

On Theatre

An Interview with Hélène Cixous

ERIC PRENOWITZ

PRENOWITZ The plays included here were written between 1974 and 1998. At the beginning of the 1980s, when Ariane Mnouchkine asked you to write for the Théâtre du Soleil, you were already a playwright (*The Pupil*, *Portrait of Dora*, *The Name of Oedipus*, *The Conquest of the School at Madhubai* . . .): what changed then in your relationship to theatre writing?

CIXOUS In the first place, the feeling that I was beginning to do theatre. Which is to say that what I wrote before embarking on the theatrical adventure and alliance with Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil can be thought of as pre-theatrical. As the prehistory of an engagement or an event. A veritable event: the day when *Ariane asked me* to try to write for the Théâtre du Soleil. Because I had a very strong, disturbing, alarming feeling that I was being called, that I was being summoned to respond by the theatre in person, if you will. I do not mean Ariane herself, who was its representative, but the theatre in its eternal figure. I was summoned to answer to the call of an ancient and ever-present world, a quasi-divine world: whether or not I really wanted to do theatre. Why? Because I must say in all humility that I had not considered what had preceded that moment to be theatre, but rather an allusion, a childish game. It was as if I had been going on excursions, practically tourism, on a continent or in a universe, a cosmos which I never thought I would ever really come to inhabit. For many reasons. In some cases, as for *The Pupil*, it consisted in theatralizing a kind of vision of the world which was at once political and rather abstract, as if in an attempt to make it concrete, but this theatralization remained intra-literary. Which is to say that I did not think that *The Pupil* had a properly theatrical destiny, that it would ever be produced. It was an extremely experimental text.

The Accident

The adventures which preceded my entry into the universe of the Soleil were always kinds of accidents for me. I was not looking for the theatre universe, but it was as if without my knowing it “theatricality,” more than the theatre, crossed my path and was pointed out to me by others. The case of *Portrait of Dora* is exemplary. In fact *Dora* even made me think that I would never write theatre. It is paradoxical, but here’s why: one day Simone Benmussa, who was the assistant, playwright and administrator for Jean-Louis Barrault at the Théâtre d’Orsay, and who read my books, told me that in one of my books of fiction called *Portrait du soleil*, she saw a play. I saw nothing at all. I saw a fiction. And she literally told me “But look hard,” as if I had to lean over a river, “and you will see there is a play in there.” What Simone Benmussa had sensed was a diffuse theatricality in my texts which is certainly related to the presence of voices in what I write. She must have heard voices which were there; because I have the habit of lending an ear to them.

But I did not think they were emanations of what is called the theatre. Yet I obeyed Simone Benmussa's injunction and I cut and pasted the text. I considered that act to be an artifice, which is to say not at all like a creation but what would now be called an adaptation, for example, a kind of handiwork, a montage. I did not take the act at all seriously, I thought of it as a form of literary tinkering. To my great surprise this little mock-up, which was directed by Simone Benmussa, was an enormous success. I concluded that the audience considered it to be theatre. So if the audience considers it to be theatre, including Lacan himself, who was an enthusiastic spectator, then perhaps I was doing theatre without knowing it, as Mr Jourdain did prose without knowing it. But I was not convinced. I did not think of myself as a theatre writer. I thought of myself as a *theatrical accident*.

I also considered *The Name of Oedipus* not to be theatre. Because there too I had responded to a call: the composer André Bouckerezhliev had been commissioned to write an opera, which was later to be performed in the Cour d'Honneur of the Palais des Papes in Avignon (Claude Régy was the director), and he asked me to write the libretto. But here too I felt I was writing poetry, for example, and for me this poetry, which was incantation and which staged characters, was not the work of theatre. I think I also had a memory of what is called "theatre" which led me not to consider these acts which I committed with caution, or on the contrary with recklessness, to be "theatre." This memory was that of my book-knowledge of Shakespeare. I thought that theatre is what Shakespeare did, i.e. to create the universe: it is not only that "All the world's a stage," but his stage was truly the entire world. I felt I was extremely far from this. What I learned later –

THESSIE Micao!

CIXOUS Now the cat has spoken, for example, as I was speaking to you. This intrusion of the cat, who enters into the scene where we are, is precisely a theatrical act. Which is to say that the theatre is itself an action, a drama, and one of the marks of the theatre is the *unexpected intervention*. The fact that at any moment characters enter or events take place which are completely uncalculated. It seems to me that in my first plays I had not opened the door to the *event*. If only in so far as there were no events in *Portrait of Dora* because it was already there. I lifted *Portrait of Dora* from *Portrait du soleil*, and I myself had no surprises, there was no surprise; there was sculpting. For *The Name of Oedipus* it was quite similar, because it involved reanimating or resuscitating the legend of Jocasta and Oedipus, which I did in my own way, but here too I think the element of surprise was textual, aesthetic, and not dramatic.

The Event

It was only later that I had the first moment of temptation, or the first attempt at what I continue to consider to be the theatre, which is to say the great machine of events. It can be said that *the god of theatre is the event*: an event that happens on the stage, but that *happens to the author*. The first time I let events come to me, which is to say the first time I myself engaged in a voluntary exercise in which I said to myself "This time I am going to open my interior space, my interior theatre, to events," was with *The Conquest of the School at Madhubai*. It was certainly the first time I lent myself to the theatre or that I gave myself over to the theatre (I prefer "lent" because it is more modest). So what is the event? To *create emptiness* in oneself. An emptiness that is not an abyss. It is the *plateau* (in English: stage, platter, plateau). And the *plateau* is not a particular,

concrete, referential object. Every time I say *plateau*, and I like this word in French, I am reminded of the plateaux, the high plateaux, for example, what were called the high plateaux in Algeria. Immense, telluric geographic zones, flat like a stage, where storms can erupt, or all of a sudden a nomad can appear, one never knows. At first there is nothing, it is barren, it is deserted, and all of a sudden a camel or a bird arrives, some animate being arrives and becomes the character of this *plateau*. But it is unforeseeable. I had never experienced this unforeseeability, this desertedness which is suddenly animated, which receives the soul of a being. Quite simply because on the contrary I had always been preceded, all the texts I had previously written were preceded and occupied.

The Desert

The non-occupation which is indispensable to what I now consider to be the theatre constitutes the first moment of my practice with the Théâtre du Soleil. Which is to say that everything I do with the Théâtre du Soleil begins with this non-occupation and this desert. But I had never practised it, I had never even thought of thinking of it, and I had never had the thinking and imagining experience of this inaugural state, which is indeed a state. With *The Conquest of the School at Madhubai* I did it on purpose for the first time. It started with something that was very interesting and entirely new and revolutionary for me – an attempt to answer the question: Is it possible today to imagine or identify in the world someone who has the dimensions, the stature, the mystery of what is called a theatrical character? Because characters and not human beings are what inhabit the theatre. But there are also characters in the world's theatre. And I thought: But are there any today? Is there someone on the earth today like Oedipus? Is there a king who is at once innocent and guilty? Is there a woman who takes up arms to restore justice, or to attack injustice or to make war – is it possible that there exist today heroes or heroines like those we know from the archives of memory and legend? And I thought not, that there are none. Or at least I imagined it would not be easy to find them. And in the end they did exist. I searched, I looked, it was as if I had climbed up a tree or a tower and I was scrutinizing the horizon, I saw nothing, I saw nothing, and then all of a sudden I saw someone, and it was none other than Phoolan Devi, called the Queen of the Bandits. An incredible contemporary Indian character, but whose history and whose every gesture was worthy of the legends, of the Mahabharata. She was a sort of untouchable Joan of Arc, and I realized that she indeed had all the traits of a character, someone who resists the ready-made, or what has already been done, who resists the attribution of a form of life or of destiny that leaves no freedom of invention to the human being. I thought: Here is someone who invents. And from the moment she invents new situations, she also encounters new situations. I found her in a newspaper. And I decided I would see if I could make her live, if I could make her arrive in my desert and have her invent a play – it no longer had to do with me or what I thought or my double, because she became the author – in which fictive events would happen to her. To tell the truth, this was a great shock for me . . .

So I entered into a passiveness, which ought to be comparable to a trance, a passivity, an emptiness, an evacuation of myself, in which I let this character I did not know enter. I had only read a few references in a newspaper and I let entirely fictive events take place as if I were an observer or a witness of events I knew nothing about ahead of time. For example, with *Oedipus*, I knew. For her, I knew nothing. And because I had to be in a state of trance I wrote it without stopping, I think in a single day, and at the end I passed out. I had to undergo such a tension of substitution – in order to let myself be replaced, since I was not there, by someone entirely foreign – that at the end of this experience of trance, of possession, I fainted, I had a terrible and

frightening feeling of faintness. I lost myself. At the same time this play was very small. There were only three characters and I lacked the strength, and the *connaissance* – I do not mean the knowledge: the consciousness – necessary to pursue the experience any further. What's more it was quite brief. But I thought: Ah, the theatre must be something like that. And shortly thereafter, a year later perhaps, Ariane asked me: "Would you like to work for the Théâtre du Soleil?"

