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**Spectacularising the commonplaces.  
Crafting and animating the domestic environment  
in Victorien Sardou's *Maison Neuve* (1866)  
and Mrs Musgrave's *Our Flat* (1889)**

In his essay published in 1893, theatre theorist Germain Bapst reported a conversation between the famous playwright Victorien Sardou and the president of the French Republic, Adolphe Thiers. This interaction supposedly happened in the early 1870s, in the presidential office. Receiving Victorien Sardou, the president asked him what the modern theatre looked like, as he was not a regular visitor anymore. "I heard rumours about your plays" he said, "I was told the actors on stage drink real tea and put real sugar into real cups". "Yes", Victorien Sardou replied, "things did change a lot in theatres". To explain the curiosity of stages full of so many "real things", the playwright compared them with private interiors, and furthermore, with the presidential interior:

"Last time I came here, twenty-five years ago, your office was a large rectangular room, with a large table in the centre, an armchair in front of it, and all around, chairs aligned against the wall. Look at your office today! Chairs are not against the wall anymore; armchairs are put in front of the fireplace; left and right, here and there, there are pouffes, wing chairs, squat armchairs, stools, scattered, disseminated, looking at one another, or turning their backs, forming groups of characters conversing! We did just the same in theatres. At the time of Scribe, the door was at the back of the stage, facing the prompt box; on both sides, there was, like once in your office, aligned chairs. Today the stage represents a real furnished living-room, just like this one, just like the elegant rooms of our time. However, I don't deserve credits for this transformation: we owe it to Montigny, who has been skilfully managing the Théâtre du Gymnase for the past twenty years."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On dit que, dans vos pièces, on prend du véritable thé et qu'on met du véritable sucre dans les tasses !

According to Sardou, the trends of stage decorating therefore followed the trends of interior furnishing. Thumbing through stage designs from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this evolution is indeed noticeable. The decorative furniture, before aligned against the wall, progressively moved towards the centre and the front of the stage, amongst the actors. As Victorien Sardou mentioned, this display was launched by Adolphe Montigny, director of the Théâtre du Gymnase, who praised realistic stages and accessorised interiors on stage. But for Montigny furniture was not only used to give a sense of realism, it also helped regulating the movements of the actors on stage, and made their interactions more natural. During the rehearsals of *Diane de Lys*, Alexandre Dumas fils asked Montigny: “why is there always a table right in the middle of the stage?”. And Montigny replied: “Because if I don’t put an obstacle, all the actors entering the stage will stand right in front of the prompt box, and I do not want that. They enter, they find the table, it forces them to move either on the left or on the right, then I can place the scene as I like.”<sup>2</sup>

Actors conversing around a table instead of aligned in front of the stage indeed made dialogues more natural and convincing. This new way of positioning objects on stage lead to new interactions with them, and a new role for them. Objects could initiate the development of the plot – a letter – or represent a character absent from the stage – a hat. But even in the background, objects on stage had a growing part in the plot: giving hints on characters, their past, or the twists and turns of the upcoming events of the plot. Comedies tackling issues such as social status, upward mobility and social decline gave an important role to objects, as middle and upper classes relied on possessions to prove their status. Their offered great comedy potential, inviting the audience to detect cheaters and pretenders by paying meticulous attention to details. For instance, silverware, fabrics and doors would be checked for initials or coats of arms: if the name of the owner was engraved, it meant it was not borrowed or rented<sup>3</sup>.

In many comedies about social status, characters would experience a brutal mobility from one class to another. Following the evolution of the characters’ status, their private interiors

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<sup>2</sup> « Pourquoi toujours cette table au milieu du salon? – Parce que, me répondit-il, si je ne fais pas poser cet obstacle, tous les acteurs, qu'ils entrent par le fond ou par le côté, viendront se planter devant le trou du souffleur, ce que je ne veux pas. Ils entrent, ils trouvent une table, cela les force d'aller à droite ou à gauche, et je place alors la scène où bon me semble. » Anecdote rapportée dans « Au théâtre comme dans la réalité », in *Lectures pour Tous. Revue universelle et populaire illustrée*, Hachette et Cie., Paris, 1903, p.519.

