

...the elements that weave through "The Mahabharata." (Martha Swope Photo)

Brook's Back to Basics

BY GERARD RAYMOND

Peter Brook's colossal production of "The Mahabharata," which opened the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival at the newly-renovated Majestic Theatre on Fulton Street, is an example of theater at its simplest and grandest. Jean-Claude Carriere's adaptation, which Brook translated into English from the French, masterfully distills the 18-volume Sanskrit epic into a lucid and entertaining nine hours. Both Brook and Carriere first heard the marvellous stories contained in the Indian poem from story-tellers, and this is the focal point of the production. The audience sits spellbound as story after story is recounted, and so skillful are Brook and Carriere at their job, that no thread is lost and at no point are we left confused. Given that most of the audience are dealing with unfamiliar names and an alien culture, this is indeed no mean feat.

The three-play cycle unfolds as it is being told by the poet Vyasa, who is composing the poem so all mankind can learn from it. The story of the great battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, all the events that led up to it and those that followed, are written down by a scribe, the elephant-headed god Ganesha, for posterity. Vyasa is not only the composer of the poem; he is, on many occasions, one of its protagonists.

Peter Brook's staging of 'The Mahabharata' is nine hours of spare, simple theater that brings the ancient messages of East and West up to date on BAM's new Majestic stage

With this structure, Brook is able to move his action around, provide flashbacks, explanations, take pauses for philosophical discourses and give us a humorous commentary during the long evening. In staging the stories, his approach is always direct and focused on the subject of the story. There are no extraneous bits of business to distract the audience. Here is a director who is confident of his material and his cast and knows that there is no need to clutter the stage with needless activity.

Simplicity is always the key to the most effective of Brook's stage devices. He works magic with the barest of props: a

single wheel represents a chariot; one torch becomes a funeral pyre; an assortment of rugs and mats instantly change locations; a few sticks flung in the air become a deadly shower of arrows. With deft strokes, he conjures up the devastation caused by a secret weapon, the crushing to death of a warrior, the disembowelment of another; the deadly disc formation of an invading army; divine revelations and interventions and the various strange sexual encounters which provide the players for the unfolding saga. In one hilarious episode, a man levitates before our very eyes.

And then there is always the presence of

the elements; fire, water and earth. Brook's last production in New York, "La Tragedie de Carmen," also used these elements to great effect. In "The Mahabharata," the entire stage is covered by a reddish earth, while the back wall is left unfinished, half plastered — creating the effect of an old Indian temple or an ancient cave whose frescos have almost completely faded over the centuries. A river runs right across the stage; this body of water, along with a shallow pond, is used very dramatically during the plays. Stunning displays of theater pyrotechnics are used sparingly, and therefore have great impact. On one occasion the stage erupts into flames encircling some of the players, indicating the presence of supernatural forces at work guiding the destiny of the characters.

At one point a character remarks that it is good to listen to stories: "It is always pleasant, and sometimes it improves you." While the telling of the stories is the principal aim of the production, there is a theme that runs through the entire work with a contemporary relevance: the threat of world destruction. As Queen Ghandhari puts it: "When one prefers one's own children to the children of others — war is the result."

The era in which the events of the plays

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'Mahabharata' Unites Messages of East and West

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take place is one of the ages of Kali — the destructive phase of the cosmos. It is not too difficult to recognize our own age as being in the midst of another cycle of Kali. When Arjuna obtains the ultimate weapon Pasupati, a weapon whose "dimmed glow can shrivel up the world," and has to fight the temptation to use it — the modern parallel is not hard to draw.

EAST-WEST FUSION

"The Mahabharata" is the national epic of India. It has been the very core of Indian culture for the last 2,000 years. It is a guide for Hindu life, as well as the repository of an entire body of Indian culture and mythology. The Brook team spent time in India assimilating the sights, sounds and culture of the country, and the production clearly reflects this. However, as Brook himself pointed out, there was no intention of, and neither was it possible to, present his production as a depiction of Indian and Hindu culture. This English-language production of "The Mahabharata" has its own distinct Western quality. Due to the presence of two British actors in the lead roles of Vyasa and Krishna, it has a definite English sense of humor. However, the Indian flavor of the source material is refracted through it as well. In adapting the stories of "The Mahabharata," Brook and Carriere have managed to successfully convey their love for the original, yet have avoided being stifled by too much reverence.

