

A photograph of four young girls floating in muddy, brown water. They are all looking upwards with expressions of hope and anticipation. The girl in the foreground on the left has her eyes closed and a gentle smile. Next to her is a girl with dark hair and a pink and white striped shirt, looking intently upwards. To the right, a girl in a yellow shirt looks up with a slight smile. In the background on the left, another girl is partially visible, also looking up. The water is murky with ripples and small bubbles. The overall mood is one of longing and faith.

FABRIQUE DE L'ART N°3|4
FABRICATE (FABRIC OF) ART

ANNÉES | YEARS | 2017 | 2018

FABRIQUE DE L'ART N°3 | 4 FABRICATE (FABRIC OF) ART

In 2018, **TRIMUKHI PLATFORM** celebrates ten years. On this occasion, the present issue of **FABRICATE (FABRIC OF) ART** (designated *double issue n°3/4* because to go to ten is to move to two digits) offers analyses, testimonies, conversations, reflections, images that give a lively account of this singular and joyous adventure which started in West Bengal with a few Santhal dance steps, one morning of August 2008, in the village of Borotalpada.

En 2018, **TRIMUKHI PLATFORM** fête ses dix ans. À cette occasion, la revue **FABRIQUE DE L'ART** (dans un numéro baptisé *3/4* car, passer à la dizaine, c'est passer à deux chiffres) rassemble des analyses, des témoignages des conversations, des réflexions, des images rendant compte de cette aventure singulière et joyeuse qui débuta au Bengale Occidental par quelques pas de danse, un matin d'août 2008, dans le village tribal de Borotalpada.

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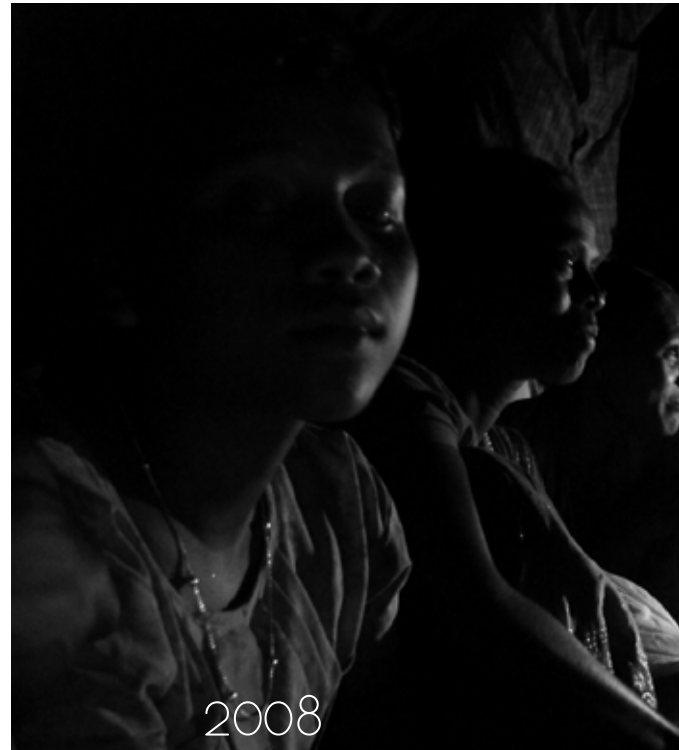
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theatre today

This is the edited transcript of a dialogue that took place at Open Air Theatre in Jadavpur University, Calcutta, on February 7, 2018. The previous day, Ariane Mnouchkine had spoken in the morning and afternoon about her theatre practice ; and in the evening she had watched two Trimukhi Platform performances directed by Jean-Frédéric Chevallier in collaboration with Surujmoni Hansda: Essay on Seasonal Variation in Santhal Society and Try Me Under Water. The whole event, titled Theatre Today with Ariane Mnouchkine and Trimukhi Platform was organised with the Institut Français and Jadavpur University as part of the third edition of Bonjour India!

Samantak Das – Thank you all for coming to this dialogue between Ariane Mnouchkine and Jean-Frédéric Chevallier. The work that Ariane Mnouchkine started over 50 years ago, was extended in one sense by Jean-Frédéric Chevallier and, in another sense, he also moved away from Ariane's work. Today, Jean-Frédéric does his work primarily in the village of Borotalpada. One thing we have understood is that it is not easy to bring work done in the village to the city. The ground is different, the place is different, the light is different, sounds are different...

Ariane Mnouchkine – Shall we start? Because I would like to say what I felt yesterday. And I mean what I felt, rather than what I thought. I was surprised. I was very surprised. Because I had not expected it to be that. As the actors were children, mostly, I thought it was a work for children, which of course it is not. And also I didn't expect it to be such an *impressionist* work. I'll try to clarify what I mean by that. In fact it's a vision by Jean-Frédéric. And that I didn't expect, and it surprised me in a very good way.

I don't say I understood everything, but I accepted not understanding everything. And when I say, "*Maybe I didn't understand everything*", it was not only because of the language problem.

So. I was very moved most of the time. And sometimes I was moved without knowing why. It took me some time to understand what it was talking about: the suicide of that girl, and then the life of that girl. And of course there are several parts, because what happens there, outside, shows the talent of Jean-Frédéric as a videographer. And I thought, although it was very different and, in a way, very strange, it was not irrelevant. And as I said, I was moved, because I was seeing in a way the pain, the sorrow, of a French man, a western man, lost in India. That's what I thought. If not lost, lonely: lonely confronted with that story. I am not saying lonely in his personal life: he is obviously not lonely in his life because he has his wife Sukla, he has his children, his work, his village. But I thought, I mean I felt, loneliness and guilt in front of that drama. Whether this guilt is legitimate or not, I don't know. But anyway, even if it's illegitimate, one feels guilty in front of such events. I felt guilty.

