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Encounters with
Ariane Mnouchkine
Erecting a Monument to the Ephemeral

(traduction Leslie Wickes)

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A book, however simple it may be, is rarely the work of one single person. This book is no exception to the rule. I would like to thank those – and they were numerous – who, whether from near or far, contributed to making these interviews possible: first, the Théâtre du Soleil (Sophie Moscoso, Pierre Salesne, Liliana Andreoni, Sarah Cornell) and of course, Ariane Mnouchkine, who consented to answer all the questions, as well as the CRSH, which partly financed this research. A special thank you goes to Elisabeth Larsen, who brought a sharp eye and inexhaustible energy to her attentive re-reading of the manuscript and made all the necessary changes. I would also like to thank Martine Franck and the Magnum agency, who permitted me to reproduce photos of Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil in this work.
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We work at transmitting the image

Theatre, is the here, the now, truly and quickly

Each character contains all the others

What tradition do we in the west have that can be balanced against the Orient?

There is something “of the moment” and there is a meeting

Wanting to climb the mountain

I see us as dinosaurs, completely against the current

To share is a willingness to receive

At a certain point, a particular play says: “Well, I’m the next challenge”

Nothing must come before the beauty of the work and respect for the audience

What discourages me, is disenchantment, blasé attitudes, cynicism… I need a certain religiousness, a relationship to the sacred

There will always be dreams

Have the courage to follow instructions to the letter

Having credulity

I believe in the pedagogy of the humble imitation

I’m not very good at meditating

An audience, is a gathering of humanity at its best

I find your question terrifying

The classics are intellectual jogging
There are as few useless noises as possible.

What’s important, is that the public goes to the theatre.
When I first contacted the Théâtre du Soleil in 1988, my hope was to interview Ariane Mnouchkine about her art and the laws of theatre. She has worked on these fundamental laws for more than thirty years and once said of them: “They’re so mysterious, so volatile! You discover them one night, and then, the next day, you have to seek them again, because they’ve disappeared.”

What are these laws? Ariane Mnouchkine doesn’t have a definitive answer, but the Théâtre du Soleil (and the work that it has accomplished) offers one part of the answer because the Théâtre is, in itself, a theatrical school.

The quest for these fundamental laws shapes the interviews that are collected here. By approaching the Théâtre du Soleil in this way, I wanted to know what the theories were that Mnouchkine based her direction of actors on: Did she have intellectual mentors in the past? Does she still have some today? According to her, are there theories that are useful to artists? And, according to her, in the absence of theories, what models do practitioners draw their inspiration from? Throughout these queries, it was the question of the actor’s performance that was at the center of my preoccupations.

I wanted to know, more specifically, how Mnouchkine worked with her actors, what qualities she expected of them, what were the tangible faults that she condemned in actors, what training she felt it was useful to have, what was her role as director? …A great many questions which Ariane Mnouchkine generously answered over the course of our meetings.

Of course, as a spectator I had followed the entire progress of the Théâtre du Soleil with fascination, from L’Âge D’Or, which left me completely dazzled, to La Ville Parjure, taking in Méphisto, Richard II, Henri IV, La Nuit des Rois, L’Indiade, and Les Atrides. Nothing was missing from my list but Norodom Sihanouk.

Consequently, it was the other side of Ariane Mnouchkine that interested me, not the woman director, but the actor’s director. I wanted to know her better, to discover her profound convictions regarding the actor’s performance and the training of performers.

Throughout these investigations, I discovered a strong woman, an artist entirely devoted to the theatre, a woman who was demanding, confident, who refused compromises and was always in quest of theatre. I also found a woman who listened to actors, who was in dialogue with them, waiting for the tiny spark that suddenly crystallizes into real theatre on stage.

Over the course of these investigations, I was able to ascertain that of course, like everyone else, Mnouchkine has some certainties, but that she does not establish them as dogma. She knows too well that certainties are fragile and that a mere nothing is enough to shake them. The beauty, the cruelty of the theatre is precisely in the ephemeral nature of the laws found in it. True on one night, they become impalpable the next day, and the paths that lead to them are difficult to retrace. They must then be rediscovered. That is the grandeur of the theatre and the artist, but it is also its finitude.

It is therefore not surprising that each Théâtre du Soleil show has, for me, always been a meeting: a meeting with a text, with performers, with a place, with a team and, of course, with a director. Each of the Théâtre du Soleil’s shows has always brought me immense pleasure because the performance is always at the meeting point, because that is
where the pleasure of theatre is found, and because the spectator in me loves this plunge into the universe of fiction and story. It is always a celebration. Although sometimes certain shows have touched me less than others, there is not a single one, without exception, that has ever left me indifferent, and whenever I approach the Cartoucherie it is with a particular anticipation and a great deal of joy.

It was consequently not surprising that I wanted to extend this pleasure by penetrating more deeply into the Théâtre du Soleil’s methods in order to bring the relationship between Mnouchkine, her actors, and their performance to light.

This investigation polarized around three encounters. The first took place in the Cartoucherie in 1988. It consisted of an interview during which, despite her extreme fatigue and difficult conditions, Ariane Mnouchkine answered all of my questions while the drums and the cymbals of L’Indiade could be heard from the nearby stage.

The second meeting was at the audition Mnouchkine held in the spring of 1988, which I attended along with two hundred other participants. The audition lasted seven days and was an extraordinary opportunity for actors to learn. Over the course of seven days, the actors improvised on the theme of “occupation” and, all the while, Mnouchkine observed their performances, offering advice and criticisms, assisting each actor in the construction of their character, helping them understand the fragility of the actor’s craft and the importance of the smallest details.

The third encounter occurred in Montreal in 1992. It was a public meeting with local theatrical schools organized by the University of Quebec at Montreal Theatre Department1. Ariane consented to the idea of this meeting spontaneously and generously, despite her busy schedule. Every public meeting with Mnouchkine is an event, and this was certainly the case in this instance.

The audience was numerous that day, close to eight hundred people were spread between two rooms. In the second room, the meeting was being broadcast on a large screen. The audience in the second room could see those of us in the first, but we could only hear them. Mnouchkine was the only one able to see the people asking her questions in the second room on a video monitor placed in front of her. We were praying to the gods (the Greek gods, of course) that it would all work tolerably well. Fortunately, the gods were kind and everything worked properly.

The absolutely exceptional fact that we had gathered in such large numbers demonstrated the extent to which this meeting responded to a need, to a necessity, to an expectation on the part of the public. On that day, spread over the two rooms, there were representatives present from all the Montreal schools as well as the rest of the region: the National Theatre School of Canada, the Montreal Conservatory of the Dramatic Arts, the Lionel-Groulx College Theatre Option, and the Saint-Hyacinthe College Theatre Option, as well as the McGill and Concordia University Theatre Programs. Of course, there were also representatives from the University of Quebec at Montreal Theatre Department. There were equally members of the profession present, along with representative members of the public, the “normal public” that Ariane Mnouchkine so often mentions and particularly enjoys.

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1 This meeting was made possible by the Théâtre du Soleil’s visit to Montreal. They were invited to perform Les Atrides by the director of the Festival of the Americas, Marie Hélène Falcon.
We were all gathered, something that happens only rarely, too rarely. It was a historic first. Like *Les Atrides*, the meeting reminded us all that theatre can still gather a crowd and become an event as it was in ancient Greece.

The meeting was initially intended to be about two hours long. Ariane Mnouchkine agreed to extend this time if the discussion necessitated it. It lasted for four hours. The performers were present for the first two hours, but had to leave afterwards in order to get ready for the evening’s performance. Mnouchkine remained by herself for the last two.

* The pages that follow reconstruct the different stages of this journey: their aim is to investigate performance in the Théâtre du Soleil, its foundations, its objectives, and its strategies. They do not aspire to trace the progress of the Théâtre du Soleil through its creations, but rather to investigate, beyond these diverse creations, the constants that guide the actor’s work.

Some of these texts have already been published elsewhere, but I believe it is useful to reproduce them here because they deal with the actor’s performance. The answers offered by the Théâtre du Soleil in these texts complete the content of the text that forms the core of this volume: Ariane Mnouchkine’s meeting with the theatrical schools.

The book also needed a title, a task that is always slightly difficult when the work in question is a collection of interviews. Then I remembered that, in Ariane Mnouchkine’s preface to *Le Théâtre en France*, she said: “Can we erect a monument to the ephemeral? Every book about theatre is, to some extent, such a monument. The good and the bad. Incomplete works of impossible resurrection.”

That is what I have tried to achieve here: To recreate the impossible by attempting to capture the ephemeral.

[Photo: *Ariane Mnouchkine and her actors during the production of Henry IV (Shakespeare).*]

“Mnouchkine’s primary conviction is that Occidental theatre has not created any theatrical forms if not the Commedia dell’arte, which is itself inspired by the Orient. Quoting Artaud, Mnouchkine openly affirms that ‘the theatre is Oriental’.” (18)

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The issues encountered in a study of performance are at the centre of Ariane Mnouchkine’s theatrical methods. In effect, practitioners who have succeeded, as she has, in maintaining a company driven by the single objective of serving the theatre for nearly thirty years, are rare. I personally know of only a few other examples of these lifelong enterprises: that of Peter Brook in Paris, that of Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret in Holstebro in Denmark, and that of the Bread and Puppet around Peter Schumann in the United States. There are, no doubt, a few others (Elizabeth LeCompte, Richard Foreman), but examples remain rare and are generally lack the longevity of the Théâtre du Soleil.

The progeny of the nineteen-sixties, these collective structures, of which the Living is a memorable example, dissolved with the advent of the nineteen-eighties and the years that followed. Approaches once again became more individual, centred on production, not companies. In the midst of this panorama, the Théâtre du Soleil is unique in the French theatrical landscape.

Why then focus on performance here? Because it is evidently the most important thing for any actor or director, but also and above all because the preoccupation with performance in central to Ariane Mnouchkine’s methods.

If the Théâtre du Soleil exists, if many actors have spent long periods with it and some remain to this day, it is because everyone’s first priority is not to create a show, or even a production, and even less to stage a text. The first, constant, permanent priority is to work on the actor’s performance.

This is a constant preoccupation in Mnouchkine’s thoughts, from her very beginnings until today. This preoccupation incites her to offer an open audition and free workshop on performance every year for more that two hundred participants, two hundred budding actors selected from several hundred, sometimes nearly a thousand, who apply. If someone asks Mnouchkine about her reasons for this, she answers that the training of actors is an enormous preoccupation for her nowadays because it concerns her that training in performance is disappearing.

Also, over the course of many years, Mnouchkine has acquired a certain wisdom, a certain knowledge of the laws of theatre, an ingrained wisdom, gained bit by bit, that she refuses to commit to paper, because “everything has already been written on the subject and it suffices to reread Zéami, Jouvet, Copeau, and Dullin” to see for yourself. Despite this deep conviction we don’t invent performance theories anymore, for her own part, Ariane Mnouchkine has nevertheless rediscovered a few fundamental laws, mysterious, intangible laws, that that elude us even as we grasp them and that must be incessantly rediscovered.

What are the laws of theatre? Ariane Mnouchkine obviously refuses to answer this question; she refuses as if she possesses the answer, the only true answer. She does however, have a few certainties that when placed end to end ultimately reveal, if not her theory, at least her practice and the foundations of the work done by the Théâtre du Soleil.

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1 See the interview I conducted with her, which is included in this volume: “Interview with Ariane Mnouchkine: we don’t invent performance theories anymore”, chapter 3, page 40.
Nevertheless, it goes without saying that, though these laws are precise, they cannot be edified in to dogma. The actual practice of theatre infinitely surpasses them.

The theatricality of Oriental performance

Mnouchkine’s primary conviction is that Occidental theatre has not created any theatrical forms if not the Commedia dell’arte, which is itself inspired by the Orient. Quoting Artaud, Mnouchkine openly affirms that ‘the theatre is Oriental’.

We, as Occidentals, have only created realistic forms. This is to say that we haven’t created any “forms”, in the proper sense of the word². In 1989, she reaffirmed: Oriental theories have left their mark on everyone in the theatre. They have influenced Artaud, Brecht and all the others because the Orient is the cradle of theatre. So, that is where we seek theatre. Artaud said: “The theatre is Oriental.” This observation goes a long way […] I would say that the actor seeks everything in the Orient. Simultaneously myth and reality, simultaneously interiority and exteriorization, that famous autopsy of the heart by the body. We also seek non-realism there, theatricality itself³.

The influence of the Orient on the Théâtre du Soleil is evident to anyone who has followed the Soleil’s work since the Shakespearian plays. In the case of the Shakespearian plays, Mnouchkine was inspired by Kabuki, Nô and Bunraku, and later added the influence of certain Indian dances, joined by a Greek influence in Les Atrides. In that case, Mnouchkine once again explained the emphasis she places on the Orient:

What interests me in the Oriental tradition, is that the actor is a creature of metaphors. His art consists of showing passion, of telling the story of a human being’s interior… In that tradition I feel that the actor’s mission is to open man, like a pomegranate. Not to show his bowels, but to draw them, to transform them into signs, shapes, movements, and rhythms⁴.

Characters who are bearers of the story

In order to create these metaphors and create the theatricality of the character who becomes the bearer of signs (and an actor creating emotional resonance on stage), Mnouchkine chooses a method where the character is, first and foremost, the bearer of the story. As in Oriental theatre, the actor must, above all, tell a story. This was the case in the Shakespearian plays, and it was also the case in Les Atrides and La Ville Parjure. For this reason, the Théâtre du Soleil’s characters are often archetypes. While preserving a very strong sense of individuality, they nevertheless belong to a larger tradition and

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² Catalyse 4, 1986.
³ See Chapter 3, page 49.
thus bear the stamp of history. This is the case for Norodom Sihanouk or Ghandi, and it is even more so for the Mother in *La Ville Parjure*.

Avoiding psychology, which trivializes the story, the characters the Théâtre du Soleil creates never carry the totality of a tale by themselves. This task is distributed among all the protagonists, making each an essential cog in the larger story. The cemetery beggars in *La Ville Parjure* and the chorus in *Les Atrides* come to mind as examples. Doubtless this explains why there really are no secondary roles the Théâtre du Soleil’s plays. All of the characters are important and carry, within themselves, a fundamental part of the story.

This rule has its opposite in the respect that, while it is clear that one character cannot bear the weight of the entire story alone, it is also clear that each character must carry all the others within itself.

[…]

the rule that seems the most important to us is to remind ourselves that all the characters, all of them, have a complete being. We also tell ourselves, and this is a little dogmatic, that each character in a play contains all the others […] Each one is complete.

The actor creating his character must focus his efforts on exteriorizing the signs, psychological work, on the contrary tempts him to interiorize the signs, and to show only the effects.

This is why Mnouchkine prefers to speak about the soul of the characters, their passions, rather than their psychology. She prefers this because psychology trivializes, and the actors at the Théâtre du Soleil distrust it. It reduces the actor’s performance, distancing him from the theatricality he seeks.

**Finding the situation**

This concept of characters explains why the actor, under Mnouchkine, works primarily with situations, with states not emotions. The emotion will come on its own when the correct sign meets with the spectator’s reception. It will come from the recognition. In other words, the emotion must not be programmed into the play. It is neither a tool of the actor, nor a gauge with which to measure the accuracy of a character. Emotion is not sought for its own sake, but rather for what it means. It is the result of an encounter that takes place between the actor and the spectator.

Consequently, the primary task of an actor is to find a situation that is true and real, but not necessarily realistic. Mnouchkine was already insisting on this aspect of performance in the era of *L’Âge D’Or*, in an interview conducted by Denis Bablet. Since that time she has never ceased to reaffirm it.

To begin with, one must find the situation. The situation must be real.

It is also necessary to create a state linked to this situation. The situation is the starting point of all theatrical work. It is at the centre of the actor’s method and it is what

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gives the action colour, truthfulness, and also meaning. The situation is what sets the story in motion and what allows the character to be defined.

This situation can, and even should be simple. Mnouchkine tells the actors who come to her workshops that it is useless to stage *Les Miserables* as a whole. A few lines will suffice. It is unnecessary to load the characters with an entire history that cripples them before they can even emerge on stage.

The situation requires that the actor work at the details, the precise facts. It is there, in the small, real, and true actions, that the character will acquire the strength of its existence and that emotion with be born.

Yet this work on detail is threatened by two mistakes that plague actors. The first is that too often, the actor has a tendency to perform the “idea” of the situation or the character and not the action itself, which leads to a gestural “verbiage” that stifles the purity of the performance. The second comes from actors’ tendency to let themselves be carried away by “the task that daunts them, or the passivity that leads to inaction”.

In his quest, the actor’s principal ally is his own imagination, which Mnouchkine freely admits is a muscle that requires much exercise. An imagination must be cultivated, maintained.

To achieve this, Mnouchkine gives actors a few simple pieces of advice, simple, but nevertheless fundamental: the action must be precise, the situation must be clear, and above all, the actor must only perform one thing at a time. In effect, one of Mnouchkine’s most common criticisms of actors in her workshops is that they are too agitated on stage and they seem to want to perform everything at once. Thus the “thread” of the story, the “setting” of the action becomes confused and the spectator no longer perceives anything.

From this perspective, Ariane Mnouchkine has an approach that is often minimalist, and strongly inspired by the Commedia dell’arte, masques, or Oriental theatre. Actors must know how to do only one thing at a time, and to achieve this, they must know how to manage their pauses, how not to become caught up in the excitement, in the action that can block the body. They must learn to give themselves breathing room, to inscribe pauses, to accept immobility.

