

Cultures Are Not Anyone's Property

Ariane Mnouchkine in conversation with Joëlle Gayot
Introduction by Nora Armani

Cultural appropriation is a label that has been applied to creations not only in the performing arts, but also in fashion, food, film, books, and other forms of cultural manifestation. When is a cultural element appropriated, and when is it used in a cross-cultural exchange experience enriching both sides of the cultural spectrum? Who does culture belong to?

In 2018, the devised theatre piece *Kanata*, by Canadian writer and director Robert Lepage and the actors of the renowned French company Théâtre du Soleil, whose subject matter ranged over a two-hundred-year history of First Nations Canadian native peoples, was shrouded in controversy around issues of cultural appropriation and exclusion. "Kanata," the Iroquois word for village, gave its name to Canada. The controversy stemmed from the fact that there were no Native North Americans in the cast, that none had been consulted while creating the play over its more than three-year process of creation, and that the history of First Nations was being told from an exclusively white point of view. Lepage was accused of cultural appropriation, and whether he had any right to tell a story considered the exclusive right of its "owners," namely the Native Canadian populations. A group of protesters formed of Native and non-Native people wrote an open letter in the Canadian papers, asking to be included in the process. It stated: "The Indigenous movement has shown in recent years that it is a mistake to erase us from the public space . . . We are not invisible and we will not be quiet." As the protests surrounding *Kanata* erupted, one of the North American investors pulled out, making it impossible for the production to continue. It had been scheduled to open in Québec City, and then move to Montreal, New York, and Paris. None of the North American performances took place.

As a result of the protests, on July 19, 2018, in Montreal, Lepage and Ariane Mnouchkine, director of Théâtre du Soleil, which is based at the Cartoucherie

in Paris, agreed to meet with the protestors and discuss the creative process of the show. In an interview with Lepage by Mélanie Drouère, published in the program of *Kanata—Episode I—The Controversy*, which was eventually produced in Paris, he explains that prior to the start of the actual creation process, there were trips taken within the First Nations peoples to “immerse oneself into the yesterday and today of these populations.”

“We spent time in the Canadian West, not only in the tribal territories in the mountains, but also in the urban centres, such as Vancouver, in order to better understand the problems in an urban setting. And only at this time the real creative work or exploration, improvisations, and writing started, over one to two-week sessions, either in Canada or at the Cartoucherie.”

When asked about the importance of the identify question, and how central it was for the creation of *Kanata*, Lepage responded by saying that it was of utmost importance and that the French company, composed of Afghans, South Americans, Australians, and actors of all types of origins, some of whom are refugees themselves or those who made the choice of exile, gave their characters a universal tenor. These actors brought to the performance their own experiences of exile and of being torn from their lands. By allowing themselves to “play the other,” as Lepage puts it, they were able to relive the emotions and tell the history of the other, in this case the Native Canadians. Lepage goes on to describe an incident during the research period in the Rockies, where the Théâtre du Soleil company actors took part in a dance workshop, when suddenly the Afghan actors had a strong emotional reaction since the geography of these mountains reminded them of their own country.

Part of the agreement of this co-creation was that the international and fully diverse cast of Théâtre du Soleil was to be used for the new work. (This is the first time they were directed by someone other than Mnouchkine.) Therefore, no special auditions were held for *Kanata* and no new cast members hired. And since there are no Native North American actors in the current company, it was natural that other actors—Afghans, Persians, Arabs, Africans, and indigenous and refugee members of the troupe—would play all the roles, including those of the Native Americans.

With the cancelation of the play’s trilogy in Montreal as a result of the protests and the retracted funding, Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil actors created a French production concentrating only on the last part, aptly retitling it *Kanata—Episode I—The Controversy*. As part of the Festival d’Automne, it took place at the Cartoucherie, from December 15, 2018 to February 17, 2019. Fol-

lowing its unanticipated success, the run was extended through March 31, 2019. During its run, I was able to attend several performances. The core part of this version became the controversy itself, addressing the freedom of a French artist, the character Miranda in the play, who wants to paint the disappearing Native Canadian girls, and who is prevented from exhibiting her work in public, because she does not have the permission of the parents. Allegorically, this scene makes reference to the same prevention Lepage faced when telling the story of the Native Canadians. According to the actors I spoke with, this condensed segment of the longer trilogy included minor references to the eliminated first two episodes through incidents and comments in order to help contextualize the events in the current and final performed version of the piece.



