

Jacques Offenbach and Jules Verne: abortive encounters

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Offenbach and Verne were among the most popular creators of the nineteenth century. Today, their works continue to fascinate a wide audience, while the academic world still looks on them with a greater or lesser degree of condescension, as in their own day. Although Verne was published in the prestigious Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in the early 2000s, Offenbach is only just beginning to receive rigorous musicological treatment. The two creators, born nine years apart, both had difficult beginnings followed by prodigious success. Their creative power and originality provide further links between them. The two men crossed paths three times in three theatres that were particularly important for Offenbach's career: the Bouffes-Parisiens, the Gaité and the Variétés. We shall return to those three occasions here, without respecting chronology, in order to focus on *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, which, even more than *Monsieur de Chimpanzé* and *Le Docteur Ox*, is emblematic of a relationship that can in many respects be regarded as a succession of abortive encounters.



THE TALE OF A CHIMPANZEE

Although Verne achieved fame from 1863 onwards thanks to his novels, he initially dreamt of becoming a playwright and, throughout his life, never gave up his theatrical ambitions. Between 1845 and 1861, he wrote no fewer than twenty-eight plays, the vast majority of which were not

performed. Shortly after he arrived in Paris in 1848, his meeting with Alexandre Dumas introduced him into the backstage milieu. It was Dumas who arranged to have his first play, *Les Pailles rompues*, produced at the Théâtre-Historique in June 1850. From 1851, the auditorium of the Théâtre-Historique was home to the Théâtre-Lyrique (formerly the Opéra National), and Verne became secretary to its director, Jules Seveste. He was thus at the heart of the theatrical world. He also began a collaboration with his next-door neighbour, the composer Aristide Hignard (1822-98), a native of Nantes like himself. *Le Colin-Maillard*, a one-act *opéra-comique* written with Michel Carré, was the first fruit of their collaboration, premiered at the Théâtre-Lyrique in April 1853. In the next few years, until 1860, Verne and Hignard had three more one-act works performed. One of these, *Monsieur de Chimpanzé*, was premiered on 17 February 1858 at the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens, which Offenbach had founded three years earlier.

Hence Verne first met Offenbach in the latter's capacity as a theatrical manager. Offenbach needed to supply his theatre with new works and had to prove to the authorities and the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques (SACD) that the Bouffes-Parisiens was not intended only as a vehicle for his own music. As a result, many aspiring composers had works premiered there, among them Léo Delibes. Nevertheless, Offenbach was chiefly preoccupied with his own works. At the beginning of 1858 his attention was focused on expanding his licence (*privilège*) in order to produce works on a larger scale, which he achieved in March with *Mesdames de la Halle* and in October with *Orphée aux Enfers*. Premiered at the same time as *Mam'zelle Jeanne*, an operetta by Léonce Cohen to a libretto by Émile de Najac, *Monsieur de Chimpanzé* enjoyed little success and left the repertory in early March. Albert de Lasalle, in *Le Monde illustré*, described the work as a 'continuation of the Carnival' and saw it as 'one of those grotesque farces that rightly belong to the Bouffes genre':

Doctor Van Carcass divides his affections between his daughter, Étamine, and his natural history museum [in Rotterdam]; the former is already complete, while the latter lacks only an ape of the chimpanzee species. Soon

the precious beast arrives and performs every imaginable gambol and caper; we are shown numerous trapeze exercises and balancing acts on feet and hands. But now a biped of a closely related species, a man, emerges from the animal's skin! This is M. Isidore, a suitor who has been refused by the doctor, but perfectly accepted by his daughter. The operetta, well aware of its duties to the public, ends with a marriage. [...] Léonce is hilarious in the character of a servant who believes he is descended from a great Spanish family; as for Tayau, if we were to be told that he prepared for his role as a monkey while strolling around the Jardin des Plantes, we would not be very surprised.

(*Le Monde illustré*, 30 October 1858)

It should be noted that, a few months later, Léonce and Tayau were to create the roles of Pluto and Orpheus in *Orphée aux enfers*. *Le Ménestrel*, under the pen of Jules Lovy, attacked Verne directly, and pretty sharply too: 'But in truth, the librettists of the Bouffes are pushing extravagance to the limit. M. Offenbach should institute a rule to ensure that human stupidity does not exceed certain limits. Even laughter requires a compass' (21 February 1858).

