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### Fifty Years Of Ariane Mnouchkine And The Théâtre Du Soleil: The Director As Dramaturge, Theater Historian, And Public Intellectual

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# Fifty Years of Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil: The Director as Dramaturge, Theater Historian and Public Intellectual

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ALLEN J. KUHARSKI

## Abstract

*This essay frames a critical summary of the fifty-year professional history of contemporary French director Ariane Mnouchkine and her company, the Théâtre du Soleil, with the author's twenty-year-long teaching of a seminar on theater history at Swarthmore College with Mnouchkine's work as the theme. Mnouchkine's theatrical career provides a vehicle for five areas of critical inquiry: Company- or ensemble-based theater-making; the theory and practice of contemporary directing; diverse practices of production dramaturgy; the project of theater history as archive, critical practice, and artistic resource; and the role of the theater artist as public intellectual. The essay presents Mnouchkine and her company as exemplars of "experimental theater" understood as "research and development in the pursuit of best new standard practices" as well as addressing the apparent contradictions of such a mission for a unique theatrical auteur. Transmission of the results of such performance research is addressed through comparative discussion of Mnouchkine's relevance and influence to contemporary American theater practice.*

## Ariane Mnouchkine, America and the Academy

The fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Théâtre du Soleil in France by director Ariane Mnouchkine and her early collaborators roughly coincides

with the twentieth year of an experiment in teaching theater history to undergraduates at Swarthmore College that I began in 1995. The seminar has enjoyed a long and vigorous life, its syllabus evolving in tandem from afar with the ongoing work of the company, with the first week traditionally devoted to the Théâtre du Soleil's most recent production. The seminar's premise is to examine critically a major theater company as a case study, reflecting our department's larger curricular emphasis on company-based work as an alternative to the "independent contractor" model that is considered normative in American professional theater and conservatory training. While the seminar is cross-listed with French and Gender & Sexuality Studies (the successor to Women's Studies at Swarthmore), its emphasis is broadly comparative, and weekly discussions are consistently framed by questions raised for contemporary American theater practice by comparison and contrast with that of the Théâtre du Soleil.

Another rationale for the seminar is to provide a critical focus on the professional biography of a director as an extension of the directing curriculum that I have also taught alongside the seminar since 1991. No one would be surprised by a seminar devoted to playwrights such as Shakespeare, Brecht, or Beckett, but playwrights are not the only artists that matter in the history of the theater, especially theater as it has evolved over the last fifty years, where the work of *auteur* directors and companies such as Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil have largely defined new movements in the field. For a theater student, the in-depth study of an artist such as Mnouchkine has the same potential value as a seminar on Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky for a student of Russian, Proust for a student of French, Faulkner or Toni Morrison for American literature, Picasso or Andy Warhol for a student of art, or Balanchine or Pina Bausch for dance. As with Morrison, it is important that Mnouchkine is a mature living artist, still making work.

My own expertise on Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil is largely the product of this teaching, which I was able to jumpstart thanks to the work of my colleague Helen E. Richardson, who wrote a groundbreaking dissertation on the work of Mnouchkine while we were graduate students in theater at Berkeley in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> My working knowledge of French, admiration for the company's work when I saw the group live in performance in Montreal and New York, and broader interest in directing theory and practice were my points of entry into the subject. While I have published on a wide variety of other notable contemporary directors, this is my first writing on Mnouchkine. My interest in Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil, like my more immediate work with contemporary Polish theater and with the American director Joseph Chaikin, was in the service of an ongoing critical interrogation of the assumptions and standard practices of theater in the United States, and the goal of

preparing students to become effective reformers of the contemporary American theater. I have often been misunderstood by colleagues in Poland and elsewhere as a promoter of Polish theater: my work there in directing workshops and in the Mnouchkine seminar has always been in the service of creating a different American theater for my students than was available to me entering the field. I have never considered life as an expatriate a meaningful artistic or professional option, for all that I have learned and admired abroad.

Approximately 100 theater students from Swarthmore, Haverford, and Bryn Mawr Colleges have completed the seminar over the years, and approximately 40 percent of those have used the seminar as part of Swarthmore's honors program, which culminates with written and oral examinations given by external examiners at the end of the senior year. Those examiners have included Judith G. Miller, author of *Ariane Mnouchkine* (Routledge, 2007) and the leading American authority on the director and her company.

### Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil: 1964–2014

Ariane Mnouchkine (b. 1939) founded the Théâtre du Soleil (“the theater of the sun”) in Paris in 1964 with a group of other recent French university graduates, all roughly of the same age. Many of the original group, all non-actors, remained part of the company for decades afterwards. Today Mnouchkine is the only remaining member of the founding group. The company has had several overlapping waves of actors since 1964, with some actors involved for twenty or more years. The Théâtre du Soleil can be described as Francophone and French by address, history, avowed citizenship, and government support, yet in practice it is today diversely international and polyglot in membership. Mnouchkine herself is French by citizenship and language, but not by family origin. Her father was the noted French film producer Alexandre Mnouchkine, who emigrated from Russia as a young man, and her mother was an English actress. The Théâtre du Soleil's long-time playwright Hélène Cixous is similarly a child of displaced Jewish parents from Morocco and Czechoslovakia who met in Algeria before the family became political refugees in France.

Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil emerged in the 1960s as a part of a wave of such *auteur* directors and companies around the world, with significant parallels to the work of Peter Brook in Great Britain, Jerzy Grotowski in Poland, and Joseph Chaikin's The Open Theatre and the San Francisco Mime Troupe in the United States, among others. An impulse behind this movement in European and American theater was perhaps best articulated by

Jerzy Grotowski's dramaturge Ludwik Flaszen in 1967 in an essay titled "After the Avant-Garde." He argued that if the philosophical, political, and theatrical givens of Samuel Beckett's theater were fully embraced, there would be no reason to do any other theater going forward—that the perfection of Beckett's thought and theatrical vision was itself an artistic and philosophical endgame. Flaszen's argument included the Absurdist movement as a whole. In Flaszen's words:

These [playwrights] deconstructed the theatre's traditional image; they showed the possibilities of a new sensitivity; they pushed language's disintegration to its very limit, after which came only stillness and silence. Within this field, Beckett's works are truly great: he has the courage to take things to the edge. His ideal would be an empty unlit stage with no sound reaching the audience. [...] However, the 1950s creative wave of destruction is over. Wonderful avant-garde playwrights are alive and well and they may still surprise us with their future pieces, yet there is no doubt that the body of their work is finished. Therefore the most important question to be asked should be: what next? [...] Language and text—as the bearers of discursive content—have reached the limits of their function. The avant-garde has proved this fact in the theater, but only in the realm of language and text. To be consistent, we must go further: to create theatre we must step beyond literature; theater starts where the word ends. The realization that theatrical language should be autonomous, built of its own substance rather than the language of words, was a radical step already attempted by Artaud in his dreams [115, 117].

Mnouchkine's early teacher and mentor Jacques Lecoq created a post-dramatic pedagogy and aesthetic of naïveté (the clown) as a knowing response to both Europe's history with fascism through World War II and the postwar theater of anomie represented by the existentialists and absurdistes such as Beckett and Ionesco. While these historical and political concerns were never explicit in Lecoq's pedagogy, his early career was deeply intertwined with that of Italian playwright, actor, and designer Dario Fo, where active social and political engagement was always foregrounded.<sup>2</sup> In American theater, Joseph Chaikin spent much of his career moving between embracing and rejecting Beckett on these terms: the theatrical expression of his rejection of Beckett was the combination of ensemble-based devised theater with his own philosophical explorations and off-stage activism, creating a theatrical hybrid of the theories of Artaud and Brecht with his own version of collective creation.

The work of Mnouchkine could be broadly defined in the same terms. The combination of political engagement, theatrical exuberance, and philosophical seeking among these theater artists can be understood as an international generational search for an alternative to the dramaturgy of Beckett, the other Absurdistes, and the existentialist playwrights that preceded them. That existentialism and absurdism were movements and terms that first crystalized

in Polish and French drama makes Mnouchkine's response of particular significance in France at the time. I would argue that her youthful move away from the existentialist/absurdist drama so predominant in France in the 1960s was not only part of the larger emergence of such *auteur* directors and companies, but also provides a defining point of departure for her specific understanding of the role of the theater artist as a public intellectual. Mnouchkine's theater has been described as "a theater of celebration," which I think succinctly captures her quite complex artistic polemic with the French and European theater of her youth. At the core of Mnouchkine's "theater of the sun," her pursuit of theatrical *jouissance* is a tacit polemic with the drama, theater, and philosophical givens of Beckettian anomie.

Today the international prestige of the Théâtre du Soleil has made it the de facto national theater of France. In Mnouchkine's vision from early on, she if anything intended it to be the antithesis of France's official national theater, La Comédie Française (the same could also be said of the work of Samuel Beckett). The company is certainly the most significant theatrical venture in France of the last half of the twentieth century. One need look no further than Mnouchkine's landmark production of *Tartuffe* in 1997, set in a contemporary North African Muslim household threatened by religious fundamentalism, to measure her accomplishment: it stands as certainly the most notable French production of the play since World War II. The process of rehearsing *Tartuffe* was documented by Mnouchkine in the film *Au soleil même la nuit* (1997), providing a late twentieth-century counterpart to Vasily Toporkov's classic account in *Stanislavsky in Rehearsal* of the Russian director's historic final workshops devoted to Molière's play at the Moscow Art Theatre just before his death in 1938.<sup>3</sup>

