

Theatre as a powerful medium of artistic action
Raising our Awareness: Mnoushkine's Scenes from Refugee Camps

1. Prologue on Hamlet

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her? (Hamlet, II.ii.542-3)

This is the question that Hamlet asks himself at a turning point of Shakespeare's tragedy, just when he decides to use the medium of the theatre to unmask the villainy of the court and «catch the conscience of the king». In the play, as you remember, a company of players comes to Elsinore and their leading actor is invited by Hamlet to recite a passage from Aeneas tale to Dido, where the killing of Priam is recalled. When the performance comes to the climax of Hecuba's despair, the actor's expression changes: he looks pale, distracted, his voice breaks, his eyes fill with tears. A mysterious exchange of emotions occurs between the actor and Hecuba, and yet «what's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba that he should weep for her?»

The question touches a crucial point in the discussion of how can actors convey true emotions «but in a fiction, in a dream of passion». Shakespeare dramatises, more than a century before Diderot, *Le paradox du comédien*. How can theatre portray human reality on a fictive, imaginary stage? In Hamlet, Shakespeare appears to be challenged by this question and to look at theatre from different perspectives; all of them illuminating even for our time. Let's give them a quick glance.

The murderous king welcomes the arrival of the players, as a happy relief. Together with the queen, he hopes that they will distract Hamlet from his dark mood and haunting behaviour, which he fears. For Polonius theatre is just an entertainment and he has no patience with the performance of the actor who tells the story of Hecuba. («he is for a jig or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps», says Hamlet). Against the court's idea of theatre as distraction from reality and therapy for threatening opposition, Hamlet enacts his own idea of theatre as a powerful, revealing mirror. In the Hecuba episode, in the position of the spectator, he focuses attention on the wondrous empathy of the actor. Then for the play within the play he assumes the role of director and chorus to the players, presented as «the abstract and best chronicles of the time». He uses the court's concept of

the theatre as innocuous entertainment as a bait for his theatrical mousetrap. And with the performance of the *Murder of Gonzago* he is not only addressing the guilty conscience of the King, but the whole court, stirring their awareness (if not their conscience, their consciousness) of the hidden machiavellian reality of Elsinore.

2. A theatre of *human in-security*

The many *Hamlets* of our time, staged by innovative directors such as Peter Brook, Eumuntas Nekrosius, Pierre Lepage, Bob Wilson, prove that Shakespeare's theatre can be revived on our stage. But what can a new contemporary theatre do to raise awareness of our tragic reality? Is the cinema a better medium? Or, as I believe, can the living actor engage in a dialogue with the audience, and create a unique experience?

While asking myself what contribution could theatre give to our project, my mind travelled back and forth in time and space trying to find examples that could help to focus on the concept of human security. In a rapid overview, I could see only a great number of plays that speak of the loss of human security. Even those with a happy ending tell of characters hit by a crisis finding a solution only in the last act, sometimes just before the curtain falls. And it is the crisis that makes the play.

Possibly - I concluded tentatively- the strength of the theatre is precisely to show the tragic loss of security, and what happens to the characters, how they react, how they cope or don't cope with the situation, how they hope, how they dream of human security. From the Greek plays to contemporary dramas, theatre has given voice to those who suffer the «stings and arrows of outrageous fortune», voices of men and women of all classes tossed by the cruelty of events. Sometimes their voice are loud and fill the whole stage, sometimes they are subdued, whispered in a corner of the stage dominated by overwhelming forces and more potent protagonists; as in the case of Richard III or Macbeth.

But where to find in our time the tragic voice of the Chorus of the Trojan women, killed, raped or sold to the Greek winners? How does theatre react to the tragedies of war, massacres, concentration camps? The best example I can give of a theatre that since the beginning has opened the doors to the blowing winds of our history is Arianne Mnouchkine's company. She has said:

'The theatre is a place of words, thoughts, and the exploration of the meaning of history in an age when such places are denied or rejected. The theatre remains a place where we learn, where we seek to understand, where we are moved, where we encounter the other and are the other' (from an interview of 1997).

With extraordinary coherence Arianne Mnouchkine has remained true to this idea of theatre, sharpening in each production her creative instruments, exploring the power of theatre as opposition to silence and censorship.

3. *Le dernier caravansérail* (Odissées): an epic quest for human security

Most relevant to our research-project is the most recent collective creation *Le dernier caravansérail* (Odissées) which gives voice to a myriad of characters deprived of everything but their quest for human security.

