

From the Palais-Royal to the Guénégaud: Life after Molière

by
Jan Clarke

In this article, I will be examining the events immediately following Molière's death and leading up to the creation of the Hôtel Guénégaud company, which, seven years later, was to form the foundations of the Comédie-Française. I will begin my account, though, in February 1672, at which time Molière seemed to be riding high. His *Psyché*, having triumphed at court in January 1671, was being revived in Paris to great acclaim (Molière 2: 797).¹ Convinced of the popular appeal of musical theatre in general and of his own *comédie-ballet* in particular, he had, in preparation for this production, invested considerable sums in the long overdue renovation of his Palais-Royal theatre precisely so as to make it suitable for the spectacular musical extravaganzas that were then all the rage (La Grange 124-25). Molière was still in favour at court, and *La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas* was performed three times at Saint-Germain in February to accompany the *Ballet des ballets* (Molière 2: 950, 1453).²

Things began to go wrong, though, in March, when Molière's collaborator on court entertainments, the composer Jean-Baptiste Lully, obtained that the monopoly on musical theatre be transferred from the beleaguered Pierre Perrin to himself (La Gorce 30-31).³

¹ This was *Psyché*'s second revival in town, it having first been performed there from July to October 1671.

² Despite the evidence of the title page, which gives the premiere as having been in February 1672, *La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas* was, in fact, first performed in December 1671 (Molière 2: 947, 1453).

³ Perrin had been awarded a licence allowing him to found an Académie de musique in June 1670. Despite the successful production of *Pomone* in 1671, financial mismanagement had caused him to be imprisoned for debt.

Molière and Lully had previously been close enough for Molière to lend the composer money (Jurgens and Maxfield-Miller 478–81). His seizure of the monopoly must, therefore, have seemed a significant act of betrayal, particularly since the two collaborators had apparently previously agreed to apply for it together, and Molière only became aware that he had been double-crossed by Lully when it was too late for him to do anything about it (Mongrédien 9–10).

Worse was to come. Lully was not a man to tolerate competition, and the text of his monopoly contained a clause forbidding theatre companies from performing any play accompanied by more than two singers and two instrumentalists without his written permission (Nutter and Thoinan 234–35). Not only would this have made the performance of Molière's *comédie-ballets* impossible, it would also have seriously diminished his other offerings, since he and his company had decided just the year before that all performances of whatever genre should be accompanied by an orchestra of twelve musicians (La Grange 125).

Molière appealed on behalf of all three troupes of French actors then operating in Paris (the Hôtel de Bourgogne and Marais companies and his own troupe performing at the Palais-Royal) and succeeded in having this clause suppressed (Nutter and Thoinan 235–36). His own attitude was not, though, entirely unprovocative. Thus, July saw the Paris revival of *La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas*, accompanying *Le Mariage forcé*, with Lully's scores for both plays having been replaced by new music by Marc-Antoine Charpentier (Hitchcock 256).

In August, in what was clearly a compromise between the interests of the two rivals, a new decree was issued limiting theatre troupes to six singers and twelve instrumentalists. They were, however, forbidden from employing any singer or instrumentalist who had performed twice at Lully's Académie royale de musique, or any of the dancers contracted to him (Nutter and Thoinan 274–

75). Lully obviously intended to cream off the best of the talent for his own company, leaving only the dregs for the rest.

In September, the composer went onto the attack once more by having himself awarded the monopoly on all the words he had ever set to music (Oliver 359). If applied, this would have had the effect of preventing Molière from performing any of his existing *comédie-ballets*, even with new scores. It appears, though, that Molière simply ignored this decree,⁴ and his company gave a number of musical works in the following months, including a major revival of *Psyché*, retaining Lully's score and deliberately timed to coincide with the composer's own production of *Les Fêtes de l'Amour et de Bacchus* (Nutter and Thoinan 286). Yet the revival of *Psyché* was not without difficulty, and La Grange notes that the production expenses were unusually high due to the troupe having been obliged to replace a number of singers and dancers 'qui avaient pris party ailleurs' (139).