After fifty years, the reputation, originality, and influence of Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil can be compared historically to that of Constantine Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theater, Bertolt Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, or Jerzy Grotowski and the Polish Laboratory Theatre. In terms of total years of activity, Mnouchkine and her company surpass all of these. In comparison, the Moscow Art Theater under Stanislavsky's leadership lasted 43 years, with Stanislavsky hardly at Mnouchkine's current level of productivity at the end. The institutional life of Jacques Lecoq's influential school in Paris is just as long, but Lecoq himself passed away in 1999. For absolute longevity, possibly the only longer-lived company would be The Living Theatre under Judith Malina in New York, but that group's artistic trajectory over time is ultimately distinct from that of the Théâtre du Soleil (though The Living Theatre's historic production of Kenneth Brown's *The Brig* in the 1960s profoundly influenced Mnouchkine's subsequent production of Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen*). The ongoing work of Mnouchkine, now in her 70s, remains risky,

accomplished, and unpredictable, with a major new production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* opening in April 2014 at the Théâtre du Soleil's long-time home at the Cartoucherie (a former armaments factory) in Vincennes, in the outer suburbs of Paris.

The trajectory of Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil over the last fifty years is one of the ultimate illustrations of "experimental theater" in practice. My preferred definition of experimental theater is that of *sustained research and development in the pursuit of new standards of performance practice and excellence*—or perhaps more succinctly (in the language of the corporate world), *best new standard practices*. This frees such work from assumptions that it is the pursuit of esoteric, elitist, or superficially novel ends; of the avant-garde understood as essentially a self-limiting niche activity, a narrow high-end theatrical market resembling at times the limitations, excesses, and ephemerality of high fashion. It is helpful to remember on this score that Stanislavsky's approach to acting began in Russia as an avant-garde and radically revisionist project, as was also the case when his theories and practices were later transplanted to the United States in the 1920s and '30s. Stanislavsky was also one of the original *auteur* directors in modern theater, which is a key dimension to his work that was never successfully transmitted to his followers in the United States. The various phases in the history of the Théâtre du Soleil can perhaps be best understood as a series of sustained investigations of ensemble-based collaboration, the in-depth exploration of acting practice, and every possible permutation of work with performance text (with the possible exception of silent pantomime). Paradoxically, the company's work with classic texts by Shakespeare or Aeschylus is best understood itself as such an exploratory process of research and development usually done in anticipation of unprecedented original new works. At times, Mnouchkine assumes the role of an unapologetic member of a theatrical *arrière-garde* or even that of a *passéist*. But this is always the means to another yet undiscovered theatrical end.

Using this definition of experimental theater reveals a consistent inner contradiction in regard to Mnouchkine's commitment to such sustained research and development. As "basic research" into new possibilities for contemporary theater practice, it has proven undeniably original and generative. The absolute originality of Mnouchkine's work as a director with her company, however, is also one of the ultimate examples of "auteurism" in contemporary theater. Mnouchkine and the other great *auteur* directors of her generation and after have in myriad ways created *new works that are un-reproducible beyond the company of origin*. Since the 1960s, Mnouchkine and other such directors have in effect created a canon of un-reproducible classic *productions* in lieu of the modernist theater's creation of a canon of highly reproducible classic *play*



*texts*. Most strikingly, this was no less true of Mnouchkine's initial collaborations with H el ene Cixous as playwright for the company, which began as an extraordinarily lavish investment in the nurturing of precisely such new dramatic texts. Thus, the combination of revelatory discoveries and artistic excellence made by Mnouchkine's commitment to such basic performance research are rarely able directly to become the basis of anything like a *new standard practice*. Her profound originality as an artist confounds the possibility of the work of the Th eatre du Soleil carrying on in a recognizable way after her departure. The same could be said for Tadeusz Kantor in Poland and many other such theatrical innovators.

What we are left with then is the unique and immense legacy of a visionary theater director over a fifty-year career. Another of Mnouchkine's many contradictions is that she has never sought to foreground her work as a director within the ensemble, and plays down the significance of directing practice in favor of the work of actors and playwrights. Yet it is her consistently catalyzing directorial presence that defines this history. It must be noted that this directorial presence is also combined with the ambition and determination required to found and lead a large and complex theatrical institution for the past fifty years.

And last, but not least, she has done so as a woman and a lesbian.

