

Constructing and cultivating a national theatrical system, 1806–24

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about the beginnings and decline of the French system for theatrical infrastructure first devised by Napoleon to oversee performance culture across the nation and lasting for almost sixty-years (1806–1864). In this article, though, I argue that new perspectives on the relationship between state governance and French theatre can be illuminated by exploring previously neglected reforms and debates between ministers about the function of provincial theatre during the first quarter of the century. I reconstruct the archival trail of ministerial plans, draft proposals, and marginal scribbles concerning provincial theatre to trace the process whereby theatrical issues were discussed, acted upon or abandoned between 1806 to 1824. These documents, I suggest, reveal the steady development of ministerial conceptions of the social and political role of the provincial French stage, charting a shift from the government's focus on the theatrical system's political and moral issues to the new importance placed on fostering social and artistic priorities. I highlight that such a shift, in turn, allowed a state-led conception of the national value of the work of regional companies in terms that had been previously reserved for the capital's institutions.

On 21 December 1824, French Minister of the Interior Jacques-Joseph Pierre, count of Corbière, announced new legislation to govern provincial theatre, giving as justification the following urgent reasons:

[We decree the following law] considering that almost all of the theatrical enterprises in the departments have been suffering for several years; that a large number of towns have made efforts, in vain, to sustain these enterprises; and that several directors have lost their fortunes; [...] wanting to favour the progress of an art that has always been successfully cultivated in

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France, and giving directors the means of bringing better acting troupes to our towns; [and] given the necessity of organising departmental theatre on a new basis.¹

Corbière painted a picture of provincial theatre in need of critical attention. His words made it clear, moreover, that finding a solution mattered to the government not only in order to enhance the livelihood of provincial directors and regional audience experiences, but also to protect the state of French theatre as a whole. The 1824 ordonnance built upon eighteen years of existing government theatrical legislation for Paris and the provinces, beginning with Napoleon's decrees of 6 June 1806 and 25 April 1807. In these laws, the Emperor established a comprehensive imperial theatrical network and control over theatrical activities for the first time, from censorship of repertoire in Paris and the provinces to oversight of directors' appointments.

Napoleon's reforms reversed the artistic and commercial freedom given to stage performers and managers in France since the 1791 Le Chapelier law,² but also earlier historic precedents for the nation's theatrical landscape. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century provincial troupes were managed at local level.³ The large majority of residential theatres were set up and managed by groups of shareholders,⁴ and touring troupes that, statistically, played to more towns and audiences than their resident counterparts, were free to travel across France (and beyond).⁵ Between 1806 and 1864, however, government oversight of theatrical activity transformed the majority of provincial working conditions: directors were appointed by the Ministry after nomination by prefects,⁶ and those heading up itinerant companies were issued with a government licence (first called a *privilege*, then a *brevet*) to tour a specific *arrondissement*.⁷ Provincial troupes were also directed to choose repertoire from across the spoken and sung works created in Parisian institutions, and directors' programmes were subject to a double level of central and prefectural censorship.⁸ Additionally, both ministers and prefects oversaw directors' itineraries, troupe lists (*tableaux*), and earnings (*recettes*), while directors contributed a 5% tax on their takings (*cinquième*) to the state's provision for the poor (*caisse des pauvres*).⁹ Even the geography of France's theatrical network was overseen ministerially. In Napoleon's initial legislation, for example, nineteen large regional towns were granted the right to host one or two year-round ('resident') companies, while 254 smaller locales were provided for by the establishment of thirty-seven travelling companies (*troupes ambulantes*) working in defined regions (*arrondissements*).¹⁰ In short, nineteenth-century

1 'considérant que presque toutes les entreprises dramatiques des départemen[t]s sont, depuis quelques années, en souffrance; qu'un grand nombre de villes ont fait de vains efforts pour soutenir ces entreprises, et que plusieurs directeurs y ont compromis leur fortune [...] voulant favoriser les progrès d'un art qui a toujours été cultivé en France avec succès, et mettre les directeurs à même de conduire dans nos villes de meilleures troupes de comédiens; vu la nécessité d'organiser sur de nouvelles bases le théâtre de département'. *Ordonnance du Roi relative à l'organisation des théâtres dans les départemen[t]s* (VIII, Bull. XI, no 225), 8 December 1824, printed in *Le Moniteur*, 22 December 1824.

2 F. W. J. Hemmings, *Theatre and State in France, 1760-1905* (Cambridge, 1994), 55–63. Graham Howard Bould, 'The Lyric Theatre in Provincial France (1789–1914)' (PhD diss., University of Hull, 2006), 53–55; Mark Darlow, *Staging the French Revolution: Cultural Politics and the Paris Opera, 1789-1794* (New York, 2012), 99–140; Sylvain Nicolle, 'La Tribune et la scène: les débats parlementaires sur le théâtre en France au XIX^e siècle (1789-1914)' (PhD diss., Université Paris Saclay, 2015), 30–47.

3 Cyril Triolaire, *Tréteaux dans le Massif: Circulations et mobilités professionnelles théâtrales en province des Lumières à la Belle Époque* (Clermont-Ferrand, 2022), 49–95.

4 Lauren R. Clay, *Stagestruck: The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and Its Colonies* (Ithaca, 2013), 4.

5 Max Fuchs, *La Vie théâtrale en province au XVIII^e siècle: personnel et répertoire* (Paris, 1986), 90–94.

6 A[rchives] N[ationales], F/21/1168, 'Liste des directeurs de Spectacle, auxquels on propose d'accorder des privilèges pour les arrondissements', December 1807. The application process included background morality and financial checks on directors.

7 Romuald Férét, *Théâtre et pouvoir, au XIX^e siècle: L'exemple de la Seine-et-Oise et de la Seine-et-Marne* (Paris, 2009), 21. Triolaire provides maps of the 1807 and 1815 *arrondissements*: *Tréteaux dans le Massif*, 104, 143.

8 Férét, *Théâtre et pouvoir*, 73–82. A[rchives] m[unicipales de] V[alenciennes], J8/26, letter from the Prefect of Nord to the Mayor of Valenciennes, 21 February 1823. ADN, 1T/1300/2, letter from the Sub-Prefect of Cambrai to the Prefect of Nord, 13 June 1844.

9 The tax was in place since 16 August 1790. Alphonse Vulpian, *Code des théâtres, ou manuel à l'usage des directeurs, entrepreneurs* (Paris, 1829), 29. All directors also had to pay copyright to the authors and composers of the repertoire they performed (*droit d'auteurs*).

10 *Collection complète des lois, décrets, ordonnances, règlements, et avis du Conseil-d'État* (Paris, 1826), 15:457, 16: 137–42; Triolaire, *Tréteaux dans le Massif*.

government theatrical legislation beginning in 1806 determined a centralized national infrastructure that determined the basic working practices for provincial companies and that lasted until the deregulation of the theatres on 6 January 1864. Persisting through multiple changes of regime, ministerial oversight of theatrical practice embodied the top-down dissemination of cultural experience, personnel, and repertoire from the nation's centre to its peripheries.¹¹

As Corbière's above-quoted statement suggests, the 1824 reform—occurring just two months into Charles X's reign—ushered in changes for the ministerial theatrical system. Yet developments in the French government's attitude towards theatre in the eighteen years leading to Corbière's reform have been minimized by historians such as Cyril Triolaire, Romuald Féret and Pierre Jourda in favour of studying Napoleon's initial decrees.¹² Similarly, while much attention in historical and musicological studies has been given to the fissures that appeared in the system within the struggling provincial opera industry from the late 1830s onwards,¹³ little is known about the earlier challenges to the national project which responded almost immediately to the practical effect of Napoleon's decrees and which the 1824 legislation was designed to solve. Corbière's legislation, though, remained in place to govern theatrical practices for forty years across the mid-nineteenth century. The lack of research into the reform's development and intended function has resulted not only the neglect of the cultural impact of a turbulent period of French history spanning the regime changes of between 1806 and 1824, but a continued failure to fully comprehend ministerial attitudes towards theatrical practice and the stage's political and social function during this era.

