

Brecht and Brook: *The Mahabharata* as Epic Theatre

Joseph H. Stodder

Peter Brook's English language version of *The Mahabharata* that opened in September 1987 as the centerpiece of the Los Angeles Festival was Brook's own translation of the Jean-Claude Carriere script that had been produced first in Avignon in Spring 1985, then in Brook's Bouffes du Nord, after a brief European tour. This nine-hour production was staged in the Raleigh Studios in Hollywood. The cavernous studio sound stage provided the kind of space that Brook had wanted for the work. His earlier preference had been for an open-air site on the order of the quarry at Balbon that he had used during the Avignon festival, but he decided against possible outdoor sites in Los Angeles because of noise problems and fire hazards, as well as possibilities of rainouts.

The Carriere-Brook text reduces the 100,000 stanzas of the epic to nine hours of playing time. Like the French productions, the English one was offered in two formats: either an eleven-hour "marathon" beginning at one p.m., with two half-hour breaks during the afternoon and an hour for dinner, or three consecutive evening performances of about three hours each. Brook's multinational cast included many from his Paris group, but also additions for the North American tour. In all, his group represented nearly twenty countries from all over the world.

Carriere and Brook both worked on the initial script over a ten-year period, from 1975 to 1985, with Carriere writing the final copy. Although wishing to avoid pretenses of specific reconstruction of Indian language or culture in the French, they sought also to avoid specific non-Indian language, such as Christian terms ("sin," "redemption") or medieval European or classical reference if possible. This effort was successful for the most part, although

Joseph H. Stodder is the author of *Satire in Jacobean Tragedy, Moral Perspectives in the Tragedies of John Webster*, and of articles in *The Modern Language Review*, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*.

Brook's English translation of Carriere did contain occasional colloquial or hackneyed expressions that seemed out of place in the overall language context.

The three parts of the Carriere-Brook text--"A Game of Dice," "Exile in the Forest," and "War"--deal in turn with (1) the origins of the rival families of the Pandavas and Kauravas and their argument over the dice game; (2) the first consequence, the exile of the Pandavas; and (3) the ultimate consequence, the all-obliterating war. Understandably, Brook and Carriere were obliged to make massive cuts of material from the original epic, but they chose also to add scenes--some for necessary bridging, but some simply out of a felt need. The final product, after many revisions (even during the rehearsal period), tells the story, retains central scenes and prominent characters, and achieves many of the principal emphases of the original.

The influence of Brecht is evident, sometimes conspicuously, sometimes more subliminally, throughout Brook's production. Before considering the dimensions of this influence, however, it should be noted that some of Brook's background and interests closely parallel Brecht's in ways that appear to have been independently formed rather than influenced. Both had worked closely with plays of Shakespeare and other Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists; both were intensely interested in oriental theatre. In his "Song of the Playwright," Brecht writes:

I studied the representations of the great feudal figures
 Through the English: of rich individuals
 Who saw the world as space for their freer development.
 I studied the moralizing Spaniards
 The Indians, masters of delicate sensations
 And the Chinese, who represent the family
 And the many-coloured lives in the cities.²

Brecht's interest in the Elizabethans began early, with his version of Marlowe's *Edward II* in 1924, and continued through the work on *Coriolanus*, unfinished at his death. As John Willett indicates, the Elizabethan stage provided Brecht with examples of "a loose sequence of scenes of great geographical and chronological scope."³ The enduring fascination that Brecht held for oriental art began in the late twenties. In 1928 his "studio" produced Franz Jung's *Heimweh*, using a "new means of representation (Chinese acting rather than German)."⁴ At about the same time he read Arthur Waley's translations of Japanese Noh plays and, later, Waley's translations of Chinese poetry. Brecht was impressed by the clarity and simplicity both of the plays and of the poetry. The theatricality of the Noh stage also impressed him. Describing the set for the 1935 New York production of *Die Mutter* to Mordecai Gorelik, he said "Let it all be elegant, thin and fine, like Japanese

banners, flimsy like Japanese kites and lanterns; let's be aware of the natural textures of wood and metal."⁵

Brook's background is equally eclectic, with his long association with the Royal Shakespeare Company, his extensive production in Iran and in Africa, and his research in India for *The Mahabharata*. And, like Brecht, Brook used his multicultural mix to explore new theatrical perspectives: the function of language in theatre in *Orghast*, the inhabiting of characters by actors in *The Ik* ("our actors had come to be the Ik, and thus to love the Ik" [a tribe that had come to be regarded as abhorrently dehumanized]),⁶ and the engagement of expansive epic narrative in *The Mahabharata*.

