

STAGESTRUCK: HARVEY SCHMIDT & TOM JONES

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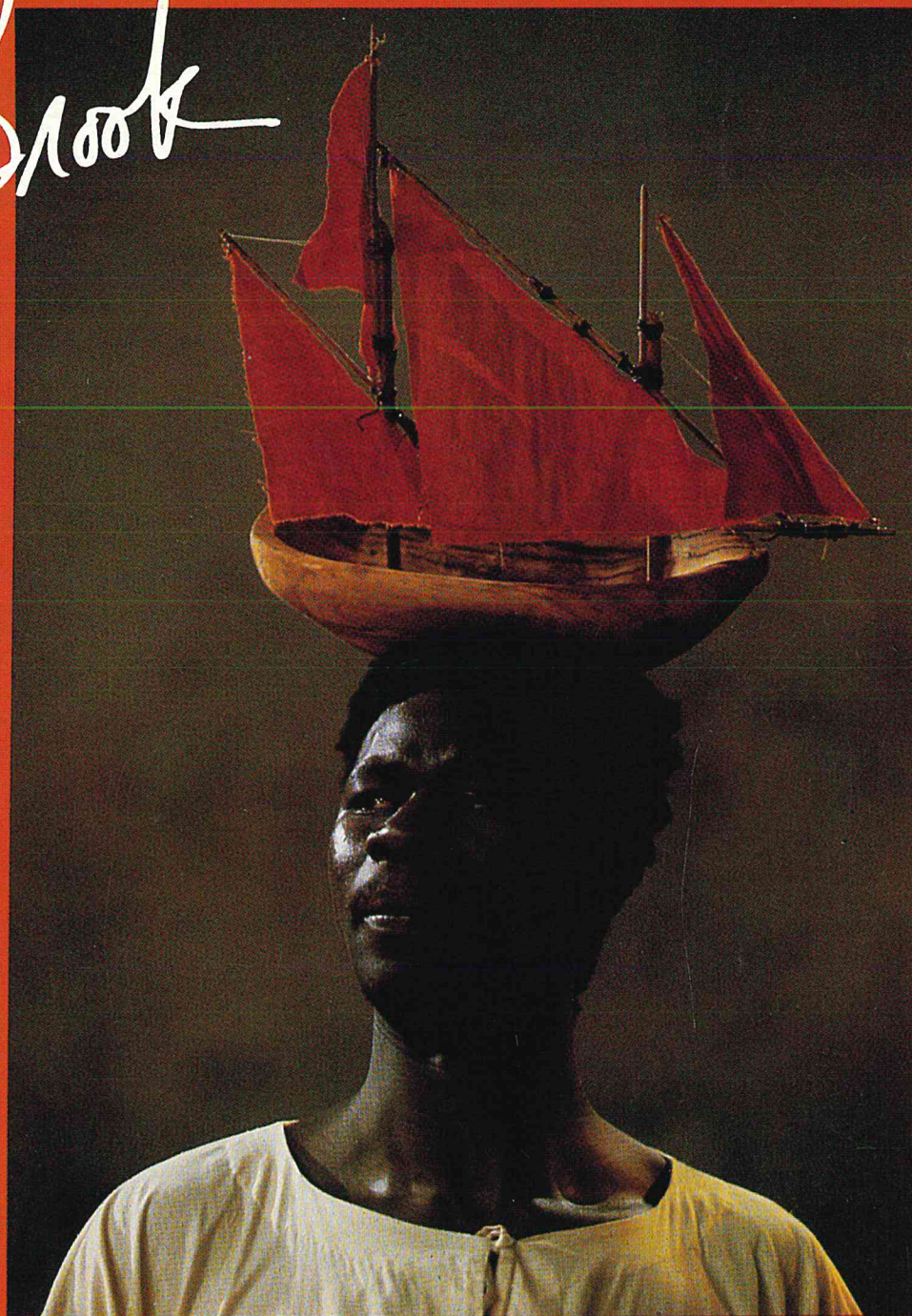
January 21, 1991

Peter Brook

Brook On
His Tempest
By Gerard Raymond

A Theater
Of Cruelty
By Charles Marowitz

A Letter
From Paris
By Margaret Croyden



Peter Brook as Prospero

by Gerard Raymond

The enigmatic director claims he's quitting the classics.

