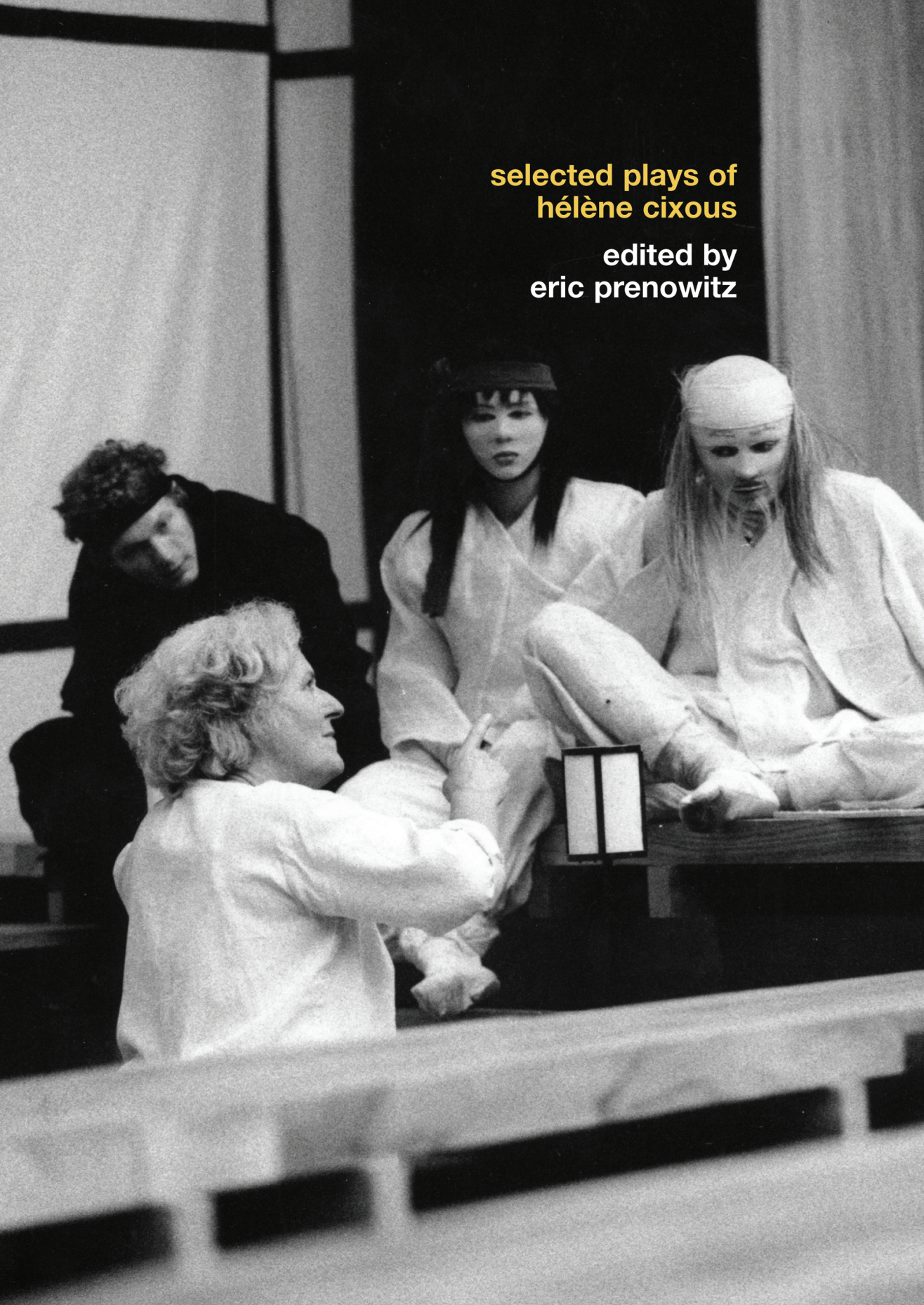


**selected plays of
hélène cixous**

**edited by
eric prenowitz**



Selected Plays of Hélène Cixous

Though renowned as a theorist, critic and writer of fiction, Hélène Cixous is less known in the English-speaking world for her work in theatre. Yet her playwriting – working mainly with the Théâtre du Soleil and its director Ariane Mnouchkine – establishes her as a participant in some of the most adventurous European theatre-making of the last forty years.

