

Maria Shevtsova

A Theatre that Speaks to Citizens

Interviews with two actresses of the Théâtre du Soleil

La Ville Parjure ou Le reveil des Erinyes (The Forsworn City or The Awakening of the Furies), directed by Ariane Mnouchkine, text by Hélène Cixous, was premiered in Paris in May 1994 by Théâtre du Soleil and played until July. In an interview published in *Western European Stages*, vol.7 n.3, Mnouchkine discussed the implications of *La Ville Parjure* a year after: how, in her words, it was a theatre for citizens and how it disclosed the treachery of passivity and silence when voices must be raised against corruption, deceit, injustice and suffering. In the light of Mnouchkine's decision at the Avignon Festival 1995 to go on a hunger strike - this in protest against the inaction of Europe and the United States as regards Bosnia - her words were particularly resonant, and to the point. She was joined in the hunger strike at Avignon and then at the Cartoucherie de Vincennes in Paris, where the Théâtre du Soleil works, by several other directors and actors. Their collective action was the end-point of a process that had begun in 1993, when the Sarajevo Association was formed at the Avignon Festival and meetings and petitions were followed up by material help to artists in the embattled city. During the 1994 Avignon Festival, forums on Bosnia and Algeria, which opened onto questions concerning Islam, were employed as further sources of information, consciousness-raising and support. The Avignon Declaration of 1995, which announced the hunger strike, marked what *Le Monde* (25 August) described as a break by artists and intellectuals with their usual petitioning by putting themselves personally at risk.

Following are two interviews¹ concerning the production of *La Ville Parjure*. The first is with Juliana Carneiro da Cunha, Immonde (First Coryphee), a Fury and the Queen in *La Ville Parjure*, and the second with Renata Ramos Maza, the Mother in *La Ville Parjure*.

I read the book L'affaire du sang by Anne-Marie Casteret which is cited with thanks in the program of La Ville Parjure. Then I read books by haemophiliacs and also about nurses working with people with AIDS. We all read, though not necessarily the same things; and we shared what we had discovered. There were moments of indigestion: the reality of it is so enormous. Sometimes, when I was reading a book, I'd stop and cry, although I wouldn't be thinking about the play.



Juliana Carneiro da Cunha

MARIA: *You play three roles in La Ville Parjure that are very different from each other. When you work on The Forsworn City, do you, in your imagination as an actress, link your roles here to that of Clytemnestra and this production as a whole to The Atrides?*

JULIANA: There is a link through the fact that this play by H el ene Cixous is called *The Forsworn City or the Awakening of the Furies*, and that the Furies are the characters of the fourth play of *The Atrides*. The Eumenides were the Furies who had become benevolent. They return in Aeschylus saying: "We have become benevolent. We've made a pact with Athena so that the earth may become more just and democracy more wide-spread and stronger. And look at it, nothing has changed." The Furies of *The Forsworn City* say the same thing. Since I also play a Fury, the idea I hold in my imagination is that the Furies defended Clytemnestra. They persecuted Orestes because they obeyed the law of the mother. There's a point at which this is very clear. It's as if the Furies were saying: "We persecute assassins today just as we persecuted Orestes." Clytemnestra comes to mind. So does Athena, all the more so because I played her in the last play of the Atrides cycle. The Fury that I play in *The Forsworn City* announces the words of Athena: "And Athena said ..." I asked H el ene permission to quote exactly Athena's dialogue, as written by Aeschylus two thousand five hundred years ago: "Let this kindly union with the earth show itself in events rich with good men." This is the pact that Athena seals with the Furies. The word "democracy" existed then. So did the vote, discussion, choice, the exercise of conscience in civic, social life, and the desire to create a just and equal society. But there you are, where are we now? With a political right

that is taking up more and more room ... With two world wars in this century ... with fascism returning to Italy, with wars in the name of gods.

MARIA: *Well, the contemporariness of The Forsworn City comes from this as well.*

JULIANA: It's contemporary and it's eternal. It talks about humanity. I wonder how it will be in two thousand years time, when people will want to play *The Forsworn City* as we have played Aeschylus.