In his verse "To Our Successors," Brecht describes the wanderings of his fragmented generation: "We went, changing our country more often than our shoes."⁷ The image of the globally mobile artist that these lines suggest is clearly epitomized in Brook, and it is his increasingly complex multicultural milieu that continues most profoundly to inform his work.

The action of *The Mahabharata* begins with Vyasa, the poet-narrator, talking to a boy identified as the descendant of the families of the story. Ganesha, a figure with a man's body and elephant's head, writes while Vyasa narrates. As the story unfolds, characters appear as actors in, but also as narrators of, their scenes. For example, Vyasa the narrator becomes the ancient king Santanu. In another scene he "carves" the statue of the great Brahmin archer Drona--while Drona freezes in a gesture, Vyasa slowly turns him around. In still another scene the repulsive forest monster Hidimbi, after falling in love with Bhima (the Pandava renowned for his size and strength), transforms herself into a beautiful woman, wins daytime rights to him from his wife Draupadi, then turns to the audience and finishes the episode in her own narrative: "She caught hold of Bhima, she swept him up into the air and everywhere--on mountain peaks, on sky-blue beaches, in the secret lairs of the gazelles, on the shores of forgotten lakes, everywhere--she gave him her love."⁸

This blending of narrative and action is, of course, a reasonable device for the theatrical presentation of epic material, and it is logical to assume that such blending would occur in the Indian sequences of *The Mahabharata* that abound on the subcontinent and throughout Indonesia today. It is however also elementally Brechtian, and Brook has long acknowledged the profound influence of Brecht on his work throughout his career.

Brecht's notion of the word "epic," although narrower, more specifically technical than the received definition, relates to it and in a sense is embraced by it. Originally used by Erwin Piscator to denote "the political documentary, the tendentious, the anti-artistic," the truth of raw facts replacing the lie of "art,"⁹ "epic" in Brecht's lexicon also assumed the connotation of "form." "What then must 'Form' be like?" he asks. "'Epic.' It must report. It must neither believe that one can identify [emotionally] with things in our world, nor must it even want to. The materials are enormous and terrifying and our dramaturgy must reflect this."¹⁰

It was apparently through such progression that Brecht's concept of "epic theatre"--iconoclastic, and in Brecht's view anti-Aristotelian--became the foundation of his work, distancing the audience by emphasizing "facts" over "art" and appealing to its reason more than, or at least as much as, to its feelings:

The essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things. At the same time it would be quite wrong to try and deny emotion to this kind of theatre.¹¹

It is perhaps worth noting that the principal meaning of "epic" in German is narrower than the English ("heroic narrative"), merely denoting "narrative," and is thus closer to Brecht's formulaic sense of it than the more comprehensive English definition may suggest.

When, by the mid-thirties, Brecht had developed his concept of audience alienation (*Verfremdung*), it was, in Willett's phrase, "something of a revelation" to him, "first subserving, then supplanting, the 'epic theatre' in his interests."¹² Building on the technical sense of "epic," Brecht's idea of alienation intensified its focus, creating a specific stage environment which permitted the audience to view dramatic action in a new and more dispassionate perspective. At one point Brecht provides this explanation of *Verfremdungseffekt*:

To see one's mother as a man's wife one needs V-effekt; this is provided, for example, when one acquires a stepfather. If one sees one's form-master hounded by the bailiffs a V-effekt occurs: one is jerked out of a relationship in which the form-master seems big into one where he seems small.¹³

By focusing on specific segments of the action itself rather than on dramatic continuity--by deliberately fragmenting it--Brecht accomplished this purpose. "The events must not succeed one another indistinguishably," he asserts in his "Short Organum for the Theatre."¹⁴

Peter Brook reminds us that "it is out of respect for the audience that Brecht introduced the idea of alienation, for alienation is calling a halt: alienation is cutting, interrupting, holding something up to light, making us look again. Alienation is above all an appeal to the spectator to work for himself, so to become more responsible for accepting what he sees only if it is convincing to him in an adult way."¹⁵

