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Reloading the Canon: Ariane Mnouchkine's Les Atrides

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*Disons en un mot que les classiques me semblent bien plus une invitation à réfléchir sur l'histoire que des illustrations d'une esthétique transcendante.*¹

The quotation provided in exegesis opens up a discussion about classics that I wish to pursue here in relation to theatre. Although critic Bernard Dort once wrote that "jouer les classiques [...] ne va pas de soi"², the number of productions of works by the likes of Shakespeare or Molière each season in France suggests that directors and audiences alike relish the opportunity to engage with such material. However, the staging of canonical works involves a difficult balancing act since it requires presenting them as both "transcendent and time-bound".³ In other words, it is necessary to show that despite being shaped by the thinking of a particular time period and place, the texts address concerns relevant to contemporary audiences. In effect, this means underlining how the works have reached us through centuries of interpretation. As Daniel Mesguich explains, when staging a classic, a director in effect has to deal with both a visible and an invisible text:

Mettre en scène un texte classique, c'est non seulement mettre en scène un texte *visible*, bien sûr (le texte littéral, imprimé), mais aussi d'une certaine manière – et à la différence des textes contemporains – mettre en scène un second texte, *invisible*, composé de la mémoire du texte visible, de son *histoire*, de sa *pousière* (gloses, commentaires, exégèses, mises en scène, voire effets des intimidations successives par lui apportées, etc.).⁴

1 Alain Viola, "Introduction: qu'est-ce qu'un classique?", *Littératures classiques* 19 (1993), pp. 11-31 (p. 30).

2 Bernard Dort, *La Représentation émanicipée* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1988), p. 51.

3 Stephen Greenblatt, "General Introduction", *The Norton Shakespeare* (London and NY: Norton, 1997), pp. 1-76, (p. 2).

4 Daniel Mesguich and Alain Viola, *Le Théâtre* (Paris: PUF, 2011), "Note" (Daniel Mesguich), p. 115.

Providing a successful interpretative reading of these two texts on stage is no simple task. Indeed, it is best achieved when “un intervalle” between actors and audience is opened up, as in Bertolt Brecht’s practice.⁵ In France, there are arguably only a handful of directors who have managed to do so: Jean Vilar, the creator of the Avignon festival, Robert Planchon, whom the critics of *Théâtre Populaire* saw as Brecht’s French disciple,⁶ Antoine Vitez, for whom “le théâtre est un champ de force, très petit, mais où se joue toujours toute l’histoire de la société, et qui, malgré son exigüité, sert de modèle à la vie des gens, spectateurs ou pas”,⁷ and the indefatigable leader of the Théâtre du Soleil Ariane Mnouchkine. This essay focuses on the work of the latter.

To say that Ariane Mnouchkine counts among the greatest living directors in world theatre is no overstatement.⁸ Simply listing the names of Mnouchkine’s productions provides an outline of key moments in recent theatre history – French history first and foremost, but the history of Western theatre more generally also.

In particular, in her cycle of Greek tragedies, *Les Atrides* (1990–1992) – canonical dramatic works par excellence – Mnouchkine played with “intervalles”, gaps, discrepancies and space to question our rapport with these ancient cultural artefacts and founding myths. I shall show here how Mnouchkine creatively reloaded or re-presented these works, balancing out tensions between universality and difference in the text, mise en scène and space. Mnouchkine thereby enabled her audience to look afresh at millennia-old texts that are the staple diet of school reading lists, making her own the requirements for directing outlined by Patrice Pavis: “il faut dégager la fable de la pièce, et donc raconter clairement une histoire”.⁹

5 Maurice Blanchot used the term “intervalle” in relation to Brecht’s practice in *L’Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 532.

6 Marie-Claude Hubert explains that, referring to Roger Planchon’s work, Roland Barthes “souligne l’efficacité, dans le traitement du récit qui progresse souvent par une juxtaposition de séquences, des procédés empruntés au langage cinématographique”. Marie-Claude Hubert, *Le Nouveau Théâtre 1950–1968* (Paris: Champion, 2008), p. 22.

7 Antoine Vitez, *Écrits sur le théâtre 3, la Scène, 1975–1983* (Paris: POL, 1996), p. 229.

8 Her inclusion in such surveys of theatre practice as Shomit Mitter and Maria Shevtsova’s *Fifty Key Theatre Directors* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) confirms this.

