

Critical Reevaluation of French Operetta: La petite mariée (1875)

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Abstract: This paper aims to present part of an archive research that is being made in Brazil and France that has the purpose of understanding and analyzing the musical popular theater genre called operetta, in order to establish a critical reevaluation of the genre. This genre was considered, by theater theoretical studies, during a long time, inferior when compared to dramas and comedies. However, nowadays exists a critical revision in Brazil that seeks to change that point of view. The historical research is a crucial part of this reevaluation. For this paper, we place emphasis in the operetta *La petite mariée* (1875) (“The little married girl”) written by Eugène Leterrier and Albert Vanloo. The material collected about the French operetta demonstrates how complex and refined the production of these shows was. Besides reviews, we found drawings of the scenes, posters and the manuscript of the director’s notebook. These materials are precious to the new critical appointments that this research aims to achieve, because they suggest that the quality of those pieces where as challenging as other better evaluated theater genres.

Key-words: operetta, critical reevaluation, theater history, archive research.

The operetta and the critics

Operetta is a theater genre that was created in France, in the mid-19th century. Although it is reputed to the musician Hervé (1825 – 1892) the title of creator of the operetta, the genre became famous because of the skills of another composer, named Jacques Offenbach (1819 – 1880). There is not a consensus about which play can be classified as being the first real operetta,

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since the genre developed itself gradually between 1847, when Hervé put on stage the play in one act *Don Quichotte et Sancho Pança*, and 1864, when Offenbach made an incredible success with *La belle Hélène*, operetta in three acts. In almost fifteen years, the operettas passed from a simple show in one act, with two characters, to a great spectacle with innumerable characters, dancers, singers, and a big orchestra to play the music.

Even though its name resembles the Italian opera, the operetta is a very different kind of show. First, it is based in comedy grounds, satirical, ironical, critical comedy. Second, the music is exhilarating, played in a fast rhythm, so that the dancers can perform a vigorous dance, which includes putting the legs up in the *can can* style. And third, the shows alternate scenes that are sung with scenes that are spoken. The songs do not break with the continuity of the plot, in a Brechtian epic way, on the contrary, they serve the plot, they are part of it. The operettas are the ancestral of the modern musicals, but they carry an important difference from this genre also: the strong satirical and critical humor, especially in the second phase of the operettas, which went from 1864 to 1870.

We can say that the first phase was the process of formation of the genre, when, as the liberty in theaters grew in Napoleon the III's France, the spectacles became more and more complex and magnificent. The second phase was the reign of Offenbach, with his very profound critical plots. And the third phase started when Napoleon's government ended. After 1870, the operettas became less political and their themes began to refer more to the day to day life of the people. The most famous composer of this third phase was Charles Lecocq (1832 – 1918).

Despite its great popularity among all kind of people, or exactly because of that popularity, operettas were considered a minor genre, in the hierarchical critical organization of the time. The composers, Hervé and Offenbach, could not find space to present their music in the French national theaters, only in private ones. However, the importance of operettas should not be despised.

To understand the real importance of the genre, that was created in France but traveled towards a great number of countries, creating an impressive network², it is important to go after that past. The intention is to

2. Jean-Claude Yon, *Le théâtre français à l'étranger au XIXe siècle : Histoire d'une suprématie culturelle* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Editions, 2008).

posit a revaluation of the theater critical standards that prevailed in scholar's studies during so many decades, in order to understand the operetta without those prejudiced eyes that considered the shows mere entertainment without greater artistic or cultural importance.

To set an example for analysis it was selected the operetta *La petite mariée* (The little married girl) written by Eugène Leterrier (1843-1884) and Albert Vanloo (1846-1920), with music by Charles Lecocq (1832-19018). This play was presented for the first time in 1875, in Paris, with great success. It is an example of an operetta in its mature phase, when the genre had already more than ten years of success.

