



THÉÂTRE DU SOLEIL IN AFGHANISTAN

*A discussion with Ariane Mnouchkine,
Robert Kluyver, and Anthony Richter*

The following remarks are edited and condensed from a panel discussion held on July 28, 2005, at the Open Society Institute in New York. The participants included Ariane Mnouchkine, director of the Théâtre du Soleil; Anthony Richter, OSI associate director and director of the Central Eurasia Project; and Robert Kluyver, executive director of the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society, OSI's principal partner and representative in Afghanistan. Mnouchkine's company had recently completed a three-week acting workshop in Kabul in collaboration with the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society.

ANTHONY RICHTER I am familiar with the role culture plays in shaping public space, in fostering intellectual exchange, and in developing freedom of expression. But in Afghanistan our engagement is focused, as the name of the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society suggests, on the overlap between culture and social engagement—the essence of Ariane Mnouchkine's work. When we were first approached by Elizabeth Hayes and the French American Cultural Exchange, without whom none of this would have been possible, Elizabeth and I thought it might be interesting to introduce the Théâtre du Soleil to colleagues in Afghanistan who are also trying to bring together culture and social engagement. That's how we got here today, as our friends can tell you.

ROBERT KLUYVER One day last November, Elizabeth and Anthony suggested I go to Paris to see the Théâtre du Soleil's production of *Le dernier caravansérail* and talk with Ariane about any possible cooperation. It seemed like a wonderful idea—maybe not something that would happen right away, but it was a good idea in any case to take a day to see the company's work and meet with Ariane. I live in France, and as you know the Théâtre du Soleil is the foremost French theater group, which in its forty years has put on incredible productions. I went to the theater piece, without knowing anything about it beforehand, and I was extremely surprised to see that there was so much focus on Afghanistan, where I had been working and living for the last five years—so much emphasis, in fact, that many of the actors had learned their lines in Farsi. Of course it's a very multinational troupe, and some of its members are native Farsi speakers. But I thought it was an incredible effort—not only to understand the language, but also to understand the culture, and the place in Afghanistan. I thought, why and how did she find all these Afghan actors? They were even speaking with Afghan accents, not even Iranian accents. We had this wonderful discussion and found out that the basis of Ariane's work on the production was a true passion for Afghanistan—which, as Ariane will tell us, is also shared by many actors in the group. And

Ariane Mnouchkine at Théâtre du Soleil's workshop in Afghanistan, 2005. Courtesy of Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini

from that passion and movement, things just moved forward by themselves.

We inaugurated the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society in Afghanistan two years ago, in June 2003, because we realized that the international community's efforts in Afghanistan were based on a vision of the Afghan people which—according to many of my Afghan friends, who admittedly are rather urban and educated—is kind of old-fashioned. The international community bases its policies on the image of the Afghan freedom fighter with a long beard and a Kalashnikov: deeply conservative, religious, and rural in nature. A lot of Afghans I was working with wanted to show that Afghanistan has moved on. We wanted to write a place for the cultural expression of a new, changing society. So we created the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society, which from its inception offered a public space for performances, for exhibitions, for debate and discussions, and also a neutral space, which is very difficult to create in Afghanistan. We managed to do this only by bringing together a great, wide team of people from different backgrounds. And of all the art forms, theater has played an especially important role in Afghanistan, to everyone's surprise. Of course, theater seems to be a very Western form of art, and it's also a little bit complicated and expensive to put together, compared to painting or poetry—and Afghanistan has a long list of poets. But theater is also extremely important; we use it with a lot of enthusiasm, more than skill. There is incredible enthusiasm among Afghan students at different universities, and also among professionals, who were trained in the years before the war and mostly come from a Soviet theater background. There was an extreme interest in this form: we used it a lot for elections, for civic education. It can seem a little bit unfortunate sometimes to use

theater for near-propagandistic purposes, but unfortunately it's the only way to find funding to keep these groups going, and in a way we can use the opportunities provided by the United Nations, or by other organizations, to build a capacity theater.

