

Margaret Croyden. *Conversations with Peter Brook 1970 - 2000* . London: Faber and Faber, 2003. 301 pp. ISBN: 0-571-22172-6

Peter Brook is widely regarded as one of the prominent pragmatic directors in modern theatre. Brook infuses multicultural, onomatopoeic and spiritual dimensions in his theatre productions (Roose-Evans 1990). Under his direction, his actors are to seek the most effortless path to communicate the universal meaning that strikes an emotional reference with any audience (Martin 1991). More interestingly, Brook stresses *the need for actors to disinter elements underlying language through a sensitisation to its deeper resonance to arrive at a possible response with integrity to a given text even when the actor cannot understand the referential meaning* (Marshall and Williams 2000: 183).

This book contains many insights as well as provocative interpretations of Brook's theatre productions. Each prelude in the conversations on his theatrical projects is an informed elaboration offering clear descriptions and vivid images of a theatrical production. The first conversation in this book began in 1971 during which Brook travelled to New York with his theatre production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Billy Rose Theatre.

Croyden finds Brook's interpretation of Oberon's intention to have Titania screwed by an ass as an expression of true love unappealing and peculiar. Readers will find Brook's modern equivalent for his literary reading of Oberon warped and offensive. In the conversation Brook made clear that the only one set formula he follows is to prevent anything from being set. This pragmatic quality set him on reshaping his work in successive improvisation, although he warned that repeated improvisations were not useful for Shakespearean theatre, which required combinations of physical exercises and various kinds of preparation.

The introduction prior to the conversation in *In the Hills of Iran: Orghast*, illustrates the epic scale of the theatrical production in Persepolis, Iran. As Croyden aptly describes, the

staging of this particular theatre was new and daring. The performance of *Orghast* demanded immense effort to reach the hilly terrain that required *a twenty-minute climb on foot up a winding, steep road full of rock, gravel, debris and sand*. The conversation on *Orghast* did not mention Brook's fascination with primal sounds in theatre production to attain the spectrum of trans-cultural meaning.

Martin (1991: 77) points out the significance of non-linguistic sound to Brook, *he prefers the actor, whose voice and creative abilities are open to nature and the instincts of the moment, believing that the actor needs precise exercises to liberate the voice, not so that one learns how to do, but how to permit – how to set the voice free*. Brook displayed much courage to overcome the individual, political and geographical barriers in the production. At this moment, practical glitches behind the stage performances pale in comparison to the difficulties faced by the writer, director and performers of *Orghast* that lasted for nights during the 1971 Festival of Arts in Shiraz.

The most dangerous form of theatre for Brook himself as communicated to Croyden, however, was improvisation when Brook talked about his staging of *The Ik*. The underpinning elements of *The Ik*, based on Colin Turnbull's book of African anthropology *The Mountain People*, were the essentials and the unity among actors, audience and materials. Brook likened the performance of *The Ik* to telling a bedtime story. The difference lay with a *double vision* in the theatrical experience through which the audience realised that the story was about themselves. Brook's concept of *double vision* was that of the actors' world co-occurring with the audience's reality in the theatre experience. Croyden relentlessly nudges the validity of this assumption with critical questions, resulting in extended replies from Brook in the book.

The Conference of Birds was Brook's theatrical interpretation of the work by the twelve-century Persian poet Farid Attar. The production used masks to tell the story of human

beings and their possibilities. The interchanging of the masks signified the applications of transforming modes in relation to the varying meaning, from concrete, to poetic and spiritual. These overtones illustrated the fluctuations of present and invisible worlds. After further prodding, Brook explained to Croyden that the invisible world could become real to the audience through the imagery that comes in contact. Stanislavsky's *Magic if* psycho-technique that traces the emotion experiences associated with the physical and sensory circumstances of the occurrences (Counsell 1996: 29), or theatre experience in our case, came to mind when Brook's concept of invisible world made real was communicated to Croyden.

