

A journey... through the press

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If we are to believe the Paris newspapers of October 1875, *Le Voyage dans la Lune* received a triumphal welcome for both the work and the artists. However, a few discordant (and therefore interesting) voices were to be heard. The director of *Le Ménestrel*, Henri Heugel, for example, wondered whether it was not time to consign old-fashioned operetta to oblivion, tacitly implying that *Le Voyage dans la Lune* belonged to that genre. In so doing, he added further fuel to the fierce criticism that had been levelled at the operetta repertory since the French defeat at Sedan:

Operetta, what wouldst thou with me? Just look at all the theatres devoted to this false, mongrel genre, which no longer even has the privilege of amusing us, and which prevents us from being amused by anything else. I hear everyone complaining about operetta, yet everyone goes there. It is no longer a passion as it was in the past, it is a habit, and the strength of the habit grows as the pleasure it gives dwindles. [...] We have reached the extreme limit of human patience. The genre is exhausted; it has yielded its flowers and its fruits; the leaves are falling today, it is winter.

(*Le Ménestrel*, 31 October 1875)

If Heugel used the term ‘operetta’ to describe this *féerie*, it is because the show conceived by the director of the Théâtre de la Gaîté, Albert Vizentini, blithely straddled the codes of a number of different repertories. This extension of the genre, already begun with Offenbach’s *Le Roi Carotte*, echoed the vicissitudes of *opéra-comique*, the specificities of which had likewise been less and less respected for several years. March

1875 had witnessed the scandal of *Carmen*, whose subject and music had firmly turned away from the tradition of Hérold, Auber, Thomas and their like. The journalist of *Le Rappel* seized on the pretext of the premiere of *Le Voyage dans la Lune* to reopen the debate on this generic disorder:

A few years ago, *féerie* and operetta fought separately; now they have joined forces, to the great detriment of the art of theatre. United, they tend to absorb all the theatres. Operetta had the Variétés, the Folies-Dramatiques, the Bouffes, the Renaissance, the Salle Taitbout and ten other small houses. But when it joins forces with *féerie* to take over a large and beautiful auditorium like the Théâtre de la Gaîté, intended for drama, intended for the people, we regard that as usurpation.

(*Le Rappel*, 29 October 1875)

Francisque Sarcey was of the same opinion in *Le Temps*. He would prefer there to be ‘no such confusion of all the genres, as they have nothing to gain from such mixtures. If you want to produce a *féerie*, use the devices that are essential to that form. But don’t try to concoct a *féerie* that will be an Aristophanic comedy and an operetta to boot’ (*Le Temps*, 1 November 1875). However, keeping their distance from the views of these few rueful spirits, the vast majority of journalists acclaimed the authors and gave chapter and verse as to the reasons for their satisfaction. For *La Petite Presse* dated 30 October, it was precisely the conjunction of the qualities of operetta, comedy and *féerie* that had produced this ‘splendid’ show, from which the audience emerged in a state of enchantment: ‘Splendid is not too strong a word, for it is impossible to see, gathered together in a single piece, more surprises and pleasures for the eyes, more brilliance, more richness, more curiosities and more beauties of all kinds.’

It must be said that the theatre director did not skimp on costs, a luxury that every *féerie* could certainly not afford in the years following the Franco-Prussian War. But then, *Le Voyage dans la Lune* was not just another show: it marked the start of Vizentini’s management of the Gaîté.

After conducting its orchestra during Offenbach's tenure, he now occupied a position of responsibility, joining the select circle of Parisian theatrical impresarios. He needed to make a powerful impact, without setting his sights on economy. This explains why Vizentini gave free rein to his flair for public relations. As audiences approached the theatre, they noticed 'a luminous sphere that seems to protrude from above the door and is a faithful representation of the Moon' (*Le Gaulois*, 28 October): this element, added *Le Figaro* of 27 October, 'is not by just anybody; it was made by M. Chéret. It exactly reproduces the volcanoes, mountains, plains and oceans that may be observed on the Moon by means of a telescope'. The whole building was also refurbished for the occasion, to such great effect that 'the enchantment [*féerie*] begins in the foyer of the theatre. The audience is astonished and ravished at the sight of the transformations carried out at the Gaîté. Flowers, carpets and draperies everywhere; the front of house staff resplendently dressed; luxurious programmes, printed in three colours, distributed free of charge to each spectator' (*La France*, 27 October).