Brook's *Tempest* at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris. In this scene, goddesses entertain at Miranda and Ferdinand's wedding.



A RECTANGULAR SAND-FILLED STAGE is completely bare save for a single rock. An actor walks on, carrying a tube over his head. Gently he tilts the instrument first one way and then the next. The tube emits a hissing sound. Repeat. More

actors appear bearing bamboo poles. With a swaying motion they wave the poles in the air. The audience makes the connection: the noise is the sound of the ocean, the bamboo poles are the sails of a ship. The cast strains against an outside force, a storm at sea.

"*The Tempest* is Shakespeare's most intangible, most technically difficult play," says Peter Brook in his office at the Bouffes du Nord Theater, his home base in Paris. It is his fourth *Tempest* but in some ways he regards this production, performed in French with an international cast, as his first true shot at it.

Brook first directed *The Tempest* for the Royal Shakespeare Company

at Stratford in 1957. He doesn't remember very much about the production except Sir John Gielgud's Prospero. He also discounts a second RSC production which he co-directed in 1963. These attempts taught him that the play shouldn't be presented in the traditionally spectacular manner. "You clutter up the finest qualities of the play that way." He also experimented with an international group of actors, improvising from elements in Shakespeare's text in 1968.

La Tempête, which plays in Paris through March 2, is a result of Brook's international theater experiment, now called the Centre International de Créations Théâtrales (CICT), which he inaugurated in

1970. CICT produced works like *Conference of the Birds*, *The Ik*, and *Carmen*. As their last production *The Mahabharata* demonstrated, Brook and his group freely borrow from many cultures, evolving a performance style of communicating that goes beyond language and text.

Brook shudders when he hears the word "style." "We don't recognize that. What we do recognize is that each day in rehearsal we try to find a better and clearer way of telling the story." He draws a parallel to a painter with a unlimited palette of colors or a writer who draws from a large vocabulary. "We try to broaden the range of theater so that in our everyday language nothing is excluded." He often talks in the plural to emphasize the group's "shared approach" to presenting theater. "A production is not something abstract. It is what comes into being through the collaborative work of the group."

How do they enlarge their vocabulary? "By improvising."

“I first heard of *Philemon* when I got the album eight years ago,” says Janet Hayes Walker, York Theater Company’s driving force who has produced *The Grass Harp* and *Anyone Can Whistle*. “*Philemon* isn’t one of your happy-happy shows,” she concedes, “but there’s a message of faith and hope that’s right for us. It’s the off-beat cult chamber musical that we specialize in.”

“When Fran Soeder said he’d direct,” Jones says, “we remembered the beautiful jobs he’d done on *110* and *Colette*.”

“I didn’t want us to be known as the people who ruined *Our Town*.”

“And I,” smiles Walker, “have an even longer association with Tom and Harvey, having played Agnes in four productions of *I Do! I Do!*”

“Actually,” Schmidt jokes, “I think of *Philemon* as Italian, because I wrote most of it in Italy—though,” he drily adds, “I wrote one song while I was in a rest room flying across the Atlantic.” If you’re visualizing passengers waiting in line for the loo while Schmidt scribbles away, fear not. “I mean I just wrote it in my head,” he explains, “I don’t read or write music. My mom, a music teacher, tried to teach me, but notes on a page are agony; melodies are joys.”

After *Philemon* closes, Jones and Schmidt will start rehearsals for Musical Theater Works’ production of *Colette Collage*. To be frank, this must be musical theater’s longest-running work-in-progress; in October of 1970, *Colette* was already playing a return off-Broadway engagement. It’s been at Houston’s Alley (1973), Cleveland’s Playhouse (1974), and had a big pre-Broadway production (starring Diana Rigg)

that closed during its 1982 tryout. There have also been other New York productions, including Soeder’s at York. “Our new production is going to be perfect,” says Jones, mock-heroically. “After it, we’ll be rich and famous and go to the seashore.”

