

outside the confines of theatre. While continuing with his theatre work, he introduced 'streamlining' as a key architectural and industrial principle of modernism, designing new and specifically modernistic forms of cars, houses, refrigerators and stoves, all of which are standard still today, as well as introducing the classic white kitchen and designing the first motorways. Using theatre as a form of propaganda for his vision, he signally created an interactive exhibit for the 1939 New York World's Fair, where the public were invited to participate in an imaginative airplane trip (this was before commercial air flight became common) right across the American continent. On this journey, where lighting effects took the spectators from broad daylight through night and into a bright dawn on the west coast, they experienced a world of the future – constructed of extraordinarily detailed models, varying in scale according to the distance from the moving aerial seats of the spectators – spread out beneath their gaze, and all embodying Bel Geddes' modern principles.¹¹

For a video of Bel Geddes' New York World's Fair exhibit, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=ei3fzdIEJcw.

This was 'Futurama' – one of the most popular exhibits in the whole 1939 World's Fair. A highly theatrical, but purely mechanical display, literally surrounding the audience who were the only actors, this shows the approach of director as *auteur* at its most extreme. At the same time, Bel Geddes' career in carrying theatrical principles into moulding society outside the theatre proper is iconic of the wider potential for theatre – and for the director, as such.

Peter Brook: collective creation versus directorial vision

Peter Brook has had a longer influence on the stage than any other later twentieth-century director. While running a variation on ensemble theatre in Paris, like Craig and Bel Geddes, Brook has sometimes created the designs for his own productions, and even though he has long-term collaborators on the production side (anticipating Katie Mitchell's 'team') Brook's is the vision that determines the productions of his companies. His career falls into two distinct halves. The first is his work in England – from the 1940s up to 1970 – moving from commercial theatre to the major subsidized companies of the RSC and the National, establishing his name largely through productions of Shakespeare; the second, his work based in Paris at his Centre International de Créations Théâtrales (CICT) – from 1971 to his farewell production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* in 2010 – with his own permanent company

(although comprising a very small group of continuing actors) drawn from across the world and representing different theatrical traditions. Towards the end of the earlier period, however, there was a distinct transition, marked by Brook's 1964 experimental 'Theatre of Cruelty' season, where he explored Artaud's concepts of physical theatre in productions of Artaud's own play *The Spurt of Blood* and Jean Genet's *The Screens*. This provoked Brook's hugely influential 1968 book *The Empty Space* – which is 'a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged'¹² – and led to major political productions like Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* and Brook's anti-Vietnam war play, *US* (1964, 1966).

Brook's 1964 season anticipated the widespread adoption of Artaud by the American avant-garde. Artaud's rejection of naturalism and demolition of the text, his search for a return to ritual in performance, and his ideal of a direct and transformative psychological impact on the spectator through a physical assault on the senses (in Artaud's metaphor, like acupuncture through the skin, or the plague), all appealed to the counterculture rejection of established political and social hierarchies by American directors such as Charles Marowitz (with whom Brook collaborated), Julian Beck, Judith Malina or Joseph Chaikin in the late 1960s and 1970s. And like Brook – following Artaud who had declared 'our present social state is iniquitous and should be destroyed' – all identified conventional or naturalistic performance as (in Brook's term) 'deadly theatre': the conformist expression of a commercialized bourgeois society they rejected (Brook referred to the status quo as 'rotten') and sought to change by creating radically new principles of performance.¹³

'Theatre of Cruelty'

I say that the stage is a concrete physical place which asks to be filled, and to be given its own concrete language to speak.

I say that this concrete language, intended for the senses and independent of speech, has first to satisfy the senses, that there is a poetry of the senses as there is a poetry of language, and that this concrete physical language to which I refer is truly theatrical only to the degree that the thoughts it expresses are beyond the reach of the spoken language.

...
After sound and light there is action, and the dynamism of action: here the theatre, far from copying life, puts itself whenever possible in communication with pure forces. And whether you accept them or deny them, there is nevertheless a way of speaking which gives the names of 'forces' to whatever brings to birth images of energy in the unconscious and gratuitous crime on the surface.

Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*¹⁴

Even more so than Gordon Craig, Artaud's reputation came solely through his writings – and primarily through a single slim volume of essays, collected under the title of *The Theatre and Its Double*, published in 1938 and translated into English in 1958 – his work as a director being limited to just three productions at the short-lived, symbolist Théâtre Alfred Jarry in 1926–27. And Brook's translation of Artaud's principles into practical stage terms offers a representative example of the style of directing derived from his theories.

