

Medusa and the Mother/Bear: The Performance Text of Hélène Cixous's *L'Indiade ou l'Inde de leurs rêves*

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In her prose fiction, essays, and theatre, Hélène Cixous teaches her public to question the terms by which the world is represented and, therefore, examine how human beings see both this world and their place in it. In 1975, for example, in her oft-cited essay "Le Rire de la Méduse" ["The Laugh of the Medusa"], she re-visioned the terrifying monster of Greek legend and Freudian analysis.¹ Rather than continuing the litany of castigation directed at the Medusa's powers to turn onlookers into stone (or men into impotent masses), Cixous transformed the gorgon's deadly tendrils into positive signs of feminine energy. As fashioned by Cixous, the Medusa's laugh became the rallying cry of the liberated female creator. In 1987, in a somewhat less polemical if not less violent vein, Cixous asked that the beast within the human heart be reconsidered. To demonstrate its innocence as well as its savagery, she dressed this creature in Mother/Bear's clothing and, in her play *L'Indiade ou l'Inde de leurs rêves* [The Indiade or India of Their Dreams], had it dance under New Delhi's skies.²

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By juxtaposing Cixous's multiform Medusa with the equally complex scenic image of the Mother/Bear--specifically as this protean figure informs her latest play *L'Indiade*--it is possible to suggest how the essayist's earlier call for "l'écriture féminine" [feminine writing] has been transposed and realized in the dramatist's recent theatre work.³ And here the term "theatre work" must be understood as encompassing the entirety of the theatrical experience offered by director Ariane Mnouchkine and the actors, designers, musicians, technicians, and production staff of Le Théâtre du Soleil in the midst of whom--since 1983--Hélène Cixous has been writing. Indeed it would seem that Cixous has found in the company the embodiment of her esthetics of transformation and fluidity. Likewise, Ariane Mnouchkine and her theatre troupe have encountered in the writer Cixous an unqualified partner in their quest to develop a modern mythic theatre.⁴

The implications for theatre practice contained in Cixous's "Le Rire de la Méduse" were first noted by Cynthia Running-Johnson in her work on Jean Genet.⁵ Taking as her starting point Cixous's hint about which writers write "the feminine," Johnson examined Genet's theatre according to the concepts of excessiveness and transgression which Cixous's female Medusa, with her pullulating phallic locks, incarnates. In addition to advancing notions of excessiveness and transgression (or "crossings" as Johnson termed it), Cixous's impassioned essay--particularly by its insistence on metamorphosis--denotes a theatre practice relying on constant transformation.⁶ Cixous's celebration of, for example, woman's capacity to be conscious of, accept, and incorporate the Other, thus her ability to grow, multiply, and "be infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange" (883) can be read as a major instance of this process. Calling for women to come to writing, Cixous moreover portrays feminine being as an unending, continuous, and transformative development. Finally, and connected to concepts of excessiveness, crossings, and metamorphosis, Cixous proposes throughout "Le Rire de la Méduse" maternal images, metaphors in which she establishes the "force which stands up against separation" (882), a force which, while enabling metamorphosis, also prevents rupture.

Translated into theatrical terms--and putting aside for the moment considerations of "masculine" or "feminine"--Cixous's Medusa essay can be understood as implying a theatre which refuses cause and effect logic and linear development, which privileges slippery characters whose psychological motivation and gender identification are not easily classifiable, which explodes a mimetic time and space frame, and which balks at foregrounding dialogue as the most important, if not only, basis of communication. Her assertion of maternity as non-separation, however, also indicates a non-fragmentary and non-dislocated theatre, one which--in the last analysis--unifies its public.⁷

Most of these characteristics have been fundamental to the Théâtre du Soleil's theatre practice since the mid-1960s. Furthermore, in its functioning--much like the unselfish, limitless woman of whom Cixous also speaks in the

Medusa essay--the Théâtre du Soleil has abolished hierarchy and "shattered the framework of institutions" (888). In this case, by sharing tasks, collectively developing its productions, and entering into financial partnership with its public, the Soleil has disrupted the institution of theatre itself.⁸ Thus it is hardly surprising that the troupe's literal fleshing out of Cixous's *Indiade* has reinforced and developed the concept of transformation which permeates the text.

