

**THEATRE FOR THE PEOPLE:
THE IMPACT OF BRECHTIAN THEORY ON THE PRODUCTION AND
PERFORMANCE OF 1789 BY ARIANE MNOUCHKINE'S THÉÂTRE DU SOLEIL**

By Agnieszka Karch

Ariane Mnouchkine is a contemporary French theatre director, associated with the Théâtre du Soleil, known for its 'activism, formalism and cosmopolitanism' (Singleton 2010, 29). Her theatre, made by the people and for the people, breaks with the traditional perception of theatre as elitist. Her revolutionary status in the profession can be explained through her belief in the power of collaborative theatre (*création collective*) as the most democratic art form, capable of dealing with political questions. The redistribution of the power of decision-making in the process of production and staging can be seen as a metaphor of a political system based on civic participation. Mnouchkine's theatre teaches the audience how to react critically to what is being observed, and to translate this reaction into political activism and participation, in shaping their community. One of the central elements of her philosophy is to make the spectators aware of their potential to participate in the process of change. Instead of passively witnessing the unfolding of political and social events, citizens should feel encouraged to act and to note their personal impact on history. Such an approach is almost certainly inspired by the work of an earlier artist whose creation also falls into the category of political theatre – that of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht was known for having coined the term *Verfremdung*, crucial in achieving a critical response, and which can be described as the opposite of the suspension of disbelief, commonly cited as a requirement for most forms of entertainment.¹ In the Brechtian epic theatre, the spectator must be aware of the fictional character of the play. Only then can the characters' actions be judged in an objective way. The motivations behind these actions are explained by the actors, often through another device typical of Brecht's style – *gestus*, defined in his own words as 'convey[ing] particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men' and 'allow[ing] conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances' (Brecht 1978, 104-5).

Bernard Dort likens Mnouchkine's method to 'the Brechtian paradigm' (Dort 1990, 100). Though the two directors' works share a number of common features and objectives, such a statement underestimates Mnouchkine's contribution to the development of political theatre. In a statement reflecting her attitude to Brechtian theory, she says that 'Brecht is not a form; it's a vision of theatre' (Williams 1999, 56). Rather than using his work as a pattern to be imitated, she reinterprets his ideas and applies them to her own artistic strategies. This is the reason why Mnouchkine calls Brecht a vision rather than a form – Bertolt Brecht is an ubiquitous artistic spirit. One could argue that the resemblance of the two is accidental, with both artists' work falling into the category of people's theatre. It is therefore not surprising that they both use similar tools to address their audiences. Given that Brecht preceded Mnouchkine, his influence on the French director is a natural consequence of the evolution of theatre.

Presenting a problem is not sufficient; the Théâtre du Soleil must engage the audience in a dialogue. Brechtian techniques play an important part in facilitating the task of speaking to the spectator. However, the difference between the two directors lies in the fact that Brecht is more text-based and Mnouchkine is better known for her use of improvisation. This is perhaps one reason why the term 'paradigm' becomes problematic. This essay will analyse the different

¹ The term *Verfremdung* is often deliberately mistranslated as 'the alienation effect' or 'the distancing effect' due to the lack of an accurate English equivalent of the German word. This translation will be used here along another term – the V-effect.

methods, inspired by Brechtian theory, which enabled Mnouchkine to advance her own model of political theatre rather than relying on the reproduction of Brecht's techniques. In order to do so, it will focus on the performance and the staging of *1789: La révolution doit s'arrêter à la perfection du bonheur* (*1789: Revolution Must Stop When Complete Happiness is Achieved*).

As a starting point of this investigation, it is useful to note that the works of the two artists share a political link undeniably shaped by the events taking place in their lives. For Brecht this is the fascist ideology of the 1930s together with its consequences, and for Mnouchkine it is the climate of the 1968 movement. Viewing history as a dialectical class struggle and aware of the threat posed by capitalism, their work emanates the philosophy of change. Their Marxist approach makes them devoted to opposing bourgeois domination. Within the context of their profession, this essentially means fighting against the exclusive character of theatre. Rendering theatre-going a mass activity was a priority for Brecht: 'Anything less than two hundred at a time is not worth mentioning' (Brecht, trans. Willet and Manheim, 1970, 31).

