

Gabrielle Réjane

The Comedy of a Celebrity Commoner

On the centenary of the comic actress Gabrielle Réjane's death in 2020, there was no recognition of her achievements as the leading comic actress of her generation. Her once-famous fashions, costumes, plays, portraits, sketches, and films were absent from public discussion. It might come as a surprise to find that in 1901 the important drama critic and impresario Jacob Thomas "Jack" Grein claimed that Réjane was "greater than Sarah Bernhardt" and "a ruler of men."¹ John Stokes helps us understand the significance of Grein's claims to theater history. In *The French Stage Actress and Her English Audience*, Stokes dedicates a chapter to Réjane and her achievements in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London. Referencing her performances in Edmond de Goncourt's *Germinie Lacerteux* (1888), Henri Meilhac's *Ma Cousine* (1890), Georges de Porto-Riche's *L'Amoureuse* (1891), Daudet's *Sapho* (1892), Henry-François Becque's *La Parisienne* (1893), and Victorien Sardou's *Madame Sans-Gêne* (1894), Stokes argues that Réjane's idiosyncratic celebrity was built on wit, low-class vulgarity, and a deft, spontaneous physicality.² She brought *le peuple* [French commoners] to educated theatrical audiences in London. Here, I focus on the gradual emergence of Réjane's late nineteenth-century fame in London, the divergence between her theatrical success in London and her failure on the stage in America, and the establishment of the Théâtre Réjane and her entrance into silent film after the turn of the century. I contend that Réjane has been largely lost to history because she was a legitimate comic stage actress who did not appear in rowdy, slapstick films transparent in their physical humor, which are still enjoyed by global audiences today. In addition, film historians routinely discuss the "theatrical film" in terms of its technical and theatrical anachronism (the static camera, the intertitles announcing narrative action, broad physical gestures, and so on) and consequently remove an important thread of film history from view.³ I instead propose that we revive the celebrity of

an actress who challenged mores of sexual propriety through her comedy and who used all available means (including the theatrical film) to agitate for class advancement, female divorce, and her own creative independence.

I begin this chapter by examining Réjane's first appearances in the late nineteenth-century London press. I explore the avant-garde artists that she inspired early on when she toured the city and the differences between her English and American fame. I then discuss the building of her theater in Paris. I bring a fresh set of eyes to the context and spread of Réjane's celebrity, demonstrating that she was an actress whose advocacy and agitation—for women in the theater's creative expansion, for the actress's commercial importance, for *le peuple* and their visibility on the stage and screen—often accompanied, overlapped, and even preceded Bernhardt's own tremendous achievements. In my view, Réjane is therefore both an overlooked celebrity and a tenacious and enduring link to the comic self-awareness and assertive physicality that women in the late nineteenth century were beginning to enjoy.

RETURNING TO THE MARGINS

Like Bernhardt, Réjane emerged on and in the margins of Paris (fig. 10). Born in 1856, roughly a decade after Bernhardt, she was from a modest social background. Her father died when she was a young child; Réjane was raised by her mother, who resisted her entry into the theater. Even so, Réjane went on to secure theatrical celebrity—albeit relatively late, in her mid-thirties—when she established her place as Paris's leading comic actress in the 1890s, after nearly two decades of performance work. Réjane achieved her first success in a theatrical role in 1890 in Henri Meilhac's *Ma Cousine*, at the Théâtre des Variétés. Her performance thrilled audiences because in this play she danced the high-kicking, popular dance the cancan. Significantly, this dance offered a rare and risqué glimpse of the music hall on the legitimate French stage.

The Variétés was a respected comic theater in the second arrondissement in Paris, nominated by James Brander Matthews as being within the “fourth class of the theaters of Paris.”⁴ Réjane's performance drew attention to the new thrills of sexual display and theatrical developments in Paris (the presentation of music-hall sexuality in the legitimate theater, the willingness to take risqué performers such as the Moulin Rouge's Mademoiselle Grille d'Égout as a shared cultural reference, the gleeful use of the theater as a platform for change in female mores and behaviors). Réjane's next major success was as Catherine, the washerwoman, in Sardou's 1893 *Madame Sans-Gêne* (fig. 11). This role, which returned her to the first theater she had performed in after her graduation from the Conservatoire (the Théâtre du Vaudeville), associated her with a comic theater considered equal in status in Paris to the Odéon. Brander Matthews speaks of the Théâtre du Vaudeville as the theater featuring “the proper all-round presentation of comedy.”⁵



FIGURE 10. Réjane in *Ma Cousine* at the Théâtre des Variétés, 1890. Photograph: Atelier Nadar. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b5316381ot>.

At the Vaudeville, Réjane was managed by her husband, Paul Porel. Porel was a respected actor from the Odéon Theatre whom Réjane married in 1893; he was also the father of her two children. In 1905, when Réjane divorced Porel, she followed Bernhardt in establishing her own theater in Paris, the Théâtre Réjane. This theater, the home of the former Nouveau-Théâtre, was located outside the city center, on Rue Blanche, in the ninth arrondissement. Although Réjane was a famous actress-manager and the director of her own theater, her theater was not centralized geographically within Paris (as the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt was), nor did Réjane share Bernhardt's global renown. Nevertheless, Réjane demonstrated that a legitimate Parisian actress could achieve celebrity through comic roles and that hard work, resilience, and the ability to grasp opportunities as they arose could lead to theatrical success, also later in life. In the early twentieth century, when Réjane divorced Porel, established her own theater, managed her own affairs, and entered narrative film, she continued to explore the myriad opportunities that the theater offered.



FIGURE 11. Postcard of Réjane as Catherine. Caricature by ZIM. Author's private collection.

STARTING SMALL IN ENGLAND

Réjane first appeared in the English press in 1875, soon after her graduation from the Paris Conservatoire in 1874. It was her debut at the Théâtre du Vaudeville that generated comment. She appeared in a play called *La Revue de deux mondes*, a play that took its name from the famous Parisian literary, cultural, and current affairs monthly magazine. Her performance was mentioned in the "Foreign Theatrical and Musical Intelligence" column of the conservative *London Morning Post*, where she was described as having "the arch and sprightly air of a Parisian grisette, a flexible voice of an agreeable tone, and perfect self-possession."⁶ The famous French theater critic Francisque Sarcey, reviewing Réjane's theatrical debut in the Parisian newspaper *Le Temps*, similarly praised her performance. Sarcey described her as a "Watteau" who boasted, among other attributes, a "petulant and malicious mouth."⁷ Réjane performed the prologue for *La Revue de deux mondes*, providing a comic introduction to a three-act satiric revue that parodied contemporary Parisian cultural and artistic life. The play's narrative followed the director of the *Revue de deux mondes*, accompanied by a female reporter, in his search for the best French literary work of the year. *La Revue de deux mondes* was considered particularly successful in its parody of the Parisian theater. Sarcey tells us, for example, that "Saint-Germain [the famous comic French actor François Victor Arthur Gilles

de Saint] reproduced in the funniest fashion the physical tics of Mounet-Sulley [as G  rald in Henri de Bournier's *Fille de Roland*]," a play that had been performed the previous month at the respected Com  die-Fran  aise.⁸

La Revue de deux mondes was written by playwrights Abrahams Dreyfus and Louis-Fran  ois Nicola  , famous for their comic skill. Dreyfus, a young journalist and playwright of twenty-seven, was known for his skill in inserting *causerie* (chitchat) into theatrical dialogue. Nicola  , writing under the nom de plume *Clairville*, was a celebrated vaudeville actor and a decorated author of burlesque revues, satires, parodies, and ribald songs. In Sarcey's view, the two failed to make use of the liberties afforded vaudeville theater as a genre of popular theater that mocked French tradition and social mores. While the *Morning Post* reported that R  jane's opening verse announced "the intention of the management to return to the special kind of performance which made the reputation of the theater at the time when it had taken for its device the famous line which is printed daily on its bills—"Le Fran  ais, n   malin, cr  a le Vaudeville [The French, born clever, created Vaudeville]"—Sarcey argued that this intent to revive the satiric verve of the vaudeville stage was never fulfilled.⁹ As he explained, Dreyfus and Nicola   were too embarrassed by the popular and lowbrow reputation of the variety theater to strip their work of literary solemnity. Sarcey quipped that *La Revue de deux mondes* failed "to throw the old man out with the bathwater."¹⁰

One year later, in 1876, R  jane was again mentioned in the English press in a brief article that discussed her performance in a new comedy entitled *Perfide comme l'onde*. A single-act work by the satirical playwright Octave Gastineau, *Perfide comme l'onde* was performed at the Vaudeville Theater. The casting of R  jane is of interest here: she played an English maid, Juliette, who comically plays the role of an upper-class English lady. *Perfide comme l'onde* is noteworthy in that it was an all-female cast that caustically explored the mores of proper feminine behavior.¹¹ It focused on two wealthy Parisian women avenging themselves on each other. While one tricks the other into consorting with a "fashionable man-milliner" (that is, a scandalous *bon vivant*), the other asks her servant (Juliette, played by R  jane) to impersonate an "English Milady" at a fashionable concert. Therefore, Juliette, a servant, performed the role of an English lady of social rank. The play's action revolved around Juliette (as an upper-class English Lady) accompanying her employer's unwitting acquaintance to Salle Hertz (a respectable concert hall, established by Hector Berlioz in Paris some decades earlier). Wit and humor revolved around the comedic depiction of class difference. Once the ruse between the two women was discovered (after the visit to the Salle Hertz), the two agree to a hostile truce. As the *Morning Post* concluded: "Madlle R  jane, charming in her part of soubrette counterfeiting the English lady, came forward at the end to announce the name of the author, since no person of the male sex appears in the work. Loud applause followed the announcement."¹²

Perfide comme l'onde is important because it was a play performed solely by women. In 1889, accordingly, *Perfide comme l'onde* was presented in a second edition in a series entitled "Théâtre des Dames." This "female theater" series was constituted by single-piece acts with no male performers, promoted as "easy to play in society."¹³ *Perfide comme l'onde* gave Réjane central billing and focused its humor around a comedy of class. In this way, her role of Juliette can be linked to Réjane's later success as the gauche laundress Catherine Hübscher in *Madame Sans-Gêne*. *Madame Sans-Gêne* was first performed by Réjane in 1893; she was resoundingly successful as Catherine, where, as the Duchess of Danzig, she reprised the hilarious performativity of the upper class.

