



Peter Book: a history of triumphs

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By: Melinda Camber Porter

The Parisians feel that they have discovered a Shakespearian reincarnation in Peter Brook. Affectionately, but ineptly, they nickname him “Brook, le shakespeareien” or “l’elisabéthain” because in his two years at the Bouffes du Nord he has attracted a vast popular following and has given the intellectuals and theatre lovers enough food for thought. It was almost impossible to get tickets for *Les Iks*, which opened nearly a year ago and which plays a season at London’s Round House starting in the middle of January. Learned journals churned out dissertations on Brook’s revolutionary ideas. He seemed to disprove the rule that you can’t have a *succès d’estime* and a *succès populaire*.

The French surprise and enthusiasm partly springs from an historical complex they nurture and bemoan concerning their own theatrical tradition. The classical work of their national heroes, like Racine, resulted in a rebellious move towards a popular theatre, liberated from the constraint of rules and precepts. But each rebellion has tended to filter off into yet another esoteric movement. Brook’s success is astounding because it bridges a gap that the French have always had difficulty in crossing.

Brook’s happy relationship with the French does not only spring from the fact that he has imported a much needed and foreign element into French theatre. In many ways, He embraces French obsessions. Even 10 years ago, a bevy of critics hurried over to London to see his production of *US*, delighted to find that an English producer was “politisé”. *Les Iks*, based on a book by Brook’s old friend, Colin Turnbull, the anthropologist, also has political overtones. The Iks had been living quite happily in Uganda until 1946 when the government transformed their territory into a national park. They were prevented from hunting and were forced to turn to agriculture. Everything in their tradition was opposed to this, and the play reveals the consequent disintegration of their society and humanity. On the simplest level, the play could be considered as an empathetic study of the violence of cultural impositions on minorities. Obviously, a worthy subject for committed anti-imperialists. But Brook is not self-righteous or content with a solely political message.

The documentary anecdote becomes the basis of a more personal and mythological statement. Brook involves the audience from the outset by presenting the actors as individuals before the moment when they assume their roles. We witness their transformation into Iks. As their human feeling and society breaks down, we are prepared to follow the reverse process, the dismantling of their personalities. The open presentation of all that normally goes on behind the scenes is not merely a gimmick. In *Les Iks* it



offers the possibility of entering into an unfamiliar world and an even stranger disintegration, and of seeing a political message from a human point of view.

Brook's insistence on theatrical research and his revolt against certain traditions would probably have gained him a following among the minority public. The reasons he gives to justify his approach and his willingness to theorize makes him a true brother. But he has gained a popular following because he has valid and proven reasons for working in an unconventionally dilapidated theatre; for dispensing with professional actors, make-up and costume. Neither his intellect nor, his revolutionary bent would have given him a *succès popitiaire*.

For the majority, he is a man of simplicity whose work is refreshingly accessible. Michel Guy signed him up for a five-year contract in September, 1974, and one can see why the French want to hang on to him. It is unlikely that Brook's popularity will be short-lived. He already has a history of triumphs: in 1955 at the Théâtre des Nations, with *Titus Andronicus*; in 1963 with *King Lear*. Although the general public might mistake Brook for an exemplary Shakespearian or a simple man, they have not yet been mistaken in believing that an evening at Brook's Bouffes du Nord is an enjoyable one.

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