

The Inaugural Peter Brook Lecture 6th February 2010 at the Barbican

An account by Richard Shannon

It was a summer's afternoon in 2008. Peter Brook had just opened *Fragments* at the Young Vic. Ivor Benjamin, Chair of the Guild and I had arranged to meet Peter over tea to discuss the notion of a Peter Brook Lecture.

Such an event would be designed not only to raise money for the Guild Trust but establish an annual platform for prominent directors to discuss their work and the state of directing. Peter was very receptive to the idea, already firmly convinced of the importance of fellowship amongst directors and he agreed to lend his name. It took some time to fix a date and a venue, but eventually we were able to announce the inaugural lecture at the Barbican, delivered by Peter himself.

The Pit was packed and we were very fortunate to have Sir Richard Eyre as Peter's interlocutor. It proved to be a really illuminating and in-depth conversation with one of the greatest directors of modern times.

Peter began by underlining his liking for directors and the need for more sharing of work and experience between them. This in essence was the meaning and purpose of a Guild. He then began to describe his own personal journey, which became a key thread through the whole talk. I was struck by his honesty and his willingness to demystify the process of directing, whilst never undervaluing the extraordinary and mysterious work that can emerge. A repeated theme was the need for trial and error. He lamented the fact that many directors today are subject to the appalling pressure of needing to create hits. Peter had been able to build up considerable experience through many productions created quickly, at a time when money was not the main issue.

Peter spoke candidly about his earliest experience with actors – imagining that his job was to give exact movement directions. He described asking an actor to tie a boot lace at a precise moment and then to imagine that it breaks. He interrupted the actors so often that they complained and the young Peter was taken aside by the manager. He was told gently but firmly, to allow the actors to find their own way.

And whilst he took this on board, Peter then threw the actors into disarray by continually changing the blocking. Again, he was taken aside and told that once the actors had the moves, they must remain fixed. This lesson Peter never followed!

At many points in the afternoon, Peter made it clear that practice is worth so much more than theory. To speak about the work itself is to speak of the concrete and much can be learned from it. It was ten years before he read Stanislavsky and he had not touched Artaud when he directed the *Marat Sade*.

Only by doing the work could one really understand the process and even then much remains inexplicable and reliant wholly on intuition. Peter made it clear that he hoped young directors would not try to imitate him or indeed believe a word he had to say!

Peter made it clear that at the heart of directing is collaboration and that as a director you must be open to influences of all kinds. You must struggle with yourself and the work and if you reach a complete impasse, you must have faith that something will come to you from the outside, from other people. He cited an example from his famous production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He was struggling to make something classical into something modern, without modernizing – to free the language from the trappings of period and find ‘the breath of actuality’.

Peter happened to be in New York and was invited to a Jerry Robbins ballet, performed to the music of Chopin. The dancers were dressed in jeans and high boots and danced a pas de deux with no reference to the old choreographic language or self-conscious modern brutalism. The dance was spell-binding and utterly fitted the music. This experience opened the door to Peter’s ‘locked problem’.

Peter now looked for an image, a language of movement in the modern world, that would capture the lightness and fluidity of *The Dream* and he found the anonymous acrobats of the Chinese circus, all dressed in white silk.

At this point Trevor Nunn offered Peter a cast who could deliver performances inspired by such acrobats and so rehearsals could begin.

In Peter’s search for ‘the breath of actuality’, he met Michael McCann, the director of the first modern dress *Hamlet* in the 1920s. Their sharing of experiences led to a formal pact – they would offer one another direct and truthful feedback. This pact operated for many years and proved invaluable to both men.

I was very struck by this agreement, which depends on mutual trust and privacy. In a sense, both directors were acting as mentors, but as equals. This model might well be applied today through the Guild, where the Guild might act as the marriage broker for such potentially productive and supportive relationships.