Before analyzing specifically the cathexis of the mise-en-scène and the dramatic text of *L'Indiade ou l'Inde de leurs rêves*, it might be useful to sketch "what happens" in the play. Like all sketches, this one can give only the outlines of a much more bountiful and highly-colored landscape. In *L'Indiade*, Cixous creates a sweeping panorama which telescopes the crucial decolonization period in India's recent history (between 1937 and 1948) into a five-hour-visual and aural drama. She confronts in heady debates the members of The Indian Congress Party: Nehru, Azad, Patel, Badshah Khan, and Sarojini Naïdu with members of the Muslim League, notably its leader and chief strategist Mohamed Ali Jinnah. While The Indian Congress Party, predominantly Hindu, seeks to establish a socialist, secular, and independent India, The Muslim League struggles for both independence *and* partition. Jinnah adamantly claims the creation of the state of Pakistan as the only solution for India's Muslim minority. Both sides' intransigency and careless politicking, as well as the haughtiness and, later, haste of India's British rulers, lead to a bloody civil conflict pitting Hindu against Muslim against Sikh. The people (as seen in shorter, more pungent, and ultimately bloody scenes), pay physically as well as emotionally for their leaders' inability to come to terms. Squabbles among the rickshaw drivers, for example, make palpable the fragile veneer of community: profound and dangerous fears about religious and caste differences surface at the merest hint of an insult.

Positioned in the center but also above the debate is Mahatma Gandhi, accompanied almost everywhere by his wife Kastourbaï--even after her death. Gandhi himself rather magically appears on stage at crucial moments to strategize with Nehru, wash the feet of an untouchable, mingle with the rickshaw drivers, plead with Jinnah, and preach by example his dual message of non-violence and universal love. Although allied with The Congress Party and linked especially to Nehru and to Badshah Khan, Gandhi is prepared to eliminate The Congress Party's political leadership if this would serve to preserve a united India. His death ends the play at the ironic moment of renewed peace. Gandhi's final hunger strike has momentarily halted the carnage caused by independence and partition, but an outraged Hindu, unable to accept the Mahatma's magnanimity, has killed him.

This straightforward account of "what happens" in *L'Indiade* not only belies the concerns expressed in "Le Rire de la Méduse" but also distorts the experience of the piece itself, for the Medusa vision enriches every aspect of the production. The ensemble of *L'Indiade's* features can, in fact, be

apprehended through the lens of transformation. In particular, the treatment and development of theme, set, register, acting, and music illustrate the ways in which the concept of transformation guides the performance.

Thematically, the notion of truth reworks itself throughout the play, the debate never settling on one position regarding the only possible future for India. Both The Congress Party and The Muslim League support their opposing verities with years of experience as well as conviction. And even Gandhi's ideal of universal love, when tested by the realities of distrust and greed, fails to be entirely convincing. Cixous shows its shortcomings in the episodes concerning the peasant Rajkumar. Rajkumar waits patiently (and non-violently) for Gandhi to find time to counsel him about how he should treat his rapacious neighbor. He ceases waiting, however, when the neighbor claims for himself Rajkumar's home, all his belongings, his wife, and his daughter. Taking up the sword in *his* turn, Rajkumar kills his neighbor's son. Consumed as he is by his personal tragedy, Rajkumar cannot make sense of Gandhi's admonishments for peaceful coexistence.

