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‘The Empire Floats Back’  
Ariane Mnouchkine, her *L’Indiade* and the *Nāṭyaśāstra*\*

SUMMARY: This paper seeks to explore certain prescriptive theorisations of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and link them, in a comparative vein, with the often radical directorial approaches and experiments in post-WW2 European dramaturgical practice, especially as seen in the work of the eminent French *metteur en scène*, Ariane Mnouchkine (1939–), who founded the avant-garde stage ensemble Théâtre du Soleil in 1964, in Paris. Mnouchkine’s *L’Indiade ou L’Inde de leurs Rêves* (1987–1988), based on the learning experiences which Hélène Cixous—who wrote the play for and with her—and she had had in India during their stay and travels there, was an almost

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\* The conceptual framing of “floating [cultural] material”, as theorised by Joachim Küpper in the theoretical monograph of the ERC-Project-DramaNet (Küpper 2018), engages with the possibility of the modern backward-movement—from the post/colonial peripheries to metropolitan European centres—of theatregrams and other drama- and performance-tropes. Also, see Ashcroft et al. 2002. This essay is based on Chapter 4 of the Dr.-phil.-dissertation (2014)—written as part of the ERC-Project-DramaNet—of the present author. I would like to thank, at the outset, Prof. Joachim Küpper for invaluable advice and formative guidance; in fact, this essay has evolved out of detailed discussions with him at the Freie Universität Berlin. This work has been supported by the ERC-Advanced-Grant-Project “Developing Theatre” (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München), the author’s current employer, which has received funding from the ERC under the Grant Agreement No. 694559. The author would also like to thank Elisa Ganser and Ewa Dębicka-Borek for their painstaking readings and editorial assistance, and two anonymous reviewers for their detailed critique and useful suggestions of secondary literature.

ground-breaking exploration of Indic motifs and staging-configurations. The play will be viewed here from the perspective of ‘total theatre’, as also envisaged in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Finally, this paper will also seek to engage with theatrical and ritual boundaries in Mnouchkine’s work by looking at the reception of Indic forms of ritual-theatre in *L’Indiade*.

KEYWORDS: *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Ariane Mnouchkine, *L’Indiade*, Hélène Cixous, total theatre, hybridity, Théâtre du Soleil, ritual-theatre, Partition of India

## Introduction

In her thought-provoking work on the French drama that resulted from and, in turn, characterised the French *engagement* with their limited colonial possessions in India, *Widows, Pariahs and Bayadères: India as Spectacle* (Mehta 2002), Binita Mehta builds upon and extends Edward Said’s discursive articulation of ‘Orientalism’. Taking care to address the latter’s much criticised overlooking of the heterogeneity embedded within the concept, she seeks to “demonstrate that theatre was more than just a metaphor. An India was literally created onstage for the enjoyment of the West” (*ibid.*: 35). Her primary conclusion in this book seems to revolve around the problematisation of the entire notion of performative border-crossings. She deploys analytical paradigms that call into question the reductive trajectories of submerging substantive differences between former colonising Self-images and their colonised Others. She further argues for the possibility of divergent cultures to successfully negotiate those facets of “intercultural collaboration [that lead to] the homogenization of cultures rather than the preservation of cultural differences” (*ibid.*: 215). Thus, while “[s]ome critics believe that the creation of a truly global theater is utopian” (*ibid.*), Mehta seems to be advancing an alternative paradigm of analysing intercultural dramaturgy that delinks performed historiography from lived and felt history. In other words, notwithstanding her engagements with the travails and traumas inherent to the colonial experience, she seems to be attempting to reconcile the performative angst of colonial imperialism with its evocation of associative references. While discussing one of the French plays in her selection, she notes that

India is first and foremost conveyed through the play’s décor, which includes garlands of flowers, rice, powders (suggesting spices), costumes, colors like saffron, red, and white, floating candles, certain motifs such as Krishna’s chariot wheel, and the music. (*ibid.*: 169)

It appears that, through these evocations of stereo/typical Indian sensory impressions, the 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century French dramatists, whom Mehta studies, theatricalise a notion of a Francophone Indian Empire that was to remain a dream for Paris. The evident depth of the French attraction to these images and associations of and with India reveal that these and other colonial and proto/crypto-colonial references in contemporaneous French drama were indicative of the constructed nature of the French Self-*imaginaire*.

In her last chapter, Mehta focuses on the two most influential and much-discussed plays, which dealt with India, to appear on the French stage in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely, Carrière’s *The Mahabharata*, as staged by Peter Brook, and Cixous’s *L’Indiade ou l’Inde de leurs rêves (The Indiad or India of Their Dreams)*, as staged by Ariane Mnouchkine. She does seem to accept that these two plays are nuanced by an augmented analytical objectivity, consciousness of the socio-cultural context/s and sensitivity to the historical background, which were almost absent in the colonial plays. However, she notes the presence of some of the same exoticising and reductionist tendencies that essentialised and sentimentalised India in terms of mystical alterity. As Carlson wrote, a few years after the first performances of the two plays, “[d]espite the respect, one might even say the veneration and love which these productions manifest for their subjects, the traditional dynamic of western appropriation of the Orient for its own purposes seems still operative here” (Carlson 1990: 49). He views—having developed a seven-fold framework for expanding “the useful categories of cross-cultural influence” (*ibid.*)—*L’Indiade* “less as an attempt to engage modern India *per se*, but as the latest in a series of Oriental variations uniting the diverse work of Mnouchkine’s Orientally stylized Shakespeare productions and the chronicle of Norodom Sihanouk” (*ibid.*).

The present essay will seek to revisit, in particular, the issue of whether these and similar metaphoric evocations of a dream/t-India, with special reference to Cixous's and Mnouchkine's *l'Indiade*,<sup>1</sup> do manage to avoid falling into the colonial trap of using these artistic engagements with the Other as 'intercultural' smokescreens for venting a self-reflexive angst about the Self. It remains to be seen if the rarefied theoretical presumptions of cultural universalism may have, indeed, informed these avant-garde theatre projects and, thus, undermined them in terms of interpretative objectivity. Though the *Nāṭyaśāstra* will be referred to at various points in this work—more as a theoretical compendium of Indic<sup>2</sup> dramaturgy than a praxis-continuum—the aim is not to show Cixous's and/or Mnouchkine's debt to, or knowledge of, or even familiarity with the Sanskrit treatise. That would require access to a substantial amount of their private papers, working-notes, diaries and correspondence, which is beyond the scope and intention of the current essay. This work seeks to explore—within the domain of comparative cultural history—possible resonances and convergences between Mnouchkine's ideas on theatre and those in circulation within the Indian Subcontinent for millennia and expressed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Though Cixous and Mnouchkine have returned, both physically and thematically, time and again to India—with the latest production of the Théâtre du Soleil being called *Une Chambre en Inde (A Room in India, 5<sup>th</sup> November, 2016–24<sup>th</sup> February, 2018)* (Soleil 2016)—*L'Indiade* remains Cixous's and Mnouchkine's *tour de force* through a broad panorama of India's post/colonial history. It also remains their India-play to have received the closest and most sustained academic attention across the world, throughout the last three-plus decades.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'Indic' is used in this essay as an adjective that refers to the people, culture and languages of the Indian Subcontinent from a trans-regional perspective, which emphasises historical and epistemic continuities without ignoring the societal-political ruptures and polyvalent transcultural affinities that have characterised Indian ways of life for millennia.

<sup>3</sup> In this essay, Sanskrit and French primary sources will be accessed, mainly, through their English and German translations and read through the lens of comparative cultural studies.

Moreover, it attempts to engage with the twofold legacy of Indic performance—theoretical and practical—in her work *L’Indiade*, within the framework of ideas about ritual circulating in avant-garde theatre-circles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; this is currently being reworked in performance studies.

