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Playing Napoleon

By

Janice Best

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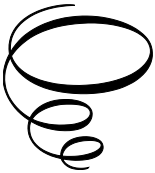

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In memory of Pat O'Neill

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PREFACE

Il était six heures et nous entrions au théâtre du Cirque; l'immense salle était comble. Vers midi déjà une foule immense envahissait les abords du théâtre; on s'entretenait de manifestations napoléoniennes; le coup d'État qu'on nous annonce tous les matins était à l'ordre du jour, et quelques artistes ne parlaient de rien moins que de proclamer le soir même Empereur des Français... M. Taillade, un jeune acteur qui devait jouer le rôle de Napoléon.

Tous les ordres étaient représentés; on apercevait, – ce qui ne se voit qu'aux journées révolutionnaires dramatiques, – car nos éphémérides théâtrales ont maintenant aussi leurs dates célèbres, – on apercevait, ça et là, à des places mêmes infimes, des célébrités politiques, artistiques, littéraires ou turbulentes, car dans le temps où nous vivons, chacun s'illustre comme il peut.

Des yeux exercés auraient pu découvrir dans le fond des loges des grands personnages – hélas! tout est relatif! – de notre époque, – l'empire, le grand empire, avec ses vieux chevronnés; l'Élysée, avec ses jeunes muscadins aux moustaches relevées et aux éperons résonnants; la république, avec ses fiers et énergiques soutiens, et enfin, le camp des *Chauvins*, dont nous avons l'honneur de faire partie, qui s'émeut à la représentation vivante de nos grandes et immortelles journées, et qui rit de pitié aux folles comparaisons qu'on veut faire, aux parodies insensées dont on nous menacent; enfin, tous avaient leurs représentants, et la solennité promettait d'être curieuse.

Au Cirque, on est chez Napoléon; l'empereur est maître de cette maison comme Molière est le maître rue de Richelieu; en tout temps, à toute époque, on a crié Vive l'Empereur! sans que ce cri eût rien de séditieux. Dans ce temple dramatique élevé à la gloire de nos armes, le plus grand capitaine du monde entier règne d'une façon si absolue sur les esprits, qu'il vous serait impossible de trouver sur la scène un individu croyant un mot, acceptant un fait quelconque de l'histoire contemporaine; pour eux Napoléon n'est pas mort [...]

Quand on prononce dans ce lieu le nom de Bonaparte, on se découvre comme dans nos églises quand on nomme Jésus-Christ. Pour être admis à remplir toute espèce d'emploi, depuis le plus élevé jusqu'au plus infime, il faut avoir appartenu à la Grande Armée, ou être fils, petit-fils, ou au moins neveu d'un des soldats du grand homme. Les échos de la salle sont combinés de telle sorte que quand vous prononcez Alexandre, Annibal, César, Turenne, Bayard, Vauban, l'écho répond Napoléon. – Le passé, le présent, l'avenir n'existent pas, ou plutôt tout cela vit ou vivra, mais dans une seule personnification, celle de l'empereur. [...]

[It was six o'clock and we entered the Théâtre du Cirque; the huge theatre was full. Already around noon an immense crowd invaded the area around the theatre; there was talk of Napoleonic demonstrations; the coup d'état predicted every morning was on the agenda, and some artists talked of nothing less than proclaiming that very evening emperor of the French... M. Taillade, a young actor who was to play the role of Napoléon.

All social classes were present; – which only happens on theatrical revolutionary days – because our theatrical ephemerides now also have their famous anniversaries – we could see, here and there, in even the cheapest seats, political, artistic, literary, or turbulent celebrities, because in the times in which we live, everyone shows off as best they can.

Trained eyes might have discovered great personages in the back of the boxes – alas! everything is relative! – of our time – the empire, the great empire, with its seasoned veterans; the Élysée, with its young *Muscadins* with curled mustaches and resonant spurs; the republic, with its proud and energetic supporters, and finally, the camp of the Chauvinists, to which we have the honour to belong, moved by the living representation of our great and immortal days, and laughing with pity at the crazy comparisons that we want to make, at the senseless parodies with which we are threatened; finally, all classes had their representatives, and the solemnity promised to be interesting.

At the Cirque, we in Napoléon's house; the emperor is the master of this theatre just as Molière is master at the rue de Richelieu; always, in all eras, people have shouted Vive l'Empereur! without this cry having anything seditious about it. In this dramatic temple raised to the glory of our armies, the greatest captain in the world reigns so absolutely over our minds, that it

would be impossible to find anyone on stage believing a word, accepting a fact of contemporary history; for them Napoléon is not dead [...]