Perfide comme l'onde illustrated a Parisian needling of English class and traditions on the late nineteenth-century stage; the English class system was clearly a familiar subject of humor in Paris. We can see the familiarity that Parisian audiences had with the English through the subject matter and script of *Perfide comme l'onde*. In the play, Réjane was instructed to speak French with an English accent, and she mixed English words into her theatrical dialogue. When Juliette is asked, for example, if she wants sugared tea, she states: "Oh yes, excessive-ment sucré"; when asked if she likes music, she states: "I like it so much; j'adore la musique."¹⁴ Dialogue was also peppered with self-reflexive banter that indicated that the playwrights understood that Réjane would be a good comic draw on the Parisian stage. For example, when Juliette is asked by her employer if she would willingly participate in the ruse, Réjane (widely known to have gone against her mother's wishes in choosing a theatrical career) retorted: "Madame can be assured that I am well-disposed to playing comedy. I even wanted to enter the theater, but my family was opposed to this."¹⁵

Perfide comme l'onde was performed by Réjane in London in 1877. A quiet affair, its performance was marked by a few advertisements in the press announcing the French Plays at the Gaiety Theatre.¹⁶ Réjane did not, therefore, enjoy the celebrity that Bernhardt commanded in London a couple of years later, when she first arrived in 1879. Nevertheless, the fact that Réjane traveled with the Vaudeville company to London in the summer season of 1877 (when the theaters closed in Paris), and performed in a theater managed by John Hollingshead, cannot be overlooked. It indicates the appeal of French class comedy to late nineteenth-century London audiences, particularly class comedy that allowed a Parisian *grisette* to mirror the performance of the English upper class to themselves. Réjane's appearance in London also reveals that Hollingshead promoted topical French plays in the summer theater season even before he had secured the Comédie-Française as an attraction, in 1879, and well before Réjane and Bernhardt were globally celebrated actresses. Indeed, it was in May 1877 that Hollingshead first committed to a summer schedule of French plays. These later became an annual event. Significantly, it was at this inaugural launch that Réjane first traveled to London.¹⁷

Although Réjane appeared in London before Bernhardt and broke new ground by appearing in Hollingshead's inaugural French season of plays, Bernhardt and Réjane were part of a larger movement to make Parisian theater increasingly available on the late nineteenth-century London stage. As Ignacio Ramos-Gay explains, "The proliferation of seasons [in the 1870s and 1880s] during which the leading London theaters staged French plays performed by French actors in their native language before an essentially upper-class, Anglophone audience, attests to the reverence that many in the business felt towards the artistry and expertise of French actors." Because France was considered "the fountainhead of the world's drama," many theaters specialized in staging plays in French. The French Seasons emerged from this reputation and included theaters such as the Royalty Theatre, the Holborn, the Gaiety, and the Princess's Theatre.¹⁸ In this context, Réjane was not a lone pioneer when she performed early on in London. Moreover, neither she nor Bernhardt represent the female equivalent of the Great Man in theater history: they did not individually pioneer new forms of theatrical celebrity but were part of a generation of Parisian actors that began to travel to London and capitalize on the opportunities that a geographically close locus of commerce and culture offered. Each actress invigorated foreign audiences with the skill and thrill of emergent trends and opportunities from Paris.

RÉJANE'S LONDON DEBUT

As a young actress performing in respected comic theaters in Paris in the 1870s, it is significant that Réjane debuted in London at the Gaiety Theatre. The Gaiety was a relatively new theater, constructed in 1868. It attracted an audience that understood that going to the theater involved more than seeing a theatrical play. As Catherine Hindson explains, the Gaiety Theatre was "a self-consciously modern entertainment space, a product of the theatre-building boom of the second half of the nineteenth century. Occupying a prime site on the Strand, at the heart of London's fashionable social centre, the Gaiety was a landmark of the capital's new commodity culture."¹⁹ Audience members attended the theater to see new plays but also to eat in its restaurant, mix in its foyer, and be seen by like-minded protagonists of fashion, art, and culture.²⁰ The Gaiety Theatre also pioneered the use of electricity in London, turning "night into day." As an 1878 "London Gossip" column in the *Wrexham Advertiser* (a Welsh paper) explained, the electric light came from Paris to London, symbolizing the modern metropolis: "The electric light now gives a signal beacon nightly in the Strand from the Gaiety Theatre which plainly shows what the light of the future will be."²¹

Although Réjane performed in a Strand theater that headlined Parisian theater and French commercial opportunities, the extent of her celebrity at this early point in her career is unclear. For example, in 1883, when the Gaiety Theatre next featured Réjane in its French summer program, the *Morning Post* was unaware

that she had already performed in the city. Discussing Jules Claretie's *Monsieur le ministre*—a “Parisian novel” adapted to the stage by M. Dumas *fils*—the newspaper explained that Réjane, “who has not previously been seen [in London], and who is specially sympathetic to the English public, makes her first appearance and shows herself an admirable comedian.”²² The *Pall Mall Gazette* stated that Réjane is “a young actress who has always been warmly welcomed in England, and who has now ripened into an admirable comedian.” Promoted as the “chief feature” of the play, it is also explained that *Monsieur le ministre* otherwise focuses on the state of politics in France and so has “naturally but a moderate interest for an English audience.”²³ In either case—whether Réjane was considered a newcomer to the London stage or recognized as an established part of the London annual French season—her emergence as a celebrity in England was a gradual affair.

LONDON AND THE CIRCULATION OF “EVENTS IN FRANCE”

It was not necessary for Réjane to perform every year in the Gaiety's summer season of French plays in order for her to achieve celebrity in London. Réjane's English reputation grew through reviews of her performances in the English press, published regularly in the 1880s and 1890s. Discussed in newspaper columns that focused on the Parisian theater—these columns were variously entitled “French Plays,” “Events in France,” or “The Foreign Theatrical and Musical Intelligence”—Réjane's name became familiar to a reading public. As Ramos-Gay explains, the familiarity that French actresses enjoyed in the late nineteenth century in London was not unusual. Because in England there was a taste for “alternative, extra-British forms of theater,”²⁴ French theater was regularly discussed in the English press. Among these forms of theater, the Parisian stage was central. Ramos-Gay illustrates the availability of the Parisian theater in the English press: “Sections such as ‘In Paris’ (*The Theater*), ‘The Stage in France’ and ‘French Literature’ (*The Saturday Review*), ‘Notes from Paris’ (*The Athenaeum*), ‘The Drama in Paris’ (*The Era*), ‘Theatre Abroad’ (*The Illustrated Review*), ‘The Parisian Stage’ and ‘The Paris Theatres’ (*Pall Mall Gazette*) evince how leading Victorian publications (both of general readership and specialized in the theater) acknowledged the exclusivity of French—and particularly Parisian—cultural life.”²⁵

MA COUSINE: CHOREOGRAPHY AND THE CANCAN

Although Parisian performers and performances were discussed regularly in the late nineteenth-century English press, Réjane's 1890 performance in Henri Meilhac's three-act comedy *Ma Cousine* at the Théâtre des Variétés triggered an unusual number of responses. Focusing on the comedy that ensues when a baroness (a member of the upper class) implores a famous actress (Riquette, a member

of the lower class) to assist in repairing her marriage, the play was a domestic satire and a self-reflexive pantomime. In the second act of *Ma Cousine*, Réjane's pantomimic satire of a contemporary Parisian play (*Le Piston d'Hortense*) was considered a highlight, particularly because Réjane's physical comedy included a satirical performance of the popular cancan dance. A reporter in the *Horse and Hound* stated that notwithstanding the success of the play, it would be "a difficult matter for an English version to be sufficiently modified to suit even our modern *risqué* tastes."²⁶ The *London Standard* elaborated, giving details not only of Réjane's thrilling and versatile performance as the dancer Riquette but also of Réjane changing the physical choreography of her role. Under the heading "Events in France," The reviewer explained that Réjane had, in the character of Riquette, to dance a relatively "sober measure." Deciding instead to adapt and use the cancan dance (known as the *chahut*, which translates as raise an uproar),²⁷ permission was obtained from M. Baron, the manager of the Variétés Theatre, and the playwright M. Meilhac. Readers were told that "after witnessing Mdlle. Réjane's performance [of the cancan] he [Meilhac] understood it would certainly be one of the great attractions of his piece."²⁸

Mdlle. "Grille d'Égout" (the pseudonym for Lucienne Beuze, translating roughly as "sewer grill") was a famous dancer at the Moulin Rouge, the Parisian cabaret that had opened just one year earlier in the popular district of Pigalle. Renowned for performing the cancan with La Goulue (Louise Weber) at the Moulin Rouge, Réjane sought d'Égout's expertise to help choreograph her own dance for *Ma Cousine*. To engage d'Égout, Réjane first approached Charles Zidler, a cofounder of the Moulin Rouge, and asked for a private audience. As Alfred Capus states in the Parisian journal the *Revue Bleue* (in an article appropriately entitled "Chronique Parisien"), Réjane's initiative was reported in local presses. Struck by the "grace, decency, and chic" of d'Égout during her requested exhibition dance, Réjane hired her to choreograph and teach her the *chahut*.

As Capus makes clear, the *chahut* was a spectacle of both movement and clothing. Citing Réjane, Capus writes that the aim of the dance was to raise the leg and retract the foot, so as "to show a jumble of lace."²⁹ What was difficult was not just the raised leg but finding "the petticoats necessary for the exhibition of a lace display." As Réjane lamented, "I had a world of trouble sourcing a petticoat similar to that of Mdlle. d'Égout."³⁰ Adapting her dress and incorporating the cancan into *Ma Cousine*, Réjane was willful, innovative, and provocative; she pushed the bounds of acceptable dress and performance in a comic act on the Boulevard stage. Réjane also acted as a lightning-rod for the wider dissemination of d'Égout's cancan dance overseas. As Capus explained, "The enormous success of *Ma Cousine* has placed Grille d'Égout among our [most famous] national illustrations."³¹ Réjane and d'Égout illustrated not only the rich intersection of legitimate female comedy with cabaret performance but also the feminist demands Parisian women were making through the creative industries. As *The Standard* commented in its 1890 review of *Ma Cousine*, the introduction of the *chahut* into M. Meilhac's play indicated

the strength in Paris of what was called the *fin de siècle* movement. As the review explained, feminist women took center stage in this movement. Their demands included a push for rational dress that would enable women to enjoy a more physically active and healthy leisure time:

Women . . . are no longer content to dress, as their mothers did, in modest garments, nor even in the rich and showy costumes adopted in recent years. A great many of the fair sex would like to walk about the streets in tight-fitting trousers. With the object of satisfying that ambition a League for what is called the Reform of Female Attire and the Liberty of Dress has been formed. A notice just published in the *Citoyenne*, the organ of the League, says:—"The Leaguers undertake to modify their costume in a rational manner, and gradually, or suddenly, to transform their feminine attire."³²

The lead Réjane took in determining her own behavior and dress on the stage remained, at least in 1890, reported in an "Events in France" column. Réjane's audacious *épater le bourgeois* (to shock the middle class) was not, however, motivation for feminist change in London. Indeed, throughout the 1880s and at least until 1894—when Réjane returned to London on the heels of her success in *Madame Sans-Gêne* in Paris in 1893—the English press advertised Réjane's costumes in terms of respectable dress and contemporary civilized fashion. Hence, in an article published across at least eighteen different papers on October 15, 1887, the autumn season fashion included reference to the "very French-looking" Réjane hat, recently "seen at a race meeting." Describing it as a broad-rimmed hat with upturned sides and a feather reaching across the left rim to rest on the wearer's hair, Réjane's hat marks a fashion-setting accoutrement for a female journalist (May Kensington) writing under the conservative heading, "A Lady's Letter."³³

"HAVEN'T WE FOREIGNERS ENOUGH?"