There is, indeed, no real evidence to assert that Mnouchkine was significantly—if at all—influenced by the theoretical formulations of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. However, it is known that, during her stay in India and, especially, her travels and conversations in Kerala and other southern Indian provinces, she was impressed by the various Kathakali and other classical dance-drama performances she saw. While this does not automatically suggest her interest in or even exposure to the dramaturgical postulates of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, it does leave room for conjecture regarding the possibility of Mnouchkine being introduced to the notion of a link between contemporary forms of Indic dance-theatre and Bharata’s text. It is within the realm of possibility that she was, indeed, informed of such a link by certain interlocutors or readings. As Mnouchkine says, while talking about the first *École Nomade* (Nomadic School), which her colleagues and she organised in Pondicherry (14<sup>th</sup>–30<sup>th</sup> December, 2015) in the form of a workshop—meant for both young students and experienced professionals—on their way of “looking for theatre”:

We, the Théâtre du Soleil, we owe so much to the culture of India. It’s been such an inspiration for me since the beginning of my artistic life; probably, even before. [... Our way of doing theatre] is a very collective way of doing it and, probably, that is something Indian theatre has known, has practised for centuries... even millennia. But maybe, from what I hear, it’s, maybe, lost a little bit... there, as it is here. (Interview of A. Mnouchkine in Soleil 2015, square brackets mine)

Further, as Shulman explains, in the context of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*,<sup>4</sup> the relationship between the textual and the practical traditions is indeed a complex and, certainly, relevant one:

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<sup>4</sup> *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, a genre of “Sanskrit theatre, which is practised in the province of Kerala, is one of India’s oldest living theatrical traditions.

The Kūṭiyāṭṭam performers from the Cākyar and Nambyār communities are fond of saying that their art is continuous with very ancient modes of drama, documented in the *Nāṭya-śāstra* and in later works (including Abhinavagupta's magisterial commentary on the *śāstra*). In this they are no doubt, at least partly, right. Classical modes, specified performance units, and a long series of analytical features do indeed fit well with what we know of the ancient theater. (Shulman 2015: 105)

### **Ariane Mnouchkine, her *Théâtre du Soleil* and the search for transcendence**

Through the period of the last three decades, Ariane Mnouchkine's *Théâtre du Soleil* ('Theatre of the Sun') has evolved as one of the most renowned stage-collectives in Europe, and she has come to be acknowledged as a premier European stage-director in and beyond the Francophone space. Along with the primarily post-WW2 Regietheater (meaning 'director/producer's theatre')<sup>5</sup> in Germany, her theatre-movement sought, and still seeks, to engage with folk and

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[... It] represents a synthesis of Sanskrit classicism and reflects the local traditions of Kerala. Access to performances was originally restricted owing to their sacred nature, but the plays have progressively opened up to larger audiences" (UNESCO 2001). It is a "cultural form that has never been seriously theorized from within" (Shulman 2015: 105).

<sup>5</sup> Regietheater is a theatre-movement that emerged, primarily, in Germany in the 1970s almost "from the ghost of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*" (Hiß 2005: 123) and sought to reinforce, in the words of Helmut Schäfer, that "the theatre is not a branch of literature" (*ibid.*). The emphasis was on delinking, through significant directorial interventions in staging- and performance-strategies, theatrical texts from their actual and/or perceived contexts. This even led to "the emergence of Theatre Studies itself [as a] remarkable expression of the assertion of the new theatre-concept" (*ibid.*: 157). The individual components that were seen to constitute the "complexity of theatre" (*ibid.*: 158) were seen to be required to immerse their specificities in the multidimensional and assimilative act of directorial orchestration, during staging, thus accentuating the role of the director.

classical traditions from non-Europhone<sup>6</sup> cultures, using cross-cultural translocations<sup>7</sup> of significant culturally-connotative themes, tropes, staging and musicological devices. The autonomy and overriding agency of the director/producer was central to the conception of the Regietheater, which makes it similar to Mnouchkine's own ideas of tight and all-pervasive directorial agency, even control, on a performance. This is independent of the spatio-temporal limitations of the text or narrational context. Thus, she managed to bring together a wide range of theatrical and folk-performance motifs, from mainstream European, Indian and other Afro-Asian sources, while appearing to maintain an open-minded and balanced approach to the contemporary ideological and societal-cultural debates. It is, especially, her nuanced yet—through a reconfiguration of their theatrical connotations—decontextualised use of Indian dramaturgical devices that earns Mnouchkine a reprieve from the charge of having an Orientalist's reductionist gaze. These devices were both from street-theatre and the classical Indic theatrical forms, which were already quite popular amongst European theatre-audiences in the 1960s. Hers seems to be a "cultural mobility" that was and is based on a creative and problematizing engagement with the hybrid and the non-rooted, which do seem to thrive in "the complex 'flows' of people, goods, money, and information across endlessly shifting social landscapes" (Greenblatt et al. 2010: 1). Thus, when Mnouchkine uses Indian dance-forms and theatregrams,<sup>8</sup> both classical and adapted from street theatre,

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'Europhone' (=writing and/or speaking in a European language) is occasionally used, instead of 'European', in this essay to comparatively emphasise and foreground the linguistic and cultural aspects of the societies concerned.

<sup>7</sup> Here, the term has been used in a sense close to its original geneticist meaning, involving chromosomal dislocation and reattachment. "A translocation occurs when a piece of one chromosome breaks off and attaches to another chromosome" (Genetics Home Reference 2018).

<sup>8</sup> The term 'theatregram' appears to have been used, for the first time, by Clubb in her seminal essay "Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time"

she does it with a keen understanding of the cross-cultural *métissage* that characterises many of these apparently-autochthonous theatrical forms and tropes. Thus, one may even presume that she understands the “unnatural acts [...of] colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unintended consequences” (*ibid.*: 2), especially as they were reflected in the kinds of memory-narratives that have, in post-/colonial India, constituted powerful narratives and counter-configurations of the Indic cultural Self. In fact, Mnouchkine appears to be imbued with the desire to engage, through her personal directorial interventions, with the project of what Greenblatt, in his essay “Racial Memory and Literary History”, describes as “recovering the creative achievements of groups that the professional study of [cultural practices] had marginalized or ignored or simply absorbed into a larger, speciously undifferentiated unity” (Greenblatt 2001: 49).

Mnouchkine’s Théâtre du Soleil was established, along with Philippe Léotard and colleagues at L’École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq, in 1964 as a Parisian avant-garde, independent theatre-collective that sought to respond meaningfully to the societal and cultural upheavals shaking the Euro-American consciousness in the so-called ‘Swinging Sixties’.<sup>9</sup> The primary reason for this

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(Clubb 1989), to indicate Italian theatrical stage-settings that influenced Shakespeare. However, as Schmitt writes, “[t]he term... has sometimes been misleading in so far as it suggests... simply the recycling and reuse of old materials” (Schmitt 2014: 93). Nevertheless, in this essay, the term is being used “for the pervasive reuse of types of characters, of relationships between and among them, actions and speeches, and thematic design” (*ibid.*: 92), in keeping with Clubb’s original use of the term. Thus, ‘theatregram’ is used, in the context of theatre, as the term ‘meme’—as coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 by applying “evolutionary principles to account for the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena” (*ibid.*: 93)—is used to conceptualise the intercultural transfer and/or exchange of ideas.

<sup>9</sup> This is a colloquial term referring to the rise and flourishing of movements championing popular culture, enmeshed with the spirit of radical student-led socio-political protests against the ‘Establishment’, that spread



socio-cultural tumult was, in fact, the ideological conflict across the Iron Curtain during the Cold War era. However, the post-WW2 unhooking of different hierarchical relationships, in the realms of race, sex, gender and labour/employment, also triggered off the socio-cultural turmoil of the time. Added to this was the critical response—that began quite early in France—to the Vietnam War, which had its beginnings in French colonialism. This led to the epoch-making protest-actions and societal rebellions against political and cultural conformism that were the hallmarks of the watershed-year of 1968, which was characterised by massive and crippling public demonstrations<sup>10</sup> and industrial actions<sup>11</sup> in France. It is against this chaotically hopeful background that Mnouchkine's founding of *Le Théâtre du Soleil* should be studied. Her project was supposed to provide an alternative to the contemporary French theatrical mainstream and its subsequent productions carried the implicit promise of the outburst of youth celebrated by the '68-generation', despite the multiple disillusionments. One should also add to this cauldron of influences Mnouchkine's intellectual and artistic debt to her mentor Jacques Lecoq (1921–1999), who acquainted her with the theatre-traditions of Jacques Copeau (1879–1949) and his famous *Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier* and the exploits of 'les copiaux' (Picon-Vallin 2006, 2014). The latter were to inspire the ambience of solidarity-based collectivity that was to become a hallmark of the lifestyle of the members of Mnouchkine's theatre.

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through and flourished in Europe and the USA, culminating in the iconic civil upsurges in 1968.

