

Costuming the Consulate and the Empire

French Theatre of the Napoleonic Era



Napoleon Bonaparte at the battle of Arcole, painted by Gros, engraved by Piroli. Credit: BnF / Bibliothèque nationale de France

This exhibition marks the Southsea Shakespeare Actors' performance of *Roseliska*, a melodrama written, rehearsed and performed by French prisoners of war in the Keep at Portchester Castle in 1810.

An international team of researchers of French Theatre of the Napoleonic Era at the University of Warwick, funded in part by the European project Rev.E (Horizon 2020, grant n. 895913), presents here a selection of theatrical costumes from Paris plays to show costumes that the prisoners of war would have been familiar with, and that they tried to copy. The images are taken from early nineteenth-century prints of some of the most successful plays of the Napoleonic period (1799-1815) from a variety of theatrical genres.

From his rise to power as First Consul (18-19 November 1799), Napoleon Bonaparte used dramatic art as a civic, didactic and propagandistic tool. After his consecration as Emperor in May 1804, he wanted theatre to reflect the glory of his reign, restricting which types of play could be performed in 1806-1807 and even closing a number of theatres to control the Parisian theatrical landscape more effectively.

Napoleon's interest in dramatic art characterised the entire period - while in Moscow in 1812 on his disastrous Russian campaign, he even took time out from military matters to deal with the reorganisation of the Comédie-Française, one of the main Parisian theatres..

This exhibition aims to provide a glimpse of Napoleonic theatre by showing images of costumes of the time just a few metres from the spot where the prisoners of war performed.



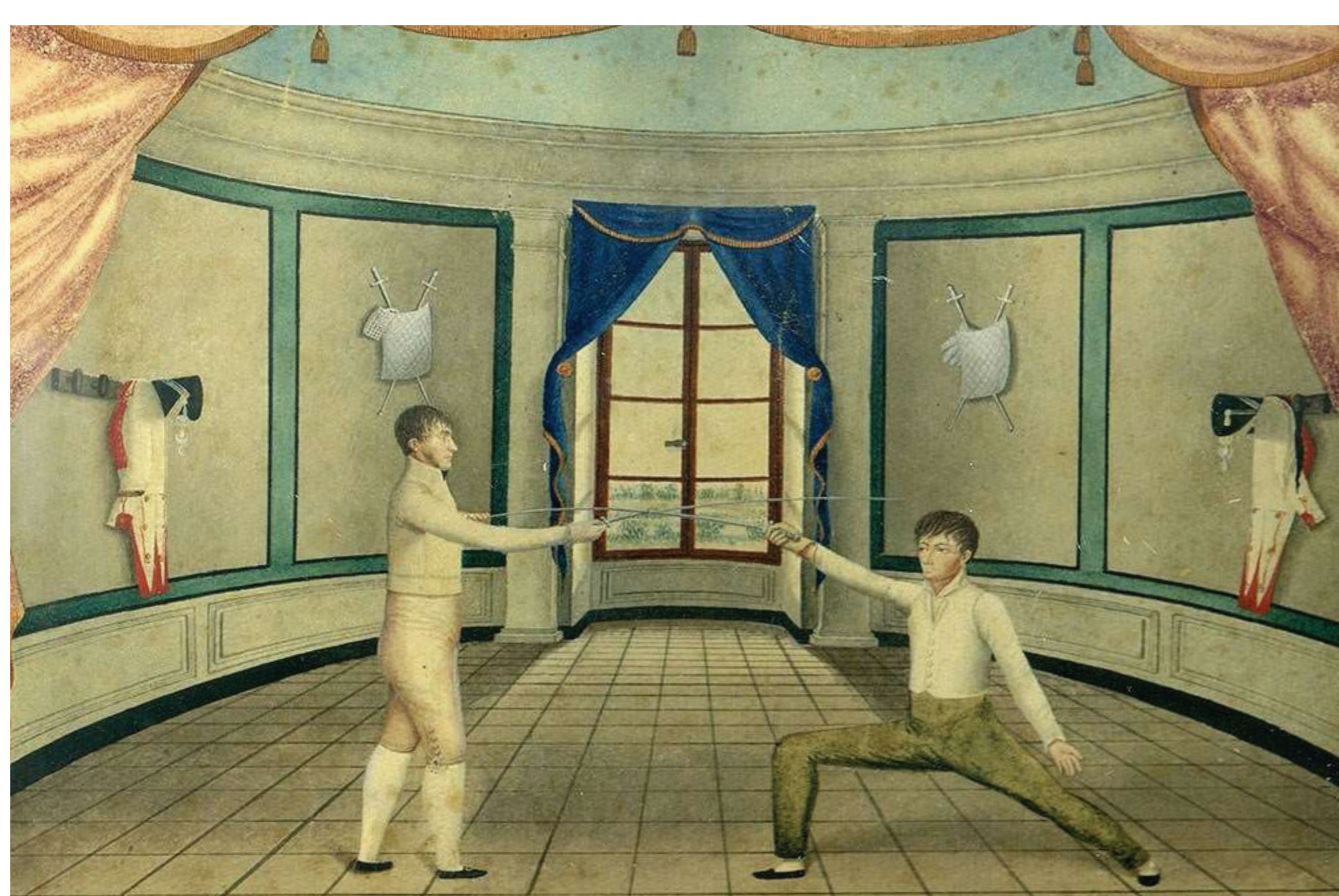
Napoleon I in his coronation robes engraved by De Launay. Credit: BnF / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Welcome and enjoy!