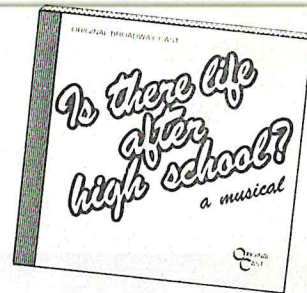
That still leaves one Jones and Schmidt work that never came in: *Grovers Corners*, the musical of *Our Town*. “But,” Jones says, “the rights have reverted back to Thornton Wilder’s sister.”

Schmidt admits, “She lived with him all his life, and always felt a little guilty for giving up the rights in the first place.”

“When Gatchel and Neufeld approached us,” says Jones, “we told them we’d just try it for a while, without a contract. I didn’t want us to be known as the people who ruined *Our Town*. One danger would be to be too sentimental, another would be to be too operatic. But,” he shrugs, “we also knew it would be wonderful to work on. After a while, we saw it as a collection of prose material which we could compress and shorten. One of the great things in the American musical,” he says, “is the form A-A-B-A song. Today’s musicals also have more complex musical forms, so we broke the piece into large sections, but kept at the center of each a clearly defined song. I think it’s some of the best work we’ve ever done.” He says it with a lack of regret that would impress Edith Piaf.

What both do regret is that Mary Martin never got to play it. “After we found that the actors we wanted for the stage manager were dead or just had triple bypasses,” says Jones, “we finally realized we didn’t have to have a man. We thought of Mary, but after *Legends*, we had doubts, as did she. So we decided that we’d work with her six months prior to rehearsals; everything would then be set and nothing could be changed. A week after we worked out the negotiations, she discovered she had cancer. If she could have finished with this instead of *Legends*,” he laments, “it would have been wonderful.” □

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The actor with the tube at the beginning is, of course, Ariel. Brook couldn't identify the instrument. (A Latin-American music expert informs me it's a rainstick which the ancient Mayans used for sympathetic magic.) One of the musicians discovered it in a store selling exotica and brought it into a rehearsal. "When you are working on something there is a certain magnetism. You can always count on a certain percentage of unexpected elements just falling out of the sky, being drawn towards it." The moment he saw the rainstick Brook found the opening of the play and realized it was "the basis of the whole work."

As the story progressed Brook needed to change locations without using pictorial sets. He had to find the right images for the viewer to make the same leap of the imagination that he had effected in that thrilling opening. "If we did nothing, the audience's imagination wouldn't be in another part of the island." He first suggested that the

sound of the rain-stick be repeated. Later, realizing that it was better not to use the same effect twice, he thought of using the instrument as a physical bridge. An actor would walk around it, or jump over it evoking the necessary change in setting.

Brook's theater magic in this production is on par with Prospero's, even though he shows the island spirits at work in the most obvious manner possible. Ariel (who is invisible to all except his master) causes young Ferdinand's sword to stay frozen in the air simply by holding the weapon, preventing it from striking Prospero. In the eyes of the audience this becomes a supernatural act when we see the amazement on Ferdinand's face. The empty space of the stage is transformed into a lush island by three actor-spirits bearing basic props such as a palm frond or a fluttering butterfly on a stick.

Brook insists that he makes no conscious decisions regarding which stage techniques he will use in a production. Nor will he let let the

nationality of an actor determine this. "We improvise out of a thousand things that are available." One day after watching the actors make bird noises during a rehearsal, designer Chloë Obolensky suggested that she could make a stick for the butterfly on the end. It happens that a Balinese actor uses it and he is an expert because the technique comes from his own tradition. But Brook reiterates, "all these techniques are part of the world possibilities of theater—for the African, the Balinese, the English or for the French. They can be available to anyone whatever their background. The fact that one person is better at it makes an osmosis by which the other one learns how to use it."