Scenically, the set is also forever changing. Between scenes, the "people of India" surge onto the central playing area to establish, usually through the unrolling of rugs and the plumping of pillows, the contours of a particular India. Thus, for example, the debate begins in the starkly elegant whiteness of the mats and throws of the enemy political camps. The Congress Party and The Muslim League occupy their separate spaces as if immured in them, just as they are imprisoned in separate ideologies. Later, the people invade the space again. Dressed in gloriously-colored saris, turbans, veils, or skull caps --the head-covering signaling their various religious identities--the people lend new class dimensions to the set simply by their physical presence. Silently witnessing, they suggest the profile of yet another India. In three major parade scenes, the stage space again bursts with energy as the scarlet-clad rickshaw drivers pull their prestigious charges across the playing area, itself become the streets of Delhi.

Textually, and correspondingly in terms of delivery, the linguistic register also shifts ceaselessly--from, for example, delicate lyricism to commonsensical aphorisms.⁹ As an instance of the former, Gandhi's lament after the death of his dearly-loved wife images their separation in terms of an unholy rebirth:

What luck we have had.

You--mother and child to me, me--child and mother to you.

For sixty-two years, each nourished at the other's breast.

How sad you were departing yesterday, leaving behind my sad and abandoned self.

I pass through death at present, and crying out I shall be born to the survivor's chilling fate.

My soul trembles from the cold as I face the flames which soothe your own (75-76).

While such poignant and emotion-laden passages tend to dominate, earthier and more piquant remarks frequently lace the dialogue. Typical of the people's wisdom, for example, is a Bengali pilgrim's rejoinder to Jinnah. Jinnah has just protested that the Hindu-dominated Congress Party will oppress India's Muslim citizens. Haridasi, the pilgrim, counters with a parable from nature: "Never does my Mother, the Cow, step on the little chick. Cow turds, yes, little chicks, no!" (24)

Like the linguistic register, the notion of truth, and the set, the actors are also in constant transformation. Most play several roles, changing from one to the next with astonishing speed. And while the actor is transformed to a greater or lesser degree in all theatre work, in *L'Indiade*, the original transformation takes place at least partially in front of the spectators, who are thus changed as well. Upon entering the theatre, the audience members are invited to watch the making-up process. This ritual--and the actor's concentration and environment make clear that this *is* a ritual--both maintains the audience's awareness of the play of the real and also, paradoxically, entices it into the Soleil's dream of India. The actors in fact interact with the spectators as though the latter were a group of tourists wandering into an Indian city. It is as if a life-sized, pastel, and geometrically-patterned Indian genre scene had come to life before one's eyes. Consequently, the spectators are themselves transformed into "European interlopers." And before the debate begins (but not before the play begins) Haridasi, the Bengali pilgrim quoted earlier, addresses directly various members of the audience, asking them their names, posing for pictures, and introducing spectators to each other. All the while, untouchables and various street people drift into the playing area where they begin to sweep and polish the marble floor. They smile eerily at the spectators, again helping to position the audience members as Western "guests."

One might finally speak of the changing or transforming locus of communication. In *L'Indiade*, communication is never centered for long in the spoken word. Music especially--in addition to gestures, glances, and movements--refocuses communication in non-verbal aspects of the performance. Verbal and musical elements bleed into and transform each other. For example, the steel drums which introduce Gandhi throughout the second part of the play very effectively suggest his presence even before he enters. The drums become a musical metaphor not just for Gandhi but also for his moral stance. As events grow more and more out of control and the mood approaches hysteria, Gandhi's rather tranquil if quizzical musical theme reminds the audience counterpointally of a different way of being in the world. The drums, then, interfere with and transform how the reigning ambience affects the spectators.

Of all the features of *L'Indiade* which can be read through the concept of transformation, none is more intriguing or central than the associative cluster which in this essay has been termed the "Mother/Bear." This figure includes three apparently separate characters who are all, in fact, facets of the

play's message. They work together to establish a dominant maternal metaphor which posits as a possible solution to the seemingly endless conflict an encompassing yet non-stifling "mother love."

The first among them is Haridasi, the Bengali pilgrim, a character who extends both Gandhi's aura and his philosophy of non-violence. Witness and commentator, she links the audience to the play just as Gandhi connects the various social classes and political camps to each other. She, too, is omnipresent and conciliatory, never giving up hope and even, in the imminency of Gandhi's death, entreating the spectators to believe in mankind.

