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When theatre managing director and critic Maciej Nowak published his manifesto 'My, czyli nowy teatr publiczny' ['We, the New Public Theatre'] in the journal *Dialog* in June 2016, the French concept of popular theatre returned to Polish critical thought. Though known to historians of Polish post-war theatre and to those who survey it, the concept remains problematic. *Théâtre populaire* – 'popular theatre': what is it that's 'popular' about it? What is the distinction between this type of theatre and popular culture? And if we read 'popular' as 'the people's theatre', what sort of quality or, rather, what sort of people is meant? Pausing to consider the utter translatability of the dreams with which the concept reverberates seems far more interesting than pondering the untranslatability of the concept's name. The fact that emotions still find their expression despite the limitations of language is inherently interesting. The name may be untranslatable, but a longing for 'popular theatre' definitely lends itself to translation.

Were one to write mythologies of theatre – after all, 'popular theatre' has more in common with emotions and beliefs than with prosaic reality – *théâtre populaire* would be a god embroiled in a struggle with the Comédie-Française. Between them a Dionysian-Apollonian dispute would brew about emotions, intellect, the timelessness of principles and democracy in art. *Théâtre populaire* came into being to slay the courtly-erudite model of national theatre. And because it defined itself in opposition to that other model, the debate about 'popular theatre' recurred in each discussion of the national-theatre model. In Poland, too, it's no coincidence that plans put forth in Nowak's manifesto were concurrent with disputes about the anniversary of national theatre, after the country celebrated two hundred and fifty years of its public theatre in 2015. The question of a Polish version of *théâtre populaire* arises as soon as we begin to consider what a Polish Comédie-Française might be like. Law of nature.

Crucially, we must bear in mind that although this is a dispute about ideas, the ideas that clash here aren't set in stone. Fixed definitions of national and popular theatre don't exist, they never have and never will – hence numerous manifestos and the protracted debates. And hence the atmosphere of great expectations and the awareness that the concept is constantly evolving.

When Théâtre National Populaire de Villeurbanne (TNP) – heir to the name chosen and to the tradition established by directors Firmin Gémier and Jean Vilar – arrived in Warsaw in 1988, two artists met

for whom the issue of relations between popular and national theatre had been fundamental through their entire careers. They were Roger Planchon, managing director of TNP, and director Kazimierz Dejmek, managing director of the Polski Theatre in Warsaw at the time (before that, at the National Theatre in Warsaw and, above all, the Nowy Theatre in Łódź). Next to nothing is known about their conversation.¹ At the same time, it's one of those exchanges whose subject – and indeed course – we can determine; and our suppositions are unlikely to be much off the mark. For directors working in political theatre, whose main aim at various points in history has been to bring about a makeover of theatre audiences (not least a radical one meant to include those who've previously given theatre a wide berth), forever defining challenges public theatre face, and who try to reform the national-theatre model – could there have been a more important issue than the content of that catchphrase *théâtre populaire*? At the same time, can we conceive of these two individuals finding common ground as to what that phrase means? Did they create a model – any model – of theatre?

This indeed is the great paradox of popular theatre: although it has hoisted banners bearing slogans of 'universality', it has never created a model institution, let alone an aesthetic. It has always been a project rather than a completed realization – perhaps because it stemmed from critical need to question the existing shape of things. When actor and director Antoine Vitez took the top job at the Chaillot in Paris in 1981, a theatre galvanized by Vilar's legend, yet another definition of popular theatre was formulated: 'Elite theatre for everyone'. According to researchers specializing in the history of Vitez's theatre, he took his motto from Grotowski – a claim French historians working on Grotowski have yet to refute. But the motto is unlikely to refer directly to popular theatre, even if Vitez did hear it from Grotowski. Still, it's no accident that, in the minds of the French, one of their definitions of *théâtre populaire* is derived from an artist we would never associate with this type of theatre. This demonstrates yet again how exceptional the idea of 'popular theatre' is: unlikely to be inspired by the provisional or the average. Popular theatre is an all-encompassing project, changing the order of things, prepared to listen to the giants. And its political character is revealed, among other things, by the political nature of slogans that define it.

It's these slogans that make 'popular theatre' so laden with emotions as a project: paradigms it refers to have mythologizing, romantic, even religious roots. Jules Michelet, France's first theoretician of popular theatre (which he still referred to as 'the people's theatre'), had hoped that this kind of theatre would take the place vacated by religion, compromised by inefficient institutions. In a series of lectures delivered at the Collège de France not long after those given by Poland's leading romantic-era poet, Adam Mickiewicz, to whom Michelet alluded, the latter returned to the fundamentally romantic vision of theatre that unifies the community: theatre as the ritual of a new religion. Theatre as an ethical institution that calls on society to rise up and revolt then consolidates

¹ Ten years ago – that is, after the deaths of Roger Planchon and Kazimierz Dejmek – I tried to find out what had been said on that occasion. I asked Michel Bataillon, one of Planchon's co-workers and historian of his theatre. Bataillon immediately named popular theatre as the subject of the conversation, but was at a loss to give me any details.

the new, better world. Mission and political quality, community and revolution, a reference to common mythology and the belief that a new order needs to be established – all these are combined as the concept of popular theatre evolves in history. Proportions remain more or less unchanged, but the ingredients are extremely difficult to dissect. This is why we find it so easy to transform artists working in ‘popular theatre’ into apostles of new art.

Isn't the return to the discussion surrounding ‘popular theatre’ due to the impact of the romantic-era paradigm in a succession of incarnations? And couldn't the same be said of theatre that's critical or political and dreams at the same time of encompassing broad swathes of society (perhaps even society as a whole)? Many Polish artists who programmatically distance themselves from romantic-era models will be less than enthusiastic about that argument – but the fact is, it's not groundless. Faith in an artist who fires the enthusiasm of the people, prompting them to act, and faith in theatre that unites when everything else detracts – these are the indexes of the Romantic paradigm, but also the challenges popular theatre poses itself. Is it a coincidence that such theatre arouses greater interest at a time when dispassionate calculations and rationalism prevail, when grand projects are in short supply and elevated ideas seek acclaim in vain?

