

**BEFORE THE MAHABHARATA****SİNAN GÜL**Dr.,University of Arkansas  
sinangul36@gmail.com**Abstract**

International Centre for Theatre Research, founded in 1970 by Micheline Rozan and Peter Brook, has been a major institution to spread a multicultural and experimentalist spirit in theatre. The twelve-hour play *The Mahabharata* is one of the trademarks of the institution in which Brook has blended Eastern motifs with the Western practices. However, his journey before the Mahabharata contains significant traces of English and French theatre traditions as well as world drama. This paper analyzes the foundation of the Centre and investigates the process that Brook and his crew went through.

**Key Words:** *The Mahabharata*, Peter Brook, International Center for Theatre Research.

**MAHABHARATA ÖNCESİ****Öz**

1970 yılında Micheline Rozan ve Peter Brook tarafından kurulan Uluslararası Tiyatro Araştırmaları Merkezi tiyatrodaki çok kültürlü ve deneysel ruhu yaymak hedefinde olan önemli bir kurumdur. Bu kurumun temel taşlarından biri haline gelmiş on iki saat süren *Mahabharata* oyunu, Brook'un doğu motiflerini batı pratiği ile harmanladığı bir çalışmadır. Ancak bu oyundan önceki deneyimler hem İngiliz hem Fransız hem de dünya tiyatrosu adına önemli izler taşımaktadır. Bu makale Merkezin kuruluşunu ve Brook ile ekibinin Mahabharata öncesi yaşamış olduklarını incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Mahabharata*, Peter Brook, Uluslararası Tiyatro Araştırmaları Merkezi.

There are certain incidents, figures, speeches, and films that represent more than they attempted in the last century. Glancing back at the bulk of them from the twenty-first century, one, however, doesn't come across many theatre productions that made a landmark in the history of the twentieth century stage arts. This situation might mostly originate from the spontaneous effect of plays because a play unfolds at a performance, and when it is over, its effect may fade away. Still, critical writings, reviews, academic essays, and books have the power to transfer the importance or glamour of major productions. Although major works, such as Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), have different thematically important places, Peter Brook's *The Mahabharata* (1985) seems to be still prevailing among many other prominent productions due to its multicultural, avant-gardist, traditional, experimental, modern and postmodern features within. If we consider *Hamlet* as the archetype of Renaissance thought, *the Mahabharata* would definitely be one of the rare and ultimate representatives of the second half of the twentieth century, particularly 1980s. With its grandeur, *The Mahabharata* as a project seems to herald the emergence of a global worldview in stage arts. This paper examines the origins of International Centre for Theatre Research (CIRT - Centre International de Recherche Théâtrale) and its significance from the inception to *The Mahabharata*.

The Centre (CIRT) was made possible thanks to the joint efforts of Micheline Rozan, a French producer and artist, who seems to have devoted her career entirely to the Centre since 1970 and Peter Brook. In 1958, Rozan persuaded Brook to do Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* in Paris, and has guided his Parisian career ever since as his agent, producer, manager, and friend. Likewise, Brook has given her equal attention and respect. In addition, he describes her as a person with whom he can communicate without words (104). Brook is not alone in his high esteem for her merits: in 2011, she was awarded the Vermeil Medal of the city of Paris at Mairie de Paris for her contributions to art life in France.

Brook is a well-known British director whose theatre and cinema productions have received critical acclaim and awards all over the world. He was known in France even before he moved there. His English language productions (*Titus Andronicus*, *King Lear*) at the Theatre des Nations with legendary British actors – Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Paul Scofield – established his reputation within the art cycles of Paris (Kustow 200). His fluent French has helped him communicate with ease. He has always been keen on trying the “unfamiliar” in his works. His book *Empty Space*, which is considered one of the most important and unique theatre theory books of the twentieth century, advocates a more liberal stage against the conservative mentality and commercial theatre. In the early 1960s, Brook's treatment of modern and Shakespearean texts earned him fame throughout Europe. He, however, had always wanted to direct a company where he would be free of commercial expectations and independent to stage the texts he desired. He raised questions that were to lead his departure from Paris. From the start, he has always been a man of questions rather than answers. For example, his idea of performing under the sunlight had a revolutionary impact on his actors as some of them saw the audiences' faces for the first time in their acting career (Schechner et al 56).