The confusion that has, over the years, clouded the understanding of these and other fundamental Brechtian tenets continues today. Some of it was certainly caused by Brecht himself, by inconsistencies and vagueness in some of his language, and by shifts in his attitudes over a period of time. To some

extent, confusion resulted from evident discrepancy between theory and practice. The meaning of Brecht's term "epic," as Brecht describes it, seems clear enough, but it assumes a different connotation when he relates it to specific stage devices such as screens, placards, and half-raised curtains. "Epic theatre" then begins to take on a meaning of its own, "narrowed down," as Willett points out, "to cover certain fashionable trends, anti-Reinhardt and anti-Expressionist, even before Brecht started to work out his theoretical ideas."¹⁶ While a degree of clarification has been achieved over the past half century through close examination of his theories and faithful rendering of his plays, distortions have also proliferated, both in the academy and in the theatre. Willett's survey of Brechtian theory and practice (in *The Theatre of Bertold Brecht*), having noted the flaws, concludes:

The theory may illuminate his own methods of production, but without some knowledge of these it is a bad guide, easily leading the producer into affectation or tedium. 'Seriousness, fire, jollity, love of truth, inquisitiveness, sense of responsibility' are among the essentials which Brecht confessedly took for granted, and there are many abusers which would have horrified him, though according to the letter of the theory they are legitimate enough.¹⁷

Brook's brilliant staging of *The Mahabharata* seemed to reflect not only Brechtian influence but many elements from his earlier theatrical work as well. In set simplicity, costuming, music, and--particularly--in acting, influences were evident from the range of his productions--from *Titus Andronicus* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *Marat/Sade*, *The Conference of the Birds*, *Orghast*, and *The Ik*. The set, designed by Chloe Obolensky, consisted of a bare, mud-caked floor with a river of real water in the background (eighty feet long, seven feet wide) and a small water pond in the foreground. Into this bare space the actors brought their own props, or others would lay them out for them. Ganesha carried a roll containing his writing materials; Arjuna rolled a huge wheel onto the stage, symbolizing his chariot. Others entered with rolled up carpets or mats and spread them to suggest an entire setting: with flags to signify a war parley, or candles and soft light for a domestic scene. Brook used special (smokeless) fire effects throughout the production: small, individual campfires, magic circles of flame, huge, bright candles and torches, and spectacular pyrotechnic displays--for example, making the lake burst into flame when a curse is placed on Arjuna.

The costumes, also designed by Obolenski, often matched the flags, bunting, and carpets: bright reds, oranges, and whites for chieftains, lush blues and mauves for the women. Much of the costuming was simple, in accordance with Obolenski's impression of the apparel that she had seen women washing along river banks in India, but some was stunningly spectacular--for example, the outfitting of the two Rakshasas, the male and female forest grotesques who

set out to attack and devour the Pandava brothers Bhima and Yudishthira and their sleeping wife Draupadi. When the female, Hidimbi, suddenly threw off her hideous exterior, it made all the more dazzling her transformation into a gorgeous woman.

Another fundamental dimension of Brook's production was the music. His musicians, under the direction of percussionist Toshi Tsuchitori, were grouped at the side of the stage, intentionally in view of the audience, an integral part of the action. Their instruments included several horns and conches, a nadaswaran and shanaj (flute and pipe), a didjeridu (aboriginal recorder-like instrument), a sitar, and other stringed instruments. A variety of percussion instruments were used: huge Kodo drums for the war, other tabla drums, and an array of bells and gongs.

Brook's use of music was no doubt influenced by his considerable work with opera--with *Salome*, *Faust*, *Eugene Onegin*, and *Carmen*--but it was also the result of extensive exposure to and research in the music of India and Java. "Part of the beauty of the Javanese theatre," he writes, "is that the musicians are all in full view, they watch and participate in all the action . . ." ¹⁸ His musicians in this production were likewise in full view, and although they did not participate in the action other than in their accompaniment, they were a constant part of it, watching intently. Again, though the influences are mixed, the echo of Brecht is insistent, especially of his "'gestich' music," which Willett describes as "one which expresses attitudes."¹⁹ Throughout this production Brook's use of music was, in this sense, "gestich."

All of these theatrical ingredients--set, props handling, costume, music, acting techniques--were no doubt the product of the many varied experiences that had influenced Brook's career. Depending on what most strikes one's fancy, a viewer might find bits of commedia dell'arte in the comic-oriented "Forest" scenes, elements of Meyerhold's biomechanics in the wizardry of some of the battle choreography, and influences of popular theatre that have accrued from Iran, Africa, and the Central Californian Teatro Campesino. Much of the spectacle as well as the focused acting is equally attributable to Brook's own sense of showmanship and his consummate devotion to the actor's craft.

Regardless of how important such factors may have been in forming Brook's complex vision and method, however, the Brecht influence is also ever-present. Calling Brecht the "key figure of our time," Brook has asserted that "all theatre work today at some point starts at or returns to his statements and achievement."²⁰ Much of the effect of this epic production, whether theoretic or mechanical, may be the result of Brecht's influence as it has continued to be embodied directly or indirectly in Brook's work.