9 Patrice Pavis, *La Mise en scène contemporaine – origines, tendances, perspectives* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007), p. 25.

Playing up Contradictions in the Dramaturgy

Readers familiar with Aeschylus’s trilogy *The Oresteia* (458 BCE) will know that the opening play, *Agamemnon*, dramatises the triumphant return of the eponymous general after the Trojan war and his subsequent murder at the hands of his wife. However by opening *Les Atrides* with Euripides’s *Iphigénie à Aulis* (406 BCE), Mnouchkine provided the back-story and posited the sacrifice of virgin daughter Iphigenia as the founding act that provoked the cycle of retributive murders in the Atreus family.¹⁰ Moreover, by virtue of this addition, Mnouchkine brought into focus how the myth comprises different versions of the story. Indeed, in the course of the cycle, two contradictory descriptions of the sacrifice are provided.

The first description, given by a messenger at the end of *Iphigénie à Aulis*, argues that the act was not only desired by the gods, but also carried out in accordance with ceremonial rites. To underline the legitimacy of the sacrifice, the messenger quotes the priest’s address to the gods textually: “Accueille le sang immaculé d’un beau cou de vierge,/Accorde à notre flotte une traversée sans encombres,/Et à nous, de prendre le château de Troie, à la guerre” (ll. 1574–76). He also emphasises that the victim was consenting, this time by quoting Iphigenia: “Et mon corps, pour ma terre paternelle,/Et pour la Grèce toute entière,/Je vous l’offre” (ll. 1533–35).¹¹ He then reveals how, miraculously, the goddess for whom the sacrifice was intended, substituted Iphigenia in *extremis* with a heifer: “elle ne veut pas souiller son autel d’un sang de bonne race” (l. 1595). However, as Nicole Loraux has explained, despite the messenger’s insistence on interpreting the substitution as a tidings of joy, the fact that the maiden is replaced by an animal not normally sacrificed in ancient Greece, somewhat undermines his claims that all is in order.¹²

10 Regarding the translations used in production, Mnouchkine relied on Jean and Mayotte Bollack’s translation *Iphigénie à Aulis* (Paris: Minuit, 1990). However she herself translated the opening two plays of the *Oresteia*: *Agamemnon* (Paris: Éditions théâtrales, 1992) and *Les Choéphores* (Paris: Éditions Théâtrales, 1992), while regular Théâtre du Soleil collaborator Hélène Cixous provided *Les Éurynides* (Paris: Éditions théâtrales, 1992). Quotations from the plays will hitherto use these translations. In keeping with convention, line numbers and not page numbers will be provided.

11 For a discussion of the victim’s consent as requirement in Greek sacrifice, see Pierre Bonnechère, “La Notion d’acte collectif” dans le sacrifice humain grec”, *Phoenix*, 52: 3/4 (1998), pp. 191–215, (p. 191).

12 Nicole Loraux, *Façons tragiques de tuer une femme* (Paris: Hachette, 1985), p. 66.

Such a sense of unease about the validity of the act is taken to a whole new level in the second description, which paints a very different picture of the event. The chorus at the start of *Agamemnon* tells “a much more brutal tale than we have heard in Euripides”.¹³ Indeed, the old men reveal that orders were given to seize Iphigenia “comme une chèvre au-dessus de l’autel” (ll. 231–232), but that she resisted: “de toutes ses forces elle s’accroche à la terre” (l. 234). As a result, her father asked for her to be silenced, else she might curse his name: “Et qu’on étouffe sur les lèvres de sa belle bouche / Les cris qui sinon maudiraient la maison” (ll. 236–237). In comparison with the messenger’s account, the chorus’s testimony places greater emphasis on the visual and thus seems all the more believable. The old men were present at the scene but refuse to comment on events they did not directly witness: “La suite, je ne l’ai pas vue et je ne la dirai pas” (l. 248).¹⁴ Of course, the chorus is remembering the event ten years after its occurrence, however in comparison, the messenger’s account, which was delivered to reassure the on-stage audience made-up of the grieving mother and a chorus of maidens, appears fabricated.