Only by demonstrating exceptional force could Brecht and Mnouchkine counteract the bourgeois domination. Their approach required, therefore, revolutionising the concept of theatre; this was achieved by introducing a political dimension into their works. As a committed Marxist, Brecht believed that theatre must be a vehicle for political ideas. Such an attitude appealed to Mnouchkine and soon became her artistic driving force. Theatre had to be adapted to social needs arising from political circumstances, with entertainment no longer being its primary focus. Brecht's and Mnouchkine's works are therefore often referred to as social experiments rather than plays, with the success of these experiments measured according to the reaction of the audience. Brecht once wrote that the effectiveness of theatre lies in its capacity to lead people into believing that they too can act upon their reflections and actively participate in the process of change as '[t]he present-day world can only be described to present-day people if it is described as capable of transformation' (2001, 274).

Brecht's and Mnouchkine's socialist ideals are clearly visible in their working methods. Opposed to bourgeois domination, state despotism and the fascist idea of the personality cult, they support an even redistribution of power among the members of the troupe – *la création collective* (the collective creation). The political significance of this concept was particularly critical for Brecht, to whom it was clear that collectivism must be reborn after it was destroyed by fascism. The concept of an omniscient director is therefore eliminated from his works. Performances are a result of members' collaboration, discussions and conflicts. There is no hierarchy, every member of the troupe is encouraged to share her or his ideas and thus becomes a source of knowledge for the others. Therefore, such an approach does not only favour an egalitarian mode of creation but is also beneficial due to its didactic value. Mnouchkine describes the method of collective creation this way: 'They know that they must watch. They know that it is valuable for them to watch the others. To watch the others properly' (Kiernander 1993, 15). Collective creation is as beneficial to the performers as it is to the audience. By empowering the actors and by letting them have an impact on their work, spectators are led to believe that they too can have a say in their community and thus influence the process of change.

Developed by Brecht, collective creation as a means of extracting performers' creativity is a perfect tool for experimentation – it is also the approach favoured by Mnouchkine. Actors are encouraged to make contributions at any stage of the production, even during an actual performance. There is therefore no single formula for a successful performance because it constantly evolves due to improvisation. Since they usually cannot predict the final outcome of their work, the Théâtre du Soleil performers often refer to their acting as 'a journey into the unknown' (Kiernander 1993, 22). The idea of change is engraved into the three-year long evolution of the play *1789*, just as it is inherent in the course of history.

The use of collective creation techniques is only one way of showing the audience their potential to provoke social change. More importantly, both Brecht and the Théâtre du Soleil attempt to awaken the spectators' critical thinking, which they see as a more direct incentive to action. Brecht, and subsequently Mnouchkine, wanted their audiences to produce logically-deduced judgements on presented ideas and to subsequently act upon them. In order to pursue this project, new performative devices became necessary. Brecht and Mnouchkine could no longer rely on traditional theatre forms, too often faithful to the Aristotelian concept of the catharsis. Their refusal to comply with the device of the *Ausbruch*² can be explained by its tendency to hypnotise the audience and thus weaken their logical reasoning abilities. Brecht himself was, for instance, opposed to the concept of traditional opera, which makes wide use of the technique. Yet he collaborated with the socialist composer Kurt Weill to produce an opera, its distinction lying in their attempt to challenge the very concept of theatre while simultaneously offering a critique of the capitalist system. Music is therefore not used to provoke a purely emotional response, which is one of the objectives of bourgeois theatre. Instead, it is meant to create emotional detachment. This way it acts as a tool for educating the audience and encouraging them to question the reality they live in. This is also achieved through the use of *gestus* – a way of presenting social interactions between contradictory characters and allowing the audience to critically assess their behaviour and choose the right attitude. Such an approach appeals to Mnouchkine, who aims to educate more than she seeks to entertain.

