# The Aesthetics of *The Empty Space* in the Theatre: Exploring the Writing and Theatrical Work of Peter Brook

**Catharine Dada**

**Abstract**

Peter Brook's seminal text *The Empty Space* envisioned theatre as a vehicle for spiritual transformation where presence, silence and symbolic embodiment worked cohesively together. Deeply influenced by the work of G. I. Gurdjieff, Brook's Holy Theatre positioned the actor as a living symbol. His pioneering work at the Centre International de Recherche Théâtrale (CIRT) fostered profound engagements between performers and audiences, seeking to create mythopoetic states of consciousness. Famously, Brook's epic production The Mahabharata was a vibrant manifestation of what could occur when the Rough and Holy Theatres were juxtaposed together: creating a transformative space for audiences. Throughout his life Brook challenged traditional theatrical conventions and worked to transcend cultural boundaries, renewing theatre's role as a space for shared symbolic revelation.

**Keywords:** Peter Brook, G. I. Gurdjieff, theatre, *The Empty Space*, sacred art

## Introduction

Art, and specifically sacred art, has the ability to function as a vehicle through which a connection with the transcendent can be affected. The model of theatrical engagement delineated in Peter Brook's 1968 seminal text *The Empty Space* is like a roadmap for working with the sacred within a performance-based context. He delineates a pathway of possibility: conduits for the potential embodiment of the sacred to manifest through the physical presence of the actor and therefore in the performance space itself. Arguably one of the most important and influential contemporary theatre directors in the West in the last century, Brook's sources were as eclectic as his world was wide. *The Empty Space* shattered forever the illusions of Victorian theatre and the more mundane conventionalities of traditional proscenium arch theatres. For Brook this was the 'Deadly Theatre' and stood for that which belongs to a non-dynamic Western theatrical past. In his seminal text he claimed that the future of theatre is not linked with buildings, styles or forms; his work aimed to uncover the essence of the present moment, and the transformational properties contained in an authentic experience of it.

For Brook, a fine new theatre cannot emerge out of a desire to hearken back to the past, he sees that we have drifted away from the knowledge that the theatre is a holy instrument, and indeed potentially an instrument of the holy. In this sense, Brook extends Jean-Louis Barrault's concept that the theatre should not imitate life but should enable the creation of direct experience of life.[1] Brook's theatrical work explored the realm of symbolic knowledge,

Catharine Dada teaches at Loyola Marymount University. She is interested in exploring spiritual experience and liminality in theatre and in film. Her research on Jerzy Grotowski provided groundbreaking evidence that his theatrical work was heavily influenced by his fascination with G.I. Gurdjieff. Email: catharinedada@gmail.com.

whereby actors and audience alike are enabled to realize the potential for the great spiritual, mythic and metaphysical models within. This is the work of the Holy Theatre such as he proposed in *The Empty Space*. To the general public, Brook consistently refused to provide a formula for his own spiritual evolution or to place his theatrical work in the context of the Work of G.I. Gurdjieff. Brook was keenly aware that others had tried to superficially emulate his own theatrical styles, and in that copying them, they would lack the authenticity that a genuine transmission would have. Others would have to find their own sources, their own connections, their own lineages. Brook played the cards of his own spiritual practice close to his chest. At least publicly so. He declared that it was contrary to the ethos of the work itself to speak of it in a fashion that could easily be misinterpreted.

But scholars and practitioners of Gurdjieff's Work will have recognized Brook's fascination with Gurdjieff's oeuvre, as well as his presence at their gatherings and conferences. And clear evidence of the influence of Gurdjieff's style and ideas are apparent in The Empty Space, as they also are in Brook's theatre and film work. In the main, the theatre of the twentieth century has been instructive at revealing the psychological layers of texts: most performance companies in the West are at home working with a Freudian awareness of the ego, the super-ego and the unconscious and with that which is expressed as well as with what is concealed. This is, however, not the realm in which Peter Brook's suggested 'Holy Theatre' operates. As he states in *The Empty Space*:

> 'Holy Theatre' implies that there is something else in existence, below, around and above, another zone, even more invisible even farther from the forms which we are capable of reading or recording, which contain extremely powerful sources of energy ... It is not communicated through noise but through silence. Since one must use words, one calls it 'sacred.'[2]

Brook was interested in the creation of a Holy Theatre, whereby actors and audience alike are enabled to realize the potential for the great spiritual, mythic and metaphysical models within. This was made manifest in all of his work – notably, and for the purposes of this study, in the productions of *Orghast*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Mahabharata*.

