Representations of the Resistance in World War II France

by Rosemary P-Z Clark

Jean-Paul Sartre, born in 1905, and Armand Salacrou, born six years earlier in 1899, were contemporaries in the French literary world throughout much of the twentieth century. They knew each other during World War II and saw each other's plays. Not long after the end of the war, they both wrote a play about the Resistance in France. The two plays opened in Paris at almost the same time. Sartre's play, *Morts sans sépulture* (in English, *The Victors*), had its première on November 8, 1946. Not quite five weeks later, Salacrou's play, *Les Nuits de la colère (Nights of Wrath)* opened on December 12, 1946.

Sartre's play, although it had a short-lived "*succès de scandale,*" was a failure, as he admitted himself, while Salacrou's wartime drama was an enormous success, not only in France, but in numerous other countries as well. Both works contain powerful dramatizations of the conflicts facing French citizens who had to endure the Nazi occupation of their country.

In Sartre's play, a group of "*maquisards*" (members of the French Resistance) is imprisoned in the attic of a school building, taken over by French militiamen who are collaborating with the enemy occupying France. The Résistants (Lucie, François, Canoris, Sorbier, and Henri) refuse to reveal the name of their leader (Jean), who escaped during the unsuccessful operation in which they all participated, and during which they were captured. When Jean unexpectedly joins them in their prison, the others now have even more information to hide from their captors, because the militiamen (Landrieu, Pellerin, and Clochet) are unaware of Jean's leadership position. Two of the Résistants die during the course of the play: Sorbier, and François, Lucie's fifteen-year-old brother. In the end, there are three Résistants left: Canoris, Lucie and Henri. Jean is freed because his identity remains a secret. The collaborators, unable to force the Résistants to talk, finally offer to make a trade with them: their lives, in exchange for information. The three prisoners invent a ruse and pretend to capitulate. Expecting to be freed, they give their tormentors false information concerning Jean's whereabouts. But having given this information, they are not freed: they are shot.

In Salacrou's play, another Jean (Jean Cordeau, a chemical engineer) is a member of the Resistance. Together with several colleagues, Dédé, Rivoire, and Lecoq, they have the dangerous job of setting off explosives on a train track near Chartres. The plan is to derail a train carrying fuel to the enemy. The four men succeed in their mission, but are spotted by a German patrol. In the rush to escape, Jean is seriously wounded. He seeks refuge at the home of his longtime friends, Bernard and Pierrette Bazire. Jean does not tell the Bazires what he was doing, but they soon realize what has occurred, especially after Pisançon, a collaborator, comes to their home looking for a doctor to treat those injured as a result of the train derailment. Pierrette Bazire, frightened by the possible consequences of harboring Jean, wants to turn him in. Jean is betrayed by the Bazires to the Gestapo, who take him away. He is tortured, blinded, then executed.

As seen in these brief synopses, there are a number of similarities in these two wartime plays. Both contain powerful depictions of the conflicts taking place in France under the German occupation during World War II. Both plays have scenes set in prison. Two of the four acts (called "tableaux" in *The Victors*) take place in the attic room which serves as a prison for the "*maquisards*" in Sartre's play. In *Nights of Wrath*, four scenes are set in a Nazi prison somewhere in Germany. There are also resemblances to be found in some of the characters. In both dramas, there is an individual who is self-assured and pragmatic. Canoris, in *The Victors*, and Rivoire, in *Nights of Wrath*, are both single-mindedly dedicated to their cause of undermining the Nazi presence in France. Canoris and Rivoire are not concerned, as are some of the other characters, with understanding the meaning of life, suffering, and death—reflections to be expected in the midst of such a chaotic time. Sorbier, for example, one of Sartre's *maquisards*, is tormented by not knowing whether he will be able to stand the torture or not:

> Je voudrais me connaître. Je savais qu'ils finiraient par me prendre et que je serais, un jour, au pied du mur, en face de moi, sans recours. Je me disais: tiendras-tu le coup? . . . Eh bien, le moment est venu, ils vont me travailler . . . Je vais souffrir pour rien, je mourrai sans savoir ce que je vaux.
> [I would like to know myself. I knew that they would end up by getting me, and that one day, I would have my back up against the wall, with no way out. I said to myself: will you be able to hold out? . . . Well, the time has come, they are going to work me over . . . I am going to suffer for nothing, I'm going to die without ever knowing what I am worth.]

