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1968 and Collaborative Creation at the Théâtre du Soleil

The Creation of the Théâtre du Soleil as a Co-operative

When I joined the Théâtre du Soleil in January 1968 for its production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, the company had already celebrated its fourth anniversary and staged several plays. It would be even more accurate to say that the group who would found the Théâtre du Soleil had met several years before in the context of theatre at university.

After Ariane Mnouchkine had travelled for over a year in Asia, the group was reunited and in May 1964 established the Théâtre du Soleil. The group of nine wanted to set up a collaborative theatre company right from its inception, and after listening to several recommendations decided to create the company as a collaborative workers' production, where the rights and duties of each member would be the same. They believed that this is what suited them best. Each of the nine founders paid their share of the annuity – which amounted to 900 francs (£119.86) – to subsidise the co-operative. They continued their activities during the day (as a salesperson, student, photographer, model maker, teacher, sports teacher, and so forth).

Ariane Films, a French film company co-founded by Ariane's father, provided the group with a small office on the Champs-Élysée, which remained the registered office for the Théâtre du Soleil until the company's permanent relocation at the Cartoucherie.

The Co-operative

The associates did not receive any salary (their troupe had since increased from nine to thirteen). Only the actors who chose to remain outside the co-operative received a sum of money for their performance. The work of the associates was measured by the amount of 'labour' they invested in the enterprise.

As they rehearsed Gorky's *Les petits bourgeois* (*The Petty Bourgeois*) in the evening, the actors worked or continued with their studies during the day. This would also be the case for the second play produced by the Théâtre du Soleil, Théophile Gautier's *Le Capitaine Fracasse* (*Captain Smash-All*). In reality, the situation of the theatre company only changed with the incredible success of Arnold Wesker's *La Cuisine* (*The Kitchen*) which was produced at the Circus Medrano in 1967, and this troupe of semi-amateur actors progressively became professional – even the associates started to receive some money. The originality of the Théâtre du Soleil took shape in these first plays: namely in the way the company prepares itself for its performances.

For *La Cuisine*, the actors did internships in the kitchen of a famous restaurant where they worked on their characters' movements, and especially on their characters' circumstances. As Jacques Lecoq (who taught Ariane Mnouchkine for six months) reveals, no role was assigned at the beginning, but the work was made through improvisations developed from the performances of waiters and their body language. The play sought to describe the world of work and how, even in

this world, dreaming is essential. Ariane has always said about this piece that ‘[i]t is a simple play. It doesn’t need explaining. And this is what true, popular theatre is like. This play tells [...] how happiness cannot be found in work if it is not performed under specific conditions. Arnold Wesker wrote: “Humankind needs bread but it also needs roses” [...] The roses, in this play, are the dreams.’

And when, in May 1968, a general strike was announced, it was with the play *La Cuisine* that the Théâtre du Soleil met the striking workers. When, awestruck, I watched it at the Circus Medrano in 1967, I did not know that I would join the troupe a year later.

1968

In February 1968, the Théâtre du Soleil was working on a new play at the Circus Medrano: Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. When I arrived, the rehearsals had already begun two months ago. To interpret the two main roles, Titania and Oberon, Ariane called upon two dancers: Germinal Casado, from the company Béjart Ballet Lausanne, and Ursula Kubler, a dancer and actress originally from the Zurich Opera and then from Béjart. In France, she was especially known as the second wife of Boris Vian, a French artist. Nearly all the actors from *La Cuisine* were reunited in this new production, but the actresses who did not receive a role performed in *Jérôme et la Tortue* (Jérôme and the turtle), produced by Catherine Dasté, the daughter of Jean Dasté and Marie-Hélène Dasté, granddaughter of Jacques Copeau. This play was performed on Saturdays and Sundays, before *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

It may seem that this production returned to a more classical approach: many of the actors who were part of Oberon and Titania’s court, as well as the amazons, companions of Hippolyta, were only there for the duration of this one show. I was one of those amazons. We rehearsed in a small studio situated close to the circus, and when we arrived for the final rehearsals the décor seemed very impressive: the entire stage was covered with goats’ skins in which we joyfully rolled. This was probably the most erotic performance of the Théâtre du Soleil. Anyhow, the Bablets wrote that ‘*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is the most brutal and violent play one can dream of. Everything in it is direct, brutal, “natural”’. (Denis Bablet and Marie-Louis Bable in CNRS 3 *Le Théâtre du Soleil et la quête du Bonheur*)

While we were performing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with resounding success, the students of the University of Nanterre were already protesting and on the 22nd March 1968 they instigated ‘the movement of 22nd March’ – a student movement which consisted of anarcho-Marxists, Maoists and Trotskyists. ‘Danny the red’, who turned into ‘Danny the green’ as the years went by, aroused Nanterre – and now, who knows what has become of this young anarchist?

