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978-0-521-29605-2 - Peter Brook
Albert Hunt and Geoffrey Reeves
Excerpt
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Prologue

I'm living all my life in the theatre. I made my cash there and have proved my ability to live in the competitive world through one form, the theatre. Now I want to know what it is, and to know what it is is to know what it could be.

Peter Brook, a month before leaving for Africa in December 1972

This book tells the story of a search. The search began, in public at least, when a seventeen-year-old Peter Brook directed a production of Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* at the Torch Theatre, London, in 1942. The production was scarcely noticed and has long since been forgotten. But, after a handful of other productions, in London and at the Birmingham Rep, Brook stepped on to the national stage in 1946 with a production of *Love's Labour's Lost* at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. Since then he has only been out of the public eye when he has chosen to pursue his search in remote areas of the world. He has always returned to put his findings on display, in Paris, London, New York and, more recently, in Glasgow.

The precise object of the search is hard to define. In the early days, the search had a strictly limited, practical objective. During a brief stay as an undergraduate at Magdalen College, Oxford, while the Second World War was on, Brook and some friends had succeeded in raising enough money to make a full-length film of Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*. Brook was, apparently, seized with a passion for film-making. But the British Film Industry was then an entirely closed monopoly: there was no possible way for an unknown outsider to be given the opportunity to direct films. (It was not until the late 1950s that a new generation of directors succeeded in penetrating the closed world of British film-making – and they got in, interestingly enough, on the back of a successful piece of theatre, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*.) A decade earlier, Brook, faced with the impenetrability of British cinema, found himself also faced with openings in the theatre. He eagerly seized them and found, in a very short time, that he had launched himself on a glitteringly successful career.

It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that in those early days in the theatre what he was searching for was a passport into film-making. He got it in 1952 when he directed John Gray's *The Beggar's Opera*, for Herbert Wilcox and Laurence Olivier, with a cast that included (as well as Olivier) Stanley Holloway, Dorothy Tutin, Hugh Griffith and Laurence Naismith. The scriptwriters were Denis Cannan and Christopher Fry, both of whom figured largely in Brook's theatre work. If this eighteenth century costume drama had

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been as successful at the box office as Tony Richardson's version of the eighteenth century novel *Tom Jones* was to be nine years later, Brook's search might have taken off in a different direction. Fortunately for the theatre, the film was a flop. But he was to continue to make films throughout his career – *Moderato Cantabile* in France in 1960, *Lord of the Flies* in 1963, the year after one of his greatest successes in the theatre, *King Lear*, and the year before his theatre career itself took off in a different direction. Since 1970, when he formed his Centre International de Créations Théâtrales (C.I.C.T.) in Paris, Brook seems to have regarded the filming of the theatre work, developed in the Centre, as a part of his on-going projects. He filmed three versions of *Carmen* and spent much of 1989 making a filmed version of *The Mahabharata*, which was markedly different in style from the epic he has created in the theatre. (But virtually all his film-making since *Lord of the Flies* has been dependent on his theatre work. Films like *King Lear* and *The Marat/Sade* derived directly from stage productions.)

If, however, he began working in theatre largely because the offers of work were there (and in the hope that theatre might give him a passport into film) he quickly found that he was enjoying the success his theatre work brought him. In 1972, a few weeks before taking a group of international actors on an 'experimental' trip through remote African villages, he looked back on the process that had taken him to that particular point in his search:

Of course I am delighted if a play I do is successful. I like playing the game of the commercial theatre, of going into the box office and asking what the advance is and so forth, but that's the fringe. It's totally unimportant and in no way connected with my real work. Fundamentally all the work I've done has been like an airplane circling to land. It has been spiralling and dealing with one question only: what is the nature of theatre? I've worked in every form – West End farces, TV, comedies, musicals – I've worked just to explore the field. But exploring the field doesn't mean going on in the same way, for that would mean being locked into an eternal adolescence. Circling the field eventually narrows and now I am coming closer to the point of landing.

What Brook seemed to be searching for primarily in those early years of exploring the field was variety of experience. He was like a magpie, apparently snapping up anything that came his way. As he flitted between *Measure for Measure*, *The Little Hut*, *Salome* and *Irma la Douce*, between Stratford-upon-Avon, the West End, Paris and Broadway – not to speak of a year as Director of Productions at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, a title he invented for himself – he gives the impression of being driven by an insatiable curiosity. But it is not until the 1960s that he begins to show a more overt curiosity about the nature of what he is doing. Articles start appearing, mainly in the recently launched magazine, *Encore* (which refers to itself as the 'Voice of Vital Theatre'), in which Brook begins to speculate about the nature and purpose of

theatre. These speculations are summed up in his book *The Empty Space*, published in 1968, in which he tells us that his search is for a 'less deadly, but as yet largely undefined, theatre'. But by 1968 he was already nearing the end of what for many people would have been regarded as a second career.

