

# AN OPEN BROOK

For director Peter Brook, theater — and life — is like a walk on a tightrope.

By Leida Snow

“L

egendary” and “visionary” are two of the words used most often in connection with director Peter Brook, so when it was announced that he would be in New York talking about his new memoir, hundreds showed up. But Brook hardly mentioned *Threads of Time*; instead, he presided elegantly, like some theatrical guru, over a probe into the meaning of theater and life.

The occasion was a BAMdialogue, one of a series of public conversations featuring artists associated with, or presented by, the Brooklyn Academy of Music (in collaboration with the French Institute/Alliance Française). Brook was a natural choice. After all, his stage, film, and opera productions have thrilled audiences for 50 years, and his credits include some of contemporary theater's most memorable productions: *The Visit*, *Marat/Sade*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Mahabharata*, and *The Tragedy of Carmen*.

Brook took the stage at Manhattan's Florence Gould Hall with diffident steps, his jeans and casual jacket setting a relaxed tone even as his intense eyes seemed to take everything in. On stage, there was a single chair surrounded by microphones, but Brook did not sit down. Instead, he began to examine some marionettes hanging lifelessly on the stage behind

him, left from another production.

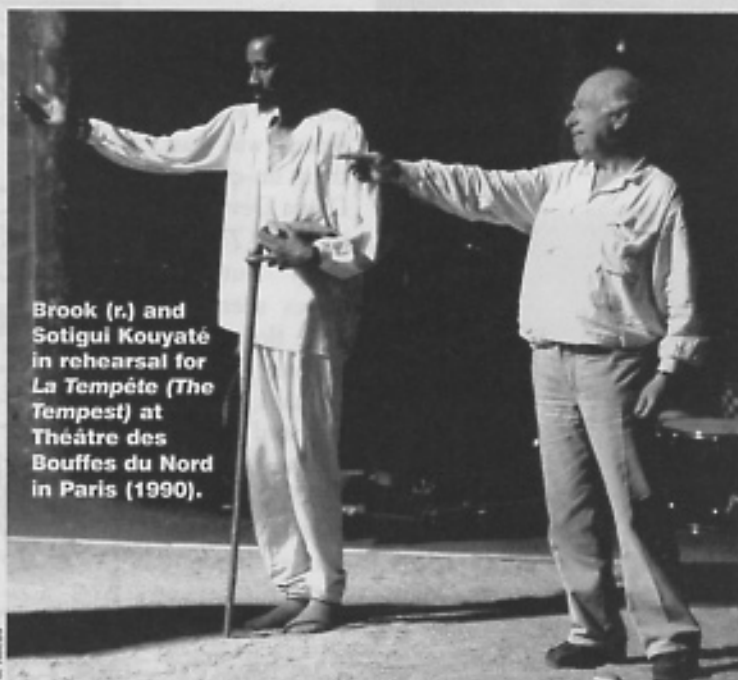
“It's strange to be on stage with these marionettes,” he said, “yet there is something about them that goes to the very heart of theater. And that is [during certain performances] when one knows that this is a piece of wood, and yet as you look at it, you see that piece of wood coming to life. None of us has ever seen life, even though it's a word we use all the

movement. “Then, suddenly, you forget about them, and you see the current of life flowing through the wood,” said Brook. Somehow the puppet in his hand seemed to move by itself. “If the process is done well, we are moved deeply. We see through the surface to something we don't normally see.” And that, he said, is the essence of theater.

Brook then took on the contrast between daily life and theater. What is the difference, after all? In the '60s, he reminded us, a real person in a real chair was considered no less artistic than a play by Shakespeare; the thinking was that one could take anything from life and put it on stage. The director sat down and played out a few minutes of ordinariness that some not-so-clever playwright might consider stage-worthy if life were the equal of theater. “One smells there is something wrong with that argument,” he said with a short laugh. Most

of life, he pointed out, is filled with enormous lifeless patches that are not fundamentally interesting. But these patches are rewarded by wonderfully intense moments. As Brook put it, “In theater, if it's good, it's life with the dull bits left out.”

In theater, he went on, space and time become concentrated, eliminating the slack and softness, the uninter-



Brook (r.) and Sotigui Kouyaté in rehearsal for *La Tempête* (*The Tempest*) at Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris (1990).

time. And yet we all know when it isn't there.”

Quietly, delicately, he fingered the marionettes and talked about different kinds of puppets — especially those in Japanese theater, *Bunraku*, in which anonymous people dressed in black manipulate the wooden figures — and the audience is aware at all times that humans are controlling the

esting portions, except to highlight the interesting parts — to give breathing room between the intense moments, in the same way that there might be a clear background in a painting or quieter moments in music. Brook then meticulously showed us a man (him) on a tightrope (imaginary), and applied his visual metaphor to actors, directors, and writers. As he explained it, the theater process is made up of two opposites: There must be a strong, broad idea that covers a big distance — some ideal one is trying to reach. At the same time, the journey along the distance is made up of the most minute details; every moment, there is something different. It's the same with the tightrope walker who must keep his final goal in mind, yet must pay attention to every step along the way. He must not only respect the smallest details of the trip, but also know where he is going.

“I don't know any other occupation in which there is such a close relationship between a big aim and the respect for the minute detail that is changing by milliseconds. This is where the whole skill of theater comes in,” Brook continued. “The way that, from moment to moment, one actor is more interesting than another is in this balance between having this big aim and minutely observed detail.”

It is the details that split a character open into so many shades. “The extraordinary performance will show details of thought and feeling that are the essence of life on the stage,” he explained. “The author provides the generalization — the big picture. The difference between average and great acting is the ability to fill that generalization with masses of detailed, contradictory, shifting meanings without losing continuity with the next moment.”

The progression itself has its own rules, according to Brook. He gave the example of the man on the tightrope who falls off once, twice, even three times, but then completes the task to thunderous applause. On the other hand, if the man only falls off once, but does so at the end of the walk on the tightrope, it would be a disaster. We know this from our own experience, he said: A brilliant singing per-

formance can be ruined with a cracked note at the end.

Even if in life we feel that one day is like the next, there must be progression in the theater. “In this thing that makes the difference between everyday life and concentrated life, [one thing we all need] is coming together in a space, being mildly interested in the beginning, and then gradually feeling — as the energies flow between the audience and the performers — reinforced by those tiny details and by the sense that we're going somewhere. We don't know where, [but we feel] that the somewhere is worth the going. Because we are being drawn and lifted to an intensity, to a degree of perception, to a focus, and to a penetration beneath the surface that we don't normally experience in everyday life.”

Brook seemed calm and centered as he reached his conclusion: “All of the work that one can do in the theater is so demanding that no single person — author, actor, director, designer, or spectator — can do it alone,” he said. “This is a very mysterious group undertaking. The aim is to see life, and each attempt can bring us to a second of new perception if one recognizes that one is on a tightrope all the time.”

During the question-and-answer period, Brook said that the most important thing for actors is to find the relationships with the people they are working with. The best advice he had for actors, directors, and writers was simple: Do it; create theater. “Don't wait for all the conditions to be right. Do it and keep on doing it.”

While Brook had talked about theater and theatrical life, somehow his tightrope metaphor seemed equally relevant to how real life should be lived — our need to respect the tiniest details of our lives while aiming toward some wider goal. Asked if he had intended the parallel, Brook replied: “Well, I tried.” ■

**LEIDA SNOW** contributes cultural updates to the Business News Network, and is Director of Development for the NY Regional Office of People for the American Way.