An Evening at the Théâtre Comte: Commercial Theater for Children in Early Nineteenth-Century Paris

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“An Evening at the Théâtre Comte,” (figure 1) a full-page illustration depicting the theater’s child spectators and child performers, appeared in Le Journal pour Rire on October 2, 1852. A bourgeois family, complete with baby and nurse, occupied one of the theater’s comfortable loges in the image. One child was transfixed by the performance, another explained something to his siblings, and a third appeared bored. Some adult spectators, too, looked bored, bringing into question the theater’s claim to entertain parents as well as children, though other adults appeared pleasantly entertained. Two crying children in another box shrieked with fright, while still other children, onstage and in the boxes, looked and acted like adults.1 This article examines representations of the Théâtre Comte and its attendant child spectators in the first half of the nineteenth century. Director Louis Comte, I argue, used the press to convince bourgeois parents to purchase the cultural commodity he offered. By linking commercial theater and education, Comte marketed his theater as a commercial theater of education.2 By the 1830s, regular theater attendance was a mark of bourgeois status and sociability for adult Parisians.3 It was also, I argue, a component of bourgeois childhood and

1 Le Journal pour Rire, 2 October 1852.
2 Theater of education was an eighteenth-century genre popularized by Madame de Genlis. It was intended for performance by children, friends, and family in a domestic setting. Many supporters of theater of education believed children learned best through their senses. The sensory nature of theater, they believed, made it a powerful pedagogical tool. See Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval, Madame de Genlis et le théâtre d’éducation au XVIIIe siècle (Oxford: The Alden Press, 1997).
served as a means of transmitting bourgeois morals, gender norms, and a bourgeois aesthetic to children. In this way, the Théâtre Comte, where child performers appeared in pieces intended for a family audience, incorporated children into Parisian consumer culture.

Figure 1: Le Journal pour Rire, 2 October 1852
Historical studies of French theater from the Revolution through the mid-nineteenth century have focused primarily on the relationship between theater and political culture. More recently, historians have examined theater attendance as a form of social capital and cultural consumption. In her study of provincial theaters in eighteenth-century France, Lauren Clay has shown that the consumption of entertainment via theater, though not a material good, can be considered a “cultural commodity” and part of an emerging consumer culture.

Attendance at popular Paris boulevard theaters in the early nineteenth century, argues Denise Davidson, allowed spectators to discern and cultivate class and gender identity in the wake of revolutionary social tumult. Furthermore, Davidson, referencing Pierre Bourdieu, has explained how popular theater attendance during this period functioned as “cultural capital.” It provided the opportunity for “audience members to observe and construct social hierarchies on display around them.”

This study builds on the work of Clay and Davidson by examining the development of commercial theater for children in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Taking one’s child to the theater, I argue, was also a cultural commodity for bourgeois families in Paris. By examining the development of commercial theater for children in early nineteenth-century Paris, this article broadens historical debates about French bourgeois culture and identity by taking bourgeois children into account. Precisely what it meant to be bourgeois in the first half of the nineteenth century, or if a French bourgeoisie even existed at this time, is a subject of debate among historians. Sarah Maza contends that the French bourgeoisie did not exist because no social group in French society self-identified as bourgeois during the period under examination in this article. Instead, opponents of Louis-Philippe used the term “bourgeois” derisively to criticize the politics, culture, and society associated with the royal regime in the 1830s and 1840s. Other historians, like William Reddy and Jan Goldstein, work from the

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position that though a bourgeoisie in the strict Marxian sense of the term did not exist in France in the early decades of the nineteenth century, a bourgeois identity based on a variety of less quantifiable, non-economic, cultural components including honor codes and a Cousinian understanding of "the self" existed, but was in flux during this period.\(^8\) I refer to this cultural sense of bourgeois identity and argue for the importance of theater attendance to it.

