

# JULIE AND THE GRANDSART-COURTOIS THEATRE: A FAMILY AFFAIR

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If we believe the few history books on popular visual entertainment in the nineteenth century, women rarely took centre stage. Until very recently, a lanternist or magician has predominantly been associated with a male figure. The female performer is mostly portrayed as the graceful assistant. Dressed in glamorous revealing costumes, her role seems reduced to handing over the lantern slides to her husband or the central male performer, to shifting props onto and off the stage or her beautiful body being sawn into pieces. This notorious female stereotype in the historiography of popular performance culture tells probably more about the gender bias of the historian than of the talents of female performers. Women have always played a prominent role in illusion shows, not only as assistants but also as performers in their own right. Particularly during what magic historians today consider as the 'Golden Age' of stage conjuring, that ranged from roughly 1850 to 1920,<sup>1</sup> magiciennes and female lanternists took to the stage in growing numbers to present the whole spectrum of professional magical activity and, in some cases, to travel the world.<sup>2</sup>

One of these extraordinary women was Julienne-Reine Courtois, known as 'Julie', a Belgian physicist and conjurer, born in Bruges on 16 May 1813. Coming from a family of itinerant fairground magicians, the young Julie grew up on stage. Her grandfather Jacques-François Courtois was born in Antwerp, according to the baptismal registers, the son of French 'vagi' (vagabonds).<sup>3</sup> As a travelling physicist-magician he performed on fairgrounds in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Ghent and Bruges. Julie learned the craft from her father, the renowned magician Louis Courtois (1785-1859), also known internationally as 'Papa Courtois'. He was the father of a large family of 18 children who all accompanied him during his tours in Western Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century. This 'Théâtre de la Famille Courtois' travelled through France, Switzerland, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands to end up in Paris where Papa Courtois died at the age of 74. By then he was widely known and well respected, as illustrated by the various newspaper articles that announced his death in 1859.

As the eldest daughter of Papa Courtois, the clever Julie already had a well-developed stage act by the age of 19. A few years later, when she accompanied her father during a tour in France in 1836-37, she



1. Louis Courtois, 'Papa Courtois', Julie's father (left)

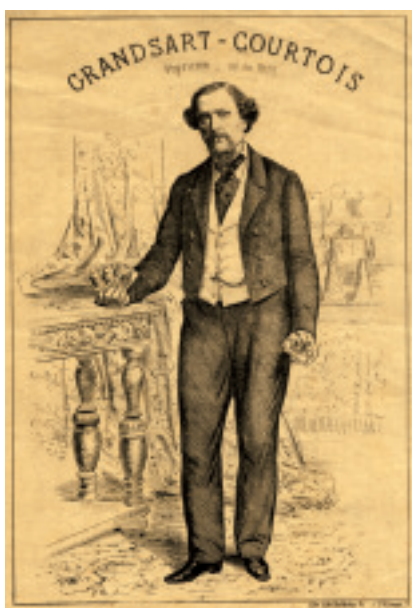
2. Show bill featuring Julie Grandsart-Courtois in Amsterdam, 1852 (above)

The creation of the Grandsart-Courtois Theatre in around 1840 allowed the young couple to take a different route and to build a distinct reputation to differentiate between these two 'physicists' well known in the early nineteenth century.

After the separation from Papa Courtois, Julie performed together with her family in front of all the royal courts and high families of Western Europe, as well as at many fairs in small towns and villages, until the beginning of the 20th century. Both Julie and André-Joseph Grandsart were much respected and celebrated magicians. After demonstrating their talent before Napoléon III, they took the title of 'Physicien et Physicienne de l'Empereur Napoléon III'. Although the playbills generally announced the family as a whole, and history books mainly focus on the handsome André-Joseph Grandsart and his sons,<sup>4</sup> we learn from contemporary newspaper announcements and reviews that Madame Grandsart-Courtois was the key figure in the family business – "in magic acts matched by no one" and "assisted by her husband and an eleven-year-old boy, her son, who can now already be called a professor in the Indian parade".<sup>5</sup> Often Julie was introduced as the only woman who became famous as a 'Physicienne and Prestidigitatrice'.<sup>6</sup>

