I was saddened to hear of Peter Brook's death in July of this year. My students and I were lucky to have caught a few of his outstanding experimental dramas at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris. It is now 20 years since the events below happened but they remain fresh in the memory! I haven't added anything to the somewhat light-hearted write-up I did at the time. The whole saga was all *burningly* real and as *dramatic* as any budding theatre-goer might have wished – except me! So here it is:

Peter Brook's "Hamlet" Rehearsal in Sèvres in 2002 (in 21 scenes)

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Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing To what I shall unfold….

(..you shall hear Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts…)

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1 If there be any good thing to be done, That may to thee do ease and grace to me, Speak to me…

In September 2002, when I was Head of English at the International Section I saw that Peter Brook's **Hamlet** was coming to the **Bouffes du Nord**, in Paris so I booked as many tickets as possible. Afterwards there was a constant flurry of phone messages coming through from the theatre that I largely ignored - checking on this and that, dates, cheques etc. Finally, I began getting notes in my pigeon-hole marked *URGENT* - they had been trying to get me, and *only me,* for three days. And…..yes… it was Monsieur Brook (or rather his assistant) asking if they could come (out of the blue) and do a *full rehearsal*, in the Lycée de Sèvres. Goodness knows why they should have chosen our inadequately equipped lycée to wish to work in. It had been undergoing a process for over a year, honoured by the name of *réaménagement*. This meant a great deal of commotion for everybody, and the lycée looked no different yet, from the outside, at least. It did, however, now have quite a nicely *réaménaged "Salle de Conférence"*….

2 You come most carefully upon your hour….

I duly met "the team" – minus the great man himself – who all arrived by taxi scrupulously on time (I was to learn that *timing* is *adhered to*) and I offered them (his *assistante,* his *régisseur* and his *éclairiste*) a choice: they could have our brilliant, new local

theatre just opposite the school, the SEL Theatre, where we did many of our plays (seating for hundreds, lights, dressing-rooms, all mod cons) or else they could have, recently *réaménaged*, the *Salle de Conférence,* in the sinister Bâtiment Archinard. The SEL Theatre were, by now, shrugging off their normal surly apathy towards us and falling over themselves in their desire to attract *Monsieur Peter Brook*, "Oh," came the answer from the Brook Team, "the *Salle de Conférence* is *parfait*. *Peter* would *rather* be in the lycée – amongst the *pupils* etc." OK, then. So be it! I had a few misgivings, but never mind.

3 Look, my Lord, it comes…..

The story then picks up the day before the rehearsal, when the van carrying their stuff arrived at the lycée and…. *couldn't get in,* (this in spite of the fact that I *had* warned the caretaker at the *loge*). I was phoned at home in the evening: "*Urgent* – they *couldn't get in*…what was happening? They were *annoyed*….!"

I had to drive down in the dark and help *décharger* - but then they wanted more than just *to unload* and got quite stroppy about the fact that the room *hadn't been cleared of chairs* (they hadn't asked for it to be!) and so I had to stay and stack chairs for an hour. I had inklings then that this was NOT going to be a clear run. The *régisseur* was a curtly spoken, unsmiley young Frenchman, dark-haired and unsympathetic, who was obviously put-off by the room, the lycée, the electrical system, the chairs, the floor… you name it. It was all bad. At the end of the hour he still looked peevish.

4 There are the players……

Then the great day arrived, and so did they. A quarter of an hour early – I never got to have my ten o' clock cup of coffee. Peter Brook, looking white-haired and charismatic, in bog standard *director's leather jacket*, but with a slightly disconcerting large, white pimple on the side of his nose, wandered in, barely murmured a little "Hello" over his shoulder as he passed, and instantly started moving all the chairs *backwards;* these were the chairs that we (I mainly) had carefully set out the evening before. "They were too *close*". In the end, of course, they *weren't* - and they all got moved back again, very nearly to their original positions. He reminded me of an elderly British prep school headmaster. Rather prim and disapproving. He was looking pissed off, frankly.

5 O! my offence is rank, it smells to heaven….

My bête noir, the *régisseur*, then passed his hand through his sleek, dark, Gallic locks, took a turn with Peter Brook around the room, which he and I had laid out the previous evening, and came up to me, tersely: "Our carpet is not quite big enough. We need more carpets - *now*!" Carpets?? "*Oui, et vous avez dix minutes*." The lycée had never had a carpet in all its history. Finding even a small off-cut of *éducation nationale* linoleum would have been a very dodgy business. So I had to search out the *agents de service*, and, more importantly, the bursar or *Intendante*, who promptly confirmed that there were <u>no</u> carpets. *Des tapis, monsieur?!? Impossible!* But there *were* some gym mats, just possibly, that perhaps *Monsieur Brook* could use. *"OK, but they had to be got within ten minutes."* So off drove the *agents* to some depot or other, the *Intendante* clucking her teeth with disapproval. The *régisseur* again: *"Why hadn't the room been cleared properly before they arrived??"* The answer was again because they hadn't *asked* for that. I had had specific instructions only to get pupils willing to *help* set up the room for the morning. And here, on cue, were the pupils suddenly, talking to each other expectantly. "*SSSSSSH! Peter Brook and the actors need lots of SILENCE before the warm-up!*" The pupils subsided.