I. Theatre as a State Religion

Popular theatre has always been primarily a political rather than an artistic project. It was born out of the belief that art ought to ‘change more’. This becomes evident when we look into the history of the movement. Revolutionaries longed for popular theatre as they established great festivities for the ‘post-Bastille society’. Romain Rolland's ‘people's theatre’ originated when France was splitting in two at the end of the nineteenth century (seen clearly during the Dreyfus scandal). Popular theatre was to overcome divisions afflicting France and its people after they'd colluded with the German's in the war years, then was meant to cure the post-war hangover and serve as a remedy for fear caused by political transformations of the 1980s. In each of these phases, popular theatre elevated the artist to the status of a priest, turning the stage into an altar (perhaps even a pulpit), and regarding its viewers as believers whose attachment to this lay religion was mystical and in fact unquestioning. Not only ought art ‘change more’, but ‘more is permitted’ in art. This quasi-religious vision of art is most evident in Jean Vilar, an artist who by common consent is deemed to have had the strongest ties to the idea of popular theatre.

Vilar's ambition had been to bring about an *aggiornamento* of theatre; the idea of returning to the origins was at the centre of his plan. His was not a revolution that, having severed the hydra's head, would never again look into the past. To a certain extent, Vilar was a sentimentalist – perhaps, despite his professed fascination with Communism, he also showed signs of attachment to traditional values and the belief in social advancement by work and study, pivotal for the petite bourgeoisie of the Third Republic and instilled in Vilar in his family's home. Jules Michelet and turn-of-the-century theoreticians of people's theatre were keen to reference the myth of ancient Greek theatre. For them, finding a model of theatre and of society in a bygone period had been another way of distancing themselves from the France of aristocrats and the grand

bourgeoisie which, in their view, has discredited. Like the revolution conjured by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, theirs, too, had been born out of admiration for utopia. By contrast, Vilar glanced back at Epidaurus with admiration but without mystical rapture. Others had wished to erase centuries of history, and believed the future would be their ally. Vilar wanted to save whatever mattered to him in history from the future.

It's sometimes implied that Vilar was the Jules Ferry of French theatre. As the legendary Third Republic minister had granted the French people access to education, Vilar sought to popularize theatre. What the men had in common was respect for masterpieces, and faith that the literary canon had the power to create a community. In light of this, Vilar's frequently professed dislike of the French political system before the war becomes all the more problematic. It needs to be said that as he called his theatre into being, he didn't so much dispute most gains of the bygone period as take issue with their undemocratic distribution – though he'd likely object to that view. He took exception to the fact that what had been the stuff of daily life for a certain group couldn't even have been a festive occasion to all in the Third Republic. Vilar didn't reject the culture of that period *en globe*: he was well aware there were both good and bad things about it.

What's important to understand is that he was handed a ruler scaled to assess culture in Jules Ferry's secular school – although he waved and wagged it, struck with it and bent it, he never broke it. This is why he was hissed at and booed by students in Avignon in 1968, and why several years earlier he'd become the target of fierce criticism from leading intellectuals including Sartre, Barthes and Dort. He was a figure of the revolution against the Third Republic and bourgeois France whose Bastille had fallen in the aftermath of the defeat by Nazi Germany. The Vichy regime enabled Vilar to make a start, then he was elevated to glory by post-war France. Until he came across his Jacobins.

Nevertheless, Vilar believed the task of theatre was to unite and overcome divisions, an assumption that worked ideally when France, vanquished in 1940, refused to accept that it had been humiliated by defeat, refused to accept that collaboration with the Germans was rife and the Resistance was weak. Vilar's view was equally timely when, after 1945, France was at a loss to find a place for itself in a reality being shaped with its ever-diminishing participation. Vilar's theatre enabled a certain kind of national pride to be upheld, and a national consensus to be reached. Criticising the past and contributing to reflections on the shape of the new state gave reason to believe that theatre could become an ark in which what was best about France would sail through the stormy waters of global transformations.

But in large part Vilar's theatre was a swan song of the pre-war order. His trouble begins as soon as the cultural *aggiornamento* comes under more detailed scrutiny, French society is shaken by political conflict, and voices are heard undermining the idea of a civic consensus.² That May 1968 was so brutal in speaking out against Vilar was due among other things to the fact that the possibility of creating any inter-class or inter-generational community had been called into question. And if we attempt to understand Vilar's popular theatre, 'community' is one

2 See Jean Caune, *La Culture en action. De Vilar à Lang: le sens perdu* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1992), p. 82.

keyword – the community, indeed, for which the French language reserves the mystical term ‘communion’.

Is that surprising, regarding an atheist director? Certainly. But here, too, it becomes evident to what extent secular reality is conducive to building another kind of religiosity. On this issue, Vilar didn't prove much wiser than his predecessors, who'd erected altars of culture in praise of their homeland on the ruins of the Church. Vilar's reminiscences of taking his first communion³ despite the fact that his parents did not practice – at most, some religious sentiment was displayed by his mother, but not by his father, an avid reader of the left-wing series ‘The Popular Library for a Penny’ – have an almost anecdotal ring to them. And the fact is that, by the 1920s, the pressure from local communities to manifest one's religious devotion had lessened even in provincial France, of which Vilar's home town of Sète was part. Churches were becoming empty and, in any case, by that time they'd already been owned by the state for several years. Years later, Vilar would almost literally take advantage of diminishing church attendance, turning once-sacred buildings in Avignon around the Papal Palace into platforms for his own religion.

Though by the time Vilar had arrived in Paris in 1932, when he was twenty, he had familiarised himself with the literary canon, the clash with the new world that ensued prompted him to return to some of his old reading. One experience encouraging him to do so was a series of lectures by the philosopher and journalist Émile-Auguste Chartier which Vilar attended without enrolling. The director's gratitude towards Alain, as Chartier was known – who was an inspiration for intellectuals as diverse as Julien Gracq and Simone Weil – would last for years and remain strong even in 1955, when Raymond Aron, another student of Alain, published *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, one of the major post-war works hitting out at French Marxists (and hence Vilar): yet another proof that Vilar's way of thinking was eclectic indeed.

In theatre, Vilar had his moment of illumination when taking part in rehearsals for *Richard III* at the Théâtre de l'Atelier where he met director Charles Dullin (1933): Vilar would become his disciple and join his ensemble as an actor two years later. He got to know Dullin's fellow drama school faculty members, including director Jean-Louis Barrault and Jean-Paul Sartre. Above all, he was present as major projects of French theatre reform were born: disciples of director and playwright Jacques Copeau, particularly those close to the Cartel des quatre, an association founded in 1927 by Copeau, Dullin and others, would play a crucial role in these transformations. Finally, Vilar witnessed at close range an unprecedented alliance between the authorities and artists recognized as the most progressive founders of French theatre companies, when in 1936 the government was formed by the Popular Front. The Cartel and Copeau's disciples received the blessings of the state.

