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An Essay of Dramatic Renovation: The Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier

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JACQUES COPEAU

*An Essay of Dramatic Renovation:  
The Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier*

Translation by  
RICHARD HIATT

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NEXT OCTOBER A NEW THEATRE WILL OPEN AT 21 RUE DU VIEUX-COLOMBIER, PARIS. It will be called the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier. Its program will be comprised of masterpieces of European classics, of certain already established modern works, and of those of the new generation.

Conceived by a small group of artists whose intellectual intent and a common taste for activity have allied them, this long-meditated project has known a great many alternatives. It has had to surmount a great many obstacles. If it is finally realized it will be because of loyalty to which we cannot here pay too much recognition.

Certainly nothing can be attempted if it is against the will of all. For several years, we have had to accustom ourselves to the murmurs of discouraging voices. We have heard the ironic warnings of the businessmen, to whom life has left nothing but their sterile experience; the pessimistic previsions of the timid and the sceptics; the counsel of the satisfied, inclined to extol the excellence of the diversions on which they thrive; the remonstrances of friends, sincerely moved at seeing us expose our tranquility to fruitless tribulations, to chance all our forces on the pursuit of an idle fancy.

But words have no hold at all on those who are resolutely devoted to an idea and aim to serve it. Fortunately, we have attained maturity without despairing of all. To grim reality we oppose a desire, an aspiration, a will. We carry within us this fancy, this dream which gives us the courage and eagerness to try. And if we must identify more specifically the feeling which animates us, the passion which pushes us, forces us, compels us, to which we must finally concede: it is *indignation*.

An unbridled industrialization which, from day to day more cynically degrades our French stage and turns away the cultivated public; the monopolizing of most of the theatres by a handful of entertainers in the pay of shameless merchants; everywhere, even where the great traditions should prevent such shame, the same spirit of quackery and speculation, the same baseness;

*Copeau's prospectus for his famous theatre was originally published in September, 1913, in La Nouvelle Revue Française, the literary-art journal he had founded in 1908. It is published here in a new translation because of its great importance in assessing Copeau's accomplishments against his vision. Richard Hiatt of Eastern Oregon College, La Grande, Oregon, is the translator.*

everywhere bluffing, buying and selling of all sorts, and exhibitionism of every nature attaching itself like a parasite to an art which is unquestionably destroying itself; everywhere weakness, disorder, lack of discipline, ignorance and foolishness, disdain for the creator, abhorrence of beauty; productions more and more foolish and vain; critics more and more acquiescent; a public taste more and more misguided: these are the conditions that make us indignant and rouse us to revolt.

Others besides us have felt this indignation; others before us have expressed it. But among the most courageous, how many have slowly resigned their anger; or been intimidated into silence or debauched by friendships, or weakened by lassitude into dropping the pen from their hands. Some new complaints will be heard; some fresh protestations will be raised again. . . . But does it suffice to protest? Is it enough merely to fight for a lost cause, merely to sharpen one's critical arrows in vain, or to withdraw in self-satisfied contempt? We must do more than express a dissatisfaction without acting. Although the best among us may be satisfied to express their likes and dislikes, while maintaining their personal taste above the general corruption, the evil increases around us, and soon we will have no more place to stand in the domain of our art, in this area which is ours.

We don't believe it is enough today to create great works; where will they find acceptance, where will they meet both their public and their interpreters, in an atmosphere favorable to their development? Thus, inevitably, like a "postulation perpétuelle" this great problem confronts us: to build a new theatre on absolutely solid foundations. Let it be the rallying point of all those, authors, actors, spectators, who sense the need to restore beauty to the stage. Perhaps one day will see this miracle realized. Then the future will open up before us.

For we have nothing to expect from the present. We should count as nothing that which exists. If we wish to regain health and life we must shun that which is corrupted in its form and foundation, in its spirit, in its manners.