At the Théâtre du Soleil we were in the midst of staging our shows and most were not yet concerned with what was happening at Nanterre. However, in the group of amazons that I was a part of, we were interested in this movement that was taking shape and which drew us into passionate discussions.

The play was a triumph, and offers to tour abounded in the face of the new-fangled success of the *Dream*. The Théâtre du Soleil was scheduled to perform successively in the Soviet Union, at the *festival des nuits* (Night Festivals) of Bourgogne, in Shiraz, in Venice and in Milan, and this news brought us such joy. For myself as a young actress, this was a dream in the making. During this time, we met up three days a week to rehearse. The Théâtre du Soleil is a theatre where we were

continually able to improve, and no one could deny this, even nowadays. I can honestly say that it was the place where I had my training and where I discovered improvisation for the first time. During these improvisations, the Théâtre du Soleil unearthed the masks created by Erhard Stiefel, a mask sculptor who Ariane had known from her time studying under Jacques Lecoq. There was a Harlequin, a Pantalone and a Captain, three characters from the Commedia delle'Arte, which even now I dare not associate myself with, but rather admire those who have already understood how to bring them to life.

May 68

News from Nanterre travelled to us: the students continued to fight for their claims, meetings followed meetings and everybody converged upon this area, transported by this prevailing atmosphere and its rising wind of freedom. Slogans appeared, shaping dreams. We learned that there had been ruthless fights with the students from the far-right who had come to clash with the leftists. On 3rd May 1968, confronted with this situation, Nanterre's director decided to close the university, which in turn led to a crowd of people moving towards the Latin Quarter and the Sorbonne, where students had withdrawn and convened a meeting. The police evacuated them, which marked the start of May 68 and the first arrests. When I returned home to St Germain, after the performance, it was another kind of show that was being played in the streets, with the building of barricades and the CRS (state security policemen) throwing tear gas grenades. Paris was divided between the right bank where we performed and the left bank where all the action was taking place. In the streets of the Latin Quarter, small groups began to form, to talk amongst themselves and to work each other up: you could feel a sort of agitation and tension building up. We met at the theatre where Ariane claimed that we were an action committee, but I must confess that I thought it was a shame that we were remaining indoors and not joining the action that was taking place outside – although some of us would end up doing just that. Ariane invited some communist militants to explain the situation. It was obvious that they were not in line with the leftist students.

Before touring *La Cuisine*, the final performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were presented in a tense atmosphere. Behind the scenes, we exchanged the latest news stirring in the Parisian night, such as the rumours of a general strike, especially when we learned that Renault's factories had begun to strike. Over-excited, some of us wanted to announce this news to our audience but our more cowardly colleagues stopped us.

And in the evening, when I returned to the Latin Quarter after the performance, the atmosphere of a revolution still prevailed. The conflicts in Gay-Lussac street were related by radio, a medium that would be used as much by the demonstrators as the police force. The Sorbonne was occupied and people rushed there as soon as the play finished. And then suddenly, a huge emotional moment in the world of the theatre: a sit-in at the Odéon Theatre, the symbol of middle-class theatre. In reality, the Odéon was situated in a district that was easier to occupy than the Comédie Française, which would have been a lot more symbolic. Jean-Louis Barrault, director of the Odéon, had had the courage to put on a play from Jean Genet on the Algerian War: *Les Paravents* (The Screens). This had triggered a lot of tension among those on the right. Several threats of bombing had interrupted performances. Barrault was punished twice once order was regained: he was removed

from his position, and found himself with no place to go. At the Odéon, words poured out to form magnificent speeches filled with dreams, or filled with anger: there was something for everyone. Some people rushed into the actors' dressing rooms and came out wearing theatrical costumes that Barrault desperately tried to protect, but he was overwhelmed. Not everybody enjoyed the party.