The underlying assumption in much historical analysis of early nineteenth-century bourgeois identity was that "the bourgeois" was an adult male in the public sphere. This article contributes to recent historical work that questions that assumption. Davidson and Jennifer Popiel ably demonstrate that even though separate spheres and domestic ideology were part of bourgeois identity, women played an active role in fostering the development of bourgeois identity both privately and publically. Mothers in the home, argues Popiel, contributed to bourgeois society beyond the home's walls by training children to exercise the kind of self-control inextricably linked to the adult honor examined by Reddy.\(^9\) Bourgeois children too, I argue, had both a private and public presence. A theater like Comte's was one place where the bourgeois family could make a public appearance together and children could rehearse bourgeois self-control through their behavior. Comte clearly operated under the assumption that bourgeois parents existed and he appealed to their bourgeois identity and culture to market his theater.

Children's involvement with commercial theater in Paris already had a long history when Comte settled into his theater on the passage Choisel in 1826.\(^10\) The relationship between children and commercial theater in France in the eighteenth century had been fraught with charges of immorality. Eighteenth-century théâtres d'enfants – all-child acting troupes – infamous for lewd material and corruption of its young members, cast a dark shadow over child performers in Paris. The young players at Nicolas-Médard Audinot's Théâtre de l'Ambigu-

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Comique, for example, performed roles written for adults intended for adult audiences. Though morally questionable, théâtres d’enfants enjoyed popularity with adult audiences and financial success through the 1770s and 1780s until the 13 January 1791 decree removed the theater licensing requirement and ushered in a flood of competitors. Throughout this period, théâtres d’enfants and their directors faced scandals surrounding the moral corruption of young actresses. Though morally questionable, théâtres d’enfants enjoyed popularity with adult audiences and financial success through the 1770s and 1780s until the 13 January 1791 decree removed the theater licensing requirement and ushered in a flood of competitors. Throughout this period, théâtres d’enfants and their directors faced scandals surrounding the moral corruption of young actresses. 11 These were just some of the reasons pedagogues and theater reformers relocated theater for children to the protected space of the home with the theater of education.

Still, as Colin Heywood notes, leisure time was a part of bourgeois childhood as early as the eighteenth century, when markets for children’s amusements such as toys and board games began to emerge. 12 Public theater attendance, I posit, should be included among these amusements. But in order to attract respectable bourgeois families to his public theater, Comte had to overcome the eighteenth-century legacy of immorality linking child performers and commercial theater. Though leisure time was a hallmark of the bourgeoisie, it also presented a problem for bourgeois identity in the early nineteenth century. As Carol Harrison has argued, “leisure was potentially the slippery slope out of bourgeois respectability.” For this reason, bourgeois men chose their leisure activities carefully. 13 Comte, I argue, exploited this sentiment by emphasizing respectability and portraying his theater as an educational endeavor, not just a leisure activity. In order to make theater attendance an acceptable leisure option for the bourgeois family, he emphasized the moral and instructive nature of his productions. In so doing, Comte cast his theater as a safe destination for the bourgeois father to bring his entire family not only for entertainment and recreation, but also for moral edification. 14

Bourgeois parents, according to the theater press, were expected to provide their children with the “leisure of childhood,” including, of course, trips to the theater. 15 Theatergoing had become a family affair but parents faced the problem of finding a venue that struck the correct balance between morality, children’s


13 Gazette des Théâtres, 23 October 1836.


15 Gazette des Théâtres, 23 October 1836.
aptitudes, and adult tastes. Comte insinuated that his theater met this need – a need he himself created – and bridged the gap between the tastes of parent and child in order to assist parents with their parental duties. He attempted to convince adults, especially fathers and teachers, that commercial theater was a useful educational tool. Comte presented his theater as a hybrid of théâtres d’enfants and theater of education in order to rehabilitate the reputation of child troupes in Paris. His claim to a public theater of education did not go unchallenged.