Peter then went on to raise the crucial question: what is it that you want to appear on stage? He spoke of theatre’s crucial function in a dark world, to evoke ‘laughter and joy’, to offer ‘consolation and to carry an audience with its energy’. But he also went on to underline theatre’s power to expose the mechanisms, to investigate power and then to do something more – to explore the revolutionary, positive and dynamic possibilities of the human heart. He pointed to this notion of transcendence, that the theatre should always be striving to go beyond the surface to struggle for the sublime; and that this was perhaps the most important and the hardest part of the director’s role. He was very clear that the theatre had to ferociously resist all forms of censorship, if the quest was to be achieved.

The achievement of ‘that something more’ cannot be sustained but for a moment, but it will be that moment which will renew an audience’s spirit – perhaps renewing their faith in ‘old fashioned humanism’, which lies at the heart of what theatre can explore and celebrate.

Richard Eyre raised the question of how to define a director's job, reminding Peter he once said it was to get people 'on and off the stage'. Peter finessed this answer by emphasizing that it was the timing of such simple actions, the rhythm that is established - this is a vital element in the director's role. He went on to say that directing was not simply to suggest possibilities in any given scene, but also to give an overarching sense of direction. But, and this was crucial, such a sense of direction was not the imposition of a blue-print. This would be utterly deadening, especially to the creativity of the actors and other collaborators. The notion of an abstract concept imposed on a text was anathema to Peter. You may feel, like a sculptor, a 'latent form in the material' - but this form only emerges gradually and in play with your collaborators. It is a process of genuine discovery.

And this process of investigation begins with a hunch. 'You are drawn to something, you may not even know why'.

At one point, Trevor Nunn asked Peter if there was a classic he still wanted to direct and this question allowed Peter to expand on the notion of how he is drawn to projects. For Peter, a new piece of work will feel right for its time, a theme will emerge and over time establish itself as urgent and necessary.

And in describing this process, Peter indicated, that as the shape emerges you have to allow yourself to believe utterly that you are on the right road, whilst at the very same time, knowing that at any moment, you may have to change direction. This lightness and agility of thought, that Peter captured in his production of *The Dream*, has clearly become a key element in his whole approach.

Another enduring and important tool in Peter's process is improvisation. It 'allows all sorts of unexpected things to emerge' and frees the actors from the paralysing fear that they are 'getting things wrong'. Once a mass of material has been accumulated, this can be stripped away until only the essence remains.

This process of elimination is mirrored in Peter's own career. Richard Eyre pointed out that Peter was known for his love of the 'ironmongery' of the stage, but now his theatre vocabulary has been sharpened to a point where elaborate effects are no longer needed. Peter agreed, but also celebrated the fact that all young directors should go for excess!

Peter also reflected on the fact that you have to be true to your generation and experience. He was not against technology per se – Beckett, for example, was thrilled with the dramatic possibility of the recorded voice – but you had to be wary of over-using techniques that became dated all too quickly. Above all, you should only use technology when the story demanded it. In *I am a Phenomenon*, Peter used a number of video screens to show images and so liberated the script from a lengthy explanation of synaesthesia.

Peter was asked why he left for France and if the insularity of British theatre was at the root of his move. He made it clear that the theatre in the UK has changed completely and is now much more open. In 1970, the picture was very different. He initially went to Paris at the invitation of Jean-Louis Barrault to run a workshop. He asked for an international cast and so began the long and liberating exploration that would lead to a new home at the Bouffes du Nord.

Richard pointed out that the move to Paris was a well trodden path for great British directors. Peter agreed, but noted that Paris had always welcomed artists – who brought both prestige and money to the city. Peter reflected on the key cultural differences between France and the UK and pointed to the unchanging nature of the French language as a barrier to the kind of gutsy theatre we have here. But by the same token, the French theatre strives for a kind of finesse which can be absent here.

At the end of the session, Peter was asked how he would like to be remembered. He made it clear that he would prefer not to be remembered at all, that the world was already far too cluttered with cultural baggage. He was, however, happy for an ‘influence’ to remain. He hoped that new directors would take whatever influence was of use and make it their own. As he said of the African story teller in *The Threads of Time*:

‘I lay my story on the ground for someone to take it up another day and tell it in their own way’.

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