III. Lettre, de Madame Riccoboni, Actrice du Théâtre-Italien, auteur des *Lettres de miss Fanny Butler* et du *Marquis de Cressy*, à Monsieur Diderot, 1758, suivi de la réponse de Diderot.

Letter, from Madame Riccoboni, Actress at the Italian Theater, authoress of Letters from Miss Fanny Butler *and* The Marquis of Cressy*, to Monsieur Diderot, 1758, followed by Diderot's response*, selections translated from the French by Richard Gardner, also referring to the German translation under the title *Brief von Madame Riccoboni an Diderot*.

[…]

I have carefully read *Le Père de famille*[2], and I thank you for giving it to me, but have not forgotten that you did not show it to me earlier. To punish you for this mistrust, which shocked me to the quick, I shall pay you no compliments at all. Does that sting a bit? So much the better, for that is what I desire. O, man, what pride you have! I do not want to increase it with my praise; Germeuil would not have done so. He is likable, your Germeuil. If he had written a play and promised to show it to me, he would have kept his word. But you, Syphax[3], your word means nothing! But I wish to defend the actors on some points where you attribute to them shortcomings they are not guilty of. The Ancients usually placed the action in a public space. That is why the Spanish, and after them the Italians, maintained the usage of a square with doors to the houses where the principle characters live. They added a room, because they ignored the rule of unity of place, a negligence which produces great advantages. The French, with audience on the stage, can only decorate the rear wall. Given that, if you want the style of room we live in, the fireplace will be in the middle. Thus, the actors you place at such a far distance will be able to make no movements that could be perceived. The theater is a painting, agreed, but it is a moving painting whose details one does not have time to

[2] [Translator's note] Play by Denis Diderot from 1758; characters: the Father of the Family, M. Orbesson (title character); Commander D'Auvile, father-in-law of the Father; Cécile, daughter of the Father; Saint-Albin, son of the Father; Sophie, unknown young lady; Germeuil, son of a late friend of the Father.

[3] [Translator's note] Syphax, king of the ancient Masaesyli tribe of western Numidia in the Third Century BC, originally concluded a treaty of alliance with Rome in 213BC during the Roman war against Carthage, later refused to ratify it, instead joining with Hasdrubal in an alliance with Carthage.

examine. I must present an object that is both easy to discern and easy to change. The position of the actors, always standing, always facing the auditorium, seems awkward to you; but this awkwardness is necessary for two reasons. The first is that the actor who turns his head enough to look behind the second wing drop can only be heard by one-fourth of the audience. The second is that, in an interesting scene, the face adds to the expression, that there are occasions when a glance, a slight movement of the head does a lot, when a smile indicates that one is making fun of the character one is listening to or tricking him while speaking to him, that lowered or raised eyes show thousands of things; and an actor three feet back from the footlights has no more facial expression. The Ancients were masked; for expression, they made body movements; and we have little idea how their playacting was. Besides, their manner would be ridiculous in our eyes. You insert pauses in your instructions on how to render your scenes. Such pauses are what we call *tempi*. Nothing in a play requires more control. A poorly placed pause is like an ice block thrown at the audience.

The curtain rises; one sees the Father of the Family sunken in thought, Cécile and the Commander playing, Germeuil in an armchair holding a book in his hand. Do you know how long it takes for Germeuil to indicate that he is reading, look at Cécile, resume reading, and look at her again? No matter how conspicuous his action may be, it will never be expressive enough for those unaware that he loves Cecilia and fears the Commander's gaze. So do you think anyone will pay attention to those occupied with something in the background? No, the sad man walking about downstage is the one who arouses curiosity. That is the audience's focus, what is most striking in the painting. And if this man does not very soon speak, a chill spreads, interest ceases, and the audience grows impatient. Then you need thunder claps to recapture it. And don't think the audience will turn to those who are seated; the audience will forget them because it does not know who they are. But I do not want to talk about your play, for fear that I might slip and applaud its diction or emotions. I only want to insult you so as to teach you to treat your friend like a lady, be it a silly lady. You have a lot of wit, a lot of knowledge, but you do not understand the little details of an art which, like all the others, requires its own particular labor. One should not believe that ignorance is the

reason why actors act the way they do; it is because the theater where they perform requires them to act in this way, and in trying to do better, they would do worse. With regard to the seated scenes, as they have less movement, they are colder, and that is why one tries to avoid them. Not all natural actions should be performed, but only those which express criticism or teach a lesson. Nature is beautiful, but it must be shown from those aspects that can render it useful and pleasant. There are defects one can not eliminate and a naturalness that is revolting rather than touching. The *Pallas Athena* by that famous painter viewed too closely would have crossed-eyes, a skewed mouth, a monstrous nose; elevated, she appears to be Minerva herself. The stage can never become as simple as a room; and, to be truthful on the stage, one must renege on nature a bit. Farewell, I am angry with you, quite angry.