Charles D’Argé, editor of the Journal des Comédiens, and Victor Herbin, editor of the Journal des Théâtres, both publically challenged Comte’s claim. In 1831, D’Argé insinuated Comte was a speculator and questioned whether a theater of education could even be commercially successful. He classified Comte’s theater as a théâtre d’élèves because it staged the same repertoire as other popular theaters. Its repertoire did not originate in “works where the action always relates to that of childhood and youth,” the standard subject matter of theater of education. Comte had, according to D’Argé, perverted the purpose of theater of education and the acceptable social order by casting children in adult roles, in pieces intended for adult audiences, for profit. In 1847, Herbin too argued that Comte’s enterprise was a théâtre d’élèves. It was also immoral, argued Herbin, not because of an immoral repertoire but because of “the relations, and what relations! of children and of adults of both sexes” that injected “a life of passions and sensations that [children] should not yet know.” Contact between adult and child performers, feared Herbin, would lead to sexual relations and the precocious acquisition of sexual knowledge by the children. The theater described by D’Argé and Herbin contrasted sharply with the morally wholesome domestic environments encouraged by the proponents of the theater of education.

Much of the publicity for the Théâtre Comte took the form of “editorial advertising,” which H. Hazel Hahn has defined as “articles or illustrations created for the purpose of advertising or articles that included advertising, and therefore appeared as forms of publicity.” Artists, musicians, and individuals in search of “fame,” would purchase editorial advertising and even “ran systematic campaigns for decades.” Despite challenges from critics like D’Argé and Herbin, Comte’s

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17 See L’Indépendant, 11 April 1844 and La Sylphide, 25 November 1839.
18 Journal des Comédiens, 6 January 1831.
19 A théâtre d’élèves was a so-called drama school that staged public performances of pieces written for adult performers for paying adult spectators. Students were typically teenagers. Journal des Comédiens, 16 January 1831.
20 Journal des Théâtres, 11 August 1847. Herbin does not give any specific examples of adult-child relations.
message was clear – the Théâtre Comte was the only theater in Paris where parents could assuredly take their children for a moral and educational theater experience. Reviews agreed with Comte, and repeatedly linked the Théâtre Comte to theater of education. An April 1829 review noted a current vogue for “children’s soirées.” The play under review, counseled the reviewer, provided parents an opportunity to “cure” children of “coquetry” and “conceit.” “As for morality,” assured the reviewer, “that is the rule at the Théâtre Comte.” Comte’s productions, assured Gil Blas, were “of simple subjects, but well chosen, of fresh and gracious sketches, [with] a truly moral aim.” Performances met the needs of “men of taste, enlightened parents and wise professors” who came to Comte’s theater seeking a quality alternative “to see and show to their students, to their children, who preferred pretentious pieces, poorly written and poorly drawn.” It also continued a child’s education when school was out of session. “It is important to use” the time “vacations leave children” wisely, suggested Gil Blas in 1829: “One does well therefore to take them to this theater, to gain experience, and enjoy an innocent pleasure.”

As early as 1823, editorial advertisements attempted to convince parents to purchase this “good” for their child. Comte linked his theater, children, and education in the press as a means to distinguish it from competitors. Notices implied a parental duty to provide children with leisure, as well as education. They also conveyed the message that leisure activities should conform to the specific tastes and abilities of a child’s age. One notice counseled parents that if they wished to “provide pleasures to [their] children suitable to their age, bring them to M. Comte; if you love sleight of hand that does not bring tears, and does not swell the budget, go to M. Comte; finally, if you care to pass two hours of your evening agreeably, get a ticket at M. Comte’s theater.” Taking one’s child to the Théâtre Comte was portrayed as a gift parents could repeatedly give to their children. The experience could extend to the home through the purchase of printed texts. Comte’s theater offered parents “relaxation that was at the same time agreeable and useful for long soirées, and parents would promise this instructive pleasure . . . as a necessary complement to the lessons of the day.” Simply put, the notices implied that bourgeois parents were expected to partake in this experience with their children.

