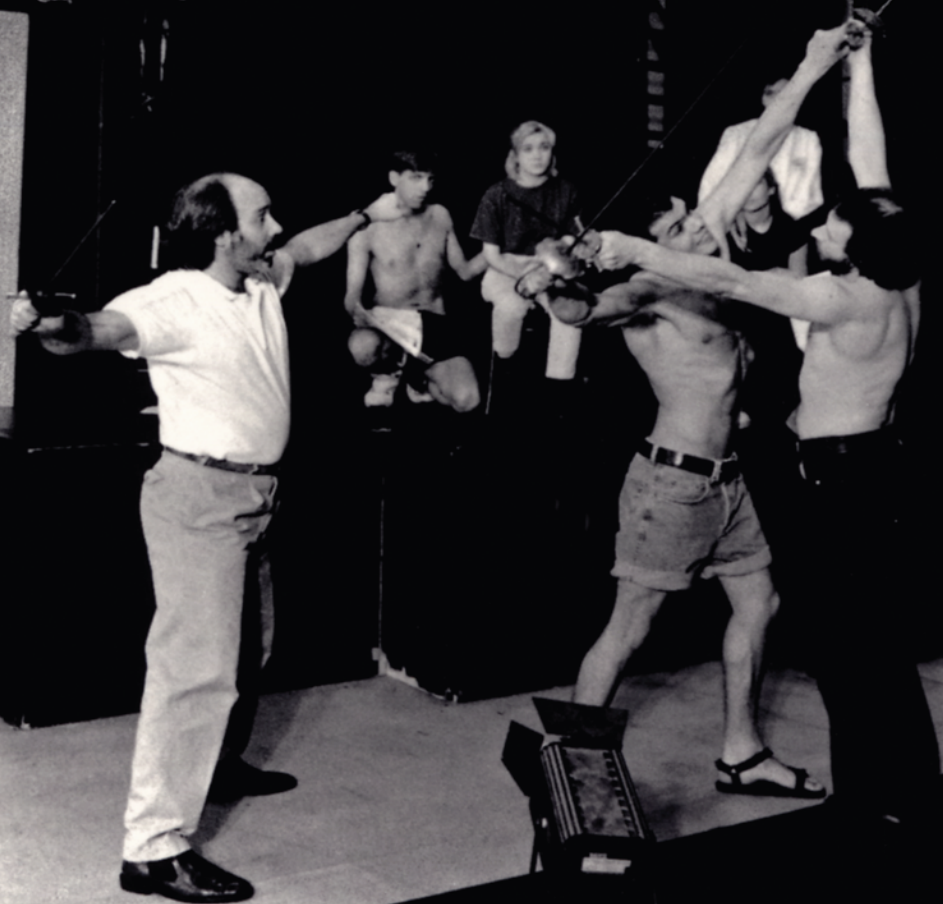


systems of rehearsal

Stanislavsky,
Brecht,
Grotowski
and Brook



Shomit Mitter

SYSTEMS OF REHEARSAL

Systems of Rehearsal is the first systematic appraisal of theatre workshop techniques which successfully bridges the gap between theory and practice. A product of both academic training and practical experience, the book elucidates the three principal paradigms in which most theatre work is conducted today—those developed by Stanislavsky, Brecht and Grotowski.

Mitter assesses the extent of Peter Brook's debt to these directors in terms of the different aims they have had for their theatres, the problems these have entailed for their actors and the exercises they have developed to combat these difficulties. The result is perhaps the most illuminating introduction to modern theatre practice available—essential reading for students and practitioners.

Shomit Mitter conducted most of his research for this book at Cambridge University and in workshop with Peter Brook, Richard a year at the University of Nottingham and now works as a freelance Schechner and the Dhurva tribes of Central India. He taught drama for writer in London.