PRENOWITZ But you already had some sense of the emptiness of the interior *plateau* and this relationship with history, the search for a character in the world who could become an event on your stage?

CIXOUS Yes, of course. But this could have been an isolated experience. What happened next was that Ariane asked me – which was another event because it was totally unexpected, this request that was turned towards me at a time when I had known her for nearly ten years, and we were friends. But I had never had either the idea or the desire to write a play for the Théâtre du Soleil. In fact it was out of the question. For two reasons. A writing reason: my writing, which had nothing to do with Ariane's theatrical practice. And a theatre reason: what Ariane did seemed to me to participate in the great theatrical tradition I believed in – I had faith – but in which I did not at all see myself as a participant. If only because of the immense dimensions of the ambition and the scope of her enterprises. Ariane belonged to that epic dimension of the theatre that is found in the Greeks, in Shakespeare, etc., but at the time I did not feel I was concerned. I watched as a spectator but absolutely not as an agent. I did not at all think I could ever in any way be called by or respond to that space. And so when Ariane proposed that I try, she was very prudent, very just, very wise, she asked me to try and she did not guarantee either that I would succeed or that what I would do would be received by her troupe. And this was very good because it gave both of us great freedom. I did not commit myself, I could not promise, I did not believe in it, and neither did she. It was a possibility. And quite honestly I did not succeed right away. I wandered as I always wander. Which is to say that each time I start off again on a trail with Ariane I go through a period of wandering, of erring and of error before glimpsing in the distance the light of a theatre. Always. It remains for me the *foreign country*. Each time I start off again I go towards a foreign country and don't even know what this country is. All I know is that I'm off. Which is to say that I move away from myself. I move away from the interior in the interior, I move away from my limits, and I take to the open sea.

The Foreign Country

I think that for me, although this is also part of its essence and its mystery, the theatre remains, the theatre will always remain the place of two types of laying bare: the change of country, the un-country, it is an un-country, another country, another world, it is the world but a world that is other, or it is the world that can tear itself away from the world as it is by becoming the sublime form of the world as it is. It is no longer the world as it is; it is the world's world, it is the world par excellence. And it is a world that is a figure. It is entirely transfigured. It is true that in a certain way the theatre as world, the theatre-world exists virtually in the great epics. This is why it was not absolutely impossible for me, because I am someone who has always frequented the epic, it is my childhood imagination, my place of childhood. The Bible is extremely theatrical; nearly all the great stories of the Bible could be staged. All the adventures that are related in the Bible as being historical – whereas they are not at all historical, they are fantastical – have a partner who is none other than God. From time to time the Devil, but rarely, and in fact God. Which is to

say the gods. There is no theatre without gods. It is the first thing that becomes clear when you turn to the theatre: there are god(s). In the singular and in the plural. God in all forms, at times the lowly forms, or else sublime forms. They are superior forces. God is what I would call all the superior forces with which we negotiate or which treat us or mistreat us, which we imagine at times to be interior but which we experience as exterior, against which we fight. Sometimes they have names of powerful abstraction like King or Justice or State or Honour, all those sorts of values that precipitate the great theatrical actions, even War, Hate. At the theatre, God or the gods are always blowing, as if in the sails of the theatre, in the theatre's invisible sails; they give to the theatre, they take the theatre, they lift it above the earth, up to the *plateau*, higher still. This is what we see in the Bible: everything is lifted, one is always setting off towards the mountains, further along, higher up, stronger, more terrible. It is more. The theatre is more, always more. It is what the Greeks called enthusiasm, possession by the gods.

PRENOWITZ It is bigger-than-we-are.

Always More

CIXOUS Always more. It can be worse. A "bigger" that transports us, enthusiasm is being transported, it is called transports, to have transports. Something that unglues us, that makes us lift off, that tears us from the earth, from common sense and from identification, from identity, from the self. A moment ago I said there is a change of country; at the same time there is de-selfing. This is something I formulated very quickly when I was at the Théâtre du Soleil, but my first experience of it was *The Conquest of the School at Madhubai*: it is only possible to enter the theatre *without self*. And in the place where my self had previously been: my place without myself, deserted by the self and left vacant so that all the others can approach, manifest themselves, take place. This is why the theatre is a genre that is mentally, spiritually, physically difficult, and dangerous. Because it requires a temporary but none the less sufficiently long suppression, ablation, confiscation of the usual occupant of the author's head. And because this entering into trance, which happens in many primitive cultures, is no longer practised in the West. We are no longer accustomed to it. In primitive societies the trance has an accompaniment: when these rites take place in Africa or in Asia, they are accompanied by a group of people, by music, by magical incantations . . . All of this must be reconstituted in oneself, in the little European Western head without any means or instruments, and it is very difficult. At the same time it is fascinating, it's a passion in the proper sense of the word: it must be suffered, and when it happens it is an absolutely extraordinary and non-communicable experience. Except that it leaves a trace in the form of the play. But it is also exhausting, and I always enter into this sort of interior temple and give myself over to it with a kind of fear, as I prepare myself for an extreme mental and physical ordeal. This is why I prefer not to repeat the theatrical ordeal too often. Every three years is enough, because it wears me out.

PRENOWITZ Even after becoming the Théâtre du Soleil's playwright, you have also written plays for other companies: for example, *The Story (That We'll Never Know)* for Daniel Mesguich. What is the relationship between these two paths in your theatrical writing since the 1980s? I'm thinking for instance of the fact that you are actively involved in the staging of your plays at the Théâtre du Soleil, reworking your text in response to the obstacles or the possibilities that arise in rehearsals, while *The Story* or *Rouen* were mounted by Mesguich virtually without any modifications.

CIXOUS I have to say to begin with that the trunk and the roots are the Théâtre du Soleil. This is not to suggest that what I do outside the Théâtre du Soleil is only branches, but that the apprenticeship, the vitality, the sap, the nourishment come to me from the Théâtre du Soleil. For many reasons. In the first place because I think it is originaire: in its practices, which are those of Ariane, it is at the origins, at the sources. It is at the sources of theatre. I must add, being as they say the house author, that the Théâtre du Soleil represents the *sources*, but also the school. Because I know nothing, I do not have knowledge, and I feel that I always go to the theatre as an apprentice, as a disciple, as a schoolgirl, as a researcher, as a student of this art that I will never have acquired, which I am always only discovering, and searching for, and glimpsing by illumination, but without ever acquiring it as a knowledge. And I believe it will always be thus. It happens that the Théâtre du Soleil is a theatre in exercise; it is also a theatre school. Which begins again every two or three years, which goes back to the sources, which begins again to do theatre from the first elements, which returns to a sort of ignorance that is not a lack and disregard of knowledge but a childhood, which returns to a sort of naïveté, of newborn-ness, and where all the active elements of the theatre are reanimated anew, where initiations are always taking place. At once in the art of acting, in the initiation to mask-work, to the musical instruments, to the different dances from the most ancient theatrical arts. In addition, the Théâtre du Soleil, which is perhaps unique in the world, does not stage a play as it is done almost everywhere else, but *searches for the play*, as the author will have searched, at length. This would be called rehearsal in classical vocabulary, but it is a search and a recreation of the play that can take months and months and months. This is not done elsewhere, for reasons of economy; most theatres cannot treat themselves to such a long period of research and they generally take shortcuts. The Théâtre du Soleil does not take shortcuts; it goes back over the entire path.