The Popular Front, in equal measures, was critical of the political system in the Third Republic and sought to make improvements on reforms concurrent with that system's birth – perhaps even to bring those reforms to a close. In their pre-election declarations concerning education and the arts, the Front's politicians were radical, but once they came into power, instead of dismantling the system, they took a position

3 See *Jean Vilar par lui-même* (Avignon: Maison Jean Vilar, 1991), pp. 9–11.

reverting to a concept more than half a century old: problems are solved by knowledge. It was thought that more competent school graduates and competent arts recipients were needed in every aspect of French life, including culture and education. Jean Zay, education minister in the Popular Front government, whose responsibilities included theatre, thought very highly of good education, and his approach to fine art was based on a play-it-safe hierarchy, granting classic masterpieces primacy over avant-garde works and other trends that were the darlings of the far left. Zay believed not so much in education through art as education towards art. His actions demonstrated very clearly that he sought to grant state support to – and hence to protect – institutions that didn't advocate radical change to their audiences: he subsidised the Opéra and Comic Opera in Paris, supported the Comédie-Française, and was in favour of the idea that directors associated with the Cartel should be contributing more to that institution. Zay also provided financial assistance to several independent artists, and his choices were in no way motivated by political considerations.⁴

Vilar observed these politics from close up – not least because Zay had asked Dullin to draw up a report on the state of French theatre. The document, known as the Rapport Dullin and presented to the minister in autumn 1938, identifies the main ailments of French theatre as the centralisation of artistic life and the very limited access to theatre in society at large that resulted from it. These pathologies manifested in theatre by its becoming excessively commercial and inaccessible to the less well-off.

Dullin recommended that theatres be founded across the country with the capacity to mount productions and tour their local areas. His objective was to provide equal opportunities: making the arts more accessible and freeing them from economic and artistic dictates in the capital. Democratisation and decentralisation were to be bound up with each other, the one in-existent without the other.

A change of government made the implementation of Zay's plans more difficult but, as will become evident below, many conceptions drawn up during his time in office would be developed. In culture politics, the war wouldn't be a turning point: most artists whose circumstances had improved when the Popular Front was in power – a time when the government began to channel funding to theatre companies – would find a place in Vichy France. Vilar's work with his newly founded ensemble, L'Équipe, would be hindered by the outbreak of the war but, ambiguous as it may sound, the Pétain era enabled him to grow professionally and would be key for the maturing of his ideas of theatre. The most enduring friendships were forged during the period, and foundations were laid for what would become his life's works: the Avignon Festival and the Théâtre National Populaire – the National Popular Theatre.

And it's during this era that Vilar came across the fiercest criticism of the Third Republic yet. 'It was Vichy that provided popular theatre with vital support, enabling it to enter the phase between 1945 and 1968, which is today regarded as its golden era'⁵ – such sentences can be found

4 See Marc Fumaroli, *Państwo kulturalne*, trans. Hanna Abramowicz, Jan Maria Kłoczowski (Kraków: Universitas, 2008), pp. 84–88.

5 Pascal Ory, 'Le Front Populaire, aux sources d'une politique théâtrale publique', in *La Décentralisation Théâtrale. Le Premier Age 1945-1958*, ed. Robert Abirached (Paris:

in virtually every paper or monograph on the culture politics of post-war France. Popular theatre's golden era was also Vilar's. Did this cause him any discomfort? The dislike of the Third Republic, instilled in Vilar during that time, proved stronger than later attempts at a rational assessment of the war years. True, Vilar did reject Vichy, coming to his senses while the war was still being fought – but it's equally true that he became a continuator of culture politics from the Vichy era.

And in Vichy France, that branch of politics had been paramount: a distinguishing factor between the colluding regime and the Third Republic, distancing itself from artists and their affairs. The recurrent view, expressed in an almost anecdotal manner, is that this was due to the inability of the Vichy government to deal with serious matters: it tried to salvage its prestige by turning to minor issues such as the arts. That view couldn't have been more mistaken: the arts were the focus of attention for Pétain's government to at least the same degree as in Bolshevik Russia, Nazi Germany or Mussolini's Italy. Following the capitulation of France in 1940, as questions were being asked about the country's surprising weakness and attempts made to identify those responsible, the blame was laid on the Third Republic – on what were presented as its democratic indecision and liberal slogans. As the national motto of 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' was replaced with 'Work, Family, Homeland', activities of civic society were curbed. The French State – no longer the French Republic – was carrying out a 'national revolution', and producing a new people was at stake. This new people was in need of a new culture: one that would appeal to it but would, paradoxically, be instigated from the top, at the level of state offices. Though the economic situation was disastrous, subsidies for theatre activity were increased from sixty thousand francs in 1939 to six million francs four years later. Even if we consider inflation, it's clear that, in occupied France, the arts were by no means a secondary issue.⁶

The Vichy regime took over the most radical aspects of the Popular Front's demands, easily adjusting gains on the front of ideas to their own radicalism. The wartime regime followed in the Front's footsteps in their criticism of bourgeois France, a sentiment enhanced by the need to find a scapegoat for the country's defeat in the war. This is when a quasi-mystical approach to the arts was born: they were beginning to be described as festive, spiritually elating and a cause for celebration. It's as if, a century and a half after the Bastille had been demolished, people were witnessing a return to the vocabulary known from the plans of David and Robespierre for mass celebrations. A lay religion? Partly, at least: a religion at the service of military drills at the Uriage school, the breeding ground for Pétain's new staff, or in thrall to the youthful Jeune France scouting movement, tenderly nurtured in its earliest days by the Vichy government.

The distaste for 'bourgeois France' and its theatre was, above all, a dislike of Paris theatres, criticized for economic elitism and for flirting with the commercial world. True to the principle of a radical about-turn, the Vichy government advocated non-commercial theatre for a broad audience, an approach that extended to ticket pricing. Serendipity – or

Actes Sude-Papiers, 2005), p. 40.

