

## Postcolonial Performance

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*Le dernier caravansérail (Odysées)*. By Ariane Mnouchkine. Dir. Ariane Mnouchkine. Perf. Le Théâtre du Soleil. La Cartoucherie de Vincennes, 2003–2005.

*Le dernier caravansérail (Odysées)* is a six-hour long epic, written and performed by the Parisian stage ensemble Le Théâtre du Soleil under the direction of Ariane Mnouchkine. The production, which ran from 2003 to 2005 in Paris and toured Berlin, New York and Melbourne, retraces the hazardous journeys of refugees, displaced persons, and illegal migrants. The play draws on testimonies Mnouchkine collected during interviews with asylum seekers in retention centres in Australia, as well as at the Red Cross shelter in Sangatte, in northern France. Developed over six months of intensive improvisations, the play in its final stage counted sixty-two different episodes divided into two parts which have since been filmed and released on DVD. The first, entitled *Le fleuve cruel* [The cruel river] reconstructs the diverse points of departure and routes travelled, while the second *Origines et destins* [Origins and destinies] examines the motives behind the journeys undertaken by men, women and children of heterogeneous origins and nationalities. While themes of exile and asylum seeking form the connective thread of the play, the sixty-two episodes show individuated fragments of the lives of a vast cast of characters. Importantly, presumably to underscore the myriads of stories, the play is set in a number of locations, starting with an unnamed river crossing in Central Asia and ending on the white cliffs of Dover. Throughout the play the characters travel from Africa, Central Asia and the Far East slowly working their way towards the promised lands of Western Europe and Australia. Mnouchkine presents her audience with the multiple facets that can make up asylum seeking: the political, religious, and moral persecution that cause one to flee, dangerous and pre-

carious journeys, exploitation by human traffickers, women forced into prostitution to obtain illegal passage, rhetorical arguments of government officials, but also the compassionate individuals who provide shelter and assistance. The play demonstrates both the existence of solidarity across language, cultural and national barriers, as well as the absence of fraternity and the exploitation of humans by other humans. The dialogues include fifteen different languages, some translated, others not, thus creating a chaotic microcosm of the world.

The title, which doubles as the theme, as well as the performance strategy of the play, underlines the centrality of displacement in the history of mankind and its crucial importance in the definition of cultural belonging and national citizenship. The word “*caravansérail*” derives from the Persian nouns, *karwan* [caravan] and *seray* [palace, large house or courtyard] which denote an enclosed, four-walled structure with stables on facing sides and sleeping quarters on each of the four corners. Traditionally, the *caravanserail* is a place of shelter on long distance journeys; it is also a place for gathering and exchange where foreign travellers encounter one another. The subtitle of the play, *Odyssées* is an allusion to the father of all odysseys, Homer, while stage props allude to other voyages. For instance, in the river crossing scenes at the start of the play the furious river waters are represented by metres of grey silk in a tribute to another ancient travel route, the Silk Road. Through these references Mnouchkine’s play then posits “*l’errance*,” geographic displacement, at the centre of human experience. However, *Le dernier caravansérail* also illustrates how Western values, forged through voyage on the one hand, and duty of hospitality to strangers on the other, are now being put into question by contemporary odysseys.

By addressing the issues of hospitality towards refugees and asylum seekers, *Le dernier caravansérail* takes a real and polemical global issue, usually discussed by newspapers, television news editors, and politicians, into the realm of performance and theatrical illusion. In an interview with the Franco-German television channel Arte, Mnouchkine describes the role of theatre in our understanding of daily events on the world stage as follows: “Tous les jours, nous voyons des images atroces, mais voilà, nous avons des cuirs. Nous disons: ‘Comme c’est atroce!’

