"Designing Readers: Redressing the Texts of Classic Drama"
Keren M. Smith

I. Introduction

In an essay published in 1992, Roger Wilson suggests that one of the things that characterizes Western theater is its tendency to prioritize the audial at the expense of the visual. Wilson, a director also involved in performance, design, and production aspects of his pieces, is commonly associated with the "theatre of images" group, which seeks to liberate visual and aural imagery from its subservience to the written word. It is the subservient and illustrative relationship of image to text which Wilson believes is responsible for the relatively limited theatrical language in Western theater. By contrast to some Eastern traditions, such as Japanese Noh or Kabuki, theater in the West assumes a play first and foremost to be words: "It's still bound by literature so we think a play is a text, or something that's spoken." [1]

In this article, I want to take up Wilson's challenge by concentrating on the kind of theater in which such a dichotomy is most likely to occur: "classic" theater, whether "classic" refers to the ancient Greek world of Euripides or the renaissance of Greek art and culture that inspired the seventeenth-century Racine. The point is that classic theater often is referred to as such not simply because of its historical time-frame but because of certain assumptions about the enduring excellence of "the text"—faith in its universality and transparency of meaning to any and every audience. In such a context, design could seem to be of secondary, even negligible importance, so long as the actors can act and their lines can be heard. My contention, however, is that it is precisely in such a strongly verbal context that the classical nature of theatre itself, in its alliance of the visible and the intelligible, may be "seen" and appreciated.

As director Peter Brook indicates a play is never, and has never been, simply about "words":

A word does not start as a word—it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by an attitude and behavior which dictates the need for expression. This process occurs inside the dramatist; it is repeated inside the actor. Both may only be conscious of the words, but both for the author and then for the actor the word is a small visible portion of a gigantic unseen formation. [2]

1   Robert Wilson in "Bühnen Raum, Stage Space," *Daidalos* 44, (June 15, 1992): 92-101.
2   Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 [1968]), 15.

If we accept this view of a play as being generated by an inner vision or "impulse," a "gigantic unseen formation," then the manner by which this impulse is brought to light and made intelligible obviously is significant. All art, Paul Klee tells us, is about rendering visible the invisible. How much more obvious and needful is this rendering in theater, where the visible has a special tangibility and "presentness" through the sensual medium of the actor's body and voice. On purely historical, linguistic grounds, theater is *theomai:* a matter of beholding, in the old sense of this word which implies not just a seeing but also a sitting up and taking notice; paying careful attention. And *theatron,* in the ancient Greek, was considered an aspect of speculative thought as well as referring to the act of looking, while *thereo,* the one who theorizes, also was called a spectator: *theoros.* Visibility and intelligibility are inseparable in the language and culture from which much of our Western theatrical tradition derives.

The process of making the invisible visible is not restricted to dramatists and actors. The definition of the actor's body and the space in which he moves requires clear and intelligent decisions in the matter of design. However "universal" in action or character, no classic drama can be played exactly as it was first intended. It is impossible to recreate the first theatrical moment, conditions and intentions of the dramatist. Staging therefore must be literally by design: a work of imaginative animation not a reproduction. Choices facing interpreters of the classics may be informed by the additional concern that the time-gap of the "classic" not become an understanding gap. Choosing to represent a play in period costume makes it into an historical play, and this may not be appropriate for the text, especially if it was not originally written with a clear sense of time or place. As Richard Loncraine points out, "Shakespeare never performed his plays in period costume." [3] Similarly, if recent decades have seen a revived interest in modernization-assisted perhaps by the vogue for updated Shakepearean films and quest for "relevance"-contemporary images may prove to be distracting. Ultimately, as most directors and critics would agree, what matters is not old clothes or new but that the classics be "made intelligible in their essence." [4] Even though ideas about what that "essence" really consists of may vary, the question of design is related more to the unseen giant of the dramatic imagination than to the particularities of period, so that the task facing the director is not: "choosing the period of the costumes" but, as Jean-Loup Rivière phrases it, "finding the costumes most able to reveal the question of the work." [5]

In some cases, the director also may fulfill the function of designer. Most often, however, the architecture of space and movement requires the skills and expert knowledge of a designer, whose role in opening up the "question of the work" and making the text "readable" is as important as the director's. The tendency to stress

