

The theatrical quest: British director Peter Brook (1925-2022)

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14 July 2022

Something should be said about British theatre director Peter Brook, who has died aged 97. Brook remained, his whole life, a genuinely exploratory theatre practitioner. His artistic seriousness, which resulted in some hugely influential productions over seven decades, was informed by wide study and knowledge of international theatre history and technique.

Whatever problems or limitations emerged, this is worthy of note and praise. Criticisms are legitimate and necessary, but Brook consistently advocated for the highest standards in theatre. He was also an intelligent communicator of his ideas, despite occasional lapses into obscurity, and his book *The Empty Space* (1968) remains a cornerstone text for performers and creators.

He identified in that work four types of theatre—Deadly (“bad theatre ... the form of theatre we see most often”), Holy, Rough, and Immediate. The synthesis of Immediate Theatre in many ways characterised both his aspirations and his actual achievements as a director. The four types, he argued, can co-exist in various degrees, and they contain certain abstracted ritual qualities that could encourage some less healthy tendencies, but his quest for Immediate Theatre remains rich with lessons for future theatrical development.

Brook was the younger of two sons of Latvian Jewish immigrants in London. He had a relatively privileged upbringing and public school education. Excused military service on health grounds, he went up to Oxford University during the Second World War, when he was more interested in cinema. He said later he regarded theatre then as cinema’s “dreary and dying precursor.”

Brook wanted to direct movies, but feared this would involve a lengthy apprenticeship. This was probably influenced by his experiences at an advertising company after Oxford. He was sacked for shooting a washing powder commercial in the style of *Citizen Kane*.

He learned his craft in commercial theatre, and remained conscious throughout his life that theatre needed also to thrill and entertain. It was easy enough to identify Deadly Theatre with commercial productions, especially after the war, when Brook said British theatre was “dominated by men with fastidiously draped muslin curtains at their windows,” but commercial theatre also failed on its own terms.

More fringe productions in 1945 led to him directing Shaw’s *Pygmalion* for an army tour. This resulted in an invitation from impresario Barry Jackson to Birmingham Repertory Theatre, where he established a brilliant working relationship with Paul Scofield.

One reason for Brook’s enduring appeal in theatre is that he trusted actors, constantly seeking to bring out their best. He was aware of the pressures that could limit an actor’s development of their art, and sought to overcome them, often with thrilling results. His comments on the commercial and working pressures confronting actors are a sympathetic recognition of the economic realities within which artistic creation must struggle for existence.

During the post-war stabilisation this involved some sort of struggle against the complacency of drawing-room plays. One response was the

“kitchen sink” drama, seeking to convey a new realism in speech and drama, but it was not the only battleground.

Shakespearean productions, Brook noted, were not exempt from being bad. At the Stratford Shakespeare festival in 1946, he wrote, “Every conceivable value was buried in deadly sentimentality and complacent worthiness.”

Jackson took over the festival that year—a preliminary step that resulted eventually in the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), where Brook and Scofield’s *Love’s Labours Lost* was the season’s success, marrying theatrical vitality with commercial viability. Brook became a busy and successful freelance director across many genres and styles, directing many new plays, as well as operas and musicals.

His classics were groundbreaking, eliciting great performances from Scofield and John Gielgud, whose “form of theatre,” Brook wrote, “is one that is known to reach above the ordinary, the common, the banal.” Laurence Olivier, at the peak of his authority in British classical theatre and beginning to become more mannered and inflexible, was spurred on by Brook to a revelatory performance in *Titus Andronicus*.

Brook continued to harbour movie aspirations, with varying results. Attention focuses on *Moderato Cantabile* (1960) and *Lord of the Flies* (1963), but his 1953 take on John Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera*, with Olivier leading a sterling cast, is rather overlooked. It has the best of his commercial vigour, visually matching Gay’s cynical wit.

He spent two years editing 83 miles of footage for his most successful film, *Lord of the Flies* (1963), but that is not its least problem. Brook described William Golding’s morbidly pessimistic novel as “a potted history of mankind,” which also chimes with his enthusiasm for Samuel Beckett’s bleaker takes on human experience.

Lord of the Flies coincided with Brook’s definitive turn to the theatre. The decision reflects some of the demoralisation evident in that film. He rejected cinema’s claims to reflect “reality,” seeing it instead as the static freezing of images. Theatre, by contrast, must always and can only exist in the given moment.

But this was contradictory. The energy at the heart of Brook’s Immediate Theatre, which points to theatre’s strength as a medium, reflected in some ways a vigorous reaction against existing political and cultural conditions. This was part of the developing social radicalism of the period, although its unformed or semi-formed character led some sections of the artistic middle class in less productive and unhealthy directions, particularly as that radical wave subsequently receded.

It is again to Brook’s credit that his seriousness prevented him being dragged down into the worst excesses of this, but his work shows the pressures. To some extent these were also facilitated by his own eclectically empirical inclinations.

Inspired by the mystic Gurdjeff, Brook took scepticism about appearances and the need to question everything to absurdly relativised lengths. In 1998 he told an interviewer “I am ready to disclaim my opinion, even of yesterday, even of 10 minutes ago, because all opinions

are relative.”

This could lead to separating theatrical sensation and representation from meaning and the social world. There was a constant tension between Brook’s awareness of the historical outside world in which his theatre was situated, and the internal moment of theatrical immediacy, which led him away from more concrete engagement even as he seemed to be striving to remake the world in some way. This tension remained throughout—his last production, *Why?* (2019), brought him back to the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), a friend of Chekhov and Stanislavski, later sympathetic to Trotsky.