When Réjane returned to London in 1894, she did so during a summer season that also saw Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt perform successively at London's new Daly's Theatre (opened in 1893). In the opinion of the *Morning Post*, the appearance of Duse and Bernhardt confirmed London "as a capital which can command such a succession of histrionic luminaries." The presence of the two actresses also indicated that London audiences were sophisticated enough to appreciate "artistic contrasts."³⁴ The English theater critic Clement Scott, writing an article in the *Illustrated London News* about the programming of two continental actresses, playing consecutively in the same London theater, made their contrasts clear. Scott characterized Sarah Bernhardt as "an emotional actress" and Duse as "a cold and calculating artist." Opening his discussion with a reflection on the riches offered London society during the theater's season, Scott also included mention of the "newer" actress, Réjane: "what with the constant chatter of comparison between the Divine Sarah and the new Duse and the still newer Réjane, not one of whom can in any possible way be compared to the other—what

with matinées and melodramas and music, that curious world known as London Society scarcely knows which way to turn.”³⁵

Réjane’s return to London in 1894 represented something of a high point in late nineteenth-century French-English theatrical exchange. A summer season, in a globally important commercial and theatrical capital, featured some of the most important international actresses in the world. Significantly, the importance of the continental actress as a new, international phenomenon received much attention in the press. The *New York Times*, citing the *London World*, called the era “the age of the actress.” Noting that “more than ever before in the history of the drama woman has ‘taken the stage,’” it asked: “Who have been the leading figures of the present theatrical season in London?” Significantly, the paper mentioned once more the “still newer” Réjane: “Four women, beyond all question—Ada Rehan, Eleonora Duse, Sarah Bernhardt and Réjane. No male performer, English or foreign, has held so large a place in the public eye, or, indeed, has done such remarkable work as these four ladies. And all of them, be it noted, come to us from abroad.”³⁶

It was not just the contrast between Bernhardt and Duse but between Bernhardt and Réjane that drew particular comment. The satirical London paper, *Moonshine*, jibed: “Sarah is to have a rival this year. Good gracious! Haven’t we foreigners enough? No, the company of the Paris vaudeville will occupy the Gaiety stage for a time, and at least one actress of high ability will be seen, the attractive Mdlle. Rejane, who is to appear in *Madame Sans-Gêne*, by Sardou, a play which they say requires the utmost finesse and finish of French art to make palatable to British tastes.”³⁷ Réjane’s low comedy was contrasted to Bernhardt’s emotional tragedy; the two actresses revealed the range of theatrical genre and celebrity that Paris could boast. Moreover, and unlike the program of plays that Bernhardt presented at Daly’s, Réjane appeared for the season in a single work, *Madame Sans-Gêne*.³⁸ As the Gaiety program announced, Réjane’s play was “A New Play in Four Acts,” written by Victorien Sardou and Emile Moreau, and advertised “As produced at the Theatre de Vaudeville, Paris, October 27th, 1893.”³⁹ In the mid-1890s, Réjane was therefore characterized as an actress whose recent success in Paris catapulted her back onto the London stage.⁴⁰ Advertisements reiterated this, stating that *Madame Sans-Gêne* was “the great theatrical success of the Paris season,” carried directly from Paris to the London stage.⁴¹

MADAME SANS-GÊNE: POPULARIZING THE NAPOLEONIC EMPIRE

Catherine, the washerwoman nicknamed “Madame Sans-Gêne” (Madame shameless), drives most of the action of Sardou and Moreau’s play. Married to Marshal Lefebvre in the days of Napoleon I (and based, anecdotally, on Lefebvre’s wife, Catherine Hubscher), the story traces her life as she moves from being an anonymous laundress for Napoleon (who, at the time of their first encounter, is an

impecunious, unknown soldier) to a duchess (the Duchess of Dantzig), tasked with dressing and performing appropriately within his Imperial Court. The second act, in which, as an ennobled laundress, the duchess takes lessons in deportment and receives the queen and princess, is the most obviously farcical and underscored Réjane's capacity to excel in a comedy of class. The climax of the story revolves around the actions Catherine takes when she is faced with losing her husband and her position, as well as the clever diplomacy she employs to save the life of Count Neipperg. It is at this moment that she reminds the emperor that she was once his laundress and had sheltered him from his enemies. When Réjane played this role, she expressed the comic humanity and "honest vulgarity" of a *blanchisseuse* (common washerwoman). As a reviewer in the *Morning Post* reflected, while the scenes were "trite and slight"—the script was "an example of theatrical cookery"—the mastery of Réjane's comic performance held the work together.⁴²

So *Madame Sans-Gêne* tells the tale of a washerwoman who remains true to her common origins, even when she has reached a position in Court. The play's focus on the female protagonist as a genuine representative of "le peuple," comedy as a theatrical genre worthy of critical attention, and the ability of court gossip and domestic anecdote to drive a narrative about the Napoleonic era was significant. Whereas in *Ma Cousine* Réjane was making Parisian cabaret (the cancan in particular) visible to London audiences, in *Madame Sans-Gêne* she centralized a female commoner and exerted feminist demands from the margins of official history. Shifting focus from Napoleon to a duchess, from a soldier to a washerwoman, and from political power to a wily performance of upper-class graces, the play asked audiences to focus on the overlooked history of working women, as well as the overlooked history of the female point of view. As Réjane explained in *The Sketch*, "When acting, I have but one ambition . . . that is, to reinterpret, to re-incarnate, if possible, a woman's soul, a woman's individuality."⁴³

Not all reviews of Réjane's performance of Catherine were positive. A discussion of *Madame Sans-Gêne* in the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* argued that the work was unable to "lift history above gossip." *Madame Sans-Gêne* was lambasted for the domestication and historical diminishment of Napoleon and for the way in which he was "Kodaked through the keyhole." Stating that "it is as though the *valet* had dictated the play," the reviewer reminded readers that Napoleon was a strong and important global leader. Hence, "when we find him [Napoleon] revived in a drama we expect to be moved by his force and not merely amused—if we are amused—by his pettiness."⁴⁴

The narrative focus of *Madame Sans-Gêne*—the Napoleonic legend—was a fashionable topic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Michele Majer explains in her article, "*Plus Que Reine: The Napoleonic Revival in Belle Epoque Theater and Fashion*," interest in Napoleon was renewed between 1890 and 1914, largely because 1899 was the centenary of Napoleon's *coup d'état* (an event that made him head of a new consular government in France). Reflecting this surge of

enthusiasm for Napoleon in 1893, the same year that *Madame Sans-Gêne* debuted on the Vaudeville's stage, there were other, contemporaneous works that explored Napoleon's life—for example, Alphonse Lemonnier's *Madame la Maréchale*, Leopold Martin Laya's *Napoléon*, and Charles Grandmougin's *L'Empereur*.⁴⁵ These plays were similar to *Madame Sans-Gêne* insofar as they emphasized the private man—Napoleon as a son, lover, husband, and father. According to Venta Datta, the focus on Napoleon's personal history demonstrates the capacity of *fin de siècle* theater to bridge the past and the present through “popular, democratic history.”⁴⁶ In this context, we might remember the uniqueness of Réjane's role as a laundress in *Madame Sans-Gêne*. When Henry Fouquier discussed *Madame Sans-Gêne* in the special 1900 edition of the French journal *Le Théâtre*, he observed that the personal life of Napoleon held universal appeal. In *Madame Sans-Gêne*, however, French audiences particularly enjoyed seeing Napoleon “struggling with a woman who is at once a refined Parisian with a very delicate spirit, yet who retains her working-class air.” Alluding to the quiet diplomacy the duchess exerts to prevent the execution of Count Neipperg at Court, Fouquier concluded that “it is the triumph of our noble tradition that a good-hearted *grisette* with a charming humor is, for an instant, the good angel of a hero.”⁴⁷

“A NOTHING CAPABLE OF EVERYTHING”

Réjane's 1894 Gaiety season was a resounding theatrical success. Hailed as a “new comic actress of the first rank,” Réjane had “introduced” herself to London.⁴⁸ Discussion of the celebrities who attended her London performances confirm this public appeal. The actors Ellen Terry, Henry Irving, Geraldine Ulmar, Florence St. John, and Fanny Bernard Beere attended her opening night. So, too, did the drama critic and writer J. Comyns Carr, as well as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley.⁴⁹ Two days later, it was reported that the Prince and Princess of Wales, accompanied by the princesses Victoria and Maud of Wales (“and suite”) had visited the Gaiety to watch Réjane perform.⁵⁰ Actors (from a range of theaters), as well as young avant-garde artists and English royalty, joined to confirm Réjane's newfound celebrity abroad.

