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‘Whole shew and spectacle’: French prisoner-of-war theatre in England during the Napoleonic era

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Abstract:

During the Napoleonic wars there were tens of thousands of French POWs in Britain. Whether out on parole or held in prisons or on prison hulks, theatre was a common feature of their experiences. This article compares and contrasts the on-board theatricals that POWs performed on the hulks, in the purpose-built theatre at Portchester Castle and those put on by officers held on parole in towns across the country. In so doing, it explores the extent to which theatre was perceived by the prisoners as a particularly French response to difficult circumstances and as a conduit for reinforcing their national identity as well as creating a temporary sense of community with ‘the enemy’, that is to say British guards and civilians watching performances.

Key words

Theatre; prisoners of war (POWs); hulks; Portchester Castle; parole towns;
Napoleonic wars; French national identity

Katherine Astbury is Professor of French Studies at the University of Warwick. Between 2013 and 2017 she was Principal Investigator on an AHRC-funded project on French Theatre of the Napoleonic Era which resulted in a long-standing collaboration with Portchester Castle to tell more widely the story of its French POWs. She has published extensively on the French eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. She edited the melodrama La Forteresse du Danube for
Classiques Garnier’s complete works of Pixérecourt (2016) and is the author of *Narrative Responses to the Trauma of the French Revolution* (Legenda, 2012).

There were tens of thousands of French POWs in Britain during the Napoleonic wars. Whether out on parole or held in prisons or on prison hulks, theatre was a common feature of their experiences but, until recently, it has received little scholarly attention despite the fact that it contributes to narratives and cultures of war as well as scholarship on POWs and on French and British theatre of the early nineteenth century. POW theatre sits at the intersection of military, social, and cultural histories of the Napoleonic wars and opens up reflections on experiences of war and captivity (Chamberlain, 2008; Forrest, Hagemann and Rendall, 2009), encounters with the Other and constructions of identity (Clarke and Horne, 2018), cultural consequences of war and military memoir writing as well as the shifting relations between soldiers and civilians (Dwyer, 2010). Theatre was perceived by the prisoners as a particularly French response to difficult circumstances and as a conduit for reinforcing their national identity as well creating a temporary sense of community. Catriona Kennedy, writing about British POWs in France has talked of the experience of captivity as a ‘dramatization’ of the encounter between those on opposing sides in the Napoleonic conflict (2013: 115). In performing theatre for their captors, French POWs were indeed creating a powerful sense of solidarity, community, and identity, as this article will show.

Within the broader framework of research into cultural responses to war, POW theatre has long interested those working on the World Wars (see, for instance, Emeljanow, 2015), but their approaches and hypotheses are only just starting to be
applied to the nineteenth century. In 2011, Mary Isbell, a scholar of later nineteenth-century shipboard theatricals, reflected on how an 1807 playbill for a French prisoner-of-war performance on the hulk the Crown can be used to ‘usefully complicate existing histories of the English hulks during the Napoleonic Wars and our understanding of the circulation of ideas across national, cultural and linguistic borders via performance in this period’ (2011: 10). Theatricals on this hulk and at Portchester Castle have recently become a focal point for research on prison-of-war theatre, leading among others to the re-enactment of the 1810 POW melodrama, Roseliska (Cox, 2017; Astbury, Hambridge, and Hicks, 2017; Astbury and Tisdall, 2021; and Astbury and Cox, 2021). Yet, until now there has been no systematic comparison of POW theatre in different settings in Britain. This current article brings together for the first time POW theatricals at Portchester, on the prison hulks out in Portsmouth bay, and in temporary locations in the parole towns. In comparing and contrasting the practices in these places, it explores the extent to which theatre was perceived by the prisoners as a particularly French response to difficult circumstances and as a conduit for reinforcing their national identity.

One of those heavily involved in theatre at Portchester Castle during his time in Britain, Joseph Quantin (17...-after 1826), explained in his memoirs, ‘the taste for theatre was strong amongst the French as in the most disagreeable circumstances they still looked to satisfy it’ (1823: 135). Similarly, Louis Garneray (1783-1857) painter and memoirist, whose account of his eight-year stay on the prison hulks in Portsmouth bay remains a key source of information about life on board the prison ships, wrote that

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1 Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
One of the oddest aspects of French character lies in its incredible
gaiety and fertility of imagination, capable of discovering sources of
laughter and amusement at the most difficult times when foreigners
would lapse into despair and yield to their sufferings! (1851: 45–46;

Memoirs such as these are important sources of information about French POW
theatre in England, even though they were often published years, sometimes decades,
after their return to France. Long dismissed as unreliable because written to stress the
superiority of a particularly French resilience to circumstance, the memoirs
nevertheless find surprising echo in the archive when cross-referenced with
contemporary sources, such as the papers of Charles William Paterson (1756-1841),
the captain in charge of Portchester Castle in 1810 when the theatre there was
constructed. Now held at the Victoria and Albert Museum Theatre Collection, his
papers include letters, playbills, and play texts. The combination of these sources
shows that French theatre was performed the length and breadth of Britain by amateur
POW actors, often for invited British audiences, who were sometimes given plot
summaries in broken English to help them follow the action.