According to Indian tradition, "Everything in 'The Mahabharata' is elsewhere. What is not there is nowhere." As one watches the Brook-Carriere adaptation, it is impossible not to recall similar stories, rituals and philosophies from other cultural traditions. The tales of the battle, the invincibility of warriors of divine origins like Karna and Arjuna, bring to mind the heroic episodes of "The Iliad." When Krishna makes the sun disappear in order to trick the enemy, one thinks of the biblical Joshua stopping the sun in its tracks. The disgrace Amba who nurtures her hate for Bhishma even through death, could have its parallel in Greek or Celtic



mythology. Similarly women like Draupati; the single wife to five brothers or Kunti; the mother of the five Pandavas (all fathered by gods) as well as their strongest enemy, Karna, have their counterparts in the epic poetry of other lands.

The universality of this work is further reinforced by the cast which has been assembled from 18 nations. Quite a few of the actors were in the original French production two years ago. Many of them had to learn English so they could repeat the roles they created. It is to their immense credit, and Brook's as well, that although the accents and English pronunciation vary greatly, and the fact that the diction could on occasion be a little clearer, nothing jars or sounds out of place. The cast is a skilled ensemble and space prohibits the listing of this fine team of actors, quite a few of whom play several roles. Together they bring life to the wonderful

The Majestic Theatre still retains the paint-peeled, plaster-crumbled-look of a theater in ruins. The faded gilt and red of the proscenium arch seem almost perfectly designed for Brook's production. The seats have been renovated to produce a Greek amphitheater-like effect. The acoustics are perfect. While it remains to be seen if other directors will adapt to its unique design as well as Peter Brook has done, there is no doubt that this is the most exciting 'new' theater space in New York

EXPERTLY SETTING THE STAGE

There are three other people who must be credited for the richness of this production (notwithstanding, of course, the technical team that worked on it throughout the world tour). The Japanese musician Toshi Tsuchitori developed the score along with his fellow musicians. The music is almost always present, subtly giving an Indian flavor to the action and creating the framework for the recital of a poem. Jean Kalman designed the lighting which enhances and often provides the theater magic of the production. Chloe Olensky, who designed the sets and costumes, has expertly captured the colors and textures of India. Her exquisite color coordination may not necessarily be Indian, but it provides the perfect visual setting for Brook's simple staging. Reds, browns and earth tones predominate with the occasional green or startling

splash of white, gold and saffron. On one occasion the fragrance of burning incense pervades the theater, transporting the audience to King Yudhishthira's magnificent palace. Traditional oil lamps are used frequently and in the truly tranquil coda, are floated on the river, bringing this memorable production to a close.

IT WORKS, MAJESTICALLY

The Majestic Theatre, revived after an almost 20-year dormancy, still retains the paint-peeled, plaster-crumbled look of a theater in ruins. The faded gilt and red of the proscenium arch seem almost perfectly designed for Brook's production. The seats have been renovated to achieve a Greek amphitheater-like effect. This provides for a large and flexible playing area. The boxes on either side of the proscenium have been removed and the remaining arches can be used for effective entrances.

The acoustics of the theater are just perfect. From the furthest reaches of the stage, all the actors were clearly audible and not a single one of them was miked. If nothing else, this feature alone will rank the Majestic above any of the theaters on Broadway. While it remains to be seen if other directors and designers will adapt to its unique design as well as Peter Brook has done, there is no doubt that this is currently the most exciting "new" theater space in New York, home to the season's most exciting production.

NEXT WAVE THEATER: "The Mahabharata" continues at BAM's Next Wave Festival through January 3: Marathon performances, October 24, November 7, 14, 21, 27 and 29, December 6, 12, 19, 22, 28 and 29, January 3, 1-11pm; October 31, 9pm-1am. Three consecutive performances, October 13-15, and 20-22, November 17-19, and 23-25, December 2-4, 8-10, and 15-17, 8-11pm. Performances once a week for three weeks, October 27, November 3 and 10, October 23, November 4 and 11, October 23, November 5 and 12, 8-11pm. Majestic Theater, Fulton and Rockwell Sts. Tickets are \$98, \$30. For information, call 636-4100.