Brook's Theatre of Cruelty season was a training exercise for RSC actors designed to demolish 'the Stanislavsky ethic' through exploring the roots of physical expression. The aim was to create 'a transcendent experience of life' through cries, incantations, masks, shock effects and simultaneous actions 'all flooding one's consciousness simultaneously' in discontinuous rhythms 'whose crescendo will accord exactly with the pulsation of movements familiar to everyone', corresponding with 'the broken and fragmentary way in which most people experience contemporary reality'.¹⁵ The starting point was for each actor to attempt mentally projecting an emotional state, then adding vocal sound or movement, 'to discover what was *the very least* he needed before understanding could be reached'.¹⁶ This was followed by physical improvisations to express emotion: women lashing men with their hair (repeated in a playlet scripted by Brook, *The Public Bath*, where a symbolic scapegoat figure whips a judge as he condemns her, and in his staging of the *Marat/Sade* where Charlotte Corday whips Sade), or Rorschach-like abstract action-paintings (part of *The Spurt of Blood* performance, and reaching full expression in *The Screens*).

Dramatic material was presented as work in progress, rather than a finished product – with texts being brief one-act scripts, or short abstract word-collages by Paul Abelman, Artaud's script for *The Spurt of Blood* being reduced to screams, and only the first twelve scenes of *The Screens* being staged. The emphasis was on collective creation, with short pieces being improvised, and Brook writing down the speeches evolved by the cast, while the authorship of *US* was specifically listed as 'The Collective' in the published text. At the same time, actors were de-individualized, and their personal expression limited: as in *The Spurt of Blood*, where all the performers wore square full-face blank masks with simple holes for eyes, or in *US*, where actors representing the maimed victims of battle wore paper bags over their heads. The stage was bare – even in the *Marat/Sade*, set in the asylum of Charenton – and where there was any form of construct (as in *The Spurt of Blood*, where the acting area was formed out of huge steps and ramps) this was designed to emphasize physical movement. Apart from *Marat/Sade*

(where the costuming was clearly nineteenth century, but in general very basic), the actors all wore simple modern clothing. The notional barrier between stage and audience was broken: in *US* the injured soldiers, blinded by the paper bags, stumbled out among the spectators forcing assistance from them – while at the end of *Marat/Sade* a line of capering and chanting inmates surge threateningly down the stage towards the audience, acting out the Marxist image of revolution in one step back, two steps forward.

In Artaud's and Brook's model of 'Total Theatre' – more radically than Bel Geddes – all barriers and separation of functions are broken down. The traditional primacy of text, and verbal language, gives way to physical expression. The focus is on the actors, and on direct involvement of the spectators. In terms of production, less is more – so that while the emotive effect of lighting is (as in Gordon Craig's conception) exploited, there is little in the way of spectacle, scenery or costuming. In addition to uniting all modes of art (the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*), a performance unites actors and spectators, stage and society in a transcendental whole. Yet the removal of the author and the privileging of the performer in fact leads to greater directorial control; and Brook's productions all have a completely unique and highly recognizable style. As he has commented: 'By his choice of exercises, even by the way he encourages an actor to find his own freedom, a director cannot help projecting his own state of mind on to the stage.'¹⁷

Perhaps the best illustration of this – and of Brook's concept of 'the empty space' – is his 1970 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

For a video selection of Brook's *Midsummer Night's Dream* staging, see
www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYMlylIPkXo (4.40–6.09 minutes).

The stage became a stark white box, highlighting the actors' moves, which being based on circus acrobatics were highly physical. There was no change of scene; omnipresent fairies brought in props or shaped themselves into trees and plants. In poetic passages, Shakespeare's verse was reduced to patterns of sound. The opposing worlds of Athens and the magic woods were united through Theseus doubling as Oberon and Hippolyta as Titania, while Puck literally 'girdled' the auditorium, physically enacting his flight around the world and so bringing the audience physically into 'the magic circle of the play' in which 'the wood and its inhabitants pour forth a primitive wildness which infected all who come into contact with it'.¹⁸

The same primitivism had been evident in Brook's 1968 staging of Seneca's *Oedipus* (in a modernized version by Ted Hughes) where extreme violence and sexual anarchy were presented ritualistically, with the speeches patterned on

Maori chants and delivered in a depersonalized monotone, together with minimal and formalized movements – as with the blinding of Oedipus, retold by a slave, while Oedipus (John Gielgud) sits completely motionless on the stage.