Response to Madame Riccoboni's Letter

[…]

You suffer sometimes when someone contradicts you, don't you? Well then, first I would like to tell you that you seem to be excusing the wrongs of our theatrical play acting by those of the theater auditorium. But wouldn't it be better to recognize that our auditoria are ridiculous, that as long as they are so, as long as the stage is encumbered with members of the audience, and as long as our sets are wrong, our theatrical playacting must be bad? *"We can only decorate the rear wall because we have audience on the stage."* Well then, no one else should be there and we could put sets all over the stage.

"If you want the style of room we live in, the fireplace will be in the middle." No, Madame, the fireplace will not be in the middle. It was by no means in the middle of the room in *Père de famille*, but on the side; and it must be on the side of the stage, please, and rather near the audience, or your set and the room in *Père de famille* will not be the same; it will have been to no avail that the playwright wrote, "The setting is in Paris, in the salon of the Father of the Family." Then, all actions will be seen. How do the Italians and most other peoples manage to be heard and seen on immense stages where

several incidents occur at once, one or two of them upstage? Why raise a problem the answer to which you know the answer so well yourself?

"The theater is a painting, but it is a moving painting whose details one does not have time to examine." This is not so in the first moment when the curtain rises. Then, if the characters are silent, my gaze will focus on their movements and I won't miss a thing. In the real world, everything is taken in. Is one less perceptive, less attentive in the theater? If so, too bad; it is up to a good poet to correct this mistake in man. But when the silence is broken on the stage, and the less one takes in the details of the painting, all the more must its masses be striking, its groups energetic. In short, is the stage a painting? Then I must see you on it as the figures a painter shows me on his canvas. Don't be symmetrical anymore, stiff, fixed, and prim, or stand still in a circle. Recall your most agitated scenes and tell me if there is a single one Boucher[4] could make a bearable composition out of if he rendered it exactly.

"One discerns no details on the stage." What an idea! Are we writing for imbeciles? But, let us suppose, my dear friend, as you have allowed me to call you, let us simply suppose that a salon we both know very well were furnished as I wish, that Fanny were playing a game with The Master of Ceremonies of His Royal Highness, that I was placed behind the Master of Ceremonies, and that, while Fanny was completely absorbed by her game and I in my emotions, the brochure I had been holding slipped from my hands, that my arms gently fell, that my head leaned towards her tenderly, and that she became the object of all my actions. However far away someone in the audience were seated, could he get the wrong idea? That is the kind of gesture necessary on stage, forceful and true. One should not act only with the face, but with all of oneself. By minutely submitting to certain positions one sacrifices the totality of features and the general effect for a small momentary advantage. Imagine a father dying amidst his children, or some similar scene. Observe what is happening around his bed, each caught up in his own grief, what impression follows. The one whose gestures I can only make out some of gets my imagination going, intrigues me, impresses me and

[4] [Translator's note] French Rococo painter, 1703-1770.

sorrows me perhaps more than another whose every action I see. How moving Iphigenia's father's veiled head by Timanthes[5] is. If I had had to paint this subject, I would have grouped Agamemnon with Ulysses; and the latter, on the pretext of supporting and encouraging the leader of the Greeks in such a terrible moment, would have concealed from him with one of his arms the spectacle of this sacrifice. Van Loo[6] did not think of that.

"The position of the actors, always standing, always facing the auditorium, seems awkward to you." Oh, very awkward, and I will never get over it. I see that I have a declamatory system which is the opposite of yours, but I wish you had for your rehearsals a special stage, such as for example a large round or square area, without front, sides, or back, around which your judges would be placed as in an amphitheater. That is the only method I know to disconcert you. I do not know whether my method of writing a play is the right one, but here it is. My office is the setting; the window side is the auditorium, where I am; in the back, at my bookshelves, is the stage. I locate the living space to the right; to the left, in the middle, I open doors as I need and have my characters arrive. When one enters, I know his feelings, his situation, his interests, his state of mind, and immediately see his action, his movement, his physiognomy. He speaks or is silent; he walks or stands still; he is seated or stands; he presents himself to me full face or from the side; I follow him with my gaze; I listen to him; and I write. And what difference does it make whether he looks at me or sits in profile in an armchair with his legs crossed and his head leaning on one of his hands? Is it not always the posture of a man meditating or lamenting? You see, my friend, I haven not been to the theater even ten times in the last fifteen years. The falsity of what is done there kills me.

"The actor who turns his head enough to look behind the second wing drop can only be heard by one-fourth of the audience." There again, build better theaters, design a system of declamation to remedy this problem, approach the wings. Speak, speak

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[5] [Translator's note] Ancient Greek painter of the Fourth Century BC; his most famous work portrayed the grief of Agamemnon, veiled, at the sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia.