Katherine Astbury, Paola Perazzolo, Eve Register



The Prisoner-of-war theatre at Portchester



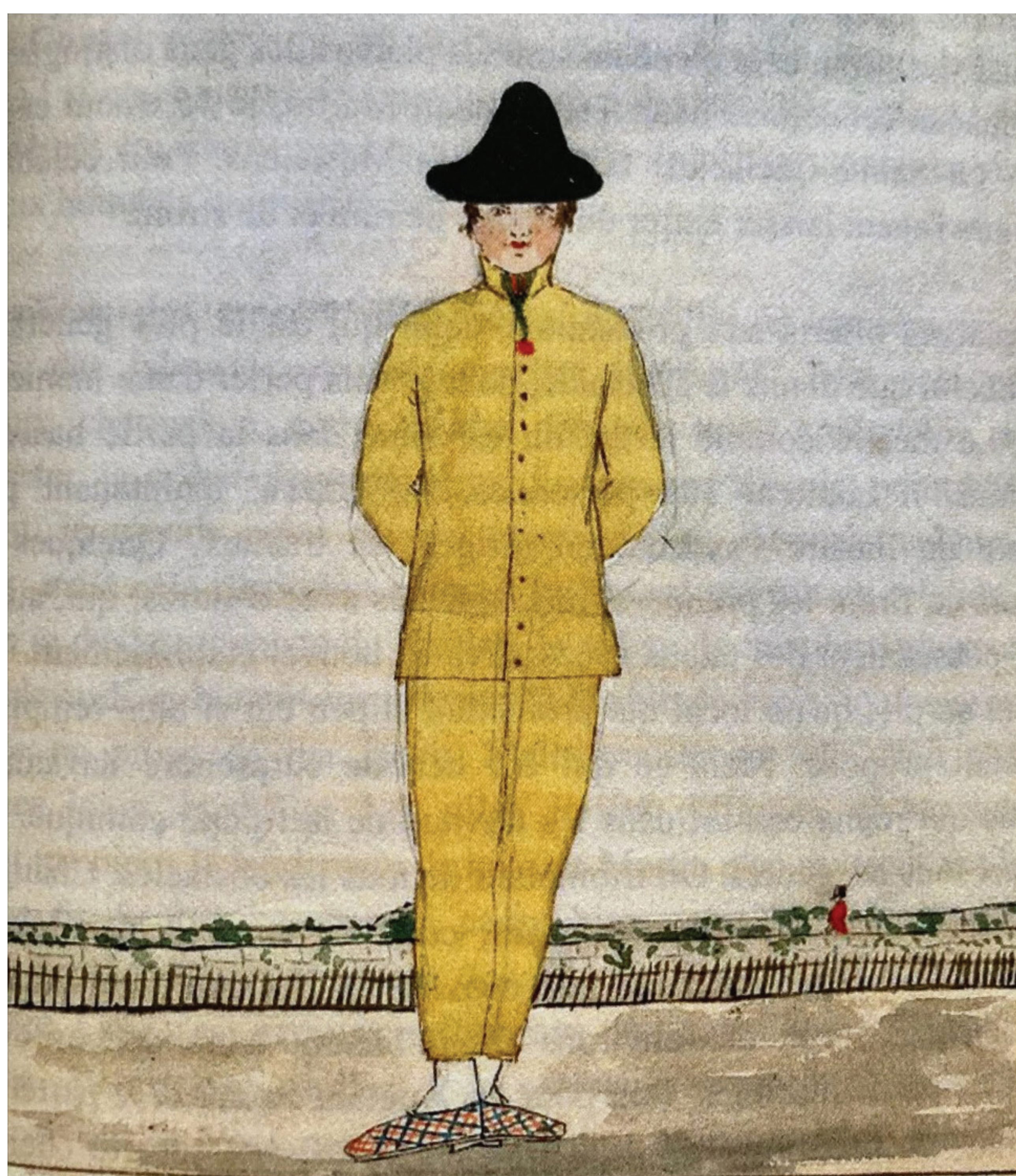
We believe this illustration to show the stage at Portchester. It's from a certificate issued to a prisoner at the castle in 1814 confirming that he had graduated as a master of fencing © Historic England