In this interview with Ariane Mnouchkine, published in Paris in *Télérama* on September 18, 2018 (updated September 24) and on the Théâtre du Soleil website, the artist responds to the controversy. The interview has been translated by Nora Armani.

What does the term “cultural appropriation” mean for you?

This term evokes nothing for me because there can be no appropriation of what is not and has never been a physical or intellectual property. That is to say, cultures are not anyone’s property. No bounds limit them because, precisely, they have no known geographical or, especially, temporal boundaries. They are not isolated, and they have been cross-pollinating since the dawn of civilizations. No more than a peasant can prevent the wind from blowing a spray of healthy or noxious seeds sown by his neighbor onto his field, can people, even the most insular, claim the definitive purity of their culture. Finally, the stories of groups, hordes, clans, tribes, ethnic groups, peoples, nations cannot be patented, as some claim, because they all belong to the great history of humanity. This great history is the territory of artists. Cultures, all cultures, are our sources and, in a way, they are all sacred. We must drink from these sources studiously, with respect and gratitude, but we cannot accept to be forbidden to approach them, because we would then be pushed back into the desert. It would be a frightening intellectual, artistic, and political regression. The theatre has doors and windows. Theatre tells the entire story of the world.

What has transpired in the history of First Nations that can explain this controversy?

I am not a historian of Canadian colonization, but let us look at history. An insidious spoliation, turned violent. Endless betrayals. Promises that were never

kept. Treaties that were not respected. And, in 1867, at the time of independence, a genocidal treatment of First Nations. Exclusion and systematic marginalization. And—in a process that has left the deepest traces—a real assault by the Catholic Church and the Canadian state on native culture through the elimination of the involvement both of parents and of the community in the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual development of native children, implemented through a system of infamous boarding schools, where a forced, sadistic, abusive, violent, mindless, unimaginable assimilation of children was practiced. It's similar to what happened in Australia with Aboriginal children. This system was still practiced in Canada until 1996. That is to say, until very recently. So many horrendous things happened that, despite undeniable efforts in recent years, nothing could be repaired at the snap of a finger. The legitimate claims of the indigenous people far exceed this controversy. Moreover—and I wish to say it again—it was not only aimed at canceling *Kanata*, but it was also a vindictive movement of thought, advocating the “return of the baton” rather than the long and difficult path of reconciliation that the majority of natives go through with determination and resilience.

Are you worried about the turn of events?

I must admit, I am a little. Enclosures are being defined within which identities that are reduced to themselves alone are cloistered. Is it to better classify them? Infinitely? On September 22, 1933, at the initiative of Joseph Goebbels and through the creation of the Reich Chamber of Culture, Jewish artists were excluded from the cultural arena and could only appear in productions intended for Jewish audiences. Do not panic, I am not accusing anyone of being a Nazi, in this context, but when one starts to examine my theatre company's ethnic composition, I cannot but recall what the Nazis did. I sound the alarm bell. Beware of certain similarities of thought or methods. Even inadvertent ones.

How should artists react to this? Are you calling for a mobilization?

The first censor is our fear. Being accused of racism is very scary, and our accusers know that. They use it. But as long as we are concerned, in all conscience, we know that we are not racist and that our work, the diversity of the group with which we have been creating works for so many years, is not. In short, our whole life proves the opposite. We must refuse, in the light of the ethnic composition of this cast, even before anyone has seen our production, to be labelled spoliators and racists, and consequently criminals. We all have eyes, ears, memories, legends, all of which are interrelated in many ways. We are not “only” French or “purely” white. Or “only” indigenous. Should we bow our heads to an ancestral curse, of biblical dimensions, that continues to plague us from generation to generation?

