Beyond the *Affaire Tartuffe:* Seventeenth-Century French Theatre in Colonial Quebec

On December 31, 1646, the inhabitants of the fledgling French settlement of Quebec—missionaries, colonists, and Amerindians—assembled around a makeshift stage in the warehouse of the colony's trading company to watch a tragicomedy, tentatively identified by most scholars as Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid* (Journal 75). Surprising though such an event may seem to most students of seventeenth – century France, which often is thought of in scholarship as "enclosed within an insular, self-protective bubble" (Melzer 14), scholars of French America long have known that plays from the metropolitan stage sometimes found their way to audiences in New France. Most scholarly treatments of the phenomenon have been content, however, to reserve most of their analysis for a single well-documented and controversial moment in early Quebec's theatrical history: the fight that erupted in 1694 between secular and religious authorities over a planned presentation of Molière's searing comedy *Le Tartuffe.* This article examines instead the record of French plays that were actually presented in the colony, and attempts to glean from it lessons about the most basic aspects of the phenomenon—its extent, how plays may have been chosen, and their reception. The relative sparseness of this record makes it impossible, for the present, to draw many firm conclusions. And yet, close attention to examples aside from the oft-studied case of *Le Tartuffe* brings some potentially useful nuance to the conclusions that scholars typically have drawn

about the place of theatre in colonial life, and points the way to further research that may have much to teach us not only about colonial New France, but also about its relationship to seventeenth-century France and its literature.

Various accounts of life in New France record the performance there of plays from the Old World. The first was an unnamed tragicomedy that was performed in 1640 to celebrate the birth two years earlier of the child who would become King Louis XIV, according to the *Relations* of the Jesuit missionaries in New France that were published annually from 1632 to 1673 (Campeau Vol. 4, 566). Next, the missionaries' journal, written by several hands across more than two decades, testifies to the performance in 1646 of the above-mentioned tragicomedy, identifying it as "le Sit." Scholars frequently have understood this to be a misspelling of *Cid,* although this identification must be regarded as speculative in the absence of further clues. It is made at least plausible, however, by the fact that Corneille's iconic play was later performed in the colony, and that the Jesuit chronicler misspelled the title in that instance, labeling it "le Scide." According to the Jesuits' journal, that performance took place on April 16, 1652 (166). The same source indicates that Corneille's *Héraclius* was performed on December 4, 1651 (164), and that the anonymously-authored tragicomedy *Le Sage Visionnaire*, published in Paris in 1648, was performed twice in February 1668, in the span of only three days (358). Finally, the 1694 *mémoire* of colonial soldier Antoine de Lamothe Cadillac reveals that tragedies by Corneille and Jean Racine—*Nicomède* and *Mithridate*—found their way

to the New France stage in 1693 and 1694.[1] Apparently seeking to build on that success, the colony's governor, Louis de Baude, Comte de Frontenac, reportedly sought in 1694 to stage a performance of Molière's *Le Tartuffe,* a proposition that sparked a bitter feud between the colony's secular and religious authorities and resulted in an outright ban on theatre there, eventually and at least temporarily including pedagogical dramas in the colony's religious schools (Grégoire 263).

None of the above-listed performances is unknown, but they generally are overshadowed in scholarship by the *Tartuffe* controversy, or in some cases Marc Lescarbot's *Le Théâtre de Neptune*, reputedly the first play written and performed in the French New World.[2] Indeed, no fewer than five articles and book chapters have been devoted exclusively to the dispute in Quebec over Molière's incendiary comedy, and even the many surveys of theatre in colonial New France tend to focus mostly on that fight.[3] This is no doubt because the surviving record of theatre in New France generally says very little about plays that actually were performed, in most cases not even indicating where performances took place, who sponsored and acted in them, or what kinds of sets and costumes were used. The performances of Corneille's *Héraclius* and *Le Cid* in 1651 and 1652, respectively, are marked with single sentences in the Jesuits' journal that offer nothing more than the plays' titles

[1] The *mémoire* is housed in the French National Archives. Several scholars have independently reproduced the relevant portion of its contents. Francis Parkman translated and quoted the relevant section in his 1899 book (340). Robert de Roquebrune and Lewis P. Waldo quoted portions of it in the original French in 1931 and 1942, respectively (186 and 31).

