

A collective it may be, but France's acclaimed Théâtre du Soleil has been powered by the single-minded vision of one woman for almost four decades.

Caroline Baum meets Ariane Mnouchkine, agitator, den mother, soup server and powerhouse.



The sun queen

THERE'LL BE SIGHS OF RELIEF AT the Sydney Festival offices when France's Théâtre du Soleil (not to be confused with Canada's Cirque du Soleil) arrives later this month. Two months ago, the company's fiery director, Ariane Mnouchkine – a woman the French have endowed with the status of cultural legend – contemplated cancelling her Australian visit in protest at the Howard Government's treatment of refugees.

In Tokyo to meet her after a performance of her latest production, *The Flood Drummers*, I was kept waiting for three days while she considered her position, monitoring events in Australia via the laptop in her dressing-room. Cancellation would have robbed festival director Brett Sheehy of the biggest theatrical coup of his career – one in which he would deliver what no other festival director in this country could. Most, if not all, of them have been trying to woo Mnouchkine and her troupe to Australia for more than 20 years. In every case, she has refused, or festivals have been defeated by the cost of bringing out such a large ensemble: a company of more than 60 actors, together with 150 musical instruments.

Until now, Australians wanting to see one of the world's most thrilling theatre companies have had to make a pilgrimage to its home on the outskirts of Paris at Vincennes, where it occupies a vast expanse of land including an old munitions factory, the Carroucherie.

Performances are held under a huge pitched roof on a vast open stage. There is no

proscenium arch, no wings. Everything is exposed. The actors' dressing-rooms are housed in the scaffolding under the audience seating, and it has become a tradition for theatregoers to arrive early to watch the actors transforming themselves at their personal shrines with wigs, hairpieces, jewellery and make-up. Instead of lessening the magic of the performance, witnessing this ritual only seems to heighten it.

Another trademark is that Mnouchkine tries to greet theatregoers in the foyer as they arrive. I remember shaking her hand a few years ago and begging her to bring the company to Australia, only to have her shake her head of unruly curls and explain that it was just too far (she hates flying). At interval, she serves food to the audience – well, after all, this is France, so why separate culture and cuisine? And besides, Mnouchkine, who has no children of her own, feels maternal not only towards her actors, but towards her audiences, wishing to nourish them in every way.

"I love the transformation an audience makes to prepare for the show," she says, in flawless English. "It is not like going to the cinema. Theatre is not a shop, either; I am not just selling you a ticket. I want audiences to have access to our utopia, and we need their participation to live, so it's a bit like going to mass and making a donation after the service. I love ritual.

"People who come to us are in for a long night – our shows are usually around the three-hour mark, sometimes more, and all in

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTINE FRANCK/MAGNUM PHOTOS

Highbrow drama: Shakespeare goes samurai in Théâtre du Soleil's Paris production of *Henry IV*. (top left) the company's formidable director, Ariane Mnouchkine.



all they may spend five hours with us: they must be welcomed so that they feel they are entering a little world, our kingdom.

"They also need a place where they can lay down their arms and gain new strength. I notice that when we've greeted them and fed them, our audience changes during the evening – especially the French: they lose their brusqueness, they become more civil towards each other," she says, leading me to a small canteen backstage where she offers me a bowl of chicken broth. Members of the cast are having a dinner break during the interval and we all slurp our noodles companionably and noisily together.

I first saw the Théâtre du Soleil in London when I was 12. My parents had taken me to a performance of Mnouchkine's epic re-creation of the French Revolution, called simply *1789*. They had warned me that we would have to stand for four hours while the play unfurled on a series of mini stages arranged in a circle around us. I imagined that I was in for a terrible ordeal; instead, I understood that art can change your life, and I felt theatre's transforming, transcendent energy like an electric current.

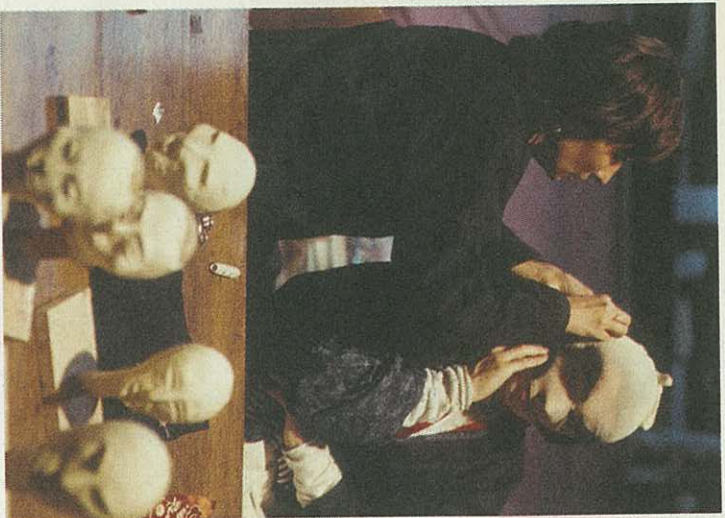
I became a member of the hungry rabble desperate for bread, seduced by the charisma of Danton, inspired by the beat of the drum. At the end of the four hours, I could have stood for another four. Next to me, Laurence Olivier cheered, tears rolling down his cheeks.