To understand how fast the operettas traveled around the world, it is enough to mention that *La petite mariée* opened December 21st in the Renaissance theater, in Paris, and in June 14, 1876, it was presented in Rio de Janeiro, in a French theater house called *Alcazar Lírico*. So in less than half a year the show had already crossed the ocean and was applauded by Brazilians in its original French version. Even more impressive is to remark that in August 19 of that same year of 1876 the Brazilian adaptation of the operetta, called *A casadinha de fresco* (The fresh little bride), written by the Brazilian playwright Arthur Azevedo (1855-1908) opened in the Phênix Theater in Rio de Janeiro. This theater was famous for presenting popular musical theater genres, having introduced the adaptations of French operettas in Brazilian soil.

Remarkable as it can be, this was not a novelty in the 19th century. Before *La petite mariée*, another two successful Lecocq's operettas had been recently presented in the *Alcazar Lírico* theater, and had been also adapted to Brazilian reality and presented in popular theater establishments of the city. *Alcazar Lírico* was a theater for the elite, since the plays were presented there in their original language. Jacques Offenbach's operettas were incredibly successful among Brazilian public, in French language, for a restrict public in the *Alcazar Lírico*, and for everyone in its Brazilian adaptations³, that maintained the major characteristics of the plot, but changed much of the surroundings, transforming the French characters in

3. Orna Messer Levin, "Offenbach and the dispute for the Brazilian public (1840-1870)", in Márcia Abreu and Marisa Midori Deaecto (org), *Transatlantic circulation of printed forms: connections* (Campinas – SP: Unicamp/IEL/Setor de Publicações, 2014), 299 – 310. (Portuguese). Aléxia Ferreira, "Jacinto Heller: repertoire of a theatrical producer (1975-1885)", *Cadernos Letra e Ato* vol.06 (2016): 28-41. (Portuguese)

Brazilian folks. These adaptations were very popular; they were watched by all kinds of peoples, from the poorer, since the ticket of the cheaper seats had very accessible prices, to the richer ones, that bought the best places in the theater houses⁴. Even though Jacques Offenbach's operettas were the most presented ones, the operettas of other French musicians had also a great acceptance in Brazilian cities. Charles Lecocq was the second most famous one.

Hence, it is important to understand why those shows attracted so many people. It is beginning to be outdated the thought that they were not complex or literary interesting only because they were so popular. The research for documents about those plays shows not only that they had very well written plots, but that the intricacy of the history and the exuberance of the shows demonstrated the need for more studies about their composition, in order to evaluate their quality. In France exists a good number of researches about the history of the operetta and of their main musicians, such as Hervé, Offenbach and Lecocq. But there are not researches about their structure and their scene. It seems that the genre is valued because of the music, and the place that it had in the 19th century history, but not much as a theater genre that deserves to be analyzed in a more meaningful way. There are not studies that lean over one specific play in order to understand it more profoundly, for example.

In this paper we aim to present some documents about *La petite mariée* that were found in archive and library research, in order to try to recover how the text was put to scene.

***La petite mariée* – discovering the past**

In search for scene information about *La petite mariée*, a great number of documents were found in French libraries and archives. There are news reports and critics, images of the scene, an abstract of the plot accompanied by drawings, and a unique material: the notebook of the *Renaissance* theater director of scene, Raul Callais. With these kind of materials, it is possible to recover a little of how the show was structured.

4. Larissa de Oliveira Neves, "The comedies of Artur Azevedo: in search for history", (PhD diss., University of Campinas, 2006). (Portuguese).

First, it is impressive the virtuosity that the main actors should have in order to speak, sing and act in the three long acts of the operettas. In *La petite mariée*, one of the main characters, the *Podestad*, was played by an actor called Amedée Vauthier (1845–19..). The magazine *La comédie* of April 1876 brought a feature about him in its first page. The article described M. Vauthier's abilities in scene:

The audience, that only new Vauthier for his surprising skills and agility in the *Polichinelle's drunkenness*, was surprised to recognize a real artist in a man he thought was a mere *clown* that doubled an acrobat. The audience loudly applauded the singer that was suddenly revealed and the *bravos* weren't enough. (...) Besides experience in acting, which Vauthier has better than anyone, it is important to emphasize without reservations his brilliance, his enthusiasm, his good mood and the pureness of his trill, which he throws sometimes like a real musician, in order to brighten up the melody.⁵