Between 1810 and 1814, the ground floor of the keep at Portchester was turned into a fully working theatre by a group of French prisoners of war. They not only put considerable effort into staging and set design but also into the costumes for their theatrical productions. Money from ticket sales was ploughed back into further productions which meant that over time they were able to improve the quality of their costumes.

Nicolas Hippolyte Sutat, who played the lead female role in the melodrama *Roseliska*, written and performed by the prisoners in the autumn of 1810, allegedly refused to perform unless provided with a dress. One of his fellow actors, Joseph Quantin, recounts in his memoirs that this prompted other members of the cast to make similar demands for better costumes, much to the despair of the troupe's treasurer.



This painting by Gabriel-Michel-Grégoire Gourdet, one of the prisoners, shows the company's 'Green room'. Their hammocks are on the left, props and costumes hang from the back wall.



Prisoner-of-war regulation uniform, taken from the manuscript of Quantin's memoir, *Sept ans d'absence* in the National Library of Belarus

Quantin suggests that the partners in the theatre avoided offering roles to some of their fellow prisoners for fear that they would spend excessively on their outfits. Nevertheless, the prisoners wanted their theatre to impress the locals who came to watch, and the actors were particularly keen to show off fine costumes to the Englishwomen in the audience, which meant that they made considerable efforts to source costumes. Their usual prisoner-of-war outfit was a regulation yellow so being in costume was an opportunity to wear finery for a change.



The valley of Montmorency or Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his hermitage, comic opera

*La Vallée de Montmorency ou Jean-Jacques
Rousseau dans son hermitage, opéra-comique*



BnF / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Script by Piis, Barré, Radet and Desfontaines

