## VAUDEVILLE

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The term *vaudeville* derives from *Vau de Vire*, the name of a valley (today Val-de-Vire) in the Calvados Department of the Normandy region. From here, starting from the 15th century, the so- called lascivious *chansons à boire* and written satires, mostly against the English occupiers, began spreading. The discontent of the years of English domination, which ended with the Battle of Formigny in 1450, was followed by a truce characterized by economic prosperity and a flourishing of the arts in the region, which lasted until the first part of the 16th century. This relaxed climate witnessed an increase in the production of songs that were both burlesque and full of admiration for a joyful lifestyle, and which, after crossing the borders of Lower Normandy, spread to all the great French cities. This would explain the appearance of the term in *vaudeville*, namely *voix de ville*, which derived from light anecdotal stories, adapted for easily repeatable rhythmic texts, and performed in taverns and other popular meeting venues (see de Bourgueville 1588; Ménage 1750, p. 563, https://data.bnf.fr/fr/12241082/gilles_menage_dictionnaire_etymologique/). Best known in this first period (15th - 16th century) are the productions of the Normans Olivier Basselin (1403-1450) and Jean Le Houx (1540-1616), who had the merit of being the first to document a tradition that, until then had been handed down only orally: in 1576 *Le Recueil des plus belles et excellentes chansons en forme de Voix-de-ville, tirées des diverses auteurs tant anciennes que modernes, auxquelles a été nouvellement adaptée the musique de leurs chants communs publié by Jehan Chardavoine, the Beaufort en Aujou*, containing both the songs of Basselin and those of Le Houx himself, appeared (https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k858262g/f1.image). The Le Houx collection of irreverent verses annoyed the local clergy who blocked their circulation. In order not to expose himself to greater risks the poet gave up these songs, which were considered sacrilegious, and devoted himself to redacting much more spiritual Christmas carols (see Heurtevent 1915 [1702], p. 136). However, the collection reappeared in an edition in 1610 (*Livre des chants nouveaux et vaux-de-Vire, par Olivier Basselin*), one from 1615 (*Le Recueil des plus beaux airs accompagnés de chansons â danser, ballets, chansons folâtres et bacchanales, autrement dites Vaudevire, non encore imprimés*, Caen, Jacques Mangeant, 1615, 48 ff.) and in another around 1670 (*Livre des chants nouveaux de Vau-de-Vire, par ordre alphabétique, corrigé et augmenté outre the précédente impression*, Vire, Jean de Cesne, imprimeur, 53 ff.). In the second half of the 17th century, as evidenced by a volume of *Airs et vaudevilles de cour, dédiez à are altesse royale Mademoiselle, à Paris, au sixième pilier de la grande salle, vis-à-vis the montée de la cour des aydes, à la Bonne foy couronnée* (1665), and a similar collection in 1666, *vaudeville* showed its versatility by adapting to the grandeur of court songs written in honor of Louis XV's entrances into the city and other solemn events. Many *vaudevilles* songwriters in search of visibility performed near the Pont Neuf; among them were Tabarin, Mondor, Gaultier-Garguille, Gros-Guillaume, Turlupin, Jodelet and Bruscambille.

Between the 17th and 18th centuries, *vaudevilles* maintained their traditional satirical tone but lost their purely exuberant spirit to make room for anecdotal content with the result that *vaudevilles* are now considered useful historical documents. To give an idea of the proportions of this phenomenon, one might only recall Clérembault-Maurepas' hundred manuscript volumes, which represent only a part of the vast *vaudeville* production of the period. Collections of *sottisiers* containing anecdotes of everyday life are scattered throughout France (see Tiersot 1889). In the 18th century, *vaudeville* merged into the theater as one of the first manifestations of the nascent comic opera (comic opera in *vaudevilles*), characterized by brevity and the pre-eminence of emerging musicality in dialogues sung along the theme of popular arias. In particular, the meeting between the irony of the chansons *à boire* of Norman origin and the parodies of Italian comedians, who had been expelled from France in 1697, both inspired and gave opportunities to the Parisian *forains* (see Terni 2006, p. 222). In the first half of the century, *vaudevilles* became a tool to get around