## The Director as Dramaturge

Over time, Mnouchkine's work with text with the Th eatre du Soleil has incorporated virtually every category of dramaturgical practice, that is, of collaborative work with texts and writers in creating theatrical performance. In spite of her rejection of the theater of playwrights such as Beckett or Ionesco, Mnouchkine has been on an exhaustive career-long quest for an appropriate poetics of theatrical text and language no less than her similar searches for new categories of acting and relating with audiences. These varied practices over time cover essentially every known category of dramaturgical practice in live theater (the one possible exception would be the work of dance dramaturges with choreographers such as William Forsythe). As such, when I introduce my seminar with Mnouchkine and her company as the focus, I point out that this range of practices with texts, writers, and a theatrical ensemble makes our subject as much *production dramaturgy* as an introduction and investigation of *theater history*. These practices have included:

*Work with existing classic texts by major playwrights, both living and dead; both writing in French and a variety of other languages.* These playwrights include Maxim Gorky, Arnold Wesker, Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Euripides, and



Molière. Mnouchkine's 2014 production of *Macbeth* marks her third pass at staging Shakespeare (her first was *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1968; her second was her Shakespeare cycle in the early 1980s). This will be her first production of one Shakespeare's tragedies, though she has long flirted with the idea of staging *King Lear*. This kind of dramaturgy could be described as virtual collaboration with dead or otherwise absent playwrights.

*The creation of new translations of classic plays suitable for contemporary stage performance in French.* This has consisted of new acting versions of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part I*, and *Macbeth*, as well as the first two parts of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (the third part was translated by Cixous). These translations have been published, and Mnouchkine's translations of Shakespeare are highly regarded by critics as contemporary acting versions of these plays. Such translation is the most intimate form of dramaturgical collaboration with a dead or otherwise absent playwright writing in a foreign language. Actors in collaboration with a translator are also arguably the most valuable (and expensive) editors and consultants for a performance text in a target language.

*The stage adaptation of non-dramatic works.* For Mnouchkine, this has included dramatizations of novels by Théophile Gautier, Klaus Mann, and Jules Verne. It is perhaps significant that such adaptations bookend her work over the last five decades: among her earliest productions was an adaptation of Gautier's 1863 novel *Captain Fracasse*, and her most recent completed work was based on Verne's posthumous political allegory *The Survivors of the Jonathan* (completed in 2010 and now available on DVD).

*Ariane Mnouchkine herself as a playwright.* The one instance in which Mnouchkine has taken playwriting credit herself was for her dramatization of Klaus Mann's 1936 novel *Mephisto*, produced by the Théâtre du Soleil in 1979. She also took credit for the screenplay of her 1977 film *Molière*. The script for *Mephisto* has been published, including an English translation by British playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker, and the text is an exception among those generated by the Théâtre du Soleil in actually having a history of theatrical production by other companies, particularly in Germany. In 1989, Mnouchkine also shared screenwriting credit with Hélène Cixous for a television film called *La nuit miraculeuse* (*The Miraculous Night*), which was commissioned for the bicentennial of the start of the French Revolution.

*The collaboration of Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil with a living playwright, Hélène Cixous, on the development of a series of original plays.* These have included *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia* (1985), *L'Indiade, or the India of Their Dreams* (1987), *The Perjured City* (1994), and *The Flood Drummers* (1999). In the parlance of contemporary American theater, this could be described as "new play development

by a company with a resident playwright." If Cixous here functions as the house playwright, then Mnouchkine in effect works as both director and developmental dramaturge.

*The creation of ensemble-generated devised works, or "collective creations."* Alongside Jacques Lecoq's school in Paris or Joseph Chaikin and The Open Theater in the U.S., Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil were groundbreaking practitioners of this "anti-literary" or "post-dramatic" approach to generating new work in their historic pair of productions in the early 1970s inspired by the French Revolution, *1789* and *1793*, which were book-ended by two ambitious productions inspired by *commedia dell'arte* and clowning, *Les Clowns* (1969) and *L'Age d'or* (1975). These productions are all notable for the absence of any credited playwright or production dramaturge, and for the latter two the absence of any published script, even as a document of the performances. In the case of *L'Age d'or*, the Théâtre du Soleil published a case book of documents and statements by various members of the ensemble in lieu of a performance script (the materials were significantly published with the subtitle "Première ébauche," or "first draft," announcing their understanding of the piece as a perpetual work-in-progress).<sup>4</sup> While the scripts for *1789* and *1793* have been published (and the text for *1789* even translated and published in English), in the position of "author" on the printed page and in bibliographies, library catalogues, etc., is emphatically "Le Théâtre du Soleil."

*1789* and *1793* were performed over several years for audiences that numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and *1789* was eventually documented on film by Mnouchkine herself. For the Théâtre du Soleil's Shakespeare cycle in the 1980s and for *Les Atrides*, their version of *The Oresteia* in the 1990s, attendance numbers again approached those of *1789* (well over 200,000 each).<sup>5</sup> With the reach of works such as *1789*, *Molière*, the Shakespeare cycle, and *Les Atrides*, Mnouchkine's experimental explorations have consistently reached a version of what Helen Richardson has aptly called the Théâtre du Soleil's "quest for popular theater in the twentieth century."