And I thought that the team, the company, the children, the actors, were actually magnificent. Because they were so simple, so pure, without any *pathos*. I was very, very admiring. In fact the *pathos* or the emotion came from the ensemble of the vision, came from the very subtle interplay between the cinema, the rhythm, the music, you, the fire, the lighting (which is very strange, because we used those two lamps in a play and I was pleased to see how well it works).

I am very very easily bored in the theatre, very often bored. And I was not bored for even one second yesterday. I was at times questioning or making a few criticisms. For example, there is a moment where the space is too wide, too diluted. Or maybe, when at the beginning, Jean-Frédéric uses a recorded text – I don't know if it was an interview, or if you composed it for the performance – but I thought it was too colloquial, too casual. The recording could have been a bit better. In two languages, no? I think it could have been a little bit more like them: a little bit more pure. Especially the part of the recording in French, actually. But that's just minor, you know, things that can be changed in 15 minutes.

So I was very touched and what I would like to know is – and these are questions, not objections: what were the children really told to do? Were they conscious of all the things I told you, if what I told you is true? I mean your sorrow, your loneliness, this India which glitters like this in the night but where there is a splendour and a melancholy. In the work, were they conscious of the originality, of the specialness of this project? Or did Jean-Frédéric direct without having to give you the feeling of all that? And I repeat: it's a question, not an objection.

Jean-Frédéric Chevallier – Thank you. I go directly to the answer. Regarding what you understood: what each one among the audience will understand or not understand will depend on each one. For example, there is a Santhal student who is doing a Bachelor in Engineering at Jadavpur University. He came yesterday and day before yesterday to watch the performance. First day he approached Bhudray and yesterday he approached me. His focus was on Chumki's life. He wanted to know more about her.

AM – My question was for the actors....

JFC – Yes. This was my introduction. With the work we are doing, what happens is that each person in the audience creates his or her own interpretation or story. So, in a certain way, on our side, with all the team, we don't need all this... I mean the reading you did is very insightful, wise, beautiful, and I found it very interesting even for my own life, but we never create such effects consciously, because we don't talk about all these things.

As Chumki and Kajol were close to us, we all together thought it would be good to do something for them. Usually before we perform this theatre piece, we open a bottle of alcohol, and we put it on the floor for both of them, because this is a Santhal way to remember the dead. Let's say, for the team, basically the performance is something we are doing to remember them both.

AM – Well, then I have realised from what Jean-Frédéric says, that the parts I did not understand were the parts of the second character. Because I understood, I think, about Chumki. But you are also talking about somebody else and that I skipped totally. So whether it's a language problem, because it's in Bengali and I could not understand or whether it's not... this is probably the part I did not understand.

JFC – Yes. Maybe it's less relevant. Or it depends also on each person.

So this is the context. And officially I am not the only director: I am co-directing with Surujmoni. In fact we are all more or less co-directing together. Let me explain. We start by choosing a place. And when I say “we”, it's “we”. Sometimes each one will think of or try a space. Because in the village we can use plenty of spaces. For a previous performance, four years ago, someone in the team suggested a tree. So we climbed the tree and we found out it was possible to do something relevant there.

SD – Who was he?

JFC – It was Chandrai. And we start trying things. But we don't speak that much. I mean I may propose something, but when we find it starting to become boring, Surujmoni may

propose something, then someone else. It's very empirical. We talk very little.

SD – Would you say that is like the improvising that Ariane was speaking about yesterday?

JFC – We try different options and choose together, but we have no topic, no theme.

AM – Not even Chumki?

JFC – No. In the sense that there are words about Chumki, there are video images of Chumki, and there is what we do also. But it's not a topic, it's a material.

AM – And when the girls jump on stage one after the other, the small, the medium, the big, ta-da, ta-da, they are not supposed to be Chumki? It's a coincidence?

JFC – No. When you said there is no *pathos* and the feeling or the emotion in the audience is created by the combination of all the elements, it's what we are aiming at.

AM – Yes, but there are still 5 or 6 girls, jumping on stage and looking at us and we see Chumki growing. So it's not as if you just throw a cauliflower. It is relevant to what you are saying. So don't exaggerate!

JFC – I don't exaggerate. That's the fact. But it's beautiful what you are saying.

SD – In fact, if I may say so, I did the same thing: I saw Chumki as becoming a kind of, type of, life in the village or whatever.

AM – Because it is! That's the fable, the fable of Chumki. That the real one, the real terrible story of Chumki is a background, is a material, I accept. But it has to do with your unconscious: it brought out these images and these actions of the children, and not others. Which is absolutely an artistic process. I mean, to let the unconscious drive some actions or writings or choices or whatever. It's a way of writing and it's a way of assembling materials – I agree – plus what you do with the video, which is particularly interesting.

Is this second character the one that climbs out here on the pillar?

JFC – No. I mean for us there is no character. It's Ramjit who climbs.

AM – All right, that's why I could not understand. So there might be a slight point of abstraction. Maybe.

SD – But the second character is also a woman.

AM – I see. Then I didn't get it. And they both died?

JFC – Yes.

AM – And their deaths were related?

JFC – No. They were both working in Trimukhi Platform and they were both very close to all of us.

AM – And they were killed, both of them?

JFC – No. One committed suicide and the other, she was old.

AM – I see.

JFC – There is an introduction in Bengali but, as we are a little tricky, we did not translate it. I start saying: *"Normally we don't try to express anything, no story, no message, but as two people very close to us died recently, this time our process is a little different"*.

AM – I thought it was really... Because even if it's co-directed and even if everybody puts forward suggestions, which is the basis of collective work and improvisation, it is the vision of one person. And they did it. So I think it's very interesting. No, it's more than interesting: it's moving, it's touching.