6 See Emmanuelle Loyer, *Le théâtre citoyen de Jean Vilar, Une utopie d'après guerre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), p. 22.

perhaps the competence of Vichy officials responsible for dramatic art, as the one doesn't exclude the other – made the regime extend its patronage to eminent artists from the Cartel and Jacques Copeau circles. The focus, therefore, was not on the avant-garde or on political theatre. Aesthetically, the artists chosen by the regime were in favour of theatre of personal encounter, not theatre for the masses, unlike in Fascist countries and the USSR in the Stalinist era. In any case, the fact that there was a time when theatre artists received support not from the arts or education administrations but from a dedicated 'intellectual unemployment' scheme – part of the anti-unemployment programme – turned them into employees, rather than militant advocates of 'a cultural revolution'. A similar 'clerical' structure was also in place in the theatre section of the Jeune France association, the northern branch of which was chaired by Vilar.

Artists joining Jeune France – a non-public organization that was nevertheless funded exclusively by the state – were in fact not much different than full-time employees: their task was to organize arts-related activities, educate people and 'be in service of the state'. Vilar would later take over this last concept, reiterating it in the Théâtre Nationale Populaire manifesto: 'Thus the TNP is first and above all a public service – just like gas, water and electricity'.⁷ And again, artists associated with the Cartel and Jacques Copeau circles – along with Vilar, they included André Clavé and Jean Dasté – were at the forefront of this trend.⁸

Much has been said about the ambiguity of Jeune France, its worship of Pétain, infiltration by the Gaullists and, finally, the organisation's dissolution by the Vichy government in March 1942. It's always a good idea to emphasise that the greatest Jeune France associates were also active in the Resistance – even if they didn't join it on day one. Still, their ideas of the arts and the state's obligations to the arts didn't change when they opened their eyes to the abominable politics of the Vichy government – or, indeed, when France regained independence. As an anonymous author argued in a 1941 pamphlet:

The task of Jeune France is not to fill the leisure time of the French people, but to re-awaken the arts, enlisting the aid of young people for the purpose. [...] There was a time when song and gesture were inseparable at work, when a celebration was born in equal measure of tasks and days and of prayer and rest; when poetry concocted in daily toil accompanied that toil for hours on end. This is the normality of art we strive to find today.⁹

This approach to culture is recurrent in many post-war documents on arts policy, regardless of who is in power. Vichy provided popular theatre with vital support. Vichy contributed substantially to post-war arts policy in France.

2. A Festival Away from the Capital

Almost everything we know about Vilar's activity during the Vichy era is strictly limited to the arts: his biographers concentrate on describing

7 Chantal Meyer-Plantureux, *Théâtre populaire, enjeux politiques de Jaurès Malraux*, (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2006), p. 262

8 Serge Added, 'Les Premières pas de la décentralisation dans les années Vichy', in *La décentralisation théâtrale*, pp.41–49.

9 Fumaroli, *Państwo kulturalne*, pp. 100–101.

productions he co-directed. Hence, as if contrary to the ideal of art and life as two interwoven realities, we know very little of Vilar's life in Vichy France. In his publication *Jean Vilar par lui-même*¹⁰ [Jean Vilar on Himself], a collection of all notes, letters and documents handwritten by the artist, pages referring to the German occupation of France mostly describe Vilar meeting his audience and preparing to appear on stage – not just in the State of Vichy but also in occupied France, including Paris. As if there was no war. In fact, Vilar's oldest accounts of the Avignon festival read very much the same: as if the whole world was encapsulated within the performance.

The first edition of the festival was held soon after the war: in 1947, poet René Char and art critic Christian Zervos were planning an exhibition in Avignon of contemporary painting, in the grand chapel of the Papal Palace. The exhibition was to include works by Picasso, Matisse, Léger, Mondrian, Miró and Klee: artists who, though often described as avant-garde, were still working within the modernist tradition, all of them attached to certain styles, schools and to craft. Vilar was approached about mounting a production of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* as part of the exhibition. His rendition had been shown in Paris in 1945: in Avignon, it was to be a one-off event. Vilar declined at first: still used to small theatres, he was apprehensive about playing in the grand spaces of the Papal Palace. But, several days later, he approached Zervos about staging three plays in Avignon: Shakespeare's *Richard II*, *L' Histoire de Tobie et de Sara* by Paul Claudel and *La Terrasse de midi* [*The Noon Terrace*] by Maurice Clavel, who would come to prominence as a journalist in the 1950s but was virtually unknown at the time. Zervos was unable to fund such a major event from the exhibition budget, and suggested that Vilar turn to local authorities.

Thus was born the first *Semaine d'Art Dramatique* [Week of Dramatic Art], later renamed the Avignon Festival. In a move that smacked strongly of Vichy atmosphere, volunteers and soldiers from the local regiment helped organize the September performances. 4,818 tickets were sold, no mean feat considering the cottage-industry style of preparations. 'We all ate at one table,' Vilar reminisced. 'A charming, hospitable group of respectable Avignon residents offered us beds either in hotel rooms or... at their own homes. Obviously, everything felt like a great adventure. Epic panache'¹¹ – an idyll which recalls Vilar's notes from the Vichy era and the time of the touring shows of shows of La Roulotte theatre. In 1941, he'd written: 'We are put up by one of the villagers. And there, after the performance, a felicitous surprise: we're served an apple, cider and butter omelette. These people have a sense of hospitality. A true family home, very much like mine'.¹² Making militant political theatre out of a fascination with simplicity is a tall order indeed – but the need for didacticism will continue to be cultivated.

From its very beginning, a key civil-service director of Performing Arts and the State Fine Arts Secretariat, Jeanne Laurent, had been following the Avignon festival with great interest. Laurent, who had worked for the French government before the war then for the Vichy regime in wartime (she did join the Resistance later) and, finally, after

¹⁰ *Jean Vilar par lui-même* (Avignon: Maison Jean Vilar, 1991).

¹¹ Vilar, *Jean Vilar par lui-même*, p. 61

¹² Vilar, *Jean Vilar par lui-même*, p. 30.

the war, once again for France – was at the time heavily involved in theatre decentralization. Her acquaintance with Vilar dated back to the days of Jeune France. His approach to directing, his tendency to make a performance into a genuine celebration for artist and audience, his love of simple, sincere theatre, inspired Laurent with the hope of reforming French stagecraft and its organisation.