Moreover, Verne's libretto – perhaps written with the anonymous collaboration of Michel Carré – has the defect of being reminiscent of *Le Docteur Miracle*, the libretto that was set to music in the operetta competition launched by Offenbach in 1856, won jointly by Lecocq and Bizet. It has an exaggerated vein of burlesque which no longer really corresponds to the tone that the composer-director wished to set for his theatre and which was, rather, typical of Hervé – this is confirmed by Lovy, who observes that several numbers 'recall the "Crazy Composer"', in a genre that flourishes on another stage, with text and music situated on the road to Charenton'.¹ Hence, in writing for the Bouffes, Verne did not under-

¹ Hervé was called 'Le compositeur toqué' on account of the extreme eccentricity of his invention; Charenton-le-Pont just outside Paris was known for its insane asylum. (Translator's note)

stand Offenbach's intentions. But he prefigured his novels in depicting the character of Van Carcass, a pretentious and stupid scientist who is easily duped by Isidore. And one can only dream of how his libretto, which is not without merit, might have turned out if it had been set to music a few months earlier by Offenbach himself. Robert Pourvoyeur, an expert on both the writer and the composer, poses this question in the preface he wrote in 1981 for the first published edition of the piece. For, in fact, neither the libretto nor the score was published in 1858, an indication of its very modest career.



RENDEZVOUS AT QUIQUENDONE

Let us now move on nineteen years, to 1877. In the meantime, Offenbach had become one of the most famous composers in the world and had enjoyed dazzling successes. At the Bouffes-Parisiens he launched a new genre, the operetta, which he later brought to the Variétés, before combining *opéra-bouffe* and *féerie* during his time at the Gaité (1873-75). In 1877, however, he was going through a bad patch, despite a brilliant tour of the United States the previous year. His new works were not very popular with the public. Verne, for his part, had become a successful novelist, and he too had created a new genre, sometimes referred to as the 'roman scientifique' (scientific novel). Furthermore, having concluded a partnership with Adolphe d'Ennery, the master of melodrama, he had finally managed to enjoy a triumph on the stage thanks to *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (*Around the World in Eighty Days*), which was premiered at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin in November 1874 and revived with equal success at the Châtelet in 1880. In February 1876 the press reported on a project for a stage adaptation of a short story by Verne (in which Offenbach was mentioned!), *Une fantaisie du docteur Ox*, which had been published in the *Musée des familles* in 1872 and was reprinted two years later in a new version. The work was intended to enable Offenbach to return to the Variétés

after the lukewarm response to *La Boulangère a des écus*. The libretto was written by Arnold Mortier and Philippe Gille. Verne participated in the project and received royalties, but his collaboration was uncredited. Gille had been a longstanding friend of Verne's, having succeeded him as secretary at the Théâtre-Lyrique – this must have facilitated relations with Offenbach after the episode of *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, which will be examined below. However, preparations for the show – which called for considerable resources and was 'almost a *féerie*', as Offenbach wrote – were complicated by the poor relations between Offenbach and Eugène Bertrand, the director of the Variétés, who was reluctant to accept Offenbach's plans to develop the work. Verne attended the final rehearsals, but apparently without playing any active part.

The *opéra-bouffe* in three acts and six tableaux *Le Docteur Ox* had its first performance on 26 January 1877. The final rehearsals were complicated by the need for fine-tuning of the gas apparatus called for by the stage action. Jules Claretie observed in *Le Petit Journal*: 'With *Le Tour du monde* and *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, we have had the scientific *féerie*. Here is the scientific operetta. One might invent the chemical formula: $H_2 + O_2 = a$ success' (28 January 1877). The plot, once again set in Holland, takes up the principal idea of Verne's short story, 'a little tale in the manner of Swift, extremely attractive and most agreeably philosophical' (Charles de La Rounat in *Le XIX^e siècle* dated 30 January): the attempt by the Danish scientist Ox (Dupuis) and his assistant Ygène (Léonce) to enliven the placid town of Quiquendone by diffusing a gas that 'doubles vital energies'. Oxyhydrogen gas is thus 'the generating element, the melodic principle of the operetta' (La Rounat), and Henri de La Pommeray declared in *La France*: 'M. Offenbach was the mandatory choice to compose a piece in which oxygen plays the leading role. Does not his music overstimulate gaiety and passion?' (28 January). The effect of theatrical acceleration he refers to reaches its zenith in the finale of the second act. To flesh out the action, the librettists introduced a troupe of Gypsies and created the character of a Caucasian princess, Prascovia, played by Anna Judic. This was the fifth female part Offenbach had written for her. The artist was then at the peak

of her career and the role was lavishly endowed with both costume changes and showcase airs (such as the superb *Légende de la guzla*). The critic of *La Liberté* aptly summed up the *opéra-bouffe* with the following words: 'After all the eccentricities of the Olympian and Underworld gods, the maestro, becoming more serious, now sets oxygen gas to music, while his collaborators, Gille and Mortier, give us a lesson in amusing chemistry, whose principal formulas are named Judic and Dupuis' (28 January).