Are we, forever, for centuries, racists and colonialists, or are we human beings, carriers of universality: Blacks, Jews, Arabs, Khmers, Indians, Afghans, and natives, whose epic stories we sometimes want to tell, and who, like us, as the basis of their cultural particularities, carry within them the universal human being? And after all, who benefits from tearing society apart in this way? How will this interminable tribalization help dismantle the savage capitalism that is ruining our planet? How will it stop the greed of multinationals? What is the purpose behind it? How will it give us the meaning and the love of the common good? Why do some ideologues try to fool our youth by taking advantage of their idealism, their generosity and their thirst for solidarity and humanity?

Who are these ideologues?

I do not have to name them. By their answers and their attacks, I believe, they will show that they have recognized themselves.

Is it not a discourse that falls on deaf ears?

It's worse than that. It is a trial, where every word of the defense is inverted and added to the indictment of the self-appointed prosecutors. It becomes necessary to constantly navigate between forbidden words that are more and more numerous. How to speak sincerely, and with confidence, when each word can become, at the whim of the interlocutor, an incriminating clue, revealing our ignominy? Under the scrutiny of such commissioners, how can one escape artificial language, clichés, hypocrisy, and finally the inevitable lie?

Is it possible to avoid guilt?

Once all paths of material, legislative, and symbolic reparations have been made and these repairs, always imperfect and insufficient, have been definitively obtained, we must recognize that we may still be guilty of many things, but not of everything, not all the time and not forever. The path is identical for those who are—or who think of themselves as—the victims, because it may be somewhat indecent to appropriate too much of the suffering of an ancestor or make it one's own. The grandchildren of deportees did not suffer what their grandparents or great-great-grandparents suffered. I am one of these grandchildren, and as such I cannot build eternal bitterness and hatred on the fate of my ancestors. Hatred and bitterness that my grandparents who died in Auschwitz would not have wanted to leave me with. They loved me too much, I'm sure, to want to inflict the pain of such hatred on me. I cannot boast of their legacy and through it hold the whole world guilty and responsible, and forbid a young German actress, innocent of

what her great-grandfather could have done to mine, from playing Anne Frank, when she has the talent and the moral stamina to do it.

How do you feel today?

At a meeting in Montreal back in July, Robert and I sought out the indigenous artists who had expressed their incomprehension, not to say their disapproval, at the lack of native actors and actresses in the *Kanata* cast. We had to remind them again and again that this play had been rehearsed and produced in France, with actors of very diverse origins, first of all refugees, then residents in France, then most of them naturalized as French in recent years. Many of the artists who met with us that night had heard vaguely about the Théâtre du Soleil but were unaware of its principles and its way of operation. The meeting was held in a respectful atmosphere, on both sides, and I thought we were moving forward on the difficult path of understanding and reconciliation.

This meeting, which I will remember all my life with a very special emotion, lasted more than five and a half hours, but we would have needed, and we will still need, more time. We will take this time. We promised. But, the next morning, all those who did not want this meeting to conclude with an agreement, and who had not attended it, attacked us. And, I admit it today, that Robert and I have been plagued by accusations of all kinds resulting from the amount of intimidation and misinformation on certain forums or blogs and springing up on social networks where a multitude of anonymous people are involved. After the announcement of the cancelation [of the show in Canada], many of the native artists we had met with that night did not hide their disappointment and even their disapproval of this outcome, which they had not asked for. So we pulled ourselves together and decided that the best answer to the attacks would be to present the first episode of the production ourselves.

Will you be the co-author of this episode of the play with Robert Lepage?

No. But I'm the co-author of the manifesto explaining the decision to present it.

This interview was previously published by Jonathan Kalb on his blog, *TheaterMatters*.

NORA ARMANI is an actor, director, and filmmaker with many international stage and film credits in multiple languages. She is currently based in New York and is pursuing an MA in theatre at Hunter College. Armani also holds her M.Sc. in Sociology (ECON) from the London School of Economics. www.noraarmani.net