One technique that was at least partly indebted to Brook's reading of Brecht was evident in the pacing of the scenes. Considering the vast scope of *The Mahabharata*, it is especially noteworthy that Brook dealt unhurriedly with so many of the scenes, taking time, as necessary, to focus on the meditation of Yudishthira, the Pandava leader, or on the central Krishna-Arjuna dialogue of

the "Bhagavad Gita." But at other times the action was fast-paced, making chronological as well as imaginative leaps. In *The Empty Space*, Brook attempts to clarify what he believes to be misconceptions of Brecht's attitude toward illusion. He suggests that Brecht rejected not illusion itself, but "dead" as opposed to "living" illusion. "The illusion that is composed by the flash of quick and changing impressions," he writes, "keeps the dart of the imagination at play."²¹ Such flashes were frequent in this production, as when Brook's entering actors would rush in--while the exiting group was still on stage--rolling out mats and bunting to a pounding percussion background, presenting a dazzling visual and aural spectacle.

Perhaps partly because of the essential philosophical ambiguity of many of the situations in *The Mahabharata*, opportunities were frequently provided in Brook's production for application of other dimensions of epic theatre in the telling of this epic story. Beyond the more restricted technical aspects of Brecht's concept is a broader social one:

the spectator [in epic theatre] is given the chance to criticize human behaviour from a social point of view, and the scene is played as a piece of history. The idea is that the spectator should be put in a position where he can make comparisons about everything that influences the way in which human beings behave. This means, from the aesthetic point of view, that the actors' social gest becomes particularly important, the arts have to begin paying attention to the gest.²²

In the "Baghavat Gita" sequence, for example, our sympathies are with Arjuna, who "ever since childhood" had been "marked for war," Arjuna whom the Brahmin Drona had taught to be the greatest archer in the world--the all-but-invincible Arjuna, whose first tasks in battle were to kill the revered warrior Bhishma and then the great Drona himself. When Arjuna instead drops his bow, the audience can share in the frustration of the young warrior as his earlier illusions of glory dissolve in the presence of the horrible reality of warfare. But Krishna's message to him is clear and unequivocal. After first transfiguring himself before Arjuna in a vision in which he grinds all of the warriors of the world in his teeth while revealing through his body a spectrum of stars, life, death, and silence, Krishna tells him: "Matter changes but I am all that you say, all that you think. . . . Have no fear and rise up, because I love you. . . . Now you can dominate your mysterious, incomprehensible spirit, you can see its other side. Act as you must act."

It is Arjuna's karma to kill Bhishma and Drona (and others), as it is theirs to be slain by him. In the larger perspective of *The Mahabharata* war is a great mystery. The reasons for war are manifest but ultimately inexplicable, and war itself is inevitable in the destiny of the race. Brook focuses our attention, as does the Sanskrit epic, on this lesson, evidently believing with

Brecht that "the [socially significant] gestic principle takes over, as it were, from the principle of imitation."²³

The "Baghavat Gita" scene, in the Los Angeles production, illustrated Brook's insistence on Brechtian "distance" in his actors' approach to their roles. Bruce Myers as Krishna and Vittorio Mezzogiorno as Arjuna seemed to be working from instinct, or intuition, as they neared the climactic point of the scene. Some of their dialogue was realistic, but much of it was presentational, reminding the audience of its epic narrative context, but reflecting as well the alienation principle.

Specifically as it concerns acting, "distance" for Brook, as for Brecht, means "keeping [the actor's] personality at arm's length. It means the individual voluntarily subduing many subjective impulses, because he wishes something to appear that for him is more objective."²⁴ Throughout his directing career Brook has concentrated on this Brechtian approach, working in each project from a "formless hunch" toward a product in which "the director cuts away all that is extraneous, all that belongs to the actor and not to the actor's intuitive connection with the play." Brook illustrates his idea of "distancing" in acting with the example of a radio newsreader:

[The newsreader] is intuitively impersonal and distant because he understands his function--he is a voice put at the disposal of making a news sheet clear--he needs clarity and tempo--his intonations must be neither too warm nor too dry--and yet for him to bring his personal emotions to bear on the information, coloring it according to whether the news makes him bright or sad, would be silly.²⁵

