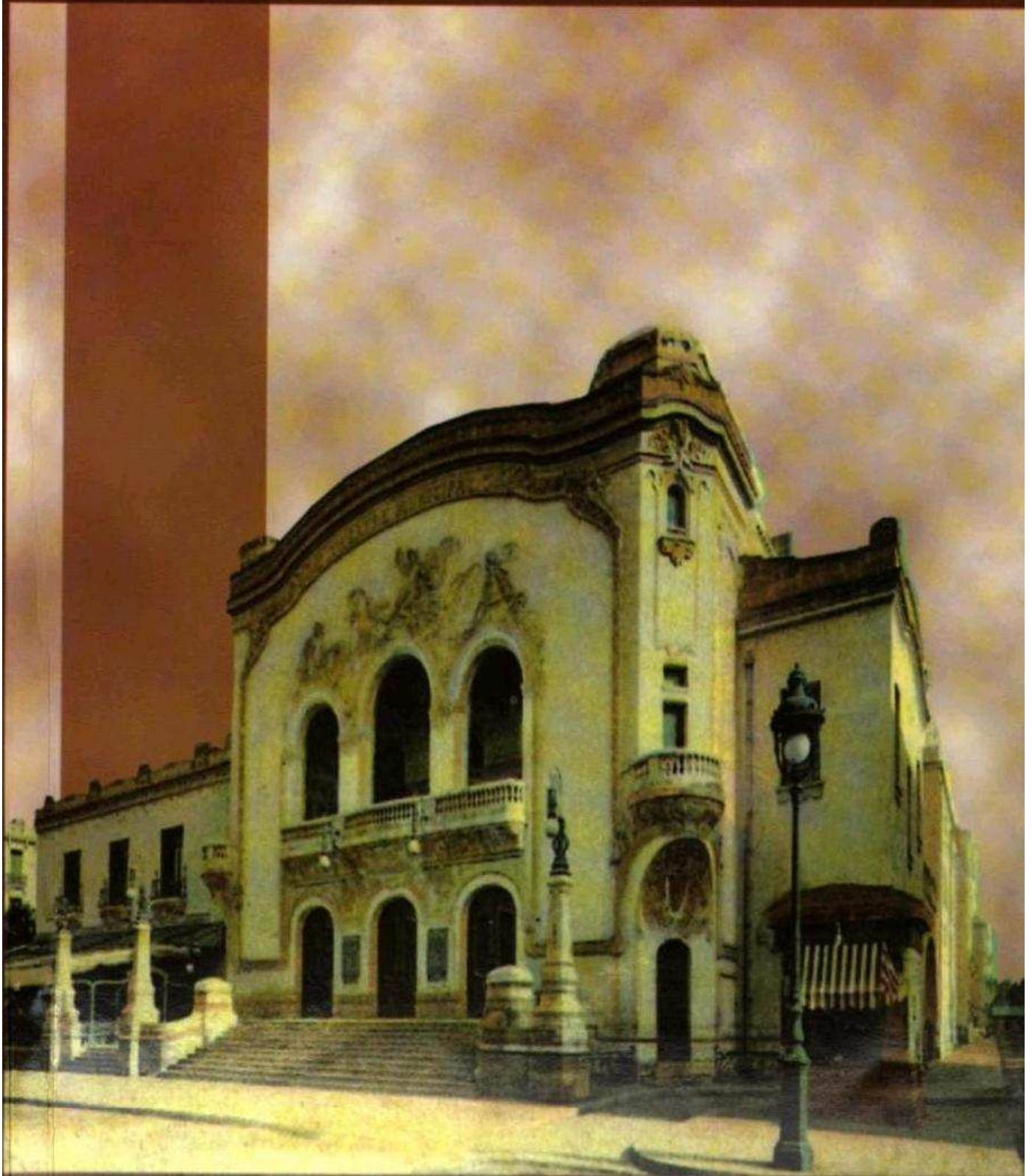


DEUX SIECLES DE THEATRE EN TUNISIE

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Two centuries of theatre in Tunisia

By Moncef Charfeddine
(pp91-96)

THE MUNICIPAL THEATRE OF SFAX

In the published program on the occasion of the inauguration of the Municipal Theatre of Sfax, second version, on January 16, 1954, Master Rene Charuel. First Deputy Vice-President of the municipality wrote what follows, under the title "OLD PAPERS":

"Certain narrators of the short story, take pleasure in searching papers yellowed by time for the proper subject to interest their readers.