Henri is also concerned about the meaning of death, when he asks Canoris, "Canoris, pourquoi mourrons-nous?" ["Canoris, why will we die?"]. Canoris' reply indicates that he sees their situation in a lucid and uncomplicated manner: "Parce qu'on nous avait chargés d'une mission dangereuse et que nous n'avons pas eu de chance" ["Because we were given a dangerous mission and because we ran out of luck"].

In *Les Nuits de la colère*, Rivoire takes a similar view. As he and the three other Résistants are waiting by the train tracks for the right moment to sabotage the fuel train, they discuss the situation in which they find themselves:

> Jean: Le monde a toujours été fou. Ou plutôt, il n'est pas fou. Il est ce qu'il est. Ce qui est fou, c'est le monde vu par un homme qui croit que le monde est fait pour l'homme.
>
> Rivoire: Si tu juges la vie essentiellement idiote, qu'est-ce que tu fiches avec nous ce soir? . . . Si vous voulez donner un sens à tout, rien n'aura plus de sens . . . Tandis que ta bombe, elle a un sens.

> [Jean: The world has always been crazy. Or rather, the world isn't crazy, it is what it is. What's crazy, is the world seen by a man who believes that the world is made for men.
>
> Rivoire: If you judge life to be essentially idiotic, what in heaven's name are you doing here with us? . . . If you want to give a meaning to everything, nothing will have any meaning . . . While your bomb, now, that means something.]

Rivoire is not concerned about whether the world is absurd or not; he is concerned about the job at hand—detonating the bomb to derail the enemy train.

Given the wartime setting, death is, of course, present in both plays. Indeed, in Salacrou's play, the Act I curtain rises on a scene of violence and death: bursts of machine gun fire are heard on stage, along with wild shouting. Three characters are shot down before our very eyes: Rivoire has just machine-gunned Bernard Bazire, who collapses to the floor and dies. Pisançon enters and is also shot by Rivoire. Before he dies, Pisançon is able to aim his revolver at Rivoire, and send him to his death also, along with Bernard, whom Rivoire had come to shoot for betraying Jean Cordeau to the Gestapo.

In *The Victors*, death comes to two characters during the play and to three others at the end. Moreover, death is present in the French title of Sartre's play; however, the word and the idea are lost entirely in the translation. The English translation communicates a very different concept or image from the French title, literally rendered as "deaths without burial" or "the deceased without burial." Salacrou's title has been translated more closely: *Nights of Wrath*. Although the word "death" is not in the title, either in French or in English, the ideas connected with "night" certainly presage fateful images.

At the first performance of *The Victors*, the theater audience was shocked by the graphic scenes of torture and death. Sorbier, the Résistant most worried about the torture to come, finds he is unable to endure the physical pain inflicted on him. He decides to leap to his death from an upper story window, and succeeds when his tormentors are not looking. Another character, also afraid that he will not be able to withstand the cruelties of the interrogators, dies in a gruesome fashion. François, Lucie's younger brother and only fifteen, is strangled by fellow Résistant, Henri. The other Résistants do not intervene, because they have agreed that the boy must be silenced to save the lives of sixty other members of the Resistance.

Sorbier's suicidal leap through the window, François' strangulation, and the description of Lucie's rape by the militiamen, provoked such a scandal and reaction from the theatergoers, that some passages were eliminated from the play after the opening night, and a warning was posted for the subsequent performances. In Salacrou's play, torture also occurs, but never on stage. We see its results (Jean Cordeau blinded and with a broken arm), and we hear a description of it after the fact. It is also true that there are three deaths in the opening scene, but this scene takes place very quickly. In addition, the three dead bodies resurrect as Bernard Bazire, Rivoire and Pisançon lie dead on stage, the lighting alters and the walls of Bernard's living room blur, then fade away. Much to their own and to the spectators' amazement, Pisançon and Rivoire begin to crawl toward each other. They raise their heads and begin to speak. Salacrou uses this dislocation of time to more vividly contrast the way in which these two men have lived their lives: Pisançon as the collaborator, and Rivoire, as the Résistant.

> Pisançon: (se levant lentement) Tu n'as pas l'air de comprendre: c'est fini pour nous dans la vie, fini pour toi et pour moi, pour toujours.
>
> Rivoire: Pas pour moi! . . . Les copains continuent. Et un jour, les hommes seront libres et heureux.
>
> [Pisançon: (getting up slowly) You don't seem to understand: it's over for us, our life is over, yours and mine, forever.