Searching for the Play

It happens that from time to time I write for someone else or for another space. It is rare, it has only happened two or three times. But I do not write plays abstractly or in the direction of the unknown. In general these other plays are intended for or turned towards a particular person. I usually address them to Daniel Mesguich. My friendship with Daniel is different from the friendship that links me with Ariane, but it is very familiar, I would say fraternal. I use the word fraternal on purpose, because there are cultural, literary, intellectual connivances and complicities between us, it is perfectly overdetermined. So I address plays to him which are like letters. As if I were writing letters and not plays. They are plays all the same, in so far as they are structured, executed, organized, controlled by the experience with the Théâtre du Soleil. Daniel knows Ariane very well, they are friends, so this stays within a sphere of friendly connections, and Daniel has even said to me: "Write me a play as if it were for the Théâtre du Soleil." Which is to say that he has placed himself within his desire, or placed his desire in a space which remains this antique and primordial space. But Daniel's intellectual and textual structure gives priority to textuality, and much more than for Ariane his referent is the great French texts. The texts Ariane has mounted are the very great texts from Aeschylus to Shakespeare: the great immemorial texts – which of course don't have a wrinkle. Curiously enough, Daniel, who is no more French than I am, is more steeped in, more shaped by the French tradition, the French language, whether Racine or Claudel. And so when I write a letter to Daniel in a sense I write in my-kind-of-French, that is, in poetic French, going back along the path or the course of a grand verbal, linguistic French tradition. Because I know he is a man of letters of that language, as you would say a Chinese man of letters. He knows all its tricks, all its stratagems and all its strangenesses, all its

foreignnesses. So in his direction I give free reign to a certain writing which in general I keep for my fiction writing and which is relatively uncommon under the great roof of the theatre. Daniel is the first receptor. But there is not only one receptor, after him there are others, as these plays are taken up again and performed abroad. But the first receptor is essential. This is why the text that I write in his direction will be received as a letter. He reinterprets it of course, because he performs it, he transposes it, he does a reading of it; but he receives it, in the end and without our ever having said this to each other, as one would receive a letter. He does not remove a sentence, because in the relay that is set in motion from the genesis of a theatrical text to its different transpositions on the stage, he places himself within a great tradition of literally – "to the letter" – epistolary reading.

PRENOWITZ The fact that you write for a real theatre company or troupe, the Théâtre du Soleil, is in itself very important it seems to me, and your relationship with it, the singularity of the theatrical project of this troupe which devotes all its many lives (including yours) to an amazing adventure in "creation," is at once rare and I would think decisive for the theatre it produces. This is what Shakespeare and a certain number of others no doubt did, but there are very few real troupes left today. What is the importance of this relation to a theatre company in the history of your writing, in your plays and for the theatre in general?

CIXOUS It is indeed decisive. I think the word "adventure" is very important. It is decisive in the first place with regard to the dream. If there is an art that has a structural complicity with the dream, it is the theatre. I mean the dream in the sense that children have grand dreams. Where they dream that they will be a king, or a bandit or a corsair. The theatre company dreams that it will play all the roles and that it is going on an adventure like the great heroes in the epics, or like those who went in search of the golden fleece. It is a treasure hunt. And the treasure is the theatre. It is simultaneously a dream that has an absolutely magnificent goal, which is to do theatre together; and at the same time something very dangerous because to do theatre together is like going in search of India, which became America. The spices, the gold are this art which can only be done together, it is a collective art; and on the other hand no one knows where the country is. Just as they went in the wrong direction, they went to the East in order to find what later turned out to be to the West. It is the same thing with the theatre: you go in one direction and you arrive at another. At the same time what is shared is the sense of adventure without any certainty that the goal will be reached, for it is entirely possible that the company will fail, that it will not find what it is searching for. The adventure is very dangerous because the collection of sixty dreams is always dangerous: it is never sure that all the dreams will hold together in the same boat. What is more, the adventure is heroic in the sense that it is very costly. It comes at a very high social, mental and economic price.

No One Knows

Doing theatre is a question of passion: the reward is not assured at any level. So it involves consciously putting oneself in danger, and by the way one never knows what the extent of the danger is, without a guarantee of any benefit or that anything will be found. What animates the members of a theatre company is also the capacity to take this risk. The people who come to the Théâtre du Soleil are very diverse: there are the actors, the technicians, the painters, the sculptor, the musician, the silk painters . . . Each one goes there in the hopes of satisfying at least his or her artistic taste. And I think that this satisfaction exists. But it must be said that they pay for it

"economically," because the salaries are very modest. Everyone earns the same thing. Each of the people engaged in this adventure is paid exactly the same sum; the actors, the technicians, Ariane the director, myself, the musician-composer, we all earn the same thing. The salaries are modest relative to the salaries that are current in the institutional theatres, not to mention in the film industry. All of these people could in fact go in other directions and earn money. But what they want here is not money (*argent*) but art (*art*) and people (*gens*).

At the same time it is fragile: from time to time the company must rely on unemployment benefits, so they earn even less and find themselves in a holding pattern that would be difficult to put up with and even intolerable, impossible, if they thought of themselves as workers. But they are dreamers. Dreamers who have a profession. Professional dreamers. Whose profession is dreaming. But again, it is very dangerous. People's destinies, their lives, their material conditions of existence are all at stake. On the other hand, working together is a pleasure. But it is a trembling happiness. And then there is the moment the play is presented to the audience, and it's double or nothing. Which is to say it will either be a triumph or a failure. Thank God it is generally a triumph. But it is a triumph because everyone has worked for it, with sweat and tears. Has struggled to get to this point. Without any stability ever setting in: one never settles down. No one is a functionary. The reward, when it is achieved, is the relation to the audience, the happiness of sharing an experience with the audience which, at the Théâtre du Soleil, is very large: 600 people a day, and when we give 100 or 150 performances that makes 100,000 people who come. That is a lot of people. This means that we speak the same language, 100,000 people speak the same language for at least a few hours, and share the same dream. This is ethically and politically powerful. This is of course the reward, when there is one. In addition, as with *Drums on the Dam*, when the production ends up going beyond our theatre, when it travels, goes out into the world, to Japan, to Korea, to Canada, to Australia, we have the sense of an extraordinary vision of humanity. The feeling that in the world, in the universe, there are no borders, because of course art passes across everything, that the desire for dreams is shared by a great number of very diverse populations, and that they communicate through a common language which is the language of theatre. This clearly gives immense happiness, but it is a fragile happiness: for *Drums* it will have lasted two or three years, and now we are going to find ourselves once again before the unknown. It means starting off again on an adventure, towards another imaginary country without knowing where we are going, if we will arrive, and who will arrive. Because I must also say that exactly as Ulysses lost men along the way in the *Odyssey*, along the way we also lose members of the crew. For many reasons: since these are very long voyages people can fall ill, and all sorts of accidents can occur. On these magnificent long voyages there is also mourning – and one has to be aware of this.

So it is very important for me to work inside this troupe, in community, in communion. With human beings I know and love, and with whom we all share. Just as people share bread and wine, here we share bread and wine that are sublime, symbolic. My desire, my appetite for sharing and love and friendship and beauty are fulfilled. On the other hand I also pay in my way, which is to say that I am in a dependant relationship to the group. Inside the troupe one does not have the freedom one has alone. There are immense human benefits and they are paid for in restrictions, because there are common laws, common rules, obligations. The other thing that should be noted is that what I do in this case is to adopt the direction of the dreamer which is a direction that I do not command alone. I respond to an order. This order is formulated by Ariane, who must be thought of as herself-plus-the-troupe. The Soleil has its own aesthetics, there are aesthetic and political choices, and if I did not share them, quite simply I could not be the troupe's author. But it happens that we have common visions, we have a relationship to society, to political commitments, to art that is shareable and that has been in place for a long time. We have been in agreement for nearly thirty years. We are in tune, we are musically harmonized.

There is an order. Which is to say that I have never made a proposition to Ariane saying "This is what we must do." She proposes a direction to me, but she proposes it after long discussions between us. We discuss different possible projects. And what orients the choice of a subject – because in the end what we agree on is an initial subject – is in the first place that it must of course correspond to the history of the art of the Théâtre du Soleil, but even more that it should inspire Ariane. She must be able to see, even before I write, she must have the possibility of having a vision in the fullest sense of the word: to have visions, which are visions in space. This has to do with her own art. Her art must be nourished, set ablaze, or else she cannot create. There is a sort of order: when we talk, when we have our discussions, as we always do in these situations, we cannot take an orientation if she has no visions, even for example if I say: Ah! I'd like to go in that direction! Her workshop must be illuminated. This suits me, I can function in a certain number of directions because my functioning is not based on visions but on voices. My visions are auditory, if I can put it that way. I simply have to be able to hear voices.

To Hear Voices

That is what it is to be in a troupe. It is an experience which is not only of being on stage, but one of sharing a certain time which is out of the ordinary. And it is a time that goes on. Twenty years of creation with Ariane. But with the company it is a human time, a prolonged time that overflows the simple stage to go into the kitchen, into the workshops and very often into the particular, intense and subjective moments of each actor. But I would say that it succeeds rather well, because after all it has been twenty years that Ariane and I have been working together unfailingly. It is the same thing with the composer of the company, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, whom I consider to be absolutely brilliant and with whom from time to time we take little excursions. For example, he recently did the music for another of my plays in a reading directed by Daniel Mesguich, and I know that he has a project for an opera whose libretto he wants me to write. In the end we weave together living and continuous affinities: there are no divisions among us. It is very well orchestrated. It is clearly quite miraculous. And this leaves a mark, this marks everything I write for the Théâtre du Soleil.

