Compare this article with writings by the following authors in this reader

Barba – a later anti-psychological attitude to theatre
Benjamin – friend and comrade, developed a Marxist theoretical approach
Boal – another, South American, political role for theatre
Copeau, Grotowski and Stanislavski – different European approaches to actor training
Etchells – for a post-modern view by a writer/director
LeCompte – a later non-psychological approach
Meyerhold and Piscator – contemporary, European views of political theatre
Müller – a later German director
Wigman – a contemporary compatriot in modern dance
Williams – a later, British, position
Foreman, Wilson – comparisons with later directors/scenographers

Further reading

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Chapter 14

Peter Brook

THE DEADLY THEATRE

I CAN TAKE ANY EMPTY SPACE and call it a barestage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. Yet when we talk about theatre this is not quite what we mean. Red curtains, spotlights, blank verse, laughter, darkness, these are all confusedly superimposed in a messy image covered by one all-purpose word. We talk of the cinema killing the theatre, and in that phrase we refer to the theatre as it was when the cinema was born, a theatre of box office, foyer, tip-up seats, footlights, scene changes, intervals, music, as though the theatre was by very definition these and little more.

I will try to split the word four ways and distinguish four different meanings – and so will talk about a Deadly Theatre, a Holy Theatre, a Rough Theatre and an Immediate Theatre. Sometimes these four theatres really exist, standing side by side, in the West End of London, or in New York off Times Square. Sometimes they are hundreds of miles apart, the Holy in Warsaw and the Rough in Prague, and sometimes they are metaphoric: two of them mixing together within one evening, within one act. Sometimes within one single moment, the four of them, Holy, Rough, Immediate and Deadly intertwine.

The Deadly Theatre can at first sight be taken for granted, because it means bad theatre. As this is the form of theatre we see most often, and as it is most closely linked to the despised, much-attacked commercial theatre it might seem a waste of time to criticize it further. But it is only if we see that deadliness is

deceptive and can appear anywhere, that we will become aware of the size of the problem.

The condition of the Deadly Theatre at least is fairly obvious. All through the world theatre audiences are dwindling. There are occasional new movements, good new writers and so on, but as a whole, the theatre not only fails to elevate or instruct, it hardly even entertains. The theatre has often been called a whore, meaning its art is impure, but today this is true in another sense – whores take the money and then go short on the pleasure. The Broadway crisis, the Paris crisis, the West End crisis are the same: we do not need the ticket agents to tell us that the theatre has become a deadly business and the public is smelling it out. In fact, were the public ever really to demand the true entertainment it talks about so often, we would almost all be hard put to know where to begin. A true theatre of joy is non-existent and it is not just the trivial comedy and the bad musical that fail to give us our money's worth – the Deadly Theatre finds its deadly way into grand opera and tragedy, into the plays of Molière and the plays of Brecht. Of course nowhere does the Deadly Theatre install itself so securely, so comfortably and so slyly as in the works of William Shakespeare. The Deadly Theatre takes easily to Shakespeare. We see his plays done by good actors in what seems like the proper way – they look lively and colourful, there is music and everyone is all dressed up, just as they are supposed to be in the best of classical theatres. Yet secretly we find it excruciatingly boring – and in our hearts we either blame Shakespeare, or theatre as such, or even ourselves. To make matters worse there is always a deadly spectator, who for special reasons enjoys a lack of intensity and even a lack of entertainment, such as the scholar who emerges from routine performances of the classics smiling because nothing has distracted him from trying over and confirming his pet theories to himself, whilst reciting his favourite lines under his breath. In his heart he sincerely wants a theatre that is nobler-than-life and he confuses a sort of intellectual satisfaction with the true experience for which he craves. Unfortunately, he lends the weight of his authority to dullness and so the Deadly Theatre goes on its way.

Anyone who watches the real successes as they appear each year will see a very curious phenomenon. We expect the so-called hit to be livelier, faster, brighter than the flop – but this is not always the case. Almost every season in most theatre-loving towns, there is one great success that defies these rules; one play that succeeds not despite but because of dullness. After all, one associates culture with a certain sense of duty, historical costumes and long speeches with the sensation of being bored; so, conversely, just the right degree of boringness is a reassuring guarantee of a worthwhile event. Of course, the dosage is so subtle that it is impossible to establish the exact formula – too much and the audience is driven out of its seats, too little and it may find the theme too disagreeably intense. However, mediocre authors seem to feel their way unerringly to the perfect mixture – and they perpetuate the Deadly Theatre with dull successes, universally praised. Audiences crave for something in the theatre that they can

term 'better' than life and for this reason are open to confuse culture, or the trappings of culture, with something they do not know, but sense obscurely could exist – so, tragically, in elevating something bad into a success they are only cheating themselves.

