

# Observing the body, recovering rituals – Antiquity artifacts in the contemporary scene

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## **Abstract**

Reclaiming of the body in contemporary theater is linked to the nostalgia of the lost sacred, to a call to restore rituals. The European vanguard movements reveal a growing interest in the East and the consequent return of theatrical traditions that go back to Antiquity. In this study I will focus on contemporary creations that recover techniques from masks and puppets as a source of work for the scenic corporality, in some of Ariane Mnouchkine creations.

**Keywords:** Contemporary scene, masks and puppets, ritual, sacred, corporality.

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## Observing the body, recovering rituals – Antiquity artifacts in the contemporary scene

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The presence of masks, puppets and objects/effigies on the scene is inevitably attached to a sacred dimension, giving rise to ambiguity, enigma, mystery, awakening the interaction between the visible and the invisible. Body discovery and awareness are stimulated through the figure and its articulation with matter, forcing the body to question itself and to recognize itself, re-configured with new traits. The object masks the body at the same time revealing it and stimulating new capacities of expression.

In this study I am interested in following the timeline that leads the connection between ancient sources and contemporaneous practices. In that sense, I am going to focus on some creations from Théâtre du Soleil, particularly from the 1980's and 1990's, which draw on ancestral sources and techniques for play designing and actor work, such as Chinese puppets, of which we have records dating back to 1.000 BC, Indian Bharata Natyam and Kathakali dances that lead us back to the ancient dances of the temples and to the Bharata treaty, dated with uncertainty from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, as well as later influences such as the Japanese Bugaku and Gigaku dances imported from Korea in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Without copying any of the oriental forms that inspired her, the director tried to assimilate the different sources, transforming them and developing them in the stage's pulsation, without resorting to ready formulas. Always aware that each Eastern form does not correspond to a style, but to a driving force for creation.

Before going back to Antiquity, I will consider the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a starting point, a shifting moment for theater practices, when the European vanguard movements began promoting the dissimulation of the actor's organic body by transforming it with masks, puppets and costumes among other scenic artifacts. This tendency is related to a break with the principles of realism and is reflected in the consequent revitalization of traditions that go back to different civilizations and periods of Antiquity.

“Puppets are as old as the world and rebirth from their own ashes,”<sup>1</sup> Jacques Chesnais says. Between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, puppets are reborn from the ashes at the hands of authors such as Edward Gordon Craig or Maurice Maeterlinck who proclaim an abstraction theater. Maeterlinck suggests banning the actor from the scene, by replacing it by matter and proposing a consequent return to the first theatrical forms: “Il faudrait peut-être écarter entièrement l'être vivant de la scène [...] L'être humain sera-t-il remplacé par une ombre, un reflet, une projection de formes symboliques ou un être qui aurait les

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<sup>1</sup> Chesnais 1947, 12.

allures de la vie sans avoir la vie ? Je ne sais pas; mais l'absence de l'homme semble indispensable [...] Il est difficile de prévoir par quel ensemble d'êtres privés de vie il faudrait remplacer l'homme sur la scène, mais il semble que les étranges impressions éprouvées dans les galeries de figures de cire, par exemple, auraient pu nous mettre, depuis longtemps, sur les traces d'un art mort ou nouveau. Nous aurions alors sur la scène des êtres sans destinées, dont l'identité ne viendrait plus effacer celle du héros<sup>2</sup>.

In 1914, at the Zurich International Theater Exhibition, Swiss Adolphe Appia and British Edward Gordon Craig occupied places of honor with collections that marked the return of the mask as a means to theater renovation. Craig's collection included Burmese and Javanese masks, some from Congo and Japan and three Aschanti masks. Craig proposed replacing the actor with a super-puppet, inspired by the early theaters of Greece, Egypt, and India. He proposed that masks, sculptures, shadows and puppets should occupy the human figure's place:

“Most people smile when someone talks about puppets. They tend to think immediately of their strings, their stiff arms, their shaken gestures, people say: “they are funny figures.” But keep in mind that they are the descendants of a great and noble family of idols, of idols made, in fact “in the image of a God” and that for many centuries these little figures had harmonious and not shaken movements, without the need for twine or strands of wire and did not speak through the nasal voice of the puppeteer.”<sup>3</sup>

From the European aesthetic vanguards, the representation of the human figure began to explore the binomial absence/presence through new perspectives, revitalizing ancestral techniques. Theater is rethought as a primitive art, a place where gods and the dead meet. According to Monique Borie “Corps de nouveau capables de faire apparaître le double, corps de nouveau habités par le contact avec l'invisible, capables de recevoir le dieu qui descend ou le fantôme qui revient, tels sont les acteurs dont Artaud a rêvé»<sup>4</sup>.

