

Library of Congress (Music Division)

Lars Schmidt to Jacques Chirac, 24 September 1997

Translation of correspondence from the Lars Schmidt Collection

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Please receive my renewed and very sincere and very warm thanks for the honor that you gave me in awarding me the rosette of an Officer of the Legion of Honor.

You sent me a magnificent memory in a photograph of such moving moments, especially for a foreigner, and I express all my gratitude in the name of myself, the name of my family and of my country.

You alluded to Göteborg, a city where we share some good memories. Not far from this city, in the archipelago of the west coast, not far from the Norwegian border, I would be much honored to welcome you onto a wild island to spend some time there in the splendor of my country.

Please, Mister President, accept this expression of my sincere and respectful esteem.

Lars Schmidt

Mister Jacques Chirac
President of the Republic

WHY IS THE SITUATION OF PRIVATE THEATER SO DIFFICULT?

In a recent report to the Economic and Social Council on the Development of Theatrical Activities, Pierre Dux expressed himself as follows: "Aggravating all these difficulties, the critique of dramas, quite often plays a rather discouraging role. Although in earlier times it made a concerted effort to provide motivated and objective analyses of plays, tending to correct and council the authors and actors, it seems today, too frequently, hasty, categorical, over-passionate, even arbitrary, an attitude that is very toxic for theater in general, taking into account that bad reviews are incomparably more effective than good ones."

There are several reasons for this state of affairs, which I could present, analyze and even debate here afterward. But first of all I would like to demonstrate to what degree the theatrical critiques of Paris are harmful for private theater, which is seriously fighting for survival.

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Why has this private sector lost 40% of its audience? The principal motivation for this defection is that the reviews in the daily and weekly press exercise an influence that is immediately toxic for theater because of their ignorance of our theater and its functioning. I know that Sacha Guitry, at one point, banned the attendance of critics at his full dress rehearsals, and theater directors have seen themselves become constrained to arrive at the same decision.

Here's an example from my own experience from this season: I produced two shows, one with Marie Bell at the Théâtre du Gymnase - "ARRETE TON CINEMA" (Stop your cinema) by Gérard Oury (In passing I'd like to point out that, at the moment, this was one of only two "premier play of the author" since the start of this season.) - and the other at the Théâtre Montparnasse - "TROIS LITS POUR HUIT" (Three beds for eight), by the celebrated English dramatic author Alan Ayckbourn.

Firstly, an observation on the play from Montparnasse: an exceptional full dress rehearsal, an audience that showed its delight by laughing for two and a quarter hours without interruption, and then authors such as Françoise Dorin, Barillet et Grédy, Félicien Marceau, Marcel Mithois, Ramond Castans, etc. who came to support us by declaring officially: "A funny, funny play", "Brilliant actors", "A festival of theater", etc. But the reviews, tired, ill-informed, didn't dare nor wanted to report on the response of the audience. By a lack of generosity? By a complex when confronted with the creativity? Each review delivered its own personal terrorism. The review of France-Soir pushed the limits of good taste up to the point of saying: "Honesty does obligate me to report, however, that the audience didn't let the slightest movement of an eyebrow pass without howling with pleasure. (Thank you to the directors of the theater for now using this sentence in their publicity.)" As for the criticism in the Figaro - who, aside from this daily, influence readers of four newspapers, not to mention the provincial press - it writes with its impotent pen: "They laughed a lot, but a forced laughter." I could cite thousands of viewers belonging to all social classes that, having seen the play, declared having momentarily forgotten their worries and are not allied one bit with the review of the Figaro. The purpose of the review should be to inform the public by providing a conscientious and honest report of a performance in an objective, general and constructive article, instead of destroying all our efforts by a petty and negative summary. It is unacceptable that one could express themselves in such a way that these Parisian critics do without possessing the slightest notion of the practical aspects of our craft.

It would be with the greatest pleasure, by the way, that I would invite a critic to follow us in our work, from the moment where we choose a play and then passing on to auditions, to distribution to the choice of the director and the decorator, and finally through the weeks of rehearsals up until the premiere, a project that can take us between one and two years. This experience would allow this critic to form a sound opinion about our field and it would most certainly lead him to alter his points of view.

I've produced (sometimes by myself, other times with other theater directors) about 60 performances in Paris, among which are classic and modern French plays, as well as contemporary foreign pieces, providing work as a consequence to thousands of actors, directors, decorators and stage constructors, workshops for costumes, advertising offices and all types of theater personnel, etc, etc, and I must say this to you: Never, in any other country, have I felt such a lack of understanding of such a marvelous art.

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Yes, with your poisonous pens you have caused a moral wound to our initiatives and to private theater, and I know all my colleagues have feel the same way as me. We have certainly committed some mistakes - and some are difficult to understand - and they must be effectively exposed, but if one considers the risks involved, I would estimate that we have to right to demand a fair treatment.

How to gather enough enthusiasm to put on a modern French play when one thinks of the criteria in effect and to the critiques that Gérard Oury received for "Arrête ton cinéma" (Stop your cinema)? France-Soir wrote: "Stunning Gérard Oury, lucid, not indulgent but generous, satire without lowering itself to caricature, full of love for the theater like a Jovet, whose echo one could sometimes hear." while the Figaro, decreed upon him: "This is cardboard cut-out theater. No psychology, no language, no truth. They flattened it all out and put it in a box." One can only guess which one of these two knows what he is talking about. In any case, what is sure is that the Figaro succeeded in killing an excellent soirée.

You make a living off of us but you mistreat us instead of encouraging us. Therefore, sooner or later, we will have to resign ourselves to closing the doors of our private theaters. It is not the public that has let us down; it's you who have destroyed their faith, as well as ours.

LARS SCHMIDT