From chapter 11, "To Paris and Beyond: 1970–73," 198–204.

Brook, by the late sixties a thinker as well as a practitioner of theatre, pushed further, led by a strong metaphysical drive to see beyond the surface of things. Although the Royal Court 'revolution' had brought a new social realism and sense of debate into the British theatre, for Brook it still operated on too narrow a waveband. The Elizabethan theatre, wrote Brook, 'was far ahead of our present theatre, which can only be acutely partisan or weakly liberal. Furthermore, the Elizabethan theatre passed from the world of action to the world of thought, from down-to-earth reality to the extreme of metaphysical inquiry without effort and without self-consciousness. Here again, it is far ahead of our own theatre which has the vitality to deal with life but not the courage to deal with life-and- death.'

In 1970, he faced the fact that he'd had enough of his love-hate relationship with the English-speaking theatre. Taking further the diverse group of actors in the Roundhouse *Tempest* company, which had been his first experience of working with a group not defined by its nationality, he began to lay plans for an international group.

To begin with, he wanted to work free from box-office pressures; he needed funds to subsidise the freedom to perform to audiences only as and when the work needed it. He wanted to see whether theatrical meaning could be made, using the simplest means available, by a group of performers who did not share a language – the pioneering group of 1970 with which he began his journey of exploration came from Japan, Britain, France, Mali and America. What were the common stories, the recognisable shorthands, the instant abstractions, the shared outlines of story and character with which an international group could work? What was a group, anyway? How could it become more than a collection of individuals? What would be its myths, its basic impulses, its comedy beyond words?

Brook had been raising the questions which were to lead to his departure for Paris for more than two years before he finally left London in the autumn of 1970. During his seven months editing the *King Lear* film in Paris in 1969, he wrote a manifesto to spearhead funding applications for a '*Centre International de Recherches Théâtrales*, the International Centre for Theatre Research' (CIRT is the

French acronym, which has stuck) and to run it for three years without any need for box-office income:

> The world's theatre has rarely been in so grave a crisis. With few exceptions, it can be divided into two unsatisfactory categories: those theatres that remain faithful to traditions in which they have lost confidence, and those that wish to create a new and revolutionary theatre, but have not the skills that this requires. And yet theatre in the deepest sense of the word is no anachronism in the 20th century: it has never been needed so urgently.
>
> The special virtue of the theatre as an art form is that it is inseparable from the community. This could mean that the only way to make possible a healthy theatre is by first of all changing the society around it. It can also mean the opposite. It can mean that although the world cannot be reformed in a day, in the theatre it is always possible to wipe the slate clean and start again from zero. Total reform can be put into immediate application.

There are many ingredients here that sprung from Brook's work and his encounters over the previous decade: the idea of calling the organism a research centre, as Grotowski, seeking to evade the censorship of the Communist authorities, had done. A research centre, with its aura of science, is also something which sober foundations would find easier to fund than a theatre, which to some still carries associations of profligacy. In Brook's text there is also a submerged political thread, a dialogue with the *révoltés* of 1968 who had insisted that the world must change before true art can be made. Brook turns the argument on its head: just as the slate can be wiped clean in the theatre, by the same token everything within the theatrical experience can be utterly transformed – if only for the 'two hours' traffic' of a play. It is the Shakespearean magic of his *Midsummer Night's Dream* applied to his own field of work.

The actors must become as skilled with their bodies as with words, 'actors of many nationalities and very different backgrounds, with all skills and no prejudices, actors belonging to no school, who learn to master the arts of all schools, actors who can move like dancers and acrobats, but who are capable of just the same dexterity with words'.

And free expression, American style, is not enough: 'Only a disciplined actor is free.'

He ends his appeal document with a call to enlarge and develop the audience around a shared search for theatre's necessity and, echoing all the modern theatre's reformers, from Ibsen to Stanislavski and from Copeau to Grotowski, a commitment to renewal.