> Rivoire: Not for me! . . . Friends will go on. And some day, they will be free and happy.]

Perhaps this disruption of chronological time enabled Parisian spectators, in 1946, to maintain some distance from these reminders of the recent horrors of the war, while allowing them to reflect about the beliefs and motivations of both collaborators and Résistants. The chronological and structural order of Salacrou's play is dislocated throughout by means of flashbacks and flashforwards. The opening scene of Act II is set in 1938, six years before the time setting for Act I. In Act II, Jean and Louise Cordeau are visiting their friends, Pierrette and Bernard Bazire, in Chartres, before the outbreak of the war. They are drinking champagne, practicing some new dance steps, remembering their younger days, when suddenly there is a dramatic verbal interruption, causing a suspension of time. Bernard is telling Louise that he hopes that someday, two of their children will marry. Louise reacts violently, shattering the chronology of the "real" time frame. She cries out: "Et c'est toi qui vas trahir Jean!" ["And you're the one who will betray Jean!"]. Her anguished cry propels the scene forward into the future to 1944, the time of the train derailment and Jean's subsequent betrayal to the Gestapo by the Bazires.

Another contrast can be found in the manner in which the characters are depicted in the two plays. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish Sartre's *maquisards* because they do not appear to have clearly delineated personalities. They function more to represent various answers to the question posed by the author as the main premise for *The Victors*: "How would I/one react to torture?" Moreover, the characters change their attitudes (except Canoris) at various times during the play. At one moment or another, they worry about saving themselves; or they are concerned about their reputation as it is perceived by their fellow prisoners; or they are anxious about saving Jean, their leader, and the other *maquisards*. As stage characters, we see them in all their human weakness, which perhaps reminded the theatergoers in 1946 too vividly of the roles they themselves had played—or not played—during the war. In the first act, after Jean's surprise arrival in their midst, Henri has found a meaning in their struggle and suffering, and declares to Jean and to the others:

> Tu es là, et tout ce qui va se passer à present aura un sens. On va lutter. Pas pour toi seul, pour tous les copains.
>
> [You are here, so everything that is going to happen now will have a meaning. We are going to fight. Not just for you, but for all our friends.]

But later, in Act III scene 1, after his own torture session, Henri's reason for surviving becomes more primitive, or at least less fraternal: "L'important, c'est de gagner" ["The important thing is to win"]. Henri sees their situation now as a contest between two teams, and the main reason to not talk is to be victorious over the enemy team, the militiamen.

The central conflict for the *maquisards* in *The Victors* is not well defined, as they change from one position, or concern, to another. In *Nights of Wrath* , however, the conflict is more discernible: the moral gap between the courage of the Résistants and the cowardice of the collaborators. The reason for the suffering in *Nights of Wrath* is unmistakable: to recover the freedom lost during the war. Salacrou uses his characters to portray how the French responded to the German occupation of France, while Sartre utilizes his characters to depict how individuals might react to torture in an extreme situation.

Salacrou's characters, like Sartre's, are afraid of what awaits them, and some of them question the meaning of their acts, but they know they will accomplish their mission, because they believe in the goal which motivates them: to free their families and their country from tyranny. Bernard cannot understand why Jean Cordeau has become involved in the violent work that he is doing with the Résistants, blowing up trains:

> Bernard: Mais, Jean, enfin, mon vieux Jean, comment toi, marié, sérieux, père de famille, comment t'es-tu

> embringué dans une telle histoire, avec des bandits de tous les pays?
>
> Jean: Précisément parce que je suis père de famille . . . Je n'ai pas voulu que mes enfants puissent me reprocher plus tard d'avoir accepté de vivre sans révolte une telle horreur.
>
> [Bernard: But Jean, after all, how did you, a married man, a serious person, a father, get caught up in such an affair, with hoodlums from all different countries?
> Jean: Precisely because I am a father . . . I didn't want my children to be able to blame me later for having lived under such a horrible régime without fighting against it.]

