

Prize-winner: Ariane Mnouchkine, founder and director of the “Théâtre du Soleil”

Ariane Mnouchkine is an iconic figure in European theatre. Over 40 years ago, she established the “Théâtre du Soleil”, whose artistic and stage director she remains to the present day. Even today, her alternative approach to theatre is unique. Ariane Mnouchkine is to receive the Goethe Medal in recognition of her artistic and political achievements and her contribution to relations between Germany and France.

With her life's work, Ariane Mnouchkine has erected a monument to theatre as an aesthetic practice. “I believe in light. I believe in magic. I believe in the power of beauty, light, hope, joy, laughter and tears to inspire. I believe in emotions. I believe that they communicate thoughts, and thus communicate life. They are transformers of intelligence”. This is what the *grande dame* of French theatre once said and with her theatre worlds has repeatedly provided the proof for her words.

Her productions tell of how cultures coexist and battle against one another. They uphold the ideals of European enlightenment and tolerance. She has toured the entire world with her company, and has encountered every conceivable language and culture. In turn, she has incorporated these experiences into her creative oeuvre; they have characterized her theatre work. With its dreamlike, powerful and political drama, the “Théâtre du Soleil” has enchanted the world time and time again. It is thanks to Mnouchkine's unshakeable faith in the actors and in the possibilities offered by the theatrical domain that the “Théâtre du Soleil” has been able to celebrate worldwide success for four decades. As a mediator between the cultures, she has also taken on a particular political responsibility, fighting with great passion for artists who have been subjected to political persecution and for Europe's forgotten people – the migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers on the fringes of European society. With a Russian father, an English mother and a childhood spent in France, she grew up instilled with the European idea. She also felt ties to German culture – the first work presented by the “Théâtre du Soleil” in 1964/65 was Maxim Gorky's “The Petty Bourgeois”; this was followed in 1979 by the stage adaptation of Klaus Mann's “Mephisto”, which marked Mnouchkine's debut as a dramatist.

From 1971 onwards, numerous productions were shown in Germany, in cities such as Berlin, Munich and Essen. Through her life's work, Ariane Mnouchkine has rendered outstanding services to international cultural relations, for which she is to be honoured with the Goethe Medal.

Born in 1939, Ariane Mnouchkine was immersed in the world of art from the moment of her birth. Her father, a Russian émigré, was a film producer. While still a psychology student at the *Sorbonne* in Paris, she established an independent theatre group at the age of 20. In 1964, this group became the “Théâtre du Soleil”. Following some early successes, the theatre moved to the “Bois des Vincennes” on the outskirts of Paris. The collective, numbering around 40 members, continues to rehearse, work and produce in the magnificent old brick halls of the former factory site. In the early 1970s, the “Théâtre du Soleil” celebrated its

international breakthrough with the legendary popular theatre play “1789” about the French revolution (this wonderful spectacle also resulted in one of the best film adaptations of a play). Mnouchkine’s drama broke with traditional concepts of theatre, blurring the boundaries between art and life in her *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In her productions, which were often four or five hours long, elements of popular theatre and ancient theatre were intertwined with oriental and Asian traditions such as Kabuki, Kathakali and Noh theatre. Influenced by stylistic methods such as pantomime, acrobatics and improvisation, Mnouchkine’s work was frequently compared with the dance theatre of Pina Bausch. The “Théâtre du Soleil” practises a unique and alternative approach to theatre; even today, the collective upholds the solidarity principle, with everyone being paid the same wage. The majority of its costs are covered by revenues from guest performances all over the world and invitations to international theatre festivals.

Mnouchkine is particularly keen to spotlight political enlightenment and human historicity, not only in Molière’s “Tartuffe”, in which she portrayed the cheat and hypocrite as a fundamentalist sect leader in 1995. Over the past ten years, Mnouchkine has increasingly explored the themes of escape, asylum and migration. In “Les Ephémères”, elements of her own life were incorporated into her work for the first time. The political fight for freedom, equality, humanity and human dignity always went beyond her artistic work, however. As a left-wing intellectual, Mnouchkine successfully used demonstrations and interventions, and an international association founded in 1979 (AIDA – Association Internationale de Défense des Artistes victimes de la répression dans le monde), to effect the release of imprisoned artists. Ariane Mnouchkine has received numerous awards in recognition of her life’s work. She lives today in Paris.

