Arts & Humanities

Reading Between the Acts

Director Peter Brook was drawn to the Columbia audience as much as it was drawn to him.

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When Peter Brook brought his new work *Tierno Bokar* to Columbia University in April, he was concerned about attracting a certain kind of audience. He was even more interested in alienating other kinds of audiences. Bokar is no one's idea of commercial theater. It's a somber meditation on religious tolerance based on the writings of an African sufi mystic. And it's in French.

The fact that *Bokar* is not for everyone is part of the reason Brook brought it to Columbia and labeled it as a "research," instead of as a play. "It's a way of keeping away people who want to see directorial fireworks or a director they know," he says. "I want to help people not to be disappointed."

Brook, the 80-year-old godfather of avant-garde theater, was looking for a nontraditional theater audience — specifically, he says, young people and African-Americans — and came looking uptown. "It's obvious that this show is more interesting to a black audience than a white audience, so producing near Harlem is important," he says. "If we did this at NYU, there would be less diversity."

Brook adds that he avoided his longtime New York home, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, because of economics. "Their ticket prices have become too high," he explains. At Columbia, the top ticket was $40.

Busy Intersection

Brook and his company, the International Center of Theatre Creation, spent a month-long residency at Columbia as part of the newly formed University Arts Initiative, led by Gregory Mosher. For Columbia, which is not known as a producer of theater, acquiring a New York premiere of a new play directed by Peter Brook was a coup. The University was also able to offer something new to Brook, according to Mosher.

“We offered him an audience,” he says. “An audience that was new to him and that came to him without having seen his plays. He’s been directing for 60 years, but our audience hadn’t seen his legendary productions. From the beginning we said, ‘Come if this seems interesting to you. Don’t come if what you really want to see is silliness on stage.’

“So when I spoke to Peter last year his decision was based on who we would try to bring in to see the piece. We said students and faculty who were open.”

Besides establishing itself as a player in the theater scene by producing Brook, the University has tried to integrate the work of the academy and the theater, two worlds that usually keep each other at arm’s length. The school turned *Bokar* into the focal point for a satellite of other more scholarly events that could deepen an audience’s understanding of the play or of Brook. (In 2002 Columbia collaborated with the Royal Shakespeare Company to bring Salman Rushdie’s *Midnights’s Children*, and a month of programming, to the University and the local community.)

Among the more than 30 programs were a discussion on tolerance in the Western African Muslim tradition led by Columbia history professor Gregory Mann, and a lecture on global Sufiism by Peter Awn, dean of the School of General Studies and professor of religion at Columbia. Brook himself spoke at the Miller Theatre.

“Peter Brook’s residency at Columbia represents an important point of intersection between arts and scholarship,” President Lee C. Bollinger said. *Bokar* is an excellent test case for locating this intersection, since scholars have always been much more interested in African culture than have theater artists.

One exception, of course, is Peter Brook, who throughout his varied career has always gone his own way. Among his many accomplishments are stagings of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *King Lear* that are considered by many to be the definitive 20th-century productions of these plays; and a nine-hour Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*, that is one of the landmarks of international theater. *The Empty Space,* his wildly influential text on directing and theater, remains required reading

for theater students 35 years after it was published.

Over the years, Brook has been known as a guru, a visionary, an intellectual, an elitist, a Broadway showman, a savior, a mystic, a madman, and a genius. No living theater artist inspires as much fascination. But to understand who Peter Brook really is and what separates him from every other brilliant English director of our time, you must go back to 1970 when he made probably the most controversial decision of a very controversial career: He left town.

When Peter Brook moved from London to Paris, many theatre watchers thought he was crazy. It wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last. Brook had just finished directing his startlingly stylish production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which had a white box set and acrobats that became touchstones of the modern stage. Brook, then in his mid-fifties, was at the top of his game and the toast of the West End.

If it seemed strange for Brook then to start a new theater, les Bouffes du Nord, in a dodgy neighborhood in Paris — "for some," he said of his fellow Englishmen, "my leaving was a secret criticism of them" — it was nowhere near as odd as what he did two years later, which confounded observers throughout the theater world. In 1972 he embarked on a three-month tour of the Sahara desert and Central West Africa, bringing a troupe of eleven actors from around the world to mount plays for audiences who had probably never seen a Western play.

At that time, this may have seemed like a detour for the prolific artist, a pause in his schedule of mounting West End revivals, Broadway musicals, operas, and film projects (such as *Lord of the Flies*). But this trip was actually the turning point in Brook's illustrious career and the beginning of his fruitful relationship with African culture. In his book *Conference of the Birds*, critic John Heilpern writes that everything Brook had done since "links to that incredible African journey." It is doubtful that *Tierno Bokar*, based on a memoir by a Malian writer who settled in Paris, would have caught his eye otherwise.