Sartre's Résistants, for much of the play, cannot comprehend why they must suffer. Their final goal is to hold out against their torturers, not just to save the others, but to win out over the militiamen—to be the "victors." Sartre's *maquisards* give the militiamen false information, in exchange for being allowed to survive. But Clochet disobeys Landrieu's orders, and has them shot anyhow. This outcome is ambiguous: who were the "victors"? Were there any victors at all? It seems not, making the English title ironic. One can imagine that to audiences in 1946, this ending must have been disconcerting and disquieting, especially after all that had already taken place on stage: scenes of torture and death.

The ending of Salacrou's play is more hopeful and less ambiguous. Jean Cordeau is seen in his prison cell, dictating a farewell letter to his wife, Louise. With him in prison is Lecoq, who is writing the letter for Jean, because the latter is blind. Louise has just learned from Rivoire that she will never see her husband again. Husband and wife appear on opposite sides of the stage. They bid farewell without, however, communicating directly; they speak one to the other across time and space. In this scene, Jean Cordeau transcends the confines of his physical imprisonment. In an analogous way, he is able to see beyond the limitations of his short life: because of his belief in, and commitment to, the cause of the Resistance, he is able to "see" the freedom which his family and those living after him will enjoy. Jean dictates to Lecoq:

> Ma grande Louise, mes petits chéris. Je vais être fusillé cette nuit, avec mon vieux Lecoq. Et voici l'heure où je dois abandonner les compagnons de mon passage sur la terre . . . J'ai bien reçu ton colis. Il était magnifique. Merci. Nous avons, Lecoq et moi mangé comme des rois. Mais je n'ai pas pu goûter aux crêpes. Leur odeur m'a rappelé tout à coup toutes nos petites fêtes et voici notre dernier anniversaire. Je ne saurai plus rien de toi . . . Et plus tard, quand nos enfants seront heureux, parce qu'ils seront libres, je serai vivant dans leur vie, et toujours vivant comme la liberté.
>
> [My dearest Louise, my little darlings. I am going to be executed during the coming night, with my good friend Lecoq. And now it is time that I must leave behind my life's companions . . . I received your package. It was magnificent. Thank you. Lecoq and I ate like kings. But I couldn't try the "crêpes." Their smell suddenly reminded me of all our little holiday festivities, and now, our last anniversary is here. I will never know anything else about you . . . And later, when our children are happy, because they are free, I will be present in their lives, always, as will be liberty.]

Jean Cordeau is not besieged by uncertainty, as are the Salacrien collaborators, the Bazires and Pisançon, and as are some of the Sartrien characters. Rather, Jean's courage sustains and metaphorically liberates him from his incarceration. The closing lines of the play are the words he writes to his wife, and speaks to the audience:

> Dites à nos enfants que vous verrez grandir, de ne jamais désespérer de la vie, puisque dans la mlée d'une telle époque, nous avons pu vivre honorablement.

> [Tell our children, as you watch them grow up, never to despair about life, because, in the confusion of such a time, we were able to live honorably.]

Salacrou's play was an enormous success immediately in France, in 1946, and for some years afterward. When Sartre wrote about *The Victors* in 1960, he delivered his own verdict:

> The play was a failure. To put it roughly, I was dealing with a subject in which there was no room to breathe, for the victims' fate was absolutely predetermined . . . There was no suspense . . . It is a very grim play, lacking in surprise.

What Sartre states about his own play is accurate, but holds true too about Salacrou's *Nights of Wrath.* We learn in both plays early what has happened to the Résistants. Perhaps the key word in Sartre's self-criticism is "grim." It would appear that Sartre misjudged the needs of the audiences in the immediate postwar period, and included stage depictions of too much of the physical and mental horrors which so many French citizens had endured. Further, he embodied these horrors in characters with whom it was difficult to empathize or identify. Sartre was too concerned with exploring an extreme situation—man's reaction to torture—and not concerned enough with considering his theatrical audience.

Salacrou's play was an immediate success, doubtless due in part to the stellar cast of the production. Jean-Louis Barrault, one of the great names in twentieth-century French theater, directed the production and also played the role of Jean Cordeau. The rest of the cast was equally well known and highly regarded. Finally, the main reason for the difference in the stage success of these two plays most probably lies in the fact that in Salacrou's drama of wartime resistance the characters found meaning in their lives, even in their suffering, through their heroic deeds, and through their knowledge that somehow their actions would effect change. In Sartre's play, the meaning was ambiguous, and coupled with the all too graphic portrayals and reminders on stage of wartime cruelties, the audiences simply could not respond to this grim and harrowing representation of resistance. □

Works Consulted

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