We recognize that often valuable talents of all kinds come to light in contemporary dramatic productions. They are feverishly wasted, dissipated and spoiled there. For want of orientation, of discipline, for want of seriousness and above all *honesty*, nowhere does one see them arrive at the fulfillment, at the accomplishment of a work of art. Considering these things, it is impossible not to recognize that several succeeding generations have passed without a true artist aspiring to the dramatic form to express his genius. Even when his faculties seemed to make the theatre a natural choice, the artist has always sought refuge in some other genre, esteeming it more worthy of him, though it conformed less to his aims. Is this to say that the instrument which Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine, Molière and Ibsen used, and with which they were content, is without resource, too fragile in powerful hands, too rebellious to all novelty? No. But it has degenerated amidst infamous practices, and the use of it seems forbidden to whoever presumes in our day to create a work of beauty.

In the last thirty years we have seen several real talents turn to the stage. We have seen some gradually assume, perhaps without realizing it, an attitude of complaisance which early success brings to susceptible souls; from their

exploited, deformed talents they have drawn this hollow prestige which they exercise henceforth on the crowd. We have seen others, armed with greater firmness of character and respect for their art, desert a theatre which had welcomed them only to corrupt them, their fervor abated, their inspiration broken. To all was imposed the alternative either to be silent or to abdicate.

The irrevocable indictment of the modern stage is this: that it defeats the power of the artist. And this aversion, this disgust that the artist expresses toward it in return is what has degraded the present theatre into what someone has justifiably called "*the most disreputable of the arts.*"

We wish to work to restore it to its lustre and grandeur. To this enterprise, for want of genius, we shall bring determined ardor, concerted force, self-denial, patience, method, intelligence and culture, the love and concern for that which is well done. And of whom should one expect such effort, if not of those for whom it is part of their very life? Not from the traffickers nor from the amateurs, nor from the proud aesthetes, but from the workers in their art, accustomed to work, striving to accomplish all with their hands and mind, preparing the materials, and conceiving the plan by which these materials will be assembled from the foundation to the ridge pole. Since we are still young, since we are aware of our aims and the practical means of attaining them, let us not hesitate. Let nothing dissuade us any longer. Let us abandon secondary activities. Let us face up to our task at once. We must take it in hand. It is vast, and will be laborious. We can hardly hope to complete it. Others besides us, perhaps, will complete the edifice. Let us try, at least, to form this little nucleus from which life will radiate, around which the future will make its great contributions.

I have not hesitated to let our hopes and ambitions appear in their fulness. The first productions we attempt will not stand comparison with them. We are aware of that. In discussing now what the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier will be, I hope to persuade the reader of our modesty, and invite him to recognize that our plan of action, far from avoiding the contingencies, looks them square in the face and affronts them.

## THE THÉÂTRE DU VIEUX-COLOMBIER

### I. SITE. ORGANIZATION

The influence and import of a renovating work depends strongly upon that work's continuing. It is necessary, above all, that it live. That is why we maintain that the foundations of our venture should be based on a wise economy: little principal to repay, low rent, rational limitation of general expenses of all kinds, of the expense of initial installation and of those which concern the material of scenery and costumes. The organization of our personnel, the recruiting of our company, all engaged by the year, the ingenious combination of our sets, the method of constructing our costumes, all permit us to expect a maximum of output from a minimum of expenditure.

We have felt it would be foolish to try to make a place for ourselves in the midst of the popular theatres, and to enter into a competition with them which would soon exhaust our resources. Among the itinerant crowds of the Boulevard, in the midst of so many cries, calls, and discordant advertisements, how would

we be heard? It was necessary, on the contrary, to leave these places where the cinema vies with the theatre for its frivolous clientele.

The theatre we will open is situated on the left bank, at the Carrefour de la Croix-Rouge. Near the schools, close to a well-to-do neighborhood and large new streets which are daily extending, it is, moreover, connected to the rest of the city by numerous and rapid means of communication.

