

THE MAHABHARATA **TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER**

Peter Brook in conversation with Jonathan Kalb

At age eighty-five, Peter Brook does all he can to avoid interviews. He has no interest in his own legend, and as for his theatrical ideas, he has said it all before, in his autobiography (*Threads of Time*), in his other books (*The Empty Space*, *The Shifting Point*), and in the body of influential productions that established him as one of the giants of twentieth-century theatre. At the request of a common friend, he nevertheless kindly agreed to speak to me on the subject of his magnum opus, *The Mahabharata*—a focus of the book I was writing at the time (*Great Lengths: Seven Marathon Plays from Three Decades*, forthcoming). Brook was in New York rehearsing his adaptation of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* at Lincoln Center and accompanying the Theatre for a New Audience presentation of *Love is My Sin*, his staging of Shakespeare sonnets. Although he announced in 2008 that he was giving up day-to-day operation of his theatre in Paris, Bouffes du Nord, he has been notably active. Among his other recent projects have been: *Fragments*, a program of five short pieces by Samuel Beckett; Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*; *The Grand Inquisitor*, adapted from Dostoyevsky; and *Tierno Bokar*, a parable about tolerance and fundamentalism rooted in a spiritual dispute among Sufis.

The Mahabharata was Brook's eleven-hour stage adaptation of the massive, epic cornerstone of Hindu literature, religion and culture, originally produced in French in 1985 and performed in English for a 1987 world tour that included the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Majestic Theatre (now The Harvey). The production dramatized the epic's main storyline—the tale of an ancient, high-cast dynastic conflict involving two opposed camps of cousins, the Pandavas (“sons of light”) and the Kauravas (“sons of darkness”). Brook speaks at length below about this conflict, using the story's villains, the Kauravas, as a trope for all that remains irresolvable between nations, ethnicities and religions. He has always felt that the core questions in *The Mahabharata* touch on ethical, spiritual, social and historical dilemmas basic to all humankind. His production—which he adapted into a film in 1989 (available on DVD)—received mostly enthusiastic reviews during its international tour. In New York, however, it also encountered skepticism and, in some quarters, outright hostility; at issue was the ethics of Brook's interculturalism, which some condemned as Orientalism and cultural piracy. Over the past twenty-five years Brook has said

little about this heated dispute, but here he offers some candid remarks about it. The interview was taped on April 25, 2010, in New York City.



How do you think back on The Mahabharata?

I don't. I don't think of any of the things I've done in the past. I'm only interested in what re-emerges in the present.

Is that really true?

Absolutely. The one thing that I often come back to is the *Bhagavad-Gita*, because it's the pearl at the heart of *The Mahabharata*. It is one of the great expressions of human understanding, which cuts through every tradition: Christianity, Judaism, Islam. The essential meaning is in the *Gita*. Hinduism in that way is the founder religion, because its values have degraded ever since. In the Hinduism of *The Mahabharata* there is no question of good and evil. There is a question on the contrary of forces that are more and more chaotic and thus destructive, and there is a rising scale that sets true order against chaos. In Sanskrit there isn't a word for evil. There is only non-good. It's like the definition of darkness in present-day physics. Nobody can understand the nature of light in present-day physics, so darkness is considered non-light. There isn't something in the universe called darkness which is an evil, black force. Night is when the day goes. Death is when the manifestations of life disappear. And all of this is in the heart of *The Mahabharata*. At the end it's Krishna, I think, who says that "a light has been saved." That is why there is no judgment. And the one reference I do make regularly is to call *The Mahabharata* the only Shakespearean work I know outside Shakespeare, because it is exactly that way with him. Shakespeare never judges any of his characters. He puts you in front of living beings, comic and tragic situations in which you can see more and more and more the multiple facets of contradictions that come into conflict. But he doesn't judge. That's the only way I look back on *The Mahabharata*.

It's interesting that you mention the Bhagavad-Gita because Jean-Claude Carrière distilled that text down to just a few lines in his playtext for The Mahabharata.