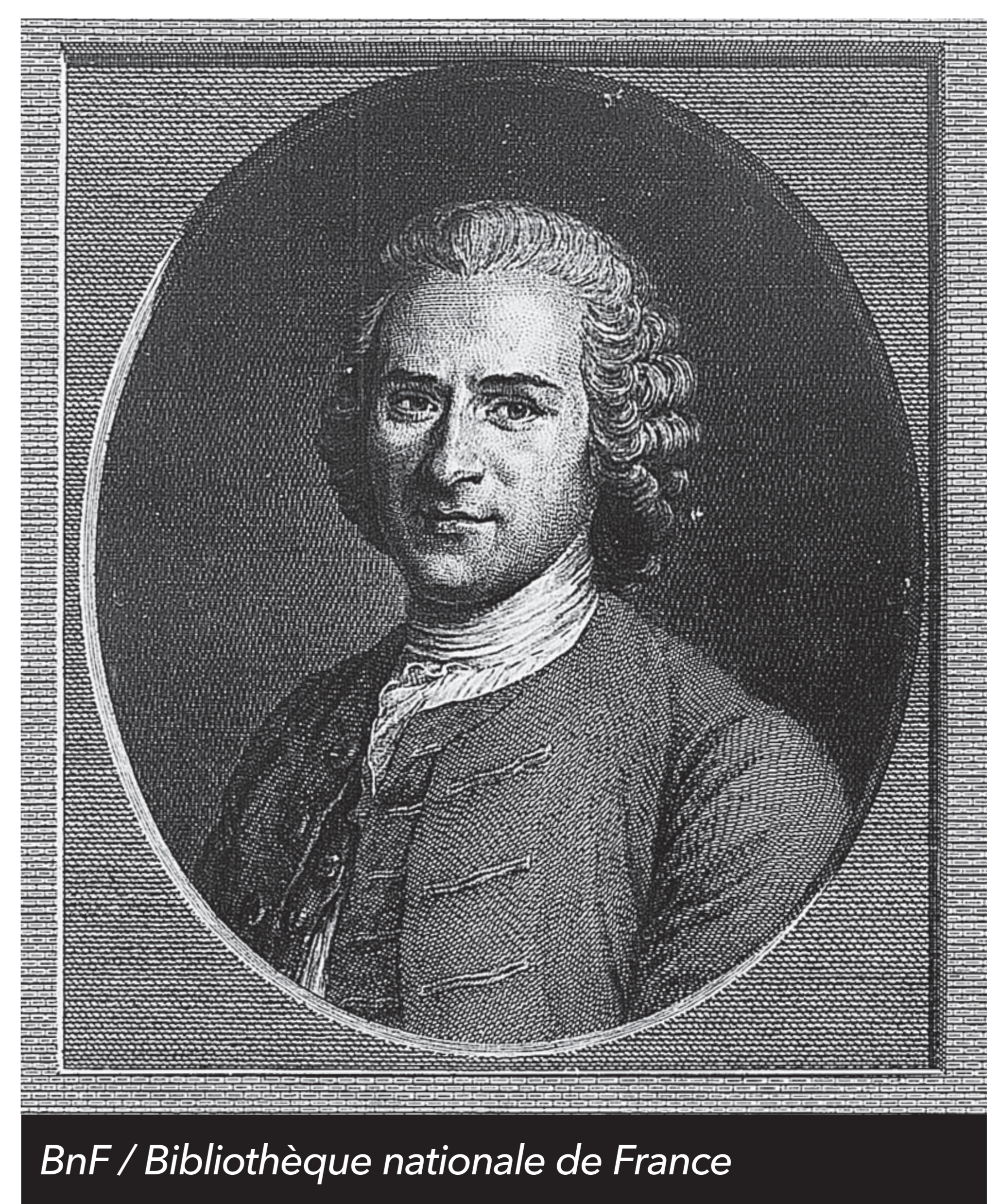
First performed at the Théâtre du Vaudeville, 11 June 1798

Plot

Two lovers from the rural Parisian suburb of Montmorency, Julienne and Vernier, are engaged and eagerly await their marriage, until Julienne's mother Genevieve raises a fierce objection. Without Genevieve providing an explanation, the lovers turn to their friend Rousseau for help. Rousseau appears to be universally respected, including by Genevieve. He insists Genevieve must explain herself. She reveals that because she is Catholic and Vernier's father is Protestant, it is her duty to detest them both. Rousseau teaches her that people should be judged by their actions rather than their faith, explaining that he himself was raised by a Protestant. The play ends happily with all characters uniting despite their differences.

Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is a renowned French philosopher whose work has greatly influenced the development of social and political thought. His belief in the necessity of basic and universal human rights became an essential demand of the French Revolution. Rousseau argued that humans are innately good in their natural state and he maintained that it is their exposure to the corruption of society that is responsible for their immorality. In *La Vallée de Montmorency*, this theory is dramatised as the fictional character of Rousseau has left central Paris and lives a simple life among peasants to escape corrupt Parisian society.



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Museum of the French Revolution, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Piis

Pierre-Antoine-Augustin de Piis (1755-1832) was a mixed race French playwright and member of a quartet of vaudevillists (Piis, Barré, Radet and Desfontaines) who frequently wrote plays together, including *La Vallée de Montmorency*. Aside from his work in theatre, Piis also worked for the French royal family and later the Prefecture of Police. These jobs enabled him to survive the social and political turbulence of the French Revolution and allowed him to continue disseminating his plays under several different regimes. His decision to glorify Rousseau in *La Vallée de Montmorency*, a philosopher whom Napoleon openly admired, is perhaps an illustration of how Piis sought to appease those in power.



