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978-0-521-07097-3 - Ariane Mnouchkine and the Theatre du Soleil

Adrian Kiernander

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The function of the director is, as is well known, a relatively recent development in the history of theatre, and the parameters of the director's responsibilities have been in rapid evolution for about the last hundred years. Until recently the work of the director has been difficult to discuss in any proper context because of a lack of reliable information about individual directors and because the director's work has seemed so nebulous. Not least of the problems is that the result of the director's efforts – the theatre production itself – is inherently ephemeral, and many major works of recent years have not left even the imperfect record of a videotape.

Nevertheless, the rise in the importance of the director has been one of the constants of theatre in the twentieth century. This is the case both within theatre practice and in the wider discourse about theatre in the public and the academic arenas; the volumes which have appeared to date in the *Directors in Perspective* series are a sign of this increasing attention and they contribute towards the development of a language with which to talk about the work of directors. We are at last seeing the emergence of a context for the overall development of the directorial role so as to be able to establish the importance of the work of any given director.

Within this wider context, the work of Ariane Mnouchkine can be seen to be significant in a number of ways. Most obviously, she has been one of the first women to achieve an international reputation in this largely male-dominated profession, and even today she remains one of the very few women to be taken seriously as a theatre director; only Joan Littlewood, among those female directors who preceded Mnouchkine, can claim a comparable renown. Significant as this achievement is, Mnouchkine's importance goes far beyond that of being a female pioneer. Her productions and the company to which she belongs, the Théâtre du Soleil, have at times been widely acclaimed as being in the forefront of twentieth-century theatre, and she has been recognised as an influential and challenging director for the development of theatre performance.

Mnouchkine is best known for the innovative nature of her productions, and the Théâtre du Soleil has at various periods in its roughly thirty-year history created performances which were unlike anything else which had been seen at the time. The clearest example of this was the Shakespeare cycle in the early 1980s, which was heavily influenced by a variety of Asian theatre

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forms. Mnouchkine is far from being the first director in history to have combined Shakespeare with Asian theatre traditions, but, as is typical with Mnouchkine, she pushed the execution of this idea to an extreme which made the results seem original and revolutionary. No other production of *Richard II* has ever combined the same qualities of spaciousness and grandeur, such visual luxury in settings and costuming, together with a sense of hieratic formality in the staging and stylisation of acting. Mnouchkine above all is an extremist, a quality which has characterised all her best work.

Mnouchkine could not of course stand completely apart from the work of her contemporary directors, and some elements of her work show signs of outside influence, or at the very least, the existence of a powerful *Zeitgeist*. Her famous production of *1789*, for example, used the kind of oversized puppets which had already become a trademark of the Bread and Puppet Theatre, and similarities with Luca Ronconi's then recent *Orlando Furioso* were also noted at the time. She has occasionally mentioned Giorgio Strehler's work in published interviews. Strehler's productions, especially his famous *Harlequin, Servant of Two Masters*, inspired her at an early stage, but she usually draws a major distinction between his working methods and her own. She regards him as a brilliant virtuoso of the theatre, one of the few,<sup>1</sup> but this is not a quality she claims for herself, and his autocratic way of directing is not compatible with her own approach.

Peter Brook occupies a special position in relation to Mnouchkine's work, and there is a mutual admiration between their two companies. For example, during rehearsals for Mnouchkine's *Norodom Sihanouk* the actors of the Théâtre du Soleil were eagerly looking forward to the opening of Brook's *Mahabharata*, which was also in preparation at the same time. Conversely, a member of Brook's company suggested to me that these two productions happening simultaneously made 1985 a very important year for theatre in Paris. Brook is one of the few living directors whom Mnouchkine has discussed publicly in interviews, and their careers have at some moments followed surprisingly similar trajectories. The influence of Artaud on both is one of the more obvious links.

This commonality was clear in the late 1960s. Mnouchkine's 1968 production of *Le Songe d'un nuit d'été* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), informed by Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, has a strong affinity with Brook's production of *The Tempest* in the same year, focussing especially on savagery, cruelty and the liberation of powerful subconscious urges. Brook, who saw and was impressed by Mnouchkine's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, was to direct his own famous production two years later.<sup>2</sup> But, for the most part, she keeps a considerable distance from the work of other directors, claiming that she seldom goes to the theatre.