The commentary praises the actor because it is the first time he sings in an operetta, but, before this opening, he had had a great experience as comedy actor, whose histrionic abilities were known by the audience. The *pantomime* theater goes back to the *Commedia dell' Art* esthetics and the character of Polichinelle (Pulcinella) was one of the most important ones. These comedy scenes were based in the actor's histrionics, which is indicated by the quote: he had skills and agility recognized when he interpreted a drunken clown. This kind of experience, combined with a good singer's voice, would be perfect to represent a character in an operetta. The genre has a fast rhythm, the scenes change rapidly, alternating between the sung ones and the spoken ones. The description of M. Vauthier confirms that the art of acting in an operetta was not simple, or trivial. The artists should have great capacity to work with comic characters and swiftness to respond to the quick change of scenes.

It is possible to observe, also, in this quote, that the skills of an acrobat, in the pantomime, were not considered "real art" by the journalist. The journalist was surprised to observe that M. Vauthier was not "only" a comedy actor, but also a real singer, and, therefore, could be more highly considered. But operettas, in the hierarchical pattern followed by the critics

5. *La comédie*. Camée artistique: Vauthier. April 1st week, 1876.

of the 19th century, were also considered a minor genre. And one of the motives was paradoxically the skills to play comedy parts that actors should have in order to achieve the fast movements the genre demanded.

This was emphasized by the play's text. For example, in the first scene of *La petite mariée*, which happens in a hotel restaurant, we have:

(The travelers eat and drink in a hurry, seated in front of the tables. Beppo and Béatrix go from one costumer to another, serving them)

Introduction

Travelers Coeur

Let's eat fast,
Let's drink fast,
The car is leaving
And tonight in a good place
We will dine with pleasure

One traveler

Hey, hostess!

One traveler

Hey, host!
Come fast!

Beppo

Don't worry,
The break lasts one full hour.

Béatrix

They won't leave without you.

Beppo, to one traveler.

Empty this bottle.

Béatrix, to another traveler

Taste this *paté*.

Beppo, offering a glass of liqueur to an old man

This liqueur is old.

Beatrix, offering a ham to a wet nurse

It's good for your health

Coeur

Let's eat fast
Let's drink fast, etc...

It can be heard the car's bell

A traveler

A minute, silence!

I can hear the car's bell.

Everyone

Yes, it's the car's bell.

Let's go!

Let's go!⁶

It can be noticed by this first scene how fast the movements must be. Beppo and Béatrix must run from one table to another, offering food and drink to the travelers. All of them sing. The scene is dynamic and cheerful. Therefore, the actors must have great skills for acting, singing, and moving naturally around the tables. Béatrix and Beppo must do all that, and still carry food and drink, pouring it while they sing, in the exact perfect timing, because the song must not stop. Hence, the acrobatic background of M. Vauthier was not a minor quality for his success in the operetta, even though considered by the critic as a less important ability.

Other critics of the opening also valued the good work of the main actors, and the well-orchestrated plot. It is interesting to remake, as in the quote above, that we may find the qualities of the operettas in the commentaries in a reverse direction. As in the case of the description of the actor M. Vauthier: his abilities as acrobat and as comedy actor are considered minor by the critic, but the commentary reveals that the actor had them. Therefore, as scholars looking back in the past, we can analyze that those skills were a great quality for the actor.