On a meta-theatrical level, by bringing together two versions of a same myth, Mnouchkine revealed how both form part of our heritage. Iphigenia both dies and is saved as her sacrifice is “re-membered” by the tellers of stories in these two founding works of the European stage. On a diegetic level, Iphigenia’s father Agamemnon appears all the more shifty and I concur with Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Nacquet’s reading of the *Oresteia* that he is revealed to be guileless but guilty of ambition:

On sait désormais ce que fut réellement le sacrifice d’Iphigénie: moins l’obéissance aux ordres d’Artémis, moins le dur devoir d’un roi qui ne veut pas commettre de faute à l’égard de ses alliés, que la coupable faiblesse d’un ambitieux dont la passion conspirant avec la divine *Triché*, s’est résolu à immoler sa propre fille.¹⁵

13 Sarah Bryant-Bertail, *Space and Time in Epic Theatre: the Brechtian Legacy* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), p. 192.

14 See commentary provided by Jean Bollack and Pierre Judet de la Combe in “*Agamemnon d’Eschyle. I.2. Parodos lyrique II-III. Présentation du premier épisode, Premier stasimon, Index*” (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1981–82), p. 296.

15 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Nacquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Maspéro, La Découverte, 2001 [1972]), p. 40.

In the dramaturgical thread that Mnouchkine wove, a gap or “intervalle” opened up between Agamemnon and the rest of society as represented on stage by the chorus and off stage by the audience. She was in effect accentuating a feature of Greek tragedy that Jean Duvignaud saw as key, whereby the dramatist isolates the protagonist and “le pare de justifications qui rendent nécessaire ou du moins admissible sinon désirable sa mort”.¹⁶ Highlighting significant aspects of the classics she was staging, but doing so in innovative ways – as here, by providing the back-story – could be said to characterise Mnouchkine’s directorial approach. Such innovation in the telling of the stories was also evident in the framing of the performance via pre-performance interactions with the audience.

Revealing Distance in Pre-Performance

In the pre-performance of *Les Atrides*, the director’s and performers’ roles in bringing these mythological stories to the stage were brought into focus. Unlike other performance venues, where actors and audience “ne se voient pas, sont présents dans le même temps, mais ne sont pas ensemble (ni dans le même lieu, ni dans le même rythme, ni dans la même activité)”, at the Cartoucherie de Vincennes, Mnouchkine’s home base, the performers are visible from the beginning.¹⁷ As Marvin Carlson points out, Mnouchkine invites audiences “to arrive before the performance and come ‘backstage’ to witness the actors’ preparations”.¹⁸ Such an experience can be uncomfortable for those unaccustomed to it, as it was for Robert Bethune, who described the experience of watching the performers prepare for *Les Atrides* as a disturbing cross between “Madame Tussaud’s and [...] windows in the red-light district of Amsterdam”.¹⁹ Other audience members at *Les Atrides* had a quasi-religious experience: John Chioles describes attending the production as akin to being asked to join “the priesthood”.²⁰

16 Jean Duvignaud, *Le Théâtre et après* (Paris: Casterman, 1971), p. 45.

17 Christian Biet and Christophe Triau, *Qu’est-ce que le théâtre?* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 407.

18 Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: the Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) p. 134.

19 Robert Bethune, “Le Théâtre du Soleil’s *Les Atrides*”, *Asian Theatre Journal*, 10: 2 (1993), pp. 179–90, (p. 180).

20 John Chioles, “The *Oresteia* and the Avant-Garde”, *Performing Arts Journal*, 15: 3 (1993), pp. 1–28, (p. 27).

However, it seems to me that both the above critics were somewhat bewildered by the experience and missed the key point, that a wedge was being driven between actor and character. In many Western playhouses, audiences are expected to suspend their disbelief and view the actors as embodiments of their character, yet this is impossible in the Cartoucherie where the actors are seen preparing. As a result, the character is held at a distance from the actor. The mystique of metamorphosis that Brecht railed against in Western acting cannot take place.²¹ Rather David Williams's analysis of the rift that occurs between actor and character in Peter Brook's work, which provides the actor "with the objectivity, lucidity and compassion of a narratorial commentator or puppeteer" is appropriate to describe what happens in Mnouchkine's practice too.²²