With their beautifully decorated and luxuriously equipped 'magic palace', the Grandsart-Courtois Theatre was a welcome and regular returning guest at the annual fairgrounds of Amsterdam, Bruges, Brussels, Liège, Verviers, Lille and Roubaix, amongst others, with Ghent as their geographical base. Illuminated with 200 gaslights, their travelling theatre could host 800 fairground visitors for a three-hour performance.<sup>7</sup> Joseph Mousset (known as Hasserz, 1799-1870)<sup>8</sup> who was a locally famous 'chanteur forain' (fairground singer) from Liège, wrote a few songs dedicated to the Grandsart-Courtois family. All the lyrics were written to well-known melodies, such as the Belgian national anthem *La Brabançonne*, or *Valeureux Liégeois*, so people could easily sing along. The following song beautifully illustrates Julie's key role in the family theatre, sung to the melody of *Dans un grenier qu'on est bien à 20 ans* from the prolific French singer Jean Pierre de Béranger:

*Aimable dame, tu mérites l'hommage,  
Pour ton génie et tes tours enchanteurs,  
Pour ton talent, ton adresse et courage  
Qui savent tant charmer les spectateurs.  
Madame aussi vous êtes la première*



3. André-Joseph Grandsart (courtesy of Didier Morax)

met the young and handsome André-Joseph Grandsart (1813-1882). He was the son of travelling musicians on the roads of Belgium and northern France and became the Courtois family apprentice. The Courtois children and Grandsart formed an orchestra to play various musical interludes between each act of the Belgian patriarch. After their marriage, Julie and André founded their own touring theatre specialising in 'physiques amusantes'. Over the years, competition developed between Papa Courtois and his apprentice.



4. Postcard of the Grandsart-Courtois Theatre (courtesy of Didier Morax)

5. Newspaper cutting about the Grandsart-Courtois Theatre from 1855 (courtesy of Didier Morax)

*De tous les grands prestidigitateurs;  
Bien loin de là, vous n'êtes point sorcière. (Bis.)  
Mais vous savez enchanter tous les cœurs.*

*Vous n'êtes pas une magicienne,  
Mais bien l'épouse du bon Grandsart-Courtois.  
La patrie belge est la vôtre et la mienne,  
Aimée des vieux et braves Liégeois.  
Je vous souhaite heureuse et long vie,  
Vous qui jouez devant princes et rois;  
Honneur à tous! Gloire à notre patrie! (Bis.)  
Vive l'épouse du bon Grandsart-Courtois!*

*Et toi, Grandsart, prestidigitateur,  
Epoux chéri, père d'aimables enfants,  
Tu mérites la gloire, aussi l'honneur,  
Pour tes beaux tours amusants et charmants.  
Que le Seigneur pour toujours te prospère,  
Et te conserve une bonne santé;  
Ce beau souhait, je te le réitère:  
Vive Grandsart! Au sein de la gaité.<sup>9</sup>*

The programme of the Grandsart-Courtois Theatre was extremely diverse, combining magic with science and technology, music, juggling and acrobatics. Every member of the family had their own particular talent: Julie was a celebrated magician, as was her husband, who was also a violin virtuoso. Their son Jules was known as an acrobat, juggler and equilibrist and their oldest son Emile was also a conjurer. Little is known about the many different acts, but from the few remaining sources, it becomes clear that on their travels around European fairgrounds this itinerant family picked up new technological developments and ideas that were particularly suited for show business. The nineteenth century was an age of unprecedented technological and scientific progress, and the Grandsart-Courtois family had a good nose for novelties and spectacle. They introduced every new invention in their shows – from projection with magic lanterns, the use of electric light and the introduction of the cinematograph at Belgian and French fairs. For instance, in the mid-1860s, during a tour in Belgium, they introduced a series of magic lantern projections of 'Tableaux Pittoresques et Monumentaux' representing "the most beautiful sites and panoramas known worldwide".<sup>10</sup> According to *Courrier de L'Escaut*, the oldest Belgian newspaper still published, the repertoire consisted of 130 new experiences. This lantern show was enthusiastically received at the fairs in Brussels, running for more than 60 performances, and in Liège where the audience was "amazed by this truly extraordinary experience" as reported by *La Meuse* on 18 November 1862. In this way, Julie Courtois and her family appropriated what was new on the European show business market. They popularised progress and disseminated cultural knowledge and exchanging ideas between European cities and at the annual fairs in smaller towns and villages.