In 1968, Brook was invited to Paris by Jean Louis Barrault to conduct a workshop at the Theatre des Nations, where he had the first opportunity to work with actors from different nationalities. The theater, however, was later occupied by rioting French students, which did not let the group complete their work. A number of corporations and individuals donated funds that made it possible for the group to move to England under the auspices of Royal Shakespeare Company. They presented *The Tempest* at the end of their workshop. This play, whose cast included actors from totally different backgrounds, inspired Brook to question his view on many aspects of theatre. Learning about Brook's plans to move to Paris, Peter Hall pleaded with him, though unsuccessfully, to delay his departure so that funds might be collected for Brook to conduct his experimental career in England.

Paris, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, was an attraction center for many artists and writers. It had turned into a cultural center where many philosophers, writers, playwrights, and intellectuals had a strong influence on social and cultural life. The expansion of any powerful concept or product was considerably more attainable in Paris than in any other part of the world. Besides, Parisians have always been more liberal-minded towards and more supportive of new and avant-garde works of art. However, as Richard Schechner notes, "Brook's real home is at the intersection of cultural energies rather than in Paris" (58).

In 1969, during the seven months of editing the *King Lear* film in Paris, Brook wrote a manifesto to initiate funding applications for a 'Centre International de Recherches Theatrales' to operate for three years without box office pressure:

*The world's theatre has rarely been so grave a crisis. With few exceptions, it can be divided into two unsatisfactory categories: those theatres that remain faithful to traditions in which they have lost confidence, and those that wish to create a new and revolutionary theatre, but have not the skills that this requires. And yet theatre in the deepest sense of the word is no anachronism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: it has never been needed so urgently.* (Kustow 199)

Jean Louis Barrault personally sponsored the time Brook spent in France, but in order to establish the "new and revolutionary" theatre company he desired, Brook needed larger sums of money. After processing applications with Rozan, state offices and private foundations agreed to help Brook and his future troupe. As international as the members of his troupe, the subsidy came from different continents - Ford and Anderson foundations from the U.S., the Gulbenkian Foundation from Europe, and the Shiraz Festival from Iran. The JDR 3<sup>rd</sup> Fund, the David Merrick Arts Foundation and UNESCO provided fellowships for special collaborators. In total, Brook received around one million dollars; the provisions of the funding stated allocated 100.000 dollars of the sum for the foundation of the theatre, and the rest of the money was to be equally divided for three years. Having various financial sources secured the nomadic character of the company. The ICTR officially began work in Paris on 1 November 1970 (Smith 29).

When the center's inception became a fact, Brook decided to have an international cast where people did not have any shared set of communication devices, much unlike almost all theater companies on earth. While searching for the actors, he did not aim to find typical

representatives of different cultures and nations. On the contrary, to create his team, he looked for unique actors with original talents. Although the research center seemed to be a theoretical place, Brook and his team were always after practice. Brook points out that the name was appropriate for mostly practical reasons where it could be an advantage for international purposes such as funding or tours (Helfer, 258). Brook explains in his book *The Shifting Point* how he decided to start:

*The reason we started the Centre was to start working outside contexts. My own work, and the work I've been in contact with, has always been work within a context. The context is either geographical, cultural or linguistic, so that we work within a system. The theatre that works within a system communicates within a system of reference. The broadest of these is language in the general sense of the word. Spoken conversation in English is incomprehensible to someone whose ear is only tuned to spoken conversation in Finnish, say. This is the broadest barrier. And within English itself there are forms of "in" language, of argot, and there are local references that almost completely enclose the group of people who can share a common experience with the actors. The common experience, to a greater or lesser extent, relies on something that is not universal. (Brook, 124)*

Peter Brook's career during ten years prior to his move to France also signaled the experimentalist characteristics of his artistic directing to find "something universal". His collaboration with German writer Peter Weiss and staging of his play *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* (usually referred as *Marat / Sade*) in 1965 became an instant success on European stages. In 1965, as a tribute to a French theatre theorist, Antonin Artaud, he staged the play *Theatre of Cruelty*, a collage of different improvisations. The show in LAMDA theatre in London illustrated his efforts to break the borders of the commercial theatre. In this play, he tried to revive "the holy theatre" and turn to the ritualistic roots of the dramatic text. *The US* was another product where he criticized the Americans' attitude towards the Vietnam War. Although Brook became famous with his Shakespeare and classical productions, he has always shown interest in contemporary social events.