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Mnouchkine is important not only as an innovator. Her ability to push ideas to an extreme has also made her an important figure within the developing tradition of the director. In this way her work can be seen to continue, extend and, in some cases, fulfil the ideas of other visionaries and pioneers who came before her. She has been consciously influenced by the work and writings of her predecessors, from Stanislavsky and Meyerhold onward.

Stanislavsky remains the most pervasively and subtly influential force on young directors even today. Mnouchkine explored and used his legacy in her earliest productions, but soon abandoned the Stanislavskian emphasis on psychological realism for a more explicitly theatrical view, which we now associate with Meyerhold. This open acknowledgment of the theatre as performance rather than the imitation of everyday life, to some extent under the acknowledged influence of writings by and about Meyerhold, has continued to be one of Mnouchkine's informing and enabling visions.

Brecht might be thought to be a major influence, and the company once began rehearsing his *Baal*, but despite some superficial similarities between their work, he seems not to have been especially significant. Mnouchkine is very cautious about the potential tyranny of Brecht's role in twentieth-century theatre. Nevertheless some signs of Brecht's heritage are present in the company's awareness of the political context of the plays they perform. Where the plays do not deal directly with twentieth-century European society, the company's approach will frequently seek to draw close comparisons between political aspects of the world of the play and that of the audience.

More significant is her position within a specifically French theatre tradition, and many important French directors and actors such as Roger Planchon, Charles Dullin and Louis Jouvet have had an impact on her directing style. Planchon agreed to be the patron of the Association Théâtrale des Etudiants de Paris, the precursor of the Théâtre du Soleil, at the time of its founding.

The most immediate French influence on her early work was the now legendary teacher Jacques Lecoq, with whom she studied for a time while already directing the Théâtre du Soleil. Lecoq's emphasis on acting as a corporeal and not just mental or vocal activity has clearly been fulfilled in the work of the company's best actors. But in addition to the importance of Lecoq's influence, the three French names which have been most frequently associated with Mnouchkine's work are Jacques Copeau, Antonin Artaud and Jean Vilar. Copeau is particularly important because his visionary aim, in the early years of the twentieth century, to revitalise the worn out conventions of theatre performance can be seen to have direct links with Mnouch-

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kine's work. There are certainly major differences in both their achievements and ideals; whereas Copeau rejected the idea of financial subsidy and was therefore constrained to make a virtue of austerity and the simplest of staging, Mnouchkine's is one of the most heavily funded private companies in France and her work is spectacularly opulent. And there can be little comparison between the scale and success of the Théâtre du Soleil for more than twenty years and the erratic achievements of Copeau's group of actors at the Vieux-Colombier and in the countryside.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, there are many important similarities. Like Copeau's, Mnouchkine's vision of theatre is based on the ideal of a collective company of equals working closely together over a long period of time, collaborating jointly on the creation of performances. Both directors have had a parental role within the group, and have tended to assemble companies of actors who are young, idealistic and dedicated. Both directors also see the troupe functioning as a school for its members, who are not professional actors engaged for specific productions.

One way in which Copeau's practice went further than Mnouchkine's was in the rejection of the city as a place for the creation of theatre. However, his uprooting of members of the company from central Paris to the Burgundian countryside has some parallels in the Théâtre du Soleil; the company early on had a dream of living and working collectively in the country, and this has been tried on rare occasions for short periods of time, though it was rejected as a normal working method very early in their development. But the Cartoucherie, where the Théâtre du Soleil has its headquarters, can be seen as a compromise between the continuing desire to work in natural, bucolic surroundings and the conflicting need for the city.

Copeau's writings were especially influential on the Théâtre du Soleil when they were first collected and published, long after his death. By coincidence, the Théâtre du Soleil was at that time engaged in devising a collectively scripted and created production. Copeau's ideas and aspirations as set out in his *Appels* coincided remarkably with what Mnouchkine was trying to achieve. In particular, Copeau's aim to rediscover the techniques of improvised theatre was vitally important, and along with it went an interest in the forms of *commedia dell'arte* and clowning. These two traditions, which Copeau and his actors experimented with, were to be the direct basis of two major productions by the Théâtre du Soleil, as well as informing much of its subsequent work.<sup>4</sup> Mnouchkine has explored these aims of Copeau more completely and for a longer time than he himself was able to do.