Molière died on 17 February 1673, following the fourth performance of his final *comédie-ballet*, for which music had also been provided by Charpentier (Powell 87–142).⁵ The question appears immediately to have been raised as to what should become of the Palais-Royal company, the assumption evidently being that it would be unable to continue to function without its former leader:

Dans le desordre ou la troupe se trouua aprez
cette perte irreperable le Roy eust dessein de joindre
les acteurs qui la composioient aux comediens de

⁴ There is evidence that the Guénégaud company, too, subsequently ignored similar decrees limiting the use of stage music (Clarke, 'Music' 101–02).

⁵ La Grange records that this production required the involvement of twelve instrumentalists, twelve dancers, three 'symphonistes' and seven singers, thereby marginally exceeding the limits imposed in Lully's favour (144).

l'hostel de bourgogne. Cependant apres avoir esté le
Dimanche 19 et mardy 21 sans jouer en attendant
les ordres du Roy on recommencea. (La Grange
142–43)

The troupe had to defend itself against any unwelcome propositions by demonstrating that it was still in a position to perform. It reopened its theatre, therefore, on 24 February with *Le Misanthrope*, with Baron in the title role (La Grange 143). *Le Malade imaginaire* itself was brought back a week later, with La Thorillière replacing Molière (La Grange 143). This play had been very expensive to mount and the company could only hope to pay off its creditors and attain a much-needed financial security by continuing to perform it, despite any tragic associations.

Even so, the company was still in debt at the time of the Easter recess (Chevalley 163). It was at this moment that four of the troupe (La Thorillière, Baron and the Beauval couple) decided to leave the Palais-Royal. Deierkauf-Holsboer, in her book on the Marais, believes that these departures were the consequence of a power struggle between La Thorillière and La Grange. She argues that La Grange seized control of the troupe, causing La Thorillière to leave in high dudgeon taking his future son in law, Baron and his supporters the Beauval's with him (2: 185).⁶ Such a view supposes that it was the practice for a seventeenth-century theatre company to have a designated leader. This leader is sometimes identified with the *orateur*, who made public announcements at the end of each day's performance. The matter was, though, rather more complex. Thus, Molière was clearly the prime force in the company popularly known by his name, since he was its chief

⁶ There is evidence of a lingering animosity between La Thorillière and La Grange in the fact that it was only after the former's death that it was possible to effect the fusion of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and Guénégaud companies to found the Comédie-Française (La Grange 237). This may, though, have come about as a consequence of his 'desertion', rather than being a result of any preceding power struggle.

actor and dramatist, as well as what we would today call its *metteur en scène*.⁷ Yet, Molière only acted as *orateur* from his return to Paris in 1658 until 1664, at which point he handed over to La Grange (La Grange 70).⁸ It is sometimes suggested that this implies that Molière was designating La Grange as his successor. Certainly Chappuzeau, in 1674, made a connection between the duties of the *orateur* and a concern for company administration, although without going quite that far. He writes: ‘il [La Grange] n’a pas seulement succédé à Molière dans les fonctions de l’Orateur, il luy a succédé aussi dans le soin & le zèle qu’il avoit pour les interests communs, & pour toutes les affaires de la Troupe’ (166). However, despite the fact that La Grange was now the primary public mouthpiece of the troupe, there is no doubt that Molière continued to be viewed as company leader by the general public and no doubt within the troupe also.

After Molière’s death, the actors of the Guénégaud company, which included the majority of those formerly with Molière at the Palais-Royal, seem consciously to have tried to distance themselves from the use of the term *orateur*. Thus, Richelet’s dictionary of 1680 reports as follows:

Celui qui a fait le théâtre *françois* [...] [i.e. Chappuzeau] a écrit que les Comédiens appelloient *orateur* celui qui annonce les pieces, fait les harangues et compose les affiches. Les Comédiens ne sont pas du sentiment de cet Auteur, au moins Rosimont qui est l’un de ces Messieurs qui parle le mieux, me l’a assuré positivement. Ils disent, c’est

⁷ This was by virtue of the fact that he was the author of the majority of the plays given by his company, particularly in the latter year’s of his life, since the part played by the dramatist in the direction of his plays was greater than is sometimes supposed (see, for example, Chappuzeau 72–73).

⁸ However, Molière did continue to address the public on special occasions (Brooks 311).