<sup>10</sup> One of the most significant public gatherings was the march—protesting against the police-action at the Sorbonne University—organised, on 6<sup>th</sup> May, 1968, by the union of university teachers and the *Union Nationale des Étudiants de France* (UNEF), which remains the biggest French students' union and “[a]s early as 1948, [...] had condemned the French war in Vietnam” (Seidman 2004: 33).

<sup>11</sup> A major industrial strike, which saw major unions collaborating with each other, occurred on 13<sup>th</sup> May, 1968, with postal workers, “[d]rivers, maintenance workers, and carriers conform[ing] to the general strike order. Foremen and clerks, who had previously been quiescent, also joined the stoppage” (Seidman 2004: 168).

In fact, the non-hierarchical and cooperative working ethos of this collective, which has been described by members as “much more a style of life” (Cohen 2009) than a career-choice, extends even to the audience, as “[f]or Le Théâtre du Soleil, theater is an entirely collaborative enterprise” (*ibid.*), representing a totality of experiential symbiosis that is shared between the actors and the viewers. This is not unlike the vision, discussed later in this essay, of ‘total theatre’ in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which informs many of the contemporary Indian genres of dance-drama that appear to have influenced Mnouchkine. Despite the absence, to date, of an official artistic charter for the entire collective, Mnouchkine’s troupe has always been committed to collaborative and cooperative synergisation of individual strengths and inputs. This is convincingly demonstrated not only in terms of rehearsal and performance but also through the maintenance of a horizontally-structured institutional framework and an extended family of members that even live in the same “old munitions factory in the forest of Vincennes in Paris” (*ibid.*).

It must, however, also be remembered that, despite ‘collaborative enterprise’ being the keystone of the Soleil-arch, Mnouchkine’s visionary authority is deeply ingrained in the artistic DNA of the group; one can see this, for example, in Philippe Caubère’s creations, like *Ariane ou l’âge d’or* (1986). This sense of community is also expanded to commensality, even with the audience, with the troupe’s ideas about the significance of a welcoming and hospitable familiarity with the audience being impressively reflective of the value accorded—also within the Indic tradition—to the social functions of the theatrical space and the larger ambiance surrounding a dramatic performance.<sup>12</sup> The considerable lengths of most of the theatrical productions of Le Théâtre du Soleil constitute, as Kalb puts it, “an odyssey through

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<sup>12</sup> In the “Introduction” to his translation of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Ghosh writes, while discussing the social function of drama, that the Indic “[c]ritics never forgot that the drama was basically a social amusement and as such depended a great deal for its success on the average spectator” (Ghosh 1950: xlvIII).

uncharted physical and spiritual territory where the theater loses its trick-box aspect and becomes a site of unexpected communion and awful reckoning” (Kalb, quoted in Cohen 2009). In fact, this tradition of including the public in the performances of the group was initiated with the famous staging of *1789* (1970), which remains a milestone in the annals of French theatrical production. This dramatic Olympiad seems to attempt to encapsulate the totality of human experience that transcends ideological delimitation, given Mnouchkine’s idealistic and open-minded catholicity in processing her various artistic and political influences. This is notwithstanding her and the troupe’s commitment, as seen in their productions like *Le Dernier Caravansérail (Odyssees)* (*The Last Caravanserai—Odysseys*, 2005), to a left-leaning solidarity with contemporary human rights’ issues and concerns. This, as will be shown later, brings Mnouchkine’s dramaturgical vision closer to the formulation, as articulated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, of an over-arching socio-cultural awareness that is implicit in theatre. This perception came, through late sixties’ campaigns like the Dutch Aktie Tomaat (Action Tomato), to be accepted as “the social function of drama and theatre, [as] performances were geared to sections of the population that had previously had no contact with drama” (Banham 2000: 14).

It is necessary to consider Mehta’s nuanced observations about the presence of a qualified exoticised essentialisation of the Indian Other in Mnouchkine’s, and Cixous’s, treatment of the epic narrative of modern India’s achievement of political Independence—through the horrendous tragedy of religion-based Partition—and march towards societal emancipation. Nevertheless, one feels justified to note that Mnouchkine’s version of the Indian ‘Grand Narrative’ does appear to take into account many post-colonial sensitivities that could not be unpacked in more Orientalist—if one were to take a Saidian stance—enterprises. Given Mnouchkine’s dynamic engagement with contemporary history, which her troupe attempts to explore through the theatrical invigoration and privileging of thespian agency, it is not unjustifiable to give her and Cixous due credit for researching and recreating the postcolonial history of the Indian Subcontinent in *L’Indiade* with a considerable amount of even-handed empathy.

This expanse of artistic magnanimity, which characterises Mnouchkine's theatrical responses to various pressing human-rights' concerns, seems to have informed her personal *Weltanschauung* ('world-view') through her nuanced evocations of the precarious poignancy of her Jewish identity. Her grandparents "were deported and gassed, their story emblematic of some 83,000 Jews living in France at the time, victims of the Holocaust" (Miller 2007: 4). This traumatising sense of personal loss, at an early age, through the vicissitudes of climacteric historical processes—like the Holocaust—that were impervious to individual suffering, seems to have made her especially responsive to similar ideologically-created suffering in other geopolitical contexts, from Cambodia to the Indian Subcontinent. In her dramatic adaptations of these genocidal narratives, one notes "her deep empathy for victims of discrimination, political violence, and marginalization, a sensitivity that manifests itself both in the subjects of her plays and in her activism" (*ibid.*: 5). One may further trace the formative genealogy of her deep socio-political involvement through her early efforts, during her psychology studies at the Sorbonne, to organise students and other colleagues into theatre-collectives that "sought to explore the contemporary rapport between theatre and society" (*ibid.*). This activism-oriented, hands-on approach to the divergent challenges and prospects of an increasingly intercultural and ideologically more complex world was given a defining, "unquestionably life-changing" (*ibid.*: 6) shape by her year-long Asian journey. This sojourn, in 1962–1963, "would orient, especially after 1980, her approach to theatrical form" (*ibid.*). In Cixous's words, Mnouchkine's first Asian interlude "was an initiatory voyage, [which] stayed with her as a book of images" (Prenowitz 2004: 19). In this and later trips to the continent that has contributed so extensively and deeply to the innovative theatrical practices and thematic configurations of *Le Théâtre Du Soleil*, Mnouchkine was acquainted

with what she has come to believe are the roots of true theater: powerful iconic visual imagery, physical acumen based on intensive training and imitation of master players, joyous and direct contact with an audience for whom the experience of theater is as necessary to life as water. (Miller 2007: 4)

While she had already savoured the lustrous and variegated artistry and gestural and motile fluidity of the Indian *Kathakali*-theatre<sup>13</sup> in the international and novel dramatic performances she had viewed, in her girlhood, at the Parisian Théâtre des Nations, it was left to her Indian sojourn to ignite in her a lasting passion for the choreographic exactitude and reified figuration of the allegorised sublimation of intensely-experienced emotional states that were to characterise her stage-direction later on. These methodological transformations<sup>14</sup> of theatregrams and performance-concepts, from non-‘western’ sources, onto a European, ‘metropolitan’ stage, along with the concomitant broadening of thematic horizons, as effected by Mnouchkine, reflect her awareness of the paradigm shifts in international geopolitical equilibria. This enables her to leverage the French and, indeed, European societal-cultural gaze to the prism of intercultural regeneration through transcultural agency, thereby allowing her to widen the scope of her dramaturgical engagement to non-European techniques like

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<sup>13</sup> Kathakali, “itself probably a derivative of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*” (Shulman 2015: 107), is a classical genre of southern Indian dance-drama, which originated and has been nurtured in the post-Independence State of Kerala, having been patronised in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the Mahārājās of the Raj-era Travancore State. It is intrinsically connected—in terms of its “preliminary exercises derived from” (Zarrilli 2000: 93) them—to the Indic traditions of martial arts. It inherited its mimetic—especially, in terms of hand gestures—codes from the older Sanskrit theatre genre *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. Performances do, more often than not, continue overnight and are never without an onstage musical—both vocal and instrumental—accompaniment, which is crucial to their auditory-interpretative component, given that the actors perform through gestures only, without reciting their text (as is the case in *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*).