THE QUALITIES OF THE LIBRETTO

It is not as easy as one might think to compose a *féerie*; to abdicate, so to speak, one's authorial role to make way for set designers and stage engineers, and at the same time to invent a lightweight plot thread which will keep the audience interested while marvels of scene changes are being prepared behind the backdrop, is no simple matter. If the author is content with the traditional poppycock and the established non sequiturs, people will say 'Old-fashioned, and just suitable for children'; if, on the contrary, he seeks a more refined concept, a more ingenious manner of bringing about the scenic transformations, he is regarded as pretentious, and is no longer understood. I prefer, for my part, the old *féerie*.

(*Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 31 October 1875)

Although Henri Lavoix, the author of the above lines, openly proclaimed his reactionary opinion, a large part of the press appreciated the originality of the libretto, which clearly went beyond offering a simple pretext for a succession of fantastical sets. Better still, it was a genuine success considered on its own terms. And its appearance was timely, for many commentators, like the critic of the *Journal amusant*, were ‘despairing of the salvation of the *féerie*, which was suffering from an acute case of *punsteritis*, of which it did not seem to want to be cured. The piece at the Gaîté has proved that we were mistaken’ (6 November). Vizentini had shown intuition by choosing young men to ‘risk his first battle; admittedly, those young men are called Mortier, Leterrier and Vanloo, and have many successes to their credit which would be the envy of their elders’ (*Le Gaulois*, 28 October 1875). It is true that the team of collaborators had the benefit of the skilful pens of Eugène Leterrier and Albert Vanloo, both seasoned practitioners of operetta and boulevard comedy. Although Arnold Mortier was still cutting his teeth in the theatre, the cynicism of this society journalist gave the dialogue a sense of social observation that hit the bullseye. The skill of the team of writers was apparent in the end result: ‘This is not [...] the usual *féerie*’, declared the *Journal des débats* of 8 November, while the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* appreciated the considerable ‘efforts to depart from routine’ and Victorin Joncières congratulated the authors on their desire to ‘break with the standard traditions of *féeries*’ (*La Liberté*, 1 November). ‘Unlike their predecessors, MM. Leterrier, Vanloo and Mortier have not lapsed into the same old routines with which we have already been sated for too long; they have hit upon something new, original and amusing’, wrote the critic of *La Comédie* (7 November). These favourable opinions were due as much to the inventiveness of the overall narrative – whose sequence of tableaux constantly provided new surprise effects – as to the high standard of wit displayed in the dialogue. ‘The play is amusing’ (*La Presse*, 28 October); ‘all of this is witty’ (*La France*); ‘some scenes are genuinely funny and good comedy’ (*Le Rappel*). The *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* concluded: ‘All praise to the authors of the play, who have shown themselves to be original.’

The quality of the libretto is to a large extent founded on a satirical humour reminiscent of Offenbach's pre-war successes. It is the insolent, caustic spirit of those operettas that nourishes the dialogue of *Le Voyage*, except that here the idiosyncrasies of the period are not so much personified by specific *bouffe* characters as mocked by the comparison of two entire populations, the Earth-dwellers and the Moon-dwellers. Even if the audience laughs spontaneously when it discovers the customs of these bizarre Selenites, their philosophy is none the less admirable: paying personal money into the coffers of the state, modestly casting off the decorations they received at birth, and their other oddities are all virtues of which humans would be quite incapable. *Le Figaro* admired the ambiguity of this diatribe, which is 'always piquant and sometimes very biting about the old habits and new ideas of our civilisation'. The *Journal amusant* also observed that 'instead of falling into heavy-handed caricature, [the piece] spices up its dialogue with allegorical satire'. 'The audience laughed a lot at the wisdom of our Moon-dwelling neighbours', added *Le Figaro*, recounting some of the 'good jokes that retain a grain of truth beneath their extravagance'.

Were there no criticisms of the libretto at all, then? At the very most, *La Presse* suggested 'toning down the slightly bawdy jokes that are found highly amusing on opening night, but which would scare off families at subsequent performances'. Only *La France* recommended 'cutting three or four pointless and slow scenes, and shortening the tableau of the Paunchy', an opinion shared by *La Presse* ('Once certain longueurs have been pruned, such as the tableau of the enormous bellies, everything will be as splendid as one might wish'). This advice was duly taken.