Within the troupe, we were truly divided. Some were indifferent to what was happening in the streets of Paris. I really thought this was a shame as it was a unique moment: we felt as if we were right under the heat of the spotlight.

On the evening of departure of the Soleil's tour, a general assembly of actors was held in the large lecture hall of the Institute of Art and Archaeology. The company members attended before getting on the bus that would take them on tour in Saint-Etienne. Ariane believed that the challenging problems that were discussed by the Parisian actors had already been addressed at the Soleil over a long period. The entertainers decided to go on general strike, thus joining the striking workers. The strike announcement at the company Renault was a warning sign. It was at Jean Dasté, where they performed, that the actors of the Soleil would have confirmation. What should be done? Should the Soleil go completely on strike or undertake an active strike? This would lead to unending discussions within the group. Finally, it was decided to go on an active strike: the troupe would perform in occupied factories. The décor of *La Cuisine* therefore stood on the black floors of the factories as it did in its previous home. The tour thus continued, from factories to factories. This experience would be foundational for the Théâtre du Soleil.

During that time, in Paris, standing in front of the photocopiers, I became a draftsman for the *revolution* in the Beaux-Arts, which was occupied all day. We printed daily tracts, the latest drawings, and the latest slogans – which never lacked imagination. At the end of the afternoon the general assemblies decide what to do the next day. They were organised by militants of various political leanings: anarcho-Marxists, Trotskyists, Maoists (who were on a roll), Situationists. The rooms were crowded, we were all feverish. Freedom was the watchword, *It is forbidden to forbid* was scrawled on the walls of Paris.

The workers' council asked the Théâtre du Soleil, on its return to Paris, to continue its tour of occupied factories. The set of *La Cuisine* was transported in vans lent by the factories. The director of the Circus Medrano, Joseph Bouglione, was not sympathetic to all these events and asked for the rent to be paid: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* should have resumed. It would only do so in June and then only for a month. The situation of the theatre company was once again critical: all the summer festivals had rescinded their contracts and it was now out of the question that we would tour in Moscow, or even Shiraz for that matter. However, the general Council of Doubs, which was meant to host the *Dream*, suggested a location for Ariane to use in exchange for a performance.

The party was finished, the political powers of the time signed the Grenelle agreements and work resumed.

Summer 68 – The Royal Saltworks at Arc-et-Senans

Ariane offered any of us who wished the chance to spend some time at this special place: the Royal Saltworks of Arc-et-Senans in the Doubs (Jura) and it was practically the whole troupe who turned up with their families. This ideal city was conceived and built by the architect Nicolas Ledoux in the 18th century. It was a utopian project of a working-class city, which would never come to

fruition. And for two months the Théâtre du Soleil would settle in this place. The beds were borrowed from neighbouring hospitals, we stayed in big rooms falling to pieces, and it was in the salt lofts that we did our morning training. At Arc-et-Senans, we read texts under the shade of the trees — a lot of texts: Shakespeare, the Elizabethans, Chinese and Japanese plays... We trained every morning (exercises exploring animals, materials, sensations, working with masks, mime, gymnastics, the Commedia dell'Arte approach...). The training ceremonially began ceremonially with an exchange of movements. This exercise had been borrowed from the Living Theatre, who truly impressed us with their performance of Brecht's *Antigone* at the start of 1968. The villagers attended and participated in a big public show, during which they would exchange movements with us and transform those that we offered in turn. These were studious and fantastic holidays in this special place, which suited an active retreat. During the lunch breaks, taken together, we discussed the news. In August 68 the entrance of the soviet tanks into Czechoslovakia shocked us all.

At the Saltworks we were a bit cut off from the rest of the world, even if news from Avignon, where the struggles from Paris wanted to endure, reached our ears. At the Avignon Festival a show caused a scandal: Living Théâtre's *Paradise Now*. The play was half-improvised and the actors slowly stripped during the performance. We were told that the students wanted to stop the festival, Vilar refused and was booed. Vilar and Béjart were insulted and compared to Salazar, the dictator. How can one compare Vilar, our reference-point, the man behind the creation of the Popular National Théâtre, to a dictator? We were told that he was really shaken – so were we.

