

Book Review

*Politics, Ethics and Performance:
Hélène Cixous and the Théâtre du Soleil*
Edited and Translated by Lara Stevens (Melbourne:
re-press, 2016)

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This necessary, revelatory, and delightful collection of program notes and commentaries penned by Hélène Cixous allows readers to trace the evolution of the fabled Théâtre du Soleil and Cixous's place within the collective since 1985. Her roles as author, keeper of the ethical flame, philosophical mentor to the company, inspirer of poetic vision, collaborator in collective creations, and occasional *dramaturg* are documented by Lara Stevens in a comprehensive introduction and illuminated by Cixous herself in the lyrical prose that characterises the compendium of thirty-eight short (often excerpted) meditations on the responsibility of theatre to society and the moral obligation of the artist.

Complementing Cixous's richly evocative essay and interview on theatre published in Eric Prenowitz's anthology *Selected Plays of Hélène Cixous* (2004), this open-access volume provides at last, in French and in Stevens's English translation, a thorough-going portrait of Cixous, the theatre person. Most often studied as feminist thinker, as prose stylist known for her punning and polyphony, Cixous emerges here as a sensitive and incisive critic, as an artist at home in the sometimes agonising but always generative world of collective theatre making.

Stevens's stimulating introductory overview first situates the Théâtre du Soleil within the idealistic artistic vision of the 1960s that unhesitatingly assumed that art, and notably theatre, can and must make a difference in bringing about social justice and political reform. In their efforts to engage an audience representing all social classes, the Soleil practiced and still practices an experimental aesthetic that blends distancing techniques (including reinterpreted Asian traditions) with deeply empathic emotional work. Institutionally, the company functions as a workers' cooperative, and members continue to practice social activism—in addition to devising collectively their productions or collectively helping to develop, through rehearsals, the scripts that Cixous writes in harmony with them.

As Stevens explains, when Cixous came to the Soleil, she had already acquired a following and a reputation for innovative feminism in the theatre. Her earliest theatre pieces, such as *Le Portrait de Dora* (*The Portrait of Dora*, 1976), employ a structure of representation that forces us to reconsider how gender is constructed and interpreted. Stevens draws out at length the concept of “*écriture féminine*,” introduced in Cixous’s famous manifesto, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (*Le Rire de la Méduse*, 1975) and puts a great deal of pressure—too much perhaps—on the term to account for Cixous’s continuous efforts to subvert fixed meanings of words. Cixous refuses rigidity in order to free us from conventional and restrictive ways of thinking. Connecting Cixous to the philosopher Jacques Derrida and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, as Stevens does, helps locate Cixous’s experimentation with polysemy and multiplicity within a larger current of thinking, one that held sway throughout the second half of the twentieth century. By questioning the possibility of ever pinning down meaning or of ever fulfilling desire, Cixous participates in the radical rethinking of subjectivity that marks a broader-based post-structuralist turn.

However one seeks to position Cixous, her radical textual experiments are much more obvious in her essays for and about the Théâtre du Soleil than in the actual theatre texts that have resulted from their collaboration. In other works for the theatre, staged by directors independent of the Soleil, in plays such as *Le Nom d’Oedipe: Chant du Corps Intérdit* (*The Name/No of Oedipus: Song of the Forbidden Body*, 1978), for example, the slipperiness of her writing drives how the play creates meaning. Stevens does not tangle with that aspect of Cixous’s non-Soleil dramatic writing, nor does she examine the ways in which the force of the company’s improvisations impact her writing for the Soleil. The task she has given herself is daunting enough: translating essays and notes that appear in certain instances, as Barbara Cassin might put it, “untranslatable.” Such pervasively “untamed” prose, as Stevens puts it, has clearly influenced the emphasis she places in her introduction on Cixous’s homophony, self-reflexivity, pronoun shifts, neologisms, alliteration, and intertextuality.