This radical de-emphasis on the presence of a playwright or dramaturge in practice surpassed Chaikin's work in the United States at the same time: while playwrights such as Jean-Claude van Itallie, Megan Terry, or Susan Yankowitz eventually stopped working as such on his productions, what emerged instead in the person of Mira Rafalowicz was a new kind of production dramaturge for the creation of ensemble-generated devised work.<sup>6</sup> Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil to this day return at times to making original works either without credited playwright or dramaturge or in collaboration "in harmony" with Cixous, with the writer here functioning arguably more as a resident developmental dramaturge than as a house playwright.

Such original, ensemble-generated, devised work, or collective creation,

is today a category of standard practice in contemporary theater around the world, with the Théâtre du Soleil as both one of the historic pioneers of the practice and Mnouchkine as possibly the longest-living committed creator of such company-based *auteur* productions.

### The Director as Theater Historian and Public Intellectual

A few words about the teaching of theater history in general, and about my seminar at Swarthmore in particular. For theater faculty and students alike, theater history is the unloved Cinderella of theater studies. My undergraduate professor for a required theater history class at UW-Madison (today a distinguished senior colleague in performance studies), announced the first day of class that he would never teach the subject if the department hadn't forced him to do so. Most theater students similarly would gladly forgo taking theater history if it were not required, and as a required field of study it has the unsavory flavor of a tuition bill or parking ticket that one simply has to pay. Essentially all of our students in theater departments come to us because of their interest in performance, and most that go on in the field after graduation do so as working artists rather than academics. While at Swarthmore we also send a significant minority of our students on to doctoral programs in anticipation of academic careers, the challenge is to introduce these students to theater history in a way that they leave the required class understanding why and how to do more in the field—including perhaps eventually practicing and teaching theater history themselves.

On a more fundamental level is what I describe as *theater history as an impossible project*. In graduate school at Berkeley, my professor Travis Bogard argued that he never understood the point of pursuing theater history since how could one write meaningfully and critically about a performance one has not personally *seen*. I had two contradictory responses to this: first, as a practicing theater person, I agreed immediately. How *dare* someone try to write something about *my show*, much less have an opinion of it, if they did not see it in performance? I only later understood, however, that Bogard had conflated the work of theater history with that of performance criticism.

As someone on the rebound from the declaration of martial law in Poland, however, I was also acutely aware that oppressive governments like the Jaruzelski regime very much wished for our knowledge of theater history to be selective and incomplete, especially when theater assumes a leadership role in resistance to such regimes—when theater artists assume one of their most significant roles as public intellectuals. In the case of Poland under martial

law, the Polish actors union led a highly effective boycott of state-sponsored theater and television in protest against the regime, a form of political intervention publicly supported by Ariane Mnouchkine and her company at the time.<sup>7</sup> Not to insist on the project of theater history in the face of such political and historical forces seemed a surrender to those forces.

The theater person in me then also spoke up and pointed out that in practice no one is able to attend all the live performances that deserve our attention in the world today, much less in the past, least of all working theater people, who if successful are too busy making and performing their own work to see the work of others taking place around them (much less at a distance). So the *necessary impossibility* of theater history is to insist that we can make some sense of the theatrical past (which begins with yesterday's performance) with incomplete, imperfect, and wildly variable material evidence. Working with these materials is the nitty-gritty of theater historiography, as is creating and maintaining the performance archives of the future. The inevitable gaps in these theatrical archives, the result of neglect and chronic lack of resources as well as of the violence of history and political oppression, are best filled by the creative work of later artists wanting to invoke, claim, and complete this history. Today I understand that the work of theater history *begins* where the possibility of performance criticism *ends*: its purpose is to somehow access the performance that could not be seen.

The *Swarthmore College Bulletin 2014–15* lists over thirty different courses and seminars in highly diverse aspects of art history,<sup>8</sup> but our Theater Department for decades has strained to sustain this *one* offering to cover *all* of theater history (alongside three other courses in performance theory and dramaturgy). This situation is hardly unusual in theater departments around the country. And the reality is that there are vast gaps waiting to be filled in theater history scholarship. These gaps include significant ones in the area of translations of plays (both classic and contemporary works) written in languages other than English, including major languages such as German, French, or Japanese. Glaring examples include the work of contemporary playwrights such as Dea Loher in Germany or Toshiki Okada in Japan, or of modern classics such as Paul Claudel in French, or several of the Polish classic plays staged by Grotowski. I have had to hire a talented former student of French who took my seminar (now a doctoral student in dramaturgy at Yale) to translate two major scripts generated by the Théâtre du Soleil for our use in the seminar: 1793 and Cixous's *L'Indiade*, which have never appeared in print in English. Should we find this astonishing or not? These specific gaps are generally not being filled, nor do I see any sign they will be filled, by the often brilliant work being done by our colleagues in Performance Studies. The problem of massive gaps in our historical and cross-cultural understanding of theater history is

compounded by comparable gaps in the archiving and documentation of contemporary theater for the future in ways starkly illustrated by the relative resources currently dedicated in the academy to art history or music history compared to theater history. Those thirty courses in art history at Swarthmore reflect an historical investment in tenure-line positions and the scholarship and curatorship they generate.