This was the backdrop for the arrival of the Théâtre du Soleil in Afghanistan. There was extremely strong interest, if not always a high level of skill or standard of equipment. (Very, very little was available.) So when we discussed what kind of workshop we could do with Ariane, what kind of presence to be, together we decided—though most of the ideas came from Ariane, who has been doing this kind of work in other countries—that it would be best to have a workshop that would, from the very beginning, put the Afghans on stage and that would then, subsequently, work on different forms of theatrical expression.

By getting an early start, the Théâtre du Soleil managed to collect an enormous amount of material, from sewing machines and some three hundred costumes from Paris to something that might eventually become the floorboards of the Comédie Française, and of course a lot of projectors, sound consoles, and lighting dimmers. All this was shipped by French military airplanes, along with provisions for their troops. Ariane and her company arrived on the sixteenth of June and left on the tenth of July. I would now like to let Ariane talk about the workshop itself.

ARIANE MNOUCHKINE It's very strange, but it's true, as Robert said, that it started because everybody was looking for some money to have us here in New York. Elizabeth Hayes and the French Cultural Institute were working very hard to try and make it happen. In the end we came with money from elsewhere, but this very precious workshop in Afghanistan happened because of this search. Eliza-

both suggested that Robert see the play, and it started from that good luck—it's good to be reminded of that.

When Robert came and saw the play he was astonished at how strong the relationship was between this work and Afghanistan. So we wondered what we could do. Of course, we could not go and perform *Le dernier caravan-sérail* there. The production was too big, too expensive, and also, probably, not exactly the right thing to do anyway. It was too soon to bring such a piece there. But then we had the idea of doing a workshop. I remember Robert asked, "How many people will come—three, four?" And I said, "Forty." He said, "Forty?" And I said it would be important for all the actors to come, and the others too. I felt that we needed a large show of strength to be there, to show what we're doing. After all, we weren't going to Afghanistan to show what theater is; we're going to show what *our* theater is. And that's already a lot to do. So I needed all the company to be there, to share, to receive from the Afghan people, and to give whatever they have to give.

So the word *money* came up again. How do you pay for these plane tickets to Afghanistan? And I must say that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France paid. Robert's foundation is located in a big, beautiful, strange house, and they had room for us to sleep and eat there. There was a beautiful garden in which we could work, and there was a small stage, which we made a little bit bigger when we arrived, and so suddenly there we were. Forty-three of us went and stayed for three weeks, with all sorts of ideas from things people told us: "It's very dangerous, don't go, there's a plague, there's cholera, there's the Taliban, you'll be shot, you'll be cut into pieces, you'll be kidnapped." Most of the actors' parents hated me for doing this. It meant assuming a large responsibility for

taking my friends there; we had a discussion about it before leaving, of course, and people said, very honestly, "I think I'm afraid." Nobody was obliged to come, but many of them chose to come all the same.

And then the most incredible things happened. We felt that we were very, very protected. We would not go out without an Afghan friend. On all the excursions Robert arranged for us, there was a man with a Kalashnikov—a *Kalashnikov*—on both ends of our little caravan. (We did not have interaction with American troops there, because we did not see a single American in Kabul. I don't think they're in Kabul; they're in Baghlan, and they were fighting in the southeast, first of all.)

But nonetheless we suddenly began meeting normal people: competent people, curious people, emotional people, grateful people, and very, very interesting people. Among them of course were students, about a hundred people every day, most of them from the fine arts department at the university. However, that didn't mean that they were all fine arts students by choice. Some of them, it turns out, were in that department because they couldn't get into another department—that was strange to us. They wanted to do medicine or chemistry or something, and they were not accepted. You can imagine what the University of Kabul is today, still, in spite of the efforts and achievements in recovery. This has to be said sometimes about Afghanistan—in the newspapers, we only read about the catastrophes. But there are achievements, too; there is a lot of work going on. Many people are trying to build things there and are trying to improve the situation. They come from within Afghanistan first, but they also come from Europe, from America, from everywhere. Little by little we came to understand that. For instance,

there is an evangelical school, ASCHIANA [Afghan Street Working Children and New Approach], which we discovered late in our stay, unfortunately, which brought students to the foundation to show us one of their plays, which they called *Against Weapons*. ASCHIANA is an incredible organization; they work with street children.