Comparable to Bernhardt's foray into shows in reputable art galleries and headline charitable events, Réjane's visibility in London in 1894 was not restricted to her Gaiety appearances. There are reports of her undertaking many initiatives during her stay, each of which indicates the range of networks (including both people and institutions) she was able to build and enjoy. Réjane joined, for instance, a range of popular artists headed by the chief tenor from the Paris Opéra-Comique (Edmond Clément) in a concert held at St. James's Hall.⁵¹ Réjane was also the guest of honor among four hundred guests at a garden party hosted by the (then reputable) playwright and publisher Frederick William Horner and his wife. More significant, Réjane joined Bernhardt to headline a six-hundred-strong benefit reception for

the French Hospital at the Grafton Galleries. This event was assisted by short recitations and performances from celebrities such as Irving, Terry, the Canadian soprano Emma Albani, the composer and pianist Léon Delafosse, actor Lucien Guitry, and others.⁵² Attended by an illustrious audience (including royalty and members of the political establishment), the benefit recognized Réjane and Bernhardt as leaders of the season's theatrical events.⁵³

Because the Grafton Gallery was a cutting-edge gallery in the exclusive area of Mayfair that had opened the previous year, Réjane and Bernhardt's event was charitable and fashionable. Hosted in a forum that showed a "Summer Exhibition" headlined "Fair Women," the venue also promoted female initiatives in the arts. Indeed, with the Princess of Wales as the exhibition's "Patroness," and boasting an all-female "exhibition committee" comprising nineteen titled or otherwise powerful women, the Grafton Gallery provided an especially suitable space from which to make Bernhardt and Réjane international leaders of art and philanthropy. While Bernhardt was featured in two of the 575 works exhibited (in a portrait by Walter E. Spindler and a marble bust by Prosper d'Épinay), they were both implicitly a Grafton Gallery "Fair Woman."⁵⁴ Explaining that a "Fair Woman" took into account achievement and endeavor rather than beauty alone, the preface to the gallery program stated: "As there are included certain pictures of Women possibly more celebrated for their historical interest, their influence, or their wit than for their beauty, some exception has been taken to the title of the Exhibition."⁵⁵

Although Réjane's fame was too new to be included in the wide-ranging survey of artworks shown in the "Fair Women" exhibition, an image and a discussion of her fame circulated in the new London quarterly, *The Yellow Book*. Associated with the British Decadent art movement—*The Yellow Book's* title alluded to French novels, wrapped in yellow, a practice that alerted readers to their risqué content—the first four editions of the journal were edited by a young Aubrey Beardsley. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Beardsley's renown for challenging middle-class mores, *The Yellow Book's* content launched "new" challenges to its readers. These challenges can be seen both in terms of the journal's bold, visual design and in terms of its celebration of "new" women. As Bridget Elliott explains in her article "New and Not So 'New Women' on the London Stage: Aubrey Beardsley's *Yellow Book* Images of Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Réjane," of the thirty-one images illustrated in the journal, twenty-seven were women. In the view of critics, these women "bore disturbing signs of corruption, sexual decadence, and emancipation. Most were drawn from categories of females whose very existence challenged middle-class feminine ideals of the dependent wife and mother, categories ranging from actresses and masqueraders to prostitutes and lesbians."⁵⁶ Beardsley's sketch of Réjane (shown in a clear outline as Catherine in *Madame Sans-Gêne*), was topical yet did not cause a stir. As Elliott explains, French actresses were accepted as new women and therefore judged by different moral standards from those of their English counterparts. Furthermore, the stylistic association of Beardsley (as

a Francophile artist working in a Decadent style) with Réjane (as the leader of French theatrical comedy) connected the moral challenges of the new woman with French, not British, subject matter.⁵⁷

The article about Réjane in *The Yellow Book* clearly expressed the terms of French (particularly, Parisian) cultural difference. Entitled “Madame Réjane,” and written by the poet (and, later, historian) Dauphin Meunier, the article introduced Réjane through a single, descriptive sentence that was almost half a page long. Mentioning the actress’s name for the first time, the sentence concluded: “. . . beauty without beauty, immorality without evil: a nothing capable of everything: such is Woman at Paris: such is the Parisienne: and Madame Réjane is the Parisienne, is all Parisiennes, incarnated.”⁵⁸ Later, mentioning Réjane’s association with the new woman featured in the avant-garde theater of Ibsen, Meunier spoke of how “the seekers after strange novelties, the fanatics for the mists of the far north, the vague, the irresolute, the restless” will also remember Réjane’s appearance as Nora in *A Doll’s House*. In a Meunier’s view, however, “most of us, loving Réjane for herself, probably prefer to this vacillating creation, the firm drawing, the clear design, the strong yet supple lines of Madame Sans-Gêne.”⁵⁹ Helping to describe in these last words Beardsley’s simple “portrait of Madame Réjane” in the same *Yellow Book*, Meunier deftly articulated the centrality of the actress to a generation of aesthetic, cultural, and social change in London.

AN AMERICAN DEBUT: PERFORMING “THE RED SASH OF MME. SANS-GENE REPUBLICANISM”

Like Bernhardt, Réjane traveled to America on the heels of her first successful season in London. Taking the transatlantic steamer *La Champagne* from Le Havre, this ambitious actress sailed with her Parisian vaudeville company, arriving in New York on February 24, 1895.⁶⁰ Her arrival in America was celebrated as offering the possibility for New York theatergoers to see a famous Parisian actress in a role that had also been fêted in London. Audiences were promised a famous Parisian performer, as well as her supporting cast and scenery. As the *New York Times* reported in an article published roughly a week prior to Réjane’s arrival:

Next to Sarah Bernhardt, Mme. Réjane, who is now on her way to New York to present the French version of “Mme. Sans Gêne” at Abbey’s Theatre next week, is perhaps the best known actress in France. In comedy, her particular line, she may be said to hold an equal position in the French theatrical world with Bernhardt herself. For ten years she has been the pet of the Parisian public, and her fame has been steadily growing, until it reached its climax with her acting in the part of Mme. Sans Gêne, the washerwoman of Lieut. Bonaparte and the lady of the Court of the Emperor.

. . . In it Rejane made the great success of her life. The play has been presented there ever since [October 27, 1893], with the exception of a short season in London, until it was withdrawn recently to allow Rejane and her company to come to this country, where they will appear at Abbey’s Theatre.⁶¹

An English version of *Madame Sans-Gêne* (tweaked as *Mme. Sans-Gene*) was contemporaneously performed by American actress Kathryn Kidder under the direction of Augustus Pitou at the Broadway Theater in New York. The *New York Times* headed its article about this performance “The Original ‘SansGene.’” First performed in Washington at Albaugh’s Opera House on November 5, 1894, this English version of *Madame Sans-Gêne* opened to New York audiences on January 14, 1895. With scenery that “duplicated” that of the Vaudeville Theatre, and Kidder promoted as an actress who had seen Réjane perform in both Paris and London (and who reportedly met to discuss her production with the playwright Sardou), the American performance of *Madame Sans-Gêne* attracted much comment.⁶² Audience familiarity with Réjane’s performance in the play was assumed: as the review of the opening night’s performance stated, the work “was familiar by name and story” to the audience of the packed Broadway Theatre. As readers were also reminded, “We get our new plays from abroad after the gloss is worn off of them. Probably two-thirds of last night’s audience knew every incident of Sardou and Moreau’s play called ‘Mme. Sans Gêne’ before they went to the theatre; knew about the furor of Rejane’s portrayal of the principal role, the washerwoman of the first republic, who became the Duchess of Dantzig of the first empire, had created in Paris and London.”⁶³ Described as “an excellent preparation for something better,”⁶⁴ the American translation of *Madame Sans-Gêne* confirmed the international celebrity of Réjane’s particular performance of class comedy.

Advertisements for Réjane’s American debut in Abbey’s Theatre on Feb. 27, 1895, highlighted the Paris-London trajectory of her fame (fig. 12). *Mme. Sans Gêne*, readers were told, was “expressly written for Mme. Rejane, and performed by her for over 400 nights in Paris and 40 nights in London.”⁶⁵ As this advertisement indicated, Réjane could command the attention of an international playwright and enjoyed celebrity in the cultural capitals of the world. The play ran at Abbey’s Theatre for three weeks, its success aided by Réjane’s renown, Kidder’s contemporaneous American *Mme. Sans-Gene*, and a more general American interest in the Napoleonic era. As in France, *Mme. Sans-Gene* could be seen alongside a range of related plays that focused on Napoleon.⁶⁶ As one commentator argued, “the days of the first Napoleon . . . [have] been exciting almost as great an interest in America as in France.”⁶⁷ This focus on the First Empire was evident in other areas of creative industry. For instance, the International Exposition of Costumes, which opened in Madison Square Garden during Réjane’s appearance as Catherine, included displays of costumes from the Napoleonic period, as well as dresses based on this era.⁶⁸ Perhaps more tellingly, Réjane’s *Madame Sans-Gêne* was interpreted in America within the context of its own national history. Considered “a legitimate part of the revolutionary revival and the present Napoleonic cult in France,” the play represented a capacity to move between social classes, as well as the capacity of the lower classes to claim a public and political voice. Indeed, when Réjane departed for New York, the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed that she sailed with “her red sash of Mme. Sans-Gene republicanism—both French and American.”⁶⁹



FIGURE 12. Cover of the French and English “Argument of the Play,” published in America for *Mme. Sans-Gêne* (Madame Free-and-Easy), 1894. Author’s private collection.

Réjane followed her performance of *Mme. Sans-Gêne* at Abbey’s Theatre with *Ma Cousine*. These were the two roles that introduced Réjane’s comedy to American audiences. The reception of *Ma Cousine* was, however, comparatively mute. Réjane’s performance was commended; particular note was made of the way that she conducted the first act while lying on a couch. Nevertheless, the morality of the play was questioned. As the *New York Times* reflected, “the piece is one of those curiously-confusing productions of French genius in the presence of which the Anglo-Saxon observer must struggle between two impulses—one to denounce it with vigorous indignation for outrageous disregard of conventions that should be universal, and the other to praise it unreservedly for ingenuity and wit, leaving any questions of morality to be settled in the land of its origin.”⁷⁰ When *Ma Cousine* was followed a week later by Réjane’s performance as Nora Helmer in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, audiences did not come. Ibsen, readers were told, “draws a very small audience in New York, whether his interpreters are English, German or French. . . . The house was barely half full.” Although Réjane’s acting was technically noteworthy, she was considered no Ibsenite but “simply a remarkably fine actress.”⁷¹

Réjane’s decision to headline the risqué comedy of the Parisian boulevard in *Ma Cousine* and the new woman of Ibsen’s *Doll’s House* did not appeal to American audiences. When Réjane continued her American tour (she played in

Philadelphia, New Orleans, Chicago, and Boston), it was *Madame Sans-Gêne* that attracted crowds. As the *Boston Herald* recounted, with the exception of *Madame Sans-Gêne*, attendance at Réjane's vehicles was "exceedingly 'light.'" Because of this, discussion about her Boston engagement opened with the statement: "The old saw about leading a horse to water might be applied to Mme. Rejane's Boston engagement, for, though she has been brought hither, it is the public that refuses to do the drinking."⁷²

"PRODUCTIVE OF LITTLE SAVE DISAPPOINTMENT":
RÉJANE'S REJECTION IN AMERICA

Réjane's 1895 American debut was considered a failure. The reasons were many. Under the heading "Mme. Rejane's Tour Unsatisfactory," the *Chicago Daily Tribune* explained that Americans, once drawn to French plays (specifically, those with Bernhardt's elaborate costumes), now prefer "native companies better." Rival performances, like Kidder performing *Madame Sans-Gêne* in English, in New York and in the same year, drew a competing public. Although this allowed Réjane's French performance to be translated and therefore understood, it also meant, as the *Tribune* pointed out, "the star often played before pits and boxes with yawning voids. The imitation article drew crowds." Furthermore, American women supported theatrical matinées, soirées, readings, receptions, lectures, and souvenir presentations. Arbiters of taste, they determined the success or failure of a play. Men, devoted to business, "were too tired to find pleasure in what costs each moment a mental effort to understand."⁷³ Réjane's comedy, regarded as morally, culturally, and linguistically challenging, was therefore neither embraced nor well understood. In 1896, Bernhardt confirmed the difficulty of transporting legitimate French comedy to America. Addressing Réjane's failure in America, Bernhardt stated that emotion and larger passions can be understood across languages and cultures. In contrast, "in comedy one must have the lines *absolument*. That is why Rejane, a great comedienne, failed."⁷⁴