<sup>3</sup> « J'ai dîné chez lui !... charmant appartement, belle argenterie, un dessert en vermeil à ses armes ! donc ce n'était pas emprunté... », Mercadet, Acte I Scène VII, p.20.

would contain more furniture or new accessories, and sets would change accordingly. Such as in *Caste* by Tom Roberston. The interior of the first act where the two young sisters were living in a very poor environment therefore changed into a luxurious living room when marrying a rich man made one of the sisters move upward on the social scale. Nevertheless, such changes were operated between acts, behind the curtains. But the two plays I would like to talk about today are particularly interesting because the changes in the scenery do not only occur in the shadows, behind the curtains: they are also performed during the play as a part of the plot. They then become dramatized and spectacularised, and the interiors on stage take part in the movements on stage.

In *Maison Neuve*, Victorien Sardou set the plot in the context of the major urban remodelling of Paris made under Napoleon the third. He opposed the new neighbourhoods, built under the supervision of the Baron Haussmann, with the authentic parts of the capital. *Maison Neuve* tells the story of a young couple of hatmakers living with the husband's uncle in the old neighbourhoods of Paris. They live in a wealthy house, their shop is working well and they have a nice life but they have a strong fear of missing out: they are bored and want to experience the vibrant life of the new and fancy neighbourhoods. So they move in a new house - as the titled says, *Maison neuve*, "New House" - a new flat on the fashionable and bustling boulevards. They also start to frequent different circles and make new friends. However, this new exciting life has a cost, especially in home decoration. As they cannot afford to buy furniture, they rent everything to an upholsterer. But unlike other comedies talking about an upholsterer as a distant and absent character, in *Maison Neuve*, the upholsterer becomes a character. As soon as they move into their new flat, he appears on stage, and as the main characters interact in the foreground, he finishes the decoration of their interior.

Later in the third act, after the couple's disgrace, the upholsterer drastically changes behaviour, feeling the upcoming confiscation by the bailiff. "Get your candles" he orders to his employees. "To your ladders, quick!" he says, and all the decorators start deconstructing the stage in front of the astonished audience. They remove the chandeliers, benches, planters, frames, before leaving the set, taunting the unfortunate. In the fiction, the upholsterer has the function of decorator of the comedy played by the couple in this superficial world. Building the scenery during the play, he materialises the *mise en abyme* of the social performance in the theatrical performance. The audience's reaction to this scene is quite negative, some reviews even reported hissing. *Le Figaro* justified the audience's disapproval: "the scene is fake and useless. Coming from

Sardou, who knows everything, who talks trials like a solicitor, and finance like a banker [...] how can he ignore that no law allows an upholsterer to remove furniture in an occupied house at three in the morning?"<sup>4</sup>.

Victorien Sardou was probably conscious about the implausibility of the scene – with the performance of the upholsterer as a character, he might have tried to emphasise his argument about how vainness, fashion and counterfeit make a household unstable and ephemeral. Therefore, by animating the sets with the intervention of the upholsterers, he depicted the interior of the couple as everchanging, and eventually, crumbling down – a metaphor of their attempt to live a life of futile delights amongst high society. Compared to the sets of their first house, well-furnished but frozen in time, the ‘new house’ is covered in gilding that quickly cracks to reveal the true nature of things. Looking into Victorien Sardou’s life off stage and his own interiors, we can see that he actually shared this morale.

In all of his plays, Victorien Sardou introduced every scene with a detailed description of the accessories and how the actors would interact with them. As the curtain rises, one actor is reading the newspaper – another one is sitting by the piano. Wardrobes are open, showing the many accessories they contain. During rehearsals, he took great care of the organisation of the actors and the furniture on stage. Therefore, the character of the upholsterer in *Maison Neuve* could be seen both as the metaphor of the theatre decorator but also of the playwright himself.

Victorien Sardou himself was a fervent collector and expressed a religious devotion to things, especially antiquities. At the time of his death in 1909, the catalogue of his belongings was introduced by a short biography suggesting that his material possessions inspired his dramatic works – and referred to his objects as “the marvellous characters he would use to create his plays”. Going back to his conversation with the French president in the 1870s, he did describe a furnished interior as chairs and tables “forming a group of characters conversing”. Victorien Sardou clearly saw objects as coming to life and able to perform their own role.

In the second play I would like to talk about today, *Our Flat*, the furniture and decoration are also moving, appearing and disappearing. What is particularly interesting with this play is that it involved the main characters in the process of constructing and deconstructing the sets during the performance – and especially women, who had a major role in home decorating off-stage. The play premiered at the Prince of Wales’s Theatre in 1889, then at the Opera Comique and

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<sup>4</sup> *Le Figaro*, 5/12/1866, p.1.

the Strand. Though the play was never published, it quickly became a hit play and was adapted overseas, especially in the United States where it was a resounding success for several years.