In *The Empty Space*, Brook wrote:

Anyone interested in processes in the natural world would be very rewarded by a study of theatre conditions. His discoveries would be far more applicable to general society than the study of bees or ants. Under the magnifying glass he would see a group of people living all the time according to precise, shared but unnamed standards. He would see that in any community a theatre has no particular function – or a unique one.

If we put a magnifying glass on the 'theatre conditions' Brook has worked in, we can see the way in which he himself has changed them. His theatre work falls into three distinct phases.

In the first phase, from 1946 to 1963, he worked in the commercial theatre. In Britain, this normally meant three or four weeks' rehearsal with a maximum of forty hours a week. In the United States, this rehearsal period would be followed by weeks of playing in places like Boston and Philadelphia, during which time the production was often changed in the light of the audiences' responses.

In Britain, productions usually toured the provinces for two to four weeks before they reached London, but there were very few radical changes during the tour. Rewrites were minimal and actors were hardly ever fired, as happened in the States.

In Paris, there might be five weeks' rehearsal, but there would be no pre-opening tour. Only at the Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon would there be more rehearsal time, perhaps five or six weeks, but during the rehearsal period actors on contract to what became the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) would be performing in other plays while they rehearsed. Actors would be lost to matinées. It was only towards the end of this first phase of his career that Brook had enough power to demand longer rehearsal periods. The success of his RSC production of *King Lear* in 1962 put him in a particularly strong position.

The second phase of Brook's work can be said to have started at the beginning of 1964, after he persuaded Peter Hall, Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, to give him three months for research with a specially selected group of ten actors. This phase lasted until 1970. During this period he worked only for the large subsidised theatres: the RSC and the National. His rehearsal periods at the RSC were now anywhere between six and eight weeks. *US* was given four months. The National gave him ten weeks' rehearsal time for *Oedipus*. The six years between 1964 and 1970 were to be decisive in changing Brook's relationship with theatre production.

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In 1964, he was able, following his period of research, to form the nucleus of an acting group in the RSC. But throughout the 1960s he was still forced to make compromises, particularly concerning casting. During the first phase of his work, Brook himself had helped to make the director a more powerful figure in the theatre. But by 1964 new authority figures had emerged. The Artistic Directors, both at the RSC and the National could, and did, have a say in what went on the stage.

The third phase of Brook's career began in 1970 (after a false start in 1968). Brook had decided to acquire control of his own means of production. Backed by a million-dollar subsidy for a three-year programme, from the Ford Foundation and others, he set up his Centre International de Créations Théâtrales in Paris, and has made this his base ever since. In the last twenty years he has only made one foray into a theatre not under his control: in 1978, when he returned briefly to the RSC to direct *Antony and Cleopatra*.

The existence of the Centre in Paris (which acquired its own theatre, the Bouffes du Nord in 1974) has given Brook virtually complete freedom to 'experiment', as he sees it, in his attempt to answer the basic question of 'what the theatre is and . . . what it could be'. He has been able to gather round him a permanent group of collaborators and performers from several continents. The rhythm of his working life is no longer built around the demands of first nights: he juggles with a number of projects that sometimes seem to disappear only to reappear in a different context. He takes his flock to remote places in search of new experiences – but from time to time they make acclaimed appearances on world stages – in quarries in Avignon and Adelaide, in theatres in Brooklyn and Glasgow (redesigned at huge cost to look as decayed as the Bouffes).

This last phase of his work, though, and the freedom it has given him to follow his deepest instincts, sheds a questioning light on the earlier stages of his search. What precisely has he been looking for? A search for a 'less deadly' theatre seems modest enough. But it has taken him into obscure regions of experience. 'The work is about something more than theatre style', Brook told his group in 1973, after a night in which they performed three different improvised versions of *The Conference of the Birds* in Brooklyn – a marathon effort which pointed the way to the even more marathon all-night versions of *The Mahabharata* twelve years later. Brook went on:

It's about revealing truth – and there's no way of dividing truth up into 'spiritual' or 'funny' truth: there's only one truth. All this has been opened up for us by doing a work like the *Birds*; it took us perhaps a year of reading to realise that understanding this book necessitated serving it, getting inside it, grasping it. In coming to grips with this reality, one comes to grips with a work which is about theatre and about life: it has to become true in a theatre, and yet it is about something far beyond theatre, something within each one of us.

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So Brook's search for a 'less deadly' theatre leads him to what he perceives as 'truth', of which there is only one. As we follow him in his search, we shall attempt to put a magnifying glass on the nature of this 'truth' which he believes his work reveals. We hope that our discoveries will, in Peter Brook's words, be 'far more applicable to general society than the study of bees or ants'.