My seminar on Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil is one solution to these issues that I have been working on since 1995. The premise of the seminar is the history of Mnouchkine's company as a case study of a major artist and organization in the field from start to finish. The methodology of the teaching is that theater history is not only the domain of academic specialists, too often the graying Faustus of the tenured faculty (among whom I include myself these days), but also of working artists such as Mnouchkine: that theater history provides a set of tools and "stock" materials essential to the creative working lives of actors, directors, designers, and playwrights. The key to a typical unit in the seminar is the combination of historical and dramaturgical source materials with Mnouchkine's contemporary engagement with those materials: the various forms of influence and exchange between artists of different historical periods and cultures. Sometimes these relations are polemical: for example, how Mnouchkine's treatment of the French Revolution pointedly *differs* from other theatrical treatments of the history by Georg Büchner in *Danton's Death* or Peter Weiss in *Marat/Sade*. I also include Polish director Andrzej Wajda's 1982 film *Danton*, released at the height of the actors boycott in Poland, which is in turn based on the 1931 play *The Danton Affair* by Polish playwright Stanisława Przybyszewska.

The unique opportunity offered by such a comprehensive survey of the Théâtre du Soleil in particular is that the company's history over time encompasses most of the elements of a conventional undergraduate theater history survey: Greek tragedy; Shakespeare and Elizabethan/Jacobean theater and drama; *commedia dell'arte*; Molière and seventeenth-century French theater; Romanticism; the rise of social and psychological realism in Russia and Great Britain; Stanislavsky and Bulgakov in the context of Stalinist Russia; interwar German cabaret and political theater (and indirectly Brecht); a variety of classical Asian traditions, including Kabuki, Bunraku, Kathakali, and Korean court drumming; Lecoq, physically based acting, and collective creation; feminist and queer theater; and versions of verbatim and documentary theater addressing contemporary global social issues. Such a syllabus is inevitably a broadly comparative one, and includes not just the plays staged by Mnouchkine, but also key works for defining certain periods, genres, and subjects.

As a socially-conscious theater artist, Mnouchkine has turned repeatedly to the genre of the history play, both as received from earlier playwrights such

as Shakespeare, and as a vehicle for major original works such as *Sihanouk* and *L'Indiade*. While she emphatically argues that all theater is *metaphor*, she also famously insisted that her productions of *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part I*, were based on how Shakespeare was *not* our contemporary.

Among the most interesting facts that emerge from the history of the Théâtre du Soleil over time is that Mnouchkine and her collaborators not only mine social history and theater history as a source for their ongoing work, but that *theater history* per se repeatedly becomes the significant subject of the company's work. Her theme repeatedly becomes that of the theater artist in society, the responsibility and the challenges to theater artists individually and collectively to function as public intellectuals: theater history as social history, social history understood through the lens of theater history. Mnouchkine's interest in social history almost always somehow treats the role of theater artists in their time, most significantly in works from the 1970s such as her film *Molière* and her stage adaptation of Klaus Mann's novel *Mephisto* (which is itself based on the life and career of the twentieth-century German actor and director Gustav Gründgens, a contemporary of Bertolt Brecht). The Théâtre du Soleil's 2010 production *The Survivors of the Lost Hope* (*Les naufragés de fol espoir*), freely inspired by Jules Verne's little-known posthumous novel *The Survivors of the Jonathan*, is perhaps Mnouchkine's most complex and poetic reflection on the dance between artists, the societies they inhabit, and the performative representations they create and share.

For Mnouchkine such theater historical subject matter, unlike her take on Shakespeare's history plays, is always about implicit cross-historical metaphor and social commentary. The impulse to stage theater history was there from the very beginning of the company in its 1965 production based on Théophile Gautier's 1863 novel *Captain Fracasse*, which presents a vivid imaginary picture of the life of a company of itinerant actors in early seventeenth-century France: a rare representation of French theater *before* the age of Corneille, Molière, and Racine. This period of early French theater history reappears in the first half of Mnouchkine's epic film version of the life of Molière. One metaphor consistently embedded in Mnouchkine's repeated excavation and stage representation of the work of past theater artists is that these are both celebratory and critical self-portraits of the Théâtre du Soleil, as well as the naming and claiming of a theatrical heritage.