3   Richard Loncraine in *Cinéaste, Shakespeare in the Cinema Supplement,* 24:1 (1998): 53.

4   Tim Supple in an unpublished interview with K. Smith, June 5, 1998.

5   Jean-Loup Rivière, 'Le coût du vent,' program notes for the Comédie-Française production of *Iphigénie,* 1992: 14.[Author's translation.]
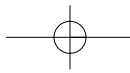
the director at the expense of the designer suggests an ignorance of the theatrical process, and is the result of a false conceptual opposition between word and spectacle. David Whitton notes the rise to prominence of the director as one of the defining features of recent French stage and cinema history. [6] One of the reasons such an imbalance has persisted is, perhaps, the result of a certain suspicion of the ocular, evident in such works as Odette Aslan's study of director Roger Blin. In this work of criticism, Aslan praises Blin for his loyalty to "textual theater," where the audience is made conscious of the "primacy of listening," and of the actors as "carriers of words" over and above their function as "expressive bodies." Referring to Blin's "uneasiness" with the "distance" between the original project and "its concretization in space," she concludes:

> Concretization is a barbarous word for the visionary poet/painter who dreamed of an almost abstract support for his play, and who suddenly sees a materialized ground […] The artist-designer in his studio had prepared an esthetic and functional object; the director had turned over ideas and worked with the minds and bodies of the actors. Suddenly his stage is invaded.…[7]

Apart from the apparent devaluing of the physical nature of theater in Aslan's dream of abstraction, her remarks seem to imply that the designer is a being of inferior understanding in the matter of texts and actors. Aslan is not alone in this assumption. French *créatrice de costumes* for stage and screen, Yvonne Sassinot de Nesle, was only reluctantly given equal prominence in the credits for *Swann in Love* alongside director, Peter Brook, despite the fact that her work entailed equally detailed research into the text and close interaction with the cast. In the chronology of David Williams's book *Peter Brook, A Theatrical Casebook,* (1988) writers of the screenplay for the film (Brook, Carrière, and Estienne) and the principal actors (Muti, Irons, and Delon) are mentioned, but the name of the designer is not.[8] Although she is happy to describe the director as the "maître d'œuvre," Mme Sassinot de Nesle received a César award for her costumes for *Swann in Love.* She was the first designer in French cinema history to do so: an important victory in an art form whose critics occasionally have reflected the same imbalance Wilson deplores in theater.

Contrary, then, to explicit or implicit judgments about the importance of the designer, I would contend that, through an informed knowledge of the text, the designer is indispensable to sensitive visualization, and concretization is not "barbarous," but fundamental to classical theater. The designer is, in short, a visual director responsible for formulating the image-based language of the stage, which must acquire its own coherence if it is to serve the coherence of the text.[9] In the following study, the first production referred to is the work of a designer who also is a director, a clear

6 In his *Stage Directors in Modern France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) David Whitton describes the last forty years in France as the history of the emergence of directors "for whom the text is more a pretext for the expression of their own aesthetic, metaphysical or ideological vision." viii.

7 Odette Aslan, *Roger Blin and Twentieth-Century Playwrights* trans. Ruby Cohn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 9, 5, and 7.

8 David Williams, *Peter Brook. A Theatrical Casebook* (Methuen, 1988).

9 New Zealand set designer and Senior Lecturer at VUW School of Architecture, Dorita Hannah, is one who sees the designer as a "visual director." Lecture at Victoria University, March 1999.
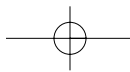
testimony to the fact that designing is an interpretative and creative activity, and not simply a matter of props and costumes.

Kokkos: *Iphigénie*

Yannis Kokkos, himself Greek, always has accepted the Greek alliance of form and meaning, describing the designer as one who conjugates "the inner mystery with visibility, with an objective vision." [10] For Racine's *Iphigénie* at the Comédie-Française (1991), Kokkos assumed, for the first time, the dual role of designer and director, a role which enabled him to fully realize his belief in the theatrical partnership between materiality and the visions of the inner eye: "Being a scenographer," he explains, "also is one way of being a director. My scenographical propositions have never been solely plastic. They have always involved a personal interpretation of the work." [11]

The stage for this production is almost entirely bare, lit with intense walls and fingers of light that reveal at once the drama of heat and marble that was the twentieth-century idea-image of Greece, and the stark simplicity that is Racinian tragedy. It also forms a near whiteness of space against which the forms of the actors can move with symbolic power. Costumes are of a "classical" elegance, mobile draperies clothing the women and covering the military dress of the men. Their simple lines evoke the ancient toga, while allowing for a structuration of the body that is at once, mobile and symbolic. The cloth wound around the body is free enough to follow its movement, concretizing for a moment its direction and impetus, and sketching in space its anger or despair.

