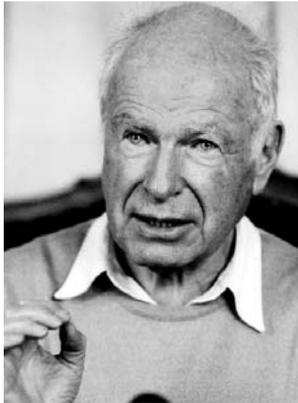


PETER BROOK

By Georges Banu



Peter Brook was born in 1925. His parents, Russian Jews, had left the country following the upheavals caused by the First World War and also because of the political unrest after the revolt in 1905. They settled in London where Mr. Brook senior worked as a chemical engineer. They had two sons, Peter's elder brother made a career in psychiatry and his professional advice was called upon for various performances. Peter Brook studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he came to be the youngest graduate in comparative literature. This is where he started, in 1944, with *Dr. Faustus* by Marlowe and embarked upon his cinematographic career in the same year with an adaptation of *A Sentimental Journey*, by Laurence Sterne, trying to lead a double career in theatre and cinema, without quite succeeding.

His career really took off in Stratford where, immediately after the end of the Second World War, the Shakespeare festival opened, as in other places in Europe. He directed *Love's Labours Lost* there, whilst already announcing his interest – later confirmed - in Shakespeare's so called "secondary" works. He focused on extending the Shakespeare repertory by working on the less well-known texts at the time, such as *Measure for Measure* or *Titus Andronicus*, alongside, obviously, on the more frequently represented great works such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* or *King Lear*.

Brook constantly adopted this double approach to Shakespeare which he used in order to reveal cinematographic fluidity as well as the relevance of these historical works to the here and now. Firstly, he demonstrated an approach based on the exploitation of cultural references taken from the history of art, and then he based himself on the discoveries of modern artistic practices, like concrete music for example, to then take inspiration directly from the data of contemporary life and society. Brook progressively transformed his work on Shakespeare to arrive at what would become, and remain a masterpiece of theatre directing, his *King Lear* in 1964, a production where he puts into action all the conquests of the Theatre of the Absurd,

of Beckett's in particular, and the tragic experience of war and the war camps. His production was the most convincing confirmation of Jan Kott's thesis in his revolutionary book *Shakespeare, our contemporary*. It was while working on this text that Brook embarked on the path of "Empty Space", abandoning all superfluous scenography and sacrificing the temptation to do elaborate scenery, still going strong at the time.

As a particularly open-minded man of the theatre Brook was also interested in opera and he was responsible for performances that were a resounding success such as Mussorgsky's *Boris Godounov* (1948) and Richard Strauss's *Salome*, the latter with a scenography by Salvador Dali. He was also, quite fleetingly, Artistic Director at Covent Garden before breaking off from the world of opera for a long time. In this first period, he stands out for the broad spectrum of his deliberately eclectic repertoire, as he stretches unabashed from Shakespeare and Seneca to lower-brow playwrights and contemporary agit-prop writers. He is compelled to try everything and not to cut himself off by making too rigorous choices before having explored the field of writing in its whole complexity. Acknowledged at this early stage as the most outstanding director of English theatre, Brook worked with the greatest actors of that time: John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh and later on, Paul Scofield and Glenda Jackson.

Meanwhile he pursued a successful career in the film industry, creating two of his greatest and most internationally celebrated films *Moderato cantabile*, with a scenario by Marguerite Duras, and Jeanne Moreau in the leading role, and in particular *The Lord of the Flies* after William Golding's famous novel. Unfortunately, carried along by the success of his drama productions, Brook dropped author cinema only to come back to it later in life, and at the time settled for a few choice films based on his most accomplished drama productions.

In 1964, Brook set off on an experimental journey exploring theatrical language and opened a workshop heavily inspired by Artaud's work, to whom he was then indebted alongside "our whole generation", as he admitted. He involved himself in experimental work on communication in the theatre and, at that time, he invited Jerzy Grotowski to London where their enduring friendship began. Brook had found an ally and a helper: their work went in a common direction and on that basis a real collaboration was born. Following the experimentation around *The Theatre of Cruelty*, Brook embarked upon what still remains to be one of his most remarkable successes, the work on the relation between madness and politics, based on the renowned play of that time, *Marat – Sade* by Peter Weiss. In tune with the political "engagement" of

that time, he made a performance documentary called *US*, based on the Vietnam War and its effect on the Western world and on the young generation in particular.