The auditorium of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier is small: around 500 seats. We do not anticipate large crowds; the average of our daily expenses will permit us to live and even prosper on an average of relatively low receipts. The public we propose to attract at first is "a 'lesser public,' in part composed of intelligent theatre-goers, in part of people who have ceased to encourage the banalities and falsities of the theatre of commerce, in part of a new quota of the human throng."<sup>1</sup> We hope to recruit the first element of this public in our neighborhood, among the cultivated elite, the students, the writers, the artists, the foreign intellectuals who live in the old Latin Quarter. They constitute an already numerous clientele, no doubt ready to second the efforts of a theatre where they will always be certain to find interesting plays presented with taste, and *low priced*. The Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier will be the cheapest theatre in Paris, its system of subscriptions exercising appreciable reductions on a normal admission price already greatly reduced.

## II. ROTATION OF THE PRODUCTIONS

Since a theatre has all the more chance of arousing the interest of the public and maintaining curiosity if it varies its productions, the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier establishes from its beginning the principle of rotating at least three productions a week. This will prevent us from basing our fortune on the success of a single play, while allowing us constantly to maintain the level of our repertory, to offer the public works of daring novelty capable of succeeding in the long run, but which, without the help of other plays, would never at first be able to get on the bill. This rotation presents, finally, the advantage of keeping the actors in practice and making them versatile while accustoming them to all the demands of interpretation.

## III. REPERTORY

*Classical Repertory.* I have already stated that before profitably trying a reform of any kind in the theatre, it is necessary to purify it, to honor it "in recalling the great works of the past, in order that the poets of today, seized by a filial respect for the stage which has become tarnished, might aspire to it in their turn."

Our first concern will be to show a particular veneration to the classics, ancient and modern, French and foreign. It is no exaggeration to say that they are unknown to the public. We propose them as a constant example, as the antidote to false tastes and aesthetic infatuations, as the standard of critical judgment, as a rigorous lesson for those who write for the theatre of today and for those who interpret it. We shall strive to place ourselves in a *state of*

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Archibald Henderson (a propos the *Court Theatre* of London).

*sensibility* before these works of other times, which the mechanical habits of some actors and the routine of a pretended "tradition" too often disfigure. But we shall guard against wishing to "renew" them, that is to say, to deform the spirit of them. We shall never presume—under pretext of making them more meaningful to us!—to adapt Molière or Racine to the fashions of the day. That would be a pleasant diversion, indeed, to undertake to rejuvenate from the outside what is eternal to the core, and to season with a bit of modern verisimilitude that which overflows with truth. We shall forbid ourselves these fantasies. All the originality of our interpretations, if one finds any there, will come only from a profound knowledge of the scripts.

*Revivals.* In so far as it will be in its power, the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier will revive, among the best plays of these past thirty years, those which time has not seemed to weaken and, in a more general way, those which mark a date in the history of the theatre, a stage in the evolution of the dramatic genre.

*Unpublished plays.* As one has just seen, the existence of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier rests securely on the basis of established works. Indeed, we do not nurture the illusion that in opening a theatre to the most sincere manifestations of the dramatic spirit we are by this act instantly going to provoke a renaissance. And we do not imagine that there exists at the present time in France a whole army of young unrecognized talents, worthy to be brought to light, and who, beginning tomorrow, are going to respond to our call. Furthermore, we reserve the right to exercise a severe judgment on the unpublished works which will be submitted to us, deeming that one does not usefully serve an ideal in encouraging the false talents which blunder in its pursuit.

It often happens that under pretext of style, of thought, of lyricism, new writers produce on the stage works that have been forged more from literary a-priorism than from human experience and tragic necessity. Good intentions, lofty aims do not suffice. Between an "idea" of a drama and the drama itself, there is the distance of the entire art. The Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier is open to all attempts, provided they attain a certain level, that they be of a certain quality. We mean: a *dramatic* quality.