As a family business, they were particularly well placed to do so. Like other travelling theatre and fairground families, marriage with other show people was not an exception and helped ensure the continuity of the business. It also avoided the inevitable conflict between settled and nomadic ways of life. So when Julie died in 1880, the family theatre was passed on to their youngest son, Jules (1845-1905) who married Adrienne Boesnach, the daughter of a Dutch photographer. Emile Grandsart (1843-1891), oldest son of Julie and André-Joseph, also continued to work in show business and operated a mechanical theatre ('Salon d'Automates').<sup>11</sup> In the next generation, the nineteen children of Emile and the six children of Jules Grandsart all became artistes and showmen.

Although the few books on the history of Belgian and Dutch magicians and fairgrounds<sup>12</sup> do all have references to the Courtois and Grandsart-Courtois Theatres, an in-depth study on how this itinerant family acted as cultural mediators by adopting and transferring visual culture still needs to be undertaken. The author would welcome any information that might help to map their travels around European fairgrounds from the early nineteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century and enable analysis of how this large family spread cultural values, technology, novelties and ideas along their route.

#### NOTES

1. Or from 1880 to 1930, depending on the source. Jim Steinmeyer (Jim Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant. How Magicians Invented the Impossible*, Arrow, London, 2005) assumes a Golden Age from 1845-1936. For Mike Caveney it starts in the 1880s (Mike Caveney, 'The Masters of the Golden Age', in *Magic, 1400s-1950s*, edited by Noel C. Daniel, Taschen, Cologne, 2009, pp. 338-397).
2. For an account of female performers in nineteenth century popular performance, see Amy Dawes, 'The female of the species', *Early Popular Visual Culture (EPVC)*, 5:2, 2007, pp.127-50; Catherine Hindson, 'The female illusionist – Loïe Fuller', *EPVC*, 4:2, 2006, pp.161-74; Emma Doran, 'Figuring modern dance within fin-de-siècle visual culture and print: The case of Loïe Fuller', *EPVC*, 13:1, 2015, pp.21-40
3. André De Poorter, *Belgische circussen en foortheaters*, Uitgeverij Lannoo, Tielt, 2015, p.133
4. Jacques Garnier, *Forains d'hier et d'aujourd'hui: Un siècle d'histoire des forains, des fêtes et de la vie foraine*, J. Garnier, Orléans, 1968, pp.281-285; Patrick Vanden Berghe, *800 jaar Meifoor Brugge: de fabuleuze wereld van forains en kermisvogels, spiegelpaleizen en pandspekken*, Uitgeverij Gevaert, Zwevezele, 2003, pp. 42-43
5. 'Binnenland. 8 September', *Nieuw Amsterdamsch handels- en effectenblad*, Amsterdam, 9 September 1858
6. Advertisement, *Nieuw Amsterdamsch handels- en effectenblad*, Amsterdam, 15 September 1858
7. Vanden Berghe, 2003 [see 4]
8. Daniel Droixhe, *Le Cri du public: Culture populaire, presse et chanson dialectale au pays de Liège (XVIIIe-XIXe siècles)*, Le Cri, 2017
9. My sincere thanks to Didier Morax for sending me an (undated) document with these songs entitled 'Couplets Patriotiques Belges, Dédiés à M. & Mme Grandsart-Courtois, célèbres physiciens-prestidigitateurs, propriétaires du Théâtre royal des Fêtes de Belgique, établi au boulevard de la Sauvenière, entre les rues du Pont-d'Avroy et du Pot-d'Or, à Liège'. Based on regional press announcements (*La Meuse*, Liège), we know that the family performed almost every year at the annual October fair in Liège between 1862 and 1903 (after Julie's death in 1880 her youngest son continued the business)
10. *Le Courrier De L'Escaut*, Ed.1, BelgicaPress, Tournai, 2 September 1860
11. De Poorter, 2015, p.133 [see 3]
12. Garnier, 1968 [see 4]; Vanden Berghe 2003 [see 4]; Marja Keyser, *Komt dat Zien! De Amsterdamse kermis in de negentiende eeuw*, B.M. Israel, Amsterdam/ A. Donker, Rotterdam, 1976; Guido Van Genechten, Guido Convents, Eddy Muyllaert, *Kermis: het spiegelpaleis van het volk*, Kritak, Leuven, 1986; Christ and Kobe Van Herwegen, *Chapeau: De geheime goochelgeschiedenis van België*, Manteau, Antwerp, 2014