In the same way, other critics valued the plot of *La petite mariée*, which was vibrant and interesting for the audience. More than one remarked, however, that the writers, Leterrier and Valoo, repeated the same pattern of history traced in their previous operetta, which was called *Giroflé-Giroflá* and had been a great success in Paris and in Brussels two years before, in 1874:

If the starting point is the same [of the two plays], the road is different for each one of these farces seasoned with a lot of salt. So what is the purpose of *La Petite Mariée* and of her former sister? It is to make, without any realism, direct and without prudery scenes and comic situations follow one after another, in order to make the audience laugh without rest and

6. Eugene Leterrier and Albert Valoo, *La petite mariée* (Paris: Trésse Editeur au Palais-Royal and Brandus et Cie Éditeurs de Musique, 1876), 1-2.

to provide the composer good settings for his inspiration and experience. That program was sufficiently accomplished so that the authors of *La Petite Mariée* may hope for a great success.⁷

The critic seems to forget, or not to realize, without the time distance that we have now, that the operettas were indeed a genre built by patterns, and the fact that its aim was to make the audience laugh and listen to light music does not take away its qualities or its intricacy. The absence of “realism” is also a convention of the genre, which worked, since its creation, with the parody of myths and classical legends or characters. These patterns continued to be the mark of the genre in the late 19th century, with plots like *La Petite Mariée*'s tale, which is placed in Italy, in the 16th century. This kind of fantasy plot did not take the social criticism away from the comedy, because the references towards the contemporary society happened metaphorically. In *La Petite Mariée* there is a background critic against despotism and, nowadays, we can even find a critic about the place of submission of women in society.

The critic, who signs Bénédict, continues:

In judging the productions of light music, improvised, disordered, which we listen in theatres where the parody, more licentious than smart, is the rule, it is necessary to consider the needs, the eccentricities of the genre, and oneself needs to adapt, wanting it or not. The critic, full of scruple and wanting to see operetta with repugnance and with the tooth of Horace's rat's disdain, will be exposed to hear, in justice: “It is not for you that the table was prepared!” My opinion is that, in that case, if one is not going to eat, let the others do so. Thus, I will seat down and get – for good manners – a toothpick.⁸

In this ironic quote we can observe clearly how the operetta was seen in the more scholar groups of critics. However, even the journalists who had a certain “disdain” for the genre, used to enjoy them. This is a very difficult matter to verify from a 140 years distance. From the eyes of the 21st century, what we can understand from the documents of the scene and of the text, is that the operetta had a very well composed plot, vibrant, fast, with a lot of

7. Bénédict. *Theatre de La Renaissance*. Paris: National Lybrary's Briefing, December 21, 1875.

8. Bénédict. *Theatre de La Renaissance*. Paris: National Lybrary's Briefing, December 21, 1875.

With the details of the scenery, objects and costume description presented in the notebook, the researcher can recover the image of the scene. In the right high corner is written: "Door of the tailor and the seamstress"; in the middle: "Door"; and in the left: "Car" and "Hostel". This indicates the passages around the dining room where the act places itself. After the sketch that indicates the position of the tables and the surroundings in the scenery there is the description of all the objects that the characters should use or carry. In the small column on the left is the list of characters: Scotsman and Scotswoman (that is a man), four children, coachmen, a singer, two pilgrims, two kitchen boys, two wet nurses, four Italians. The page ends with Béatrix, which is an important character in that act, since she is the hostess of the inn and takes part in the main plot. Besides each name is described some of their costume equipment. The Scotsman has a traveler's bag, the coachmen carry small whips, the kitchen boys hold knives, etc. It is also impressive the number of actors, more than thirty, that will participate in the whole act, and whose description continues until the fifth page of the notebook.

From this information, we get to know that Béatrix enters the stage with two buckets over her shoulders connected by a stick. To describe it there is not only the text, but a small drawing in the inferior right corner of the page, as it can be seen in the copy above. Therefore, besides singing, walking fastly between the tables, serving the costumers, we now know that the actress should appear, at first, with two buckets hanging over her shoulder. The dexterity of the main actors, to accomplish a well played operetta, can be visualized by this details that both the description of the critics and the notebook provides.

This description of the stage continues for more four pages of the notebook, before the curtain is raised. After the detailed enumeration of all the scene objects, another sketch only of the scenery is provided, with the title of "Setting":

In this part, after the drawing copied above, there is a description to understand each letter code. The scenery includes: a curtain with the landscape of the Italian village (A), a realistic Henry the IV's coach (with description and a small drawing of it (C), trees, flowers, frames, Italian style construction, stairs, etc. Obviously, and as it is already known, one of the great operetta's audience attractive was the luxury of its settings. People wanted not only to follow an interesting and comical plot and to listen to joyful songs, but also

to be fascinated by the scenery and the costumes. To create, build and paint all those elements, specialized artists were contracted. In Brazil, the newspaper advertisements of the operettas would often highlight the scenographer's name.

