

## Tartuffe and the Imams

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The success of Ariane Mnouchkine's immensely imaginative latest production, her Middle Eastern *Tartuffe*, presented in the set for *The Forsworn City or the Furies' Awakening*, a putty-colored walled city of the dead, owes much to the seamless blend she achieved between the Molière text and her portrayal of the tyrannical excesses of Islamic fundamentalism. This amalgam works so well that one begins to doubt that no one tampered with the text until one hears the steady, stately rolling of Alexandrine verse. In fact, at intermission, a gentleman from Milan, seated behind me with his wife, bent over to inquire of me: "Is this Molière's unaltered text?" I was happy to dispel his doubts. However, the fact remains that the butt of Molière's satire, the rigidly moralistic *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement*, a body of lay and clerical men of high standing and powerful alliances at the court, bears a striking resemblance to the imams and Ayatollahs throughout the Middle East and the former French colonies of North Africa. Mnouchkine's production emphasizes this similarity by having Tartuffe, his acolytes, and their victim, the gullible Orgon, sport identical black beards, black suits, black caps. The set, music and costumes are resolutely Middle Eastern: the women wear white trousers, white shirts, white kerchiefs to hide their hair. The elegant Elmire is bare-headed and favors embroidered caftans. The women of Orgon's household (his daughter, wife and servant) spend much time folding dazzlingly white sheets, or sitting cross-legged upon a sumptuous Oriental carpet. There is no hint of the French *Grand Siècle*, except for the wrought iron gate enclosing Orgon's domain, a replica of that of Paris' Palais de Justice.

*Tartuffe* is yet another of Mnouchkine's ingenious cultural shifts, like her Kutiyattam *Les Atrides*. One of the reasons why these transplants or graft hybrids have taken root lies in the fact that her international cast, much like that of Peter Brook, has become Parisian if not French. For example, in this production, the comically free-speaking Molière maid, Dorine, the *raisonneuse* of the piece, is played by Mnouchkine's former Clytemnestra, the beautiful, tall Brazilian dancer Juliana Carneiro da Cunha, who never acted before joining the Théâtre de Soleil. This

superb *tragédienne*, Mnouchkine's Galatea, has emerged as a first-rate comic actor in the *commedia dell'arte* mode; she has in fact mastered the physical vocabulary of farce, so basic to Molière's humor even in his philosophical, somber comedies. Elmire, the former Iphigenia of the Atride cycle, as well as one of the three Furies of *The Forsworn City*, is the tiny, delicate Indian actress, Nirupama Nityanandan. Brontis Jodorowsky, once a silly-looking Achilles, is a bewildered Orgon, while the tall dancer/acrobat, Shahrokh Meskin Ghalam, the unforgettable Night, who silently scaled the gate of *The Forsworn City*, capers through his part as a lustful, every-ready Tartuffe, a comical, silent film-type villain with Eisenstein or Dr. Caligari kohl-circled eyes.

All of Mnouchkine's actors speak with the same foreign accent, even the French-born ones. All have acquired what I call Mnouchkine speak, which has nothing to do with her manner of speaking in everyday life. These actors articulate with intensity, but their French is exotic, and their French audience finds it more arduous to understand them than do foreign tourists. Perfect interpreters of their parts, whatever they may be (all are encouraged to try out for any part they may be interested in, irrespective of gender), these actors are somewhat removed (in the Brechtian mode, which was formative for Mnouchkine), as though each had come from a different planet, ending in the same rocket. This rocket is Ariane Mnouchkine herself, an irrepressible dynamo, a great artist constantly involved in self-renewal.