At the end of those two months of work we offered to perform to a local audience. The masked improvisations were a time of sharing that was truly cherished. The summer spent in the Saltwork marked a turning point in the history of the Théâtre du Soleil and a decision was made: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would be the last time we would perform a text from the repertoire.

To find a new relationship with the audience, we would have to find a new theatrical language.

Towards a collective creation

At the end of September, Jean Vilar called Ariane Mnouchkine and asked her to participate in the next Avignon Festival, which he wanted to devote primarily to young theatre companies. He suggested decentralising the places of performances.

The Théâtre du Soleil was invited to perform *La Cuisine* and *Jérôme et la tortue* at the Venice Biennale in the magnificent building of La Fenice, an Italian opera house which contrasted with the factories we had toured and the characters we played. Because of a baby boom within the company, Ariane invited me to reprise a role in *La Cuisine*, and this was how I joined my first international tour.

On our return to Paris, we had to find a place for rehearsals, and it was Chaillot who put at our disposal a room where the rehearsals for *Clowns* could begin, the first show we created together. Ariane Mnouchkine would later say: 'We had an urge to transfer our exercises into a show that confronted clowns with the most distinctive situations in a person's life.'

1969 – the first play created collectively

In the beginning we thought about incorporating masks, but clowns are idiosyncratic and ferocious. Their chaos leaves room for no one else. Over twenty of us embarked on this adventure, only a few of us survived. *Les Clowns* became the quintessence of each individual's invention rather than a truly collaborative creation. The texts were shaped by the actors' imagination. This show was performed at the Théâtre de la Commune in Aubervilliers, and the set was built in the theatre's workshop. With another colleague I became a member of the technical team – that too is a characteristic of the Théâtre du Soleil.

Claude Roy, the poet, journalist and French writer who had shared his summer with us at the Saltworks, wrote about the company: 'Neither a convent, nor a community, not even a commune, the Théâtre du Soleil could be defined as a workshop of friendship.'

The show was fairly well received and went on to have more success at the Avignon Festival.

Ariane was already thinking of the next show: Brecht's *Baal*. Meanwhile, the actors increased the number of discussions, meetings, shows. Meeting the audience is all part of the life of the company. At the start of the 1969-1970 season, the troupe took *Les Clowns* to Auberville. It was a difficult time.

1970 – The French Revolution

Ariane withdrew to think about the next show and came back with an idea: we must be completely consistent with the decision made in the Saltworks and give up on written text.

The project became clearer and focused on a heritage shared by all French people, involving, the history of France and the founding period of our time: the French revolution of 1789. After many deliberations about who was going to tell this story, Ariane suggested another solution: a troupe of street entertainers, stallholders, public criers or agitators would perform whatever they felt about, knew about or were inspired by historical events and significant figures.

68 was not far away and you could say that it was reflected in the show. We began to read historians and every night for two hours we would receive a history lesson as well as screenings at the film library (Jean Renoir's *Marseillaise*, Abel Gance's *Napoléon*, Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm*).

From 15th July 1970 we met to rehearse and improvise. Every morning we were divided into five groups and, taking turns, we suggested situations arising from our lessons and what inspired us here. Costumes were made available. All forms of theatre were explored: farce, living paintings, operas, puppets, harangues. At the start we rehearsed at the Palais des sport. The rent was expensive and thanks to a friend, who told us of a wasteland in the Bois de Vincennes, we invested in the Cartoucherie, which would become a prime locus for theatre, largely thanks to the Théâtre du Soleil.

1789 was performed in Milan at the request of the Piccolo Teatro, and had a triumphant success. On our return to Paris, without a place to perform and aware that we had on our hands an original piece of work, because of how it was created and how the stage was designed, we only had one solution left: to convert the Cartoucherie into a performance space. Despite the cold weather of December, despite the broken glass panels of the roof and without heating, everyone began to plaster and on 23rd December, after three weeks of work, the audience was standing at the centre

of the set, jumping on the spot to ward off the cold. Those who had chosen to stay in the stands were wrapped in blankets. For six months, the play would be performed to a full house, the audience relived 68 and chanted at the end of the play 'this is but the beginning, we will continue to fight'.

1789 would become a platform for many struggling groups. They came at the end of the show to speak and explain their fight, and for a moment we believed we were in the midst of it.