PRENOWITZ Is there a chronology, a history, an evolution from play to play in your work with the Théâtre du Soleil? If so, to what extent is it due to the history of this theatre and to what extent does it have to do with an evolution in your works or life as a writer?

CIXOUS It is possible now, twenty years later, to talk in terms of a history. Because there has been a history, there has been time. When you begin, the first play has no history. It is an event, and you do not know what it will lead to. But after twenty years, like all stories that go on for a certain time, if you look back, yes, you can imagine or make out a shape that has emerged, but which was not anticipated. When we began this was not our goal. Each time we have proceeded as if from play to play it was the first time we were working on something. This is not true, because from one play to the next something gains in depth, or appears in a slightly more familiar way. For example, I realized after a few plays that there were elements that returned, types of characters, but this was never planned in advance. It is only with experience that you recognize signs and accents. Going from play to play I noticed that there were recurrent characters. Characters from my own unconscious who come onto the stage. If I had not written a series of plays, in the first place they simply would not have returned, nor would I have noticed them. I spoke of this in "Enter the Theatre": the character who is constantly returning and who is therefore in some sense

my signature in the play, is the character of the border-crosser. The one who goes between the living and the dead, between eras, between different circles, between the different "houses." When I was working on *Sihanouk*, we used this word "house," which came from Shakespeare's theatre. In Shakespeare you have this royal house and that royal house, and with *Sihanouk* there were the house of the king, the house of the Americans, the house of the people. These are groups, sorts of microcosms that form a macrocosm. These houses are closed in, they are enclosures, and then there is a character who can pass from one to the other, and who, in this first play, can even go from the house of the dead to the house of the Khmer people, and all the way to Chou En Lai's house in Peking – and the whole way on a bicycle. He is a magic character who crosses through everything. This magic character was Sihanouk's father, who was dead, a dead king who can pass from one house to the other; it is the magic of theatre. At the time I did that, for me it was necessary for the play, I needed someone who could go from one place to another, and it is only very recently that I realized there was always such a character in my plays. That there was always someone who could give passage, like the needle that takes the thread through the tapestry. I did not recognize it myself because the play was what required it. The theatre required it. It was not some recipe I had. Suddenly I noticed that in *The Perjured City* the person who passed from the scene of the Cemetery to the scene of the City, which do not communicate otherwise, or between the living and the dead, was Aeschylus, the guardian of the Cemetery. This little character was also present in *The Indiad*: it was the Baul woman who could cross India on foot, or the bear tamer. These are characters who do not belong to any house, who precisely do not belong, who are not identified with houses and who are the messengers the envoys the border-crossers of theatre, of the spirit of the theatre, of the spirit of humanity, from one place to another. Because there is a path and along this path from one play to the next something is communicated: the spirit, memory. It was not a decision or a calculation, it was not a kind of speculation. It was necessity.

The Border-Crosser

So from play to play: there is certainly something even if, once again, for each play we go back to zero, we start from nothing. We are on the beach, on a sandbank, and we do not know what is before us. Once the work is underway and has developed, in looking back we can say that each play was engendered by the previous one. That *The Indiad* is in a certain sense the child of *Sihanouk*. And one could continue and say that from play to play there is engendering and causality, which we are not able to see when we begin. When we begin, it is really in a state of innocence. We start the world over. The feeling of genesis, of creation *ex nihilo* is always there, otherwise we would do nothing. But after all we are ourselves human beings with memories. I think that if we were to analyse the question, which I don't wish to do or don't have the time to do here, we would see the lineage, where elements of *The Perjured City* come from *Sihanouk* by way of *The Indiad* . . . At times it disturbs me, for example when I was writing *Drums*, at a certain point I said to myself "But there are elements of *The Perjured City* here: the tidal wave." But then I forget. I do not want to know. If we feel we are repeating ourselves or doing something over again then we have to stop.

But these elements that travel in a subterranean fashion and which reappear differently – because when they reappear it is in an altogether different way – probably come from the fact that when I write for the Théâtre du Soleil, I always place things at the root, at the *causes*, what causes the behaviours, the catastrophes, the wars, the destructions in humanity. And here we are in a space that is continuous with the space of engendering, thus of mythologies, of all that

caused the first literary works: the epics, etc. There are fundamental structures. In the same way that one talks of the fundamental elements of genealogical ties, there are fundamental elements in the history of humanity, and each time we ask how things happened, where they came from, we find driving elements that are universal. This is why the theatre can travel from continent to continent.

Causes

The one which functioned explicitly in *Drums on the Dam* is auto-immunity. This is a force of self-destruction that is at work in humanity. Take what is going on at this moment, the great drama that is occupying the entire world and which began on 11 September, 2001. We can see it as a play, and who could imagine more of a play: the most symbolic, the most beautiful, the most triumphant place in the universe, the World Trade Center, disappears. It is an extremely spectacular event. Scene 1. And then we discover in Scene 2 that this was done by a character who is the opposite: the towers are as visible, obvious and ostentatious as he is hidden. The metaphors are incredibly powerful. He is in a cave. They are as naked as he is hidden. And the entire world is at the theatre, the tragic theatre. The auto-immunity factor, the self-destruction, is everywhere. Some people have asked: "Is it not the United States that caused this?" which is a perverse question. However, there is auto-immunity in that Bin Laden will come to a bad end. He has already lost the war, he is destroying what he wants to save, he has already lost his power, he risks losing his freedom and his life. We can ask what principle guided him: it was the certainty that he would triumph, that his power would grow enormously. The fantasy that this character could have is to crush the most powerful country in the world, to have his God rule over the earth, his God being the partial God (in both senses of the word) that is the Islamist God. Afterwards we can transport ourselves a bit later in time: if we look at this story we see that he set everything up for his own destruction. Why is it that he brings about his own destruction?

Drums on the Dam is set in an absolutely magnificent kingdom which has always been prosperous and which in the excesses of the exercise of power – it is always the same thing – overturns itself. It turns its power, its beauty, its riches, into absolute destruction. We wonder: Why do people do what will produce their own ruin? But this question exists in Shakespeare. It is a question that is being increasingly described, thought about, philosophized today. It is like the question of globalization: the Americans have refused to sign the Kyoto accords. They ought to protect human life on earth, but they do not want to put a limit on the exercise of their industrial and capitalistic power. They are heading quite simply towards their own suicide. It is at a great distance, it is always the question of the great distance: I am not the one who is going to die, it is my children. This is an enormous question. We think: How can human beings think such a thing? How can human beings say to themselves "I don't care"? In France there is a phrase for this, Louis XV's phrase: "Après moi le déluge," "After me the flood." A king who is the successor to Louis XIV, the greatest king of the French monarchy, who little by little causes the catastrophes of his kingdom, and who, when reprimanded and told that this is not a good policy, says "Après moi le déluge." And the deluge arrives: the death of Louis XVI, the French Revolution . . . We look at this each time and wonder: But what is it that motivates these people? The phrase says that after all I will have lived well and if the deluge comes after me I don't care. It is incredible, and yet this is what rules power. Power thinks it rules, yet it is ruled. And it is ruled over by death.

PRENOWITZ So there are elements that return, continuities such as the border-crosser, the tidal wave, the "causes," the fundamental structures. But you said that on the one hand you have to

begin each time at zero and on the other hand that you must not repeat yourself. So what changes? How would you describe the evolution? Where are you going?

CIXOUS First remark: if I look retrospectively – because clearly only retrospectively can one begin to recount the history of a collaboration or of series of works – looking backwards from *Drums* successively to *The Perjured City*, *The Eumenides*, *The Indiad*, *Sihanouk*, I see an evolution I find very interesting, though it was not planned out, towards less and less realism, or fewer and fewer references to existing facts, and more and more inventions. Less and less reliance on immediately readable current affairs, to the point of attaining pure fiction with *Drums on the Dam*. Once again this was not planned by us; it is like a telluric, organic evolution, the natural maturation of a working engagement over time. In the first place because in an obvious way, it is not simply an arbitrary succession: each of the plays can be seen to come out of the previous one. They cause each other, they engender each other, they suggest each other but without there ever being an omniscient project. It is a process.