Ted Hughes, *Seneca's Oedipus*: National Theatre, March 1968 – Director's Book

<p>Suddenly he began to weep everything that had been torment suddenly it was sobbing it shook his whole body and he shouted is weeping all I can give can't my eyes give any more let them go with their tears let them go eyeballs too everything out is this enough for you you frozen gods of marriage is it sufficient are my eyes enough he was raging as he spoke his face throbbled dark red his eyeballs seemed to be jumping in their sockets forced from the skull his face was no longer the face of Oedipus contorted like a rabid dog he had begun to scream a bellowing animal anger agony tearing at his throat his fingers had stabbed deep into his eyesockets he hooked them gripping the eyeballs and he tugged twisting and dragging with all his strength till they gave way and he flung them from him his fingers dug back into his sockets he could not stop he was gibbering and moaning insane with his fury against himself gouging scrabbling with his nails in those huge holes in his face the terrors of light are finished for Oedipus he lifted his face with its horrible raw gaps he tested the darkness there were rags of flesh strings and nerve ends still trailing over his cheeks he fumbled for them snapping them off every last shred then he let out a roar half screamed you gods now will you stop torturing my country I've found the murderer and look I've punished him ...</p>	<p>The Slave Narrator</p> <p>1. Slowly lifts arms</p> <p>2. Hooks fingers in front of eyes</p> <p>3. Raises arms</p> <p>4. Drops arms, X over Box to U/R – stands.</p> <p>TIRESIAS rises, X to OEDIPUS.</p> <p>5. Slave sits as TIRESIAS puts hands on OEDIPUS's eyes.¹⁹</p>
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In *The Empty Space*, Brook rejects the practice of coming to rehearsals with a Director's Book in which all the moves and stage business are already worked out, instead defining a working method where the staging is arrived at during the rehearsal through improvisation with the actors. Yet, as the example from *Oedipus* shows, by the time of the performance every gesture has been noted down – defining the concept expressed by the production. To achieve this minimalist effect, in rehearsals Brook developed exercises from t'ai chi, using

gravity as the only source of energy to achieve economy of movement, and led sessions where actors learned to express extreme personal experiences through sounds alone, or through irregular rhythms of breathing based on a recording of a witchdoctor in trance. This drive for ritualistic theatre reached its peak with Brook's production at the 1971 Theatre Festival in the ancient city of Persepolis. A direct rendition of basic myths like the gift of fire, a god eating his children and the Promethean search for liberation through knowledge, the script for *Orghast* was a vocal experiment by Ted Hughes in constructing a universal and organic language out of blocks of sound, where the expressive qualities of tone and rhythm could communicate without the interference of verbal meaning.

Our work is based on the fact that some of the deepest aspects of human experience can reveal themselves through the sounds and movements of the human body in a way that strikes an identical chord in any observer, whatever his cultural and racial conditioning. And therefore one can work without roots, because the body, as such, becomes the working source.
Peter Brook, Interview, 1973²⁰

This search for universal communication, together with the most minimal basis for performance, led to Brook's 1972 theatrical tour through Africa. The ideal of performing on a rug, laid on sand, to an audience who neither spoke the same language nor shared any common theatre traditions, informed this experiment; and from it came the kind of physical theatre embodied in *The Ik* (1975) or *The Conference of the Birds* (1979). At the beginning of *The Ik*, the cast scatter soil over a bare stage, then carefully place stones around, and the performance – based on an anthropological study of the displaced and starving mountain people of Uganda – presents the lives of a tribe at the extreme edge of human existence through the barest of gestures and non-verbal language. To match the extremity of the figures they represented, Brook explored the potential of 'being' instead of 'acting,' by having the actors build and live in an Ik stockade, playing out episodes, many of which never appeared in the script. In the performance there was no attempt to look like the African tribespeople – the actors wore rehearsal clothes without make-up. The focus was on living their behaviour.

