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Liliana Andreone, the longtime administrator of Le Théâtre du Soleil, and Helen Richardson, professor of theater at Brooklyn College. Le Théâtre du Soleil will be holding acting workshops at Brooklyn College this week and next, taught by Théâtre du Soleil's Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini and Maurice Durozier.

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## Troupe's Communal Vision Includes Lunch

By PATRICIA COHEN

Good food is an essential element of any Théâtre du Soleil production. A lunch last week started with platters of salad, colorful mosaics of fresh greens, mangoes, tomatoes, eggs and pine nuts, followed by three kinds of pasta — all prepared by members of this renowned French troupe. Baguettes adorned each of the dozen or so tables set up in two solemn wood-paneled rooms at the Park Avenue Armory, where Soleil's latest production, "Les Éphémères," opens on Tuesday, the first night of the Lincoln Center Festival.

"If we're going to work well, we need to eat well," said Maurice Durozier, who has been part of the company for 17 years. Its 70 members — actors, technicians, administrators, musicians — always dine together. And as any one of them can tell you, it is almost as much a part of the creative process as writing the script or designing the costumes. For Le Théâtre du Soleil, theater is an entirely collaborative enterprise. And one that includes the audience.

"Ariane is also very concerned with how we feed the public," Eve Doe-Bruce, a veteran of more than 20 years, explained, her fork pausing above her plate. "There's something that happens when the public eats together and they begin to share something."

Ariane is Ariane Mnouchkine, the founder of the 45-year-old Théâtre du Soleil. Though she is not as well known in the United States as in Europe, she is considered one of theater's most influential innovators. This year she was given the Norwegian government's International Ibsen Award for exceptional achievement in the arts. The citation noted how "each member of the audience is drawn into a total experience — sensual, richly colored, teeming with life and absorbing in its choreography."

Food is a part of that, Ms. Mnouchkine explained later in a makeshift office; it is akin to welcoming an honored guest into your home. She was wearing a dusty-blue T-shirt and a long brown-plaid skirt and took a moment to play with a baby, one of the swarm of children who made the journey from France. At most theatrical performances, "as soon as it's finished, the public is thrown out as if we didn't want them," she said. "But we don't want only the money of the public, but also their presence."

Unfortunately the logistics of the armory make it impossible to feed the 578 audience members during the nearly seven-hour, two-part cycle of "Les Éphémères," as is the practice when the troupe is at its home base, an old munitions factory in the forest of Vincennes in Paris.

"We are very isolated in the woods, very protected," Mr. Durozier said during lunch. "That quality of life is essential. I do not think we could do the same presentation without it."

In 2005 the troupe presented "Le Dernier Caravansérail (Odyssées)," or "The Last Caravansary (Odysseys)," a six-hour production based on letters and interviews that Ms. Mnouchkine and her colleagues collected during visits to refugee camps and detention centers around the world.

At the time Jonathan Kalb, chairman of the theater department at Hunter College, wrote in *The New York Times* that "marathon dramas by someone like Ms. Mnouchkine can be extraordinary; an odyssey through uncharted physical and spiritual territory where the theater loses its trick-box aspect and becomes a site of unexpected communion and awful reckoning."

"Les Éphémères" started with a single question posed by Ms. Mnouchkine: What would you do if you found out that all of humanity would die out in three months? The group followed with improvisations.

"We started with about 600, and there are about 42 in the play," said Shaghayegh Beheshti, who was seated next to Mr. Durozier. "So much of the preparation is invisible but essential."

By the end of the nine-month process the idea about humanity's end was jettisoned, but it had produced a rich collection of stories and snapshots from everyday family life.

Though Soleil is known for its left-wing politics, Ms. Mnouchkine is quick to say that her communal approach to theater is not ideological. “Immediately I was convinced that 10 people have more ideas and intuitions than one alone,” she said.

Ms. Mnouchkine is insistent on the absence of hierarchy. Everyone earns the same salary. Each actor takes on other responsibilities, like cooking or caring for the “chariots,” the rolling platforms that deliver and remove the actors and sets from the stage. She refuses to be interviewed unless other members of the company are included. And at 70 she has already discussed with the group the question of her successor. “It was very important that everyone agree,” she said. (Her assistant, Charles-Henri Bradier, will get the job.)

The approach is decidedly different from the traditional Western notion of the individual artistic vision. “It’s not based on the genius in the wild,” Ms. Mnouchkine said. “It’s based on the quest. We are a group that is chasing theater.”

It is an adventure to which each member of the troupe must wholeheartedly commit. It is not simply a career path, said Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini, whose two daughters, Alba Gaia, 14, and Galatea, 12, also perform in the show. “It’s much more a style of life.”

In other words, a family, with all the joys and strains. “Sometimes we hate together; sometimes we love together,” Ms. Doe-Bruce said.

Jeremy James, an Australian who joined seven years ago, acknowledged that the rich creative life demanded sacrifices: “We miss Christmases with our families.”

Such a life is clearly not for everyone. But for those who embrace it, Mr. Durozier said, there is an almost mysterious communion between actor and director. “It’s like a coup de foudre,” like falling in love, he added. “You cannot do anything else.”

Ms. Doe-Bruce recalled first seeing a Théâtre du Soleil production of three Shakespeare plays. “I see all my senses — ” She struggled for the right word, looking to her companions for help.

“Activated,” Mr. James offered.

More than that, said another: “Pleased.”

“Stimulated,” Mr. Doe-Bruce said. Everyone laughed.

After lunch, as some of the company members went downstairs to attend to costumes or chariots, Juliana Carneiro da Cunha and Serge Nicolai took a moment to explain what is unique about Ms. Mnouchkine’s vision.

“She has got something,” Mr. Nicolai said, putting his wrists together and turning his hands right and left like a weather vane. “She’s got this barometer inside her for the theater. She feels so many things. She’s got this talent.”

Ms. Carneiro da Cunha described seeing the troupe in “L’Âge d’Or” (“The Age of Gold”) in 1976. The light slowly started to rise behind the stage, and for a moment the audience members thought they had spent the night at the theater and were watching the sunrise before suddenly realizing it was a special effect. Everyone was so energized and joyful, she said, they began dancing and running on the grass. “I fell on my nose,” Ms. Carneiro da Cunha said, “and I thought ‘What does it mean? What does it mean?’

“I am going to join this company,” she answered herself. Fourteen years later she did. “I had a dream, and it became true. I think it was like that for everyone in the group.”

Mr. Nicolai smiled and shook his head. Not for him. He spoke instead of seeing the 1978 film “Molière” with his mother when he was 11. Most affecting was the voice of the narrator, which imprinted itself on his mind, he said. Years later he participated in one of Ms. Mnouchkine’s workshops. “I was hearing that voice,” he said, and “I found out it was Ariane.” It was only then that he discovered that Ms. Mnouchkine had been the writer, director and narrator.

The Lincoln Center Festival opens Tuesday and runs through July 19; [lincolncenter.org](http://lincolncenter.org).