

ARIANE MNOUCHKINE

By Georges Banu and Béatrice Picon-Vallin



Ariane Mnouchkine, born in 1939 and of French nationality, has been directing the Théâtre du Soleil since its creation. She defended and implemented this particular type of theatre which is directly related to the politics and spirit of 'May 1968'. An adept of collective creation for a long time, Ariane Mnouchkine returned to the text in 1981, be it classical (Shakespeare, Greek tragedies) or contemporary, but always inspired by the great events of world history. She and the Théâtre du Soleil incarnate one of the most original aspects of French theatre.

She studied psychology at the Sorbonne University and founded the Association Théâtrale des Etudiants de Paris, with which she created her first production, *Genghis Khan* (1961). After a long trip to Asia, she turned her drama group into a professional company: the Théâtre du Soleil (May 1964) which functioned according to the model of a worker's cooperative. It opened with *Les Petits Bourgeois* by M. Gorki (1964), then with an adaptation by Philippe Létard of *Capitaine Fracasse* by Théophile Gautier (1965) where one of Mnouchkine's most cherished themes became apparent: travelling theatre and the problems that arise from the encounters with different types of audiences. After touring with *Capitaine Fracasse*, Mnouchkine entered the International School of Jacques Lecoq. The troupe became more prestigious thanks to *La Cuisine (The Kitchen)* by Arnold Wesker (1967), in which the audience is shown life behind the scenes of a big restaurant's kitchen, orchestrated like a symphony. This production was awarded several prizes, and was

performed in the Citroën factories in 1968. *Le songe d'une nuit d'été* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) (1968), performed in the same manner as *La Cuisine* in Cirque Medrano's circus ring carpeted with goatskins this time, pushes the dreamlike quality towards sensuality and joyful bestiality. With *Les Clowns* in 1969 (a production created in Aubervilliers and performed at the Avignon Festival and at the Piccolo Teatro of Milan) Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil confirmed their interest in forms of popular theatre that had tended to be undervalued, and released the poetic nature of this most particular and festive universe.

The Cartoucherie and the French Revolution

The real outburst took place with *1789* (1970) created at the Milan Pallalido on Paolo Grassi's invitation. It was rehearsed and later performed again at the Cartoucherie de Vincennes, a derelict site that Mnouchkine took over and transformed, and which progressively became a sacred place for the Parisian theatre world, a place outside drama institutions and off the beaten track of the usual thespian circuits. *1789* taught the spectators who had undergone the 1968 revolution to participate in the scenic action of the earlier revolution, the one which had founded the Republic. In this case the nature of the subject is as fascinating as the form of devising which the Soleil had been pioneering for a good while: *collective creation*. Its aim was being to abolish any contradiction between the theory and its implementation: both must be given life by one and the same spirit. Work on the audience, who can watch the action from the outer circle or immerse themselves in this action, is an aspect which flows from this constant quest for coherence: actors and spectators feed off the same values that belong to the model of a collective, theatrical and political action. *1789* is a re-evaluation of the tradition of fairground theatre, of street entertainers re-enacting historical events in the market place. The second part, *1793* (1972), brings the audience into the action, whilst inviting a reflection on the Revolution and its last moments. If we consider *1789* to be the Soleil's first production involving political participation, then we can consider *1793* to be its first production of political thinking. For a long time, both the French and the European theatre were to bear the mark of these two seminal works, in which history has a fascinating relevance to the present and its troubles. Mnouchkine's utopia was always to create a production which talked loud and clear about our contemporary world.

From improvisation to text

Mnouchkine experimented with *L'âge d'or* (1975), based on a collective scenario that had never been published, in a new “ephemeral architecture” realised by Guy-Claude François, director of scenography at the Soleil. *L'âge d'or* is about present-day issues using commedia dell'arte and oriental storytelling techniques. The success of the production was mainly due to the exceptional quality of the theatrical language, which linked a contemporary topic to these antique forms. In this instance, Mnouchkine's point of reference is Jacques Copeau's work, as he too wanted to stage a modern-day commedia.

After *L'âge d'or* the company went into a crisis which worsened after shooting the film *Molière* (1976-1977). The collective devising and creating period ended for a while. In 1979 Mnouchkine adapted dramatisation of Klaus Mann's novel *Méphisto* (the demise of the left and the rise of Nazism in Germany in the thirties). She then engaged in an ambitious project, preparing for the production of twelve Shakespeare texts. In the end she only produced three: *Richard II* (1981), *La nuit des rois (Twelfth Night)* (1982), and *Henry IV, Part I* (1984). Her aim was to use the traditional techniques of Kabuki and Kathakali to highlight the theatrical nature of Shakespeare's works. The sheer beauty of the shows, with their plastic quality, was at odds with French scenic tendencies of time, which were dominated by the grey tones imposed by Brecht's epigones. Mnouchkine combined the Oriental theatre's splendour with the raw energy of Shakespearian verse, and in this way she restored the fine taste and appreciation of beauty of French theatre, the first call of beauty being the extraordinary mastery of the body, in the company's physical theatre vocabulary.

Telling the story of the world

The third period in the history of the Soleil could appear to be a synthesis between the chorus-aspect of a company and the unique presence of a certain playwright, Hélène Cixous, all of this being organised by the guide, Mnouchkine. Cixous's writing projects developed in collaboration with Mnouchkine and in relation with the company's own reality. *L'histoire terrible mais inachevée du prince Norodom Sihanouk* (1985) and *l'Indiade ou l'Inde leurs rêves* (1988), are two plays in which we find ourselves confronted with the great political tragedies of the contemporary world, through a Shakespearian experience. This is the path which Mnouchkine, Cixous and the Soleil embarked upon together, drawn by the alliance between history and stage worthiness which must always be a source of pleasure and joy, because the Soleil plays

for vast audiences who are fired by a social conscience. Mnouchkine always assimilated theatre to a community festivity, without ever throwing overboard the political and ‘agit-prop’ aspect of her productions. After Vilar, Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil went back to the activist roots of popular theatre whilst making it very personal and interpreting it in their unique fashion.