Soon after the festival's first edition, Laurent offered Vilar the post of managing director of the theatre at Palais de Chaillot, a legendary venue associated primarily with Firmin Gémier and his work. Since 1941, its main function had been to host productions mounted by different ensembles. National theatres including the Comédie-Française and the Opéra National were among the visitors to the Chaillot. In addition, the theatre hosted exhibitions, occasional celebrations and, after 1948, even an occasional United Nations session. The General Directorship for Literature and the Arts, which Laurent chaired, sought to restore the building to its historic, Gémier-esque role: it was to become home to a popular theatre, whose productions would be addressed to a wide range of viewers. An official document dated 27 July 1951, terminating the contract of managing director Pierre Aldebert, outlined the theatre's future:

The success of drama centres in the provinces has demonstrated that we need to turn to a wide audience by staging productions in their local areas; it has shown, moreover, that presenting this audience with worthy classical and contemporary works is practicable. One must, therefore, make a systematic effort to look towards the suburbs including those further afield, and offer a different kind of production than those currently on at the Théâtre Populaire.¹³

Chaillot wasn't in the suburbs; it wasn't even in a bad district of Paris. Nearby communities of Auteuil, Neuilly and Passy, even at that time, were the most bourgeois addresses in town. But the Gémier-esque legend of the place was doing its job and Vilar, for his part, was consciously alluding to that legend. He saw Théâtre Nationale Populaire as a chance to continue his Avignon adventure, and the adventure of the Vichy era. Previously, he'd sought to find a living relation between theatre and the audience, like Copeau and Dullin had before him. Now he was just as keen to get a flavour of that relation in the capital. The imposing Chaillot edifice was another step on the road to theatre that was more democratic – the goal of Vilar's campaign. At Chaillot, he could remind himself nightly of the words he wrote in 1948: '1,200 100-franc seats are worth more to our art than 300 400-franc seats'.¹⁴

3. Vilar's Cathedral

The contract Vilar signed as the Chaillot managing director was no guarantee of a stable financial situation. The state subsidy had been modest; if Vilar incurred any debt, he would have to pay it off out of his own pocket, and any equipment including items bought during Vilar's tenure automatically became state property. Vilar's assistant manager was Jean Rouvet, whose excellent organisational skills enabled

¹³ Comité Central d'Enquête, 'Conclusions sur la salle de spectacles du Palais de Chaillot', 27 July 1951, in Denis Gontard, *La décentralisation théâtrale en France 1895-1952*, (Paris: Sedes, 1973), p. 319.

¹⁴ *La Décentralisation théâtrale*, p. 115.

Chaillot to remain solvent.¹⁵ Though Vilar appreciated the open space of Avignon's Papal Palace, the huge capacity of the Chaillot auditorium did not have all the advantages of Avignon's outdoor space. It wasn't so much the impressive number of seats (2,800) as the architecture. The actors on the twenty-three metre wide stage were inaudible from many spots in the auditorium: viewers were seated on two levels and those in the balcony had no contact with those in the stalls. Under these conditions, creating a 'common experience' scarcely seemed feasible.¹⁶ In both Avignon and Chaillot, Vilar was faced with architecture that imposed on him specific stage-design solutions: as audiences entered the auditorium, they could see the stage filled with characteristic platforms. Since the first rows of seats had been removed and a ramp 'cutting into' the audience was built, these platforms amalgamated smoothly with audience space. There were no footlights or curtain: as with operas at Bayreuth and performances at poet Maurice Pottecher's People's Theatre at Bussang, a performance began with the TNP fanfare composed by Maurice Jarre, who'd write the score to the David Lean film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).

The decision to take the managing directorship at Chaillot marked the beginning of a new period in Vilar's life, and he was keen that it also be a new period in the life of Paris audiences. According to the director, the point was to establish another milestone. Years, later, he would reminisce:

Coincidences often take me by surprise, as they do many of you. I arrived in Paris the year Gémier left. I was placed at the helm of a national theatre in the month of Jouvet's sudden death. These two departures have always encouraged me to reflect, as they both occurred at what I regarded as turning points.¹⁷

When Vilar took the managing-director post, one of his earliest decisions was to reinstate the name given to Chaillot by Firmin Gémier: Théâtre National Populaire – the National Popular Theatre.

Sonia Debeauvais, in charge of TNP's audience relations from 1955 to 1966, remarked later that it's difficult to comprehend the innovativeness of changes introduced by Vilar during his first years in office.¹⁸ On average, performances were to start two hours earlier than in other theatres: the start time was set at 8 pm, which enabled viewers to get home after the performance by public transportation: the popular audience doesn't take cabs or own cars. (Today, all Paris theatres must end performances while the Métro is running.) The cafeteria was open from 6:30 pm, offering affordable meals to those who came straight from work to see a performance. The custom was abolished of tipping theatre employees (cloakroom workers, ushers, orderlies) – a real revolution, which not only brought down the cost of a visit to the theatre substantially, but also eliminated the particular stress experienced by audience members unaccustomed to such protocols. (Today, tipping has been banned completely from public theatres – by contrast, in private theatres tips are the ushers' main source of income.) New methods of purchasing and booking tickets

¹⁵ Sonia Debeauvais, 'Public et service public au TNP,' in *La Décentralisation théâtrale*, p. 116.

¹⁶ Alfred Simon, 'Jean Vilar, Qui êtes-vous,' in Collette Godard, *Chaillot, Histoire d'un théâtre* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 24.

¹⁷ Jean Vilar, 'Le théâtre service public,' in Vilar, *Jean Vilar par lui-même*, p. 101.