IRONICALLY, FOR A COMPANY RUN AS A collective, the spirit of that other revolution, in the Paris of 1968, had little impact on Mnouchkine, who had founded the company four years earlier with a group of fellow students at the Sorbonne. "Would you believe the only drama group at the university at that time was one which did the classics and was only for men? They sent me straight to the sewing department!" she laughs.

"Many people thought '68 was a turning point for us, but we had already been living our own kind of utopia for four years. Maybe we were a little arrogant when we started out, but what we saw in '68 was the danger of bad radicalism, people who became sinister – not student leaders like Daniel Cohn-Bendit, he was rather joyful – but others, who also had an arrogance about them and whose struggle was a struggle for power. I think we've lasted because we distanced ourselves from those factions," says Mnouchkine.

Before the Sorbonne, she read English at Oxford, where her peers included film director Ken Loach and theatre critic Michael Billington, who had a small part in a student production of *Coriolanus*. "I remember a strong woman in a woolly coat who imposed discipline on a somewhat untidy production, even though she was only the assistant director," Billington recalls.

Make no mistake: Théâtre du Soleil may be a collective, but Mnouchkine is definitely its Sun Queen. She may travel in economy class with the company, but, as Billington puts it:



"Like all first-rate directors, she's a democratic autocrat. You can only achieve the kind of visual unity and consistency that she does if you have a strong controlling figure. She is clearly the boss."

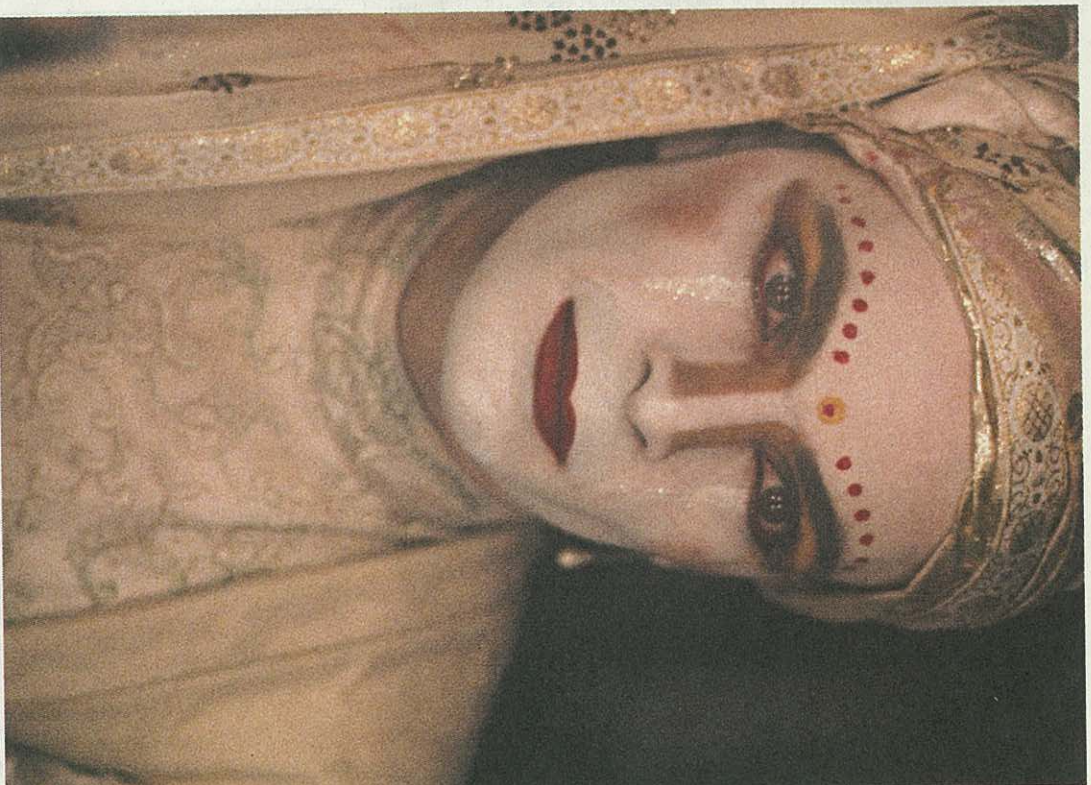
Although loved and admired by the company, she is also famous for having a terrible temper. Two of the things that are said to infuriate her are not being punctual and smoking. All her actors strive to please and surprise her.

