

Peter Brook Creates a Nine-Hour Epic

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IN HIS LOFT IN A WORKING-CLASS SECTION OF Paris, Peter Brook, the British theater director famous for his "Marat-Sade," "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and his more recent, controversial "La Tragedie de Carmen," sits at a white enamel table in his kitchen drinking Perrier water. Photographs of his wife, the actress Natasha Parry, and their two children, Irina and Simon, now in their 20's and pursuing film careers, hang on the whitewashed walls. The loft, hidden by an alley and numerous passageways, is Brook's hideaway, and it is sparse, serene and casual.

Brook is dressed in a blue, patterned Provencal shirt, cotton slacks and a long cotton jacket with heavy shoulder pads. Responding to my questions, he sits straight as a Buddha and fixes his shining, crystalline blue eyes on me. His hair is thin and gray - he was 62 this year - but his face is ruddy and full of vitality.

He speaks slowly, carefully, his Oxford accent creating a rhythmical sound. His mind is fluid. He tells anecdotes, voices opinions, cites examples and analogies, and gives explanations. Always his eyes beam like two searchlights. They tell of a life well lived and of an inner serenity that cannot be disturbed.

It is Sunday, Brook's day off, but one filled with work anyhow. There are manifold preparations for the English-speaking world tour of his largest and most difficult work, "The Mahabharata." This nine-hour adaptation of the Indian epic, translated into English by Brook from the screenwriter Jean-Claude Carriere's French version, opens at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's new theater, the BAM Majestic, on Oct. 13. The production is being financed by Philip Morris Companies Inc., the Rockefeller, Ford and A.T.&T. Foundations, among others.

The Majestic (which later will house Brook's version of Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard,") is an old movie theater near BAM. It has been renovated by the City of New York, thanks to the efforts of BAM impresario Harvey Lichtenstein, Brooklyn Borough President Howard Golden and Mayor Koch, and remodeled to resemble Brook's Bouffes du Nord Theater in Paris, where for the last 15 years he has lived and worked. There, he and his partner, Micheline Rozan, an agent and producer, created the famous International Center of Theater Research, out of which grew Brook's theatrical experiments in Africa and Asia, and where he assembled the international ensemble of actors who performed "The Ik," "The Conference of the Birds," "Ubu" "The Cherry Orchard" and "Carmen." All of this work led to "The Mahabharata."

Acclaimed in France and Western Europe as Brook's masterwork, "Mahabharata" is derived from the longest poem in world literature: more than 90,000 couplets in 18 volumes. Written in Sanskrit between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200, 15 times longer than the Bible, it contains hundreds of stories and myths, including the sacred Bhagavad-Gita, and it documents the history, culture, morality, religion, cosmology and mores of the Hindus. For more than 10 years, Brook and Carriere pored over this vast work and, after dozens of revisions, the essential story was dramatized in three parts (which the public may see on three different nights or in one sitting).

It begins with a narrator telling a boy an archetypal tale centering on two sides of a dynastic family, descendants of gods, whose struggle for power leads to an apocalyptic war. Imbedded in the text are philosophical questions: What are destiny and choice, obsession and rationality, idealism and cynicism? What causes jealousy and hate? What of man's necessity to fulfill his "dharma" - his moral obligation to contribute to the balance and harmony of the cosmos?

The story recalls familiar mythic figures of the West: the ideal king, but with a fatal flaw; his brother, the ideal warrior, who at first refuses war and then seeks out a magic weapon; the blind, ambivalent king and his power-driven sons, and the gods Krishna and Shiva, who intervene in the lives of mortals.

Why did Brook undertake such a gigantic and esoteric project? "One of the things that attracted me about 'The Mahabharata,' " he said, "was that it was not a linear work." (It is not an uninterrupted narrative.) "It takes set ideas of what is right, what is morality or immorality,

and through contradictory characters who intermingle, great questions are turned into human material.