Both Copeau and Mnouchkine have a penchant for working in large, open performance spaces, and both have used the idea of the *tréteau*, the traditional raised wooden stage of French fairground performers, implanted within a larger acting space. The rejection of pictorial sets in favour of the more

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architectural use of permanent structural materials, like concrete, provides other parallels. A photograph of the interior of the Vieux-Colombier<sup>5</sup> showing prominent roof-beams and skylights above an open acting space without wings has a quite striking resemblance to the fixed features of the interior of the Cartoucherie.

Artaud is another theatre visionary who was unable to fulfil many of his own ideas, and Mnouchkine again, though to a more limited extent in this case and with less direct influence, has brought some of them to fruition.

Artaud was greatly impressed by what he saw of Asian theatre when a Balinese dance company visited Paris in 1931, especially in what he regarded as their privileging of the physical over the verbal aspects of theatre. His statement 'The theatre is oriental' has often been quoted by both Mnouchkine and by commentators on her work as a way of explaining some of the more unusual aspects of her productions. The Asian influence also derives from Copeau, who had been one of the first European directors to see the possibility of rejuvenating Western theatre by using Asian theatre forms, but in the case of the Théâtre du Soleil Artaud seems to have been more significant. Artaud's slogan is often misapplied to Mnouchkine's productions to explain the superficially Asian appearance of her sets and costumes, but Artaud's focus on the physical rather than the verbal in Balinese theatre is also an important influence on the work of the Théâtre du Soleil.

Another of Artaud's phrases is also often applied to the Théâtre du Soleil: his concept of 'affective athleticism'. This phrase has been used, rather inaccurately, by French theatre critics when discussing the purely physical athleticism of a production like *Richard II*. But Artaud's idea was that the actor should be an athlete of the emotions to the same extent as others are athletes of the body, and this emotional athleticism has been attained much more completely by Mnouchkine's company and especially by Georges Bigot, who is the company's most prominent actor, than by those Artaud himself worked with, to judge by accounts of the first production of *Les Cenci*, for example.

The influence of Artaud is felt deeply throughout the company, especially his sense that to be an actor is a total commitment, to the brink of self-destruction. Georges Bigot suggests that

to be an actor without burning, to be an artist without burning oneself up a little, without giving of oneself, is not possible ... An actor is someone who allows himself to be impregnated by something, who allows things to live ... who has the courage to open himself, to open his soul, to the service of theatre.<sup>6</sup>

Jean Vilar is the third of the significant names from the twentieth-century French tradition to be linked with Mnouchkine, and this time the link is a personal one. Vilar is surprisingly little known in the English-speaking world,

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but his influence on French theatre since the Second World War has been immense. His two best-known achievements were the establishment of the Théâtre National Populaire and the founding of the Avignon Festival. Vilar himself was an enthusiastic supporter of Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil in their early days and invited them on several occasions to perform in Avignon. There was even widespread speculation that Mnouchkine would take over the directorship of the Festival after the retirement of Vilar's immediate successor, Paul Puaux.

The practice of theatre for the people has been the major link between Vilar's work and Mnouchkine's. The Théâtre du Soleil has from its early days self-consciously defined itself as people's theatre, and it quickly adopted the Théâtre National Populaire's practice of establishing contact with working-class audiences through links with trade unions and the organisation of groups of factory workers to come to see productions. Many other theatre companies now also organise audience groups in this way, but there is often a hint that the workers who are bussed in are being both patronised and exploited by such companies, who see them primarily as a guaranteed way of filling seats. The Théâtre du Soleil, however, has always approached this practice conscientiously, and commentators have seen Mnouchkine's theatre as the true heir to Vilar and the TNP. Her productions have at times even been compared with the theatres of classical Greece and of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, which are sometimes perceived as unifying their society by providing shared experiences which reach across class boundaries and by giving the social discourse a set of common reference-points.

Mnouchkine's work with the Théâtre du Soleil is thus a blend of traditional and innovative elements. In terms of working methods, she is the only director to have sustained a company organised on collective lines for such a long period, and she has used this structure and approach to create, repeatedly over the course of more than twenty years, some of the most theatrically innovative productions in the late twentieth century of both classic texts and new writing. She continues to explore connections between contemporary theatre and the historical traditions which inform it. After the conclusion of *L'Indiade* in 1988 the company talked about creating a new play, with a script by Hélène Cixous, dealing with the Resistance to the German occupation of France during the Second World War. This is still a controversial and divisive topic in France, and the closest Mnouchkine has ever come to dealing with contemporary French history.

