

LES TROIS DUMAS

BY CHARLES SMITH

Les Trois Dumas (The Three Dumas) focuses on three generations of famous Frenchmen of the 19th century. General Thomas Alexandre Dumas was a black man from San-Domingo who rose to become an important figure in Napoleon's early military campaigns. Alexandre Dumas *père* was one of France's most popular and prolific playwrights and novelists, the author of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* among many others. Alexander Dumas *fil*s was the playwright of *Camille*, one of the most scandalous sensations in theatre history. (The words *père* and *fil*s are *father* and *son* in the French language; they are used to distinguish between two men with the same name, much as *Sr.* and *Jr.* might be used in America today.)

The play is set in 1848, midway through Dumas *père*'s career and before Dumas *fil's* has begun. While Dumas *père* revels in the luxury and fame he has achieved, his son suffers from a strange illness, furious at his father's spendthrift ways and his succession of mistresses. In fevered nightmares, Dumas *fil's* has visions of his grandfather's falling out with Napoleon. These visions confuse and enrage him, as he refuses to accept his black heritage.

Dumas *père* is anxiously awaiting news of his admission to the French Academy, a prestigious honorary society of writers, when his theatrical producers, George Sand and Felix Harel, arrive to collect his latest play, *Christine*, and to renew their request for a play about Napoleon. Dumas refuses to write such a play, citing Napoleon's unjust treatment of his own father, the General. While Sand reads *Christine*, Felix expresses a desire to be one of Dumas's collaborators; he is convinced that no single writer could produce as much work as Dumas claims to write, and that he therefore must



use a secret group of ghost writers who share the profits in order to get their works published under the famous Dumas name. Dumas denies using such collaborators, and outrages Felix by informing him that the novel he had submitted for consideration was so bad that Dumas has used the pages of the manuscript as toilet paper. Felix is even more infuriated when he discovers that Dumas's new play seems to be based on his supposedly bad novel.

Victor Hugo arrives, having been elected to the Academy; Dumas *père* has not been chosen. Hugo promises to use his influence to help Dumas if he gives Hugo's niece, Juliette Drouet, the leading role in *Christine*. But Dumas has already convinced Sand to give the role to Ida Ferrier, Dumas's latest mistress, and Sand agrees to recast the play only if Dumas writes the Napoleon play. Dumas refuses.

The action of *Les Trois Dumas* culminates in a grand masked ball hosted by Dumas *père* at his Chateau Monte Cristo. Elaborate costumes, mistaken identities, thrilling swordfights, and daring escapes, in the robust tradition of Dumas's own swashbuckling novels, bring the play to its exciting and entertaining conclusion. ★

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Les Trois Dumas focuses on three generations of a renowned French family of the 19th century. All the characters in the play are based on real people.

GENERAL THOMAS ALEXANDRE DUMAS was born in San-Domingo in 1762, the son of a French marquis and a black slave girl. As was common practice among the French planters, he was raised as a member of the family; when the marquis returned to France, he took his 18-year-old son with him.

A very handsome black man, blessed with astonishing physical strength, Dumas enlisted in the army in 1789. His physical strength and daring exploits quickly established his reputation, and by 1792 he had risen to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He married that same year. He met his wife, MARIE LOUISE, when he was billeted at her father's house. They would have a daughter who died in childhood and a son, Alexandre, born in 1802.

In 1793 Dumas was made a general and commander in chief of the army of the Pyrenees under Napoleon. Indeed, the two discussed serving as godparents to each other's sons. Perhaps Dumas's greatest victory involved scaling the sheer rock of Mont-Cenis in Italy with only a handful of men and winning the fort from the Austrians.

Dumas later became suspicious of Napoleon's ambitions during the Egyptian campaign; Napoleon in turn thought Dumas disloyal. Captured by the enemy, Dumas spent two years as a prisoner of war. Napoleon, however, branded Dumas a deserter, and upon his release refused him any back pay or pension. Having been poisoned in prison, Dumas was nearly blind, deaf, hardly able to walk. He died in 1806, leaving a wife and son in poverty.