"Like Shakespeare, 'The Mahabharata' is not a set piece of ideology. The telescopic effect that comes from many views seen in the round is the basis of Shakespearean theater, where constantly roles are intertwined in a way which makes something unexpected happen."

"Are you comparing 'Mahabharata' to Shakespeare?" I asked.

"I would not compare 'Mahabharata' to a single play of Shakespeare but to the complete works of Shakespeare. There is a claim that everything that exists is in 'Mahabharata' - that what isn't in 'Mahabharata' doesn't exist anywhere. 'Mahabharata' touches many levels, from the practical to the spiritual and metaphysical. Besides, 'Mahabharata' is fresh, and in theater it is necessary to do things continually freshly."

Consequently, in directing "Mahabharata," Brook has eschewed the minimalism typical of his recent work and synthesized into a seamless whole every theatrical means at his disposal: elements of Indian ritual, Oriental storytelling, Asian puppetry, magic and clowning, images from his work in Africa, the savagery of the Theater of Cruelty and the epic tones of Shakespearean and classical tragedy.

The ruling images of the production are fire, water and earth. Fires blaze to evoke the gods, to call forth enemies, to perform ritual ceremonies. In one spectacular scene, a snakelike fire ignites in a pool of real water downstage as well as at the river upstage. The water is a constant element and is used by the characters to drink from, wash in, wade in and die in. Dominating everything is the earth that covers the stage and which, as it changes colors according to the time of day, has its own life. It lies there, constant, vast and mysterious.

Scenes are pristine, economical, architecturally patterned and move ahead with precision and grace. Poetic dialogue merges with memorable images: a magnificently gowned goddess is carried in on an elephant's back made from the actors' bodies; a king makes love to a fawnlike creature dressed in transparent white, who dies instantly; an archery master instructs young warriors in the symmetry and grace of his art. Then there are the lively and comic court scenes, where courtiers lie on elevated white couches watching a puppet show while lighted cups of lotus flowers float in the pool. The reds and golds that are the colors of the production, together with the embroidery and flowing lines of the women's costumes, imply rather than state the presence of India as well as evoking an undefined timelessness and a primitive quality.

Even the horrendous war scenes have a grotesque beauty. As the end draws near, the warriors are disheveled, disfigured, disemboweled - mankind at its basest. Only the women remain human, burying their dead, questioning the value of the conflict. Throughout, there is the innocence of the young boy listening to the storyteller, watching, questioning, searching.

A UNIQUE FEATURE of the production is the international cast, 24 actors from 18 countries, some of whom perform in accented English. Brook believes that seeing different types and hearing different speech patterns telling the same story enrich the viewing experience and give the production a generic quality.

"The Mahabharata" is very much a team effort, although Brook is clearly the master. Toshi Tsuchitori, composer of the score played by six musicians who use dozens of Oriental and African instruments, traveled in Asia studying its music. Chloe Obolenksy, designer of the set and costumes, spent time in India deciding on colors, fabrics and various authentic objects. Jean Kalman, the lighting expert, grew to understand what Brook wanted and improvised as he went along. And there is Carriere, the playwright, and Micheline Rozan, Brook's closest adviser and the business brain of the enterprise. These people - plus the technical director Jean-Guy Lecat and Marie-Helene Estienne, longtime assistant to Brook, and the actors - committed themselves to years of work and struggle to create "The Mahabharata." Brook's desire to do fresh material in a fresh way is the key to his artistic fertility. He deliberately leaves his staging open-ended during the rehearsal period and even after opening-night performances. I wondered if this didn't cause chaos among the actors. "Apparently, the actors have survived and most of them come back for more," he replied.

"Of course, there are some good English actors who would become paralyzed if you changed anything after the first day. Naturally, they are not the actors I can work with. But when I worked with John Gielgud and Orson Welles, for example, they would have been appalled if I had come to work with a rigid plan. What I do is to study until something grows which is a sense of direction, which is knowing what one is looking for - that it is over there, on the other side of the mountain.