> The problem today is not one of restricting the theatre to any single group of spectators. On the contrary, it is a matter of making theatregoing a necessary experience and consequently a social activity that is essential to a community as a whole. This cannot be achieved by popularising the theatre in a naive way. This cannot be achieved by adapting the theatre to the tastes of its audiences. It cannot be achieved either by limiting the theatre to the expectations and criteria of an elite.
>
> Such a theatre can only be created on the basis of a new audience with the intention of serving all those members of a community who see theatre as a possibility of renewal for themselves.

These were the questions behind the flow of position papers which Brook and Micheline Rozan sent out to foundations, festivals and governments to raise the $300,000 per annum needed for the first three years' work of his international group.

It is commonly felt that Brook left London for Paris because French culture, with its monarchical and centralist traditions, was more generous to outstanding individual artists, and more cosmopolitan in giving foreign artists a home. Culture, even in a republican state, meant *gloire*, and Paris thrived on it. In fact, for the first three years of the group's work, the French state did little more than provide a rent-free space in a vast warehouse in Les Gobelins, on the Left Bank of Paris. The funding came from a variety of international sources, and could have been applied to Brook's 'work in progress laboratory', if he had chosen to base it in London or New York. Indeed, Peter Hall had pleaded with him to delay his departure so that funds might be raised and a space found for Brook to conduct his explorations in England.

For Brook, that wasn't the point. He knew English culture and English theatre through and through, from the Royal Shakespeare Company to

Binkie Beaumont's West End, from the fiefdoms of the Royal Opera House to the cosiness of British cinema. He needed to cast it off, he needed to unleash himself into a new climate, different sounds, sights, tastes and appetites.

He was hardly a stranger to French culture. But, even in the cosmopolitan French capital, he stood apart. Clearly well versed in French theatre, an early admirer of the exquisite designer Christian Bérard, the presenter to the English of the plays of Anouilh, Sartre, and Cocteau, at ease with the outrages of Surrealism and in sympathy with French cinema's *nouvelle vague*, he also trailed an exotic aura that came from the regular visits of his English language productions (*Titus Andronicus*, *King Lear*) to the Théâtre des Nations, with legendary British actors – Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Paul Scofield. It was as if he were at once an accomplished Parisian director, and an envoy from another culture. He spoke French fluently and thoughtfully, though with no attempt to make his accent any better than he needed to. But when he took off for Paris he had a longer journey in mind.

There had always been an otherworldly side to Brook, noticed by many, from the young Tynan to the actors who enjoyed imitating him. It was something about his tempo, his long ruminative pauses, the way he sought for an idea or a word with his fingers, the steadiness of his eyes. More and more, in the decade leading up to his departure, he could have been saying, like Coriolanus, 'There is a world elsewhere.' That world was also a spiritual world.

In fact, his deepest reason for going to Paris was neither its cosmopolitanism nor that 'England destroys its artists', as he had written in *Encore*, nor that it supplied a place to work and, in Micheline Rozan, an effective producer who he respected. No, he said, the real reason was Jeanne de Salzmann. Since the death of his Gurdjieff teacher Jane Heap in 1964, Brook had increasingly looked to Jeanne de Salzmann, who had formally inherited the mantle from Gurdjieff himself after his death. She was now living in Paris as the successor to Gurdjieff, his inheritor and 'transmitter', a striking woman of eighty, still an example for Brook. He wrote about her with a dedication due to someone who had attained a higher level of living: 'Through her own unremitting struggle, she had gained the capacity to transmit to others a unique quality of experience, and I now made a vow to myself always to be available whenever the opportunity arose to be near her.' Living and working in Paris would make this much more possible.

Then there was the other remarkable Parisian woman in his life: his agent, producer and manager Micheline Rozan, who he had met twelve years before, when she'd persuaded him to do Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* in Paris, and had guided his Paris career ever since. In Brook she encountered not only a talent she admired, but a bold thinker whose ambitious schemes stimulated her own strategies as a producer. Together they turned Brook's vision into a theatre, production budgets, a troupe, tours, and, as time passed, the reputation and the clout to raise development money for Peter's next experiment. They attained a shorthand which meant they hardly had to exchange a word to know what the other thought: a glance would be enough, or merely a raised eyebrow in a meeting with others. Their partnership, their creative complicity over thirty years, can be compared with modern theatre's great double acts: Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko, Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi, Joan Littlewood and Gerry Raffles.