The dearth of scholarship exploring this period of theatrical history likely stems from the lack of official explanation behind the 1824 legislation in its published decree form. Although Corbière alluded to the financial and artistic frailty of provincial troupes, as quoted above, the ministerial motivation behind its specific changes remains a mystery from the ordonnance alone, despite the law's major impact on provincial activities.¹⁴ Two large-scale changes in the 1824 law distanced this iteration from earlier legislation. First, Ministers redrew the geographical division of France from twenty-five to eighteen theatrical *arrondissements*. Second, they created a two-tiered system of itinerant companies, establishing a distinction between *troupes d'arrondissement* and *troupes ambulantes*. In addition, several small-scale changes affected the working lives of travelling companies: women were banned from managing troupes;¹⁵ directors were restricted to overseeing just one group (whereas previously they could oversee two under changes from 1815); and the

11 Katharine Ellis, *French Musical Life, Local Dynamics in the Century to World War II* (Oxford, 2021), 171–72. Ellis emphasizes that the theatrical system was unique in its comprehensive, centralized logic and national reach compared to other musical networks managed by the French government, such as regional conservatoires. Besides the official government troupes, independent companies also toured to French colonies and Francophone cities, such as Ajaccio, Algiers, La Réunion, New Orleans and Port-Louis (Mauritius); Matthieu Cailliez, 'Le Théâtre lyrique en Corse et en Algérie française au miroir de la presse musicale européenne (1830–1870)', in *Between Centres and Peripheries: Music in Europe from the French Revolution until WWI (1789–1914)*, ed. Yvan Nommick, Ramón Sobrino, (Turnhout, 2023); *La Gazette des Théâtres*, 10 May 1835; Charlotte Bentley, *New Orleans and the Creation of Transatlantic Opera*; (Chicago, 2022); Isidore Lolliot, *Revue pittoresque de l'île Maurice* (Port-Louis, 1842), 168–76; *Lois usuelles, décrets, ordonnances et avis du Conseil d'État* (Paris, 1887), 542.

12 Féret, *Théâtre et pouvoir*, 40; Pierre Jourda, *Le Théâtre à Montpellier: 1755–1851* (Oxford, 2001), 46–49; Philippe Bourdin, Françoise Le Borne, Triolaire and Clothilde Trehorel, 'Le programme THEREPSICORE: personnels dramatiques, répertoires et salles de spectacle en province (1791–1813)', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 367 (2012), 17–48; Bould, 'The Lyric Theatre in Provincial France', 67, 71–72; Féret, *Théâtre et pouvoir*, 13, 40.

13 Malincha Gersin, 'Les Spectacles à Lyon sous le Second Empire: stabilisation locale et débat national sur les "débutants"', in *Les spectacles sous le Second Empire*, ed. Jean-Claude Yon (Paris, 2010), 290–302; Katharine Ellis, 'Funding Opera in Regional France: Ideologies of the Mid-nineteenth Century', in *Art and Ideology in European Opera*, ed. D. Cooper Brown and Rachel Cowgill (London, 2010), 67–84; Katharine Ellis, 'Unintended Consequences: Theatre Deregulation and Opera in France, 1864–1878', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 22 (2010), 327–52.

14 Sophie Horrocks, 'Performing for the Provinces: Travelling Theatre Troupes and the French Political Imaginary, 1824–64' (PhD diss., Durham University, 2024), 60–84.

15 Discussion of female directors is sadly entirely absent from the archival trail. Broader research about the status of nineteenth-century women managing theatres is needed to solve this lacuna and to build on Hemmings' hypothesis that it was contemporary derogatory social attitudes to women as a whole as a 'weaker sex' that led to this legislation: Hemmings, *Theater and State*, 162–63.

The insights into the theatrical system's mechanism that these documents provide challenge current scholarly understanding of the political underpinning of French theatrical administration throughout this period. Notably, ministerial theatrical debates spanned the varying political ruptures between 1807 and 1824. The announcement of the 1815 reform, for one, was ordered by Louis XVIII's administration in August 1814, but its details (including outlining the geographic re-division of *arrondissements*) were executed by Napoleon during the Hundred Days.²¹ Although specific issues were inflected by particular government factions, the ongoing political weight of

21 Féret, *Théâtre et pouvoir*, 36.

theatre and the question of working out how to implement a national structure was recognized consistently across diverse authorities, leading to its fifty-eight year duration.²² The long-term nature of state theatrical oversight has led to the argument, advanced by researchers such as Triolaire and Ellis, that ministerial attitudes to theatre throughout the entire period 1806 to 1864 marked a consistent continuation of three Napoleonic principles: to gain central control of the theatrical activity post the freedom of 1791; to use theatre to provide educative and moralizing onstage content for provincial audiences; and to use theatrical experience to condition public order in provincial towns.²³

There is no doubt that these political issues affected provincial theatre governance and practice throughout the period surveyed in this article. In an 1816 *circulaire*, for example, Minister of the Interior Joseph Lainé reiterated the sentiments voiced by several past government regimes that control of theatrical production, including itinerant troupes, was essential for cultivating an art that:

offers the noblest pastimes for the educated social classes. Overseen with care, performances can spread sound instruction and can serve useful purposes. Often magistrates find in theatre ways to occupy the leisure hours of an anxious population that, left to itself, might become dangerous.²⁴

As a result, provincial stages were subject to a double level of ministerial and prefectural censorship, and political disturbances in the theatre were largely stifled in the regions.²⁵ Local prefects, too, parroted similar sentiments between the 1820s and 60s, describing touring troupes as responsible for shaping the behaviours of provincial spectators.²⁶ In Saint-Omer, deputy Mayor Bonnard included a telling statement in his regulations for the new theatre building, which opened in 1840 as part of a municipal campaign to attract the 1st *troupe d'arrondissement* more frequently to their town. In a statement eliding aesthetic and political categories, Bonnard wrote that theatre, when properly policed, offered clear social benefits: 'maintaining good order and, with it, [providing] the joy of relaxation that peaceful people and friends of the arts search for in the theatre.'²⁷ The recognized social value of theatre was not only imposed by officials but could also be exploited by theatre professionals when managing their itinerant enterprises: four years later, in the same northern *arrondissement*, director Colson wrote to the Mayor of Valenciennes to request vital funding for his *troupe ambulante* by underlining 'the usefulness' of a troupe as 'a tool of pleasure, order and civilisation'.²⁸ The sense that the spread of theatre to an increasing number of provincial towns represented a civilizing influence over wider town life was echoed by regional theatrical commentators. Consider, for instance, the visit by the Parisian troupe of the Théâtre de Madame in 1830 to Roubaix, a town which then had no formal *salle de spectacle*. The critic for *Le Journal des comédiens* commented that Roubaix was now one of the 'tiny corners' of the Nord which

22 Triolaire, *Tréteaux dans le Massif*, 32.

23 Triolaire, *Le Théâtre en province*; Ellis, *French Musical Life*, 171.

24 'offre les plus nobles délassements à la classe instruite de la société. Surveillés avec soins, ils peuvent répandre des saines maximes et servir de vues utiles. Souvent les magistrats y trouvent les moyens d'occuper aux heures de loisir une population inquiète et qui abandonnée à elle même pourrait devenir dangeureuse'. AMV, J/8/26, *Circulaire*, 15 May 1823.