When we talked in New York, before he began rehearsals for the production, Brook acknowledged that *The Tempest* "is an all-English play written in marvelous English by an all-English writer." But he added, "I have a feeling that our

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Brook's *Tempest*: Ferdinand (Ken Higelin) leaps over a spirit while Ariel (Bakary Sangaré) watches with his hand on the rainstick, a magical prop.

group of actors from so many different parts of the world, particularly from countries with traditional beliefs and a traditional way of life can, if the work is good, give an expression of what doesn't come naturally to Western actors in relation to this particular play." His point was that in the West today an actor who has to play a god or spirit turns to "pure, almost comic book fantasy" because he or she has "absolutely nothing real to draw on."

In Shakespeare's day, he explained "there was a strong relationship to the world of imagination, from superstition to very profound, esoteric studies." So in a play with magicians and spirits, "the actors could draw on something real in themselves." He cited the example of a Japanese actor being able to play a phantom or a spirit in a way that nobody else can, because it is still close to his understanding.

Brook conceded that his group would not be as successful if they performed a play like *Henry V*, com-

peting with the best English actors. "I wouldn't think that any of our actors could play the tavern scenes of *Henry V*, play Falstaff, in the way that the English can do it. You need to be born and brought up in England to do that best. But when it comes to playing Ariel and Prospero and this whole world of the imagination, I have a feeling that these actors will bring something different to it."

Back in his Paris office, I ask Brook if he had cast the play before hand or if the casting came out of the rehearsal/improvising process. "With Shakespeare's plays, I have always done them partly because there has been an actor to play the leading part. I wanted to do *King Lear* for 15 years but I never thought of really doing a production until suddenly there was Paul Scofield—the actor who I was certain could play *Lear*. I think this is vital because you can't do these plays if you haven't got that pivot."

His axis for this current *Tempest* is a Prospero played by the tall, dignified Sotigui Kouyate from Burkina-Faso, the small West African republic formerly known as Upper Volta.

Kouyate made an impressive Bhishma, the warrior/sage who took a vow of celibacy in *The Mahabharata*. He is descended from a long line of "Griots," a special caste which was entrusted with the oral transmission of African history from generation to generation. Many critics have commented on his calm, shamanic Prospero—a far cry from the vengeful or bitter old men of previous interpretations. Brook writes in the program note that Prospero's island is a "void, a place to play in, where Shakespeare at the height of his art devised games to catch the spirit of the human question." Kouyate's Prospero is very much the deviser of playful games.

Brook quickly dispels the idea that his production is some kind of international cultural pageant. "I

“Like today’s teenager, Caliban has tremendous energy but no self-control. He is totally blinded by his anger.”

have always attacked the thought that people from different cultures come together and each produces his own bag of tricks. In a way one has to eliminate that until you get at something central which is what the person really carries in himself.” But he concedes that Kouyate’s Prospero is shaped by the actor’s background, “shaped by hundreds of years of storytelling tradition and everything else that is in his nature.” Bakary Sangare, who plays Ariel with irrepressible charm, comes from Mali, a neighboring country to Burkina-Faso. Brook acknowledges that because of their shared background there is an “immediate understanding” between the two actors .

One the most original and striking interpretations in Brook’s production is the portrayal of Caliban as a young punk. Played by David Bennet (the dwarf child in the film of *The Tin Drum*), Caliban is a rebellious and confused adolescent. Brook believes that the external descriptions of the character in the text—that he looks like a fish, etc.—are not very important. He imagines going beyond the end of the play and sees Caliban “at the very first step in that whole long process that can lead to a Prospero.” Prospero talks about his every third thought being that of the grave and speaks at the end “as someone who has reached the end of a great journey.” Caliban “is very clearly presented by Shakespeare as being in every way the next generation.”

A distinct note of tolerance and understanding informs this *Tempest*. For Brook, Caliban’s “monstrosity” and “unformed” nature is the raw material of a human being. “Like today’s teenager, he has tremendous energy but no self control or self-discipline. His tragedy is that he has so much energy and life but not the means to use it. Caliban is totally blind by his

anger and his uncontrollable nature. When he realizes what an idiot he has been at the end of the play, he has intimations of something else, it is quite clear that something is growing in him.”

