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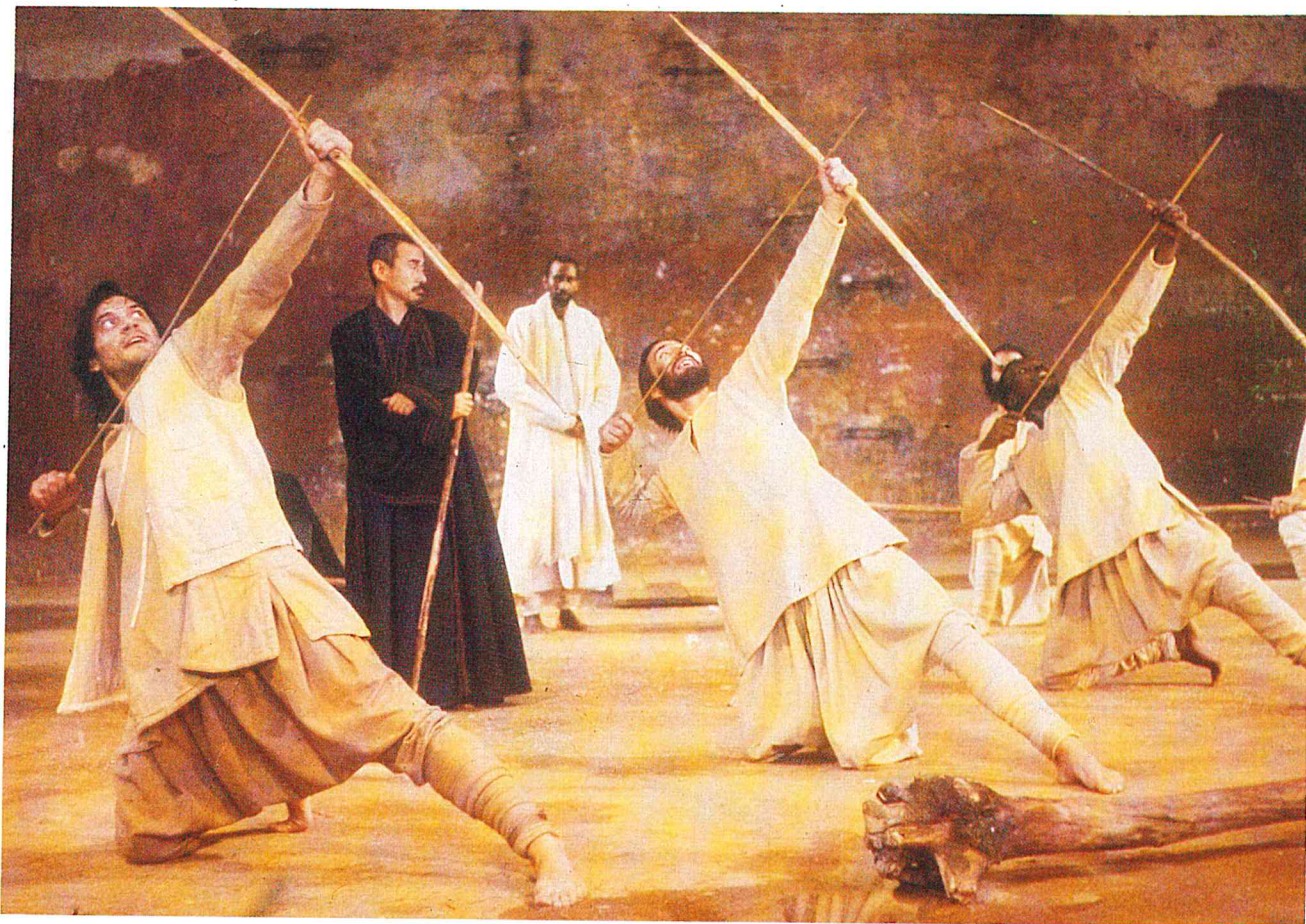
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PHOTOS: MARTHA SWOPE

The Mahabharata

Travels Around The World

GERARD RAYMOND
captures the behind-the-scenes drama
when Peter Brook assembled a dazzling
international star-cast to stage
an evergreen epic.