Less and Less Realism

I think I have already told the story of *Sihanouk*. The first play I wrote for the Théâtre du Soleil was *Sihanouk*, a play of enormous dimensions. Here is what I could say about the prologue to the story of the creation of the play: when Ariane asked me if I wanted to write for the Théâtre du Soleil, although I had known her for a long time by then and had never thought of writing for the Théâtre du Soleil, she asked me very directly to write on India. That was her dream. And I was struck with terror. I was emerging from a chamber; and in this little room or in this little office I had convoked characters like Freud. My dimensions and my imaginary horizon were no greater than that. The most I had done, and it was already in the direction of India, was the little play *The Conquest of the School at Madhubai*. But even if it took place in India and even if the character was Indian, India was only in the atmosphere, which is to say the rain, the monsoon: everything took place in a cabin, the equivalent of a plain little room. It could be performed in a small theatre, there were no more than three or five characters. I had not gone beyond the dimensions of what I have always called “chamber theatre.” When Ariane said India I knew that for her it was the Indian continent. And I truly panicked. I ruled it out right away, I immediately said no, I cannot do it. I saw that I was a little ant before the Himalayas, and I thought: What is she talking about? An ant cannot write the Himalayas. It’s impossible. It will take me centuries to climb the Himalayas. I was incapable of *envisaging* India, in the proper meaning of the word. I understood Ariane’s desire, but for me it was out of the question. It was a question of proportion, of capacity – and this is very important because it is a question of theatrical art – which is to say that my capacity, what I could contain, was very small. It could not be anything so gigantic. So Ariane conceded to my concerns and we started looking for something else, but in Asia none the less. This is where the Théâtre du Soleil’s Asia comes from: Ariane needs to be Asian, and what she wanted was an author who could write something Asian for her, because Asia has always been the cradle of all her images, of all her references.

In the first place *Asia*; in the second place *today*. A today that has never been rigidly tied to current events, but a present – the present being in any case the time of the theatre – making reference to something very close, contemporary, because what she wanted was something contemporary, but which would be valid for all times. I could understand a present that would apply to all times, but not a universal Asia. So I began to look around in the twentieth century which is relatively easy to explore mentally from a historical, political point of view. It is clear that

the great events of the twentieth century can be seen in the light of their universal implications: for example the chaos produced by the Vietnam war which affects Asia. I saw all of this. And while searching I read a great deal – I have always done this for the Théâtre du Soleil – I read everything that could be seen to interweave the political and the mythological, the theatrical and the ethnological. All the books that are archives relating to structures of the imagination or of a culture, as well as the narratives of the tragedies of our times. I even think that Ariane must have told me she was looking for the story of a people – the theatre is itself a people – whose tragic destiny could be the image of other tragedies, of other contemporary stories. In this research I was attracted by the tragic history of a little people named the Jarai, a tiny ethnic group between Cambodia and Vietnam that simply disappeared during the Vietnam war because they were bombed, massacred, and nothing was left. A people that has disappeared. I had begun working on this, I began writing a few scenes and when I showed them to Ariane she cried: “What is this? It’s much too small. This is the story of a village!” And indeed it took place in a village. “This is not for us. We are a kingdom, you have got the wrong dimensions.” I had gone from too big to too small. This woke me up. It was as if I had forgotten the dimensions of the Théâtre du Soleil, which are royal dimensions. So I looked for a kingdom with Ariane, and very quickly, because we only had to take a step to the side, we were either in Vietnam or in Cambodia. So we were in Cambodia, and we found a lot of very good books. The one that acted as a trigger for us was a remarkable book by an American journalist (*Sideshow* by W. Shawcross). The epic dimensions of this universe became clear to me in reading this book. At the same time, and in a way that was enlightening for me, what carried me was the fact that Cambodia resembled Shakespeare’s England. Like two peas in a pod. England saw itself as a large kingdom, but it was small, three million inhabitants. The exact dimensions of Cambodia.

The Small for the Large

The first lesson I learned at that time was the small for the large. It is clearly a question of image: just as England saw itself in Shakespeare’s time as the greatest kingdom in the world even if France was its rival, Cambodia could see itself as an immense kingdom even if it was very small. And from there we could have taken any other kingdom, we could have turned to Tibet: any small-large kingdom. I understood something about the imaginary dimension that reigns at the theatre, whereas I had been realistic in my first choice. And so I set off on that path. I began to write in a way that was instilled with my epic memory, from Shakespeare. And this gave *Sihanouk*.

But for us, *Sihanouk* was the story of Cambodia. The way we experienced this story was in the first place literary for me, then human. Ariane wanted right away to go to Cambodia. I did not. Which is to say that I am so fearful of the curse of realism, and also of reality; I thought that too much reality would simply crush my capacity to dream. I must be able to dream something. I told her that I had to finish writing first, before going to Cambodia. She left before me and during that time I finished the first part and I began the second part. It was only then, when I was sure of my own inner images and my own dreams, that I joined her in the refugee and resistance camps between Thailand and Cambodia. Because at that point I could support the reality without it destroying the imagination. And in the same way I thought to myself that I did not want to establish relations with real Cambodians before my imaginary Cambodians had taken flesh. And once they existed, based only on the documents and images I had, I began to see the real ones. Real Khmers, either in Cambodia or here in France, where there is an enormous Khmer community. And at the very end, once everything was finished, *Sihanouk* himself. So that was the first period of practice in the adventure.

PRENOWITZ So the spectral presence of Shakespeare in *Sihanouk* comes first of all from this parallel between the small that sees itself as large . . .

CIXOUS The small-large.

PRENOWITZ . . . the small-large of these kingdoms and the imaginary dimension of the theatre: it had primarily to do with these questions rather than, for example, being a way of giving a form or a frame, that would be recognizable by a Western audience, to a story that is in principle very distant?

CIXOUS Yes. On the other hand the small-large is so important that in *Sihanouk* I am constantly talking about the small and the large. This is my way of inscribing things in the text, both in fiction and in theatre: when I begin to understand the genealogical and genetic roots of a work, they also become a subject of the work itself. Which is to say that there is a reflexivity that I inscribe in the text. So in *Sihanouk* there are reflections on the small and the large just as there are reflections on Shakespeare: these are signatures, genealogical traces. It is a derived form of what could be called intertextuality. It is not intertextual but it's a way of reminding myself and whoever can perceive it that this is a work of theatre or a work of art; it is not something realistic. The genealogy has its sources in the history, in the real events that it formalizes, that it transfigures, and also in the other world which is the world of literary creation. There are always two worlds. There is the political world and the literary world, and I cross-pollinate them.

Then comes *The Indiad*. Curiously enough, *Sihanouk* served as if it were the first stage of a rocket. From the moment I was able to take on a play that had immense proportions, even if the focal point was small, I realized I had discovered the trick that would allow me to undertake what seemed impossible to me, for example a play with fifty characters. I could not write a play with fifty characters all at once: I had to go at it ten times. That is, I did five plus five plus five . . . I shuttled back and forth, as if I were a boat, to bring five characters across each time. I realized that I am a limited being; I could have quintuplets but I could not have fifty children at once. But the obstacle had been removed. So when Ariane and I started off on the second venture, India was no longer impossible. But the lesson was there, i.e. the small for the large, and also the trigger, which is to say a particular emotion, a particular event. What is interesting is that we both had a strong emotional reaction to the death of Indira Gandhi, and we let ourselves be taken in by the seduction of this drama. We thought it's terrible, it's perfectly theatrical: the assassination of this woman who is in charge of the biggest country in the world, so to speak. And we went to India (we had to go there for the archives, the documentation, etc.) with the presupposition that we would work on Indira Gandhi. I worked for months, and the more I worked the more it became impossible. I worked as an academic, as an archivist, I had a great mass of documents, and what increasingly appeared – I was horrified – was what I said to Ariane slowly and then more and more urgently: Indira Gandhi was not an interesting character. She was not a theatrical character. She was a newspaper character, not one that could be transformed to make an epic character. Because with any ordinary character you can make an immense theatrical character on the condition that you be able to invent him or her. But I could not invent Indira Gandhi. She was too close, there were millions of witnesses of her reality, and what she was in reality was not interesting. It was not her fault, most political beings in the world are uninteresting. There are very few who have a transformable dimension. An epicable or saga-able dimension, if you will. They must have an interior greatness. If we look at the world stage now, there are hardly any characters who would lend themselves to transposition.

PRENOWITZ Who is there?