MARIA: *The Forsworn City calls into question the type of democracy that we have today, doesn't it? How can we be democratic if facts of primary importance are kept quiet? Surely the play is making a point about what is happening right now rather than about something eternal!*

JULIANA: Certainly! Look at Forzza ...

MARIA: *Which is a reference to Berlusconi and Forza Italia? [There is a difference in spelling between the name of Cixous' character and the Italian term for Berlusconi's political movement.]*

JULIANA: What is incredible is that the play was written in May-June of 1993 when Berlusconi had not yet come to power. The play is like a premonition. H el ene didn't call her character "Forzza" because of Forza Italia, but because the word means "strength" or "force"!

MARIA: *Even so, the movement which became Forza Italia existed already, and so did Berlusconi! Cixous may well have felt the importance of the word in respect of what was already happening in Italy. What about France? You spoke about the "eternal", but I'd like to ask you this. Theatre specialists of all kinds have been captivated, during these past years, by the idea of the universality of the theatre. Now, are the same things meant by the*

terms "eternal" and "universal"? Are they synonymous? Furthermore, if we insist on the "universal" nature of the theatre, what do we do about what is particular in it? After all, aren't Cixous' play and Mnouchkine's production both inspired by something particular, which is the contaminated blood affair that occurred in France?

JULIANA: This particular affair happened in France, but we know that similar cases have occurred elsewhere in the world. I think that, when you evoke an event that is quite particular, you touch on something universal. You are universal when you are particular. I think that, if you tell the story of one particular people, you are touching on the universal of which they are a part. We are talking about human beings.

MARIA: *And what about the particular French people who were directly affected by the whole business of the contaminated blood? Are they absorbed in this universal, this Humanity with a capital H that you've just been talking about?*

JULIANA: What's at stake there is justice, and we know how difficult it is for justice to be done. There is law, and there is justice. There are people who make the laws, and then there is reality, where these laws are not respected. Just think of Hippocrates' oath, which is pronounced in the play by Madame Lion, the woman doctor: "And if I am forsworn (that is, break my oath), then may my destiny be otherwise." It's at this point that the male doctor says that nobody should ever swear because - I don't remember his exact words - people are young, they swear and then, straight afterwards they "break their oath".

MARIA: *I'd like to come back, just to bother you a little, to this notion of the "particular" and to what, nevertheless, is a specific French case. When preparing the show you all used*

Anne-Marie Casteret's book, *L'Affaire du sang* (The Blood Scandal - Paris: La Découverte, 1992). Because of this, you spoke, didn't you, about a situation specific to France, in which, in addition, a number of important political issues are involved? Did you try to use this particular case so as to remind spectators of what was at stake in it?

JULIANA: I think that Hélène took a true story of our time in order to talk about a situation occurring now but which refers to a universal situation, as happens in tragedy. I think that the play talks about a specific case in the same way it does about the King. The Queen says that the King is "the best thing available", "if you get Forzza tomorrow, you will regret it". If we have fascism or nazism again tomorrow ... what do we do in a situation which is as fragile and as politically difficult as the one we are living in now, and one where socialism has been discredited? How do we become conscious of the fact that what we have is the best we've got? How can a politician stay faithful to his principles all his life? What must he do so as not to let himself be taken over by "the system", not be caught up in the political snares, which destroy ideals? What must we do to stay faithful to the ideals of our youth, to keep our inner youth, our hope?

MARIA: *Does this production give hope?*

JULIANA: I think it does insofar as it stirs up people's consciousness. It's not that those of us who work at the Théâtre du Soleil think that we ought to dictate the truth to others. It's simply that we live this awakening of consciousness in our daily life. The production also talks about the homeless, with whom we are in contact every day. It talks about everything that we are living through right now, and raises questions as to what we are to do so as not to be afraid. I work. I go home. I watch



television. I don't want to have too many complications to deal with: I'm too tired and have too many things to do already. How am I to behave as a social being? So, hope is this: it's being alert, being aware, being active.

MARIA: *Hope is also incarnated in the role of the Mother who becomes a kind of metaphor of the city and of life ...*

JULIANA: ... and of the person who wants to be - I'm quoting the text - "a rebellious trumpet whose notes are intolerable to the ears of wolves". The Mother wants to go on shouting at the top of her voice. Let's be together so that she's not all alone in her cries. Let us give her our support!