ALEXANDRE DUMAS *père* is today almost famous for such novels as *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, but he exerted his greatest influence on literature through his early plays, key works in the definition of French romanticism. Dumas's literary strengths were expressed flamboyantly in dramatic conflicts, sudden reversals, and coincidences so thrilling that the audience had no time to examine the plot's logic.

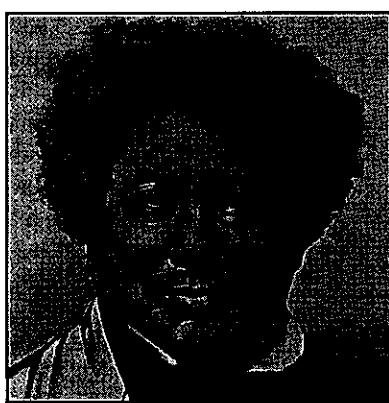
Dumas's extravagant tastes—in furniture, homes, food, and mistresses—forced him to

maintain a hectic writing pace. His frequent use of collaborators (chiefly Auguste Maquet) inspired controversy as to the extent of Dumas's authorship, but recent scholarship has authenticated his contributions. If his boast of having written 1,200 volumes is a gross exaggeration, an edition of his complete works containing 301 volumes is irrefutable proof of his unflagging energy. That energy animated his journalistic enterprises, his extensive travels, and his adventures, includ-

ing participation in Garibaldi's campaign in Sicily in 1860. Scandals and financial vicissitudes plagued his last years. He died in 1870.



(above) General Dumas



(left) Dumas père

(below) Dumas fils

ALEXANDRE DUMAS *fil*s, born in 1824, was the illegitimate son of Alexandre Dumas *père*. Like his illustrious father, he wrote novels and plays, establishing the genre known as the problem, or thesis, play. His output was copious, but it far from equalled the avalanche of works produced by his father. But Dumas *fil*s, unlike his father, worked without collaborators. Dumas's most famous work is *La Dame aux camélias* (known in English as *Camille*). The play became world famous, serving as a vehicle for such actresses as Sarah Bernhardt and Greta Garbo; it also inspired Verdi's opera *La Traviata*.

In his choice of subjects, Dumas *fil*s pointed the way toward the naturalism of such authors as Emile Zola. His father's tastes and abilities favored the historical novel and the adventure tale, but Dumas *fil*s preferred to write of contemporary society. Although

DUMAS

(DUMA)

vestiges of romanticism can be noted in his works, Dumas *fil*s attempted to analyze the social ills of his times. The tone of his work is somewhat moralizing, but his plays have remained attractive to theater audiences because he gave his characters' emotions free range. He died in 1895.

VICTOR HUGO, novelist, poet, and dramatist, was the preeminent French man of letters of the 19th century and the leading exponent and champion of romanticism. Hugo was also involved in politics, and his work touched upon many of the major currents of artistic and political thought of his time. Although best known in the English-speaking world for his two major novels, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831; translated as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) and *Les Misérables* (1862), Hugo was also the outstanding French lyric poet of the 19th century.

Born in 1802, Hugo had early success as a poet and novelist and in 1822 married his childhood sweetheart, Adèle Foucher. Their home became a meeting place of romantic writers. The preface to Hugo's epic play *Cromwell* (1827) was the most influential manifesto of romantic literary theory. In it, Hugo spoke of freeing art from the formal constraints of classicism so that it might reflect the full extent of human nature. Premiered at the Comédie-Française, his controversial *Hernani* (1830) was

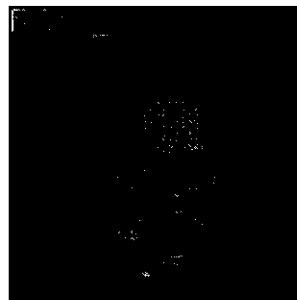


The ACADEMIE FRANCAISE (French Academy) is a learned society established by Cardinal Richelieu (yes, the villain in Dumas *père*'s *The Three Musketeers*) in 1635. Richelieu asked the founding members to work "at the development, unification, and purification of the French language." The Académie was devoted to classic ideals and established rules of composition covering not only literature but theatre as well. The forty members, elected for life, tended towards the conservative and scholarly. Victor Hugo was a member of the Académie (despite the romantic works of his youth), but Dumas *père* was never elected; to his great disappointment, Dumas *fil*s was admitted, however, in 1875.

