

Dominic Glynn

(Re)telling Old Stories

**Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*
and Ariane Mnouchkine's
*Les Atrides***

Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine are among the most important directors in recent theatre history.

This book focuses on two of their landmark productions, *Mahabharata* (1985) and *Les Atrides* (1992-4) respectively, in order to uncover parallel methodologies in the transfer of ancient mythological narratives to the contemporary French stage.

It investigates audiences' relationship with these works re-told, questioning their/our relationship to heritage, at a time when marketing departments and politicians re-hash the same old stories to cajole would-be consumers and voters.

Dominic Glynn trained as a director in London before completing his DPhil at the University of Oxford. He has collaborated with Olivier Cadiot, Ludovic Lagarde and Joël Pommerat amongst others, authored articles in leading journals, and taught at universities on both sides of the Channel.

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P.I.E. Peter Lang

Bruxelles · Bern · Berlin · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

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This publication has been peer-reviewed.

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INTRODUCTION

Grand Narratives

On 8 April 2014, Manuel Valls took centre stage in the Assemblée nationale to deliver his first address to parliament as Prime Minister. Cameras and microphones were turned on, social networking sites buzzed, and the audience in the hemicycle was hyped. Too much suffering, too little hope – no sooner had he uttered the first words than the room erupted.¹ The opposition jeered, heckled and booed, while the government and its party majority cheered. Viewed from a distance, the event resembled a British Christmas pantomime with full audience participation. Considered up close, it was more akin to a bullfight. Valls, the toreador, had to use rhetorical bravura, combativeness and political guile to come out victorious. And victorious he was, for in the immediate aftermath, the self-appointed Caesars cum political analysts gave their thumbs up. The gladiator would live to fight again.

On that day in early April, Manuel Valls provided a textbook example of political storytelling.² He explained how the country was in a bad place and that the previous government (of which he had been a member) had reacted too slowly. Now the time had come for action. Reforms needed to happen fast in order to change the state of the economy, to stimulate growth and to boost consumer confidence. Yet, few concrete solutions were provided. This is because Valls did not need to give much away other than vague hints at budgetary cuts. He was telling a frequently re-told story, that of the economic crisis.³ He was also giving a dynamic performance. In stark contrast to his predecessor, Jean-Marc Ayrault, Valls appeared vigorous. An astute communicator, he showed that the story needs a good storyteller.

¹ See footage: <<http://videos.assemblee-nationale.fr/video.5281.seance-unique--declaration-de-politique-generale-du-gouvernement-8-avril-2014>> accessed 27 January 2015.

² See Christian Salmon's definition of 'storytelling' as a marketing concept heavily used by politicians in *Storytelling: la machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), 11-13. Gisèle Sapiro elaborates on this definition in *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain* (Paris: Seuil, 2011), 720.

³ It seems that Jean-François Lyotard was mistaken to claim in *La Condition postmoderne* (Paris: Minuit, 1979) that there are no longer any grand narratives in our postmodern societies given how frequently the story of the crisis is told. A point made at length by Terry Eagleton in *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2004).

A year on Valls's performance that day has all but been forgotten.⁴ Yesterday's news is already ancient history. Just as the electrically contracted world is no more than a global village, our relationship with time has changed. We are becoming accustomed to being hyper-connected, receiving emails and news updates on mobile devices throughout the day (and night). Leading newspapers have to compensate for the decrease in sales of their paper format, relatively recent rituals such as watching the 8 o'clock news *en famille* have died out and the profusion of images has brought about a form of hyper-reality.⁵ So the globalisation story is not disconnected (no pun intended) from that of the digital revolution. Thanks to the Internet, so the story goes, everything is now available on demand, from information to material goods via sexual gratification.

'Every little helps' a leading British supermarket tells us. I no longer have to go out to do my weekly shopping: I can order everything from home. I can even order someone else's shopping for them. Or buy their Christmas presents and have them delivered to their door. If I am lucky, I may even receive an e-card in return. E-cards are good because they do not need to be printed and so save trees. The same goes for all the e-books that I can stash on my digital book reader. And I can download them quicker than even a very efficient distributor can deliver them. No more paperbacks, CDs, DVDs, the digital is replacing the physical object. Not that this seems to bother anybody. In a speech to launch the new season of *House of Cards*, actor Kevin Spacey argued that people were not concerned about whether they watched series on TV screens, tactile tablets, laptops or desktops, they were concerned about content.⁶ As long as film studios can find new distribution channels, the change to digital economy should do them little harm.⁷ There is no reason why record labels should not be able to adapt also – though they have hardly shown a willingness to do so, hence their current difficulties.⁸

⁴ His recent speech given in the aftermath of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* was similarly saluted, however. See *Le Figaro*: <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/citations/2015/01/14/25002-20150114ARTFIG00383-le-discours-de-manuel-valls-apres-l-attentat-contre-charlie-hebdo.php>> accessed 29 January 2015.

⁵ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).

⁶ See Alex Moaba, 'Kevin Spacey Speech Urges Broadcast Networks to Adopt Netflix Model at the Edinburgh Festival', *The Huffington Post* (26 August 2013) <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/26/kevin-spacey-speech-tv-future_n_3817956.html> accessed 27 January 2015.

⁷ The recent release of Abel Ferrara's *Welcome to New York* on VOD and not in cinemas in France could be a turning point in that regard.

⁸ Regarding the nascent digital market, McLuhan was wrong, it seems, the medium is not the message. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extension of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 5.

As people hide away behind computer screens or block out the rest of the world with their mp3 players, the notion of a collective or community has evolved. Though people still protest in the streets, the virtual world has put in place the equivalent of public meeting places – the Latin word ‘forum’ after all is used to describe a space where Internet users hotly debate a particular issue. Even when physical protests occur, participants document them and spur them on via posts and videos on social networks. The Internet, so we are led to believe, has opened up a vast number of possibilities in terms of communication, subversive political action and more generally interaction with people from all over the planet and from the comfort of one’s own home. But the change in social habits is problematic for activities that rely on people being physically present at a given moment, at a given time, as part of a group. Jean-Pierre Han noted in a recent article that there has been a significant increase in books bearing titles such as ‘What is the point of theatre?’ or ‘Where is Theatre Going?’⁹ Could this be an indication that the art form’s very existence is threatened?

It is certainly an invitation for those engaged in making theatre today to deal with the threat. One means of doing so is to move towards a hybrid form of performance by embracing the use of modern media and technologies. The young director Cyril Teste, for instance, makes heavy use of multimedia in his shows.¹⁰ Another option though is to create a form of theatre that explores what it means to bring people together to see stories performed. This is the type of theatre that directors Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine have created throughout their careers.

Comparing Theatre Practices

To say that Brook and Mnouchkine count among the most important theatre directors in the world over the last fifty years is no overstatement.¹¹ Such is the renown of both that they are not only highly regarded in France, where they ply their trade, but have also become actors on the international stage. In university theatre departments, many students will have some appreciation of their practices. Some will be able to quote

⁹ Jean-Pierre Han, ‘An Unlikely Scene: French Theatre in the New Liberal Economy’, trans. by Dominic Glynn in Clare Finburgh and Carl Lavery, eds., *Contemporary French Theatre and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 81-101, 83.

¹⁰ Information about Teste’s work with his company ‘Collectif MxM’ is available on their website: <<http://www.collectifmxm.com/index.php?page=reset>> accessed 27 January 2015.

¹¹ As can be attested by their inclusion in such surveys of theatre practice as Shomit Mitter and Maria Shevtsova’s *Fifty Key Theatre Directors* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).