MARIA: *You know, it's only now, in talking with you, that I understand the Mother fully. She carries other mothers inside her: Gorki's Mother, Brecht's, and Aeschylus's Mother - Clytemnestra. This Mother is female strength as seen through the twen-tieth century. This figure of the Mother is not only the bearer of hope in the play, but also carries all of its force. What's at issue here is feminine power, which represents social power. In other words, the feminine principle and the social principle are one and the same.*

JULIANA: We've come back a full circle: we come back, through the Mother, to Aeschylus and to the Furies, who defend the law of the Mother.

MARIA: *Which helps to explain why several spectators said that the production was too feminist. I wondered how you could be too feminist and what, in fact, being too feminist really means. And perhaps this is what it means - that the production shows feminine strength!*

JULIANA: Yes, it is feminine - although what is feminine also exists in men. It's true that the Furies, the Mother and the Queen, who tries to wake the King's conscience, are

Juliana Carneiro da Cunha and Nirupana Nityanandan (front) in *La Ville Parjure*.

part of this feminine strength. I think that women need power less than men. Power isn't a female characteristic. When you think of all the devilry of our century - it's men who have badly needed power and glory and who have waged their wars in order to satisfy these needs.

MARIA: *I don't think, though, that the production relies all that much on this idea. The men don't look for power; they try to hide their guilt.*

JULIANA: It's money that predominates in the play. I don't remember the dialogue exactly, but it suggests that abandoning the contaminated blood involved serious economic consequences. Everything would have to have been dismantled; machines would have to have been reconstructed - which is precisely what happened when the news got out. Not using contaminated stock would have meant spending money! It's absurd. It's criminal. Anne-Marie Casteret's book discusses the link between guilt and money.

Renata Ramos Maza

MARIA: *What, in your opinion, is La Ville Parjure about? You're inside the show, which means that your gaze could well be different from the gaze of the spectator.*

RENATA: I think the show is about faith, about the criminality of human beings, and the relations between them. It speaks of honour, truth, justice and injustice, weakness, and cowardice. But it is basically about the desire of human beings to believe and understand.

MARIA: *To believe or to hope?*

RENATA: To hope also. This performance is not at all about a single individual. What matters is the encounter between two human beings. For me, the show is about

the hope of human beings today who fight for what they need to believe. The political system, the legal system - all that is full of holes, and, yet, people struggle on.

MARIA: *As you see it, then, the show is very optimistic?*

RENATA: Yes, and this is what I like so much about the piece. It discusses such difficult things, but it isn't morbid. In the theatre you speak about serious things in an overly serious way you share nothing with the spectators. The performance becomes morbid. It becomes "intelligent", and there is nothing left to understand. You have to dive into a performance as into a lake and get wet. You have to look for things and discover them so that the performance is alive. Obviously, it's not easy. And it's tiring to dive for eight hours like that. But spectators are free to look at certain scenes and then doze a little. The theatre isn't a place where spectators have to sit in a stupefied way. Sometimes listening means letting go, and saying that you are tired. Actors are nothing without spectators. The best meals at my parents' place were those where we stayed at the table for a long time, had coffee and talked; and things happened between us. I'm aware of the fact that the show is long, as people say, but I enjoy participating in it. I think that people will have learned a lot about themselves if the only thing that they remember from the performance is how they stayed on, to the end. The best thing of all is discovering capacities in yourself that you had forgotten about because no-one has asked you to be patient and tenacious.

MARIA: *Do you think the mise en scene is political, that it analyses a political problem, that it is political theatre?*

RENATA: I think that it is theatre, above all else. Everything today is linked, fortunately or unfortunately. Of course, the production

talks about a political situation that is happening today, and it is biased. After all, the play was written by someone who was involved in what was happening in France at a particular time, when the Left was in power and when people believed in such big words as "democracy", "equality", "fraternity", "morality". They were part of the idealism of the period.