THE BRITISH THEATRE genius Peter Brook and the famed French screenwriter and playwright Jean-Claude Carriere were first introduced to the fascinating stories of India's national epic, "The Mahabharata", by Philippe Lavastine, a French Sanskrit scholar. At three o'clock one morning in January 1975 after a long story-telling session, Brook and Carriere, who had just opened their own theatre in Paris, made a commitment. In Brooks'

words; "We would find a way of bringing this material into our world and sharing these stories with an audience in the West". Having decided that they would make it only when they were ready and that it will be as long as it need be, they worked for a decade on this project which eventually opened as a nine hour production in French in a quarry in Southern France in 1985. An English version written by Brook was launched, a year later,



on a spectacular world tour which has so far included highly acclaimed and extremely successful runs on both coasts of the U S and an engagement in Australia.

"The Mahabharata" is an 18 volume Sanskrit poem which dates back over five thousand years. The central saga of the poem deals with the bitter struggle for dominance of the world between the five Pandava brothers and their rival cousins, the Kauravas. Over the years the stories, the names and the philosophies of this work have become the very backbone of Indian culture and Hindu civilization. While individual stories and episodes have always been a part of Indian theatre, dance and songs, no one had ever attempted to dramatize this colossal work in its entirety before. Carriere began the daunting task of adapting it to the theatre from the point of view of the story-teller. Indeed this is how the epic itself had been passed through the generations in the first place. "It was as if we couldn't read", said Carriere, "as if we were somewhere in a village in India, listening to wonderful stories that we had never heard before". This is a quality that is retained in the version that reached the stage as well. Two years after he began work on "The Mahabharata", Carriere wrote a first draft, based entirely on the stories he had heard. Only after that did he begin reading the poem, a project which took him a full year.

In order to condense the work into what eventually became a nine-hour theatre production, Carriere had to eliminate some of the tales which were duplicated and even dispose of characters who didn't affect the main ev-

ents of the saga. The first thing that struck Carriere was the almost natural division of the entire story into three. He found that he could tell the story in three different long acts which were really plays unto themselves. He structured it in such a way as to reflect its story-telling aspect. The plays unfold as they are composed and dictated by Vyasa. The first play is titled "The Game of Dice". Here we are introduced to the protagonists, the five Pandava brothers. The hundred Kaurava brothers are born to the blind king Dhritarashtra and his wife Gandhari. Even while growing up the Pandavas; Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva; who shine in everything, are resented by their cousins who are led by the eldest Kaurava; the embittered Duryodhana. Duryodhana, finally gets his way when he wins from Yudhisthira his entire kingdom and all his possessions in a rigged game of dice and forces the five brothers along with their shared wife Draupadi into exile. The second play titled "Exile in the Forest" details the thirteen years spent by the Pandavas as they wander through the forest encountering many adventures. Arjuna, the finest warrior of them all, seeks and finds Pashupati, the ultimate weapon which can "shrivel up the world". In the final part aptly titled "The War", the age of Kali, the age of destruction, comes into full flower as the Pandavas and Kauravas bring the world to the edge of annihilation.

Peter Brook, who staged "The Mahabharata"; Jean-Claude Carriere; and the designer Chloe Obolensky made several trips to India to assimilate the sights and sounds of the country. They were very much aware, however,

they could not duplicate an Indian experience. "We were touched by the love that Indians bring to 'The Mahabharata' and this filled us both with respect and awe at the task we had assumed", said Brook. "We returned from India knowing that our work was not to imitate but to suggest". Further, the company that Brook had assembled, was a multi-lingual, multi-racial group of actors who formed part of the International Centre of Theatre

Research in Paris. This institute was founded by Brook in 1971, after he had completed a landmark decade in the annals of British theatre with the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. The cast of "The Mahabharata" comes from all over the globe, bringing with them their own cultures and accents, all of which are filtered through the Indian flavoured stories of "The Mahabharata".

In order to heighten the universality of the work,

MALLIKA SARABHAI — an opinion

MALLIKA SARABHAI has the unique position of being the only Indian in the international cast of Peter Brook's stage production of "The Mahabharata". She studied at the Academy of Performing Arts in Ahmedabad, which was founded by her mother Mrinalini Sarabhai. She performs both Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi with her mother's Darpana Dance Company. While she has acted in many films, "The Mahabharata" represents her debut as a stage actress. When she was made the offer to play the part of Draupadi, the exemplary wife of the five Pandava brothers in the great epic, she accepted it because she thought it would be "a good adventure". She had to learn French for the original production, and then played the same role (along with the minor role of Satyawati, the mother of the sage Vyasa) in the English productions as well.