**The Fourth Way and Mythopoetic Consciousness: The Actor as a Living Symbol**

Gurdjieff's Fourth Way combines three pathways of spiritual practice: through the body, the heart and the mind into a "fourth way" that produces a more dynamic and effective means for "waking up". G. I. Gurdjieff's understanding that the symbol can transmit knowledge is evidenced in his presentation of the Enneagram and in his belief that the sacred dances were to be experienced by practitioners in their function as living symbols. This is the Fourth Way of Gurdjieff's work; many teachers have striven to manifest this fourth way – even without knowing of Gurdjieff.

---

[1] Jean-Louis Barrault and Thomas B. Markus, 'The Theatrical Phenomenon', *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 17, no. 2 1965), pp. 89-100.
[2] Peter Brook, *The Open Door: Thoughts on Acting and Theatre* (London: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) p. 70.

American literary critic M.L. Abrahams states that: "Art is seen as imitating not what we observe but what is "in" or "behind" what we observe: i.e.: the Ideas or Forms which gave rise to nature as well as art."[3] Abrahams further suggests that the work of the imagination is not something that is active within a pre-existent external reality; because of its internal source of motion it does more than simply represent altered states of reality. Art is seen as an enduring process, it not only touches on the spiritual dimension in a way that no other human activity can do, but that it also provides a form for the expression of the invisible, working through oneself.

This pursuit of the mythopoeic states of consciousness from the more mundane workaday levels of awareness through to the realm of the mythic has been brilliantly observed by English poet, Ted Hughes. An early collaborator with Peter Brook, Hughes claimed that all of art was a form of 'negotiation' between the level of the ordinary and the hidden and symbolic level of myth; bringing the mythic realm into a relationship with the changeable everyday world, the world where we and the theatre exist. Through this juxtaposition the theatre can be seen as a potential external ally of a spiritual way. The Holy Theatre functions not as a spiritual discipline in itself but exists in its highest manifestation to throw a light upon the hidden levels of myth. The glimpses the theatre can offer are invariably of short duration but are nevertheless pathways into the symbolic realms, so often ignored by our senses in our day-to-day reality. This parallels easily with Gurdjieff's Fourth Way work and his belief that most of humanity are sleepwalking through life. Brook obliquely associates this state of consciousness with the Deadly Theatre. He suggests that theatre artists (and audiences) cannot go back to the places where drama does not touch the soul in some way. He believed that live theatre could and should effect a profound change on the consciousness of the individual.

The concept of theatre art as an initiatory vehicle is not new: there are radical suggestions made relatively recently that tragedies such as Oedipus were not merely performed as straightforward plays but were also enacted symbolically as ritual as well. In order to facilitate this, actors were not professional entertainers in our current understanding of the word, but citizens trained to perform a religious office. In this sense the actor functions as performer and as the primary psychologist and doctor of the soul, in the most ancient sense of the concept. In this work the theatre can provide a medium for such an experience to occur: if the right criteria are met in the preparation and training of the actor and in the rehearsal process as well. Embodying what these rituals of a lost faith in a theatrical capacity could do for the audience have formed a major part of Brook's work.

In the Holy Theatre he describes in *The Empty Space*, the stage functions not as a representation of the world but rather acts as the vehicle through which the projection of the symbolic and the mythic can occur. The stage also functions as a location where the author's or actor's inner self can manifest. More naturalistic dramas, or indeed the methodology of Stanislavsky, is of no real value for Brook; his aim was to reach to deeper levels of reality, beyond the surface appearances. This work typifies the concept that logical thought patterns form a wall that must be breached, in order that the experiences of a true visionary might occur:

[3] M. L. Abrahams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953) p. 45.