[2] Since Lescarbot's play was composed in North America instead of imported from the Paris stage, this play—fascinating though it may be—is not under consideration here. For more, see Lynch and Welch. For the same reason, this article does not take up dramas written for use in colony's Jesuit college and Ursuline convent.

[3] For scholarly work focused narrowly on the *Tartuffe* controversy in New France, see Eccles, Gosselin, Grégoire, Rambaud, and Roquebrune. Surveys of varying completeness—most of which devote a large portion of their attention to the *Affaire Tartuffe*—include Burger, Cameron, Laflamme and Tourangeau, Laflèche, Paquet, Séguin, Trudel, Vance, and Waldo.

and the dates on which they were staged. *Mithridate, Nicomède,* and *Le Sage Visionnaire* receive similar treatment, with the addition of very brief comments trumpeting their success. The unnamed play in 1640 and the 1646 performance of what may have been *Le Cid* occasioned slightly more commentary, as we will soon see, but still no more than a few sentences. The dispute over *Le Tartuffe*, in contrast, is comparatively well documented in the official records of the colony's religious and civil authorities. It is certainly understandable that scholars have preferred to examine the one case over which much ink was spilled in seventeenth-century New France, but as the remainder of this article will show, common scholarly characterizations of colonial performances of plays from the French stage may be called into question when the phenomenon is viewed more generally, instead of primarily through the prism of one admittedly fascinating case.

One question that often arises in scholarship on theatre in New France is that of extent: just how common was it for plays from the Old World to find their way to the colonial stage? The usual answer to that question is that it was a fairly inconsequential part of life in the colony. Several researchers have implied or directly asserted that the above list of performances represents a full accounting of plays staged in New France during the seventeenth century. To cite only a few examples, Baudouin Burger wrote that "dix ans, vingt ans même peuvent séparer deux représentations jusqu'à la moitié du XVIIIe siècle. Il n'existe donc aucune habitude de jeu théâtrale" (34). Annette Saint-Pierre claimed that no plays by Corneille were performed between 1652 and 1694, as if the gap in the record could only be explained by an actual hiatus in performances (Vol. 1, 456). And Margaret M.

Cameron asserted that "the history of the theatre in Canada under the French régime is not more than the history of a few college spectacles, and of a few plays presented under the patronage of the governor" (19). Some scholars ignore the question of extent entirely, allowing their lists of performances—few and far between—to speak for themselves.

And yet, there are reasons to think that theatrical performances may have been more common than often is suggested. We owe our knowledge of all of the performances mentioned above—with the exceptions of *Mithridate* and *Nicomède*—solely to the records kept by Jesuit missionaries. Other potential sources of information—the contemporaneous reports of the Ursuline nun Marie de l'Incarnation, the letters home from missionaries and other colonists that have survived into our time, etc.—regrettably are mute on the subject. The Jesuits, for their part, may not have been wholly supportive of everything that happened in the colony, especially imported aspects of Old-World life (True 179-183), and therefore may not have bothered to note every play in their journal or published *Relations*. Even if they had no objections, the missionaries naturally would have been more interested in documenting the spiritual life of the colony and their progress in converting Amerindians than in providing an exhaustive accounting of civic life. And even if the journal that records five of the above-mentioned performances were assumed to be an exhaustive account of events in the colony for the years it covers, that coverage extends only 23 years, from 1645 to 1668, due to the apparent loss of parts of the manuscript. After 1668, there is no record of plays from France being performed in the colony until Cadillac's report on *Mithridate* and *Nicomède* in the

final decade of the seventeenth century. Although some scholars have interpreted this gap as an actual hiatus in performances, the fact that it coincides with the end of the surviving portion of the Jesuits' journal makes that a risky conclusion.

Indeed, even if the current state of knowledge on theatre in New France does not allow for the identification of additional examples, there are clear signs that more plays from the Old World were performed there. A 1685 letter from Jean-Baptiste de La Croix de Chevrières de Saint-Vallier, soon to be appointed Bishop of Quebec, warns new colonial governor Jacques-René de Denonville against allowing his daughter to act in secular comedies, and alludes to performances of which no record has survived. Wrote Saint-Vallier, "ce serait renouveler ici sans y penser l'usage du théatre et de la comédie, ou autant ou plus dangereuse que le bal et la danse, et contre laquelle les désordres qui en sont arrivés autrefois ont donné lieu d'invectiver avec beaucoup de véhémence" (*Mandements des Évèques de Quebec* I.172). The Bishop's advice on this matter comes almost two decades after any specific theatrical presentation that we know to have occurred, none of which were comedies. His use of the words *Renouveller* (renew) and *usage* (custom) to designate past theatrical practices in the colony hints that at least during a certain period of the seventeenth century, plays from France may have been a regular part of life there. And despite the Bishop's warning, performances appear to have continued in the colony. The records of the Conseil Souverain de la Nouvelle France for 1694 mention, in discussing the *Tartuffe* controversy, "les tragédies et les comédies qui se sont jouées les années précédentes pendant le Carnaval" (*Jugements et Délibérations* Vol 3, 926). Vague though they are, these clues make it practically certain that