This collection brings together four of Cixous's plays – three of which appear in English for the first time:

- *Portrait of Dora*, translated by Ann Liddle
- *Black Sail White Sail*, translated by Donald Watson
- *The Perjured City*, translated by Bernadette Fort
- *Drums on the Dam*, translated by Judith G. Miller and Brian J. Mallet

Featuring a new interview with Hélène Cixous in which she talks in detail about her experience and practice as a playwright, and a translation of her essay, "Enter the Theatre," *Selected Plays of Hélène Cixous* concludes with a bibliography of her theatre writing and a complete list of premières of her work.

This exciting new collection is a unique and extraordinary resource for scholars, students and theatre-makers alike.

Hélène Cixous is a writer, playwright, theorist and critic. She created the first French doctoral programme in Women's Studies and has published several major plays and theoretical texts, as well as more than thirty works of fiction. Her publications in English translation include *FirstDays of the Year* (1998), *The Third Body* (1999), *Portrait of Jacques Derrida* (2003) and *Reveries of the Wild Woman* (2003).



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Selected Plays of Hélène Cixous

EDITED BY ERIC PRENOWITZ

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Foreword

Modernepic Theatre

ERIC PRENOWITZ

This collection of plays by Hélène Cixous is the first of its kind in any language. It contains four plays in previously unpublished English translations which together begin to chart out one of the essential theatrical itineraries of our times: both in Hélène Cixous's long writing career and in the history of contemporary theatre. The volume opens with two additional texts that serve to situate Cixous's involvement with theatre in theoretical, historical and literary terms. The first is an extended interview with the author conducted expressly for this publication, and in which she discusses the "laws" of theatre and retraces her journey as a playwright. The second, "Enter the Theatre," is an essay by Cixous, originally a lecture delivered in 2000, in which she reflects on one of her recent plays and explores the origins (autobiographical, artistic, ethical) and the ends of her theatre. A bibliography of Hélène Cixous's plays and a list of premières complete the book.

Hélène Cixous was born in Oran, Algeria in 1937. She grew up in a multilingual household formed of the North and the South, of European and North African memories, of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish heritages. Although she received French nationality at birth – Algeria was then a French colony – in 1941 her citizenship was revoked by the anti-Jewish laws of the Vichy regime. Her profound mistrust of nationalism and the concept of nationality can be dated to this decisive experience. Her father died when she was ten years old, and in 1955 she moved to France. Her mother remained in Algeria until 1971, well after Independence. As an author of fiction, a playwright, a professor, a theorist and a critic, Hélène Cixous has been a central figure in the profound reassessment of prevailing intellectual paradigms that has swept through virtually every domain of the humanities since the 1960s. She participated in the events of 1968, and was among the founders of the experimental Université de Paris VIII. At this time, Cixous's friends and collaborators included such scholars and artists as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jean Genet and Jacques Lacan, some of whom she recruited to join Paris VIII.

The earliest of Hélène Cixous's plays included here is *Portrait of Dora*, in which a Freudian primal scene is revisited and played out again on a different stage. It originally opened in 1976, although *Portrait du soleil*, the book of fiction on which it was based, had been published in 1973. This was a period during which Cixous had become intensely involved in the women's movement. In 1975 she published "The Laugh of the Medusa" which, along with a number of other theoretical texts, contributed to her reputation, particularly in the English-speaking world, as a "new" French feminist theorist. By the time her next major play, *The Conquest of the School at Madhubai*, was staged in 1983, many transformations had taken place: in the French political world, with the election of the Socialists in 1981, but particularly in Hélène Cixous's world of writing. In 1977 she had discovered Clarice Lispector, a Brazilian author who was to join Cixous's elected family of vital writers. And above all, in the early 1980s, Ariane Mnouchkine, the director of the Théâtre du Soleil, asked Hélène Cixous to write a play for her troupe.

