

# A turn toward history we need: Paris Commune at the Public Theater in New York

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Paris Commune, written by Steven Cosson and J. Michael Friedman, directed by Steven Cosson, and performed by The Civilians at the Public Lab Series Workshop at the Public Theater in New York City, April 4 to 20

*Paris Commune*, staged recently at the Public Theater in New York, is a musical about the first government established by the working class, which ruled the French capital from March 18 until May 28, 1871, when bourgeois troops crushed it and massacred thousands.

The artistic quality of the work and the seriousness with which the creators treat the material make this theatrical piece unusual in the current cultural environment, especially in the US. It suggests that the general restiveness and discontent in artistic circles is beginning to find a more focused expression.

Plays and other works of art about the lives of ordinary people are not entirely lacking, but a consideration of those moments when daily life becomes charged with great historical purpose has been more or less off the map for most artists.

In *Paris Commune*, we are presented with a thoroughgoing and lively presentation of precisely one of those moments in history.

Writers Steven Cosson and J. Michael Friedman uncovered new material from primary sources for this work. They present facets of French life often missing from accounts of the Commune—in particular, with the Public Theater production's 14 songs and dance numbers, the popular culture of Paris in the 1870s.

The play lets the workers of Paris speak for themselves, but it fills in many of the gaps in historical knowledge that a contemporary American audience might have. (For that matter, the Commune is not widely taught in French schools, either.) At one point, for example, the play combines a lesson in French revolutions from 1789 to 1871 with a dance number that simultaneously teaches the history of the famous dance, the can-can. This scene, literally breathless, puts the Commune in context as the final and greatest revolutionary struggle of the nineteenth century.

The writers, of course, can't fill in all the blanks in 90 minutes. A sense of the French Second Empire (1852-1870) and its Napoleon III is largely missing. That is a shame, too, since the period resembles our own in many ways: the frantic greed of the ruling classes, the social polarization, the stifling political atmosphere, the constant military adventures and provocations, a vulgar and dimwitted ruler.

The link between defeat in war and social revolution, whose close relationship the next century was to demonstrate so vividly, is also understated. The immediate cause of the Commune was a major setback for the French military in the Franco-Prussian War.

German armies routed the Emperor Napoleon III on September 2, 1870, at the Battle of Sedan and captured him along with over 100,000 of his soldiers. A day after news of this debacle reached Paris, the masses of the city revolted and a new Republic was established.

German troops soon besieged Paris. A new government under the veteran political operator Adolf Thiers negotiated peace terms, but the

working population of Paris began to flood into the militia and the National Guard to help defend the city.

In working-class neighborhoods, the Guards began to elect officers from the various socialist parties to a Central Committee, which shortly afterward became the political leadership of the Parisian working class.

Thiers attempted to disarm the National Guard by removing heavy cannon from Paris on March 18, but the Guard, supported by civilians, including many women, confronted the regular army on a hill called Butte Montmartre.

When the actors recreate the events of March 18 on Montmartre, they throw themselves in pantomime in front the cannon and appeal to the soldiers. We hear a narration of events from the journals of participants and other eyewitness accounts.

The commander ordered his troops to fire into the crowd, but his soldiers refused (and later shot him). Soldiers defected to the insurgents, and the entire city was under the control of the Central Committee of the National Guard within a day. Thiers and his government fled to Versailles, 12 miles away. On March 28, the workers of Paris elected a representative body called the Commune.

The play begins not with the insurrection of March 18, but toward the end of the Commune, as a female narrator (Aysan Celik) stands alone on a sparsely furnished stage and asks the audience to imagine the Tuileries in Paris, the old palace of the French kings next to the Louvre, now the legendary art museum.

She conjures up a concert that took place there on May 21, 1871. She invites us to visualize the audience at the show, the *canaille*, which, she tells us, can be translated as “the scum,” and refers to the Parisian working class.

This is perhaps one of the most effective strategies of the play's creators. The New York audience is pulled into the song and popular culture of the day, hearing something that the people of Paris heard. The audience goes to concerts, too, and it can attend the same concert, in its imagination, as the Paris audience of 137 years ago. The result is both distant and familiar.