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To M in spite of whose every effort this book is at last complete

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 TO BE: Konstantin Stanislavsky and Peter Brook	5
2 TO BE AND NOT TO BE: Bertolt Brecht and Peter Brook	34
3 LET BE: Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook	63
<i>Epilogue: A MULTI-FACETED ONTOLOGY IN PERFORMANCE: Uniting Rough and Holy in <i>Le Mahabharata</i></i>	108
<i>Notes</i>	116
<i>Bibliography</i>	129
<i>Index</i>	140

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INTRODUCTION

I had lived through a happy moment in my artistic life. I had received a true gift from Apollo. Were there no technical means of conscious entry into the paradise of art? When technique reaches the possibility of realising this hope, our stage craftsmanship will become a true art. But where and how is one to seek those roads into the secret sources of inspiration?¹

(Konstantin Stanislavsky)

He believed that the only directing method to give results was a fusion of several different methods...²

(J.C.Trewin on Peter Brook)

There is a curious asymmetry in contemporary theatre studies. On the one hand theatre historians admit that drama criticism must include analyses of performance. They argue that, as theatre is a compound entity comprising both speech and action, criticism must find ways of addressing theatre's non-verbal elements. On the other hand they continue for the most part to discuss only those features of the theatre event that are dictated by the author's text. This is largely because scripts can be reproduced and are therefore easier to study than performance which is ephemeral. The indignation of champions of performance criticism such as Beckerman and Styan has thus tended to obscure the irony implicit in their position: that while they agree that significance in drama is a function of both language and gesture, their analyses elucidate only the texts with which the directors they study are concerned. Productions of *Macbeth* by Reinhardt, Craig and Irving are still discussed in ways that tell us less about these directors than about *Macbeth*. The demand for a method of studying theatre on the basis of its immediacy is met with all that constitutes the denial of that immediacy—the mechanical and indiscriminate application of the critical methods of literature to theatre.

In an effort to develop a more appropriate means of addressing the distinctive attributes of the theatre, this book takes as its subject the process of rehearsal. Working on the assumption that actors and directors have methods specific to their craft that are independently valuable, it examines three schools of theatre workshop that have proliferated recently. It compares the rehearsal techniques used by Peter Brook at various points in his career with those developed by Stanislavsky, Brecht and Grotowski. The book assesses the extent of Brook's debt to these systems of rehearsal, methods which assist actors to capture, through carefully structured means, the elusive advantages of inspiration.

This study complements existing work on rehearsal technique in three ways. First, whereas books like Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theatre* are sometimes misleading in that they list techniques devoid of the purposive contexts that make them

meaningful, I have tried to locate exercises within the larger patterns of which they are products so as to render them properly intelligible. Far too often I have seen young directors using methods drawn from manuals without realizing that these are sterile unless deployed in tandem with certain complementary routines. By elucidating the structures which books like Ms Spolin's make available only in part, I hope I have been able to facilitate more coherent and ambitious sweeps of work.

Second, whereas books like David Selbourne's *The Making of A Midsummer Night's Dream* merely document theatre practice, I have attempted to *model* these experiments so that it becomes easier to relate them to the theories they are designed to realize. I find that rehearsal logs, however accurate and sensitive, tend to be far too embroiled in the day-to-day details of workshop to give a sufficiently substantial account of the principles and aspirations that underlie the work they discuss. A strictly linear narrative of a particular production can tell us what a director does but not, in the long term, to what end. I have therefore tried to rationalize the information provided by these first-hand accounts, to structure it analytically rather than chronologically. My intention is to ask what ambitions these directors have had for their theatres, what problems these have entailed for their actors and what solutions they have been able to offer in workshop. I hope that, as a result, I have been able to approach the larger issue as to what theatre can achieve—not with the dull generality that afflicts universalizing answers to such questions but with the authority that stems from studying specific, dissimilar and profoundly practical projects.

Third, whereas books like Stanislavsky's *An Actor Prepares* and Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* set out systems of theatre with an attractive semblance of completeness, the element of comparison here provides the advantage of perspective. Manifestos and autobiographical assessments have the virtue of consistency, the product of the refraction of a number of concepts through the filter of a single authoritative sensibility. But they also lack, for the same reason, a multiplicity of opinions and interpretations that characterizes a healthy understanding of ideas. However judiciously written, personal declarations do eventually argue for certain points of view. Whether or not one finds these positions intrinsically interesting, one almost always misses in them the vitality that comes from the interplay of convictions and attitudes. My intention in structuring the book as a series of comparisons has been to redress the balance by having each position comment critically on every other. Whereas each section of this book presents a fairly straightforward exegesis, the juxtapositions, both within and across chapters, are designed to generate a critical counterpoint through the incongruities they reveal.