Recent scholarship about amateur performance reminds us that it ‘can bring
political awareness and change lives even while they are apparently operating with
small worlds’ (Gilbert et al, 2020: 3). In offering melodrama, vaudeville, and opéra
comique, the prisoners were contributing to an important cultural exchange as these
plays were performed in front of English guests: the naval officers who authorized the
performances, but also civilians. Thus, the prisoners gave the British a chance to see canonical plays, new Parisian releases, and works the POWs wrote themselves whilst in captivity. The breadth of the repertoire allows us to rethink the relationship between prisoners and jailors — or should we say hosts? — as there is certainly cultural exchange occurring. For the length of a performance at least, the fact that they were ostensibly enemies on opposite sides of the conflict was put to one side.

Taking as a representative sample the playbills and manuscripts of plays written and performed by French POWs from hulks in Portsmouth bay, at Portchester Castle (which overlooks the bay), and the English parole towns (for the situation in Scotland, see Abell, 1914), this article offers new insights into the prisoners’ conceptualisations of nationalism, loyalty, and France through theatre and how this was influenced by rank. Since no trace has yet been found of how English audiences responded to what they were seeing, I focus instead on how theatre gave the prisoners an opportunity to reframe their identity as prisoners and as Frenchmen. As Helen Gilbert has shown, theatre is ‘a means by which communities register, reiterate and/or contest modes and models of national belonging’ (2004: vii). Theatre is a space where the POWs can exploit ‘the affective power of national affiliation’ and reinforce a sense of collective identity (Holdsworth, 2014: 3).

The prison hulks

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2 Covid-19 has prevented access to the National Archives to explore the records of the various prison agents and the Transport Board for British responses to the theatricals.
The British largely treated French POWs according to rank: officers were allowed to live in designated parole towns such as Chesterfield (Derbyshire), Alresford (Hampshire), and Wincanton (Somerset); lower grades were held in prisons or on hulks. The numbers of POWs were dramatically higher during the Napoleonic period than during the Revolutionary wars: ‘in 1795 Britain held only 13,666 prisoners of war of various nationalities, yet by March 1810 there were 43,683 French prisoners of war… with the figure increasing to approximately 70,000 by 1814’ (Davy, 2004: 363). By the end of the wars, about one third of prisoners were housed on hulks.

Responsibility for the care of the POWs, wherever they were held, fell to the Transport Board in London and their agents.

The registers show that in 1807 the prison hulk the Crown was largely populated by seamen from mainland France — an uncommonly homogenous group when compared to the general heterogeneity of sailors on warships at the time (Rodger, 1986; Frykman, 2009; Rediker, 2014). They included some captured at the battle of Trafalgar in 1805 (mainly from the ships Intrépide and Redoutable) and others from the battle of San Domingo in 1806 (mainly from the Alexandre) (ADM 103/85). While hulks could hold up to 1200 prisoners (Masson, 1987: 86), the Crown appears to have significantly fewer on board. Given that many of those taken from the Redoutable were badly wounded, the Crown may have been a convalescent ship and therefore at lower capacity. French accounts of the hulks, but also British historians since, have seen them as ‘hells upon water’ (Abell, 1914: 10). Nevertheless, on a number of ships, the prisoners put on theatricals and British guests (civilians as well as officers) were invited to watch performances. Consequently, conditions on board could not always have been quite as fetid as nineteenth-century French memoirs suggest (see also Morieux, 2019: 233).
Permission to perform may in part have been the result of the ‘humanitarian patriotism’ that Renaud Morieux has identified as a British strategy to mobilize public opinion during the Napoleonic wars (Morieux, 2019: 77). That said, the British navy had a tradition of on-board theatricals as a means of occupying those at sea for extended periods of time since at least the mid eighteenth century. Lieutenants in charge of the prison vessels were seemingly happy to allow theatre on board primarily for its therapeutic benefits rather than propagandistic purposes. The fact that the Transport Board was often unaware that theatre was being performed by POWs — and tried to put an end to it where and when it did find out — suggests that those in charge of the POWs were not seeking ideological advantage from permitting performances. No records survive explaining why the French were allowed to perform theatre but elsewhere political calculation can be seen in the reasons given by the Lieutenant Governor for allowing convict theatre in Australia in the late eighteenth century (Jordan, 2009: 35). Moreover, theatre was a well-tried means of control in the Georgian navy as ‘entertainment was an important means of dispelling boredom, often the seed-bed of a more dangerous disaffection’ (Russell, 1995: 141).