When we pronounce the name of Bonaparte in this place, we remove our hats as we do in church when we name Jesus Christ. To be allowed to play any kind of part, from the highest to the lowest, one must have belonged to the Grand Army, or be the son, grandson, or at least nephew of one of the soldiers of the great man. The theatre's acoustics are such that when you pronounce Alexandre, Hannibal, Caesar, Turenne, Bayard, Vauban, the echo answers Napoléon. – The past, the present, the future no longer exist, or rather all of this lives or will live in a single personification, that of the emperor. [...]][1]

(Matharel de Fiennes, *Le Siècle*, February 4, 1850, "Revue des théâtres, *Bonaparte* au Cirque", Review of *Bonaparte, ou les Premières pages d'une grande histoire,* a military play in five acts and eighteen tableaux by Labrousse and Albert, first performed at the théâtre National, February 2, 1850.)

Note

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

INTRODUCTION[1]

In nineteenth-century France, authorities both feared the inflammatory power of the stage and sought to exploit it as an effective means of propaganda. The focus of this book is on theatrical representations of Napoléon Bonaparte immediately prior to and during France's Second Empire (1850-1870), a period marked by *Haussmannisation* and the *impérialisation* of the capital and of France's collective memory through the renaming of streets and public spaces. (Bourillon 2012, 90) Plays about the emperor and his army were so popular at this time that one theatre in Paris, the Cirque National, specialised in military plays and historical dramas devoted to the history of France and in large part to the saga of the *petit chapeau.* (Wild 1989, 79-86)[2] As Louis Sonolet states: "Aussi peut-on affirmer en toute certitude qu'aucun personnage historique n'a été aussi souvent mis à la scène que Napoléon." [Thus, we can say with complete certainty that no historical figure has been so often put on the stage as Napoléon.] (Sonolet 1905, ix)

Napoléon, of course, was not the only historical figure to appear in these plays. Many other heroes of the revolution and the wars of the Empire appeared with him or were sometimes the main characters. Several plays also featured members of his family, Joséphine, for instance, and her son, Eugène, but other historical personalities as well, such as the actor François Joseph Talma, or the fortune teller Marie-Anne Lenormand. Many of the plays contained subplots blending historic and fictional characters, creating what Ariane Ferry has called the "délicat problème de la fabrique du personnage historique de théâtre comme ils se sont frottés au rapport complexe rattachant les figures historiques attestés aux personnages fictifs." [the delicate problem of creating a theatrical historical character as if they rubbed shoulders with the complex relationship linking well-known historical figures to fictitious characters.] (Ferry 2014, 8)

Spectacular and lengthy (often lasting more than six hours), these plays about Napoléon, known as "mimodrames",[3] were famous for their realistic troop and cavalry manoeuvres, cannon shots and drum rolls, as well as their

costumes and sets of remarkable historical accuracy.[4] Much of the enthusiasm generated by these dramas came from "the perceptual and sensory stimulation brought about by the re-creation of the sights, sound, and even smells of battle." (Pao 1998, 120) As Jean-Claude Yon has written: "Plus encore que la féerie et le mélodrame, les exercices équestres et les pièces militaires joués au Cirque-Olympique sont avant tout des spectacles "pour l'œil" qui veulent éblouir, ébahir, stupéfier, susciter l'enthousiasme ou l'effroi". [Even more than fairy plays and melodrama, the equestrian exercises and military plays performed at the Cirque-Olympique are above all spectacles "for the eye" which aim to dazzle, amaze, astound, arouse enthusiasm or dread.] (Yon 2005, 83) The use of *tableaux vivants*, or *arrêts sur image* (Vielledent 2000, 360), reproducing the works of well-known painters reinforced the realism of these plays, blurring the distinction between reality and representation by offering not an imitation of reality, but the imitation of a painting, in other words, reality already filtered through an artistic gaze.[5] (Samuels 2004, 121-122) These plays thus offered a curious blend of movement and stasis. While time appeared to stop as actors took up their poses to reproduce famous paintings, the events that were depicted offered a sense of time replayed, because they referred to well-known images, but also because many of these plays restaged the same events (Napoléon crossing the Alps, leading his troops across the bridges at Lodi and Arcole, or winning the battle of Austerlitz) repeatedly, but in slightly different contexts. Audiences also knew what the outcome of the events staged would be. The only surprise endings came when authors included a final scene of apotheosis in which an actor playing the role of Napoléon III would appear on stage as a reincarnation of his uncle, to underscore the continuity between imperial regimes.