"But there are many paths to take to get to the other side of the mountain and perhaps all of them must be tried," Brook continued. "Directing is pointing, not imposing. Someone asks you the way, you direct them. If they set off misunderstanding you, you stop them and say no, and point them in the right direction, which is very different from a director who has it all figured out beforehand."

Brook's method of working began early in his career. After graduating from Oxford University and mastering six languages, Brook launched his reputation as an enfant terrible by directing, at the age of 24, an unorthodox version of Richard Strauss's opera "Salome" at Covent Garden and later a savage interpretation of "Titus Andronicus," with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh. He followed these with plays of Sartre, Genet and Durrenmatt, as well as musicals and films. As a co-director of the Royal Shakespeare Theater, newly constituted in 1960, he re-examined and revolutionized Shakespearean theater in directing Paul Scofield in a severe, absurdist "King Lear" (for which Brook also designed the sets) and producing an airborne, joyous "Midsummer Night's Dream," with an open stage and swings, catwalks and trapezes.

For the Royal Shakespeare Company, Brook created the first experimental workshop in Brechtian techniques and Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, out of which came the shocking, almost surrealist version of playwright Peter Weiss's "Marat-Sade," an exploration of revolution and madness.

Brook's abandonment of naturalism and his striving to express the essence of a work with visual elegance have influenced not only subsequent Shakespearean productions but much other theater as well. And his daring distillation of "Carmen" won over even some diehard traditionalists.

"Brook has been a force for making new ideas available," says Richard Gilman, drama professor at Yale University. "His 'Lear' was the best Shakespearean production I've ever seen. He defined the nature of directing more than anyone else. His first book, 'The Empty Space,' was seminal: it is the fullest statement of his theatrical ideas. That book and indeed all his work influenced everyone who came after him - John Dexter, Peter Hall, Trevor Nunn. I don't think there is another more important director in the English-speaking theater in the last 50 years. But his recent work strikes me as forced attempts at rituals and myths by fiat. I am suspicious of contemporary theater that tries to transplant ritual."

Brook has also been criticized for being too pragmatic; but it has been said that it is just this avoidance of dogma that enabled him to pursue the new while retaining, as he sees it, the spirit of his model - the world of Shakespeare. His aim has been, he explains in "The Shifting Point" (a book of his essays just published by Harper & Row), "to create a new Elizabethan relationship -linking the private and public, the intimate and the crowded, the secret and the open, the vulgar and the magic." He strives for an absence of style, for a synthesis of variegated styles, performers, cultures and environments, and hopes to appeal to all kinds of audiences.

BROOK HAS BEEN pursuing his goals since 1970 from his base in Paris, where he and Micheline Rozan founded the International Center of Theater Research, which survives on subsidies from the French Government, foundation grants and ticket sales (albeit prices are kept low). Brook and his troupe, created to explore new ideas and forms, traveled and performed extensively throughout the third world. In 1974, when Madame Rozan discovered the Bouffes du Nord -Brook's theater to do with as he wished - the Center became his main commitment. Without the money or time pressures of commercial theater, he was free to rehearse as long as necessary and to play in both commercial and nonprofit theaters.

The Bouffes du Nord, located in a working-class area, was a dilapidated, 19th-century theater ready for demolition. Because Brook loves old things, he left the interior unrestored: he liked feeling close to the actors of the past. So the walls of the Bouffes remain battered, the floors damaged. The orchestra seats were replaced by hard wooden bleachers (which are never reserved), and the playing area has no curtain and is on the same level as the audience.

A door at the back of the theater leads to the cafe (decorated with posters from Brook productions) which serves as the company's "green room" - the traditional actors' lounge. The cafe staff is part of the Brook "family," treated with courtesy and appreciation. Every day, they prepare for the troupe nutritious lunches which proved to be some of the best food I had in Paris. At 1 o'clock, the entire troupe, including Brook, having begun rehearsal at 10 or 11 in the morning, comes in for its hour of lunch, after which it will resume working, sometimes as late as 11 P.M. The cafe is lively, multilingual; the espresso machine rumbles, telephones ring, staff conferences are held. It was there that I talked with various members of the "Mahabharata" company when they were not needed on stage.