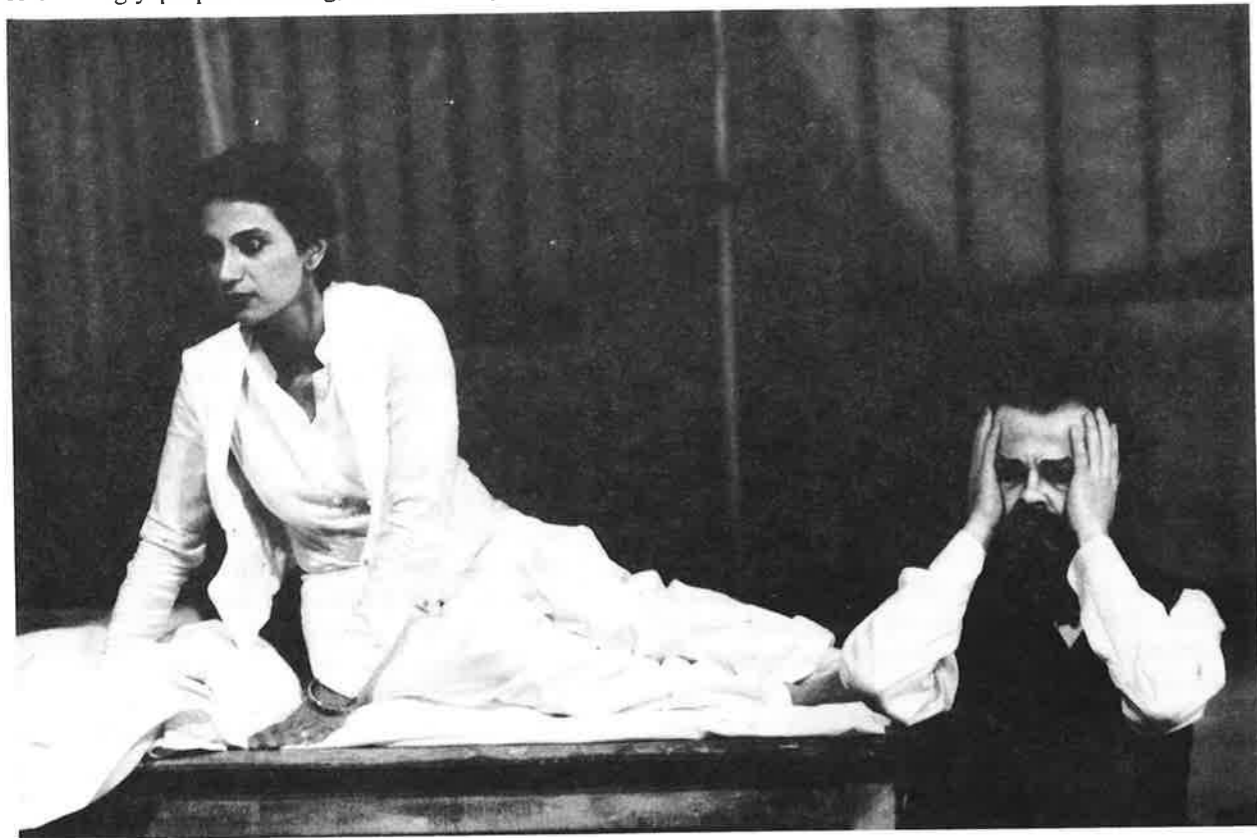
This time she has taken on the "*intégristes*," as they are called in France. Their anger, fueled by the conviction that right is on their side, on their side only, that there is no truth outside the spot where their two feet rest, has of late taken the form of subway terrorists bombings. As we entered through the Cartoucherie's high double doors, greeted by the ever-present, tireless hostess, our handbags were carefully searched. All of us were happy with the strict controls, for in the crowded theatre (every seat is taken and extra visitors settle on the steps) much damage could be done. However, *intégristes* are not theatre goers; in fact entertainment is frowned upon, and laughing might mean a death sentence. In Oran,

the AIS (Armée Islamiste du Salut), had decreed the sale of cassettes and records punishable by death. On September 29, 1991, Cheb Hasni, one of the most popular *rai* singers, was shot in front of his house. He was 27 years old. One can imagine that Molière, who laughed at everything and everyone, must be a special devil in their view.

