How Offenbach rehearses

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¶The maestro almost always arrives at the theatre before the time appointed for the rehearsal. He goes up to the director's office, where he discusses material details of the staging, examines the costume sketches and mock-ups of the sets, and asks for changes. For Offenbach, whose nervous disposition is legendary, and who sleeps very little, almost always continues working at home at night on the operetta he is rehearsing. The next day, he comes to the theatre with many plans to change things.

> 'Here's how to fix this scene! Here's how I'll simplify that introduction! The *couplets* for... you know the ones I mean... in the second act...'
>
> 'Oh, yes, they're charming!'
>
> 'Well, I'm cutting them out!'
>
> 'Really?'
>
> 'I'm cutting them out! They make it too long!'

Offenbach is the implacable foe of longueurs. Even the finest number, if he thinks it slows down the forward movement of the work, will be cut without hesitation. So everyone exclaims:

> 'You're cutting *that*? But it would be bound to make such an effect! It's murder, suicide!'

Then, after a rehearsal or two, everyone is forced to admit that he did the right thing.

¶It is one o’clock. The rehearsal is about to begin. Offenbach moves downstage, wrapped in a huge fur coat, so huge that it is barely possible to see his head between the collar and the hat. Around him, at the proscenium, a whole general staff: the director, his collaborators; M. Marius Boullard, the conductor; M. Cognet, the accompanist; M. Bonnesoeur, the stage manager. M. Cognet plays the opening chords on his piano; M. Boullard makes a gesture to the assembled masses; the music begins.

Just the day before, since Offenbach had left the rehearsal a little earlier than usual, his assistants adjusted the staging of a chorus. That’s the chorus that is being sung now. Offenbach listens and watches with a smile, both hands resting on his cane, head bent forward. Gradually the smile grows bigger until Offenbach leaps up, as if propelled by an invisible spring, brandishes his cane aloft, lets it fall back on the boards of the stage after lashing the empty air and shouts:

‘Very well, my children, that’s not it at all!’

Everything stops. In the twinkling of an eye, Offenbach has turned everything upside down, then put it back in place. Earlier it was dull, slow; now it is lively, spirited. His very music, so theatrical in its essence, is transformed thanks to this change of staging. For the maestro rarely writes a number without knowing where he will place the characters who are to sing it, and what are the movements that might detract from it or enhance it.

¶In *Le Docteur Ox*, there is a sung and danced finale that the soloists and chorus rehearsed seated for around a week. When the time came to stage the number, Offenbach managed it in less than two hours. This is because, as he composed it, he had fixed in his brain the comings and goings of all his characters, decided on the crowd movements, counted the steps, so to speak. So there is not one bar too many in the orchestra. Everything fits together like the scattered pieces of a jigsaw that end up representing a landscape.

¶Once Offenbach has got up, one may be sure he is not about to sit down again. All one hears now is his interruptions.

'That's not it! Over that way! That's not what I decided yesterday!

Let's start all over again! Let's do it all again, everything, everything!'

And he removes his fur to replace it with a lighter overcoat. It is generally on an overcoat belonging to one of his collaborators that he confers the honour of replacing his fur.

But this change of overcoat almost always has a serious influence on the rest of the rehearsal. Now that he has acquired complete freedom of movement, Offenbach becomes fearsome. He runs around, bustling about, crying hurrahs at the chorus, dancing, beating time with his cane and stamping the rhythm with both feet until, out of breath, exhausted, he collapses into a chair, at the front of the stage, trying to hide a grimace of pain.

¶For if Sardou suffers from neuralgia, Offenbach has a no less formidable enemy: gout. There is only one difference between them, but it is a huge one: Sardou likes people to know about his health, he likes to be comforted, to be fussed over, to be given remedies, in short, to be pitied; Offenbach, on the contrary, never wants to be seen to suffer. Often the pain is at its height and forces him to remain seated for part of the rehearsal. But he says nothing to anyone about it. Never a word of complaint. At most one may hear him murmur:

'I'm a little tired!'

¶From time to time, especially during the final rehearsals, Offenbach will turn to one of his collaborators and say to him:

'I'll let them do that tableau straight through! They can say what they like, I won't interrupt them!'

I believe that, when he says this, his resolve is sincere. But after a moment, he is unable to keep it, and one hears him shouting:

'Very well, my children, that's fine! Let's do it again!'

Offenbach's 'Very well, let's do it again' is legendary in the theatre world.

So are his rages. But they are ephemeral rages that vanish as suddenly as they flared up, and a remark that may have started somewhat harshly almost always ends as a compliment.

That is how Offenbach rehearses.

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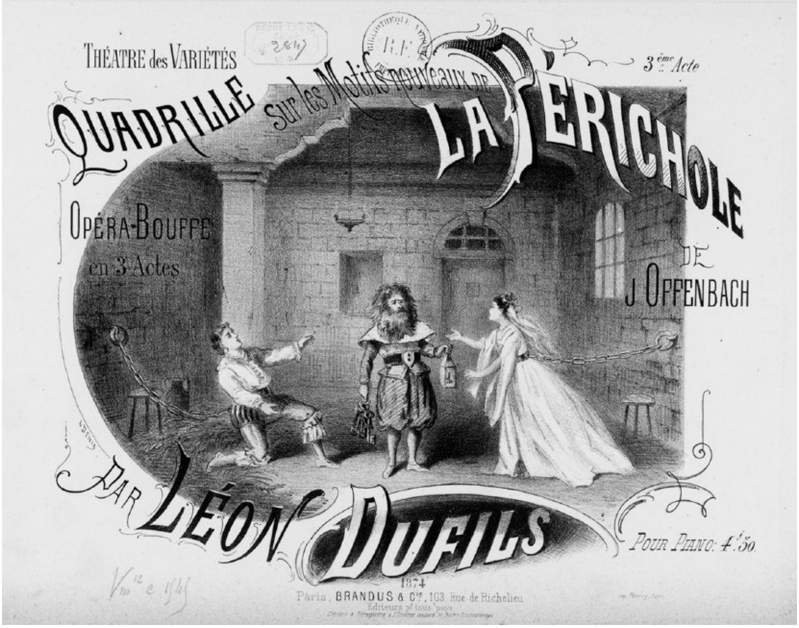
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