Jean-Claude Carriere spoke about his 15-year experience writing for Brook's company: "Peter changed my life. He showed me a new way of working. I never had such a luxury, to have such access to a director. I call him, he comes; I read him my work on the telephone, he listens. He is totally there. But that does not mean that he is not hard to please."

Carriere admits that although it was annoying to revise scenes for Brook dozens of times, it proved worthwhile. Carriere had been accustomed to working in films - he wrote "Danton" and "The Return of Martin Guerre," and was a collaborator of Bunuel - where everything is carefully planned and immediately set. "With Peter, it is different," Carriere says. "From the very beginning, Peter gives criticism and proposes changes. Then, all of a sudden, some actors come; they unroll a carpet and try some of the text which is not even totally finished. Slowly, the direction starts and I'm still there writing until the very last moment, at least until 15 performances after the opening."

For the writing of "Mahabharata," Brook asked Carriere to do an extraordinary thing: to audition with the actors, perform as an actor. He would play all the parts, including the female ones. "The purpose," said Carriere, "was to understand what I had written. If I couldn't do it, I was obliged to admit that the scene did not work. It was devilish of Peter, but extremely helpful."

A frequent source of criticism of Brook from actors is just this mode of working. He changes everything, even after opening night. And he is not known to compliment actors. The director's familiar, "That's good, keep it," is absent from his vocabulary.

The Japanese actor Yoshi Oida, who joined Brook in 1968, says, however, that if nothing is set at the beginning, the actor can create his own work. "Peter's greatest asset is that he is never satisfied," said Oida. "He brings actors where he wants them to be by the magic of the word. He is a magician with words." Some actors have complained that, regardless of their good work, Brook is always the star; but for Oida that doesn't matter: "If 'Mahabharata' is good, it is not because of actors. It is Peter. If actors leave, 'Mahabharata' stays. If Peter leaves, no 'Mahabharata.' I am happy I met a great master."

TO HIS COMPANY, Brook seems to have taken on the role of guru, father and creator. Most cast members agreed that working with Brook was totally different from working with other directors. Alain Maratrat, a Frenchman, who played in "Carmen," said the director's greatest value for him was to find out "how your real self can serve the part. Peter is not interested in grand acting, but in getting to the essential self. He creates a certain atmosphere; it is he who makes the circle." (Brook begins rehearsals, discussions and criticisms by forming a circle.) "After two months, the circle becomes alive, actors make proposals and he tries them all. Then he chooses. He has the eye, you know."

Bruce Myers, an Englishman who plays Krishna in "Mahabharata," believes that Brook's great attribute is patience: "He can wait until you find for yourself what you need. It's not only that Peter is a great director, but being around him increases one's sense of the richness and intensity of life."

And Ryszard Cieslak, the former star of Jerzy Grotowski's now defunct Polish Lab Theater, has returned to the stage only because of Brook: "I am a difficult actor and he is not an easy director. It makes a good combination. Easy actors and easy directors make mediocre art. Real art is a battle,"

For Mamadou Dioume, a Senegalese, the experience with Brook is completely new: "I am surprised by the fact that we try to build family feeling. That is the first time that has happened to me, especially because all of us are from different cultures."

Not every actor thinks that Brook has succeeded in establishing a cohesive group. Some object to waiting all day for their scenes or they dislike group exercises. Others find the atmosphere too solemn and are irritated by Brook's tendency to lecture and his obsessiveness about work. Brook can rehearse 12 hours a day, see people afterward, then be completely fresh the next morning. In Africa, Afghanistan and India, everyone else became ill - never Brook.

He is sometimes accused of being cold, remote. Yet many tell of his kindnesses to company members, his generosity to family, friends and colleagues. He does have a natural English reserve, even a certain shyness, and he is always under control. Like all creative persons engaged in large projects, he has a large ego and steely determination. But, says Harvey Lichtenstein of BAM, "he doesn't behave like a star, he doesn't live like a star. And he is one of the few artists that I have known through the years who has truly developed. He is at peace with himself; he has no need to pretend. That quiet center makes him different from other artists."