Mais nous ne blémissons pas. Le théâtre nous aide à nous rendre compte que ce qui se passe dans l'actualité n'est pas seulement médiatique, mais aussi historique. Le théâtre aide à se mettre dans l'Histoire." ["Every day we witness horrendous images, but we have an armour. We say 'How terrible!' but we don't turn pale. Theatre helps us realize that what is happening in the news is not only a news item but is also historical. Theatre helps us enter History."] ("Ariane Mnouchkine Raconte").<sup>1</sup> These comments reflect Mnouchkine's own perception of the dual aspects of theatre: an aesthetic role through the dramatization of an external reality, and a political one by eliciting the audience's reaction. In this particular case, the creators of *Le dernier caravansérail* aim to make the public reflect on the refugee question, on the role of world powers in man-made human tragedies, as well as on our moral duty to be compassionate and provide shelter.

*Le dernier caravansérail* explores the contradiction between a western cultural and philosophical tradition, which regards hospitality and the provision of asylum to strangers as cornerstones of its moral values but which, nevertheless, closes its doors to refugees in search of a safe haven. These issues are explored both in the performance and in a program book accompanying the play. The latter breaks with the traditional format of the theatre program in both its design (with the use of different fonts as well as handwritten passages) and content. Moreover, the booklet reproduces written testimonies of the individual refugees on whose accounts the play is based, and gives details of their fate since they first crossed paths with Mnouchkine. The program is also a philosophical and political inquiry into the motives, objectives, creative process and themes addressed by this theatrical production. Containing a series of short essays written by Hélène Cixous, a long-time collaborator of the Théâtre du Soleil, each piece focuses on a specific question: for example, the difficulty of speaking for silenced refugees, the place of odyssey in Western cultural imagination, or the significance of epithets ascribed to the displaced such as traveller, refugee, or stranger. As Cixous observes the term *refugié* (refugee) originates from the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685, which rendered the Protestant faith illegal and forced thousands of French Huguenots to flee Catholic repres-

sion. The word, then, is historically linked to persecution and conflict. Etymology also provides useful insights in current attitude towards refugees, guests and hosts in foreign countries: the Latin root of the word host, *hostis*, means the stranger, the enemy. But Host also has a religious dimension with the holy bread eaten at communion, which symbolizes the body of Christ. Host is further related to the Latin *hospes*, a guest. These roots gave us both hospitality and hostility. Etymology thus highlights how two opposing terms are nevertheless related. In his writings on hospitality and friendship, *Of Hospitality*, Derrida takes the roots of the two opposing words to coin the term *hostipitalité* to illustrate the paradox posed by hospitality by accepting that, which is other to my own self. While for Kant hospitality must be extended universally, absolute and unconditional in character, when strangers arrive with customs, languages and religions foreign to our own, the provision of hospitality is influenced by our awareness that accepting these differences may occur to the detriment of our own customs, language or faith. In reality, hospitality is then conditional, and in the case of asylum-seekers based on complex and often competing demands: for instance, the political desire to preserve national cohesion in terms of race, religion and/or culture while complying with humanitarian obligations defined by international agreements such as the Geneva Convention.

Themes of hospitality, as well as the limits of hospitality resonate in the play and in the entire approach to the performance. Further, the notion of hospitality is carried out beyond the stage, as Mnouchkine herself greets the audience at the entrance of the theatre, welcoming the audience on a voyage, which starts with a ride on a rickety bus from the nearest metro station. In addition, the actors also become hosts mingling with the audience during the intermission. But hospitality and the motif of displacement lie at the heart of the cast's own understanding of performance. Maurice Durozier, an actor in the Théâtre du Soleil, explains: "Quand on est acteur, il suffit de rendre son corps disponible—je dis, il suffit, mais c'est un cheminement, tout un travail: avoir le vide nécessaire à l'intérieur et offrir cette enveloppe à une autre âme qui vient à un moment donné et qui est le personnage." ["When you're an actor, you simply need to make your body available—I say 'simply,' but it's

more a journey, something you work and develop: you need to have the necessary void inside and offer this shell to another soul which comes at a certain time and is the character”] (qtd. Mouchkine, “Humour”).