Réjane toured America again in 1904, on the heels of her growing celebrity in Paris and London. This was a decade after she had risen to prominence through *Madame Sans-Gêne* and a period in which she was separating from her husband, Georges Porel. Porel was a powerful and respected director and manager of Parisian theaters (in 1904 he managed the Vaudeville Theatre, a role he had enjoyed for more than a decade). Porel had granted Réjane legal permission to sign engagements without his consent as her manager. This permission, now withdrawn, was contested in the courts. While a decision was found in Réjane's favor, a three-month tour to America (appearing in the same cities—New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and New Orleans) provided an opportunity for the actress to take control of her own business affairs. Réjane's very public divorce, combined with her willingness to advocate for her rights as an independent actress-manager,

indicated to audiences that she was a woman who was willing to take risks, to negotiate business dealings of her own, and to define her celebrity on her own terms.⁷⁵ Consequently, before departing from Paris to New York, there were reports that Réjane was “considering a proposition to remain in New York for a long time, in connection with the establishment of a dramatic conservatory similar to the French Conservatory.” As her American manager, George C. Tyler, of the New York-based Liebler & Co., confirmed, “We have gone so far as to make arrangements for control of a theatre for Mme. Réjane in case she should decide to try the plan, if even for one season only. In this theatre what would amount to a stock company would be established.”⁷⁶

Réjane opened her American tour in New York at the Lyric Theatre on November 7, 1904. For this opening night, she presented a one-act boulevard burlesque entitled *Lolotte* (Meilhac and Halévy) and an “intensely emotional drama” entitled *Amoureuse* [*Lover*] (Georges de Porto-Riche). Likened to “the opening night of the grand opera season in the presence of wealth and fashion,” Réjane’s return was much anticipated.⁷⁷ Reviews of her performance, however, were critical of the moral chasm that separated France from America. Recognizing that Réjane was “the most talented exponent of the comedy of manners,” the *New York Times* reviewer nevertheless explained that “now, as then [on her first tour in 1895] she is hampered by the moral bias of American audiences, and by the fact that the manners she so searchingly studies and exquisitely depicts are exotic—foreign alike to our sympathies and our experience. We loop-the-loop and bump the bumps of our native drama with hilarious joy; but to loop the angles of the triangle of French love brings a moral jar which we endure at best with inward discomfort.”⁷⁸

Réjane’s presentation of *Amoureuse* was considered particularly shocking. In this play, Réjane performed Gabrielle, a wife who has an extramarital affair and then returns to a chastened and dishonored husband. The narrative was criticized for its immorality and Réjane for her bawdy, realistic performance of a woman who, as a commoner, was of a lower class than the actress herself. It was observed that “there were moments when Mme. Réjane revealed somewhat too much the traits of the woman of the boulevards, frankly Parisian and Bohemian though Germaine was supposed to be. The gauche stride of the heels, the lifting of the skirts, the shrugging of the shoulders, the throwing out the elbow, the smile that twisted itself up toward one ear, all seemed at times ill to accord with the manner of the highbred Frenchwoman.”⁷⁹

Criticisms also emerged when Réjane played another work, *La Passerelle* (Fred de Grésac and Francis de Croisset), during her second week at the Lyric. So morally outraged were New York audiences that readers were told that it was “a play to which no careful girl will take her mother.” The incongruity between Réjane’s age (she was then in her late forties) and her “kittenish heroine” motivated particular concern. As one observer wrote: “The *poudre de riz* [white powder] on her forehead is thick and slab [caked or blocked on]. The carmine [bright red

colorant] on her lips invades the corners of her mouth, making it, in its mobile mimicry, sensual and leathery, as one imagines the mouth of Circe.”⁸⁰ On this program, Réjane also appeared as Yanetta, the wife, in Eugène Brieux’s *La Robe rouge*. Here, audiences struggled with the technicalities of the theme of French law and were unable to follow Réjane’s French language and expression, with its “finer shades of wit and satire.”⁸¹ It was also noted that little care was given to her theatrical sets. For example, Réjane’s *Sappho* was disparaged as “pathetically inadequate” from a scenic point of view.⁸²

When Réjane traveled to the other cities on this second American tour, criticism of her program, style of play, and scenery were repeated. Although she was introduced in Chicago as “one of the ‘great’ of the world,”⁸³ observers were frank in their disdain. Summing up her tour, one reviewer stated that “Mme. Rejane’s fortnight engagement at the Grand Opera House has been productive of little save disappointment for all concerned. The business has been noticeably light, the work of the star and her company has not proven of the high grade of excellence anticipated, and the plays offered have been not only immediately unpleasant but have left a most unfavorable and disagreeable impression as to the dramatic art and stage literature of France.”⁸⁴ Unlike Bernhardt, whose advancing and theatrical artistry were rarely criticized in America, Réjane’s comedy of manners, class, and domestic affairs did not align with what audiences considered appropriate behavior for her age nor with what they considered legitimately “theatrical.”

THE ENGLISH EXCEPTION: CELEBRATING RÉJANE IN LONDON

Although Réjane did not achieve success in America, she did enjoy growing success in London. Returning from her 1895 tour of New York to scheduled performances at the Garrick Theatre, Réjane secured the same manager that Bernhardt engaged (a Mr. C. J. Abud as business manager, working for Henry E. Abbey and Maurice Grau).⁸⁵ On this occasion, Réjane was also billed for the first time as a lead attraction. Hence, unlike her earlier Gaiety appearances, where she had been listed under the title of a given play, at the Garrick she headlined the theatrical program. The Garrick Theatre presented a “Mme. Réjane’s Season” under the direction of Messrs. Henry E. Abbey and Maurice Grau, beginning July 1 for twelve nights and four matinees.⁸⁶

We can best determine the difference between New York and London audiences by contrasting reception given Réjane’s performance of *Ma Cousine*. In contrast to the rebuke and criticism Réjane’s performance received in America, in London *Ma Cousine* was described as a “vastly clever piece” that Réjane’s acting saved from the charge of coarseness.⁸⁷ Réjane’s following performance—a reprise of *Madame Sans-Gêne*—was also received with enthusiasm. Celebrated as the play that first “captured the suffrages [feminists] of Metropolitan theatre-goers,” it was a play that

asserted female visibility, both in terms of a central and assertive female role on stage and through the female audience that was attracted to Réjane's performances in London.⁸⁸ As Sardou explained, the play advocated for democracy and glorified sexual equality. Local papers in London also explained that *Madame Sans-Gêne* was welcomed for the "overwhelmingly excellent reason that it is amusing."⁸⁹ In this acceptance of Réjane's comic theater as a platform for female agitation and feminist change, a subtle but significant step was made toward recognizing the actress as a performer capable of forging new publics and audiences abroad.

Réjane's 1897 return to London confirmed her status as inimitable theatrical celebrity. Unlike the production of *Madame Sans-Gêne* in America, where Pitou's English production diverted audiences away from Réjane's original French play, the English production of *Madame Sans-Gêne* in 1897 confirmed Réjane's star status. Performed by Henry Irving and Ellen Terry at the Lyceum Theatre, and adapted by J. Comyns Carr, the work did not generate the accolades that Réjane's performances maintained. It was noted that Terry, although performing with *bon-homie*, was not a Parisian *blanchisseuse*; Irving, performing Napoleon, was physically unconvincing and unable to conceal his own idiosyncrasies of performance.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, the willingness of leading English actors to essay a role that was so famously Réjane's indicated that Réjane was an active member in a network of global celebrities, as well as a key reference point for the reinvigoration of the comic theater in London.

A few months later, when Réjane once more played the role of Catherine at the Lyric theater, reviewers spoke of "the singular excellence of her study" and of the fact that in London, "she has continued to grow in favour." A triumph for the actress and a delight for spectators, *Madame Sans-Gêne* was so successful that Réjane was forced to add another three concluding performances of the play to her program.⁹¹ These comic performances replaced her proposed performance of *A Doll's House*: the "new woman" that audiences wanted to see, and that defined Réjane's success, was instead a Parisian woman of the street, not a Northern woman of Ibsen's drama. In a sense, then, Réjane exported to London the woman that she knew best: the Parisian *blanchisseuse*, a working-class woman who might mix in upper-class and powerful circles but who never lost sight of her popular and powerful origins.

By the end of the 1890s, Réjane had joined Bernhardt as a headline attraction in London charitable events and was well known enough to take her theatrical company on tour to the English provinces.⁹² A 1901 article, entitled "Paris in London" (and printed in the widely circulating *Le Figaro*), paid attention to this theatrical fraternity between London and Paris. Stating that "London contains a large slice of Paris," the journalist and writer Ludovic Naudeau seemed genuinely surprised at London's thirst for French theater. As Naudeau observed, London theater companies could not overrun Parisian theaters in the summer season in the same manner that Parisian troupes occupied London theaters and programs.

Significantly, Naudeau isolated Bernhardt, Coquelin, and Réjane as leading examples of the London taste for French theater, and he explained that these celebrities often appeared simultaneously in the city. Although the theater in which Réjane had most recently played—the newly built Coronet Theatre, in Notting Hill Gate—was not as distinguished as Bernhardt and Coquelin's engagement at Her Majesty's Theatre, her appearance at the Coronet was equally important. This is because the theater made the unusual gesture of flying a French flag during her theatrical residency and was known to serve the rich and powerful residents of West London (Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park). Here, again, is evidence of Réjane's ability to build networks of important people in London and of the intimate yet also very public way in which this was done.