> The world only exists on stage as a vehicle for the soul or a reflection of the will, so objects and figures can be transformed to correspond to the emotional states of the dreaming or visionary mind. To find a frequency that avoids the noisy static of daily life, the artist must use symbols. For theatre, visual images, keyed in by emotionally charged words and accompanied by suggestive vocal sounds, [these] become the primary means of communication.[4]

The network of cross-fertilization that normally defines an artistic movement is clearly apparent in Brook's work. As a theatre artist he was humble enough to question the fundamental nature of theatre, asking what functions it could perform. In examining the intersection between performance and esoteric practices, he worked toward raising the art form of the theatre to new modern heights, such as it has arguably previously attained, within the parameters of its ancient function. For Brook, the theatre as a discipline was treated with the full awareness of the spiritual responsibility it engendered, in order that it might serve a therapeutic and/or spiritual function for modern society.

It was the work of Brook to train actors in finding ways of accessing realms of the mythic, in order that the landscape of the soul might become not only visible, but also accessible as a gateway for the collective of the audience. His work searched for the theatrical equivalent of a poetic cosmology where the ultimate constituents were not simply that which was beautiful but also that which contained flux and strife. It was in searching for the totality of these constituents to be experienced in their wholeness, rather than a more straightforward and therefore tamer explanation of their contents, that led him to a study of the workings of myth and symbol within a theatrical context.

**Brook's work at Le Centre International de Recherches Theatrales**

At the invitation of Jean-Louis Barrault, Brook moved to Paris and instigated the experimental work of Le Centre International de Recherches Theatrales (CIRT) at Les Bouffes du Nord in the early 1970's. The work of CIRT has meant that experimentation unencumbered by the usual demands of commercial theatre has produced a series of widely variant productions, through which the search for a Holy Theatre can be charted, and one where the ritualistic function of performance has been publicly realized. CIRT considers that it provides a haven for genuine theatrical communication, ceremony and involvement. In the spirit of cross- cultural participation, actors were sourced from all over the world working together, not in any facile attempt to create a new homogenous style, but one that involved an embracing of the unique cultural particularity of each of the participants, thereby heightening their individualities. Indeed, Brook's work touring in Africa with the CIRT meant in practice that he and the international team of actors had to examine and allow for:

[4] Christopher Innes, *Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avant Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 44 – 45

> Reversing the traditional priorities of communication, elevating the secondary elements of gesture, pitch, tone, and the dynamics of sound or movement that give expressive values, over the primary element of intellectual meaning.[5]

It was perhaps specifically because an international group of actors were assembled that they were able to examine the depth nature of elemental communication at such a visceral level. This work became foundational and was, they discovered, utterly relevant to any form of theatrical communion.

### *Orghast: The First Public Performance at the CIRT*

An exploration into the nature of sound as an expression of the pre-logical and as a universal method of communication came into sharp focus through Brook's collaboration with poet Ted Hughes at CIRT, culminating in the production staged at the ruins of Persepolis, entitled *Orghast*. Critic David Williams called it:

> A self-consciously holy work made up of esoteric mystical abstractions both vocal and gestural. This project may be seenas an attempt to go back to the very source of language as incantory sound, when an act of communication was synonymous with communion.[6]

During the experiments of the first year at CIRT, the dynamics of sound and sound vibration and the potentially magical effect they could have on the mental state of the subconscious, particularly in relation to the imagery of myth, were examined. An entire language was created by Hughes in the process: sounds were intuitively assigned emotive values and emotional states of consciousness, as related to the sounds, were realized through the participation of the actors in the experimental creative process. Ted Hughes explained in an interview with Tom Stoppard:

> What you hear in a person's voice is what is going on at the centre of gravity in his consciousness at that moment. When the mind is clear and the experience of the moment is actual and true, then a simple syllable can transmit volumes. A survivor needs only to sigh, and it hits you like a hammer. A commentator could chat on for a month and you'd get nothing.[7]

Brook concurred, and significantly moved the dialogue further into the terrain of the mystical:

> What is a sound? One thinks that man's sound comes from a link between what's deepest in him, his body, his windpipe, his diaphragm, his throat, and his head, and that the link between the head and the stomach comes into play when he makes a sound. When you say that the making of a sound is one of the most profound and the most

[5] Innes, *Holy Theatre*, p. 136.
[6] David Williams (ed.), *Peter Brook and The Mahabharata* (London: Routledge, 1991) p. 5
[7] Tom Stoppard, 'An Interview with Ted Hughes', *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 October (1971), p. 8.

> intimate actions, then the moment you start approaching sound in that way, you can't fail to enter into a world of infinite qualities.[8]

In practice Brook was catholic in his tastes and pragmatic in his outlook, rejecting the naturalistic ethic of Stanislavski in favour of a sense of deeper engagement with theatrical physical expression. Criticized by some for his tendency towards simplified asceticism, he nevertheless managed to consistently produce exciting interpretations of some of the more conventional dramas as well.

Brook's sources of inspiration were wide ranging. Those who know the work of Gurdjieff will see the parallels in the way in which his work demands that we wake up and be present for the potential of a transformative experience in mind, heart and body. There are other international and ancient influences on Brook's work. The purity of detail of the Kabuki Theatre of Japan and the Kathakali dancers of India each contain traits that clearly move beyond pure asceticism. For Brook these provided an inspiration for the further development of the Holy Theatre, where great attention is given to makeup and the perfection of the smallest prop. For the CIRT production teams this purity of detail provided a further vehicle for the sacred to manifest. Noting this, costumes, music and set were intentionally designed to reflect another level of existence, and the banal and vulgar were eliminated:

> In the great traditional societies, the potter is someone who tries to live with great eternal questions at the same time he is making a pot. This double dimension is possible in the theatre; it is in fact what gives it all value.[9]

In Brook's work at CIRT this was true not only for the actors, but it was the ideological foundation underpinning the work of the entire production staff.

Glimpses of a Gurdjieffian flavour, if you will, could be seen from time to time. Yoshi Oida, one of CIRT's most famous actors, related a conversation with Brook about his directorial methodology, whilst Brook was in rehearsal for his legendary *Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Tellingly, and with great appreciative humour, Oida related the following when he asked Brook how one should direct actors. According to Oida, Brook's answer went something like this:

> If during a scene, a director asked an actor to perform while walking on the ceiling, the actor would think that the director was completely mad and refuse to even consider the idea. Therefore, I don't suggest anything to the actor, I just say, 'Play it as you like'. In most cases, the actor would choose to utter the line while sitting on a chair. But if I had arranged things so that the chair broke when he sat on it, he might decide to speak while wandering about on the stage. But if the stage was covered in oil and then set alight, the actor would be forced to perform on a table. Again, if the table had been designed to break, the actor would realize that he could not use the chair, the floor, or the table. In desperation he would turn to the director for help. When this happened, the director would not need to say a single word. Just pointing to the ceiling would suffice. And the

[8] Margaret Croyden, *Conversations with Peter Brook* (New York: Theatre Communications Groups, 2003) p. 63.
[9] Brook, *The Open Door*, p. 75

> actor would think, "Of course! The ceiling! What a brilliant idea!" And willingly try to find a way to do it.[10]

If it can be said that Gurdjieff was constantly in search of the links between levels of reality, with their point of origin in this reality, and their end point in another realm entirely, then one could say the same work of consciousness was also undertaken artistically by Brook in The Empty Space and in his work at CIRT. Both men were seeking for an awakening into this reality, for an awareness of the 'real and permanent I' that for Brook could re-order and unify psychic functions, allowing for the audience and the actors to meet in the middle of the newly-cleared psychic space. Brook's theatre was visceral and dynamic. The work of CIRT in Africa taught the company that theatre had to find and open a pathway to something ancient and indigenous to the nature of human beings for it to work as a process of communication. Only then, with the meeting in the middle between actors and audience, could there be a meeting in a holy space where the potentials for deep transformation could occur.