¹⁸ Debeauvais, 'Public et service public au TNP', p. 116.

by post and by phone were introduced. Programme booklets for the productions were reasonably priced, were ad-free and included the play's complete script. Latecomers were not admitted; performances started on time.¹⁹

As he took up the Chaillot directorship, Vilar carried on as director of the Avignon Festival. He tried to combine the two roles: as a result, the majority of the theatre's productions in Paris were shown at the Papal Palace during the summer. But Vilar's Théâtre National Populaire also presented its work beyond its stage and beyond Avignon. Between 1953 and 1954, the TNP ensemble performed twelve different productions two hundred ninety-four times in forty-five locations! TNP only performed in Paris four months a year; after that, it was on tour. The ensemble comprised a mere twenty to twenty-two actors, around ten technicians and twelve administrative workers.²⁰

Winning a loyal audience was vital for frequent performances in Paris. This process lasted several years and was, to a large extent, the result of huge organisational and administrative efforts. Cooperations with trade unions, teachers and educators were to ensure that organised audience groups would visit TNP. These friendly ties took time to establish (there was no payment for ticket distributors). Vilar was intent on ensuring that seats were allocated in a democratic fashion: a tranche sold to a given group always included better and worse seats, tip-up seats, seats closer to the stage, in the balcony, mid row, etc.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Vilar's theatre, a term encompassing TNP in Paris and the Avignon Festival, was the most widely debated theatre phenomenon in France – it was also the most criticised, which will be addressed below – and the one that attracted the largest audience. Like Copeau before him, Vilar was in favour of theatre with a literary slant, and not just any literary slant: in his view, theatre should rely on literary classics. Even before his theatre had opened in Paris, Vilar remarked that 'the evil of contemporary theatre is it indulges in too much thinking. [...] The stage is no longer a place for action; instead, it has become the anteroom of a philosopher's study'.²¹ In later years, he would sporadically experiment with more recent repertoire, but attempts to stage contemporary drama weren't received enthusiastically: the audience preferred the canon, and wanted it staged in a certain way – without elaborate decor but in lavish costumes designed by Léon Gischia. It's difficult to say today to what extent his audience imposed this staging style on Vilar and the spaces he worked in. Perhaps he was opportunely confirmed in his own vision by the needs of the audience and the size of the stage. It's irrelevant what came first, ultimately: what matters is that expectations converged between the director and the audience.

Private theatres were quick to attack Vilar. Not so much and not solely because they saw him as competition in the rivalry for audiences, but above all because they refused to accept criticism from Vilar, who didn't mince words when deploying arguments known from the very beginning of the campaign for popular – or people's – theatre. What's more, private theatres were irked by the subsidy Vilar received: this form of funding

19 Debeauvais, 'Public et service public au TNP', pp. 116–117.

20 Debeauvais, 'Public et service public', p. 117.

21 Jeanyves Guérin, *Le Théâtre en France de 1914 à 1950* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007), p. 344.

was perceived – not entirely without grounds, it must be added – as assistance that deregulated the Paris market, where a mere two theatres received meaningful support from the state while the rest had to cope in a commercial environment. Representatives of the political right and centre were annoyed by Vilar's political declarations. Intellectuals, for their part, criticised the director for taking advantage of literary classics to respond to the need of the moment – and Vilar was indeed keen on updating literary plots. Their task was to describe the present day, though blatant allusions to current events were rare – such as the 1958 production of *Ubu Roi*, where the protagonist was obviously being compared to de Gaulle.

4. Schism

At first, the left looked favourably upon Vilar: so much so that in 1953 Roger Voisin, owner of the publishing house L'Arche founded the journal *Théâtre Populaire*. In its earliest issues, the editors were ready to consider any scrap of paper wasted that did not contain praise for Vilar. Academics including Roland Barthes, Bernard Dort, Jean Duvignaud and journalist Morvan Lebesque all began to write for the periodical, making it into an intellectual base for Avignon and the TNP. The line of the editorial board was clear: as the title of the journal indicated, new theatre was popular theatre. The term was understood very broadly indeed, so much so that at first it was easier to define it in negative terms. Knockabout bourgeois theatre in particular came under fire: in this genre, the audience was 'an assembly of voyeurs rather than a collective'. Theatre meant for a handful of viewers was criticised, too, as was psychological theatre, with the latter frowned upon because 'by turning the human skull into a box from which anything or nothing could emerge' psychology 'reduces theatre to a surprise and a riddle, and the audience to the level of novel readers'.²² Vilar inspired the editors with hope.

But by 1954, *Théâtre Populaire* was already becoming rather less enthusiastic about Vilar. Barthes was critical of his choice of repertoire, with Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas* the bone of contention; the following season, Duvignaud took issue with Claudel's *La Ville* [*The City*] and Hugo's *Marie Tudor* being adapted for the stage. Barthes argued there was 'a dearth of history' in these dramatic works. In 1955, Sartre joined the chorus of critical voices in the journal: 'Playing *Don Juan* or Racine is no bad thing: it's needed, but it misses the point. A popular audience should first and foremost be presented with plays that are meant for it: written with that audience in mind and taking it as their subject'.²³ Vilar wouldn't let that pass. In *Bref*, a journal/theatre programme published by the TNP, he wrote as if directly in response that he had been asked to stage *Le Cid* by a trade-union representative from a Renault factory.²⁴ A thesis opposed by empirical data: this dispute has been inherent in the development of popular theatre since time immemorial. Radical theoreticians versus active theatre makers. In 1960, Vilar would brand as proponents of 'irresponsible Jacobinism' writers who took to Roger

22 Roland Barthes, 'Pouvoirs de la tragédie antique', *Théâtre Populaire* 2, 1953.

23 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Jean-Paul Sartre nous parle de théâtre', *Théâtre Populaire* 15, 1955.

24 The conflict is discussed by Marie-Claude Hubert in *Le Nouveau Theatre 1950–1968* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008), pp. 19–21.

Voisin's journal to criticise staging Corneille, Hugo, Molière, Marivaux and Büchner.

Those 'irresponsible Jacobins' wanted Vilar to turn the TNP into a French counterpart of the Berliner Ensemble. The German company came to Paris in late July 1954, on the invitation of the Festival International de Paris. At the Théâtre Sarah Bernhard – the very place where Dullin had been managing director before the war, and where Vilar learned the ropes of acting – the Berliners gave three performances of *Mother Courage*. It wasn't a full house, but editors of *Théâtre Populaire* (except Dort) and many French directors were in the audience. As Barthes would write later, 'the illumination was like a fire. Nothing of French theatre remained before my eyes; in my consciousness, the difference between the Berliner and other companies was not one of level: it was a difference that must be considered in historical terms'.²⁵ For Barthes and for other members of the editorial staff, Brecht became the dream author of new theatre, his theory of theatre a hint at the direction staging should take. According to *Théâtre Populaire*, French audiences were in need of Brecht's plays.