25 AMV, J8/26, letter from the Prefect of Nord to the Mayor of Valenciennes, 21 February 1823; Féret, 'Le Théâtre de province au XIX^e siècle: entre révolutions et conservatisme', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 367 (2012), 119–43.

26 A[rchives] d[épartementales] du M[orbihan], M/5330, letter from the Prefect of Morbihan to the Mayor of Lorient, 16 January 1819; AN, F/21/1250, letter from the Mayor of Lorient to the Prefect of Morbihan, 8 September 1841; Directors also knew how to sell their repertoire as 'useful' ('utile'), i.e. morally educative, to prefects: AN, F/21/1258, letter from director Desroches to the Prefect of the Haut-Rhin, 23 December 1835; ADN, 1/T/301 4, letter from the Counsellor of State to the Prefect of the Nord, 24 July 1818; Féret, *Théâtre et pouvoir*, 35–36.

27 'le maintien du bon ordre et, avec lui, la jouissance du délassement que les personnes paisibles et amies des arts viennent chercher au theatre', B[ibliothèque] A[gglomération de] S[aint]-O[mer], 50849/BRO, rules for the theatre building, signed by members of the municipal council, 9 December 1840.

28 AMV, J/8/47, letter from Colson to the Mayor of Valenciennes, 26 March 1844.

'civilises, shapes, and enlightens itself'.²⁹ Even though inter-town rivalries mean that the writer's tongue was likely firmly in his cheek in this statement, he still linked the arrival of professional performances with the rational development of civilization and enlightenment, here enacted through the import of the capital's artists to the peripheries.

Yet while the educative and moralizing overtones of the state theatrical project are evident within provincial theatrical environments during this period, I argue that the terms of the ministerial debate about theatre's social and political role shifted substantially during the first quarter of the century to additionally encompass new priorities. Throughout the article, I highlight how government officials attempted to work out the means by which to practically organize a system of nationwide access to and oversight of theatre. This included discussing the negotiation of local expectations of receiving performances in the provinces, reconsidering the social place of directors and performers in France, and the means by which to better theatrical working conditions and raise artistic standards. These arenas at times overlapped with the political and moral questions mentioned above, but, at their heart, the changes addressed artistic and social goals emerging within ministers' oversight of French theatre. Moreover, I suggest that, by 1824, the government's commitment to fostering societal and aesthetic aims in its theatrical system, in turn, achieved the development of a new function for provincial theatre within France's cultural landscape by articulating the national value of the work of regional companies in terms that had been previously reserved for the capital's institutions.³⁰

I

Corbière's 1824 ordonnance grew out of a sixteen-year-long period in which successive French ministers attempted to ascertain the evolving conditions of provincial stages and, in response, create a series of reform proposals. It is clear from the archival trail that multiple ministers invested a colossal amount of effort in continuing to develop a national infrastructure for French theatre during the first quarter of the century. Moreover, this process was a collaborative one: between 1808 and 1823, successive ministers sent out nine *circulaires* to departmental prefects, enclosing new nuances in legislation and/or asking for local information.³¹ As an arm of the state, the prefect had a key duty to act as the local observer for the state and gather information to report back to the centre. Ministers also commissioned reports on the provincial situation from theatrical correspondents such as Pierre-Étienne Perlet and Étienne de Champeaux,³² and received speculative proposals for theatrical change from provincial directors such as Antoine Herbelot and Antoine Dumaniant.³³ The contents of these reports were later referenced in ministerial plans. These archival traces emphasize that Parisian ministers placed high value on the insights of local administrators and artists. Rather than being formed solely through the thought processes of high-ranking Parisian officials, the development of the 1824 decree was a shared endeavour.³⁴

²⁹ 'se civilisent, se façonnent et s'éclairent', *Le Journal des comédiens*, 22 July 1830.

³⁰ On the hegemony of Paris in the French operatic and theatrical sphere, see Hervé Lacombe, 'Introduction', in *Histoire de l'opéra français: Du Consulat aux débuts de la III^e République*, ed. Hervé Lacombe (Paris, 2021), 14–15; Nicolle, 'La Tribune et la scène'.

³¹ *Circulaire* dated 15 January 1808; 1 July 1808; 28 December 1812; 22 December 1813; 18 May 1816; 17 November 1818; 24 February 1823; 13 May 1823; Another *circulaire* was dated 1810, with no further precision. Féret mentions only the year: *Théâtre et pouvoir*, 33.

³² AN, F/21/1168, 'Correspondance de Perlet', 01 October 1810; Notice from 3rd Division of the Bureaux des Beaux Arts, 29 September 1810, 'Note M.V', c. 1810; *Almanach des spectacles pour 1826* (Paris, 1826), 392.

³³ AN, F/21/1168, 'Projet d'organisation des théâtres de départemen[t]s par M. Herbelot', c.1819.

³⁴ These findings contradict Jeanselme's view that systematic reforms were 'thought up in the high places of government by technocrats without always taking into account the realities of the situation [in the provinces]', 'Quelques aspects de la vie théâtrale de l'arrondissement d'Aix-en-Provence dans la première moitié du XIX^e siècle', in *La Musique dans le midi de la France*, ed. François Lesure (Paris, 1997), 2:53–85.

Judging by the sources, the process of generating theatrical change was simultaneously urgent and chronically delayed. The need to alter the provincial system was first raised in June 1808, just a year after Napoleon's 1807 ruling.³⁵ Yet ministers only made prefects aware of potential large-scale reforms in February 1812 and they were only implemented, in two parts, in August 1814 and May 1815.³⁶ Similarly, proposals to again alter the shape of provincial theatre were floated in a *circulaire* from 18 May 1816 but, due to the years of occupation, it took a further three rounds of prefectural questionnaires before the finalised 1824 legislation.³⁷ The rate of theatrical reform was, naturally, inflected by the changing political situation. That several new regimes declared the desire to alter the theatrical system in their initial months in power accentuates successive officials' recognition of theatre's function as a unit of public governance and the potential need to reshape the system according to their own party line. As stated in the introduction, the two parts of the 1814–15 reforms, for instance, were declared in the third months of Louis XVIII's reign and pushed through during Napoleon's Hundred Days, just as the theatrical question was, again, put back on the table in early 1816 shortly after the restoration of Louis XVIII to power, and its implementation finally catalysed by the succession of Charles X to the throne in September 1824. Across the regimes, it was officials' desires to consult regional administrators and theatre professionals in order use local insights to inform the future of provincial theatre that delayed the process of reform considerably, as the rate of reply from departmental Prefects was erratic, and petitions from directors often poorly timed.

Key to the ministerial project was the circulation of theatre performances across French territory in order to spread the moralizing and orderly experience offered to provincial audiences by the stage.³⁸ Accordingly, almost as soon as the ink on Napoleon's 1807 decree had dried, ministers revisited the practical means of dispersing troupes across France, debating the nation's theatrical geography. The first 25 Napoleonic *arrondissements* were initially shaped according to perceived needs: the regions were based on historical theatrical routes,³⁹ and the towns needing to be visited were drawn from prefects' responses to *circulaires* sent in April and August 1806 about the state of towns' *salles de spectacles* and the prior rhythm of departmental theatrical visits.⁴⁰ The 1807 groupings attempted to offer theatrical provision equitably to provincial citizens. Each *arrondissement* was given one or two *troupes ambulantes*, decided according to population size and/or whether prefects and mayors believed that these towns had the 'particular resources' to foster stage culture,⁴¹ namely a large garrison population, *foire* or spa visitors, or an influx of commercial travellers needing to be entertained.⁴² In practice, though, the varying suitability of provincial towns for theatrical visits meant that the 1807 *arrondissements* were quite uneven, creating a striking range of working conditions for different itinerant groups, ranging from a remit of six to sixteen cities across two to six departments.⁴³

³⁵ AN, F/21/1172, letter from the Minister to the Prefect of Pas-de-Calais, 14 June 1808.