In the dusty file relative to the old theatre of Sfax, one document is of some interest: this is a sheet of seat rentals for the presentation of June 8, 1913. What was the scene that evening - placed there under the inspiration of Melpomène or of Terpsichore? It is not mentioned.

But the sole fact that the name of the "The Alliance Française" appears in the top right of the sheet, reveals to us that the spectacle was of quality.

Also the spectators were numerous and the blue crosses, some red, which strew the plan, let us suppose the whoever played this evening to a full house, at least for the reserved places, because there were places of second galleries, vulgarly called 'peanut gallery' ("*poulailleur*"), which did not deserve the honors of reservations.

The "Poulaille" could envy those which were comfortably installed in the orchestra seats behind which extended a floor simply furnished with benches; the seats in the dress circle also were pleasant in the condition of not being placed too close together. In effect, built according to the traditional pattern of the 19th century, the room clearly had the form of a semi-circle whose stage formed the diameter and the balconies and gallery layered in corbelling; from the forestage one saw only the opposite part of the stage and from the side balconies places and the last rows one saw strictly nothing.

¹ It was in fact, the annual Festival of the The Alliance Française given with the benevolent cooperation of Decharneux, La Sfaxienne, and of the teachers and children of the schools and various amateurs of the city, of which here is the program.

- 1) *Marche Slave*, by the orchestra
- 2) *Adieux à la Mer*, by a chorus of pupils.
- 3) *Christ in Paris, O Bella Mia* solo by Mrs. Wroblenski, accompanied by Mrs. Hyvert.
- 4) *The Balloon Messenger*, poetry recitation by Mr. R. de Ceocaty.
- 5) *Fantasia on Carmen*, by l' orchestra
- 6) Gymnastic Exercises by the gymnastes of La Sfaxienne.
- 7) **Les Decharneux** in their repertory.
- 8) *America - March*, by the orchestra
- 9) *Les Bifteaks*, comedy in one act of Gaston Duthil, played by Mr. D'Orfini, Mrs. Wroblenski and Mr. Gerber.
- 10) Symnastic Exercises by the gymnastes of La Sfaxienne.
- 11) *Joan Arc*, luminous projections with songs, by Mrs. Wroblenski, accompanied by Mrs. Hyvert.
- 12) The French language, a living tableau prepared by Mrs. M... and performed out by 46 young girls and young people.

Such as it was, this small theatre of five hundred places was charming and very well attended. Conceived in the Hispano-Mauresque style of the end of the last century by the architect Guy, whilst Mr. Georges Porcher who traced the arteries of the town of Sfax was Principal Engineer and Mr. Jules Gau Deputy Vice-president of the Municipality, it had been inaugurated on January 22, 1903: that evening "Faust" was performed.

No photography exists alas in the files, and one can regret it; of this evening, there remains nothing, except perhaps the memories of some.

The enthusiasm, one must think, had to compensate for the missing heating, because the room was full to bursting; as for the stage, it was wide and one could play "Faust" and other sumptuous operas perfectly there: our fathers liked the opera very much.

No documentation exists relative to the cost of these representations; on the other hand, the seating plan which allowed this short incursion into the past, tells us that the price of the armchairs was of 1,75 F, that of the second galleries of 0,50.

"Faust" for 10 pennies: that was a good time", says one. Eh well; thanks to the collections of old newspapers, we are able to give all the possible information on the old Municipal Theatre of Sfax and on its inauguration.

It is as Jacques Didier informs us in the *Dépêche Sfaxienne* of February 21, 1903, that four years before the inauguration of the Theatre, sides were taken, with some "gênes" [people?] from Lyon wanting to assemble a puppet theatre, the only spectacle that they had in mind. And he adds: "But almost at once Gontier arrived and in the small meeting room, we had the prospect of a theatre for quality representations of operettas with Nury and Mlle Valtour; the following year, the same impresario had brought us Mme. Méa and the idea of a municipal theatre was absolutely anchored in Sfax.