The second is the Dancing Bear, Moona Baloo. The Bear, like that other *méduse*, the jellyfish, is completely alive to everything passing around her. She reacts instinctively to the growing tension in the second half of the play. Only Gandhi, who shares her innocence, keeps her calm. Together they gambol about enthusiastically and awkwardly, both of them "babies," as Haridasi laughingly tells the public (125). But as people grow violent around her, Moona Baloo too becomes a "beast." Like Gandhi, Moona Baloo must also be sacrificed, for she turns into a killer, her innocence unable to withstand the bloodletting which, as Cixous explains in her essay "L'Ourse, la tombe, les étoiles" ["The Bear, The Tomb, The Stars"],¹⁰ is the result of human kind's refusal to acknowledge the divine in the human and to accept the yearning for compassionate exchange:

How we love the innocence of living creatures, how we long for Paradise, and how we scratch at Heaven's gate each time we caress the Bear. But, of course, if by ill luck, we are able to translate that bizarre tenderness as nostalgia for our own goodness, we take pains to place the Bear in a realm beyond the human. That human beings might define themselves as those who love others is something we ordinary Westerners hardly ever imagine, for such a thought does violence to the violence we're used to (249-250).

The third and chief figure of the Mother/Bear cluster is Gandhi himself. He is the true Medusan hero: beyond gender, both mother and lover, infant and old man. According to the character Lord Mountbatten, Vice-Roy of India, Gandhi is "the last proof of the existence of the gods and of their impotency to impose their prophets on our political times" (148). Unafraid to humble himself ("humbling oneself" being a notion he does not, in any event, comprehend), immortal (reborn twice within the play and again by the very existence of the theatre project itself), Gandhi, like the mother in the Solomon tale, knows that love precludes the struggle for mastery. He is the embodiment of the sum of all the maternal metaphors from "Le Rire de la Méduse," that is: an empowerer, a nurturer, a person who laughs freely and who by laughter sets free.

It is therefore Gandhi who delivers the message of love which, despite the ugly quarreling between Nehru and Jinnah, despite the terrifying massacre and pile of corpses in the penultimate segment of the play, weights and infuses the entire production. Indeed, he speaks to Jinnah as if to a reluctant beau:

There's no love without fear. And yes, sometimes, no love without a kind of disgust, even repulsion. We human beings, Hindus, Muslims, men, women, we're so different, so strange. There facing me is the Other, and nothing's like me! For example, you and I, could anybody imagine anything more different. You, with your handsome head of hair, your fine tie, your suit, your polished shoes and all your teeth. And me without. Without anything. Without hat, suit, teeth, and with all my toes constantly chewing up the paths I walk on. What attracts us in this world? Mystery. The other sex, the other religion, the other human being. If there are two leaves on a tree, they aren't identical but they do dance to the same breeze--that's true of the human tree, too. Let's allow time for human affairs to grow and ripen (81-82).

Gandhi, Haridasi, and Moona Baloo are the three terms of Cixous's unlikely theatrical trinity, what might be entitled a "Medusan head," or--as for the purposes of this discussion--a "Mother/Bear." All three partake of the same argument for literature and writing, which here takes on also the form of an argument for love, a thought which Cixous has been developing since the seventies when she wrote that women must open up and allow themselves to be traversed and changed by what seems (or has been deemed) foreign. Only then will they discover all their hidden beauties. Only then will the beast within--Medusa or bear--reveal its possibilities. These days, however, immersed in the theatre and especially in the very exceptional theatre which is the Théâtre du Soleil, Cixous has reworked her concepts in such a way that the liberating "feminine" is no longer understood as that which must be conjured up and released but rather, that which the theatre is capable of realizing. "In theatre everything is woman" ["Tout est femme au théâtre"] writes Cixous.¹¹ And this "woman," light years removed from all conventional definitions, this "mother" who is beyond gender yet can birth the world, encourages the spectators of Le Théâtre du Soleil to find the holy and the heroic in themselves.