A sense of movement is one of the most noticeable features of Kokkos's preparatory drawings also, which he never finishes in the manner of an illustration, but leaves incomplete; an idea in suspension, awaiting the completion of the actor's body, while suggesting the dynamism of theater which is incompatible with complete or closed forms. (figure 1) He thinks on paper as he later will think in the three-dimensional space of the stage: "It allows me to keep the ideas fluid, to maintain a sense of movement and integrate this constantly into the way the performance is conceived." [12] At the same time, the actors whose forms become part of a moving frieze, occupy a particular symbolic space in Racine's drama. Color reflects their essential character and predicament: Iphigenia in white, Clytemnestre in red, and Eriphile, the one fated to the double death of suicide, in black.

Like the choreography of movement, the language of color is all the more clearly articulated because of the relative simplicity of the stage: almost but not quite bare. Stage right is a slab of rock which remains throughout, a mute reminder of what is to come, and a rough-hewn altar of sacrifice and of marriage that repeats the irony of Achille's line to Iphigénie: "You are destined by your father for the altar." (III, iv) Beside this rock, Kokkos also has Clytemnestre

10 Yannis Kokkos in *Le Scénographe et le Héron* Georges Banu, Actes Sud, Arles, 1989, 41. [Author's translation.]

11 Yannis Kokkos in "Yannis Kokkos l'Athénien," *La Croix* (October 21, 1991).[Author's translation.]

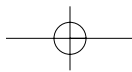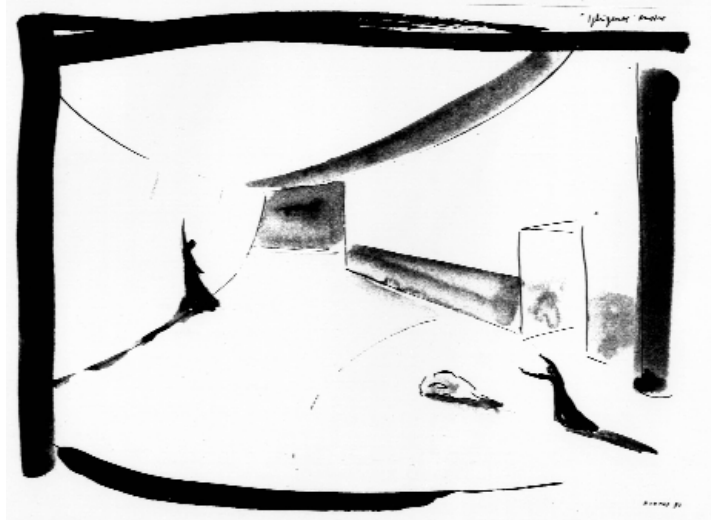12 Kokkos, *Le Scénographe et le Héron,* 16. [Author's translation.]

crouch in pain, a waiting menace of rage. Objects such as this acquire a symbolic, almost iconic, status in Kokkos's work, and in their essential simplicity, combined with their powerful symbolism in relation to the work, they form recognizable elements of Kokkos's stage language.

It is the great length of cloth suspended above the stage, however, which is the perfect realization of Kokkos's aim to find and reveal to the audience what he calls the "secret geometry of the work." This watermarked expanse of canvas, slackly hanging over the heads of the actors, provides, in a single image, both the tent from Racine's only stage direction ("The scene takes place in Aulis, in Agamemnon's tent") and the lifeless, salt-stained sails of the ships, waiting for the wind. The sense of foreboding that broods over the characters, entrapping them in a fateful destiny, is there before our eyes. Even Kokkos's manner of speaking of this "secret geometry" is a reminder of something self-evident to a scenographer, namely, that a work has an underlying shape and design. The latter is not merely a matter of philosophical or ethical ideas as Rivière's reference to the "question of the work" might imply. It is a matter of a vision conjuring up powerful images which demand physical actualization.