As for the university students, some of them were coming to the workshops just to see things, to be in a quiet place, to find out what was happening there. They were not all completely involved in the theatrical work, but gradually there was a solid regular group of about fifty who came every day. Some of them even had to be stopped from coming onstage—sometimes I would have to tell someone, “No, you’ve already been onstage three times, you can’t go onstage today. You have to leave the stage today!”

We brought costumes from our theater in Paris, and masks. I don’t know why, but I had this idea that we would do mask work and nothing else. I knew that in three weeks we wouldn’t have time to do more, and that masks would be the instruments that would create theater as quickly as possible. I could have been wrong, but apparently I was not: they had never seen masks in their lives. Never. They had never heard of Harlequin, or commedia dell’arte, or Noh, or Kabuki, or anything like that. When we first showed them the masks, it was really as if something was being recalled from an ancient memory. They recognized the masks without ever having seen any before. It made me think that theater is probably the first art form, along with painting, that humankind practiced—and even if tradition or religion forbade these arts for a period of time, it remains inside us. When the Afghan actors became familiar with these masks, they were deeply happy, because masks are shades of personhood. All the masks we took there are ur-masks, very, very traditional, antique masks. And their faces are universal. They can be recognized even by people who have never seen such a thing.

We got started, and off we went: they had to undress, to dress in the costumes, and they had to understand what it meant to put such a thing on. Théâtre du Soleil actors helped them, always, showing them: “No, you can’t dress like that, you look like nothing. This is ugly. This is not the character. All right, you’re dressed like that, but you can’t move, so what is going to happen? Your hat is over your eyes; you can’t see, you can’t hear, you can’t, you . . .” And little by little some of them—I would not say all—started to be able to dress themselves, to recognize what made a character, the volume they had to take, and, well, there was theater. Some theater was created, nearly every day. I think we had one *jour maudit*, a cursed day, when nothing came, absolutely nothing—even the actors from the Théâtre du Soleil were cursed, which happens. But otherwise theater was discovered on this stage every day, the most surprising theater.

After four or five days, we started working on a specific theme, which was false marriages, false marriage—but, of course, not in Afghanistan. In our societies, three hundred years ago. So there they were, sort of improvising love scenes, with one Afghan woman and French actors, or Afghan actors. And, well, we were in a normal kingdom, the kingdom of art, where we never spoke about certain things: not once did I hear, “I’m Uzbek,” or “I’m Tajik.” Not once.

When we were organizing the visit, I had told Robert that I wanted women included among the participants or I wouldn’t come. I felt that I was creating difficulties for him. He said, “Yes. Huh. I will try. Yes.” Every time we spoke on the phone I asked, “Are there women?” and he would say, “Yeah, well, it’s coming. It’s coming.” Of course, when we finally arrived in Kabul, I wouldn’t have told him “OK, we’re going back because there are no women.” But I was really hoping. And luckily he succeeded in finding three, then five, then six. They were very courageous,

Actors preparing to perform at Théâtre du Soleil’s workshop in Afghanistan, 2005. Courtesy of Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini



very courageous, to brave public opinion. They have to feel that they are supported, you know? They have to feel that we admire their courage and their struggle, that we won't let them down as long as they are there, that we are not going to ask them to do foolish things. That is important. You cannot put them in danger. But to avoid putting them in danger does not mean that you have to tell them, "No, no, no, keep your scarf on." If they take their scarves off, good. You know?

And this is good for us too, you know. Western women should not wear a scarf in Afghanistan, and that was something I was totally convinced of, but it took relatively more time to convince everyone else in the company. "We are not going to wear the scarf in Kabul; we are not." And we were told that we should wear one, by very intellectual people, young and not—even by male diplomats, who tell you it's better if you wear a scarf. Of course not! Why should we? But these women had to be supported, they must not be pushed to do something rash that would put them in danger. (The same goes for the men.) I didn't praise what they were doing onstage just because they are women. When it was not good, I would tell them. It was more complicated to prevent the men from censoring them; when I felt that something was not totally benevolent toward them I would be very, very, very clear with the other students and tell them I will not accept it. On that subject I was very clear, as I think one has to be. Even if it's your best Afghan friend, you cannot say to him that you approve of something if you don't, just because of his so-called culture. I mean, I don't approve of slavery, although it belongs to some cultures. I don't approve, and I will not say otherwise, even if it's part of the culture. There is something which is called *les droits de l'homme*, human rights, and that is my culture.