We did that together. It was all a collaboration. I felt very strongly that when you are dealing with what is very rightly seen as the most sacred of sacred texts, you don't put it into a piece of theatre. In a piece of theatre you evoke the feeling, try to evoke an interest in it, but it's not a religious service. It would be a very bad play about the crucifixion if you actually stopped the action and for forty minutes read the teaching of Jesus. That would be really not only stupid and boring but also counterproductive, imposing something falsely on an audience. The Sermon on the Mount is to be read and contemplated very quietly in silence, or perhaps read among four or five people on a special occasion. In India there is a tradition of reading the whole of *The Mahabharata*, as you know, and that takes six months. The *Bhagavad-Gita* is the bedside book of hundreds of thousands of Indians who dip into it all through

their lives. So what we decided to do was to present it in the core of the work as if it were a secret teaching—secret in the sense that it could only be understood by Arjuna. This great warrior Arjuna is led to a point where he hesitates to fight, and Krishna then has to tell him something that can only be murmured. It's the most intense situation of his life, on the battlefield, and the audience hears only one or two tiny lines. Krishna leads him through a labyrinth or forest, to the point when dramatically you see this man who has listened, and he gets up and says, "now I can enter the battle." And this should leave the spectator with this question: I want to know what he said. Now if that's real, and if it's intense enough, there is one simple answer for yourself: get the *Bhagavad-Gita* and start reading it.

Krishna says that the war is an inevitable calamity that he must nevertheless try his best to prevent. That also seems to be the obligation of everyone in the play: they must act to prevent something that's going to happen anyway. But that's a very hard idea for Westerners to grasp.

Krishna is a god who comes to earth as a man. He explains: "I can come into this earth as a snake, but when I enter the world in the form of a snake I can do nothing outside the possibilities and limitations of a snake." He can be the best snake ever but he can't do more, he can't get up and sing a song or walk. Disney can do that; he can't. He then says—and this is where it relates to the Christ story—"when I'm here on earth as a man, I can go to the farthest limit of what a man must and can do, but that's all." And this is what's hard for Westerners to understand: here is God, with every possibility of God, seeing the horror, the misery, all the sufferings of this war, but he's a man, a superman indeed, but a man, so he can only do what a man can do. He uses his eloquence, his powers of persuasion, his understanding, his authority, to beg, challenge, shape the people around him to prevent the war. But in the end even he has to accept that it is impossible. He has tried; he has done everything to thwart the war, but when he sees that the forces in play are stronger than those of any man, even a god-as-man, he then sees that there is only one thing to do: win that war. This is *The Mahabharata's* answer to all the naïve and stupid questions of Western pacifism or aggressivity. It isn't the gung-ho Bush view: you leap into war, send the Marines and say, "we've won." That doesn't even arise on the higher level of thinking of *The Mahabharata*. But you also don't take the view of naïve pacifism and just do nothing.

Obama, with all of his incredible qualities, has spent the past year naively saying, "Yes, I'm listening. No, I'm not against you. Yes, tell me what you feel"—and Yudhishtira is the Obama of the story in *The Mahabharata*. Here is a man who isn't a warrior but who wants to be a good king. And he will do everything in his power to be that except soil his hands. Yet he is put in the position—and this is the greatness of the story, there's nothing in all of Shakespeare to touch this—where he must. This man wouldn't cheat at the game of dice—a ritual for every new king—because he had in front of him somebody who could cheat better than him, whom he knew. But to be a true ruler, the last test you have to pass is to be even more of a cheater, if you have to cheat, than the most brilliant cheater. That's the meaning

of the game of dice. Obama is a bit naïve in a very pure way. He walks into the Oval Office on the first day and sees sitting there the most cunning and ruthless people, and his job is to learn to be more cunning than them. Yudhishtira is like that, and that's why he's sent into exile. His punishment is a purgation in the forest because he must learn this, and he does. Later, during the battle, he is able to tell a lie at the crucial moment to weaken his opponent.

A critic once called your Mahabharata an "essay on theatricality," referring to the elegant formal movement, the ritualistic activities seen throughout, and the general resourcefulness of the staging. Was theatricality merely a means to an end for you or was it also a meaning in the piece?

As far as I'm concerned, theatricality as such has had less and less meaning since the age of twenty-five or so, when I loved all that. By the time I did *The Mahabharata* it had no meaning whatsoever. My feeling was: these are the tools of the craft. And I was and am less and less inclined to use them. With *The Mahabharata* it was clear to me from the many workshops and experiments that certain scenes could not be done just with actors on a bare stage—with what we called the carpet show. It couldn't be done. It needed something further to make it vibrant and alive. So that's where the theatricality came from. As I say, these are tools, which you use because you have to, because you can't do otherwise. This is where the contribution of a remarkable designer Chloe Obolensky was essential. She was an integral part of the work from the start.