She was combative, relishing hard negotiation. She worked long hours in an office attached to her flat in the rue du Cirque, telephoning between the world's time-zones, pushing herself and her tiny staff. She had a brain and a tongue like quicksilver.

It was she who found for Brook the ruined theatre he turned into a theatrical emblem of enduring transience; she scrutinised every nail and wire in it. She barred the door to time-wasters and took care of the theatre's budget and Brook's finances. She drove a hard bargain, knowing Brook's worth to the world's international promoters and presenters. Recognising that Rozan was an exceptional force of nature, Brook heeded her warnings, for she had an awareness of dangers ahead, and a refusal to look on any illusory bright side. Brook made himself available for key meetings, delivered speeches, drafted appeals. She believed in him, even when she questioned some of his shows, and he supported her during the good times and the inevitable bad ones. Perhaps he had never had such unconditional support since his father.

Brook's eloquence and Micheline's energetic networking bore fruit. One wealthy American triggered all the other foundations. Brook and Rozan's International Centre for Theatre Research ended up receiving substantial grants from the Ford and Gulbenkian foundations, from UNESCO in Paris and from a Persian commission to make a new work

for the Shiraz/Persepolis festival. In New York the swashbuckling impresario David Merrick, who had presented *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on Broadway, made a donation from his fund.

Brook called up all his international contacts to find actors for the group. Ellen Stewart, founder director of the La Mama Experimental Theater in Greenwich Village, suggested a great range of high-spirited American actors; Grotowski proposed actors who had come to his workshops; Jean-Louis Barrault remembered actors who he had met through his Théâtre des Nations; Brook himself canvassed the more adventurous talents of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and kept an eye on the bolder spirits playing in the nooks and corners of London theatre. The group assembled in Paris in October 1970, in a dingy hall in the Cité Universitaire, since their future home, the Mobilier National, was not ready. 'What, in the theatre, is "a company"? What is "a troupe"? What is "an ensemble"?' asked Brook. The group of actors that was to go with Brook to Paris in 1970, Persia in 1971, Africa in 1972 and America in 1973 was a company of no fixed abode. It had a base in Paris, but it emanated outwards, it was, in Brook's own terms, 'a shifting point'. Its cohesion rested on what Brook, in an interview with David Williams, scientifically defined as 'the pre-expressive substrata that underlie cultural stereotypes and imitations'.

They wanted to reach the greatest diversity of audiences. Audiences of strangers, coming from distant worlds of belief and values. Audiences who had never been inside a theatre, who did not even have a concept of theatre. Audiences separated from the actors by language, religion, ethnicity.

Brook's group in 1970 was neither an expatriate English company nor an expatriate French theatre troupe; it was, like the astronauts, extra-terrestrial. It was the beginning of something unprecedented: a planetary theatre.

From chapter 11, "To Paris and Beyond: 1970–73," 214–17.

Brook's loosening of old ties and his building of a new way of working had three phases. The first, starting in November 1970, had been the intensive work in the laboratory of the Mobilier National, turned towards the actors, and in *Orghast* what they could discover across demarcations of race and culture. The second, more outward-turned

phase, their two-month trip to Africa, which they began in December 1972, was a rough, often desolate, and now and then exalting trip. Within the group, traditions continued to mingle: Brook's own eclectic but ultimately rigorous explorations met the instinctual, freewheeling, jazzy energy of new American theatre; Africans bedded down side by side with Europeans and Americans in the sleeping bags that sheltered them from the cold Sahara night. And Brook urged them to destroy the boundaries between art and life, to see even the chores of group camping – the washing-up rota, latrines, setting up lights to eat by – as part of 'the whole exercise, the mega-exercise'. When things went wrong, as they inevitably did, John Heilpern writes in his picaresque New Journalistic account of the safari, 'Brook would call another of the countless group meetings, say that he refused to be put into the position of a teacher ticking off pupils who were not pulling their weight in washing-up duties, and utter his mantra, "These things should be *sensed*".'

He must have had second-sight reminders of the authoritarianism of his own school experiences, and of the group anarchy he had let loose in *Lord of the Flies*. But any fears of repeating the past were countered by excitement at his real goal: a functioning, creative group that meshed at all levels, a life/art ensemble which he could lead and join.