A key work in our unit on Mnouchkine's portrayal of Molière is *The Versailles Impromptu*, in which Molière satirically portrays himself and the members of his company as a cast of characters named after themselves. Mnouchkine's series of metaphorical stage self-representations similarly becomes literal in the portrayal of the director and the members of her company in the vast cycle of satirical one-man shows generated by her former lead-



ing actor Philippe Caubère (who played Molière in the film, among other roles on stage as part of the company). Thus the circle of representing theater history on stage is completed in a surprising way (Caubère in fact uses a quote from *The Versailles Impromptu* as an epigraph to the published text). Caubère created his eleven-part cycle over several years, and it ultimately runs around thirty hours in total performance time. He has both performed live and recorded it for distribution on video, with the complete text also available in print. Caubère's massive cycle is possibly the most exuberant example in contemporary theater of the "actor-creator" cultivated through Lecoq's pedagogy and Mnouchkine's subsequent practice.

Mnouchkine, like Charles Ludlam or Tony Kushner in American theater, is one of the great magpies of theater and film history. She does her homework with evident pleasure, and has consistently woven arcane archival materials into the company's productions such as street theater from the time of the French Revolution or sketches from Erika Mann's anti-Nazi Peppermill Cabaret.<sup>9</sup> She has also excavated and staged the histories of significant women in theater history such as Madeleine Béjart and Erika Mann. Comparisons between Mnouchkine and Kushner comprise one of the themes of the seminar, in particular the combination of their shared passion for the excavation and recycling of theater history and highly visible roles as public intellectuals. An early unit, for example, consists of reading Kushner's *The Illusion* (his adaptation of Corneille's *The Theatrical Illusion*, written in 1636) with the Théâtre du Soleil's early adaptation of Gautier's *Captain Fracasse* (works that all present complex defenses of actors and artists in society). A late unit similarly combines viewing *The Last Caravansary*, the Théâtre du Soleil's epic piece on displacement, the documentary film on the company's workshops in Kabul in 2005, with reading Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*.

My seminar, therefore, is framed by the argument that Ariane Mnouchkine should be understood as a great contemporary theater historian, though one that has never taught the subject in a university classroom. We read theater history both through Oscar Brockett and Ariane Mnouchkine.

Mnouchkine's theme and inspiration is often theater history. But just as Shakespeare is unreliable as a social or political historian, Mnouchkine is also unreliable as a theater historian. As an artist, she selects, she has an appropriately subjective critical lens, she is creating the truth of an artistic work, not that of the historical record. Interestingly, she is perhaps more scrupulous about the details of social history that inform her works than of theater history. Her interest in theater history, like Shakespeare's histories of the English crown, is the creation of an enduring mythic history of the significance of theater and theater artists in society.

I am proud of the fact that my undergraduate theater students at Swarth-



more may be the only ones in the country, if not the English-speaking world, who are introduced to the nineteenth-century French writer Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) as part of their education, an author whose collected works in French and English otherwise gather dust on the shelf of the Swarthmore library (our leather-bound sixteen-volume edition of his complete works in English dates from 1900). When Gautier's name is referred to in our annual viewings of Marcel Carné's 1945 classic film *Children of Paradise*, the students already know who he is.

*Children of Paradise* is another staging of a little-known period of French theater history, that of the early nineteenth century and the career of the renowned Czech-French mime Jean-Gaspard Duburau (b. Jan Kašpar Dvořák, 1796–1846). Duburau is of particular relevance to Lecoq and his writings, as well as to the entire tradition of *pantomime blanche* in French theater, through the performance of Jean-Louis Barrault in the film and into the post-war work of Marcel Marceau and others.<sup>10</sup> The making of the film in Vichy France and the post-war fate of the actress Arletty is yet another illustration of the seminar's theme of the political role of the theater artist in society.

Among the exercises that the students do in the seminar is imaginatively to retrace the steps of the theater-historical and dramaturgical process of a little-documented production such as *Captain Fracasse*, which at times is more generative than the parallel unit we do on the richly documented dramatization of *Mephisto*. Every year one student is assigned to read *Fracasse* and report on it to the group. That report includes a hypothetical discussion of how and why the novel would present an opportunity for theatrical adaptation and performance as our only way to get at what the 26-year-old Mnouchkine might have been thinking at the point she committed her company to this project. Among the unexpected collateral benefits of this exercise over the years was a student's decision to create precisely such a dramatization of another fascinating metatheatrical novel by Gautier, the gender-bending classic *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, as an honors thesis in production dramaturgy in 2011.<sup>11</sup> That thesis project earned a rare highest honors from the student's visiting examiner (Walter Bilderback, the resident dramaturge of the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia). Thus, students in the seminar can begin to apply the principle of engaging with the archive of theater history in the creation of new work, with Mnouchkine as a model of this practice.