**Archival evidence: the Crown playbill**

One surviving playbill from the Crown in 1807 provides archival evidence of the theatrical activities on hulks in Portsmouth Bay, and indicates that much of what may seem fanciful in the published memoirs has a basis in reality. Isbell has shown how ‘this single artefact — a promotional skeletal narrative of an anticipated event — functions as historical record and active component of the performance event’ (2011: 1). I extend Isbell’s analysis by placing this playbill more firmly into the context of contemporary French theatre practice.
The playbill announces a double-header at 3pm on Friday 10 July 1807 on board the Crown: the premiere of a historical drama, *Le philantrophe révolutionnaire ou L'Hécatombe à Haïti*, advertised under the English title *The Revolutionnary Philantrophist [sic] or The Hecatomb of Haïti*, a historical drama in four acts and in prose, written by ‘one French prisoner of war of this prison ship’ about the slave revolt in Haïti in 1793, followed by the ‘very gay and diverting comedy’, Molière’s *Le Médecin malgré lui [The Doctor in spite of himself]* (1666). Molière (1622-1673) is perhaps an obvious choice for a group of prisoners wanting to craft a particular image of the French amusing themselves even in the most difficult circumstances; an amateur historical drama about revolution perhaps more surprising.

The playbill is written in English, as seems to be the norm for POW playbills of the time, presumably for the benefit of the British officers and/or civilians invited to watch, and it proudly proclaims a ‘grand performance’. Memoirs talk of entrance fees and earnings and although there is no ticket price indicated on the playbill (French playbills then did not normally include such information), the fact that the prisoners involved in the performance call themselves a ‘Dramatic Society’, implies that profits would be shared. Furthermore, this organisation as *sociétaires* indicates that this was not a one-off event but a regular activity expected to provide income. It was not uncommon for POWs to earn income; they generated an extensive ‘cottage industry’ producing domino sets, straw boxes, bone carvings, and lacework (Lloyd, 2007). POW theatricals are just another example of their ingenious ways to make money.

The playbill follows French conventions: it is headed with the name of the theatre, in this case the ‘Theatre of Emulation’. The name links the prisoners’ play to Paris as the Théâtre d’Émulation was one of main Parisian boulevard theatres (better known as La Gaîté). The choice to imitate a boulevard theatre is significant. In Paris,
the theatre scene was divided between the main four theatres and more popular, commercial venues, like La Gaîté. The latter theatres were not supported by the state, but they offered a variety of highly entertaining vaudevilles, melodramas, and short comedies ensuring their popular success. The use of the title Theatre of Emulation by the prisoners rather than La Gaîté might suggest that those performing had not been to Paris recently (the theatre had only been labelled the Théâtre d’Émulation during the Directory between 1795-1799); or that they wanted to highlight the respectable, educational purpose of their endeavour. The fact that the sociétaires used the name of a Parisian theatre — and performed a total of seven acts in the course of the afternoon — indicates an ambitious enterprise.

This ambition is also evident in the promise of a ‘grand spectacle’ — such and more extravagant hyperboles were a common weapon of the boulevard theatres to entice audiences. Could an audience on a prison hulk really expect likewise? The playbill boasts that the premiere of the Revolutionnary Philantrophist will be ‘adorned by its whole shew and spectacle fighting with swords and pistols’. This corroborates the memoirs’ talk of hulk plays containing costumes, orchestra, and even backdrops, all of which would form part of audience expectations invoked by a ‘whole shew and spectacle’. Fight choreography was a standard part of early nineteenth-century popular theatre and the manuscript of the play confirms that weaponry is a key element of the plot, including gunshots off stage. We know that Portchester Castle had a fencing school and that therefore weapons were put in the hands of POWs; it seems likely that the theatrical performances were also using authentic props rather than wooden replicas.

The officer in charge of the ship had to grant permission to use weapons. The support of the prison hulk’s commander was essential to the success of the theatrical
venture — whether on the Crown, other hulks or at the prison of war depot at Portchester Castle. The *Revolutionnary Philanthrophist* playbill explicitly mentions the ‘advice of the commander [Lieutenant James Rose (17..-1841)] concerning the propriety of the hour’ and it is clear that without permission from the officer in charge, no public theatricals would have been possible.