After the opening of the Centre, the English poet Ted Hughes in England became aware of the company and showed interest in its work. Hughes, who would become a 'poet laureate' in 1984, wanted to watch rehearsals and called Brook for permission. Brook did not allow anyone to watch rehearsals on principle, and he did not make an exception for Hughes, but he offered an opportunity to become a part of the company. Upon accepting the offer, Hughes became one of the prominent writers of the Centre. The first year's theme of the Centre was study of sounds. Having a variety of languages and cultures in the troupe, Brook was looking for a new language which was different than the conventional communication methods. He was questioning every notion of the theatre he had learned and applied until that time. At first, they prepared small, wordless plays. John Heilpern, one of the writers, wrote *The Shoe Show*; Ted Hughes did *The Ogre Show*, and the actors invented their own play *The Bread Show* (Kustow 8). The rehearsals and workshops they conducted along with

the journeys they took together, earned them the insight and ability to use natural voices and gestures.

Brook assigned Hughes “the incredible task of inventing a phonetic language” (Brook, 109) for their upcoming play, which was to be staged at Persian Shiraz Festival. Hughes called the play *Orghast*, which meant both the title and the name of the language invented for the very purpose of this play. ‘Org’ meaning ‘sun’ and ‘ghast’ meaning ‘spirit’ turned into an expression of Promethean mythology. Hughes combined different languages to make a single unit which was not comprehensible at all. The Spanish of Calderon, the Greek of Aeschylus, the Latin of Seneca, and other texts in Japanese, Persian, Arabic, Armenian, and in Persia, the ancient Zoroastrian language of Avesta, were the elements Hughes employed for his creation. He pointed out:

*The point was to create a precise but open and inviting language, inviting to a lost world we wanted to explore. Music is one such language – mathematically precise, but completely mysterious and open, giving access to a deeper world, closed to direct analysis. In comparison to what we tried do, music is very sophisticated. If you imagine music buried in the earth for a few thousand years, decayed back to its sources, not the perfectly structure’s thing we know as music, then that is what we tried to unearth. A language belonging below the levels where differences appear, close to the inner life of what we’ve chosen as our material, but expressive to all people, powerfully, truly, precisely.* (Brook, 129)

Brook shook the foundation of the conventional Italian scene with his book *Empty Space*, and *Orghast* replaced conventional language with a material “expressive to all people”. Joseph Chaikin and Jerzy Grotowski joined Brook in his effort to create a universal communication on stage. Each of these theatre artists created a new method and way of working in and outside of theatrical space. They all tried to explore new ways of representation and expression.

The Shiraz-Persepolis Festival, which was run and serviced by the national television organization, NITV, on funds made available by the Queen (the Shahbanu), was an annual event held only between 1967 and 1977. Brooks’ contact with the Festival was Arby Ovanessian, who ran NITV’s own theatre workshop in Paris. At Easter of 1967, Brook went to Tehran together with Ovanessian to choose the Persian actors for the summer’s work. Only two amateur university students appeared at the first audition due to adversity nourished by Iranian bureaucracy and previous audition catastrophes in Iran. Brook had to make a speech to the actors to clarify his reasons and motives. When actors realized what Brook tried to make, they all joined the auditions. Brook chose fifteen Persian actors, and he added five more actors to the cast in Paris. After long rehearsals in Tehran, the play was split into two parts, the first to be done at the tomb of Artaxerxes II twice a night on successive nights, beginning at sunset, the second - at Naqsh-e-Rustam once or twice, at dawn, a few days later. These two places were spectacular tomb sites of Persia’s great ancient kings. No sets were prepared, and the only lightning was fire. Fire images were naturally to play a significant part in Promethean-based work. After the performances in the festival, Brook wanted to take the play to a village. He was directed to a village called

Jar-Baravoon, but Brook was not pleased with the results of the performance. In an interview at Shiraz with Erica Munk, Brooks summed up his priority of theater to other cultural elements in that project: "I don't give a fuck about ritual, about myth, about universal language or universal brotherhood. This is a stage of work – this sharp emphasis- the defining quality of research work- on one thing" (Smith 170-197).

