



Theater – cum – Ethnology – cum – Prophecy

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"Les Iks," the new play recently put on by Peter Brook and his actors at their theatre, les Bouffes du Nord, is based on a book called *The Mountain People* by Colin Turnbull, the English ethnologist (whom Brook knew when they were both students at Oxford.) The Iks are a Ugandan tribe traditionally dependent on hunting. In 1946, their territory was reduced and turned into a national park by order of the colonial administration. The Iks themselves were forbidden to hunt or to live off the natural produce of the land. They were obliged, more or less immediately, to turn to farming for a livelihood. Eighteen years later, Turnbull set out to study how the Iks had reacted to these radically new conditions.

Bit by disgusted bit, he discovered that all fundamental community relationships had fallen into disuse. The only law maintained by these abruptly uprooted people was exclusive self-interest, the only notion of good being a full stomach. Whenever an Ik had something to eat, he would go into hiding in order not to have to share it with a dependent. Husbands let wives fend for themselves; mothers let children scavenge like dogs. All Turnbull's – that is to say, the Western world's – concepts of what living as a society should imply were inapplicable. For the Iks, from our viewpoint at least, life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" indeed. Peter Brook has attempted to give the play drawn from his book as much documentary value as possible. He and his actors lived for a time in the African bush and tested their attitudes and techniques against the reactions of villagers. The play is naturally full of everyday detail about the Iks: snatches of their language, methods of building and cooking, likes and dislikes, and so on (though, of course, one has to take their accuracy on trust.) We are left in no doubt of their brutishness: there is a long scene in which the Iks force themselves to vomit, very literally, in order to eat more: one finds out that copulation is very much like defecation to their way of thinking, and that the dead awake feelings of greed – for a few utterly miserable belongings or a tiny store of food – rather than any sensation of loss or pity. Apart from the possibility of gain, death and misfortune are seen as subjects for hilarity. There is nothing, apparently, that brings an Ik out of his habitual sullen silence as surely as the sight of someone in danger or pain.

These grim facts come across with perfect clarity in this until recently disused, unredecorated theatre. Much of the play is self-explanatory, with the ethnologist/narrator serving to link certain sequences; but it is nevertheless difficult to define the effect of the whole. At its most superficial level, it is a criticism of



man's interference with man, and of the very contemporary kind of absurdity that will insist on a "national park" even though it just happens to destroy an age-old pattern of existence. But more important, perhaps, is the indirect, yet inevitable, possibility that we are all at some time, to some extent, Iks: and that we could easily become more so. Modern city life, after all, is full of parallels with the Iks' asocial behaviour.

In this way, "Les Iks" symbolizes the whole problem of the breakdown of social coherence, whether it is in Uganda or Manhattan or one's own family. It is conveyed in a flatly undramatic manner, which quite visibly bored a section of the audience. But this flatness (which was a measure of the actors' skill and devotion) allowed one to view the play as a kind of case-history of a much more general disease. It seems easier, because of this deliberately undramatic position, to ask certain questions – such as what kind of alternative civilization the ethnologist represents. This makes it a difficult, and sometimes distinctly trying, play – at times, one senses a dour puritanical joy in moralizing, for instance. But it goes in the most direct fashion to the most important problems of human existence. Despite the little pleasure in it for the eye or the ear, how welcome it is to find a play that sets out these hard, vital facts of life with such simple seriousness.

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