# Sacred space and ritual performance: mapping a shamanic perspective in the work of Peter Brook

Roberta J. Cullen.

# Sacred Space and Ritual Performance: Mapping a Shamanic Perspective in the Work of Peter Brook

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BY

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## with love, for my grandmothers and my mother

I pray that my children will be able to stand on my shoulders as I have stood on yours.

#### Preface

In 1979 I was working on an acting exercise for class. Our assignment was to recreate one of the Malvina Hoffman statues in the Field Museum of Chicago. We were supposed to bring the figure to life: to see, hear, smell, feel, and touch the world of the person depicted. I had spent the whole day near the statue of my choice, examining the detail, trying to create the stance and still movement of the Bush woman's body in my own. I strained to see what she saw, hear the sounds around her, smell the air, while doing my best to camouflage the exercise as museum visitors strolled past. My nephew Jeremy (a pre-schooler at the time) helped out, pretending to be the older of the two children depicted with the woman in the statue group. Somehow, doing this essentially personal exercise in public was easier with him there.

Nevertheless I left the museum that afternoon feeling frustrated and unsuccessful. Nothing set off any imaginative sparks. How was I supposed to be able to bring this statue to life with nothing else to go on?

That evening at home alone in my living room, I was working on it again. The position and rhythm of my body resembled the statue woman's as closely as I could make it. I felt the baby on my back, as I thought she did. and I was conscious of breathing into the lower part of my body. As I stared hard, strait ahead into space--something unusual began to happen. The physical world around me started to dissolve. It was full of energy and ran like a watercolor in the rain. I knew my living room was still there somewhere, but completely washed over with wild, swirling colors. Everything was moving, running, like water but lighter than water, and in no particular direction. I felt as if my self had no boundaries either. The presentiment was strong that everything was part of everything else. It was all made of the same "stuff." Everything belonged to the same whole. The feeling present was pure elation and I was fully conscious. In fact, I knew that if I didn't relax and let this continue, it would dissolve in an instant. Some moments later the palette of energy quit running, the walls and furniture bled back through, and the experience ended of its own accord.

I was amazed and remained in a mild state of shock for a few days after. Though I am still surprised today by what I now think of as a temporary lifting of the veil between everyday reality and non-ordinary reality during my acting assignment, the experience is more comprehensible for me now. I am surprised it doesn't happen in the theatre more often...or does it?

"I believe the future of the theatre must lie in its transcending the surface of reality...."

"The work is the work of an artisan, there is no place for false mystification, for spurious magical methods."

-Peter Brook, from The Shifting Point and The Open Door, respectively

### Table of Contents

Prefaceiii
Introduction1
Chapter One: A Shamanic Perspective11
Chapter Two: A Midsummer Night's Dream64
Chapter Three: Orghast97
Chapter Four: Conference of the Birds132 The African Journey 135 The US Journey 153 The Journey Within 168
Chapter Five: Closing the Curtain (and Dodging Back in Again)193
Works Consulted

#### Introduction

In 1880 in North America, the Oglala Sioux performed a vision which a young man of their tribe had kept secret for many years. Though he experienced the magnificent vision when he was but nine years old, it was not given to the world for another eight years. A sick young man of seventeen finally told the story of his vision to an elder shaman by the name of Black Road. This shaman understood something about visions as well as illness. Black Road knew that the vision which the young man had been keeping to himself was a gift from the spirits: a gift of potential healing. The elder man's "patient," young Black Elk, had become sick (in part) because the gift he received had not yet been given to his people or the rest of the world. Young Black Elk said that he was much healthier after just telling it to someone. The vision itself is beautiful (even upon reading it). It reflects the right order and forces of the world.

If the healing power contained within Black Elk's vision was going to be given to the people and to the earth, Black Road knew it must be performed in a sacred manner. So he and another old and wise shaman, Bear Sings, went about learning all of the minute details of the vision from young Black Elk. The "rehearsals" and preparation took some days. They recreated and/or reenacted his vision using many people, horses, and a location which echoed the one in the vision. All details were given strict attention: the color of the horses for each direction, the painting of certain designs on the horses, the painting of people's faces using particular colors, costuming for the riders, finding and perhaps altering specific hand-held objects, learning songs which came from each direction, creating a teepee in the center of the "playing area"

to the specifications of the vision, and so on. A spirit of reverence was taken in all of the preparations for this event. Through the *performance* of his vision, a curtain seems to have opened between the spirit world where Black Elk originally received the vision, and the everyday world where the ceremony took place:

And as they sang, a strange thing happened. My bay pricked up his ears and raised his tail and pawed the earth, neighing long and loud to where the sun goes down. And the four black horses raised their voices, neighing long and loud, and the whites and the other horses in the village neighed, and even raised their heads and neighed together. Then suddenly, as I sat there looking at the cloud, I saw my vision yonder once again—the teepee built of cloud and sewed with lightning, the flaming rainbow door and, underneath, the Six Grandfathers sitting, and all the horses thronging in their quarters; and also there was I myself upon my bay before the teepee. I looked about me and could see that what we then were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. I knew that real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here. (Elk, Niehardt 169)