SD – May I say something?

AM – Of course.

SD – We don't understand all the languages either, because we don't know Santhali and most of us don't know French, so we understand one third. And I don't think anybody here except perhaps Jean-Frédéric understands all of it.

JFC – No, not even I...

SD – Even Jean-Frédéric doesn't understand all the sentences. I understand only the bits in Bengali, and of course I understand the English, and little bits of the French which I don't follow too well – but Santhali is completely foreign to me.

AM – Yes. I wasn't worried about not understanding the language. I mean in a play, in a theatre show, there is always some mystery. There must be some mystery. But I always say: it doesn't have to be an *opaque* mystery; it must be a *glowing* mystery. Some parts I did not understand were *glowing*. And there was probably a little bit of *opaque* mystery, which is why I skipped the second character.

SD [to the audience] – Did all of you feel or sense that there was a second character?

AM – For example, would she be the woman that does that [Ariane Mnouchkine makes a gesture] at a certain moment?

All – Yes.

AM – I understood she was important, but I didn't realise you were also telling her story.

JFC – In terms of structure, it's when we start with the brooms; that's when we begin to focus more on her.

AM – But it doesn't matter. As Samantak says, some people don't understand a third of the play, that's all. There is the emotion and the beauty of most of the images, and the journey, the importance of smoke, the importance of fire, these lights, your eyes, your strength, your leaps...

JFC – Let me try to answer this question: are we all conscious of what we are doing? We are all concerned about doing something that “works”. This is our target. Something that will move you. But we don't know what will move in you. Not only “we”: in the village people come to see rehearsals and they make sharp criticisms, just as you were doing – like what you told us about the diluted space and the interview recording in French. They offer

the same kind of commentaries, extremely useful, that we take into consideration to make our work more efficient. So the consciousness is among many people and sometimes I personally am not conscious of everything.

I want to give an example with Kajol. It was *Night of Theatre n°7* and she was performing (Kajol performed the first time we came to JU in January 2009 and she performed in the seventh *Night*). In the video extract from that *Night* we are using now in the play you saw, there is a moment where she is saying a text I don't follow. Because I asked her to speak at that moment and we had been trying different things. But what she decided she would be saying is something that I never asked her. The trust between us was such that it was unnecessary. It was working on stage, so I had no need to know what it was. And finally someone else from the team explained it to me after we premiered the performance, because he felt I should know. And what she was saying was fitting beautifully into the performance. I even gave a lecture about it later.

AM – Is there a name for what I saw yesterday?

JFC – The first one is *Essay on Seasonal Variation in Santhal Society*.

AM – Why did you have to give it such a conceptual, pretentious title!?

JFC – We don't use it...

AM – Ahh! What a disappointing title! You do something really artistic and then you add a French conceptual intellectual rubbish title!

SD [laughing] – Ha ha ha...

JFC – Among us, we say: *Chumkir Natok*. When we speak about our different performances, to mention this one, we speak about *Chumki's play*.

AM – Voilà!

JFC – And the second part, that is from the moment you went out onto the campus, is called *Try Me Under Water*.

AM – Where before did you perform what I saw yesterday?

JFC – Two years ago, in March 2016, we did a first dry rehearsal of both performances with the audience in Borotalpada village. Samantak was there. At that time, we presented about two thirds of “Chumki's play”.

AM – With these children?

SD – Yes, two years ago in the village they presented two thirds of what you saw yesterday.

AM – I see.

JFC – And we presented also the second part, *Try Me Under Water*. But at that time we did not have the budget so we could not buy the video projector. Samantak saw both and he helped us to make the second part even simpler. About this second part, Samantak was saying: “*It's so wonderful to walk in the countryside; why are you hurrying us? Let us move slowly; don't worry*”. We took the feedback from the audience at the end of this dry rehearsal.

SD – I said: “*Why rush the people? Let them take their time. Go slowly. Walk.*”¹

AM – Yes. Actually I even felt that yesterday. Because the nice gentlemen and girls, as I didn't have any light, came to help me because they think I am even older than I am... [laughs] So they were, you know, guiding me, as if I was really one hundred years old. But they were right in a way because I could not see everything. And I think, I thought: “*Well, do we have to?*” And when I saw the place I said: “*Yes, we have to*”. But in a way, it should have been even slower, even quieter.

And actually, they had a very good idea because they told me, “*Maybe you should take your chair*”. And I was very pleased I had taken my chair but I thought everybody should have taken their chairs and sat quietly, not only me. We would do that in France, before. Even outside Avignon during the International Festival. Sometimes we played outside Avignon. There was one occasion where people found a spot to watch our play without need to pay for the entrance

¹ | See in this issue:
Samantak Das,
“Conversation after the
Night”, p. 94.

ticket. They came with their folding chairs and sat and looked at the performance for free, having taken their seats. Yesterday everybody should have taken their chairs. Because, who knows, it might have lasted a long time.

SD – Doing it in the city, you know, with lights, the noises... In the village, it's completely dark, it's totally different.

AM – There were very good coincidences with the train yesterday. Because it was one sound at a certain moment which was very good. And there, below, the tree with the swing, one train quietly passing... wow... so beautiful!

JFC – We weren't familiar enough to play fully with the space... For this outside part, day before yesterday, Surujmoni suggested adding a few things during the video projection: interventions in the water. With more days, we could have tried out more things for this part. I mean place is important for us each time. But more or less with this one, we finally found a way. No?

SD – Yes.

AM [to the performers] – What about you, do you have anything to say about your work? You have received a load of compliments – don't you have anything to say? Were you pleased yesterday, were you happy? Do you feel joyful while you perform?