And what women! One was very courageous. There were six girls watching the

workshops and three participating, who were already being very courageous just by going on the stage. For an Afghan woman to go on the stage is outright heroism, because in Afghanistan it means that they are a prostitute—and they went onstage and they worked. They did not do badly, and one did very well, so this one was among the group.

We even had a scene with a Christian priest on stage, with a little boy who played a choirboy. We were very astonished, and I think the actors and I grew. In this group of fifty there were perhaps seventeen who really led the workshop, who did really good work, so we gathered them at the end of our visit, for the whole afternoon, and I asked them, "So what's going to happen now? Are you going to stop? Or are you going to do something with yourself? Why don't you try and make a group?" They started to talk about, "Well, yes, but what is going to happen between a Tajik and a Pashtun? Are we strong enough to leave our origins at the door?" And I said, "Not only at the door, but at the frontier, and not only at the frontier, but at the womb."

And so at the end of the afternoon, they decided to create a group. They called it Theater Aftab—*aftab* meaning "sun"—so they were actually calling it "Théâtre du Soleil" in Farsi. They elected a director, at least for the moment, as he said himself. And they decided not to stop but to continue working, with the help of the foundation and Timor Hakimyar and Robert, who are going to lend them the garden and the place to rehearse and to help them. We are very proud of that—and we plan to go on helping them, too, because I think they deserve it. I think there are some very good actors among them, they will be good actors in the future, so we have several projects to continue with them. Except for thanking everybody who helped with this adventure, I don't know what else I should say.

KLUYVER I would like to mention how difficult it is to find funding for culture, which unfortunately is rarely seen as part of reconstruction or development of a country. I just want to thank the Prince Klaus Fund in Holland—not because I’m Dutch myself—but because they have strongly supported this project with quite a lot of money, to allow this workshop to happen in Afghanistan. We actually have enough left to continue supporting the group for the coming month, as they prepare a play to participate in the Cairo Theater Festival, which will happen in August and September, 2005, with the participation of twenty different Afghan theater groups. We hope we can see this process through, and then after that there will be additional relationships in the future, hopefully.

MNOUCHKINE I must add that the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs paid for the tickets. Robert gave us shelter and food, and of course, everybody who went there was not paid for three weeks, and that has to be taken into consideration for future groups, because there is no money at the moment for this.

And also the French Army, who transported clown noses and costumes. I thank the French Army for having the good humor to use their big, good army planes to carry in such futile materials as theater material. It’s nice—many armies should do that. Take a little bit less of that, take a little bit more of this.

KLUYVER I think one of the big things the Afghan students learned was the spirit of teamwork, which in the Théâtre du Soleil is especially remarkable: all the work, cleaning up, crushing plastic bottles, is all done by the actors themselves. And this was an extremely useful experience for Afghans who tend to think other people have to clean up behind them. [*Laughter*] Workshops lasted eight hours a day, from eight in the morning to

twelve, from two to six. Sometimes till seven o’clock, despite the heat—it was a very intensive experience.

MNOUCHKINE There was quite a cathartic improvisation about the Taliban. All of the actors in it were Afghan, except one.

KLUYVER But it ended up with a woman, beating the Taliban—it was an Afghan woman, very nice.

MNOUCHKINE She was very happy to do that! We did many workshops, but they were not all in difficult places. Sometimes they were done under difficult conditions, but they were not in difficult places.

I had always thought that musicians are so lucky: they go into a country, they take their instrument, and even if they don’t speak the language, they will go and play night and day, and they will understand each other. What an art music is for that! Well, I must say I felt exactly the same thing with theater in Afghanistan. You take a mask, you give the actors a little story to work with, and there they are playing together in French and English and Farsi—as long as our interpreter Shasha was there, that is. I have to say if Shasha had not been there, the workshop would have been totally different; she is an incredible interpreter, she translated very, very fast and very, very well, and she really does *translate*, conveying the sense, the emotion, the intonation, everything.