If we talk of deadly, let us note that the difference between life and death, so crystal clear in man, is somewhat veiled in other fields. A doctor can tell at once between the trace of life and the useless bag of bones that life has left; but we are less practised in observing how an idea, an attitude or a form can pass from the lively to the moribund. It is difficult to define but a child can smell it out. Let me give an example. In France there are two deadly ways of playing classical tragedy. One is traditional, and this involves using a special voice, a special manner, a noble look and an elevated musical delivery. The other way is no more than a half-hearted version of the same thing. Imperial gestures and royal values are fast disappearing from everyday life, so each new generation finds the grand manner more and more hollow, more and more meaningless. This leads the young actor to an angry and impatient search for what he calls truth. He wants to play his verse more realistically, to get it to sound like honest-to-God real speech, but he finds that the formality of the writing is so rigid that it resists this treatment. He is forced to an uneasy compromise that is neither refreshing, like ordinary talk, nor defiantly histrionic, like what we call ham. So his acting is weak and because ham is strong, it is remembered with a certain nostalgia. Inevitably, someone calls for tragedy to be played once again 'the way it is written'. This is fair enough, but unfortunately all the printed word can tell us is what was written on paper, not how it was once brought to life. There are no records, no tapes – only experts, but not one of them, of course, has firsthand knowledge. The real antiques have all gone – only some imitations have survived, in the shape of traditional actors, who continue to play in a traditional way, drawing their inspiration not from real sources, but from imaginary ones, such as the memory of the sound an older actor once made – a sound that in turn was a memory of a predecessor's way.

I once saw a rehearsal at the Comédie Française – a very young actor stood in front of a very old one and spoke and mimed the role with him like a reflection in a glass. This must not be confused with the great tradition, say, of the Noh actors passing knowledge orally from father to son. There it is meaning that is communicated – and meaning never belongs to the past. It can be checked in each man's own present experience. But to imitate the externals of acting only perpetuates manner – a manner hard to relate to anything at all.

Again with Shakespeare we hear or read the same advice – 'Play what is written'. But what is written? Certain ciphers on paper. Shakespeare's words are records of the words that he wanted to be spoken, words issuing as sounds from people's mouths, with pitch, pause, rhythm and gesture as part of their meaning. A word does not start as a word – it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behaviour which dictates the need for expression. This process occurs inside the dramatist; it is repeated inside the actor. Both may only

be conscious of the words, but both for the author and then for the actor the word is a small visible portion of a gigantic unseen formation. Some writers attempt to nail down their meaning and intentions in stage directions and explanations, yet we cannot help being struck by the fact that the best dramatists explain themselves the least. They recognize that further indications will most probably be useless. They recognize that the only way to find the true path to the speaking of a word is through a process that parallels the original creative one. This can neither be by-passed nor simplified. Unfortunately, the moment a lover speaks, or a king utters, we rush to give them a label: the lover is 'romantic', the king is 'noble' – and before we know it we are speaking of romantic love and kingly nobility or princeliness as though they are things we can hold in our hand and expect the actors to observe. But these are not substances and they do not exist. If we search for them, the best we can do is to make guesswork reconstructions from books and paintings. If you ask an actor to play in a 'romantic style' he will valiantly have a go, thinking he knows what you mean. What actually can he draw on? Hunch, imagination and a scrap book of theatrical memories, all of which will give him a vague 'romanticness' that he will mix up with a disguised imitation of whatever older actor he happens to admire. If he digs into his own experiences the result may not marry with the text; if he just plays what he thinks is the text, it will be imitative and conventional. Either way the result is a compromise: at most times unconvincing.

It is vain to pretend that the words we apply to classical plays like 'musical', 'poetic', 'larger than life', 'noble', 'heroic', 'romantic', have any absolute meaning. They are the reflections of a critical attitude of a particular period, and to attempt to build a performance today to conform to these canons is the most certain road to deadly theatre – deadly theatre of a respectability that makes it pass as living truth.