As Martin Meisel explains, this use of well-known images in these plays also served to authenticate the myth that was shown on stage: "By employing widely familiar pictorial images as a form of external authentication, the Napoléon myth could pass itself off as history. At the same time, recognition of the image, a shared epiphany, would unite the audience into a community of worshippers." (Meisel 1983, 217) These references to paintings also had the effect of making the actor who played the role of Napoléon seem more real and present, as if the dead emperor himself had come back to life. (Marin 1981, 9)

Even the actors and the extras (recruited among off-duty soldiers, or former members of the *grande armée*)[6] were often carried away by the realism of the experience, removing their hats and presenting their arms backstage to the actor who played the part of the emperor. Already popular during the July Monarchy, these plays enjoyed a renewed interest with Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's rise to power.[7]

Other theatres also produced Napoléon-themed plays, although without the spectacular special effects made possible by the unique design of the Cirque theatre,[8] including ones that specialized in comedy such as the Gymnase-Dramatique, the Variétés, the Palais-Royal and the Vaudeville theatres (Wild 1989, 178-183, 351, 407-412, 420-426).

In this book, I analyse a series of plays produced in Paris between 1850 and 1870 that featured stories about Napoléon, his marshals and generals, his soldiers, his wife and son, and many retired former members of the *grande armée*. Although based on historical fact, these works were nonetheless subject to prior government censorship, as were all dramatic works at that time, and were often substantially modified. The denouement of *Une petite fille de la grande armée* by Barrière and Perrot (first performed at the Gymnase theatre on May 8, 1852), for example, was changed so that the play ended with the announcement of the return of Napoléon from Elba, not the news of his death, as had originally been planned.

Some plays were banned outright, such as *La Malmaison*, a vaudeville in one act, which the Gaîté theatre hoped to produce in 1853. The action of this play takes place in 1809, the year that Napoléon divorced his first wife Joséphine. The authors show her despair when her son, the prince Eugène, and the duke d'Otrante come to tell her of the emperor's plans. The censors felt that the topic was too intimate and too delicate for the theatre in which the play was to be produced, and for the comic genre of vaudeville. The play was banned and never performed. Censors often hesitated to grant approval for plays that put real people on the stage, in this case the maternal grandmother of Napoléon III. In their report the censors indicated as much, stating that "un sujet aussi intime et aussi délicat ne pouvait être mis au théâtre dans un pareil cadre, sans blesser de hautes convenances." [such an intimate and delicate subject could not be put on stage in such a setting, without offending high-placed susceptibilities]. (Archives Nationales, "Report, *La Malmaison*", January 18, 1853, F/21/977).[9]

Authors of plays that had previously been approved and performed were also required to make changes when a theatre sought approval for a revival, because, in some cases, the censors felt that the play had taken on new meanings due to the ever-changing political landscape in the which they were performed. One such play, *Les Chevaux du Carrousel*, *ou Le dernier jour de Venise*, a revival of a work by Paul Foucher and Alboise, first performed at the Gaîté theatre in September of 1839, highlighted an episode from Napoléon's Italian campaign of 1796-1797. When the Cirque Olympique (formerly the Cirque National) proposed to reprise it in 1861, the censors hesitated to grant their approval, fearing that the audience might make associations between the Venice of 1797 that they saw on the stage, and the Venice of 1861, when seen in the context of Victor Emmanuel's attempts to reunify Italy. The play was eventually performed, but only after the authors added a new ending, making it seem as if the French were liberating Venice, even though, as the title of the play indicates, the action culminates with the capitulation of Venice to Napoléon.

The plays analysed in this book represent a variety of genres: Some are historical dramas, others are comedies, and still others are melodramas. What links them is a common theme. In some, Napoléon himself plays the central role. Both *Bonaparte en Égypte* by Labrousse and Fournier (first performed at the Théâtre National, December 25, 1851) and *Le Consulat et l'Empire* by Labrousse and Albert (Cirque Impérial, August 1, 1853) retrace Napoléon's rise to power, and he appears in almost every scene. In others he is present only in the wings. *Une petite fille de la grande armée* by Barrière and Perrot, for example, ends with the announcement that Napoléon has returned from Elba and is marching towards Paris, but we do not see the emperor on stage. Other plays focus on important victories won by some of France's most famous generals of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars: Lazare Hoche in *L'Armée de Sambre et Meuse* by Labrousse and Fournier (Cirque National, February 16, 1851), or André Masséna in *Masséna, ou l'Enfant chéri de la victoire* by the Cogniard brothers (Cirque National, December 15, 1852).

Still other plays highlight the lives of simple soldiers, *grognards* or *vieux de la vieille* such as *La Veille de Marengo* by Arnault, Judicis and J. Delahaye (Gaîté, June 9, 1859) where we follow the adventures of the exiled Italian count Villanova and his daughter Lélia. In *Le petit tondu*, *ou une*

Réforme sous l'Empire by Labrousse (Cirque Olympique, December 21, 1850), the hero is a hussar, Tartareau, who eventually becomes a captain. While many authors restricted themselves entirely to historical events, others chose to incorporate private, fictional subplots into their historic narratives. In *Masséna*, for instance, we follow the story of Fernand, a young French man who has fled to Switzerland to avoid serving in the French army. His mother, who lost her husband to enemy fire, has made Fernand swear never to bear arms against another person. To prove that he is not a coward, Fernand helps Masséna during an important battle. This fictional story is blended with historical fact to add a sentimental subplot to the main action of the play:

> […] comme au boulevard du Temple, plus encore que partout ailleurs, on éprouve le besoin de faire des vœux pendant toute une soirée pour le succès des amours d'un bel officier français et d'une jolie jeune fille de n'importe quel pays, MM. Cogniard se sont tirés d'affaire en reportant tout l'intérêt sentimental sur le lieutenant Fernand, dont jusqu'à ce jour aucun historien n'avait fait mention.
>
> [[…] since at the Boulevard du Temple, even more than anywhere else, one feels the need to spend a whole evening wishing for the success of the love between a handsome French officer and a pretty girl from any country, MM. Cogniard suceeded by transferring all the sentimental interest to Lieutenant Fernand, who, until now, no historian has ever mentioned.]
> (Louis Huart, *L'Argus des théâtres*, December 29, 1852)

Intended for a predominantly working-class audience, the historical dramas staged at the Cirque theatre and elsewhere were carefully revised and reshaped by the censors so that the narrative they presented reinforced the images of power the plays projected by removing any suggestions of regime change or revolution and strengthening the ties between the First and Second Empires. These censorship measures were not always successful, however. Because the censors focused primarily on the written manuscripts (although they did attend rehearsals and performances), they often failed to fully evaluate the impact a play could have on its audience. Extra-textual elements added meaning to these works that were difficult for the censors to control.

What has emerged from this examination of the ways in which the censors changed these works and by studying audience reactions to them is the central role these plays about Napoléon and his army played in shaping collective cultural memory and myths of national identity in the early years of France's Second Republic. As Sudhir Hazareesingh writes, Napoleonic celebrations of the Second Empire offer a range of complexity and subtlety: "with their memories of the glorious past and their assertion (and occasional reinvention) of the core values of the Bonapartist tradition – order, civil equality, patriotisms, military valor, and peace." (Hazareesing 2004c, 2) My method for studying the complexity of these plays and their censored theatre manuscripts has drawn on the key concept of Bakhtinian dialogism, or multiplicity of voices, to explore the interaction of meanings at play as one reads the original and the censored versions of manuscripts.[10] Such an approach highlights the complex nature of dramatic language, and the textual strategies authors employed to ensure that spectators played an active role in actualizing the possible worlds of the dramatic text.

Macherey's concept of lacunae or meaningful silences has been central to this study. (Machery 1990, 199) When one looks at a censored manuscript the silences are visible, for in many cases the words the censors deleted can still be deciphered. By examining what is hidden in these manuscripts I hope to have brought to light what the original text was meant to say, how the censors changed it, and, ultimately, why the censors found these passages subversive.

Although these plays are often considered to be non-literary works,[11] produced mainly for visual effects, the lengthy reports outlining the changes required make it clear that the censors and the government attributed considerable power to the written aspects of these works. For, as Florence Naugrette has remarked, "Avant toute autre chose, le théâtre est une pratique institutionnelle: organiser un spectacle est, au sens propre, un acte politique, qui mobilise les administrateurs de la cité, des lieux publics réservés à cet effet, et convoque un public potentiellement ouvert à la société entière." [Above all, theatre is an institutional practice: to organize a show is, literally, a political act, which mobilizes city administrators, public places reserved for this purpose, and invites an audience potentially open to the whole of society.] (Naugrette 2002, 17-18) As a political act, then, even a

theatrical performance that was mainly visual in nature required government attention and supervision.

What is less clear is whether these official efforts to suppress meaning were effective. According to Odile Krakovitch, the censors were often out of touch with the latest trends and shifts in public opinion, making them incapable of controlling theatrical creativity. (Krakovitch 2003, 66) Indeed, one of the principal paradoxes of official, overt censorship measures is that as both authors and spectators become more aware that censorship is taking place, they pay more attention to the silences of the text and find new ways to give them meaning. (Holquist 1994, 14) Decisions to ban plays were regularly reported in the press, often revealing what aspects the censors had found problematic. (Best 2018, 61) As Judith Butler has said, explicit forms of censorship are vulnerable precisely because they are easily accessible to the public. Censorship rules inevitably "introduce the censored speech into public discourse, thereby establishing it as a site of contestation." (Butler 1997, 130)

Napoléon on the stage under the Restoration and the July Monarchy

This collective enthusiasm for history in general and for Bonaparte-themed plays can be traced back to the early 1820s. According to Sylvain Ledda: "sous la Restauration (1815-1830), toute une génération d'intellectuels a pensé […que] le théâtre pouvait raconter le passé mieux que ne l'avaient fait de copieux et savants volumes, et à partir des années 1815-1820, la passion pour l'histoire s'est manifestée dans les productions dramatiques." [under the Restoration (1815-1830), a whole generation of intellectuals thought [… that] theatre could tell the past better than copious and scholarly volumes had done, and from 1815-1820, this passion for history manifested itself in dramatic productions.] (Ledda 2008, 94) This historical theatre represented a rupture with the classical tradition of topics drawn from antiquity by finding its inspiration in the recent French past.