Ironically, audiences hadn't take to *Mother Courage* when Vilar staged it three years before to inaugurate the TNP – not to mention the fact that his rendition provoked a wave of ideologically motivated criticism. It's true that, in terms of style, it had been a far cry from the principles of Brechtism. When Vilar staged the play, he didn't renounce empty stage, platforms, spotlighting and improvisation imbued with psychology. His *Mother Courage* was a heroine taken straight from classical tragedy: a proud character, grappling with fate and her own weaknesses – unsurprisingly, considering that *Le Cid* was being rehearsed at the same time. 'The entire dialectics of Brecht's play has vanished. The viewer felt for the lonely woman, lost in the turmoil of war'.²⁶

And so, after 1954, the *Théâtre Populaire* circles were determined to see to it that Brecht was staged in France in keeping with the aesthetics advocated by the Berliner Ensemble. More than that: Voisin and his editors began to fiercely oppose anything that didn't allude to Brechtism. Not just Vilar but the entire theatre world came under fire. The atmosphere of the dispute has been aptly captured by Eugene Ionesco, likewise chastised for his lack of interest in epic theatre. Barthes and Dort appear as Bartholomeus I and Bartholomeus II in the playwright's *Alma Impromptu* (1956), where they scold the misbehaving author with abandon:

BARTHOLOMEUS II: Are you aware you must learn everything from us?

IONESCO: I admit I must! Everything, my learned gentlemen, everything...

BARTHOLOMEUS II: In the field of the theatrical?

IONESCO: Yes.

BARTHOLOMEUS I: And in the field of costume design?

²⁵ Roland Barthes, 'Témoignage sur le théâtre', in Barthes, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), p. 1,530.

²⁶ Anna Rysiak-Vallet 'Klasyk przez Brechta odczytany', in *Arcydzieła inscenizacji. Od Reinhardta do Wilsona*, eds. Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz, Małgorzata Sugiera (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 1997), pp. 71–72.

IONESCO: Costume... what?

BARTHOLOMEUS I (to BARTHOLOMEUS II): Poor thing, he doesn't know what costume design is! (to Ionesco): You'll learn!

IONESCO: I'll learn!

BARTHOLOMEUS II: In the fields of historicism and decoratology...

IONESCO: I'll give it my utmost!

[...]

IONESCO: Please forgive me, I won't do it again, that was an exception...

MARIE: And not the rule! ²⁷

Ionesco mocked the Brechtists and their dictatorship – but many directors with close ideological links to popular theatre were actually being given a carpeting: this includes Jean Dasté, the veteran campaigner for theatre democratization, whose staging of Brecht's *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* [*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, 1956], enthusiastically received by the audience, could have been better (as the two Bartholomeuses argued) had it been staged in keeping with the rules in force at the Berliner Ensemble. Vilar alternated between fighting the dictate and diminishing its effectiveness. *Théâtre Populaire*, once so supportive of him, came to resemble a disloyal friend.

That disappointment wasn't the only reason that, in 1963, Vilar decided not to apply for the renewal of his contract as managing director of the Théâtre National Populaire. But it made the parting easier. Vilar resolved to go back to his roots and devote himself entirely to the Avignon Festival. Behind him were twelve years of managing the theatre on the Chaillot hill: during that time, the TNP became a living legend, and numerous sacrifices and compromises had been needed to sustain it. Although government subsidies to Vilar's theatre were in a different league from those for other theatres established as part of the decentralization policy, to Vilar they'd still been no guarantee of peace of mind at work. Vilar's inability to find common ground with ministerial officials and numerous (if unexpected) disputes with France's first minister of culture, André Malraux, were another reason for his resignation. There was another one, too: having observed for some time that theatre aesthetics were changing, Vilar endeavoured to get some assistance in renovating the TNP house: the style of the empty stage, innovative in the 1950s, seemed to have run its course. ²⁸

New TNP productions continued to be presented at the Avignon Festival (directed by George Wilson, newly installed at the helm of the Paris theatre), but Vilar was inclined to change the formula at Avignon: his plans were to open it to other arts. 1966 marked a turning point: several productions choreographed by Maurice Béjart, who became a regular at subsequent editions, were shown at the festival, as were *Richard III* and *George Dandin* directed by Roger Planchon – the following year,

²⁷ Eugène Ionesco, 'L'Impromptu de l'Alma', in Roger Pic, Chantal Meyer-Plantureux, Benno Besson, *Bertolt Brecht et le Berliner Ensemble* (Paris: Marval, 1995), p. 15.

²⁸ Godard, Chaillot, *Histoire d'un théâtre*, pp. 49–50.

Planchon presented his *Bleus, blancs, rouges ou les libertins* at the Papal Palace. Concerts, exhibitions and film screenings were organised, with Jean-Luc Godard presenting his *La Chinoise* in 1967.

Aware of changes in theatre aesthetics, Vilar decided to also mount productions in smaller, more welcoming spaces of the former cloisters Cloître des Carmen and Cloître des Célestines. Those changes enabled artists who had been driving forces behind decentralization to come to Avignon and present their achievements, including comedian and director Antoine Bourseiller, actor and director Gabriel Garran, theatre managing actors Marcel Maréchal and Guy Rétoré and actor and director Benno Besson. Once again, Vilar got a second wind. Once again, he believed in *aggiornamento*. Avignon once again had a pope – a pope the audience was prepared to stand up for.

How odd the criticism of Brechtists in Paris sound here, who claimed the audience doesn't need the emotions encapsulated in classic French literature. How disingenuous radical activists sound, demanding that theatre be made exclusively for workers... How insufferable the objection that Vilar was working mainly with the petit-bourgeois audience in mind... As Vilar kept saying over and over again, popular theatre belongs to all audiences. The popular audience stems from across the social spectrum. Vilar felt at home in Avignon, and the festive atmosphere he granted audiences during the summer had something special about it – not least because it was rooted in the past.

Théâtre Populaire criticized Vilar for productions that stirred up emotions and dulled the audience's sense of criticism. This complaint, formulated at the top of the Brechtist ranks, isn't entirely without grounds, admittedly. Even if Vilar was intent on discussing important matters through his productions, it was the presence of the greatest Paris stars including Maria Casarès and Gérard Philipe reciting from stage well-known tirades by well-known writers that enticed audiences to come to his theatre. Vilar provided fine theatre for the masses at the TNP and for the crowds in Avignon, but he also provided them with an image of fine theatre – in other words, theatre based on tried-and-tested literature and featuring stars on stage.