A key feature among Brook's work was that in accessing this 'meeting place in the middle' the audience were not handed everything as they would be in a production of pure spectacle or easy entertainment. Brook's audiences were given an absolute minimum, and restraint was exercised in the expression of details, the use of sets, props, costumes, etc. The audience were invited to come along on the journey, but it was for them a working one, where their imaginative faculties were continually called upon, to complete the theatrical picture. By engaging the audience in the work, Brook thereby engaged them with the archetypal and in the realm of the sacred.

### *The Voodoo Pole*

An extraordinary analogy was used by Brook in conversation with American theatre critic and friend, Margaret Croydon: he discussed with her the importance of wielding the theatrical equivalent of a voodoo pole. In Haitian rituals, the assembled participants dance for several hours in a circle, then, when the energy is at a fevered pitch, one of the assembled drives a pole into the ground. This pole becomes the medium through which the gods, who have been called by the collective gathering, will enter the circle, manifesting through the action of any of the participants going into trance and speaking on behalf of the god. It was this concept of the voodoo pole that Brook introduced into his work in the 1978 CIRT production of *Measure for Measure*.

In *Measure for Measure*, Act V, scene i, the nun Isabella must kneel before the Duke to request that Angelo's life be spared, and this following his attempted rape of her. Depending on the characterization and previous rehearsal choices made, it can be one of the most difficult transitions to make in the whole of Shakespeare's canon, and indeed this was the case in Brook's *Measure for Measure*.[11] He asked the actress playing Isabella to, as it were, drive a voodoo pole into the circle; in effect she had to wait until she felt the energy of the gods manifesting on stage and moving through her before she was empowered to authentically kneel

[10] Yoshi Oida, *An Actor Adrift* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992) pp. 34 – 35
[11] William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Act 5, Scene 1, *Folger Shakespeare Library*. At: https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/measure-for-measure/read/5/1/.

and beg for Angelo's life. In practice this often meant a silence of two or more minutes: an extraordinary and lengthy amount of time on a stage. Nevertheless, when she did finally speak it was as a result of her sense that the gods had symbolically and actually entered the space and had viscerally effected the profound and empowering change for her, enabling her to forgive Angelo fully and then to ensure that his life be spared.

With regards to the use of the concept of the voodoo pole as theatrical device, the actor's own ability to function as a conduit becomes of paramount importance. The body becomes a utility related to the extent to which it can provide access to both the 'wielding' of the voodoo pole and subsequently in the extent to which the actor's body and psyche can manifest the presence of the gods, on behalf of the audience. As Brook pointed out in his later text, *The Open Door:*

> If the present moment is welcomed in a particularly intense manner, and if conditions are favourable for a sphota, the elusive spark of life can appear within the right sound, the right gesture, the right look, the right exchange. So, in a thousand very unexpected forms, the invisible may appear. The quest for the sacred is thus a search.[12]

The concept of the voodoo pole provides an excellent and workable metaphor for an actor in search of one of the many ways to manifest the sacred.

### *The Mahabharata*

One of the most successful of Brook's collaborative efforts, the nine-hour version of the vast Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*, involved twenty-one actors and five musicians from sixteen different countries and took over nine years to craft. Brook's understandings of the Holy Theatre were perhaps most clearly made manifest in this work. Jean Claude Carriere's script lifted from the Indian epic the story of a noble king: the leader of the Pandavas and tells of the trials he undergoes in the finding of his dharma. Brook and Carriere were loath to reduce the Hindu epic to a mere complex of themes, nevertheless, their work did distil a story where the saints and the warriors occupied the same stage. In retaining the depth and grandeur of the original myth that is the embodiment of Indian culture, Brook had the task of making it sing to a primarily Western audience. This was effected by linking the text to that which is universally archetypal and universally symbolic.

