

## *Theatre Photography in Nineteenth Century France: Document, Archive or Pure Fiction?*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Indoor performance photography, which was born in France on the occasion of the Paris World Exhibition in 1889, remains a problematic theatrical and media object to this day. But at the Belle Epoque and until the Second World War at least, it requires to be approached with all the more caution because it is always the fruit of multiple manipulations, either at the time of the making of the shots (mandatory posing of actors, specific lighting, etc.), or at the time of their “post-production” (printing, but especially edition in review or volume). A complex and particularly rich object that must be studied in its context (publications or archives), stage photography is then offered as much as a document to be deciphered as a fiction to be deconstructed.

**Key Words:** theatre photography, France, Belle Epoque, document, photographic archives.

In January 1898 there appeared in Paris the first issue of what would remain for a long time the leading French theatre review, *Le Théâtre*. Its distinctive feature was that between 60% and 80% of it consisted of photographs, either portraits of actors or photographs of performances. The policy statement by Francisque Sarcey at the beginning of the first issue makes the peremptory claim:

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This journal aims to irrevocably fix past events like a shadow on a wall and to keep them for our descendants.

Thanks to it they will be luckier than we are. They will have before their eyes incontestable documents<sup>3</sup>.

Such affirmations should however not blind us to the real documentary significance of the photographs in question, nor lead us to forget their capacity to create effective *fictions*, capable of stimulating the imagination of those who see them. Shadow is not reality, and far from being the “incontestable documents” so lauded by “Uncle” Sarcey (a largely backward-looking protector of the theatre, including in his understanding of the medium), the creations made possible by Niepce’s and Daguerre’s invention, or more precisely that of Talbot (making multiple prints possible from a single negative) must still be treated with caution. Even after the numerous technical improvements which continue to be made, the creations must, *a fortiori* in the case of theatre, be subject to a critical approach and scrutiny, which is impossible, as Sarcey would have wished, if they are seen as irrefutable proof. Whether it is a question of their creation or of their dissemination, these constructions are in reality equally indexical, imaginary and symbolic.

Retouching, for example, is involved not only in portraits of actors wishing to be shown in the most favourable light. It can interfere with all sorts of photos, including those of the least “noble” settings, or the least expected or the least necessary *a priori*. Thus, the more or less dusty or unchanging wooden floor, which constitute the floor of the majority of theatre sets (and which can reappear from the start to the finish of a performance, in a totally unrealistic way equally for exterior as for interior scenes) are preserved in some rough prints of photos destined to be cheaply distributed (**fig. 1**); on the other hand they are regularly corrected by reviews such as *Le Théâtre* or *L’Art du théâtre*, in accordance with what the reader’s imagination expects of the floor of a convent, or of a palace or of a park, as with the Luxembourg Gardens (**fig. 2**). These editions assume then a uniform style which literally ‘cleans’ from the actual décor the errors which could taint the décor of the *story* proper (it is equally the case with the prompter’s desk which almost always disappears

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3. Francisque Sarcey, “Le théâtre instantané”, *Le Théâtre*, n°1 (January 2018):1.

in the photographic reproductions, whilst Antoine was at first the only one to actually abolish it. Thus what is seen corresponds to the fiction shown, not to the actual live performance; so it comes at the expense of truth and the real circumstances of the production.



**Fig. 1:** Photos by Jean Larcher, 1902. *Le Billet de Joséphine* by Georges Feydeau and Jules Méry (first performance on 23 February 1902 at the Théâtre de la Gaîté). Two stereoscopic views. © Private collection, all rights reserved.



**Fig. 2:** Photos by Jean Larcher, 1902. *Le Billet de Joséphine* by Georges Feydeau and Jules Méry at the Théâtre de la Gaîté. Extract from *Le Théâtre* (n° 79, April 1902/I). Same photos as previous number.

On the other hand, however, the post-production editorial work can attempt to compensate not for the actual imperfections of the production, but for those of the photographic medium. The most frequent interventions (even if they are not systematic, doubtless for reasons of cost and the time taken) consist amongst other things in removing the shadows cast by artificial lighting. The unrealistic nature of shadows coming from several directions at once, or reflected in the sky itself, can thus be erased (**fig. 3-4**).



**Fig. 3:** Photo by Paul Boyer, 1904. Jean Coquelin, Péricaud, Réjane, Coquelin, Francq and Monteux in *La Montansier* (first performance on 24 March 1904 at the Théâtre de la Gaîté).

Acte III. Argentic print on paper mounted on cardboard ; 21,2 cm x 29 cm.

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**Fig. 4:** Same photo as the previous number, retouched in *Le Théâtre* (n°128, April 1904/II), 25.

Sometimes, on the other hand, rather than removing what is overdone, the touching up aims to add elements which are present in the performance but cannot be captured in photographs (because of insufficient sensitivity). That is the case, for example, with the snow which was falling at the Châtelet, at the end of 1903, in the eighth scene of *L'Oncle d'Amérique*<sup>4</sup>. *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique* mention it specifically<sup>5</sup>, but it does not appear in

4. Victor de Cottens and Victor Darlay, *L'Oncle d'Amérique*. First performance at the Théâtre du Châtelet on 20 November 1903.

5. Edmond Stoullig (dir.), *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique*. 1903 (Paris: Librairie Paul Ollendorff, 1904), 355.