The Municipality paid the subsidy to the director; one year afterwards, there was the monument... "

Similarly we learn that it is Renault who made the installation of the stage, that the merry monument was raised "on the very site where visitors of Sfax saw a disastrous urinal leaning against a wall not less disastrous, where the auctioneer sold the last straw mattress of the widow and the orphans, pieces of furniture soiled and distressed, overcome in the fight for existence on our desert soil, in this same place as the last glance of those which that remained perceived only in shudders" and that before deciding, he needed the complete building because the asymmetry wanted by the daring architect Guy seemed strange.

From another part, "in consequence of various circumstances independent of the Management and also of the good will of the contractors and drivers of work" (known air!) the opening announced for January 20, 1903, took place two days later.

Here is presented an article of the *Dépêche Sfaxienne* which gives an account of this inauguration:

The Dépêche Sfaxienne
Saturday January 24, 1903

INAUGURATION

It was the day before yesterday evening, January 22, that the opening of the Municipal Theatre of Sfax took place; this pretty monument, this gracious theatre deserved, it seems to us, something more than the banal opening of the doors, after the post announcing the spectacle of the evening; but the traditions are lost, the good ones especially, those that transform a minor event of the middle-class life of a small town into a festival, where everyone takes its share.

One needed an inauguration for this monument raised by the town of Sfax from its public funds, for the wellbeing of its fellow-citizens; one needed a popular ceremony other than a renting at the cost of gold for the seats of the first presentation; it was necessary that beside all of elegant Sfax, which decorated the theatre from the ground floor to the balcony, the whole population had its share of the brilliant presentation given by the Manrick troop.

p94 It had been talked about, for more than a month; even the business manager had made proposals which deserved more attention than they had from municipal commission of the Theatre; one comes up against the price which would cost three artists engaged, especially to give the first evening, an extraordinary spectacle, which could have been given again the following day free for everyone and perhaps also a happy continuation for part of the season.

There was haggling over tickets of one hundred francs which would have made it possible to make an inauguration worthy of the Theatre which was going to be opened: it is deeply regrettable.

Only one thought that it was not appropriate that this first representation passed unperceived near some, this was the distinguished architect of the monument, the honourable Mr. Guy who asked the new director to allow all the workmen who had cooperated with his work to enter.

Mr. Manrick willingly accepted and reserved for them the second galleries, which will be opened to the public only next year. More than 250 of them came to greet the new director and to give their architect a cordial ovation in the third interval, by forcing him to

appear in the municipal box, to receive the applause of the whole room.

These are the workmen of the theatre, with the assistance generous of the director, who made the inauguration in spite of municipal indifference.

A semblance of an inauguration was made, of which the ceremonial was limited to a small speech from the vice-president of the Municipality, from the door of his box, after the execution of the Marseillaise by the Harmonie Sfaxienne massed in the orchestra.

The honourable Mr. Gau thanked several eminent personages of the Government for lending lent their benevolent assistance to the erection of this movement, he complimented the architect and the engineer for the plan and completion of the work and the contractors for the way in which they built the new building conscientiously and all that is marked there.

And yet the room was prettily furnished; in the boxes of pretty outfits, thus with the orchestra armchairs and the balcony; more than 400 people, without counting the second galleries, had made a point of honouring with their presence this premier that could so easily have been transformed into grand and beautiful festival.

The most flattering reception was made by the troupe, the enthusiasm was in the air, it only missed a spark to light it.

^{p95} In another piece, still dated January 25, 1903 in the *Dépêche Sfaxienne*, with the heading "Spectacles and Concerts" , one can read what follows:

Municipal theatre

The management asks us to remind subscribers that for the performances without reservations, those on Sunday, they must come to the booking office, the very same day before 11 o'clock in the morning, if they wish to keep their places for the evening, last this time, the subscribers for the performances, apart from reservations have the ability to take again their places at the price of their subscriptions.

Contrary to the rumour which runs downtown that all the boxes are rented by subscription, the management requests us to inform the public that there is still a box in the dress circle with 4 places available.