They must also know how to take their time, the time required to enter into a state, to establish a situation, to explore it. Mnouchkine observes that often, actors are in too great a rush to express what they have to say; also, instead of living a situation, instead of showing it, they say it – in words or gestures –, causing one of the fundamental principles of theatre to disappear: “recognition”. Spectators no longer have the luxury of recognizing a state or a situation because the actors decode the scene for them and inform them of it through their words or gestures. This is close to the stage “verbiage” Mnouchkine denounces and attempts to avoid.

Also, in the course of improvisations, Mnouchkine often advises actors to eschew overly long actions that ultimately muddy the image as a whole as weigh down the process, just as she asks them to avoid overly slow actions that slow down the rhythm and arrest the action. During her workshops she often likes to use the phrase: “It’s too slow to be truthful”. Why should we express slowness through slowness? Theatre dislikes such tautologies. Actors only have a few seconds in which there can be theatre, and they cannot waste these few seconds in useless pretension. She observes: “You cannot say to the spectator: wait, I’m getting myself ready”. When the actor emerges on stage, the
action must be already begun, the situation must be already defined, and the state of the character must be already evident.

Hence the importance Mnouchkine and her actors accord to the characters’ entrances and exits, gripping and superb entrances and exits where the action continues to play out even in the immobile bodies. The chorus’ entrances in Les Atrides and Clytemnestra’s exit with the dead Agamemnon at the end of the eponymous play come to mind.

**Being in the present**

If the characters’ entrances and exits hold such a privileged place the Théâtre du Soleil’s aesthetic, it is because they launch or interrupt the action while always giving the impression that what the spectators are witnessing is the spectacle of a story that is taking place right in front of them.

The story takes place on stage in the immediacy of the moment, before the spectators, with the other actors, in collaboration with them, and performers must know how to inscribe themselves within this immediacy and be present. To achieve this, they must concentrate, not on what will happen on stage or on what has happened, but on what is happening in that moment. Mnouchkine demands that the actor be entirely, absolutely, in the present.

Here again, actors must eschew what they know will happen in order to grasp the present. This is why Mnouchkine accords little importance to memory as a skill to drive performance⁷. For her, what is important is that actors become visionaries and come to believe in, to see “the sky above them, the rain”, to believe in what they are performing, in what they are, in what they incarnate, to “believe in what the other incarnates, believe in his troubles, his strengths, his anger, his joy, his sensuality, his love, his hate […]. They must believe”⁸.

This belief is learned, it is developed in several ways. One of these is the gaze. One must know how to look, listen, understand. One must also have enough humility to copy, to copy another’s work, not from the exterior, but from the interior. Mnouchkine openly tells her actors: “Have the humility to place your feet in the tracks of those who have preceded you.” “Accept that sometimes you must be a humble copy. Resist originality at any cost.” That is to say, the actor must be convex and concave at the same time, convex in order to project, and concave in order to receive.

Performing, as Mnouchkine says, is learning to climb a mountain. To a participant who asked her, during her visit to Montreal, what were the essential qualities necessary to the actor in order to climb this mountain, Mnouchkine responded: “Enormous amounts of

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⁸ See chapter 3, page 47.
courage, patience, and perhaps the need to reach the heights […] but also good calves”⁹. Mnouchkine’s method of never separating the performance from its bodily inscription truly puts the emphasis on the enormous amount of physical work that is the task of every actor.

Mnouchkine reminds us that, far from the sublime summits of an endlessly possible transcendence, theatre is performed in the here and now, immediately, and totally.

It seems obvious that actors must strive to obtain a “body that is as free as possible, as highly trained as possible,” but Mnouchkine adds that they must “also have imagination, a trained imagination and an immense need to surpass”.

What role then do directors play in this process? They work to “transmit the image”. Ariane Mnouchkine’s modesty conceals a master, always listening to her actors, always receptive, ready to seize the unexpected, the sublime, the true, the real, and the poignant.

“I feel that when we embark upon a work, we embark upon an adventure” Mnouchkine says, “you think you’re discovering India but you discover America.” The works of Ariane Mnouchkine and the actors of the Théâtre du Soleil stand as permanent proof of these discoveries.

[Photo: The Cartoucherie that houses the Théâtre du Soleil.]

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⁹ She had already evoked a similar connection between performance training and physical training when she affirmed that the imagination “can be strengthened, it can be exercised”. See Chapter 3, page 46.
A Workshop at the Soleil: An Extraordinary Lesson in Theatre

Of all the professions, the theatre is the one whose training is the most difficult to undertake and to pursue. After the schools and the conservatories, which are the royalty of theatrical training for artists, even though the teaching they offer is periodically contested, come the universities, which have created practical teaching programs for over ten years (this statement is more accurate with respect to U.S. and Canadian universities, who possess budgets that allow them to establish genuine training programs, than to French universities, which remain terribly under funded).

Other paths exist aside from these two modes of training, such as the seminars and workshops that certain theatrical companies (for instance those of Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Brook) provide for their members. Sometimes, on rare occasions, they open these workshops to others, to artists with or without talent, with or without prestigious affiliations, but with a real desire to improve themselves and to learn. There are never enough places for all of these actors in pursuit of improvement. Many workshops are available on the market, but they do not all have the same worth or the same appeal.

Among the most popular workshops, there are some which are not advertised, that are only known to initiates; workshops whose dates are spread among friends before they are even confirmed by those running them. Ariane Mnouchkine’s annual workshop is one of these. It is highly anticipated and heavily sought. Candidates sign up in large numbers from all over the world, but they are not automatically accepted. A preliminary interview, conducted by Mnouchkine alone, determines those she will keep and those who must go. A selection process is necessary because the candidates are numerous (about a thousand in 1988). In addition to the interviews, Ariane Mnouchkine assumes complete control over everything that happens during the few days of the workshop.

Nothing fundamental is said during the few minutes the interview lasts, simply the reasons why each candidate wants to attend the workshop. However, Mnouchkine chooses one candidate over another according to these criteria. Doubtless she perceives a certain sincerity, a certain sensibility, an anticipation that sometimes tips the balance. The candidates themselves are often unable to say what might have guided the final decision.

A group of two hundred and twenty remained at the end of this process, hailing from forty-two different countries. Two hundred for a workshop that would last for seven days, perhaps ten. In effect, a rumour was spreading among the workshop participants that, in the past, Ariane Mnouchkine had extended her workshops by a few days. From this it was concluded that she would do the same in this case… hopefully. To questions on this point, Mnouchkine responded that she didn’t know yet, and that it depended on several things, but primary on the participants.

The rules are established

When I arrived at ten after nine on the first day, roll call was already underway, having begun at nine. There were so many people in the Cartoucherie’s auditorium that it seemed ready for a performance. Assisted by Sophie Moscoso, Ariane Mnouchkine read the names and handed each an attendance card that would be necessary in the days to come. After calling out two hundred and twenty names Mnouchkine took the latecomers
aside for a vehement lecture. The actor’s first rule is punctuality. Subsequent late arrivals were struck from the list, a warning to future hopefuls. Other rules were very quickly established: an absolute respect for the masks and costumes, total silence in the auditorium, an attentive observation of what takes place on the stage by all those present (Ariane repeatedly and forcefully reminded the participants that learning happens as much through the gaze as through action), a ban on doing anything else during the improvisations, and a mandatory cleaning of the auditorium at the end of the day. However, despite these restrictions, actors wandered in and out during the improvisations, the costumes always ended the day in piles on the floor, the participants seated in the tiers did not always give the others’ work the required attention, and the cleanup fell to a group of a few volunteers who set the auditorium to rights for the next day. The masks were the only things that received universal respect. It was a difficult lesson in ethics for them to learn! Mnouchkine was outraged. Ultimately, overcome and discouraged by the excessive laxity and the lack of good will, on the third day she announced that she was cancelling the workshop and that everyone could go home. It was a very bad start to the workshop. The level of work was too low this year, there was no real effort at collaboration; and moreover, she sensed a certain animosity from the observers towards what was occurring on stage that was unproductive for the work. It was a real wake-up call for the participants. Suddenly confronted with something so unexpected, they woke up and applied themselves to the task of swaying Mnouchkine, who was adamant. Nonetheless, two hours of discussion ended with her allowing the workshop to continue, but this time, everyone understood that we would not be receiving the three extra days that each had secretly hoped for.

Mnouchkine would never say that she does this workshop for free (of all the workshops available, it is the only one that is free) because of her generosity, or for her love of the theatre and all actors. Ariane Mnouchkine does it because she is very worried about the future of theatrical performance, a practice that is disappearing and that we absolutely must try to save. Moreover, she was very clear from the beginning: “There might be twenty actors among all of you; if that turns out to be the case, it would be wonderful. We’re going to attempt to create theatre together and if we succeed in creating just a few minutes of theatre over the course of these few days, it will be fantastic.” Ariane would prove to be right: during those seven days, over the course of which each participant, on average, improvised in two group sketches, there was at most a brief half an hour of theatre. There was only a brief half an hour, but it was an intense and exceptional half an hour. The half-hour did not occur as a whole, but was spread out in fragments of a few seconds, sometimes a few minutes, where the spectators witnessed the emergence of a story and the exceptional osmosis between character and performer.

**Masks that travel very well**

“I would like to remind everyone that this is a workshop. Seven days that we will share together. It is not an audition. If you go onstage to show yourself, or to show me, you won’t show anything. This is not a test workshop, it’s a theatrical workshop.” Ariane Mnouchkine’s opening warning is an important one. The actors in attendance, some of whom are at their second or even their third workshop, know that sometimes Mnouchkine recruits participants. This was the case for *L’Indiade* and before that, for *Sihanouk*. 
Consequently, some of them are hopeful, while others are there just for the pleasure of being there and learning under Mnouchkine’s merciless scrutiny. Her eye has a rare intensity and austerity. Seated in the first row, she watches all the improvisations, even the most pitiful, with complete attention and a very sharp ear, determinedly seeking the spark of theatre wherever she can find it. And if the improvisations follow, one after another, without any glimmer, Mnouchkine nevertheless maintains a respect for the actor’s work when they bring a real desire to create to the stage. Sometimes she has to be harsh, even savage, which paralyses the more timid at first (“You don’t have the minimum volume” she said before dismissing an actor from the stage); but her judgment is always accurate, without complacency, her gaze is precise, her attention intense; she seeks theatre in each of the little pieces of improvisation presented before her over the course of the day (from nine to five, the only interruptions being two brief coffee breaks and an hour for lunch), in each gesture, behind the masks. Sometimes she suddenly interrupts an improvisation after a few seconds, dismisses actors from the stage, and even forbids an actor from entering onstage because the costume they have chosen shows a lack of respect for the character. These moments, that are eventually accepted by everyone because they never prove to be arbitrary, are balanced by the remarkable moments when, before everyone’s eyes, an unmediated dialogue emerges between Mnouchkine and a character. In effect, in the most productive moments onstage, Mnouchkine works with an actor or a group of actors where she has detected that they were on the point of giving birth to a character. She gives them a trajectory, opening a vast imaginary world before them, animating them with a word that gives them breadth and propels them forwards.

As is her usual method, Mnouchkine makes the actors work with masks: masks from the Commedia dell’arte and Balinese masks that, as becomes clear over the course of the improvisations, work well together and obey the same theatrical laws. Thus we come to know Pandeba, Rajissan, Pucci (inaugurated at this particular workshop)…

Mnouchkine began by saying:

I will not tell you the characteristics of the masks, in doing so, I would restrict them. Some of them have names, others do not. For example, this one is Rajissan. They are all important. They have complete beings. Do not disrespect them. Do not caricature them even if they lack sophistication. In contrast to Nô masks, which are so well protected that they are difficult to locate, these are human masks. But they are also sacred. We named this one Punta, this one has eyes, and it dances. He’s very difficult, he has no name. This is Pandeba. The mask is heavy, but be careful, he is light, very light. Don’t make him sillier than he is. He is also complete. He has a behind, he has an anus, and that is what you have to find. Obviously, the first piece of good luck you may have is to like one. To recognize one, to have known one. You’ll see, they all travel very well. They can be surprised, but they adapt well. The opposite is true for the Commedia dell’arte masks. They crumble under the weight of characteristics, they die under the weight of characteristics. They are all human beings. The masks are made of leather or wood. They are quite fragile. Erhard Stiefel made them. You can imagine what will happen to you if you break one. [Laughter.]
You have only a second for theatre to happen

After the introduction to the masks and their first use, comes the group work: the choosing of a character, the elaboration of a scenario, the preparation of the costumes. Mnouchkine provides a theme: occupation. The previous year, the subject was invasion. This time the improvisations would center on collaboration, resistance, the black market, fear, rivalries, passivity, and denunciations. All of the Théâtre du Soleil’s costumes were placed at the performers’ disposal, including clothing from the Shakespearian plays, Sihanouk, and even from L’Âge D’Or and 1789. Mnouchkine has a particular taste in costume; she likes it to be lively, rich, precise, finished. In her preoccupations, one can see what led to the splendour and the extreme sensuality of the Shakespearian costumes, the heat of the 1789 costumes, and the joining of velours, lamés and sequins in her many productions. During the workshop, dressing would become an important step in the preparation, the step that allowed the actor to enter into the character.

For the improvisations, the performers grouped themselves according to their affinity to perform the various scenarios. It took fifteen minutes, a half an hour, sometimes

[Photo: A Balinese mask.]

[Photo: A Balinese mask named Pandeba.]

“This is Pandeba. The mask is heavy, but be careful, he is light, very light. Don’t make him sillier than he is. He is also complete. He has a behind, he has an anus, and that is what you have to find.” (30)

[Photo: The wardrobe room during Mnouchkine’s workshop at the Cartoucherie.]

forty-five minutes of coordination from improvisations that often lasted only a few minutes. Ariane Mnouchkine often reminded them that this was too long. Performers have a tendency to get lost in the maze of a convoluted plot, to the detriment of the details of the events and states.

You have only a second for theatre to happen. When you come on stage, the story is already in process. I want to see a character immediately. Where is he? Why is he there? The spectators have paid their admission, you can’t tell them: wait a minute while I get it together. We, the audience, are there, and they, the characters, know we are there. I know you know we are there. And you know that I know that you know… we are there and we are there for them. That is the most difficult part.

A few basic rules for performers

Ariane incessantly repeated the same advice to the performers on stage, simple advice, but advice that always proved difficult to put into practice.
**Regarding the preparation and the scenario:** Don’t create a consultation or you’ll be staging *Les Miserables*. Content yourselves with three good sentences of preface. The goal is not to follow the story to its conclusion. Work together. What can you achieve all by yourself at home? Alone you achieve nothing. You must learn together. Listen to each other, be open to each other. You must accept other’s ideas. If they suggest something, accept it. And if they do something well, imitate it. Imitating does not mean plagiarizing, it means recognizing. They have been imitating in the Orient for generations. It’s not a question of imitating from the outside, but from the inside. Not imitating what another did, but what he was. If it’s impossible for you to imitate in that sense, then it’s impossible for you to imitate someone else, to imitate a character. You must have the humility to place your feet in the footsteps of another.

You must also have imagination and secrets. Do you have secrets? [Laughter.] It’s apparent that, in this workshop, there are no secrets. You must learn the patience and the humility of mystery. Do not seek to be original at any cost. I don’t give a damn about originality. Learn from others. When someone does something well, imitate it well and take it to the next level. Avoid falling into the idea, seek the true, not the realistic. Truth is not realistic. Entering a scene is already entering a symbolic place, where everything is musical, poetic.

**Regarding masks and characters:** The masks are there, with a terrible and unavoidable existence. The actor chooses the costume in conjunction with the mask and the character. The mask is not makeup. It is not one object among many. Everything serves it. It will condemn you instantly if you use it ill. It is you who must surrender to the mask, the mask will never surrender to you. So you must respect it, love it. Otherwise, it is as if you don’t realize that these masks have a history, a past, a divinity. Instead of rising to meet them, you lower the masks to you, you make them common. There is a journey to be made to meet them. You don’t use the masks like that, in any old way. You don’t just use any mask either. The rapport with the mask is one of grandeur. These are masks from a distant land, from another continent. Theatre is another continent. It’s as if you want the theatre to come to you. No! Theatre is not great when it comes to us.

When you call upon a character, he comes with his own world. He is complete. Characters are not functions. Preserve the autonomy of each character. Let them breathe. No prettiness, no coquetry. But don’t make them bizarre, ugly creatures. It’s a sin to think that there isn’t some beauty in every creature. I want to see a character. I sense that you want there to be a method behind the mask. No!

**Regarding costume:** Make sure to finish your costumes well. They can be your friends. They’re your enemies if they are poorly put together, if they don’t hold together. Heads must be defined, covered, and hairless. Bare skin is difficult to use with masks. Hands, feet, they make it too realistic.

**Regarding performance:** Seek your own internal music that makes your actions rhythmic. Let imagination come to you. The hard part is to let yourself go while you are in action. You’re either in the action, which blocks you, or in a passive state, not doing anything. Use your imagination. The imagination is a muscle. It can be shaped, developed, nourished. The actor is an active receptacle, this is not a contradiction, but a challenge. The actor must be concave and convex. Concave to receive and convex to project.
Avoid always being in motion. If you move incessantly, I no longer see you. You must find your pauses and your rhythm. Pauses confer movement, states give life. In order for me to see you, you have to pause. Do only one thing at a time. [Then, to an actress:] “What are you doing? You’re jumping for joy, good. Well then, jump, then speak, don’t do both at the same time!” [To another:] “You performed two things: Your despair and your distrust. You did not successfully perform one thing at a time. Consequently we didn’t see anything. Finish your gestures. Take the time to finish everything. No stuttering in your gestures. Finish your pauses.”

Avoid slowness as a way of conferring meaning. Often it’s too slow to be sincere. Don’t fall into real slowness. You have to perform slowness, but faster than it is. Slowness is your enemy. In a few seconds, there’s nothing left of the light that was there.