**Fig. 5:** Photo by Paul Boyer, 1903. *L'Oncle d'Amérique*.  
Extract from *Le Théâtre* (n°136, August 1904/II), 22.

Boyer's photograph reproduced in n° 136 of *Le Théâtre*. (**fig. 5**) On the other hand, it is certainly there, although obviously added manually, in the reproduction which appeared in the January 1904 issue of *L'Art du théâtre* (**fig. 6**), thus in a way *repairing* the imperfections of the medium and restoring, if not actual reality, at least a possible version of it. But it is only by checking with other documents that we can arrive at such a conclusion<sup>6</sup>, which in no case is justified solely by the indexical nature of the photograph.

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6. One could easily imagine that no artificial snow fell on the stage, and that, as with the floorboards transformed into a palace or garden floor, the flakes were added for conformity with the story, not its scenic representation.



**Fig. 6:** Photo by Paul Boyer, 1903. Same photo as the previous number, retouched (snow added) in *L'Art du théâtre* (January 1904), 9.

But it is often even before the editing process, at the moment the photograph is taken, that the purely documentary and objective aspect is destroyed. Artificial lighting and the lack of sensitivity of photographic film emulsion are themselves enough to require a more or less lengthy exposure time and so inevitably an initial shaping of the construction of images. But the deceitfulness of stage photography sometimes goes beyond this deception inherent in the technology. Thus it is not rare for photographs claiming to be of actual scenes to be nothing in fact but a concatenation of scenes which the audience could not at any time have witnessed. Anyone who is at all familiar with the story of *Occupe-toi d'Amélie* (*Take care of Amelia*) by Feydeau could only be amazed to see characters brought together in the same photograph (taken at the time of a performance at the Théâtre-Français in Bordeaux, shortly after its first performance in Paris) in such positions that are not supposed to come together at any time of the play. (**Fig. 7**) At first glance, it involves the very beginning of Act I, scene 5:



THEATRE PHOTOGRAPHY IN NINETEENTH CENTURY FRANCE...

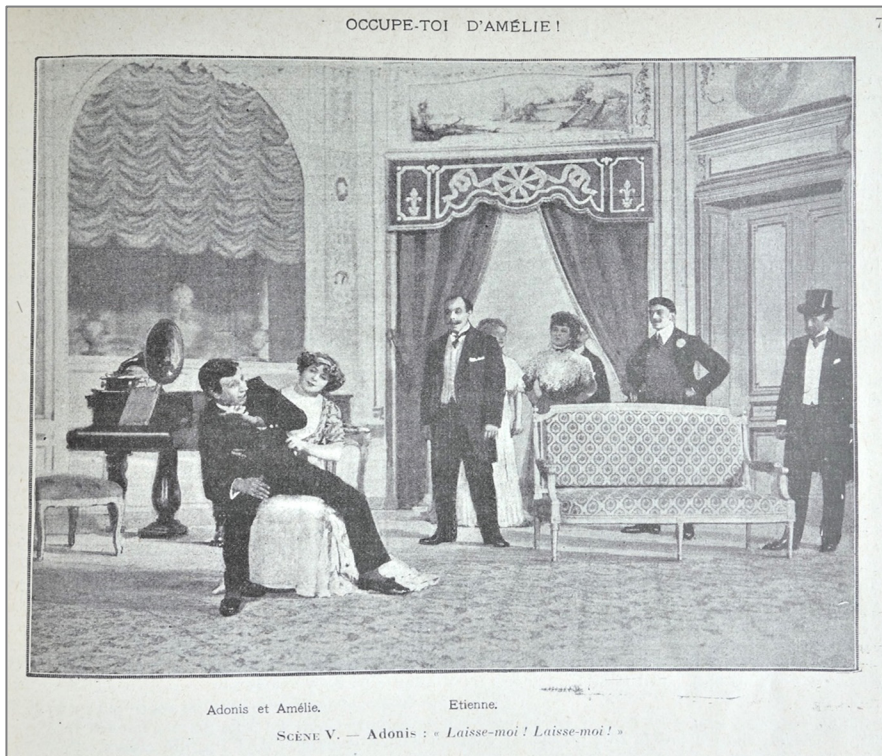
*The same [Amélie and Adonis], Etienne, Palmyre, Yvonne, Boas, Bibichon, Valcreuse, then Pochet. Etienne, who appears first, recoils in shock at seeing Adonis on Amélie's knees. – Oh!  
All, like an echo, with the same recoil – Oh!  
Adonis, seeing Etienne, twists around on Amélie's knees, trying to free himself from her arms. – Let go of me! Let go of me!  
He rushes away stage left.  
Amélie, without getting up, speaking quite naturally. – Well, what? .... What?  
All, aghast. – Oh!  
Pochet, appearing at the door at the back of the stage. – Well! How's it going?  
Etienne, furious, coming to the front of the stage, to Pochet. – Look, monsieur, I hope you're happy! I've just found madame with her servant on her knees!...<sup>7</sup>*



**Fig. 7:** Unidentified photograph (maybe Panajou in Bordeaux), ca. 1908-1909. *Occupe-toi d'Amélie* by Georges Feydeau, Théâtre-Français of Bordeaux. Argentic print on paper mounted on cardboard; 23 cm x 34,4 cm. © Private collection, all rights reserved.

7. Georges Feydeau, *Occupe-toi d'Amélie* (Paris: *L'Illustration théâtrale*, nr 174, 25 March 1911), 6.

In reality, this opening is clearly “condensed” in our photograph, which readily sacrifices the story and especially the staging imagined by the author<sup>8</sup>: Adonis is still there on Amélie’s knees, whilst Pochet has already entered and seems to say “Well! How’s it going?” whilst Etienne de Milledieu comes forward as if to reply: “Look, monsieur, I hope you’re happy! I’ve just found madame with her servant on her knees! ...” In other words anyone wanting to rely on such a photograph to gather information about the Bordeaux staging could only fail. The comparison with the photograph which appeared as an illustration of the first edition of the text in *L’Illustration théâtrale* in March 1911 (fig. 8), confirms this confusion, at the same time as aiming to



**Fig. 8:** Photo by Auguste Bert, 1908. *Occupe-toi d'Amélie* by Georges Feydeau (first performance on 15 March 1908 at the Théâtre des Nouveautés).