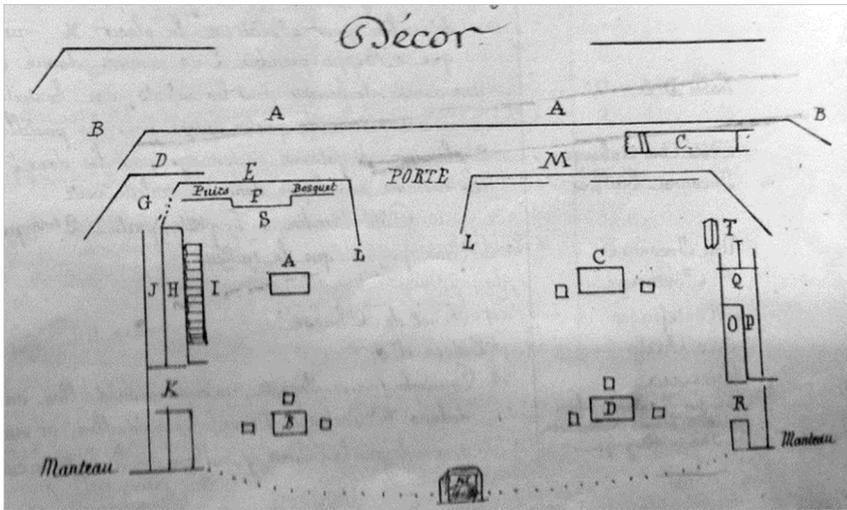


Fig. 2: *La petite mariée*: the director's notebook, page 5.¹⁰

After this detailed description of characters, costumes and scenery, begins the indications of scene movements. It is written "Curtains rise". And then the movement around each table in the restaurant is described, including the surrounding actors and the children. For example: "Table B: two travelers seated, the second is in higher position. A third uses a big coat. They eat and drink."

The scene of the travelers being served is then fully outlined in pages 8 to 11. Four pages describe only the first scene, which is very fast, but full of chorus songs, dances, movements. The travelers eat and drink, they here the bell, the coaches come inside to call everyone. Béatrix and Beppo run up and down "displeased that their clients are going to leave so soon". While everyone gets ready to continue their voyage, some characters change the scenery, taking to the backstage the tables and all the elements concerning

10. Paul Callais, *La Petite Mariée: mise-en scène* (Paris: Brandus & Cie Editeurs, 1875) 5.

the meal. It is a very vivid and active scene; everything must be very well orchestrated, so that the actors, which include children, perform, like in a harmonious dance, without bumping over each other.

When the stage is empty, the prologue is finished and the main plot begins. San Carlo enters the room. The director's notebook continues with the indication of the movements and actions that the actors should conduct in their scenes. In the left column, where was the list of characters in the initial pages, is now written references of the play's text or of the song that is singed in each part of the scene. For example, when San Carlo meets the Podestad, in the hostel, it is described: "As long there is still hope [the Podestad]" – Goes to the right. He turns his back to the audience. San Carlo enters very happily from the small door G./ "I am married" – He does not see the Podestad. He sees the Podestad. Both act surprised at the same time."¹¹

The Podestad is the most powerful man in the village, which represents Bergamo. He is a kind of a coronel, and the mayor at the same time. San Carlos is his favorite subject, even though he cheated on the Podestad with his late wife. The Podestad is waiting for San Carlo to get married, occasion in which he will get his revenge by seducing San Carlo's bride. To avoid that, now that San Carlo is in love and to be married with Graziela, he wants to keep his wedding in secret. Hence, he claims to the Podestad that he is out of town because of an illness, but in fact he is getting married. The Podestad is worried about his favorite subordinate's health and goes after him. That is when they meet in the hostel.