THE ENCHANTMENTS OF THE SCORE

And the music? It is vintage Offenbach. The composer's Muse has drunk the elixir of youth; she has become once again as supple and fresh as in

the days of her greatest beauty, flowing and winding through the events of the libretto, never weighing them down, never crushing them, arriving at the right moment to enliven a scene, to elicit applause.

(*Le Ménestrel*, 31 October 1875)

Praise for the score was as warm as for the libretto – perhaps even warmer. It was described as ‘fizzing with spirit and panache’ (*La Liberté*), and was compared to ‘dazzling embroidery’ (*La France*). *La Petite Presse* wished it had space for detailed description of each number in a score ‘whose charm vies with the originality of its motifs, and which is a stream of melodies always flowing along the most joyful, the merriest, the most poetic paths of fantasy’. *La France*, the *Journal des débats* and the *Journal officiel de la République française* declared it to be one of Offenbach’s finest creations. One thing was certain, at any rate: that he was pursuing the renewal of the genre launched with *Le Roi Carotte* in 1872. And ‘it is no small advantage for the modern *féerie* to have replaced the old *couplets* with new music, the hackneyed oompahs with jaunty refrains. No composer is better suited to this type of exercise than Offenbach’ (*Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*). For all these reasons, the press predicted the work would have a long future, with its music ‘by no means a minor factor in the success of *Le Voyage dans la Lune*’ (*La Presse*). A few grumblers – who were little heeded – opined that the music was too subtle and sophisticated for such a big theatre (‘too charming [...] and too refined for this vast setting’, said *Le Rappel*), and too extended and abundant to fit into the tradition of the genre, being capable of ‘supplying ample material for three operas’ (*Le Figaro*).

As was the norm, each commentator selected the most outstanding pieces according to his personal tastes. On the whole, the numbers for Prince Caprice were greatly admired. Admittedly, the performer of this role (Zulma Bouffar) was very much the centre of attention, and Offenbach had endowed the role with a range of solos covering every vocal style: in the first act the furiously paced *Couplets* ‘Ah! j’en ai vu’, the poetic *Romance* ‘Papa! Je veux la Lune’ and the lively (and technically perilous)

waltz song 'Monde charmant que l'on ignore'; in Act Two, the *Rondeau de l'obus* and the remarkable *Madrigal* 'Je regarde vos jolis yeux'; finally, in Act Three, the testing *Boniment*, which has a café-concert feel to it. It was this last piece that enjoyed the greatest success, so much so that Mlle Bouffar had to encore it twice. 'Offenbach has written a song for a mountebank that will go down – yes, I dare to say it – in history. Nothing could be more original, more daring, more unexpected. The audience wanted to hear it three times: a triumph for the composer' (*La France*); 'Nothing is as merry and good-humoured as this *Boniment*, full of unexpected cries, strange intervals, bizarre sonorities, spiced with fantastical ritornellos. This is Offenbach through and through' (*Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*).

Curiously enough, the press failed to mention the crucial role of the chorus, even though it takes centre stage on several occasions. It is also worth noting that the orchestra plays alone for forty minutes out of the two hours of music in the score. This is because – let us not forget – the *féerie* grants a significance place to the dance. Hence *Le Voyage dans la Lune* includes two ballets: the *Ballet des Chimères* at the conclusion of Act Two (*Introduction* | *Mazurka* | *Andante* | *Pas de trois* | *Valse*) and the *Ballet des flocons de neige* at the end of Act Three (*Les hirondelles bleues* | *Le bonhomme de neige* | *Les flocons animés* | *Polka* | *Mazurka* | *Variations* | *Galop final*). The critics paid particular attention to this side of the show, as the ballet was a prerequisite of any successful *féerie*. What was the journalists' verdict? For *La Comédie*, the ballet music 'also merits praise: lively, light, catchy, it possesses both richness of rhythm and elegance of conception'. According to *Le Rappel*, 'the dance numbers follow one another in brilliant and colourful fashion', and 'abound in the grace of effortless melody, combined with stimulating rhythmic momentum' (*Le Figaro*). In general, the comments express a preference between the two ballets, the one in Act Three (*Les Flocons de neige*) being considered even better than its fellow because, as the critic of *La Chronique des arts et de la curiosité* said on 6 November, 'the first does not depart from the ordinary run of ballets', whereas the second 'is one of the prettiest things one can see'. For *Le Temps*, too, the 'Chimeras' sequence appeared 'very

pretty' but the 'Snowflake' one was 'delightful'. All the same, let us not lose sight of the fact that the costumes of the 'blue swallows', so scanty as to verge on indecency, were undoubtedly a major factor in the more captivating 'charm' of this second ballet...