Once, when giving a lecture on this theme, I was able to put it to a practical test. By luck, there was a woman in the audience who had neither read nor seen *King Lear*. I gave her Goneril's first speech and asked her to recite it as best she could for whatever values she found in it. She read it very simply – and the speech itself emerged full of eloquence and charm. I then explained that it was supposed to be the speech of a wicked woman and suggested her reading every word for hypocrisy. She tried to do so, and the audience saw what a hard unnatural wrestling with the simple music of the words was involved when she sought to act to a definition:

> Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
> Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;
> Beyond that can be valued, rich or rare;
> No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;
> As much as child e'er loved, or father found;
> A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;
> Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

Anyone can try this for himself. Taste it on the tongue. The words are those of a lady of style and breeding accustomed to expressing herself in public, someone with ease and social aplomb. As for clues to her character, only the façade is presented and this, we see, is elegant and attractive. Yet if one thinks of the performances where Goneril speaks these first lines as a macabre villainess, and looks at the speech again, one is at a loss to know what suggests this – other than preconceptions of Shakespeare's moral attitudes. In fact, if Goneril in her first appearance does not play a 'monster', but merely what her given words suggest, then all the balance of the play changes – and in the subsequent scenes her villainy and Lear's martyrdom are neither as crude nor as simplified as they might appear. Of course, by the end of the play we learn that Goneril's actions make her what we call a monster – but a real monster, both complex and compelling.

In a living theatre, we would each day approach the rehearsal putting yesterday's discoveries to the test, ready to believe that the true play has once again escaped us. But the Deadly Theatre approaches the classics from the viewpoint that somewhere, someone has found out and defined how the play should be done.

■ ■ ■

Source

Brook, P. (1968, 1990) 'The Deadly Theatre', *The Empty Space*, Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1–17. First published (1968) by McGibbon & Kee.

Peter Brook (1925–)

European theatre director, who studied at Oxford, and established himself by directing relatively conventional Shakespearean productions, alongside opera at London's Covent Garden. Notable productions included *Titus Andronicus* (1955, with Laurence Olivier), *King Lear* (1962, with Paul Scofield), and *Oedipus* (1968). In the early 1960s he read Artaud's *Theatre and Its Double*, newly available in English translation, and staged his famous 1964 Theatre of Cruelty Season, which included Artaud's *Spurt of Blood*. There followed a series of productions which have now achieved the status of classics – Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (1964), *US* (1966), and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970). In 1970 Brook left the UK to found the International Centre for Performance Research in Paris, with the help of a million-dollar grant from the Ford Foundation. This international company of performers, whose 'disunity is their unity', went on to develop *Orghast at Persepolis* (1971), played in the classical ruins in Iran, *The Ik* (1975), and others, culminating in a performance of the Indian epic *Mahabharata* (1985), which toured the world. A more recent piece of theatrical research has been *The Man Who* (1993), based on the neurological discoveries of Oliver Sacks.

Brook's restless eclecticism has meant that he cannot easily be classified, but he shares with the Polish director Grotowski a continual search for some form of universal understanding based on theatre. In spite of criticism from some non-Western sources he remains the major British director of our time, and one of the few whose work is always an occasion for celebration, and a source of inspiration to others. This essay introduces his concept of deadly theatre, or the theatre of which we see most, against which all Brook's variety is juxtaposed.

Compare this article with writings by the following authors in this reader

Artaud – an early inspiration, for a search for universal meaning
Beck – North American notion of collective collaboration
Benjamin – another critique of the dead hand of bourgeois theatre
Copeau – for an earlier French notion of the responsibilities of theatre
Grotowski – a contemporary explorer of theatre whom Brook acknowledged as unique
Meyerhold – for the concerns of a Russian director/pre-cursor
Schechner – for another, North America, view of intercultural experiment

Further reading

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Chapter 15

Trisha Brown

TRISHA BROWN: AN INTERVIEW

MY DANCE TRAINING began in Aberdeen, Washington, when I studied with a teacher, Marion Hageage, whose background was primarily musical. I studied acrobatics – that was my long suit – tap, ballet and jazz dance. I was in my early teens at this time and my class was at the end of the day when the instructor was tired and, sharing her privacy with me, would dance around in a slow jazzy manner punctuated with meaningful silences and high kicks. I tagged along as fast as I could go, memorizing the outflow. These dances, which could best be categorized as Hollywood style dance routines, were performed in local recitals and hospitals. Later I attended Mills College and became a dance major by the end of the first year. The training incorporated Martha Graham technique and Louis Horst composition which culminated in a senior recital. I also spent a couple of summers at Connecticut College studying with Louis Horst, José Limón and Merce Cunningham. Doris Humphrey was there also, but I was not advanced enough to be in her classes. After graduation from Mills College I went to Reed College to teach and started the dance department. I stayed there two years, but exhausted conventional teaching methods after the first few months and then became involved with improvisational teaching. During this period I began developing my own dance vocabulary.

In the summer of 1959, I joined Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer and other dancers at Anna Halprin's six week workshop in Marin County, California. Anna was working with the choreographic idea of task, such as sweeping with a broom – an ordinary action,

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