6 We'll wait upon you…..

Meanwhile the *assistante* was testing the radiators (which surprisingly were on for the first time since the summer) and asking me if they could be turned up. "*Oui, bien sur*," I replied and did nothing – they were lucky to have *any* heat in Archinard. Also, they wanted lots of bottles of Evian, *tout de suite*. And plastic beakers. Couldn't they use tap water? *No! Surely you can get all that from the canteen?* Then they wanted a vacuum cleaner for their carpet (the one which was now too small – though it hadn't been too small the previous day when they had laid it out). There wasn't an *aspirateur* in the *whole* of the lycée, the Intendante assured me – and I believed her.

7 Give me your pardon, Sir, I've done you wrong…

So, meanwhile, I went off to get bottles of water – everybody else was teaching and I had a lesson in forty minutes. As I did so, I called the secretary, Pat Morgenroth, at the Lower School *Collège*, who organised a rescue vacuum cleaner from the Collège. This was the

Collège Intendante's own aged *aspirateur,* which she kindly went to get from her flat, the Collège not having any sort of vacuum cleaner either (there's obviously a niche in the market here!). At this point the *agents de service* returned from their depot with a story that *all* the gym mats had been *stolen*. The Lycée Intendante went into deep trauma at this news and I never saw her again. I told the r*égisseur* that they would have to make do with what they had brought, and he looked at me with disgust written all over his face and shrugged. It was obviously not good enough.

8 (A flourish of trumpets, and ordnance shot off within) What does this mean, my lord?

Suddenly the bell rang for lesson change-over. The team all looked up in alarm, profoundly shocked. What was this catastrophic noise?? What was happening?? Peter Brook had *started* his *warm-up* with the actors; they needed *calm and peace*. Also, there was "*too much noise on the ceiling while classes changed*". "What was going on?? Was this a *bordel* or what?? *Quel foutoir*!" I refrained from telling them that I *had* offered them the SEL Theatre to rehearse in and it was *they* who had *insisted* on the lycée room! Well, after all, I reasoned to myself, this *was* Peter Brook – and for *free!*

9 …it harrows me with fear and wonder…

The Warm-Up was now in full swing. There seemed to be a lot of slow warming-up and transcendental-type meditation in the *Brook Method*, but we weren't allowed anywhere near to see. It was pretty *holy* stuff, all of this. Doors were shut with guards patrolling. Somebody, one of our teachers, walked in on them, by mistake, to see if they needed anything and she said that the whole cast stopped and stared at her in silence until she withdrew, in terror.

10 Whereto serves mercy But to confront the visage of offence?

My role was to keep fielding complaints from the *régisseur*, who took a sadistic delight in plaguing me with comments, sotto voce - that the whole thing was a *mess* - we were *badly* organised - nothing like this had *ever* happened to them. I wanted to know if all this was just the *régisseur*, or if it was coming from *Peter*. I *had* seen Peter Brook, briefly, since his

arrival but the great man had managed to avoid me, moving off at each sighting into a huddle with his main actors or the production team. The team managed to protect him and the actors from any direct contact with these miserable creatures who had invited them in under such false pretences.

11 Say why is this? Wherefore? What should we do?…

When I drove off to get them their bottles of water, somebody in the company rang the Collège, saying that *Paddy Salmon must be found. He had walked out on them in a fit of pique, had driven off in his car, apparently, and that unless he were back in ten minutes, they would abandon the whole show*. I never discovered who sent *that* message, which Pat Morgenroth duly delivered to my wife, Vicki, at home. Further panic! A flurry of messages that luckily never reached me.

12 Too much of water, hast thou, poor Ophelia…..

The tension eased somewhat at lunch-time, when Peter Brook suddenly realised that I was English and he became instantly slightly friendlier, and we moved off to have lunch up at the lycée canteen with all of the actors. Part of the principle behind the Five Year Plan of *réaménagement* was that the first thing to be *wholly* made over as new was….. not the library, nor the classrooms, nor even the *salle des profs*. No, this being France, it was the *cantine*, with the result that we therefore had a new, refurbished canteen to vie with *any* canteen from Marseilles to Lille – it even had a terraced look-out platform (shaded from the sun's penetrating rays) from which one could (theoretically) sip a dry martini and stare out over the splendid *verdure* of Sèvres, if ever one had the time. Team Brook *could* not complain about the canteen, whatever else they had had to complain about. Magnificent food *on a plate*, and good *wine (pour Monsieur Brook)* – eight bottles of freshly uncorked Beaujolais. Not *one* of the company touched the wine, in the event! Now, that really *did* impress us. Water, they called for, and still more water! "*Evian!*" In front of me at last was somebody genuinely nice and relaxed, a very handsome, young black actor, who turned out to be Hamlet (I hope I didn't look surprised) and who was, in fact, Adrian Lester (lately of ***"Primary Colours"*** and ***"Maybe Baby",*** if you saw them, which I hadn't, though George, our eldest son, was deeply impressed by this news)**.**

13 Who would fardels bear , To grunt and sweat under a weary life….?

One of the actors at lunch next to Adrian Lester said very seriously, "I taught once; it was the most exhausting, the most frustrating and the most exhilarating thing I've ever done in my life! Acting's a doddle compared to teaching." I began to see that these were nicer and more intelligent people than I had imagined.