Madame Angot in the harem of Constantinople, drama, tragedy, farce, pantomime

Madame Angot au sérail de Constantinople, drame, tragédie, farce, pantomime



Credit: Musée Carnavalet

Script by Joseph Aude

First performed at the Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique, 21 May 1800

Plot

A Turkish privateer named Broamar seizes a ship off the coast of Marseilles and returns to Constantinople with four captives: Madame Angot, her daughter Nanon, Nanon's fiancé François and Nicolas, the family clerk. Madame Angot fights back fiercely

as Broamar decides what to do with each captive. The family come across an old friend from Paris, Bramen, and believe they are to be saved. He instead tricks Madame Angot into believing the Sultan of Constantinople wants her as his Sultana, hiring actors to make the trick more convincing. Members of the court come covertly to watch the trick play out and are so amused by the performance, along with Madame Angot's gullibility, that they decide to free her and her family.



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Madame Angot character

Madame Angot is a popular recurring character whose rise to prominence began in 1797 and lasted through the Napoleonic period. When the climax of one playwright's work ended in her death, there was an outcry from the audience. While her character is often wealthy and directed to be dressed in the fashion of the time, Madame Angot is also known for her sharp tongue and use of vulgar language. She frequently encounters bad luck and overcoming it often leads her to become the heroine of the narrative. However, the comedic value of the plays in which she features is often at her expense, though she's usually oblivious to this.

Her character was typically played by male actors, which added to the comedy of her role and arguably contributed to the success of the plays that used her as a protagonist. However, it was far more common in this era for women to take on male acting roles than the reverse, as seen with Madame Angot. Male to female cross-dressing was primarily intended to add a comic element to the character, while female actresses usually played serious male roles, as in this illustration where an actress has a title role as a page. Perhaps as a result of this difference, male to female cross-dressing became obsolete during the 19th century.



Mademoiselle Bourguin in the role of Théodore in the comedy *Auguste et Théodore* at the Théâtre Français de la République in February 1800
BnF / Bibliothèque nationale de France



Guilbert de Pixérécourt (1773-1844):

the star of Napoleonic melodrama



Theatre was the main form of entertainment in France at the start of the 19th century. The commercial boulevard theaters were hugely popular. The best known playwright was Guilbert de Pixérécourt, who wrote over 120 plays which, between them, had more than 30,000 performances. He was also very successful across Europe and the United States with numerous translations and adaptations.

Pixérécourt is best known for his melodrama, a theatrical form that offered a mixture of the sentimental, the spectacular and the comic, with the addition of music to heighten emotion. Many melodramas offered a grandiose spectacle: elaborate sets, stage effects such as fires or explosions, a large number of extras and highly anticipated dance and fight scenes, choreographed by the best choreographers.

The plays aimed to produce the greatest possible emotional effect. After the French Revolution, people needed something strong to move them, after everything they had experienced in real life. The melodramas were closely linked to their socio-political context: we might consider the reassuring happy ending of each work as a form of balm to soothe the troubled psyche - the trauma of the Revolution is reworked in the struggle between villains and heroes. The happy ending comes only after several terrible crises, designed to cause as much anxiety as possible in the audience, but in the last scene the harmony - and the social hierarchy - is re-established: melodrama was above all a conservative and protective theatrical form.



René Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt, *L'Homme à trois visages, ou le proscrit* (The Man With Three Faces, or the outlaw), first performed on October 6th 1801, Paris, Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique. The show ran for 378 nights.
Credit: BnF / Bibliothèque nationale de France



René Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt, *Tékéli, ou le siège de Mongatz* (Tékéli, or the siege of Mongatz), melodrama, 3 acts, first performance on the 29th December 1803, Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique. The play broke the author's previous record with a run of 430 performances (although it was banned briefly when a real-life conspiracy came to light as it was felt that the play would lead audiences to have sympathy for an opponent of Napoleon).
Credit: BnF / Bibliothèque nationale de France



René Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt, *La Forteresse du Danube* (The Fortress of the Danube), first performed on the 3rd of January 1805, Paris, Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, where the play ran for a whole year.
Credit: BnF / Bibliothèque nationale de France

An important feature of melodrama was the use of stock characters. The principal creator of disruption was the villain, whose role it was to threaten the virtuous characters by thwarting plans for their happiness. Comic characters were also an essential part of a melodrama as they were a means of relieving tension in the plays. The theatre's best-known comic actors were used for these parts and costume illustrations are often of them rather than the hero or heroine, as with the illustration here of Talon in *The Fortress on the Danube*, playing a not very bright peasant who is meant to look ridiculous in his Sunday best.