CIXOUS That is the question Ariane and I have always been asking. Sakundeva, who was in fact Phoolan Devi, had an epic dimension. It was not a question of power, because people in power are very often dull, stupid, without imagination, without dreams. You have to find someone who has a dream, a real dream. There was de Gaulle in France; no one since, of course. I do not know. We were obliged to go back to the previous generation. When we discussed it, I said to Ariane "It's too early. In fifty years I could invent Indira Gandhi, but now I cannot: because she exists, so I can't get around her, and I can't do anything with her." At that point, after months of suffering and panic, all of a sudden Ariane said to me "But why are we doing this? We were moved by her death, but since the spectacular theatrical heroes of the history of India are of the previous generation we must simply take a step backwards. It's obvious." We took a leap backwards, which was in fact a leap forwards, and from then on I had no more problems: I had all the great heroes of the twentieth century. They all lived at the same time. And of course this is not an accident: one hero calls forth another. So there was Gandhi, there was Nehru, there was Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the great Pashtun, all the great figures of the history of India up until today were there, including the evil Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. So we had only made an error in diagnosis, but it was because we were ignorant. We did not know who Indira Gandhi was. Which I discovered in rummaging through the newspapers. I read everything, and each time I came across documents on her political policies or in reading each of her speeches I said to myself "My God it's enough to bore you to death. There is nothing there. There is no vision." She was a woman without vision, a pragmatic woman. And even if people had an embellishing vision of her, she resisted all transfiguration.

Great Heroes of the Twentieth Century

During the Second World War there were dreamers. There was Churchill, it is undeniable. In France there were the heroes of the Resistance. Today we could find a local character here and there, among the Kanaks or something like that, but again this is not enough because we find ourselves back with the Jarai. It is too small and does not bring with it the history of the world. These are local heroes, even if they are heroes. They will not change the world machine. What we need is to find the cog that makes the universe turn. Which is to say that by touching for example on India, and in working on the Partition of India, we were working on all that followed, up until Kosovo. All the disintegrations of all the national, nationalist groupings: when this was happening in Yugoslavia people asked us: "Are you going to do something on Yugoslavia?" But we had just done it, it's in *The Indiad*. It is a metaphor.

PRENOWITZ And why were there theatrical characters on the world stage at that time?

CIXOUS I think it is due to two things. First, these are very old struggles: the struggle for the independence of India began with the twentieth century. Such struggles end up engendering the characters that are necessary to the triumph of the struggle. Here is another character: Mandela. I'll come back to him. And second, once there is a truly great character, as I said, he or she attracts others. The greatest is Gandhi, and by the way it is not an accident that he started out as a young lawyer in South Africa. Gandhi makes Nehru possible. He ends up engendering someone like Nehru, who is younger, who adores him and who has been raised by him. Gandhi raised up the characters around him. But there must be at least one, after which there are two, three, four . . . They form a generation. Then we have Mandela and his world. At one point we

thought about working on him. I had written a book on Mandela, called *Manna, to the Mandelstams to the Mandelas*, I have a passion for that man and for that magnificent story. And Ariane was drawn by the beauty of those events, of that struggle. But at the time she said to me "I'm unable to find a theatrical way to stage black people with our troupe which isn't black." It would be necessary to use masks . . . She could not find the necessary theatricality. So we went no further; otherwise I surely would have written something of the sort. Perhaps she could change her mind today, I don't know.

So *The Indiad* came after *Sihanouk* in the same river of research, except that I was less anxious, less terrorized, and that I wasted a year because we had chosen the wrong subject. In that case the problem was not that I was too small for India, it was Indira Gandhi who was too small.

PRENOWITZ You had "discovered the trick" as you said, which was to take the characters across five by five. You also spoke of the character of the border-crosser: can we say that this is another example of how you reinscribe the genesis of the play in the play, that this character in the play repeats metaphorically your posture or the work you do as an author?

CIXOUS Yes, indeed. Although I never planned it because once again it was only long afterwards that I noticed this necessary internal structure. In *The Indiad* there were several of them, but they seemed to me to be the spirits of India. There was Haridasi, the Baul woman who could cross all of India, and since she was a nomad, since she was a detached character, an element that circulates, she came in the place of Sihanouk's father. But I did not realize this. What's more she was not alone: since India is an absolutely gigantic continent I needed her – to be the people, to be the person who could show up anywhere in India at any moment, she is a magic character – and I doubled her up. Since she was Baul, thus leaning in the Hindu, Gandhian, Sufi direction, I also needed her Muslim equivalent, which was the bear trainer and his bear.

The Nomad

Actually, I could say that there is the *border-crosser*, but also the *nomad*, as a double or as another possible incarnation of the travelling flame, of the spirit in the sense of ghost. The one who is unattached, like the ghost, and who, being unattached, is not tied and obliged to belong to this or that house or this or that intrigue because he or she can simply appear. It is the *bearer of apparitions*, who can appear at any moment from behind a curtain, from under the earth . . .

After which Ariane needed to nourish herself on the most ancient models, and perhaps the plays we had done together are what both allowed and required her to go back to the sources. This time they were not at all Shakespearian: up until then she had gone in the direction of Shakespeare, she had staged the Shakespeares just before I began to work with her. Instead, began a kind of re-apprenticeship in the direction of Greece, which she had never tackled. So she staged the *Atreids* in an Asian manner. And in this cycle I translated *The Eumenides*, which was theatrically and textually decisive for me.

But to come back to the place of history in this type of theatre, after *Sihanouk* and *The Indiad*, and before *The Eumenides*, there was the project on the Resistance, our third moment of contemporary political and historical aspiration. It is worth mentioning because it has never left us. We did not succeed in engendering it, but this phantom play is still with us. It is still here with all the characters I had brought onto my stage and also the spirit of the play, that is, the spirit of the Resistance. At once as an ideal and as a reality because Ariane and I spent a year going to see all the surviving members of the Resistance in France. Who have remained our friends; those who

are still alive are our friends. The spirit of the Resistance was what we wanted to work on, but it is also the spirit of resistance that animates literature as an art and theatre as a practice in the city. We did not do the play for a thousand reasons, but we were on the road to doing it. I wrote about half of a play. And it remains for us as an indispensable theatrical adventure. There had been a problem of transposition, certain figures had not been found, and so to try to get around the limit we had reached and were unable to cross, Ariane needed to return to a very ancient theatrical tradition. To see how it would be possible to find images for texts of another kind. This led to the *Atreids*.

In this cycle of plays, I had the task of translating *The Eumenides*. And this was decisive, again without our having calculated it. In the first place because *The Eumenides* is an extraordinary play. It is rarely staged because it seems to have a sort of aridity: it is a play on the questions of vengeance, of the law, of justice, of the foundations of democracy. But for me it was absolutely enlightening in theatrical, textual and philosophical terms, although I was not at all expecting that. *The Eumenides* is an eminently political play, in the most ancient sense of the word: it tells of the very foundation of the city, of modern law, by Athena and the invention of the vote, of the election, of choice, of the exercise of citizenship, and even the invention, which Ariane staged in a remarkable way, of the court of justice. All of this touched on my most intense preoccupations concerning this problematic, as I reflect on them and have always reflected on them, at once in theatre, in fiction, in my seminars, etc. And what struck me was to see how Aeschylus gave form to these profound, complex things with an extraordinary verbal economy. But a Greek economy. It was the first time that I had found such a sober verbal garment which was at the same time so poly-semantic, so polysemous, comparable to an economy I would find later in the Noh. But I had not made the connection. Aeschylus writes the way the Noh would later be written. With the same condensation, the same reduction. And these are foreign languages, they are not our languages. Our languages do not have that economy, they are much more dilated, much more luxuriant. Like Japanese, ancient Greek has structures, a grammar that is very lapidary, which our Western languages do not have at this time. And if for example I were to write like Aeschylus, which I did for *The Eumenides* since it was Aeschylus, it would seem artificial, whereas it is indispensable.

Aeschylus – Noh

But that experience was very important for me without my calculating what effects it would have subsequently. After the cycle of the *Atreids*, when we set off again as always in search of a subject that would be at once the most ancient and the most contemporary, the small-in-the-large, this experience immediately came to my aid. But not consciously. We were going in a direction that was as far as could be from *The Perjured City*. We first discussed the fall of the Soviet empire. Then we moved to something smaller, which occupied us for a while: Czechoslovakia with Havel as the main character. And while we were in the process of dreaming in that direction, the story of AIDS-contaminated blood passed before us, as if it were a meteor shooting by. It was something that was not the product of historic events reaching across the twentieth century; it was an accident, but a mortal accident of Western culture.

PRENOWITZ But which reflects the state of Western culture in the twentieth century.