However, after the completion in 1989 of *La Nuit miraculeuse*, her film to mark the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of the Rights of Man in the French Chamber of Deputies, she began work on a cycle of classical Greek tragedies collectively titled *Les Atrides*, consisting of Euri-

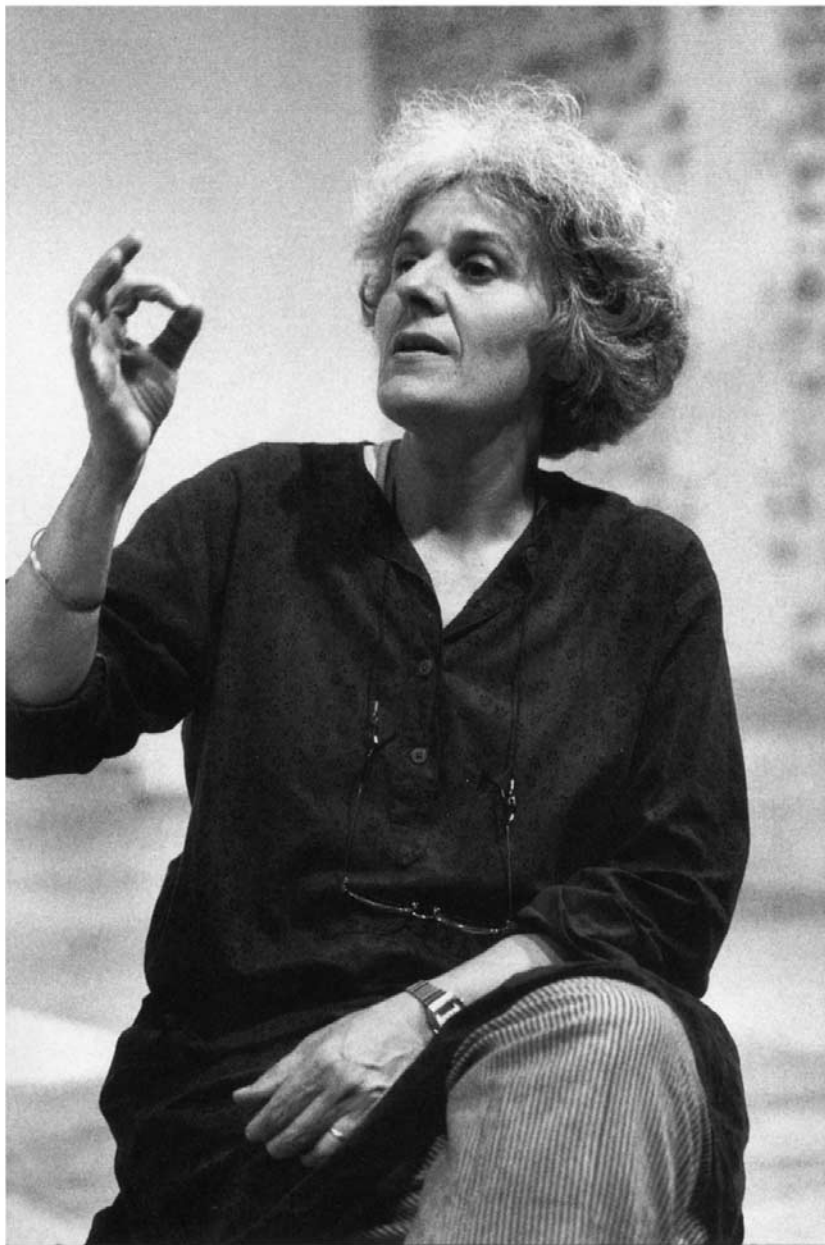
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pides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *The Choephoroi*, with plans to augment this cycle with further productions of *The Eumenides* and a new play by Hélène Cixous, *Voile noire et voile blanche*. Typically of Mnouchkine's way of working, this retreat into theatre history is not only a theatrical end in itself, but is considered part of an ongoing research project looking for new ways forward for contemporary European theatre, and new forms which can confront controversial contemporary topics.