A popular performer of the day, Rosa Bordas (Kate Buddeke), sings her outraged *La Canaille* to the imaginary audience, in which she identifies herself with the revolution: “They are the lowest scum/but so am I.” After this, she sings the melodious *Le Temps des Cerises* (*Cherry Time*).

The irony of this second song remains unclear until the piece is nearly over and one learns that a few hours after the concert took place, troops from the bourgeois government in Versailles entered the city and drowned the Commune in blood, killing many who were in the audience that day. The Tuileries itself burned down, never to be rebuilt.

The play shows a baker and his tailor wife (Jeremy Shamos and Aysan Celik), who embody the Parisian masses, the real hero of this work, and the audience encounters the foul-mouthed Le Père Duchêne (Sam Breslin Wright), the personification of a satirical left-wing newspaper of the day. The tone of the dialogue is humorous and sometimes hilarious.

Adolf Thiers (Brian Sgambati), in frock coat and top hat, demands bourgeois order and promises clemency to the Parisians in an electronically modified voice. It is not hard to image what the double-crosser is really planning.

The international orientation of the Commune, which declared its solidarity with a “world republic” is brought across by an explanation and singing of the *Internationale*, written by Eugene Pottier, a participant in the Commune. The song remains the best-known anthem of the international socialist movement.

The renowned painter Gustave Courbet appears, demanding that rich artists support poor ones. He represents another side of the cultural framework of the Commune. A significant artistic figure of his age, his work was recently the subject of a major retrospective at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Courbet was in charge of protecting the Paris museums during the Commune, and he was known as an advocate of its great symbolic act—the pulling down of the Vendôme Column. The painter argued that the column, erected by the first Napoleon and refurbished by Napoleon III, tended to perpetuate “the ideas of war and conquest of the past imperial dynasty, which are reproved by a republican nation’s sentiment,” and was devoid of artistic merit.

The play also highlights the differences within the new revolutionary government. An anarchist tendency asserts that Paris should be an autonomous city in a federation along with other autonomous municipalities. Others, on the other hand, seek to extend the revolution to the rest of France, where, indeed, workers in various cities were beginning to set up their own Communes.

The taking and holding of power by the working class was a new historical problem. Socialism, furthermore, had not fully emerged from its utopian phase, and there was a generally a strong influence of sectional interests representing older handicraft methods of production that tended to find an expression in ideas of local autonomy, political dilettantism and hostility to centralized military action.

Many leaders of the Commune were followers of such figures as Louis-Auguste Blanqui (who was arrested by Thiers shortly before the Commune), known for his advocacy of revolutionary conspiracy, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (whom Courbet admired), the ideological representative of small shop owners and one of the founders of anarchism.

The play shows us the Communards debating whether the National Guard should march on Versailles. Louise Michel (Jeanine Serralles), the anarchist schoolteacher, says, “No, the revolution means an end to aggression of all sorts.” Elisabeth Dmitrieff (Nina Hellman), a supporter of the International Workingmen’s Association (the First International), is for open civil war with Versailles.

Dmitrieff reads out Karl Marx’s letter to the German socialist leader Wilhelm Liebknecht: “It seems the Parisians are succumbing. It is their own fault, but a fault which really was due to their too great *decency*. The Central Committee and later the Commune gave that mischievous *degenerate*, Thiers, time to consolidate hostile forces...they should immediately have advanced on Versailles.”

By early April, Communards and Versailles troops were skirmishing on the outskirts of the city. The Prussians released French prisoners of war to supply troops to Thiers, and by the final week of May, street fighting began in which both sides used arson as a weapon of war. The Communards were outmatched by the discipline of the Versailles troops, who were already used to guerilla warfare from their experiences against the Germans.

The government forces were merciless. The week of May 21 is known as *La Semaine sanglante*, the bloody week. Unarmed men, women, and children were summarily shot by the Versailles troops. The Commune had executed seven hostages, including the Archbishop of Paris (who blamed Thiers for his fate before he died), in response to the shooting of prisoners

by Thiers, but in the last week of May 1871, by best estimates, the Versailles troops, under the command of General Patrice Mac-Mahon, shot between 20,000 and 30,000 Parisian workers and members of their families.