Moreover, driving a wedge between actor and character was part of an overall attempt to drive a wedge between the audience and the fable. The omnipresence of Mnouchkine prior to the performance, from checking the audience's tickets, to serving food and directing people where to sit, showed how the director was positioned in the space between the fable and the audience. As Sallie Goetsch notes: "If Mnouchkine's engagement with Aeschylus and Euripides was mediated by translations, our experience of *Les Atrides* was even more carefully and explicitly mediated by Ariane Mnouchkine."²³ However, the most ingenious means of opening up a space between the audience and the story in *Les Atrides* was an installation. En route from the reception hall to the performance space, the audience passed next to what appeared to be archaeological digs. Trenches were filled with life-sized statues of people and horses lined up in rows, which bore a resemblance to the warriors of the Chinese terracotta army, but also to the costumed actors. As the chorus entered at the start of *Agamemnon*, it seemed as if "the crowd of statues had returned to life and found their way to the stage."²⁴

21 See Bertolt Brecht, *L'art du comédien*, trans. Jean Tullieur and Guy Delfel (Paris: L'Arche, 1999).

22 David Williams, "The Great Poem of the World: a Descriptive Analysis," in David Williams (ed.), *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 117-191, (p. 189).

23 Sallie Goetsch, "Playing Against the Text: *Les Atrides* and the History of Reading Aeschylus," *Tulane Drama Review* 46: 1 (1994), pp. 75-95, (p. 77).

24 Bryant-Bertall, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

The trenches allowed the audiences to participate in, or at least view, the excavation of the texts, digging them up from the past.²⁵ They served as a metaphor for the excavation work that Mnouchkine had undertaken in order to translate the works in the first place.²⁶ Instead of churning out pots and vases with depictions of scenes from the *Oresteia* as one might expect, the digs playfully underlined how ancient Greek society was as removed from us as Emperor Qin's mausoleum. Indeed though references to non-Western traditions might be taken as indicators of the universal scope of the myth, they mainly highlighted distance for European audiences between the material and themselves.

Mixing Cultures as a Distancing Device

Such distancing effects created in pre-performance by allying different cultural references were also explored in the mise en scène. For instance, rather than figuratively representing a tableau of ancient Greece, the set referred back to combat sports anchored in Roman and Spanish cultures. Ochre walls enclosed a large space that resembled an arena not unlike that of the Coliseum. Or to quote Guy Dumur: "le plateau, éclairé pleins feux, est entouré d'un mur décrépi, percé d'ouvertures comme dans les plazas de toros."²⁷ The critic for *Libération*, René Solis, provides a remarkably similar description: "des arènes, l'espace a gardé non la forme mais la couleur ocre et le mur d'enceinte avec, à des intervalles réguliers, de ces abris où se glisser pour échapper à la bête,"²⁸ as does Robin Thornber in the *Guardian*, who labels the space a "bare timber bear-pit or bullring."²⁹ The dramatic intensity of the space described is striking and fate takes on the role of the bull, which the protagonists stand up to, while the chorus darts

25 It is also tempting to read the archaeological digs as an ironic allusion to Barthes's indication, "c'est donc en donnant à *L'Oresteie* son exacte figure, je ne dis pas archéologique, mais historique, que nous manifesterons le lien qui nous unit à cette œuvre." Roland Barthes, "Comment représenter l'antique?" in *Théâtre Aujourd'hui*, 1 (2007 [1972]), pp. 74-82, (p. 76).

26 Commenting on working with Mnouchkine, Pierre Judet de la Combe explained that "Mnouchkine chose to associate scholarship with her project intimately, so that her findings in the wording of the translation and in the staging of the plays could always be related to precise and argued decisions concerning the meaning and the syntax of the words" in Pierre Judet de la Combe, "Ariane Mnouchkine and the History of the French *Agamemnon*" in Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michalakis, Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin (eds), *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 273-290, (p. 275).