# 1 Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil

Because Ariane Mnouchkine has chosen to work exclusively with one theatre company, the Théâtre du Soleil, of which she was one of the founders in 1964, it is even more difficult than usual to distinguish her work as a director from that of the actors, designers and other company members. To talk about Ariane Mnouchkine's work as a director therefore is also necessarily to talk about the Théâtre du Soleil, its implementation of collectivist principles, and its home at the Cartoucherie.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE THÉÂTRE DU SOLEIL AND THE IDEA OF THE COLLECTIVE

A superficial investigation of the work of the Théâtre du Soleil reveals several seemingly contradictory aspects. For a company whose goal is explicitly political and 'popular' (in the sense of aiming to provide 'people's theatre'), the theatrical practice is unusually aesthetic, opulent, and committed to the highest possible standards of performance and staging – far from any ideas of 'rough' or 'poor' theatre. For a company which publicly articulates feminist ideals and which is led by a woman there is surprisingly little obvious feminist practice. And perhaps the most striking apparent contradiction is that the collective structure seems in strange contrast with the prominence, in the public mind and within the company itself, of Ariane Mnouchkine as director. Many of these contradictions are difficult to explain, but some of them at least can be seen to be more apparent than real when viewed in the context of the special conditions which apply within the life of the troupe.

An essential characteristic of Mnouchkine's work as a director and of the work of the Théâtre du Soleil is that, perhaps uniquely among the great theatre companies of the world in the 1980s, it has retained the collective structure which developed and evolved out of the utopian experiments of the 1960s. While there have been significant changes in the detailed organisation of this structure over the years, the collective spirit is still strong and characterises many aspects of the Théâtre du Soleil's work.

A common misconception is that the company is, or has been in the past, a kind of commune where all the members live together in the same way as the Living Theatre did in the 1960s. This has never been the case. Mnouchkine herself has talked about a period early in the company's history where the

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members did indeed have a fantasy of living together in the countryside in the Ardèche region in the south of France, combining theatre with raising sheep. However, these ideas were quickly abandoned as being unrealistically romantic, and the company has never practised a communal lifestyle except for a few brief periods where it has retreated from Paris temporarily. For example, in 1968 the group lived for two months at Arc-et-Senans, a former salt factory near the Jura Mountains designed by the eighteenth-century utopian architect Claude-Nicholas Ledoux.

The original structure was a formal and legal workers' co-operative with frequent meetings to discuss and decide matters of policy. This co-operative was set up by nine members (Gérard Hardy, Martine Franck, Françoise Tournafond, Georges Donzenac, Myrrha Donzenac, Ariane Mnouchkine, Jean-Claude Penchenat, Jean-Pierre Tailhade, and Philippe Léotard) who each contributed 900 francs to its establishment. Even at this early stage, however, Mnouchkine had the dominant influence. This created tensions which have been a recurrent feature of the company, and have been the cause of some of the most frequent criticisms of her work. In the early days it even precipitated the departure of some members, but it was recognised by many in the company as essential to the group's ability to make decisions and hold together. It may even have been Mnouchkine's autocratic insistence on maintaining a collective structure which has ensured that this kind of organisational principle has survived. Philippe Léotard, in discussing his early experiences with the company, has commented on this seemingly paradoxical aspect and on the need for Mnouchkine's strong guiding hand even from the beginning.

One must not be utopian. If there has been a small collectivist phenomenon at the Théâtre du Soleil it is due to the authority, to the tyranny even, of Ariane. Right from the start, the Théâtre du Soleil was the gathering of a group of actors around a director. And luckily there was a director recognised by everyone. If we had wanted to direct collectively we would still be in the process of thinking about our first production, and we would never have got around to performing.<sup>1</sup>

Over the years the Théâtre du Soleil has grown gradually from the original nine to a company of more than sixty full-time members, and this has resulted in some significant changes. The company's legal status as a workers' co-operative technically still exists, but it is now something of a fiction. Mnouchkine herself is the only one of the founder members of the co-operative to remain (although Gérard Hardy returned to perform in *Norodom Sihanouk*, and Martine Franck still continues to photograph all the productions while working mainly as a photographer with her agency, Magnum). Nevertheless, several of the early co-operative members retain their legal status with the company. On the other hand, many of the current members of the Théâtre du Soleil are not legally members of the co-operative.