PETER BROOK DIS-likes outsiders to watch rehearsals, but one day he makes an exception. I am inside the Bouffes du Nord when the company assembles after lunch. Actors limber up, they vocalize, they wear bits and pieces of their costumes. Some are barefoot,

some bare-chested. Brook confers with his assistants. Musicians tune up. Everyone quiets down.

Brook is calm; he is known never to lose his temper. He calls the cast together on stage, and they form a circle. He gives instructions, whispers to some actors. The theater goes dark, the stage lights are up; the scene begins. Brook does not stop the actors often. He takes notes on a pad; sometimes, he can't hear and says, "Whaaat?" He calls one or another actor aside and they speak privately.

After the scene, there is a short break. Actors pour into the cafe for coffee, cokes, water and snacks; in five minutes, they are rushed back to the stage. They will finish early that night, perhaps 8:30, after the nightly critique by Brook.

Afterward, Brook and I go to dinner at a restaurant near his loft. The owner knows him and they chat about what is good on the menu. I ask him what he's looking for when he directs, what kind of actors satisfy him. "Working with a group is something quite different from working with a star," he says, "and that is the unity of the group. What one is looking for is transparent acting - the opposite of virtuoso acting - acting where in the end you can no longer believe that there is acting at all, where there is the total transformation of the fiber of the person. And this is what we were looking for in 'The Ik,' for example."

Brook talks about the unspoken, evocative emotions of a production, what he calls the "invisible" elements. "There is a point," he says, "where the real experience happens in between the words. Language can carry it to a certain point, but then the actual reality of an experience is neither this nor that. It's just in between. And that's what I'm looking for, to make absolutely concrete and visible that certain something that just slips between a word or a sentence and which actually expresses the essence of things. The audience doesn't see the invisible; they just feel a certain density, a certain substance, an idea that has actually become material."

I ask Brook about the influences in his life.

"The most powerful thing in my life comes straight from my father. I see myself very strongly as part of a chain. My father represented a tremendous security for me. I look unhappily upon people who have resentment toward their parents." "Were you brought up more British than Jewish?"

"My parents were both intellectuals and freethinkers, part of the revolutionary movement in Russia. They emigrated to England and settled there, and it seemed to my father that England was a country of great freedom and they became naturalized citizens. My father became an assimilated Englishman and we were brought up, my brother and I, in a completely different atmosphere from traditional Judaism. We have never hidden the fact that we are Jewish, but it was not an emotional influence in our lives."

He recalls another influence: his reading of P. D. Ouspensky's explication of the work of G. I. Gurdjieff, the early 20th-century Russian-Armenian philosopher and teacher whose ideas about reaching a higher consciousness are still little known. Had Brook become a Gurdjieff follower?

"To me, Gurdjieff is one of the most interesting explorers and teachers, the most comprehensive and scientifically developed. One of the central aspects of Gurdjieff's work is that he was provoking people and not trying to win followers. His first principle is that everything must be verified by oneself. You ask me if I am a follower. I say no, because that is a contradiction in terms. But a searcher, I hope so."

What have you found in your search?

"I have learned long ago that there are no answers, and that if you wish to know something, a greater perception is the only kind of answer that you can ever have. In other words, being open to a richer level of experience. This is endless in life and is also my aim in any production.

"My capacity for awareness is absolutely inseparable from work with other people. And that work is inseparable from the eventual work with the audience. I don't perform, but if the performance increases awareness, I am as much sustained by it as a member of the audience. And that's why there is no abrupt difference between the work in the theater and what I am looking for in life."

It is past midnight; the restaurant is almost empty. Few people are on the street. Brook hurries across the square into his loft. I hail a taxi and go my own way. The next day, I was leaving Paris. Brook calls from the theater to say goodbye. He is in the middle of rehearsal.