"You don't care whether she's tough or gentle, you'd do anything for her," asserts Juliana Carneiro, who plays Madame Li, a peasant hawket, in *The Flood Drummers*. Carneiro joined the company in 1990 as a trained dancer from the Maguy Marin company, after Mnouchkine selected her at a workshop which involved acting out flying on a magic carpet and skating on ice. (More than 2,000 people sign up whenever any Mnouchkine masterclass is announced, such is her charisma and the reputation of the company.)

One of the reasons the actors strive so hard to please their queen is that, in the spirit of the collective nature of the company, Mnouchkine does not follow a conventional approach to casting. No-one knows, during the extended rehearsal period, which part they will play, so they are kept in a state of slightly paranoid and highly competitive anxiety, which the actors seem to thrive on, so they assure me.

Mnouchkine also fuels their ambition with generous support for research. In the case of *The Flood Drummers*, each member of the company received a six-month travel grant to study techniques that might contribute to the work. The actors scattered across Asia to investigate music, dance, puppetry and shadowplay. Ironically, in *Drummers*, many of the company's best actors (Mnouchkine accepts that, even in a collective, there are inevitably stars) are invisible, shrouded in black clothes and masks as they manipulate the human puppets on stage.

Her productions are an expensive business. One of the elements that make the work so powerful is the intoxicating sight of so many actors – Mnouchkine peoples her stage more lavishly than any other director, except perhaps Pina Bausch, and choreographs their movement to form stunning tableaux of gorgeous pageantry, accompanied by a tapestry of sounds and music.



She took the 360 Africans in. "France is not a great example of racial tolerance, but we did not do what you are doing and dump them on an island. This shocks us."



Fortunately, the director is a favourite of the Mitterrand regime's flamboyant arts minister, Jack Lang, who increased the company's funding significantly. Today, the company receives about 7 million francs (\$1.8 million), which Mnouchkine describes as "fair, but not enough", as she will never compromise the scale of her vision.

"My taste is for the epic. I don't seem to choose works for two actors, or even the plays of Chekhov. Rather than spend it on sets, I spend it on people and time," she says, pointing out that every member of the company, including herself, earns the same salary: 11,000 francs a month (about \$2,800).

"My taste is for the epic. I don't seem to choose plays for two actors". (clockwise from above) pulling the strings in *The Flood Drummers*; masking reality; the dramatic face of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*; the "democratic autocrat" (foreground) cranks up the intensity.



SHE MAY NOT HAVE MOUNTED THE barricades in '68, but Mnouchkine is a passionately political figure, committed to social justice and humanitarian issues. Rather than using the stage in some heavy-handed fashion as an arena for agitprop, she leads the actors in defiant public gestures such as drawing attention to the plight of refugees and AIDS sufferers. In 1995, Mnouchkine went on a hunger strike to protest against Europe's non-intervention in the Bosnian crisis. But her most high-profile protest, involving the entire company, took place in 1997.

"We were in the middle of doing a production of *Tartuffe* which I had set in Algeria. One day someone rang me and said, 'I have 360 people who don't have proper papers and I don't know what to do with them any more.' They had been sheltered by a union, who could not look after them any more. So I called the company together, explained the situation, and we decided to take them in. They stayed at the Cartoucherie for a month, and came back three months later, again for a month. They were Africans from Mali, decked out in beautiful, colourful clothes and they never, ever got in the way or caused any trouble. At first, audiences were a little nervous of their presence, but they got used to them. They would sleep in the big hall where the stage was, coming in after performances.

"Certainly, France is not a great example of racial tolerance, but at least we did not do what you are doing and dump them on an island. This shocks us, because your country is so vast, and when you look at Australia's history, it seems to be an inappropriate reaction."

She admits that consensus on taking a stand is not always easily achieved; there have been passionate and heated arguments within the company on questions to do with the Middle East and particularly the Gulf War. The current world crisis, which the company watched via CNN in their Tokyo hotel rooms, has prompted fresh debate. At their daily meeting, world events are regularly discussed and interpreted, along with the business of the day. If it sounds tedious, the actors claim the opposite is true. "It's the ideology of the company that gives us the



strength to keep going in between shows," says Duccio Bellugi Vanaucini, who plays the chancellor in *The Flood Drummers*.