the obstacles the *forains* had been subjected to by the Opera, French Comedy, and Italian Comedy – the three theatrical institutions which held the monopoly over speech and song. In fact, in that period, various posters, marionettes, monologues, and other stratagems, depending on the prohibition to be circumvented, were used. In particular, the posters containing lyrics of the *vaudeville* repertoire to be sung by the public itself, represent one of the most significant expedients for understanding the effectiveness of *vaudeville* to combat the privileges of the three major Parisian theaters (see Prou 2006, pp. 6-8). The fortunes of *vaudeville* were to be even more evident in the years of the Revolution: starting from 1791, thanks to the abolition of censorship and the end to the privileges of the three major Parisian theaters, *vaudeville* became consolidated above all among the working- class fringes of the population. The conviviality of these shows, where actors and spectators sang patriotic songs together and talked about themselves in terms of the ideals of fraternity and equality, was part of a precise socio-political design. The main themes of the *vaudevilles* between 1789-1795 concerned the everyday life of ordinary citizens – ranging from debates on divorce to social classes – without losing sight of the need to defuse controversies and disagreements with jokes and light songs that captivated the attention of the working class, the main audience of revolutionary propaganda. However, the breakdown of barriers and social distinctions worried the Jacobins, who reintroduced censorship, at first unofficially in 1793 at the time of the proclamation of the Terror, and then officially from 14 May 1794 on. The same year the Jacobins, understanding the subversive potential of theater to reach and engage the masses, inaugurated a people's theater in the capital. Renamed *Théâtre de l'Égalité*, it represented *pièces* suitable for shaping the patriotic spirit of the public (see Graczyk-Landes 1989, pp. 396-97). In these years the *vaudeville* repertoire was enriched with revolutionary songs, and the recognition of its success is attested by the Théâtre du Vaudeville, directed by Piis and Barré in 1792 in Paris, as well as its presence, from the early 19th century, in the programming of the theaters of Variété (1803), the Gymnase (1820) and the second Théâtre du Port Royale (1831). These theatres, with their light-hearted plays, sprung up near the Place de l'Opéra in the *boulevard* quarters (see Bassan 1991) and aimed at distracting public, which was no longer limited to the working classes but also to the bourgeois, especially in the period of the July Monarchy. While the French 19th century was politically dynamic because of the alternation of seven political regimes ranging from liberal to reactionary (the Consulate, the Empire, the Restoration, the July Monarchy, the Second Republic, the Second Empire, and the Third Republic), it was mainly the years between 1830 and 1848 that saw the social rise of the bourgeoisie, a phenomenon recorded and reflected in the theatrical performances of the period. Being well-suited to represent the lightness and optimism of the century of positivism, liberalism, and industrial and scientific progress, *vaudeville* achieved its greatest success during the 19th century as witnessed, also, by the rise of many *vaudeville* theaters. Starting from the Thirties, *vaudeville* comedies narrated and increasingly poked fun at the competitiveness and rampant consumerism that distinguished the bourgeois in the new urban *milieu*, above all the Parisian one. Besides, there was a constant search for signs designed to show one's bourgeois identity, signs which were constantly and negatively represented in the theatre. These included: smoking, participation in worldly events and circles, reading newspapers, the possession of items of furniture and clothing appropriate to the *status* of the wealthy, and, not least, going to the theater. Under the July Monarchy in Paris, twenty-four new theaters appeared. These were often next to wine bars, restaurants, and *cafés*, and could be easily reached by intensified urban transport and, starting from 1828, the circulation of omnibuses (see Terni 2006, pp. 227-33). The somewhat schematic and repetitive repertoire of plots and fixed formulas of these comedies always depended on the same characters and situations to generate their comedic flow. The typical plot of vaudeville of those years involved a protagonist experiencing sentimental or economic misfortune, which he then attempts to overcome by deceiving his adversaries. The scam often relied on disguising the identity of the protagonist to spy on the moves of the enemy. Other adventures resulting from mistaken identities were typically linked to unsolicited courtships in which a man, disguised as a woman,

would even find himself courted by an enemy, and typically ending is his unmasking and discovery, and the realization, to his surprise, that he and all the other characters of the comedy had been deceived in a domino effect mechanism, triggering the general hilarity among public (see Terni 2006, pp. 233-36).

Under the influence of Eugène Scribe, one of the major 19th century *vaudeville* promoters and author of dozens of *vaudevilles* represented between 1810 and 1850, the songs in the decade between 1830 and 1840 no longer represented the soul of *vaudeville* and, in particular, the *comédie de boulevard*. However, they reappeared to play an important role in variety shows in the second half of the century (see Terni 2006, p. 236).