In his conversation, Brook compared Mahabharata, the longest (Indian) poem, written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200, to the entire work of Shakespeare. The strength in Mahabharata that attracted Brook was the repetitive contrasts of good and bad in different depictions. This destabilising energy against set ideas was a challenge to cosmic harmony and man. Mahabharata contained the universal depth that enabled Brook to show good behaviour and personal morality in a particular situation.

Rejecting the idea that *Mahabharata* was the climax of his career, Brook explained in his conversation with Croyden that it was a momentary preoccupation. He and the French screenwriter Jean-Claude Carriere chanced on the Indian epic through a Sanskrit student who took nights to tell them the whole story in Paris. A French adaptation for the theatre performance of Mahabharata emerged from various forms of conceptualisation.

Brook avoided casting stereotypes by deploying the performers in multiple roles and switching the roles of his cast of seventeen nationalities in different parts of the performance. Change is indeed the only constant in Brook's production. The concept of Mahabharata had changed from physical theatre to French adaptation:

Then suddenly, Brook wrote me to come to Paris...the boy was not mentioned ... So I wrote to Peter ... and asked him what to do about the boy. He wrote back ... and said ... He had previously thought the production would be very much a physical thing ... But now it had become

a hard speaking French text, and so they would not need us ... (Zarrilli 1986: 93-5)

Consequently, Guha and Dohonda, the Benggali dancers promised a role in Mahabharata initially, had had problems as they did not understand that production plans change constantly (Schechner 1988).

In the final conversation recorded in this book, Brook acknowledged the female Russian piano teacher who taught him two important lessons when he was twelve. First, listening was more important than doing, while the hands only act as instructed by the mind. Second, audience was very important to learning. Audience ensured an attested learning, which simultaneously made it instrumental.

Despite his success, Brook conceded that 99.9% of universal experience was outside his personal understanding. There were many things beyond his understanding and every one began life at a simple starting point. Brook rejected the claim that he was fascinated with mysticism, believing that such remarks showed the ignorance of speakers who would not even have raised the issue at all, had they knew what they were saying.

The last conversation allows a rethink about the remark that Brook addresses the decay of the modern world and celebrates the power of ritual that binds community in this theatrical work (cf. Counsell 1996). His conversation on Mahabharata with Croyden suggested that he understood the metaphysics of life but it did not prove if he actually advocated positive actions to sustain cosmic harmony beyond showing aesthetically the possibilities of making a choice.

While *The Ik* depicts deteriorating human issues, and he avoided parochialism with multiple casting of actors of various nationalities in many performances, there was little healing created in his experimental production with various modes of performance representation. Social theatre can be divided into four logical successions, namely theatre for

healing, theatre for action, theatre for community, and theatre for transforming experience into art (Thompson and Schechner 2004: 15).

On the other hand, one can argue that *Orghast* and *Mahabharata* aimed to communicate with the audience creatively; however, their productions were exclusive to the mainstream socioeconomic structure. As pointed by Croyden, the former was part of an Arts Festival in Iran and the latter opened a Theatre Festival in France.

The Ik attempted to tell the story of the sense of being lost in a community, although the audience might not have empathy for but rather an appreciation of an alienated moribund. Although Brook himself became the choragus who led the polyphonic choir, there was no particular direction, as his formula is an amorphous state of constant change. His agenda was to avoid the creation of deadly theatre that dulled the audience, *mediocre actors...perpetuate the Deadly Theatre with dull success, universally praised* (Brook 1990: 13). In relation to the seven functions of performance (Schechner 2002: 39), however, Brook's theatrical work clearly fulfills all the functions, i.e. to entertain, to make something that is beautiful, to change or mark identity and to foster community to heal, to teach or convince or to deal with the sacred or demonic.

Croyden's intelligent prodding on Brook's opinions resulting in Brook's interesting and expanded clarifications make this book a significant collection of dialogues on modern theatrical directing and production. The opinions of this outstanding modern theatre experimentalist are worth examining by scholars, students as well as audience to obtain certain insights of spiritual theatre in the twentieth century.

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Jyh Wee Sew
CHIJ St Theresa's Convent, Singapore