There was a certain formality to the piece, a consistent style to it with people touching the earthen floor and doing Namaste greetings and so on.

Yes, but somebody wrote wisely long ago that an author must never ever think of style. Style is what remains when you have done your very best and completed your work. What remains is its style. A thing that people used to say a long time ago about opera and classical theatre was: "we love it because it's so artificial." Cultivated, upper-middle-class people would go to the opera and love all the artifice. But to me "artifice" is a completely pejorative word. Art may contain artificiality but that is not what you go there for. You go for the living experience. I'm doing *The Magic Flute* now as I did *Carmen*, with no scenery whatsoever, because as far as I can see at the moment, there isn't a single visual artifice that can do other than cloak something more beautiful that's in the living musical line. *The Mahabharata* is in between. It is a great Hindu, Indian classic. It isn't an Esperanto classic. So India is in the names of the characters, in the presence of the Ganges, in the costumes, the gestures, and even in the manner of shooting a bow. We paid homage to it to the degree that would enhance the subject and not cloak the subject. We had performers with twenty-odd nationalities, and if we had them playing Indians with Christian gestures, or Arab or Muslim gestures, or just their own improvised gestures, that would have betrayed it. So all their little natural acknowledgments, when they greeted each other and so on, were Indian, something they would do without thinking about it. It was for that reason that I took the actors to India after

we'd worked for a long time. I didn't take them before rehearsal, which I think is very dangerous, because then they come back full of images and ideas and things they want to imitate. But when you've worked and worked and then go to India on top of that prepared soil, it gave the actors just enough nourishment to be able to do those gestures in a purer way than what they'd picked up already.

Is that what you meant by seeking a "naïve style" for the work? Carrière wrote in his book about the India trip that you and he were seeking a "naïve" relationship to what you had witnessed there.

Yes. Well, "naïve" covers a lot of things, but I think in this case it means letting go of a lot of built-in intellectual and cultural habits of reaction. I prefer to say, being simple. When a professor, like Levi-Strauss, goes to a completely different culture, he comes with a whole structure of convictions about what that culture is. He has done all that work and so he looks for confirmations. The naïve explorer is one who is open, who doesn't at once catalogue in his mind. He receives impressions and then catalogues afterwards.

Is your point that the creative artist needs to take this naïve or simple path because anything else would kill his creativity?

Well, I'd say it applies to everything. Colin Turnbull had a lot of the anthropology profession against him when he wrote about the Ik, because he not only recorded everything he saw as a trained anthropologist but also received impressions as a human being and brought them into his anthropological observations: impressions of disliking them, liking them, being touched or repelled. This was part of his evidence as much as the facts he wrote in his notebook. It was the same with Oliver Sacks. Oliver Sacks has opened a whole new horizon in neurology, but he is not respected in the profession as a top-level neurologist. Only very recently have neurologists begun to think that they too must feel and empathize with their patients. Until very recently, every young neurologist was taught never, never to respect emotions, because feelings don't exist, only brain chemistry. So Oliver Sacks was suspect because for him a case is inseparable from his human feelings about it. So naïve means letting your boundaries relax.

Did you have any discussion about time as content during the making of The Mahabharata—about the length of the piece becoming part of its meaning?

These are intellectual questions. That's the exact opposite of the way I work. I can't imagine doing that. That is the German way, I'm afraid, where the director gets the actors around the table and talks. They call it "working at the table"—a great, honored thing where you sit down and discuss and discuss what you're aiming at. I have total visceral horror of that. The opposite way is an evolutionary process of exploring where you start immediately with the actors on their feet. The text of *The Mahabharata* is enormous, as you know, and the length of the show just came from the fact that we couldn't, as in India, do a play that lasts eighteen nights, and