THE ARTISTS

The *féerie* tradition places great emphasis on dialogue and on the standard of the performers' acting; some of them readily pushed their characters to the point of caricature. In this respect, *Le Voyage dans la Lune* makes the most of the four stereotyped character parts of V'lan, Cosmos, Cactus and Microscope. The actor Christian was given the role of the earthly king. 'His name is enough to let you imagine the very type of the ebullient and fanciful ruler', said *La France*. The same journal pointed out that the artist 'was, at last, sober, and consequently very amusing'. But everyone knew that he would 'not fail to embellish witticisms aptly when the situation calls for it' (*Le Figaro*), for he enjoyed 'offering the audience those dizzying exaggerations for which he has such a knack' (*Le Gaulois*). The comedy of his performance was further enlivened by his skill in mime, which he used in the mountebank scene by adopting 'inimitable poses [and] gestures' (*Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*). None of the journalists criticised him for this outrageous acting, 'as whimsical and as mocking as ever' (*La Comédie*), with *Le Temps* insisting that he should be allowed to play freely:

[He] is only amusing when he feels he has been given free rein, and allows himself all the eccentricities that come into his head. One should go to hear him in three or four days. He will have added a thousand touches of silliness to his role; some of them will be very amusing; others will merely be greeted by a shrug of the shoulders; but he sweeps his audience along in the torrent of a coarse good humour.

(*Le Temps*, 1 November 1875)

None of the writers mentions his capacities as a singer, even though the role is vocally demanding.

The other king – the sovereign of the Moon, named Cosmos – was assigned to an artist equally experienced in comical character parts: Tissier, ‘one of the pillars of the old *féeries*, who has stood the test of time’ (*Le Rappel*). The journalists have very little to say of this actor (perhaps because they had already spoken so much of him in the past?), except to point out his entrance on the back of a dromedary. Cosmos had to ride a real animal borrowed from the Jardin d’Acclimatation. It belonged to the mehari breed, whose white coat was a perfect match for the lunar landscapes conceived by the set designers. ‘Tissier’, *Le Gaulois* tells us, ‘was not wholly unperturbed when this new kind of mount was brought to him; Leterrier had valiantly to straddle the amiable dromedary first before he was persuaded to do so.’

Each king is accompanied by a confidant whose ridiculous pretensions accumulate effects of cowardice or vanity. Microscope was played by Grivot, an actor who seems to have made a speciality of physical stunts: he ‘knows no obstacles, when there is something a bit dangerous to be done. “Don’t we have Grivot?” they say in the theatre. And Grivot plunges into the trap room, goes through the walls, rises into the flies, is blown up with the volcanoes; he is the all-round artist of the house’ (*Le Gaulois*). Nevertheless, the frantic way he paced up and down the stage did not make him a good actor, according to *Le Figaro*: ‘He often misses an opportunity to be amusing.’ Yet he went on to create the four valet roles in *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* at the Opéra-Comique.

Microscope has his mirror image on the Moon in the character of Cactus, an overzealous companion to his monarch, Cosmos. At first the tenor Laurent seemed disconcerted by the score: ‘It was the first time [he] had had to sing music written for him by Offenbach. So he was extremely agitated. At rehearsals he would sometimes go over to the conductor, M. Thibault, and say very seriously: “Perhaps this is rather low for me!”’ (*Le Figaro*). The same journalist, not very enthusiastic about his performance, took the opportunity to slip in a quip: ‘Why doesn’t Laurent

imitate the discretion of his namesake in *Tartuffe*, who remains offstage? Though he did not admire the singer any more than his fellow journalist, at least the critic of *Le Rappel* admitted to having smiled at 'his comic breathlessness, [which] always makes its effect'.

