



"Mahabharata", set in Peter Brook's theatre "Le Bouffes du Nord" (1985)

## The beginning

*How did you get to know Peter Brook?*

I was in New York working at "La Mama Theatre", where we had performances of "Medea", "Electra" and "Trojen Woman" directed by Andr El Serban. I had three functions at the same time: actor, set designer and stage manager. This was in 1975. We did an european tour with this three plays and "Trojen Woman" was done in Peter Brook Theatre "Les Bouffes du Nord". In Bouffes du Nord I heard that Peter Brook was looking for somebody to organise his tour for his last production "The Ik", that he had produced in Paris at his theatre. The French Government in 1976 had supported some companies to perform in USA as his present for the American bay Centenal.

As I have, from my training and interest, one foot in theatre and one in architecture, I thought I could be interesting for Peter Brook and I was interested in him. We met and he engaged me to find all the space he needed in America for his tour. I was not really sure about it was needed for "The Ik", I have seen the play a year before, but I did realy know his work. When I asked him about what he needed, he answered me very simply: "I cannot tell you what I need, you will recognize the space, but I know what I don't want: a dead space." To understand what he meant by that I had to understand Peter Brook, what *he* needed and not just to do a space to "The Ik". I tried to figure out what fascinated him, everything he was interested. For me, this was quite a new experience, I had worked with Jean Louis Barrault, the Living Theatre and some other companies, which had also been very interesting experiences. But with Peter Brook I found that he was looking for more than just a space, I had to find spaces for him that were alive. This life that we were looking for was probably the reason why we spent 25 years together, starting in spring 1976. Much later Peter Brook said about this "It was not for Jean-Guy to transform a space for this play or that play but to give life to these plays".

*For these who do not know Peter Brook's work very well we have to recall that for him, the environment of the space is a decisive factor of theatre. Therefore he never wanted to perform in traditional theatres. He either wanted to transform the configuration between audience and stage within the existing building according to his needs or he looked for spaces out of theatre that were adequate for his performances and this search was your task...*

I had worked with many different companies and had opened "The Cartoucherie de Vincennes" with Jean-Marie

Serreau and knew what it meant to create an adequate space for a performance, but before knowing Peter Brook I did not know how essential is the relation with the audience. We had performed half of the time in theatre but most of the time we had created a different relation with the audience and didn't accept a bad relation propose in traditional theatre.

*In 1968, Peter Brook had published his book „The Empty Space” that became a bible for everybody questioning the implications of bourgeois theatre play. What was so new in his vision and therefore attractive and exciting for the audience?*

I think that what he wanted was not really new, in fact it was very new for the French. You have to keep in mind that Peter Brook came from Great Britain that he had grown up in the tradition of the Elizabethan tradition of theatre. This tradition placed theatre in the middle of life, the actors and the play close to the gravity center and the audience directly around it. In France, theatre was performed in the Italian tradition with the proscenium etc. So for the French, Peter Brook's theatre was new, like a revelation. But also simplicity is the result of destruction and ideas. He never hesitated to take the necessary risk to express the right words to bring back the actors in middle of the theatre. It was not enough to be in middle of live it was also for the actors to received all the contradictory sort of energy.



"The Storm", set in Milan" (1985)

## New Spaces for a New Theatre

*You had to look for the spaces where Peter Brook's company could perform and adapt them to his needs. How was Peter Brook involved in this process?*

I had to observe during the rehearsal process where Peter Brook put the actors in the play. He always cared for a minimum distance between actor and audience. To him it was essential that the actor could see the eye of the spectator, and that distance is 20 m at the maximum. This is a natural phenomenon, if you cannot see the eyes you loose the presence of the actors. For me this distance and the acoustic question were the essential elements in the search for spaces. We had different experiences in transforming the spaces according to these needs: on our tour to the USA we played trusht stage in Washington, in Philadelphia we put audience and actors on the stage of the existing building and transformed the stage into an Elizabethan theatre, in Berkeley we performed in a small auditorium, in the Uni-



"The Storm", set in Avignon" (1990)

iversity of Los Angeles we played in a small movie studio etc. All spaces were different, we transformed these theatres, that often were constructed like cinemas, into „found“ spaces that responded to our needs. We were infected with the idea of creating plays in conjunction with the space around to have one space and not the stage with the play and the audience in another context.