**Archival evidence: a manuscript play text**

Fortuitously, a manuscript copy of *Le philantrope révolutionnaire* survives: made on board the Crown in January 1811, it was acquired by the Bancroft library at the University of Berkeley in 2004. It is one of two full-length French POW play manuscripts to have survived for this period (the other is *Roseliska*, to which I will return later). Given that the *Revolutionary Philanthrophist* premiered in July 1807 and the copy was made in January 1811, when the Portchester prisoner theatre was at its height, it is likely that the text was copied for use at that venue.

*Le philantrope révolutionnaire* is labelled a ‘historical drama’ — a fashionable theatrical genre during the revolutionary decade, when playwrights increasingly turned from mythology as a source of inspiration to modern French history (Julian, 2018). Set in 1793, the play tackles the revolt of enslaved people on Saint-Domingue, France’s wealthiest colony at the time. Inspired by the French Revolution, the enslaved of African descent rose up to overthrow their masters, and in August 1793, the radical commissioner Léger-Félicité Sonthonax (1763-1813), sent from Paris to ensure the French retained control of the colony, abolished slavery. An uprising of the enslaved is a curious choice of topic for the Lieutenant Rose to approve, given that it is being performed by individuals who have lost their freedom in front of those responsible for taking it. The play gives a genuine sense of place: it heeds the customs, mores, and locations on Saint-Domingue and the names of the * Créoles*
match those of actual plantation holders. This level of knowledge suggests first-hand experience of the island. Indeed, some sailors held on the Crown had partaken in Napoleon’s expedition against Saint-Domingue (1801-1803) and leading figures from the Consulate’s attempts to restore French control of Haiti were held on prison hulks in Portsmouth Bay after their capture by the British in 1804, notably the vicomte de Rochambeau (1755-1813) and his forces (*Hampshire Telegraph*, 1804). All this may have inspired the anonymous playwright to use the 1793 revolution as a means to explore their current lack of liberty. As such it offers an intriguing example of how those involved in global military campaigns absorb — and are influenced by — their surroundings. Encounter with the Other is at the heart of the play.

The entry registers for the Crown reveal that this would have been a blackface performance and the play text is racist, reproducing stereotypical notions of racial difference prevalent at the time. Nevertheless, those fighting for their freedom are given a voice. Encouraged by revolutionary tracts distributed by the French commissioner, Spartacus, the leader of the Black rebels is preparing to take revenge on white plantation owners ‘under the auspices of liberty’. His rebel army in the woods are inspired to attack a plantation-owning family by pamphlets about the rights of Man, distributed by a fanatical Parisian commissioner (the revolutionary philanthropist of the title, modelled on Léger-Félicité Sonthonax). The family are saved by the heroic Victor, a plantation owner born on the island who stands for ‘a pure and disinterested patriotism’ (Anon, 1810: 17r.) and is placed in direct contrast to the commissioner.

Despite the pro-plantation owner standpoint, the theme of freedom runs through the play, highlighting the power of theatre to give a voice to the voiceless. In
particular, Spartacus, the Black revolutionary, talks repeatedly of how freedom is worth dying for and in the final act sings (the tune is not listed) the following:

Let us be brave, let us be loyal
Give our hearts to hope
Let’s be models to the French

To live without infamy
Is the most glorious life of all
The most enviable there can be. (repeat) (Anon, 1810: 43v.).

The song links freedom to patriotism and to notions of what it means to be French — concepts also to be found in marionette theatre produced by French conscript POWs in Cadiz, where a puppet Napoleon rescues them from the Spanish Inquisition (Cox, 2017: 89), and in the three-act melodrama *Roseliska* to which I will come shortly.

While the perspective of *Le philanthrope révolutionnaire* is ultimately that of the Creole landowners, it is equally critical of the radical liberty enshrined in Parisian Jacobinism and of the enslaved people’s revolt; it articulates both the debates around justifying violence to shake off the shackles of the enslaved and the moral complexity of the situation. It must be remembered that the concept of freedom holds particular resonance for actors and audience of a POW production. Theatre, by suspending reality for those incarcerated, seems therefore not only to have sustained the prisoners’ hope but also given them autonomy and empowered them to forge a form of resistance. The Haitian revolution was a particularly powerful topic for exploring such notions.
When the play was copied in January 1811, watercolour illustrations were added giving indications of the *mise en scène*, though it is unclear if they indicate actual, or potential, staging. There is an illustration for each of the four acts, with an additional illustration for the final act (the latter is reproduced in Isbell, 2011). The revolutionary views of Spartacus and the eponymous Philanthropist are evident in their *tricolore* sash and cockade and the military attire of the former is reminiscent of depictions of the Haitian general François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture (1743-1803). The colonists would seem to be dressed in French fashion; the women’s hats in particular seem unsuited to the Caribbean sunshine. Whether or not the actors in 1807 had designed French robes or borrowed English ones, sadly the memoirs do not say.