Three 'singing' parts complete the array of principals. The tenor Habay, in the role of Prince Quipasseparla, was 'the true male singer of the piece' (*Le Figaro*). Victorin Joncières even thought that his talent, worthy of the Opéra-Comique, had 'gone astray in operetta' (*La Liberté*). Alongside him, the youthful Noémie Marcus (Fantasia) attracted the attention traditionally accorded to beginners just out of the Conservatoire. 'She does not have a very large voice, but she sings with taste', according to the *Journal des Débats*, which accredited the idea that she had embarked on a career in operetta out of spite. *La Presse* averred that her lack of vocal power and her excessively discreet stage presence had made her seem 'almost subdued at the Conservatoire', whereas, according to *Le Figaro*, the stage of a less academic theatre gave her the opportunity to take 'her place among the Parisian artists'. To be sure, she was no more than 'pleasant', but at least 'without affectation' (*La Presse*). But then, how could she lay claim to any more plaudits when all eyes were on Zulma Bouffar, the undisputed star of the production, who was given the breeches role of Prince Caprice? 'She scored not just a success, but a triumph. [...] As an actress, as a singer and as a woman, she is charming, charming, charming' (*Le Petit Journal*). Zulma Bouffar, Offenbach's mistress (and mother of two of his children), might well expect to be spoiled by a score tailor-made for her. On several occasions the audience asked her to encore – or even double-encore – her solos, regardless of how tired she was, and she bravely did so. *Le Figaro* admired her interpretation, sung 'with spirit' and acted 'with intelligence and finesse'. And yet, during the first performances, *Le Gaulois* stated that the 'poor unfortunate [...] sang with a heavy cold!' The press virtually ignored Blanche Méry, who played the small role of Flamma (which she 'warbled [...] very gracefully', according to *Le Rappel*), and Adrienne Maury who sang Adja (and interpreted 'with wit and finesse the few *couplets* she was

given', according to *La Comédie*). There was not a word for Adèle Cuinet, who played Queen Popotte, the temperamental lunar consort of King Cosmos.

Naturally, in the context of a *féerie*, the press did not fail to mention the performance of the stars of the ballet. It was an Italian, Mlle Fontabella, who was assigned the role of principal dancer, which she executed both 'vigorously and gracefully' (*Le Figaro*). But some observers, such as the critic of *La Petite Presse*, felt that she 'did a little too much gymnastics and not enough choreography'. They preferred Mlle Vernet who 'at least danced graciously' and 'did not indulge in any capers' (*La Petite Presse*). Victorin Joncières also mentions a Mlle Maillart 'whose correct style and respectable grace form the happiest contrast with her fiery partner [Mlle Fontabella]' (*La Liberté*). All these ladies benefited from the choreographic genius of M. Justament, who had created ballets 'that the Opéra might well envy' (*La Petite Presse*).

The journalists systematically acknowledged two other artists of the show, probably the least expected and yet the most widely noticed: the dromedary mentioned above, and an ostrich whose task it was to draw the wagon shared by Christian and Zulma Bouffar: 'These two animals live in the theatre, looked after by keepers from the Jardin d'Acclimatation. The ostrich eats lettuce; as for the dromedary, it is fed like a horse, but it is particularly grateful to anyone who is kind enough to give it bread. The ostrich got used to its new role quite quickly; the dromedary was more difficult to train' (*Le Gaulois*). Among other administrative records of the production, we still possess invoices for the hire of the two animals and the expenses of the keeper who took care of them.



A GLASS PALACE AND A MOTHER-OF-PEARL GALLERY...

Three artists produced sets commensurate with Vizentini's ambitions: Eugène Fromont, Télémaque Cornil and Chéret (the professional name of Jean-Louis Lachaume de Gavaux). The twenty-four sets alternated between realistic replicas of the Paris Observatory, a forge and a volcano, and imaginary creations such as Cosmos' glass palace and gardens, not to mention a mother-of-pearl gallery. *Le Gaulois* was captivated by these settings 'of a kind certainly never seen before' and *La Presse* could not remember having admired 'féeries so majestically staged'; *Le Temps*, for its part, deemed several of the tableaux purely and simply 'magnificent'.