Strict censorship laws prevented direct depictions of Napoléon during the Restoration. Nonetheless many authors incorporated allusions to recent history and to Napoléon himself in their plays, either through characters of usurpers or warlike tyrants, as in the dramas of Lemercier, or through

characters of liberal peacemakers, as in *Sylla* by Jouy, performed in 1821, only months after Napoléon's death.

Dramatic authors writing during the July Monarchy did not face the same constraints. The period of freedom of expression that followed the Revolution of 1830[12] allowed the performance of plays directly staging *le petit chapeau*, much to the delight of theatre directors and audiences alike. (Vielledent 2009, 351) The Napoléon revival was so popular that "[b] y the end of 1831, no fewer than twenty-nine new plays about Napoléon and the Empire had opened in France." (Samuels 2004, 108)

The theatre critic for the *National*, A. R. wrote:

> Chaque soir nous le revoyons sous l'habit d'écolier ou de lieutenant d'artillerie, sous la redingote grise et le petit chapeau, à l'attaque d'une redoute de neige, au siège de Toulon, au passage du Saint-Bernard, au pont de Montereau, au départ pour l'île d'Elbe. Longtemps il fut interdit aux théâtres de reproduire les hauts faits et la vie brillante de gloire de *celui que la pudeur défendait de nommer,* du plus grand capitaine des temps modernes. On ne pouvait effacer son souvenir, on effaçait son nom...
>
> [Every evening we see him again in the uniform of a schoolboy or of an artillery lieutenant, in his grey coat and little hat, attacking a snow fort, at the siege of Toulon, crossing the Saint-Bernard pass, on the bridge of Montereau, departing for the island of Elba. For a long time, theatres were forbidden to reproduce the achievements and the brilliant life of glory of the *man whom modesty forbade to name*, the greatest captain of modern times. Since one couldn't erase his memory, his name was erased...]
> (*Le National*, October 22, 1830).

Although these plays were popular and could be staged without prior approval under the new regime of freedom of expression,[13] they also prompted the minister of the Interior, Montalivet, to introduce a new law in January of 1831, less than six months after the Revolution, which, although not requiring theatre directors to obtain prior permission, would have given the government sweeping powers to ban a great number of plays. (Krakovitch 1985, 59) The success of the Napoléon-themed plays, and particularly of one work entitled *Le Fils de l'homme, Souvenirs de 1824* by Paul de Lussan, performed at the Nouveautés theatre in December of 1830, prompted this move to reintroduce censorship. This play featured the duke of Reichstadt, Napoléon's son, who was seen as the incarnation of the future

emperor of France. (Hallays-Dabot 1862, 291-293) This proposed law was never passed or even discussed, however, and prior censorship was not re-established until 1835. (Krakovitch 1985, 63)

By allowing these plays about Napoléon to flourish, Louis-Philippe's government attempted to align itself with the history of the Empire for its own purposes, to reinforce its own claim to legitimacy, much as Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte would do twenty years later. These plays rarely showed unknown facets of the Little Corporal but rather conformed to popular beliefs and legends.[14] Secondary characters such as *grognards* or *vivandières* played a predominant, although stereotypical roles. (Vielledent 2000, 352-353) As Sonolet writes, what the public loved in these theatrical Napoléons was not so much the great war hero, but the simple man of humble origins: "Grandi par le martyr, par les années, par les récits des vieux soldats, Napoléon a un temple dans le cœur de tous les humbles. On l'appelle l'*Homme du peuple*, on lui rend un culte sentimental, familial et bon enfant, où la bonhommie se mêle à l'adoration. L'objet de tant de ferveur n'est pas tant le César invincible que le "Petit Caporal" d'allure simplette […] c'est celui-là que la France toute entière va applaudir dans ses théâtres." [Made even greater by martyrdom, by the passage of time, by the tales of former soldiers, Napoléon has a temple in the heart of all the humble. He is called the Man of the People, he is revered in a sentimental, family, and friendly way, in which good-natured love mingles with worship. The object of so much fervour is not so much the invincible Caesar as the simplistic "Little Corporal" […] this is the man that France as a whole goes to applaud in her theatres.] (Sonolet 1905, xi)