Chintamoni Hansda – Yes.

A student from the audience – There was one dialogue in the performance where a journalist asked one of them, "*What do you feel when you perform? Do you do it for money? Do you do it for something else?*" The reply was: "*I do it because I feel good*". That was Chumki's response.

AM – That I could understand. So you see she is right: the answer was in the play!

JFC – Exactly: once a journalist asked Chumki: "*Why are you working in Trimukhi Platform? Is it because you get money, is it because you get to learn a skill so you can open a small business?*"

Chumki was very smart. She replied simply: "*No, nothing of that sort, I do it because it brings me joy.*"

Budhray Besra – Every one speaks of Chumki but we went through a hard time trying to collect information about her. Chumki had been working with us but we didn't know the mystery of her life. It's only after she committed suicide that we came to know she didn't have parents. After her death, I performed the last rites. I took her body to the police station, for the postmortem: that's a requirement here. After I did all that, I let *Jean-da* know.

SD – *Jean-da* is how Jean-Frédéric is called in Borotalpada.

BB – When I told *Jean-da*, he asked me to go to her childhood home to find out more about her. I went with a friend. We went in the afternoon and there was nobody there except one housewife. She asked me, "*Why have you come here?*" There was the sense, in her family, that she had been killed, that she hadn't committed suicide. So the situation was very fraught, very tense. The lady told me: "*Go away, don't stay here*". So I explained to her that I was not from the neighbourhood where she had got married, that I was from elsewhere, that Chumki used to work with us and we wanted to know more about her. And then her foster mother came. She was crying. She told me the whole story. I came back and narrated the whole story to the team. That's how we got to know the story of Chumki.

AM – And you say it's not a theme! That's a very intellectual distortion. That's what we call a theme! I am sorry.

SD [laughing] – Maybe that's because Jean-Frédéric is a philosopher from the Sorbonne...

BB – In our work we always try to find out new things. We discover things through our work. When we discuss, we all speak very little. We work. We do.

AM – We do too. We don't speak. We work. But you need at least a theme.

What do you do when you are not working with *Jean-da*?

BB – I teach in a church school from class I to class IV. I do cultivation too. I am a farmer.

AM – What do you cultivate?

BB – Paddy, rice. And then I do this theatre too and I play piano also.

Sukul Hansda – I do the work my father and mother ask me to do. I dropped out of school.

AM – Why?

SH – I don't like to study. I find it more interesting to work than to go to school.

Sukla Bar Chevallier – He knows a lot of things.

SH – I do electrical work for my home and for our Cultural Centre. I do light installation and sound editing in Trimukhi Platform.

Ramjit Hansda – I study in a boarding school, 10 kilometres away from the village.

Joba Hansda – I too study in a boarding school.

AM – So when do you work with Jean-Frédéric and Sukla?

Joba Hansda – During the holidays.

JFC – And if there is Trimukhi Platform work required, we have such a good relation with the schools that we are allowed to bring them for rehearsals and performances.

AM – I see.

JFC – Now we are working also with 15 girls from the boarding school. We were conducting a double workshop at the boarding school. The school approves. Unless there are exams.

Pini Soren – I study from home. I study in class VII.

Chintamoni Hansda – I too study in the same boarding school as Joba.

AM – What about the co-director?

Surujmoni Hansda – I too study in the same boarding school.

JFC – The other two, Salkhan and Dhananjay, do not go to school. Time to time Salkhan goes to other states in India to work. In Trimukhi Platform, all of them have chosen one or two specialisations so they will be able to do more things in the arts. It is a seven-year dynamic process and we hope that at the end of seven years, for example Salkhan instead of going to Gujarat to do manual work can work at his art speciality and earn approximately the same amount of money. Chintamani is in creative writing, Salkhan and Ramjit are in contemporary dance, Joba in dance and theatre, Dulal and Pini in theatre and Sukul in sound art and light. Dhananjay, who is shooting the video now, is in video and photography and Surujmoni is in theatre direction and photography.²

AM – The videography we saw: did they do it, or did you do it with them?

JFC – No, those are mine. But it depends. For example, for *Night of Theatre n°9 • La Nuit des idées*, all the video documentation was by students from Film Institutes in India and France and by Dhananjay. It depends on each activity.

SD – Some of my students from Jadavpur University had gone also for the *Night of Theatre n°10 • La Nuit des idées* in the village. That's why they got interested in watching yesterday's performances too. The *Night of Theatre* goes on all night. There are several performances. This year, the first performance was in water: it happened in a pool, not a lake, a sort of waterbody where the water dries slowly in summer and gets full again in the rainy season. It's very shallow. So they did it there and that took quite a bit of time, and created one of the most amazing effects. Maybe I will write about it later. I keep thinking that Jean-Frédéric is increasing his space. At one point there were these sky lanterns – so the stage was like half a kilometre long, because there were actions going on and the sky lanterns slowly drifting off.³ My students saw that.

And then there was a performance by a Japanese choreographer (Ikue Nakagawa) on the path leading to the village, without any lights. There was a Canadian guy (André Éric Létourneau) who did a sound installation with Sukul and Dulal, using mud pots. Then

there was a more formal presentation by the Japanese choreographer.

There was also traditional Santhal dance over which the French philosophers Patrice Maniglier and Barbara Cassin spoke a piece that they composed for the occasion.⁴ Then there was a philosophical discussion. And then the dancing went on for the rest of night. So my students participated in it and one of the questions that some of them asked me was: “*What does it mean?*” And I answered: “*It doesn't matter*”. They saw that, and they saw this in Jadavpur with you. [to the students] So would any of you like to say how you felt?