Interviewing the three actors individually, in a front-page spread, Naudeau highlighted the difference between French theatrical reception in America and England. Bernhardt, who opened his article, explained the difference between the two different audiences. She observed that the English were "charming, welcoming and intelligent." English audiences were full of warmth and sympathy for the French and expressed their fondness through the enthusiasm with which they clapped the French flag ahead of any other on the stage. As Bernhardt stated, the English public was "more serious than the American public. The American public only goes to the theater to amuse themselves, while the English go to reflect, compare, educate and instruct themselves."⁹³

Coquelin's reflections were comparatively abrupt, and they focused on the way the English public informed themselves about the French plays before attending their performance. He highlighted the sophistication of theatergoers and the willingness with which they educated themselves so that they could better understand French theater. Réjane's concluding conversation was longer and more reflective, focusing on the successful reception of *Madame Sans-Gêne* in London. She reasoned that the English taste for Napoleon (seen also in Bernhardt's successful and contemporaneous performance in *L'Aiglon*) was a "supreme tribute, more or less conscious, to the memory of [Arthur Wellesley, the First Duke of] Wellington, the iron duke, the 'saviour of Europe.'" Focusing on Europe, Réjane then stated that her success was due to the theatergoing public in London, who "have a lot of curiosity. . . . They are very intelligent, and have a depth of tolerance and liberalism." She continued:

Nevertheless, I am certain that, of one hundred well-dressed gentlemen and bejewelled ladies in attendance at a given French theatrical production, there are no more than ten who are capable of following the entire French dialogue, and no more than twenty-five who can discern, without having already read a translated preamble, the general sense of a play. The others come to see the performance of reputable actors; they come to satisfy their curiosity, and to improve their rudimentary knowledge of French. And then there are also the snobs, yes, the inoffensive, excellent snobs, here in their land of birth, and who teem in England more than in any other country. . . . I

would also note that, when I perform, the bursts of laughter, all audible mirth in the theater, emerges from the “pit,” where a seat does not cost more than two shillings six pence. The pit, literally invaded by the French, is filled with artisans from all over France. These artisans live in London by the thousands.⁹⁴

Naudeau concluded his article with a brief statement confirming that it was London’s many French immigrants who “joyously and patriotically” brought the *claque* (the organized cheering and vocal support for a stage performance) to both Bernhardt’s and Réjane’s performances.⁹⁵ While Réjane highlighted that a London audience was itself diverse and composed of a range of people from different classes and countries, her celebrity was nevertheless part of a dialogue about the success of Parisian theater as a contemporary cultural export.

ATTRACTING AMERICANS IN PARIS: FOUNDING THE THÉÂTRE RÉJANE IN 1906

When Réjane divorced Porel in 1905, she left the Vaudeville Theatre in Paris. At the Vaudeville, Réjane had been managed for thirteen years by her husband. Given that Porel could determine her roles and was known as a forward-looking businessman, this was an arrangement that worked in her favor. Porel was considered “modern” in the sense that he kept abreast of current changes in the running of a theater. On Réjane’s first tour to America, Porel was therefore introduced as her husband and as “the most modern and enterprising manager in Paris.” Readers were told that Porel “is the only theater-man in the French capital (unless we except that grand hermaphrodite, Sara Bernhardt) who bravely attempts to introduce some of the latest foreign mechanical improvements . . . [into] that somewhat antiquated world known in general as the Parisian theater-house.”⁹⁶

Within a year of her separation, Réjane became the manager of the Théâtre de Paris (at the time, called the Nouveau-Théâtre). This was a progressive theater in Rue Blanche, in the ninth arrondissement, that had been under the direction of Lugné-Poe. Lugné-Poe, famous for staging challenging, modern dramas, brought works by Maurice Maeterlinck and Henrik Ibsen to the Parisian stage. When Réjane was granted a ninety-nine-year lease, she renamed, renovated, and renewed this “new” theater. In this way, she took over the tasks that her husband had once undertaken for her and forged a name for herself as an actress-manager and forward-looking director in her own right. Assisted by the financial support of the theater’s owner, the powerful journalist and magnate Alfred Edwards, the Théâtre Réjane was highly praised. As Édouard Noël and Edmond Stoullig recounted in the 1906 *Annales du théâtre et de la musique*:

Who does not have their own theatre? . . . Sarah Bernhardt has her own, Guitry, Coquelin, Antoine and Gémier have their own. “Why can’t I also have my own?” asked Mme. Réjane. And she has one. . . . It is herself who was in charge of this idea, and not her proprietor, M. Alfred Edwards, since she certainly did not skimp on expenses.

It is charming, this theatre, quite simply the prettiest in Paris, with its orange and pink decoration, its exquisite ceiling by [Philippe] Chapron, its brilliant yet soft lighting, its cozy salons, its comfortable 900 seats, its female staff, all uniformed in their reddish-brown silk dresses, its mahogany cloakrooms, large armchairs and folding seats, its rim a veritable museum—with smoking rooms, reading rooms and restaurants, gypsy musique between entr'actes, as well as vast and numerous foyers.⁹⁷

It was not just the newly decorated interior of theater that was praised but the work Réjane instigated for developing its exterior. A postcard advertising the A. W. Andernach industrial company featured, for example, the theater's new rooftop, shot from the terrace of an adjacent building. As the company proudly announced: "The roof plates are largely provided by the Maison Gruin company using the volcanic cement of the 'Andernach' factory."⁹⁸

Inside the theater, Réjane's interior decorating was carefully planned. Her stated aim was to allow visitors to see the stage as clearly as possible and to maintain the intimacy of a Boulevard theater in a modern building.⁹⁹ More than one hundred electric lights rimmed the theater's high ceiling; walls were white, seats upholstered in pale yellow, and the theater boxes and balconies were pink. Records show that the inaugural program visually matched this décor (see fig. 13). On the theater's opening night, December 14, 1906 (at the midway interval of a debut performance of Max Maure's *La Savelli*), Réjane asked her assembled guests to remain seated, stating that she wanted to have them photographed as a durable record of her launch.¹⁰⁰ This focus on interior design, a modern color palette, and electric lighting, as well as the turning of the camera back onto her spectators in order to document their place in theater history, demonstrates Réjane's creative business acumen.

Réjane managed her theater with an eye to the changing tastes of local audiences. She adopted the new business practice of selling tickets to dress rehearsals. Traditionally, in Paris, critics and patrons were issued free invitations to dress rehearsals in the expectation that they could provide critique as well as publicity for a play. Réjane's decision to sell these tickets to rehearsals opened her public up, increased theatrical revenue, and allowed her to access what she termed "genuine critique" before a play premiered. Stating that it was important that she was available, between acts, to mingle and welcome observation, Réjane considered her own managerial role as a collaborative one.¹⁰¹ Aware that Americans flocked to Paris in the summer season, Réjane redecorated her theater in a style and with comforts that they would appreciate; she also cast herself in roles that appealed to an American audience and reprised internationally favorite plays like *Madame Sans-Gêne*. In March 1907, and with an eye to seasonal American audiences, Réjane shrewdly elected to appear as a breezy American in a play called *Paris and New York*. A comedy by Emmanuel Arène and Francis de Croisset, *Paris and New York* focused on the comedy of an American girl who bartered her millions for a French title.¹⁰² As an article in the *Los Angeles Times* reported, "Mme. Rejane has a special



FIGURE 13. Cover of Réjane's inaugural theater program at the Théâtre Réjane, matching her pink and white décor, 1906. Author's private collection.

comedy, 'Paris and New York,' written expressly to attract American dollars to her theatre, built according to American ideas of comfort." Forming part of the six "American months" of the Paris theater season, the play was part of the larger Parisian effort to capitalize on the boon of American travel to France. American flags, American-style comforts, as well as the reservation of the largest American hotel suites for American travelers joined the curation of special theatrical programs (such as Réjane's) to ensure the enjoyment of an expected two hundred thousand American tourists to Paris.¹⁰³ Even though Réjane was not successful in America, she did her utmost to engage this audience in Paris. Although the Théâtre Réjane became known as "always a favourite resort of Americans," Réjane returned to acting in 1910, beset by financial losses. As the *Chicago Daily Tribune* tactfully reported, "Mme. Réjane has won the reputation of being almost too amiable as a manager. . . . Amiability and economy are not always compatible."¹⁰⁴

AT THE VANGUARD OF THE VARIETY SHOW

After Réjane left America in 1905, she headlined her own “Madame Rejane’s Season” in London’s newly renovated Terry’s Theatre on the Strand (in June 1905).¹⁰⁵ Some of her roles focused satirically on the emerging rights of women; for example, she played *La Passerelle*, a 1902 comedy about a sham wedding that, the program explained, was “The Original of ‘The Marriage of Kitty,’” as well as Sardou’s 1880 *Divorçons*, a bedroom farce about the impending passage of France’s first divorce laws. Other plays in the “Réjane repertoire” wittily presented passion and female age (through the first performance of Dario Niccodemi’s *L’Hirondelle* in London), as well as the comic performance of a strong, errant wife and her ridiculed husband (in Meilhac and Halévy’s *La Petite Marquise*). When *Madame Sans-Gêne* was presented for a week in mid-June, the playbill guaranteed audiences “New Scenery and Costumes.”¹⁰⁶ With the promise of a fresh vision of a familiar play, as well as a focus on strong female advocacy and largely new (or at least recent) theatrical work, Réjane kept herself at the forefront of developments on the comic stage. The prices for admission varied between the more expensive £3 3s and £1 1s for a box, down to 2s 6d in the pit and 1s 6d for the gallery. In this way, a wide net was cast for her possible London audience. An upper-class audience (with the ability to understand spoken French) was not a prerequisite to the appreciation of Réjane’s wile and wit.

The following year, in 1906, Réjane opened her own theater in Paris. She was subsequently billed for the first time on the London variety stage as the manager of her own theater and, in April, 1910, as an actress who had headlined successive summer seasons of plays that reached a broad audience in England. Réjane’s appearance in the London Hippodrome, a theater located in Leicester Square that had been established in 1900 and newly decorated and refurbished in 1909, can be seen in the context of her concern for modern cultural relevance. Réjane was also an actress aware of her commercial celebrity: she needed not only artistic accolades but also the funds to offset her theater’s financial losses in Paris. Her appearance at the Hippodrome accorded her the highest salary yet recorded in the variety theater (£750 a week).¹⁰⁷

The music hall in London in April 1910 functioned for Réjane in the same ways that—as I discussed in my previous chapter—the music hall did for Bernhardt some five months later, in October. The variety stage kept Réjane visible in London as a celebrity actress of Parisian repute; it allowed her to reduce a play to its most engaging and idiomatic act, and it placed her in a large forum (with matinee and evening performances) that attracted new audiences. The Hippodrome made much of securing Réjane. It mimicked the legitimate theater in offering “Box Plans” that could be booked in advance. It also mimicked legitimate programs by including a full-size (and copyrighted) Reutlinger photograph of the actress on the program’s opening page and by opening, in bold red print, with the statement: “AN ENGAGEMENT OF EXTRAORDINARY INTEREST THE BEAUTIFUL

GIFTED AND FAMOUS ACTRESS MADAME RÈJANE [*sic*].”¹⁰⁸ This program replaced the traditional Hippodrome program, which opened on an image of the theater itself, as well as a paragraph explaining that the London Hippodrome had been opened on January 15, 1900, and had closed only for the funeral of Queen Victoria and for refurbishments in 1909 (readers are told it boasted a global record of 5,782 uninterrupted performances, staged twice daily). The theater was celebrated as a “leading attraction of the artistic world,” where, audiences were informed, Réjane would present “Short Selections” from her repertoire. Capable of adapting her theater to suit changing trends and emerging markets, Réjane was notable because she interrupted the Hippodrome’s own marketing and managerial practices and was considered a celebrity whose comic theater could bring new and untested publics (notably, women and families) to a popular variety show.