Extract from *L’Illustration théâtrale* (n°174, 25 March 1911, 7), first edition of the play, following the revival of 25 February 1911.

prove that Bert's photographs taken at the time of the 1908 production are closer to what the audience would in fact have seen ... *in theory*. For even the series published in n° 226 (May 1908/II) of *Le Théâtre* (which does not show the photograph from *L'Illustration* but others from the same collection), is a series less unreliable *a priori*, but is still problematical. One of the photographs in question, showing Amélie, Marcel, the maid, Irène, Pochet, Etienne and the Prince wearing a mask, in Marcel's room in Act II, becomes a real 'mystery photo', as Romain Piana<sup>9</sup> has shown, since it does not correspond at any time to the published text and despite illustrating a long account of the early performances:

Could there be an intermediate version of the play – which would be the stage version of the production [...]? Or else in order to conform to the principle of visual alternation between stage setting and posed illustration which rules the play's illustrations included in *Le Théâtre*, could the photographer(s) have organised or arranged for a grouping which extended the *dramatis personae*?<sup>10</sup>

If this last hypothesis is correct, and even if the presence in all cases of the masked prince proves the existence of a different text from the one published (of which the photographs despite everything would be *proof* – although one could not say of what ...), this brings us back to the case of our photographs of the Bordeaux production. The situation is repeated around the same time and unambiguously, notably in the images of another performance at the Bordeaux Théâtre-Français, *Le Passe-partout* (fig. 9). The photograph concerned on this occasion gathers together, this time against a set which cannot be other than that of the second act of Georges Thurner's play (the only one of the three acts which takes place in the offices of the newspaper which gives the work its title) more or less the whole list of characters: Lionel Régis, the editor of *Le Passe-partout* (stage right), Jacqueline

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8. The staging quoted and the positions of the actors are indicated in detail as early as the first edition of the play, in *L'Illustration théâtrale*, which points out that the text is accompanied by 'a complete staging suitable for the production' (half-title page), accompanied by a sketch of the décor (*op. cit.*, p. 2).

9. Romain Piana, 'Between suggestion, "tradition", and testimony' in *La Photographie de scène en France*, ed. A. Rykner (Paris: *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*, nr 283, 2019-3), 131-144.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 142.



**Fig. 9:** Photo by Panajou frères, ca. 1909. *Le Passe-partout* by Georges Thurner, Théâtre-Français of Bordeaux. Argentic print on paper mounted on cardboard; 17 cm x 28,2 cm. © Private collection, all rights reserved.

Hélouin (known as Minerve), Martineau (the editorial secretary), Louis (“the impressive office boy, with his chest covered with medals<sup>11</sup>”), with his hand on the shoulder of a character wearing a hat who cannot be other than Brézin, coming to ask for explanation from Lionel Régis who himself asks him to remove his hat for “there are ladies present” – that is to say Minerve on the one hand and Madame d’Allonval (one of his mistresses) on the other, who has entered just before Brézin and who can be no other than the woman wearing a hat played by Bertrande Berthet –, and finally, towards the back, the bellboy, who normally only appears occasionally during the previous scene (scene 3) to briefly introduce a different character. But in scene 3 there are only five other characters, not including either Brézin or d’Allonval, whilst the bellboy himself only reappears later, equally briefly, at the end of

11. Georges Thurner, *Le Passe-partout* (Paris: *L’Illustration théâtrale*, nr.105, 26 December 1908), 15.

scene 9 in which besides only Brézin, Lionel and Minerve appear ... Even if one can place the episode as being most likely at Brézin's entrance in scene 8, the character who, stage left, dragging another by the sleeve, can only be Luzancy who, in scene 2, "exits left dragging Lambert", the same Lambert who had begun to submit to his chief a request from Luzancy who, fearful at the irritation of Lionel, asks him for a postponement and drags him away: in other words, and to sum up, what appears in the Panajou brothers' photograph is a *completely unreal mixture of the story and the staging between different scenes of Act II*. Consequently, the justification of such a composition cannot be the desire to portray a specific moment of the specific production; it is simply a question, for the photographer, of composing a tableau capable of maintaining the interest of someone who might have seen a production, or of arousing the interest of someone who has not yet had that opportunity. The arrangement of the actors in a V-shape, around an axis created by the empty armchair placed towards the rear of the stage as if to emphasise the perspective, demonstrates this purely iconic concern; far from the performance itself the photograph provides its own staging, almost allowing the photographer's voice to be heard directing his subjects in the studio, which thus has taken on the dimensions of a theatre ...

If not all of the theatre photographs from the Second Empire to the Belle Époque are fabricated, with such an underdeveloped taste for accuracy, it is obvious that such examples (chosen from amongst many others) invite the eye to look for something other than the "incontestable" evidence as claimed by Sarcey. That is why it is appropriate to cite the content of some major photographic French archives in order to better understand both their intrinsic interest and the necessity of subjecting them to a careful analysis. To this end, we shall consider two of them, one already fairly well known to researchers and the other which has paradoxically acquired a sort of mythical status yet without having, as far as we know, been subjected to a real investigation along the approach we have taken.