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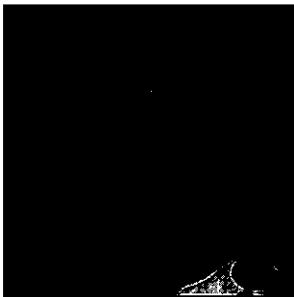
a triumph for romanticism. Throughout his career he was a popular and critical success.

Hugo spent twenty years as a political dissident in exile, creating some of his finest works. He returned in 1870 to find himself a national hero. His death in 1885 was an occasion of national mourning, and he received a state funeral. His works remain among the most significant of the 19th century.



(left)
Victor Hugo

(below)
Napoleon
Bonaparte



women's
freedom
to find
emotional
satis-

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE, born the son of a lawyer in 1769, first made his name as a soldier. In a series of campaigns he seized the port of Toulon, drove Austria from Italy, and conquered Egypt. Returning to France in 1799, he determined to govern the country himself. Many thought he could bring strong rule after the instability following the French Revolution and were glad to support him. Within two years, he threw out the Directoire and became sole consul. In 1804 Napoleon declared himself Emperor of the French.

For eight years Napoleon's armies marched through Europe from Portugal to the Russian border. At its height Napoleon's empire stretched from modern Spain through France and Germany and part of Poland and down through Austria, Switzerland, and the Italian peninsula.

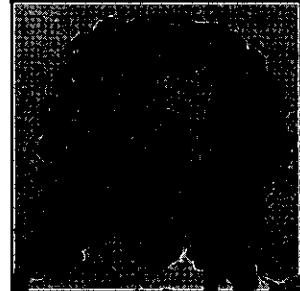
In 1812, although he defeated the Russian forces at Borodino, he failed to capture Moscow. The cold Russian winter came early and crushed the retreating French army in weeks; only a few thousand soldiers remained fit to fight again. This disaster started a general European uprising against French power. In 1813 Napoleon was defeated by the forces of Austria, Prussia, and Russia. Britain drove the French out of Spain and by 1814 had crossed into France. Napoleon abdicated and was

exiled to the island of Elba. A brother of Louis XVI was welcomed as French king but became so unpopular within three months that Napoleon was able to leave Elba, gather an army, and drive him out of Paris.

Napoleon ruled again for about 100 days. But near Waterloo in Belgium in 1815, British and Prussian armies defeated him. Napoleon abdicated again and was exiled to a South Atlantic island, St. Helena, where he died in 1821.

GEORGE SAND, pseudonym of Aurore Dudevant, was the most famous woman writer in 19th-century France. A prolific writer of novels, stories, plays, essays, and memoirs, she represented the epitome of French romantic idealism and unconventional iconoclasm.

Born Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin in 1804, Sand was married at 18, unhappily. She left her husband and out of financial necessity began writing. Her novels astounded her readers with their frank exploration of women's sexual feelings and their passionate call for



(above) George Sand

(right) Ida Ferrier

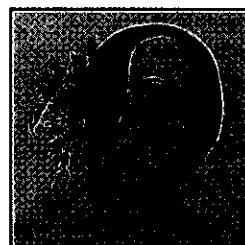
(below) Mlle Mars

faction. Sand never advocated "free love" but remained an idealist, exalting the idea of marriage between equals but condemning the social system of male dominance that made such marriages impossible. Legally separated from her husband in 1836, she kept up a furious pace of literary composition throughout her life to support herself and her children. Her reputation for iconoclasm grew not only from the themes of her novels but from her unconventional behavior: her occasionally masculine clothing, her habitual smoking, her rumored lesbianism, and her series of love affairs with such well-known artists as Alfred de Musset and Frédéric Chopin. She died in 1876.