In the same way as “The Bioscope” was an item on Bernhardt’s music-hall program, so, too, did Réjane’s appearance at the Hippodrome feature “Animated Pictures.” Again, we do not know which specific films were featured in the music hall nor (in contrast to the Bioscope at the Coliseum) which company filmed the works on display. But film again concluded the second half of each program, allowing time for audience changeover and the promise of a spectacular mechanical end to the variety show. Réjane was advertised alongside musical, comical, and unusual acts. She appeared, for example, with the Bellclair Brothers (athletes); Sgt. Brennan, the “World’s Champion Diabolist”; and “The Twelve Fezzans, Natives of the Sahara.”¹⁰⁹ Advertising “The Star Russian Dancers” (the Ballets Russes) as a coming attraction, and with fellow Parisian Yvette Guilbert “coming soon,” Réjane was part of a renowned international network of spectacular shows that internationalized and broadened the appeal of the music hall.¹¹⁰

Réjane’s billing as the thirteenth attraction in a fifteen-act program was the clear highlight of the Hippodrome show. Similar to Bernhardt appearing after intermission, she ensured audience presence and attention. Moreover, the practices of the traditional stage were adapted to this newer popular context. Again in parallel to the Coliseum program providing special narrative descriptions of Bernhardt’s plays, the April 4 Hippodrome program provided a “Special Slip” to audiences that gave a synopsis of her play (Meilhac and Halévy’s single-act 1879 comedy, *Lolotte*). This slip provided a three-hundred-word description of the play’s plot, describing how Réjane, performing the role of a jealous actress (*Lolotte*), instructs a baroness to perform for an amateur parlor show, only to discover that both she and the baroness are amorously pledged to the same man. While this pamphlet helped non-French-speaking people understand narrative action onstage, the comedy was not entirely new in England. *Lolotte* had been performed in English as *The Lesson*, by Mrs. Bancroft, at the Haymarket Theatre in 1881 and subsequently, by the French actress Céline Chaumont, in 1890, at St. James’s Theatre.¹¹¹

Reports of Réjane’s reception in London, a city she regarded “as her second home,” were glowing. Playing two shows each day, she was “incomparable,” a

“popular Parisienne” who received “a truly British welcome” to London.¹¹² As *The Tatler* also reported, *Lolotte* was a choice play, since it “gives Madame Réjane every opportunity to display her charming gift of comedy and her infinite sense of the humorous.”¹¹³ A following appearance at the Hippodrome featured the actress in “an excerpt from Sardou’s celebrated play—*Madame Sans-Gêne*.”¹¹⁴ Again, a “Special Slip” (this time a little longer, roughly five hundred words) offered “full particulars of Cast and Synopsis,” ensuring audience members understood what Réjane would perform onstage.¹¹⁵ The single act presented was act 3 of the play, in which the duchess revealed herself to be the former washerwoman to Napoleon. Applauded for being particularly appropriate to the vaudeville format, the act foregrounded a member of the working class moving within upper-class settings through the exposure of bawdy, physical humor. As the *Music Hall and Theatre Review* explained, this was the role in which “the saucy wench of the washtub reminds the now all-powerful and ill-tempered Napoleon of certain services rendered him when he was an officer of small importance in Paris.” The same review stated that Réjane, “the most popular of French actresses,” was playing a famous role and that this “goes to show how largely the music hall is attracting to itself the best the theatre has to offer.”¹¹⁶

Réjane, like Bernhardt, returned to perform in the London music hall in 1911. Significantly, she also used the London Hippodrome to raise funds for charity events. In October 1911, she organized a *matinée* with more than fifty performers at the Hippodrome to support the survivors and families of the *Liberté* battleship fire, an event that killed 286 crew. Drawing on the patronage of the royal family and the Diplomatic Corps, Réjane used “society beauties” as program and flower sellers.¹¹⁷ Discussed in papers as “The Rejane Matinee,” the event foregrounded Réjane’s networking skills, her commercial celebrity, and her ability to capitalize on the cultural and diplomatic goodwill between England and France. After her season ended, she was debated in Parliament when the Liberal politician (and agitator for censorship) Robert Harcourt asked whether the Hippodrome had a license to stage her plays. In Harcourt’s view, her work breached good manners, decorum, and public peace. Significantly, Winston Churchill defended Réjane, stating that there were more urgent matters to consider before the House.¹¹⁸

A FORAY INTO FILM

Réjane’s engagement in a variety program in a London music-hall theater came at a time when actresses, musicians, and dancers were working across both the legitimate stage and popular theaters. Her willingness to be part of the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre program at the Paris Exposition of 1900 indicates, even before the variety theater began to adapt itself to changing possibilities a decade later, an awareness of film’s potential to intersect and overlap with the French theater and to draw international crowds. Appearing in a short, filmed excerpt in the

Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre program, Réjane was one act alongside other short films with legitimate stars drawn from the French stage. At this point, Réjane had not yet established the Théâtre Réjane and had toured North America only once. Nevertheless, she was an actress of renown, featured alongside leaders of the Parisian stage, and clearly aware of the importance of appearing in a new experimental mixed-media show in the World Exposition.

Réjane's choice of role for the 1900 Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre was telling. Echoing Bernhardt's decision to film an excerpt from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (whose duel with Laertes spectacularly presented both masculinity and death),¹¹⁹ Réjane appeared as Riquette in *Ma Cousine*. In this way, she audaciously danced the boulevard *gaminerie* of the *chahut* in the Baroness d'Harnay la Hutte's home before an upper-class, noble audience. This presentation of a popular dance allowed Réjane to perform a spectacle from the Parisian boulevard. The scene also self-reflexively highlighted Réjane's capacity to bring the thrilling spectacle of Grille d'Égout's lace and black silken hosiery to the interior of a respectable *salon*. As viewers were aware, Réjane was an actress playing at being an actress, who had a part to act in real life. Arthur Symons, reflecting on this scene, stated that Réjane "summarize[d] the whole art of the Moulin Rouge" when she played the pantomime and did so in her own, particularly audacious, way.¹²⁰

Réjane was a late addition to the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre program. She appeared in September 1900 rather than at its launch on April 9 of that year. As a note in *Le Gaulois* stated, her debut was a sensational addition to the successful program implemented by the artistic director of the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre, Marguerite Vrignault. Transforming the program into a "new triumph," Réjane opened the show and was described as adding "spice" to it. Applauded "in her famous dance scene in *Ma Cousine*, where she dances her famous naturalist *quadrille* (quadrille naturaliste)," Réjane proved an enormous success. Parisian as well as provincial and foreign visitors were drawn to this fashionable establishment, which also featured "our great Sarah [Bernhardt], with her elegant and svelte figure, with such sober and dramatic gestures."¹²¹

At the same time that Réjane appeared in the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre, she also appeared in roles in the Théâtre du Vaudeville (the theater that had made her famous in Paris), most notably in *Madame Sans-Gêne*. As Édouard Noël and Edmond Stoullig state in their *Annales du théâtre et de la musique*, Réjane appeared in her five hundredth performance as Catherine Hubscher, in Paris on July 31, 1900; her six hundredth performance was presented with fanfare on October 30. Réjane's play *Madame Sans-Gêne* was chosen with the exposition's international audiences in mind: no play was better suited to "fill a room with foreigners and draw crowds to the theater."¹²² A special edition of the journal *Le Théâtre*, dedicated to the actress in June (and reading very much like a theatrical equivalent of a catalogue raisonné), feted Réjane as the most famous comic actress of the epoch.¹²³ The Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre operated in dialogue with Réjane's renown. It offered proof of her capacity to reemerge as a new and appealing attraction, even in the context of a star-studded Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre program.¹²⁴

THE BRITISH BIOSCOPE

Given the enormous success of *Madame Sans-Gêne*, it is perhaps unsurprising that when Réjane entered narrative film more than a decade later (in 1911), she did so in this play. It was *Madame Sans-Gêne*, more than *Ma Cousine* or any other comic role, that had made her famous across the globe. As Paul Porel and Jules Huret stated in the special issue of *Le Théâtre* in 1900, *Madame Sans-Gêne* played successfully in Belgium, England, America, Germany, Holland, Russia, Austria, Romania, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. The play “restored the fortunes of the theater, made the name of Réjane penetrate further into the deep mass of the public, [and] it definitively consecrated her popularity.” The play was translated into different languages and performed across theaters of Europe, and readers in France were told that “furniture, fabrics, jewelry, sweets, paper, even dishes” were available in the style of *Madame Sans-Gêne*.¹²⁵

In England, French global dominance in the moving picture industry at the opening of the twentieth century was attributed to the unusual willingness of the French theater industry to embrace and recognize film as a theatrical and commercial opportunity. Considered a “new department of the modern drama,” film was supported by celebrated French actors. Precisely because in France—where “the bioscope is far more recognised than here [Britain]”—actors such as Le Bargy, Réjane, and Bernhardt “are not ashamed to pose for the moving picture camera.” Aided by (the late) Victorien Sardou, Alfred Capus, Henri Lavedan, and Edmond Rostand, playwrights also readily furnished scenarios for this “new sort of stage.”¹²⁶ It was recognized in the English press that theatrical celebrity saw the establishment of companies such as the French Film d’Art. This recognition gave “new life” to an instrument (the cinematographe) formerly looked upon as “little more than a vehicle for vulgar peep shows in penny gaffs.”¹²⁷ Theater-film companies, “getting films of famous dramas with famous actors in their famous parts,” ensured potential viewers that future generations “will be able to see (and probably hear) Sarah Bernhardt in ‘La Tosca,’ Coquelin in ‘Chantecler’ (if he ever produces it), and Rejane in ‘Sans Gêne.’”¹²⁸ Embracing the foresighted move of French theater stars into film, *The Bioscope* celebrated the French theater’s flexibility, adaptability, and entrepreneurship: “We are a great people. The history books of the future will be found among the playthings of to-day.”¹²⁹

The opportunities that French actors and playwrights saw in the future of film was accompanied by a respect for the theatrical professionalism of the emerging French film industry. As an article entitled “Foreign News. France” explains, French actors were employed in the film industry in terms that were similar to those of the traditional theater: they were “regularly employed to pose for these pictures, just as they might be engaged to act in a theater.” A stage manager directed filmed scenes, carrying the manuscript for the play in his hands, as he might in the theater. Furthermore, and again in parallel to the theater, rehearsals were scheduled. Rather than perform without practice for the camera, “over and over they [the actors] are drilled.” In this way, film became “as lifelike as any stage

setting ever can.”¹³⁰ Rather than regard the French theatrical film as unnecessarily theatrical, outdated, or irrelevant, the “bioscope” (as it was often referred to in the British press) succeeded because it was treated as a creative opportunity for theatrical developments in France.

