Theater and the Truth: Political and Theatrical Representations of the 1793 Siege of Toulon

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Cover Page Footnote
I would like to acknowledge my project advisor, Dr. Giulia Pacini, for her guidance and insight over the course of this research.
In December 1793, the Republican Army in the south of France recaptured the port city of Toulon after nearly four months of siege. In the countrywide unrest following the fall of the Girondin party earlier that year, the royalists of Toulon had taken control of this city and its key naval resources, soon calling on their English and Spanish allies for aid. The ongoing war effort, magnified by Toulon’s strategic importance as a Mediterranean port, made the siege a constant topic of discussion in the National Convention over the period of its duration. Mentions of Toulon in political discourse were at a height in December, as the fighting continued and letters from the officers and representatives “sous les murs de Toulon” reported progress and then victory.¹

The surrender and flight of the allied monarchic forces and the port’s recapture were greeted with effusions of joy on the part of republicans across France. Literature commemorating the event began to be published in the form of verses and songs only a few days after the victory was announced in the National Convention.² These pieces were hardly the last of such topical works. On January 3, 1794, Bertrand Barère, a member of the Committee of Public Safety, declared it was the duty of the nation’s theaters to ‘repeat’ “aux Français ce qu'ils ont fait sur les bords de la Méditerranée.” [“to the French what they have done on the banks of the Mediterranean.”]³ Given the predominance of plays showcasing current events during the Revolution (pièces de circonstance or théâtre d’actualité), one assumes playwrights hardly needed such urging. At least seven plays recounting the fall of Toulon premiered in January 1794.⁴ The database César records ten separate plays on Toulon for the year 1794, while archivist Alfred Parès recorded...
thirteen performed in Paris and the provinces. The vast majority of these pièces de circonstance were written and performed in the months immediately following the victory, with interest tapering off as the year went on. None of the plays recounting the fall of Toulon went on to become classics of French theater. In fact, it would be safe to say that after 1794, they were never performed again. Only two later plays addressed the capture of Toulon: one in 1798 and one in 1893. As M. Parès wrote, “Telle fut cette littérature lyrico-dramatique de circonstance, née spontanément sous l’impulsion des événements; œuvres hâtives, inspirées par la fièvre et l’exaltation du moment, et qui n'euirent pour la plupart, qu'une durée éphémère…”

Yet théâtre d’actualité of this kind was a relatively new phenomenon at the time, as it could not have existed before the Revolution. Under the Ancien Régime, contemporary French history and politics were banned from the theaters, which were under strict government control. Any reference to politics of the day had to be veiled in allegory to escape censorship. The “historical” tragedies of the Ancien Régime were predominantly set in Ancient Greece and Rome. As Philippe Bourdin outlines, history’s place in French theater was the subject of increasing debate over the latter half of the eighteenth century. Since Voltaire’s 1748 “Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne,” writers had expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of relevant history and politics in Ancien Régime theater, criticizing contemporary theatrical works as trivial and purely spectacular. Susan Maslan points out that on the eve of the Revolution, the belief that theater was the crowning jewel of French cultural achievement coexisted with a widespread fear that this theater was in a state of degeneracy. French theater, it was believed, was in decline because of the constraints government control had placed on content, preventing theater from being fully relevant to the social and political concerns of the time. In many ways, the Revolution freed theater from these constraints. In 1789, Marie-Joseph Chénier’s play Charles IX, ou l’école des rois, labelled a “national tragedy,” set the tone for new theatrical representations of French history.
however, references to the monarchic past were erased, leaving only the immediate and the classical past. At the same time, revolutionaries’ acute consciousness, of their place in what was now conceived as national history and of the historicity of current events, contributed to the preponderance of the new pièces de circonstance on the Revolution’s stages.  

The plays on Toulon can certainly be described as typical of the Revolution’s théâtre d’actualité—specifically the way revolutionary military victories were portrayed onstage in their immediate aftermath. In a period in which grand upheavals took place in politics, theater, and political culture, the genre of théâtre d’actualité which appeared during the Revolution provides perhaps the most direct example of interactions between the political and theatrical spheres. In this sense, the case study of Toulon serves as a microcosm of broader trends in revolutionary theater and politics. 

This paper will analyze the National Convention’s records of December 1793, along with plays recounting the fall of Toulon, focusing on Bertin d’Antilly’s opera *La prise de Toulon par les français* and Hippolyte Pellet-Desbarreaux’s play *La prise de Toulon, drame héroïque et historique*. These primary sources are complemented by secondary research focused on theater and politics in the Revolution and pièces de circonstance as a genre, which places these materials in their wider historical context as well as within the framework of current historiographical debates on the nature of the relationship between theater and politics during the Revolution. 

