

Lesbians, Please Leave the Stage!

LAURENCE SENELICK

THE AUDACIOUS FRENCH THEATER DIRECTOR ANDRÉ Antoine felt compelled to write to an author whose play he had accepted for production that he would have to cancel the performance. “Your play, which might possibly be performed among intimates, *is not playable to a public audience,*” he explained on May 26, 1891. At the read-through, the actors, case-hardened as they were to “naturalistic” subjects, had been aghast at the boldness and violence of the central concept. Antoine admitted that he had let himself be won over by the play’s literary qualities, but “I do not think that, after this trial, an auditorium of 1,200 persons could accept coolly such an inordinately abnormal and impassioned situation.” Were the author to insist on his rights, “we simply run the danger of having the Théâtre Libre closed by a huge scandal which would be quickly exploited by someone you know and which you do not seek ultimately any more than we do.”

What could have provoked such a nervous reaction? Antoine, an employee of the gasworks, had founded his Théâtre Libre in Paris in 1887 precisely to challenge conventional dramatic taste. It was located in an obscure neighborhood on the unfashionable Left Bank and employed amateur actors. The evenings were usually made up of three or four one-act plays accompanied by a lecture to provoke discussion. In the past, one-acts had been mere comic curtain-raisers or afterpieces. Under Antoine, they were naturalistic “slices of life,” drawn from the seamy side of society. The subject matter was often as raw as the sides of beef Antoine had hung on stage in a play about butchers. There were frequent protests from the press and the public.

As a rule, Antoine had no qualms about shocking his audience. He declared that he preferred “license” to “liberty.” The year before his apologetic letter, he had staged Linert’s *Conte de Noël* (*Christmas Story*), in which an illegitimate newborn is thrown to the pigs, while an offstage choir intones “Venite adoremus” (Come let us adore him). However, in the case of this newly submitted “strange and powerful” play, he had no choice but to turn it down for performance. “When I speak of convention which we all detest,” he wrote, “I refer to that wholly British hypocrisy peculiar to people in aggregate who, as individuals, indulge in lots of smuttiness without the least shame.” In other words, what might be acceptable in private was bound to be rejected in public.

So far as we know, the author, Gabriel Mourey, did not complain. Instead, he published the play as a pamphlet and

prefaced it with Antoine’s letter. Mourey (1865-1943) was a prominent Parisian art critic who wrote libretti for Debussy. A collection of his poems had just been published. So he was no rank beginner whose efforts could be dismissed as inept. What made his play unperformable was that its subject was sex between women.

The title of the one-act is in English: *Lawn-tennis*. At this time French high society was infected with Anglophilia. Such terms as “le week-end” and “le fif o’clock” (high tea) had entered the language. Lawn tennis was a genteel Victorian innovation, and 1891 was the year in which the highly exclusive French Championships in Lawn Tennis were founded. Mourey, who had written a book about London, was well-informed about these cross-cultural exchanges.

The action takes place on an elegant country estate on a fine summer’s day. Japanese fans, a rocking-chair, and tea tables indicate wealth, fashion, and social status. The manor belongs to the newly wed Georges Marville. His bride, Elaine, seems nervous at the impending arrival of her girlhood friend Camille (a unisex name in French). They were raised as sisters, and Georges confesses, jokingly, that during his courtship he had been jealous of their intimacy.

Lawn-tennis encapsulates fin-de-siècle preconceptions of the lesbian—not so much the mannish spinster as the oversexed woman or Bacchante.

Camille, who hasn’t seen Elaine since the marriage, praises her ardent nature and loyalty. George suspects that Elaine had had a lover before they met and wants to know who it was. He doesn’t understand her present coldness. “She stayed in bed two days, gripped by fever ... and words, indistinct words issued from her mouth, a name ...

whose? A strange name. And she was calling you too ... in her delirium. ... But that name! that name! Oh! I could have killed him.” What he doesn’t know is that his own name, Georges, was also the name Camille had adopted as her “butch” persona.

No sooner has Georges made his exit into the house than Camille erupts into a Sapphic rhapsody (note that the many ellipses are in the original text):

My head is spinning ... my blood is boiling. It has been so long!
... And this is your hair ... your hair! ... These are your eyes ...
your eyes! ... These are your lips ... these are your lips ... Elaine
... you see, I’m weeping like a little girl ... (*She sobs*) With happiness ...
I thought I had lost you forever ... I wanted to fling in his face. Yes, she was mine, before she was yours. It is the taste of my kisses you find on her mouth ... on her eyes ... her shell-like ears ... her hair ... all over her flesh ... I was there first!

Camille then recalls their first night of passion, when they were dressed as twins and she draped herself in Elaine’s hair. Elaine, who has been trying to be a good normal wife, is terrified yet mesmerized by these remembrances.

Laurence Senelick is Fletcher Professor of Drama at Tufts University and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Exit Stage Left book. Read 25 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Casey Fitzgerald has always been an actress. She's known it was her... Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking "Exit Stage Left" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving... Want to Read. Read about Please Make Me Lesbian! #4 by Girlfriends Films and see the artwork, lyrics and similar artists. A new version of Last.fm is available, to keep everything running smoothly, please reload the site. Girlfriends Films. Please Make Me Lesbian! #4. Love this track. More actions. Set as current obsession. floor level ground stage The doctor gave me a _ for some medicine yesterday. note receipt prescription recipe Can you tell me when _ ? the train leaves does the train leave leaves the train does leave the train I _ a reply to my letter in the next few days. hope expect wait for get When Simon _ back tonight, he'll cook dinner. comes will come. 'No, I've _ seen her. nearly hardly often always He told me that he _ in Spain the previous year. has been working had been working has worked had been worked She looks _ she's going to be sick. as if as likes if The best way to learn a language is _ a little every day. speak in speaking to speaking by speaking She _.