Civil History

The play is set in a precise place and time, but it has the feel of a timeless fable told in the simplest way possible. The actors remain onstage through most of the play, standing to the side when they are not involved in the action, which is introduced by

a narrator. A scene often begins when a performer walks to the center of the stage and places a rug on the floor.

Performing on a spare and functional set, and walking through simple, elemental blocking (one of the director's signatures), the cast is mainly African, but includes, as Brook's plays always do, a multicultural mix of ethnicities and racial backgrounds. (In one early Columbia performance of *Bokar*, which had runs in Paris and London before moving to Barnard's Lefrak Gymnasium, the audience included more young people and African-Americans than one would see in a Broadway house, and their attention seemed rapt until the final standing ovation.) Many of the performers are longtime Brook veterans, including the actor playing the title character, Sotigui Kouyaté, who starred in the productions of *The Mahabharata* and *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, that Brook brought to the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2001.

Bokar is a serene man undergoing a change of heart about what side he's on in a fierce dispute among rival religious sects that occurs in 1930s Mali in the shadow of French colonialism. The conflict is whether a certain prayer should be recited 11 times or 12. Many critics have seen the work as an allegory for the situation in Iraq, with parallels between the Sunnis and the Shiites.

But while this metaphor is certainly suggested, Brook is not the kind of artist who makes polemical political arguments. Since the early '70s, he has been fascinated with making theater that transcends culture. Only in a piece by Brook such as Bokar would you find an English director staging a French translation (with English supertitles) of an African work for an American audience.

Out of Africa

Brook, wearing jeans and a casual shirt, has eyes so brightly blue that it's almost distracting. Speaking with a writer during the production's run, he wastes little time with small talk.

"It's the unknown," he says, explaining his fascination with Africa. "We are brought up to learn about many cultures, but not much about Africa. We're always stealing from Asian cultures, and in that plundering there is great respect. With Africa, we have only plundered people, slaves. Otherwise, what does anyone know or understand or respect about Africa?"

Bemoaning the Western prejudices of the theater community has become commonplace, but Brook was one of the first English theater artists actually to bring African theater to the West. In searching for a theatrical language that goes beyond nationality, his own aesthetic has evolved.

For more than 30 years, Brook's plays have become austere and minimalist, increasingly drawing comparisons to abstract art. But he has always had the instinct to strip a work of drama to its core. Describing working with him in the 1960s, the actress Glenda Jackson said, "Someone once asked me what was the word that was most synonymous in my mind with working with Peter Brook, and the word is no."

In 1963 Brook famously declared that we need a "theater without words" and (and of course his book is *The Empty Space*). His plays are much more likely to pose questions than suggest answers. His 1963 anti-Vietnam Broadway show US concluded with the cast still onstage staring at the audience. (On opening night, the critic Kenneth Tynan shouted, "Are you waiting for us or are we waiting for you?") In his recent production of Hamlet, he trimmed the play to a brisk two hours. The production ended with Hamlet asking, "Who's there?"

"I think you should try everything as a director," says Brook, "but after a time you can become obese, and I recognize the danger of obesity, so I let go of what I don't need. I let go of everything that's not helping."

While many people rave about Brook's elemental style as a return to the essentials of the theater, some critics see it as a kind of naïve and vague mysticism. In a public spat in 2002, playwright David Hare, author of *Amy's View* and *The Blue Room*, lashed out at Brook during a lecture, saying he "set about draining plays of any specific meaning or context to a point where each becomes the same play — a universal hippie babbling which represents nothing but fright of commitment."

This sparked a fascinating exchange of letters between the titans of the late–20th-century stage, which illuminated a debate about the role of theater in the world. Brook has never shied away from politics, but he seems more interested in exploring the mythic and unknown than in engaging the issues of the day. In one letter, Brook attacked the usefulness of the polemic and said that he no longer believes "in the value of debates, pamphlets, statements and pseudo-Brechtian speeches." And while his new play has been called political, Brook says he doesn't think that Hare would agree. "I could have had elaborate deconstructions of colonialism, but today

the references are already there and you can invoke them more quickly than what David Hare would suggest," Brook says.

In his old age, Brook has learned the limitations of the theater. But he knows that just because plays cannot always change the world doesn't mean that they can't broaden horizons or make audiences think deeply about a subject that they had ignored.

In *Tierno Bokar*, the Sufi sage is asked, "What is God?" and he answers that "God is the embarrassment of human intelligence." For Brook, it's the ability to recognize what you don't know that is the real sign of wisdom.

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