Textually, onstage representations of the siege of Toulon greatly resembled the discourse surrounding the siege in the National Convention. Although the public had greater influence over the performance (including its script) within the space of the theater, government efforts to publicize the Convention’s proceedings were key in generating a relatively uniform account of the victory across different media. In this sense, théâtre d’actualité played a significant role in perpetuating and was itself nourished by the revolutionary ideology of transparency. Ironically, however, this type of theater itself altered the “truth” it revealed to the public by defining the narrative of an event in its immediate aftermath. The texts of the Toulon plays reveal a striking degree of similarity to the political discourse in the National Convention concerning the same
event. To begin with, the basic account of the events associated with the fall of Toulon as presented in the National Convention (through letters from the deputies at the front, as well as from General Dugommier) is essentially the same in both Pellet-Desbarreaux and d’Antilly’s works. However, in the plays, details are occasionally changed, or rather embroidered, to tell a more compelling narrative. For example, d’Antilly’s opera (which, unlike Pellet-Desbarreaux’s shorter play, shows the fighting onstage) shows soldiers fleeing and rallied by the people’s representatives, Fréron and Ricord, and the capture of “Fort Pharon” (“Pharaon” in the reports). Although d’Antilly adds in the image of Fréron holding aloft the tricolor flag and the soldiers rallying to him, the rest of the episode is exactly as detailed in Fréron and Ricord’s report to the Convention: the fleeing soldiers, the representatives being accused of imposture when they try to rally the men, Fréron being threatened with a pistol to the chest, and the representatives being saved by the appearance of a commander. 14 As in the National Convention’s records, both plays contain an episode relating to the threat of explosives having been set in Toulon by the enemy before their flight. Both plays also contain an episode in which the heroic convicts of Toulon save a remnant of the French fleet from burning, if on a greater scale than the four frigates mentioned by Carnot in the National Convention. Moreover, like the reports, both plays include, albeit in different ways, a solemn, touching rendition of the people’s representative Charles Beauvais’ rescue from captivity. 15 Despite minor variations in each version of the story and the addition of a few fictional characters and subplots, the plays would have imparted to their audiences a narrative which was essentially similar to that presented in the National Convention. Taken altogether, the plays and the deputies’ speeches and military reports present a highly coherent account of the fall of Toulon.

Not only the events, but also the language of the plays overlaps heavily with that of the Convention’s records. Emphasis is placed on the duty of setting aside personal, familial bonds when the country is in crisis: the exact phrasing of “étouffer les cris de la nature” [“stifling the cries of nature”] is used in Pellet-Desbarreaux’s work and the Convention’s records. 16 Similar imagery, such as lightning as national vengeance, liberty trees, the “satellites des rois,” and the treason of the “infâmes Toulonnais,” as
well as similar motifs such as Beauvais’ assumed martyrdom, soldiers impatient to fight, and swearing oaths of victory are common to the works. The texts of the Toulon plays speak on a whole in the same tone as the political discourse of the National Convention. Most strikingly, both of the plays include, in full, Barère’s address, “La Convention nationale à l’armée de la République sous les murs de Toulon.” This is especially interesting because the Convention’s address to the troops, a text placed directly in the political sphere, is being performed onstage as part of a theatrical representation. Thus, the Revolution’s théâtre d’actualité was intensely politicized, to the extent that even clearly political text might be used onstage as in the National Convention. These plays’ audiences would have seen and engaged with representations in the theater which highly resembled the discourse of the representatives in the Convention.

How to account for these similarities? In the preface to “La prise de Toulon par les français,” d’Antilly lists only one source for his opera: the Bulletins de la Convention. At the time, the Bulletins de la Convention nationale, which recounted nearly the entirety of the day’s proceedings in the Convention, were widely distributed across France “to administrators, schools, and sociétés populaires.” The Convention expended significant effort to print and distribute such documents, with the government printing shops overshadowing even the largest newspapers at the time. While the proprietor of the Moniteur universel and Mercure ran an establishment with 27 presses and 91 workers, the government employed at least 40 printing presses and several hundred workers in 1794. This print medium would have facilitated the ready transmission of the Convention’s political discourse to the theatrical sphere.