FELIX HAREL, born 1790, began his career in government, later founding a paper, *Le Miroir*. Falling under the spell of an actress, Mlle George, he turned to theatre management. Harel was an extravagant manager who enjoyed scenic effect: Dumas's

Napoleon Bonaparte, or thirty years of French History cost 80,000 francs and, after a few performances, had to be shortened from 23 scenes to 14. His greatest success was as manager of the Porte-Saint-Martin, which he tried to make an alternative to the well-established Comédie-Française. Unfortunately, although their plays were staged by Harel, the great romantic dramatists felt the lure of the Comédie-Française, and some of his actors were also drawn there. Harel wrote a curious *Theatrical dictionary, or, 1,258 truths about various managers, actors and actresses*. He was an excellent conversationalist and publicist. Good at extracting money from people, he was less precise about paying his actors or creditors. He had a reputation for uncleanness and kept a pig in his apartment. Eventually Harel had to give up the Porte-Saint-Martin and leave Paris to escape his creditors. In his last years he became insane and died in poverty.

IDA FERRIER was an actress who became Dumas *père*'s mistress when she was cast in a small role in one of his plays. Short, with a tendency towards plumpness and a chronic headcold, she was nonetheless a gifted actress; but with her career assured by Dumas's patronage—there was always a role for her in his numerous plays—she sank into medi-



ocrity. Her constant competition for roles was Juliette Drouet, Victor Hugo's mistress; while Ida was a better actress, Juliette was considered prettier. In time Ida became Dumas's "head" mistress, as it were; she ran the household, tolerating his many other lovers. Eventually they married, although four years later they separated and she became the mistress of the Prince of Villafranca in Italy. For the rest of her life she repeatedly sued Dumas—unsuccessfully—for money owed her.

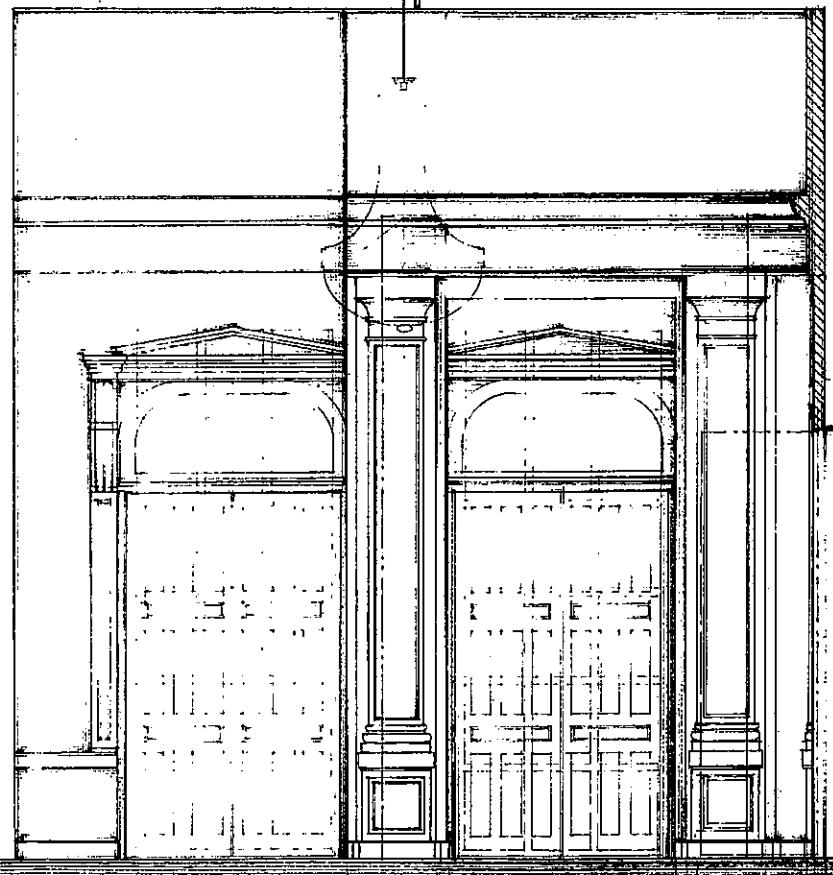
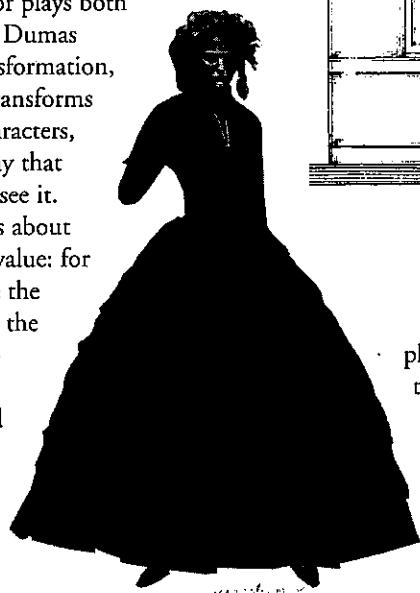
MMLE MARS (Anne Françoise Hippolyte Boutet) made her first stage appearance at Versailles as a child. At 16 she joined the Comédie-Française, excelling in the classic comedies of Moliere and Marivaux, many of which she restored to the repertoire. In her career she also created 109 roles in new works, including those of Dumas and Hugo. She was the model of fashion for Parisian ladies for 30 years. When she died, she lay in state for three days, and 50,000 people attended her funeral. ★