The highlight of the show was a marvel created by Chéret: a volcano set that underwent seven transformations, all of them carried out in full view of the audience. In addition to presenting the crater and the interior of the mountain, the stage engineers depicted, in succession, the descent into the depths of the cavity, an eruption with a shower of ash, and a superb final 'earthlight' effect. The whole thing was a 'succession of bedazzlements' (*Le Gaulois*). The journalist of *La Comédie* almost lost his professional sang-froid: 'It is something miraculous, vertiginous; we float amid the supernatural, and I do not know that the art of staging has ever equalled such splendours.' Of course, the complex workings of the machines that made possible the scene changes in view of the audience called for strict adjustments of the music and dialogue in order to achieve perfect synchronisation with the effects.

For his part, Alfred Grévin is said to have designed no fewer than 676 costumes – a figure that calls for verification in the archives, unless it implies, in part, mere variations of colour – in order to dress choristers, dancers, soloists and extras. 'Never, I believe, has the pencil of the famous artist invented more graceful costumes and more beautiful arrangements of colours; this is great art. No one will ever do better', wrote the journalist of *La Comédie*. The *Chronique des arts et de la curiosité* made a point of describing the costumes of V'lan's court, 'half Tyrolean, half German',

and those of the subjects of *Cosmos*, ‘dressed more or less like the Egyptians of the Pharaonic era, with a certain amount of eccentricity in the details and a tendency to come considerably closer, in the case of the women, to the close-fitting dresses of today. Princess Fantasia is an Egyptian from the *Chaussée d’Antin*’.

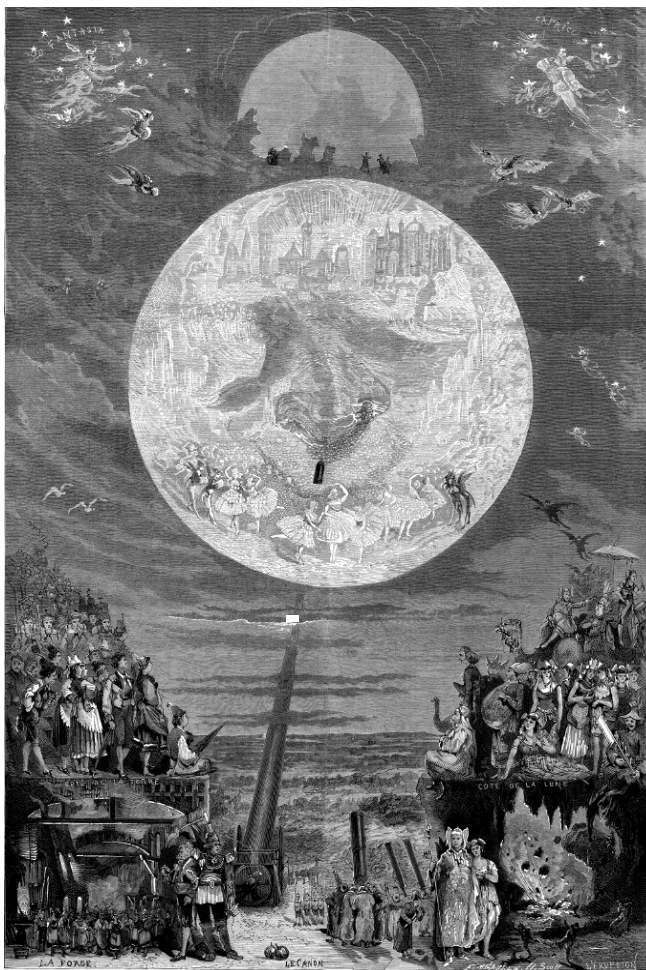


We leave the *Gaîté*; it is half past one. We are delighted to record an immense success; everything came off perfectly. We congratulate Vizentini most sincerely. [...] Once again, bravo!

(*Le Gaulois*, 28 October 1875)

NOTE

The press reviews of the premiere of *Le Voyage dans la Lune* – including those quoted in this article – may be read in full (in the original French) on the Bru Zane Mediabase website (bruzanemediabase.com).



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‘Théâtre de la Gaité. *Le Voyage dans la Lune*’, *Le Monde illustré*, 13 November 1875.
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« Théâtre de la Gaité. *Le Voyage dans la Lune* », *Le Monde illustré*, 13 novembre 1875.
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