The *Birds* illustrates other elements of Brook's directing process. Based on an epic Sufi religious poem from Persia, it was developed over a seven-year exploration, being presented in various improvised forms from 1972 in Africa to 1979, when Brook asked a long-time collaborator, the screen writer Jean-Claude Carrière, to provide a script. So in the first New York production at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1973 on a single night there were three completely different retellings of the story – at 8 p.m. an energetic dancing

and musical mime; at midnight a ceremonial minimalist and low-key evocation of its religious significance; and at dawn (with Brook himself leading the actors) free-form solo dances, songs and a love story, with the birds only represented by eleven wooden bird-statues, hidden beneath an altar and only revealed at the end. In rehearsal the group focused on improvisations of the many different stories in the poem, and in turning sounds into bird song – with the American composer Elizabeth Swados composing songs for the actors, based on bird calls – or discovering how to move like birds flying. When the scripted *Birds* reappeared at La Mama in 1980 the actors wore ancient and archetypal Chinese masks, or (for the thieves and charlatans) modern grotesque Balinese masks to represent primal forces, together with hand puppets as externalizations of themselves or figures from a different level of reality. (For instance, the birds circle a small Balinese puppet, who, as they land, is replaced by an actor in the Hermit mask). Used to embody character types (Beautiful Princess; Slave; Warrior King) or changes in a character's condition (the Slave's night of love with the Princess, versus his ordinary status), the masks were stripped off when the birds had crossed the desert and arrive in the seven valleys of the spirit, and the Valley of Death was presented through shadow-play projection of three butterflies circling round the light of knowledge, with one consumed by the candle flame as it reaches understanding. The performance was intensely physical, privileging the visual (as with Gordon Craig or Robert Wilson), corresponding to Brook's principle that 'The exchange of impressions through images is our basic language.'²¹

Masks, puppets and shadow-play, together with the symbolic representation of non-human beings, require an abstracted and ritualistic mode of acting, which Brook's troupe had been exercised in over the whole decade. And in the same way, it was largely the long-term unified nature of Brook's acting group that enabled his experimental theatre, where every production was an attempt to change the nature of performance.

Characteristically one of his most recent pieces for CICT was a discussion of the different movements to reform theatre through the twentieth century, as well as bringing in the Japanese tradition that has been so productive for Brook himself. *Why Why* is a monologue that questions texts quoted from Artaud, Craig, Meyerhold and the medieval Noh Theatre philosopher, Zeami Motokiyo. A generic (and unnamed) actress – in fact one of Brook's troupe in the mid 1970s, who had returned for this production – finds herself on the empty stage he has continually called for, and unable to discover a reason for being there, starts to philosophize about the purpose of theatre. The title of the piece echoes Brook's comment that 'the work of a director can be summed up in two very simple words: why and how', while

the one-woman monologue highlights his principles and their pedigree, as with a story about Gordon Craig, standing in the wings of a theatre in Germany, noticing a sign declaring 'Sprechen Verboten' (talking is forbidden) and remarking: 'How clever of them to have discovered the true meaning of theatre.'²²

Robert Wilson: the 'Visual Book'

Where Gordon Craig employed a visual basis for his vision of theatre – as to some degree did Bel Geddes, who began his career as a designer – the contemporary equivalent is Robert Wilson, who creates 'storyboards' (on the line of film-production practice) to define each significant moment of a production before rehearsals begin. As with Craig, too, Wilson's stagings are highly stylized; and where Craig had collaborated with a leading poet of symbolism, W. B. Yeats, Wilson has focused on the linguistic experiments of Gertrude Stein. So, while the way Wilson has extended the notions of interior time and subjective vision that were developed by Maeterlinck or Claudel has been remarked upon by several commentators, linking this to the slowness of movement in his stagings, Wilson's statements about time echo the symbolists: 'Time in the theatre is special . . . We can stretch it out until it becomes the time of the mind, the time of a pine tree moving gently, or a cloud floating across the sky and slowly becoming a camel, then a bird . . . The time of my theatre is the time of interior reflection.'²³

Wilson began his storyboard method with *Einstein on the Beach*, premiered in 1976. He quickly turned this notation of visual images in sequence into a method by which his sketches, or 'visual books', as he called them, allowed him to perceive the production he would be working on as a coherent whole. To his mind, these 'visual books' in their pictorial form were analogous with the written texts – the dramatic literature – of the Western tradition;²⁴ and they served him both as a mnemonic and a compass, facilitating as well, as do prompt books, the reconstruction of productions over long periods of time. To this day, whatever the project, whether it is a stage production, an installation, a video portrait, a landscaped garden or any other activity generated by his versatile talent, Wilson is at once its medium, mediator and arbiter. The very fact that Wilson's capabilities are multiple, making him as much a designer and a painter as a director and a performer, and equally adept in the fine arts and the arts of performance, dance and opera included, goes a long way to explaining his ability to take charge of, and channel, the different creative output of his collaborators.