<sup>14</sup> The word “transformations” is used here in a Lecoqian sense, suggesting that artistic practices and techniques are neither emulated nor created, *sui generis*, but undergo comprehensive transformations. This French *dramaturg*, who was Ariane Mnouchkine’s preceptor, had written, in 1987, that “[t]here’s what we might call a great ancestral river which thousands of actors navigate, inventing the theatre each time” (Lecoq, quoted in Miller 2007: 63).

“kathakali, [...], Amerindian dancing, Indian martial arts, Chinese opera, and other traditional forms” (*ibid.*: 15). She has also experimented with Topeng dance, Korean dance-styles and music and Bunraku or Ningyō Jōruri—as it is better known—the traditional Japanese puppet theatre, which uses chants and stylised music.

This almost kaleidoscopic expansion of theatre-capacities has been related by some critics to the *fin de siècle* quest for rediscovering the primitive in operatic expressions of selfhood. Thus, ‘primitivism’ appears to have sought to free, from its perceived bourgeois and/or post-Industrialisation, commercial shackles, what can be called the *Ur*-template of mimetic art. This prehistoric and, thus, supposedly, uncorrupted performance-template was mostly sought after in non-European sites of cultural transfers, like, for example, those of colonial encounters. “The opening of the Far East to trade and the colonial conquests of major European powers brought cultural forms to Paris that were to have a profound impact on arts practitioners” (*ibid.*: 16–17). One could here mention the works of Antonin Artaud (1896–1948), who was influenced by the Balinese dance he saw at the International Colonial Exposition (1931) in Paris. One may further mention, in this context, “Brecht and the Peking Opera, [...] Peter Brook, [and] the Theatre Anthropology by Eugenio Barba” (Ganser 2007: 63). From the techniques derived from Japanese Kabuki to those gleaned from Kathakali, an interestingly intense aura of reverence, which seems to have been a function of the supposed authenticity of these practices, attached itself to non-occidental theatrical registers. The underlying search seems to have been one for tools that would help in bringing about a renegotiation of post-Enlightenment engagements with rationality and logical inevitabilities, through the exploration of the blissfully irrational faculty of intuitive connection and dream-states, to mention just two examples. In the ‘classical’ Indic drama, the intuitive bonding of the individual and/or societal microcosm with the metaphysical, cosmic macrocosm appears to have been accepted as a ‘given’, which did not require rational vindication or even validation. The subtle relationship/s and tension/s between multiple levels of T/truth/s and

the yearning of the individual Self for an idea—even if it can only be an approximation—of the ‘T/transcendent’, which was recognized as central—generally speaking—to Indic philosophical thought, and its appropriate expression find a central place in what came to be regarded as the holistic performance-tradition of Indian dance-drama. The performance-techniques of Kathakali provide a vivid example of this. Its rich and varied *mudrās* (hand and finger gestures), along with codified facial expressions and specific stylised movements of other parts of the dancer’s body, are used to indicate different levels of meaning including psycho-emotional states and broader cultural-philosophical ideas. One feels confident in venturing to propose that it is no wonder that Mnouchkine found, for Le Théâtre Du Soleil, Kathakali to be a suitable vehicle for the expression of these intuitive approximations of transcendence linking theatre and philosophy. This intersubjective yearning for bridging the transcendental divide, at the level of performance, will be dealt with in the present essay, while discussing the direct impact of Indic forms in *L’Indiade* and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as a theoretical source-text describing the same.

### **India in *L’Indiade***

*L’Indiade* (1987), which invokes “the India of their dreams” in the subtitle, was Héléne Cixous’s second playwriting contribution to Mnouchkine’s grand project of engaging with ‘eastern’ historical-political panoramas. It sought to allegorise the subcontinental experience of a schizophrenic deliverance from colonial subjugation, reached through fratricidal and genocidal violence, and clumsy and uncaring geographic partition, as a narrative of the ever-present threat of irrational and ‘spontaneous’ ethnic animosity to a ‘western’ idyll of democracy and socio-religious toleration. Thus, optically impressive displays of the vibrantly coloured strands of Indian felt life break up, almost without warning, into scenes that convey impressions of mind-numbing atrocities committed by people who were, a little while earlier, marching towards freedom from the Raj. Here, Cixous and Mnouchkine seem to suggest that the undeniable brittleness of democratic sensibility in Europhone societies

is just as real as that in two nascent Asian nation-states, given that the Asian ‘Other’ is but a convenient and almost surreal exteriorisation of the European ‘Self’. Thus, the Indian Subcontinent can, in this context, be considered a *topos* for the unfurling and investigation of obsolescent attributions of individual and collective wish-fulfilment. Nevertheless, in *L’Indiade*, the configurations of notional hybridity do not necessarily straddle Asian registers or even attempt to re/configure Asia creatively, but effect “a rendering of Asia in such heightened realism that characters seemed both life-like and cartoonish” (Miller 2007: 85).

When one compares Cixous’s and Mnouchkine’s play with Peter Brook’s trend-setting rendition of the ‘Great Indian Epic’, *The Mahabharata*, as adapted by Jean-Claude Carrière, the former comes across as harbouring a nostalgic yearning for an idyllic, almost theoretical pacifism that does not seem to be innate to the Indian tradition. Brook’s rather long staging—the play enthralled viewers for over eight hours with luxuriant costumes and gestural opulence—seemed to be an affirmation of the panoptic *joie de vivre* that was suggested to be the Indian *leitmotif*. It cherished the Indian experience in its totality and did not highlight, as did Mnouchkine’s production, non-violence as a central value in Indian life. While the Indic schematisation of life—through the *caturvarga*-system<sup>15</sup>—almost resembled a Maslowian hierarchy of societal needs, with warfare, greed, violence and other negative emotions being accorded their rightful places in the cosmic and ritual orders, which reflect each other, Mnouchkine’s was a more prescriptive take on the normative and desirable centrality of non-violence and Gandhian across-the-board toleration. This, further, led to Mnouchkine’s

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<sup>15</sup> The *caturvarga*-system, which is based on the pursuit of the four *puruṣārthas* (=goals to be striven for in human life), is one of the key conceptual pillars of Hinduism; it aspires to the actualisation of a balanced and harmonious life at the individual and social levels. These goals are *dharma* (the righteous path, ethical self-regulation), *artha* (economic well-being, financial success), *kāma* (the pursuit of pleasure, psycho-emotional gratification) and *mokṣa* (ultimate liberation from the cycle of reincarnation, self-realisation).



actors being unable to personalise, through an unmediated assertion of their autonomous agency, their individually represented segments of the great Indian dream, which is schematised, in *L’Indiade*, as an intercultural vision. It could even be argued—from a perspective that appears to interrogate the issue of the authenticity of transcultural creativity—that

Mnouchkine’s actors in the *Indiade* use a naturalist acting style in their attempt to become their roles, but [...] they appear all the more inauthentic as they attempt to behave like Indians; they speak, think, and dream like products of Western humanism. (Pavis 1990: 66)

As Carlson notes, “India is signified above all by the body techniques of various characters: gait, posture, gaze, skin colour; everything must contribute to an illusion of an ethnological constitution of the Indian mosaic” (Carlson 1990: 60). There is, of course, nothing wrong with that *per se* and, it appears, Mnouchkine’s personal directorial style, which is perfectionist and almost non-delegating, has more to do with this presentational *mimesis*. She ensures the thoroughness of the translation of her artistic vision on the stage through not only a subversion of the play’s script, but also through the supervisory denial of individual thespian autonomy. In the case of *L’Indiade*, this integrated directorial vision revolved around the sagacious yet guileless—as portrayed in the performance—innocence of Gandhi. The latter is shown to be caught at the intersection of competing ethno-religious claims on his interiorised and, apparently, infinite resources of kindness and tolerance. Thus, in Cixous’s and Mnouchkine’s treatment, which avoids “a totality or a totalizing schema” (*ibid.*) of the narrative of India’s Partition, the historical helplessness of Gandhi has been even more sentimentalised and presented as a tableau of idealised virtue. This renders what was, in essence, a political personality that was delineated in ethical-moral terms into a quasi-spiritual configuration of exaggerated character traits that appear to bestow a messianic impulsiveness to a martyred mystic, which is what Gandhi’s character in *L’Indiade* seems to approximate.

The play, in itself, is almost an epic alluding to India’s modernity, with forty-nine main characters and lasting five hours.