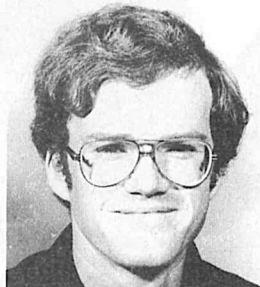
The episodes where Caliban mistakes the drunken Trinculo and Stephano for gods are not only broadly comic, but also pathetic, and

eventually a learning experience for the boy. “That is why one can’t take a negative view about the end of the play, or a naïve view that it is about colonialism. You can put anything you like onto Shakespeare and find it, but it isn’t about that. It’s about fundamental human relationships. Colonialism, dictatorship and oppression are only results of these

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"My clearest recollection is of walking into the theatre for the first time. I had just driven all day from New York. The theatre was darkened, and on stage was a pastoral setting for 'Love's Labours Lost,' beautifully lit. It reminded me so strongly of how I felt seeing my first professional show. I knew I was in the right place. If you are looking for a program that gives you the chance to put it all together, this is it."

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Martha Swope



Sotigui Kouyaté born aloft in *The Mahabharata* at BAM in 1988. Now Kouyaté is playing Prospero in Paris.

Peter Brook on adapting Shakespeare: "Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* is a better version of *Macbeth* than any English version."

human relationships. Any attempt to make the play over, misses the point. Unlike in *King Lear*, he is telling the story in the lightest possible way. You have only to repeat the story of Caliban taking a drunken English butler for a god and you are already in a high comedy, P.G. Wodehouse, situation."

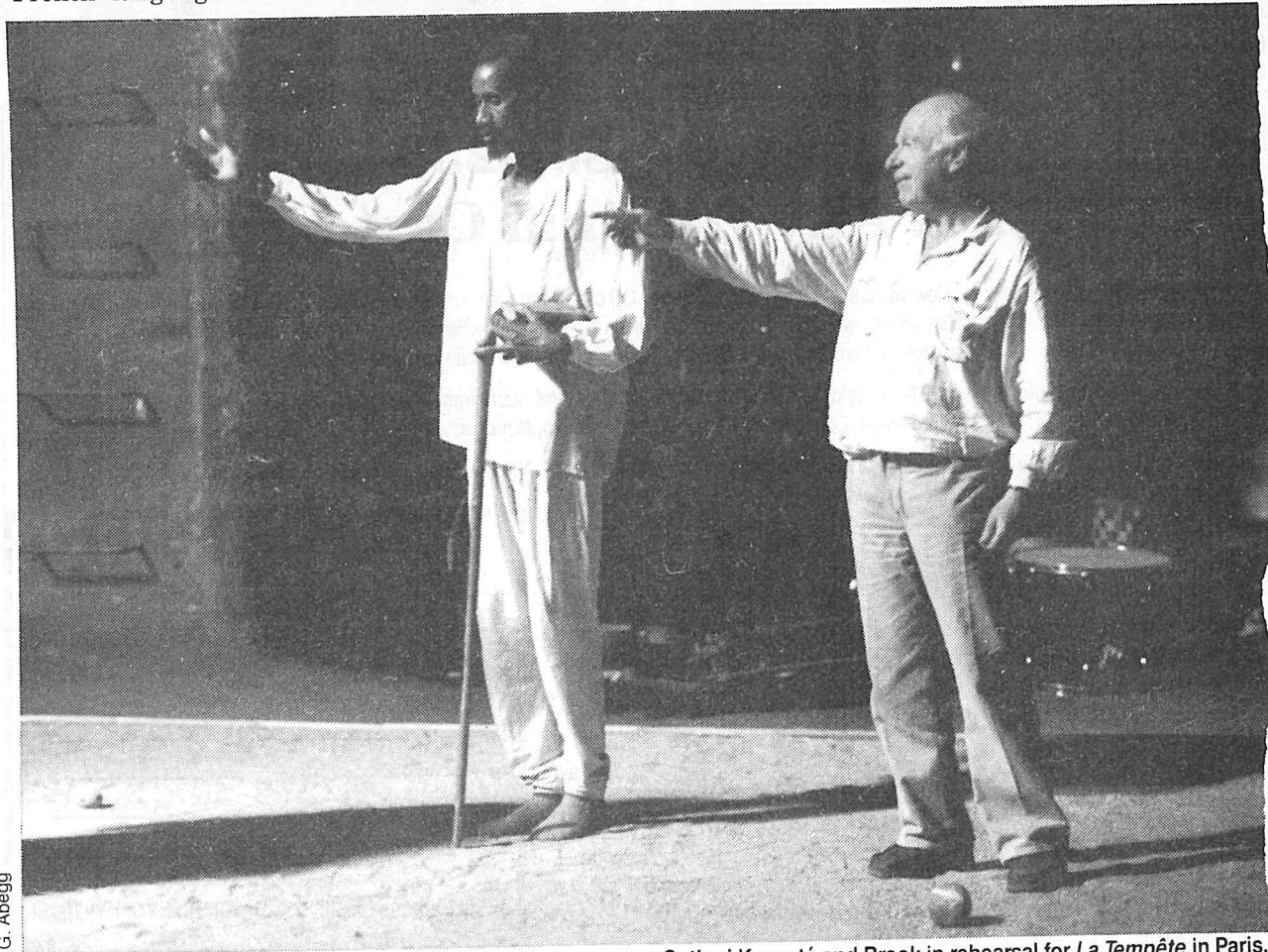
For a director who has worked with the cream of the British theater, directing landmark productions of Shakespeare in England, does he miss working on *The Tempest* in the original language it was written in? "That is a personal, private nostalgia and I put it right out of my mind when I start to work. Jean-Claude Carrière has done a very remarkable translation and there are advantages because the French language is more direct.