Echoes of the influence of Gurdjieff are apparent in Brook's interview about the production with critic Margaret Croyden:

> The first challenge given in life is: do you want to know yourself or do you want to remain asleep, blind, like the blind king? Do you want to live blind, or do you want to achieve the capacity to open your eyes? To open your eyes means knowing yourself. Knowing yourself well is inseparable from accepting the fact that one is programmed, which is the modern word for destiny. Now you can be nothing more than your

[12] Brook, *The Open Door*, pp. 71-72.

> program, or you can go beyond. Of course, you have to know what your program is or what your karma is, and then you will know how to fit in with dharma.[13]

Although transposition and reinterpretation of *The Mahabharata* have occurred for thousands of years, Brook faced serious accusations in some of the world press about what was considered to be the plunder of the Indian epic, ostensibly for his own Western use. Other, more flippant critics unfairly dismissed it, as one critic did by calling it the "reduction of the soul of a formidable culture to the level of a clichéd children's bedtime story."[14] True, the epic was framed within the relationship between a troubadour and a child, but this effectively served to make the story more accessible and interesting. On the whole, Westerners were unfamiliar with the story and needed an access and entry point to properly engage with the myth. In the framing of the epic in this fashion, we were reminded of the honest simplicity that is necessary in order that we could ourselves be affected by the work on stage.

In the light of some of the unfair criticisms levelled at the work, Mallika Sarabhai, the actress who played Draupadi and the only Indian in the cast, significantly defended her choice to work with not only the initial French production, but with the English touring company and with the film as well: declaring that she would have left the work immediately if she felt that what was being done was not true to the text at a depth level. In spite of the fact that the directions Brook gave were entirely contrary to what an Indian director would give, she recognised that, in his directorial detours, he ultimately allowed for the actor to arrive at the truth behind the text:

> Peter does not let you fall back on any clichés, or any predetermined understanding. This means that he forces you to peel away the outer layers of a character, to find the basic silence and nothingness within … At those times when he thinks the work is not leading anywhere, Peter can be very precise, very cutting; even very hurtful and sometimes unreasonable.[15]

Shades of Gurdjieff's influence colour the latter half of Sarabhai's statement, but even she concurs that ultimately, Brook would elicit the right nuances and subtleties of performance, for the benefit of the production as a whole.

For Vittorio Mezzogiorno, the actor playing Arjuna, the implications of this peeling away of the outer layers of the self to manifest the 'nothing' present at the core of his being, were also apparent in Brook's rehearsal methods. For Mezzogiorno, work on Arjuna involved work on himself; in his process, researching the terrain of his own soul was necessary to find the truths of Arjuna, in order that he could manifest the communal truth of the 'nothing' at the core of Arjuna and Mezzogiorno combined. However, Andrezej Seweryn, the actor who played Duryodhana and Yudhishthira affirmed that freeing the body from its own inner obstacles was not an easy task stating that "this ideal state that Peter refers to as 'transparent' is very difficult

[13] Croyden, *Conversations with Peter Brook*, p. 219.
[14] Liza Henderson, 'Brook's Point', *Theatre* (Spring, 1988) p. 37.
[15] Williams, *Peter Brook and The Mahabharata*, p. 102.

to attain; occasionally, for a minute or two in a performance, it flows unimpeded by blockages."[16]

It is however most resonantly in the clear and unbounded delight of West African actor, Sotigui Kouyate, who played Bishma and Parashurama, that one receives a real understanding of the super-human levels of commitment required and of the core development of the cast and crew as a family:

> With Brook I have learnt more in six months than in twenty years [of performing] particularly on a human level … He allows the actor freedom – demands it. The actor must reach deep within himself or try to discover what there is inside of which he's unaware – or perhaps he senses but does not possess enough courage or will to express. With infinite calm, gentleness and patience Peter guides you in this direction; so much better than a director showing it to you. And outside of the work, he takes time to talk with each individual. You are at liberty to talk about personal worries and problems just as much as, on a more professional level, about your blocks. He has also allowed me to understand that one never truly arrives at a definite summit: it's the life of the ongoing journey that matters … In fact, paradoxically, Brook gives us everything, even though everything comes from us. He leads and guides us like a father bringing his children together, helping them to understand themselves, to be aware of themselves, to love and express themselves.[17]