A student in the audience – I would like to ask Jean-Frédéric a question. There seems to be a conscious playfulness with meaning, with the semantic meaning of the performance text that you create with all of them, and you maintain a certain ambiguity both for us and for the people who are performing. Is that not a problem? You are moving away from the symmetry of meaning, you want everybody to interpret things in their own way, so...

SD – I think what you are asking is how much of it is a conscious process on Jean-Frédéric's part and on their part?

The student – Yes. How do you direct your actors?

SD – You know, when you said in the beginning that everybody will interpret it in his or her own way: how conscious are you of creating this thing?

AM – Actually that was also my question.

SD – How conscious are they? And the playfulness?

The student – And sometimes the ambiguity is disturbing because it doesn't match with logical reasoning. It can be disturbing, for the people who are there, who are not inside the art-space, who are not at all specialists in theatre but we call them, they were there, they couldn't understand. So how do you deal with that?

AM – May I first ask you a question? You say “*It is disturbing*.” Do you mean disturbing for you?

² See in this issue: Jean-Frédéric Chevallier, “The Centre at the Periphery”, p. 85.

³ See in this issue: Jean-Frédéric Chevallier, “জল ই জীবন | La Vie dans l'Eau”, p. 180-189.

⁴ See in this issue: Barbara Cassin, “Flow of Intensity?”, p. 66-69; Patrice Maniglier, “The Birth of Something Else”, p. 74-77.

The student – Yes, sometimes it disturbs me.

AM – And you asked some people who did not understand?

The student – No, no.

AM – So you are not speaking for them, but for yourself.

The student – Yes.

AM – Then I understand your question.

The student – Sometimes it does not match with the logical reasoning...

AM – But it is not a logical play. Playing is not logical. Theatre is not logical.

JFC – I have three layers of answer. First. I may have said this before, a few years back. When people from Borotalpada go to see Jatra, it's very interesting because it lasts also all night. As they all understand everything, the same story, the same meaning, when they come back home, they don't speak about the play at all, they only speak about how was the sitting place, if comfortable or not, the quality of the sound equipment, etc. and then they go to sleep.

In what we are doing, we purposely don't control the meaning, so that each one among the audience can have a different experience. If we would control the meaning, there would be no diversity of experiences. There would be only one, as in the example I gave about Jatra. I know that if I focus too much on meaning, the work will not have the effect it is having. So I put the question of meaning in parentheses. I stop being worried about it. When we have to take a decision regarding editing the work, about the combination of elements, I know that if we focus on the meaning, it may mislead us in terms of rhythm, in terms of effects on the audience. One basic criterion for all of us is: are we sleeping when we watch our own work or are we awake? If we start sleeping even if it is "meaningful", even if it is "logical", we leave it out because it will not work, aesthetically speaking. When we started to rehearse this performance some years back, I repeated several times to the team: "*Be careful*"

because we may do it for years so we have to like it".
But this is an aesthetic criterion, it's not in terms of transmitting any meaning.

SD – Once you create a work like this you don't change it? It will remain the same three years from now?

JFC – No, for example after what Ariane said about Marc Hatzfeld's voice recording in French at the beginning, maybe if we do it again, we should edit the track as she suggested.

The second layer: this is funny because it breaks down all the 'normal' sociological analysis in India. In our Santhal Adivasi area, people are much more ready to understand that they don't have to 'understand' and that they can enjoy the performance directly. We knew about the reaction of some of you [Samantak's students from Jadavpur University], because news comes to us from different sources in the village. We know that during our first play, some of you were wondering about the meaning. Similarly, when we came to Calcutta in January 2016 with *Bachchader Experimentum*, the performance with the tree, a lady from the city (Manjula Dugar) told me, "*It took me half an hour to let things flow*", as at first she was worried about the meaning, worried about the meaning, worried about the meaning. It was in total a one hour performance, and she could enjoy fifty percent of it only. But once she let herself go with the flow, being attentive to other things than meaning, the experience suddenly became important for her, enjoyable, and even meaningful.

AM – I just want to add something about meaning. I quite understand why Santhal people would not be obsessed with logical meaning. Because, after all, they deal with illogical poetry all their life: in their religion, etc. In fact I was not thinking all the time of the meaning except in just a few parts which I called *opaque*. But it does not mean that it is meaningless or senseless. If it had been meaningless or senseless, I would not have liked it, I would not have been moved.

I agree with Jean-Frédéric when he says the meaning comes by itself and you build it in your imagination, in your heart, in your unconscious. Because of course, as I

said, you recognised guilt. Of course it's not the guilt towards Chumki. It's a guilt towards people who were with us but we did not see the danger or how serious she or he was. I mean, everybody has experience of this. So I recognised this. I recognised a certain loneliness, in my own journey. A melancholy. Or to have seen something so beautiful that it becomes heartbreaking in a way and you know that you will never share it totally because you will go away; because you don't share things in the same way if you can go away or if you don't or can't go away. And I suppose Jean-Frédéric and his wife Sukla, they can go away. Chumki couldn't go away. That makes the difference. So in fact for me the meaning was there. And also in the strength of the presence of the performers, in the way they jump over any psychological or social obstruction because they are still in their full power, with the full freshness of childhood. So I wanted to emphasise the fact that you [speaking to JU students] with your literary minds want a certain kind of logic: if you don't find logic, it does not mean that there is no meaning.

JFC – I give the third part of my answer. Finally, if meaning is built, like Ariane has built meaning, it's because there were feelings. I mean you experience something with your sensibility, with your senses, something sensible happens to you first. And sometimes we try to push you a little more. In the performance in the water, the one you saw in Borotalpada last January, the text which is in four languages is composed purposely to make you think, to make you ask yourself questions.⁵ But it does not give an answer. It is purposely done like that and it is in four languages so that you cannot catch everything. We have tried to build it kind of musically. Because they are speaking sometimes in French, sometimes in Santhali, sometimes in English and sometimes in Bengali. Sometimes there are subtitles, sometimes not. There is much more text in this new performance. But the purpose is not to give you a meaning. The purpose is to push you a little more to seek meaning yourself: not meaning about what you see, but meaning about what you experience while seeing it, so ultimately about yourself.