Although he hasn't modernized it and made it colloquial, it is simpler and the French audience understands it better than an English audience understands Shakespeare. It is modern in the sense that the words are natural, normal words, not those which have passed out of usage."

By extension then, I wondered if Brook contemplated modern English adaptations of Shakespeare? "I once tried this," he replies. He was very impressed by the fact that Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* is a "better version of *Macbeth* than any English version" he had seen, so when he was filming *King Lear* (1971) he asked Ted Hughes to rewrite the scenes in a more basic English. "He tried for several months and then in the end we both recognized that when you come to

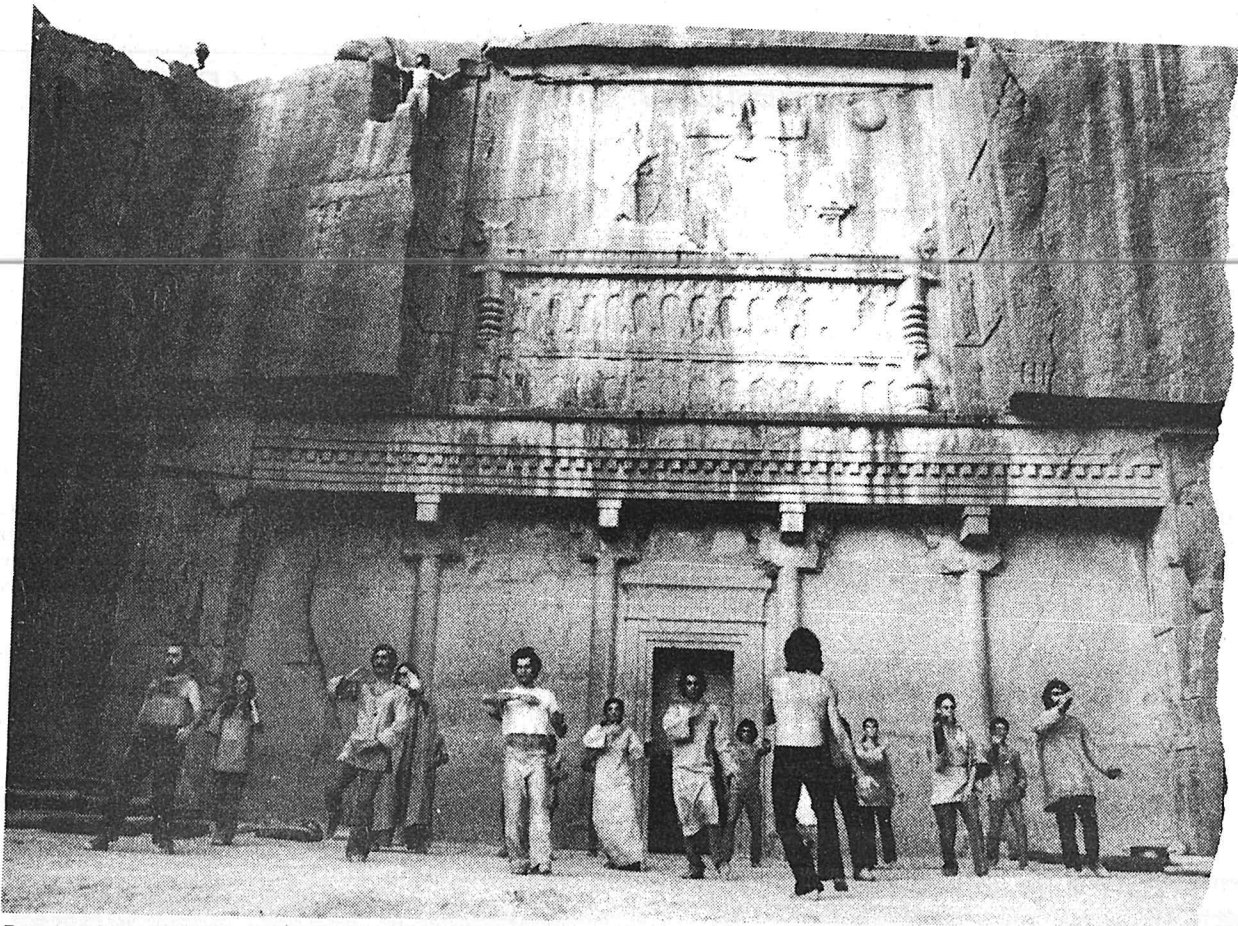
something as remarkable as *King Lear* you can't do it. But," he laughs "the theory was good."

Brook recognizes that his multinational, multi-lingual cast may have difficulty in performing *The Tempest* in Shakespeare's English. The usual practice is for CICT actors to repeat their performances in an English production after the original French one. For the English language production of *The Mahabharata* in New York and Glasgow (it never played in London), many of the actors, including Kouyate, learned English solely for the production. But Brook believes it would be "asking too much" to expect the African actor to play Prospero in the original text. Since Brook doesn't want to do the play with another cast, the only way his production of *The Tempest* will be



Sotigui Kouyaté and Brook in rehearsal for *La Tempête* in Paris.

G. Abegg



Nicolas Tikhomiroff

Peter Brook's production of *Orghast*, performed at Persepolis, August, 1971.



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seen in this country is if someone is willing to mount the French production.