This would not be news to him. Indeed, *Tartuffe* was rewritten three times. The first version was presented on 12 May, 1664, as part of the sumptuous spectacle and royal festivity, *Les Plaisirs de l'Île Enchantée*. Louis XIV saw nothing amiss with the three acts of *Tartuffe, ou l'Hypocrite*. However, pressured by *les dévots*, he decided there would not be "public" performances. The author then turned his text into the more traditional five-act comedy. Entitled *Panulphe ou l'Imposteur* it played at the Palais Royal on 5 August, 1667. This single performance took place in the King's absence since Louis XIV was busy laying siege to the city of Lille, then under Spanish rule. Molière dispatched his petition for royal approval and support. He explained that his protagonist was no longer a cleric, but a man of seemingly proper breeding, a fashionably attired

crook. He begged his sovereign to take his part against a cabal of "Tartuffes." It is interesting to realize that even in the midst of battle, a king might turn his attention to matters of art and conscience. Obviously, Louis XIV enjoyed these distractions even if he did not take them as seriously as the writer expected. However, the hypocrites carried the day. The performances of *Panulphe* were suspended on the second day. Finally, two years later, a definitive version was presented on 5 February, 1669. In it, Tartuffe (his name comes from *tartufo*, which means "truffle" and was a coded designation for a hypocrite) occupies an intermediate position between a cleric and a man of the world; he is a spiritual advisor, one without virtue or conscience. The play's success matched the delay which had been imposed on it by the forces of *les bien pensants* ("the right-thinking ones"). It received 77 performances in Molière's own lifetime, and gave him ample vindication.

Mnouchkine's production begins with an empty stage which will quickly fill up. It reproduced Molière's unorthodox introduction, a scene full of motion, agitation, proliferation of people and of



Nirupama Nityanandan (Elmire) and Brontis Jodorowsky (Orgon). Photo: Théâtre de Soleil.

words.

At first there is nobody but a street vendor making his way along the wisteria-covered wall. His cart is laden with brightly colored goodies: oranges, candy, soft drinks, silk scarves, dolls. He dances as he goes to the sensual Arab music coming over his very modern boom-box. In one hand he holds a wooden percussion instrument much like oversized castanets. It speaks for him since he remains silent, but his whole being expresses joy and a deep love of life and freedom. The tassel of his red fez bounces from side to side, his feet tap out the rhythm of the song. In the program notes, we are informed that the music is the composition of Cheb Hasni, one of the many gifted victims of fundamentalist assassins.

The Merchant (Sergio Canto) is Mnouchkine's addition to Molière's cast of characters. It is perfectly in keeping with the author's message since his very presence defies the rigid order imposed by bigots, whether they be called *intégristes* or members of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement. Created in 1627, this secret order denounced theatre as a frivolous activity, one detrimental to piety. Mazarin, then Louis XIV himself, tried to curtail their power but they had strong allies in the person of the king's mother, the Archbishop of Paris, and the President of the Parliament.

Nor is the Merchant Mnouchkine's only addition. As members of Orgon's household begin to run in, then start to dance as though impelled by the music coming from the street, we espy two clownishly fat women in black, their heads covered by black peasant scarves, their round bellies by white aprons; they are the personal maids of the endlessly preachy Madame Pernelle (Myriam Azencot), Orgon's mother, an even more unquestioningly devout admirer of the still invisible Tartuffe (He will appear only in Act III, scene 2). In Molière's play, Madame Pernelle is followed by one silent servant, Flipote. She is there to receive her mistress' resounding slap at the end of the first scene, a slap this virago symbolically imparts to each and everyone she has been reproving. In the Mnouchkine production, Flipote has become the twin figures of Flippe (Valérie Crouzet) and Pote (Marie-Paule Ramo Guinard). Is this twinning gratuitous? Certainly not for those who have seen *The Forsworn City*, a play with which *Tartuffe* was paired on the company's recent tour (Wiener Festwochen, the Avignon Festival). Indeed, the puppet-like twin figures, together with the fat, angry Pernelle, reconstitute the three furies of the previous play. Thus, they are not merely comical, but

vaguely threatening as well.