⁵ | See in this issue: Jean-Frédéric Chevallier, “জল ই জীবন | La Vie dans l'Eau”, p. 180-189.

A student – You mentioned something about Jatra. Jatra has a narrative but your performance text is not restricted or limited, as you say, to a narrative, you go beyond this.

JFC – In this new work you saw last January in Borotalpada, there is no narrative.

SD [to AM] – Jatra is a traditional theatre form in Bengal and Bangladesh. It typically goes on all night. Earlier they used to be primarily mythological, on the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, etc., but now there are also social dramas. You can have a Jatra on the perils of drug addiction or whatever...

JFC – There is Santhal Jatra, Bengali Jatra, Orissa Jatra....

SD – They are very melodramatic, operatic in many ways, with songs and dances.

JFC – Not always very well done, but technically they are very big shows.

SD – There was even a Jatra on *Jurassic Park*... But the point was not Jatra, the point was the responses after the Jatra.

The student – I was asking about the text in four languages, English, French, Santhali and Bengali. I cannot understand any French nor Santhali but those were not translations, were they?

JFC – For the part with two microphones in yesterday performance, we composed the text together. I sometimes suggested something in French and if it sounded nice we kept it, or we translated it into Bengali or Santhali. Sometimes others proposed something directly in Bengali or Santhali. The text of this part was built together. And purposely we want you to catch some of it but we are not worried, we know you will not catch everything and that's not the purpose because it is also nice to listen to sounds, the composition of sounds.

A student – When you are trying to use language you are actually trying to produce some meaning. Those are not nonsense words. They have some meaning, in French or in Santhali. But we cannot understand

the language so the meaning is not coming through to us.

JFC – It does not matter. If you check the composition of this part, you will realise that it is going in multiple directions and you cannot get simple meaning and that really it is not important to get everything, something else is at stake.

The student – The message is not particularly important?

JFC – There is no message. If Joba is telling you she likes a specific actor (Aditya Kapur) and she wants him to be on stage with her, it is great if you understand and it's great also if you don't understand.

Sukla Bar Chevallier [laughing] – Jean-Frédéric doesn't like this actor.

JFC – We tried several compositions and we found that this one works, but it is not composed for you to be stuck on immediate meaning. The effect that the composition is producing on you is important.

AM – Still. This India, this Bengal, this village, this man, should not have let Chumki commit suicide. That's a message. We should not have. She should not have had to flee her husband and seek the protection of her parents four times a year. That's something about the situation of women. So there is a message. Jean-Frédéric said that there is no message because there is no *propaganda*. But of course there is a message because there is an emotion, because we are told some time in our life to know that Chumki has been forced to commit suicide by humanity, man, society, India, Bengal, tradition, nasty traditions. But this is not said. It does not have to be said. It is just evoked. It's like the smoke. It's really like the smoke: it's there. The message was already there when Bhudray went and asked the foster mother to tell him the story of Chumki. That's the beginning of the message.

SD – If I say to Bhudray “*Come to my room at 11*”, it's a message. “*I don't like the colour of your shirt*”, is a message. That's not the way in which Ariane uses the word “message”. For Ariane, it's about the meaning. To look for the causes.

Another student – If we are calling this a “performance” instead of a “natok”, a “play” or a “drama”, I was wondering – as for the audience there is an element of individualistic response and meaning – if the act of performing then doesn't only remain with the actors, then even the audience members in a way become performers in performing their meaning... do they not?

AM – I would not make that difference, actually. For me it was theatre. It's theatre which is totally different from mine but it's theatre. And the individuality of response from the audience exists in every kind of theatre performance. There is a community, which is the audience: it's like an oceanic swell, it moves together, but each wave in the swell has a different height and sometimes speed, and one is white and another is not. The audience is the same: it's together but the reactions are individual. It's an ensemble. Between our two ways of doing theatre, the difference is a difference of forms. The relationship of the audience to this or to that will be different in degree, or in intensity, but the individuality of each of us stays. For example, when Richard II comes in from the expedition, in my play, there is nothing, just Richard II and little bit of wind blowing on one banner and the music. Yet the audience saw a beach because Richard II says, “*I catch the sand of the beach.*” So everybody saw a beach, but I don't know what beach they saw. There were 540 people and I am sure there were 540 beaches.

Don't try to put a wall between forms. I don't. It's different. I will never do that type of theatre but I am totally prepared to receive that type of theatre. It's theatre! I don't see why we should find a name for that. And actually dance also is theatre, and opera also is theatre. I mean we separate things. Why do we do that?

SD – I think there is a small historical reason here because in Bengali we associate “theatre” with the western “drama” developed in the 19th century. So when we say “natok” we think of this “drama”.

AM – Yes, that's why: because you are French minded! [laughs] The Bengalis are French minded!

The only thing which is not theatre is bad theatre. When it's not true, when it's not incarnated, that's not theatre. But when it's true, when it's acted like this or like that, whether the actors are very, very young or very, very old or whether they are up here or down there or the stage is like this or immense, as long I am moved, as long as I cry or laugh, it's theatre. And it belongs to everybody. And there is no wall. It doesn't belong to boxes. The different theatres in the world don't belong to shelves and boxes.

An actress from the audience – When an actor gets to play a particular character what should be his or her approach towards the study of the character, so that the essence of the character does not get lost in the translation from the script to the portrayal in person?