Contemporary scenic practices stimulated working methods that undergo a discovery of the actor's corporality, of the perception of the body and its limits, of the way it inhabits space and also of its cutout with matter. Reclaiming of the body in Western theater is still linked to the nostalgia of the lost sacred, to a call to restore rituals. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, human figure representation in the contemporary scene breaks from the principles of realism and naturalism, allowing the emerging of theatrical practices that deviate from mimicry and promote the visual dimension to the detriment of the text. Body concealment makes the desire for metamorphosis concrete, expressing the defense instinct, the preparation for a transition ritual. To hide or transform the body is an ancestral act that we recognize in different communities around the world and that arises as a way of responding to certain spiritual concerns.

Masks and puppets represent ancestors, deities and spirits in rituals and theatrical practices that go back to different ancient civilizations. Anchored in rites and celebrations

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<sup>2</sup> Maeterlinck 1999, 335-336.

<sup>3</sup> Craig 1999, 116.

<sup>4</sup> Borie 1997, 253.

they are present in a wide range of cultural and artistic expressions. Before they emerged as scenic artifacts they were magic and religious intermediaries, establishing connections between deities and human, the dead and the living, the supernatural and the mundane.

### ***Shakespeare Cycle***

Between 1981 and 1984, Théâtre du Soleil consecrates three creations from Shakespeare texts. The plays *Richard III* and *Henry IV* are approached with Japanese techniques such as Nô, Kabuki and Kyogen and *Twelfth Night* with Indian techniques like Khatakali, Bharata Natyam and also some influences from Commedia dell'arte. Ariane Mnouchkine's reading of Shakespeare's work has motivated her to anchor herself in the strength of Eastern theatrical codes: the rituals, the empty stage as a space propitious to apparitions, the sacred, the invisible, the illusion.

In Mnouchkine's opinion, the dehumanization of the actor's figure sculpted and stylized into an artificial body, simultaneously matter and effigy meets the supernatural reality and the essence of the phantasmagoric creatures that populate the texts of the playwright: "Quand nous avons résolu de monter Shakespeare, le recours à l'Orient est devenu une nécessité. Car Shakespeare se situe dans la métaphore des vérités humaines. Nous cherchons donc comment le mettre en scène en évitant à tout prix le réalisme et le prosaïsme"<sup>5</sup>.

It is a set of theater shows that combine different mask techniques, not only at the face level, but also with body masking and gesture stylization, with traditions that cross many different cultures and time spans. Nô, whose classical style was founded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by masters Kanami and Zeami, has echoes of earlier origins in the context of temple dances, since its treatises show affiliations in the Bugaku and Gigaku dances imported from China in the 7<sup>th</sup> century that, in turn, derive from Korean masked dances of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century in an agricultural context whose purpose consisted in requesting good harvests from the gods and amusing the peasants. Throughout the ages, Nô has evolved but it still maintains the character of a mystical ceremony. Until today, a Nô is still dramaturgically understood as an appeal of the deities and ancestors, the actor being an intermediary between the mundane and the supernatural world.

While in *Richard III* and *Henry IV* we have the recreation of a set of Japanese techniques, in *Twelfth Night* the company immersed itself in an imaginary India as a drive for creation. Indian Bharata Natyam and Kathakali dances were one of the resources for body work in the actor's game. Its costumes main function lies in a conscious deformation of the actor's body and expressiveness, such as the use of make-up that metamorphoses the face into a dehumanized mask. The reconfigured bodies abandon their daily postures, through choreographic dynamics, using the encoded movements of the mudras and a base posture: bent and parted knees supported by the external side of the feet. Kathakali is defined by Eugenio Barba<sup>6</sup> as a representation of tales, a show in which the stories are presented by

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<sup>5</sup> Mnouchkine 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Barba 2006, 74.

two singers and interpreted by actors through mimicry, gestures and movements that oscillate between dance and acrobatics, in a codified body language, a true alphabet of the body.

