

Aragon's *Au Pied du Mur*

Au Pied du Mur by Louis Aragon was first performed at the Collège de France and then at the Vieux-Colombier Theatre in Paris. The exact dates of the production remain unclear. Antonin Artaud, in a letter to Genica Athanasiou, declared that the presentation was to be made on the 28th and 29th of May, 1925, though the most frequently mentioned date for the performance is sometime in "June, 1925." The appearance of a review of *Au Pied du Mur* in the June 13, 1925, edition of *Le Journal littéraire* establishes that the play had been performed prior to this date. There were only two or three performances of the piece, which was directed by Artaud, who also played the part of the protagonist. Genica Athanasiou played the major female role.

The spirit of the performances was of rowdy provocation. In his article in *Le Journal littéraire* on the presentation of *Au Pied du Mur*, R. Comminges recounts the disturbances that occurred the evening he saw the play. The performance was preceded by a speech by Robert Aron, who later founded the

Theatre Alfred Jarry with Artaud and Vitrac, on the subject of the average Frenchman. The Surrealists sabotaged the speech and caused a scandal. Whether this disturbance was prompted or condoned by Aragon himself, who loved "scandal for scandal's sake," is unknown, though the possibility has been suggested. At any rate, Aron never managed to speak more than twenty words. He was interrupted by voices, one of whom cried: "We will not let you speak, signed: the Surrealists." Soon, everyone in the room was standing and shouting. The climate was that of menace. Robert Desnos was on stage haranguing the crowd. Someone hit Eluard, whereupon Vitrac rushed up to his defense. Finally, the police were called in to intervene; the presentation of *Au Pied du Mur* commenced. Unfortunately, Comminges was more interested in the disturbance than in the performance. All he tells us of the production is that Genica Athanasiou had a beautiful and tragic presence and her own striking way of acting.

Jacques Baron includes in his book, *L'An I du Surréalisme*, Vitrac's account of the production. According to Vitrac, there was no money for the staging of the piece. Several actors got together on their own time, found a place to perform, and gave two or three performances. Aragon's piece was chosen because of its irritating or provoking qualities. Vitrac relates how one particular scene had an especially provocative effect on a spectator. The decor consisted of a room lighted by a candle. A glass of poison was on the dressing table. Pierre attempted to drink it. Melanie prevented him and they talked. Pierre repeated many times, "I am speaking in general." The fourth time he did so, an exasperated spectator, thinking he was saying "I am speaking as a general," yelled out: "Then get on a horse!" The spectator left the room amid a round of applause from the audience, proving that Aragon and the performers of *Au Pied du Mur* had indeed achieved their aim of provocation.



Louis Aragon

Lenora Champagne