Samuels notes a direct link between the Romantic theatre's adoption and transformation of the national past into spectacle in the works of authors such as Dumas *père*, Stendhal and Hugo and the proliferation of plays about Napoléon in 1830-1831, immediately after the strict censorship rules banning any mention of the emperor on the stage had been lifted. Samuels argues that the popularity of plays about France's first emperor that marked the early years of the July Monarchy can be seen as the "logical culmination" of theatrical trends towards more visual realism in costume and set design in historical Romantic dramas.[15] (Samuels 2004, 115)

Napoléon on the stage during the Second Empire

Beginning with his rise to power in the wake of the 1848 Revolution and throughout the Second Empire, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte carefully monitored his own image as reflected through the theatre, but also that of his uncle, France's first emperor, to use these plays to further his political ambitions and situate himself as the legitimate leader of France, the direct inheritor of France's First Empire. Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's declaration of the Empire came after years of derision in the popular press. He had, in fact, already declared himself emperor twice before, in Strasbourg in 1836 and in Boulogne in 1840, but his claims had been dismissed. Long discounted as "an illegitimate heir to the throne and as a lackluster and presumptuous counterfeit of his imperial uncle, Louis had suffered repeated exiles and imprisonments." (Carpenter 1997, 302) On December 2, 1852, a year after dissolving the National Assembly and forty-seven years to the day after his uncle's famous victory at Austerlitz, he was finally successful. Through his censors, and in some cases by direction intervention, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte carefully controlled the types of links that could be made between the two imperial regimes. Later in the Second Empire, of course, more plays were staged about Napoléon III's own accomplishments, dealing with contemporary events such as the Crimean War.[16]

Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's rise to power was not without opposition. Several contestatory publications appeared such as Marx's *18 Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Nerval's *Faux saulniers* (1850), later reworked as *Les Illuminés* in 1852, Hugo's *Napoléon le petit* (1852), and relentless assaults by the popular press and the caricature journals. After a brief period of freedom of expression following the February Revolution of 1848, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte re-imposed strict censorship rules that aimed at making the theatre "un lieu de repos et de distraction et non pas une arène ouverte aux passions politiques" [A place of rest and entertainment and not an arena open to political passions] (Archives Nationales, F/21/4635). Prior theatre censorship measures under the Second Empire aimed to use commemorations of the past as a means to gain control of public opinion and consolidate the legitimacy of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's regime.

As Louis Marin has pointed out, the act of representation relies on substitution, a presence that implies an absence elsewhere, in time or in space:

> Qu'est-ce que re-présenter, sinon présenter à nouveau (dans la modalité du temps) ou à la place de… (dans celle de l'espace). La préfixe re- importe dans le terme la valeur de la substitution. Quelque chose qui était présent et ne l'est plus est maintenant représenté. À la place de quelque chose qui est présent ailleurs, voici présent un donné ici. Au lieu de la représentation donc, il est un absent dans le temps ou l'espace ou plutôt un autre et une substitution s'opère d'un même de cet autre à sa place.
>
> [What is re-presenting, if not presenting again (in the modality of time) or in place of… (in the modality of space). The prefix re- imports into the term the meaning of substitution. Something that was present and is no longer present is now represented. In the place of something that is present elsewhere, here present is a given. Instead of representation, then, it is an absent in time or space or rather another and a substitution is made of the other in its place.]
> (Marin 1981, 9)

The first effect of representation is thus a form of imitation or sham, intended to make viewers believe that the other, who is absent, is here, not a presence, but the effect of a presence. Contrary to what Vielledent has suggested about plays performed during the July Monarchy, the plays I examine show that, under the Second Empire, the representation of Napoléon on the stage had not only the power to make the absent and the dead seem present, but also to lend authority and legitimacy to the person represented. It is for this reason that those in power sought to control representations of themselves and of other leaders to ensure their own legitimacy. According to Marin, to project an image of authority, a leader must be shown "en état d'exercer une action sur quelque chose ou quelqu'un" [able to exert an action over something or someone], not actively doing something, but rather giving the impression that he has "cette force de faire ou d'agir" [this force to do, or to act]. (Marin 1981, 11) Official portraits of Napoléon I by David or Gros, for example, rarely show the emperor in full action, but rather on the point of acting, about to cross the Alps or rallying his troops for an upcoming battle.

However, if representations of leaders offer the possibility of enhancing their power and reinforcing their legitimacy as Marin suggests, since they are also imitations of the original model, intended to be realistic, they can turn into parody (or farce, as Marx famously said of Louis-Napoléon's coup d'état) if the imitation is not successful. The censors thus feared that theatrical portrayals of leaders, or of anyone associated with authority, could be seen to imply a certain criticism of the original model if they became associated with a comic effect, or simply with a play that failed to achieve success.

Many theatres had an actor who specialized in playing the emperor, Edmond Dusquesne (1849-1918) at the Cirque theatre, or Gobert (18..-1873) at the Porte Saint-Martin theatre. But playing the emperor had its drawbacks for the actors who took on the role. Gobert, for example, played the role of Napoléon for over twenty years and had such success in this role, that the public associated him almost exclusively with the emperor, whom he resembled by his stature, his diction, and his gestures, thus limiting his success in other roles.