Avoid overperforming, being in the idea. Verbiage is gestural as well as verbal. Avoid the decorative. There are some who don’t realize the physical commitment this requires. Don’t adorn your actions when you don’t yet have the basics. Some people come with nothing. Others come with a whole bag of tricks, and that’s worse. It’s fake. Go it simply.

You’re in such a hurry, that you’re explaining instead of living [Mnouchkine tells one of the performers]. Don’t incessantly comment on your gestures. The audience isn’t stupid, they understand. You’re not taking the time to perform your journey and your anger. You’re not in the present. You’re already here, and I didn’t see your journey. I want to know your journey before you reach your destination.

Action is one of your only weapons. But while you’re merely doing, nothing can happen to you. That is why you need states, presence. The state is what justifies the actions. The most important thing is to find your state. You need a pure state, a series of very pure states. Is it enough to work on the state? Are we certain of what you believe or disbelieve? The belief is the most important thing. You believe that space is outside you. This is incorrect, it is within you. I cannot receive space unless I see you receive it. I can only see distance through your eyes. You are seeing before us. We see you seeing. You must be visionary. It is essential.

As long as we have illustrative, figurative entrances, you’ll never get off the ground. If you illustrate space, there’s no scene, there’s no theatre. You have to see to believe. You want to create through intelligence. No! Give yourselves the time to let a state blossom.

The problem is the relationship between the interior and the exterior. [Then, to an actor:] “You’re not succeeding in translating this relationship, you’re doing small things, instead of daring to tell us, instead of creating signs. It’s the signs that call things into question. As long as you haven’t felt the emotion and the exteriorization through the sign at some point, you won’t have found it. Don’t hide yourself, reveal yourself. You must have the courage to discover. You’re being figurative instead of being metaphorical, instead of finding the sign.”

You’re challenge will be to translate your state. It’s a problem of translation. Dramatic performance is a translation. The translation of something intangible, [I chose an indirect translation here. In English “immaterial” connotes something unimportant, which is clearly not what Mnouchkine is saying.] the translation is of an emotion into a body. It is through this body that this emotion operates. The actor is a double translator, for his own translation must also be translated.
The mask is the essential training for performers

It became obvious over the course of the workshop that the mask is the essential training for performers, because it does not allow falsehood and reveals all the actor’s weaknesses: lack of imagination, style over being, lack of presence, inability to listen. By its very nature, it reveals all complacency, all weaknesses. It deserts the performer who does not enter into it and uses it to hide. Inversely, it can become sublime and allow the actor to achieve moments of theatre of rare intensity. Behind the mask, thanks to it, and with its help, characters caught up in extraordinary adventures emerge. It is true that the use of masks imposes a certain type of performance that other less distinctive theatrical forms do not, but it is evident that the rules of theatre that apply to it are valid everywhere and that it is one of the training methods that requires actors to bare themselves.

Thus, after all the lessons, a few simple principles emerged again and again, though their application remained difficult: the distinction between the easy and the simple, the decorative and the necessary, pretence and belief, the great and the small, solitude and listening, movement and action, the illustrative and the state, exteriority and exteriorization. Some of Mnouchkine’s advice to the performers ultimately acquired the power of maxims: find the tiny, precise, true detail; seek the small to find the great, do not mistake movement for expression, apoplexy for dynamism, or slowness for depth; disdain movement for the sake of movement in the theatre; do not perform against your mask; accept versatility during an improvisation and know when to cast aside what was planned to seize upon what presents itself. But, above all, Ariane endlessly emphasized the importance of the perspective one brings to things, a perspective that learns, that listens and that remembers the necessity of learning through observation. The important words remained “state” and “presence”; the fundamental rules of performance were those of precision in the service of imagination. The actor, who Mnouchkine defines as an active receptacle and regards kindly, but without complacency, must have a corresponding work ethic. This is the fundamental lesson of the workshop.

Despite the numerous failures and the rare successes, the workshop was a fantastic lesson in theatre for all who attended. At the end of it, Mnouchkine reminded everyone that, without a doubt, the laws of theatre existed, but that they were exacting laws, which flow from your grasp like mercury. Overnight, they can disappear and no one knows where they went.

[Photo: Ariane Mnouchkine.]

Photo taken from a video recording of the Théâtre du Soleil’s public meeting with theatrical schools (Chapter 4). This video was produced by the UQAM Audio-Visual Services’ Jacques Archambault.
Interview with Ariane Mnouchkine:
We don’t invent performance theories anymore

There are performance theories

J. FÉRAL: Ariane Mnouchkine, I already know that you’re going to answer the first question I’m going to ask by saying that there are no performance theories.

A. MNOUCHKINE: I don’t know if I’d tell you that there are no performance theories. I know that I don’t have any, perhaps because I’m not yet in a position to elaborate one; perhaps I’ll never be able to do it, because in the idea of a performance theory, there is a written elaboration of the performance theory and there is a performance practice. Let’s say that we, directors and actors, “practice the practice”, and not the theory. I think that there is, if not a performance theory, a least a set of theoretical laws that are strangely enough, found in all performance traditions. To me, the expression “performance theory” doesn’t seem fundamentally wrong, but it always seems a little bit imperialist and pretentious. I prefer to use the fundamental laws that we sometimes know, and that sometimes we lose and forget, because the practice is what makes the law or the tradition suddenly re-emerge. So I won’t tell you that there are no performance theories, on the contrary, there have been many. Obviously, what interests me in these multiple theories are the essential laws they share.

J. FÉRAL: In the nineteen-sixties, there were a few performance theories that everyone referred to: for example, those of Brecht, Artaud, and Grotowski, who represented an important moment in theatrical evolution. Some of these theoreticians were also practitioners, while others were not. Artaud, for example, was not a practitioner in the same sense as Brecht, although he did try the theatre and write for the theatre. However, what he said about the theatre made enough sense to earn the following of an entire era. Today actors and performers in training are a little deprived because all those who were our models for thought are no longer so.

A. MNOUCHKINE: They weren’t the only ones. Those theoreticians were among the greatest, but they weren’t the only ones. There was Stanislavski obviously, Meyerhold… and others. In France, for example, some people wrote some absolutely fundamental things: Copeau, Dullin, and Jouvet. If you re-read them, you’ll see that there are things in Copeau’s writings that are also found in Zéami, and that’s what’s interesting, moving, not reassuring, but “comforting”. You see that, in the twentieth century, Copeau is repeating what was said in the
fifteenth century in Japan and that Brecht, as original an ideologist as he can be in his less legislative moments, was rediscovering completely traditional elements of the Oriental theatre. You’re right, I don’t make any distinction between the creators of theoretic models who were practitioners and those who were non-practitioners, because even Artaud, from what we know, failed in practice, probably because he didn’t have either the physical or the mental strength to achieve what he wanted. But what he wrote is so close to Balinese theatrical practice, he created such a strong translation of the theory, that it’s almost the practice.

J. FÉRAL: Artaud had such powerful intuitions that they fused with our sensibilities and our expectations in the field of theatre so well that, even though he doesn’t provide a method, he remains important. Stanislavski, Brecht, and Artaud are agreed on one point, the laws they are attempting to reveal are based, first and foremost, on a vision of what the theatrical act should be in its very essence.

A. MNOUCHKINE: I wouldn’t put Artaud and Brecht on the same level. Artaud is closer to the fundamentals than Brecht. Brecht provided the laws for a certain type of theatre, some of which are found in all types of theatre. I think Artaud envisioned the function, the mission of the actor in a more profound way… less political and more metaphysical.

Such mysterious fundamental laws!

J. FÉRAL: We get the impression that theatrical practices, in the Orient as in the Occident, have become universal because they are governed by the fundamental laws you and I were discussing, although the techniques may vary from place to place. What are these laws?

A. MNOUCHKINE: You want me to give you a list? [Laughter.] How can I put it? They are simultaneously so mysterious and so volatile. Sometimes you have the impression that an entire rehearsal is spent remembering the laws that you thought you knew perfectly the night before. Suddenly, during a rehearsal, the theatre is gone. An actor can’t perform anymore, a director can’t help an actor anymore. You ask yourself why and you don’t understand. You have the impression you’re abiding by the laws, but in fact, suddenly, you see that you forgot the essentials, such as being in the present. I think that for the actor, theatre is the art of the present. There is no past, no future. There is the present, the present act.

When I see young students working, as they put it, “according to Stanislavski’s methods”, I’m surprised to see how often they
sometimes “enter the past”. Obviously, Stanislavski talks about the characters’ past, where they come from, what they do. But then suddenly, the students simply can’t find the present, the present action, anymore. So when they enter, I always tell them: “You’re entering leaning backwards, burdened with the weight of all that past, but in the theatre, all you have is the present moment.” The most important of these mysterious laws is no doubt the one that governs the mystery between the interior and the exterior, between the state (or the sentiment, as Jouvet terms it) and the form. How do you give passion a form? How do you exteriorize without slipping into exteriority? How can you autopsy the body… the heart? [Ariane Mnouchkine said “body” before correcting herself and saying “heart” – “My lapse is revealing, because you do this autopsy through the body.”] You could say that an actor worthy of the title, or an actress worthy of the title, is a sort of “anatomist”, [This is the closest I can come to “autopsieur”. All other translations have more to do with preparing the dead for burial than showing the interior. You may wish to use “autopsier”, although the word does not exist in English and you will be coining a phrase.] a sort of permanent anatomy model like in medical engravings. Their role is to show the inside.

Yesterday it was really beautiful, there was a little debate with the high-school students in the theatre option, all very young. They wouldn’t stop asking me the same question: “How is it that there is so much emotion?” (It was a moment when Nehru said “I’m scared.”) It was a young girl, barely fifteen years old, who asked me the question, then a boy. So we asked ourselves the question together. How? Why can a young French girl of fifteen be completely overcome by a particular scene by Nehru? And we decided that there is something particular in theatre that is the memory of the life unlived. Thus, by the grace of theatre and the actor, a young French girl who has not yet lived is able to understand and recognize what she has in common with a sixty year old man living in a country of four hundred million, to understand his fear. We were pleased to discover that that is theatre, that theatre occurs at the moment where an actor succeeds in making the unknown familiar, and inversely, makes the familiar dazzling and deeply moving (not the everyday, because the everyday is actually the “used”). So, when you ask me what are these laws? ...If I knew what they were with permanence, I wouldn’t tell myself what I tell myself every day of rehearsal: “Well then, what is theatre? Will we succeed in producing an instant of theatre today?”

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1 On the subject of *L’Indiade*. 
The emotion comes from recognition

J. FÉRAL: You talk about emotion from the point of view of an actor, but it’s true that this emotion the actors create and project through their characters also exists on the side of the spectators, who seek it in the actors. There are two emotions that converge.

A. MNOUCHKINE: The emotion is different in the two cases. For example, Indian theatre offers something really beautiful from this perspective. There are considerable theoretical works on the subject. There is Zéami, of course, but there is also an Indian book, an enormous work that gives the theory behind the entire Indian theatre. There are some laws in it that I find extraordinary. There are, for example, two different words to define the actor’s and character’s emotions, and the emotions of the spectator watching the actor. And I find that in their performance style, certain Occidental actors confuse what should be their emotion and what should be in the action, and what the spectator’s emotions will be. The great moments are when suddenly a spectator has tears in their eyes while the actor performs a moment of enthusiasm,

[Photo: *La Ville Parjure* (Hélène Cixous).]

“We were pleased to discover that that is theatre, that theatre occurs at the moment where an actor succeeds in making the unknown familiar […]” (42)

[Photo: *La Nuit des Rois* (Shakespeare).]

“[…] what I try to do with actors is to make them present, in their actions, in their emotions, in their states and also in the versatility of life.” (45)

happiness and laughter. Why do you suddenly weep in joy or in recognition?

J. FÉRAL: Because at that moment we perceive the truthfulness of what is happening, the truth of the moment we are witnessing, independently of what it expresses.

A. MNOUCHKINE: Exactly, the emotion comes from recognition, from the fact that it is real.

J. FÉRAL: This recognition is not only of the content, of what is being said, of the life that is being performed; it’s the recognition of the truthfulness of what is happening on stage perceived in the actor’s performance. That’s what’s fascinating about the Théâtre du Soleil; quite often, I won’t say all the time, but most of the time, the actors
are absolutely accurate in their performances. There is something in their gestures that comes from the necessity of the moment, that is urgent. There’s such an efficacy that you say to yourself that the only gesture the actor could have made with such truthfulness at that moment is the one he made and that you saw. That brings us back to one of the laws that you touched on earlier. You were saying that the actor must be present.

A. MNOUCHKINE: Careful, I didn’t say, “be present”, but be in the present. The theatrical act happens in the moment and, once the moment is past, something else is occurring.

J. FÉRAL: One of the concepts borrowed from the Orient that is frequently discussed these days, and that people like Eugenio Barba use in their work with the actor is the idea of the actor’s presence. It’s a very difficult idea to pin down, but it is true that, as a spectator, I can identify with an actor who has presence, in contrast with an actor who does not. That actor’s body is present on stage but you don’t see him, you only see his absence. He is a void. Do you use this idea of presence? Does it seem to correspond to anything?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Presence is, in effect, something that you notice, but I’ve never worked with the idea. I wouldn’t know how to tell an actor to be present. However, what I do know, what I try to do with actors, is to make them present, in their actions, in their emotions, in their states and also in the versatility of life. These are lessons Shakespeare teaches. You sense that with him, you can begin a line in a murderous rage, and forget this rage a moment later to be purely happy about something in the text, only to fall back into an atrocious desire for vengeance, and all this in two lines, in other words, in a few seconds. So the present is hyper-present. It’s a present second by second. As far as the concept of the actor’s own presence, there… There are actors who are very present and others who are less so. A good actor is present. It goes along with the talent. There are no bad actors that have presence, unless it’s a case of a bad presence. Presence increases with the actors’ ability to bare themselves.

Exercising your imagination

J. FÉRAL: How do you help actors be in the present? Do you follow a technique? Is your method a form of listening?

A. MNOUCHKINE: I think there are no techniques. There are probably methods, and I think that each director has one, perhaps unconsciously. I definitely have one, but I don’t know it. The last word you said is
very important: “listening”. I think I know how to do that well. I wouldn’t even say that I know, but that I love to, I love to listen and I love to watch actors. I love it with a passion. That’s already one way to help them. They know that I never tire of listening to them, of watching them. But I have no idea how I help them.

J. FÉRAL: You guide them, you stimulate them. One day you said: “You must exercise the actor’s imagination.” The nourishment you give to their imaginations is a form of help.

A. MNOUCHKINE: I claim complete responsibility for the expression “exercising your imagination”. [I had to add a few words here to convey Mnouchkine’s unique use of the term.] When I’m working with young performers, in a workshop for example, it’s one of the first questions I ask them. I ask them what, in their opinion, is the performer’s most important muscle? Obviously no one thinks of that, so I tell them: “It’s the imagination.” And it can be exercised, it can be worked; it’s like the calves.

J. FÉRAL: In what way?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Through sincerity. Through emotions. Through performance, especially through performance. Not through memory, because I don’t believe in that. Little by little, they must succeed in having visions, in becoming a visionary, in seeing what they’re talking about, in seeing where they’re going, where they are, in seeing the sky above them, the rain, in receiving the emotion of another, in believing in it. We’re very seriously and solemnly talking about theatrical theories, but in the end, the essential theory is that they must believe: believe in what they’re performing, in what they are, in what they’re incarnating, and believe in what the other incarnates, believe in his troubles, his strengths, his anger, his joy, his sensuality, his love, his hate, and anything else… but they must believe. And the misinterpretation of Brecht that is often made is that Brecht said that you must not believe. Brecht never said that. He said that you must not fake it. I think there is something in the actor’s job that requires not that they fall back into childhood, but that they enter childhood, that they divest themselves of the ready-made images that are the opposite of imagination. These ready-made images are clichés, crutches, and that is where there is no emotion.

J. FÉRAL: But the imagination must find fodder somewhere. It’s not enough for actors to say: “I will believe” in order to believe. They still need starting points to help them believe.
A. MNOUCHKINE: There needs to be a real situation already there; I won’t even say a pretext because we know that that’s possible in improvisation, but there needs to be a theatrical situation and the ambition to create a character. There must be invention, discovery.

Escaping the everyday

J. FÉRAL: Is this work on the character done alone? In a group? Through discussions?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Nothing is ever done alone. From the beginning, the work is done through performance. For us, work is never, never done around a table. We read the play once, and the next day we’re already on the boards. The actors can decide to try out all the characters they want over several weeks, or several months. They have old bits of costumes at their disposal to costume themselves and they begin. And we perform right away. There must be theatre on the first day.

J. FÉRAL: Are there certain anchoring points in effect from the beginning? Are the actors responsible for remembering what they performed so that the gestures, the attitudes, and the situations discovered over the course of the improvisation are preserved over the course of the rehearsals or is it simply a period of experimentation?

A. MNOUCHKINE: There is a period of experimentation, but the good things remain when they’re really good, when everyone understands, that’s a sign. It’s what you were saying about the truthfulness of the gesture, the proof of the gesture. It’s not the gesture that will remain, because those things take on their final forms much later, but we know that that character will have that sort of gesture, that he’s a little like that. Then we’ll discover something else. Because the rule that seems the most important to us is to remind ourselves that all the characters, all of them, have a complete being. We also tell ourselves, and this is a little dogmatic, that each character in a play contains all the others. There is a little of the Prince in Falstaff, a little of the father in the son, a little of the fiancée in the fiancé, a little of the fiancée in the nurse, a little of the nurse in Juliet… Each one is complete. Because otherwise we fall into an error that we have sometimes committed. There are moments when I have realized that the concept of working on characters, the concept of characters itself, could be very limiting and that often we translate characters by limiting them, instead of, in contrast, making them someone who is limitless and will always surprise. There are, of course, some characters who are types, but you must always be able to surpass the type.
J. FÉRAL: Do you a psychological study of the characters? I ask because, in *L’Indiade*, you don’t get the impression that the characters have a psychology. Instead you have the impression that they are theatrical characters, presented as theatrical constructions with a great deal of theatricality. They seem complex, but without everyday psychology. They’re almost emblems. They convey signs rather than psychology.

