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Béatrice Picon-Vallin. *Le Théâtre du Soleil: The First Fifty-five Years*. Translated by Judith G. Miller. Routledge, 2021.

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Abstract

Review of Béatrice Picon-Vallin. *Le Théâtre du Soleil: The First Fifty-five Years*. Translated by Judith G. Miller. Routledge, 2021. xi + 453 pp.

Keywords

Contemporary French Theater, Collaborative Theater, Ariane Mnouchkine, Hélène Cixous, Robert Lepage, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre

Béatrice Picon-Vallin. *Le Théâtre du Soleil: The First Fifty-five Years*. Translated by Judith G. Miller. Routledge, 2021. xi + 453 pp.

Judith G. Miller's translation of this stunningly illustrated history of the artistic, theoretical and socio-political commitments driving the Théâtre du Soleil's creations under the direction of Ariane Mnouchkine offers the most current and comprehensive portrait of the Soleil to date. The English translation supplements the original 2014 French edition with expanded photographic documentation and notes by Miller clarifying cultural and historical references for English-speaking readers. It also updates the history to 2019 with an additional chapter by Picon-Vallin documenting the company's last major productions: *Une chambre en Inde* ('A Room in India') (2016), reprised at the Cartoucherie in December, 2019, and the polemic-generating production of *Kanata-Épisode I-Le Controverse* ('Kanata Episode I—The Controversy') which premiered at the Cartoucherie in 2018 after controversy in Canada over cultural appropriation and lack of indigenous representation in the cast derailed the opening there. *Kanata*, directed by Robert Lepage, was the first major performance of the Soleil not directed by Mnouchkine. At the time it was being rehearsed, Mnouchkine was in Rio de Janeiro supervising *As Comadres* ('Village Women')—a Portuguese-language version of Quebec director René Richard Cyr's musical adaptation of Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs* ('The Sisters-in-Law')—which she is scheduled to bring to the Théâtre national de Bordeaux en Aquitaine in the summer of 2021. As the production of *As Comadres* marks Mnouchkine's first time directing actors who are not from the Soleil and reprising the staging of another director, the English translation ends the study at a time of transition for the company.

Picon-Vallin's history was awarded the Syndicat de la critique's 2014/2015 prize for the best book on the theater when it was first published in France. The honor was richly deserved. A citation in the book of one of Mnouchkine's idiosyncratically utopian descriptions of the stage as "the vacant lot of the sublime" gives a measure of the lofty artistic aspirations driving the Soleil's work (194). It also captures the challenge posed by the writing of a comprehensive account of the wide range of the company's extraordinary ventures. The success of Béatrice Picon-Vallin, a former director of France's research laboratory for the Performing Arts at the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and a professor of Theater History at the National Conservatory for Dramatic Arts in Paris, in meeting that challenge reflects both her academic formation and the many years she has spent immersed in Théâtre du Soleil activities. The meticulous historical research is enriched by her close access to the company's many constituents. Interviews and excerpts from their personal

correspondence, spectators' testimony and abundant photographs drawn from personal as well as public archives figure prominently in the study. Picon-Vallin communicates the intensity of the company's productions and working methods and also its struggles as the members persisted through many years of imposed nomadism and financial difficulties exacerbated by its lengthy rehearsal schedules. Although not as fully elaborated as other aspects of the Soleil experience, the work sympathetically addresses the toll taken by the personal conflicts and painful departures inevitable in a communal endeavor based on collective, but at the same time selective, improvisational creation.

Beginning with Mnouchkine's launch with fellow Sorbonne students of the Association for Parisian Theatre Students in 1959, an early herald of the collaborative processes that guided the founding of the Théâtre du Soleil as an official workers' cooperative in 1964, Picon-Vallin closely examines the entirety of the company's dramatic and cinematic productions as well as projects begun but not completed. She depicts with particular success the richness of the elaborate staging, sounds and physicality of the collective's engagement with making "history dialogue with the present," a dialogue carried out through reworking of elements of commedia dell'arte, clown performance, mask work, puppetry, Greek tragedy, Shakespearian theater, and, especially, Asian theater arts (5). The study also documents in detail the multitude of ancillary activities supporting these productions as the Soleil expanded from an adventurous group of nine into a world-renowned, multi-national and multi-cultural troupe of eighty or more members. Investigational travels, research projects, the hands-on restoration of the Cartoucherie in the Bois de Vincennes as a uniquely welcoming theater space come vividly to life as do the company's commitment to human rights in France and abroad and the educational outreach of its Nomadic Schools in multiple countries.

A significant strength of the work compared to many studies of the Soleil is its emphasis on the company as a whole, even as Mnouchkine inevitably remains a primary focus. The collaboration with H  l  ne Cixous as resident playwright and dramaturg is examined in depth as are the crucial contributions of Jean-Jacques Lem  tre, who has composed and performed the music for all of Mnouchkine's productions since 1979, set designer, Guy-Claude Fran  ois, mask-maker, Erhard Stiefel and costume designer, Fran  oise Tournafond. Picon-Vallin excels as well at portraying lesser-known company members and the many international actors, dancers and musicians who played integral formative roles in the Soleil's evolution. In compelling sections labeled "Voices," she very effectively delegates a significant portion of the historical narrative to diverse participants who recount their personal experiences.

Rich photographic documentation, reproductions of all of the company's remarkably inclusive theatre programs, chronologies of productions and awards,

and extensive footnotes providing bibliographical material and web resources make this up-dated translation an invaluable resource for scholars of Mnouchkine and Cixous's work. The appeal of this book is by no means limited to theater scholars, however. Picon-Vallin, who describes the experience of going to the Soleil as "itself a celebration, for some even a wonderland" conveys the exhilaration of this experience to readers, whatever the degree of their theater background (344). This study makes it possible to conceptualize, visually and intellectually, the beauty and energy that emerge from the Soleil's demanding artistic standards, risk-taking creativity and athleticism, and also to measure the considerable social impact of an ever-evolving collaborative adventure that holds its place among the most innovative of contemporary theatrical experiments.

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