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Notes

1. Hélène Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse," *L'Arc* No. 61 (1975): 39-54.
2. Hélène Cixous, *L'Indiade ou l'Inde de leurs rêves et quelques écrits sur le théâtre* (Paris: Théâtre du Soleil, 1987).
3. My analysis of the production of *L'Indiade* is based on three viewings of the play at the Cartoucherie de Vincennes in Paris on November 6, 11, 19, 1987.
4. Ariane Mnouchkine has frequently explained her ongoing experiments in theatrical form as an attempt to find the images, language, and rhythmic patterns capable of englobing and communicating myths of modern society. With this goal in mind, in 1975-1976 the entire company elaborated through improvisations based on commedia dell'arte figures, *L'Age d'or* [*The Golden Age*], a production which addressed, among other problems, the difficulties of the immigrant worker in France. In a press conference at which I was present in 1983 at the Avignon theatre festival, she commented that this type of improvisation had become stultifying to the company's growth. Thus they had decided to adapt *Nô*, kabuki, and bharatanatyam techniques to stagings of Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Twelfth Night*. In this way, the Soleil could continue to combine extreme stylization with fundamental stories of political and sexual power. Cixous's and Mnouchkine's first collaborative effort, *L'Histoire terrible mais inachevé de Norodom Sihanouk, roi de Cambodge* [*The Horrible But Still Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia*] (Paris: Théâtre du Soleil, 1985), advanced the company's efforts to realize a dramatic juncture of stage metaphors and history. Cixous's mythic treatment gives *Sihanouk* the dimensions of a contemporary tragedy, as rich and probing as a Sophoclean trilogy.
5. Cynthia Running Rowe [Johnson], *Jean Genet and Hélène Cixous: Reading Genet Through the Feminine*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1985.
6. All quotations from the Medusa essay are from Keith and Paula Cohen's excellent translation, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *Signs* Vol. 1: 4 (1976): 875-893. Specific page numbers will follow the quoted material.
7. In addition to *Sihanouk* and *L'Indiade*, Hélène Cixous has written to date four full-length plays: *La Pupille*, *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* No. 78 (1972); *Portrait de Dora* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1976); *le Nom d'Oedipe: Chant du corps interdit* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1978); and *La Prise de l'école de Madhubai, Avant-Scène Théâtre* Vol. 746 (1984). The plays written before her association with the Théâtre du Soleil foreground concerns with gender formation and Freudian or Freudian-dominated interpretations of female sexuality. These earlier plays involve experimentation in multi-media as well as in grammar and syntax. Without the epic scope of *Sihanouk* or *L'Indiade*, they tend to distance the audience, making the public uneasy rather than drawing it into the experience of the drama.
8. For an overview of the work of Le Théâtre du Soleil, see Ruby Cohn, "Ariane Mnouchkine: Twenty-One Years of Théâtre du Soleil," *Theater* Vol. XVII: 1 (Winter 1985); see also Wolfgang Sohlich, "The Théâtre du Soleil's *Mephisto* and the Problematics of Political Theatre," *Theatre Journal* (May 1986), Titus Thomas Suck, "Representing Power/Power of Representing: Esthetization v. Production in the Théâtre du Soleil's *Mephisto*," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* Vol. II: 2 (Spring 1988), and my chapter on the company in *Theater and Revolution in France since 1968* (Lexington: French Forum, 1977).
9. All translations from *L'Indiade ou l'Inde de leurs rêves* as well as from the accompanying *Quelques écrits sur le théâtre* [Some Notes on Theatre] are my own. Where appropriate, page numbers from the original French text follow quotes taken from the play and the theatre writings.
10. Hélène Cixous, "L'Ourse, la tombe, les étoiles" in *L'Indiade ou l'Inde de leur rêves et quelques écrits sur le théâtre* 247-252.
11. "L'Incarnation" 260-261.