Stevens’s prefatory remarks also stress the principles that undergird most of Cixous’s theatre work: whatever she writes always deals directly or indirectly with the interrelationship between aesthetics, ethics, and the possibility of transformative politics through theatre. And while Cixous never skirts the complexities of making theatre that engages with history, she knowingly centers her historically-inflected pieces on the process of “othering,” that is on how people are marginalised through race, gender, political passion, class structure, or refugee status—an othering, as Stevens tells us, that Cixous knows personally from having grown up in colonial Algeria as a Jew ostracised by the Vichy regime, which was then in control of most of North Africa.

Throughout her essays and meditations, as Stevens accurately suggests, Cixous rehearses her passionate beliefs about theatre, to wit: canonical theatre has been built on the bodies of women; hospitality, as Derrida defines it, is what theatre does best, because hospitality requires theatre-makers and theatre-goers to strip their egos in order to let the other in; and, finally, theatre functions to reveal our blindness to the world’s horrors, especially to the

plague of neo-liberalism. Theatre must, then, be alert to contemporary societies' very real temptation to repeat heinous and ultimately self-destructive acts. Stevens has organised Cixous's essays and program notes chronologically, from most recent to earliest. Thus, we also glean that Cixous's current ethical stance, one of resistance, has evolved from her earlier focused concern for a common humanity and her lucid preoccupation with the thin line between good and evil.

While all of Cixous's ingenious musings on theatre in this volume are engrossing—each organised under the title of the production referenced (although the essay “Our Bad Blood” is misplaced, coupled with the incorrect theatrical production); and each production very helpfully framed by a synopsis that provides information on context, two essays stand out especially for what they tell us about the nature of theatre and the Soleil's theatre-making process. In “Theatre Surprised by Puppets”/“Le Théâtre surpris par les marionnettes” (64–75), Cixous grasps the nature of the theatrical experience through the metaphor of the marionette. The metamorphosis of the inanimate to the animate speaks exactly to what takes place when theatre happens. Here, as elsewhere, Cixous contemplates how theatre dances with mortality, a dance that enhances our awareness of life. Moreover, through its formal aspects, the production referenced in this essay, *Tambours sur la digue/ Drums on the Dam*, 1999, which was performed by actors playing puppets and puppeteers, asks vital questions about control, about partnership, about will and subjection, about loss and resurrection. Cixous advances the idea that marionette theatre embodies concretely the doubling of the self, while at the same time potentially exposing the truths behind social masks.

In “Acknowledging Debts”/ “Reconnaissance de dettes” (106–21), Cixous details the process of engendering theatre with the Soleil. In this instance, the production of *La Ville Parjure* (The City of Perjury, 1994) serves as exemplar: the theatre “call” first came to Mnouchkine through the pulse of the times. And in this case, the hammering of the collusion between government and big business was deafening. To stage this sickening connection, the Soleil had to imagine first the right space, so they invented a *City of the Dead* to echo how contagious greed had poisoned the city. Then, the composer and multi-talented musician, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, as always, invited the cosmos into the playing space through his music, while simultaneously helping to shape characters through rhythm. As is also always the case, various aspects of earlier productions haunted *La Ville Parjure* and thus set up connections with the history of the Soleil's work. And just as the production resonated with the past, it spilled over to the future. By concluding with what can be considered a “non-ending,” *La Ville Parjure* invited its audience to take the furious criticism of the French government and its relationship with corrupt medical professionals out into the streets and into the ballot boxes.

Given the density of the verbal moveable feast offered teasingly, if lovingly, by Cixous to her readers, Stevens has done a very credible job of translating. Most of the time, she catches the playfulness and palimpsestic nature of the writing. For example, in her notes on the Soleil's *Oresteia*, Cixous makes alliterative fun of the god Apollo's machismo: “Rien n'ébranle ce branleur,” which Stevens cleverly captures as “Nothing weakens this wanker”

(133–34). On other occasions, she smartly handles Cixous's neologisms and homophonic terms in notes, rather than overburdening the text with too many alternative translations. She uses the latter sparingly, as in "There is only a 'no'/one step" (34) to translate the double sense of Cixous's "Il n'y a qu'un pas," which could be rendered as both: "There's just one step/There's only a no."