So here we were, in a very quiet place in Kabul in the midst of a poor and unquiet area where we were told not to gather at night. In this garden there was peace, and the possibility of discipline and concentration, which of course did not happen immediately: the obligation of doing that in order to create was not immediately clear to the young Afghans. I kept asking them, “Please be silent, please—you



Workshop stage,
Afghanistan, 2005.
Courtesy of Duccio
Bellugi-Vannuccini

can't go on talking like that." They had to understand that the rumoring among themselves had to stop if they wanted art to come into being. But the surprise was that theater can be like music, it can be totally clear and transcendent, even when I knew who was under the mask and knew how we were mixing languages and nationalities.

So that was the surprise. That theater, when it was present, when it was among us, could reign—as if nothing else was important except art. Religion? We didn't care. Man or woman? This was forgotten—for a while, not

outside our workshop, but for a while. Nobody came in with a burka, only head scarves, and the girls that were going to the workshop did not wear the burka outside. There is a photograph of two Afghan women with two actresses from Théâtre du Soleil, and one of the Afghans has her shoulders naked. This is a sort of tiny revolution in itself, though nobody even mentioned it—it was just what had to be done in order to work. Of course, there are things which are intolerable, and in fact I think we must tell them what is intolerable, and we did so.

My goal in choosing the theme for the workshop was to go as far as I could go without rocking the situation. As I said, I didn't know everybody who was there. I knew the group of fifty, the people who really wanted to do theater. But sitting behind were other people, and I didn't know what they were thinking. That's why I didn't want something to suddenly happen which would hinder everyone, and which would stop this flowering liberty that we discovered in the workshop. I did not push. As we say in France, *je ne voulais pas pousser le bouchon trop loin*—I did not want to push the cork too far. If we do a scene on arranged marriage in Afghanistan, that means we have to talk about somebody who is very near us. And we have to talk about an everyday happening in Afghanistan. But distance is also a great tool in theater, and I think they understood perfectly well the cruelty—yes, the cruelty—of this act, from watching a Molière scene about an arranged marriage in seventeenth-century Italy.

We dealt with comedy as well. That was my second goal: mask and comedy. If we want to deal with forced marriages in Afghanistan today, that's tragedy, not comedy, so it's another form. Maybe if there is another workshop, and people are working there for a longer time, they can deal directly with tragedy. But I wanted to deal with comedy, because I think that comedy has a revolutionary strength, and because I thought—mistakenly—that they didn't laugh a lot. They worked on Molière without exactly knowing they were working on Molière. And I discovered that they can really laugh!

In response to questions I have heard about whether theater is received or condemned as a Western form in Afghanistan, I must say that I don't think the word *Westernized* is a good one because they have many Eastern Greek Orthodox theaters. And the East has beautiful theaters, too: India has many very beautiful theaters, and Indonesia has beautiful theater, and other Islamic coun-

tries too. Theater is not Western. Art is not Western. I don't even know what Western influence is. It depends on what people are told, of course; if somebody comes to a village and says, "This is Shi'ite, this is Western," then the perception doesn't come from instinct, it comes from propaganda.

The struggle against art does not come from the soul; it comes from the brainwashing, from fascism. I think theater is in our genes, so of course it's dangerous. It's dangerous. So either they try, fascists try to destroy it, or they try and manipulate it, because they know it's a very, very powerful weapon in a way. It's a civilization weapon. It's incarnation. It's flesh, it's thinking flesh, so it mustn't rival another power.

KLUYVER I have some experience with this too. First, as a general remark, I will say that theater is a medium—theater in itself is not Western or Eastern. We have actually shown theater in more than seven hundred different places in Afghanistan to date. We have organized theater, mobile theater campaigns, which related to elections, but with a free kind of interpretation: not really delivering messages, but offering a general idea of why elections are important, of what kind of person you should try to elect. Since Afghanistan has a lot of regional cultural differences, we use local groups to tour in their own regions instead of sending a group from Kabul, since the groups in Kabul are afraid of going to the other provinces. Local groups already know how far they can go, and what they can do. So this helps bridge differences from region to region, for example, and especially with the issue of women: In some regions they won't have women actresses perform, but they'll have male actors dress up and perform the roles of women. In other regions even that is not done. In the north when we ask them to put in one woman, they put in two women because they would like to have more women perform, so it depends a little bit on the region. But it's

definitely seen by the audiences, and we've attracted very, very large audiences, because obviously in these villages there's not much to do, so everybody comes and watches.