The illustrations are thought to resemble the naïve folk art of Haiti (Popkin, 2007: 247), but those held on the Crown were from mainland France. The naivety stems most likely from the fact that they are set design illustrations — an extremely unusual source to have survived, providing valuable insight into a potential staging of the play.

**Hulk theatricals in the memoirs**

The POW Louis Garneray leaves detailed descriptions of prison hulk theatricals in *Mes Pontons [My Prison Hulks]*, a work published in 1851, shortly before he died. The son of a painter, he had joined the French navy in the 1790s and was captured by the British in 1806, spending the next eight years on the hulks before returning to France. His description of on-board theatricals may at times sound far-fetched but it is repeatedly corroborated by evidence from archival material dating to the Napoleonic decade such as playbills, manuscript play texts, and letters (Astbury and Cox, 2021). Garneray says of the prison hulk theatre for which he painted the set and backdrop:
By a theatre I do not mean a puppet show, but a proper theatre where actors and actresses, elegantly turned out, performed in front of scenery to the accompaniment of an orchestra. When I think of the pleasure these plays gave me I consider that they were in no way inferior in dialogue or performance to those of some Parisian theatres. (Garneray, 1851: 45–46, translated by Rose, 2012: 148)

His final phrase echoes that of one of the local Hampshire paper’s verdicts on the theatre at Portchester Castle:

The French Prisoners at Portchester have fitted up a Theatre in the Castle, which they have decorated in a style far surpassing anything of the kind that could possibly be expected. The Pantomimes which they have brought forward, are not excelled by those performed in London (Hampshire Telegraph, January 1811).

Garneray’s claim that it was ‘a real theatre’ is corroborated by other prisoners’ accounts, though it would seem that some simply take all the details of theatricals from Garneray (see, for example, Chevalier, 1895). Various spaces were repurposed for performance: on board the Vengeance, Garneray mentioned they used the far end of the spar deck and Alexandre Lardier (1786-18..) talked of one of the lower decks being used. One way in which the prisoners’ endeavours emulated ‘real theatre’ is in their desire to make money from performances: English guests and fellow prisoners would be charged to view the plays. Ticket sales were sometimes ploughed back into
performances via spending on costumes, backdrops, and musical accompaniment (sadly no details have survived of scenery, music, or costume) but often the money was needed to enable the theatricals to take place in the first place. The support of fellow prisoners had to be bought — either to keep them quiet during performances (such as on the Vengeance according Garneray) or to clear space temporarily to be able to perform (Lardier, 1845: 45).

The captain of the Vengeance supported the prisoners’ theatrical efforts — not just in helping them source female clothes but also in inviting British visitors to the ship to watch the performances: ‘all the fashionables of Portsmouth, Gosport and Portsea were swarming over the Vengeance’s deck’ (Garneray, 1851: 46, translated by Rose, 2012: 149). In his representation of the select group of spectators arriving on the hulk to watch the performance, Garneray captured the idea that theatre often invites a carnivalesque reversal of social order. Still, the way in which plays purportedly served as an opportunity for escape is less credible. Garneray tells us that an English officer was so taken by the cross-dressed heroine of the melodrama on the Vengeance that he left the ship with her, facilitating the prisoner’s escape; on Dartmoor, two prisoners allegedly escaped after borrowing an English officer’s uniform and one of his wife’s dresses for a performance and then walking out of the gate still in their clothes (Catel, 1845: 269–70). These anecdotes imply a suspension of disbelief bordering on implausibility. It is in part the contrast between the daily existence of the prisoners and the illusion of the theatre that contributes to the fantastical accounts of performances. ‘It truly was incredible’ writes Lardier of the plays that were performed on the prison hulk the Guildford (Lardier, 1845: 45). Of course, stressing the incredible, and more specifically the quality of the performances also allows writers to reinforce a sense of their own importance and give themselves
agency. As prisoners they are powerless but as actors or spectators they have a role, a purpose.