theatre may have been a larger part of life in the colony than is sometimes asserted and often suggested in scholarship on the subject. At a minimum, it can be said with some confidence that the above-listed performances are not the only ones to have occurred in seventeenth-century New France.

A second question that presents itself when one considers theatre in the colony from a more holistic than usual point of view concerns how such plays were selected for the New France stage. Taken at face value, the plays that are known to have been performed—several well-known works by Corneille, a single play by Racine, and the less-known *Le Sage Visionnaire*—seem to be an odd assortment of dramas from the Old World. What made them, but not other plays, the preferred choices for the colony? It is impossible to offer a definite answer in the absence of a complete list of the plays that were performed there, but it can at least be said that novelty does not appear to have been a consistent criterion in their selection, because the performances that are known to have taken place in most cases came many years after the plays' initial success in France. The first performance of *Le Cid* in New France that we know of came nine or 15 years after its Old World début, depending on whether the 1646 tragicomedy is understood to have been Corneille's masterpiece. The only recorded performance of *Nicomède* in Quebec came 42 years after its 1651 appearance in Paris, and the staging of *Mithridate* came 20 years after its Old World début. Twenty years separated the publication of *Le Sage Visionnaire* in Paris and the Jesuits' notation of its performance in the colony, and nearly 30 years elapsed between *Le Tartuffe's* first performance in France and Frontenac's plan to have it performed in Quebec. *Héraclius*, atypically, appears to have found its

way to Quebec relatively quickly, appearing there only four years after its 1647 début on the Parisian stage. Although it is impossible in the absence of a complete record of theatre in seventeenth-century Quebec to discount the possibility that each of these plays was performed several times in the colony, and perhaps closer to the dates on which they debuted in Paris, the partial record that has survived suggests a clear pattern: plays from the French stage often were performed in the colony long after their initial popularity in France had subsided. And yet, if the colonial sponsors of such performances had wanted to feed their audiences a steady diet of France's most recent plays, they likely could have done so. It was not uncommon for the merchant ships that crossed the Atlantic Ocean annually to carry with them books that only recently had been published in Paris. (Drolet 491).

If not novelty, then, what may have accounted for the selection of plays performed in seventeenth-century Quebec? Scholarship on the *Tartuffe* controversy may provide an important clue, and point the way to a promising avenue for future research on how theatre contributed to life in New France. Underlining Frontenac's reputedly impetuous and imperious nature, scholars often have suggested that the colonial governor planned a performance of *Le Tartuffe* solely to antagonize the colony's clergy, whom he apparently found too meddlesome in civic affairs (see, for example, Gosselin 60, Rambaud 429, and Cameron 15). In other words, the theory goes, the play may have been selected for how its thematic content was expected to be received in the colony's political and religious climate. Might the same be true of the performances that actually took place? More than one scholar has suggested in passing that *Le Cid*—with its themes of honor, heroism, and armed conflict—may

have had particular resonance for New France's political situation at the time of its performance there (Blum 151, 208; Saxon 62). And the oft-overlooked case of *Le Sage Visionnaire* lends credence to the theory. That play is, in the words of Lewis P. Waldo, "a combination of morality and allegory" (29). It contrasts the experiences of Pamphile, who gives in to worldly temptations, and Dorante, who resists them and turns to the Church for salvation (Waldo 29-30). It is not hard to see why the colony's Jesuit missionaries seem to have embraced the play, noting that it was presented twice and "avec grand succez et satisfaction de tout le monde" (358). Indeed, its message coincides with the lessons they sought to impart to would-be Amerindian converts, as well as to the French residents of Quebec. Although this point must remain speculative, unless and until more clues come to light about how plays were selected and who organized each performance, it can at least be said that the sponsors of French theatre in Quebec were not merely following the fashions of the Old World, and must have had their own reasons for staging particular plays when they did.