Brook was an acute student of theatrical history. In *The Empty Space* he wrote of the need “to look at the affirmations of [earlier practitioners and thinkers about theatre], then compare them with the life of the particular place in which we work. What is our purpose, now, in relation to the people we meet every day? Do we need liberation? From what? In what way?”

These are profound and complicated questions. Brook’s drive to liberation, however healthy, became increasingly confined within the narrow limits of theatre itself. Theatre, like other arts, cannot save itself. The urgent need for solid grounding in the historical development of an art form requires a similar awareness of the historical and political developments of the world it reflects.

Symptomatic of a broader radicalisation and artistic re-thinking, Brook and Charles Marowitz in 1962 established a Theatre of Cruelty group at the new RSC, based on the writings of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948). Artaud’s combination of experimental passion for theatre as “total spectacle” with a mystical esotericism became a central plank in Brook’s Holy Theatre, a ritualised place of liberation away from “the recognizable forms in which we live our daily lives.”

Brook recognised the limitations here, asking how all-encompassing this truth actually was and whether it might even contain something quite reactionary: “Is it really holy—or is Artaud in his passion dragging us back to a nether world, away from striving, away from the light ... is there even a fascist smell in the cult of unreason?”

His initial use of elements of Artaud’s work, however, was quite brilliant. His *King Lear* (1962) was harsh, uncompromising and fiercely intelligent. It featured one of Scofield’s best performances, voted by RSC actors in 2004 the greatest Shakespearean performance ever.

In 1964 Brook directed an extraordinary cast, including Patrick Magee, Ian Richardson and Glenda Jackson, in a version of Peter Weiss’s *Marat/Sade* by the radical poet Adrian Mitchell. Mitchell’s account of the play was as theatrically exuberant as Brook could have required, although its richness came somewhat at the expense of the arguments between the French revolutionaries. Brook saw the production within his Rough Theatre category—raw, vital, but not necessarily coherent of thought.

Brook’s film of the production (1967) contains some striking moments, but now (as with his 1971 filmed revisiting of Scofield’s *Lear*) film was subordinated to his theatrical vision.

Marat/Sade, and the association with Mitchell, brought him as close as he would ever come to directly political theatre. In 1966 they collaborated on *US*, a devised piece exploring British attitudes to the Vietnam War (filmed as *Tell Me Lies* in 1968). Despite Brook’s adamant insistence that theatre must be understood in historical social context, this marked the full extent of his theatrical engagement with contemporary politics. Identifying *Marat/Sade* as Rough Theatre was part of his step away from this theatrical direction, and may also have expressed some disappointment or dissatisfaction with political theatre.

Instead, he returned to Shakespeare in 1970, for one of his most celebrated theatrical achievements. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* smartly dismantled the proscenium arch theatre Brook had been fighting against, combining sharp intelligence with the inspiration of Jerome Robbins’ ballets. It was a huge success, transferring to Broadway. On the back of it,

Brook moved to Paris and set up the International Centre of Theatre Research (ICTR).

Again, this was contradictory. Faced with some dead ends and an ebbing of the radical wave he had contributed to, one gets a sense of ICTR as a protected and protective environment in which Brook could pursue ever more intensely his probing of global theatre history and traditions.

Yet it is difficult not to see it also as some sort of retreat in the face of mounting and real artistic crises. Its continued seriousness risked coming at the expense of concreteness. Brook spoke of “returning to the source of theatre.” His vision of a universal theatre, comprehensible to all, appealed to supposedly universalised, archetypal emotions. This could not but require a step back from the very material conditions he had always invoked. A theatre “for everyone,” one might say, in a socially divided world, runs the risk of becoming a theatre for no one.

In 2002 playwright David Hare, who continues to probe contemporary political questions directly, accused Brook of “universal hippie babbling, which presents nothing but fright of commitment.” Brook was stung—he pointed out that his international ICTR had involved a direct fight against racism—but the ensuing correspondence pointed to the evasions.

Brook had taken advantage of a relatively welcoming form of state patronage in France. He was right that “England destroys artists ... No one presses them to do anything,” but his response was disingenuous. The one strength of British theatre’s empirical incorporation of influences and elements was that it allowed the healthy roughness that had marked Brook’s earlier development, even if he was trying to move beyond that. Brook’s direction of the empiricism towards a more rarefied form of ritualised theatre based on abstracted archetypes seemed to take him backwards somewhat, towards his Holy Theatre.

There were some powerful results, but this was often a ritual theatre in denial about its patronage and privilege as it toured the world. In 1971 Brook and poet Ted Hughes produced *Orghast*, a drama performed in ancient Greek, Latin, ritual Persian Avesta, and an invented language, in the ruins of Persepolis. The play, funded by the Shah of Iran, has been described as “mystical, ritualistic, and obscure, but deeply moving according to those few people who shared the experience.”

Brook’s seriousness meant that big mythical texts could still be produced well, however. In 1985, Brook and Jean-Claude Carrière produced a masterful nine-hour trilogy of plays based on the Hindu epic poem *The Mahabharata* in a quarry in Avignon.

He continued to produce significant work that demanded attention on merit, not just reputation. *The Man Who* (1995) staged Oliver Sacks’s neurological case studies. In 2011 he stripped down Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* for the Lincoln Center Festival. And he continued to think hard about theatre itself. *Qui Est Là* (1996) combined readings from essential 20th-century theatre practitioners with *Hamlet* as they might have produced it.

This informed passion for his art and craft, throughout a period that has been immensely difficult for artists, remains his most powerful contribution to theatre. His efforts deserve critical study for the further development of the art.



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