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

Adrian Kiernander

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This is the first full-length study of the renowned French theatre director Ariane Mnouchkine and her company, the Théâtre du Soleil. Mnouchkine first came to the attention of the English-speaking world with her 1970 production about the French Revolution, *1789*, and later with her Shakespeare cycle influenced by Japanese and Indian theatre techniques, which was seen at the Olympic Arts Festival in Los Angeles in 1984. Today Mnouchkine is recognised as one of the first women directors to achieve an international reputation and her productions, spanning from Shakespeare to contemporary drama, have been widely acclaimed as being in the forefront of twentieth-century theatre.

Having worked with Mnouchkine's company in 1985, Adrian Kiernander was in a unique position to observe her directorial style and working methods. In this fascinating study, which includes an interview with Mnouchkine, Kiernander analyses the elements which inform her work as well as the impact she has had on modern theatre.

The book will be of interest to theatre practitioners, students and scholars of drama and theatre history and French studies, as well as to the general reader. It includes a chronology of Mnouchkine's productions and theatre career and is illustrated with photographs from productions.

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DIRECTORS IN PERSPECTIVE

General editor: Christopher Innes

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What characterises modern theatre above all is continual stylistic innovation, in which theory and presentation have combined to create a wealth of new forms – naturalism, expressionism, epic theatre, and so forth – in a way that has made directors the leading figures rather than dramatists. To a greater extent than is perhaps generally realised, it has been directors who have provided dramatic models for playwrights, though of course there are many different variations in this relationship. In some cases a dramatist's themes challenge a director to create new performance conditions (Stanislavski and Chekhov), or a dramatist turns director to formulate an appropriate style for his work (Brecht); alternatively a director writes plays to correspond with his theory (Artaud), or creates communal scripts out of exploratory work with actors (Chaikin, Grotowski). Some directors are identified with a single theory (Craig), others gave definitive shape to a range of styles (Reinhardt); the work of some has an ideological basis (Stein), while others work more pragmatically (Bergman).

Generally speaking, those directors who have contributed to what is distinctly 'modern' in today's theatre stand in much the same relationship to the dramatic texts they work with, as composers do to librettists in opera. However, since theatrical performance is the most ephemeral of the arts and the only easily reproducible element is the text, critical attention has tended to focus on the playwright. This series is designed to redress the balance by providing an overview of selected directors' stage work: those who helped to formulate modern theories of drama. Their key productions have been reconstructed from promptbooks, revues, scene-designs, photographs, diaries, correspondence and – where these productions are contemporary – documented by first-hand description, interviews with the director, and so forth. Apart from its intrinsic interest, this record allows a critical perspective, testing ideas against practical problems and achievements. In each case, too, the director's work is set in context by indicating the source of his ideas and their influence, the organisation of his acting company, and his relationship to the theatrical or political establishment, so to bring out wider issues: the way theatre both reflects and influences assumptions about the nature of man and his social role.

Christopher Innes

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to the memory of
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What is the theatre? That is a question which I will ask myself until I die.
Perhaps I shall arrive in sight of it, perhaps I shall arrive at the doors of the
theatre, like a traveller in a story or in a dream. (Ariane Mnouchkine quoted
by Dominique Jamet, 'Ariane Mnouchkine accrochée au rideau',

Le Quotidien de Paris, 7 December 1981).

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Preface and acknowledgments

The research for this study began during 1985 when I spent a year studying French theatre with the aid of a scholarship from the French Ministère des Relations Extérieures. During that year I had the good fortune to be able to work with the Théâtre du Soleil while they were preparing *L'Histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, roi du Cambodge*. It is to the company members that I owe the greatest debt of thanks, for the warmth of their welcome and their continuing hospitality, and especially to Ariane Mnouchkine herself, who has been most generous with her valuable time.

I owe her a special debt for agreeing to my writing this book despite her initial reservations; in the past she has been unwilling to allow the publication of a full-scale study of the company in case such a book implied that their work was somehow at an end. It is because this is far from being the case that this book does not pretend to be a definitive history of the company – it is written at a time when it is still fully involved in the production of theatre, and I hope the definitive history will not be able to be written for many years to come.

The book is rather a long-overdue study in English of Mnouchkine as a theatre director, focussing on her company, her working methods, and her achievements to date, all which are nevertheless closely bound up with the history of the company. Instead of proceeding chronologically, it begins with a general description of the company's structure and operation, Mnouchkine's role within it, and her personal approach to the business of directing. It then concentrates on giving a detailed description of *Norodom Sihanouk* as the one example of their work which I have been able to observe at close quarters from the inside. Only after this does the study go back to the origins of the company and attempt to sketch in sequentially its historical development. I should add that all translations from the French are my own.

I owe many other debts of gratitude; to the French Ministère des Relations Extérieures, and especially to Etienne Wermester, the French Cultural and Scientific Attaché in Wellington in 1984 who arranged my scholarship; to the staff of the Association Française de l'Action Artistique; and to the University of Queensland, and particularly my colleagues in the Drama Section of the English Department who have made it possible for me to complete the manuscript.

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