PERHAPS HER OWN ORIGINS, WHICH ARE Russian and Jewish as well as French and British, contribute to Mnouchkine's empathy for those who are uprooted or displaced, although she herself has never been a theatrical gypsy, moving from company to company as a gun for hire. Instead, like Peter Brook, that other theatre guru based in Paris, she has formed a tribe and appointed herself its ruler, needing the security of intense personal relationships with the other members to keep her grounded as she embarks on each theatrical journey.

When company members have left, to pursue other projects or simply to lead a normal family life – something which several of the actors acknowledge is virtually impossible unless you are involved with a fellow member – there have been bitter rifts.



"When we created Soleil, we wanted to be happy – not to be rich, not to be quiet, but to be happy. That means really living. I think we've achieved that."

"Ariane has deepened the dialogue between East and West": (from top) 15th-century China à la *The Flood Drummers*; rehearsing an Indian-flavoured *Eumenides* by Aeschylus; *El Soudain des nuits d'ivell* explores France's reaction to the Chinese annexation of Tibet.



"We are a family and, like all children, we don't want to be treated as such," explains one of her actors. "She's connected to us like a kite and a string; she never pulls too much, but she's still full of tension." Mnouchkine herself shares a Paris home with actor Juliana Carneiro. Previously she lived with her long-time collaborator, writer Hélène Cixous (whose work includes *The Flood Drummers*).

When we finally retreat to her dressing-room, Mnouchkine is surrounded by tour paraphernalia – an exercise bike, underwear drying on a heater and boxes of gifts from Japanese fans who have marvelled at her understanding of their theatrical traditions.

The Japanese part of the tour was always the one Mnouchkine worried about most. In *Drummers*, she has adapted various gestural techniques from Bunraku puppetry, an extremely complex, formal and highly stylised theatrical language. "To master the way a Bunraku actor turns his head takes 12 years, and we had only months," she says. She's relieved that it has been so well received.

Mnouchkine is a large woman, masculine in dress, and always leaning forward, whether walking or sitting. In rehearsal, she doesn't sit on the sidelines and watch – she gets in among the actors, not so much to demonstrate physically, but to gauge, and if necessary, crank up their intensity.

"She is like a flame," says Bellugi Vanaucini. "Always burning. Perhaps now the flame is less blue than it was, but it is still a fire."

It's an image that Mnouchkine echoes later when she says: "When we created Soleil, we wanted to be happy – not to be rich, not to be quiet, but to be happy. That means celebrating victories and really living. I think we've achieved that, and it's still our goal, to keep on burning."

EVER SINCE HER STUDENT DAYS, WHEN SHE boarded a ship in Marseilles and eventually got off in Yokohama, Mnouchkine has looked to the East for inspiration, and Asia has been central to her landmark productions: the kabuki *Richard II* she took to Los Angeles for the 1984 Olympic arts festival; and Aeschylus's epic Greek blood-lust tragedies, which she transposed to an Indian Kathakali-style.

Long-time admirer and former Adelaide Festival director Peter Sellars says: "Ariane was not just window-shopping or dipping her finger in for a taste of the East. A lot of Western theatre has fetishised the East by appropriating a bit of the make-up, a few gestures here and there, but Ariane has made a life commitment and deepened the dialogue between the East and the West."

The Flood Drummers, a fable of greed, conflict and corruption set in a 15th-century Chinese kingdom, is not just a powerful polemic, it's a spectacle of breathtaking technical audacity. The actors have mastered a highly stylised language of movement, including flying and leaping similar to that in the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, but without the use of special effects or wires. Mnouchkine is most insistent that "we were working on that style long before the film, which I love, came out". They also play enormous Korean drums ferociously – it took nine months to learn the blood-curdling rhythms.

Not all of Mnouchkine's ideas are accepted by the group, and some have even defeated her warrior spirit. She appears to have abandoned, at least for now, a project close to her heart: to stage a work about the French Resistance. In the meantime, she is putting the finishing touches to a film version of *Drummers*.

Mnouchkine's first foray into film remains her most successful – *Molière*, a celebration of the life of France's greatest actor/playwright. It is a glorious biopic, and one which deserves to be seen more often for its extraordinary ensemble cast and its scenes of grandiose splendour at Louis XIV's court at Versailles. The film earned itself several French Césars (Oscars) and was seen by more than two million people. It is also the only time that the Sun King met his match in the Sun Queen. ■