we couldn't at the same time do justice to this material in an hour and a half. So we worked and worked and made something that was right for itself but was, in relation to the realities of that time, incredibly long. And for those who saw it as a marathon—a one-day marathon rather than spread over three nights—they received something that was extraordinary. For me the analogy was a very long plane flight. When I first went to Australia, I realized that a long, long trip like that is much less fatiguing than something like a trip over the Atlantic—a mere eight hours in a plane—because before you start for Australia you put on your seatbelt you know that this is an enormous, long journey and you don't think of time anymore. You relax. I found the same was true with *The Mahabharata*: people came in knowing that this was the whole of, say, Sunday. You came, you'd get there at perhaps noon, and you knew that you wouldn't be home until near midnight. So you entered into it readily, and you could be naïve in that way I described. You could just let yourself become part of it because you had this day in which you had decided to feel comfortable. We do a lot of work today that is very short, like the sonnets piece, *Love is My Sin*, which is under an hour. And still you can witness the tensions and impatience of the day there, which you have to reckon with, a piece of art being regarded as a mere momentary gap in the day. *The Mahabharata* was long, and the result of that was that people gave it their time, gave it a whole day.

I saw it in one day and couldn't imagine seeing it in three days. It sounds like you agree that it was better as a marathon.

Oh yeah, that was the idea of it. At the same time it wasn't for us to break up people's social habits. Some people needed to see it the other way.

This may sound intellectual but I did feel as though the length of the piece prepared you for its content in a way. The three parts had different means of holding attention dramatically. The first part introduced you to the characters and the stories, which were new and amazing to most Westerners. By the middle part you were exhausted but also attentive because you were waiting for the development that would occur in the exile tale. And in the last part you were in need of excitement to revive your energies and the war action provided that. The oddity for me was that I didn't crave a resolution as in a conventional drama—the conjured world was too captivating for that. The action put you in another state of mind where you weren't demanding that. That's why people were so receptive. So it seemed as though the production was in part about what happens when you stick with something for a long time. It changes you, makes you less rigidly goal-oriented. You're different by the end from the way you were when you went in.

But what you say goes right back to what I said at the very beginning of our conversation. Today, after the event, you can say all this. But you weren't saying it to yourself second by second as you were there. You and I, we can look back and draw all these conceptual conclusions, but they never arose at the time. I think there is not a single creative act that can come from the outline of a concept. That's why I think conceptual art is absolutely a lunatic term. You work and you discard. You work and you think, "ah yes," or "oh no." You use all your intellectual equipment as

you go but it's all about working towards necessities, inner necessities. I've written a lot about this Japanese concept of Jo-Ha-Kyu. Jo-Ha-Kyu is a way of referring to a three-part division, the principle of three, a trinity. It's very fundamental in all human experiences. It can be seen in the old practice of knocking three times before a play starts in France. Or in the three-act form, which reigned for so many years and didn't come from nowhere: there was a sense that the first act prepares, the second act develops and the third act culminates. And this is something that, without formulating it, Jean-Claude and I felt. Whenever we would come to a certain point, we'd feel, now something must develop. It's a second part and it's not taking you farther, so there's a problem. And if the next part wasn't Kyu, wasn't culminating, then that was something to be solved. You can also think of it as a pattern from a dark beginning, to light, to apotheosis. And this pattern can also be found within the parts. The graying thing in the third part of *The Mahabharata*, for example, has to have its own Jo-Ha-Kyu within it, a build to intensity to give the sense of a light saved, a sense of the sun rising only for a moment. If you focus the whole third act on how lovely everything is when peace is restored, it won't touch you. But if you do it this way it will. And I think the audience had a Jo-Ha-Kyu of endurance in *The Mahabharata*. When it applauded at the end, the audience was also applauding itself for having made it to the end. We had an extraordinary experience in Zurich, when we played the show once through the night in a shipyard, an enclosed ship-building space. At the very end—and people who were there will never forget this because it was a miracle—the back wall rose up at the very moment when the rising sun came straight in. There was a feeling then that the audience had earned that by their own effort as much as the actors.

I'd like to ask you about the controversy about The Mahabharata that arose in academia in the 1980s, when you were called an exploiter of Indian culture. What was your response to that back then, and have your feelings about it changed in the meantime?