Another way in which both directors challenge the notion of traditional theatre is by refusing any kind of expressionist devices which they perceive to be irrelevant to their aims; dramatic theatre does not appeal to them. They are, equally, against the other end of the stylistic spectrum – naturalism. According to Mnouchkine, imitating reality 'turns actors into living pieces of furniture' (Kiernander 1993, 26). A naturalistic approach encourages observation rather than critical inquiry on the part of the audience. Reproducing the status quo creates the impression of an inescapable reality and does not leave any room for potential change. Illusion, which leaves the spectator passive, is therefore renounced. In pursuit of the awakening of the audience's critical thinking, Brecht's most influential device – the *Verfremdung* effect – comes into play.

Before answering the question of how the V-effect is adapted by the Théâtre du Soleil, it is necessary to focus on its original meaning, as devised by Brecht. Its main principle is the process of creating distance between the characters and the audience, the distance being not physical but emotional. The audience move away from the inner reality of the play; they do not suspend their disbelief. They must be aware of the distinction between their reality and the reality of the play. Martin Esslin calls the V-effect 'non-emphatic distancing' (1990, 140). The consciousness of the spectator renders her or him capable of passing objective, unbiased judgement on presented problems. Brecht was not the first to employ the technique – it was previously used by East Asian, Indian and Elizabethan theatre. However, his application of it within a European context may be seen as revolutionary. Not only did he detach his audience from the events presented, but he also encouraged them to act upon their reflections. The success of the V-effect depends on the synchronisation of various theatrical devices.

The process is evident in the techniques employed by the Théâtre du Soleil. Mnouchkine's choice of a historical setting for the play is the first aspect of the V-effect, as one of the most important Brechtian influences on the production of *1789* is the idea of historical distancing. By contradicting the concepts of timelessness and universalism perpetuated in bourgeois theatre, Brecht presented history as a closed chapter to which public access was denied. Revolutionary personages from Mnouchkine's play guard their historical reality by making sure that the audience is not immersed in it by identifying with the characters. Watching historical events from a temporally conscious perspective allows the spectator to adopt a critical approach. The

² 'The sudden, devastating cry from the depth of the soul that in their terms constituted the climactic moments of drama' (Esslin 1990, 137).

characters' reality is analysed by the audience and the consequences of this analysis applied to their political outlook.

The task of the actor in Mnouchkine's theatre is to facilitate the transformation of a humble spectator into an active participant. The Théâtre du Soleil actor stands in opposition to the dramatic actor. Here, the performer is more of a craftsman who presents his skill and knowledge. Inspired by cabaret and circus performances, Brecht writes that 'the beauty of nature is a quality which gives the human senses an opportunity to show skill' (Hauptmann 1967, 645-6). The actor's constant self-observation, later defined and described by Barthes,³ shows him as aware of a permanent subjection to judgement. This internal detachment of the actor is also visible in his alienation from the character played, which can be observed in the chapter entitled *Le Lit de Justice* (*The Bed of Justice*): '*Le bateleur se moque de son propre personnage en le rendant larmoyant, suppliant et dérisoire* (The juggler ridicules his own character making him look tearful, wishful and pathetic)', or: '*Le bateleur qui va jouer ce rôle [...] se présente en ironisant sur son personnage*' (The juggler who is going to play this part [...] introduces himself and makes ironic comments concerning his character) (Théâtre du Soleil 1971, 18-19).⁴ The separation between the personage and the craftsman who masters it is clear. Mnouchkine's actors create characters, who are not a given, but who appear in the intellectual space between the performer and their audience. It is left to the spectator to read these characters.

This technique of acting can be defined in opposition to realistic presentation. Mnouchkine says that 'for a long time Europeans have not represented anything. Europeans present everything' (Kiernander 1993, 89). She wants therefore to exercise the art of the parable, to present ideas rather than people and events. The presence of the Brechtian concept of *gestus* is clearly visible here. Mnouchkine adapts it by juxtaposing contradictory social situations and relying on the capacity of the audience to read between the lines and to identify, by means of logical reasoning, the behaviour that she means to represent. This is the case during the performance of the chapter *La Réunion des États Généraux* (*The Meeting of The Estates-General*), when actors use marionettes to present in a mocking fashion the pre-Revolution class conflict.