Moreover, the revolutionary government was well aware of the political and ideological expediency of théâtre d’actualité, given theater’s vast cultural significance at the time and the power which plays were believed to exert over public morality. The government, therefore, sought to promote and influence such works. In August 1793, the Convention decreed that works which relate “les glorieux événements de la Révolution, et les vertus des défenseurs de la liberté” [“the glorious events of the Revolution and the virtues of the defenders of liberty”] should be performed each week at the
Republic’s expense. As mentioned earlier, shortly after the success of Republican forces in Toulon, Barère called for French theaters to produce works that would recount the victory. Representations of military victories were especially useful as propaganda for the levée en masse, the policy of mass national conscription which was enacted during the revolutionary wars. The government clearly considered that pièces de circonstance showcasing these victories would play an important role in the war effort, since scarce saltpeter was donated to theaters for the staging of military spectacles.

However, in practice, the extent to which the theatrical sphere was dominated by politicians’ decisions is highly debatable. The victory over Toulon’s Royalists and their foreign allies likely would have met with public approval, if not outright enthusiasm. The spectators at the National Convention, as well as the highly democratized section assemblies of Paris, individual citizens, and political societies across the country, expressed every sign of exuberance at the news. Thus, pièces de circonstance relating to military victories, where audience response would have generally aligned with political aims, hardly present the best example with which to examine the contesting powers at work in revolutionary theater. That being said, the case study of the Toulon plays presents strong evidence for audience control over theatrical representations. In the preface to *La Prise de Toulon, drame heroïque et historique*, Pellet-Desbarreaux explains that he kept or cut scenes and dialogue from his play based on audience response. Even when it ran counter to his own wishes, Pellet-Desbarreaux was forced to cut parts of the script because of the “impatience” of the audience: “J’ai été obligé de supprimer au 3e. acte tout ce qui se trouve également marqué par des guillemets, pour accéler la marche de l’action théâtrale; si le public était un peu moins impatient de voir la catastrophe, je désirerais vivement que l’on rétablît ce qui est dans le rôle de Salicetty…L’action héroïque du forçat de Toulon doit être conservée dans son entier.” [“I was obliged to take out everything in quotation marks in the 3rd act to speed up the plot; if the audience were a little less impatient to see the catastrophe, I would deeply wish Salicetti’s dialogue to be re-established…The heroic action of the convict of Toulon should be kept in its entirety.”] By including it in his notes for future productions of the play, Pellet-Desbarreaux implies that whether or not Salicetti’s dialogue in the third act is
performed or not should depend on the mood of the audience. Positive response from the audience also had a direct influence on the script: “J’ai conservé l’Adresse même de la Convention Nationale à ses frères d’armes sous les murs de Toulon: il est difficile de rien voir du plus énergique, et l’enthousiasme qu’elle produit au théâtre m’a prouvé combien cette manière de parler à des hommes libres est puissante.” [“I even kept the Address of the National Convention to their brothers in arms at the walls of Toulon: it is difficult to find anything more energetic, and the enthusiasm it produces at the theater has proven to me how powerful an effect that manner of speaking has on free men.”] 26 Within the space of the theater, the audience could to an extent impose its will on the representations before it.

Théâtre d’actualité and its mutual public and governmental support can also be understood as an experiment with transparency. As many authors have pointed out, contemporaries often criticized revolutionary politics for being too theatrical. 27 At the time, this would have been a deeply troubling concern because theatricality and spectacle were intrinsically associated with falseness as well as the politics and political culture of the Ancien Régime. 28 Moreover, with war still raging, in the paranoid atmosphere of the Terror, falseness of any kind was understood as not only morally reprehensible, but also potentially dangerous. 29 Transparency, the act of making events and actions public, was understood as the solution to the threat posed by theatricality. 30 Both sans-culottes and Jacobins believed that it was essential that citizens know what went on in the political sphere, specifically the actions of their representatives. If each citizen could see everything and if everything were made public without falsehood or distortion, then there would be no place for a lie to hide. This idea of truth and its publicization was perceived as crucial to both security and democracy, since only in a transparent society could the people properly supervise their representatives and their fellow citizens. 31