At first, however, Mnouchkine's production taps the farcical vein. She who filmed a life of Molière faithfully transmits his aesthetic. Half of the play is pure farce (slapstick, horse play, running, slipping and falling, pouring water on someone's head, or on one's own). The second half of the performance grows increasingly dark, yet is still full of ribald humor. Mnouchkine has staged the funniest seduction scene, the one in which Tartuffe is finally unmasked. Yet we are shown how dangerous the bigots are, particularly since their presumed religiosity is a cover for usurpation of power.

Mnouchkine's most important addition is in her creation of a silent chorus of imams. Orgon does not move without them. He arrives with a group of these black-clad, black-bearded men. Under their influence, Orgon grows insanely tyrannical. He insists that his only daughter marry Tartuffe, much as the Imaginary Invalid requires that his daughter marry a doctor. The imams are the physicians of his soul; they will insure his safe passage to paradise. Never has the connection between Molière's final play and *Tartuffe* been more clearly shown. Orgon has reached an age when he lives in terror of dying. He will divest himself of all family ties and leave all his worldly goods to this "holy man." This way salvation lies and life eternal.

Orgon, the fortunate husband of a young, beautiful, loyal wife, whom he married as a widower and who has been a model stepmother to his son and daughter, has eyes only for Tartuffe; he is besotted by his house guest, as Dorine unhesitatingly declares. Love for Tartuffe has obliterated the love for his wife. In fact, when his son tells him that he surprised Tartuffe trying to seduce his hostess, Orgon refuses to believe him. He even closes his ears and mind to Tartuffe's confession of guilt, and, kneeling before him, kisses his hand and begs him to stay forever under his roof. He is really asking to be cuckolded, which takes French farce to the edge of the ridiculous, to use a modern term, "the absurd."

It is at this point that Elmire suggests she can "show" him Tartuffe in action. He need not believe what he has heard about him; he will witness his house guest's villainy. This is the famous scene 5 of Act IV. Orgon must only hide himself under the long table cover and listen to the improvised scene which will be enacted for his benefit. As Jacques Guicharnaud writes wittily in his *Molière, une aventure théâtrale*, everyone will be acting, everyone will assume a disguise: Elmire that of a *coquette*,

Tartuffe of a religious man ready to worship a desirable woman, and Orgon's mask is the best cover of all, that of a table. This is truly meta-theatre: "A confrontation takes place between three people who are not what they appear to be: a *coquette* is in reality an honest woman; a pious man is a parasitical sensualist; a table is the head of a family and a husband."

This is bedroom farce without a bed. The covered table is about to become the altar of Tartuffe's real cult: the female body. He is in fact ready to bed Elmire upon her table. By now, he has drawn the white window draperies and stripped to his long johns. As to Elmire, seeing all these preparations, she is desperate at Orgon's slow reactions. Even when she coughs to call his attention, or knocks upon the table, the gullible man does not stir. Will he have to witness the complete act to be convinced? At a crucial point, Elmire sends Tartuffe out to check whether her husband might not be lurking outside, in the hallway. The eager lover, panting with desire, brushes away her fears: "Why these precautions, Madam? Your husband is a man to be led by the nose. He takes pride in our intercourse,

and 'seeing is believing' is not his credo." This time, however, when a breathless, triumphant Tartuffe returns to claim his prize he finds himself facing the potential cuckold. The game is up!

Not quite yet, for Tartuffe is legally the master of Orgon's house and all his wealth. Besides, he has in his possession a strong-box which Orgon had been keeping for an absent friend. Once again the imams are at the gate, ready to take over. This is Mnouchkine's fine "translation" of the ten friends of the misnamed Monsieur Loyal, a process server. However, as in Molière, L'Exempt (a police officer) appears, bearing for Orgon the King's pardon and support and a warrant for Tartuffe's arrest. Mnouchkine has added a revealing detail. The police officer is as corrupt as the rest. Before leaving, he fills his pockets with the precious jewels he found in the strong-box, knowing full well that no one will dare protest.

However, the play ends in a joyous celebration. The Merchant has returned with his music. Everyone on the stage breaks into a dance. The imams have disappeared and the air is once again unpolluted.