The first constitutes the plentiful documentation gathered by the Association de la Régie Théâtrale (A.R.T. – Association of Theatre Directors), created in 1911, and now in the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris (History Library of Paris) since 1969. Containing programmes, posters, directors' notebooks, models, etc., the collection includes tens of thousands

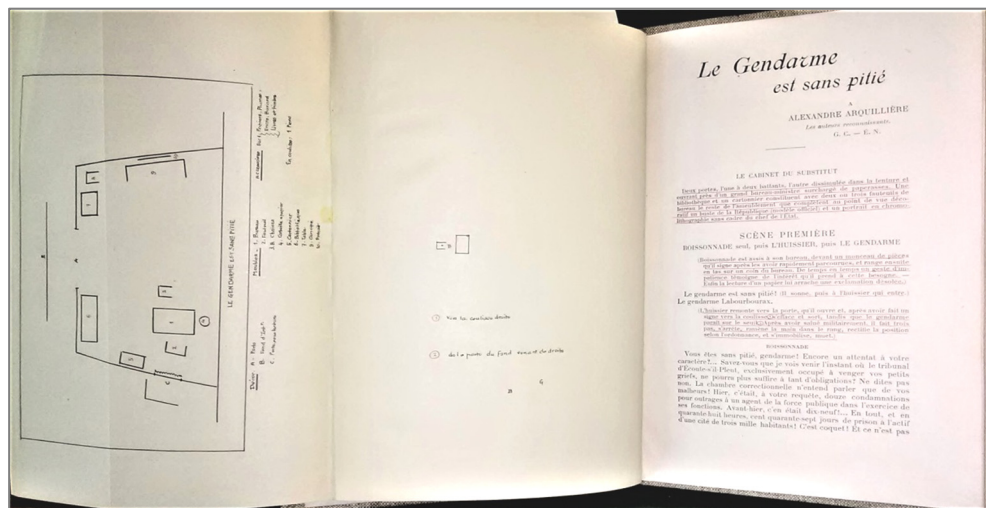
of photographs, many of them belonging to our period of interest. The collection has already been the subject of some important publications<sup>12</sup>, but we wish to emphasise here some of the issues relating to the questions we are interested in. Amongst the staging and set plans prior to 1918 to be found there, several are accompanied by photographs, generally in the form of press cuttings or post cards. That is the case, for example, with the staging plan of Courteline and Norès' *Le Gendarme est sans pitié*<sup>13</sup>. If the play was created on 26 January 1899<sup>14</sup>, the plan with various sketches or annotations was in fact inserted into the pages of a copy of the edition which appeared the same year in the collection "Les pièces à succès" ("Successful plays", Flammarion publishing) (**fig. 10**). Cautin and Berger's photographs, clearly taken at the time of its first performance, are interspersed with comments made by a stage manager/director. Elsewhere, in the text itself, stage directions are underlined in red and footnotes are introduced on the opposite page, referring to movements around the stage and completed where necessary by small diagrams. One could imagine that it is a question there of a plan based on the staging of the original play, which was put back into the text published at more or less the same time in order to keep its memory alive. At first sight, the photographs and the insertion correspond. However, on looking more closely some important differences become obvious: the photographs never show the table stage left at the back (diagram n° 7), nor the filing cabinet stage right (n° 5), and the bookcase stage right (n° 6), instead of being a real piece of furniture in front of the backdrop (as specified in the diagram) seems itself to be painted on the cloth. In the same way, the door hidden behind a curtain stage right (c) seems to have been replaced by a

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12. Françoise Péliisson-Karro, *L'Association des régisseurs de théâtre (1911-1939)* (Villeneuve- d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2014); Jean-Marc Larrue and Giusy Pisano (dir.), *Les Archives de la mise en scène : Hypermédiatités du théâtre* (Villeneuve- d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2014); Pascale Alexandre-Bergues and Martin Laliberté (dir.), *Les Archives de la mise en scène: Spectacles populaires et culture médiatique (1870-1950)* (Villeneuve- d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2016), and Jean-Marc Larrue and Giusy Pisano (dir.), *Le Triomphe de la scène intermédiaire. Théâtre et médias à l'ère électrique* (Montréal : Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2017).

13. Cote: 8-TMS-01052 (RES).

14. The date given by *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique*, which is generally reliable. However, the catalogue of the ART gives the following day, 27 January 1899.



**Fig. 10:** Staging plan for performances of *Le Gendarme est sans pitié* de Courteline et Norès. Unknown year. First pages of the plan inserted into the pages of a copy of the edition in the collection 'Les pièces à succès' (Flammarion publishing, 1899). Association de la Régie Théâtrale, Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris. © BHVP.

fireplace, with a door on its right side which does not appear in the diagram. One may conclude then that the plan and the stage directions date from a later production. But what matters here is that if the plan and the stage directions do not correspond to the photographs, and if the illustrated edition can still be used to preserve some of the original production, it is because the director himself *does not trust* the photographs to have a real documentary value. So they become more or less vague indicators, without providing vital guidance for a future production (which would respect the "tradition" whose lines Sarcey wished to be fixed by photography), nor guidance on stage directions of a past production (as described in the staging plan). The very loose connection thus established shows fairly well the place of photography in people's imaginations: it does not prove a reality, but that does not make it superfluous, even when it does not correspond.