La Grange que annonce & fait les compliments, & jamais c'est La Grange qui est l'*orateur*. (in Brooks 312)

Might this not be precisely because the term had come to be associated with a company's leader? In fact, Richelet is somewhat unfair to Chappuzeau, who takes great pains to emphasise the republican and egalitarian nature of theatre company administration, and actually describes the role of the *orateur* with a certain amount of delicacy:

Pour ce qui est de l'Orateur, ie le tire du rang des Officiers, & comme il represente l'Estat en portant la parole pour tout le Corps, il serait peut être de l'honneur de la Troupe qu'il en fust nommé le Chef, puisque ie luy ay donné la face d'une Republique, & que ie croirois luy faire tort de l'appeller Anarchie. Mais comme cet Orateur ne doit le plus souuent l'honneur de sa fonction qu'au pur hazard, sans que precisement le merite y contribue, & que d'ailleurs il n'a pas dans la Troupe plus de pouuoir ni d'auantage qu'vn autre, ainsi que les Comediens de Paris me l'ont assuré, ie ne le nommeray simplement que l'Orateur, & je diray en peu de mots quelles sont ses fonctions. (Chappuzeau 139–40)

Nevertheless, and despite his consultations, it would seem that Chappuzeau did not go far enough along republican lines to satisfy those actors who had commissioned his work.⁹ Whether this new attitude on the part of the Guénégaud actors came about as a direct consequence of the events of 1673 which led to the founding of

⁹ The manuscript of *Le Théâtre françois* is dedicated to the 'Troupe du roi'. This was the Hôtel Guénégaud company (the Hôtel de Bourgogne company was known as the 'Troupe royale'), which showed its appreciation by paying Chappuzeau 55 *livres* 10 *sols* on 21 September 1673 (Clarke, *Guénégaud* 8).

their company and to which reference is made in this article it is, of course, impossible to say.

Recalling these events in 1679, during a legal dispute with Mlle Auzillon, La Grange attempted to minimise the loss the Palais-Royal company had incurred. When asked if it was true that the troupe's principal actors had gone to the Hôtel de Bourgogne, he replied that it was not and that the best actors had stayed with Molière's widow (Monval 75). It is interesting to note here the primacy given in the new company to Mlle Molière, contrary to what more recent critics have frequently assumed (e.g. Valmy-Baisse 92–94).¹⁰ Mlle Auzillon, for her part, maintained that these were the only actors permitted to join the Hôtel de Bourgogne company, and that the remainder had been rejected both by the Hôtel de Bourgogne and Marais troupes (Monval 75). In any event, and whatever the individual merits of the actors concerned,¹¹ Chappuzeau, writing in 1674, declared that as a result of this departure, the remaining company members were no longer in a position to perform (Chappuzeau 127).

Whether or not this was, indeed, the case, Molière's former company must now have seemed easy prey, and Lully once more moved on to the attack. On 28 April, the King gave permission for Lully to take over the theatre in the Palais-Royal as the new home of his *Académie royale de musique* (Deierkauf-Holsboer 2: 187). And, just two days later, a further decree was issued in his favour limiting theatrical companies to just two singers and six musicians

¹⁰ The widely accepted view is that La Grange, as Molière's staunch lieutenant, stepped into the breach when Mlle Molière's natural 'nonchalance' made her unequal to the task of running a theatre company.

¹¹ We should perhaps note here that Mlle Beauval had been one of Molière's leading comic actresses and that Baron is generally reputed to have been the greatest tragic actor of his age.

and forbidding them from employing any dancers.¹² The compromise solution found in August 1672 between the composer's interests and those of Molière was evidently no longer deemed necessary. As part of his deal to take over the Palais-Royal, Lully undertook to find new premises for the Italian actors with whom Molière had shared the theatre, as well as to assist them with the payment of any rent ('Differends' n. p., Cordey 138).¹³ That no such arrangement was made for Molière's troupe might be a further indication that it was no longer considered in a position to perform. There is also a certain finality in the way in which La Grange lists his income for the whole of his Paris career up to that point, together with his income and expenditure on costumes (145–46). Moreover, on 16 May, the actor Du Croisy visited Monsieur, the Palais-Royal troupe's former patron, 'pour dire adieu', which might be interpreted as suggesting that the company was about to be disbanded (Clarke, *Guénégaud* 46).