27 Guy Dumur, "Les Atrides parmi nous," *Nouvel Observateur*, 20 December 1990, pp. 58-59.

28 René Solis, "Mnouchkine à la grecque," *Libération*, 02 January 1990, p. 36.

29 Robin Thornber, "Les Atrides," *Guardian*, 18 January 1991, p. 15.

behind to hide. Although the space may have had little in common with traditional representations of Ancient Greece, it appealed to what Mnouchkine defines as the permeability of the audience.³⁰ In other words, audience members could read into the agonistic space their own political interpretations. Thorbert, for instance, was drawn to see via the arena images of “a bloodied village square that could be anywhere from Bosnia to Iraq”.³¹

Mnouchkine’s mixing of Roman and Spanish references may not have received much negative comment, but her forays into the visual languages of Asian performance traditions have often been criticised. When in the 1980s her productions started to reveal an interest in non-Western traditions, a number of critics took this to be an indicator of a decline in the Théâtre du Soleil’s political activities. Gautam Dasgupta saw this as part of a global trend: “as political enthusiasm waned worldwide in the late seventies, the Théâtre du Soleil’s productions came to be seen and appreciated largely for their prodigious aesthetic experimentations”.³² Brian Singleton, who attended Mnouchkine’s cycle of Shakespearean dramas, *Les Shakespeare* (1982–1984), believed that the audience on exiting the theatre “leaves behind the feudal power struggles of Shakespeare, the Asian primary source cultures and the interculturalist theatre forms, pigeon-holing this as a purely aesthetic experience”.³³

Singleton’s comments about Mnouchkine’s earlier production cycle may be applied to *Les Atrides*, yet my own reading of her use of non-European performance traditions is rather different. I follow John Rockwell, who in his review of *Les Atrides* for the *New York Times*, suggested that Mnouchkine conducts her experiments from the perspective of a “lifelong Parisian” who has “created a unique style that blends world theatrical cultures in the service of Western classics and contemporary epics”.³⁴ In other words, Mnouchkine’s work needs to be viewed through the prism of the

30 Mnouchkine qtd in Solis *op. cit.*, p. 36.

31 Thorbert, *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*

32 Gautam Dasgupta, “Richard II, Twelfth Night”, *Performing Arts Journal*, 6: 3 (1982), pp. 81–86, (p. 82).

33 Brian Singleton, “Mnouchkine and Shakespeare: Intercultural Theatre Practice” in Holger Klein and Jean-Marie Maguin (eds), *Shakespeare and France* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), pp. 307–326, (p. 324).

34 John Rockwell, “Behind the Masks of a Moralist”, *New York Times*, 27 September 1992, p. 2.

French cultural scene and her use of motifs, patterns and signs borrowed ostensibly from the East opens up spaces for critical reflection precisely because they are other. Or as Eugenio Barba explains in the preface to his *Dictionnaire de l’anthropologie théâtrale*, “A travers la confrontation avec ce qui nous paraît étranger, nous éduquons notre regard et lui apprenons à la fois participation et distanciation”.³⁵ This is indeed the analysis that Bryant-Bertail provides of Ariane Mnouchkine’s work, describing her use of intercultural references as a “commitment to a historically responsible theatre [which] has taken her along a Brechtian route through a Verfremdung achieved by borrowing from Asian theatre”.³⁶

Costume in *Les Atrides*, for instance, implicated the heroes in a world of brutality in which murder was performed almost ritualistically. Thus in *The Libation Bearers*, the women of the chorus were dressed all in black with a red cummerbund, golden jewellery and headgear, their faces painted white in similar fashion to Kabuki actors, whilst heavy black eye liner brought out startled looks in their eyes. Some also had tears of red painted on their faces and wore very bright red lipstick, which drew attention to their mouths as conveyers of bloody news. The heightened expressiveness of the choral bodies saw them “whirling and chanting like Javanese dancers at some tribal feast, they become enthusiastic celebrants of Orestes’ blood-sacrifice while lamenting the necessity of such an ‘action sauvage’”.³⁷ Or, as Judith Miller puts it, “the shaking, convulsing bodies of the chorus transmitted to the public the emotional impact of the play’s horrific actions: infanticide (*Iphigenia*), parricide (*Agamemnon*), matricide (*The Libation Bearers*), vengeance (*The Eumenides*)”.³⁸

As the previous descriptions attest, it would be wrong to claim that Mnouchkine attempted to replicate a particular Eastern tradition. Although for Eileen Blumenthal she “crossbreeds the Greek scripts with south Indian Kathakali dance drama”, I would suggest that this form was rather the starting point for creating

35 Eugenio Barba, “Préface” in Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *Dictionnaire d’anthropologie théâtrale* (Montpellier: l’Entretemps, 2008), p. 13.