This is the starting point of the plot. To mischief the Podestad and be happy with his wife, San Carlo will pass through a lot of complications, as well as the other characters, until the happy ending prevails. The detailed description of the scene pointed out in the notebook demonstrates that the group of actors must be very well rehearsed and attuned. The notebook has approximately 90 pages full of detailed instructions and sketches. Each movement is described following the complications of the playwriting, composed by scenes that go from solos to chorus of about thirty actors.

Around the main plot, small actions evolve to make the show vivid and fast, and all of them are traced out in the director's notebook. After the first scene, when the travelers wait for their coach to leave, a sequence of

11. Paul Callais, *La Petite Mariée: mise-en scène* (Paris: Brandus & Cie Editeurs, 1875) 20.

happenings makes the play extremely cheerful and, at the same time, complex. We have scenes of San Carlo and the couturiers hired to make the wedding attire; San Carlo and the owners of the inn, who suspect that the guests, because they keep so many secrets, are conspirators; San Carlo and his fiancée; both of them plus the father of the bride; an arguing discussion between the lovers, who end the engagement to subsequently make peace (a scene worthy of Molière). The tale is so complex that its abstract is hard to be fulfilled.

Despite the starting point being that simple, all the other happenings fill several pages with discussions, misunderstandings, hidings, escapes, etc. In a newspaper of the time was also published an illustrated abstract of the tale. This kind of publication would, at the same time, be a good advertisement for the show and help the audience understand the happenings from the beginning to the end. The feature presents two drawings for each act, with the description below it:



Fig. 3: Illustrated abstract of *La Petite Mariée*¹²

12. Léon Sault. *La petite mariée: analyse illustré*. In *La petite mariée collection*. Paris: National Lybrary, n.d.

This is the first of seven other drawings. We can see how the artist worked hard to reproduce in the drawing every detail of the garments, the costumes and the scenery, with all its laces, frills and, in the back, the building, the well and the mountains. The reader of the newspaper would not only understand better the tale, but probably want to see these ornaments for real, in the theater.

The text describes briefly all the main events of the first scene, which ends with the marriage of San Carlo and Graziela and the arrival of the Podestad. To trick him, San Carlo says that Graziela is newly wedded with Montefiasco, San Carlo's best man. But the Podestad is enchanted by Graziella nevertheless. He takes everyone to his palace, where he turns Graziela into his private book reader, in order to seduce her. This is only the main plot, very rapidly resumed. All the turnarounds of the scenes, listed above, turns the tale even more interesting and, despite simple, very demanding to the audience.

This intricacy, already very tricky as it is in the text, in stage gets even more complex, when all the turnarounds must be built concretely. We have a dialectical way of understanding the passage of this kind of text to the scene: first, it is not easy to maintain all the details clearly visible and hearable to the audience; on the other hand, the operettas literature is written directly aiming the materiality of the scene, regarding all the objects, the body and the voice of the actors.

The characters dialogue and sing, successively. Songs are part of the illusion of the tale as much as the spoken parts. These fast movements make the scene restless and difficult to pursue, if the audience is not attentive. It is even harder for the actors, to make the scenes understandable, to talk and sing, to dance, to run from one part to another of the stage, to enter and leave the stage in the perfect timing, in order to undertake all the changes that occur scene after scene. But if they accomplish that, the audience will be delighted with what it sees and hears, and swept away by the entertaining and critical tale.

The drawings of the scenes are a document that helps to validate the information found in the director's notebook and enables the researcher to imagine with more accuracy how the scene was organized. There were no other forms of getting a glance of the stage. Photos were rare and the ones that exist were taken in studios and not directly from the scene in progress. The researcher has few materials to try to recover the scene. The text of the play is an important base, since it brings all the happenings, characters, songs and

some description of the scene in the headings. In the special case of *La petite mariée*, the director's notebook details the scene, but, even with it, imagination is necessary to delineate what was in fact being showed on stage. The drawings give an additional hint, because we can see concretely what the text descriptions only indicate.