Quotations from Ariane Mnouchkine

Ariane Mnouchkine on the relationship between politics and theatre:

“They are not the same thing. [...] Its [theatre’s] impact, its influence, makes itself felt more in the long term. Unfortunately, a play does not incite audiences to get up and stage a revolution the very next day! But perhaps there are three or four people who, at the end of the play, are somewhat less barbaric in their lives. They ask themselves questions and become more sensitive or more attentive or more brotherly towards their fellow humans. For a time, at least. Theatre thus has a civilizing, educational role. [...] Political action is not always civilizing: it is there to stop or to trigger something. This is the reason why I do not place theatre and political action on an equal footing.”

(in: Féral, Josette (Ed.): Ariane Mnouchkine und das “Théâtre du Soleil” 2003)

Quotations about Ariane Mnouchkine

“Only one woman has really reached the pinnacle of the director’s profession. And this goddess = diva is a queen – and, as a Frenchwoman, is indeed the sun queen of world theatre. No independent company with such comparatively little subsidizing has triumphed so frequently over more than three decades and has become such a magic brand as the Théâtre du Soleil founded and still run today by Ariane Mnouchkine.”

(Peter von Becker on 3 March 2009 in Die ZEIT weekly newspaper)

“Anyone who has watched an Ariane Mnouchkine production at the Théâtre du Soleil in Paris leaves the theatre with the sense of having taken part in a fairy tale – a fantastical story that comes close to real life. A fantastical journey which shows the past and today’s society in a new light and enriches the world of thoughts and feelings.”

(From the jury’s statement explaining why she was to be awarded the international Ibsen Prize in 2009)

Productions

“The Petty Bourgeois” by Maxim Gorky (1964/65)

“Le Capitaine Fracasse” by Philippe Léotard, an adaptation of the novel by Théophile Gautier (1965/66)

“The Kitchen” (1967) by Arnold Wesker

“A Midsummer Night’s Dream” by William Shakespeare (1968)

“L’Arbre sorcier, Jérôme et la Torture” (1968)

“Les Clowns” (1969)

“1789” (1970/71) and “1793” (1972/73) about the French revolution – collective works (1970/73)

“L’Age d’or” (1975)

“Don Juan” (1977/78)

“Mephisto” – Novel of a Career by Klaus Mann (1979/80)

“Les Shakespeare – cycle” (1981/84)

“L’histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom, Roi du Cambodge” (1985)

“L’Indiade ou l’Inde de leurs rêves” (1987 / 1988)

“Les Atrides – Atreus cycle” (1990/93)

“L’Inde, de Père en Fils, de Mère en Fille” (1990)

“La Ville perjure ou le réveil des Erinyes” (1994)

“Le Tartuffe” by Molière (1995/96)

“Et soudain, des nuits d’éveil” (1997)

“Tambours sur la digue” (1999)

“Le Dernier Caravansérai”I – collective work (2003)

“Les Ephémères” – collective work (2006)

“Les Naufragés du Fol Espoir” – collective work (2010)

Filmography

“That Man from Rio” (L'homme de Rio) (1964), co-writer

“1789” (1974)

“Molière” - with Philippe Caubère as Molière (1977)

“La Nuit miraculeuse” (1989)

“Au Soleil même la Nuit” (1997)

“La Ville perjure ou le réveil des Erinyes” (1999)

“Tambours sur la Digue” (2002)

“Le Dernier Caravansérail” (2006)

“Un Soleil à Kaboul... ou plutôt deux” (2007)

“Les Ephémères” (2009)

“Les Naufragés du Fol Espoir” (2011)