[6] [Translator's note] Carle van Loo (1705-1765) painted *Le sacrifice d'Iphigénie* [The Sacrifice of Iphigenia] (1757) showing Agamemnon's face unveiled, provoking a great controversy.

loudly, and you will be heard, and all the more easily nowadays with this extremely ridiculous policy they have introduced in our assembly halls and theaters. Since I have come to this, I must tell you my thoughts on it. Fifteen years ago, our theaters were the site of tumult. The coolest heads became heated upon entering, and sensible people got more or less as carried away as the fools. From one side one could hear, “Make room for the ladies;” from the other, “Raise your arms, Father Abbot;” and from elsewhere, “Take off that hat;” and from all sides, “Quiet! Quiet down, you rabble!” People got agitated, moved around, pushed each other; people were beside themselves. Well, I know no other situation so favorable to the poet. The play had trouble getting started, was often interrupted; but, should a good bit come, there was incredible noise and there were endless calls for “encore”. People went wild over an actor or an actress. The infatuation swept from the orchestra level to the balconies and on to the stalls and boxes. People had arrived all heated and left drunken. Some went off to the girls; others spread out in social life. It was like a storm that would clear away into the distance but whose echoing murmur was to be heard long after it had moved on. Now that is pleasure! Today, they arrive cold, listen coldly, they leave cold, and I do not know where they go then. Those armed guards positioned on the left and on the right to temper any arousal of my admiration, of my sensibilities, of my joy, and who turn our theaters into places more tranquil and decent than our houses of worship particularly shock me.

“In an interesting scene, the face adds to the expression; there are occasions when a glance, a slight movement of the head does a lot.” And these are quite minor, quite momentary, quite fleeting details. Yet even the lazy lady for whom there was only a seat left all the way in the back catches them. So try to reconcile your own ideas. I shall treat you strictly, as I respect and like you too much to humor you.

“An actor three feet back from the footlights has no more facial expression.” That is very bad, since he must have facial expression even six feet back from the footlights. My dear friend, one does not go to see an actor or actress ten times if one cannot comprehend his or her performance from the greatest distance. The inconvenience that disturbs you is at most one for a debut. Get my imagination working, and I will see what

is farthest away, and I will guess at what I cannot see, and perhaps that will be to your advantage[7] … Oh that cursed, morose manner of acting that prohibits raising the hands above a certain height, that fixes the distance an arm may be moved away from the body, and that determines as though with quadrants how far it is suitable to incline the body. Have you then resolved to be nothing more than marionettes all your life? Painting, great painting, great paintings, there are your models; interest and passion, your masters and guides. Let them speak to you and act within you with all their might. And here is an incident that the Duc de Duras[8] could tell you about better than I can describe. He was a witness to it. You know by reputation an English actor named Garrick[9]. One day, in his presence, people were talking about pantomime, and he maintained that, even deprived of speech, there was no effect one could not achieve. He was contradicted and he got all worked up. Exasperated, he picked up a cushion and told his opponents, "Gentlemen, I am this child's father." Then he opened a window, took the cushion, bounced it around, kissed it, caressed it, and began to imitate all the silly things a father does to have fun with his child. But then came the moment when the cushion, or rather the child, slipped from his hands and fell out the window. Then Garrick began to pantomime the grief of the father. Ask Monsieur de Duras what happened then. Those watching became subject to such violent emotions of consternation and fright that most of them withdrew. Do you think Garrick cared at that moment about whether he was seen from the front or in profile, whether his action was decorous or not, whether his gestures were measured and his movements cadenced? Your rules have made you wooden, and multiplying them makes you to the same extent

[7] [Translator's note] The explanation for this remark is given in a footnote in the original French edition I had available for this translation: "It is well known that Mme. Riccoboni, though full of spirit and finesse, produced no effect on stage. See what Diderot says on this subject in *Réfutation de l'*HOMME, vol. II, p. 312"

[8] [Translator's note] Emmanuel-Félicité de Durfort, duc de Duras, 1715-1789, French politician and diplomat, was made head of the Comédie française and the Comédie italienne in 1757.

[9] [Translator's note] David Garrick (1717-1779), English actor, playwright, theatre manager, and producer, who favored realistic acting instead of the pompous style till then prevalent, to whom Mme Riccoboni dedicated her *Comtesse de Sancerre* (1766) and whose play *The Clandestine Marriage* she translated into French.

automatons. It's as if Vaucanson[10] added yet another spring to his *Flute Player*. Beware of that! If you contradict me, I will learn a role and play it in front of you just as I please.

[10] [Translator's note] Jacques de Vaucanson (1709-1782), French inventor, artist, and automatic machine builder, including the first automated loom. His first automaton was *Le flûteur automate* [The Flute Player], 1737-8, a life-sized mechanical shepherd playing a flute.