On a larger scale, my teaching of the Mnouchkine seminar at Swarthmore since 1995 has exactly coincided with the history of Philadelphia's Pig Iron Theatre Company, whose core members have mostly studied at the Lecoq School in Paris (as did Mnouchkine in her youth), have participated in workshops with Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil in Paris, are avid followers of Mnouchkine and her company, and whose work Mnouchkine has seen in

performance. Pig Iron is an example of an American theater company of a younger generation in the tradition of Chaikin, Lecoq, and Mnouchkine, that has for decades looked to Mnouchkine as an inspiration and model in the way that earlier American theater artists looked to Stanislavsky or Brecht. Pig Iron's work with performance text over the last twenty years has striking similarities to that of the Théâtre du Soleil (with the significant exception of Mnouchkine's collaboration with Cixous). As with the Théâtre du Soleil, Pig Iron's more than two-dozen productions, almost all original works, have typically been created under the direction of a self-effacing *auteur* director with a talent for company organization and management, Dan Rothenberg (b. 1973).

Pig Iron launched their Advanced Performance Training Program (APT) in 2011, which is North America's closest counterpart to the Lecoq School or to its English spin-off the London International School of Performing Arts (LISPA). APT is a two-year conservatory training program emphasizing physically-based devised ensemble theater. The influence of Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil is present both implicitly and explicitly in the curriculum and daily teaching of the Pig Iron school. My role as an occasional faculty member at APT is to provide a broader version of the historical and theoretical framework I use in my seminar on theater history and classes on performance theory at Swarthmore.

The example of the Pig Iron Theater Company and school is one way of affirming there is a resolution to the apparent contradiction of Mnouchkine as an *auteur* director and the Théâtre du Soleil's mission of experimental theater as research and development in the pursuit of *best new standard practices*. The issue for such experimental *auteur* directors and ensembles, defined as early as 1980 by Richard Schechner in *The End of Humanism*, is that of *transmission* to other artists, especially those of other cultures and younger generations.

With Mnouchkine as a model, the future practice of theater history should be bright.

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

## NOTES

1. Helen E. Richardson, *The Théâtre du Soleil and the Quest for Popular Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1990.
2. See the 1999 documentary *Les deux voyages de Jacques Lecoq*, directed by Jean-Gabriel Carasso and Jean-Noël Roy.
3. Vasily Osipovich Toporkov, "Tartuffe" and "First Showing of Tartuffe," *Stanislavsky in Rehearsal*, trans. Christine Edwards (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1979).
4. Théâtre du Soleil, *L'Age d'or: Première Ebauche*. Paris: Éditions Stock, 1976.
5. David Williams, ed., *Collaborative Theatre: The Théâtre du Soleil Sourcebook* (Lon-

don: Routledge, 1999). The production chronology that is an addendum to the text includes comprehensive attendance figures for all productions by the Théâtre du Soleil.

6. See articles by Mira Rafalowicz and Allen J. Kuharski in *Dramaturgy and American Theater: A Source Book* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1997) and Roger Babb's book *Joseph Chaikin and the Winter Project* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010).

7. Ariane Mnouchkine, "AIDA," *Komedianci: Rzecz o bojkocie*, Zakłady Wydawnicze "Versus" 1990, 9–12.

8. *Swarthmore College Bulletin 2014–15*. CXII.1. The curriculum in art history at Swarthmore includes a total of 34 regularly scheduled courses and seminars in the following areas: six on Western architecture; six on Japanese and East Asian art; five on modernism in painting and photography; five on the Spanish Golden Age, colonial Latin America, and Native American art; ten on classical, medieval, and renaissance art; and a hand-full of broad survey courses. The Department of Theater, in contrast, is able to offer a total of four survey courses in theater history, performance theory, and production dramaturgy, all of which are by necessity comparative and (appropriately) emphasize methods and practices over knowledge of a cultural canon. A small number of additional courses in dance history and the history of opera are offered in the Department of Music & Dance. In the Department of Theater, it was decided decades ago that a course or seminar in twentieth-century American theater and drama would be too specialized an offering given the compression on our academic curriculum.

9. See Katrin Seig's chapter "The Cabaret: Erika Mann and the Peppermill" in her book *Exiles, Eccentrics, and Activists: Women in Contemporary German Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 50–80.

10. Jacques Lecoq, *Le théâtre du geste mimes et acteurs* (Paris: Bordas, 1987), 49–53.

11. Isa St. Clair, *Mlle*, Stage adaptation of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* by Théophile Gautier, Swarthmore College, Department of Theater, 2011.

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