Yet this image of fine theatre, rooted in a Third Republic mentality, was miles away from stage revolutions that were soon to cause an upheaval in art. Vilar and his audience were apprehensive of that upheaval. The catalogue of names featured in the 1947 Avignon exhibition – Picasso, Matisse, Léger, Miró, Mondrian, Klee – is impressive. But, from the point of view of the increasingly democratic post-war society – and in particular the first generation of baby boomers whose voice will begin to be heard in the late 1960s – those artists represented a different order. Just as Léon Gischia, Vilar's costume designer.

Although he had been a disciple of Fernand Léger and, as a painter, he remained faithful to non-figurative art, his theatre costumes were likely bring to mind the work of the greatest post-war fashion designers. Gischia thought in terms of the human figure and solids; his costumes might just as well have been sewn in the Balenciaga atelier. What audiences saw in Vilar's productions was not just haute culture – high culture – but also haute couture, the normally unattainable luxury of high society, which no doubt delineated the aspirations horizon of many. The issue here isn't fascination with fashion, but a fascination with a reality becoming unsustainable in the midst of post-war modernization. When

Vilar inaugurated the Avignon Festival, more than a hundred fashion houses were operating in Paris; twenty years later, that number had shrunk to just over ten. Fashion houses were also adversely affected by the crisis in craftsmanship values. And they failed to grasp the principles of progressing democracy and economy – they, too, lost out in the shift in the global economy's poles. France was still touring shows around the world – fashion shows and shows directed by Vilar – but those tours were becoming more and more like showcases for museum exhibits. 'Fashion as a public service, just like gas, water and electricity? Too bad we're the only ones who didn't install a meter', said Daniel Borin, president of the *Chambre d'Haute Couture* in the late 1960s – not entirely ironically, and not at all in order to mock Vilar.²⁹ Dior's new look? In 1968, it wasn't even fit for the stage, even at a very conservative theatre. In Avignon, Béjart had his performers dance in jeans and T-shirts – but that was just another costume. Baby boomers weren't fooled: soon they would chant in front of the Papal Palace: 'Vilar-Béjart-Salazar'.

It is the most tragic moment of Vilar's life. Two orders clash before his eyes. On one hand, Avignon residents, proud of their festival, prepared to do whatever it takes to defend the good name of its founder. On the other, Paris students accusing Vilar of doing nothing but pulling the wool over audiences' eyes with special effects. According to his detractors, Vilar's theatre was devoid of art and petrified the already ossified social and moral rules – a truth that great classical literature and colourful costumes could no longer hide. 'We've nothing to do with you', both sides shout over each other. Did Vilar still believe in theatre as a commune? Strolling the streets in the shade of stone walls and under censoring glances from local residents is Julian Beck of the *Living Theatre*. Strolling in scant clothing which Vilar's audience indignantly calls 'indecent'. Beck will appear on stage stark naked, shouting 'Paradise Now!'. Avignon's new anti-pope.³⁰

Vilar will continue to organize the festival, but the festive atmosphere in Avignon will never be the same. He'll die three years later.

5. Saint

Vilar's biographers are usually hagiographers. For years, every single French minister of culture has been referring to Vilar's legend in a major speech on theatre. Every one has been trying to define new challenges faced by popular theatre whose idea, per ministerial dogma, is everlasting. But though there is a hint of the grotesque about this cult, it can be pointed out that popular theatre has become another French theatre myth – as important, perhaps, as the myth of the *Comédie-Française*. Theatre in France owes to popular theatre the fact that it has become more pluralistic. Artists and perhaps even more frequently organizers of theatre life no longer define their views solely with reference to the historic national theatre. Theatre is no longer a constellation created around a single centre. Popular theatre has enriched the French debate on the arts, making a clear distinction between the category of 'cultural heritage', which relates to the *Comédie-Française*, and the present and future, which is the premise of popular theatre, forever a work

²⁹ See *Paris couture 1945-1968*, dir. Jean Lauritano, ARTE France, Slo Production, INA, 2016.

³⁰ This conflict is described in my article 'Ciemne strony maja'68', *Dialog* 5, 2008.

in progress.

More than the Comédie-Française, popular theatre is synonymous with asking questions about theatre politics and responsibility held by theatre. About theatre's social aspect. This includes questions about art as utopia – art's right to be a utopia. Even if Jean Vilar's story in the heyday of Avignon and his work at the Chaillot may demonstrate that a communion between artists and their audience has been established, we must bear in mind that popular theatre failed more often than it succeeded. Audiences and artists don't always want the same things – in fact, they rarely do. It was more typical for popular theatre to be in circulation only as a project or manifesto, with no venue, budget or audience.

Today, the assessment of popular theatre is anything but self-evident – the assessment of a utopia can never be that. This is very clear indeed from the Polish perspective, as, in the aftermath of historic experiences with totalitarian ideologies, we're programmatically apprehensive when it comes to utopias. The question is: how much of a constraint is fear of utopia on artists for whom, all risk notwithstanding, utopia is a natural living space?

This article utilizes extensive excerpts from the author's forthcoming book *Laicka religia. Teatr popularny (we Francji)* [*Lay Religion: Popular Theatre (in France)*]. Part of this text has been previously published in the journal *Dialog* 9, 2016, under the title 'Laicka religia Jeana Vilara' [*Jean Vilar's Lay Religion*].

Translated by Joanna Błachnio

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Abstract

Piotr Olkusz

The Pope's New Clothes Jean Vilar's Lay Religion and Popular Theatre

It is no accident that the return of questions concerning popular theatre coincided with the debates triggered by the celebrations of 250 years of public theatre in Poland. Ought the public theatre of today model itself on the tradition of the Comédie Française - or should it look up to the idea of the 'théâtre populaire' instead? Whom should this type of theatre serve :artists or audiences? Should it be overtly political and cause controversy, or should its foremost task be the formation of a broad community? The fortunes of French popular theatre refer us back to its quasi-religious - which, however, were being born in

an increasingly secular society, as if theatre was to become the universal religion of the new republic. In analysing the actions of Jean Vilar, and the conceptions he proposed, we may argue he regarded popular theatre not just as an 'audience's theatre', but also 'a theatre of the state'. The festivals in Avignon or the Théâtre National Populaire performances were, in a way, celebrations of the values shared by those populating the republic. Despite their frequently professed political ambition, their revolutionary nature was limited.