A. MNOUCHKINE: We rather avoid the everyday. We don’t talk about psychology, but rather the soul of the characters. But they have emotions, they have sensations. They feel cold, they feel hunger, they’re prideful, they seek power, they scorn power, and they’re stubborn. They each have their way of being, they each have their world. Boileau said: “The real is occasionally not realistic” and the realistic is not necessarily real. In a historical play, you feel it even more acutely. In other words, what happened is this. It is those particular characters who underwent or directed or brought about those events. Those events took place with their psychology, as you put it. But that has nothing to do with it, theatre is not duty-bound to represent psychology, but passion is another matter. Theatre is responsible for representing motions of the soul, the spirit, the world, history. In the Théâtre du Soleil, psychology is a criticism. When I tell the actors: “Careful, that’s psychological”, it’s a criticism. They know very well what I mean: that it’s not real, that it’s tedious, complicated, and narcissistic. In contrast to what people think, psychology doesn’t bring you closer to interiority, it brings you closer to the internal mask.

The theatre is Oriental

J. FÉRAL: There is no gestural tradition in the Occident. Many directors seek this tradition in the Orient. You yourself, in the Théâtre du Soleil, have found inspiration in Asian theatre. What do you draw from it?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Oriental theories have left their mark on everyone in the theatre. They have influenced Artaud, Brecht and all the others because the Orient is the cradle of theatre. So, that is where we seek theatre. Artaud said: “The theatre is Oriental.” This observation goes a long way. Artaud doesn’t claim that there are Oriental theories that are interesting for the theatre, he affirms that “the theatre is Oriental”. And I think Artaud is right. So, I would say that the actor seeks everything in the Orient. Simultaneously myth and reality, simultaneously interiority and exteriorization, that famous autopsy of the heart by the body. We also seek non-realism there, theatricality itself. The Occident has only produced the Commedia dell’arte – but this originates in Asia – and a certain type of realism
that the great actors escape. It’s true that a great actor, even if he is in a realistic theatre, succeeds in not being realistic himself, we don’t really know how. But it’s very hard.

J. FÉRAL: In the end, theatre needs traditions.

A. MNOUCHKINE: It needs sources and memory. It needs to work to always bring its depths and its origins to the surface. It’s hard to say that we need traditions. We have them. The bloodlines exist and they belong to us entirely, even beyond borders.

J. FÉRAL: How do you choose your actors?

A. MNOUCHKINE: I meet a lot of young actors who want to join the Soleil. Consequently, there are several phases of selection. The workshop is one of these phases, but it’s not the only one because I don’t do it with that aim in view. I don’t know how I choose the actors. To begin with, I choose people who touch me. People who touch me on a human level before they touch me on an artistic level. People who move me. I like those that I think give me a presentiment of strength, innocence, fantasy, joyfulness, and also high standards.

J. FÉRAL: Have you been wrong?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Yes, but not very, very often; however, my mistakes are serious, because, in a group, being mistaken is quite serious. It has happened. When I see my mistake soon enough, it’s not too serious, it gets corrected very quickly. But when the mistake is well entrenched, it’s more serious. We’ve known moments of crisis. Still, in twenty-four years, to my recollection my major mistakes can be counted on one hand. There have been a lot of little mistakes, but they were minor. There are people whose place really wasn’t with the Soleil; but those who have tried to harm it, and succeeded, are truly rare.

J. FÉRAL: You said that it’s the duty of every director to do workshops for actors. Is it because training is insufficient?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Yes, training does exist, but it’s insufficient when you see the real demand for it. There are one or two good schools and they take on thirty to forty students a year. And then even the students who were trained at the schools need to keep working. When they don’t perform, they stiffen up and become paralyzed.

We don’t invent performance theories anymore
J. FÉRAL: Why not write down your theories about performance?

A. MNOUCHKINE: First because I’m not a writer, and then because, I sincerely believe that everything has already been said extraordinarily well on the subject of performance. Our musician at the Théâtre du Soleil, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, was telling someone who asked him if he had invented instruments that: “We don’t invent instruments anymore; we transform them, we rediscover them, but we don’t invent them anymore. They’ve all been invented.” In the same way, I would say that we don’t invent performance theories anymore. The problem is that performance theories exist, but they get buried as fast as they are introduced. Have the young students read Zéami, Artaud, Copeau, Dullin, Jouvet, and Brecht… Everything is there. That’s all I can say to them. And have them do theatre. There’s nothing more to be said.
Théâtre du Soleil’s public meeting with theatrical schools¹: A troupe begins with a dream.

A. MNOUCHKINE: Before we open the floor to discussion, I would like to introduce the performers from the Théâtre du Soleil seated next to me and elsewhere in the room. They will have to leave at four o’clock to get ready. Not because they’ll have had enough of you [laughter], but because they have to go to work. Here at the table, we have Duccio Bellugi, Brontis Jodorowski, Simon Abkarian, Nirupama Nityanandan and Juliana Carneiro da Cunha. They are the protagonists. We are missing Catherine Schaub, the Coryphaeus, who is resting.

JEAN-MICHEL LAMOTHE
UQAM Theatre Department: During the interview you gave last Thursday at the Maurice Richard Arena², you used a beautiful metaphor to describe the relationship between theatrical artisans and the work they are attempting to stage. You compared the work to a mountain that

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¹ This meeting with Ariane Mnouchkine took place on November 6th, 1992, at the University of Quebec at Montreal. It was organized by the Theatre Department, with the assistance of the Theatrical Festival of the Americas, during the Montreal theatrical run of Les Atrides. Ariane Mnouchkine and approximately fifteen actors from the Théâtre du Soleil troupe attended.

² Where the play Les Atrides was performed.
must be scaled and not circumvented. In your opinion, what are the essential qualities that an actor must possess in his skill set in order to succeed in climbing as high as possible on this mountain? And are these qualities innate or can they be acquired through practice?

A. MNOUCHKINE: I’ll begin with the last question. Are these qualities innate or can they be acquired? Obviously, I think you must possess a gift. There are people who are gifted in this respect and others who are gifted in other ways. You must not mistake your vocation. I believe in talent. But obviously an uncultivated talent, a talent that has never been developed, is the worst thing. So, I also believe that there are many things that are acquired. But to deny the fact that certain actors are made for the theatre, is to refuse to see the truth.

Now, what must a performer have in his skill set in order to scale the mountain? Courage. [Laughter.] Enormous amounts of courage, patience, and perhaps the need to reach the heights. And when I speak of the need to reach the heights, obviously I do not mean the need for celebrity or glory. An actor or actress will not scale a mountain unless they need poetry, grandeur, transcendence, ultimately humanity. Because the essence of being human is perhaps the need for transcendence. I know that this sort of talk is not very fashionable. [Laughter.] So, obviously it requires good calves, good muscular calves. In other words, a body that is as free as possible, as highly trained as possible, but also good calves, and imagination, in other words an imagination that is as free and as highly trained as possible.

We work at transmitting the image

CHANTAL COLLIN
National Theatre School of Canada:
If the performer’s most important muscle is justly the imagination; because it works, because it flexes like a calf muscle, can the director help stimulate the actor’s imagination? And if so, what approach do you take?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Providing a space for the actors’ imaginations is probably the most essential part of the director’s job. The director must open as many doors as possible for them and perhaps give them as much fodder as possible. So, how do I do it? I must admit that I always find it very difficult to define what it is that I do because I barely know myself and it depends on the moment. You exchange many images with the performers. They give me images through their actions, through their achievements on the rehearsal mat. I, in turn, give them images back. I suggest worlds. And if that doesn’t work, if it
yields nothing, then I suggest others. And then sometimes an actor gives me something and I run with it. So, the two of us move forward together.

Your question is a good one in the respect that it emphasizes that you must successfully engage their imaginations, which does not mean simply stimulating each performer’s anarchic spontaneity. Sometimes when I see that game played with rocks slid across ice where a little man sweeps a path for the players to allow the rock to pass [laughter], I think to myself that our work is somewhat similar, that we work to allow the image to pass. Hurry hard! Hurry hard! Image coming through! Image coming through! Hurry hard! [Laughter.]

CHARLES LAFORTUNE
Montreal
Conservatory of the Dramatic Arts:

At the Conservatory, we often have a particular way of conceiving shows: for example, the director arrives, and announces: “We will be staging this play in this way.” The performers accept it and give the director what he wants. I would like to know if it is you specifically who orchestrates things at the Théâtre du Soleil? Do you have a very clear image of your show from the beginning or is it created as the work progresses? Do you have the right of veto? [Laughter.] How do you work in actual practice?

A. MNOUCHKINE: When I propose a show at a meeting of the Théâtre du Soleil’s performers and technicians, I don’t have the entire concept already in mind. The work, or the collection of works or themes, that I am suggesting to the performers makes my heart race, troubles me, incites a particular sort of affection in me. Sometimes, as in the case of plays that were subsequently written by Hélène Cixous, I have not even read the work. When I suggested them to the performers, I only knew the theme.

So there is a sort of love at first sight. It’s like exploring a new continent. There are people who crossed the oceans believing they were going to discover a new continent, but instead of finding India, they found America. I feel that when we embark upon a work, we embark upon an adventure. But the continent we expect to discover is not the one we arrive at.

CHARLES LAFORTUNE:

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3 She is referring to curling.
But when we discover America, when we arrive upon its shore, is the show finished for you? Or do you continue to work on it as a whole?

A. MNOUCHKINE: It depends. Because we allow ourselves the privilege, the luxury of spending a long time working on a show, at a certain point we may feel that the show may not yet be completely finished, but that it now requires the presence of the audience in order to be completed.

Each case is different. For example, there are shows we continue to work on because we need one or two more weeks to finish them, despite allowing ourselves ample time. That was what we did, for instance, in the three first performances of *Les Atrides* (including *Iphigénie*), which we have now performed more than a hundred and fifty times. We continue to try to add depth, rather than change them, or if we change them, we only change them a little. It’s as if the show has taken on a physical shape, a nature, to such an extent that changing an element is almost like operating on a body. It is generally the worse for it.

Although there are always things we are not quite satisfied with, there comes a moment when it is too late and it is better to accept the imperfections as they are. They can be found in all shows, even the most polished. They exist in all plays, even in the greatest masterpieces. After all, Shakespeare and Aeschylus left flaws in their works. So, if they can dare to accept a few flaws, I think we can tolerate a few.

**Theatre, is the here, the now, truly and quickly**

DIANE DUBEAU  
UQAM Theatre Department: I’d like to hear your thoughts on the state of presence, of “being in the present”. I think you draw a distinction between these two notions.

What distinction do you make and can we say that presence can be worked at?

A. MNOUCHKINE: I think so. When I say, in the context of work, that we are not *in the present* enough, it has nothing to do with what you call “presence”. In France, they say: “That performer has presence”, or: “That performer has none.” If he has no presence, he isn’t a performer. [Laughter.] A performer without presence is very boring. In fact it is an absence. [Laughter.] A performer who acts, or in other words, who plays and is in the present, obviously has
presence. However, it is not the individual himself who has presence. It’s the character who has presence at that moment.

That’s why I don’t particularly care for that very Parisian expression: “That comedian has a tremendous presence.” If he has too much, it’s not a good thing either because then what do you do with Agamemnon’s presence? So, talking about presence is already using professional, corporate jargon that isn’t really accurate.

What we say is this: theatre is the here, the now, truly and quickly. These are little rules we set ourselves. Theatre is the here, in other words, if it is in Verona, on the morning of X’s wedding, then that’s where it is, it’s not elsewhere, it’s not yesterday.

Young performers who have misread Stanislavski, or perhaps who have not been taught him very well, ask themselves so many questions that, when they walk on stage, they have so much past in mind that they forget to perform the present. Being in the present is being in the present of each word, not already being in the next line, because, in effect, the next line is not yet written.

At one point, we set ourselves a little task: we decided we would work each play as if it was written for us, in other words, as if it was an unknown, in a state of absolute discovery.

In order to not already be in what we’re going to say or in what is about to be said to us, because we don’t know yet, we must listen.

That’s what it is to be in the present. That’s our method. We come to realize that, in the great ancient or modern texts, if we are not present, we remain global. We deny ourselves an infinity of emotions that we ourselves call states.

If you read fifteen lines of Aeschylus’ chorus, or fifteen lines of Shakespeare, you see that it’s like a stormy sky, meaning there is a moment of despair, then suddenly, this despair is forgotten in an immense flash of hope, and then suddenly it shifts to a murderous rage and then despair once again. You must be absolutely in the present to perform it all. You cannot perform two emotions at once; sometimes they are performed very quickly, but one after the other. That is the present.

DIANE DUBEAU: Let’s banish the word “presence” and say “being in the present”. My question is for the performers: every night, you perform shows and you perform them over long periods. Do you have particular
techniques to focus before the performance? How do you apply this “being in the present”?

SIMON ABKARIAN:
From the moment you say “I am in the present”, it means: “I am not pretending”! Of course, we know we are not really there. That’s what Ariane is saying: if we know we’re going to be slapped on stage and we’re already cringing, we’re not in the present. [Laughter.]

Each character contains all the others

ANNICK CHARLEBOIS
Theatre Option at Lionel-Groulx College:
You do very little work at the table, and very few readings of the plays. You tend to avoid psychology and realism. How do you approach a character if you avoid realistic psychology and readings, in other words, analysis of the text? How do you develop the characters?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Just because we don’t do fifteen days of work around a table doesn’t mean it’s set in stone. This way of working is really quite particular to the Théâtre du Soleil. When we say: “We must be in the present”, I truly believe that it’s a pretty fundamental rule of theatre, but when we say: “In the Théâtre du Soleil, we don’t do fifteen days of work around a table”, it’s not a rule. Why don’t we do it? Because it bores me. Working around a table bores me. Moreover, I’m not sure the director has to transform him or herself into a Drama professor for fifteen days. There are people who do that very well. Also, before long the actors want to get up and perform. They want to perform. But if we forgo work at the table it isn’t because we don’t try to understand what we’re working on. We try to understand it on the boards, on the mats.

The second question asks about how we approach a character without psychology? If I asked you what psychological clues the text provides to define Agamemnon, I think I might embarrass you. What I mean to say is that when you try to approach Agamemnon, Iphigenia, or Clytemnestra by looking for the characters’ psychology, you are obliged to invent this psychology from beginning to end. Because there is nothing but passion in the text. There is nothing but objectives and passion. This is even true of Euripides, who is called a psychological author by professors. Finally, aside from Achilles, the only possible psychological note on a character is when Clytemnestra says of Agamemnon: “He’s a
cowardly man, he’s too afraid of the army.” If we had developed Agamemnon with only “he’s a cowardly man” in mind, we would have gotten a pretty silly result. [Laughter.] And yet, it’s perfectly true. Agamemnon does possess that sort of cowardice, he has the cowardice of heroes, he has the cowardice of battle commanders, and in other words, he’s afraid of losing his popularity. But is that really psychological?

And then, are they characters at all? For a little while now, in fact, since *L'Indiade*, I sometimes say the word “character” and then correct myself. I say to myself: “No, forget the word ‘character’.” Because in the end, as soon as you use the word “character”, you become slightly racist, that is to say, you limit. You say: a character is someone who is neither this nor that. But you don’t know. And suddenly you are reducing the possibilities.

I have the impression that in a great work, each character contains almost all the others. Otherwise you have people who are little more than caricatures, or more exactly, who are limited.

**JULIANA CARNEIRO DA CUNHA:** Makeup and costume are important in the process of creating characters. They participate in the transformation to such an extent that before you have even begun to work, you are already transformed.

**ANNICK CHARLEBOIS:** Would it be accurate to say that you develop the characters from the outside in?

**A. MNOUCHKINE:** No, no, that’s not the case.

**JULIANA CARNEIRO DA CUNHA:** No, because the character you create with the costume also corresponds to an image, an imagination of the character. You make yourself up according to an image, a vision that you have. And that is internal.

**A. MNOUCHKINE:** I don’t think that you can say that a well wrought costume, which is how it should be in my opinion, that is to say, a costume that is researched like everything else about the character, is exterior. The performers develop their costumes in the same way that they develop, that we develop all the rest. Therefore I don’t really think the costume is exterior. It’s part of the interior.
The costume is part of the exterior when it is delivered two days before the premiere and created from a sketch that was chosen three months before the first rehearsal. In that case, yes! The costume is an exterior part.

But when the costume was developed with bits and pieces of old cloth, like a child that disguises himself bit by bit, making errors along the way, then it becomes interior.

In the beginning, all the actors look like rutabagas, it’s horrible. We have photos of the early rehearsals. Every time we see them we laugh. But at the time, we weren’t laughing at all. In fact, the costume is neither psychological nor exterior.

What Juliana said is completely true. It’s like an invocation. It’s an invocation that tries to invoke the character to come forth, inhabit, and invade you. At a certain point, all methods are good ones. There are times when I try everything, when the performers try everything. Those are the moments when we’ve sort of dropped the ball. And it’s normal to drop the ball when faced with a great work.