CIXOUS Yes, of course. It is an accident of this culture, which is to say a symptom. But at first I resisted. I resisted for a thousand reasons: this story of contaminated blood was so monstrous

that I needed a certain amount of time, perhaps a month, to be sure it was true. That the horror was true. But from the moment this story appeared, and since I belong autobiographically to the medical world, it was overdetermined for me. That is, at once the vile story of the contaminated blood and the story of medicine, within which I have always lived. I know doctors only too well. I am the daughter of a doctor and the sister of a doctor, I have always lived in that world. And always in revolt because, to tell the truth, I considered, and I continue to consider, that my father and my brother were amongst the rare doctors who did not betray the Hippocratic oath. And since I have always lived with it, since for me it is extremely grave, since I saw my father die from it, the story was overdetermined and overinvested for me. The bad doctor and the good doctor are characters that have accompanied me throughout my entire existence, and still today, of course.

But the big question was how to transpose a story that was in the newspaper headlines for a year, and a tragedy from which the victims were *in the process of dying*? How could one take tragedies that were not yet finished and turn them into theatre, make them visible? Tragedies that were before our eyes, under our nose, that did not take place in Asia? And while I was writing *The Perjured City* I thought to myself that in the audience there would be haemophiliacs who were dying. The consciousness of the immediacy and the proximity of this tragedy did not leave me for a second. In every domain: the patients, the victims, the mothers, the children, the men, the women, the doctors, a universe I know very well. And I thought: This cannot be put on stage without the help of all the gods in the world. Which is to say without being transposed, without it becoming something that has been torn away from the newspaper page, and which protects all those who are presently suffering. This is where *The Eumenides* came to my aid. I immediately saw the transposition by way of *The Eumenides*. I thought: This can only take place in a mythical universe where there will be Aeschylus, the Eumenides. Something that is poeticized in such a strong way that the suffering will find expression in extremely poetic words.

Tragedies Before Our Eyes

This is where we see what theatre is: you do not have a vision as in fiction. It is that the subject commands the form. The subject commands the search for a certain form without which this subject cannot be materialized on the stage. This is what happened with the Resistance. The subject commanded a form which we did not find. But for *The Perjured City* it was already there.

PRENOWITZ *The Perjured City* was both different from the Partition of India or the unravelling of Cambodia as events implicated in the entire history of the twentieth century, and a story that was much closer to us.

CIXOUS Yes. There was not the least distance. All the distance we had for example as we wandered through Asia was gone. So we had to recover these distances which constitute theatre, and we could only recover them through an adequate transfiguration. It could not take place in Paris. It could only take place in eternity. Even if, in inventing this poetic super-temporality, in mixing the dead with the living, in having characters of all eras enter on stage, I could also have today's doctors enter. But "today" was carried off in a collection of entirely different times and figures. As soon as I realized that *The Eumenides* would carry this I had no more problems. Instead of going to "India," I went to "medicine," to "hospital." I began to talk with the haemophiliacs, with the doctors, as I had talked with the Indians. And I always thought that if I had not been the daughter of a doctor and the sister of a doctor and the daughter of a midwife, and if I had

not always lived in that world, I am not sure I would have been able to hear those languages and those secrets. I was already initiated.

PRENOWITZ And what about Asia?

CIXOUS Indeed, it is a very important question. What I must absolutely say is that Asia is not Asia. It is theatre-Asia. I am always talking about another world, a second world: it is not a realistic continent, it is a reservoir, a gigantic cavern of images. I also have to say that since "Asia" is a global word, there are many Asias in Asia. There is India which is itself full of worlds, full of universes, Cambodia which is something else altogether even though it is also related, Japan . . . it is endless. Why Asia? Initially because with a sort of intuition or instinct, Ariane went to Asia at the age of 20 when she decided she was going to do theatre, as if Asia were a cradle and she sensed that she had to go there. And for a year she went from country to country without any theory: it was an initiatory voyage, as in Hesse. But it stayed with her as her book of images. And this is the book she held out to me when she asked me to come to the Théâtre du Soleil. Because my book was not Asia. It was Shakespeare and Aeschylus, but not Asia. It was only then that I went to Asia.

Theatre-Asia

Let me add that the Asias have conserved something that we have not. For example Noh is a relatively recent art, younger than the Indian arts, only about ten centuries old, if you will, but when you go to Japan there are Noh performances every day. In France there is not any Noh. You have to go to Japan. In Asia the traditions have remained alive and present, not past. They have a present, the past has a present in Asia. And the country that has kept the most and the most ancient traditions is India. When you go to India tradition is in the street every day, you go on a sort of voyage across the millennia, and even while being in the twentieth century one is also three thousand years earlier. Now since all theatre is structured in this manner, which is to say that its temporality is age-old, forwards and backwards: three thousand years before and three thousand years after, it is perfectly clear that Asia is the theatre of the theatre. It is the Khora of the theatre. So Asia is not realistic. It is the temple. It is the caves of the theatre.

PRENOWITZ And the present which as you said is the time of the theatre is a present that contains all times.

CIXOUS All times. The present of the theatre – we should always say the-present-of-the-theatre – is a present where all the pasts can present themselves as present.

PRENOWITZ And why is Asia like that? Or why is the West not like that? Why does it seem as if our present were simply the present?

CIXOUS This is a very important question. It is related to industrial, mechanical development, etc. The "proof" is the United States, the country that is the most modern because it is the youngest; the youngest and the most modern. And here we see implacable laws: India, with its three thousand years, must lift three thousand years in order to take one step. And so it is slow, even if we know very well that a part of the Indian population belongs to the twenty-first century, aligned with the United States. Industry and capitalism are all-powerful motors which have pushed the West very hard and have therefore distanced it from its past – I am not speaking of the United

States, which has no past. But at the same time there are also the religions, although this is very complicated. But perhaps it has to do with a certain type of religion, religions such as those we see in India: polytheisms that are so everyday that in a certain sense they also slow the acceleration towards modernity. Because it is difficult to combine belief in the gods, which you see everywhere in India at every second, with a formidable technological advance, since technology and the gods are different gods. But if there is still theatre in France, I would say it is because what nourishes the theatre – and which is this sort of presence under the stage of the gods in which we no longer believe, but which we still believe in – has been maintained in France by the non-interruption, the continuity of the creative literary archive: France is a country of memory, and without being comparable to Asia, it is an old country that can go back with its cultural creations a thousand years. France has a thousand years at its doorstep. When you study the history of France you begin with the Roman empire. When I say a thousand years it is perhaps fifteen hundred years. And all of this is archived. And continues to be, for a certain type of person, because clearly there is also a population in France that does not have fifteen hundred years behind it.

A Thousand Years at the Doorstep

PRENOWITZ If *The Perjured City* came very “close to home,” what is the significance of this new departure for Asia-theatre, with *Drums on the Dam*? On the one hand, it seems to me, there is this new marionette form, and on the other, the fact that it’s a fiction, a pure fiction as you said. But there must also be an evolution: what you said about the form of the language you found in Aeschylus greatly resembles what one would be tempted to say about the marionette language that resurfaces with *Drums*.

CIXOUS The heart of the subject – with *The Perjured City* we had defined it exactly – is the sickness of the kingdom: what is it that is hurting us at this moment? And what is hurting us in a new way? Because in the end human beings are great inventors of evil, of sickness, of catastrophes. You know, the sentence that is always being pronounced in France, “Plus jamais ça,” i.e. “Never again,” or “That will never happen again,” is a sentence I have always found at once interesting and touchingly naïve, because it is never “that,” it is always “that will never happen again.” There is never the same catastrophe twice. Evil is always in action and it invents new forms. There will never be “that,” of course, because “that” has already happened. There are phenomena of repetition, but it is simply that the forces of evil, everything in man that is bad, cruel and inhuman, is permanent and repetitive. But it can only repeat itself in so far as it can find new masks, which is to say foil the mass of people who say “that will never happen again”: they are there, at a place where a catastrophe has happened, saying “that will never return.” But of course that will never return there; it will return here, and differently.

New Masks of Evil

With Ariane we look for signs of a new catastrophe, that is, an extremely ancient catastrophe whose mask or figure was unexpected: “that,” this particular “that,” had never before been seen. Once again we shiver with horror before the inhuman things man has invented. And this is not easy, because we can be mistaken: one can have the ephemeral feeling that something old, something we have already seen a thousand times, is entirely new, but it falls away very soon, it does not hold up.

While we were searching, there were enormous, catastrophic floods in China. The newspapers said there are similar floods all the time. It has been going on repeatedly in China for three thousand years. And so it will go on being repeated for another three thousand years. But why and how is it that there continue to be such horrifying natural catastrophes? Although we suspect, of course, that they are not natural. It is too easy to say that it’s nature: there is an element of nature, but of course an element of culture. And at this point we ask the question: What is it that makes states, and governments, be their own destroyers? The enemy does not come from outside; the enemy is inside. So it is not a punishment by the gods; it is a fabrication of men against themselves. It is one of the greatest mysteries of the ethical and political world.