It is perhaps to reinforce their sense of importance as agents that the prisoners who write about theatricals present them in glowing terms. In Garneray’s Les Pontons we read: ‘there are provincial theatres which can scarcely offer a sight as satisfying as that of our stage’ (Garneray, 1851: 46, translated Rose, 2012: 149). Similarly, Lardier talks of how both English and French spectators ‘left the theatre enchanted by the execution of the performance’ (1845: 45). This may simply look like patriotic and/or nostalgic exaggeration — upon their return to France, the writers reinforce their national identity and sense of superiority over the English, whose theatrical productions were generally perceived as inferior by the French (Saglia, 2019). What can be more affirming of French superiority than that the performances were moving English audience members to tears, even if, as Garneray puts it, ‘not one of those tearful ladies knows a single word of French’ (Garneray, 1851: 46; translated Rose, 2012: 149). While a play’s action and its language might lead audiences to interpret texts differently, particularly when exploring themes like revolutionary violence as in the Revolutionary Philanthropist (Isbell, 2011), frustratingly no accounts of the plays’ effects on English audiences have yet come to light.

**POW theatre at Portchester Castle**

Even though British military and naval theatricals were quite distinct (Russel, 1995: 134), the repertoire at Portchester resembled that of the prison hulks. The POWs here, however, were French army sub-officers captured at the battle of Bailén in July 1808 were held at Portchester from 1810 onward. The man in charge of the depot, the naval captain Charles William Paterson, understood the importance of theatre for those cooped up together for long periods of time. The extent of his support for the
prisoners’ theatre is extraordinary, and one of which he seems to have been proud as he kept letters, playbills and play texts given to him by the prisoners. He did more than just authorize performances; he enabled the POWs to acquire timber to build a fully working theatre in the basement of the keep, designed by Jean-François Carré (17..-18..), a machiniste at the Opéra Comique in Paris before being conscripted into Napoleon’s army in 1807 (Cox, 2017). Quantin describes the theatre ‘as a small wonder’ with ‘machines as good as those of the capital’ (1823: 135).

Paterson’s unique collection of letters, playbills, and manuscript play texts provide the most important evidence we have of the physical design of the wooden theatre at Portchester because stage directions in the play texts give us details of special effects. They confirm that this was a theatre much more elaborate than most of the provincial theatres of France. There was a trapdoor, a fly system for raising and lowering things onto the stage and for sending a cherub across to the box built for the captain and his guests. They also had the capacity to effect changements à vue (scene changes with raised curtain).

The collection also includes the manuscript play text of Roseliska, a three-act melodrama. The play is an adaptation of a three-act Parisian melodrama, Metusko, ou les Polonais by Emmanuel-François Varez (1780-1866) and Armand Séville (17..-1849), with music by Benoni Darondeau (1741-1810), and based on a Pigault-Lebrun (1753-1835) novel of same title from 1800. Metusko premiered at the Théâtre de la Gaîté in July 1808, so after most of the prisoners were captured in Spain. Memoirs by Louis-François Gille (1788-1863) published in 1892 by his son claim that the machiniste Carré asked a colleague at the Opéra Comique to send ‘the newest and most fashionable works’ (1892: 270). The Roseliska manuscript suggests this was indeed happening.
Roseliska gives invaluable insight into how POW theatre expresses hopes and fears. Themes of freedom, imprisonment, resistance and loyalty suffuse this play as they did the Revolutionary Philanthropist. Metusko and Roseliska open in a similar way — a comic servant preparing for the return of his master — but then the two plots diverge. In Roseliska, the hero, Stanislas, has returned from war, having been forced to leave his bride Roseliska on their wedding day to fulfil his duty to the King. His friend Polowitz had confessed his love to Roseliska in Stanislas’s absence. Spurned, Polowitz decides to abduct Roseliska. Stanislas sets out to rescue her, is captured, but escapes and, with the help of Polowitz’s concierge, rescues Roseliska and defeats the villain. This brief synopsis shows that the play hinges on unjust imprisonment — a matter of direct relevance to POWs. Although the play makes use of a typical rescue plot, the escape scenes — particularly the one where Stanislas escapes out of a tower window, blur both the architecture and situation of the theatrical characters with reality. The prisoners’ ‘strategies of resistance’ are being shaped by the space in which they find themselves (on strategies of resistance in other political contexts see Navickas, 2016: 19). Whereas the original Parisian melodrama deals with imprisonment in a cliched way, Roseliska explores the mental anguish of incarceration. Escape from unjust incarceration is the focal point of the entire melodrama. In the context of a performance in the hulks for the depot’s commander and his prison guards, the sympathetic jailor takes on additional resonance, as does a heroine who remains steadfastly faithful to her absent husband. The latter gives us an insight into the prisoners’ fears for loved ones left behind. Thus tackling imprisonment, escape, and faithfulness — both to monarch and to loved ones — Roselika incorporates the hallmark themes of POW theatre performed in Britain during the Napoleonic era.
Reinforcing national identity