With *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, Arianne, and the whole troupe of the *Théâtre du Soleil* (and there are many)* give stage life to fragments of stories of our time, odysseys of migrants from the four corners of the earth. These men and women are travellers in flight, spurred on by the hope of reaching a society where they may in some way recover all that they've lost in their native lands. Theirs are Odysseys of hope and despair; their dream is to reach the shore. But they are not Odysseus: the shore they reach is not their island, but a foreign land more closely akin to Polyphemus's dark cave, and they are compelled to flee once again. «Nos Ulysses sont aujourd'hui sans nom et sans retour. Ils sont personne», we read in the programme.

The «caravanseraï» of the title is the place where these stories converge, interweave and are told. It is a provisional desert halt, like those of the Arab caravans, and at the same time the stage of a play that is open, capable of 'receiving' the voices, memories, fears, anxieties, and courage of so many. What we see is just part of the immense canvas woven out of all these experiences. Setting off from Paris and heard in various parts of the world, it is staged through that art of improvisation, the driving force of Arianne's theatre, which she has been exploring with her actors for some time now. Unwinding like a film reel, through the montage of scenes that still bear the numbers with which they were 'shot', what she gives us is two sequences of this contemporary epic, entitled *Le Fleuve Cruel* and *Origines et Destins*.

The opening scene is dazzling: surging up from the bare stage are the whirling waves of a river in full flood traversed by a small plunging boat tossed up and down on the water.

Women, men and children are attempting to cross from one bank to the other. Some who have already made it stretch their arms out towards those remaining who are thrust back by the ferryman, while the wind's whistling grows louder. The maelstrom intensifies. But they still want to make the crossing, even at the risk of their lives. «Better to drown in the water, than in tears», says one voice.



The scene prefigures, by way of prologue, the dynamics of so many other risk-ridden ‘passages’, of so many flights which mean leaving behind one’s home, one’s affections, one’s native tongue and culture. And the perilous journey takes to an imprisoning compound, which annuls all identity, encloses, leaving only the strength to attempt yet again to escape through a gap in the wire fence.



Sangatte, the centre built in 1999 by the French Red Cross, is the backcloth of many of these autobiographical fragments which have become theatre. From there, we spectators ‘cross’

continually from one bank to the other of the cruel river, from countries where violence prevents one from living (Afghanistan, Iran, Irak, Kurdistan...) to the mirage countries (France, Britain, Italy, Australia...).

One scene follows hard on the heels of another by means of a montage constructed around internal intersections, analogies and contrasts between the different events. They recount stories of shattered relationships, conflicts, violence and illusions. Many are centred on the tragedy of women sold, exploited or punished simply because they have dared to dream the dream of freedom.



Characters and stage props appear and disappear rapidly, wheeled on and off stage on small rolling platforms in endless, forced movement. Only at the end, after the acceleration in rhythm of these entrances and exits, do the actors walk slowly back on stage, to the audience's applause. The men appear on one side, the women on the other: they look at each other, suspended in the distance, then suddenly rush into one another's arms. Their embrace, which both reunites them physically and brings them together in brotherhood, also links the representation of this contemporary tragedy to our own hopes, our own utopias. It is a suspension bridge over the waves of the cruel river of events: the powerful image of theatre as a place of exploration of the violence of history and at the same time as a space where we seek to understand, where we are moved, where we encounter one another.

* Théâtre du Soleil, *Le Dernier Caravansérail (Odyssées)*, directed by Arianne Mnouchkine, music by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, designed by Guy-Claude François, Serge Nicolaï, Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini, lighting by Cécile Allegoedt, Carlos Obregon, costumes by Marie-Hélène Bouvet, Nathalie Thomas (Parigi, Cartoucherie, 2003).

The Odissées have been recounted (told) and listened to, improvised and staged by:

Shaghayegh Beheshti, Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini, Virginie Bianchini, Charles-Henri Bradier, Sébastien Brottet-Michel, Juliana Carneiro de Cunha, Hélène Cixous, Virginie Colemyn, Olivia Corsini, Delphine Cottu, Eve Doe-Bruce, Maurice Durozier, Sarkaw Gorny, Astrid Grant, Emilie Gruat, Pascal Guarise, Jeremy James, Marjolaine Larranaga y Ausin, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, Sava Lolov, Elena Loukiantchikova-Sel, Mangado, Jean-Charles Maricot, Judith Marvan Enriquez, Stéphanie Masson, Fabianna Mello e Souza, Ariane Mnouchkine, Serge Nicolaï, Seietsu Onochi, Mathieu Rauchvarger, Francis Ressor, Edson Rodrigues, Santonja-Ruiz, Andreas Simma, Nicolas Sotnikoff, Koumarane Valavane.