³⁶ AN F/21/1168, *Circulaire* draft, 25 February 1812; Note, referencing report 18 March 1813; *Circulaire* draft, 25 February 1812.

³⁷ *Circulaires* dated 17 November 1818, 24 February 1823 and 13 May 1823.

³⁸ Jourda, *Le Théâtre à Montpellier*, 49–52; Clare Siviter, 'Rewriting History through the Performance of Tragedy, 1799–1815' (PhD diss., 2016), 240–245; None of the *arrondissements* ever spanned the entire nation. For example the 1824 arrangement covered only 63 of the 83 departments, with departments left out if they were close to Paris, had a particularly thriving resident theatre or did not have theatre buildings/enough provincial desire. See Triolaire *Tréteaux dans le Massif*, 97, 138.

³⁹ Triolaire, *Le Théâtre en province*, 54.

⁴⁰ Bould, 'The Lyric Theatre in Provincial France', 60; Triolaire, *Le Théâtre en province*, 309; Triolaire, *Tréteaux dans le Massif*, 105–6.

⁴¹ Triolaire, *Le Théâtre en province*, 31–32; Triolaire, *Tréteaux dans le Massif*, 105–6.

⁴² AN F/21/1200, letter from the Prefect of the Nord to Minister, 27 August 1806; AMV, J/8/26, letter from the Mayor of Valenciennes to the Prefect of the Nord, 15 July 1823.

⁴³ Triolaire, *Tréteaux dans le Massif*, 105–7, 119; AN, F/21/1277, letter from the Minister to the Prefect of Lot-et-Garonne, 22 February 1842.

In response to these uneven conditions, ministerial tweaking to individual *arrondissements* was commonplace in the early years of the system, often enacted after prefects' complaints.⁴⁴ In an 1808 Bureau des Beaux Arts plan, for instance, the unnamed ministerial authors described the necessary reduction of the 'too extensive' 7th *arrondissement* (Tarn, Lot-et-Garonne, Lot, Gers and Landes) in which 'some towns were too far away to receive enough performances.'⁴⁵ The 21st *arrondissement* (Nord, Pas-de-Calais, Oise and Aisne) was similarly problematic. The Prefect of the Pas-de-Calais wrote to the Ministry in 1808 and again in 1813 to complain that the vast *arrondissement* forced director Saint-Romain to 'neglect all the towns and displease everyone', but that the frequency of visits to Boulogne and Calais and absence of the troupe in Béthune was particularly galling, as pointed out by this town's mayor.⁴⁶ The Mayor of Béthune's grievance against Saint-Romain came at a time when the town had no *salle de spectacle* and no tradition of regular theatrical performances.⁴⁷ Yet the Mayor and Prefect's criticism of the *troupe ambulante* demonstrates that both local officials interpreted the *arrondissement* system as a guarantee that troupe directors had a responsibility to visit any town that wanted performances. The response from then-Minister Emmanuel Crétet, count of Champmol, confirmed the government's similar understanding of the function of the national theatrical system. Crétet agreed that all towns in an *arrondissement* were eligible for a visit, a ruling that laid down the gauntlet for Saint-Romain to include Béthune in future itineraries.⁴⁸ The Minister's decision allowed local officials in the north, and elsewhere, to continue to expect performances every year and to lobby directors accordingly, as they did throughout the country until 1864.⁴⁹ In this way, government attention to geographical problems as early as 1808 emphasizes that the national system enshrined and then protected the right for itinerant theatre to be made available to *all* French inhabitants, regardless of town size, if their administrators were willing to fight for stage culture.⁵⁰

Likely responding to local administrators' concerns for change, the matter of providing comprehensive theatrical coverage quickly became a reason for Ministers to envisage systematic reform within the initial years of the Napoleonic infrastructure. In two plans from 1811 and 1812, Chief of the Ministry's Third Division De Neuville proposed a large-scale reshaping of the theatrical system to further the ministry's aims. In the second, De Neuville acknowledged that the concerns seen in Béthune's 21st *arrondissement* were replicated nationwide:

Directors find themselves unable to serve all the theatres that are in the region, because there are towns that are too far away from the places that troupes travel to, or because the connections between these towns and central towns are difficult. Numerous complaints from local authorities and theatre owners have come out of this situation.⁵¹

⁴⁴ AN, F/21/1168, report by De Neuville, 3 March 1812.

⁴⁵ 'trop étendue et quelques villes trop éloignées ne se sont pas trouvées suffisamment pourvues', AN, F21/1168, report for 'Son Excellence' (Napoléon), c.1808, concerning 'le changement dans l'état actuel des arrondissements de theatre', c. 1808. The solution was breaking the *arrondissement* in half and making a new 26th region out of Lot-et-Garonne and Gers.

⁴⁶ 'le force de négliger toutes les villes et de mécontenter tout le monde'. AN F/21/1172, letter from the Minister to the Prefect of Pas-de-Calais, 14 June 1808; Letter and report from the Prefect of Pas-de-Calais to the Minister, 27 January 1813, in response to a ministerial *circulaire* (AN F/21/1330, *Circulaire*, 2 December 1812).

⁴⁷ The town is not included in Nattiez's account of northern theatrical routes, *La Vie théâtrale*, 5–7.

⁴⁸ AN F/21/1172, letter from the Minister to the Prefect of Pas-de-Calais, 14 June 1808.

⁴⁹ In Béthune, lobbying eventually led to visits: *Almanach des spectacles pour 1819* (Paris, 1819), 201; *Almanach des spectacles pour 1825* (Paris, 1825), 414.

⁵⁰ On theatre as a right later in the period, see Ellis, *French Musical Life*, 170–180.

⁵¹ 'Les plus grandes causes des inconvénien[t]s et des abus même qui ont lieu dans le système actuel, provient de la fixation vicieuse des arrondissements. La plupart sont trop étendus, les entrepreneurs des spectacles se sont vus dans l'impossibilité de desservir tous les théâtres qui en font partie, parce qu'il y a des villes qui sont trop éloignées des points que parcourent les troupes, ou que les communications entre ces ville et les villes centrales se trouvent très difficiles. De là les réclamations nombreuses qu'on élevées les autorités locales et les propriétaires de salles de spectacles'. AN, F21/1168, letter from De Neuville to the Minister, 20 February 1812.

