrand.

The Royal Comedians will present on Sunday, September 5, 1762 *Le Chevalier à la mode* in Prose in five Acts by Mr. Dancourt *L'Amour diable* in verse in one Act by Legrand.

It will begin at the Fifth hour.

4. Les Comédiens Du Roy Représenteront aujourd'hui Samedi 18 Septembre 1762 *Le Grondeur* Com[edie] En Prose et en trois Actes de Palaprat suivie *D'Arlequin Sauvage* Comédie en Prose et en trois Actes du nouveau Theatre Italien.

The Royal Comedians will present on Saturday, September 18, 1762 a Comedy under the title *The Grumbler* in Prose in three Acts by Palaprat Additionally *Arlequin Sauvage* in prose in three Acts from the new Italian Theater.

5. Les Comédiens Du Roy représenteront Jeudi 21 Octobre 1762 *Tartuffe ou l'Imposteur* comédie en Vers et en cinq Actes de Molière suivie de *l'Ecole des Mères* Comédie en Prose et en un Acte de Marivaux.

The Royal Comedians will present on Thursday, October 21, 1762, the Comedy under the Title *The Impostor* in verse in five Acts by Molière Additionally *School for Mothers* in prose by Marivaux in two Acts.

6. Les Comédiens Du Roy représenteront Dimanche 24 Octobre 1762 *Le Légataire* Com[édie] En Vers et en cinq Actes de Regnard suivie du *Temps passé* comédie en prose et en un Acte de Legrand.

The Royal Comedians will present on Sunday, October 24, 1762, a Comedy under the Title *Le Légataire* Com[édie] in verse in five Acts by Regnard Additionally *Temps passé* in prose in one Act by Legrand.

NB In order to avoid any disturbance, it will be necessary to send for Tickets to the house of P. Albani in the City Market where the cashier will give them out, starting from the ninth hour in the morning, until the second in the afternoon. The money will not be accepted otherwise only according to the Reduction

We entreat all of you to order your servants to behave modestly.

7. Les Comédiens du Roy représenteront Dimanche 31 Octobre 1762 *Le Glorieux* Comédie en Vers et en 5 Actes de Destouches suivie du *François à Londres* Com. En Prose et en 1 Acte de Boissy.

The Royal Comedians will present on Sunday, October 31, 1762 The Comedy under the Title *Le Glorieux* in verse in five acts by Destouches Additionally *Le François à Londres* In prose in one Act by Boissy.

8. Les Comédiens du Roy représenteront Vendredi 5 Novembre 1762 *Le Chevalier à la mode* Comédie en Prose et en Cinq Actes de Dancourt suivie du *Babillard* comédie en Vers et en un Acte de Boissy.

The Royal Comedians will present on Friday, November 5, 1762 a Comedy under the Title *Le Chevalier à la mode* in Prose in five Acts by Dancourt additionally *Le Babillard* in prose in one Act by Boissy.

9. Les Comédiens du Roy représenteront Jeudi 2 Décembre 1762 *Les Femmes Savantes* comédie en Vers et en cinq Actes de Molière suivie de *Colin maillard* Comédie en Prose et en un Acte de Dancourt.

NB Au premier jour *Le Père de famille*.

The Royal Comedians will present on Thursday, December 2, 1762, a Comedy under the Title *The Learned Ladies* in Verse in five Acts by Molière Additionally *Colin Maillard* in Prose in one Act by Dancourt.

NB The following Sequence will be followed by *Le Père de famille*.

10. Les Comédiens du Roy représenteront Dimanche 5 Décembre 1762 *Le Père de famille* Comédie nouvelle en Prose et en cinq Actes par Mr Diderot.

The Royal Comedians will present on Sunday, December 5, 1762, a new Comedy under the Title of *Le Père de famille* in Prose in five Acts by Mr. Diderot.

Translated by Maciej Mahler



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