Besides exploring the prisoners’ hopes and fears, both the plays on the prison hulks and those at Portchester show that French POW theatre becomes a conduit for reinforcing their national identity. Plays are performed in French, albeit with plot summaries in English, which allows the actors to assert a linguistic ascendancy over the site of their incarceration — and their audience, supposedly moved to tears without understanding a word of the dialogue. The physical space also reinforces the notion that the theatre is a French space. Lardier describes the theatre on the prison hulk the Guildford being decorated with white percale with a red and blue border, pilasters of red and blue too, ‘so that the whole presented the national colours’ (1845: 46). The use of the national — revolutionary — colours is portrayed as a deliberate act of asserting Frenchness in a British space (even though, of course, Britain’s flag is also red, white, and blue) and reinforces a sense of collective identity for the prisoners. It is less clear, however, what effect this would have had on the British invitees.

At Portchester Castle, the curtain resembled that of the Théâtre de la Cité with a view from the Pont-Neuf of key Parisian landmarks, including the Louvre and the Tuileries palace (Gille, 1892: 269; for details of the Théâtre de la Cité curtain, see Lecomte, 1910: 3), so the theatre becomes not just a French but a Parisian place. Notably, the entry registers for Portchester reveal that all those involved in the theatre were Parisian conscripts in their twenties, including several who served in the Garde de Paris (ADM 103/334) — in fact many of the memoirs comment on a Paris-provinces split in those who were interested in theatre. These two examples of decor suggest that at least for the length of the performance, the theatre space, whether temporary on
the hulk, or a permanent structure as at Portchester, becomes a miniature Paris. The national colours, vaudevilles and melodramas indicating the use of familiar French popular tunes, lines spoken in French, visual reminders of ‘back home’ such as the scene on the curtain, all combine to create a space which allows the possibility of a return to France. The theatricals’ nostalgic recollections of home reinforce the emotional ties binding the prisoners together. In this way, the theatre is not simply a diversion, a means to pass the time, but a way of reaffirming Frenchness and of mitigating the trauma of imprisonment. Nevertheless, a playbill for ‘a vaudeville in the Billingsgate style’, shows that prisoners adapted their repertoire ‘to meet the needs and expectations of their British audience’ (Cox, 2017: 201). The Portchester theatre had to close to British audiences two weeks after the review in the *Hampshire Telegraph*, allegedly because the manager of the local Portsmouth theatre had reported them to the Transport Board for eclipsing his theatre (see Cox, 2017: 202). No evidence survives that it was the Portsmouth Theatre Royal director who denounced the theatre to the Transport Board but commercial theatre directors may well have felt threatened by the quality of the POW performances, a particular achievement given the circumstances in which the prisoners wrote and performed theatre.

**Parole towns**

In addition to the large numbers of POWs on the hulks or in prisons, there were officers on parole in dozens of towns across the country. As Morieux has shown, ‘the preservation of social hierarchies was at the root of the parole system, which was supposed to reproduce military ranks and privileges’ (2019: 253). Consequently the
context in which POW theatre takes place there is very different to that on the hulks or inside Portchester Castle. The scope that officers on parole had for interacting with a British civilian audience was obviously greater than for those in captivity and increased the potential for theatre to cultivate even greater affinity between the French and local people. Katherine Stevens shows that ‘social status was the greatest influence on individual attitudes and encounters’ (2017: 90) which suggests that officers’ theatre may have had greater impact than the performances on the hulks or at Portchester. There is certainly some evidence in an 1824 Dictionary of Musicians that the composer John Feltham Dannely (1786-1836) gained knowledge of French music from POWs billeted on parole in Odiham and that this directly affected his own work. However, archival evidence for parole-town theatricals is patchy with but a handful of playbills, occasional references in memoirs, and comments from the Transport Board.