To provide more regular access to performances, De Neuville envisaged increasing the number of touring troupes to 49 or 50, each serving an *arrondissement* comprising two to 11 towns.⁵² He also aimed to circumvent directors' avoidance of smaller locales by dividing the provinces into three tiers: the first with resident theatres; the second being *arrondissements* with towns that could host troupes for part of the year; and the third tier featuring *arrondissements* with the smallest locales that could only sustain performances for a few weeks or during *foires*.⁵³ Although a large proportion of the towns already served by the *troupes ambulantes* at that time featured in the second order, some, like Auch and Dax, were relegated to the third, an action that separated them from the network of neighbouring larger south-west towns such as Pau and Bayonne. De Neuville's arrangement re-shaped theatrical communities to bring together towns that were more evenly matched in terms of size and capacity. These tiers aimed to help places such as Auch, Dax and Béthune, from 'missing theatre because of their distance from big troupes' since, in the present arrangement, companies were coaxed away from these small towns by the competing bright lights of the likes of Boulogne or Bayonne.⁵⁴

De Neuville's proposed equitable theatrical tiers responded to an understood practical need within provincial touring practice. Yet he also sought to reform the theatrical system's financial, as well as geographical, basis, proposing a radical idea: subsidies of between 1000fr to 3000fr a year for the previously unfunded itinerant troupes. The money does not appear to have been budgeted for out of additional taxes on the constituent towns of each *arrondissement* but, rather, provided for out of central funds.⁵⁵ This surprising financial move demonstrates the Chief's understanding that with nationwide theatrical spread came a financial responsibility, and that, currently, the system was offering a service for the nation for which no one was paying. No one except provincial directors, that is, whose frequent bankruptcies were well-known.⁵⁶ In 1812 De Neuville thus attempted to put the government's money where its mouth was in order to revitalize a theatrical system that had become unruly precisely due to its national aims but lack of associated financial support for the provinces.

De Neuville's plans were ambitious but not implemented. Consequentially, the practical problems related to providing nationwide theatrical access that he addressed continued to plague ministers and evolved into new problems. By 1816, Minister Lainé still complained about the *arrondissements* in his *circulaire* but, particularly, focused on local administrators' actions in these shared regions. He suggested that mayors were now often too territorial over theatrical experience, keeping itinerant companies in their towns too long and, as a consequence, making the rest of the *arrondissement* suffer.⁵⁷ Additionally, he cited how mayors and prefects hungry for regular performances frequently approved visits from non-authorized troupes made up of French performers who operated outside the ministerial system. This was something that Ministers continually chastised between 1806 and 1864.⁵⁸ The same officials, though, appear to have turned a blind eye to competition from foreign-language troupes such as Italian, German and Swiss companies who regularly toured throughout the regions during the summer months.⁵⁹ There

⁵² AN F21/1168, report 'Tableau des villes d'arrondissement destinées à former des directions théâtrales' c. February 1812, dated by De Neuville's letter 20 February 1812 referring to the plan, a plan with fifty *arrondissements*; See also AN, F/21/1168, report 'Divisions théâtrales', c.1812 with 49 touring *arrondissements*.

⁵³ AN, F21/1168, letter from De Neuville to the Minister, 20 February 1812. De Neuville's tiers drew on an early idea for three theatrical 'orders' of *arrondissements* floated in the preparation for the 1807 legislation, AN/F21/953, 'Historique', c. 1807.

⁵⁴ AN, F21/1168, report 'Divisions théâtrales' c. February 1812.

⁵⁵ Idem. The 1824 legislation, by comparison, asked towns to subsidise resident companies if their municipal councils wanted the privilege of a year-round troupe, rather than providing central funds.

⁵⁶ Triolaire, *Le Théâtre en province*, 166–174.

⁵⁷ AMV, J8/26, *circulaire*, 18/05/1816.

⁵⁸ Féret, *Théâtre et pouvoir*, 249–51.

⁵⁹ Horrocks, 'Performing for the provinces', 253–94; Guy Gosselin, 'Les Italiens en province au milieu du XIXe siècle', in *D'un Opéra à l'autre: hommage à Jean Mongrédien*, ed. Jean Gribenski, Marie-Claire Mussat and Herbert Schneider (Paris, 1996), 371–78; Cailliez, 'La Diffusion du comique en Europe à travers les productions d'opéra buffe, d'opéras-comique et de komische Opern (France—Allemagne—Italie, 1800–1850)' (PhD diss., Universités de Paris-Sorbonne, de Bonn et de Florence, 2014).

were several causes for concern over the French non-ministerially approved troupes. Their repertoire could not be censored, the government feared that unauthorized companies' actors were of dubious quality, and worried that performers exploited their mobility across *arrondissement* boundaries to mask criminal activity.⁶⁰ To deal with this problem, government ministers re-emphasized the ban on non-authorized troupes in the 1815 and 1824 legislations,⁶¹ and continually castigated regional administrators once they got wind of infractions. Yet these regulations were often no match for the zeal of local officials determined to secure more performances for their inhabitants.⁶² These constant tensions show that, by creating a system that promised theatre as a provincial right but had only limited troupes to deliver this right, Ministers unwittingly fostered a situation where the theatrical centre was frequently unable to meet the demands of its peripheries, prompting certain local officials to dispense with the national infrastructure.

Amidst the unravelling shape of the national project during the 1810s and 20s, Ministers' determination to continually prioritize nationwide access to theatre is captured by the government's rejection of contemporary alternative plans dreamt up by theatrical correspondents and agents.⁶³ In one proposal sent to the ministry that was later referenced in a ministerial planning document c. 1816, theatrical agent de Champeaux suggested that government-controlled professional actors need only tour to important urban centres, with the current *arrondissements* making do with amateur theatrical or ad-hoc troupes working beyond ministerial oversight.⁶⁴ De Champeaux's plan meant the government abdicating their responsibility to provide theatre for as many towns as possible. It was also predicated on the author's financial gain, since the director-agent stood to earn a ministerial fee for his organizational services. The strategy, though, would have altered the nation's theatrical infrastructure to one which concentrated government-approved performances to a handful of important provincial centres, leaving the rest of France subject to the vagaries of the commercial market or amateur societies. In de Champeaux's model, the ministerial concept of national theatre was defined by quality, rather than quantity: it privileged the creation of regional, funded, hubs where higher standards of artistry could thrive at the expense of nationwide coverage. Ministers' rejections of de Champeaux's, and others', projects to privatize and reduce the scope of the national theatre project, however, underline the government's continued commitment to national theatrical access.

It is here that the links between theatrical legislation and national power dynamics in ministerial thinking begin to emerge. The changes enacted to theatrical geography during this period may have had localized effects, yet, alongside government rejection of De Champeaux's project, officials' responsiveness to *arrondissement* difficulties demonstrated the established ministerial priority to refine a system that would deliver performances nationwide at all costs, despite ongoing difficulties with the practical rollout of the Napoleonic vision for theatre provision across France. Crucially, in choosing to continue refining the *arrondissement* set up via small-scale changes, the state positioned even minor provincial locales, like Béthune, as valuable centres of French theatre-making. Rather than simply relying on the royal theatres in Paris to guide and represent the nation, Ministers' actions argued that only if as many provincial centres as possible received stage culture would the commitment to national theatre be achieved.

⁶⁰ AN, F/21/1169, letter from the Prefect of the Bas-Rhin to the Minister, 30 December 1843; GC, 5 November 1835; For anecdotal evidence about the links between theatrical troupes and criminality, see Fuchs *La Vie théâtrale en province*, 22–25.

⁶¹ Férét, *Théâtre et pouvoir*, 36.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 249–251.

⁶³ AN, F/21/953, report: 'État actuel des théâtres', mentioning projects sent in by de Champeaux and Antoine Dumaniant. F/21/1168, 'Projet d'organisation des théâtres de départemen[t]s par M. Herbelot', c.1819.

⁶⁴ AN, F/21/953, letter by de Champeaux to the Minister, 28 September 1815.