For example, here I have been observing the great debates about the question of nuclear energy. People began saying that if a bomb were dropped on the storage site at The Hague, France would be dead. Now it exists in the open air, and any airplane *à la* Bin Laden could crash into it and France is dead. So one thinks: This can’t be possible! But yes, it is possible. It is a gamble, an insane gamble, on the non-catastrophe. But why should there not be a catastrophe? The whole question of nuclear energy is there, and not only in France, everywhere. Chernobyl is everywhere; it is a decisive, terrifying question.

There is nothing that is at once more familiar and more non-familiar than a calamity such as a terrible flood. For example what just happened in Algeria, or what happened in the valley of the Somme last year. There is something awful about floods because it is human beings that create them, and human beings are carried off by what they themselves have unleashed. The theme was very simple. It was then necessary to give it life, a story, characters. And for the first time, and to my great joy, we gave up all reference to current events: we did not need to go to China and to singularize something that is so universal that at one point or another it happens again in one country or another. But in each country the pain is singular, the revolt is singular. We immediately turned to fiction. For the first time in our twenty-year history we agreed that it should be a fiction. But for it to be fiction, and theatrical, we returned to the cradle of fictions, which is to say to Asia. But taking a precaution: it would really be fiction. We would not go to see a flood in China or a flood in Bangladesh. That is indeed the universe we worked on, where there are effectively cyclones, tornadoes, floods, but it was not localized. I would not make reference to one country anecdotally. It had to be the Earth, let us say, and this particular calamity. And as regards the date, it had to be the same thing. In order for it to be embodied theatrically, it had to be a period situated historically, but not precisely: it could be the ninth, the tenth, the eleventh century.

The Cradle of Fictions

Although, since the Earth and the theatre make a couple, a plateau, we had thought of having a figure in the figure, an intrigue in the intrigue, such that the story, which would be a sort of universal poetic fable, would have a metaphorical face like a mask, which would be that the theatre would itself be a character taken up in the turmoil. And for this, we turned to the historical beginnings of the theatre in those countries. Historically, the genesis or gestation of the theatrical arts is rather complex, but we can say that they were born around the ninth and the tenth centuries, in particular in Japan. And to begin with, we thought that the play would interweave a political story, the story of a king, a duke or a lord and his country, with a second intrigue that would act as a mirror for that story: a little kingdom in the big kingdom, and which would be a little theatre-kingdom. That is, the story of a theatre family, etc. I began to write one story inside the other with a theatre-family as a hostage of the political story. The Noh took precedence right away,

and all the history of Japanese theatre. We had discovered something that neither of us had known, which was that the first Japanese theatrical arts were propagated by women. In particular by a very famous woman, Okuni, of whom we know nothing, except her name and that she existed. She was a great woman of theatre. I worked at length on this character we know nothing about, and in my first versions of the play you could see the country come apart and the theatre come together simultaneously. At the same time that the theatre was being invented, this theatre was doomed to sink because the country was sinking. So it was an extremely complex plot which finally dissolved because it was too much, it became so immense, whereas for once we had decided to do a play that would not be too immense. To do a double plot we would need two parts. "This time I want a single part, for economic, technical reasons," Ariane said. The theatre in the theatre, the plot in the plot, the whole theatre-family fell away very quickly. I worked on some very famous theatre families, for example the Kanzé family, which still exists in Japan today. These families were dependant on the political sphere, they were protected, a bit in the way the classical French theatre was protected, therefore censured, by the Court. Molière, Racine and the others were simultaneously maintained and encircled, in economic and theatrical terms, by the Court. It was the same thing in Japan, where the theatre companies were at once extraordinarily inventive, but dependant on the authorities. Protected by a Shogun, or else, on the contrary . . . But we dropped all of this.

The Theatre in the Theatre

PRENOWITZ So there was an organic link between the little kingdom of the theatre and the big kingdom.

CIXOUS They were completely interwoven. And to give the last trace of it, Okuni, who was the head of a theatre troupe, was the sister of the Chancellor. But it was a sister with whom he had lost contact. He had left the family farm and did not know that his sister had followed a theatre troupe and had invented a new theatrical form. There were many subplots and it became so immense that little by little we were approaching an impasse: it was immense, but we were going towards the marionette form, and the marionette form will not tolerate the immense.

How is it that we went in the direction of the marionette form? It is another story: in writing all of this, and with the double plot at the beginning, I was in the library while the troupe was in Asia – because for two months they were exploring all the countries of Asia in order to steep themselves in forms, colours, etc. I was in Chicago at that point, where I had access to an immense collection of Japanese, Chinese and Korean plays in translation. I read these texts and I used them from the point of view of the projection of images, a bit like Eisenstein, who had studied Noh. I also had a freedom I had gained through a game Ariane and I had played like children: in order to be able to enter into the mythical domain and to shed all reference to reality, one day Ariane called me up and said "What if it were the old and famous Chinese author Xi-Xou who was writing the play?" And I thought: That's brilliant! I am free. I am detached from myself. Xi-Xou is the one who is writing the play, not Hélène Cixous. So I can do as I wish. And in the two days that followed, I dreamed the first scene. Which is to say that Xi-Xou dreamed, and it was the Soothsayer. I called Ariane and I sent her the first scene.

PRENOWITZ You had to detach yourself from yourself in order to see.

CIXOUS Yes, of course. I was no longer needed, it was the old Xi-Xou. It gave me complete freedom. There's another border-crosser, by the way, the Soothsayer.

It was during the summer, I had already written a certain number of scenes. In Chicago I was working so intensely on these documents that I was in danger, every night I dreamed and more characters arrived. There were more and more of them. From the moment you are no longer held back by anything, when you are in total fiction, it is like what happens in dreams: there are hundreds of characters. I thought: A hundred is too much . . .

PRENOWITZ You no longer needed to bring the characters over five by five. You had too many characters.

CIXOUS Yes, absolutely. But very quickly the theatre plot fell away. Because of the limits we had set and because it was not vital to the functioning of the killing machine. It was additional victims.

The mental structures, and so forth, came to me from the world of Noh and Kabuki, but I had said nothing about this to Ariane. I never say what I use for nourishment when I write my plays. I never say I am in the process of reading this or that philosophical or poetic text, because I am nourishing myself. Ariane nourishes herself with a certain universe of images, I nourish myself with a certain textual universe. And when Ariane began to rehearse with the material I had given her, once everyone had returned, within a week she said to me "You know how we are rehearsing? As if we were marionettes." I had never said that I had been entirely supported by that theatre, and I thought: The subterranean work happens all by itself. After which everything had to be marionetted in a much more imperative manner. Once we had decided to go with the marionettes, even if marionette shadows were already there for me, I had to marionette everything. Which is to say that everything had to obey the laws of the marionette, whereas at the start this had not been planned. But in the first week of rehearsals this is what happened, and so everything changed: Ariane's job, the actors' job and my job, everything was oriented towards the economy of the marionette, which we had yet to discover.

The Laws of the Marionette

PRENOWITZ So in a certain sense the Japanese Noh, Kabuki and Bunraku are all marionette forms, even if Noh and Kabuki properly speaking do not involve marionettes, at least in appearance.

CIXOUS Exactly. But we were faithful to the principle that it would not have a particular reference, which is to say that there was total freedom. And so for months and months Ariane set aside all Japanese references: the costumes were Korean, the drums were Korean, there were many elements that came from elsewhere, up until the point where . . . something caught up with us.

PRENOWITZ Yes, but it retains the indetermination. I understand entirely that in so far as it was a pure fiction, it was necessary to avoid any precise reference, be it temporal, geographic or cultural.

CIXOUS Yes, of course, but it remained a certain universe. Just as the theatrical forms of China, Japan and Korea communicate, but they are not identical.

PRENOWITZ So you had to completely redo the play, and write differently.

CIXOUS I had to reach the marionette level of writing, just as it was necessary to reach the marionette in the actors and ultimately in the voices. Little by little the law of the marionette established itself everywhere, but it happened gradually. When we began we did not know exactly what this new type of marionette was, since they were not marionettes but actors. We didn't know what these marionettes we had never seen before needed, what they could not endure, and what they required. We felt our way along. Little by little the text had to find its own marionette form. But not any known marionettes, with strings or otherwise: it was these marionettes, the marionettes of *Drums on the Dam*, which is to say marionette-actors. An entirely new form.

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