One is tempted to agree with Robert Pourvoyeur's assessment in his study of Offenbach and Verne, published in the *Bad Emser Hefte* in 1999, that Gille and Mortier 'disfigured' the action by drawing it out with heterogeneous elements: 'Verne saw in this plot no more than a pretext for a short, lively novella, and he was right.' Nevertheless, this encounter with Verne was a stimulus for Offenbach, and the score of *Le Docteur Ox* contains many excellent numbers. But the work's musical qualities did not save it from a mediocre career; Bertrand took it off after thirty-nine performances. Truth to tell, it is much more interesting to focus on what had happened two years earlier between the two creators, on a terrain much more extraordinary than a Flemish town, since it was the Moon!



'CHARMING WORLD, SO LITTLE KNOWN'

A third name should be mentioned when discussing Verne and Offenbach in the context of *Le Voyage dans la Lune*: the poet and novelist Théophile Gautier, who was also one of the best dramatic critics of the nineteenth century. It was a column of his about a revue performed at the Théâtre du Château d'Eau at the end of 1871, *Qui veut voir la Lune?*, that inspired Arnold Mortier to write a piece about explorers on the Moon. Gautier's article emphasised the beauty and strangeness of lunar landscapes, and so these lay at the heart of the project of *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, which coincided with Offenbach's ambitions for the Théâtre de la Gaité: to put on works in which the staging would appeal to the audience as much as

the text and music. Yet when Mortier and his collaborators Vanloo and Leterrier came to him with their project, Offenbach refused it; as director of the theatre, he could only reject what he called a ‘folly’ on account of the enormous costs it would entail! Once the management of the Gaité had been handed over to Albert Vizentini, though, Offenbach swiftly agreed to set a libretto whose exceptional potential he had discerned.

As soon as the press began to talk about *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, which was to allow Offenbach to pursue the path of the *opéra-féerie* he had embarked on with *Le Roi Carotte* (1872), Verne grew alarmed and sought to prevent what he considered to be plagiarism. In mid-October 1875, he had a statement published in *Le Figaro*:

In response to certain rumours, would you do me the service of announcing that I have not collaborated in any way on *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, which is to be performed at the Gaité? I do not even have the honour of knowing the authors of this *féerie*. I am working exclusively with M. d’Ennery on the play *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant*, which is scheduled for the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin.

(*Le Figaro*, 18 October 1875)

He also wrote to the SACD, asking the author rights society to take note of his reservations. Three weeks later, he told his publisher and friend Pierre-Jules Hetzel of his irritation and discomfiture: ‘The authors’ borrowings from *De la Terre à la Lune* as the starting point of the plot and from *Voyage au centre de la Terre* for its conclusion seem to me to be indisputable.’ He pointed especially to the forging of the cannon, the protagonists’ departure in the projectile and the denouement in which they are tossed out of the volcano by an eruption. But Verne hesitated to start legal proceedings, knowing that the composer and his librettists were powerful enough to hush up the matter. In the end, no action was taken. Did he come to an amicable agreement with the Gaité? Did he think that, having become a successful playwright himself, he had more to lose than to gain in this business?

Whatever the case may be, every one of the journalists who reviewed *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, the *opéra-féerie* in four acts and twenty-three tableaux created at the Gaîté on 26 October 1875, mentioned the name of Jules Verne. Alphonse Daudet, then drama critic of the *Journal officiel*, observed that the librettists 'seem to be wonderfully familiar with all [his] works' (1 November 1875) and Lapommeraye said that Microscope, the designer of the giant cannon, had enjoyed 'the collaboration of a fellow named Verne (see the catalogue of the publisher Hetzel)' (*La France*, 27 October). All the same, many of these writers pointed out that the subject had been dealt with by others before Verne, both scientists (Arago) and writers (Cyrano de Bergerac). And many of them underlined the differences between the *opéra-féerie* and the Verne novels, among them François Oswald in *Le Gaulois*:

M. Verne, whose name has become so popular, has also made a journey to the Moon, which he enveloped in all the discoveries of modern science and enriched with those myriad details that make his most extravagant inventions credible. But since, with him, the marvellous must always be explained by an appearance of reality, he stopped short and did not dare to penetrate to the heart of his subject, limiting himself to popularising what astronomy can tell us about the Moon.

MM. Leterrier, Vanloo and Mortier have been more daring; they have simply borrowed from their illustrious predecessor his point of departure, that is, the gigantic cannon which sends three or four adventurers to the Moon. From then on, their actions float in a wholly fantastical world until the denouement, where they rejoin M. Verne, who has also, in another work, feigned to believe that travellers inside a volcano could be thrown back out of it, safe and sound, by a sudden eruption. That is the limit of a coincidence which is, so to speak, dictated by the story: it concerns a young prince spoiled by his father, the glorious King V'lan, who, having run out of whims, decides to ask his progenitor for the Moon.