The abstract, atemporal nature of cloth, stone, and canvas mean that Kokkos's stage geometry may be responded to and completed by the spectator in the same way that his sketches are completed by the bodies of the actors. *Iphigénie* is the story of a father sacrificing his child to satisfy a call for blood linked implicitly in the text to biblical images of expiatory sacrifice and Jansenist doctrines of predestination. It also tells of a demand for carnage that is political. At the time of rehearsals at the Comédie-Française, the Gulf war had broken out. In Iran, as in the United States, sons were sacrificed by their political "fathers" to serve the call of dubious
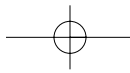
nationalistic oracles. Parallels were made by spectators of the play without these having been made explicit by the designer:

> […] this near-fanatical hunger for sacrifice, may… be seen as a very contemporary metaphor, one towards which Kokkos guides us, albeit discretely, at a time when everywhere, not only in Iran, children are sent to die in wars instigated by adults.[13]

Kokkos's atemporal set thus is open to comparisons, but these are made through association and an effort of creative reflection on the part of the spectator. What Kokkos calls the esthetic barrier separating us from Racine—again, from the designer's point of view the question of relevance is an aesthetic question, based on the assumption that a vision of the world also will shape and organize the world in a tangible style—is not lifted through overt translation from one period to another, but through the creation of an open, symbolic space that allows for a free association between periods.

If a choreography of color and gesture forms the basis of many of Kokkos's productions of classic plays, a 1995 production of Racine's *La Thébaïde* established a more overt dialogue than the 1991 production between ancient and "modern" worlds.[14] Kokkos described the décor merely as: "the antechamber of a Mediterranean palace which opens onto an exterior of rooves, ruins, and modern apartment buildings." What the interchange of spaces actually comprised was a Greco-Roman architectural backdrop on which is superimposed a Poussin-style fresco: a "classic" image of violence recalling the *Rape of the Sabines*. Down right, a pillar dominates; left, a great white wall, in which a jagged opening has been torn, as by a bomb-blast, the careful debris of the whole downstage area evoking both the timeless devastations of the passions and the scarred spaces of twentieth-century warfare. If critics drew parallels at the time between Racine's Thebes and Sarajevo, or even the political fracas between Jacques Chirac and Edouard Balladur shaking the Élysée palace, the effort of imaginative identification is left up to the audience.

For here again, what captures the eye are not facile correspondences or literal images of the action, but timelessly simple, symbolic form and shadow, while Kokkos plays with the drama of light to reveal the spiritual vision of the work, and fix in the mind of the audience the play's principal emphasis on conflict. (figures 2 and 3) At the same time, if the huge gutted wall makes the underlying "question" of the work consciously intelligible, the stage space as a whole retains its own beauty and coherence. In allowing for the freeplay of historical association, Kokkos also creates a stage world that has a reality and mythical power which function parallel to the text—a co-creation rather than an illustration of the text's meaning. The language of stage imagery creates a form of scenic writing more immediate than the words themselves, in so far as, like all imagery,

13 Chantal Aubry, "Racine à l'Heure du Golfe," *La Croix*, (October 25, 1991).[Author's translation.]

14 *La Thébaïde*, Comédie-Française 1995, Mise en scène, décor, and costumes, Yannis Kokkos; with Assistante décor, Muriel Trembleau; Assistante costumes, Lili Kendaka.
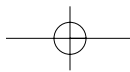
Figures 2 and 3
Photographs by Didier Lefèvre for the
Comédie-Française production of *La Thébaïde,*
1995. Direction, set, and costumes: Yannis
Kokkos.

15   Anne Michaels in an interview in *The
     Evening Post* (March 13, 1998).

16   1990 production of Euripides's *Iphigénie à
     Aulis* (part of the *Atrides* sequence which
     included *Agamemnon, The Libation
     Bearers* and *The Eumenides* by
     Aeschylus, translated by Ariane
     Mnouchkine).

17   Note Racine's reaction to the "shamefully
     sullied" altar of Diana in most ancient
     Greek versions of the *Iphigenia* story:
     "How could I possibly have sullied the
     stage with a horrible murder of so virtu-
     ous and lovable a person as Iphigenia
     necessarily had to be in this play?".
     Racine's "Preface to Iphigenia,"
     Iphigenia/Phaedra/Athaliah, trans. and
     intro., by John Cairncross,
     (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970 [1963]),
     50.

it impacts on the unconscious mind and has the capacity to "enter (the spectator) before they (have) a chance to defend themselves against it." [15] Kokkos's scenography not only replaces the lost social context of Racine's original, but also provides an entrance point, a door of the imagination for the contemporary spectator into a seventeenth-century world. The magic of the theater thus is able to perform its ritual of both displacement from the everyday world and enticement into the world of the drama, assisted by the scenographer's art.