RÉJANE’S FEATURE FILM IN ENGLAND

Réjane first played *Madame Sans-Gêne* in London in 1894. In January 1912, when this role was first released in London as a 3,133 ft. Film d’Art film, she had toured *Madame Sans-Gêne* four times in the legitimate theater and twice (once in 1910, again in 1911) on the variety stage in England. Reports that the film had been released in Paris on November 10, 1910—and was playing in more than thirty theaters in the city, its publicity aided by Film d’Art’s “magnificent posters”—indicate that London received the film in the same manner as it habitually hosted Réjane: as a Parisian comic celebrity.¹³¹ She was a celebrity actress who brought new work to London in the season following its Parisian debut. The first full-page review of *Madame Sans-Gêne* in *The Bioscope* emphasized, therefore, that Réjane had created the title role and that she was joined on film by [Edmond] Duquesne, her “original” Napoleon. In this sense, the work was not new; film was instead a novel form of revival, promising English audiences access to a Parisian production anew.

Réjane’s *Madame Sans-Gêne* was marketed in England by the production and distribution company Jury’s Imperial Pictures. Réjane was therefore marketed by a London-based company that leased films to British theatrical exhibitors. Headed by British businessman William Frederick Jury, Jury’s Imperial Pictures was famous for providing bioscope films to popular venues and was accordingly advertised as being “direct from the Crystal Palace.” Part of this renown was driven by the successful and varied programs Jury’s furnished variety theaters such as the Alhambra Theatre in London (where an exhibition agreement had been entered into in August 1908).¹³² Bringing programs to popular venues throughout the English provinces, Jury’s Imperial Pictures provided “an incomparable series of up-to-date animated pictures” in cities such as Manchester, Sheffield, and Birmingham.¹³³ In this context, Réjane’s film emerged as a “special photoplay” and a “stand-alone attraction” that brought the actress’s *pièce de résistance* to local audiences (and was therefore leased at the higher price of £7 per week, or £3 10s for three days).¹³⁴

The language used in the publicity for Réjane’s film was similar to the language used in the promotion of the Bernhardt/Réjane program in America. Réjane was “The Greatest Box-Office Attraction of All Times” and “The renowned Parisian actress.”¹³⁵ Promoting Réjane’s capacity to be “as clever in mimicry as she is as a comedienne,” the film promised audience engagement and intelligibility.¹³⁶ Publicized in terms of financial gain and business opportunity, Réjane also spearheaded a new development in film—the emergence of the 3,000 ft. subject.¹³⁷ When exhibitors in Bradford falsely claimed that their exhibition of *Madame Sans-Gêne* was

Réjane's pioneering film, Jury's Imperial Pictures was quick to prosecute. As the public apologies published by Alton Electric Theatre Company and The Farnham Picture Palace confirm in the May 30 edition of *The Bioscope*, Gaumont's 1912 film of the same name wrongfully advertised Réjane, and they will "not again advertise or exhibit any films purporting to represent Rejane as 'Sans Gene' or any colourable imitation thereof."¹³⁸

When Bernhardt's *Camille* was added to Jury's "exclusive" offerings in February 1912, it was considered "quite in the order of things." As the *Kinematograph* reflected in February 1912 (and note that the films were marketed together only in March, well after they had been released as separate feature films): "this enterprising firm [Jury's Imperial Pictures] have managed in a very short time to acquire films with the two leading French artistes M^{de} Sarah Bernhardt representing tragedy, and M^{de} Rejane the admitted premier exponent of comedy appearing in their most favoured parts. Surely this is unique in the history of the trade, and M^{ssrs} Jury deserve every success for their spirited enterprise."¹³⁹ Réjane's and Bernhardt's ability to exploit film for new business opportunities spearheaded Jury's own achievements in England. Programming the cinematic equivalent of the theater's Comedy and Tragedy masks, the company adroitly publicized film as the vehicle through which popular audiences could access, from within their own cities and neighborhoods, the international celebrities of the stage.

GLEEFUL GAMINERIE: "SOMEHOW THAT TOUCH OF LESSER REFINEMENT BELONGS TO HER"

In England, Réjane was famous for her capacity to play the role of an unrefined woman. As I noted in my introduction, the British drama critic Jack Grein stated that it was Réjane's ability to be vulgar, exuberant, and uncontrollable onstage—a capacity he equated with spontaneity and versatility—that made her a greater actress than Bernhardt, the Italian Eleanora Duse, or German actress Agnes Sorma. As Grein explained, in Réjane "there is an undercurrent of vulgarity, the vulgarity of the 'gamin' of Paris, the kaleidoscopic being. . . . Somehow that touch of lesser refinement belongs to her; she is a child of the people."¹⁴⁰ How do we see this vulgarity manifest in *Madame Sans-Gêne*? In the first place, there is a busy play with costuming that is comic and prompts the desired laughs from the audience. For example, Réjane arrives to present Napoleon with his washing bill in a fine dress, cape, and jewelry. Before sitting, she drops her cape unceremoniously on a stool, hitches up the top of a sleeve, straightens her necklace, and hoists her bodice. Presenting Napoleon with his unpaid bill, she proudly retrieves it from her cleavage, flapping it to gain his attention.

It is Réjane's full-bodied and physical play that we see in this film. In this scene with Napoleon, where she presents him with his unpaid bill, she enters his office walking heavily, her flat heels stomping an ungainly passage to his desk. When

she then curtseys, Réjane does this in a noticeably perfunctory bob. She does not attend to the elegant hitching of skirts and deep fall into the pose (with one foot outstretched in front) that, by comparison, Napoleon's refined sisters immediately display. When these two women depart, Réjane raises her elbow as if to jab them. Later, while telling Napoleon that she will not divorce her husband, she sits busily tapping her toes. Her arms are bent, both hands are on her thighs, and her elbows protrude defiantly outward. She then knocks three times on Napoleon's desk to command his attention as he writes, standing to give him his unpaid bill. We see her watching him insouciantly with a hand on her hip as he reads the bill; she then signals her joy when Napoleon recognizes who she is by bending forward in convivial glee, rubbing her gloved hands in satiric anticipation of payment, and pantomiming the process of washing clothes, asking for payment, and being denied. The three coins Napoleon hands her are quickly slipped back inside her bodice: she might be a duchess but she certainly knows how to keep money safe from theft and what it means to be paid for services rendered. When we then follow Réjane through the more dramatic scenes of the play—by the end of the film, she cleverly foils the execution of Count Neipperg—it is her play of comic vulgarity in Court that signals her honest roots as a hardworking laborer. Still today, Réjane's performance is enormously funny. It's efforts to mimic the linguistic and physical play of upper-class mores can be viewed as a precursor to the comedic role of Eliza Doolittle, appearing just two years after Réjane's film, in the 1913 production of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

A FIRST SUCCESSFUL TOUR: FRENCH FILM IN AMERICA

Three years before *Madame Sans-Gêne* was made (in 1908), the American trade press discussed French theater on film as an improvement to American film content. Comparing an example of American comedy on film—described as “a lame attempt to make a farce,” “bordering on the indecent,” and “disgusting”—to the “perfect satire” of a French production, French theater and, in particular, French actors were regarded as elevating the stature of film. Film, it was argued, offered uneducated American people access to “real French art.” Citing Réjane, it was explained in *Moving Picture World* that “through the picture film, those of us who speak no French learn why Rejane is better than Leslie Carter, why Jack London limps after Guy de Maupassant.”¹⁴¹

Other reports in the American press explained that the greatest living dramatists in France were collaborating with publishers of moving pictures, securing artists of Bernhardt and Réjane's caliber, and replacing music-hall and circus productions with “cinematograph shows.” Accompanied by an excellent orchestra (“or at least an ‘orchestration’”), sometimes even a chorus of fifty or more voices or the use of a phonograph, the recording of Parisian actors on film allowed them to

appear “simultaneously in theaters all over the world.”¹⁴² In the American trade presses, Réjane appeared quite differently than she did on her failed theatrical tour. Instead of being a risqué or immoral actress, she was an exemplary French actress who elevated the content of American film. Even within the regular daily newspapers—where she had been criticized for flaunting French sexual permissiveness in front of American audiences—her involvement in film was celebrated for enabling the democratization and cultural elevation of the film industry. Hence, the *Los Angeles Times* stated that “Mme. Sarah Bernhardt and Mme. Gabrielle Réjane, the two glories of the French stage and two of the world’s greatest actresses, whose art has delighted theater-goers in every country in the world, have found immortality in the motion pictures.” Bernhardt played “her greatest dramatic success before the motion camera”; Réjane produced “her greatest comedy creation.” Placing “two of our greatest actresses within the reach of everyone,” the newspaper predicted that the French actress on film will “establish a new standard for the motion-picture field in general.”¹⁴³

The failure of Réjane’s 1904–5 stage tour in America was not a consideration in her reception on film. Réjane was an *avant-courier* of new business practices in entertainment industries in America. Accordingly, American reports speak of how Bernhardt’s and Réjane’s feature films prompted Maude Adams to negotiate with the French-American Film Company to make *Joan of Arc* after her successful performance of this at the Harvard Stadium in 1909. Although this film project was never realized, it is significant that a French subject and play was considered suitable for film and that a female actress was to be featured in a leading role. As the report predicted, Bernhardt and Réjane’s initiative will “completely revolutionize this important branch of entertainment.” In this context, *Madame Sans-Gêne* helped a Parisian celebrity enter film, a French film enter legitimate American theaters, and young American entrepreneurs find new ways to market and sell celebrity. In turn, audiences of all classes and generations became participants in the expanding world of the motion picture industry.

I have documented the celebrity and successes of an actress whose class comedy and ongoing social agitation have been overlooked by film historians. My overriding argument is that we need to include legitimate comedy as a space for feminist agency in early film. I also contend that Réjane’s initiatives (both in the music hall and on film) evidenced her commercial and creative foresight. With Réjane, however, we face a difference that was not part of our discussion of Bernhardt: whereas Réjane was successful in London, she never really enjoyed celebrity in America.

In my next chapter, I examine Mistinguett, an actress whose music-hall celebrity in the interwar years linked her to the groundbreaking work that Bernhardt and Réjane had earlier undertaken on the variety stage. I believe that our current focus on Mistinguett’s celebrity in the interwar years ignores the foundational work that she earlier undertook on the stage and screen. Drawing on primary materials, I trace the emergence of Mistinguett’s remarkable physicality on the

Parisian stage. When Mistinguett made films at the opening of the twentieth century, she used this physicality to drive short dramatic films, initiate action-packed serials, and comically develop the French feature film. In my following exploration of this singular performer, I return to these lost records of Mistinguett's achievements. I establish her English and American celebrity years before she rose to global prominence on the glamorous 1920s and 1930s music-hall stage.