Heilpern captures the fervour of his commitment:

> 'See the camp as an *extension* of the work,' Brook kept telling us. 'See it as an improvisation. Either it lives or it doesn't.' And on another occasion, when fatigue and depression took over the group, he called the actors together. He was shaking with anger. He confronted them in silence on the carpet. 'I am prepared to stop this trip at any time,' he began. The force of it stunned us. 'I will stop it this minute if necessary! If I'm to be put in the position of a schoolmaster it would be intolerable. But if we cannot work together at every level there is just no *point* in us being here. This isn't a sightseeing tour. If there is anyone who thinks it is, then say so now and go home. It isn't just a challenge. It's something far more than this. It's in the nature of a super-challenge. It is for us the whole point of being here. Are we aware of this? It is the word that summarizes this whole discussion – *awareness*.'

In Salah. Agadès. The Tuareg people, the Peulh people. These are some of the places and the people where the group succeeded in bridging the cultural abyss, and through loosely prepared scenarios, on-the-spot improvisations or soaring musical riffs, reached their audiences. The group would arrive, ask the village chief or the regional authority if they could perform – they didn't call it theatre, for there is no place in the mind of Africans for the word 'theatre', they called it 'story', 'music'. They obtained permission and agreed a space where they could lay out their magic carpet, in the shade of a big tree if possible. They had done exercise after exercise, standing in a circle looking straight ahead, but becoming aware that a movement had been made by their neighbour and it was their job to pass it round the circle, looking neither at the one who had passed on the movement nor the one to whom it would be transmitted.

In Paris they had prepared small, wordless plays. Heilpern had done one, *The Shoe Show*. Ted Hughes had done another, *The Ogre Show*. The actors invented their own, *The Bread Show*, and a hundred varieties of box shows. With the right conditions, the whole thing could ignite, as it did early on, in In Salah in the Sahara, when Sylvain Corthay soloed wildly above a pulsing bass from the group, and immediately the audience responded with laughter and enthusiasm to a quality of sound. Or in the second performance in Agadès in Niger when, in Heilpern's words, 'at times it was as if they were playing in a frenzy, switching direction time and again, risking more and more in an effort to catch all the moods and lightning responses of the people.'

Often an extraordinary sound or gesture came from the Africans themselves, and the actors simply gazed in wonder and tried to offer a response, witnessing the sky-storming visions of Antonin Artaud sung and danced out before them with a composure, a relaxation, a humour, even a high-camp glee, that exploded the solemnity of many of Artaud's manifestos. The laughing villagers of Wuseli performed an infectious celebration ceremony made up of hoots and shuffles, with an ambling insouciance and ease that went on for hours. The village of the loonies, Heilpern called it. And the Peulhs, a gorgeously tricked out group, face-painted and bejewelled, who disdained all the musical offerings from Brook's actors until they finally decided to join them in a long sustained 'ah' sound: 'It was as if the Peulh were pulling the sound from them. They pointed to the sky . . . Somehow the sound makes itself.' The next day, the group set up under a tree in the fields to give a farewell show for the people of Agadès. They waited and they

waited, until sunset, singing. Then they realised that nobody would come. The village was virtually deserted. The people had left in search of better land. They knew famine was on its way.

As the group went on, they introduced a new element into their shows – birdsong, the voices of hoopoe and nightingale, dove and swallow and a multitude of other exotic birds which they had explored in Paris. This had come from a sequence of bird-poems which Brook had asked Ted Hughes to write, as a preamble to their work on Brook's next project: a Persian Sufi poem by Farid Uddin Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, which used the journey of a flock of birds as a metaphor for human life. In Africa they took the first steps into this material, trying out birdsong, bird journeys and bird fights.

Of course, there were misunderstandings and misapprehensions. The poet and playwright Tony Harrison, who speaks some of Nigeria's many languages, was amused to see a subsequent documentary in which Brook arrived by boat in a village in backwoods Nigeria where they were going to perform. An old man on the bank muttered *Kwabo, kwabo* as they approached. Brook, picking the phrase up quickly, stepped out of the boat, advanced beaming on the old man, threw his arms open and said, *'Kwabo, Kwabo*', with long English vowels and diphthongs, evidently unaware that the word meant '*Give us a penny*'.