II

Alongside discussion of nationwide access to performance, De Neuville's plans identified a second theatrical question emerging out of the national system by 1811 and 1812: how best could the government control itinerant directors and their troupes? De Neuville's question highlights a key shift in ministerial thinking about the social role and responsibilities of directors and troupes within the early years of the theatrical system. Bringing the theatrical profession under the ministry's thumb was a key governmental issue at the onset of Napoleonic theatrical control. As stated in a ministerial planning document produced in May 1807 to prepare the emperor's second decree, the *arrondissements* were crucial to controlling actors within proposed legislation:

The 8th article of the decree, which states that the Minister of the Interior will fix the *arrondissements* for the *troupes ambulantes* in the empire, is without a doubt the most important, and the one whose execution is the most difficult. [The *arrondissements*] for the first time [...] puts a class of man that was previously almost independent under the eyes and thumb of the authorities.⁶⁵

In a post-Revolutionary world in which actors were now enfranchised citizens,⁶⁶ the *arrondissements* were seen as a controlling and sanitizing measure to restrict the well-known and potentially suspect free mobility of the provincial acting profession. Admittedly, actors' regular movements between troupes and between the provinces and Paris did allow a small proportion of unscrupulous souls to flee their families, leave debts behind unpaid, abandon newborns or fiancées, or vanish with the takings of the entire company.⁶⁷ Yet the government projected their fears that mobility would mask criminality onto the whole of the acting profession:

A troupe of actors will no longer serve, as before, as a refuge for individuals who were forced to hide their names and existence because of corrupt morals or even crimes. All actors and actresses in France will be known and classified.⁶⁸

The 1807 author saw the *arrondissements* as a means of curbing what he called the current 'specific existence' of travelling performers who, crucially, 'form what can be called a nation within the nation'.⁶⁹ The consequent decree of that year, then, was a means of normalizing and making visible itinerant actors' behaviours and of controlling the mobile theatrical workforce, a change quantified by ministers as making the performing profession part of the one French nation. In other words, theatrical order was seen as a nation-building exercise. In Napoleon's legislation, the provinces, as much as the capital, played an essential role in defining the French nation through theatre.

The contrast between the government's suspicion of actors in 1807 and De Neuville's plans in 1811 on how the ministry could manage theatrical personnel underlines just how ministerial attitudes towards actors and directors had transformed in four years. De Neuville was concerned

⁶⁵ 'l'art 8 du décret, qui ordonne que le Ministre de l'Intérieur fixera des arrondissements aux troupes ambulantes de l'empire est sans doute le plus important, et celui dont l'exécution est le plus difficile [...] met pour la première fois sous les yeux et la main de l'autorité une classe d'homme qui autrefois était presque indépendante'. Ibid AN, F21/953, report, received 23 May 1807 as stated in a corresponding letter from an unnamed clerk to the Minister mentioning the report, 30 May 1807.

⁶⁶ Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 2002).

⁶⁷ A[rchives] m[unicipales] de Roubaix, 2R27.

⁶⁸ 'Une troupe de comédiens ne servira plus comme autrefois de refuge aux individus qui de mœurs corrompues, ou souvent même des crimes forçaient à cacher leur nom et leur existence. Tout ce qu'il y a d'acteurs et d'actrices en France seront connus et classés'. Ibid.

⁶⁹ 'la profession d'acteur, dans les provinces, n'a jamais été bien déterminée. Les comédiens ambulants, surtout, ont une existence particulière, et forment pour ainsi dire une nation dans la nation'. Ibid.

that the theatrical system itself by 1811 forced directors to act outside government-approved national norms:

Many *arrondissements* were too expansive, and this was the pretext given by directors to excuse the exchange that they often made with their licenses. Since [directors] could not take their troupes everywhere, they would make an arrangement with other licensed directors who, because of secret understandings passed between them, were actually working entirely independently [...] ⁷⁰

De Neuville referred to the common practice of subletting parts of an *arrondissement* to directors unknown to the ministry.⁷¹ Forced by the confluence of a large *arrondissement* and the demands of administrators such as the Prefect of Pas-de-Calais and Mayor of Béthune, for example, Saint-Romain managed one troupe and sublet up to three others between 1808 and 1815 to cover his four departments.⁷² The worry for De Neuville was that such subletting took French performances out of the hands of ministers who did not recruit these directors nor oversee their repertoire, as mentioned previously. De Neuville's concerns here did reiterate earlier governmental fears about the potentially dangerous mobility and liberty of theatrical personnel. His plans, though, highlight that he also had sympathy for directors. Indeed, his documents introduced important new concerns into the national system about how ministerial oversight should aid artists in fulfilling their duties, rather than simply control their work.⁷³

The financial position of the *troupes ambulantes* that De Neuville touched on in his second funding plan from 1812 was frequently linked to the idea of providing more direct support for theatre directors at this time. In the 1808 Bureaux des Beaux Arts document, for example, the authors described the need to expand certain *arrondissements* in which directors could not make ends meet.⁷⁴ The government did not commit to supporting troupes themselves in the case, though, but attempted to foist financial responsibility onto municipal councils. In *circulaires* from 1816, 1818 and 1823, successive Ministers of the Interior again asked councils to take local responsibility for touring troupes by providing a free *salle de spectacle* that might alleviate the financial precarity of these companies who otherwise had to rent theatre buildings in each town.⁷⁵ In the last of these *circulaires*, Corbière even used 'the multiple bankruptcies [...] and difficulties in supporting themselves felt by almost all [touring] enterprises' as an incitement to push as many town councils as possible to go further than providing a free *salle* and actually invest in a residential company.⁷⁶ Significantly, ministers' financial concerns revolved around an artistic issue: that the current theatrical infrastructure fostered low talent and poor practices in touring troupes in sung and spoken genres alike. Indeed, Minister of the Interior Lainé, in *circulaires* from 1816 and 1818, encouraged local financing of troupes to try and help directors increase companies' finances and actors' pay in order to raise performance standards, to develop the quality of actors themselves and, in doing so, heighten the quality of French theatrical art.⁷⁷ Similarly, the artistic issue defined the need for an entire system reform, rather than just a change in its financial component, for

⁷⁰ AN F/21/1168, report presented to the Minister by the Chief of the 3rd division and cover letter, 19 February 1811.

⁷¹ AN, F/21/1168, Report by Perlet (theatrical agent), 01 October 1810, mentioning the 25th *arrondissement* sublet to German troupes.

⁷² AN, F/21/1172, letter from the Prefect of Pas-de-Calais to the Minister, 27 January 1813; Troupe list (Saint-Romain) 11 January 1813.

⁷³ These issues also linked with wider anxieties about vagrancy, *saltimbanques* and curiosity spectacles: Nicole Wild, 'Les Spectacles de curiosité du Premier au Second Empire', *Vibrations: musiques, médias, société*, 5 (1988), 13–28.

⁷⁴ 'ne peut suffire à une troupe de comédiens'. AN, F21/1168, Report to Son Excellence (Napoléon), c. 1808, concerning 'le changement dans l'état actuel des arrondissements de théâtre'.

⁷⁵ AMV, J8/26, *circulaire*, 18 May 1816. ADN, 1/T/29S/1, *circulaire*, 17 November 1818.

⁷⁶ AMV, J/8/26, letter from the Prefect of Lille to the Mayor of Valenciennes, 1 July 1823.

⁷⁷ AMV, J/8/26, *circulaire*, 18 May 1816; ADN, 1/T/29S, *circulaire*, 17 November 1818.

Jean-Pierre Bachasson, comte de Montalivet (in post as Minister October 1809 to April 1814) who described his desire to reform the theatrical system in 1813 in order to 'return the brilliance to dramatic art'.⁷⁸

The artistic priorities outlined by Montalivet, Lainé and Corbière demonstrate an important shift in government thinking about theatrical personnel within France from 1806 to 1818. That is, a shift from a conception of provincial players as a dangerous part of the subversive 'nation within a nation', into a vital component of the one France, integral to the flourishing of national theatre. The former did not necessarily disappear in either ministerial consciousness nor in the wider public perception of performers.⁷⁹ Yet contemporary understandings of the role of an actor or singer in society were certainly significantly pluralized in this period through the official backing of a more nuanced way of thinking about the theatrical profession.

