



Brook in rehearsals for *Ubu Roi* in France in 1977, above left; with Anthony Quayle, Arthur Miller and Mary Ure in London in 1956

## BROOK NOW SEEMS MORE PHILOSOPHER THAN DIRECTOR, MORE MASTER THAN MAVERICK

Bryk, was anglicised by a British immigration officer), Brook was seven when he staged a production of *Hamlet* for family, with himself in all the roles.

He'd wanted to be a conductor ("When I was 12 I stood in front of an old gramophone waving a pencil") but discovered that by "collaborating" ("directing is such an authoritarian word") he could bring together all his beloved arts.

After graduating from Oxford University he looked around at the cosy, anodyne plays of the day and vowed to shake things up. An early production of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* with Alec Guinness began with a loud pistol being fired at the audience. A production stint at the Royal Opera House included a controversial 1949 staging of Strauss's *Salome* with hallucinatory sets by Salvador Dali. He did Shakespeare at Stratford-upon-Avon before deciding to do away with the proscenium arch.

By the time he published *The Empty Space* he had evolved into a theatrical maverick, changing the cultural climate in Britain with his feverish invention, multiracial casts, and by tearing down Shakespeare to his human essence.

In 1971 he decamped to Paris, to the Bouffes du Nord: "Britain then was too insular and hide-bound, which thankfully is no longer the case. France seemed to be a place where there was no cultural barrier to people of different cultures. Artists like Chagall, Giacometti and Mondrian



Scenes from the Young Vic Theatre production of the South African township fable *The Suit* in Paris, left and below



were welcomed in Paris; I felt there was an opening for theatre."

Though Brook officially retired from the Bouffes du Nord in 2008, he continues to do productions with his small team. The theatre — with its crumbling plasterwork and earthy red interior — is, he says, "the real basic implement for our work".

It was at the Bouffes that Brook workshoped and debuted a series of plays that reflect his long fascination with Africa: 2005's *Tierno Bokar*, about the eponymous Malian Sufi and his message of religious tolerance, based on a book by Malian writer Amadou Hampate Ba, who met Brook in the 1950s.

His French-language production of the searing *Sizwi Banze is Dead*, co-written by actors Winston Ntshona and John Kani and playwright Athol Fugard, toured Australia in 2007; *Il and I2* — a meditation on fundamentalism, personal sacrifice and tribal divisions in French colonial West Africa, also from a book by Hampate Ba — was performed at the 2010 Sydney Festival.

Then there is *The Suit*, which — along with *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* and Fugard's *The Island* — stems from Brook's long connection to the Market Theatre in Johannesburg and its former director, playwright Barney Simon.

"[In 1976] Barney started a theatre in the middle of a market because he brilliantly and courageously realised it was one of the few places the races could mix under apartheid," says Brook. "After we did a South African season at the Bouffes we heard that [in 1993] the Market was doing a play called *The Suit*, so we got a copy and adapted it into French. Now we have this version that is going to Australia, with the most wonderful cast."

The best actors, he says, are those who have managed to work through hang-ups such as vanity and exhibitionism to become increasingly transparent: "The real thing in performance is the moment when you are no longer trying to control what is going on and it is flowing through you, like a miniature of the ideal moment in life. When there is no

longer any question that you are part of life."

Despite the criticisms that are sometimes levelled at Brook — that his methods have become clichéd; that he could put on a play about paint drying and still be proclaimed a genius — there is something inherently spiritual in his calm wisdom and lifelong search for truth.

Brook's personal interest in Sufism, an esoteric and peace-loving branch of Islam, has been little written about, even if his 1979 film *Meetings with Remarkable Men* underscored his devotion to Greek-Armenian mystic GI Gurdjieff, a new-world prophet who was himself strongly influenced by Sufism. Brook found a hero, too, in Tierno Bokar, a peacemaker he has likened to Martin Luther King.

"The truer and deeper the inner experience the less you want to cheapen it [by discussing it]," he says when I press him. "But I've always thought that the only way to bring together Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and Orthodox Jews is to do a little helicopter tour for the Pope, the rabbi and the archimandrite and so on."

He pauses, smiles. "You would start with Chartres Cathedral in France, then go to the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, then to one of the great carved Buddhas. Then you could go to Jerusalem and stay there. And the people you were taking couldn't fail to recognise that what vibrates inside them, in each of those places, are the same experiences."

Ninety years old next March, with only his body slowing him down, Brook now seems more philosopher than director, more master than maverick. He remains, however, a magician, who for all his back-to-basics sets is able to make an audience believe that a clothes rack is a window, that a few bamboo poles are a forest, that a glass of water contains an ocean.

"No play in the whole of history has ever changed a policy of the world," he says, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. "But if it brings a drop of something more positive, if there's a quality of thought and feeling that touches even one person who is there, then it is worthwhile."

*The Suit* opens in Adelaide on October 1.