While working on different projects, the group travelled to different places. On December, 1972 a group of thirty people –actors, technicians, and auxiliaries, went to Africa. It was the start of a three month journey. The group set out from Algiers, went straight through the Sahara into northern Niger, from there to South of Niger. They travelled to Nigeria, and Mali. Their journey was a cultural expedition. They did shows at the villages they stopped by. They watched traditional African performances and listened to their songs. They tried to find a way of communicating through their improvisations which were often set on a "blue magic carpet". This journey acquired for the group a chest of images, metaphors, concepts and ideas which would be used in all of their performances in the future. Following the same route they went back to France.

After Africa, the troupe's next destination was the USA. They had an eight-week experience of living together with the political Teatro Campesino, which came into existence out of a need within a strike in the city of San Juan Bautista, California. Then they went to collaborate with an American Indian group from La Mama in Minnesota. They also performed for deaf children together with National Theatre of the Deaf. They ended their tour in New York with a few performances in the city.

The first play Brook decided to work on for the Centre was *Timon of Athens*, which had not been properly staged in France before. After six months of rehearsals, the play was presented in Bouffes du Nord, which was founded in 1876. Although managed well until 1914, with the start of WWI it closed its doors just like many other theatres did at the time. Until 1974, the theater was occupied on temporary terms by different groups, none of whom could afford the repairs and maintenance needed for the security regulations. The history of this old theatre vividly illustrates what Brook has tried to do. He installed his theatre on an old and well-established heritage that definitely needed renovation and restoration. The outside kept up the connection with tradition, the inside represented the modern and contemporary. A Shakespeare play with Brook's directing served the purpose well as the opening play of the theatre. The next project was *The Ik* in 1975, for which the troupe worked for a year and a half. For this play, actors had studied some photographs taken from Colin Turnbull's detailed anthropological studies in *The Mountain People*. The play in general reflected the famine disaster that Ik tribe in Africa went through. Brook and his life-long-collaborator, Jean Claude Carrier, started to work on *The Mahabharata* at that time. In 1977, Brook directed Alfred Jarry's *Ubu aux Bouffes*, and the movie *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. In 1978, he directed *Antony and Cleopatra* for the Royal Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon, and *Mesure pour Mesure* in Paris.



The group produced *La Conference des Oiseaux (The Conference of the Birds)*, which was inspired by a Sufi poet Farid Uddin Attar's poem using the journey of a flock of birds as a metaphor for human life. John Heilpern wrote and edited the script for the stage. The play was first shown at Festival d'Avignon, and the group performed short fragments in the African bush, in the suburbs of Paris, with Chicanos in California, and Indians in Minnesota, and on the streets of Brooklyn. This was the first major work by Jean Claude Carrier, who had taken over from Ted Hughes (Brook 154).

In 1981, Brook directed Chechkov's *La Ceriseraie (The Cherry Orchard)*. He also proved his talent at opera by directing Bizet's *La Tragedie de Carmen (The Tragedy of Carmen)*. The opera was shown at Vivian Beaumont Theatre in New York. He directed three versions of a movie of the opera the following year. Until 1985, he worked on the colossal task of the stage, *Mahabharata*. It took almost fifteen years to complete the laborious work of turning the huge epic into a stage production. Tuncel Kurtiz, who is the only actor from Turkey to participate in this huge organization, highlights the multicultural fabric of the cast and the constant performance of the twelve-hour play in an interview (Pak). Considering that Kurtiz was living in Germany at that time due to the political turmoil in Turkey, it was fortunate for his acting career to get the role of Shakuni in such a major production. Kudsi Erguner is the second Turk to contribute to this glamorous production among with many other important musicians.

The journey that Brook and his company took to produce *The Mahabharata* was an arduous effort which required a myriad of trial, error, and patience. During that time, Brook, as well as members of his troupe, abolished and recreated everything they used to know about acting, discovered new places, cultures and ideas. They collaborated to produce their own texts, met new people, and listened to their stories. At a time when "the Westerner's view" was highly dominant, they turned their face to "non-Western", "unknown" and "unfamiliar". Breaking all the rules and regulations of the western theatrical world, Brook led his troupe to a new vision which was going to enlighten many, both Westerners and non-Westerners, about the other parts of the world. Although most of those members of the CIRT do not actively participate in any artistic event at the moment, they have bequeathed a powerful legacy to the future generations to dare to question everything they think they know.

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