In 1790, the anonymous writer of l’Influence de la Révolution sur le théâtre français declared, “Que désormais la philosophie des theaters soit libre, pure, sublime comme la vérité…Que nos auteurs tragiques…mettent en scène les obscures manoeuvres de nos oppresseurs. Qu’ils portent dans ce dédale ténébreux le flambeau terrible de la vérité.” [“From now on may the
philosophy of the theaters be free, pure, sublime as the truth…May our tragic authors…put onstage the obscure maneuvers of our oppressors. May they carry into this gloomy labyrinth the terrible torch of truth.”][32 Even before the Revolution, allowing playwrights to use modern history in their works had been theorized as equivalent to revealing the secrets “des Cours et des cabinets secrets…nous laissant juges des maîtres du monde” [“of the courts and secret cabinets…leaving us, the audience, judges of the masters of the world.”][33 The writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier argued in 1773 that historical theater would prove useful in order to gain a true picture of the power or weakness of a kingdom. [34 However far-fetched the assumption that theatrical representations of events would be true to life, it is certainly worth noting that theater, especially théâtre d’actualité, was perceived as playing an important role in publicizing the truth. When Barère decreed that theaters “repeat for the French what they have done on the banks of the Mediterranean,” he may have been referring to exactly such a journalistic function. The theaters were to recount the victory so each citizen could see and experience it. Along similar lines, Pellet-Desbarreaux writes in his preface that he invites all the theaters in France which do not yet have a piece relating to Toulon to stage his play without compensation (often, the playwright was owed a percentage of the profits from performances.)[35

Theater, the major cultural institution during the Revolution, could certainly have been useful in spreading the news of events among the public. Mark Darlow has commented on the degree to which the Revolution’s théâtre d’actualité sought to anchor itself in the “textually documented past” as proof of accuracy.[36 Given the general consistency of the plays’ accounts of the fall of Toulon when cross-referenced with the records of the National Convention, it would be fair to say that, in this case at least, such claims on the part of playwrights were not unfounded. To all appearances, then, the experiment of using theater to publicize the truth was a successful one. Whether one learned of the events surrounding Toulon’s fall in the National Convention, in the press (including the printed Bulletins de la Convention), or onstage in the nation’s theaters, essentially the same narrative was presented. This equivalence nourished and reinforced widespread belief in transparency, the existence and transmission of pure, unmediated truth.
The irony of theater playing a role in transparency when the latter was conceived of as the opposite of theatricality would be hard to miss. In fact, however, the Revolution’s culture of intense performativity and transparency combined with anti-theatricality was also reflected in the theaters themselves, including the content and themes of the plays. In Pellet-Desbarreaux’s play, characters who dissembled before their monarchic oppressors proudly declare that there can be no lies between free men. D’Antilly’s opera overtly attacks the theatricality of the Ancien Régime through the characters of the stereotypical aristocrats. In the opera, the aristocrats’ exaggerated theatricality and hierarchical custom is mocked and unmasked. Audience sympathy is meant to lie with their foil, the blunt, honest Republican-sympathizer John Bull, an allegorical character of the English everyman. Bull’s nephew (the “personnage ridicule” Milord Pudding) describes him apologetically: “n’est ni galante, ni poli, mais il a le coeur excessivement bonne, et seroit un homme accompli s’il avoit le complaisance de mentir quelquefois pour les Dames.” “[He isn’t gallant, nor polite, but he has an excessively good heart, and would be an accomplished man if he had the deference to lie sometimes for the ladies.”] Thus, pièces de circonstance could be considered simultaneously one of the most overtly political genres of theater as well as one of the most anti-theatrical in the way that theatricality was conceived of during the revolutionary period.

However, as Maslan points out, it would be overly simplistic to assume that the Revolution’s théâtre d’actualité was simply a reflexive reaction to recent events and politics, or that these works merely revealed the truth without themselves shaping it. Rather, pièces de circonstance expressed their own complex relationship with their historical context when they “translated” revolutionary events into the framework of theater. These works did not just recount an event to their audiences. Rather, in a similar way to press journalism, théâtre d’actualité staged in the immediate aftermath of a revolutionary event was itself responsible for the way that event became defined in the minds of the public. Theater effectively created an event by immediately giving it importance, as well as writing its narrative. As Bourdin writes, “La prise de la Bastille, la fuite du roi, les victoires militaires passent aussi à l’histoire entre scène et foyer.” [“The fall of the Bastille, the flight of the king, the
military victories *thus passed into history* between the stage and the home” (emphasis mine).

Théâtre d’actualité was responsible for the way an event would go on to be remembered as history. Moreover, when the events of the Revolution were staged in their immediate aftermath, they became part of the national past.