MARIA: *And do you think that the production questions this idealism, or, on the other hand, does it attempt to say that this idealism should be kept up?*

RENATA: I think that it appeals to an idealistic spirit. Wanting to believe in an ideal - that's in the text. The production doesn't say that you should be an idealist, or that you shouldn't be one. It's not its purpose. When you try to do things properly, you have to be as neutral as possible. You cannot, as an actor, go on to the stage and criticise your character because, if you do, you won't be able to find his or her soul. Afterwards, in daily life, you can say "I like this, I don't like that". Stage work doesn't allow you to come on with your own personal ideas. If you do, you won't be able to get inside the text. The performance won't come to you. At least, that's the way it is at the Théâtre du Soleil.

MARIA: *Even so, let's take Forzza, for example, who brings Berlusconi to mind or, at least, what a Berlusconi represents today. The elections in Italy and all the debates surrounding them were on television and in the press, and became part of our daily life. How can we wipe all that from our consciousness when we look at the performance? Moreover, how can we avoid noti-cing that the text takes a critical perspective on him? And the audience responds to it as such. It also laughs.*

RENATA: Yes, but is it critical laughter? When you see Forzza - I mean the character - do you see someone who is in the process of making fun of himself? I don't think you do. I think you see someone who is very dignified and who defends what he believes

in. The context with all its resonance comes into the picture afterwards. But we don't know, when we rehearse, how the audience will respond. There were a number of things that were sacred for us during rehearsals, and yet, suddenly, the audience was laughing at them!

MARIA: *I find it difficult to understand how this character can be seen as dignified. One can't take him very seriously. Doing so would mean not seeing what a figure like this - Berlusconi or any other, Italian, French, or whatever - signifies today ... a manipulator, a neofascist.*

RENATA: Well, if that's what Forzza is like, you're the one who is telling me.

MARIA: *Really!*

RENATA: What I mean is that you can't go on stage making a caricature of someone. You can't go on stage saying "I want to make people laugh" - or, for that matter, "I want to make them cry". It's unthinkable. We always try to go on to the stage whole. I also worked on Forzza, although not in order to perform him in public. We all work on different roles and, consequently, all participate in discovering this or that character so that he or she stays rounded, universal, and not an idea that one single person had drawn up for himself or herself. A character is nourished by different points of view.

MARIA: *So, the aim is to have a global view, from the inside?*

RENATA: Exactly. Doing other characters and seeing other points of view nourishes the performance of each one of us, and nourishes the whole.

MARIA: *Did the actors refer a lot to the case of contaminated blood when they were preparing the performance? I'm putting my question in plural terms, since the company works in a collective way.*

RENATA: For me, personally, referring to the case was essential. I read the book

L'affaire du sang by Anne-Marie Casteret which is cited with thanks in the programme of *La Ville Parjure*. Then I read books by haemophiliacs and also about nurses working with people with AIDS. We all read, though not necessarily the same things; and we shared what we had discovered. There were moments of indigestion: the reality of it is so enormous. Sometimes, when I was reading a book, I'd stop and cry, although I wouldn't be thinking about the play. The play followed on, later: it was something else again. You don't perform telling yourself that you have read a lot. You just perform. Quite clearly, it's very important to gather information as you work on a show, and to digest, to absorb, what you have accumulated. And you must respect the spectators among whom there are people who have lived through experiences similar to the ones we have read about and perform.

Translated from French by Maria Shevtsova

1. The full interview with Renata Ramos Maza was published in *Western European Stages*, vol.6 n.3, fall 1994. Both interviews were originally published in French in *Théâtre / Public* n.121, January-February 1995.

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JULIANA CARNEIRO DA CUNHA (Brazil) trained as a dancer using Laban improvisation before going to the Volkwangschule founded by Kurt Jooss. She has performed with a number of dance companies, notably with Maurice Béjart and Maguy Marin, and danced such dramatic roles as Phaedra in Brazil, to which she returned after her first stay in Europe. She joined the Théâtre du Soleil, following a major dance tour in Japan with Marin, to play Clytemnestra in the *Atrides* cycle (1990-93).

RENATA RAMOS MAZA (Mexico) studied for two and a half years at a drama school in Paris before doing a workshop with Ariane Mnouchkine in 1993 that led to Mnouchkine's offer for her to join the Théâtre du Soleil. Before appearing with the Théâtre du Soleil, Ramos Maza played at the Théâtre de l'Épée de Bois in Paris.