But out of the testing journey, out of the encounters good and bad, Brook had reason to feel that his hunch about a common theatrical language and the rich resources of a diverse group was working out.

From chapter 15, "Departures and Returns: 1989–2000," 269–75.

After the Himalayan effort of *The Mahabharata*, throughout the 1990s Brook pursued a variety of paths, none of them on such a gigantic scale, all of them feeding the Bouffes du Nord, or translating his theatre work into film terms. He filmed *The Mahabharata* in a six-hour version, finally shot in an expanded set in the last days of a Paris film studio, after scouring the world – India, Australia, Tunisia – for suitable locations. Mounting a distilled, chamber-version of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, he continued to renew opera at the Bouffes du Nord, though with a work much less popular than *Carmen*, and he pursued his engagement with opera by doing *Don Giovanni* at the festival of Aix-en-Provence.

He staged Beckett's *Happy Days*, with his wife as Winnie. He constructed a theatrical collage around *Hamlet*, splicing Shakespeare's text with aphorisms from the pioneering twentieth-century directors. He wrote and spoke about Shakespeare, and staged *The Tempest* with an arresting cast. With two penetrating productions he plunged into the interior world of the human brain. He began a continuing association with black South African theatre, and its passionate connection between performance and politics. And he hunted down the heart of *Hamlet*, in an English-language production in his Paris theatre.

He opened the South African vein of work with a play devised by two black South African actors, working with a white South African writer and director. *Woza Albert!* was a product of that upsurge of drama from the South Africa townships in the 1960s, which Brook had first encountered in a South African season at the Royal Court Theatre in 1973. Townships such as Soweto or Sophiatown had begun in the 1950s to break open their country's dominant white culture in a flood of creativity through jazz, journalism, photography, music and especially theatre. It was an ebullient return of the repressed, as black people found their voice through devised and collectively authored plays, in which white theatre-makers such as playwright/actor Athol Fugard and writer/director Barney Simon joined with actors such as John Kani and Winston Ntshona.

Brook was stirred by this eruption of energy and life in the face of oppression and deprivation. *Woza Albert!*, which opened at the Bouffes du Nord in 1989, was Brook's French staging, translated by Marie-Hélène Estienne, of a show devised by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon. It turned upon an idea which the two black author/actors had brought to Barney: that Jesus Christ makes a second coming – in apartheid South Africa today. It was a ninety-minute vaudeville of angry yet strangely gleeful tableaux, a demonstration that the victim is more generous-spirited than the oppressor. The work had the chutzpah of the African street comedian, as the two actors cut a ping-pong ball in half and each stuck a half on his nose, to play rich white people.

Micheline Rozan has said that 'Peter had a weakness – *un faible* – for African actors'. He settled down with pleasure to work on *Woza Albert!* with two of the outstanding actors of *The Mahabharata*, Mamadou Dioume and Bakary Sangaré. The 'something else' Brook found in his

two actors from Africa was not just the suppleness of their bodies, the directness of their contact with an audience; it was what he called 'transparency', an openness and simplicity, the ability to slip in and out of character, a playfulness whose source was laughter, no matter how grim the story told, the circumstances revealed.

Reflecting on the work, Brook wrote:

> In the world of apartheid, the audience which the actor addressed was at one and the same time his witness and his subject. The township plays, and the actors' way of performing them, came about not because of an artistic wish to adapt a theatre form to the present day but simply because there was no other choice . . . Plays about social injustice generally adopted a serious tone. Athol Fugard, for his part, saw that it wasn't through anger but through the cruelty of laughter that the hardship of life in the townships could best be evoked. Barney Simon continued in this path, encouraging the actors, black and white, to include as many elements of real life as possible in their work. Social reality had no need to be foregrounded, the context was so strong that it seeped into the most intimate of human situations.