Ministers' debates about directors' social roles, artistic standards, and the provision of theatre across the nation's territory highlight the emergence of social and artistic issues at the heart of government cultural policy in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. These issues suggest an emerging shift of the purpose of the ministerial theatre framework beyond simply extending Napoleonic principles of control in this era. Rather, government views of the future of provincial theatre largely addressed pressing concerns about how best to organize the regional theatrical environment to enable companies' economic viability and artistic credibility, as well as the effective and equitable circulation of troupes across France. That officials prioritized finding the means to provide some level of local theatrical autonomy that could address these diverse problems additionally implies that the state theatrical system was considered firmly established as a unit of political governance during the years of Napoleon's reign and, as I will demonstrate below, well beyond, thereby allowed a ministerial reappraisal of theatre's social and political function within France.

III

Ministerial discussion of changes to be made to the theatrical system during its first nine years gave way to two instances of legislative reform in the following decade, occurring, as mentioned earlier, at the beginnings of Louis XVIII and Charles' reigns. The social and artistic issues present in the ministerial plans and *circulaires* of the first two decades of the nineteenth century went on to inform the reforms of 1815 and 1824. Although some concerns about political order remained present within these legislations, the ways in which such concerns tied into changes aiming to address troupes' circulation and standards demonstrated ministers' official commitment, now on a larger scale, to acting in a responsive rather than controlling manner towards the provincial theatrical situation.

The 1815 reform addressed the small-scale changes and discussion of the previous nine years by reshaping theatrical geography in order to redistribute directors' workload. The troublesome 21st *arrondissement*, for example, was split: the department of the Nord now formed the new 1st, Pas-de-Calais the 2nd, and Oise and Aisne the 3rd *arrondissement*.⁸⁰ In his account of the 1815 geographical reforms, Féret argues that ministers also used geography to curb problematic subletting practices, forcibly re-setting the number of troupes from 43 to 25 in 1815, an inverse strategy to the project increase outlined in De Neuville's earlier plans.⁸¹ I read the decree differently. While the geographic reform did include a ban for directors subletting to other troupes, it offered

⁷⁸ Féret, *Théâtre et pouvoir*, 35.

⁷⁹ Fuchs, *La Vie théâtrale en province*, 22–25.

⁸⁰ Triolaire, *Tréteaux dans le Massif*, 143, for a map of the *arrondissements* after 1815.

⁸¹ Féret, *Théâtre et pouvoir*, 34–36; This reform was pre-empted in 1813 in a partial legislation change which kept the 1807 *arrondissements* but allowed directors to manage several troupes, *circulaire* 22 May 1813.

new and crucially *official* flexibility to address the unmanageable *arrondissements*. Each region was kept under the control of one director, but they were sanctioned to personally manage either one combined *comédie* and opera troupe, one of each company, or to use their *régisseur* as a proxy to manage a second troupe.⁸² When set against the backdrop of almost ten years of ministerial planning, it becomes clear that the arrangement came out of De Neuville's playbook: with each director in the 25 *arrondissements* allowed to manage two troupes, the result was the extension of touring companies up to his magic number of 50 in order to continue serving as many towns as possible, while, significantly, keeping every theatrical employee under ministerial oversight. This resulted in an expansion of theatrical endeavour, rather than the curbing implied in Féret's reading.

Crucially, the expansion allowed the subversive working practices that directors were previously forced into by the national system to be officialized by the 1815 law. This offered directors devolved power to attempt to circulate more effectively, attend to the expectations of local administrators and audiences and, as a result, raise their working practices. In doing so, the law transformed the political overtones of ministerial control within theatrical infrastructure, as subletting was treated primarily as an artistic issue addressed through the offer of further local autonomy. Such a shift of power was, in turn, only possible thanks to the new ministerial understanding formed through the discussions of the previous decade: that of directors and troupe members as belonging to a national body of workers cultivating art, rather than forming a group of potentially politically suspect figures at the margins of society.

When considered against the backdrop of ministerial planning for almost a decade, the 1815 reform enshrined into cultural policy new ways of conceiving of the regional stage. Questions of efficient circulation, economics, and standards implied that provincial theatre now had the potential to be viewed as a site of the cultivation of artistic quality, rather than as a mere geographic network of theatrical activity. Corbière's legislation nine years later made explicit the significance that such a cultivation of quality held for the way in which the government considered the role of provincial theatre within France's larger theatrical landscape. The minister described his overall aim for the 1824 legislation to find a means to '[give] directors the means of bringing better acting troupes to our towns.'⁸³ His focus, though, was not on local autonomy. Instead, Corbière saw the prosperity of individual provincial companies and pleasing local theatrical experience as essential parts of a French theatrical system that, through the rungs of different provincial companies, provided a training ground for artistic talent that would eventually flourish in the capital:

dramatic art is invested in the prosperity of provincial theatres, because they offer young performers, through the advantages of incremental training, all the means of making themselves known and of one day arriving at the royal theatres.⁸⁴

Corbière's statement stressed overtly, for the first time, the national rather than local interest of provincial theatre. The Minister's articulation of the national value of nineteenth century provincial theatre in 1824 not only solidified the implications of the planning debates leading up to the reforms of 1814–1815 but is significant for understanding the broader context of the power dynamics established between France's centre and its peripheries. The concept of national theatrical value within nineteenth-century France is currently overwhelmingly equated with Parisian institutions and practices, due both to historiographical bias about cultural capital and a scholarly

⁸² Article 11, decree 15 May 1815, quoted in Arthur Pougin, 'Arrondissement théâtral', in *Dictionnaire historique et pittoresque du théâtre* (Paris, 1885), 61; On the genre implications of this and other contemporary reforms, see Horrocks, 'Performing for the Provinces', 53–58, 74–81.

⁸³ *Le Moniteur*, 22 December 1824.

⁸⁴ 'considérant que l'art dramatique est intéressé à la prospérité des théâtres de province, puisqu'ils offrent aux jeunes comédiens, avec les avantages d'une instruction graduée, tous les moyens de se faire connaître et d'arriver un jour aux théâtres royaux'. *Le Moniteur*, 22 December 1824.

focus on historical sources that showcase how Parisian institutions did, indeed, capture much of the contemporary narrative about theatre's national status.⁸⁵ Government theatre funding during this period is one arena of state activity that clearly delineates how the state-funded royal theatres of the capital were perceived as institutions that represented national art, based on their creation of new repertoire and production of elite genres such as opera and *comédie*. Claims of provincial companies to a similar status were considered laughable by members of the budgetary committee across the century, as exemplified in an 1849 parliamentary debate on potential regional funding—which involved theatre professionals and were reported widely—that only the capital's performances mattered for 'national self-esteem'.⁸⁶ Here, government spending (drawn from public taxes across France) on only Parisian companies was justified 'in the general interest of dramatic art' for the whole nation.⁸⁷ Ministers and contemporary commentators such as critic Jules Janin considered provincial theatre, by contrast, to be dependent on the capital and, in doing so, divorced from national art. In Janin's words, spoken to the Conseil d'État in the same funding debate, 'we must not treat the provinces as a serious thing, dramatically speaking'.⁸⁸

However unequivocal Janin's statement was in 1849, Corbière's 1824 legislation and its background suggest that such sentiments cannot fully account for the way in which ministers considered provincial theatre's role in French society two decades before, although Paris-centered scholarship has implied this way of thinking.⁸⁹ Rather, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, stage culture outside Paris evidently embodied a nationally representative status that was differentiated to the capital while also related to it. As Corbière argued, changes to the theatrical system in 1824 to ensure provincial 'prosperity' were primarily actioned to ensure that regional companies (encompassing residential and touring troupes) could function as steps in a national theatrical career ladder rising to the Parisian royal theatres. While the changes within the 1824 law addressed familiar issues—circulation and quality—and some of these changes repeated earlier actions—that is, the redrawing of theatrical *arrondissements*—such mechanisms were now pressed into the new service of developing French art rather than individual provincial environments.