In the Box Theatre the stage was created for the set not for the actor. This was clear for me from the beginning. Also the architecture had to level the volume that could be universal untemporal (the Bouffes in Paris with another decoration could be a good church) and the decoration which had a date. When you arrive to a total simplicity all things tell something, even the decoration of the theatre which might be in contradiction. So I am again the restoration of old theatre. I have one anecdote about this interesting question that illustrates the idea behind: In San José in Costa Rica, we were looking for a space to perform „Ubu“, looking around everywhere in the city. During the three days we crossed, the old opera house looked very attractive to us, but it was closed. We asked for the possibility to visit it but always got negative response. Finally at the last day of our visit the Minister of Culture invited us to visit it. When we were inside, we saw that it had burnt out. All that was left was pure architecture. To us it looked absolutely beautiful. The Minister then told us why he had not shown us the building before: „I knew that you would want this space for your performance. Your play here will be beautiful, you will have a big success if I offer it to you, so how I could tell people we need to restore it...“

*How did Peter Brook get the chance to have his own theatre in France as a British citizen?*

In the sixties, Peter Brook was one of the directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company. In 1967, he founded a group of actors and searched for new directions in theatre play. In 1968 Jean Louis Barrault, the famous director who had much influence at that time, invited the group to present their search in Theatre Recamier in Paris (I was stage manager of that place at that time). He was very interested in the work of Peter Brook and later he helped Peter to stay in France to establish this group. The actors came from different continents, some of them were exercising in New York at the time, and this group had not prepared a play yet. Then, in 1974, Peter Brook was looking for a place to present "Timon of Athene". At that time the theatre of the Bouffes du Nord was an abandoned theatre, destroyed by his owner to build a garage. Many young directors who knew this place asked the government for support, to renovate the space, installing new machinery, renovating the

audience, etc. To me there was a contradiction between the idea to create new plays with the ideas of the seventies and to restore an old building from the 19th century. When Peter Brook visited the theatre, he found that it should be left as it was, with all its traces of the past. So the government who did not have money to restore the theatre had the money for the small things Peter Brook was asking for to reopen it.



"The Cherry Orchard", amid the auditorium (1981)

### **Renewal was in the air Peter Brook gave a form to it**

*But in this period of the seventies of the last century, Peter Brook was not the only concerned with new forms of theatre...*

No, but it was a key experience for me to realize that Peter Brook had another way to think than the others. Certainly, there were others who were looking for new forms of theatre. I had worked with Samuel Beckett before, I also knew Ariane Mnouchkine – also Jean Louis Barrault was looking for other spaces than the traditional theatres. So you can say that this renewal was somehow in the air. In my view, Peter Brook gave a form to this air. The idea worked, it opened the eyes of the public. "Simon of Athens", a classical play by Shakespeare performed in a morbid surrounding, the stage in the middle of the audience – this was a shock for the people but finally a huge success – it was the practise of his at the time famous book "The Empty Space".

*You said before that in fact it was not so new but going back to the British tradition. You also said that the only thing Peter Brook not wanted was dead spaces. How could you realise your search for the right proportions in the right space to make it live?*

The idea is so simple: in Italian theatre the stage is outside of the classical circle. He placed the stage back within the circle. I think that this has really to do with his roots in Britain. Now to the search: after observing the work of Peter Brook, I took my step as the base for the measures. Once you have found where the centre of the play, of the energy is, it is easy to go forward from there, define the stage width, define the steps in the audience, the balconies, etc. This also in relation to what I said before, the distance of the eyes that always has to be respected. It is not only the distance, but you always have to keep in mind that theatre is a volume, there is also the height. In the Bouffes du Nord, we thus had a stage of 8 x 7 m. In principle, you always have to respect

the inside of the play, then you also can define the relation. When I looked for performance spaces, I sometimes made a test: I put my bag on a point that I felt was centre of gravity of the space. I made a sign on the floor to see where the actors walked. When the sign was really centre of the play I knew it was alright. This sounds simple but certainly you also have to look for the acoustics – very important! – for the colours, the materials in the space. It is a big misunderstanding to think that Peter Brook meant by Empty Space that there is nothing. But you have to define what you want to have in the space.



"Impressions de Pelléas" (1992)

### Space and play as an unit

*This leads to the next point: For Peter Brook play and space are inseparable. On the other hand, the company went very often on tour – this meant that the spaces where you performed permanently change. Does this mean that the play is also adapted to the space?*

Peter worked with this, he was doing a play for the space and in the space, to make it alive. Together with the actors he was looking for nice spaces. But we did not always perform in these found spaces. Half of our performances took place in traditional theatres. The adaptation goes in two ways – the play is adapted to the space, but the space is also used. I give you one example: in Argentina we performed "Carmen", in a theatre with a very bourgeois audience. The opera plays within this bourgeois society, and we thought that if we take "Carmen" too far away from the audience, it will not be concerned. How can the theatre be used to bring the story to life and to the public? We took out the seats of the theatre and used the ground as the stage. "Carmen" was thus in the middle of this bourgeois society. In the 19th century in Spain she could not be a normal woman – either a brave wife, a prostitute or simply sick. "Libre je suis née, libre je mourrai", so she became prisoner of that society and finally died. The audience got this role as the threatening society by being placed around Carmen – no escape possible! But this is certainly very different if you perform this opera in an industrial.