There is an almost incessant hustle-and-bustle of the primary cast and supportive actors rushing onto the stage and off it, creating a protean and motile acting ‘body’. The central theme is the tragic triumph that is the simultaneous Independence and Partition, on ethnocentric lines, of the unified nation-state-experiment called ‘India’ and the traumatising experience that this entailed for millions of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims scattered across the Subcontinent. The chronological span depicted in the *dénouement* is, broadly, from 1937 to 1948, covering the last and greatest mass-mobilisations called for by Gandhi, the achievement of Independence and its bloody resolution through internecine civil war, mainly through the Muslim League’s inability to appreciate, let alone share, the mainstream nationalist aspiration for the emancipation of a united Motherland. In *L’Indiade*, the lion’s share of the blame for this seems to have been laid at the door of the League’s perception that, in a united India, Muslims would, necessarily, be subjected to systemic inequality of treatment.

One of the most striking aspects of the play is the highlighting of the perceptual differences between the various political camps in pre-Independence India and the manner in which they are aired in dialogues with each other and the British. The more vibrantly coloured and intense evocations of Indianness, however, emanate not from these political leaders but from the more subaltern characters, like untouchable rickshaw-pullers, common soldiers and other combatants, and poor farmers, whose approximations of the Indian dream complement “the lyrical musings of Gandhi, the theoretician of nonviolence” (Miller 2007: 85). Another significant character, almost as central to the play as that of Gandhi, is that of the itinerant Bengali pilgrim, Haridasi, who bridges different parts of the plot in a narratorial capacity. Hers is the view from below, but this worm’s-eye view seems quitecapable of comprehending and valuing Gandhi’s free-flowing magnanimity and almost limitless toleration and acceptance of the ‘Other’. His was, at least “for Cixous[,] a choice maternal figure, a Solomonic good mother in keeping with the Cixousian definition of ‘the feminine’.” (*ibid.*: 86) This interpretative fecundity and border-crossing multivalence of Cixous’s masterly—in both literary and

dramaturgical terms—configuration of Gandhi's character may be seen as her envisioning of the same as a locus of gender reversal and the sacralisation of the eternal feminine. This seems to have been a crucial element of her understanding of communality, mercy, toleration-induced metamorphosis and the willingness and ability to give of oneself, which she relates to the Gandhian sublime. As she enunciates, through the champions of this new humanitarian manifesto of the reconciling fellowship of acceptance, "[i]f there are two leaves on a tree, they aren't identical but they do dance to the same breeze—that's true of the human tree too. Let's allow time to let human affairs grow and ripen" (Cixous, transl. in Miller 2007: 82).

In her aesthetic schematisation of the staging of *L'Indiade*, Mnouchkine seems to have developed upon this very Cixousian leveraging of the power of emotive transcendence and rather deliberately blurred the border between the 'real' and the 'unreal', with lavish stage-settings and a frenetic flurry of never-ceasing activity on and around the stage. She had arranged for a pervading smell of Indian spices and food to greet the viewing public upon arrival, followed by exposure to the milling actors, who would be smiling and selling snacks and victuals as on an Indian street, the experience of which they had garnered during their rehearsal-trips to South Asia. The play would be introduced by Haridasi, who would have already introduced herself to the viewers by uttering pleasantries in Indian-accented English and chatting about the impending ethnic conflagration. In fact, hers is the character that exerts a continued vigil, of sorts, at the threshold of the Gandhian conscience, given that, in her tripartite function as "storyteller, commentator, and witness, [she] added yet another disconcerting layer to the performance, as she, border-crosser par excellence, spoke directly and throughout the play to the spectators... as a pilgrim... [the audience's] onstage partner" (Miller 2007: 90). Another similarly trans-dimensional character is that of Moona Baloo,<sup>16</sup> "a performed and performing female

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<sup>16</sup> This seems to be an English transliteration of the Hindi word *bhālu* (from the Sanskrit *bhalluka*)—as also seen in the late-Victorian English

bear whose destiny in the production paralleled India's" (*ibid.*). This character seems to mirror the psycho-emotional vicissitudes of her ambience, striking and killing a Muslim figure after going rogue and injuring her trainer, who seems to allegorise the body politic of India's societal-civilisational equilibrium. Thus, when she calms down after meeting Gandhi, an emotional-mimetic bond seems to have been established between herself and the latter, which is reflected in the similarity of their deaths, almost as sacrificial offerings to the cataclysmic and daemonic forces of political emancipation in the midst of civil strife.

These two border-crossing subaltern presences in the play, those of Haridasi and Moona Baloo, succeed in unpacking a level of essentialised meaning inaccessible without the interpretative and reconciliatory mediation of such haunting and transgressive spectres. The spectrality of their influence does not diminish the centrality of their signification, which operates by the very transgression that seems to deny them genealogical agency or the ability to trace their ideational and creative lineages. By pushing the connotative dimension of the 'Indian' expression of Selfhood beyond the realm of self-defined categories of inclusion and exclusion, they expand the scope of these very categories and render them accessible and comprehensible to the 'Other' and the uninitiated and/or the excluded. Thus, "the hyper-real 'Indians', whose gestures and detailed costuming both signalled the 'real' and the Théâtre Du Soleil's efforts to construct it" (*ibid.*: 92), seem to be a function of the transcendence Mnouchkine inscribes into her characteral delineations. The overt surreality and reified representational agency of many of the characters in *L'Indiade*, thus, may be an attempt to accentuate

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novelist Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894)—which means 'bear'; 'Moona' could be derived from the Hindi *munnā*, which is used affectionately for a little boy. It may be worth noting that the role of Moona Baloo was assayed by Catherine Schaub Abkarian, a French actress who "studied at Beaux-Arts in Bourges and Paris before studying Kathakali [...] for five years in France and India. She has worked with Bread and Puppet Theater and later with Théâtre du Soleil" (Schaub Abkarian 2015).

the acceptability of the same as authentic mediatory figures in their own right. This may, also, render the play somewhat Shakespearean in its approach to capturing and celebrating the heightened magic of the moment. In its unpacking of the tragic between the historical and the personal, in its ability to encapsulate both the individual and the societal, the personal and the political, through the operation of a deferral and delegation of dialogic meaning, in its lyrical concatenation of emotional fields and temporal leaps, and in its figurative linkages, one may be able to trace a Shakespearean gambit in *L’Indiade*. This is not surprising given Mnouchkine’s demonstrable regard for and debt to Shakespeare, along with Chekhov, for the ‘realistic’ dimension, and Molière, for the ‘comic’. As in her interpretation of *Richard II*, Mnouchkine attempts to unpack and communicate meaning through the sustained utilisation of intensive and energetic bodily exertions on the stage, together with vigorous choreographic interventions and the creation and proliferation of what may be regarded as ritually-connotative—in the sense of the ritual background of theatrical ‘spectacles’ (Fischer-Lichte 2005)—and symbolically powerful pockets on and off the stage. This brings her technique quite close to that followed in, for example, Kathakali and other Indic genres of dance-drama, which also emphasise—within a totalising framework—the use of intense and multi-layered allusive frameworks that refer to complex psycho-emotional and social states. This dramaturgical proximity will be discussed in the following section, through comparisons with some of the precepts and conceptual frames of Indic dramaturgical theory.