22 Le Figaro, 3 April 1829.
23 Gil Blas, 15 November 1829.
24 Gil Blas, 5 August 1829.
25 Le Miroir, 30 April 1823.
26 L’Indépendant, 3 January 1847.
27 Le Réveil, 22 March 1823.
28 Gazette des Théâtres, 6 January 1833.
Reviews and notices presented the Théâtre Comte as a uniquely Parisian family experience, part of the city’s consumer culture. Advertising strategies of the day transformed the Théâtre Comte into a site of cultural consumption. Its location reinforced the link between theater attendance and consumer culture. The passage Choiseul was a center of consumer culture at the height of the Théâtre Comte’s popularity. It was “an enchanted place” and “the bazaar of the elegant world.” Comte was perhaps quite calculating in locating his theater in “the center of the richest and most fashionable quarter of the capital.” This location guaranteed a constant flow of bourgeois parents. Comte took care to shape the theatergoing experience to their tastes. “The Théâtre Comte, passage Choiseul, is the rendezvous each night for all of the elegant of Paris,” suggested the *L’Indépendant* in 1844. Comte made an effort to retain his audience with “the luxury of the décor” and “the richness of the costumes.” The theater press assisted Comte by creating the impression that parents competed for the theater’s luxurious loges. “Already,” reported the *L’Indépendant* in 1838, “families rush to rent the loges.” Competition became fierce when Paris hosted expositions. The “Théâtre Comte is universally known,” declared the paper in May 1844, but “the salle is ten times too small to receive all the families the provinces send.”

Bourgeois Parisian children, portrayed in an entry in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (*Pictures of the French*) by Mathurin Brisset, theater critic for the *Gazette de France*, expected to be taken to the theater, and bourgeois parents unable to do so failed their children. “The most unhappy children in Paris,” remarked Brisset facetiously, were from “the bourgeois household in financial trouble.” These children were not happy unless their material needs, including

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29 Modern consumer culture, asserts Hahn, emerged in France during the July Monarchy. References to the Théâtre Comte in the press, I suggest, facilitated the incorporation of the Théâtre Comte, bourgeois families, and children into this consumer culture. Hahn, 3-7.


32 *L’Indépendant*, 19 May 1844.

33 *L’Indépendant*, 9 August 1838.

34 *L’Indépendant*, 23 May 1844.
theater needs, were met. While Brisset’s portrait was likely exaggerated, inclusion of “Children in Paris” in the larger work suggested an increased presence of children in theater audiences and the public bourgeois child as a social type. Brisset, who seemed annoyed by the presence of children in what he considered an adult space, had not yet accepted this change. While Parisian children could find amusement other places, though, such as the city’s public gardens, one paper declared that they were most amused at venues like the Théâtre Comte.

Parental decisions concerning the purchase of goods for their children were shaped by a number of factors. As Popiel’s examination of the development of luxury clothing for children in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries shows, the purchase of non-educational items such as clothing could be motivated by parental attitudes about education and childhood itself. Purchase of a theater ticket was a mark of a family’s social status much like the purchase of the latest children’s fashions. Not only did the child attend the theater to see the performance, but being seen at the theater reflected upon the parents’ status and attitude toward childhood. The purchase of tickets to the Théâtre Comte reflected an understanding of bourgeois childhood in which leisure was an expected facet.

The theater was not just a leisure activity, it was also a space in which the bourgeois child observed, and exercised, public behavior appropriate to his or her class and gender. Children were expected to behave properly at the theater and comport themselves like respectable adults. Theater attendance for adults during this period, argues Davidson, “shaped spectators’ notions of social distinctions as well as their sense of their own identities and roles.” Certain behaviors, correlated

35 M. J. Brisset, “Les Enfants à Paris,” in Les Français peints par eux-mêmes, encyclopédie morale au dix-neuvième siècle; Volume 4 (Paris: L. Curmer, 1840-1842), 157. Les Francais peints par eux-mêmes was one of the physiologies popular in Paris in the 1840s. Physiologies presented often exaggerated portraits of social types. Though these portraits were often satirical and humorous, they are still valuable historical sources. Physiologies, argues Victoria Thompson, are valuable not as “visions of what was, what is, and what could be” but as “an important tool in the reconfiguration of interrelated social and spatial dispositions during the first half of the nineteenth century.” Victoria E. Thompson, “Telling ‘Spatial Stories’: Urban Space and Bourgeois Identity in Early Nineteenth-Century Paris,” Journal of Modern History 75, no. 3 (September 2003), 525-6. “Physiologies,” argues Richard Siebuth, “transformed the social world into a completely predictable system, completely interpretable” as a way to make sense of a changing urban social world. Richard Siebuth, “Une idéologie du lisible: le phénomène des Physiologies,” Romanticisme no. 47 (1985): 39-60.