When Brook left England to set up his international group in Paris he described the move as an "evolutionary retirement." He doesn't like being asked to chart the progress of his work since then. "Other people can do that for me. I have always tried from my very first work to alternate. I went from serious plays to light comedies to opera to films to television always not going beyond a certain point. I can only think specifically of what I am doing, which is to try to do a certain thing better."

He recently turned down a very attractive offer to direct Mozart's *The Magic Flute* although it was on his list of projects for a very long time. "I can't do it for the simple reason that after *The Tempest* I wouldn't know where to start—how to approach spirits and goddesses and initiations in a different way than this." Noting a direct line through the *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970), *Conference of the Birds* (1973), *The Mahabharata* (1985), into *The Tempest* he says he has reached "the absolute saturation point with the classics and with classic imagery."

As Brook moves on, he takes his group of actors/collaborators with him. In December 1991 they will present a dramatization of Oliver Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* at the Bouffes du Nord Theater. Independent of the opera version of the same text, Jean Claude Carrière will adapt the best selling book of case-histories for a production first in French that the group will perform later in English.

Since the essence of Brook's theater is "imagery and references" he now feels the need to find a new set of "contemporary symbols and signs different from what you find in even the best classical writing." Brook is confident that Sacks's "world of neurology and the brain" will enable him and his group of actors to find new words to tell their stories. □

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