To intensify the effect of detachment by further convincing the audience that they are merely watching a play, all processes, which normally belong behind the scenes, become visible: props are carried around during the performance, actors dress and put make-up on in front of the spectators' eyes: '*pendant le discours du roi, l'autre bateleur maquille son compagnon qui va jouer Mirabeau*' (during the king's speech, the other juggler does the make-up of his fellow actor who is going to play Mirabeau) (TdS 1971, 18). What is more, Mnouchkine introduces third-person narration to her performances. As a consequence, the audience not only watches the actors but is also told what is being presented.

The reality of the play no longer belongs to the present, but to the past – through the use of verbs conjugated in the past historic – and the future – when Crieur, Conteur and Presentateur announce the stage directions and describe what is about to happen before it is acted out: '*Mesdames et Messieurs, nous allons vous jouer la célèbre comédie: La réunion des États-Généraux*' (Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to perform in front of you the famous comedy: The Meeting of the Estates-General) (TdS 1971, 14). Chapelier, following Presentateur, says: '*Et maintenant, mesdames et messieurs, vous allez assister à un authentique débat parlementaire sur la question des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*' (And now, ladies and gentlemen, you are going to witness an authentic parliamentary debate on the issue of the rights of man and of the citizen) (TdS 1971, 34). The audience is not only presented with the content of these scenes, but also their emotional aspect – the jugglers say: '*c'est cette colère que nous allons jouer*' (it is this anger that we are going to perform) and '*nous allons*

³ In *The Death of the Author*.

⁴ All extracts from the play have been translated by myself. Further references to this edition of the play are given as 'TdS' within the body of the text.

vous jouer dans le mode barbaresque "le roi aux deux visages" (we are going to perform in front of you in a Barbary fashion 'the two-faced king') (TdS 1971, 18, 20).

This is aptly described by John Willett as 'quoting the character played' (2001, 94). By addressing the audience directly, the actor engages in a dialogue regarding the character that he plays. A close relationship is established between the performer and the spectator. One can recognise here the influence of environmental theatre, which favours the rapprochement of actors and audiences. The *1789* performers make full use of this device. The scene of the parliamentary debate engages the spectators in a discussion by transforming the theatre space into an arena for democratic participation. One of the *députés castillanes* (Castilian delegates) acknowledges the close link between the people in the theatre hall when he says: *'Je suis certain que la majorité de ceux qui m'écoutent pensera comme moi'* (I am convinced that the majority of those listening to me will agree with me) (TdS 1971, 36). By recognising the presence and the active involvement of the audience, the actor makes them aware of their political potential and encourages them to participate in the life of their community or their country, and to have their personal input into the process of change.

The V-effect is not only achieved through acting techniques; it is equally visible in the physical structure of the play. The structural fragmentation and discontinuity of the performance allows the spectators to see presented problems clearly and logically, preventing them from suspending their disbelief. Brecht writes:

As we cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither, the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement (2001, 201).

The fragmented character of *1789* is clearly visible through the presence of its distinguishable parts. Similarly, consecutive scenes in Mnouchkine's play are not logically connected. Each of them is a separate chapter that must be appreciated as an individual entity. The idea of giving names to scenes in *1789* conveys a strong Brechtian influence, as during the staging of some of his plays, titles and numbers of scenes were projected onto screens at the back of the stage. Mnouchkine also uses music which is incompatible with the atmosphere of presented events in order to mark this discontinuity. The aim of such devices is to challenge the bourgeois tendency to perform plays in a smooth and hypnotic way. Thus, the audience are constantly reminded that what they are watching is merely a staged act, which can be seen in Bateleur-Magicien's words: *'Si vous le voulez bien, nous allons laisser là l'imaginaire et revenir à notre réalité!'* (If you wish, we are going to leave the imaginary world behind and go back to our reality) (TdS 1971, 21).

The source of Brecht's penchant for the technique of fragmentation can be found in the Dada movement, which flourished in the years following World War I. This aesthetic style favoured the spontaneous combining of arbitrary elements rather than harmony. Brecht's preference for multiplication is clear in his reproach to film: 'the camera gives us only one eye' (Van Dijk 1990, 126). He used, therefore, what Franco Ruffini calls 'vertical montage' (1986, 33), which involved operating on several different levels of fiction simultaneously. Mnouchkine builds on this technique in *1789* by the use of *mise en abîme* and thus develops her own distinctive style. Actors play fairground performers, who, in turn, play participants of the Revolution. Another example of theatre-within-theatre in her play is the appearance of actors of the Comédie-Française who are in fact actors of the Théâtre du Soleil performing the roles of actors of Comédie-Française.