[Photo: Ariane Mnouchkine with a performer from the production of Henry III (Shakespeare)]

“I don’t think […] that a costume […] is exterior. It’s part of the interior. […] It’s an invocation that tries to invoke the character to come forth, inhabit, and invade you.” (62) [This page number and subsequent ones will obviously need to be updated for the layout of the English version of the text]

And you search everywhere. Then, it’s very strange, in a moment, you find it and you say to yourself: “But we didn’t do that last week.” Yes, we did, but not quite like that. Through these enormous digressions, the little thing has happened, the little thing that suddenly makes everything obvious, and it is neither psychological nor exterior. That’s how it is.

DOMINIQUE DUPIRE
UQAM Theatre
Department:

I really enjoyed the costumes in your performances. I’d like to know what method you use to determine the costume’s final form. Are there many elements directly borrowed from the peoples around Greece? Are they authentic elements from their dress, such as belts for example, or is it a reconstruction from the costume department? What is the performer’s role in the creation of his costume?
A. MNOUCHKINE: It’s enormous. The performer’s role in the creation is enormous, but the final product is obviously the result of the two costume designers’ work. They really work together. And all the little details that are on the costume – because costumes are simultaneously all the same and all different –, such as the belt and the apron, are made by the performers. They elaborate the costume.

Of course there are areas of influence. In fact, I asked that there not be any Greek influence, because we don’t know what it was like in Greece and I didn’t want to end up with bed sheets. So the influential areas were Turkish, Persian, Indian… but not Greek.

DOMINIQUE DUPRIE:
I have a very technical question: do you use synthetic materials or only natural materials?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Very rarely. In this case there are no synthetics. In the Shakespeare plays there was a little bit.

I can’t describe my passion in any case.

SERGE OUAKNINE
UQAM Theatre
Department:

Ariane, about fifteen years ago you quoted a poet that I like very much, his name is Henri Michaux. I’d like to quote the lines you used. In A Barbarian in Asia, Michaux said: “Only the Chinese know what a theatrical representation is. For a long time, Europeans have not represented anything, they present everything. Everything is there on stage, all things, nothing is missing, not even the view from the window. In contrast, the Chinese position what will signify the plain, the trees, and the ladder as needed.” I bring this up in order to ask my question about theatrical training. All the interesting directors of the twentieth century, all the interesting theatrical instructors of the twentieth century, have unavoidably taken the path of Asia, the Asian theatre, whether it is Eisenstein, Meyerhold, Brecht, Artaud, Claudel, Grotowski, Barba, Brook, or yourself. Everyone. This seems to indicate that there is no serious theatrical education outside of Asia, and that Occidentals don’t know what theatre is, at least from the perspective of an actor’s training.

So, my question is the following: From the moment when you integrated Oriental techniques for training actors, such as Kathakali, the techniques of Chinese theatre, of the Peking Opera, of the Nô theatre, you were obliged to break with Occidental
theatrical tradition – particularly in France where there is a textual tradition –, to break with the sense of mimesis, of staging, of representation. Can these Asian techniques be introduced into the institutions, into the theatres, without destroying these institutions: the conservatories, the schools, the universities?

My second question is for you as well as your fellow collaborators. I’ve observed that European and North-American actors can integrate these gestural techniques, this physical work, but they cannot integrate the vocal work. Why?

**What tradition do we in the west have that can be balanced against the Orient?**

A. MNOUCHKINE: I would not have the pretension to say that we use Oriental theatrical techniques in the Théâtre du Soleil, simply because, in the Orient, actors begin their training at the age of six and because there is a real millennium of knowledge that extends from exercises for the eyeball to the tips of the toes, including massage. They do many things that we do not do.

We don’t do these things because we don’t have the capacity. I lack that kind of science. I prefer to use the word you mentioned, “the road, the path”. In effect, it’s a road I try to follow, that we try to follow, because I think the actor’s art is an Oriental art. You quoted Michaux’s text, but you could also quote Artaud’s wording, he said, without circumlocution, “The theatre is Oriental.”

Now, can theatre follow this path without destroying the institutions? It’s because the institutions are so powerfully resistant to this path that they risk being destroyed by it. If these institutions weren’t so vain [laughter], so aristocratic – in the worst sense of the term –, that is to say, so certain of being the crème de la crème, I think that if the students also had just a little humility, then they could very productively explore these roads, at least come to know them, know that they exist, know that they might eventually be able to borrow from them.

But it is true that here there is a resistance among the few schools that exist. You framed your question by listing the names of schools that are already so numerous that it’s wonderful to me. In France, there are very few schools – I mean public schools –, there is the Conservatory, the National School of Strasbourg, the Rue Blanche. And then there are many private schools which are worse, aside from a few exceptions.
But could you please tell me, what tradition do we in the west have that can be balanced against the Orient? Granted, the Occident has dramaturgy. Oriental theatre has very few great works: there is the life of Ramayana, there is the Chikamatsu in Japan… Asian theatrical art is the art of the actor, the dancer, the singer. In contrast, since the time of the Greeks, we have had a large number of great written works. So, we have this tradition of the written word, but this tradition is not opposed to the other. So, yes, I think there is an ethnocentric resistance in France.

A young performer from the Théâtre du Soleil told me that one day a friend of his who didn’t like our shows said to him: “What I would like to see is a French Greek tragedy.” [Laughter.] He’s not wrong. That says it all. That says everything he means. He wanted a Greek tragedy, but in French. So, we seem a little foreign to him, so to speak.

With regard to the question about voice, as in the case of the body, I won’t talk about techniques, I’ll talk about work. It’s an imaginary road. The work that we’ve done with Kabuki or Nô for Shakespeare, or with Kathakali, is work but it’s also a work of imagination. And then you notice that the essential laws are the same in all these theatres. And you notice that an actor who has a Commedia dell’arte mask can encounter an actor from the Balinese Topeng and they can share a stage without a single word of common language. They can spend a magnificent hour on stage, for both themselves and the audience, because they can improvise, because the laws are the same.

Vocally, I think I’ve been less successful. I sense a slight criticism…

SERGE OUAKNINE:

I’d like to clarify. I’ve seen nearly all your shows since 1967. I can say that you have an elegance in scenic construction and a truly astounding, admirable level of physical work. But I’m not always convinced by the density of actualization of the voices, except at certain moments when there is a troubling quality, where the voices are neither male nor female, where they are neither low nor high, where they are double. So, I want to know if this is an aspect that you work on, or if it’s a miracle of the moment that allows the players to touch on something that Asians know very well and that Occidentals do not?

There is something “of the moment” and there is a meeting
A. MNOUCHKINE: I’d prefer to answer that question a little later. Perhaps something will lead us to pinpoint the heart of the problem. It is neither a miracle – though, of course, I believe there is always a miracle, but it occurs after a great deal of work – not mysterious, technical vocal work of which we know the secret. No, there is something of the moment, there is a meeting and then everything is there. And I think that it certainly can’t happen all the time, throughout the performance. I believe we’re not quite at that level yet.

RENÉE NOISEUX-GURIK
Theatre Option at Lionel-Groulx College:
I have two questions. One is probably in the mind of many of the young people here. What are your criteria for admission? What are the possibilities for admission into the Théâtre du Soleil? The other question touches on a preoccupation that surely exists among the young directors here today, but which they might not ask you about. How is a set created in your troupe? What happens? Who decides how to deal with the big problems with regards to the space, the way things are used, the whole technical apparatus. Is it a group process? In the case of the costumes, we clearly understood that it can be pinned down, but, in the case of the décor, it’s a little more delicate and fairly complicated.

A. MNOUCHKINE: In the case of the costumes, everything really begins with the performer’s work. Nathalie and Marie-Hélène4 come into the process almost hypocritically. What I mean is that in the beginning it’s the performers who go, who unearth, who seek, who invent, who do a great many things. The interaction between the two costumers and the performers occurs gradually.

Do things happen differently with regard to the décor? Usually, there is always a proposal that we mark out on the floor. We always begin with an empty rehearsal space, always. And along with Guy-Claude François5, we allow ourselves everything we want on paper: pools of water, waterfalls,… everything we want. And then, as the rehearsals proceed, I say to Guy-Claude: “You know, we don’t need all this anymore because they’ve performed it. So, because they’re performing it, we don’t need it.”

With Les Atrides, it was a little different. We began with an empty platform, and along with Guy-Claude, we said to ourselves: “Wait.” After two and a half months of rehearsals, I felt that the

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4 Nathalie Thomas and Marie-Hélène Bouvet are in charge of costumes in the Théâtre du Soleil.
5 Guy Claude François has been the Théâtre du Soleil’s decorator and scenographer since L’Âge d’Or (1975).
chorus, embryonic as it was at the time, started to need something, but I didn’t yet know what. At a certain point, the chorus performers were off to the side and I said to myself: “Yes, but they need to be separated now; they need to be able to be separated.” So we put up palisades in the rehearsal space.

I felt that the chorus could not be further developed. The space needed more precision. But for two months, two and a half months, the empty platform was all we needed to work. Then suddenly, there was a need for another place, another zone. That was how it developed.

RENÉE NOISEUX-GURIK:
I’d like to clarify my question. If, in the course of developing a work, you find yourself in a situation where you feel that your technical or visual knowledge is slightly limited, would you call upon outside help? Would you bring in scenographers?

A. MNOUCHKINE: But Guy-Claude François is a truly great scenographer! He’s worked with us from the beginning, or almost the beginning. He’s been the decorator-scenographer for the Théâtre du Soleil since *L’Âge D’Or*. Even before that, he was the technical director. He doesn’t perform in the shows.

RENÉE NOISEUX-GURIK:
I was misinformed, because I was told that all the actors always participated in all aspects of the development of a show.

A. MNOUCHKINE: In the décor, no. They participate through their needs. Sometimes they create it. And again, for *Les Atrides*, they were so overwhelmed with work that they didn’t participate much. For as much as I think the actors’ participation in the costumes is enormous and indispensable, I also think that their participation in the space in which they work is minimal.

When they are performing, I only notice one thing: are they good in the space or are they bad? They might indicate their need for something in a specific place in this way.

RENÉE NOISEUX-GURIK:
So this development occurs a little like the way Brecht worked with his contemporary collaborators, a very slow gestation where everything is genuinely integrated.

A. MNOUCHKINE: Yes, but it’s long. It’s long.
Wanting to climb the mountain

RENÉE NOISEUX-GURIK:  
My first question was: What qualities must you possess in order to be admitted into the Théâtre du Soleil? What are the criteria for admission?

A. MNOUCHKINE:  
The criteria for admission? I have a lot of difficulty answering that question because I think that there are criteria, but I myself don’t know what they are. Simon says that it’s a different story for everyone. I don’t know what makes me say to some: “Ah yes, let’s give it a try” and to others: “Ah no, not yet, another day.” I think maybe it’s emotional. There are looks that appeal to me, and others that appeal less. There are looks that lead me to hope. Maybe they’re not very great performers yet, but there’s hope for them. There may also be an impression I get that they want to climb the mountain. If someone really wants to climb the mountain, even if they don’t yet visibly have the means, it’s already very attractive.

I can’t give you any more detail on the criteria. Sincerely, it’s not an evasion, but it’s almost physical. There’s a physical rapport. There’s something of sensuality, of confidence, of hope, of poetic perception. And sometimes, it disappears. Something that looked affecting, charming, suddenly disappears. You say: “Oh no, maybe I was wrong” and then, no, it reappears, or it doesn’t. I can’t say why. But in any case, it’s not their resume, so to speak, or their awards that prompt my decision. It’s true that we also do workshops, and sometimes chance encounters happen during these workshops. But I can’t say that I’d say “yes” to someone who did something really stunning at a workshop. There are people who were admitted to the Théâtre du Soleil who didn’t do anything stunning at a workshop.

SERGE DENONCOURT  
Theatre Option at Lionel-Groulx College:  
I’m trying to understand who merits what in your troupe. For example, a really obvious question, would you have a negative bias against a Paris Conservatory first prize winner who wanted to work with you? [Laughter.]

A. MNOUCHKINE:  
When someone asks me if they can join us, I already have a positive bias towards them. I always find that flattering, even if it’s someone who has never worked in the theatre. As for a Conservatory first prize winner, let me tell you right now: There’s
never been a Conservatory first prize winner who asked to work with us. [Laughter.]

I was just talking about the vanity of performers, of student performers from certain schools. One day, I actually got this extraordinary answer from a student at the Strasbourg School who came to see us and, what a shock! Asked to join us. I said to him: “Listen, I’m doing a workshop in a month, come and work with us a little.” The student gave me this extraordinary answer: “Come on, I’ve already finished school!” [Laughter.] He finished school, so he knows everything! So, he has no need for a workshop! What part will you be giving me, Ms. Mnouchkine? None my dear. There you have it! So I have no negative bias, none at all.

JEAN-STÉPHANIE ROY:
Theatre Option at Lionel-Groulx College:

I’d like to know what training do you provide at the Théâtre du Soleil? What do you emphasize? When someone arrives, they say, “Ms. Mnouchkine, I’ve seen your shows, I love your work, I want to work with you. I don’t want to ‘play a part,’ I want to work.” Nuance. Then what do you do? Do you say to them: “I’m doing a workshop next month, come”? 

A. MNOUCHKINE: No I don’t say “I’m doing a workshop next month.” I say: “Write the Théâtre du Soleil and say that you would like to be kept informed of when the workshops are.” You might wait three months, six months… When the time comes, we let everyone know; and then we hold interviews.

We hold interviews because in general, there are seven to eight hundred applications. I can’t take them all. But I see the seven or eight hundred people. And then, of those seven hundred people, I accept a hundred into the workshop, sometimes more. And we perform exclusively in masks.

I see us as dinosaurs, completely against the current

MARTINE BEAULNE
Director and Performer:

I’d like to ask the performers why they wanted to work with the Théâtre du Soleil in the beginning. And now that they are a part of it, with all they experience they’ve acquired, all the research they’ve done, what questions remain with regard to the actor’s
performance? What do they still want to learn together? What
dimensions do they want to explore?

A. MNOUCHKINE: We question ourselves all the time, but there are times that are
more suited to inquiry. It’s the moment when we’ve already been
performing a show for a while, when we know that the final
performance is approaching and we’ll have to find something else
to do. We also know that that’s the moment when some will arrive
and others will leave.

All these changes always take place at the end of a show. There’s a
moment of great questioning. It’s not always pleasant. We might
wonder if we still have the strength to go on. These questions
might be narcissistic, but they still have to be asked.

For example, I ask myself how long a troupe like the Théâtre du
Soleil can last, faced with a situation that is completely against the
current, and I’m not talking about the material situation.
Sometimes I see us as dinosaurs, completely against the current of
a certain social evolution. I tell myself that it’s going to become
more and more difficult. I ask myself what methods we have at our
disposal. I ask myself these questions. But there are others that I
don’t even want to tell you, because they’re too intimate or too
anguished or they have too much to do with the normal neuroses of
actors and directors. And then there are other questions that surely
must resemble the questions that certain teachers among you,
certain authors, certain writers and certain actors, young or old,
who want to succeed, who are told they will sink and wonder how
to rise, ask themselves. [This is my best guess at translating
“prêche le marais.” I have not been able to find the expression
explained anywhere.]

MARIO LEJEUNE
Theatre Option at
Saint-Hyacinthe
College:

I’d like to hear you discuss the training of actors. I’d like to know
what your workshops include and how they help in the training of
performers, of actors?

A. MNOUCHKINE: No, listen, I didn’t come here to give a lecture on workshops. We
talked about the workshops because everyone is asking me what
they have to do to get information about the workshops. So I gave
the address. They’re workshops. I think a director owes that to
actors. There you have it. So one day I said to myself: “After all, I
have tools.” There are so many young actors that don’t have any
that, when we can, we hold an open fifteen-day workshop, nine
hours a day, eight hours a day, and young performers can come and do some work.

What do they learn? They learn that they are capable of learning.

Moreover, Josette Féral wrote an article in which she described a workshop from A to Z\(^6\). She attended one of our workshops and she really wrote a very meticulous description. You only have to read it.

CATHERINE GRAHAM
McGill University: My question is about ethnocentricity. I see your performances and I look at the program. I look at the names and I look at all of you. I notice that you come from several different cultures. I wonder how that works in the creation of a show. I have the impression that you each must come with different theatre traditions, with several cultural traditions. In *Les Atrides*, I had the impression that I was seeing many different traditions. When you get down to it, what I’m asking is really very simple. How do you work together? Do you only work in rehearsals? Do you do sometimes do seminars in order to share your skills? Maybe I’m directing my question more at the actresses and actors in order to know how you react to work that seems very intercultural to me.

Essentially, do the performers in the Soleil come from different styles of training? And what do you do to share the baggage you bring with you? Do you do seminars amongst yourselves? It is simply by observing each other?

SIMON ABKARIAN:

In the troupe Niru is the only one who comes from a country with a theatrical tradition. She’s from India, she’s done Baratanatyam. However, there are different cultural backgrounds. Duccio is from Italy. Brontis is from Mexico, his father is Jewish. My father is Armenian. Juliana is Brazilian. These are cultures that interact with each other. In the Théâtre du Soleil, there are some things that come out that we didn’t know were there and that we share. Seminars happen around a table, at the end of a rehearsal, we joke around, and then we talk to ourselves in one language, and answer ourselves in another…

Things also happen on stage. For example, Niru will do something, then Duccio will do the same thing and it will be his, even though it came from Niru. So yes, there are exchanges, but we don’t say to

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ourselves: “Okay, from five to six we’re going to make cultural exchanges.” [Laughter.] For example in the morning, when we all get together for coffee, suddenly Niru will drink her coffee. I’m talking a lot about Niru because at that moment she says: “Now this morning I’d really like to eat a lot of rice like they do in the morning at home.”