The production at the Public Theater depicts these massacres on a dimly lit stage. The actors contort their bodies as imaginary bullets enter them. The execution of one group of prisoners represents the shooting of 147 Communards against a wall at the Péré Lachaise cemetery, known today as the *Mur des Fédérés* (Wall of the Communards). Among the survivors, 13,000 were jailed and more than 4,000 were sent into exile to New Caledonia in the south Pacific, including Louise Michel.

The play brings forward a great social struggle that involved immense thought, energy and sacrifice. It is an imperishable part of the history of the international working class and socialist movement. Those who came to the Public Theater knowing little about the Commune had the opportunity to have a critical event illuminated for them. One wonders how anyone who has seen the piece could ever again read about a major protest or a strike in France without thinking of the 1871 uprising.

The acting was solid and energetic. Most performers played more than one character. Sometimes it was hard for them to keep up: not every cast could have simultaneously danced and narrated a portion of French history at the same time as they offered the history of the can-can. The singing in the play was remarkably good, in particular that of Iva who played the Soprano, representing the bourgeois in Versailles, and sang, among other pieces, Offenbach’s *Ah, Comme J’Aime les Militaires!* (Oh, I how I love men in uniforms!).

The costumes projected a feel for the nineteenth century, but were somewhat slapdash, and the production overall had a little more of an unfinished feel than it needed to. Asking the audience to use its imagination was fine, but the choice of props might have been a little more selective. Adolf Thiers, for example, did not need a microphone.

Unfortunately, and perhaps inevitably, *Paris Commune* was the weakest when it tried to describe the reverberations of the Commune in later periods of history.

In an epilogue, we hear that the Commune lived on in moments like the French student and worker revolts of 1968 or the singing of the *Internationale* by students at Tiananmen Square in 1989 before the brutal crackdown by the Stalinist regime.

But the writers eclectically mix these events, moments when the issues of political power that were first posed in the Commune were deeply relevant, with other incidents, such as the minting of a commemorative medal by the German Democratic Republic in 1971 and the anti-World Trade Organization protests of the late 1990s.

The East German Stalinist regime observed the Commune to mask its own suppression of the socialist aspirations of the working class, including the 1953 uprising by Berlin workers. One must strain to find the echoes of the Commune in the anti-WTO protests as well, which was a protest and reform movement, not an uprising of the working class.

Most of all, the incarnation of the Commune at a higher level in the Russian Revolution of 1917 is missing. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in 2001 in a discussion of Peter Watkins’s film *La Commune*:

“Wars and revolutions, and similar earthshaking events, continue to gain significance in human consciousness as subsequent developments shed light retroactively on them. History adds truth to them, so to speak. It is almost impossible to consider certain events in isolation, they have so obviously been ‘completed’ by others that come after them.”

*Paris Commune* might have considered other moments in history when the Commune—and its problems—truly lived again, such as the 1956 uprising of the Hungarian workers (who established their own councils) against the Stalinist regime, when the Soviet forces played the role of repressor.

This is not primarily the fault of the writers, who did a serious and

thorough job of researching this piece and present the Commune honestly and on its own terms. The epilogue simply reveals the production of *Paris Commune* as an expression of the current cultural environment. The question—What happened to the titanic struggle for socialism?—has yet to receive a serious response from or even be seriously posed in the minds of most contemporary playwrights and other artists.

It is also worth noting that it was the Public Theater's Lab Series that featured *Paris Commune*. The Public Theater is one of the most prominent venues in the off-Broadway theater world, and its Lab Series has recently produced other works with themes that look to larger historical contexts, such as *The Good Negro* by Tracey Scott Wilson, which concerns civil rights activists, the KKK, and the FBI; the late playwright John Belluso's *The Poor Itch*, about a disabled veteran returning from Iraq; and Naomi Wallace's *The Fever Chart: Three Visions of the Middle East*.

Those interested in learning more about the Paris Commune itself will find Karl Marx's *The Civil War in France* indispensable. Northwestern University's McCormack Library has a digital collection of photographs and other images from the Commune at its *The Siege and Commune of Paris, 1870-1871* website.



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