The tragedy and the tragic

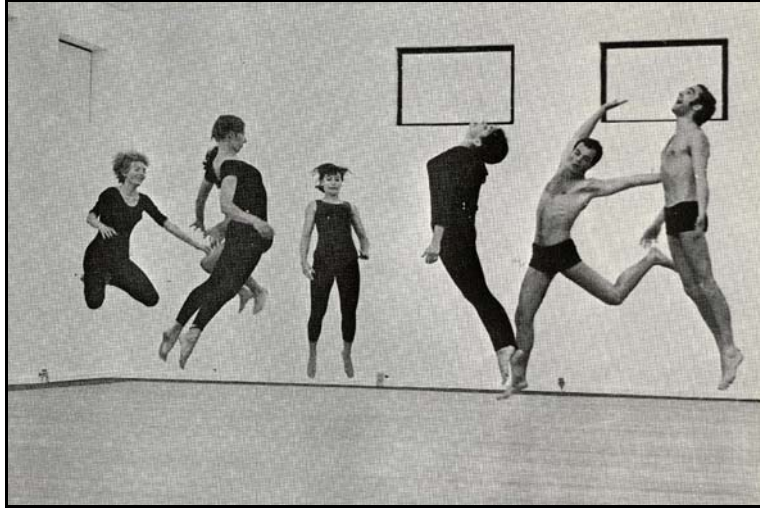
From the 1990’s, Mnouchkine embarked upon her long journey into the origins of theatre and devoted herself to the cycle of the Atrides: she adopted a similar approach to the one she used when she worked on Shakespeare, in the sense that it was still a matter of bridging the gap between an ancient Western text and a traditional Eastern form, Kathakali. The cycle reunites four tragedies: *Iphigénie à Aulis* by Euripides, (1990), *Agamemnon* by Æschylus (translation by Mnouchkine), (1990), *Les Choéphores* by Æschylus (translation by Mnouchkine), (1991) and *Les Euménides* by Æschylus, (1992). Those were three years of great success at the Cartoucherie and on tour internationally. Mnouchkine had succeeded in creating a formal repertoire of signs which could be reused, transformed, and re-integrated in another context: this process gives rise to dazzling visual beauty. Meanwhile, Mnouchkine developed an original theory and practice of the chorus whose very presence confirms with brilliance the resources of dance-theatre.

Mnouchkine and Cixous then decided to tackle one of the most symbolic scandals of modern life: the issue of contaminated blood [blood which, although suspected of being contaminated with the HIV virus in hospitals was given to a great number of patients]¹ which became the basis for a disturbing and controversial production: *La ville parjure ou le réveil des Erinyes* (1994). Working on Greek tragedy led Mnouchkine to start questioning the role of tragedy as modern destiny. For her, theatre presented the opportunity to reflect on the powers of the stage as well as on the contradictions of the present: *Le Tartuffe* (Avignon Festival 1995) was the best demonstration of the way in which an old fable from a long-distant past could be etched into the context of contemporary religious fanaticism. In 1997, Mnouchkine directed *Et soudain, des nuits d’éveil*, “a collective creation in tune with H. Cixous”, dedicated to the suffering of Tibet, and the start of an investigation into the virtues of activism. A return to the source is initiated, enriched by all the previous work on the text.

¹ translator’s note.

Tambours sur la digue (1999), was described as a “piece for puppets interpreted by actors”, in which Mnouchkine succeeded in creating a magical piece, after a difficult and lengthy period of research in which the company took it upon themselves to play either sumptuous puppets, with supple masks and fixed hands, or their *kokens*, their demonstrators and manipulators, dressed in black. The text was written by H. Cixous, inspired by Nô theatre. This production is about politics and power relationships, told through an old Chinese legend and played with refinement and extremely elaborate acting. Being an artist who accepts all challenges, Mnouchkine shot a film (2002) based on this production, accentuating stage worthiness in order to find the cinematographic quality, which was then to be released on DVD. Since *Tartuffe* and the production of a film about the rehearsals of this production, (*Au soleil même la nuit*, 1996-97), video also became a work instrument for the director and her actors. In *Le dernier caravansérail* (first part, *Le fleuve cruel*, April 2003; second part, *Origines et destins*, November 2003), Mnouchkine reverted to collective creation, in a most engaged and contemporary production, drawing together the themes of exile, refugee camps, Muslim fundamentalism and the role of the West in this context. Already a large company, the Soleil took in yet more actors. *Le dernier caravansérail* is played in the midst of bold scenery made up of mobile stage elements of all sizes, where individual entries and exits take place, as well as group scenes. These pieces of scenery are pushed on by actors who are at the same time the audience’s representatives; the scene’s close-up witnesses echoing the remorselessness of modern reality. Text is reduced to a bare minimum. Spoken in all languages by the actors of this international company, the French translation is projected onto various surfaces. Some life stories, recorded by Mnouchkine during the long quest that served as the production’s matrix, are projected and translated on the grey backdrop which is used as a big screen. Mobile staging, use of the text, languages and voices, relation to the immediate world issues, acting echoing the great silent films; all these elements compose a new form of theatre. The complete play lasts six hours up to now (1.10.2004) the most recent production by the Théâtre du Soleil. Mnouchkine is considering making a film adaptation.

Translation : Claire Carre.



Odin Teatret, 1969