AM – Will you give me your question in a less theoretical way?

SD – How to make sure a character is alive?

AM – I don't know. To act him well, to incarnate him well, to feel the truth of his feelings, to work on it, to know, to see him. A good character is when, even if it's one of the characters of the play, this character could be the hero or the heroine of other plays. We could build history on him or her elsewhere. Not only in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* or *Tartuffe* by Molière. If he is a good character, you can go on like Tintin. You know. Like Tintin. *Tintin in Congo*. *Tintin in Tibet*. A good character is someone you can imagine having an adventure in the North Pole. You know: Falstaff detective, Falstaff in a room in India, Falstaff in Bengal, Falstaff under the sea, that's a character.

In Pondicherry few days ago, one of the students suddenly came onto the stage and, strangely, he was a character. I corrected him little bit. He had rhythm but he was losing the rhythm very often, so we tried to understand what could help him to keep his walking rhythm. And we did that for five minutes and he started walking and I started talking to him and I said, “*What is your name?*” and he said, “*Nasiruddin*”, so I said, “*Alright, so where are you going?*” and he answered, “*I don't know*”. So I said, “*Well, do you want to go somewhere?*” He said, “*Yes, I want to go to S.*”

So we worked on this little travel and after that during the whole workshop, at times we would need him, so I would say "*Védant, can Nasiruddin come in, I think we need him in this improvisation?*". And he would come in and all this while he would keep this travelling idea so he would travel to Paris or he would go – I don't know where, and he was a character. We wanted to see his adventure everywhere.

SD – But Jean-Frédéric doesn't believe in character...

AM – But he is right. We use the word "character". Sometimes we don't talk about character, we just talk about person. But even if Jean-Frédéric doesn't believe in character, pedagogically we have to go through character, then we probably abandon it little by little. But characters are pedagogical.

Characters, of course they exist – he is wrong not to believe in them because they exist. Shakespeare uses characters, so they exist but you can't stop at the character. And many times, we, in certain plays, we don't use the term "character", we use "person", "human beings".

To end on a polemical note, I could say to Jean-Frédéric that sometimes one does not believe in things one does not have the courage to confront. Because to play a character is very difficult. He would have to abandon the whole of his work to start something completely different. So he prefers not to believe in it. [laughs] It's like cutting a scene in Shakespeare. I have a theory that one cuts bits in great plays when one is not able to put it on. I did it, I cut a little scene and I know very well why: because I could not find the way. And it's something to regret because I know it's because I could not do it. Character is the same. Character is a part of theatre. It's a style of theatre. It's exactly like when I said this is not my style: what Jean-Frédéric does is not my style, I will never do that. But I don't say: I don't believe in it. I say: it's not my style. So Jean-Fré should say: characters are not my style. He should not say: I don't believe in it.

JFC – It's because I did not have time to say it. I was about to say that. I think it has to be put in the spectrum of possibilities. In my case I had worked with characters but I didn't feel at ease. I don't feel happy with it in the theatre I am doing, for my work.

AM – That I can quite understand. I just said that because you said you don't believe, so I told you: Come on, you don't believe in Chaplin?

JFC – It took me a lot of time to understand the fact that I was not made to work with character. As I am a philosopher, I need to put it in words so it helps me to move on in my work on stage. It was in France, before Mexico, long ago. I had a group of actors and we needed few more actors. So new actors came from traditional acting schools like Le Conservatoire, and with the actors of my group we were trying to rehearse with them. The thing was that in my group we never used the term "character". In fact, we had completely forgotten about it. But the new actors needed to use the term "character" so, in order to make the new actors feel at ease, we had to simulate that we were speaking about characters between us. At that time, I was still not able to say: characters? no, it's not something I use. But already I was not using it.

AM & SD – Bravo! Merci beaucoup.

Born 3 March 1939, **Ariane Mnouchkine** is a French theatre director. She founded the Parisian stage ensemble Théâtre du Soleil in 1964. She holds a Chair of Artistic Creation at the Collège de France, an Honorary Degree in Performing Arts from the University of Rome III and an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from Oxford University. Mnouchkine is regularly ranked as one of the world's most influential directors, the only female winner of the international Ibsen award, whose productions – 20-odd in the last 50 years – are often spoken of in awe. Soon after the events of 1968, Théâtre du Soleil exploded into notice with its rough-and-tumble devised works *1789* and *1793*, which brought the history of the French revolution to scandalous, shocking life. Their cycles of *Richard II*, *Twelfth Night* and *Henry IV* reached an estimated 250,000 people, fusing Shakespearean history with stylised imagery drawn from Japan, Bali, India, then a four-part odyssey into Greek tragedy, *Les Atrides*, that blended Kathakali with Kabuki. Always restless, Mnouchkine has sometimes made migration itself her subject: 2003's *Le Dernier Caravansérail* (*The Last Caravan Stop*) dramatised the experience of refugees from Kurdistan, Chechnya, Iran, Russia and other countries into an extraordinary six-hour experience that featured no fewer than 169 characters. In French, the word spectacle is simply the offhand word for “show”, yet Théâtre du Soleil interprets it literally – they seem unable to make theatre that is anything less than epic. 21 nationalities are represented in Théâtre du Soleil's ranks, and it has sister companies drawn from Afghanistan and Cambodia.

Jean-Frédéric Chevallier's biographical note appears on page 37, that of Samantak Das on page 55, that of Trimukhi Platform's creative team on page 122.