An almost contrary example however appears in a different collection, giving rise to the idea that not all theatre directors treated the photographs accompanying *de facto* their staging plans with the same lack of rigour or the same flexibility. Thus, a plan of the production of *Roule ta bosse*, apparently

by Léon Lemaire, includes a document of special interest. As Lemaire seems to have been a director of the Grenelle, Montparnasse and Gobelins Theatres, the plan could refer to one of the performances of this play which was given in these three theatres in 1909. As for the document in question, it consists of a postcard of a photograph (probably one of Larcher's) of the production at the Théâtre de l'Ambigu in 1906<sup>15</sup> (fig. 11). Included in the edition of the play published by Stock in 1907, with handwritten annotations along the same lines as those of *Le Gendarme* previously mentioned, the photograph here serves not



**Fig. 11:** Unidentified photograph (probably Jean Larcher), 1906. *Roule ta bosse* by Jules Mary and Émile Rochard (first performance at the Théâtre de l'Ambigu on 11 May 1906). Picture postcard with handwritten annotations by a stage manager (Léon Lemaire ?), file 8-TMS-02118 (RES), A.R.T., Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris. © BHVP.

15. One can be sure that it is this production, for several photographs in the series (which also lead to its probable attribution to Larcher), some of which include the set and certain actors involved, appeared in the press or on postcards which were in circulation in 1906.



as a vague reference but as an open contrast: the angry comment “It’s a poor production” and the warning that “they are not there at that moment”, are completed by a vengeful hand-drawn crossing out of two actors, giving one the impression that, paradoxically, the director takes the illustration *as literal truth*, so to speak – as if it were supposed to be a faithful representation of the production. On the contrary, it is clear that it belongs to the same category as the two images previously analysed of *Le Passe-partout* and *Occupe-toi d’Amélie*. In other words, it was not a question for the photographer of showing what the spectator could see on the stage at a given moment, but of producing once again a sort of secondary staging, capable of bringing together in a single photograph characters separated in the story and in disconnected positions. Actually, the protagonists Bastien and Bastienne should be found alone, in an intimate scene where Bastien, tenderly reading Bastienne’s palm, speaks of the future of their love for each other, whilst Jean-Jeanne, the confidante, downstage and close to them in the photograph, should be tactfully sitting upstage (at the stone table stage left); for the same reasons, the two characters crossed out by the director, the Duke and the Marchioness, should have discreetly disappeared at the end of the preceding scene, failing which the amorous and private episode becomes outrageously public and deeply obvious. In his way, Léon Lemaire, if these are indeed his comments, is thus playing the role of the critical spectator required by all the theatre photography of the period under consideration. As with all documents, the photographs concerned must be seen in context and in a way *deconstructed*.

One might think that there is less risk when it is simply a question of showing the sets in order to demonstrate the reality of a performance, indeed to encourage its more or less precise reproduction in the future (always in the name of “tradition”). Boyer and Mairet, who are however mainly interested in “animated” scenes (that is to say, those containing actors, even if they have to pose), are always ready to complete their stories with images of an empty stage (**fig. 12**). The latter have the advantage, unlike the photographs with actors on stage, of providing a sort of objectivity, if not transparency, which is generally (although wrongly, it cannot be over-stressed) expected from a photograph. Closer than portraiture to the photographs of monuments,



**Fig. 12:** Photo by Paul Boyer, 1907. *Fortunio* by Gaston Arman de Caillavet and Robert de Flers (first performance on 5 June 1907 at the Théâtre National de l'Opéra-Comique). Set of act I. Argentic print on paper mounted on cardboard; 16,5 cm x 26,2 cm. © Private collection, all rights reserved.

which constituted a large part of the works produced in the early days of the medium<sup>16</sup>, the stage photographs are a part of a form of basic theatricality which involves, in a way, not “theatre minus the script” as Barthes referred to theatricality in general, but “theatre minus the actors”... Certainly, even this kind of photograph is based on a form of manipulation of reality: with the spotlight on the stage, leading necessarily to the removal of all the tricks of lighting (or of chiaroscuro<sup>17</sup>), an even more frontal framing than in the usual stage photographs, etc; the photographer’s intervention is never neutral.

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16. One thinks of those produced by the Mission héliographique which was given the task in 1851 of making an inventory of French architectural heritage.

17. See the article by Mireille Losco-Lena, “Quand la photographie de scène masque l’innovation scénique” (When stage photography masks scenic innovation) in our volume *La Photographie de scène en France*, notably: 99-103.

Nevertheless, even if they do not always provide clear information about the reality of the performance and the way in which the set was presented to the audience, and about its *imaginary* and *symbolic* effects, these images retain essential documentary value concerning the purely *technical* layout. That is what led *L'Art du théâtre* to accord them a position of particular importance (**fig. 13**), in keeping with its programme, by publishing them regularly, whether or not accompanied by preparatory diagrams, unlike *Le Théâtre*, which used hardly anything other than photographs of performances. Thus in a way the set photographs illustrate the difference between the approaches of the two reviews: if *L'Art du théâtre* was anchored in the process of production, *Le Théâtre* was more interested in the way performances were received and in their standing in contemporary media circles – media circles to which Manzi's other publications actively contributed, conceived on the same model but dedicated as much to fashion as to the arts or sport<sup>18</sup>.