Despite the July Monarchy's scientific and industrial progress, social issues resulting from the dissatisfaction of the proletariat and the financial crisis lead to the revolutionary events of February 1848. The theaters reopened in mid-March, in the first months of the Second Republic. To attract the spectators, who, because of political instability and the economic crisis, were less inclined to go to the theater, they focused on the versatility of the *vaudeville*. Because of its ability to actively involve the public, which sang arias and popular motifs together with the actors, but also because ofits anecdotal character, *vaudeville* was considered suitable to describe current political affairs by curbing tensions thanks to its brevity and joviality. So, in the spring of 1848 *vaudevilles* focused on revolutionary events such as *Les barricades des 23 et 24 février* and *Les filles de la Liberté*, represented at the *Vaudeville* Theater (see Best 2017, pp. 36-37). The latter had great success and, a few months later its authors, Clairville and Cordier, also showed interest in social issues such as those regarding women in *Le club des maris et le des clubs femmes* and that of Proudhon's socialism in *La propriété, c'est le vol!* (see Best 2017, p. 37). The political-themed *vaudevilles* also continued to meet the public's favor during 1849, but, with the return of censorship in 1850 and the *coup d'état* in 1851, political satire became riskier. *Vaudeville* also developed its structural component of musicality starting in 1851. In that year, the *Société des auteurs* was born and its founders established the payment of a remuneration to the authors of the pieces performed at the theater. Introducing this law led the *vaudeville* authors towards the more economical choice of composition of unpublished arias, written specifically for the stage, and which progressively replaced the motifs of the traditional repertoire (see Best 2017, p. 48).

Therefore, starting in 1850, *vaudeville* satire focused on current social customs, and it was in this period that Eugène Labiche established himself on the Parisian scene. He had 173 *vaudevilles* performed, which were almost always composed in collaboration with co-authors. Elected member of the *Académie Française* in 1880, Labiche was particularly appreciated for its ability to observe and to represent the vices of the dominant social class of the time, i.e. the bourgeoisie. Through caricatures bordering on the grotesque, the characters of Labiche's comedies personified bourgeoisie behavior, their vanity, frivolity, excessive ambition, selfishness, pedantry, and pride. His works include *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie* (1851) and *Le Voyage de Monsieur Perrichon* (1860), two *vaudevilles* in which Labiche's acumen and critical sense emerge in his 'dissection' of the society of the time. (see Bassan 1991, pp. 170-72). While Labiche was considered Molière's successor, his predecessor was the anonymous 15th century author of the masterpiece of the *Farcede Maître Pathelin* (1464) which inspired Labiche to create the character of the "trompeur trompé", victim of his own scams (see Balmas 1968, pp. 109-10) and above all for the representation of his egoism in works like *Moi, Doit-on le dire?* and *Un pied dans le crime* (see Bassan 1991, pp. 173-74). The main target of his social satire was bourgeoisie cynicism and opportunism. Nor did he ignore satire aimed at country yokels and, in particular, the wealthy landowners whom he denounced for their avarice and attachment to earthly goods, as was represented, for example, in *La Cagnotte*. However, his harshest caricature accusations were leveled at the urban bourgeois, and especially to the Parisians. In these, despite the apparent euphoria stemming from continuous mistaken identities and situations bordering on the limits of the absurd, the dark and melancholy side of Labiche's human ideal emerges (see Bassan 1991, pp. 173-75), since in his *vaudevilles* there is no hope of redemption.

His heir is the prolific author of *vaudevilles* Georges Feydeau, active between the 19th and the 20th century, whose production stops in the 1920s. Of the two masters Scribe and Labiche, he takes up the satirical vein that emerges in works such as *Le tailleur pour dames* (1887), *L'affaire Edouard* (1889), *Champignol malgré lui* (1892), *Occupe-toi d'Amelie* o *Je ne trompe pas mon mari* (1921). The domestic intrigues against the backdrop of Belle Époque bourgeois society are narrated and portrayed in a drier, more sober style than the comedies of the predecessors. With Feydeau, the European *vaudeville* came full circle, as in the following decades it evolved into variety – a genre in which the musical component and pure entertainment comedy, relieved of the burden of social criticism, had greater weight – landing in the United States.

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