The rumour also circulates that the draft reigns as a Master in the room. There is nothing in it. All the openings have been closed and those who fear the colds can venture without fear to the theatre.

In the excusable confusion of the first day, it is true, some order was missing in the cloakroom which was not organized completely organized.

An umbrella with a metal metal was lost.

A lady's umbrella was substituted for it.

Please bring back these objects to the theatre cloakroom. The lady's umbrella that was substituted will be returned for that which is missing.

We will finish by asking who rushed to make the decorations. Admittedly this delay in execution of these decorations is not ascribable to Mr. Manrick. But we do not wish less actively than this gap is quickly filled. The decoration of the forest is insufficient to represent everything. It is necessary to add others to it.

As for the price of the places, here it is:

Boxes with 6 seats: 18 FF, boxes with 4 seats: 12 F, seats in a box: 3 F, orchestra seats: 2 F, 50, seat in the dress circle: 2 F, 50, parquet floor 1 FR., 50, balcony seats: 1 F, 50, floor 1 F 0 F, 15 or more per seat for the booking.

Reductions:

1) For officers of the garrisons in the Tunisian South, 25 percent on the ordinary prices of the orchestra seats and of balcony, with the parquet floor and the balcony seats.

2) For the warrant officers: 50 percent on the ordinary prices on the parquet floor and the floor.

p⁹⁶ 3) for the soldiers: 50 percent on the floor.

4) For the small employees of the administrations of State, of the Municipality and the Railroad, provided that an identity card is delivered by their department heads: 25 percent on the ordinary prices with the parquet floor and the floor.

Subscriptions:

Whole cabins with 6 seats: 12 F, whole cabins with 4 seats: 8 F, orchestra and balcony seats: 1fr, 75, parquet floor and balcony seats: 1F.

The subscription cards were valid for a certain number of people of the same family (husband and wife, children, brother and sister).

The subscribers could take seats at the same price as the subscription for themselves only, for performances apart from the subscription.

As is seen, some effort was made to put the prices of the seats within the range of all purses.

To finish, here the quite eclectic program of the Municipal Theatre of Sfax on January 22, 1903 (the date of its inauguration) to March 3 of the same year:

Faust, Mireille, Le Grand Mogol, Les Mousquetaires de la Reine, La Traviata, Lucie de Lammermoor, Les 28 jours de Clairette, Le Songe d'une nuit d'été, La Princesse des Canaries, Carmen, Le Chalet. La Périchole, Haydee ou le secret, La Favorite, Les Saltimbanques. Mignon, Lakmé. Fleur de thé, La Fille du régiment, La Vivandière. Rigoletto et La Petite Mariée.



Here, on this subject, is something one can read in the *Dépêche Sfaxienne* of Sunday January 18, 1903:

THEATRE CHRONICLE

Today the Manrick troop arrived, which will start, this week, the annual theatre season of Sfax. This troop arrives to us preceded by the most flattering testimonies of satisfaction, granted on several occasions by the population of Sousse.

p154 A number of Sfaxiens are able to judge the value of this company and the echoes of their "satisfaction" are good omen for the opening season.

Mr. A. Manrick has done things well; he has assembled a homogeneous troupe where there is no longer just one star around which revolved the inferior bit-players, the star is there still but he has a whole constellation.

The selected repertory that the young impresario offers us has gained a sharp success with our neighbors; the troop comes to us better known than in Sousse which promises to us excellent performances.

In the splendid theatre with which Sfax has come to be equipped, this troop can produce only excellent effects.

This theatre in spite of the good will and the opinionated work of the architects, engineers and contractors, will not be completely finished for this season; it will miss most of the decoration, all the artistic work which will make our first scene a wonder of delicacy and good taste.

One will be patient this year, one can give credit to its builders, in the face of the feat of ingenuity achieved for building it in eight months.

Mr. Manrick is especially eager to satisfy the public, as he wants to see many at his presentations, he has made enormous sacrifices in the price of the seats so that they can be within the range of all purses.

We hope that the population of Sfax will be grateful to him for this attention and will be able to prove its satisfaction to him by filling at each presentation the range of seats which are offered it.

In greeting the new troop, we wish good receipts to its director and real successes to his artists.