In 1968, following Jean-Louis Barrault's initiative, Brook gave an international workshop in Paris. This same workshop was the origin of his break with theatrical institutions, most specifically with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and his leaving London to settle in France. Before this almost final separation, Brook took leave gracefully with one of his most dazzling productions, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where he places Shakespeare's nocturnal world in a most unexpected context: a completely white box where magic is performed with the help of acrobatics borrowed specifically from the Peking Opera. Brook then imposed not just a different angle on the work, but an unknown way of seeing Shakespeare's plays. He prised them out of a pastoral tradition, and endowed them with both an extraordinary vitality and a contemporary relevance as yet never revealed with such passion. Meanwhile, during that time, he initiated his research thanks to what would become known as the *Exercises on The Tempest*. Then came the separation, with Brook leaving his place of origin - homeland and his theatre lineage - to follow a new path.

He settled in Paris where he created the Centre International de Recherches Théâtrales (CIRT) and devoted himself to research on improvisation and voice-work. That led him to the great adventure *Orghast* (1971, in Persepolis) where he worked on a mixture of imaginary languages and archaic languages in order to find the origin of sound. As a second stage (1972) he led his team on the road to Africa, where the aim was to work on improvisation whilst testing the foundations of theatrical exchanges in a context free of any prestige or cultural conditioning. From then on he launched himself into "the quest for the theatre of simple forms". One last journey, this time in the Reservations in the USA (1973), closed that period after which, in 1974, the Bouffes du Nord opened, a theatre space completely devoted to Brook's aesthetics.

Brook took over an old, dilapidated Italian-style theatre, and restored it, keeping the traces of the passage of time, and re-organised it so as to reclaim the actor/spectator proximity, so precious to modern theatre people. He managed there to create a poetic synthesis between the authenticity of un-theatrical places and the evocative power of a traditional venue. Brook became inseparable from this place where he and his international team put their names to an impressive number of memorable productions ranging from *Timon of Athens* (1974) at the opening of the theatre to *The Cherry Orchard* (1981) and *The Tempest* (1990), to adaptations of non-theatrical texts like the anthropological novel *Les Iks* (1975) or traditional poems like *The Conference of the Birds* (1979) by the Soufi poet Farid Uddin Attar, and up to the

realisation of the historic *Mahabharata* (1985). Brook's theatre emphasises the right to simplicity and to one's emotions against a backdrop of the extolled powers at the very core of theatre. In this way he was able to perfect, in his words, *the heart cycle*.

In the early nineties, Brook launched into a new cycle which led him to an even more austere form of expression to undertake what he himself named as "the brain cycle". He adapted Oliver Sachs' text about mental illness *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, and turned it into *The Man Who* (1992) a true reflection on psychic disorders and everything that these entail in terms of the disconnection from reality suffered by victims of these illnesses. Another production, about the same subject, *I am a Phenomenon*, was on the subject of absolute memory being the painful destiny of a person who becomes a slave of his past. In 2001, Brook returned to Shakespeare with *Hamlet*, a production in which he links both cycles, of heart and mind, in a performance where we can witness the essence of the Brookian approach.

We cannot underestimate the importance of the role of Africa in Brook's research: he gave parts to a great number of African actors, he put on African plays, and he went there often. In fact, his latest production is based on the work of one of the most distinguished African authors, Ampateba. The theme of Africa has run like a red thread through Brook's dramatic opus for over thirty years.

Brook is also the author of the famous book *The Empty Space*, conceived in 1968, a true reflection on the nature of drama work and of the essence of its quest. It is a quest for contrasts and impurities against the backdrop of a bare stage with just an actor in the centre who hides nothing in order to give the pleasure of pure playing, and is capable of entering into a dialogue with an audience which feels constantly desired by the stage. Brook's theatre was forever to remain an open theatre. His autobiography, published in France under the title *Oublier le temps*, retraces the path of the artist for whom theatre and self-fulfilment remain inseparable, forever nourishing and enlightening each other.

Translation: Claire Carre



The Mahabharata by Peter Brook, 1985



Théâtre du Soleil, 1982