In a recent interview in New York she said. "For me, Draupadi is really the epitome of the contemporary woman. Here is a woman who revels in her womaness and yet is nobody's fool and no one's second. She is intellectually, morally and argumentatively on par with everybody. And she doesn't think that being feminine means being submissive or subjugated". Ms. Sarabhai said that she has always found this character a fascinating woman. "I grew up thinking that Draupadi was a hell of a woman, and I continue to

think so today, now that I have studied her seriously". She feels that it is only in the last thousand years of Indian history that male dominance has taken over in the country. Draupadi is, she feels, the best example of the old tradition of the Shiva-Shakti concept of man and woman being indivisible parts of each other.

Being the only Indian in the cast meant that Ms. Sarabhai often acted as the in-house Indian consultant to the production. She admits that there are, inevitably, things in the production that she wishes would be different and feels responsible if there are any errors. There is a limit to the corrections of pronunciation or gesture that one can make. Yet, she explains that if there was anything in the play that she felt she was ashamed of — either as an Indian or a woman — she wouldn't do the play. On the contrary, she returned to the English version after the French production and is still touring with it.

Ms. Sarabhai, feels that Indian audiences would perhaps tend to criticize the production and will inevitably feel that something or other is being misrepresented. However, she says, it should still be done in India, "because we have lost touch with the totality of 'The Mahabharata'. We know it so well, and we do little bits; only the story of Nala and Damayanti, or only the killing of Duryodhana; but the usual result of what happens when you specialize is that you lose the scope of the whole thing". She feels that India is also going through a Kaliyuga (Age of Kali) today and that "The Mahabharata" will bring this point home to everyone.

Working with Peter Brook, the acclaimed director of "The Mahabharata" has turned her into a much stronger actress than she was three years ago, Ms. Sarabhai claimed. Yet, she commented, she never liked working on stage and still doesn't prefer it. "I am a project person", she explained. "I always say that I am a sprinter and not a long-distance runner. I like to do something intensely for four or five months and then do something else." In the theatre this short term project orientation is not possible.

Mallika Sarabhai is very careful about the kind of films that she makes. "I've tried to do films that talk about issues that matter to me." Of her last two films, "Shesha" deals with the issue of rape and "Kehekasha", starring Victor Bannerjee, deals with dual career marriages. She says that film producers have difficulty coping with the fact that she is an actress who does several other things at the same time. "They feel thwarted, but I am not going to change my lifestyle just because of that," she declared. Her stint with the stage production of "The Mahabharata" is really a deviation from what she sees as her two main careers — film and dance. "Really the combination of dance and film cater to two very different sides of my nature." She fulfills a need to have rapport with a live audience when she dances and can be a perfectionist in the world of films, where many takes are possible to get a desired result. "Between the two", she confirmed, "I am artistically very satisfied."



Brook has adopted a simple and stark style. With total confidence in his material, he has focussed on the stories, which are directly and compellingly recounted. The stage is covered with a reddish mud. It has a shallow pool as well as a river running across it. Thus earth and water and on a few spectacular occasions fire, emphasize the elemental quality of the work. Always an expert at staging, Brook creates total theatre magic with the minimum of props and almost no stage machinery. Under his artistry, a handful of sticks thrown up in the air conjure up a deadly shower of arrows, a single torch becomes a funeral pyre, a wheel represents the chariot driven by god Krishna into the war. Through his deft staging the audience witnesses a warrior being crushed to death, another disemboweled and in one hilarious episode a man levitating on stage. The result is spell-binding and the nine-hour marathon a thrilling theatrical experience.

Jean-Claude Carriere quotes an Indian tradition which says: "Everything in 'The Mahabharata' is elsewhere. What is not there is nowhere." The outstanding success of the English language production in both New York and Los Angeles, where critics rated it as the major cultural event of 1987, bears witness to this. To audiences totally unfamiliar with the names and places of the epic, the production strikes chords of recognition. The parallels to the western oral epic tradition which includes "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" are obvious. Further, the prospect of a world at the brink of total destruction at the hands of an 'ultimate weapon' has an uncanny contemporary relevance.

There is no doubt that the world tour of Peter Brook's production of "The Mahabharata", which will continue through Europe and Japan, will meet with the same success it had in the United States. There are plans to bring it to India later this year, where the prospect of filming it for television in appropriate locations is very likely. It is already evident that the creators of this production Kunti (Miriam Goldschmidt), Draupadi (Mallika Sarabhai) grieve at the death of Karna.



Bhishma (Sotigui Konyate) rides into battle.

tion have achieved what Peter Brook said they were trying to do: "to celebrate a work which only India could have created but which carries echoes for all mankind."

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