From 1968 to 1980 the Experimental University Centre of Vincennes was situated in the Bois de Vincenne, before moving to Saint-Denis where it became Paris-8 University. If you go to the Bois to look for a trace of it, you won't find anything. Not even a sign, not a trace, as if they wanted to erase the memory of this place where freedom and free will were taught. As its neighbour, we would have lunch at the University's restaurant where the atmosphere of 68 still prevailed.

1793

After *1789*, we tackled *1793*. Jugglers were no longer part of the picture, and we had to find a new approach to describe this more intricate period. After thinking about representing Marat or Robespierre, the idea that endured was the fact that it was the *sectionnaires*, the Parisian revolutionaries, who had to give an account of their struggle on a daily basis. The stage space no longer comprised of trestles but rather a section where some tables were assembled on which the *sectionnaire* actors would jog to communicate their daily struggle. The audience, placed at the centre and all around in the balconies, represented the people of Paris. We called this audience participation, even if this wasn't quite accurate, for the audience felt implicated by what surrounded them.

We can say that from *1789* onwards, the life of the Théâtre du Soleil would always be connected to major political events and, of course, always connected to a theatrical concern. It is in this spirit that *L'Age d'Or* (The Golden Age) was created, a show about modern times based on the Commedia dell'Arte.

1793 and *L'Age d'Or* both took a sharp look at the past and the present.

L'Age d'Or

L'Age d'Or was the pinnacle for collaborative creation. We were authors, designers (the space in which we developed was four naves covered with rugs made from coconut fabric). Through our stories, through our bodies we described a space, a world. What we wanted was to find a way to describe the injustices of our society. In the '70s there was a strong desire to change the world, and for this reason it seemed to us that the theatre had to tell the story of our time.

The process of creation was long, eighteen months, but it gave us time to discover the form of the show, and our characters. For those who participated, this show would remain a unique experience. The actor-creator was born, and with our masks we felt invulnerable. It was probably because of this show that the role of the stage director in the company faltered.

The End of Collaborative Creation

It is also at this moment that Ariane Mnouchkine withdrew to write the screenplay of *Molière*, the story of a troupe, which was then followed by a play *Mephisto*, which Ariane adapted from a novel by Klaus Mann.

We can say that 1980 marked a turning point in the collective life of the Théâtre du Soleil: the founding members left the company. Through the performance of the Shakespeare's plays, we were witnessing a renewal of the theatre company. It was in 1983, after the staging of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, that I left the company. I was reunited with La Cartoucherie a few years later, in 1989, with the creation of ARTA, an association of research into the traditions of the actor, an idea which stemmed from Ariane Mnouchkine and our long years of collaboration.

The Théâtre du Soleil wanted to remain a witness of its time, but this is now through the renowned texts of writers such Shakespeare, Euripides and Sophocles. An important meeting would take place between the author Hélène Cixous, the musician Jean-Jacques Lemêtre (encountered during the production of *Mephisto*) and the Théâtre du Soleil, which would take a pivotal position with respect to Shakespeare's classic texts.

What has become of the Théâtre du Soleil

The Théâtre du Soleil is now 54 years old. From 1981 to 2001, a period when the productions took shape from written texts, new types of shows appeared where various works were joined together: such as the texts of Helene Cixous, the official writer of the *Théâtre du Soleil* since 1985, and contributions from the actors' improvisations who would then perform plays in harmony with Cixous's writing. The role of the stage director has become central and we are a far cry from *L'Age d'Or* or *1789*.

Whilst the stage setting is different for each play, it is now a sturdy construct. The numerous sets are activated by a troupe that grows with each new play that itself has fewer protagonists. The era of the actor-creator is long gone.

The company was nonetheless celebrated during its 50th anniversary as a durable and flamboyant utopia (*Le Monde*, 23rd April 2014). If the role of the stage director is vital, so is the music, and it could be if asked whether relinquishing the theatrical set-ups used in *the Golden Age* or *1789* does not in fact signal a return to something more traditional. However, Ariane wishes to remain faithful to her vision currently in *Cambodge (Cambodia)*, *La Ville Parjure (The City of Perjury)*, *Tartuffe*, *Le Caravansérail (The Caravanseraï)*, and in today's *La Chambre en Inde (The Bedroom in India)*, which has just been awarded two Molières (the French national theatre award).

And the *Théâtre du Soleil* always brings pleasure to its spectators, who are received with a warm welcome.

[5 mins video]