36 L’Argus des Théâtres; 22 October 1846.

37 Development of luxury French children’s fashion in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, argues Popiel, reflected the influence of Rousseau’s ideas on childrearing, education, and play. The purchase of this luxury good not only conveyed status, but also acceptance of a new parenting style. Popiel, 53-4.

38 Gazette des Théâtres, 14 July 1836.
to class and gender, were expected from adult audience members. “Proper’ behavior in a public place like the theater,” she argues, “functioned as cultural capital.”

Taking one’s child to the Théâtre Comte where they could observe proper adult behavior was a way to transmit this form of cultural capital to bourgeois children and for the child to demonstrate appropriate public behavior in line with the gender and status of the child.

Comte proactively addressed parental concerns about the potential immoral impacts of theater, particularly on daughters, by emphasizing the morality and respectability of his theater. Theater loges, according to Davidson, were especially important for making attendance at popular theaters acceptable for upper-class women during this period and “helped to reinforce notions of upper-class women’s greater respectability.”

Advertisements for the Théâtre Comte frequently emphasized its loges in order to appeal to this sense of bourgeois respectability. Comte’s motto – “[w]ith morals, good taste, modestly shines, [a]nd without danger the mother takes her daughter” – emphasized this purported goal.

Placement of the motto under the drawing of the loge in the Journal pour Rire illustration of “An Evening at the Théâtre Comte” reinforced this link. Loges literally shielded children and the family from any potential immoral behavior on the part of inappropriate audience members.

Theater attendance provided children an opportunity to practice appropriate behavior and dress. Bourgeois children, especially girls, noted one review, dressed up for the theater just like their parents. That the review singled out the dress of girls, but not boys, reflected the gendered experiences of childhood of the period. Girls, according to Popiel, began to dress like their mothers at an age when boys were still allowed to dress for play. “Little girls,” she concludes, “were not only closer to their mothers in fashion, but also simply closer to adulthood.” Girls in the theater audience, as demonstrated by the girls in the illustration, were also expected to behave more maturely than their male

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39 Davidson, 89, 99.

40 Davidson analyzes two images of audiences as evidence of the increased presence of respectable women at boulevard theaters. While the central focus in the images is on women, they also show children in attendance, suggesting they too had a public presence in the popular theater audience. Davidson, 94-9.

41 Buguet, 8. Comte was not alone in assuring parents his works were safe for daughters. Davidson finds a similar welcome, “‘mothers will permit their daughters to read this’,” on the title page of a book of prose and verse compiled for a bourgeois cercle littéraire published in 1821. Davidson, 137.

42 Le Journal pour Rire, 2 October 1852.

43 Le Figaro, 5 January 1840.

44 For a broader discussion of the way in which class and gender shaped the varieties of childhood experience in modern France see Heywood, 168-94.

45 Popiel, 82.
counterparts. The well-dressed girl in the frame, titled “Politesse” appears much more at ease behaving like an adult than her male companion.46