The play opens on a young couple in their fancy flat fancily furnished on a hire system. Reginald, an unsuccessful playwright, married Margery against the wish of her wealthy father. The court dressmaker, Madame Volant, adopting a Parisian accent, is the first one to come to claim her 'leettle bill' of 70 pounds. Following her, the employees of the furniture maker come and remove all furniture, leaving Margery with only some tablecloths, curtains and couvrepieds.

Bella, the servant, informs Margery that the general manager of the Star theatre, is coming to their flat as he has accepted a comedy she has sent under the name of her husband. Bribed by the gift of a beautiful teagown, Bella accepts to stay and help her mistress and together they recreate all the furniture by placing old boxes and the bathtub all covered with fabrics, rugs and cloth to hide their debts and make the living room look as full and fancy as possible. The manager takes Bella for Reginald's wife and Margery for the servant, but eventually finds out Margery is both Reginald's wife and the author of the comedy he received. Many more incidents follow until the manager finally pays for the play and the couple can recover from debt.

"It might have seemed a risky experiment to rehabilitate the drawing-room *coram populo*, but the audience quite appreciated the joke of being thus taken into her confidence", a review admits. All the characters of *Our Flat* recreate the theatre inside the theatre, the social comedy inside the theatrical comedy: the playwright, the theatre manager, the furniture seller, the dressmaker, etc. Making women characters the decorators of the performance is also interesting in the way it reflects the reality of the gendered division of roles in home-furnishing. As handbooks' titles prove, the responsibility of decorating and maintaining the household fell to women in the vast majority. And even more interestingly, the character of Margery seems to be a direct metaphor of the author of the play herself.

Not much is known about the playwright, Mrs Musgrave. Kate Newey's work in her book *Women's Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* indicates she wrote two other plays in the years following the premiere of *Our Flat: Dick Wilder and Cerise&Co*. Like many Victorian women playwrights, most information about her was lost as she mostly hid behind her husband's name. As Kerry Powell remarks in her book *Women and Victorian Theatre* in 2009, "when [a] first one-act piece was about to be produced, "it was advisable to conceal the sex of its author until after the notices were out, as plays which were known to be written by women were apt to get a bad press." Mrs Musgrave therefore signed *Our Flat*, her first play, with her husband's name, withholding her

own identity as author "till the agreement [was] signed." She thus signed a comedy under her husband's name, just like Margery did in the play. But as little is known about her, it is difficult to understand the actual intentions of the playwright for this comedy, especially in terms of stage designs: unlike Victorien Sardou who we can say with certainty had a great influence on stage direction, we do not know if Mrs Musgrave was present during rehearsals or if the construction and deconstruction of the sets was directed under her impulse. Nevertheless, in both plays, the manipulation and animation of the furniture and accessories do more than materialising the social evolution of the characters: they are the triggering factor of their downfall or ascent. Their presence or absence on stage emphasised both the dramatic and comedic potential of the play.

My theory is that such performances of objects paved the way to more spectacular displays where objects would move almost without the intervention of human characters. Georges Feydeau was fond of integrating technological progress in his plays – telephones, gramophones, cars – but also made objects up for dramatic purposes. For instance, the “ecstatic chair” in *La Dame de chez Maxim’s* – an armchair able to immobilise people sitting on it. Or the “flipping bed” (lit sur tournettes), designed for unfaithful couples giving secret lovers a chance to disappear in the wall in case of unexpected visits. Here you can see the mechanical process of the “flipping bed” recently reconstituted by animators of the stage designers’ school of Avignon.

Animated objects and their role in performance can also be placed in a broader aesthetic in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century of considering objects as living things with a conscience – as in the analogy of Sardou’s ‘conversing chairs’. Winsor McCay’s walking bed in his comics *Little Nemo in Slumberland* is a good illustration, or even more interestingly this illustrated book by famous actress Sarah Bernhardt – *Dans les nuages : Impressions d’une chaise* (“*In the clouds: Impressions of a Chair*”), published in 1878, in which a chair lives great adventures with the actress. More interestingly, the story is told by the chair itself. Travelling in a hot air balloon, being decorated by the actress... Conscient and performing objects that can appear as early forms of theatre of objects performed throughout in the twentieth century.