Besides, this is apparently<sup>19</sup> one of the characteristics of the photographic archives of the Théâtre de l'Odéon, deposited in the French National Archives, and particularly those connected with funds linked to the administration of André Antoine: photography there is methodically used as a way to account for the changes to sets and their re-use as much as, or indeed more than, the actual productions (even if there are also photographs of performances in abundance there). Tracing work which is literally made possible by photographic impression, is pushed to the limit of a certain logic, inviting the researcher to track the different architectural, pictorial or furnishings elements which comprise a specific décor. From this point of view the reviews and editions

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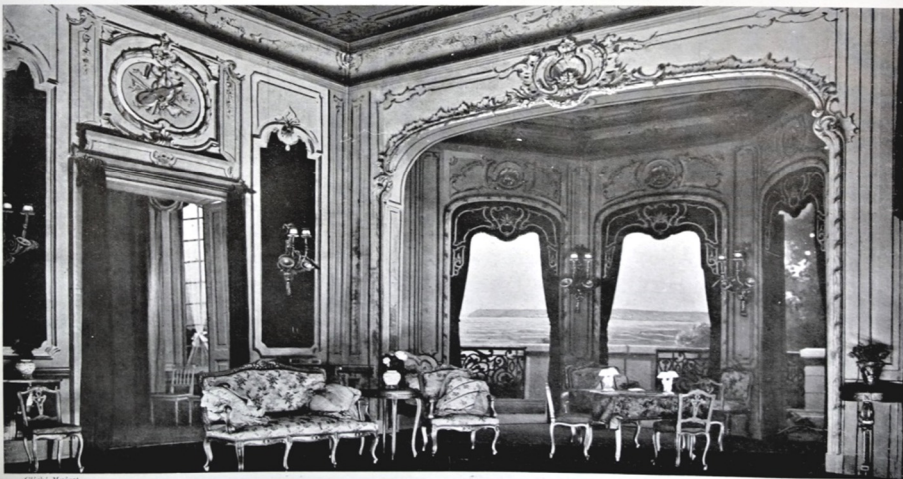
18. *Les Modes. Revue mensuelle illustrée des Arts décoratifs appliqués à la femme* (Fashions. Monthly illustrated review of decorative art as applied to women) (1901-1937), *Les Arts. Revue mensuelle des Musées, Collections, Expositions* (Arts. Monthly Museums Review, Collections, Exhibitions) (1902-1920), *Les Sports modernes* (Modern Sport) (1898-1920).

19. See 'Répertoire numérique de la sous-série 55 AJ', Élisabeth Gautier-Desvaux, Yvette Isselin, Odile Krakovitch, Brigitte Labat-Poussin and Sylvie Nicolas, reviewed and completed by Yvette Isselin and Brigitte Labat-Poussin. Cf. Emeline Rotolo : "Usages techniques et administratifs de la photographie au sein des archives des théâtres nationaux" (Technical and administrative use of photography in the archives of national theatres), in *La Photographie au théâtre. XIXe-XXIe siècles (Theatre photography 19th-21st Centuries)*, ed. B. Joinnault (Villeneuve d'Ascq : Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2021), 76-81.



*Clélie Mairret.*

Décor du 1<sup>er</sup> acte de *la Veine*, par M. ROSSIN.



*Clélie Mairret.*

Décor du 3<sup>e</sup> acte de *la Veine*, par M. LEMEUNIER.

**Fig. 13:** Photo by Henri Mairret, 1901. *La Veine* by Alfred Capus (first performance on 2 April 1901 at the Théâtre des Variétés). Sets of act I and act III (par Lemeunier).  
Extract from *L'Art du théâtre* (1901, 83).

of the scripts themselves make a contribution, although more modestly and requiring a good deal of work of systematic comparison to weave together the strands of the relevant historic sets and costumes. What leaps off the page for someone systematically leafing through the fifty volumes of the Flammarion collection “Les Pièces à succès” (Successful dramas) is confirmed by detailed studies, as when the photographs of Cautin and Berger indicate that the sets of *Le Gendarme est sans pitié* at the Théâtre Antoine move with few changes to the Grand-Guignol stage, to appear in *Les Oubliettes*<sup>20</sup> at the end of the same year (volumes 13 and 39 respectively of the collection): not only the general arrangement of the set is preserved (including the position of the table stage right), but the filing cabinet moves to the right of the door upstage, whilst the curtain above this door and the large curtain to the left are preserved, as is the door itself. The photographs thus demonstrate less the detail of a particular production as such than the way it is transferred to form a continuity and tradition.

The case of the different volumes of the Mosnier collection<sup>21</sup>, the second work of particular interest here, reveals partly the same process, and partly a different model. Worked on by Charles Mosnier, and through him invoking the backing of an actor who had participated in the creative process, the volumes aim to bear witness to the art of Antoine, at least in its visual aspects from 1897 and the opening of the Théâtre Antoine. Their interest consists, other than in the manuscript notes, the texts, the signed manuscripts and the press cuttings which complete certain volumes, in the apparently unofficial nature of the collected photographs. Leaving aside the press cuttings inserted

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20. Marc Bonis-Charancle, *Les Oubliettes* (Paris : Flammarion, “Les pièces à succès” (Successful dramas), nr. 39, 1899). Production of 13 octobre 1899 at the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol. Several productions at the same theatre feature in photographs published in the collection, starting with the production of *Lui!* by Oscar Méténier, the edition of the text of which opens the first series, or the revival of *En famille* by the same author, or again the production of *Monsieur Adolphe* by Ernest Vois and Alin (*sic*) Montjardin (*sic* – Monjardin).