While Comte’s message to parents was clear, evidence of how children actually responded to performances designed to appeal to their tastes and aptitudes is limited. As with so much of the history of childhood, I must rely on adult reminiscences of childhood, what Heywood calls “ego documents,” and adult observations of children to discern how children reacted to Comte’s productions.47 Adult observers frequently reported that child spectators laughed and appeared happy during performances. One observer noted that the Gymnase-Enfantin, Comte’s competition, was “a charming theater where they do not know the sifflet.”48 Yet the illustrations in Le Journal pour Rire showed that not all children enjoyed the performances. The frightened faces of the children in the scene entitled “Fantasmagorie Appliquée” contradicted the image’s caption, “no pleasure without pain,” for the pained expressions on the children’s faces suggested that they did not experience the promised pleasure but felt only the pain of being frightened.49 Poet Théodore de Banville recounted attending the Gymnase-Enfantin and the Théâtre Comte in his memoirs, and his recollections showed that children did not always respond to performances the way adults expected.50 Banville was taken to the Gymnase-Enfantin at age seven and quite taken aback by the performers’ method. Spoken dialogue by more than two performers onstage was forbidden, except on the stages of the state-sponsored theaters, so performers offstage provided voices for the actors onstage.51 Banville initially found this method quite disconcerting. Surely other children must have felt the same confusion.52

46 Le Journal pour Rire, 2 October 1852.
47 On the use of ego documents in the history of childhood see Heywood, 17-35.
48 Gazette des Théâtres, 14 July 1836.
49 Le Journal pour Rire, 2 October 1852.
50 Banville was born in 1823 so he would have attended the theaters in the 1830s.
52 Théodore de Banville, Mes souvenirs: Victor Hugo, Henri Heine, Théophile Gautier, Honoré de Balzac, Honoré Daumier, Alfred de Vigny, Méry, Alexandre Dumas, Nestor
Banville illustrated the potential conflict between a play’s intention and a child’s response by recounting a story from his childhood about a boy taken to see *Le Petit Robinson*, “one of the comedies imagined to correct children.” After seeing the play, the boy developed an intense interest in reading *Robinson Crusoe* and becoming a voyager just like the play’s protagonist. This was not the lesson the boy’s parents intended for him to take away from the play. Fearing he would develop a “vicious nature,” they abandoned him on an island outside Paris to cure his wanderlust. The parents hoped this experience would show him what being a voyager would really be like, he would find it unbearable, and abandon the idea. After failing to light a fire or find edible roots, the boy began to sob. At that moment, his parents reappeared believing they had rid him of his desire to travel. Banville remembered thinking that the lesson seemed excessive.53

Banville’s recollections hinted at Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s criticisms that public theater and moral tales could not in fact teach morals.54 On one hand, the conflicting generational understandings of *Le Petit Robinson* served as support for Rousseau’s rejection of fables. On the other hand, the parents’ Rousseauian attempt to orchestrate a situation for their child to uncover the moral himself was reminiscent of *Émile*. Not only had the boy taken a different lesson away from the play than the one his parents hoped, the young Banville saw the tale as a story of failed parents, not an errant boy.

Banville was also taken to the Théâtre Comte twice a year for eight years as a child. Despite the promises about the quality of the Théâtre Comte in the theater press, he preferred the low-brow performances of “Le Grimacier,” an old street performer and mime, to Comte’s productions. Banville hated the Théâtre Comte and could not bear Comte’s repeated speeches, “dotted with puns like the educational comedies that played in his theater.” Banville expressed great displeasure with its offerings: “Oh! How many of these comedies enfantines . . . hurt my petite soul already starved of what is beautiful, with their absurd

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54 Rousseau argued in the *Letter to d’Alembert on Spectacles* that public theater could not improve morals because it appealed to emotion, not reason. Morals, he believed, could only change through reason. Rousseau also argued in *Émile* that moral tales could not teach children morals. If the tale was not entertaining, it would not capture the child’s attention. If it was entertaining, the child would fail to comprehend the moral. Invariably, concluded Rousseau, children took away a different lesson than that the author intended. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to d’Alembert and Writings for the Theater*, trans. and eds. Allan Bloom, Charles Butterworth, and Christopher Kelly (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2004) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
fabrications and their numerous puns of a primitive simplicity like the warbling of a troupe of geese."\textsuperscript{55}

