

***Une chambre en Inde* ("A Bedroom in India"): A Collective Creation by the Théâtre du Soleil and Ariane Mnouchkine**



The presentation of a major new work at the Théâtre du Soleil is always an important theatre event in Paris, and after the rather indifferent reception of Mnouchkine's *Macbeth* in 2014, the company's next production has been awaited with exceptional eagerness. As usual, it both confirms long-time Mnouchkine concerns while breaking new ground.

Most importantly, Mnouchkine has returned to where the Soleil began, with collective creation. The subject matter of the performance gives this return a completely new relevance, however. The play shows a French company going to India to gather material for a new production. While there, their long-time leader, called Lear, falls into a kind of madness, that is manifested by climbing a statue of Gandhi while naked, and shouting forth his devotion to Antonin Artaud. His assistant, Cornélia (Hélène), in the wake of this event, is spending a restless night in a huge Indian bedchamber, with her sleep constantly being interrupted by telephone calls, Wi-Fi messages, the coming and going of colleagues and servants, and most important of all, bits and pieces of material that might be incorporated into a post-Lear work that she and her colleagues are attempting to create.



A Scene from *Une chambre en Inde* directed by Ariane Mnouchkine, 2016. Photo Courtesy: Pili Vazquez.

Although Mnouchkine, who as usual, took tickets at the door, and circulated among the guests, who were enjoying a delicious Indian dinner served before the performance in the elaborately decorated antechamber of the theatre, seemed as lively and spirited as ever, she is now 77, and it is difficult not to see this production as in part, a meditation on the challenges faced by her own company when, as can be understood, its “Lear” is no longer at the helm.

On this level at least, the production clearly raises some concerns. The evening I attended (during the second week of the run), Mnouchkine appeared before the show to announce that the show was still changing, but would run for around four hours (in an earlier form, it ran for six). In fact, it did run somewhat under four hours, but as is often the case with collective work, especially in the early days, it had many passages that needed focus and cutting – especially, unfortunately, in the second half, And it would not have been a significant loss, and indeed, much would have been gained, had the show had foregone at least an hour or more.

The production is extremely episodic, as real and imagined scenes and characters intrude upon the heroine’s troubled sleep. These interruptions are basically of three types. First, and the least interesting, are interruptions from the real world of the play – many of them surely drawn from the time the company actually spent in India gathering material. On either side of the chamber is a rank of doors/windows that allow one or multiple characters access to the chamber, and, subsequently, a wide array of local officials, clumsy servants, housemaids, even large monkeys make regular appearances. There is even an upstage bathroom with a window opening onto the toilet so that we can witness the effects of Indian food on various French cast members.

Most spectacularly, and most reminiscent of earlier Soleil productions, there are several extended sequences of South Indian dance theatre, with its spectacular and highly stylized costumes and presentational style. The form this production utilizes is that of the Theru Koothu, or the street play of Tamil Nadu, and although the scenes presented are fragmentary, they basically deal with two sequences from the *Mahabharata* – King Yudhishthira’s departure from Draupadi for the great war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, and the death of Karna. Both stagings are presented with a stage full of actors, musicians, and audience members, ranged on all sides of the bed of a stunned Cornélia. Although these are by far the most elaborate and stunning sequences of the evening, their relationship, if any, to the main situation is never made clear, and as it gets late in the evening, they begin to appear repetitive and over-extended.



A Scene from *Une chambre en Inde* directed by Ariane Mnouchkine, 2016. Photo Courtesy: Michel Laurent.

Although no other actual theatrical forms are represented, Shakespeare himself makes two brief appearances with his page, who offers a brief but charming rendering of “come away, come away, death;” and as Cornélia tosses restlessly on her bed, she is provided with comforting words and a change of linen by a doctor who identifies himself as Chekhov, followed by his three non-speaking assistants, Olga, Masha, and Irene.



A Scene from *Une chambre en Inde* directed by Ariane Mnouchkine, 2016. Photo Courtesy: Anne Lacombe.

As these examples may suggest, the overall tone of the work is a mixture of farce and nightmare, with the former strongly predominating. Nowhere is this made clearer than in the various, basically farcical sequences involving Islamic extremists of varying kinds, which are clearly inspired in part, by the attacks in Paris in 2015, which occurred while the company was gathering material in India. In one, the black-robed, bearded extremists attempt to send a suicide bomber to blow up a box with an American flag, an attempt that then becomes subject to a long series of bumbled miscommunications. In another, an Islamic fundamentalist film company attempts to shoot a *Lawrence of Arabia* type film, promoting retrograde sexual views, but is continually frustrated by actors, who inadvertently reverse the meaning of their lines. In a third sequence, a group of Saudi authorities consult authorities in Iceland, apparently by Skype, for advice on how to improve their record on women's issues, only to be appalled by what they hear.

These three scenes are among the funniest and most successful of the production, but given the political atmosphere, both now and when the production was created, I was troubled by the portrayal throughout of Islamic men only as bearded and ignorant black-robed savages, who are quick to employ their cardboard machine guns. There is still a strong thread of both orientalism and racism in this production which, for all its devotion to progressive causes coupled with its dazzling theatricalism, has long been a part of the Soleil tradition.

Marvin Carlson, Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre at the City University of New York Graduate Center, is the author of many articles on theatrical theory and European theatre history, and dramatic literature. He is the 1994 recipient of the George Jean Nathan Award for dramatic criticism and the 1999 recipient of the American Society for Theatre Research Distinguished Scholar Award. His book *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, which came out from University of Michigan Press in 2001, received the Callaway Prize. In 2005 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Athens. His most recent book is *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia* with Khalid Amine (Palgrave, 2012).



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