The Brechtian "gestic" principle and the *Mahabharata* story line merge, in a way, in the penultimate scene. Brook notes that Brecht's alienation "can suddenly make us confront our shifting views of right and wrong."²⁶ This is what the story does when, after the war, Yudishthira enters paradise. He is shocked to find there not the Pandavas, whom the story, enforced by Brook's direction, has made generally sympathetic throughout, but instead the hated Kauravas, basking in celestial light. "Where are my brothers?" he demands. "Where is our wife?" Vyasa, his guide, points the way down into the stench of the underworld. In Brook's production, as Yudishthira began his descent, their voices answered him from far beneath the audience bleachers. Their cries, coming from separate dark corners of the immense sound stage, provided a kind of Brechtian extension as the action began enveloping the audience. Although this scene alone did not exemplify what Brook was referring to in his remarks concerning alienation, it did, from the perspective of *The Mahabharata*, urge the audience into a confrontation of its shifting views of right and wrong as they identified with Yudishthira, alone on the stage, facing what seemed to him to be the irrational reality of karma.

Yet this too was illusion. A new scene began to unfold. Beautiful carpets were spread out, dozens of small fires were lit in welcome. As the stage became more illuminated, Yudishthira, who had, in his outrage, just defied the gods, now watched in amazement as his brothers, his wife, the rest of the Pandavas, and all of the Kauravas gradually assembled in an aura of peace and friendship, gently conversing and sharing one another's food. Here, as elsewhere during the production, implications might be found of Brook's idea of a "holy" theatre centered in ritual and ceremony, as distinguished from the more pervasive "rough" theatre of Brechtian confrontation. But such implications would themselves have been mainly illusory. In this compelling finale, Brook may indeed have succeeded in the "holy" ambition of making the invisible appear, but the scene owed less to Artaud and Grotowski, the priests of "holy" theatre--or to Brecht--than to the ancient impulses of the *Mahabharata* itself, with its ultimately simple if paradoxical message.

On balance, however, the main Brechtian influence in this production may be less evident in the application of specific doctrine or technique than in Brook's attitude toward and relationship with his actors. The close chemistry of the director-actor relationship is, as we have observed, one of the strongest bonds linking these two artists. Echoing Brecht, Brook insists that "every actor has to serve the action of the play, but until the actor understands what the true action of the play is, what its true purpose is, from the author's point of view and in relation to the needs of a changing world outside (and what side is he himself on in the struggles that divide the world), he cannot possibly know what he is serving."²⁷ It is Brook's focus on rigorously disciplined repertory acting, inspired at least in part by the example of the Berliner Ensemble, that has invested *The Mahabharata* with its basic vital cohesiveness, whether manifested in its scenes of shimmering action or in its moments of mystic stillness.

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

Notes

1. Jean-Claude Carriere, "Introduction" and Peter Brook, "Foreword," Jean-Claude Carriere, *The Mahabharata*, tr. Peter Brook (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987) vi-xvi.

2. In John Willett, *The Theatre of Bertold Brecht* (New York: New Directions Books, 1959, 86. This and all subsequent Brecht quotations from this edition are Willett's translations.

3. 123.

4. 115.

5. 150.

6. *The Shifting Point* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987) 137.

7. In *The Theatre of Bertold Brecht* 230.

8. *The Mahabharata* 90. All further quotations from the play will be from this text.

9. In John Fuegi, *The Essential Brecht* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1972) 14.

10. 17.
11. *The Theatre of Bertold Brecht* 170.
12. 178-179.
13. 179.
14. 154.
15. *The Shifting Point* 72.
16. *The Theatre of Bertold Brecht* 171.
17. 187.
18. *The Shifting Point* 179.
19. *The Theatre of Bertold Brecht* 132.
20. *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1968) 72.
21. *The Empty Space* 79.
22. In *The Theatre of Bertold Brecht* 86. Brecht's concept of "gestus" or "gestisch" is difficult to translate. Willett and other interpreters have preferred the simple word "gest." In his "Short Organum for the Theatre," Brecht describes what the term signifies:

The realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another is what we call the realm of gest. Physical attitude, tone of voice and facial expression are all determined by a social gest: the characters are cursing, flattering, instructing one another, and so on. The attitudes which people adopt towards one another include even those attitudes which would appear to be quite private, such as the utterances of physical pain in an illness, or of religious faith. These expressions of a gest are usually highly complicated and contradictory, so that they cannot be rendered by any single word and the actor must take care that in giving his image the necessary emphasis he does not lose anything, but emphasizes the entire complex (*The Theatre of Bertold Brecht* 198).

23. 86.
24. *The Shifting Point* 66.
25. 66.
26. *The Empty Space* 73.
27. 75-76.