In the early stages of the work, I was prepared to let these contrasts stand, to let the variations speak for themselves. I was satisfied that the mapping of resonances between the paradigms I had selected would be enlightening enough to furnish material for a book. However, in the course of writing I gradually became aware of an improbable and therefore interesting contrast: whereas the similarities and differences between Stanislavsky, Brecht and Grotowski seemed in keeping with the expectations of common sense, the comparisons between Brook and each of these directors showed a disproportionate convergence. I had not anticipated the extraordinary extent to which Brook would concur with his predecessors as he engaged for a period their approaches. I came to acknowledge that, in spite of my suspicion of lofty critical judgements, there did lurk a conclusion in this extraordinary correlation: Brook seemed to me more a mimic

than an inventor. Brook appeared an admirably astute assimilator, a singularly canny user of other people's ideas and techniques; but he was not 'original' if by that we mean one capable of transforming beyond recognition the pre-existing pool of concepts to which we are all inevitably and naturally exposed.

I was aware that such a view could appear to be repudiated by the virtuosity of some of his productions—the obvious freshness of his 1970 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example. However, I was not prepared to relinquish my conviction that there is a price to be paid for emulation, however spirited, skilful or shrewd. I felt that Brook's ability to present his borrowings with vigour and refinement should not obliterate our sense of the place individuality must have in the assessment of theatre directors. The fact that there is no dearth of such brilliance in Brook seemed not to contradict the contention that he does not have a distinctive legacy to hand down to future generations, a consolidated bequest that can outlast the impermanent incandescence of each of his productions taken independently. Whereas critics, however aware of history, must applaud the inventiveness of specific productions, the theatre historian must consider whether these flashes of vitality in fact cohere to comprise a contribution of lasting substance.

It seemed to me to be of some interest, for instance, that Kenneth Tynan should interpret as a mark of originality Brook's infinitely transitional identity as a theatre director:

Theatre Quarterly: You couldn't really associate him with any 'school' of theatre.

Kenneth Tynan: Nor could you accuse him of imitating anybody. He was one of the only

English directors of my time whose career was, in a sense, a search for antecedents: ...his ideas were spun out his own intuition.³

Where the critic sees a multitude of varying impressions that seem to constitute independence, the theatre historian can reveal the extent to which each phase of this work is in fact derivative and therefore less remarkable. That Brook contributes very substantially to each of the areas he undertakes to explore is scant praise: from directors of his stature one expects not startling modifications of given paradigms but the institution of personal and therefore unique approaches.

However, it did occur to me that the fact that Brook showed an affinity with such radically different directors was in itself quite extraordinary. I began to feel that his ability to absorb the influence of vastly dissimilar theatres could only be seen as an achievement. There was as well an inescapable correspondence between Brook's appropriation of styles and his dissatisfaction with what he saw as the insular individualism of contemporary western theatre. Brook had long argued against formal consistency in the theatre; he wanted performances that could fluctuate deftly between conventions. He felt that if theatre was to reflect the manner in which life makes discordant elements cohere, it must tell its stories in as many ways as possible—for each style gives access to certain truths but inevitably excludes others. Brook's work in *Le Mahabharata* seemed to confirm this view, for in it Brook was able to present this heterogeneity in a single work. By using a host of different styles in what was nevertheless a coherent body of theatre, Brook was able finally to generate an authentic image of life's plurality. By making irreconcilable elements coexist, the production also illuminated Brook's inordinately misunderstood apprenticeship amidst a plethora of

methods and codes. Far from being a covertly adopted substitute for inspiration, Brook's imitations suddenly seemed deliberate. It was a *virtue* to cast around widely for styles—and to have had the insight to recognize it as such was unmistakably original.

The book, as you read it, remains the product of each of these impulses: to elucidate, to impeach, and eventually to champion. These tendencies do not neutralize one another—for Brook's work does eventually find that unity of indiscriminate amalgamation, the hallmark we most admire in Shakespeare. Stanislavsky, Brecht and Grotowski share a certain sharpness of definition which is a mark both of the commendable uniqueness of their inclinations and of the ultimately unavoidable limits of their creativity. In contrast, Brook has an inimitable lack of individuality, a second-hand genius of formidable synoptic power.

1

TO BE:

Konstantin Stanislavsky and Peter Brook

The actor must dig inside himself for responses, but at the same time must be open to outside stimuli. Acting was the marriage of these two processes.¹

(Albert Hunt paraphrasing Peter Brook in rehearsal)

Actually in each physical act there is an inner psychological motive which impels physical action, as in every psychological inner action there is also a physical action, which expresses its psychic nature.