*We just had the experience with Tierno Bokar in Berlin. It was performed in the Sophiensäle, a morbid ruin of a festivity hall. Before it had been performed in a former industrial hall of the Ruhrgebiet within machines and*

*turbines. A nomad sitting on a machine gives a complete different impression than one sitting in the middle of a ruined ballroom. From the critics about the version in the Ruhrgebiet I had the feeling to have seen a completely different play, even with a different meaning and emphasis.*

Yes, this is right and is also what makes the performing so exciting but also difficult. The actors always have to get a feeling for the space and automatically adapt the play to the space.



"La Costume" (2000)

### Open space stage at repertoire

*I come from Germany where we have a repertory theatre. Taking out all the seats is not just a very quick and simple operation. Technicians would "reproach" to Peter Brook that the changes or installations he requires are very complicated and expensive and that the "empty space" is a very luxurious thing.*

But this certainly has also to do with the German organisation of theatre. What we ask for often was not so expensive or complicated – normally you bring tons of sets that are also expensive and complicated. From my experience, many things are more expensive in Germany than in other places of the world because of the theatre system, for instance the high number of technicians that work in two crews. I often was in a situation where the crews changed and I thought that we could go on directly. But then I learned that the crews don't inform each other on what's going on when they meet, so you have to start again and explain everything from the beginning. This can also be expensive...

*It sounds a little as Peter Brook had this system of ever changing and adapting the spaces according to your parameters. Doesn't it get dogmatic?*

No, on the contrary! The exploration of the relation between space and play is never finished. In every new production we started from the beginning. You have to remember that our company was called "Centre de Recherches Théâtrales". This means that we spent a very long time exploring the text, what was underneath the words. Peter Brook is always looking for the universal language beyond words, the human culture that unifies the human beings. Every culture is part of a larger culture, that was Peter Brook's

conviction and drove him to his explorations. This work of exploration often took a very long time, but finally there was always the obligation for a first night – so we had to find a direction, an interpretation for the plays, classical or our own ones. So every production was really new, and probably the only system we had was **not** to have a system!



"L' homme qui" (1993)

### Starting over and over again

*You probably looked for hundreds of spaces in these 25 years. Did you never get tired?*

No, it was always a new challenge, because you are never sure. You never know how it will be, because when I was looking for the spaces much ahead of the time, when the production just had started, I did not really know how the play would be. I had the main line, sometimes just hints, a few words, just the minimum to define whether it would be a large space or a small one, how the energy and relation could work out. But you also could be wrong! We did not make many mistakes but some. A big one was in Berlin when we performed "The Conference of the Birds". We performed in a kind of temporary venue, the position of the seats, the stage, nothing was right. We wanted simple solutions, but the technicians got a crisis, there was nothing to be done about.

*We have talked of these spaces, the importance they had/have for Peter Brook. But it does not go without contents, the main concern is what the company wants to transport ...*

Yes, certainly, the exploration of the play was the essential part of the work. But everything went together, and Peter Brook has always been very challenging in what he did together with the actors. It could well happen that they had a very nice rehearsal, everybody was happy and satisfied. Peter then would call the group to a meeting later and tell them that at least half an hour would have to be cut ... You can imagine the faces. But he never stops working on a theme and goes further and further, and I must say that he was absolutely right! When he would cut three quarters of the whole play then the actors knew that everything could be transformed!

*The company is an international team with a strong group of Africans and you perform in places all over the world and in English or French. What influence does the internationalism play in the work of Peter Brook?*

It plays indeed an essential role. The English version can never be translated into French, because the languages have completely different energies. French is a language which is dominated by thought, speed and clarity. But there is not a difference in sound, a scale, the melody comes from the speed. You cannot translate this into English because this is a completely different language, as is also German. Therefore the language always has a big influence, also in regard to the perception of the audience. Brook's plays mostly act on two levels: on a first visible level you always have a basic, mostly nice story that everybody can understand and follow. Then you have a second level, as for example in the Shakespeare's plays: those who are looking beyond the nice story will always find something. The plays, in my feeling are very rich, also because of the casts: as the team is international, you always get surprises in the performance, because the way of thinking and performing of the actors creates a very particular atmosphere, you always have more than one culture entering into the play and contributing to this level beyond the obvious nice story.

*But also nice stories have an end – you left Peter Brook in 2000*

Yes, but this for personal reasons. There was nothing between us, no comma could have separated us. But for me, the circle had simply come to an end. I felt that I had to spread his ideas of the work in another context of the relation between architects and theatre. After 25 years with Peter Brook and at the age of 57 I still had the energy for a new life, and this is great! Because with Peter Brook I did not learn the forms but I learned to see life. For him, there is no difference between theatre and life, all the information that goes into theatre comes from life.

*At the press conference on Tierno Bokar in Berlin Peter Brook was asked what was the most important thing to him in life besides theatre. He answered very simply: "It's life".*

*I hope that you will continue to have a satisfying life in creating theatre spaces and stages that are inspired by this motto!*

This interview was conducted by Karin Winkelsesser.

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