### **On theatrical and ritual boundaries in Mnouchkine’s work**

Fischer-Lichte’s seminal work on the complex relationship between ritual and theatre, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (Fischer-Lichte 2005), looks at the so-called ‘spectacles’—for example, the Olympics *et al.*—of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the prism of ritual. She commences this exploration with an actress called Gertrud Eysoldt, who was with the Kleines Theater in Berlin, and is said to have “transgressed the boundary between

the semiotic and the phenomenal body” (*ibid.*: 5) in her performances. In Max Rheinhardt’s version of Sophocles’ *Electra* (1903), she is said to have brought “wild ecstasy ‘from some primitive past’” (*ibid.*: 4), mainly through her “intense display of corporeality” (*ibid.*: 1). Her acting worked “on the body of the spectators, on their senses and nerves and not so much on their imagination, their mind, via empathy” (*ibid.*: 6). Through a transformative process that Fischer-Lichte sees as indicating “a temporary annulment of the principle of individuation” (*ibid.*: 7) Eysoldt “sacrificed her own physical integrity... for the sake of the impact of the performance. And it was this sacrifice that transported the spectators into a hypnotic state. Thus, in her play Eysoldt transgressed yet another boundary—that which separated theatre from ritual” (*ibid.*: 9). Building on this concept of the osmotic transgressions between theatre and ritual in Eysoldt’s performances, Fischer-Lichte goes on to write:

*Electra* cannot simply be regarded as a theatre performance. It adopted traits of a ritual; moreover, theatre and ritual seem to have merged. In this way, the performance appears as a kind of a focal point where new ideas of theatre and ritual arising and developing between the turn of the century and World War I met and converged... (*ibid.*: 13)

Fischer-Lichte’s book does not discuss the ritual/theatre binary from the perspective of Indic dramaturgical traditions, but traces this merging of the two entities back to Europhone ideas that were thrown up by and, in turn, characterised European modernity. Nevertheless, her observations may help us in making sense of Mnouchkine’s own directorial experiments regarding the dramatisation of ritual and *vice versa*. One of the principal ways in which this can operate, both in general and in Mnouchkine’s work, is through the performative foregrounding of the body. As Sweeney, while discussing “[t]he repression of the body” (Sweeney 2008: 8) in Irish theatre, writes, “[u]ntil recently practitioners who work to foreground the body in performance have had limited or sporadic success in this area” (*ibid.*). The physical process of producing meaning on stage, more often than not in the canons of theatre, reduces the corporeality of the actors’ agency in favour of linguistic

pathways of semantic sensemaking.<sup>17</sup> It is worthwhile to note, at this juncture, that Mnouchkine’s directorial praxis attaches immense significance to the actors’ physical conditioning and gestural and other non-verbal kinetic mobility on stage. In the working-patterns of the Théâtre du Soleil, while preparing for a production,

[t]he ensemble takes form through group exercises and the sharing of individual talents, research, and creation, as well as in smaller group endeavors. Exercises take the form of working with masks and other forms of physical communication and theatricalization. (Miller 2007: 111)

Thus, “experiencing [the] greater physical reality and more explicit sensuality” (*ibid.*: 75) of a theatrical production appears to be a key aspect of Mnouchkine’s conceptualisation of “the creation of a receptive community” (*ibid.*). It may be argued that this enmeshed and receptive reciprocity between the actors and the spectators, where the latter act as—to use a term from Indian aesthetic theory—*sahṛdayas* or ‘like-minded’ auditors of an aesthetic experience,<sup>18</sup> helps in re/creating a ritually-ordered space on the stage. Additionally, this spatio-temporal equilibrium and “synchronic relations between ritual and theatre” (Ganser 2017: xi), when seen from the perspective of Mnouchkine’s keen interest in and professed indebtedness to Indic theatrical tropes, seems to have been a key determinant of the avant-garde theatre of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, one remembers the role of the theatre-director and drama-critic Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966), whose “views, emphasizing the importance of the body and the actor in theatre” (*ibid.*: xii), influenced an entire generation of avant-garde

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<sup>17</sup> The term ‘sensemaking’, which has its origins in social psychology, is used nowadays mainly in organisational studies to connote “the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick et al. 2005: 409). In theatre studies, one can deploy it to signify the various trajectories through which actors attribute meaning to their collective on-stage realisations and moments.

<sup>18</sup> This term is explained, in detail, in fn. 22 later in this essay.

theatre-practitioners. He was also “one of the first European directors to take an interest in Indian theatre as a performing art, rather than as literature” (*ibid.*). It is hardly coincidental, then, that interest in Indic dramaturgy grew in direct proportion to the espousal of body-centric performance-praxes in the Euro-American theatrical avant-garde. Mnouchkine’s extensive use of ritualised bodily movements and other non-verbal gestural signifiers can, thus, be linked to a broader interest—amongst her peers and precursors—in the various ‘eastern’ dramaturgical discourses and other performance-related practices.

One of the elements of Mnouchkine’s directorial praxis that is comparable to the Indic dramaturgical discourse is the democratic idea, evoked above, that theatre brings together actors and spectators as a receptive community. As Lingorska puts it, with regard to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, “[t]he interpretation of the dramatic event as a total interdependent involvement of performers and audience in the construction of a unique time-space continuum with specific emotional charge suggested a parallel treatment of performativity in religious rituals and stage plays” (Lingorska 2007: 151). Thus, the production of performative meaning depends on interpretative synergy between the actors and the spectators, whatever the level of the cultural competence of the latter. This “apparent[ly] democratic idea of the [*Nāṭyaśāstra*]” (*ibid.*: 155) that might not have been fully endorsed by later commentators and critics, like the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Kashmiri Śaiva aesthetician Abhinavagupta, is not far from Mnouchkine’s conceptualisation of the role of the spectator.

One may even assert that the vision of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which will be touched upon briefly below, was one of ‘total theatre’ and prefigured the notion of a ‘global theatre’,<sup>19</sup> which gains currency in Europe only

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<sup>19</sup> The concept of ‘global theatre’, which has gained intellectual traction—both positive and negative—of late, refers to the transnational and transcultural circulation of play-texts, theatrical motifs, theatregrams and plots across regions and contexts, especially through the colonial and imperial expansion of Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the postcolonial



as late as in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. However, one should not envisage this as being basically contrapuntal to the Aristotelian imperative, as laid out in the *Poetics*, of the “emotional involvement of the spectators in order to achieve the goal of a performance.”<sup>20</sup> Mnouchkine’s approximations of a panoptic stagecraft that attempted to encapsulate the tumultuous vicissitudes of cross-cultural theatre may be seen as resonant with Bharata’s vision to the extent that she sought to heighten the interaction between the performance on stage and the audience. Given the plethora of references in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* to the issue of the enjoyment and edification of the audience—ranging from the visibility of the stage for differently positioned *prekṣakas*<sup>21</sup> (‘spectators’, ‘observers’) (Ghosh 1950: 20–21) to the spontaneous rewarding of excellence in performance by the gifting of shawls and rings from their persons by wealthy spectators (*ibid.*: 512)—it stands to reason that the spectators were not expected to remain a passive consumer of a given cultural product. The conceptualisation—in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and especially in the commentary, upon it, by Abhinavagupta—of the ideal and desirable spectator as an empathising *sahṛdaya*<sup>22</sup> does also appear in

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developmental and philanthropic networks that had emerged in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The term seeks to encapsulate the “transcultural entanglements of arts, media and popular culture” (cf. the URL for the website of the Centre for Global Theatre History, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München: <http://www.gth.theaterwissenschaft.uni-muenchen.de/about/index.html> that characterises these socio-political transformations. See, also, Balme 2016.

<sup>20</sup> This point, along with others in this paragraph, was pointed out by J. Kupper on 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2013, during a discussion with the present writer on various theoretical issues that have been developed further in this essay.

<sup>21</sup> The term *prekṣaka* should be understood as connoting more than just a member of the audience. Shulman sees her/him as an “attuned spectator” (Shulman 2015: 105), who is capable of discerning the finer points of complex and contrapuntal performance-registers.

<sup>22</sup> This Sanskrit adjectival noun (<*sa* = same, similar or *saha* = with + *hṛdaya* = heart) has been translated as “aesthetic appreciator” (Hardikar 1994) or ‘connoisseur’.

Mnouchkine's directorial practice. However, one does need to keep in mind that Mnouchkine's strategy seems to be rather anti-Aristotelian in its attempt to disassemble and even deconstruct the boundary between the actors on the stage and the audience. Her directorial impetus seems to be geared towards a self-reflexive integration of the audience in the *dénouement* itself, with the actors, in many situations, leaving the stage and carrying the performance into the assembled spectators, often interacting with the latter. This, obviously, succeeds only when the audience is receptive to such stylistic disintegration and, one feels, the ideal audience envisaged by the *Nāṭyaśāstra* would have a few problems with such breaks with the schematised structure of aesthetic receptivity. It does seem that the structured development of psycho-emotional narratives and the necessity of "having suitable Junctures (*sandhi*) and their [proper] unions... for presentation to the spectators" (*ibid.*: 322) are central to the vision of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Moreover, a certain aesthetic *distanciation* from the events depicted on the stage was required for a *sahṛdaya* to fully appreciate the performance.<sup>23</sup>

It could be more profitable to view Mnouchkine's practice, in this context, as a radicalisation of a number of more modern ideas, primarily those of Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936), about the actor-audience relationship. The latter had introduced, from popular, 'low-brow' genres like the Commedia dell'Arte, nuances and notions of performance-strategies geared towards spectator-participation to the sophisticated stage. Given that, in the Commedia dell'Arte, performative goals were structured around the need to respond to instant popular demands, often expressed through robust audience-engagement around and even on the makeshift stages, one can argue that this entailed a certain blurring of the distinction between reality and performance. Thus, new forms of thespian engagement and artistic self-expression<sup>24</sup> that

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<sup>23</sup> On this and other aspects of the Indic theorisation of theatre and aesthetics, see, among others, Bansat-Boudon 1992.