Both Duquesne and Gobert rose to fame in the 1830s, during the first wave of enthusiasm for Napoleonic plays, and continued to interpret the role of the emperor after the coup d'état. As Henry Lyonnet (19.., t. 2, 142) wrote in his *Dictionnaire des comédiens français*:

> Bientôt, avec 1830, le Napoléonisme fut à l'ordre du jour; chaque théâtre voulait avoir son Napoléon. Au théâtre du Cirque, l'empereur était personnifié par Edmond. À la Porte Saint-Martin, cet emploi échut à Gobert que désignaient son masque, sa taille et sa tournure. Tout Paris accourut applaudir Gobert-Napoléon dans *Schœnbrunn et Sainte-Hélène*. Mais cet immense succès nuisit plutôt à la carrière de cet artiste. Le public ne voulait plus voir dans Gobert que Napoléon, et celui-ci porta dans ses autres rôles les gestes et la diction brusque qui le servait si bien sous la redingote grise.
>
> [Soon, with 1830, Napoléonism was on the agenda; each theatre wanted to have its Napoléon. At the Cirque Theatre, the emperor was personified by Edmond. At the Porte Saint-Martin, this job fell to Gobert, whose face, size, and shape designated him for the role. All Paris rushed to applaud Gobert-Napoléon in *Schœnbrunn et Sainte-Hélène*. But this immense success rather harmed the career of this artist. The public no longer wanted to see in Gobert anyone other than Napoléon, and he took into his other roles the same

gestures and the abrupt diction that served him so well under the grey frock coat.]

To imitate a well-known historical figure successfully, actors such as Gobert and Edmond sought to reproduce the facial features, gestures and diction associated with this figure, as well as elements of costume and accessories. Edmond, who was too potbellied to be able to play the young, emaciated Napoléon, was able to impersonate the declining emperor to perfection: "Le premier est trop ventripotent pour incarner le jeune héros émacié des débuts, mais, l'aigle déclinat, il l'imite à s'y méprendre." [The first one is too overweight to embody the emaciated young hero of the beginnings, but he imitates the declining eagle flawlessly.] (Vielledent 2000, 357) As for Gobert, he was a master at reproducing the emperor's famous tics: "Quant au second, passé maître dans l'art de contrefaire les tics fameux de l'empereur (les mains derrière le dos, la prise de tabac), il répond à l'attente du public, friand de stéréotypes." [As for the second one, a master at imitating the emperor's famous tics (the way he put his hands behind his back, the way he took his tobacco), he met the public's expectations, who were fond of stereotypes.] (Vielledent 2000, 357) But focussing on these details could sometimes make these imitations seem more like caricatures. A false nose, or a corset, for instance, could make an actor seem ridiculous, turning what was intended to be a serious imitation of Napoléon into a caricature, and the play itself into a comedy.

Saint-Ernest, the actor who played the part of the emperor in *Le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* by Barbier and Carré (Ambigu-Comique, April 22, 1852), for instance, wore a false nose to enhance his resemblance with the emperor. The theatre critic of the newspaper, *Le Siècle*, found that the false nose, which altered the actor's usual way of speaking, only detracted from his performance. (*Le Siècle*, April 26, 1852)

The tension between authenticity and theatricality, and the subversive aspect of the existence of a real body on stage playing the role of an historical figure were often overlooked by government censors and are explored in the final chapter of this book.

The censors thus paid careful attention to symbols associated with authority and to representations of any person linked to the current or recent governments. In many cases, they suppressed allusions to government

officials altogether, in others, they tried to substitute references to previous regimes (the court of king François I rather than that of Louis-Philippe), or other countries (Switzerland, not France), or a lesser type of leader (a duke rather than a king), determined to make what spectators saw on stage as far from current reality as possible and prevent public demonstrations of anti-government sentiment. (Best 2016, 253) When it was a question of granting approval for plays about Napoléon, however, such a solution was not possible nor even desirable at a time when France was ruled by a new Imperial regime. Instead, the censors adopted a different approach, and sought to dissociate the emperor from episodes that might remind the spectators of past uprisings, conspiracies, or defeats.

Reconstructing the past to gain control of the present

Halbwachs' concept of collective memory helps us understand the central role that these plays about Napoléon played in the social reconstruction of memory during the Second Empire. According to Halbwachs, collective memory is not stable. Rather, it is an ongoing reconstruction of the past in the light of the present. To gain control of the present, leaders of a group reconstruct the past, eliminating, and rearranging events to conform to the social narrative they seek to promote.[17] (Halbwachs 1925, 238; 279; 289) Theatrical performances create a *cadre social*, or social framework for shared memories by at once conveying and interpreting the events of the past. By attending plays in which the same events of the past were performed repeatedly, audience members learned to understand their national history and began to develop a shared collective memory, uniquely relevant to members of French society in the 1850s. The extraordinary acts accomplished in the past during the First Empire became part of the present of the Second Empire through these representations on stage. (Marin 1981, 13)

As Astrid Erll explains, Halbwachs sees history as universal; it is characterized by a neutral coordination of all past events.