Théâtre du Soleil: *Les Atrides*
Ariane Mnouchkine's production of Euripides's *Iphigénie* provides a second major example of how design may actualize dramas of the past for a modern audience.[16] In this instance, we are dealing with the ancient Greek world of Euripides, rather than the more refined intellectualism of Racine.[17] And Mnouchkine is a director first and
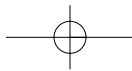
foremost rather than a designer. Nevertheless, Mnouchkine's conception of space in this production is worked out organically and in close conjunction with the inspiration of Nathalie Thomas and Marie-Helene Bouvet (costumes), and of Guy-Claude-François (set). The actors also play a part in the assembling of their final dressing up, adding details and embellishments of their own, and thus making this a particularly cooperative company in pursuit of a democratic art.[18] If the designers are not as vocal as the director in articulating the ethos of the company, the kind of distinct, even competitive, separation of designer and director as is implied in Aslan's commentary, is irrelevant in this strongly community-based company.

Where Kokkos develops a spatial vocabulary which involves light, sound, and movement, Mnouchkine provides a clear example of so-called total theater, where visual, audial, and textual are closely interwoven. Music for *Les Atrides* production, of which *Iphigénie* is a part, is composed and performed by Jean-Jacques Lemetre. It is impossible to separate this specially commissioned music from the musicality of Euripides's text. The rhythm of feet beat out the choreography of passion in stylized movements which betray a company strongly influenced not only by the East, but also by the Commedia dell'arte tradition, where physical gesture is a language as important as the written word. With the chief visual impact of the production deriving precisely from the moving mass of color and form that is generated by this emphasis on sound and movement, the set clearly is not a matter of props, lighting, and scenery. It extends to include the acoustic and dynamic spaces defined by the music and dance. This brings the Soleil production of Euripides within the boundaries of performance art, a style of theater that has been accused of sacrificing text to spectacle in the creation of a new work from the author's play. It also brings it closer to Robert Wilson's ideal, which is that visual and audial should be at least equal partners in a performance where theater, as *theatron,* is not sacrificed to text.

Not surprisingly, Mnouchkine, like Wilson, looks east for theatrical inspiration, citing Artaud's view that, at heart ,"Theater is oriental." [19] While disclaiming equivalent knowledge or training in comparison with a tradition where, "The actors start at the age of six" and acquire a training established over thousands of years which includes exercises for every part of the body "from the eyeball to the toes," [20] Mnouchkine affirms the importance of the oriental emphasis on the actor as mover as well as reciter. Elements of Kabuki, Nô, and Kathakali are evident in most of her productions. Essentially, oriental art is symbolic not mimetic, and this axiom is considered basic to oriental theater, where movement and delivery are learned disciplines and the performance space reveals its artificial nature to the spectator.

18   For a description of the way the costume is a product of an evolutionary process, as well as of design, see 47-48 of *Dresser un monument à l'éphémère, Rencontres avec Ariane Mnouchkine,* Josette Féral, Editions Théâtrales, 1995, Paris.

19   Mnouchkine, in *Dresser un monument à l'éphémère,* 49. [Author's translation.]
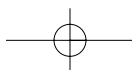
20   Mnouchkine, 49.

Figure 4
The Coryphaeus, played by Catherine Schaub in *Iphigenia in Aulis* as part of *Les Atrides,* performed by the Théâtre du Soleil in 1990. Set: Guy-Claude François, and costumes: Nathalie Thomas and Marie-Hélène Bouvet. Photograph reproduced with the permission of the photographer, Michèle Laurent.

Figure 5
Statues by Erhard Stiefel for *Les Atrides* at the Théâtre du Soleil, 1990. Set: Guy-Claude François, and costumes: Nathalie Thomas and Marie-Hélène Bouvet. Photograph reproduced with the permission of the photographer, Michèle Laurent.

21 Friedrich Nietszche in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 58.
22 Nietszche, 45.

The chorus in Mnouchkine's *Iphigénie* are the most suggestive of eastern influence in their massed, mesmeric dancing. Their role in the drama also is overtly artificial; while their commentary on the action provides an inbuilt alienation effect in terms of the audience's ability to perceive the action as "realistic." It was Nietzsche who first apprehended the chorus's anti-naturalistic, "theatrical" potential, when he described their use in ancient Greek drama as "the decisive step by which war is declared openly and honorably against all naturalism in art." [21] The beauty of the costumes and dance formations in Mnouchkine's production further contributes to the effect of what Nietzsche would call the redeeming power of illusion,[22] where the satisfying coherence of color and line acquires a cathartic function in relation to the visceral agonies played out on the stage. It is not entirely coincidental that the chorus leader, the coryphaeus, wears a costume of particularly intricate beauty (figure 4).