<sup>24</sup> This, more often than not, reminds one of medieval religious plays where the audience was so complicit in the depictions that they would, for

reflected current popular concerns more aggressively and directly were introduced by Pirandello to literary theatre. It is in this interstitial domain of proximity to the contemporary through a disavowal of the static and the structurally-fixated that Mnouchkine seems to be in her element. In fact, the influence of the *Commedia dell’Arte* is clearly discernible in the centrality of improvisations in her directorial and Cixous’s authorial praxes. Thus, almost all of her productions are, simultaneously, ‘popular’—in the sense of creatively addressing pro-people concerns—and ‘post-Eurocentric’, seeking to envision a liminality of representation that may exist in a theatrical space with a less categorical division between the real and the sur/unreal.

Such spaces did exist in pre-modern European theatre and, also, in certain forms of Sanskrit drama.<sup>25</sup> Mnouchkine seems to have succeeded in a hybridised evocation and cross-fertilisation of both the more meta-structurally-anchored and body-oriented Asian theatre-traditions and the popular theatre/s of Europe. A suitable example of this could be the plays of Luigi Pirandello, especially *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* (*Six Characters in Search of An Author*, 1921), in which the fluidity of the relationship between the real and the mimetic is a key

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instance, start cursing the actor playing Judas Iscariot; thus, they would participate in the play. The author came to know this during a discussion with J. Küpper.

<sup>25</sup> One example of Sanskrit drama addressing pro-people concerns could be the multiplicity and precise nature of the references, in the text of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, to the roles, prescribed movements, actor-profiles and physical characteristics of the ‘Jester’ (*vidūṣaka*). This figure was used, in all likelihood, to create a bridge between the events depicted on the stage and the public, by addressing quotidian matters through humour. Accordingly, the Jester has been described as “one who betakes himself to various places (lit. shelter) connected with the movement of all kinds of characters and creates [...] pleasure for them and sometimes takes shelter with women [for the same purpose] and who is ready-witted, a maker of puns, and whose speech is always connected (lit. adorned) with the disclosure of extremely humorous ideas” (Ghosh 1950: 549–550).

concern. In a nutshell, Mnouchkine's creative originality derives from the fact that she extracted rather different—almost even radically so—methodological and generic elements from the Europhone popular stage and the Indic dance-drama.

One of the most schematic and prescriptive aspects of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is its close and structured attention to minute details regarding the playhouse and the stage, which have been discussed and delineated in great and schematic detail in the original text. In fact, it is mostly in this dramaturgical domain that Ariane Mnouchkine's productions and the theatrical practices of Le Théâtre du Soleil come closest to Bharata's normative and didactic suggestions. This is most evident in Mnouchkine's principles of staging, which seem to be in favour of panoptic, carefully constructed stages, where—like in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*—close and minute attention is directed towards the relationship between architectural and construction-oriented features and stage-design. In the production of *L'Indiade*, there are multiple and multi-layered stages, with protean and multi-functional elements like the use of 'bleachers', on which the viewers are seated. Another is the 'vomitorium', which acts as the conduit through which the choric masses of ordinary 'Indians' flow in and out of the lower layers of the stage/s. This embeds the actions and mono/dialogues of the main characters within the kaleidoscopic frames of Indian life. Yet another key production-feature is Gandhi's musical theme, "played by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre—positioned side-stage left within a Calderesque assemblage of some 100 musical instruments" (Miller 2007: 87). In general, the utilisation of different kinds of music to indicate various psycho-emotional states, and the strict segmentation of stage-space between opposing political formations that ring the central figure of Gandhi are the musical hallmarks of *L'Indiade*. All of these elements bring Mnouchkine's production-values closer to those espoused in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, especially given Mnouchkine's almost-obsessive attention to detail.

Another possible locus of praxis-related convergence, if not commonality, is in their approaches to involving and including

the spectators in the *timbre* of the performance, with Mnouchkine’s firm belief in the ultimate location of theatre in the intersectional space between the actors and the viewers. Given her conviction of the impossibility of a theatre sans its public—which puts her at odds with, for instance, Kūṭiyāṭṭam where, when performed within a sacerdotal context, in a Hindu temple, there can be no audience, except for the Gods—she expends considerable organisational and temporal resources in trying to ascertain, even determine what the spectators should be like. In his perceptive and thorough-going *Collaborative Theatre: The Théâtre Du Soleil Sourcebook*, Williams provides a detailed first-hand survey and an in-depth analysis of the origins and evolution of the troupe’s performative idealism and collaborative practice (Williams 1999). This work collates the critical and historiographical insights of international theatre-scholars and interviews with members of Mnouchkine’s troupe. There is, in it, an interesting and insightful discussion of *L’Indiade*, focussing on, among other aspects, the almost symbiotic relationship between the performers and spectators in creating meaning/s. According to him, the role of the viewers in eliciting, even excavating meaning from a performance is crucial. Thus, “spectators must be left with things to discover. These are waves, resonances; an actor strikes a gong or drops a pebble in water, but he won’t try to fix all of the waves that will be emitted, to freeze them so that everyone can clearly count the number of rings that are released” (*ibid.*: 84). According to Bansat-Boudon, who sees the *rasa*-scheme as being central to the poetics of Indian theatre, the spectator must have a heart that recognises emotions (Bansat-Boudon 1992).

The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, certainly, accords the status of *primus inter pares* on the *prekṣaka* (from *prekṣā*=theatrical spectacle), though later texts also use the term *darśaka*<sup>26</sup>—literally, ‘s/he who sees’—or viewer. Although theatre should be able to appeal to different people

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<sup>26</sup> This Sanskrit adjectival noun comes from the Sanskrit root *drś* meaning ‘to see’ and is connected to the noun *darśana* (=vision, seeing); it is used to connote the ‘viewer’.

in different ways, the ideal spectator needs to be sophisticated and artistically, musically, theatrically and intellectually cultivated enough to be able to grasp the gestural, figurative, cosmetic and other representational complexities of a theatrical performance. In a categorical description of a model spectator, the text enjoins that

[t]hose who are possessed of [good] character, high birth, quiet behaviour and learning, are desirous of fame and virtue, impartial, advanced in age, proficient in drama in all its six limbs, alert, honest, unaffected by passion, expert in playing the four kinds of musical instruments, acquainted with the Costumes and Make-up, the rules of dialects, the four kinds of Histrionic Representation, grammar, prosody, and various [other] Śāstras, are very virtuous, experts in different arts and crafts, and have fine sense of the Sentiments and the States, should be made spectators in witnessing a drama. (Ghosh 1950: 519)

Such a viewer was called, in later texts, a *sahṛdaya* or empathic sharer and connoisseur of an artistic experience. S/he was expected to be able, through her/his education, training, social status and general psycho-cultural proclivities to not only accompany the actors and accompanying musicians in the theatrical striving for meaning but also unpack and even create individuated levels of deeper experiential realisations. The ideal spectator, thus, also has to be a *rasika*<sup>27</sup> or someone trained in the manner of critical and subtextual appreciation of the different psycho-emotional states and tropes presented in the performance. S/he—in the ideal ancient playhouses described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, there were both female and male spectators—has to be a *sāmājika*,<sup>28</sup> a person well-acquainted with the typical features of her/his society,

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<sup>27</sup> This Sanskrit adjectival noun is derived from *rasa* (=juice, essence); it is used for a ‘connoisseur’, who is conversant with the psycho-emotional structure of dramatic composition and performance. On *rasa* and its crucial significance in the domain of Indian aesthetics, see, among others, Bansat-Boudon 1992.

<sup>28</sup> This Sanskrit adjectival noun is derived from *samāja* (=communal gathering, congregation, royal assembly); the term *sāmājika* is commonly

thus facilitating a steady flow of dramatic material between the stage and the audience and a mutual co-creation of dramatic meaning.