21. Mainly volumes 3 to 6 where the great majority of the photographs are contained. Bibliothèque nationale de France, cote 4-COL-113. The collection contains in total seven volumes. Charles Mosnier (1865-1924) was a member of the Antoine troupe from 15 September 1902 (see his annotations, vol. 3, p. 273). The first volume of the collection includes a preface (p. 3) dated 1st April 1917, indicating the date of the total composition.

in certain volumes or the rare photographic proofs reproduced in reviews<sup>22</sup>, the photographer or photographers concerned remain – as far as we can tell – to be identified (could it be Mosnier himself?). The very great majority of proofs contained in the various volumes thus differ from the photographs published elsewhere. Comparing one with another, each time that that is possible (there not being, unfortunately, illustrated accounts of all Antoine's productions) allows us in several cases to better appreciate the choices made by the 'official' photographers, often led to distort reality to meet the criteria required by publication. Even if the photographer<sup>23</sup> who produced the photographs assembled by Mosnier cannot himself escape the technical requirements of stage photography, they still offer more than once an unusual image which initially one might believe to be closer to the actual conditions of the productions. Several images seem thus to confirm the hypotheses put forward by Mireille Losco-Lena concerning rearrangements to the focus and the layout which are the subject of a number of published photographs, which at the same time "hide the scenic innovation"<sup>24</sup> of Antoine. The reviews had an irritating tendency to rebalance certain photographs to give the impression of sets which were more or less symmetrical. Thus, the two photographs of *Maternité* included in the fourth volume of Mosnier's collection can be compared with those which appeared in n° 138 (September 1908/II) of *Le Théâtre* (specially dedicated to Antoine), not only for the moment which they capture but also for the feeling they give of a more complicated stage set than that which appeared in the first photo of *Le Théâtre* (one of the rare stage photographs signed by Reutlinger): this photograph, very significantly (and even though it is counterbalanced by the photograph reproduced on the following page) rearranges the focus and the layout of the image, by hiding the different angles in the left-hand wall. The same principal is found again in the photographs of *Papa Mulot*. Where the same issue of

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22. As in the third volume which contains the original of a photograph of *Les Tisserands* by Boyer, reproduced in *L'Art du théâtre* (1901, p. 146).

23. For practical reasons there is assumed to be only one, although the question is in no way settled, as previously mentioned.

24. Mireille Losco-Léna, "Quand la photographie de scène masque l'innovation scénique. Le cas du problème « réalisme photographique » d'Antoine", (When stage photography masks innovation on stage. The case of Antoine's problematical "photographic realism").

*Le Théâtre* shows a very refocused and rearranged photograph followed by an enlarged photograph, Mosnier's collection provides only two enlarged photographs giving both a view of the roof with cut off corner to the left. However, inasmuch as in the two case quoted Manzi's review takes care to provide also a comprehensive (and therefore slightly unbalanced) image, it is important to emphasise the tension which exists between the photographs formatted, *a priori*, in accordance with the expectations of the public, and the photographs which one might despite everything believe to be closer to a certain documentary truth.

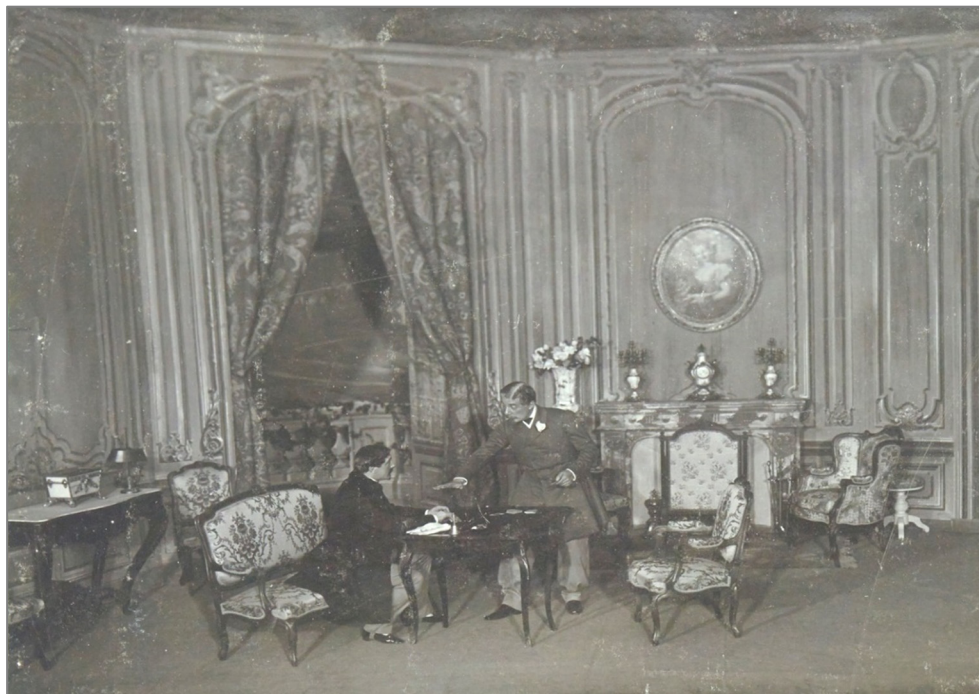
Unfortunately the reality is even more complex. Mosnier's collection, however closely it reflects the creative process, must be considered no less prudently. Certainly, several of the photographs are shown in the "untouched" form (with whatever inverted commas seem necessary), unlike those which appeared in reviews or editions of the text. Thus, the photograph of *Le Capitaine Blomet* which is included in the third volume leaves the window to stage right completely in the shadow (of the hangings), unlit in its corner by the camera's flash<sup>25</sup> (**fig. 14**); the same set photographed by Larcher, in other parts of the play, shows on the contrary perfectly clearly a splendid park whose trees and lawns have obviously been painted onto the photographs for the purpose of publication<sup>26</sup> (**fig. 15**).

