

## **The Théâtre du Soleil Invites its Audience to Remember**

Topic: Legacies of environmental theatre and audience participation

The Théâtre du Soleil is now forty-six years old. It remains one of France's finest theatrical companies, constantly innovating under the prodding of its director Ariane Mnouchkine, and constantly asking questions about the role of theatre in society. Its earliest celebrated productions, the 1970's collective creations *1789* and *1792*, included the audience in the stage design. Realizing its belief that audience participation is necessary in any politicized theatrical act, the Soleil positioned part of the audience to play "the role of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century audience" in *1789*, and in *1792*, it situated the audience around three huge performance tables to function as guests and participants in a constant revolutionary fête and debate on the future of democracy.

Since these early productions, the company has rethought and reconfigured the way in which it includes its audience. Its latest creation, *Les Naufragés du Fol Espoir* (The Shipwrecked of the Steamer Mad Hope), partially scripted by Hélène Cixous and developed from a novel by Jules Verne, calls on memory to involve the audience in a complex game of decrypting the multi-layered performance. Indeed, spectators are well served by recalling their own life stories as well as the history of other productions of the company. For with this production the Théâtre du Soleil effects what we might call a theatricalized autobiography, replaying its major political concerns and its artistic credo and confessing its tortured creative methods through a back and forth in history and in "the world" inside and outside the theatre.

I propose to examine this production in light of this latest (and successful) effort to include the audience through this intriguing development in "environmental" theatre.

### About the Author

Judith Miller is Collegiate Professor and former Chair of The Department of French of New York University. She has published widely in French and Francophone theatre (text and production) and has translated into English some fifteen plays. Her books include: *Theatre and Revolution in France* (1977), *Françoise Sagan* (1985), *Plays by French and Francophone Women: A Critical Anthology* (1995); *Ariane Mnouchkine* (2007). She is currently working on two anthologies of plays (translated into English) by Francophone African authors: one on Ivoirian Koffi Kwahulé, the other an historical overview of seven authors from Bernard Dadié (Côte d'Ivoire) to José Pliya (Benin).