Whatever might be our avowed preferences as connoisseurs and critics, our personal bent as writers, nevertheless we do not represent a school whose entire authority stands the risk of falling when the ephemeral attraction of its novelty disappears. We do not bring forward a formula with the assurance that from this embryo shall be born and develop the theatre of tomorrow. In this we differ from the ventures which have preceded us. Without denying the contribution of the best known among them, the Théâtre Libre, and without deprecating the high worth of its director, M. André Antoine, to whom we owe so much—one may say these ventures unconsciously committed the imprudence of limiting their field of action to the narrowness of a revolutionary program. We do not feel the need of a revolution. We have our eyes set on too great a model for that. We do not believe in the efficacy of aesthetic formulas which are born and die every month in the little clubs, and whose boldness results above all from ignorance. We do not know what the theatre of tomorrow will be. We proclaim nothing. But we dedicate ourselves to reacting against all the baseness of the contemporary theatre. In founding the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, we are preparing a place of refuge for future talent.

## IV. THE COMPANY

It is not just in the companies of the state subsidized theatres that the lack of direction and discipline, the lust for profit and the absence of a shared ideal are found today. As for the theatres of the Boulevard, they belong to the big "stars" who impose ruinous expenses on the directors, destroy the ensemble of the interpretation, attract to themselves all the interest the public no longer brings to the play, and lower the talent of the playwrights by asking only for scripts which provide them with opportunities to flaunt themselves.

The last homogeneous company we have seen in France was that of the Théâtre Libre. A shared faith united it. One knows what marvelous use its director was able to make of that.

The Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, in its turn, gathers under the authority of one man a troupe of young actors, unselfish enthusiasts, whose ambition is to *serve* the art to which they dedicate themselves. To free the actor from quackery, to create around him an atmosphere more suited to his development as a man and as an artist; to cultivate him, to inspire conscience in him and to initiate him into the morality of his art: it is to that we stubbornly bend our efforts. We shall always have in view the development of individual talents and their subordination to the ensemble. We shall fight against the encroachment of commercialism, against all professional deformations, against the stringency of specialization. In short, we shall do our best to renormalize these men and women whose vocation it is to simulate all human emotions and gestures. So far as it is possible for us, we will take them outside the theatre into contact with nature and life!

For two months already the company of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier has been completed and their work has begun. The first of July they took up summer quarters in a hamlet of Seine-et-Marne, in the open country. There, every day for five hours they rehearse the plays of the repertory under the supervision of their director. Two more hours are devoted to outdoor lectures, designed to exercise their intellectual development and vocal articulation, to explaining the texts (comedies, poems, fragments of classic prose) and to physical exercise. The advantages of such a regime will not be fully realized for several years. But even now results are being felt.

Today, September 1, already involved for two months in a common work, and master of part of their repertory, the company returns to Paris in order to rehearse another month and a half on stage, in costume, and with the sets.

## V. STUDENT-ACTORS

Our efforts of renovation bearing on the character itself and the nature of individuals already modeled by some previous influences, we do not doubt that they will meet with strong resistance. We would like, on this point, to carry our reforms still further. This will be a matter of creating, along with the theatre, and on an equal footing with it, a veritable *school for actors*. It will be free, and we will assemble there very young people, even children, and some men and women who have a love and an instinct for the theatre, but who will not yet have compromised that instinct by the defective methods and habits of the profession. Such a contingent of new forces will later comprise the bulk of our company. We will draw from that source in the first years people capable of

filling the small utility roles, and a crew of trained supernumeraries, eager to accustom themselves to the stage; superior, in short, to those who are generally used.

It is to be feared that excessive work does not permit us at the beginning of the venture to perfect this school plan. As soon as we are able, all our attention will be devoted to it. We will explain then, in another article, our plan of organization.

## VI. MISE-EN-SCÈNE AND SETTINGS

By *mise-en-scène* we mean: the plan of a dramatic action. It is the ensemble of movements, gestures, and attitudes, the harmony of the expressions, voices, and silences; it is the totality of the scenic spectacle, emanating from a single conception which gives it being, regularity, and form.

The director devises and strengthens among the characters this secret and visible bond, this reciprocal sensibility, this mysterious correspondence of communication, without which drama, even interpreted by excellent actors, loses the better part of its expression.