The beautiful performance of this vision evoked the spirit world, or sacred world from within an everyday reality. This process could be called "sacred theatre." It is not merely an *imitation* of what Black Elk experienced, it is an act of *creation*. The creation of Black Elk's vision in performance, with its accompanying spirit world connection, reflects in microcosm the purpose and

form of the probable origins of theatre. This vision and its recreation are at the heart of a shamanic understanding of the world. When a shaman commences a ritual performance, it is not an imitation of a myth or story. The shaman lives the story as it happens. It is created anew: it happens truly during the time of performance. A shaman is the prototype for the true actor.

Theatre is about transformation of the actor and the "creation" of an alternative reality on stage. Actors study and rehearse exhaustively to create "convincing" or "compelling" characters: to "become" Hamlet or Ophelia. (We even speak of Hamlet as an entity which transcends the boundary of a dramatic character.) In addition, great research and application of theatre technology, ideally married with the art of the designer, goes into making "realistic" settings or creating the "magic" atmosphere of Prospero's island in *The Tempest*, for example. Perhaps the only affective difference between theatre in the modern West, and ancient theatre or shamanic ritual, is that typical Western theatre no longer opens up the connection to a sacred world in which performers are truly transformed into the roles they enact, and the world around them really becomes a sacred place of performance.

The above paragraph could serve as a thumbnail distillation of Brook's chapter on *Holy Theatre* which he articulated in *The Empty Space* in 1968. His other term for it is "The Theatre of the Invisible--Made--Visible." Throughout the chapter Brook shows that he was deeply engrossed with a theatre of the sacred, and that he thought the key to rediscovering this kind of theatre rested within the performer. He recognized that ordinary musicians are "transformed by an art of possession" when they play. He recounted in detail in the "Holy Theatre" chapter, a Haitian ritual possession ceremony. It is worth noting in full for its shamanic elements and the obvious comparison

with actors and their transformation into characters:

All you need to begin a ceremony is a pole and people [and drums apparently]. You beat the drums and far away in Africa the gods hear your call....Then five or six hours pass and the gods fly in, they circle above your heads invisibly. This is where the pole becomes vital. It is the junction. Through the wood, earthed, the spirits slide and choose one of the humans as their vehicle. He gets to his feet, no longer himself, but filled with the god. He can joke, get drunk, and listen to people's complaints. The first thing the priest does when the god arrives is shake him by the hand and ask about his trip. He is a god but no longer unreal. He is there on our level, attainable. (Brook, 59)

Brook's account of the participant's possession is purposefully *ordinary*. Already the reader can see that Brook appreciates this intersection of the everyday world and the spirit world as almost customary, as something that should at least happen easily. This Haitian ceremony is of a different nature entirely from the enactment of Black Elk's vision. In both, however, there is a concept of a transformation of the actor into a sacred performer, and of the presence of a sacred reality coexisting with an ordinary one. It would be two or three years before Brook would come into contact with a sacred performance which was closer to the actual form of theatre in the modern West.

In trying to create this world of the "invisible-made-visible" on stage, Brook pursued a study of how traditional cultures, such as the Haitians he recounted, were able to contact or manifest the world of the spirits. Brook is a very private artist despite all that he has written, and it is difficult to tell exactly when he became absorbed in studying traditional cultures and their ritual practises. Clear evidence of the effect of this study can be seen, however, in Brook's writings, rehearsals, and performances: in Brook's chapter on Holy Theatre, in the extensive study of recorded tribal ceremonies during rehearsals for Seneca's *Oedipus* (1968), in the regular use of drums for warm ups and productions, and the use of drums as well as more specifically shamanic instruments in *Midsummer*, his understanding of props and bamboo poles as containing or connecting with spirits, and the eventual tour of Africa which allowed his company to experience tribal ceremony and the spirit world first-hand. Though Brook apparently never imitated ceremonies, he gained knowledge of sacred performance from them. With this knowledge and a great deal of experimentation and development, his Holy Theatre for a modern audience, finally made itself visible.

Before Brook began rehearsals on *Midsummer* (1970), he experienced a "vision" of theatre whereby the audience and performers were brought into a sacred reality which was for Brook, shared and timeless. His experience of this encounter is fundamental to all of Brook's work from *Midsummer* on. This vision was in the form of an Islamic story, told through a traditional form of Persian theatre, the Ta 'azieh. Brook sat in a group of two hundred villagers in the scorching sun, the entire population actually, to witness the story of Hussien, one of the first "saints" of Islam. He said the entire audience (women, men, teenagers, and children), "...Passed from roars of laughter to outright sobbing--although they knew perfectly well the end of the story..." (Brook, *Parabola* 1979). Because it was clearly a revelation for Brook,