To share is a willingness to receive

A. MNOUCHKINE: What Simon is saying, which is completely true, is that Niru is effectively saying: “Ah! There’s no rice” and, a moment later, I also start craving rice. That’s what happens. It comes from permeability, from sharing. After all, sharing is a willingness to receive. It is receiving. If you have an impermeable, very closed off, very French, nature, there will be no sharing, even if there are ten seminars a week.

There’s a way of being, of uniting with the other… There’s a way of suddenly hearing the Brazilians or the Portuguese in the company speak to each other. Of course there is a love for that sort of thing. It also comes from the love of performance. It’s not work. That’s what Simon meant. It’s not work, it’s a lifestyle. That’s why in a way, it’s difficult to answer.

SIMON ABKARIAN:

Sometimes people ask me: “What school did you attend? What work have you done in the Théâtre du Soleil?” One day, a journalist who came to see the show said to me: “What did you do before theatre?” I was taken by surprise because I was just coming from the performance. I replied: “I lived.” I didn’t say that to give him an interesting answer, I said it because that’s what came naturally to me. I think that what we all have in common in the Théâtre du Soleil is that we have all lived. And we share this lived experience. I think that all over the world, beautiful things look the same. So we say to each other: “In my country, we say ‘flower’ like this, in my country we say it like that, in my country we eat like this with one hand.” We talk about eating, love, and a great many things.

JULIANA CARNEIRO DA CUNHA:

Ariane mentioned that we bring our childhoods with us. Because we often work with childhood, we have the childhood of several countries to work with. It’s very refreshing.

BRONTIS
JODOROWSKY: I think we also really like to travel. There are shows that take us to particular places and others that take us to other places. I think that’s the pleasure of it.

[Photo: Simon Abkarian, Ariane Mnouchkine, Nirupama Nityanandan, Juliana Carneiro da Cunha.]

Photo taken from a video recording of the Théâtre du Soleil’s public meeting with theatrical schools (Chapter 4). UQAM Audio-Visual Services.

UNIDENTIFIED STUDENT: I’d like to ask you a question about your choices. How do you choose a play, and how do you work with it? How do you distribute the parts? Do you see a particular actor in a specific part or rather do you leave it to the actor to say: “I’m more interested in this character; it seems to me that I’d feel better with him or her in the play”?

A. MNOUCHKINE: I never distribute the parts beforehand. Never, ever. However, it’s not the actor who says: “I choose that part.” That wouldn’t work. So, for a long time, really for a very long time, all the actors try out all the parts, and for a long time at that. To tell the whole story, the definitive casting, the really definitive casting, happens so late that the program with the cast list is never ready on the day of the premiere. So, everyone tries out all the parts.

But there are also some things that are obvious. There are obvious facts that sometimes appear immediately in a dazzling way. Others are sometimes longer, much longer, in coming. Sometimes, it’s cruel because there can be a moment of hesitation between two actors or actresses, but I never distribute the parts beforehand.

I can’t pretend I don’t say to myself: “Well, this one will probably perform that.” At times I’m wrong. Sometimes I get wonderful surprises, incredible surprises. I also get disappointments that are very hard to accept. In any case, I don’t distribute the parts, but the actors don’t come to me and say: “I’ll do this part” either. They all say: “I’d like to try this out.” And they all try it all out.

At a certain point, a particular play says: “Well, I’m the next challenge”

Your first question was about the play. How do we choose our plays? I think I answered that earlier. At a certain point there’s a sort of lightning bolt that strikes. There’s a moment during the run of a show where you don’t know what you’ll do afterwards. It’s a moment of instability that’s very nerve-wracking, but at the same
time sort of pleasant because you know that at the moment, something you’re not yet aware of is ripening. Then something imposes itself, something chooses you. I’m not so sure that it’s us who choose a particular play. I think that, at a certain point, it’s a particular play that says: “Well, I’m the next challenge.”

SERGE DENONCOURT:
Is there a hierarchy within the troupe? I got the impression that during the show, there are actors who have the right to the first choice of speaking parts over the others. I have the impression that in your training, there’s a sort of stage each person has to go through where they can be on stage, but not speak. Was everyone eligible – that’s not the right word – did everyone have the right to play Orestes? Was everyone in the race or is there an apprenticeship to be served?

A. MNOUCHKINE: No! Quite sincerely, no! Everyone is eligible. But not everyone is chosen. And when you say that there are stages each person must pass through, that’s very true. There are stages each person must pass through. You can’t pretend that everyone is the same, is at the same level. It’s not true. In fact there is the idea of the possibility of apprenticeship. I think you can learn a lot by carrying a stool. For example, Catherine, who is the Coryphaeus, began by carrying a stool at the Théâtre du Soleil. That doesn’t mean that everyone, that all those who carried stools, ended up being the Coryphaeus. [Laughter.] Let’s say that it’s not a question of rights. The right is acquired. If Simon plays Orestes or if Niru plays Iphigenia or Electra, if Juliana plays Clytemnestra, then yes, they have the right because they play the part. But their rights were not posted like that in advance because everyone can try all of it out.

Nothing must come before the beauty of the work and respect for the audience

SERGE DENONCOURT:
What led me to ask this question is that Simon, for example, plays Orestes, Achilles, and the nursemaid. And I was saying to myself that there must be lots of actors in your troupe who were dying to play the nursemaid…

A. MNOUCHKINE: As far as the nursemaid goes, I can tell you that at one point Simon was dying to have someone else play the part. [Laughter.] And I have to say, I was too!

[Photo: The Théâtre du Soleil’s Les Atrides.]

“The parts belong to those who perform them best.” (83)
It was because it’s an extremely quick change. We even had to resort to a little trick; we added a few lines to the chorus so that Simon had time to change. We all would have been truly, sincerely delighted for someone else to play the nursemaid. Earlier you mentioned the right of veto. Obviously, that’s the moment at which I become very unpopular. It’s just that, at a certain point, between Simon and another person who’s not quite there, I choose the solution that is more difficult, but the most beautiful. Moreover, I think that everyone held it against me a little, including Simon, because he wanted to catch his breath at that point. But there’s something called respect for Aeschylus and for the audience. And nothing must come before the beauty of the work and respect for the audience, not even the little internal democracy of a troupe.

If someone else had played the nursemaid, it would have greased the wheels and saved me a lot of headaches. But no! What do you want me to say? No! It has to go to the best.

You know Brecht’s phrase: “The earth belongs to the one who tills it best, things belong to those who do them best.” There you have it. The parts belong to those who perform them best. But not in advance. There it is! It’s not all decided in advance.

What’s not fair, to me, is when the parts are essentially distributed from the first rehearsal. Because that creates a system. That’s not the case in the Théâtre du Soleil.

The other side of the coin is when, suddenly, after a grace period, there’s a period where an actor who was able to get everything out of a performance, suddenly gets less. I accept it. Often the actor has more difficulty accepting it.

ALINE OUELLET
UQAM Theatre
Department:
I’d like to come back to the question of the choice of actors. A moment ago you answered that your decision was based on several factors. I was thinking that you seem very intuitive, but in fact you clearly know what criteria you use as a basis for choosing your people. Could you give us a few examples of the reasons that led you to choose five or six of your actors? We all understand that a person has to be strong, morally and physically, to work with you and that they have to be humble. But what about the rest?

What discourages me, is disenchantment, blasé attitudes, cynicism… I need a certain religiousness, a relationship to the sacred
A. MNOUCHKINE: What, do you think I’m hiding something? [Laughter.] I remember Catherine in her early days, at first she was quite impenetrable, which is to say that she was a small young woman with a little bun on one side, who moved really well, who was very athletic, who frequently helped the others to dress. In the workshop she did, she was very dynamic, very cheerful. She didn’t do anything fabulous. She did a really nice improvisation, but aside from that, nothing exceptional. However, I knew she had spent two years in India in the Kalamandala. You have to be brave to spend two years in the south of India, in a village without electricity. She did all that to study the Kathakali without spending a month as a tourist. And then she asked to join the company and it was clear right away that that Catherine was someone who did what she had to do. I mean that her work was polished, meticulous. There was rigorousness, even in the smallest things she did – she carried stools, she was one in the troupe of Sihanouk’s servants –, there was meticulousness, delicacy! She immersed herself in the delicacy of the court servants of that era and she did it with enthusiasm, appetite, pleasure. Those were the first things that struck me with her. And yet, she didn’t possess the gift of speaking on stage at all.

It would be easier to tell you what discourages me. What discourages me the most, immediately, is disenchantment, blasé attitudes, cynicism, I’m not the person to do that to. [Laughter.] So that immediately is a no! It’s like throwing a wet blanket on me.

I look for reverberation, credulity, passion, need! I need a certain religiousness, a relationship to the sacred. There you have it! If someone was using the gestures, the little ritual gestures that are unique to us, without it holding any personal significance for them, it would ruin the pleasure of the sacred, of theatre, of ritual, of the poeticizing of everyday life, to such an extent that at that moment, it would no longer inspire me, it would no longer inspire me. It may be that I also need a childlike quality. Does that answer your question?

ALINE OUELLET: Yes, because you addressed the dimension that hadn’t been mentioned but that we see on stage. All the anima is there. It’s good that you brought it up because we have to move towards a dimension other than the one we perceive.

I have a second question. Ariane Mnouchkine is always identified with the Théâtre du Soleil, but it there anything that has branched off beyond it? Are there actors who worked with you and then
went on to do work elsewhere? Are there baby dinosaurs growing up somewhere? Is the Théâtre du Soleil only Ariane Mnouchkine?

A. MNOUCHKINE: There are people who have left the Théâtre du Soleil in order to branch out, to form other troupes. They’ve had varying degrees of success or happiness. There’s Jean-Claude Penchenat who founded the Campagnol; there’s Jean-Pierre Tailhade who does one man shows; there’s also Philippe Caubère. So yes, I think there are actors who worked in the Soleil and who went on to do work elsewhere, It’s normal, considering that this is almost a family situation, that those who leave react to their experience. So, there is a contradiction. Those who branch off can’t be complete clones of the Soleil. It’s not parthenogenesis, but they necessarily do things that are influenced by the Théâtre du Soleil because they were a part of it for a long time. As a result, they face a crisis and have a claim to be different.

MARIE OUELLETTE
UQAM Theatre
Department: My passion for the Théâtre du Soleil comes from that magical word ‘the troupe.’ In Quebec, we don’t have any troupes. There are theatrical companies, but no troupes in the strongest sense of the term. I’d like to hear you speak about the thing that is the troupe, about what makes it endure for all these years, about the actor and actress’ profession within the troupe, about the sphere that the troupe creates.

And then what do you think of the direction actors take in the commercial sector? What do you think of the necessity there is to make a living that pushes performers to act on television and do commercials?

There will always be dreams

A. MNOUCHKINE: It’s evident that a troupe like the Théâtre du Soleil began with a dream. And it continues because it’s still a dream. That doesn’t mean that it’s the same dream for everyone. That doesn’t mean that it’s always idyllic either. Sometimes, it’s extremely cruel. Now I’m speaking only for myself. I have no idea how long the Théâtre du Soleil will last. But I do know that for me, doing theatre outside of an ensemble that shares their common quest is inconceivable. I wouldn’t do theatre any other way. Because I believe that’s the only way to learn, and I want to learn.

I’d really like to scale the mountain. And scaling the mountain is not simply scaling the mountain of each play, it’s succeeding in
scaling the mountain of theatre, of your own life. So, there’s the fact that it’s a dream and that the dream itself is a challenge, a test.

With regard to your second question about what I think of actors who do commercials, I don’t have a right to answer that. Of course, I have an opinion but I don’t have the right to express what I think in public, because honestly I never put myself in someone else’s position. What I can tell you is that I would change professions if it came to the point where I was obliged to give up my principles. I would do something else; it’s obvious. I would not be able to do what I do not believe to be theatre. It’s not my place to judge those whose desire to do theatre pushes them to do something that is not theatre.

And then all of this is mingled with lots of other things, the desire for money, even a little money, the desire for independence, and sometimes also the desire to lead a troupe.

There are various responses to theatrical art. The least that can be said is that the world that surrounds us does not favour troupes. I wonder how long this state of things will last, whether it is an epoch, just a phase, or on the contrary, an era. People valorize individualism nowadays. It may have consequences. But I think that among the young men and women who want to do theatre, there will always be dreams, there will always be someone who will come stampeding in and say: “Yes, but I want to do something else.” I say go for it! It’s impossible for everyone to fail. There will still be people who put together troupes and swim against the tide.

However, it is true that at this moment, in France, youth are not being encouraged and are being misled. It’s a little like Pinocchio. They’re being led into amusement parks.

[Photo: Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil.]

“It’s evident that a troupe like the Théâtre du Soleil began with a dream. And it continues because it’s still a dream.” (86)

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DANIELLE CODOGLIANI
Montreal
Conservatory of Dramatic Arts:
I’d like to know what is a day like in the Théâtre du Soleil? What does the work encompass? What is the performance space like? I’d also like to know what happens between productions. Is there a pause or do you continue to work? And finally, approximately how
much time does a performer spend with the Théâtre du Soleil troupe?

A. MNOUCHKINE: With regard to your first question about what a workday is like, I have to say: it depends. During rehearsals, it’s a certain type of day; during performances, it’s another. For the rehearsals, it’s pretty simple. We arrive at eight fifty. We have coffee and at nine we begin. In other words, we warm up. How depends on the show. It’s either a simple warm up, or it’s a warm up with dancing, as we did for Les Atrides. Then, we decide what scenes we’re going to work on that day, and who will try what in which scenes. Sometimes everything is disorganized. So, the teams form according to the different distributions put forward. The actors disguise themselves – I can’t say they get into costume because we’re not there yet. So they disguise themselves, they make themselves up, they look like rutabagas or leeks… And we start rehearsing.

In the first month of rehearsals, we normally stop at seven. And soon, we stop towards eight, then towards nine, and then towards ten. Then we have dinner. And then we start all over.

I gave you the way we worked on Les Atrides, but for other productions the performers make an enormous contribution to the construction of the décor or to other things. With Les Atrides the amount of work was such that that wasn’t possible. We had so many difficulties at the beginning that every minute had to be devoted to rehearsal. We often worked from nine until midnight. In total, we worked ten and a half months for the four shows. We did the first three in seven and a half months. We performed them over a very long period because we couldn’t stop anymore since we no longer had a tour and we needed to perform. [Laughter.] Afterwards, we stopped in January. After Lyon we stopped for three months in order to stage Les Euménides. That’s how it works when we rehearse.

When we perform, it’s a little different. Because shows in Paris start at seven-thirty, everyone arrives for lunch towards one-thirty or two. Those who are on duty, as they say – in other words, about half of them – do the cleaning up, prepare the bar…, the others who aren’t on duty that week arrive at four for a seven-thirty start. They get together and warm up. The audience arrives about an hour before the start, about six-thirty, and the actors are in their dressing rooms at about five-thirty, quarter-to-six.

MICHEL SAVARD
Theatre Option at
A. MNOUCHKINE: I can only tell you how it started. Often, it starts with a group of friends. In fact, when I came back from England, when I began what I thought were my studies, I founded a troupe of student amateurs at the Sorbonne. That was where all of the Soleil’s founders first met, but it was to do amateur theatre. We became a group, a group of friends, and we decided that we would do theatre together. But for some there was military service to complete, and for others there were studies. I wanted to take the grand tour of Asia. We did all that, and then we reconnected and we created the Théâtre du Soleil. We didn’t know anything. No one knew anything.

No one among us had been an actor. All of us had only done amateur theatre. I myself had no idea what directing really was. There it is!

I think it starts with love, with hope. It starts with enthusiasm, with nerve. Because you have to be pretty brazen. And then maybe it also starts with naiveté because we knew nothing. That brings us back to the humility we discussed earlier.

MICHEL SAVARD: But there’s often the question of finances.

A. MNOUCHKINE: Yes. At the time, it took us three years to make it happen. We decided that we would put in nine hundred francs each, which was a lot. It would be about five thousand francs today. And also we worked in the day and rehearsed in the evening.

It’s ten times harder to create a company now, than it was in 1964. I wouldn’t say that, at the time, we were encouraged to create, but there was a certain regard on the part of the ministry. They didn’t give us any funds, but there were two sinister looking men called Lerminier and Deher who went to all the shows. I have nothing but respect for those men because they went out to the suburbs to see anything and everything. As soon as someone put on a little show, Deher and Lerminier turned up with their overcoats and their sinister looks and had something to say.
Nowadays, no one goes to see the young people starting out. No one. They have to put in a lot of time and energy before they even get to say: “I exist.”

And then there were those like Vilar, like Paolo Grassi du Piccolo from Milan. There were people who had created enough that they feared no one. And who wanted to see us get our start. And who watched over us, who helped us, who watered us, I’d say, so that we could grow, and thus encouraged us. We were strongly encouraged, even though we had innumerable difficulties.

There was a smile. We sensed an eye, and ear. We didn’t feel the sort of pretentious corporatism that predominates today.

UNIDENTIFIED
STUDENT: My question is for the performers. I’d like to know how you experience your relationship to the work, your relationship to the director, in the creative process over the course of a show. How does the director help you? How does Ariane Mnouchkine participate in your work?

SIMON ABKARIAN: First, I think that there is a bond of trust between the actor and the director. This bond of trust is established right away. There’s a mutual belief in each other. We put ourselves in danger on stage, we could fall apart at any moment. It only takes one brutal word or act to break us into a thousand pieces. It’s the same for the director. People tend to forget that. We all trade in imagination, directors as well as us.

It begins with the actor and we feed off each other. It’s a question of permeability. You also have to admit that you know nothing. In other words, you forget everything, but you don’t forget that you forgot it. And you take the leap.

To give an example, when we began with the Greek works, we put on costumes and makeup, as Juliana said, we took the text in hand, and we set off.