36 Bryant-Bertail, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

37 Michael Billington, “Franc and Fearless on the Parisian Stage”, *Guardian*, 31 December 1991, p. 15.

38 Judith Miller, *Ariane Mnouchkine* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 38.

her own theatrical language.³⁹ Mnouchkine's own remark, "the more I am Balinese, Javanese or Indian, the more Greek I am", reveals precisely such an intention of creating an intercultural language that mixes several traditions together.⁴⁰ In this regard, Bernard Dort's description of her work as a "collage extrême-oriental" is appropriate.⁴¹ The actors were encouraged to favour a hybrid style of performance borrowed from different sources. Such an approach is not without dangers and has not escaped violent criticism. Marvin Carlson, for one, has warned against Mnouchkine's "dangerous and self-deceptive vision"⁴² that theatre texts, techniques and aesthetics can be appropriated or assimilated to create a new hybrid form of theatre. John Russell-Brown has also heavily criticised Mnouchkine, linking her practice with that of another director interested in intercultural exchanges and working in France, Peter Brook:

Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Brook are the most accomplished among the many theatre directors who have visited Asia and returned home to Europe and North America and put what they have found into practice in their productions. Like raiders across a frontier, they bring back strange clothes as their loot and try to wear them as if to the manner born. Costumes, make-up, masks, music, dances, staging techniques, and (sometimes) texts are all carried off in this way.⁴³

Russell-Brown's advice to Mnouchkine is to renounce exotic trappings and focus on the realities of serving the local audience. Certainly in light of globalisation and Western colonial history, uncomfortable questions arise, such as the one asked by Giséle Sapiro in the opening lines of *Translation*: has globalisation been favourable to international cultural exchanges and the mixing of cultures or has it been the illustration of economic imperialism

39 Eileen Blumenthal, "French Theatre: Molière Post-Modernised" *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern Edition), 14 May 1992, p. 17.

40 Mnouchkine in conversation with René Solis, *Libération*, 2 January 1990, pp. 36-37.

41 Dort, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

42 Marvin Carlson, "Brook and Mnouchkine: Passages to India?" in Patrice Pavis (ed.), *The Intercultural Performance Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 79-92, (p. 91).

43 John Russell-Brown, *New Sites for Shakespeare: Theatre, the Audience and Asia* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 9.

accompanied by cultural hegemony?⁴⁴ It also seems to me that Mnouchkine's practice falls into the contradictory state that Pavis highlights in relation to intercultural theatre in *Le Théâtre au croisement des cultures*:

L'interculturalisme théâtral n'échappe pas aux contradictions historiques de notre époque, même si pour faire sa propre théorie et produire ses fruits les plus délicats, il aimerait bien les mettre un instant entre parenthèses, histoire de se faire rencontrer deux cultures et de voir ce qu'elles ont à se dire et comment elles pourront s'aimer.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, as Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo have argued, there is a danger of artistic stagnation if criticism of intercultural practices is pushed too far:

Moral critiques, while absolutely essential to the politicizing of interculturalism, risk instigating a kind of paralysis insofar as they suggest that virtually no form of theatrical exchange can be ethical. This position is clearly untenable for a number of practitioners, especially those whose art is derived from (and aims to explore) experiences of cultural hybridity.⁴⁶

Such indeed would appear to have been Ariane Mnouchkine's position, for whom the cultural serves to highlight a political message as well as to mark difference from what was on offer in other French theatres. Indeed, her reliance on intercultural techniques is a corollary of her positioning in the "intervalle" between institutional state and private theatres. When asked in interview, Mnouchkine explained that she could not see herself working at an institutional theatre, since she felt quite strongly that she would have less freedom. Describing the Théâtre de l'Odéon, she noted that the conditions, the building, the corridors all had an influence on the production and that what she considered superfluous (mainly additional administrative space) had a

44 Giséle Sapiro (ed.), "Introduction", *Translation: le marché de la traduction en France à l'heure de la mondialisation* (Paris: CNRS, 2008), pp. 7-23, (p. 7).