What did the audience really see? How far did Antoine highlight this glimpse of the outside? In reality it is difficult to tell. Both images should be treated with the same caution. That is equally confirmed by a detailed examination of the photographs available of *Les Oiseaux de passage*. Those of Larcher, published in the same volume of *Le Théâtre* (n° 138, pp. 6, 8, and 10), of Acts II and IV, cut out systematically the right side of the set, in order to rebalance it and centre it on the mirror at the back of the stage, giving the impression of a perfectly balanced set arranged symmetrically around an axis

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25. It is however not the case with a photograph in *Le Baillon* (1901), p. 223 of the same volume, a strict reproduction of the same set, with other props but the same fire screen. In this image the canvas depicting the park is more clearly visible ... even though it is partly and completely illogically on the story plan hidden by the shadow of the curtain, which is shown clearly there as if the light was coming not from outside but from inside...

26. The photograph found in *L'Art du théâtre* reproduced here is seen also in nr. 90 (September 1902/II) of *Le Théâtre*, along with another photograph of the same set where the retouching is also very noticeable.



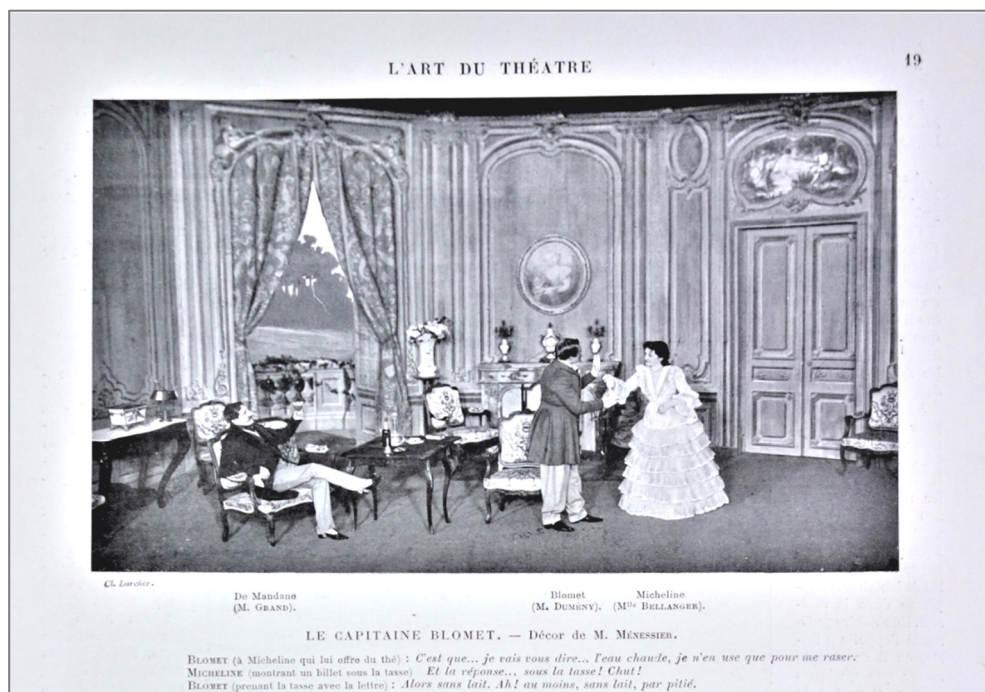
**Fig. 14:** Unidentified photograph, 1901 or 1902. *Capitaine Blomet* by Emile Bergerat (first performance on 3 December 1901 at the Théâtre Antoine). Argentic print on paper mounted in the third volume of 'recueil Mosnier', p. 226 (detail).

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[<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10462767k/f126.item>]

passing through that mirror; on the other hand, the photograph included in the fourth volume of Mosnier's collection shows it extended to the right with either a window with huge curtains (why not the same window as in *Le Capitaine Blomet ...*), or an alcove which, in every case, deliberately deflects the eye away from the centre of the room. The problem is that it would still be incautious to come to a definite conclusion about the lack of symmetry possibly adopted by Antoine. A fifth photograph, signed by Larcher which appeared in *L'Art du théâtre* (1904, p. 65) provides on the contrary an image skewed to the left, with a fireplace which appears in neither Mosnier's collection nor *Le Théâtre*, and which leads one to suppose that the set was indeed well balanced in respect of the axis of the scenery and the mirror.





**Fig. 15:** Photo by Jean Larcher, 1901 or 1902. *Capitaine Blomet* at the Théâtre Antoine. Extract from *L'Art du théâtre* (1902, 19).

What goes for *Les Oiseaux sauvages* (of which there is no photograph to show the whole of the set or its layout) goes perhaps also for a number of other performances of which the photographs were collected by Mosnier or published, refocused and retouched, in reviews. The paradox then is that perhaps only the (two- or three-dimensional) models made by the set designers, when there are any, could otherwise portray the reality, or at least allow to become obvious the manipulations involved necessarily in photography, which change the image seen. Thus trust in the apparent indicators is once again noticeably placed in doubt, if indeed after a more thorough investigation one still has such trust.

For purely documentary use of the medium proves once again – if it were still necessary – that in the end it is no more ‘objective’ than other sorts of testimony or archives, and that stage photography, like an actor’s portrait,

is no more than a construction which must above all be acknowledged as one, and placed each time in its context. The sort of proof which it delivers, *even if it is unassailable by any other*, nevertheless requires that each photograph be compared not only with others of the same performance, but also with other media, both textual and visual. It is these conditions, rather neglected by some theatre historians, understandably misled by the apparent authoritativeness of photography, which must be applied so that it can take its full place in a historiographical, critical or theoretical approach.

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