You can't work on these sorts of things, intercultural things, without recognizing that life is as it is and people are as they are. At this moment, we are doing a play which is *Tiarno Bokar* turned into an English version called *Eleven and Twelve*, and this piece ends with a silence. Naturally we've never imposed anything with this. In Paris when we did it, the silence lasted for several minutes before anyone wanted to applaud. The audience was touched and didn't want to applaud right away. That also happened in London in the first previews. But you can't imagine the fury that I received after opening from the bulk of the English press, saying that I was imposing religion on them, preaching to them, I mean, every sort of attack. I could only think that in the life of London today, the need for noise is so deep—in every restaurant, everywhere you go, the shouting, the fury, the violence—that in the theatre there's a need also for everything to be highly charged. The one thing that couldn't be accepted was silence. And it was the same thing with the political reactions at the time. They were part of the current jargon. I wasn't surprised in any way. My only reaction was to say this: every country in the world, including India, hasn't hesitated for several hundred years to translate Shakespeare, to use Shakespeare. He is considered part of the world's heritage, and nobody in England has denounced the productions in

Arabic and Swahili and Hindi. Here is a work that doesn't belong to India. It is a great heritage of India, but it has meaning for others. They can do their *Mahabharata* in their way better than anyone, as we can do our Shakespeare in our way better than anyone. But these works have a meaning not for Indians, or for white people, but for this being called Man. *The Mahabharata* belongs to mankind. So if it can find an echo we do it. If you call that stealing from you, then I can understand your reaction. It's absolutely true that Western colonialism has stolen from every culture it's touched. But that doesn't apply to *The Mahabharata* following its destiny, which is to become recognized throughout the world.

Does a Western artist seeking material in another culture, particularly a non-Western culture, have any obligations toward the feelings of people from that culture?

I don't believe in the word "culture," like "art." These words, forgive me, but that's taking an academic view. I don't believe these words have any more than a temporary convenience for talk and for categorizing. If somebody from the West goes to another culture just to look for material, yes, that is a very, very suspect attitude. But if you follow what I've tried to express about the background and the history of *The Mahabharata*, you know that's not where it came from. I didn't go find *The Mahabharata*. I reached a point early on where I felt that there was more than the cultural limits given to me by my English education, and I've always traveled and always felt that there was more to the meaning of culture than Western civilization, which now everybody's beginning to recognize. If you've read *Threads of Time*, you know about how I went to a performance of Kathakali when we were doing *US* and an Indian came by and gave me a four-page play about the beginning of the battle in *The Mahabharata*. At that time I don't think I'd even been to India. But I became interested, and then came the nights with the wonderful scholar Philippe Lavastine telling Jean-Claude and me stories from it, and all these things accumulated until *The Mahabharata* gradually found its way.

Let me press you a bit more if I may. When one follows an impulse in the theatre to seek an Other, something different from oneself, and it ends up being the heritage of a real living culture like India, is there a line of legitimacy that one must respect? Obviously there were some people who felt that there was such a line and that you didn't respect it.

I think there's one very simple thing to understand: in whatever situation we are in, we must recognize that our horizons are limited. We are, as individual human beings, far below the capacity of our human organism. Socially we are woefully inadequate. Part of the tragedy of thousands of years of human history is each culture coming to the point when they think that they've got it all. That's where the battles start. That's where the Pandavas and the Kauravas find conflict, because the Kauravas are an image of all mankind thinking that they've got it all—whether it's Muslims or Christians or the West. We're all Kauravas socially. And so one must always find in oneself—either it's there naturally or it has to be constantly renewed and cultivated—a capacity for respect. Levi-Strauss would go berserk if he heard the word "primitive" for any people because for him it was disrespectful. It was meant

to give the speaker a superior feeling and say that those people are less than us. You have to realize that they are different and if you approach them that way you'll find that there is much to respect.

If that respect is there, when someone is a stranger and you're a stranger to them, then behind it all there is something that can bind you. Then you aren't stealing from them and they aren't stealing from you. Something can flow. Sometimes, for a million political reasons, ingrained political and social reasons, somebody wants to say: "you're stealing from us." And if you're white you can't help carrying on your back all the background of years of exploitation. One cannot talk to an African, however much you want to be close to him and have him feel your total openness and respect, without knowing that as you look at him, he thinks, "Oh, I can see you reacting to the color of my face." He looks at you and whatever you do, he sees a white man. That you can't get away from. So we have to pay the price for all the monstrosities that our forefathers committed. This is a truth. If I go to Africa, knowing they need money desperately, and I say, "well, let me help you," and I give them some money, they say "thank you," but at the same time part of them is resenting it. "Ah, so he thinks he's buying our love." It has to be like this because of all the thousands of cases where that really happened.

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