Brook's South African involvement continued through the 1990s. Putting on *Le Costume* (*The Suit*) in 1999 maintained his connection with the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, where Barney Simon had mounted his and Mothobi Mutloatse's adaptation of Can Themba's short story. Themba was a legendary actor, writer, journalist and high-liver from Sophiatown, a kind of township Damon Runyon. He was one of the first and most popular writers for *Drum*, the racy photo-magazine established in the 1950s, freeing up black South African prose, so it no longer aped 'correct' English. A generation of reporters, storytellers and poets grew up around *Drum*, until the government had it closed down – at the same time as they banned the African National Congress party. The stifling both of a vibrant magazine and of organised political opposition sent a generation of writers into exile. Can Themba, uprooted and desperate, drank himself to death in Swaziland.

Brook recognised that Themba was a born storyteller; *The Suit* tells a sad story with rueful humour. It is the story of a punishment, a lifelong sentence that ends in death. A young couple, Philemon and Matilda,

live in a bustling township. Philemon is madly in love with his wife but finds her in bed with another man. The lover escapes, leaving his suit behind. Philemon tells Matilda her punishment will be to take the suit into the house as if it were an honoured guest, seating it at their evening meal, treating it with respect and consideration, nailing her to the evidence of her adultery.

In a wonderful scene, Matilda, left alone, dances cheek to cheek with the suit; her hand snakes out of the sleeve of its jacket and begins to caress her back and her bottom to the sound of Hugh Masakela's trumpet. The show is full of such beautifully simple images: eating and washing up are mimed as in a children's play, a gown-rail swings around to mark out rooms and doors, a vivid shawl becomes a bedspread and a wardrobe. But gradually, as Philemon's rage exposes her to the whole town, she begins to crack. One day, she is dead.

The Suit is about love lost. It could take place in a Cape Town penthouse just as easily as in a pinched terraced house in Sophiatown. Though the hard working conditions of the men who leave each morning for a long train journey into the city are vividly shown, there is no sermonising.

The Suit became a tremendous hit for Brook and Micheline Rozan. It toured internationally for over two years and transferred to the Paris equivalent of the West End. Marie-Hélène Estienne, having written the French version of the text and cast many of its actors, began to direct the new versions of the production. It succeeded because it was not a costly show, with just four actors and one set; but also because of the warmth of its humanity, its tough but sweet comedy.

In 2000, Brook paid tribute to two actors from South Africa, John Kani and Winston Ntshona and to Athol Fugard's dense stoic tragedy *The Island* by helping them revive the play for a British and world tour, almost thirty years after they had created it. The play tells of two black convicts on Robben Island, one of whom wants to rehearse *Antigone* for a prison concert, the other of whom is gradually giving up hope. The sight of the two visibly older actors sweating and puffing as they hump rocks in the long opening sequence was painful evidence of the scars apartheid had left.

In the 1990s, Brook, normally so objective with regard to himself, began to let into his writing and his activity glimpses of the personality

who stood behind his stream of work. His little book *Evoking (And Forgetting) Shakespeare*, published in 1998 is not only his most succinct summation of what he finds remarkable about Shakespeare; it also reflects significant aspects of Peter Brook:

> Genetically speaking, Shakespeare was a phenomenon, and the bald head we have seen on so many pictures had an amazing, computer-like capacity for registering and processing a tremendously rich variety of impressions . . . Now, is it sufficient to say that he had a great memory? I don't think so.

Memory, said the ancient Greeks, was the Mother of the Muses, and here Brook revels in its fertile and frequently indiscriminate activity, 'its permanent state of flux; feelings, images, colours, sensory impressions, theories, thoughts and ideas', as he was to write when trying to imagine the mind of Mozart. Brook was similarly intrigued by his own mind, by his flood of thoughts and words, and his strange behaviour such as not seeing the consequences of his acts on others, and by numinous images that could take years to decipher.

This is of a piece with descriptions of the *boy genius*, the *prodigal child*, *young Master Brook* with which his precocious talent was first greeted. But 'genius' is a slippery and now unfashionable, 'elitist' term.