Finally, the point of view on colonial theatre adopted here brings nuance to scholarly conclusions about the reception of French plays in the colony, easily the most frequently commented aspect of the phenomenon. Scholars often have concluded—primarily on the basis of the *Tartuffe* controversy—that plays from the Old World were popular with residents and colonial officials, but consistently despised by representatives of the Church. Jean-Claude Dubé, for example, claimed that "throughout the century, the attitude of the clergy in New France was, on the whole, very severe with regard to the theatre, or at any rate that which did not

explicitly aim to promote Christian values" (215). In the same vein, Laflamme and Tourangeau expressed surprise that there is not a richer record of the phenomenon, in light of the length of the colonial period and "la sévérité du contrôle ecclésiastique sur le théâtre" (73), suggesting that such control extended throughout the century. And Jonathan F. Vance claimed that although ritual, theatrical ceremonies such as those performed in the Jesuit and Ursuline schools were thought permissible by Church authorities, "secular drama was an entirely different story" (47). Even in the absence of such direct statements that Quebec's Church and civil authorities were consistently at odds over theatre during the seventeenth century, the long shadow that the *Tartuffe* controversy casts in scholarship on the subject makes it easy to assume that such was the case.

In addition to pointing to the Tartuffe dispute as evidence of consistent ecclesiastical hostility to theatre in New France, scholars occasionally also have cited the example with which this article began, the tragicomedy—possibly *Le Cid*—that was staged in 1646. That spectacle is recorded in just a few sentences in the Jesuit journal: "Le dernier jour de l'An, on représenta une action dans le magazin, du Sit. Nos Pères y assistèrent pour la considération de Mons. le Gouverneur, qui y avoit de l'affection et les sauvages aussi, sçavoir, les pères de Quen, Lalement et Defretat; le tout se passa bien et n'y eut rien qui pût mal edifier. Je prié monsieur le Gouverneur de m'en exempter" (75). Robert-Lionel Séguin cited only the last sentence of the passage to support his claim that the Jesuit superior was displeased by the performance (8). Guy Laflèche similarly cited only the Superior's decision to not attend the play in assessing its reception by the clergy, suggesting

representatives of the Church took it as an affront to be boycotted (62). And Jean-Claude Dubé cited the brevity of the Jesuits' notation of that event—as well as those marking performances of *Le Cid* and *Héraclius* several years later—as evidence of disapproval (215). And yet, these interpretations are hard to reconcile with the rest of what the Jesuit had to say: several priests attended, everything went well, and nothing unedifying transpired. Any perceived terseness in the Jesuits' record may just as plausibly be explained by the fact that paper was sometimes scarce in the colony, as the Jesuits had to rely on shipments from France to replenish their stock.[4] Indeed, far from confirming the impression of an all-out war on theatre that may be left by scholarly treatments of the *Tartuffe* affair, the journal entry recording the 1646 tragicomedy tells us that representatives of the Church in New France sometimes attended and at least tacitly approved of the secular entertainments offered there.

In another case, a Jesuit writer was more enthusiastic in his endorsement of a theatrical performance. The Jesuit *Relation* for 1640, attributed to missionary Paul Le Jeune, praises the prudence and zeal of then-Governor Charles du Hault de Montmagny, while describing his decision to arrange the performance of an unspecified tragicomedy that year to honor the recent birth of the dauphin (Campeau Vol. 4, 566). This praise may be at least partly explained by the fact that the missionaries themselves apparently participated in the spectacle, or at least in its preparation, in collaboration with the colony's secular authorities. Wrote Le Jeune:

[4] Complaints about the scarcity of paper abound in the Jesuits' published *Relations.* See, for example, Campeau Vol. 3, 108 and 289.

> "Mais afin que nos sauvages en peussent retirer quelque utilité, monsieur le Gouverneur, doué d'un zèle et d'une prudence non commune, nous invita d'y mesler quelque chose qui leur pût donner dans le veue et frapper leurs Oreilles. Nous fismes poursuivre l'âme d'un infidelle par deux demons, qui enfin la précipitèrent dans un enfer qui vomissoit des flames. Les résistances, les cris et les hurlemens de cette âme et de ces demons, qui parloient en langue algonquine, donnèrent sy avant dans le coeur de quelques-uns qu'un sauvage nous dit, à deux jours de là, qu'il avoit esté fort épouvanté la nuict par un songe très affreux: 'Je voyois, disoit-il un gouffre horrible, d'où sortoient des flames et des démons. Il me sembloit qu'ils me vouloient perdre, ce qui me donna bien de la terreur (Campeau Vol. 4, 566).