There’s an animal instinct in the meeting of actor and director. Complicity is created. There are moments where they simply look at each other and understand. It happens quickly because we’re in action.
Our work with Ariane is always in action, and in mutual trust, and consequently in danger, because we open up to each other.

BRONTIS JODOROWSKY: To continue what Simon was saying, I’d also say that there is an exigency, Ariane has a demanding gaze. She sees an actor do something very well on one day and then like a child on the next day, she wants to see what comes next. She wants to see where it’s progressing. So she says: “Yesterday it was very good, and now what?” Can we refine it? What can we do? How can we improve the situation? How can we be deeper? How can we render the image better? How can we make it clearer? Accordingly, there is a bond of mutual trust and complicity and exigency that is established. What it means is that, like a high jumper, Ariane is always raising the bar a little higher: “You jumped six meters, Good! We’re going to try six and a half.”

Have the courage to follow instructions to the letter

NIRUPAMA NITYANANDAN: I’d like to add something. When we work with Ariane and she gives us an instruction, we must have the courage to follow it to the letter, to do exactly what she asks and nothing else. In other words, when she says: “The old man goes back into the palace”, he goes back in, he doesn’t do something else. It’s so simple that sometimes it’s scary. Often we have the impression that Ariane is performing when she gives an instruction. It’s as if every pore on our bodies is open and focused on her and the other performers.

For example, when I began Les Atrides, I knew how to dance, but in the respect that I did not dance like someone else, I didn’t know how to dance. It took some time for me to understand that, through watching Ariane, hearing what she said to me, watching Simon, and watching Catherine. You must know how to be completely ready to be someone else.

SIMON ABKARIAN:

I would add to what Niru said that, during Les Atrides, we were put to the test in a way that we rarely have been. Ariane as well as us. Ariane was giving us instructions and it wasn’t working. She’d say something else going in the same direction, but in a different way, and it still wouldn’t work. Sometimes doubt settled in.
I couldn’t see a thing. I’d say: “Listen, Ariane, I think they’re not
doing what you told them to do.” There’s always a moment where
you say: “Wait, he’s not doing what Ariane told him to do.”
Usually, we discuss it: “She told you to do this, why aren’t you
doing it? – But I did. – No you didn’t.” We realize that sometimes
there’s deafness, blindness on the actor’s part. Someone may want
to do some wonderful acrobatics, or articulate something really
well, but if it doesn’t naturally integrate into the show, it doesn’t
work.

A. MNOUCHKINE: I’m going to add this. As Niru and Simon were saying, it is in fact
absolutely essential that, at a certain point, an actor follows
instructions to the letter because it’s the only way to see if they are
good or bad. If an instruction is bad, we get rid of it.

There’s also the opposite moment, the one where I give no
instruction. In fact, it sometimes happens that I say: “I don’t
know.” This is a strength, but for the performers, this uncertainty is
sometimes very hard to endure. It’s distressing. And Lord knows it
happened to us with Les Atrides.

So there are two possible situations. Either an instruction is given,
but is not put into action, not through unwillingness, but through
inability or sometimes simple error. This causes doubt. Or then the
director doesn’t know. He has that right. And there also, doubt
settles in. At that moment, what gets things going again? Well,
obviously, it’s an actor, who says to himself: “Since we don’t
know, let’s try this. No! It’s not working? Let’s try this. Ah there!”
It may not that either, but it revives the theatre. The scene may not
ultimately be performed that way, but, after a morning, a day, a
week of non-theatre, suddenly, the theatre is back. And it gives us
back our courage. We return to the search with the right tools. We
stop trying to dig with a sieve. We pick up a spade. And at that
moment, we dig. And it works better regardless.

Having credulity

UNIDENTIFIED
STUDENT: I was wondering what problems the text that you chose to produce
caused you. What sort of processes did you put in place to
overcome those obstacles?

A. MNOUCHKINE: There were several problems. First, there was the problem of
clichés, in other words, we said to ourselves: “Aeschylus and
Euripides just wrote this play for us.” It’s easy to say that when
there are ten thousand, a hundred thousand books on a text, when that text is absolutely swallowed up by the notes on it, the clichés, and eventually the productions of it. We were lucky, we had never seen any of the productions, but we could have. So we had to resist the clichés.

The second problem, as always with the great works, is the problem of credulity. We’re there like fools telling ourselves: “It’s a very, very, very great work! What does that mean?” And we’re so stuck on the “what does that mean?” that we don’t see that what that means is written right in front of us. [Laughter.] There’s a part of the text that’s still comprehensible. Yet, for a moment, a part of us obstinately refused to understand under the pretext that it was so great! It was so intimidating that we didn’t understand what was written. Then, at a certain point, we said to ourselves: “Come on, damn it! It’s theatre, and it was performed in front of twenty thousand people and among them there were intellectuals, but also slaves, illiterates, and people who didn’t speak Greek or who understood only a little. And then, we were in a position to be able to start fresh in the present. Then it got going! Just like that!

The problem is there. There were identical moments with the Shakespeare texts. We wanted to add “more” when there was already “too much” in the text. And we try to make it even more. A character says: “I’m going into the house” and we ask ourselves: “What does that mean?” It means that he’s going into the house. You must accept this. There you have it! And if the servant did not say “stranger,” well then! Achilles would enter and smash Agamemnon in the face. But because that’s not good, the slave arrives and says “stranger.” And what does “stranger” mean? It means that Achilles is a stranger to the slave. Good. There you have it. That’s what it means. That’s the problem. It’s that we want to be smarter than Aeschylus. And so we end up becoming complete idiots. [Laughter.]

ROBERT REID
UQAM Theatre Department:

My question is more specifically for Simon. I saw Iphigénie.

My question concerns pantomime. I noticed a particular level of effort in the entrances and exits in your performance, and a level of punctuation that approached pantomime following each answer. I’d like to know if you work on the body or on pantomime in rehearsals or in your workshops. If so, what methods do you use?

SIMON ABKARIAN:
Entrances and exits are fundamental to theatre. All work begins with an entrance. If there’s no entrance, there’s no theatre and we can’t perform the scene.

We also do a lot of work on masques, and so also on stops, because an action is distinguished from another by the stops: One stop, then another stop. But in any case, no, it’s not pantomime.

A. MNOUCHKINE: I think there’s a misunderstanding. You’re already a little beside the point with regards to our work in the way you asked your question. Simon is giving you the simple answer: “Yes, there are stops. But in Achilles’ exit, there’s not one stop, there’s maybe fifty.” In dance, there is no movement if there are no stops. So, the art of masque is founded on stops. If a great actor makes a perilous leap in a masque, you would have the impression that, during the perilous leap, he stopped eighteen times. That’s the quality of movement.

I understand that Simon isn’t really succeeding in answering your question because you’re presenting the problem in the inverse of the way that he or the other performers try to work. Simon is telling you about precision. He’s telling you that, when Agamemnon or Achilles shows you something, he really moves in that direction. He moves like an arrow. And then he stops. If he didn’t stop, there would be no movement. You’re talking about fine tuning the action, about finishing like a pantomime or a statue. That has nothing to do with it.

It’s important that Simon’s answer and my answer are very clear. Very often, in workshops with young performers, there’s always a moment when I say: “Stop! No! Stop! – Yes, I stopped – No! No! Really stop.” And generally, ten minutes can go by before someone is really immobile.

It very often strikes me that in theatre, actors never stop. They’re always agitated and so everything is permanently blurred. There’s no tableau of the action.
ROBERT REID: When Achilles exits, when Simon exits, is he still in motion even when he stops? The body is stopped in a masque, but is the actor still in motion?

SIMON ABKARIAN: Yes, because he’s going somewhere. We know that, at that moment, it’s the end of Achilles. It’s his last exit. We don’t see him again in the play. What I try to do, is to imagine where Achilles is going until the very last moment, even after he disappears into the wings. In fact, his travels continue beyond that and don’t end there.

NANCY McCREADY Actress: My question is about performing in a mask. When you are creating a production and the show is performed in masks, how do you work with the person who creates them, with the mask sculptor? At what point do you decide that the features are finished? At what moment can you say: “There, yes, it’s finished”?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Sometimes there are masks whose appearance on stage is delayed. There again, the way you’re asking your question doesn’t correspond with our method. First because we work with someone called Erhard Stiefel who is a mask-maker – I just learned the term – and who is a sculptor. He’s a very great sculptor. He’s someone who has a rapport with masks, who has a gift for making completely extraordinary masks. In fact, his work doesn’t proceed the way you put it. He doesn’t try to model the mask on a face, to give it psychology. Quite the contrary.

In fact, he makes masks. Of course he makes them with the show in mind, but when he starts to sculpt his block of wood, he doesn’t know what will emerge. It’s as if he finds his own continent. It’s his own spirit. And then a mask comes to him. He brings it out. And at that moment, the question is whether that mask will converge with one of the characters in the show or one of the actors or actresses in the show.

Thank God, it works! But often there are masks that aren’t as strong as others, exactly the way it happens in our work. Sometimes there are even masks that remain, that are still waiting to go on stage.

NANCY McCREADY: Do you keep all the masks? They stay there. Does it happen that a mask changes? That Erhard Stiefel remakes other masks right up until the night of the premiere?
A. MNOUCHKINE: Yes, but he doesn’t model a mask that way. A mask is not clay. It’s hard. So to a certain extent, it’s not something you can adjust. The mask emerges, or it doesn’t. And afterwards, there’s all the work of painting it. By that I mean that it’s not as if Erhard is working on the mask and saying to me: “Finally! I saw an improvisation. It’ll be great for her to have a crooked nose.” No! That’s not how it works. A mask has its own existence or then it’s no good. It’s for the performer to adapt to the mask and not the mask to adapt to the performer.

ROBERT DION
UQAM Theatre Department:

Personally, I’m very interested in the “pleasure” that is in an actor’s performance. You often refer to childhood. You say that the actor has to return to childhood. You even say that he must play like a child, play at being a king, play at being a queen. I wonder if that pleasure is there in plays, in works as tragic as *Les Atrides*. For example, does the pleasure of performing, the pleasure of childhood, exist in equal measure in *Les Atrides* and in *La Nuit des Rois*?

A. MNOUCHKINE: I’m sorry that the actors aren’t here anymore to answer you. I sincerely believe that they would have told you that the pleasure is clearly just as intense. Because the sensuality of suffering is the very essence of tragedy. But, after all, you can also ask yourself that question. Do you really enjoy seeing such horrible stories? [Laughter.] Evidently, yes. So do they. The actor’s pleasure is in being another, in living another’s sufferings.

**I believe in the pedagogy of the humble imitation**

ANNICK CHARLEBOIS:

To come back to the actor’s training, you often say: “One learns through the gaze.” In Quebec, we frequently learn through practice.

A. MNOUCHKINE: It’s the same.

ANNICK CHARLEBOIS:

Yes, I understand that. But what is the nature of what one learns through the gaze?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Earlier, Simon was talking about imitation. I believe in the pedagogy of the humble imitation. It’s an entirely Oriental pedagogy. I’d say that the beginning of pedagogy, for example in

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7 The actors had to leave after two hours in order to prepare themselves for the evening’s performance.
the Topeng or the Kabuki or the Nô, is imitation. The student follows the master and does as he does.

Obviously it’s not the only pedagogy for us, but there is one thing we have learned, and that is to not be ashamed to imitate. And imitating does not mean caricaturing. Imitating, is imitating from within.

It’s not enough to imitate the method or the gesture, you must also imitate the interior emotion that is linked to that method or gesture. When someone tries out a part, if the other actors are saying to themselves: “Ah, when I have my turn, I have to try to do it like this or like that”, they don’t learn anything. If they really observe what’s happening, if they observe the other, without criticism, without judgment, with as much openness as possible, then we make progress.

MICHEL VAIS
Radio-Canada Critic and Journalist:

At the press conference you gave when you arrived, I asked you a question about support from the state and the government that you gave a very animated response to. I’d like to know what place Politics, with a capital “P”, have within the troupe? Do you discuss the big political questions amongst yourselves? Is it important?

A. MNOUCHKINE:

It depends on the moment. You know, Emile Zola said that if he had been in the middle of writing a novel at the time of the Dreyfus affair, he would not have written J’Accuse. He admitted that, and in saying that he admitted that in the creative process, you have to protect yourself a little. So I believe that, when the rehearsals are in full swing, theatre is what takes precedence. During the performance run, we have more free time. However, it is true that in the troupe, most of the people lean to the left.

However, there have been conflicts that divided the group. There are issues that could have been very serious and that were resolved by very long discussions. That was the case for our trip to Israel. We had been invited by Israel and we were solicited to boycott on all sides. I felt that we should go, particularly as we were performing L’Indiade, in other words a show about the Indian separation. A large part of the troupe also thought we should go, but there were two or three actors who were saying we shouldn’t.

So, it could have been very difficult because it could have been something very divisive. It resolved itself well. We listened to each other. There was a willingness to hear. I have to say that what
really worked in favour of this trip was that the Arabs in the company at the time wanted to go. And that assuaged the debate. But if there had been someone in the group who was a little fanatical, we would have experienced a serious crisis.

There was another very powerful rift over the Gulf War. In that case, we decided that we would not allow ourselves to be invaded by the debate. There were some who thought that we needed to do it, and others who thought that we should not. It was getting tense.

Because our opinion wasn’t going to change anything in the Gulf War, we came to a consensus that we would not talk about it in the Théâtre du Soleil because it was too painful, too distressing. And moreover, we heard a lot of foolishness. When we noticed that we were all saying a lot of foolish things and that we were no longer arguing on the basis of facts, but on the basis of opinions, we said to ourselves: “Fine then, we’ll talk about it in restaurants at night, but we’re going to stop in the Théâtre du Soleil, because it’s not serving any purpose.”

There’s also the question of the European referendum. In that case, we are all for it and all very worried.

I’m not very good at meditating

UNIDENTIFIED STUDENT: Oriental theatrical language is based in an entire culture and spirituality that has its roots in meditation. Do you use meditation as a preparatory step for concentration and as a way for the actor to be more present? Is meditation useful for an actor?

A. MNOUCHKINE: That’s an individual choice. I know that Niru and a performer from the chorus often use meditation. They go off to a room and meditate a little. Personally, I’m not very good at meditating. So I obviously I can’t recommend it. That’s what we call a personal recipe. Each person has their own recipe, their own needs. And there are the collective needs. There are some things that are obligatory for everyone: for example, physically warming up together. Those who need to meditate before or after warming up meditate. Those who need to go get a coffee, something to eat, and talk to people that they don’t encounter on stage do that. Those who need to nap, nap. Those who need to do yoga, do yoga. Those who need to read the newspaper, read the newspaper. Those who need to play chess, play chess.

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8 This refers to the Maastricht Treaty. France ultimately voted 45% for “yes” a few weeks later.
UNIDENTIFIED STUDENT: It’s a pot-pourri. A democratic approach.

A. MNOUCHKINE: No. It’s not democratic. It’s entirely pragmatic. An actor may not be aware that he’s meditating while he’s having his coffee alone in his corner. [Laughter.] And if Juliana needs to nap, that means she needs to nap. The only thing that isn’t allowed is something that bothers the others. If someone needs to yell, well! He needs to go to the other end of the Cartoucherie [I assume this refers to a specific building known by this name. The literal translation of the word is “munitions depot”]. [Laughter.]

JIMMY FLEURY Theatre Option at Lionel-Groulx College: Earlier, you said that a person had to be very strong, mentally, in order to join the troupe.

A. MNOUCHKINE: I didn’t say that. Someone else said it.

JIMMY FLEURY: You used the word “humble”.

A. MNOUCHKINE: That’s not me either, but I agree. I admit it.

JIMMY FLEURY: No one else uses “humble” in the same way [laughter and applause]. I’d like to know what you mean by it!

A. MNOUCHKINE: Well, let’s see. [A. Mnouchkine opens a dictionary placed before her.]

JIMMY FLEURY: No, in your own words. How do you define a humble performer?

A. MNOUCHKINE: I’ll tell you what it means. “Humble.” Wait! That, that doesn’t interest us at all… “The humble violet… a humble home… a humble life…” No, nothing interesting there. But here, it’s just the opposite. Humble is the opposite of arrogant and pompous. [Laughter.] What’s necessary for a troupe is to know that you know nothing. The little anecdote I told about the Strasbourg student who told me: “Come on, I’ve already finished school!” What! You have to know that it’s no shame not to know; that in contrast, it’s shameful to hide that you don’t know, and in the theatre, it takes time before you can really say that you practice an art. In a certain way, when you graduate from a school, you really shouldn’t say “I am a performer.”
You also have to know that in the theatre nothing can be done without others, that you owe everything to the others. That you don’t get anything done if you don’t listen, that you don’t get anything done if you’re not receptive. That it’s always very difficult to know, in a show, who did what, where each element came from.

And you also have to know that you don’t show yourself. You are absolutely fascinating as individuals. But you and you alone, on stage, are not exciting at all.

You are only fascinating if you enter with someone else, inhabited by someone else, invaded by someone else, subordinate to someone else. You must know that Aeschylus is the important one. He is the one who gives us our daily bread, in the material sense and the spiritual.

An audience, is a gathering of humanity at its best

CLAUSE DESPINS
National Theatre
School of Canada:

There is something that we seem to forget when we are often in the company of theatrical people, and also theatrical students, it’s that the audience is who we work for. I’d like to hear you speak about the audience, what we have to do for the audience. Do we have to please the audience at any cost?

A. MOUCHKINE: During rehearsals, you don’t have to do anything for the audience. During rehearsals, I only think about the audience for two reasons: Can we be understood? Can we be heard? So I don’t really think about the audience.