In this production, Mnouchkine crosses ancestral techniques of Indian dances with the mimicry and mask games of Italian Commedia dell'arte. Since 1975, Soleil's actors cross different techniques in the mask work. The director clarifies the need for this crossing: « Les grandes traditions théâtrales, les grandes formes de jeu, utilisèrent le masque (de la tragédie grecque aux théâtres orientaux) et la musique (sauf la commedia dell'arte). [...] Pour nous, le masque constitue la formation essentielle du comédien. Dès qu'un comédien " trouve " son masque, il est proche de la possession, il peut se laisser posséder par son personnage, comme les oracles.»<sup>7</sup>

### ***Tambours sur la digue***

The 1999 play *Tambours sur la digue* has the subtitle “In the form of an old play for puppets represented by actors”. It was built from the recovery of oriental techniques such as Chinese puppets, Japanese Bunraku, Nô and Kabuki and Vietnamese water puppets. This creation has the boundary between animate and inanimate as its founding principle, since it is a puppet show without puppets, or rather, with puppets inhabited by actors, whose biological bodies are masked by costumes and body masks. These puppet actors are sometimes manipulated by strings, retrieving the old technique of Chinese puppets or moved around by other actors in the gloom dressed in black, as in the Japanese Bunraku technique. Georges Banu<sup>8</sup> refers to the interpreters who are divided between the functions of inhabited puppets and manipulators as crystallized mannequins. The scenic device was surrounded by white stones, illustrating the idea of territory marking commonly used in Nô plays, but also common to various religious rituals and moreover revealing a link with the symbolism of the stone as a place of burial.

In Hélène Cixous' text, the action begins with tragic floods and a storm, before which Mr. Khang has to decide who to save: the peasants or the city's inhabitants. The theme that led to her dramaturgy was the floods that occurred in China in 1998, one year before. The author explains how the theme revealed itself: « Ce qui s'est passé, c'est ceci : il y avait à ce moment-là des inondations en Chine ; on n'a pas besoin d'aller en Chine pour voir des inondations, il y en a toujours eu. Mais en fait, l'inondation en Chine qui existe depuis toujours - ça fait trois mille ans que la Chine lutte contre des inondations qu'elle cause -, est devenue tout de suite une figure, ça s'est concrétisé très vite sous une forme de fable qui dit simplement : "Voilà une inondation qui va détruire le monde, rêvons autour de ça." D'abord il y a de ça dans la Bible. Des inondations qui détruisent l'univers, on en a toujours eues. C'est même la façon dont les dieux se défendent contre les êtres humains»<sup>9</sup>

The use of mask theater and puppets in Théâtre du Soleil emerges as a way of discovering the body, seeking a movement for the actor's depersonalization. The actor's

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<sup>7</sup> Mnouchkine 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Banu 2000, 68-70.

<sup>9</sup> Cixous 2002.

work is anchored in corporality and in an understanding of emotions manifestation in physical actions as symptoms. In her rehearsals Mnouchkine constantly warns the actors: “Ne pense pas aux mots ; Pense à ton froid, à ton chaud. Et que ça se voit ”<sup>10</sup>. The performing body is not just a vehicle for emotions but also the place where those emotions are drawn, materialized. The use of oriental techniques is thus in line with this dramaturgical language.

Théâtre du Soleil's dramaturgy draws on pedagogical lines for the actor's work, such as the ones from French authors François Delsarte, Jacques Copeau and Charles Dullin, who suggest new perspectives to explore the stage corporality, transforming and dissimulating the actor's body through masks, puppets and costumes. Soleil's creations promote the pursuit of a gesture stylization and the discovery of a mechanized body, artificial and cut out by matter. This way, different lines of the actor's delegation by matter and representation of artificial bodies in their different incarnations and effigies are explored.

The use of Eastern traditions in the construction of the Mnouchkine play involves body work and the creation of a gestural vocabulary. In this sense, not only does the human body figure appears disguised as the gesture itself appears puppetized and stylized, reproducing the movements of an inanimate body. Bodies that reproduce puppets' characteristics, creating the idea of lightness, suspension, articulation and challenge of the laws of gravity.

In the following testimony, puppeteer François Lazaro clearly illustrates the timeless echoes of the puppets, the relationship between his craft and the routes of Antiquity: “De toute éternité, les hommes se sont penchés sur des cailloux vaguement sculptés, sur des bâtons fourchus, des effigies, et les ont interrogés, la nuit venue. Ils ont allumé des feux, se sont rapprochés les uns des autres, ont raconté des histoires, dansé, gesticulé, et ont écouté les dieux qui leurs parlaient. Ils ont représenté leurs actes quotidiens et ont appris à manipuler les dieux contenus dans les pierres, dans les totems et les statues, pour vaincre la mort et obliger le monde à avoir un sens”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Pascaud 2005, 173, 192

<sup>11</sup> Lazaro 2003, 31.

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