1 Playing the field: 1946–56

To the young people who form a large section of Peter Brook's following in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the first eighteen years of his career must seem like pre-history. Even the list of plays he produced between Jean Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine* in 1945 and *King Lear* in 1962 contains titles that seem to belong to a bygone age. (What on earth was *Both Ends Meet* in 1954? It was a play by a comedian, Arthur Macrae, about a man who hates the Inland Revenue. He won't marry his fiancée, because the two of them get better tax concessions as 'separate units', and he won't sleep with her without getting married. Audiences were, according to one witness, 'briefly and brightly entertained'.)

Shakespeare, of course, was ever-present, but often in the form of plays that were considered at the time as slightly off the beaten track: *Love's Labour's Lost* (1946), *Measure for Measure* (1950), *The Winter's Tale* (1951); above all *Titus Andronicus* (1955), which had normally been regarded as unstageable. When Brook did tackle one of the recognised 'greats' (*Hamlet*, also in 1955) the production was seen as generally disappointing.

Brook also directed plays by modern writers, both British and European, who were regarded as 'significant' after the war. There were productions of Cocteau, Sartre, Anouilh – the latter translated by a British writer who had been heralded for bringing 'poetry' back into the British drama: Christopher Fry. Another Anouilh translator was Denis Cannan, who at one time was critically hailed as a latter-day Shaw on the strength of the anti-war satire *Captain Carvallo* and a political farce called *Misery Me*, but who turned into a typical merchant of mid-century doom and gloom. (Brook had also produced a version of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, written by Alec Guinness, in 1946.)

It could be argued that Brook – who, from the beginning, acquired a reputation for being 'successful', and who, as the decades rolled by, had an increasing say in the choice of plays he produced – was simply taking the best that was available; from the United States, for example, he took Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis clos* (entitled *Vicious Circle* in English), seems a suitably lugubrious follow-up to *Karamazov* in 1946: its central image of three incompatible people, locked forever into a hell with Second Empire decor, belongs to the Peter Brook landscape. But why, in 1947, did he choose to stage two comparatively minor Sartre plays, *Men Without Shadows* (*Morts sans sepulchres*) and *The Respectable Prostitute* (*La P*

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1 *Love's Labour's Lost*, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1946–7

respectueuse). According to contemporary reviewers, *Men Without Shadows* consisted largely of a display on stage of Gestapo tortures, though Brook was said to have handled these with 'ingenuity'; perhaps the problem of handling violence on stage was already beginning to intrigue him.

Mr Peter Brook has arranged his animals to every possible advantage in their squalid cage and has lavished formidable ingenuity on the stage delights of the Gestapo.

Stephen Potter, *The New Statesman*

The continuing sight of physical beastliness is nauseating, except presumably for sadists, and impedes any of the emotions likely to be stirred by imaginative art . . . the blood-bath presented with excessive slowness in Peter Brook's otherwise vivid direction has dulled one's eagerness to listen.

Ivor Brown, *The Observer*

Presenting murder, rape, torture and sadism, it achieves as much aesthetic effect as a street accident.

Harold Hobson, *The Sunday Times*

The Respectable Prostitute (the title was mistranslated, the adjective means 'respectful' or 'colluding') satirised, from a safe distance, American attitudes to blacks in the Deep South. Both plays had that hint of the scandalous that has

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always attracted Brook, and Rita Hayworth came to the first night. Sartre was very fashionable. Existentialism was the prevailing, and highly dramatic, philosophy of post-war western Europe, and it is not surprising that an inquisitive young man would be drawn to the plays of one of its major proponents, however weak dramaturgically they might be. Brook played the texts not as philosophical debates (as they had been staged in Paris) but as dramatic situations: so that *Huis clos* became almost twice as long on the stage, the audience being made to *sense* the destructive frictions of the characters' relationships long before the announcement is made, in the last minute, that 'Hell is other people'. Brook was certainly not interested in the plays for any political reason: Sartre was a Marxist actively engaged in a daily debate about the society he lived in, who saw his philosophy as having a direct bearing on the life of that society. *Morts sans sépulchres* dealt with events not two years old. Brook's sense of the dramatic was very different, but by the time Sartre had improved his dramatic craft and arrived at his major texts (*Le Diable et le bon Dieu*, *Les Séquestrés d'Altona*) Brook, the endless conqueror of new mountains, had moved on. He was not tempted by them at all.