45 Patrice Pavis, *Le Théâtre au croisement des cultures* (Paris: Corti, 1990), p. 123.

46 Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, "Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis", *The Drama Review*, 175 (2002), pp. 31-53, (p. 41).

negative and restrictive effect.⁴⁷ Thus Mnouchkine's productions have always looked to step beyond boundaries and deal with myth, whether that of the French revolution (1789), masque play (*L'Age d'or*), or great literary monuments (*Les Shakespeare*, *Les Atrides*).

Universal Aspirations

The universal qualities attributed to such myths and literary classics are such that a dialectics of distancing is opened up in Mnouchkine's work, as David Bradby explains:

Par ses recherches approfondies dans les arts et les traditions de l'acteur, Mnouchkine s'arroge le droit de faire de son théâtre un lieu où on essaie de mesurer la distance de soi à l'autre, sur le plan personnel, politique ou géographique. Les images d'une très grande beauté plastique et le déploiement d'énergie éblouissant des meilleurs moments de ces mises en scène font partie d'une vision passionnée qui refuse les séparations, partitions, déchirements et cruautés de l'histoire récente au nom d'un humanisme universel.⁴⁸

Mnouchkine highlights distance and difference between individuals, groups and cultures, but also the connections that exist, by engaging with works so well-known that they need to be framed in a different light. Yet in so doing, she draws attention to her own commentary, for as Pavis explains, in epic theatre "on sent toujours la présence du narrateur-historien".⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Interview with Jacques Chancel, *Radioscopie*, 12 September 1978. Archives de l'I.N.A., <http://www.ina.fr/art-et-culture/arts-du-spectacle/audio/PHID99229062/ariane-mnouchkine.fr.html> [12 October 2014].

⁴⁸ David Bradby, *Le Théâtre en France de 1968 à 2000* (Paris: Champion, 2008), p. 464.

⁴⁹ Patrice Pavis, *Le Dictionnaire du théâtre* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1987), p. 191.

Mobiles et légitimation de l'écriture dans les mémoires de femmes au XVII^e siècle

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Les différences formelles entre l'autobiographie et les mémoires font l'objet d'un certain consensus parmi les historiens de la littérature, et cela malgré les éléments que partagent évidemment ces deux genres littéraires. Or, les mémoires signés de femmes sous l'Ancien régime semblent parfois troubler ce consensus, sans toutefois jamais le mettre sérieusement en doute. Prenons comme illustration André Bertière, qui dans son étude des *Mémoires* du Cardinal de Retz prétend que l'envahissement de l'individu dans la narration signale justement une "faiblesse bien féminine qu'on observe chez Marguerite de Valois comme chez la Grande Mademoiselle [...] nous sentons que l'œuvre ne répond qu'imparfaitement à ce que nous entendons aujourd'hui par Mémoires et qu'elle coquette avec les genres voisins"¹: des genres tels que l'autobiographie, bien entendu. Mais ce qu'un critique a pu percevoir comme "imperfection" et "faiblesse féminine", constituée, aux yeux d'une autre – Éliane Viennot – "un geste fondateur", qui consiste non seulement à s'exprimer par le je, "qui prend à sa charge ce qu'elle a à dire", mais aussi à "faire de sa vie, de sa personne, la matière d'un récit, et le faire hors de toute obligation".²

Nous verrons néanmoins que dans d'autres mémoires signés par des femmes dans la période qui suit la rédaction des *Mémoires* de Marguerite, le geste scriptural n'est jamais posé sans que la nécessité ou l'obligation d'écrire ne soit également signalée, voire soulignée. Dans ces textes, il faut toujours justifier le geste scriptural. Est-ce pour autant dire que le besoin de justification s'avère plus prononcé chez les femmes que chez les hommes

¹ André Bertière, *Le Cardinal de Retz mémorialiste* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977), p. 403.

² Éliane Viennot, "Les Métamorphoses de Marguerite de Valois, ou les cadeaux de Brantôme", dans Jean-Philippe Beaulieu et Diane Desrosiers-Bonin (dirs), *Dans les miroirs de l'écriture: la réflexivité chez les femmes écrivains d'Ancien Régime* (Montréal: Université de Montréal, "Paragaphes 17", 1998), pp. 83-94 (p. 87).