Besides the drawing with the abstract, published in the newspaper, there are some other sketches of the scene dated 1875. In the newspaper, the aim was to reproduce the plot, with some imagination of the scenery, even though the costumes are very alike the real ones. The drawings below have the objective of registering the theater scene, not the fiction, but the scenery and the actors.

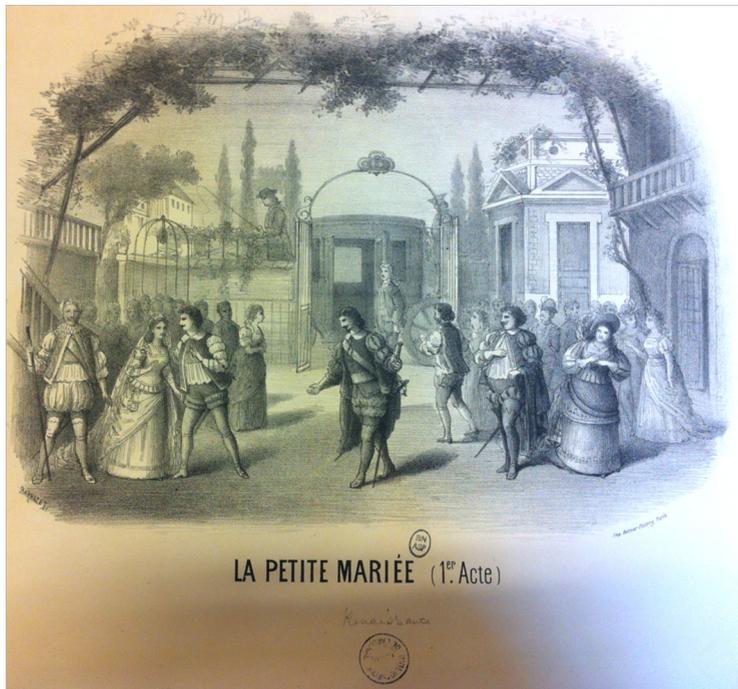


Fig 4: Sketch of the first act of *La petite mariée*

As it is possible to see, the costumes search not only for being splendidous, but to bring some realism of the historical time and location of the plot, the Italian 16th century. The painting is similar in some points with the one copied above, published in the newspaper, but, in this one, the contour of the theater

scene is clearer. In this image it is possible to notice, also, the great number of actors in scene and opulence of the scenery, since in the other one the city outlined was more representative of the tale and not of the theater's stage. In the first act's drawing, we can see the frame of leaves, and the coach in the back, as well as the innumerable figures (the coach is mentioned in the director's notebook as well). Of course we can't be sure about what was really represented in scene and what was created by the drawer, but this kind of art was made more to register a scene, in a time where photography was almost unavailable, and to advertise the quality and the magnificence of the show, than to be an authorial painting. The images confirm the description of the notebook.

Other documents help us to assure this information. In the feature about M. Vauthier, commented above, there is a colored drawing of his character, the Podestad, that resembles both drawings above.



Fig. 5: M. Vauthier¹³



Fig. 6: Jeanne Granier in *La petite mariée*¹⁴

13. *La comédie*. Camée artistique: Vauthier. April 1st week, 1876.

14. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53138688b.item>

We found, also, drawing and photograph of the actress Jeanne Granier (1852-1919), that played the main role of Graziela. Granier was the favorite actress of the composer Charles Lecocq. He wrote the role especially for her. The beautiful dress is also alike the one that appears in the image of the second act's drawing.

In these two drawings the costumes can be better observed, with all its details: the sword, the hat, the frills of the wealthy man. The dress and the head ornament that Graziela wears in the second act.

As can be seen, ornaments, scenery and splendid visual elements were part of the great operettas. The documents found in archives, about *La Petite Mariée's* opening in 1875 are not much different from materials found about a lot of other French operettas of the time. These materials indicate peculiarities of each show, of course, such as the plot, the specially built scenery, the magnificent costumes and the reception of the public. The search for this past shows the dynamism of this genre, its complexity, the beauty it relies on. They assure several characteristics of the conventions of the genre that deny the common view that theater historiography established about it.

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