His choice, in 1951, of John Whiting's very English comedy *A Penny for a Song* seems, in retrospect, slightly bizarre. Brook, apparently, played charming games with this play about an English eccentric waiting for the arrival of Bonaparte. But Whiting was, potentially, the first major English playwright to appear since the war, and two exceptionally meaty plays, *Saint's Day* and *Marching Song*, still remain neglected. Brook productions could have put both of them on the theatrical map. When *Saint's Day* won a new play competition and was staged at the Arts Theatre Club in 1951 to howls of outrage from the critics, Brook (together with Tyrone Guthrie and other theatrical notables whose championing of new material was always more obvious in print than in their stage work) wrote defending the choice and praising the extraordinary talent displayed by the author. But Brook never staged that play; and, more importantly, when Whiting's major work *Marching Song* came along in 1953, he did not stage that either; he and Olivier (who also later expressed a regret that he had not played the leading part) were busy celebrating the coronation with their fiasco of a film of *The Beggar's Opera*.

Brook's encounters with British authors seem equally perverse. He chose to stage an adaptation of a pre-war novel by Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (Cannan was one of the adapters), rather than a new Greene play. Perhaps this particular choice was made by Paul Scofield. Greene's novel about a whiskey priest on the run from the police in an atheist, pre-war Mexico, gave Scofield a success as the priest. He needed one. His *Hamlet*, in the same season (at the Phoenix in 1955/6), had been seen as lacking in inspiration. Perversely, as usual, the most successful production of the three-play season

was Brook's staging of T. S. Eliot's turgid retelling of the Eumenides myth *The Family Reunion*. This was ironic as Greene's *The Living Room* had received an inadequate production redeemed only by a powerful performance by Eric Portman: the play had many resonances of Eliot's piece but without either the creaking form or the self-conscious dramatic verse. A Brook production at this point might have made Greene into a more important dramatist than he became; after all, this was the decade when he was interested enough in the theatre to write several original plays.

Some of Brook's choices were undoubtedly dictated by his own taste for pushing back the frontiers of the acceptable. The notorious homosexual kiss in Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, to which the Lord Chamberlain objected in 1956, offered the kind of *frisson* Brook liked to be associated with. And Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which Brook produced in Paris in a translation by André Obey, was also one of the more 'scandalous' plays of the fifties. Because of the objections of the Assistant Comptroller of the Royal Household, both the Miller and the Williams plays (together with the negligible *Tea and Sympathy*, a potboiler which showed the seduction of a teenager by a married woman – a theme clearly designed to subvert what remained of the English Empire), were staged at the Comedy Theatre under the umbrella of the New Watergate Theatre Club. It was necessary to pay five shillings to join before tickets could be bought. Miller's portentous play, complete with a lawyer chorus-figure explaining what the dumb hero could not articulate for himself, hardly seemed worthy of the scandal that surrounded it (Marilyn Monroe, the current Mrs Miller, appeared at the first night and caused much more of a stir than the long awaited man-kissing-man moment on the stage). Williams's *Cat*, a far more explosive and well-written piece, received an inadequate and lightweight staging from Peter Hall, but of course Brook had already done the play in Paris – brilliantly, with Jeanne Moreau; he did not want to do it again.

There are, though, some titles which seem to deviate completely from what, looking back, we would tend to see as the narrative line of Brook's search. Leaving aside the unlikely Macrae farce, we find in 1958 a Brook production of a popular musical, *Irma la Douce*. It tells the unlikely story of a French prostitute who is rescued from her profession by a highly moral law student, who is then forced to impersonate a rich protector whose money will keep her from her other customers. The production was apparently fast, light and very funny. According to Kenneth Tynan, it invaded 'a realm of pure fantasy' and achieved 'magic'.

It is worth remembering, as we accompany Brook in his never-ending search, that in *The Empty Space* he also wrote the following sentence: 'I came to the theatre myself for sensual and often irresponsible reasons.' Of course in

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Paris, where he chose to live, the sensual and the scandalous are regarded as being traits of the mind.

A major problem in putting a magnifying glass on the early years of Peter Brook's work in the theatre is that we are almost entirely dependent for information on rare and distant personal memories, or on the written witnesses – the theatre critics of the time. And the witnesses, particularly in the early years, tend to tell us more about themselves and their attitudes than they do about the productions they are trying to describe.

Long-forgotten names crawl out of the memory holes. The language they use is redolent of must and old paper.

Avonian Stratford, blamed of recent years for humdrumery, attempts fanfares and has already been no less blamed for their flourish.

This is how Ivor Brown, of *The Observer*, opens his review of Brook's 1947 *Romeo and Juliet*. T. C. Worsley, in *The New Statesman*, wrote of *Measure for Measure*, which Brook produced in 1950:

It is not a very easy play to make sense of for a modern audience; the climate of the play, is lust . . . a lust accepted as all-pervading in an age much rougher, rawer, cruder, more violent, natural and more loose than in our late day we can easily imagine.

2 *Romeo and Juliet*, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1947