Those on parole were of course officers, who belonged to a French social elite even if they were not all of noble birth (Petiteau, 1996; Levent 2009). The differences in the repertoire they chose to perform suggests that different classes may have approached national identity in different ways. Whereas the hulk prisoners were buying into a populist narrative of nationalist propaganda, the higher officer classes seem to perform more the identity of a cosmopolitan enlightened individual, and the idea that Frenchness is equated to civility. If melodrama was the genre of choice at Portchester, it barely features in the parole towns. Instead, the officers’ repertoire chosen reveals ‘cooperative cultural dynamics’ as they seem to offer plays with particular resonance for their British audience, such as Garrick Double, ou les Deux acteurs anglais [Garrick Doubled or the Two English Actors] (1800), with its recognition of the British actor’s undisputed place in theatre history (Cox, 2017: 230).
This intent to appeal to local audiences is also evident in a surviving playbill for a performance in Ashby-de-la-Zouch on 24 March 1810 (Cox, 2017: 253). The officers intended to put on Voltaire’s (1694-1778) *La Mort de César [The Death of Caesar]* (1736) and Molière’s *Les Précieuses ridicules [Precious Ridicule]* (1659) to ‘fill up their leisure hours’. Having formed a Dramatic Society, they are using the Assembly Rooms for their plays. They hoped to attract ‘the Ladies and Gentlemen of this place and neighbourhood’ by offering them tickets; the playbill is addressed to a Miss Mathews and should she wish for a ticket for subsequent performances, she simply has to ‘have the goodness to send for them the day before’. While showing similarities to the activities at the prisons and hulks, such as the establishment of a dramatic society, the fact that the playbill is typescript rather than handwritten, suggests a level of financial input not available to the lower-ranked prisoners. Moreover, the whole enterprise is couched as a gentlemanly leisure pursuit which transcends national borders and relies on a code of conduct familiar across the officer classes of both countries. The playbill is also a reminder that despite the upheaval of the Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, ‘sections of British society continued to identify Frenchness with civility and culture’ (Daly, 2004: 377).

Pierre-Marie-Joseph Bonnefoux (1782-1855), who spent time in Odiham on parole, described his theatrical endeavours in his memoirs:

> Everything was our own work: costumes, mise en scène, music, couplets, orchestra, composition or arrangement of pieces. It was an inexhaustible source of occupation and we enjoyed ourselves immensely. The English couldn’t get enough of our performances – they even came from London to
see us act and really it was all in very good taste. It’s a happy time when even
the most bitter of sorrows flee at the sight of pleasure. (Bonnefoux, 1900: n.p.)

The enthusiasm of the British audience for French POW theatre that we saw in regard
to prison hulk or Portchester theatre is again evident in his account. Bonnefoux also
presents the theatrical endeavours as part of French civility and good taste. But the
Transport Board was less enamoured than the spectators. Anxious about the nefarious
influence of French theatre — a concern mirrored in the London press — meant that
the Transport Board circulated the following instructions to their agents in parole
towns on 8 October 1811:

it is our duty to inform you that we have never approved of or allowed
theatrical Representations at any of the Depots under our charge, nor is it
consonant with the Laws of this Realm, that any Foreigners should institute
such unauthorised Exhibitions whose Tendency may be Dangerous in political
or licentious Principle, and may occasionally and improperly draw together
some of His Majesty’s Subjects to attend them. If, therefore, these Theatrical
Representations are not immediately put a Stop to, we shall be under the
Necessity of removing the Prisoners at…[blank] to some other Depot without
Delay (Cox, 2017: 212).

This instruction reminds us that in Britain at the time, authorities were nervous about
the subversive power of theatre and its ability, to borrow a phrase from social
reformer and playwright Hannah More (1745-1833), to be ‘contagious and destructive
(1818: 44).
The theatrical performances of French POWs show that there was repeated and widespread cultural encounter between the French and the British during the Napoleonic wars: despite the military conflict between Britain and Napoleon’s Empire, British audiences were able to enjoy performances of French plays, both classics such as those by Molière and Voltaire, and recent popular hits from the Parisian Boulevard theatres with their ‘whole shew and spectacle’. While evidence for British audience responses to the plays remains elusive, the fact that ephemeral documents such as playbills have survived suggests that the theatrical events were of sufficient significance to some individuals, such as Captain Paterson, to retain them as mementoes. While the performances on the hulks and at Portchester Castle can only have reached a relatively limited audience, news of the quality of the performances extended more widely, through press reports most notably. Moreover, with about 4000 officers on parole around the country, their theatre would have been more readily accessible to British audiences, at least amongst the more genteel classes.

We are left with the intriguing possibility that these performances took place on what was already fertile ground for what critics called ‘the pervasive foreign influence’ (Saglia, 2019: 43) on theatre in Britain in the first third of the nineteenth century. Did French POW theatre contribute to making British theatre an ‘international venue’ (Burwick, 2009: 151) by making it more receptive to influences from the Continent? The manner in which theatre was used as a space to explore national identity and superiority by the French POWs was certainly mirrored on a much larger scale in the London theatres where French-inspired theatre held sway over playwrights and audiences for decades. Whether conscripted or enlisted willingly, these theatre-performing prisoners undertook a collective enterprise in a
shared place which not only provides rare insights into the circumstances in which
POWs found themselves during the Napoleonic wars, but also into how they
conceived of nationality, loyalty and France through their theatre.

Katherine Astbury
University of Warwick
katherine.astbury@warwick.ac.uk

References


Hampshire Telegraph.


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