*The union of these two actions results in organic action on the stage.*²

(Konstantin Stanislavsky)

STANISLAVSKY: TO BE

On 5 September 1869, the six-year-old Konstantin Alexeyev ('Stanislavsky' was a stage name) made his first stage appearance as Winter in a tableau vivant depicting the four seasons. He had been instructed to pretend to tend a fire represented by a candle placed behind some logs. As the curtain rose little Kostya, ashamed at having to make believe, actually prodded the candle which fell over and set fire to the cotton wool with which the stage was covered. The fire was put out but Kostya was unceremoniously carried to the nursery where he was severely scolded and cried bitterly. In his autobiography, Stanislavsky recalls being terribly embarrassed at having to beguile the audience; the act of actually overturning the candle was, in contrast, 'completely natural and logical'.³ The lessons of this early experience are carefully noted: 'the discomfort of unreasonable presence on the stage, and the inner truth of reasoned presence and action on it', writes Stanislavsky, 'control me on the stage even at the present day'.⁴ An action is meaningful only if it is real, and reality is a function of reason.

Over sixty years after his incendiary début, Stanislavsky, thinly disguised as the drama teacher Tortsov in *An Actor Prepares*, has another young Kostya (also an autobiographical figure) attempt to light a fire on stage. Kostya makes the mistake of asking for matches:

'The fireplace is made of paper. Did you intend to burn down the theatre?'

'I was just going to pretend,' I explained....

‘To pretend to light a fire, pretended matches are sufficient What needs to burn is your imagination.... [L]et me see what you would do *if* my supposed facts were true.... [*If*] acts as a lever to lift us out of the world of actuality into the realm of imagination.’⁵

Truth on stage is what the actor construes as real.

Both Kostyas face the same problem: they are obliged simultaneously to display their fidelity to two embarrassingly incompatible orders of reality. On the one hand they must imbue with truth the ‘fires’ their characters tend. On the other hand, sincerity demands that it also be conceded that the fires do not in fact exist.

In the case of little Kostya, this gap is bridged accidentally. As the cotton wool on the stage catches fire, the actor’s response can be real because the fire is real. The elder Kostya, unable to allow actuality to intercede on his behalf, must resort to more subtle means. The solution offered to him is that of Tortsov’s ‘magic if’:

It is as though he says to himself: ‘I know that everything by which I am surrounded on the stage...is all make-believe. But if it were real...this is how I would act...’. And from the instant that his soul is aware of the magic phrase ‘if it were,’ the actual world around him ceases to interest him, he is carried off to another plane, to a life created by his imagination.⁶

The expedient works in two stages. First, Stanislavsky emphasizes that the actor must acknowledge that the objects with which he is surrounded are only stage properties, fictional objects in a constructed world. This is a concession to actuality, a recognition of the literal truth of the situation on stage. The actor thus disarms the audience by establishing that everything is ‘clear, honest and above-board’.⁷ His concern is with truth, not artifice.

However, having made this gesture, Stanislavsky immediately goes on to dismiss all this as ‘crude’ and ‘having no significance’.⁸ What he is really interested in, we now gather, is the truth of the *imaginary* situation on stage—the truth of the world of the character. The concession to actuality is just a stratagem, a means of ensuring that the subsequent flight of the actor’s imagination into the circumstances of the drama does not explicitly refute the inescapable fact that the character is only a fabrication. Thus Stanislavsky gives the impression of having resolved the contradiction between the truths of actuality and contrivance by satisfying within the parameters of a single prompt their otherwise disparate claims. In fact the opposition is not resolved at all. The argument secures the release of the imagination not by orchestrating a union of truths but by obliterating the claims of one of the two positions through an elaborate and beguiling pretence of taking account of it. By acknowledging the claims of actuality, the ‘magic if’ denies it grounds on which to disturb the still waters of imagined truths. By then interpreting its ascendancy as axiomatic, Stanislavsky’s actor may now construe as real what is blatantly unreal. Through a devastating combination of censorship and propaganda, the actor may make belief.

The ability of the ‘if’ to rid the imagination of the claims of actuality is concomitant with its ability to rid the actor-character of the burden of acknowledging the presence of