Stevens is especially good at finding Cixous's music, or catching the charm of certain images. For example, in "Coups de baguettes/ Striking Sticks," (48–61) a pun-filled and terribly onerous essay to translate on the Soleil's production *Tambours sur la digue*, Cixous uses the passé simple of the verb "devenir" ("devins") to pun on the noun "devin" (a soothsayer). In speaking about her own role in creating *Tambours sur la digue*, Cixous says, "Je devins la Dame Gigogne" (53). This yields in Stevens's translation: "I divine Dame Gigogne," instead of "I became Dame Gigogne." Cixous means both, yet the image of her as diviner of characters catches more accurately her habit of allowing characters to inhabit and then escape from her mind—as babies do in some cultures from storks (*cigognes*) and as children do from the fictional Madame Gigogne. The translation choice here is very fertile indeed.

Sometimes, however, in an effort to maintain double meanings or interior rhyming, Stevens stretches English beyond where it can go; and would, it seems, have been better off anchoring a meaning: "On part en croisade contre les croisements" becomes "We leave on a crusade against the crossings" (84–85). It might have been better to invent another alliteration in order to signal better the Soleil's protest against contaminated blood: "We leave on a march against mixing." Sometimes, Stevens makes a choice, but in doing so eliminates necessary context for the reader. Cixous, for example, comments on one of the principle characters in *Tambours sur la digue*, the Chancellor, by punning on his name. "Chancelier," the French for Chancellor, can also mean the indecisive one, he who cannot make up his mind, he who is all over the place—from the verb "chanceler" (to stumble, to reel). Through his name, Cixous conjures up both a leader and a man who wavers. Stevens opts to call this character "the reeling person," and therefore evacuates the fact that he is a high official who offers special counsel to the ruler of the country.

She makes some errors in translating certain turns of phrase that are colloquial or somewhat uncommon: on p. 38 speaking about the danger posed by the newly arrived god of newly arrived immigrants in program notes to *La Dernière caravansérail* (The Last Caravanserail, 2003), Cixous writes: "cela ne va pas de soi" (which might yield in English "[this arrival] is not without problems.") Stevens' translation misses the mark with: "that doesn't leave the self."

Occasionally a mistranslation inadvertently weakens Cixous's intended irony or makes it difficult to seize the meaning of the sentence: in speaking about the contaminated blood scandal that sickened and killed some 2000 hemophiliacs in France (the source for the Soleil's production of *La Ville Parjure*), Cixous personifies the AIDs virus: "Là dessus, pour couronner l'histoire du liquide précieux, voilà que par lui nous arrive le fléau du Sida." This might be translated as: "In addition to everything else, here comes the AIDS scourge

to crown the story of that precious liquid, carried along by the same blood.” Stevens renders this as: “Thereupon, to crown the history of precious liquid, such that by it the curse of AIDS comes to us” (84). On the whole, however, Stevens handles well the thorny aspects of translating Cixous. Her translation elucidates, by example, the performative nature of Cixous’s writing, in which impact accrues through the efforts of reading and understanding.

In her prodigious study of the first fifty years of the Théâtre du Soleil (*Le Théâtre du Soleil: Les Cinquante premières années, Actes, Sud, 2015*), Béatrice Picon-Vallin characterises the Soleil’s enduring theatrical adventure as one of the rarest and most compelling in the history of 20th and 21st century theatre. As Steven’s volume shows us, Cixous’s involvement holds a special place within the remarkable Soleil constellation. This unique and internationally acclaimed “solo” artist—known for her tricky wordplay, mobile gender configurations, and untiring commitment to promoting equality and destabilising boundaries—also accepts to bend, accommodate, and reverberate in the midst of an energising collective.

The book is available for download here: <http://re-press.org/books/politics-ethics-and-performance/>

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