The former Palais-Royal actors' were not, however, going to give up without a fight, and their first reaction to these events was to attempt to get back up to full performing strength. Thus, they took on Angélique Du Croisy, the fifteen-year old daughter of the company member previously mentioned (Clarke, 'Du Croisy' 5–9). Of more significance, though, is the coup by which they succeeded in engaging Rosimond from the Marais to take over those roles previously played by Molière. Deierkauf-Holsboer portrays this as an act of treachery on the part of La Grange, whom she persists in considering to have been the new company's leader, claiming that the Marais had done him no harm (2: 187). She is contradicted, though, by Chappuzeau, who writes that the Hôtel de

¹² An interesting footnote to this fact is that, although dancers did continue to be employed at the Guénégaud, they are consistently referred to in the theatre's account books as 'marcheurs' (Clarke, 'Music').

¹³ Molière had shared a theatre (first the Petit Bourbon and then the Palais-Royal) with the Italian *commedia dell'arte* troupe then operating in Paris ever since his return from the provinces in 1658.

Bourgogne and the Marais were both actively working to bring about the complete collapse of the former Palais-Royal troupe (127).¹⁴

In the Marais company's favour, it might be said that it too was probably fighting for its life at this time in the face of a number of serious difficulties. These included both its unfashionable location (Chappuzeau 122) and the fact that Lully's restrictions affected it also by making it impossible for it to give the machine plays for which it was celebrated.¹⁵ Indeed, the former Palais-Royal and Marais troupes must have felt themselves almost equally vulnerable. One indication of this, as well as the extent of their respective determinations to protect themselves, is to be found in the penalty clauses contained in their acts of association. A fine of 1,500 *livres* did not dissuade Rosimond from leaving the Marais when tempted away by the offer of Molière's roles (Deierkauf-Holsboer 2: 184–85). After his departure, the Marais raised its penalty to 2,000 *livres* (Deierkauf-Holsboer 2: 187–88). It was, though, still significantly less well protected than the former Palais-Royal troupe, where the penalty for leaving, after Rosimond's arrival, stood at 6,000 *livres* (Bonnassies 23–25). Clearly, the experience of the departure of La Thorillière and his comrades had been a painful one that the former Palais-Royal company had no wish to repeat.

¹⁴ The act of association between the former Palais-Royal troupe and its two new recruits was actually signed on 3 May (Jurgens and Maxfield-Miller 678), almost two weeks before Du Croisy went to see Monsieur, perhaps suggesting that there had been a downturn in the company's fortunes in the intervening period.

¹⁵ Music was an integral part of the machine play, serving to cover the noise of the scene changes as well as being an attraction in its own right. The Marais had enjoyed a number of successes in this genre between 1669 and 1672, most notably with works by Claude Boyer and Jean Donneau De Visé.

It still remained for the members of this company to find themselves a theatre. The most attractive prospect was the Hôtel Guénégaud, built to house the Académie de musique when still under the direction of Pierre Perrin (Nutter and Thoinan 97–100, 141–43). They were not, though, the only people to think so, and the Marais company, desperate to move from the muddy and badly-lit streets of that *quartier*, had apparently already obtained permission to move to the Guénégaud, when the former Palais-Royal actors snatched it from under their noses. La Grange was subsequently to deny all knowledge of the Marais company's prior claim to the Guénégaud (Monval 76). This may even be true, for, far from being Molière's staunch lieutenant and designated successor as he is so often represented, La Grange and his wife were apparently unpopular with their comrades, including Mlle Molière. According to Mlle Auzillon, the other actors did not want the La Grange couple to be part of the new company, and even made secret trips to see the Guénégaud's proprietors in connection with the transfer of the lease (Monval 55). Interestingly, other trips made at this time include visits to the Marais theatre itself, no doubt to talk over the possibility of a full or partial merger of the two companies (Clarke, *Guénégaud* 40–41).¹⁶

There are three, often contradictory accounts of the events of May and June 1673 given by Chappuzeau in *Le Théâtre français*, La Grange in his *Registre* and La Grange and Hubert at the time of the Guénégaud company's dispute with Mlle Auzillon. The main area of disagreement concerns the selection of actors to transfer to the Guénégaud from the Marais and the timing of this selection in relation to the closure of the latter theatre. In his account, Chappuzeau describes how negotiations between the two companies having broken down, Colbert was ordered by the King