In his Shakespeare essay, Brook goes on to say that the accumulative power of memory is not enough to make art of Shakespeare's quality. Memory alone would result in an undifferentiated mental rag-and-bone shop. A processing is needed, and that process is called 'poetry'. For Brook, the difference between a poet and the rest of us is that:

> We, at any given moment, don't have access to the whole of our lives. None of us is capable of penetrating below the conscious level . . . to enter into the entire richness of what we have absorbed over our whole life. In many of us, it could take a long search to dig into our past impressions. For some of us it would even need years with a psychiatrist to reach into those strange tunnels where all one's experiences are buried waiting to be revived. But a poet is different. The absolute characteristic of 'being a poet' is the capacity to see connections where, normally, connections are not obvious.

And these connections, Brook insists, are made moment by moment and microsecond by microsecond. Brook believes that Shakespeare's plays were written fast; another reason why Shakespeare cannot be erected on to a pedestal of cultural grandeur, nor can his work be reduced to any overarching belief or ideology. What makes the totality of what we call 'Shakespeare' an irreducible phenomenon is a sense he shared with his audience of something beyond the world of sense data:

> For Shakespeare and for his audience, and for the time in which he was living, with the tremendous mixture of people in transformation, with ideas exploding and collapsing, there was a lack of complete security. This was a blessing because it created a very deep intuitive sense that behind this chaos there was some strange possibility of understanding, related to another sort of order, an order that had nothing to do with political order.

We can perhaps turn these words into a reflection on Brook himself, as a theatre-maker and as an individual.

Brook now turned again to Shakespeare, to *The Tempest* (*La Tempête, 1990*), his third attempt at Shakespeare's last play. This time casting was crucial to his interpretation: Prospero and Ariel were to be played by two African actors, Sotigui Kouyate and Bakary Sangaré, who had played lead parts in *The Mahabharata*. Sotigui, descendant of a famous family in Senegal, was a well-known African film and stage actor and a traditional *griot*.

A *griot* is a storyteller, and in West African villages, preserves and transmits oral history. A *griot* is also a praise-singer, a peacemaker in disputes, a satirist and commentator. The *griots* can trace back human ancestry to times before writing, when memories and storytelling were the repository of history and beliefs. Through his ancestry, Sotigui also had a familiarity with the world of gods and spirits. 'In other cultures,' Brook told me at the time, 'in the societies we call traditional, images of gods, magicians, sorcerers and ghosts evoke deep human realities. So an actor from such a culture can touch them without embarrassment.' Sotigui, a tall, skeletal actor, also enjoyed a commanding confidence to work an audience, learned from countless appearances telling stories to large crowds.

Bakary Sangaré, born in a village in the south of Mali, was a surprising choice for Ariel, a role traditionally envisaged as an ethereal spirit. Instead, here was a large, deep-voiced, very black actor, rooted in traditional village storytelling. He had an almost circus-like virtuosity, capable of turning the horsepower of his voice into a gleeful gurgle or pirouetting with the delicacy of a dancer. 'Mature African actors,' Brook said of them both, 'have a different quality from white actors – a kind of effortless transparency, an organic presence beyond self, mind or body such as great musicians attain when they pass beyond virtuosity.'

Caliban, traditionally played by an earthy (and often non-European) actor, was played by the diminutive David Bennent, a German actor best known in the title role in Volker Schlöndorff's film of Günter Grass's celebrated novel *The Tin Drum*. The casting flouted the then-fashionable interpretation of the noble native Caliban exploited by a colonial Prospero, showing him instead as an angry adolescent.

Chloe Obolensky's set was a Zen sandpit – 'a sand-carpet, a playing field', as Brook defined it – raked at the start into Zen patterns, but progressively marked and inscribed by the performance. The English scholar David Williams describes the effect: 'Sandcastles, footsteps and hieratic markings will disturb its surface temporarily, recording a Rorschach-like narrative itinerary, a calligraphic imprint of individual histories written by bodies in action.' When Prospero 'wipes the slate clean' with his treacherous brother and all the stories of betrayal and bitterness, the disturbed sand is raked back to its original pristine state. This erasure recalls the end of *The Empty Space*: 'The theatre always has one special characteristic. It is always possible to start again . . . In the theatre the slate is wiped clean all the time.' Here this life-reversing, life-redeeming action happens on the stage, here and now, before our very eyes.