

Homosexuality On Trial

by Danièle Voldman

Paris, 1933. Oscar Dufrenne, a music hall mogul and notorious homosexual, was found murdered in his office. Even though a suspect was arrested, the investigation led nowhere. The case paints a portrait of interwar France in its desire to restore order, its political violence, and the slow evolution of social mores.

Reviewed: Florence Tamagne, [Le Crime du Palace. Enquête sur l'une des plus grandes affaires criminelles des années 1930](#), Paris, Payot, 2017, 286 pp., €22.

Florence Tamagne, an expert in marginalised groups within European societies, ranging from homosexuals to young people to rockers, provides a fascinating account of a crime that was never fully solved. She patiently unravels the multiple threads of the tangled tale, turning a news item that “fed the columns of the popular press for many months, as well as the editorials of political journals” into a symptom of the unease that was eating away at a country grappling with the contradictory consequences of the Great War and caught between the hope of restoring order and a desire for social change.

A self-made man with a social conscience

The story starts with the crime: on the night of 24 September 1933, Oscar Dufrenne was found murdered in his office at the Palace movie theatre, formerly a music hall. Far from being an anonymous victim, Dufrenne enjoyed certain notoriety at the time: he was city councillor of the 10th *arrondissement* in Paris and general councillor of the Seine region, as well as chairman of the *Fédération des Spectacles* and director and co-owner of several entertainment halls. Dufrenne had left his working-class family in Lille and set off, penniless, to make his

fortune in the French capital. The epitome of the self-made man, Dufrenne became a wealthy public figure thanks to his hard work, creativity and interpersonal skills.

This murder story gives the author an opportunity to paint a portrait of the world of theatre and entertainment from the 1910s to the 1930s in Paris and the fashionable resorts of Normandy and the Côte d'Azur. The success of magazines, theatres and music halls remained unaffected during the First World War, and they were allowed to reopen under censorship surveillance in the autumn of 1914 following a brief ban; their popularity then grew considerably during the Roaring Twenties. Dufrenne took the opportunity to grow rich by offering colourful, sequin-laden shows that were extremely popular with the public.

Alongside shows with multiple scenes featuring scantily-clothed entertainers labelled “obscene” by their detractors, Dufrenne also fiercely defended his profession against the public authorities. Sensitive to the harsh working conditions suffered by both theatre workers and artists, he fought against their precariousness and unpredictable wages. He personally contributed to the financing of an artists' retirement home in Pont-aux-Dames (in the Seine-et-Marne region near Paris) established at the turn of the century and tried to find solutions for unemployed artists, both as a councillor and in his day-to-day professional work.

He also tried in vain to abolish the “poverty law.” This tax dated back to the Ancien Régime and was levied on the proceeds of shows in order to provide funds for social welfare. For the city councillors, it was morally right and expected that the entertainment of some should serve to relieve the poverty of others. To Dufrenne's way of thinking, the tax lowered the profits of music hall directors and thereby reduced the artists' fees. Each stood up for the poor in his own way.

Political notability and “homosexual subculture”

In the early 1930s, before the troubles related to the economic crisis began, Dufrenne was at the height of his success and on the verge of entering the political arena. In April 1929, at the age of 54, he ran a campaign for the first time on behalf of the Radical Party. He stood in the municipal elections for the 10th *arrondissement* in Paris, where there were numerous entertainment venues. His programme centred on defending businesses and small tradesmen who made a living from theatre (machinists, costume designers, restaurant owners, etc.) He was easily elected with their support.

Dufrenne was a prominent figure at Council meetings, which he chaired until his death. He tirelessly proposed measures in support of theatres and social hygiene, planning, for example, to build school facilities on the land freed up by the demolition of the Saint-Lazare prison. Having taken a liking to these activities, he decided to stand in the legislative elections of May 1932, but narrowly lost to the right-wing candidate.

Dufrenne's professional success as a theatre producer aroused envy and jealousy, for his lifestyle did not correspond with the ideal of notability: he made no secret of his homosexuality or his affiliations with the "inverted" groups who were so reviled by reactionaries.

Homosexuality is the third subject addressed by the author, underpinned by her perfect understanding of what she calls the "homosexual subculture." Although this term highlights the marginality of homosexuality in society, one might easily refer to an entire "community" or even "culture." In any case, the fact that homosexuality became more visible during this period did not stop it from being reproached and repressed.

This element featured highly in the Palace murder scandal. For, as Florence Tamagne explains, "it fascinated the public because it revealed an evolving homosexual subculture characterised by very different ways of experiencing and defining one's homosexuality," less hidden and slightly more accepted. Given that Dufrenne's murder was on the front page of every kind of newspaper for 3 years, it forced the press and thereby public opinion to contemplate the existence of a homosexual subculture and to revive the debate on the merits and methods of its repression.

Guilty party or perfect victim?

The police investigation shone a spotlight on "homosexual prostitution," an activity that usually remained in the shadow of female prostitution, which was much better documented and regulated." Thus, the suspicion of guilt quickly fell on a man named Paul Laborie. Not only was he a sailor – a required figure in "the market for homosexual desires" – but he had a bad character: he was a violent, quarrelsome thief who used false identities and made a living from prostitution, his own as well as that of the men and women he pimped. An occasional drug dealer to boot, he made an ideal suspect.

Despite the heavy charges against him, the police lacked evidence and the investigation went nowhere. This fuelled rumours used, even started, by the victim's political opponents, particularly the involvement of the son of Louis-Jean Malvy, former minister of the Interior and radical-socialist member of parliament for the Lot region. Against a backdrop of police rivalry, the political right used the case as a chance to denounce France's moral decline. For them, "the bodily and sexual metaphor came fully into play: the body of France, the Republic and of members of parliament seemed to be merging in the same decay."

As a result of recent research into the event, the author sheds light on French society in the first half of the 20th century. The sympathy and compassion of the show workers, many of whom attended the funeral of the "king of the night," and the solidarity shown by other homosexuals, who faced police hostility, stood in stark contrast with the stigmatisation of

“immorality” and the defence of good morals and the family unit. This clash between two notions of the social body benefited the accused during his trial in the Seine criminal court, which began on 21st October 1935.

A series of concordant charges was made against Paul Laborie, suspected of premeditated murder. Knowing he was facing the death penalty, the defendant vehemently denied all the charges, while many of the witnesses called to testify withdrew or went back on their statements, causing confusion among the jurors. Little by little, people began to doubt the merit of the investigation. Most of all, the victim, owing to his personality, was gradually transformed into a culprit whose “bad morals” offended decent morality. And Florence Tamagne concludes:

Despite the evidence gathered by the police, which left little doubt about the defendant’s guilt, the court hearings quickly descended into farce.

The complexity and contradictions of the investigation, brought about by the intense focus on the victim’s lifestyle and habits, meant that Laborie was soon set free and the methods used by the police were criticized in a court case that ultimately put homosexuality on trial. The victim became the guilty party – and the acquittal signalled a return to order.

First published in lavedesidees.fr, 11 September 2017. Translated from the French by Susannah Dale with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

Published in *Books & Ideas*, 19 February 2018.