From Bharata’s clear and detailed definition of the ideal spectator, in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, it is evident that the role played by the audience was central to the Indic dramaturgical space. The latter was reflective of the *theatrum mundi* in ways not dissimilar to those in which Mnouchkine relates her thematic and performative stage-constellations to the socio-political vicissitudes of the ‘real world’. Bharata’s vision, superficially, appears to be somewhat dismissive of *grāmya*<sup>29</sup> or non-urbane and, thus, supposedly vulgar tastes, but is, actually, a complex, pragmatic and self-reflexive assessment of the reality of an already quite diverse society. The *Nāṭyaśāstra*’s insistence that a dramatic performance be open to all and sundry necessitated dramaturgical and other investments in the creation and consolidation of public taste. This was in keeping with the original celestial mandate<sup>30</sup> of making behavioural knowledge accessible to all through drama, which was to

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used in Abhinavagupta’s commentary to mean ‘spectator’ and seems to refer to the social situation and/or cultural sophistication of the viewer.

<sup>29</sup> This Sanskrit adjective is derived from *grāma* (=village); it is often used to connote ‘vulgar’.

<sup>30</sup> This refers to the formulation of the origin of theatre in the Abode of the Gods, as detailed in the first chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In fact, the first chapter of Bharata’s text, which deals with the origin of drama, begins with a statement that its content was “uttered by Brahman” (Ghosh 1950: 1). Later, the text states that “the Holy One (*bhagavat*) from his memory of all the Vedas shaped this Nāṭyaveda compiled from the four of them” (*ibid.*: 4). In an interesting and rigorous analysis, with a number of examples from the text, Tieken asserts that “the author, or authors, of [the] first five chapters of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* attempted to equate drama with the ritual sacrifice, describing drama in terms of ritual and organising the dramatic elements by placing them on a template derived from ritual” (Tieken 2001: 122). On the widely-debated issue—within the domain of Indology—of the origins of Indian theatre in ritual or religious practices, see Ganser 2017; for an updated discussion of the interpretation of the myth about the origins of theatre in the first chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, see Lidova 2017.

mediate the indirect dissemination of restricted-access Vedic T/truth/s to the *hoi polloi*. In the words of Bharata, theatre

teaches duty to those bent on doing their duty, love to those who are eager for its fulfilment, and it chastises those who are ill-bred or unruly, promotes self-restraint in those who are disciplined, gives courage to cowards, energy to heroic persons, enlightens men of poor intellect and gives wisdom to the learned. (*ibid.*: 15)

Hence, it became rather imperative to effect a compromise between the needs of the general public and those of the *cognoscenti*. The former would be drawn by a well-known, rather simple storyline, while the latter were to be treated to the various multilayered gestural, poetic and musical conceits embedded within the performance. It is this holistic and all-encompassing didactic-recreational role<sup>31</sup> of drama that is referred to even in the works of the renowned Sanskrit dramatist Kālidāsa, who writes, implicitly referring to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, that “drama is a type of entertainment that would capture the hearts of people of different tastes” (Rangacharya 1998: 74).

This does not, however, require any lowering of the thematic and interpretative thresholds of a play as the complicity of the audience is sought to be achieved by guiding, if necessary, the spectators towards the vision of the dramatist and/or—in the case of, among others, Mnouchkine—the theatre-director.

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in Chapter XXVII (51 ff) the qualities of an audience are described thus: ‘A spectator is one who has no obvious faults, who is attached to drama, whose senses are not liable to distraction, who is clever in guessing (putting two and two together), who can enjoy (others’) joy and sympathise with (others’) sorrows, who suffers with those who suffer and who has all [the nine characteristic] qualities in himself. (*ibid.*)

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<sup>31</sup> This role seems to be mirrored in the portmanteau-nature of what one may call the Bollywood turn of Indian cinema, with commercial Indian films seeking to combine moral-ethical messaging with entertainment.



In a nutshell, the ideal viewer is to be capable of immersion in the action on the stage and identify her/himself deeply in the meta-textual processes that have been set in motion through the dramatic performance. Although empathy is required, an essential component of Indic performance-theorisation is that it required, and still requires—for the spectator—a certain distance from the events represented. Hence, an audience must be capable of a full and nuanced appreciation of the various layers and significances of a play, which would necessitate a substantial knowledge of the various *rasas* and other elements of artistic expression. The fate of a play is predicated upon the extent to which the viewers are able to critically unpack and appreciate the different *rasas* characterising and animating it. This involves the comprehension of both the vocalised and demonstrated aspects of the performance and those that are left unverballed, being conveyed through suggestive and indirect modes of theatrical expression.

The centrality of the audience and its appreciation of what is being acted out on the stage to the entire dramaturgical process is also well reflected in the detailed and almost perfectionist descriptions—in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*—of different kinds of playhouses, stage-designs, seating arrangements for the viewers, directional alignments *et al.* Thus, one may assume that the treatise operates from an awareness of the role of the physical attributes of the theatrical space in the creation of dramatic meaning, which may be seen to be constituted by possible dramatic approximations of the ritual order permeating the cosmos. This is similar to the manner in which Mnouchkine privileges the multi-focal use of different spatial and other physical elements of her theatrical productions. The multifunctional hangars of the Cartoucherie de Vincennes, the home-base of Le Théâtre du Soleil, the different levels of the stage/s on which *L’Indiade* has been staged, the Kathakali-like divisions of stage-space, the elaborate and luxuriant artifices of costume and gesture, facial and other bodily expressions and movements, and the cartoon-like fantasies of time and place that seek to transplant seemingly untranslatable ethno-linguistic registers, all bring Mnouchkine’s dramaturgical motivations closer to those discussed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In the words of Kiernander,

who views Mnouchkine's Asian engagements as path-breaking developments that enrich the European performative ethic,

[Mnouchkine unpacks] the relationship between the elements of stage signs, to make the processes of devising and reading a production part of a more interesting and flexible act than straightforward mechanical substitution. (Kiernander 1992: 153)

It is also, one might even be able to venture, generally in this flexibility of dramaturgical suggestion/s that Mnouchkine's performative experiments may be seen as close, both in form and intent and, occasionally, in content to some of the staging prescriptions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In this essay, however, the attempt has been to juxtapose Mnouchkine's methodological praxis with the theoretical postulates of Bharata's treatise, without suggesting any direct influence or correlation. Although it would have been interesting and, perhaps, rewarding to be able to look at Mnouchkine's stay in India—before she directed *L'Indiade*—in order to trace her readings in and responses to Indic dramaturgical theory and praxis and her conversations and other engagements with Indian critics and theatre-professionals, this is beyond the scope of this essay. While it stands to reason that she would have had ample opportunities to view performances of classical Indic dance-drama, in Kerala and elsewhere, one needs to study her correspondence and reading lists from that period from a biocritical perspective; this, again, is beyond the scope of this work. What has been attempted above is a transcultural textual-performative comparison between a canonical Indic text of dramaturgy and an experimental intercultural play on post/colonial Indian history by a border-crossing European theatre-director, who seems to have a sustained interest in and engagement with Asian—especially South- and East-Asian—dramaturgical forms and techniques. What has also been attempted—though this would also require another full-length essay—is to engage with the ritual dimension of Mnouchkine's work, by focusing on the ritualisation of dramatic action, as especially visible in her privileging of the body and non-verbal gestural registers in *L'Indiade*. Rather than revealing an engagement with the ritual dimensions of Indic dance and theatre praxes—through a possible direct reading

of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*—it has been suggested that Mnouchkine’s attention to the various non-dialogic features of a theatrical production is in keeping with her direct observations of contemporary Indian performance-practices. The latter, it stands to reason, appear to have implicitly and/or explicitly preserved a number of the precepts of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which were imbibed—as mediated through early-20<sup>th</sup>-century European aesthetic sensibilities—by Mnouchkine in her work. The idealised presentation of the Indic “art of dancing as akin to *yoga*, and the gestures of the dancers as symbolic and hieratic, and common to ritual” (Ganser 2017: xii) appears, in fact, to have captured the imagination of the European avant-garde, of which Mnouchkine is a doyen. Though it would require a more substantial and wide-ranging analysis of Mnouchkine’s engagement with the Sanskrit dramaturgical tradition to be able to pronounce anything definitive in this regard, one cannot fail to notice the parallels between Bharata’s conception of an ideal dramatic performance and a cross-cultural performative endeavour like *L’Indiade*.

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