There have been extremely few negative reactions, and the few which have occurred—in the east and the south of the country—were in areas where the coalitions are fighting the war and where there is political resistance to elections. In other words, it is not resistance to theater itself, but to the message that we were delivering with it. But even that was very, very rare. Luckily we haven't had any real problems. It has been accepted by most Afghans. For the Afghan theater groups, this was also a new experience. When they came back from this, it was like a theater revolution, because they've gone everywhere in the country, and everybody loves theater now. They're coming back again, we're going to send the troupes back around the country in summer 2005.

MNOUCHKINE During our workshop, some of the actors wanted to do an improvisation dealing with the Taliban, using the Balinese masks we brought with us from France. Maurice here was the only French actor in this enormous improvisation, which was otherwise done only with Afghan actors. Maurice and I were telling them yes, but with these masks, you have to remember that this is not a real Taliban. It is *this* mask, with specific character traits, and you would have to imagine that *these characters* are playing the Taliban, that *they* are performing a play about the Taliban—because, of course, they are ridiculous personages, and ridicule is very precious in that situation. But the actors wanted to actually play the Taliban. Maurice said, “No, I'm not doing it. If it's going to be real Taliban, we're not doing it.” Suddenly they understood. And they accepted it. So they built the improvisation around the scenario that a bunch of

Balinese peasants—Balinese because these were Topeng masks—were performing a play called *The Defeat of the Taliban*. It started with that premise, and it was so beautiful because the peasants received texts of their play, *The Defeat of the Taliban*, and immediately two of them wanted to leave the stage, saying, “I don't want to play *The Defeat of the Taliban!*” The improvisation was totally cathartic; the improvisation itself became the defeat of the Taliban. I don't remember exactly how it happened, because the improvisation was such chaos, but all of a sudden—and we couldn't stop—Maurice was beaten up in the middle of the whole thing. He played the peasants' director, the stage director, and he was trying to give direction to one of the “peasant” actors, but he couldn't—they had *become* Taliban. Finally this woman who was among the actors prevailed; she took a whip, the whip that the Taliban famously wielded to beat women, and suddenly she turned it against the Taliban. The audience was shouting and yelling and roaring with laughter, and something happened at that moment, really.

RICHTER Clearly, we have to continue supporting culture in this setting. Poetry is very well developed and entrenched in Afghan culture and there are traditions of Afghan poetry that blend with Persian poetry. A thousand years ago there were epics, different forms of storytelling—it's not theater, but in any event, what we've seen is that culture, and the people who are artists, have a status, a social status, and a respect. They are allowed a protected space, a special status. It may be a vulnerable situation, but it compels us to continue to support culture in this country.

MNOUCHKINE But Anthony, theater has to do with the Other. It's the art of knowing, understanding, and incarnating the Other, other people. Therefore it's also a school of life and

much more. Of course I'm not against poetry, but you can't make the comparison. To support theater is also to support something more dangerous. To play someone else, to incarnate somebody, you have to understand them, you have to accept them. If you are Muslim, you suddenly have to become a Jew or a Christian. If you are Christian, you suddenly become Muslim, or Jewish, or black, or a dwarf, or a giant, or a woman if you are a man, or a man if you are a woman. You have to *be* the Other, and that is priceless—*priceless*. Especially in a society based, because of history, on the refusal of the Other: the refusal of women, refusal of foreigners, refusal of somebody *else*. That's what I felt in that workshop, as I watched the actors dressing and undressing young students in these traditional costumes. It was such an act of sharing and transformation and that was very precious, and in a way very political. So we must support this, and support them when they go back. It's more difficult, and probably more political and more revolutionary than just editing beautiful poems, which must also be done. But sending real people, living people, there to take your things away and suddenly put some makeup on your face, even though it's forty degrees Celsius and everybody's sweating—and voilà! They were touching each others' bodies, each others' hearts, and it's very concrete. Theater has to do with concrete things and political things, and the villager has to understand—and we have to make him understand—that the body of the Other is not the devil. That's what theater has to convey, and you have to give money for that.

RICHTER Well, we can't blame anybody but ourselves for getting into this situation. We want to be in this situation, and I would like to express to you and to Robert once more our admiration for your work, and in particular for what you've shared with the Afghans.

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