Levels of characterisation are multiplied; theatrical space is also subject to multiplication. Actors appear and disappear from different spots in the audience: '*Un homme sort de la foule, il porte dans ses bras une jeune fille évanouie*' (A man comes out of the crowd holding in his arms a young girl, who has just fainted) (TdS 1971, 32). During the performance they remain both at the centre and at the periphery of events. Mnouchkine achieves this effect by the use of *tréteaux* (multiple platforms located around the theatre hall). As a consequence, the spectators' gaze is directed at a subject of their choice. They are even verbally encouraged to move around the theatre space: '*les spectateurs debout sont invités à se déplacer librement tandis que ceux qui souhaitent plus de confort peuvent s'asseoir sur des gradins*' (The standing audience are invited to circulate freely whilst those wishing to be more comfortable can sit down on the steps) (TdS 1971, 7). Due to the availability of this choice, they become aware of their potential to choose their perspective (here physical, but elsewhere political) and to play an active part in the life of their community.

The idea of change is inherent to Ariane Mnouchkine's artistic creation. According to the philosophy embraced by her Théâtre du Soleil, changing the world should start with the challenging of traditional theatrical techniques established over the centuries. The ideal consequence of this would be rendering theatre-going a more popular activity and engraving a political message into theatre performances. By means of the Brechtian revolutionary concept of *gestus* the actor of the Théâtre du Soleil speaks to the audience and establishes a dialogue, which would have been unacceptable in bourgeois theatre. The purpose of this dialogue is paradoxically not to immerse the audience in the inner reality of the play, but the opposite – to keep them behind an imaginary wall of reason. Eliminating the distance between the stage and the audience serves therefore not to invite the spectator to a fictional world but to encourage them to reflect upon presented events. This makes the audience aware of their potential to participate in the real social and political world. *Gestus* became for Mnouchkine a basic pattern which enabled her to develop other concepts such as theatre for the people and collective creation – all this to achieve greater audience participation. All of these strategies, developed by Brecht but later adapted by Mnouchkine, are a reflection of the peculiar character of the Théâtre du Soleil. They are marked by a strong Brechtian influence but their originality cannot be denied. Brecht is indeed a vision – an ideology to which Mnouchkine added her original technical elements. Calling Mnouchkine a Brechtian paradigm seems therefore to be an oversimplification.

Mnouchkine was not spared criticism even from within her own troupe. Her intention to give the masses an interest in theatre undeniably deserves acclaim. In the spirit of May 1968, the transformation of working conditions should be accompanied by the widening of access of the working class to lifestyle choices traditionally associated with upper classes. However, the insignificant working class participation in the performances of the Théâtre du Soleil suggests that her impact on the central problem of the exclusive character of theatre has been overestimated. What is more, the very concept of *création collective* has also been put into question. In the article 'Ariane Mnouchkine: demiurge et tyran' Philippe Léotard, a member of the Théâtre du Soleil, states:

One must not be utopian. If there has been a small collectivist phenomenon at the Théâtre du Soleil it is due to the authority, to the tyranny even, of Ariane. [...] If we had wanted to direct collectively we would still be in the process of thinking about our first production, and we would never have got around to performing (Salino 1981).

Mnouchkine developed some of the most important concepts that have since transformed theatre. Her own influence is undeniable. The Brechtian influences, rather than overshadowing her genius, added to it and improved the overall appearance of her work. Despite Léotard's

criticism, the work of the French director, regardless of its overall social impact, should be seen as a significant step on the way to permanently changing the face of theatre. Since change is continuous, the audience should be full of hope for the future as others see Mnouchkine as an inspiration for their work, just as she viewed Brecht when adapting his techniques to her original work.

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MA Language, Culture, History: French and Francophone Studies
Department of French

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