The result was *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia*, which opened in 1985 and marked a watershed in Cixous's theatrical writing. This "history play" in the Shakespearian tradition seems in retrospect to have obeyed both political and personal imperatives. It develops a critique of Western Cold War and neo-colonial politics and, at the same time, this tragic account of Cambodia's recent history recalls that of another former French colony, Cixous's native Algeria. *The Iliad, or The India of Their Dreams*, Hélène Cixous's second play for the Théâtre du Soleil, opened in 1987. It involved an even more ambitious political-poetical project, in which the story of the Partition of India becomes a metaphor for all the hopes and tragedies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The protagonists of the cruel dismemberments in recent history (former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Israel–Palestine . . .) find their parts played out in this epic battle between love and hate, between new aspirations to freedom and recourse to divisive delimitations. Each of the succeeding plays – *Black Sail White Sail*, *The Story (That We'll Never Know)*, *The Perjured City*, *Drums on the Dam*, to name the major productions – is a radically singular creation, marked at once by Cixous's celebrated audacity in linguistic and textual innovation, and by a complex relationship to the great theatrical traditions (Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Noh . . .), which are simultaneously summoned, reinterpreted and transfigured. Each play in turn has attempted to find a just alliance between the art of the theatre and its political messianicity.¹ *The Perjured City* and *Drums on the Dam*, both included in this volume, are the two most recent works Cixous has written for the Théâtre du Soleil, this unique laboratory of theatrical innovation where Cixous has played a central role for some twenty years.

Although there are more translations of Cixous into English than into any other language, those currently available represent only a small proportion of her prolific and multifaceted oeuvre. There are many reasons for this, including the sheer volume of Hélène Cixous's publications. But one of the most important factors is precisely the resistance to translation for which her texts are known. As Jacques Derrida puts it, Cixous's entire oeuvre is "nearly untranslatable."² This does not mean that it is simply untranslatable, but neither is it *simply* translatable. If a text were to offer no resistance whatsoever to translation, the original would have no originality: it would always already be in virtual translation. In other words, the true work of translation is to grapple with the untranslatable: that element of a text that will never (fully) surrender to translation's siege. In this sense a translation is creative in the manner of a reading: it involves an interpretative activity that is necessarily selective, partial. This is particularly true in translating Cixous. She inhabits the French language in non-standard ways, pushing it ever farther in the direction of its idiomatic singularities. She herself has often spoken and written about her intense, complex, "foreign" relationship to the French language.³ Even in the original, her texts call for a certain intralingual translation, a careful reading capable of interpreting subtle *displacements* of the French language within the French language.

Hélène Cixous's theatrical texts and her poetic fiction are not woven on the same loom. Whereas in her fiction, the signifier, and generally speaking the unconscious forces of the writing subject, are cast in a major role, the theatre demands a different textual economy. But what Cixous holds back in terms of properly poetical textual density she unleashes at another level: the slightest nuances and inflexions of spoken language are pressed into service, minuscule variations on everyday expressions, juxtapositions or omissions, all of which take on life in the body of an actor and in the ear of a spectator. And this leads to another type of difficulty for translation: the need to be particularly attentive to the breath, the phrasing, the musicality of the language, the different levels of discourse – for the vegetable hawker and the king may not have the same turn of phrase – and ultimately to all that is left unsaid when something is said.

The four plays in this collection have been translated by five translators. Each translation is a remarkable achievement in itself, and no attempt has been made to harmonize or to standardize them. A translation of Cixous is never a fixed monument, but a smuggler, a furtive border-crosser, and a witness. This volume is for theatre-goers in the broadest sense of the word, for scholars and readers of Cixous, for those who wish to study – and perform – her plays. But it is also a study in translation, as each of the English texts included here is the result of a unique encounter with Hélène Cixous’s inimitable writing.

Notes

- 1 I am thinking here of what Derrida calls “Messianicity without messianism,” as “the openness to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without any horizon of awaiting and without any prophetic prefiguration,” *Foi et savoir*, Paris: Seuil, 2000 [1996], p. 30.
- 2 “H. C. pour la vie, c’est à dire . . .” in *Hélène Cixous, croisées d’une oeuvre*, Paris: Galilée, 2000, p. 17.
- 3 See, for example, Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints*, Routledge, 1997, p. 84.



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On Theatre

An Interview with H el ene 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 Th eatre 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 Th eatre 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 Th eatre 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 theatricalizing 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 theatricalization 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 Th eatre 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 Bouckereshliev 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 Micaoo!

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 Madhubaï*: 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 naiveté, 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.