Another question H el ene Cixous raises in the programme book concerns the ethical and creative difficulty of performing the lives of those silenced by their illegal status or their geographical position in a medial space where the moral values of society are ignored and legal protection is denied. Indeed, refugees face not only the loss of their homeland but above all of their own identities. They are, as Ulysses answers to the Cyclops Polyphemus, “Nobody”: stateless, kinless, and nameless. In our contemporary world identity and citizenship are defined in terms of nationality and legal residence in a given country. The landless are therefore voiceless outcasts. Hence, the play’s ambition to find aesthetic forms which give voice to the unheard and unseen refugees.

*Le dernier caravans erail* uses the representational techniques offered by theatre to force the audience to question how the plight of refugees is represented, and what we as an audience think of the refugee question. One such device is the use of *ekkyklema*, literally a “wheeled out thing” a theatrical device used in classic Greek theatre to present the results of deaths, often violent, occurring off stage. In Mnouchkine’s play the platforms are moved on, off and across the stage by other members of the cast in full view of the audience. These small platforms also frame the action in a confined space as they are wheeled onto a vast empty stage, thus focusing the audience’s attention onto a particular character and situation in each scene. As a result, the actors never move on their own volition but seem to be pushed forward by outside elements. With the *ekkyklema*, the actors’ performances are then characterized by an ongoing movement that mimics the relentless motion of the refugees who seem both mobile and immobile at the same time. Moreover, a contrast is created between the vastness of the stage and by extension the world, and the fragility, precariousness and insignificance of the lives portrayed by the actors.

As I mentioned earlier, the play depicts snapshots of human lives of a vast number of characters rather than focusing on a central figure, who would emblemize the plights of scores of refugees. This deliberate

avoidance of allegory nevertheless provides little psychological insight into the characters as we are faced with the bare facts and emotions of one particular episode of their lives. Yet, details such as a singing bird, a scarf and other personal items do still provoke real emotion and raise empathy for the plight of the characters. Simple details of everyday life are mixed with more unfamiliar staging. One of the objectives behind the Théâtre du Soleil's collective approach to drama, is the need "to reinvent the rules of the game which reveal daily reality, showing it not to be familiar and immutable but astonishing and transformable" (Kiernander 89). One means to underline the transformative character of performance is through repetition. Straightforward, swift actions are repeated endlessly; for example, in the scenes depicting recurring attempts to board a train to England just outside Calais: discovered by security guards, the refugees make attempt after attempt to cut through the barbed wire which separates them from freedom.

To some extent, this repetitive aspect of the play's action, together with the *ekkyklema's* on-going motion becomes a form of ritual. Mnouchkine herself perceives rituals as being part of the aesthetics of life. In her view, ritual is poetic and has the capacity to forge identity. Cultural, ethnic, and national groups also rely on rituals to differentiate themselves from other groups. In the play, the coming and going of the wheeled carts, the repeated attempts to cross borders, transform geographic displacement into a ritual, which in turn forges a new form of identity dislocated from time and space. Indeed, exile is a state of limbo between a past that cannot be returned to and an elusive future. Another aspect these rituals highlight—together with the play's dramatization—is the artificial character of control through the creation of national borders. In our postcolonial world, former empires have disappeared to make way for new countries with freshly designed frontiers, while Western and liberal democracies also consolidate their own borders through the introduction of tightened immigration and asylum seeking rules. Further, questioning the limits of Western ethics in *Le dernier caravansérail* should be seen within a long-standing preoccupation with issues of boundaries in the work of Mnouchkine and the members of the Théâtre du Soleil. Since its foundation in 1964, the Théâtre du Soleil has probed the limits

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of theatre both in its organizational structure as a collective, and its artistic creations. In the course of over forty years, themes of resistance, oppression, identity and culture have formed the core of works, which also attempt to bridge the cultural and artistic distance between Western and Eastern forms of theatrical performance (Miller; Williams). Further information on *Le dernier caravansérail* and the Théâtre du Soleil can be found on the following websites: <[www.theatre-du-soleil.fr](http://www.theatre-du-soleil.fr)> and <[www.lebacausoleil.com](http://www.lebacausoleil.com)>

### Note

1 Translations from French are mine.

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