

LE THEATRE DU SOLEIL

One of Europe's most controversial, visionary, and spectacular theatre companies, Le Théâtre du Soleil, under the direction of Ariane Mnouchkine, is making its first American appearance at the Olympic Arts Festival. For nearly 20 years, this French ensemble has had a boundless sense of theatrical risk that has encompassed contemporary drama, group-created political spectacles, films and—particularly over the past four seasons—Shakespeare. Renown for the overt passion of its social convictions and its populist sensibility, the company has few peers: as one of the world's most accomplished theatres.

Mnouchkine, who is from a Russian/English theatrical family, founded the Paris-based ensemble in 1964 as a collective in which the members shared all work, responsibilities and income. Their first major success came in 1967 with British playwright Arnold Wesker's political drama *The Kitchen*, and this was followed a year later by a controversial production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Mnouchkine's staging, which relied heavily on exotic acrobatics and sexual undercurrents, anticipated by two years Peter Brook's landmark production of the same play.

The Paris revolts of 1968 began a period of radical change for the company. The run of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was cancelled so that the company could perform *The Kitchen*—as an expression of solidarity—in factories occupied by workers. The overwhelming response to those performances convinced Mnouchkine that theatre could be a genuine part of an audience's most vital political consciousness. This led to the company's abandoning its work with traditional scripts in order to produce new, group-created theatre pieces that reflected the conditions of the 1968 rebellion. Mnouchkine still led the company, but was not working as its stage director in the conventional sense. Instead, she became the pivotal observer, co-ordinator and molder of the company's developmental improvisations.

During the same period, Théâtre du Soleil took control of a vast abandoned munitions warehouse as a base for its performances. Called La Cartoucherie, the building on the outskirts of Paris is still the company's home. The spectacles given there were huge environmental productions based upon the idea of revolution in French history (*1789*, staged in 1970) or contemporary life (*L'Age d'Or—The Golden Age*, staged in 1975). The shows could be in rehearsal for more than a year, and these extraordinarily detailed and extended preparations led to a vital and cohesive company style. But after the success of *L'Age d'Or*, Théâtre du Soleil returned again to scripted work with Mnouchkine now fully acknowledged as director.

In 1981, Mnouchkine announced the start of work on "Les Shakespeares," intended as a cycle of six plays: the comedies *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labours Lost*, along with the four mature history plays *Richard II*, *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2* and *Henry V*. This major commitment to classic texts was provocative, and, amid the controversy, many long-standing members of the company withdrew in disagreement. Mnouchkine has maintained that while the company must not permanently abandon its improvised creations, the Shakespeare stagings offer a chance to continue reshaping the group's skills, to serve what she describes as "an apprenticeship in a master's atelier."

In all of the Théâtre du Soleil's work since *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there has been a conscious attempt to give the production a sense of movement and passion that reflects the most accessible kinds of popular theatre—like the traditional farce of Italian *commedia dell'arte*. The company's festive collision of different styles echoes the environment of 1968's street demonstrations and has relied heavily on masks, puppets, mime, juggling and contemporary clown techniques. Mnouchkine creates an immediate and continually surprising physical language as an alternative to the realistic

conventions of modern dialogue. Her work is a search for new forms in the theatre—an escape from the primacy of language into a realm of poetic and obsessed gesture.

Mnouchkine has made her own French translations for these Shakespeare productions, and sees no contradiction in molding rich Elizabethan English into a stage environment dominated by the classic theatre styles of Japan, Italy, and India. This is "revisionist" Shakespeare, even within the world of experimental theatre.

In both the United States and England, the Polish critic Jan Kott has had enormous theatrical influence with essays written under the title, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*. Most modern Shakespeare stagings, such as Peter Brook's, derive from Kott's point of view. Mnouchkine rejects his ideas, believing that there is not continuity between our time and Shakespeare's; that there is no contemporary way in which we can see and feel the feudal society that Shakespeare conjures for us. Renouncing modern images for the history plays, Mnouchkine uses the brutal physical mannerisms and rough percussive music of Japan's traditional Kabuki theatre, as well as its strange, tense vocal style and extravagant costumes. It is a medieval world of imagination drawn up with a fierce and timeless intensity. For the romantic comedy of *Twelfth Night*, the design concept is not adapted from Japan but from the Kathakali theatre of India. Shakespeare's mythical Illyria becomes a legendary "India of the mind," a place of extravagant music, color, love, and impassioned nightmare.

Robert Marx