> Central to history are contradictions and ruptures. Collective memory, in contrast, is particular; its carriers are groups which are restricted both chronologically and spatially, whose memory is strongly evaluative and hierarchical. A central function of remembering the past within the

> framework of collective memory is identity formation. Things are remembered which correspond to the self-image and interests of the group. Particularly emphasized are those similarities and continuities which demonstrate that the group has remained the same. Participation in collective memory indicates that the rememberer belongs to the group.
> (Erll 2011, 17)

Plays about Napoléon III's famous uncle thus served as powerful instruments of propaganda because the memories shared by audience members had the potential to reinforce an impression of membership in a unified social group, reducing divisions within French society.

Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* explains how a new historical narrative can come to be accepted. Bourdieu defines the *habitus* as the regularizing effect of the social and political situation in which we find ourselves. It is this normalizing effect that determines the set of "possibles": what one can think, say, and do. During times of political stability, the *habitus* assures the continuity of discourse in an automatic way, without having to resort to coercive measures. However, during times of rapid transformation, the internalization of the dominant discourse is incomplete and many voices in opposition to the dominant discourse can be heard. (Bourdieu 1980, 88-92)

Works of art threaten those in power because the diversity of meanings they generate introduces other voices in opposition to the dominant discourse. My analyses of these plays and of the changes the censors made will shed light on what the authorities of the Second Empire considered to be a counter discourse, or voices of opposition to France's new leader's claim to legitimacy.

This book is divided thematically into three parts which follow the course of Napoléon's life. Within each chapter, however, the plays are presented in the chronological order in which they were performed. The first part, entitled *The Saga of the 'Little Corporal'* analyses plays featuring the young Bonaparte and other generals of the revolutionary period. The first chapter of this section, *From snowballs in Brienne to the Pyramids of Egypt*, deals with plays about Bonaparte's early career, showing him, for instance, as a young student at the military school in Brienne in *Bonaparte à l'École de Brienne* a play by Gabriel de Villeneuve and Michel Masson which takes place during the reign of Louis XVI. In *Bonaparte, ou les Premières pages d'une grande histoire* by Labrousse and Albert, we see Bonaparte at the

siege of Toulon in 1793. France is under the rule of the Convention and the *Comité de salut public*. The play ends with the signing of the treaty of Campo Formio, which put an end to the Franco-Austrian war. *Bonaparte en Égypte* by Labrousse and Fournier shows us Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt, during the final days of the Directory in 1799.

In the next chapter, *The Consulat and the Empire*, I examine plays highlighting the military exploits of Napoléon, and the marshals of his Empire. The period covered in these plays starts in 1799 with the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire and ends with Napoléon's defeat in 1814. Many of these plays feature some of Napoléon's most famous battles, such as Austerlitz, Eylau, Marengo and Wagram. *La Barrière de Clichy*, a drama in five acts and fourteen tableaux by Dumas, Meurice and Maquet centres around the famous attack on the Clichy gate, an ancient city entrance, leading to the village of Clichy. On March 30, 1814, 800,000 foreign troops marched on Paris. Marshal Jannot de Moncey (1754-1842) resisted their advance with a group of only 15,000 students and volunteers, until an armistice was signed later that day. *Les Volontaires de 1814* by Victor Séjour also focuses on the final days of French campaign.

The last chapter in this section features two plays about Napoléon in exile: *Napoléon, ou Schoenbrunn et Sainte-Hélène*, by Charles Dupeuty and Régnier, which was first performed at the Porte Saint-Martin theatre in 1830 and reprised in 1852 at the Cirque National and *Le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, an historical drama in three acts and eighteen tableaux first performed at the Ambigu-Comique theatre in 1852. Both dramas, produced the same year, were highly successful.

The second section of the book, entitled *Briscards*, *grognards* et *vieilles moustaches*, explores plays about various members of Napoléon's *grande armée* as main characters. Chapter IV examines plays whose protagonists come from a variety of ranks and professions: chaplains, hussars, Zouaves, a regimental horse, flagbearers, as well as civilians caught up in warfare.

Chapter V, entitled *Les vieux de la vieille*, looks at plays featuring retired members of the *grande armée*. The common themes that link these works together are nostalgia for the Empire, and France's days of glory and the hope that Napoléon would someday return.

The last section, *Seeing double, playing the part and wearing the hat,* tackles the question of representation itself and the illusion of reality these