GLASSES

For the subscriptions of the season, while waiting for the opening of the theatre office, refer to the *Dépêche Sfaxienne* where the plan of the seats is deposited.

CHARFEDDINE Moncef.
Deux siècles de théâtre en Tunisie.
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Notre confrère Moncef Charfeddine, nos lecteurs ne sont pas sans le savoir, est un passionné d'histoire et un mordu du théâtre. Aussi s'est-il consacré à combler un vide en écrivant l'histoire du théâtre tunisien.

Il est le premier à avoir publié, en 1972, un ouvrage exhaustif sur les débuts du théâtre tunisien de 1909 à 1918. Il a publié ensuite, un second ouvrage sur les pionniers et les figures marquantes de notre théâtre (71 biographies). ce troisième ouvrage dont le titre est «Deux siècles de théâtre en Tunisie», ouvrage de 350 pages, abondamment illustré, traite des premières manifestations théâtrales dans notre pays. C'est en ces termes que l'auteur présente son ouvrage

J'ai choisi comme titre : «Deux siècles de théâtre en Tunisie», parce que j'ai découvert que la première trace d'une représentation théâtrale à Tunis remonte à 1741. Cela m'a été révélé par la «Lettre d'un comédien à un de ses amis touchant sa captivité et celle de vingt six de ses camarades chez les corsaires de Tunis et ce qu'ils sont obligés de faire pour adoucir leurs peines», sur laquelle



je suis tombé par hasard. Il y est question d'une troupe de comédiens français qui, après avoir passé cinq mois à Gênes, se rendaient à Monaco quand ils furent capturés par des corsaires tunisiens et conduits à Tunis c'était en 1741, sous le règne d'Ali Bey (1735-1756). La 2ème date à laquelle je me suis arrêté est 1826. Cette année là, un procès est intenté, par des acteurs milanais à leur impresario qui ne voulait pas les payer. En décembre 1846, Alexandre Dumas, l'immortel auteur des «trois mousquetaires» vint en Tunisie, y séjourna quelque temps et y assista à la représentation par la troupe de Mme Saqui, de deux pièces; «Michel et Christine» de Scribe et Dupin et «le Déserteur» de Sedaine. Nous en arrivons à présent,

à la naissance du théâtre arabe. Je soutiens à ce propos, qu'avant 1847, date à laquelle Maroun An-Naqqash monta la première pièce arabe, le théâtre était inconnu dans la littérature arabe. Voyons, à présent, quelles étaient les salles de spectacle qui existaient à Tunis à la deuxième moitié du siècle dernier et au début de ce siècle.

Signalons que le Théâtre Carthaginois serait le premier théâtre de Tunis et qu'il était situé rue Zarkoun. Puis l'on passe au Théâtre Cohen que David Cohen-Tanugi fit construire en 1875, par l'architecte Di Castelnuovo. Après une carrière magnifique, cette salle qui se trouvait rue de Bône, fut, en 1893, convertie en restaurant. Quant au théâtre Brulat, au nom prédestiné, construit par l'avocat Brulat, au n° 72 de l'Avenue de la Marine (l'actuelle avenue H. Bourguiba) sur le terrain de la Maison Modèle il fut détruit en 1889, par un incendie. Le Théâtre français, lui, fut inauguré le 20 mars 1886 avec «La fille du tambour Major». Citons encore, le théâtre Paradiso qui fut édifié à la place du théâtre Tapia. La Banca italiana di Sconto (qui sera, par la suite remplacée par la Banque de Tunisie) démolira, au début de 1922 l'installation qui subsistera de ce théâtre du ressortissant grec Gringa. Entièrement reconstruit, il deviendra le 1er Théâtre municipal de l'avenue de France.

Le «Casin Municipal de Tunis ne sera inauguré que le 20 novembre 1902 avec au programme Manon. On en donna la concession à la société des stations hivernales, laquelle le rétrocédera à la société Fermière et le représentant de cette dernière, Sammarcelli, engagera de telles dépenses qu'il tombera en déconfiture au bout de deux mois. Il est également question dans ce livre, des Marionnettes tunisiennes, de Karakouz, des tournées étrangères, du théâtre tunisien, de l'Essor etc...