The revolutionaries of the time possessed a strong sense of their own place in history and the historicity of the contemporary events in which they took part. We can see this concept of historicity in the historical and classical references which shared the Revolution’s stages with the immediate past. D’Antilly evokes the concept of a continuous national past in his preface when he discusses the failed attack of the Duke of Savoy and the Dutch and English fleet on Toulon in 1707 and the French literary productions commemorating that event. Most strikingly, however, both plays and political discourse drew comparisons between the Republican recapture of Toulon and Rome’s destruction of Carthage. Both the theatrical and political spheres, if they could be so neatly separated, clearly imagined the events of the time to be located in and intrinsically linked to the wider history of the nation, as well as the culturally-enshrined classical past. Théâtre d’actualité in particular, lacking the distance of time required of “historical” theater, itself rendered contemporary events historic.

**Notes**

2 See letter of citoyen Gassaud le jeune, 7 nivôse an II (27 December 1793), in *Archives parlementaires*, ser. 1, 82 :380.
3 Rapport sur la marine, 14 nivôse an II (3 January 1794), in *Archives parlementaires*, ser. 1, 82 :614.
6 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 20-21.
13 Ibid., 64-65.
14 Bertin d’Antilly, *La prise de Toulon par les français, opéra en trois actes, mêlés de prose, de vers et de chants* (Paris: Huet, an II (1794)), 80-82; compare with Fréron’s letter in *Archives parlementaires*, ser. 1, 82:262-263.

See also *Archives parlementaires*, ser. 1, 82:261, letter of Fréron, Robespierre, Ricord, and Saliceti to the Convention; 401, letter of the representatives at the front to the Convention; 400-401, address of Carnot to the Convention, 402 (different version of Carnot and Bourdon’s addresses).
16 Pellet-Désbarreaux, *La prise de Toulon*, 7, also 20, 25, 26 ; letter to the Convention from the département of Tarn, in *Archives parlementaires*, ser. 1, 81 :519.
17 See d’Antilly, *La prise de Toulon par les français*, 76-77 ; Pellet-Désbarreaux, *La prise de Toulon*, 14-15, 17; among others, the letter of the société populaire de Saint-Martin-de-Bromès to the Convention, in *Archives parlementaires*, ser. 1, 80 :424.
18 Address presented by Barère and subsequently adopted, in *Archives parlementaires*, ser. 1, 82 :580-581. See also Pellet-Désbarreaux 29-30, d’Antilly 75-76.
19 D’Antilly, *La prise de Toulon par les français*, xxix.
22 Décret de la Convention nationale relatif à la représentation des pièces de théâtre, as proposed by Couthon, 2 August 1793, in *Archives parlementaires*, ser. 1, 70 :134-135.
24 *Archives parlementaires*, ser. 1, 82:255-256, 265, and others, as well as the outpouring of individuals’ and societies’ donations following the victory,
intended as rewards for the victors or compensation for soldiers’ families; also
82:320-321, in which the section de Brutus addresses the Convention. See
Maslan, Revolutionary Acts 154-155 regarding districts and section assemblies.
25 Pellet-Desbarreaux, La prise de Toulon, iv.
26 Ibid., iii.
27 Paul Friedland, Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in
the Age of the French Revolution (Cornell University Press, 2002), 180-181;
Maslan, Revolutionary Acts, 4.
29 Ibid., 78, 124.
30 Ibid., 78.
31 Ibid., 153-154.
32 Anonymous, L’Influence de la Révolution sur le théâtre français, petition à ce
sujet, adressée à la commune de Paris (Paris: Debray, 1790).
33 Bourdin, “Du théâtre historique au théâtre politique: la régénération en débat
(1748-1791),” 57.
34 Ibid., 58.
35 Pellet-Desbarreaux, La prise de Toulon, iv.
36 Mark Darlow, “History and (Meta-)Theatricality: The French Revolution’s
397.
37 Maslan, Revolutionary Acts, 77-79.
38 Pellet-Desbarreaux, La prise de Toulon, 11. (“Penses-tu qu’un homme libre
puisse mentir ? Il ne dissimule qu’avec les tyrans.”)
39 D’Antilly, La prise de Toulon par les français, 43.
40 Maslan, Revolutionary Acts, 7.
41 Frantz, “Entre journal et épépée : le théâtre d’actualité de la Révolution,” 23.
42 Bourdin, “Du théâtre historique au théâtre politique : la régénération en débat
(1748-1791),” 64.
43 Ibid., 53.
44 Ibid., 60, 64.
45 D’Antilly, La prise de Toulon par les français, A2, viii-xxviii.
46 Ibid., 103; Pellet-Desbarreaux, La prise de Toulon, 11; see also adresse des
citoyens de Rochefort, in Archives parlementaires, ser. 1, 82 :255.