In the work of the actors quoted above, and indeed in the work of all the cast, passages were formed to connect the inner and the outer worlds of the actors and in so doing, between the inner and outer worlds of the audience. These experiences were clear manifestations of the Holy Theatre that Brook wrote of in *The Empty Space*.

Yoshi Oida strongly demonstrated the activity of the actor as 'symbol in action' during the suicide of Drona in the third play, War. The pouring of the jar of red blood over his head was simultaneously symbolic of a depth manifestation of grief as well as of the purification and release that death offered. He states:

> On reflection I suspect that this moment worked because I had been so firmly concentrated on one single thing. As a consequence there was a lot of 'space;' inside me; space which allowed the audience's imagination to enter. In turn, this concentration [on the drumbeat] created a kind of inner void. Into this emptiness the audience could project their own imagination. They could make up all sorts of stories about what I was feeling.[18]

Here Oida refers to Brook's insistence that the audience should be made to work, to engage themselves in some kind of projection or inner identification with the character. Here, the audience found a common place of identity with Drona and through this symbolic identification, was simultaneously purified by his choices and subsequently by his actions. Again, and again the actors forged links between their characters and the audience functioning

[16] Williams, *Peter Brook and The Mahabharata*, p. 90.
[17] Williams, *Peter Brook and The Mahabharata*, pp. 106-107.
[18] Oida, *An Actor Adrift*, p. 65.

in their service as priests, acting out stories on their behalf: manifesting aspects of their better natures as well as those more challenging aspects of themselves. Through these rites the transformation of the characters could be observed, and in the process, the audience were transformed as well. The story became tangible, alive and deeply, symbolically, recognisable as a universal one. Manifesting a Holy Theatre.

The juxtaposition of extreme artifice with exactitude and specificity worked well to jolt the audience into an awareness of the drama in the present moment. By characteristically reversing the traditional conventions of the realization of metaphor, Brook allowed the audience to move into a fresh terrain, free of expectations. The death of Krishna was a prime example of the perfect realization of this reversal of convention: a single arrow was gently carried across the stage and lovingly placed between the toes of the sleeping god. Because the end result of the action is the death of a god, the audience had to engage, to create within themselves their own understanding of what His death meant. Employed in such a task, they were compelled to travel not only within the realm of the symbolic, but within the realm of the emotional as well.

This antidote to traditional methods of the realization of metaphor was best served by Brook in the juxtaposition of the elements of Rough Theatre alongside the Holy Theatre. It is as these two unlikely bedfellows jostled together side-by-side that the element of humanization became apparent. The combination of the two modes meant that a sense of immediacy within the moment was sparked; such a dialectic could not occur when the two vitally different terrains were kept separate from each other. The attempted rape of Draupadi provided another perfect example of this dialectic in action. The roughness of the situation, juxtaposed with the holiness of the miracle itself served to highlight and expand our awareness into the infinite holiness inherent in the miraculous:

> Draupadi's sari unfurls like the anthropomorphism that runs through the epic, at the point of the intersection of divinity and mortality, fallibility and perfection. In aesthetic terms each of these amalgams sets up an axis of complicity between divergent sets of correspondences which the narrative can exploit to shift planes of significance.[19]

We were left with an ecstatic vision of Draupadi; her invocation of Krishna is forever swathed in the created symbol of an unceasing ream of ochre silk manifesting about her enraptured person, heightened all the more for the audience by the ugliness of the attempted rape. Brook was the master of practical integration of the sacred with the mundane, or as he himself would say: of the Rough with the Holy. Equally the use of realism is present; this is particularly apparent in Dhritarashtra's blindness as played by Ryszard Cieslak. Although the king had been blind since birth, Cieslak animated Dhritarashtra as if he had only just lost his vision; in each moment Cieslak called upon his previous via negativa work with Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski to re-discover the character's blindness. Theatre scholar Ferdinando Tavaini remembers Cieslak's Dhritarashtra to be:

[19] Shomit Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal: Stanislavsky, Brecht, Grotowski and Brook* (London: Routledge, 1992) p. 139.

