

HERVÉ (1825-1892)

Hervé [pseudonym of Louis-Auguste-Florimond Ronger].

Hervé, composer, librettist, actor, singer, stage director and opera company manager, is generally considered to be the father of operetta, although this title is sometimes given to his rival Jacques Offenbach, whose career ran in parallel to his. When his father died, the ten-year-old Florimond Ronger moved to Paris, where he became a choirboy at the church of Saint-Roch. His musical gifts led to his being presented to the composer Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, then at the height of his fame, who gave him private lessons. He was subsequently appointed organist of the chapel at Bicêtre, and it was there that he composed his first small-scale *opéra-comique*, *L'Ours et le Pacha*, for performance at that institution, then still known as a 'lunatic asylum'. After a few years he succeeded in obtaining a more prestigious organist's post, at the church of Saint-Eustache. Alongside his functions there, he embarked on a theatrical career, initially as a chorus singer and bit-player in a number of suburban theatres. It was this time that he adopted the pseudonym of Hervé. In 1847 he composed a sketch called *Don Quichotte et Sancho Pança*, which has come to be regarded as the first 'operetta'; it was premiered in a small theatre on the boulevard Montmartre, but soon transferred to the more prestigious stage of the Opéra-National, recently founded by Adolphe Adam. Having established himself as conductor of the orchestra of the Odéon, then of the Théâtre du Palais-Royal, in 1854 he opened a theatre on the boulevard du Temple which he called Les Folies-Concertantes, later Les Folies-Nouvelles. Here he presented operettas that he composed himself (among them *Le Compositeur toqué*, *La Fine Fleur de l'Andalousie* and *Un drame en 1779*), but also early works by Offenbach (*Oyayaye ou la Reine des îles*, 1855) and Léo Delibes (*Deux sous de charbon*, 1856). Trouble with the law and health problems forced him to retire temporarily, and in 1859 he sold the theatre to the actress Virginie Déjazet, who renamed it after herself. A great traveller, Hervé then appeared in the provinces as a singer for a while before re-establishing himself in Paris. He now took over the musical direction of the Délassements-Comiques, where he performed a work whose eccentricity made a striking impression on the public, *Le Hussard persécuté*. This was followed at the Théâtre des Variétés by *Le Joueur de flûte*, a one-act *opéra-bouffe* on a subject prefiguring *La Belle Hélène*. *Les Chevaliers de la Table ronde*, an *opéra-bouffe* in three acts on a libretto premiered at the Bouffes-Parisiens, is the first of Hervé's full-length operettas. After this, in addition to working as conductor at the Eldorado, he became the house composer of the Théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques, where he enjoyed great success with *L'Œil crevé* (1867), *Chilpéric* (1868) and *Le Petit Faust* (1869). The last two works provided Hervé with an opportunity to launch a fruitful English career, since he went to London to stage them in person. The new works he gave in Paris were less successful (*Le Trône d'Écosse*, 1871; *La Veuve du Malabar*, 1873; *Alice de Nevers*, 1875). In 1878, he played the role of Jupiter in a revival of *Orphée aux enfers* under the direction of Offenbach himself, and then began the cycle of *vaudevilles-opérettes* he composed for Anna Judic, the star performer of the Théâtre des Variétés: *La Femme à papa* (1879), *La Roussotte* (1881), *Lili* (1882) and finally *Mam'zelle Nitouche* (1883). This last piece was based on his own beginnings in the profession, when he was an organist by day and composer of operettas in the evenings. In 1886 Hervé left Paris for London and composed a series of ballets for the Empire Theatre. He returned to France in 1892, producing one final *opéra-bouffe*, *Bacchanale*, shortly before his death on 3 November 1892.