The reform's new theatrical geography underscored Corbière's commitment to training the nation's dramatic talent through the creation of eighteen *arrondissements*, ranging from one to seven departments. Responding to De Neuville's plans, the 1824 reform divided the provinces into three tiers rather than the earlier two. *Troupes sédentaires* were attributed to the largest seventeen towns, and Corbière created two categories of itinerant troupes: *troupes d'arrondissement* to serve mid-size towns and *troupes ambulantes* to serve the smallest provincial centres capable of hosting performances at this time.⁹⁰ The total of up to thirty-six troupes permissible in the departments decreased the overall number of groups offering theatrical provision across France up to this point, with the new tiers aiming to reduce competition between neighbouring towns and saving small places from being overshadowed by larger ones. The legislation provided greater flexibility for directors in serving provincial towns because it went further than its predecessors in establishing distinctive communities of regional towns separated by size and theatrical capacity, both solutions from De Neuville's playbook. Organisation by type of itinerant troupe, on the other hand, was a novelty.

⁸⁵ Jane Fulcher, *The Nation's Image: French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art* (Cambridge, 1987); Christophe Charle, *Théâtres en capitales, naissance de la société du spectacle à Paris, Berlin, Londres et Vienne, 1860-1914* (Paris, 2008).

⁸⁶ Nicolle, 'La Tribune et la scène', 127, quoting the parliamentary session on 15 May 1838.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ 'Il ne faut pas traiter la province comme une chose sérieuse, dramatiquement parlant', session on 24 September 1849, *Enquête et documents officiels sur les théâtres* (Paris, 1849), 70.

⁸⁹ Lacombe, 'Introduction', 14–15.

⁹⁰ Towns with municipally-funded residential theatres: Bordeaux, Lyon, Marseille, Rouen, Le Havre, Toulouse, Montpellier, Lille, Strasbourg, Metz, Nancy, Toulon, Brest, Perpignan, Calais, Boulogne, Versailles. Other municipal councils soon voted to invest in their sedentary companies eg. Nantes (1825), Nîmes, Avignon, Orleans, Amiens, Limoges and Douai (1826).

Rather than promoting the distribution of theatre as equally as possible across France, as seen in the dealings with Béthune in 1808, Corbière's 1824 touring communities sanctioned the existence of differentiated theatrical experiences because the new tiers of touring company came with enforceable hierarchies. The *troupe d'arrondissement* director had priority over his theatrical region, giving him first dibs in setting itineraries over the *troupe ambulante*. Moreover, for the first time, a clause confirmed how often the second-tier provincial towns could expect the *troupes d'arrondissement*: at least fifteen performances every six months. The *troupes ambulantes* had a differentiated role: they should tour towns that were not in a *troupe d'arrondissement*'s seasonal itinerary, had been abandoned for more than six months by this other troupe, or were outside of the eighteen *arrondissements*. On occasion, the law suggested, the *troupe ambulante* could programme performances in the same towns as the *arrondissement* troupe, but these needed to be negotiated with the local authorities. The differences between the two types of troupe positioned the *arrondissement* as a company with more dramatic and economic power than the *ambulante* because of the financial protection and artistic power given to it by the 1824 legislation. First, the right for the *arrondissement* director to choose his itinerary ensured that he could select the largest towns to visit and which moments of the theatrical season would be conducive to high ticket sales, for example during a spa season or local festivities. Additionally, the *arrondissement* director had priority over taking a 5% tax from any curiosity spectacles performing in a town at the same time as the troupe, and had the sole right to stage balls, a lucrative source of income. These economic advantages influenced the size of troupes and the genres they presented even though these elements were not constrained by government legislation. In practice, the *arrondissement* companies were bigger than *ambulante* ones (around fifteen to twenty, rather than five to twelve performers). Consequently, the former performed repertoire requiring larger forces: the *ambulante* specialized in *vaudeville* and spoken theatre, while the *troupe d'arrondissement* also staged *opéra-comique*, *grand opéra* and translated Italian opera. Most crucially, the differences between these two troupes allowed the formation of a natural progression in size, seniority, and progression of the hierarchies of sung genre (from popular *vaudeville* to large scale opera) between types of touring companies that, in turn, established the lowest two ladders of Corbière's envisaged national theatrical hierarchy.

The tangible nature of tiers established between types of itinerant troupe can be seen in the way in which provincial commentators articulated their concepts of national space through theatrical hierarchy. The tiers created by Corbière were known as 'orders' in broader artistic discourse: Paris was, naturally, the first order, and residential companies the second. Several local commentators discussed the difference between the two itinerant troupes, and the towns served by them, as distinguishing the third and fourth tiers of both artistic experience and, importantly, civic status. A journalist writing in Valenciennes writing in 1827 for example, snootily positioned his town as a place of much greater regional cultural importance than the neighbouring smaller towns of St-Armand, Bavai and Bouchain because the latter were visited by the *seconde troupe ambulante*, while Valenciennes benefitted from the flagship *troupe d'arrondissement*.⁹¹ The 1824 geographical changes thus not only tackled long term issues with circulation and quality in provincial theatre, but forged the conditions through which a hierarchy of itinerant theatrical troupes (and their associated towns) was acknowledged by theatrical professionals and commentators, supporting the ministry's understanding of provincial theatre's national function: to foster national art through a progressive ladder of companies leading to Paris.

Corbière's articulation that provincial theatre's key role in 1824 was to promote national artistic progress embodies the profound shift in ministerial thinking about the function of France's

⁹¹ *Petites Affiches de Valenciennes*, 09 May 1827. Large *arrondissements* like the 1st (Nord/Pas-de-Calais) hosted up to 4 *troupe ambulantes* at the same time over the forty-year period.

theatrical infrastructure during the first quarter of the century. Building on ministerial documents built up from almost twenty years prior, the law that oversaw provincial stage activity for forty years underlined how integral social and artistic issues now were in motivating government theatrical policy alongside more well-established moral and political concerns. The draft plans and official legislations that I have showcased in this article reveal that ministers' developments in theatrical thinking during this period is seen, most especially, in the expansion of ministers' understanding of provincial theatre from a geographical network ensuring theatrical provision to a means through which to foster national theatrical quality and heritage. This change was only made possible through the rehabilitation of the social role of provincial artists in the eyes of the government during the same plans and reforms. Directors and performers were no longer positioned as a group of wayward workers needing to be put under the state's thumb. Instead they were seen as a valued group of professionals whose labour participated in the advancement of national art and artistic goals. Overall, such a reorientation in government thinking about theatre does not emphasize a lessening of the political charge of theatre, in ministers' eyes, within French society during the Napoleonic and Restoration years. Rather, it reveals the state's acknowledgement that its theatrical infrastructure had, indeed, become a significant component of political order during these years despite turbulent changes of regime. In having done so, ministerial theatrical policy could enable the cultivation, rather than control, of provincial stage culture.