Granted, Banville’s retroactive appraisal was from his adult perspective as a poet. Still, it seems certain the young Banville did not experience the moral edification, happiness, and leisure the theaters promised. The circumstances under which he experienced theatergoing may have contributed to his negative opinion. Theaters themselves marketed attendance as a family activity. Instead, Banville came to the Théâtre Comte as a child seemingly abandoned by his parents, much like the boy in the story he recounted. His experience suggested that a schoolmaster was no substitute for a parent. Banville, the adult, criticized théâtres d’enfants in his works. His poem, “The Théâtres d’enfants,” portrayed them as contributors to the moral and physical decay of young performers. The enjoyment experienced by the parent and child seated comfortably in the audience, noted the poem, hid the unhappy reality of the child performer’s experience.\textsuperscript{56}

Poet Charles Beuzeville also addressed child performers in his 1839 collection, Les Petits Enfants. “Actors of the Gymnase Enfantin” and “Spectacles of the Foire” reflected a Romantic view of childhood innocence. Both poems were statements against public performance by children. Beuzeville presented a negative view of theaters like the Théâtre Comte. He accused them of robbing child performers of their purity and innocence: “Why leave your robes of innocence already, Children, to put on your dirty clothes?” He envisioned child performers as angels with white wings tarnished by the mire of the theater.\textsuperscript{57} In “Spectacles of the Foire,” Beuzeville reveled in the wonder and joy child spectators experienced. But he also pointed to a darkness lurking behind the performances. Child spectators enjoyed themselves only because they were unaware of the harsh training child performers experienced.\textsuperscript{58}

Beuzeville’s poems illustrated that eighteenth-century charges of moral corruption against child troupes still resonated in the 1830s and 1840s. The Romantic view of childhood innocence amplified these charges of corruption. Moral corruption no longer only took the form of stealing a child performer’s virginity; it now included stealing the performer’s childhood. Beuzeville’s poems also raised the issue of class exploitation. For him, the bourgeois child spectator’s joy and pleasure resulted from the lower-class child performers’ exploitation. This was a new criticism that appeared more frequently in decades to come.

\textsuperscript{55} Banville, Mes souvenirs, 24-8.
\textsuperscript{56} Théodore de Banville, Œuvres de Théodore de Banville: Odes funambulesques, suivies d’un commentaire (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1892), 64-9.
Whether Comte sincerely desired to educate French children or merely saw this tack as a shrewd way to attract wealthy parents to his theater, his method tapped into a sense of bourgeois identity that successfully drew customers to his theater for decades. Though Comte may have exploited the popularity of the private theater of education when he opened his theater, his attempt to operate a commercial theater of education ended in financial difficulty amid the same accusations of moral corruption levied against the eighteenth-century théâtres d’enfants. Criticisms like those raised by Herbin and Beuzeville concerning the welfare of the child performers at the Théâtre Comte rarely appeared in print in the 1830s and 1840s. Instead, Comte adeptly deployed the press to present his theater as a respectable place for bourgeois family entertainment that was educational, moral, and entertaining. The Théâtre Comte finally closed in 1855 when the building’s lease passed to Jacques Offenbach who reopened it as the Bouffes-Parisien.59

Napoleon III’s 7 January 1864 decree prohibited child acting troupes, putting an end to the likes of the Théâtre Comte for the remainder of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, individual child performers continued to appear on Paris stages throughout the nineteenth century. With the end of child acting troupes, child spectators in late nineteenth-century Paris had few options other than marionettes or theater intended primarily for adults. Still, the Théâtre Comte was significant for the development of commercial children’s theater in Paris after the First World War. Comte had adapted the key principle of theater of education – that theater written with the tastes and intellectual abilities of children in mind had the greatest impact on the child actor and the child spectator – to commercial theater.

When commercial theater specifically geared to the tastes of child spectators and featuring child performers re-emerged in Paris in the early twentieth century, its supporters harkened back to Comte. Director Pierre Humble followed Comte’s lead when he established the Théâtre du Petit Monde in Paris in 1919. Humble marketed his theater – the most successful children’s theater in Paris during the interwar period – as a place of entertainment and education. Humble also adroitly used the media of his day to convince bourgeois parents in the 1920s and 1930s that providing one child with educational entertainment was a mark of social status.60

59 Buguet, 14.