Far from being a site of tension between the colony's religious and secular authorities, this spectacle—organized by the governor—proved useful for the missionaries' goals as well. Even more strikingly, the missionary went on to praise aspects of the performance that had nothing to do with his group's religious goals: "Je n'aurais pas creu qu'on eût peu trouver un si gentil appareil et de si bons acteurs à Kébec. Le sieur Martial Piraube, qui conduisoit cette action et qui en représentoit le premier personnage, réussit avec excellence" (Campeau Vol. 4, 566). It was not only the results of the religious message that the priests were invited to insert into the play that drew Le Jeune's praise, but also its mundane aspects like the quality of the acting and costumes. The colony's religious and secular authorities undoubtedly clashed over theatre at various points in the seventeenth century, with tensions coming to a head over *Le Tartuffe.* But the above examples suggest that at other

times, the church approved of the plays, whether tacitly or explicitly, and sometimes could even participate in them.

The traces of theatre in New France that I have assembled here suggest that it was likely a more common and diversely received phenomenon than is often suggested, one that might upon further study yield important lessons about the colony and its relationship to France. Indeed, one common conclusion of scholars who have examined the *Tartuffe* controversy is that it was much like the fight that broke out over that play in France, as if to show that the tensions and preoccupations of French society were as operative in Quebec as they were in Paris (see, for example, Grégoire 248, Rambaud 433, and Waldo 36). The very fact that plays from the metropolitan stage made their way to the New France stage bolsters that argument. Such presentations, whether of icons of French culture like *Le Cid* or comparatively obscure works like *Le Sage Visionnaire,* suggest that seventeenth-century France was perhaps not as insular and inward turned as scholarship often still tends to suggest, and that its New France colony was not only a source of intellectual and economic raw material, but also a site of French culture in its own right. By staging—or attempting to stage—plays that normally are associated with seventeenth-century France's artistic and intellectual capital, the inhabitants of New France were not only entertaining themselves, but also testifying to the existence of a broader French culture, one that was not restricted in the seventeenth century to Paris and Versailles.[5]

[5] No one, to my knowledge, has attempted to assemble a full accounting of performances of plays from the Parisian stage in far-flung corners of the globe during the seventeenth century, but it is clear that the practice was not unique to Quebec. The French embassy in Constantinople is known to have

At the same time, however, the above analysis suggests that New France did not simply import the Old Country's spectacles and accompanying controversies wholesale. As noted above, there is reason to suspect that plays may have been chosen for their resonance with events in the colony, and not merely to follow French fashions. And the case of the 1640 tragicomedy suggests that plays from the Old World could be altered for the New France stage, whether out of necessity or to reach a particular audience. In that case, Jesuits were invited to add scenes to the play to make it more suitable for their would-be Amerindian converts, a tacit acknowledgment of the differences between the needs and desires of audiences in Frances New and Old. And the missionary's above-mentioned surprise at the fine acting and costumes in that play suggest that there was no expectation that performances in New France would match the sophistication and opulence of the metropolitan stage. Some degree of adaptation apparently was to be expected, as were compromises in quality. Even if the current state of knowledge on theatre in New France does not allow for many firm or far-reaching conclusions about its extent, reception, or other aspects of how and why plays were performed, this insight—that the surviving record of the phenomenon points to both kinship and difference between the colony and the metropole—points to how further study might shed new light on both places, as well as the relationship between them. Close readings of the plays that were performed in New France alongside the numerous and rich accounts of life in the colony might illuminate the political and religious circumstances in which individual plays were chosen and performed, and in turn

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hosted performances of several plays, including Molière's *Le Dépit Amoureux* and *Le Cocu Imaginaire* as well as Corneille's *Le Cid* (Longino 149).

yield fresh and innovative interpretations of the plays themselves. Such readings, when compared to more traditional interpretations, could bring into stark relief differences and continuities between France and its New World colony, in the service of a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the two places than the dominant scholarly paradigm of colony and metropole.

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