I start thinking about them with terror eight or ten days before performances begin. We really start to think about the audience when, with Maria and Selahattin running the bar, we start to wonder, “Well, what will we make to eat?” So we really don’t think about the audience.

I don’t think you have to please the audience at any cost. That’s not the question that honest actors and directors ask themselves during rehearsals. They don’t say: “Will this please?” they say: “Does this please me?”

I can’t have any criteria other than my emotions, my pleasure, my laughter, my grief. The miracle happens when that corresponds with the audience’s laughter, emotion, and pleasure. Catastrophe is
when it doesn’t correspond. But after all, as Conrad said, “you can criticize me but at least know that my intentions were pure.”

We only need to think about the audience in terms of politeness. Are they able to understand? Are they able to see? We must always place ourselves in the position we were in before we began to work in theatre.

But if not, when a show opens, when we open the doors to the public, then, yes! Before, you, the audience, enter, there’s a little meeting between the actors and I, just before we open the doors. We exchange two or three words and then I say the ritual phrase: “The audience is entering.” And the audience enters. Well, it’s really: “Attention, the king is entering.” It resonates in that way. The audience enters.

From the moment when that sentence is spoken, everything must be impeccable. There’s a solemnity. There can’t be so much as a cigarette butt.

And the audience itself is climbing the mountain. The space helps the audience to climb the mountain. In addition, because of the fact that the seats are not numbered, we oblige the audience to come an hour before the performance. It’s also a little trick so that the audience has the hour to prepare themselves. If we ask that of them, it’s obvious that there should be a space to do it in.

That’s not always possible on tour. You have to understand that when we set up in an area as immense as an arena, the location can’t be as fine-tuned as at the Cartoucherie, which is a space that we own, that we haunt, that we have inhabited for the last twenty years. That’s called respect for the audience.

An audience is really a gathering of humanity at its best. It’s rare. It’s extraordinary, six hundred, seven hundred or nine hundred people who have made the effort to come together and share a text that, in practice, is two thousand five hundred years old or ten years old, it doesn’t matter! They came to cultivate themselves. Cultivate their intelligence, cultivate their eyes, and their heart. So it’s true that, for a moment, the audience is always better. They must have everything they
need to progress. But during the rehearsals, you mustn’t think about the audience.

CLAUDE DESPINS: When you get to the premiere and you realize that the show is not pleasing the audience, what do you do?

A. MNOUCHKINE: We can’t change audiences, and we can’t want to change shows. You have to fight. It has rarely happened to us, but it has happened that we felt the audience was not with us as much as we would have liked.

For example, here the premiere of Les Attrides wasn’t cheerful. And yet, it was a really beautiful performance of Iphigénie, but with an audience that was as cold as a cold fish.

I said to Marie-Hélène 9: “Listen, they’ll have to get used to it.” [Laughter.] And, apparently, the audience got used to it.

I know, for example, that the beginning was difficult for the show about Sihanouk. People didn’t really know if they liked it or not. But we knew we liked it. And at that moment, you have to hold on. You have to defend your show.

If we are convinced that our intentions are pure, and that the text we’re defending is worth the trouble, you have to hold up against anything. I’m not even talking about the critics. As far as that goes, you shouldn’t read them. But with the audience, you have to hold on, you have to hold on.

That said, I think that you have to hold on for one performance, two, three, four, five performances, but if it continues, you have to ask yourself some questions.

You can’t triumphantly persist in failure. In other words, you have to know how to put each thing in its proper place. As Gandhi said, “victory and failure weighed in their proper measure”, but if the seats are always empty, maybe there are some little small changes to be made. [Laughter.] Maybe we forgot to open the doors. [Laughter.]

DOMINIQUE DAOUST
UQAM Theatre
Department: Earlier, you said that between productions you wondered about the future of the troupe, that sometimes it was against the current of

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9 Marie-Hélène Falcon, director of the Festival of the Americas and organizer for the Théâtre du Soleil’s venue in Montreal.
everything else being done. You also spoke of love and poetry. Sometimes people criticize you for taking on performers of all nationalities, which can occasionally make comprehension difficult. I wonder if creating this flow, where all types of people come together, where the world becomes a smaller place, is part of your love for poetry.

Here, people come from all sorts of different places. We don’t all have the same accent, but we understand each other. The world is headed that way. It’s like a sort of respect for life, for your love of life. What do you say to people, or to journalists, or to critics who condemn you for the lack of homogeneity that makes textual comprehension difficult?

A. MNOUCHKINE: There are two parts to your question. When people tell me that here, I say to myself: “It’s the French accent that’s difficult to understand. It’s not necessarily Niru’s accent or Simon’s accent or someone else’s accent.” Earlier, someone who had a very strong Canadian accent said to me: “It’s really beautiful, but with your accents, it’s difficult to understand.” But in fact, the actors have very little accent, very, very, little.

DOMINIQUE DAOUST: So, in France, it’s less noticeable.

A. MNOUCHKINE: No, in France, they notice a musicality, but no one says that Niru is difficult to understand or that Juliana is difficult to understand. I think that the fact that there are so many different nationalities in the troupe now is because it’s a French theatre and it’s an accurate reflection of the current situation in France. I hope it will stay that way and that France, despite all its demons, will remain the open country that it is. In any case, we’ll do our best to keep it that way. So it’s a reflection of the situation, because those are the people who show up, not a desire on my part to have people from all over the world.

Of course they show up because of an affinity with the troupe. I don’t seek them out. They come to France and they come to us. And we’re a French theatre. So, it’s normal for there to be such a mix. It’s our richness and France’s richness as well.

DOMINIQUE DAOUST: Soon you’ll be performing in New York. Do you perform in French or in English?
A. MNOUCHKINE: No, no. In French. We defend our language. [Laughter and applause.] We performed the Shakespeare plays in Los Angeles.

DOMINIQUE DAOUST: And people responded well?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Magnificently. I think the theatre has a language of its own. I don’t mean to say that nothing is lost on them. It’s always more difficult in another language, but in the theatre there’s usually a part that comes through in the performance anyways.

CHRISTOPHER PICKER
UQAM Theatre Department: Your troupe is based on longevity. Do you have a policy that people in the troupe can come and go as they please? In other words, do you “take a break” as we say here, do you stop for a while, do you get a little distance from the troupe and then return to it?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Yes, but if I get some distance, it’s not to go somewhere else. I get some distance to get some of my strength back. I don’t do anything else during that time. I do it, either because I’m starting some translations or because I’m working on the next project. As I said in the beginning, I don’t see myself doing theatre in any other way.

But it’s obvious that at a certain point, some performers need something else. That’s what causes departures from time to time.

There have also been returns, but I think that, once a person leaves, it’s extremely difficult to return, if only for financial reasons.

CHRISTOPHER PICKER: Do you think about who might replace you, or do you think that will take care of itself?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Yes, I think about my replacement. While I’m thinking about it, I also tell myself that it would be nice if someone else took my place for a year. It could have happened already, but in general, when there’s a possible replacement, it’s not just a new director emerging, it’s also a new head of a troupe. So, in that case, there’s an expansion.

For the moment, aside from Philippe Caubère, who directed Don Juan for us before he left, no one else has directed. But it’s not out of the question.
I find your question terrifying

CHRISTOPHER PICKER:
In an era more and more dominated by the video clip, where the image takes precedence over the word, over the text, do you think that the “average” audience is still capable of understanding texts like those of Aeschylus, Racine, or Shakespeare in performance?

When reading a text, you can reread, start a text over, re-examine a line to try and understand, but, after a single performance, do you think that contemporary audiences are still capable of understanding it all? Can we still understand the magic of Racine, the music of Corneille’s verses as well today as we did two or three hundred years ago?

A. MNOUCHKINE: I find your question terrifying. It’s not a criticism of you, but the fact that you can even ask that question terrifies me. At best, it’s evidence of such a worrying development, and at worst such a contempt for the cultural appetite, for people’s taste for beauty and intelligence, that I think to myself, if we’re asking that sort of question in this forum, then we’re screwed. Because if we’re no longer able to understand, whose fault is it?

So, of course the audience is capable! Every night, the audience answers your question. Each time we begin Les Atrides and finish it, I look at the audience here, in Toulouse, in Paris, in England, in the non-French speaking countries, I listen, and I hear silence. And I think to myself that it’s really extraordinary. In the era, as you said, of the video clip, of mediocrity, of total intellectual laziness, of total commercial propaganda, we gather eight or nine hundred people together in a theatre for two to two and a half hours. They listen to Agamemnon, in other words, the most difficult play there is. They listen to it and they weep. And afterwards, we treat them with such contempt that we dare to ask if they are still capable of understanding? They are the ones who are capable and we are the ones who are not!

CHRISTOPHER PICKER:
Perhaps I expressed myself poorly. I meant to say that, in contemporary society, where the image is more and more important, we often skim over things more superficially. People often have a tendency to concentrate less. It’s true that there are many people who see your productions, but do you find that it’s harder to reach people now than it was, in an era where there was no television?
A. MNOUCHKINE: I don’t know. I wasn’t there two thousand five hundred years ago. I don’t know how it was. [Laughter.] All I know is that we must not give up. We must stand firm. There it is.

And what really upset me was to learn that there is no longer any Greek or Latin taught in Quebec. I think that’s a catastrophe. And I don’t even understand how a people that defend the French language can abandon Latin and Greek. [Applause.] I think it’s a mistake. I was absolutely speechless. I said: “What? They’re there speaking French all the time, and they don’t study Latin or Greek anymore?” That’s a very serious loss of sovereignty. It’s the abandonment of the sovereignty of the language, of the origin of the language, of the culture. For God’s sake, fight for it! Instead of saying, “Are people still capable?” [Applause.]

CHRISTOPHER PICKER:

That’s what I meant to say, because now, people frequently talk about the theatre of the twentieth century, about the Quebecois theatre. People want to do Quebecois theatre, people want to do twentieth century theatre, people want to do nineteen-eighties theatre, and nineteen-nineties theatre. But if you mention a classic text, from Corneille and Racine, they say: “Yuck, that’s no good, that’s passé, that’s ancient. We’re not interested. It’s not relevant to our time.” But you have succeeded in drawing audiences, you, with your production of Les Atrides. It’s more and more difficult. We no longer teach people to exert themselves, to concentrate on a work, to look beyond the image.

The classics are intellectual jogging.

A. MNOUCHKINE: Quebec is not alone in this situation. Why did I get so carried away on the issue of Latin and Greek? It’s because we also have the sword of Damocles hanging over our heads in France. Fortunately, we’re doing something about the situation. But here, abandoning the teaching of these subjects is even worse.

Earlier, you mentioned ease. It is curious that in places where people do so much jogging, no one does any intellectual jogging! After all, maybe that’s what the classics are. They’re intellectual jogging.

RAYMOND NAUBER
UQAM Theatre
Department:

I’d like to hear about an actor’s physical work. You mentioned warming up. Is warming up part of the preparations for a show or is it something you practice throughout the year? How much
importance do you place on it? How much time do you spend on it? And is it a question of warming up, or training?

A. MNOUCHKINE: We do both. In other words, each show has its own type of warm up. I would say that for example, for Les Atrides, before the dancing there was a specific warm up simply so that the actors didn’t strain themselves. When the actors are tired because they’ve done two shows in a row, the next day the warm up has to be lighter and designed to help them regain their strength.

In contrast, we’ve learned that actors need to feel the link between what they do and the show. If the exercises they do are very interesting, very useful, but they have no obvious link with the show, the actors tire of them very quickly.

So I try to ensure that the link to the show is as evident as possible. It’s not always possible. For example, there’s no use in doing Taï Chi to play Chekhov. The actors won’t succeed at it, at least in our troupe.

SERGE BISSON: In your experience, how have you viewed the situation of the self-taught over the course of your career? For example, those late in life, who are too old to enter official schools and thus receive a formal education?

A. MNOUCHKINE: I can’t tell the difference. It’s funny that you immediately brought up those “who are too old”, because there are young people who are self-taught. In a certain way, everyone is always a little self-taught and never completely self-taught. Because, after all, to say you are completely self-taught would mean that no one ever taught you anything. I hope that can’t be true.

JOANNE SIMONEAU: I am in no way involved with the theatre. I have no idea if an actor gets ready in silence before going on stage. I had the occasion to see Agamemnon and also to observe the preparations. I must admit that I was absolutely captivated by the way the performers got ready in the most absolute silence. I have no idea how long it takes them, whether it’s two hours or two and a half, But do the actors in the Soleil troupe always get ready in absolute silence before going on stage, regardless of the play? Is it linked to the way that performers got ready to go on stage two thousand five hundred years ago?

There are as few useless noises as possible
A. MNOUCHKINE: The performers get ready before your arrival. The audience comes in an hour before the play starts, and the performers are already in the wings. But the length of time is different for each actor. Some are slower than others and start getting ready earlier: Juliana, for example, is an hour earlier than that. Simon is only forty-five minutes earlier.

They get ready for, say, an hour and a half to two hours before the show. What’s funny is that you said “in the most absolute silence”. In fact, that’s not the case. They talk to each other. But it is true that they prepare themselves completely.

You had the impression that a religious silence prevails in the wings. A certain silence does prevail. But when the actors need to talk to each other, when they need to ask a question, they do it. I mean to say that there’s no vow of silence, but there is as little noise as possible.

There is as little of the “useless” as possible: useless noise, useless words, and I would almost say useless gestures and useless comings and goings. But if the actors need to do something, they do it. If they need to go get a glass of water, they go get a glass of water. If they need to go pee, they go pee. And if they need to say to each other: “Can you lend me that?” they say it. However, it is true that an actor will not ask another if he has read the newspaper. If he does, he knows that it’s a mistake. Let’s say that they try to make sure, as far as possible, that everything that is done or said is aimed at preparing themselves and the audience.

It always happens that way, but the atmosphere can differ. The atmosphere for Les Atrides was obviously tenser than the atmosphere for L’Indiade, where the actors were like the Indian people. There was a greater familiarity vis-à-vis the audience, whereas with Les Atrides there was a sort of ignorance.

JOANNE SIMONEAU: I should have used the word “contemplation” instead of “silence”.

A. MNOUCHKINE: Yes, that’s it. They need it.

SERGE OUAKNINE: I’d like to come back to the question of voice and share a couple of experiences with you.

One day, an African actor let out a scream during a rehearsal. And during his scream, I saw the savannah, I saw the landscape. And I
asked him: “Did you see the image of the savannah in your scream?” He said to me: “Yes, I saw it.”

Later I saw a show from a company that you might know called the Roy Hart. They move very poorly. They haven’t done any Oriental work. They have no physical grace, but when they chant with their voices, you see. You can close your eyes and see images.

My question is the following: can you imagine a theatre where no one stirs and movement is achieved through the vocal dimension, not through the calligraphy of the body?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Yes, I can imagine anything, but what I would like to achieve is both. I don’t see why we must deny ourselves one or the other. And the imperfections you see in us are not there intentionally. It’s not that I want to deny myself one aspect, it’s that, for the moment, we haven’t succeeded in doing everything.

I don’t want to deny myself movement and I don’t want to deny myself voice. I don’t want to deny myself the text. And I don’t want to deny myself music. I don’t want to deny myself anything. [Applause.]

CHANTAL COLLIN: To come back to the actor’s training, I’d like to ask you a question. What do you make of an observation such as: “Your performance is too little. It lacks amplitude, breadth”? Or the contrary remark: “It’s too much, rein it in, rein in the emotion, it has to be controlled”? What do you think of these comments that people often make to performers?

A. MNOUCHKINE: It depends. If it’s too little, it’s too little. I don’t think that’s the way I’d put it, but I see what your director means.

As far as “it’s too much”, I see it very clearly. I can also clearly see what he means by “rein it in”. “Control, control”: that’s something you say when things are going too fast. It doesn’t mean anything. But yes, “rein it in” does. Yes, “refocus” does. I don’t say that, but I do say: “Careful, you’re getting outside your bubble.”

UNIDENTIFIED

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10 The Roy Hart Theatre is a training centre in the Cévennes. At the beginning of the century, in Germany, its founder, Alfred Wolfson, decide to explore the limits of the voice by listening to the “sounds” of the wounded at the front during the 1914-1918 War. One of his disciples, Roy Hart, developed the methods and techniques he discovered, first in London, and then in France.
STUDENT: I’d like to ask you one last question. Earlier, you said that the text is the most important thing in what you do. I’d like to know how it is that in Quebec, the directors have now taken that place.

People go to see an André Brassard show, they go to see an Alice Ronfard show. I understand that, for example, you know well in advance what text you’re going to perform. Then what do you think of the fact that directors have now taken on such an importance over the authors, and over the actors?

A. MNOUCHKINE: Everyone gets a turn. [Laughter.]

UNIDENTIFIED STUDENT: Yes. But as you said earlier, a show, a play, the theatre, is first and foremost the need for others, it’s a whole.

**What’s important, is that the public goes to the theatre**

A. MNOUCHKINE: Yes, but after all, is it so bad that you heard that it was one of my shows before anything else? Is that what counts, or is it the show?

And then I’ll tell you: what I find is important, is that the public goes to the theatre. And that, effectively, when they go, they don’t simply see an Ariane Mnouchkine show, in reality they see *Iphigénie*, *Agamemnon*, *The Choéphores*, or *Les Euménides*.

Where I’m in agreement with you, it makes me snicker a little when I see “Directed by M. Dupont” written on a poster in letters as large as the title of the play. It annoys me. I like it much better when you see Molière in big letters, and “Directed by” is in smaller letters. Maybe directors make that mistake because people have told them so often that that’s how it should be.

It’s the same for actors. It also annoys me to see “so-and-so, in…” Why? They’re “affected” in the eighteenth-century sense of the word.

I declare my intentions to be pure.