To that *mise-en-scène* which concerns the interpretation, we cannot bring too much study. To the other, which has to do with scenery and accessories, we wish to pay little attention. Not that ugliness doesn't offend us every time we meet it on the stage. Not that we are insensible to the art of creating a dramatic atmosphere by means of color, form, and light. We have applauded, for three years, the fortunate initiative of M. Jacques Rouche, exerting itself, with the cooperation of excellent painters, endowing scenery with a new esthetic quality. We are familiar with the research, we have followed the projects and realizations of MM Meyerhold, Stanislavsky, Dantchenko in Russia; of MM Max Reinhardt, Littman, Fuchs and Erler in Germany; of MM Gordon Craig and Granville-Barker in England. Certainly there is little doubt that at this very hour in all of Europe all the artists of the theatre agree on one point: condemnation of the realistic setting which tends to give the illusion of things themselves, exaltation of a schematic or synthetic setting which aims at suggesting them. The new methods already go back too far, are already too well known abroad today for one to be able, without ridicule, to make a merit of their application. In this same connection, let us keep some sense of proportion. We are naturally enemies of all excessive systematizing; we will hazard nothing against good sense and good taste. Now we must admit the ideas of the above-named masters have sometimes shocked us with their pedantic clumsiness. We have seen certain prejudices toward a simplicity which is not always in accord with true simplicity; and above all a tendency to emphasize in a work, to exaggerate by material means that are often naive the intentions of the poet. This tendency is injurious to the finesse and moderation of our French taste. The cultivated spectator prefers to discover them through a more subtle approach. It is to be feared that in attaching itself to the drama, such a constant groping for *effect*—always failing, furthermore, if applied to great classic works—favors more and more a dramatic production that becomes completely artificial, coarse, and almost barbarous. And the weakness of foreign scenic reforms, until now at least, is that they are not in step with any distinguishable dramatic movement. To hold to a particular theory of scene



design is to interest oneself in the theatre by means of a side line. To be deeply interested in inventions of engineers or electricians is to accord a secondary place to the canvas, the paint box, the arrangement of lights; under whatever form, it is to deal in *tricks*. Old or new, we repudiate them all. Good or bad, rudimentary or perfected, artificial or realistic, we deny the importance of all *machinery*.

One may find this declaration of principle suspect. One might point out to us that the small stage of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier forces us to renounce the advantages of ample settings. . . . We reply boldly that we rejoice in having to become accommodated to such a want of resources. We would refuse the use of them if they were offered. For we have the profound conviction that it is disastrous for dramatic art to become involved in a large number of extraneous complications. They weaken and reduce its force. They favor the facile, the picturesque, and reduce the drama to a mere fantasy. We do not believe that in order to "represent the whole man in his life" there is need of a theatre "where the sets can rise from below and the scene changes can be instantaneous," nor that, finally, the future of our art is tied to "a question of mechanization."<sup>2</sup> Let us be careful to give up nothing. One must not confuse scenic convention with dramatic convention. To destroy the one is not to rid oneself of the other. On the contrary! The use of the stage and its simplest crafts will act on us as a discipline, by forcing us to concentrate all truth in the feelings and actions of our characters. Let the other illusions disappear, and, for the new work, leave us a bare stage!

The exposé that one has just read, however imperfect it may be, establishes the general outline of our approaching venture. All that is needed to make it durable and fruitful is universal goodwill. I have said that we appeal to a limited chosen public; it is necessary that at least this public respond to our call. It will not suffice merely to approve of us, merely to encourage us with kind words. Of all those who declare themselves in our favor, we ask a tangible proof, an active testimony of their sympathy. All assistance, however modest, devoted to a work like this will have a real efficacy. Not only writers, critics, journalists, and all those who have a professional interest in the cause may campaign in our favor. But the isolated partisans, the proselytes scattered among the crowds may assume a part in the venture, and obtain success for it by exercising their personal influence in their restricted surroundings. If already the 3,000 readers of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* who have been loyal to us for four years were willing to support our cause and win to it, each one, a dozen initiates, we would feel entitled in using this public support as a basis for the most venturesome expectations.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Bataille (Preface to the *Masque*).