¹⁶ Jean Donneau De Visé, the former purveyor of machine plays to the Marais, was employed by the Palais-Royal troupe in its negotiations with the Marais company (Clarke, *Guénégaud* 40, 46–47). He was later, in collaboration with Thomas Corneille, to provide a highly successful series of machine plays for the Guénégaud company.

to choose the best actors to form the new company. Having done so, he ordered that the Marais troupe should stop performing, and took selected individuals from it to join the former Palais-Royal troupe at the Guénégaud (127). This differs greatly from La Grange's account in his *Registre*, where he claims that the former Palais-Royal troupe alone selected those actors from the Marais it was prepared to admit (148). In 1679, La Grange went even further, claiming that the Marais was actually closed down at the request of the former Palais-Royal troupe (Monval 77). That Colbert did play some part in the settling of this matter is, though, confirmed by the fact that several trips were made by the former Palais-Royal troupe to visit him at Sceaux and elsewhere (Clarke, *Guénégaud* 40–41).

In fact, only two members of the Marais company did not subsequently join that of the Guénégaud. These were two actresses, Catherine Des Urlis and Marie La Vallée, who proceeded to take action against their former comrades at the Marais for being in breach of their act of association. The court found in the actresses' favour and condemned the other actors to pay the stated fine, unless the former Palais-Royal company could be persuaded to accept them too (Deierkauf-Holsboer 2: 193–94). This it resolutely refused to do, thereby confirming La Grange's contention that the Palais-Royal troupe did have some say over which actors it would accept. That is not to say, though, that it had an entirely free hand, and a third actress was imposed upon it against its will. This was Mlle Auzillon, whose husband was an employee of the Lieutenant of Police, La Reynie. Several visits were made by the company to see this eminent individual to discuss 'l'affaire de Mlle Auzillon', before discretion evidently dictated that it was wiser to give way (Monval 77, Clarke, *Guénégaud* 40–41).

La Grange is contradicted, though, as far as the timing of the closure of the Marais is concerned, since this only occurred on 23 June, whereas the various negotiations between the former Palais-Royal troupe, Colbert, De Visé and the Marais actors all took place in May and the first two weeks of June (Deierkauf-Holsboer 2:

189, Clarke, *Guénégaud* 40–41). It would seem, therefore, that the actual sequence of events was very close to that described by Chappuzeau, with the Marais only being closed down once the fate of some if not all of its actors had been assured.

The former Palais-Royal company paid 14,000 *livres* in order to effect the transfer of the lease on the Guénégaud (Bonnassies 27–30). This sum was lent to the company by Mlle Molière, although she was obliged to use an intermediary in order to do so, despite the fact that the troupe was well aware of the money's true source (Clarke, *Guénégaud* 43–44). Is it not, then, somewhat ironic to discover that 11,000 *livres* of this sum came from the repayment of the loan made to Lully by Molière three years before (Jurgens and Maxfield-Miller 578). The Guénégaud company was shortly to perform, not only those *comédie-ballets* it had inherited from Molière, but also a series of brand new and highly successful spectacular musical entertainments provided for it by Thomas Corneille and Jean Donneau De Visé. Might we not, therefore, find some kind of divine justice in the fact that Lully, after having made Molière's last year so miserable, was himself the means of enabling the remnants of the dramatist's troupe to survive to create what must have been a veritable thorn in his own side?

In her book on the Marais, Deierkauf-Hosboer reverses the traditional view, claiming it was the Marais that came to the rescue of Molière's former troupe. She writes:

Or, voici la vérité: le Roi a joint la compagnie énergique et expérimentée du Marais à ce qui restait de la troupe du feu Molière qui décapité, démembrée, la plus malheureuse des trois compagnies parisiennes, a été sauvée ainsi de l'anéantissement. (2: 209)

I have written elsewhere of how little I believe this to have been the case (Clarke, 'Comédie-Française'). I hope to have given here further examples of the energy and vigour with which the remaining members of Molière's troupe fought back in desperately

difficult circumstances to impose themselves once more on the Parisian theatrical scene, as well as having hinted at certain possible future consequences of this struggle in terms of company administration and the actors' supposed republicanism.

Durham University

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