Producing LES TROIS DUMAS

Working on a new play is always an exciting journey: things can change along the way because the playwright is part of the rehearsal process: he can rewrite portions of the play because of discoveries made by the actors and director, or he can offer them useful information about how he visualized the play as he wrote it. Playwright Charles Smith has been doing just those things over the course of the rehearsal process of *Les Trois Dumas*, and the input has been invaluable. This process is strikingly different from producing the works of playwrights who have been dead for centuries and can't tell you why they wrote what they wrote or what it should sound and look like!

Les Trois Dumas is a play based upon actual history and real people; but as any good writer (or reader) knows, the art really happens when the writer moves away from the literal events of history and allows the characters to come alive in a particular interaction. This play offers a very good opportunity to learn something about "poetic license," the act of an artist reshaping history and character to make a unique artwork which contains historical ideas but does not seek to recreate history. In fact, one of the least realistic ideas in *Les Trois Dumas* is also one of the most compelling: the same actor plays both Alexis (Dumas's servant) and General Dumas (Dumas *père*'s father). The act of transformation, and the manner in which this actor transforms back and forth between these two characters, adds a texture and meaning to the play that cannot be fully understood until you see it.

Director Tazewell Thompson talks about the play in terms of its metaphorical value: for him, the entire play takes place inside the mind of the youthful Dumas *fil*, and the events contain something of his viewpoint at all times. The dream sequences, the flashbacks in time, and the fluid nature of the events of the play all have to do with Dumas *fil*'s journey toward self-discovery. He is ill at the beginning of the play, but by the conclusion he has regained his health and his sense of self-possession. The



(above) Stage right scenic elevation by designer Donald Eastman.
(left) Costume collage for Ida Ferrier by designer Merrily Murray-Walsh.

play will help you to understand why.

The events of the play, loosely speaking, span over 50 years of history, from the

1790s until 1848,

take place in several locations. From Dumas *père*'s personal quarters in his vast chateau outside Paris, we travel to Napoleon's campaign tent, a small town in northern France where Dumas *père* was born, George Sand's boudoir, and others. But set designer Donald Eastman has decided to place all the scenes inside a single room that can be altered with light and furniture to express different locations when needed. Having the play all take place in the home of Dumas *père* and *fil* also illustrates the director's belief that the play takes place in the imagination and dreams of Dumas *fil*. The vision of their home that Eastman found in his own imagination was a room that had once been grand but is now neglected and run down, illustrating Dumas *père*'s constant financial constraints. The

architecture is grand, but the things inside it have seen better times, just as Dumas *père*'s reputation is suffering, as we learn- in the course of the play.

Costume designer Merrily Murray-Walsh has found a historical look for the costumes which is accurate in its silhouette but somewhat contemporary in its use of fabric and ornamentation. Historical costumes in their most accurate form can sometimes be confining and absurdly detailed; Walsh's view simplifies the garments to their essentials but gives us the flavor of the exotic period in which the play is set.

Likewise, the task of composer Fabian Obispo is to capture the sound of France a century ago, but present it in a manner which will stimulate our late-20th-century ears. He will use contemporary instruments (mostly a synthesizer), but the sound he will create will echo the past.

Add to this crew a fight choreographer and a dramaturg, and the creative team for *Les Trois Dumas* is complete. Bringing a new play to the stage for the first time is both thrilling and challenging and requires everyone to work at the peak of their abilities. ★

IRT PLAY GUIDE

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