Nevertheless, Mnouchkine does not, like Nietzsche, invite us to be arrested by the beauty of the surface, the "skin, the fold of appearance." Nor in this spectacle, where visual beauty plays almost a transcendent role, does she seek to diminish the textual. In so far as she speaks of beauty directly, it is still of the beauty of the

work, and so, of the text, just as she speaks of respect for the audience before whom the work is performed: "Nothing must supersede the beauty of the work and respect for the public.…"[23] Even in this context of "total" theater, then, the word is given a certain preeminence, while being perceived from a different perspective which requires an alternative mode of perception from the audience.

The concern for text and spectator is carried over into the definition of space in the designs of Guy-Claude François (set) and Erhard Stiefel (sculptures). Actors are required to approach the stage at the beginning of rehearsals with a respect bordering on religious awe, touching the objects and surfaces with respectful care. For this production, the open arena of the stage is roughly boxed by an interrupted line of walls, like the underground complex of an amphitheater. In the adjacent space, an archaeological set is created out of clay statues, comprising a series of ancient warriors with their horses which rise out of the "dig" of four "excavations." (figure 5) But the figures are not Greek. They could be Chinese or Abyssinian. What is important is their evocation of an ancient world which jolts the spectator out of their present reality into the mythological space of the drama. This is achieved through a symbolic rather than a precise, representational language.

As was apparent from Kokkos's work, then, so in the Théâtre du Soleil, it is clear that good design creates its own language, and its own imaginative frame of reference. In an age that has been only too ready, after Lacan, to posit that the unconscious is structured like a language, it should not be seen as surprising or inappropriate that, in an art form that deals with the most powerful impulses of human beings, the visual will create its own insistent forms of intelligibility that will interrelate with the written word. The wealth of documentary evidence assembled in the Cartoucherie foyer testifies to serious "intellectual" research informing the production, and to the ultimate aim to "reincarnate Greek theater, so that what happened two thousand years ago happens again in the theatre now." But accurate recreation is acknowledged as both impossible and incompatible with the company's aesthetic. As Mnouchkine asserts with respect to the costumes: "I asked specifically for them to avoid the Greek "look," because we don't know what Greece was like then, and I didn't want to end up with a lot of bed-sheets."[24] The artificial, created nature of theatrical space is foregrounded, and this is what has enabled the company to continue to develop its own stylistic language. This language is reflected in the actors' mode of delivery—not simply Eastern but multi-accented from their multinationalities—and in the set and costumes which also combine elements from diverse cultures and histories in a distinctive, coherent manner. Repeated selections of color and line help to create a stage mythology that is unique to this company, while also providing the key to the function of design in the whole experience of theater generally.

23   *Dresser un monument à l'éphémère,* 60.
     [Author's translation.]
24   *Dresser un monument à l'éphémère,* 48.
     [Author's translation.]
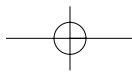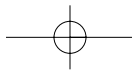
Each of the director-designers considered here have worked within the Western tradition of a strongly text-based theater. Their designs have entailed a certain response to the "meaning" of a classic text, to their perception of its essential question. Mnouchkine speaks of "respect" for the text, and Kokkos of its "secret geometry." In this regard, they do not, perhaps, go quite as far as Wilson, who in his image-based theater, sometimes will pursue the image to the point of its disjunction with the word. Nonetheless, as Mnouchkine points out, Western and Eastern traditions, in their respective emphases on the audial and the visual, need not be as opposed in their aims and effects as Wilson suggests: "We have this tradition of the written word, which need not, however, be opposed to the other kind of tradition." [25] If the Théâtre du Soleil represents the ideal of a company actively seeking to incorporate influences from both traditions, Kokkos approaches design from the point of view that the word has no life until it is "made flesh," and that this flesh must assume its own coherence. For, although design may be developed in relation to the text, unless it possesses an alternative form of readability, it will prove either a garbled distraction or an irrelevance. If these are, in some respects, inescapably "Western" terms of description they also are Wilson's own, when speaking of the process of style endemic to all art: "You start with a gesture and another gesture, and you end in a language." [26]

Design, then, must "speak" with and alongside the text, which, in theater, must be seen to be believed.

25 *Dresser un monument à l'éphémère,* 50. [Author's translation.]
26 Robert Wilson in "Bühnen Raum, Stage Space," *Daidalos* 44 (June 15, 1992): 92-101, 97.