> Magnificent, [with a] devastated face, and great hollow eyes the colour of air, filled with soul and lost, like a Tiresias suddenly deprived even of his inner vision … Cieslak showed us a father who was doubly blind. He was not so much playing a blind man as he was playing the way in which a blind man experiences his own blindness. He seemed to be leaning over a dark empty lake within himself, from which voices kept coming that would vanish straight away and become confused.[20]

Such casting on Brook's part was nothing short of genius: here was an actor who has spent his lifetime working with manifesting the sensual and the sacred through the practices of the via negativa work at the Polish Laboratory Theatre with Jerzy Grotowski, now playing a character who had no desire to plumb the grandeur of his own depths. The result was that the audience tangibly sensed the vastness of the gulf between that which Dhritarashtra sadly was and that greatness he could become. If ever there was a body tailored to become a conduit for an epiphany, it was Cieslak's. Yet, even in a character who does not apparently manifest the sacred, Cieslak still manifested the sacred, because he was in touch with that essence within himself. Brook heightened the tragedy of the man who did not seek to know himself by casting one who so obviously and viscerally did.

Western theatrical scholar Shomit Mitter suggested that for actors to perform such a function in the modern spiritually fragmented society in which we live is crucial:

> As fewer people retain the will to avail of the inspiration of traditional piety, the arts must celebrate their latent sacramental ability. If the ambition of art is to remove the randomness that characterizes the natural presence of wholeness in our lives, then the theatre as a medium of meeting is better able to do this than most. If theatre is to serve a society sadly not rooted in any form of shared and generally accepted wishes, beliefs or affirmations, it can do so by providing what people most need – companionship on the basis of their being.[21]

In the weaving of the Rough with the Holy, in the reversal of the traditional conventions of metaphor, in the apparent realism and in the deeply symbolic gestures that encompassed everything from miracle to grief, Brook's production invited, coaxed and finally compelled the audience to enter with the actors into the realm of story, myth and the symbolic. Juxtaposing conventions and upending our expectations, it was through the personal searches of the actors, that a valid pathway to the symbolic realms was found time and again. The audience were invited to participate, and in so doing, they found it to be an exciting gestalt of a process. As they engaged with this epic, the audience were invited to recognise that it was the great gestalt of life in which they had been invited to truly participate.

## Conclusion

In Brook's *The Empty Space* and in his subsequent theatre work at CIRT, an understanding of

[20] Ferdinando Taviani, 'In Memory of Ryszard Cieslak', in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford Wylam (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 200 – 201.
[21] Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal*, p. 124.

the sense of transmission of this sacred mission continued: the ancient function of theatre was making its presence felt once again: and the manifestation of the symbolic, with all the spiritual possibilities that this entails, was demonstrated. Perhaps it is most fitting to conclude this study with the words of Peter Brook on the function of theatre, from *The Empty Space*:

> If we do not understand catharsis, that is because it has become identified with an emotional steam bath. If we do not understand tragedy, it is because it has become confused with 'Acting the King'. We may want magic, but we confuse it with hocus-pocus, and we have hopelessly mixed-up love with sex, beauty with asceticism. But it is only by searching for a new discrimination that we will extend the horizons of the real. Only then could the theatre be useful, for we need a beauty which could convince us: we need desperately to experience magic in so direct a way that our very notion of what is substantial could be changed.[22]

The theatre seeks to find its primal use again. Audiences cry out to be transformed. Nearly 60 years later, the theatre world is still rocked by Brook's revolutionary cries, and by the work of the theatre practitioners who have given their lives to see this implemented on the world's stage.

[22] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 96.