- 2008 | Borotalpada village
First assembly meeting
Monsoon Night Dream (theatre of presenting)
- 2009 | Ahmedabad DARPANA ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS
Drowning Princess (film-essay)
| Calcutta EASTERN ZONAL CULTURAL CENTRE + JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
Monsoon Night Dream (theatre of presenting)
| Mexico city MEXICAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY (UNAM)
Drowning Princess (film-essay)
- 2010 | Bogota TEATRO OCCIDENTE + ADRA + COLOMBIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
Drowning Princess (film-essay)
| Borotalpada village
An assembly takes the decision of building Trimukhi Cultural Centre (= TCC)
- 2011 | Calcutta MACE
International Internal Trimukhi Platform Seminar: the 3 Faces of Trimukhi
| Borotalpada village
Starting of the construction of Trimukhi Cultural Centre (= TCC)
| Calcutta MACE + ON THE FOOTPATHS
Light e3 Sight n°1 (creative photography workshop)
- 2012 | Borotalpada TCC
Light e3 Sight n°1 (creative photography workshop)
Night of Theatre n°5 (France, India, Mexico):
Guignol's दल (theatre of presenting)
| Paris STUDIO DUPEIX
What Does To Build Mean? (film-essay)
| Calcutta INDIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Building Relations in a Space of Diversity
| Guayaquil NATIONAL PERFORMING ARTS INSTITUTE OF ECUADOR
What Does To Build Mean? (film-essay)
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Transdisciplinarity in Arts and Social Diversity
| Borotalpada GOVERNMENT PRIMARY SCHOOL
Creatures of Flesh e3 Paper n°1 (double workshop)
- 2013 | Borotalpada TCC
Light e3 Sight n°2 (creative photography workshop)
Night of Theatre n°6 (France, India, Mexico, Ecuador):
The Thing that Exists When We Aren't There (theatre of presenting)
What Does To Build Mean? (film-essay)
- 2014 | Borotalpada TCC
Night of Theatre n°7 (France, India, Mexico, Colombia):
Per Ruptam Silvam (theatre of presenting)
Crash Courses in Arts Production n°1
| La Habana CASA DE LAS AMÉRICAS + FRENCH EMBASSY IN CUBA
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Contemporary Arts and Community Dynamics
| Borotalpada TCC
Crash Courses in Arts Production n°2
- 2015 | Borotalpada TCC
Night of Theatre n°8 (France, India, Mexico, Colombia):
Bachchader Experimentum (theatre of presenting)
Pollir Shobdo Remix x 2 (sound installation)
| Calcutta JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Contemporary Theatre... What It Is?
| Calcutta GOETHE INSTITUTE
Drowning Princess (film-essay)
| Borotalpada TCC
Crash Courses in Arts Production n°3

- Worldwide ONLINE
Visions of the land in India and elsewhere (online workshop)
- Borotalpada TCC
Crash Courses in Arts Production n°4
Bachchader Experimentum (theatre of presenting)
Pollir Shobdo Remix (sound installation)
- 2016 | Calcutta JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY + MODERN HIGH SCHOOL FOR GIRLS + MINTO PARK + BANGUR PARK + MAGIC HOUR GARDEN
Bachchader Experimentum (theatre of presenting)
- Borotalpada TCC
If Each Day I Love You More, One Day Will I Explode? (sound installation)
Essay on Seasonal Variation in Santhal Society (theatre of presenting)
Try Me Under Water (night wandering)
- Calcutta JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Fabricating Texts for Theatre from a Santhal Village
- A Coruña THEATRE ROSALÍA CASTRO + SPANISH MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Contemporary Theatre Practices and Tribal Community Practices
- Paris LA MAISONS DES INDES
Launch of Fabricate (Fabric of) Art • Fabrique de l'Art n°1
- Calcutta ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE DU BENGALÉ
Launch of Fabricate (Fabric of) Art • Fabrique de l'Art n°1
- Chicoutimi UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC
Lectures about Trimukhi Platform: : Fabricating Texts for Theatre from a Santhal Village
Try Me Under Water (video installation)
- Montréal LIBRAIRIE LE PORT DE TÊTE
Launch of Fabricate (Fabric of) Art • Fabrique de l'Art n°1
- 2017 | Borotalpada TCC
Night of Theatre n°9 • La Nuit des idées (France, India, Spain, Canada):
Essay on Seasonal Variation in Santhal Society (theatre of presenting)
Try Me Under Water (video installation + night wandering)
- Birpara GOVERNMENT COLLEGE
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Globalisation or Mondialisation?
- Paris UNIVERSITÉ DE PARIS NANTERRE
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Contemporary Theatre and Tribal Community
- Calcutta OXFORD BOOKSTORE + ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE DU BENGALÉ
Launch of Fabricate (Fabric of) Art • Fabrique de l'Art n°2
Try Me Under Water (video installation + night wandering)
- Khorika + Borotalpada GOVERNMENT SCHOOL HOSTEL FOR GIRLS
Creatures of Flesh & Paper n°2 (double workshop)
- 2018 | Borotalpada TCC
Night of Theatre n°10 • La Nuit des idées (France, India, Canada, Japan):
জন ই জীবন । La Vie dans l'Eau (theatre of presenting)
- Calcutta JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
Conversation about Trimukhi Platform: Theatre Today with Ariane Mnouchkine
Essay on Seasonal Variation in Santhal Society (theatre of presenting)
Try Me Under Water (video installation + night wandering)
- New Delhi INDIAN INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Combining Differences instead of Telling One Story
- Medinipur VIDYASAGAR UNIVERSITY
Essay on Seasonal Variation in Santhal Society (theatre of presenting)
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Contemporary Theatre and Tribal Community
- Paris UNIVERSITÉ DE LA SORBONNE NOUVELLE
Lecture about Trimukhi Platform: Theatre of Presenting as a Combination of Differences
- Borotalpada TCC
Trimukhi Platform 10 years anniversary celebration:
জন ই জীবন । La Vie dans l'Eau (theatre of presenting)

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