(*Le Gaulois*, 29 October 1875)

Moreover, ‘M. Verne’s travellers do not go as far as the Moon: they stop like Moses at the entrance to the Promised Land, whereas King V’lan, his son and his minister fall like a bomb upon our satellite’ (Clément Caraguel in the *Journal des débats* of 8 November). *Le Voyage dans la Lune* nevertheless shares with the works of Verne a certain pretension to accuracy, which was reflected above all in the work of the set designers, some of whom used enlargements of astronomical photographs. The sets thus became, more or less, the equivalent of the illustrations in Jules Verne’s novels. In his letter to Hetzel, Verne claimed that the cannon at the Gâté had been copied from a popular illustration in *De la Terre à la Lune*.

Another topos shared by Verne and Offenbach, echoing *Monsieur de Chimpanzé* and *Le Docteur Ox* (whose protagonist is even more of a dangerous megalomaniac in the novella than in the *opéra-bouffe*), is the denunciation of scientists – seen as ridiculous at best and diabolical at worst. The second tableau of the *opéra-féerie*, set in the Observatory, presents them in an unflattering light. Parabase treats the visitors with technocratic contempt (‘Address a request to the grand factotum, who will send it on to the chief of staff...’) before behaving like an obsequious courtier when he realises he is dealing with the king. Cosinus and his colleagues merely answer the question put to them with empty formulas, and V’lan has no choice but to dismiss them, or rather ‘cancel them’, as Microscope puts it. The latter is not treated any better by Offenbach and his librettists. He may be an engineer (a profession that the nineteenth century praised to the skies), but he is above all vain, greedy and more interested in his liaison with the actress Cascadine – who, incidentally, shamelessly exploits his naïveté – than in the affairs of state. V’lan’s remarks about the impossibility of living on the Moon (‘Science has decided, and when I tell you that there are no inhabitants on the Moon, it means that there cannot be any!’) mirror those of Cosmos (‘The Earth has no inhabitants. [...] Science has decided’) – demonstrating that the powers that be cannot rely on the views of scientists. What does it matter, anyway? Offenbach and Verne approached the Moon as artists, the former managing to infuse his music with a ‘strange picturesque quality, as befits a world unknown

to the Earth', according to the critic of *La Gazette de France* dated 28 October. *Le Voyage dans la Lune* is one of his finest scores of the 1870s, and the 248 performances of the *opéra-féerie* given in Paris (at the Gaité and then at the Châtelet) between October 1875 and May 1877 demonstrate that the public agreed with this judgment.



EPILOGUE: THEN CAME MÉLIÈS...

These abortive encounters between Offenbach and Verne (other connections could be established, for instance between *Le Château des Carpathes* and *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, as Robert Pourvoyeur suggests) might be said to have had an epilogue in 1902, three years before the writer's death and twenty-two years after the composer's (Verne attended Offenbach's funeral). That year, Georges Méliès made what is probably the most famous film of the early days of cinema, *Voyage dans la Lune*, a 'pièce à grand spectacle en 30 tableaux'. In both its title and its subtitle, this 260-metre film (running around a quarter of an hour) refers more directly to the *opéra-féerie* of 1875 than to the Verne novels to which film specialists have nevertheless got into the habit of linking it primarily. If the emblematic image of the rocket piercing the eye of the Moon is more reminiscent of Hervé (*L'Œil crevé*, 1867 – the ninth tableau of the film is entitled 'En plein dans l'œil'), it is worth remembering that a relief model of the Moon made by the decorator Chéret was installed in October 1875 on the façade of the Gaité; it was very detailed and was illuminated every evening by powerful reflectors. Above all, a reading of the explanatory texts written by Méliès clearly shows that he made a synthesis of Verne's novels and Offenbach's work, while a viewing of the film leaves one in no doubt that the sets, costumes and *mise en scène* were clearly inspired by the *opéra-féerie*. Méliès, born in 1861, whether or not he saw the 1875 production, or its revival in 1877, or even the further revival at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin in 1892, could at least have consulted the rich iconography

left by the Gaîté production. In any case, a new art form was required on the threshold of the twentieth century to synthesise the genius of those two visionary creators, Offenbach and Verne, who belong as much to our time as to theirs, as much to the Moon as to the Earth.



Zulma Bouffar in the role of Caprice (Théâtre du Châtelet, 1877).
Jérôme Collomb Collection.

Zulma Bouffar dans le rôle de Caprice (théâtre du Châtelet, 1877).
Collection Jérôme Collomb.



Edmond Morin, the Mountebank Scene, *Le Monde illustré*, 7 April 1877.
Jérôme Collomb Collection.

Edmond Morin, Scène des charlatans, *Le Monde illustré*, 7 avril 1877.
Collection Jérôme Collomb.