14 They are coming to the play; I must be idle: Get you a place….

2 p.m. was fast approaching. They needed *more* bottles of water – *lots more* – and beakers. And fast. Where *were* they? Suddenly the atmosphere turned arctic again. Pat Short went off with some pupils to get more Evian. Students were gathering and were suddenly allowed in. There was a surge, and then the doors were shut fast and….. they began, *immediately*. Six poor pupils, who turned up at five past the hour, because they had been let out late by a teacher, were refused entrance. *Pas possible*. The *régisseur* was adamant. *IT HAD BEGUN*. Some pupils were nearly in tears and I had to console them as best I could - they would come with the Terminales to the rehearsal in Paris in November, to which *Peter* had very kindly invited those who couldn't fit in. But it was not much consolation.

15 Where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare, Collected from all simples that have virtue Under the moon, can save the thing from death That is but scratch'd withal…

I went back in. Whispered crisis, this time with one of the women in his entourage – the *asistante's* assistant. One of the actors had cut his finger! Where was the Infirmerie? It so happened that the *Infirmerie* was shut, locked. It is shut most of the time (for arcane reasons to do with the hours of the *Infirmière*), but now none of the CPEs, the form managers, had a key, nor a *trousse de sécours*. *Eh bien, alors…*? They needed bandages and FAST! Typical, bloody lycée! Pat Short, who had by now returned with water, volunteered to drive out into town again and get some sticking plasters, but she had to go all round Sèvres before she found any! The room was crowded and very hot. The acting space was very small and the audience (95 in all) were right up, eyeball to eyeball with the actors under big floodlights. Total silence. I could almost hear the blood dripping behind the makeshift screens. Total tension. This was THEATRE.

16 Suit the action to the word, the word to the action….

In the end, of course, it *was* very compelling drama. Adrian Lester is a great actor, witty, fluent, with a superb rapport with the audience, a complete plausibility, which is that magic of the theatre. Much of it was brilliantly improvised (especially where the size of the carpet was concerned), and after an hour and a half of concentrated drama, they stopped and laughingly said, "*That's as much as we have so far*". Adrian Lester then improvised a résumé of the rest of the play with the cast - very funny, but sometimes he would switch on the seriousness, electrifyingly.

17 How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form, in moving, how express and admirable!

And then they invited questions and comments. Peter Brook was very good at the pupil exchanges and there was a sense of relaxation as they mopped brows and laughed over anecdotes. All the girls were in love instantly with Hamlet and there was a gaggle afterwards, who would hardly let him leave. Brook, when asked about the choice of a black Hamlet and an Indian Ophelia and a black Claudius etc., said rather loftily, but convincingly, that we were approaching a time when such "partisan" and "horrendous" questions would not occur to anyone any more. The poor girl who had asked this *offensive* question wasn't made to feel *too* bad ("The question *is* valid!"), but I felt for her nevertheless. Anyway, they, the actors, all seemed to exude relief and exultation and Peter Brook went on about how vital it was for them to act and rehearse in front of *live* audiences.

18 And can you, by no drift of circumstance, Get from him why he puts on this confusion, Grating so harshly all his days of quiet….?

And it began to *dawn* on me, rather late in the day, (I felt I had had a wretched day altogether and Vicki ended up that evening, ministering to me with white wine and smoked salmon toasts, which did no end of good) that all the HASSLE was to do with their *nerves*. Some actor spilled the beans and told Pat Morgenroth that he had joined the company late and that he and they had all been *consumed* with nerves, he had been hardly able to speak for *shaking*! Stage fright, *all of them*, amazingly! Peter Brook's company had been shaking with

FEAR! We were a trial *school audience* and they had been horribly tense! *And* the *régisseur* even came and apologised to me at the end. Fairly graciously…

19 S'Blood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out.

But my troubles continued. The *régisseur* went off with the key to the Salle and it was the only one and was a pass key! With the Lycée Intendante breathing heavily in the background and the *loge* up in arms, I had to spend ages trying to catch him on a bad phone line to try to get him to send it back. There was to be a conference in the room the next day! It was the ONLY key!! *And* I had to face the reproachful look, at the end, of the woman to whom the *pansement*, the bandages for the cut finger were never delivered (although they had been bought). *We had to use masking tape!* she said. I could sense a court action impending and moved away from the offended woman hastily.

20 The rest is silence….

So, *bilan*? A verdict? Positive, but not to be repeated too often. Look to your *aspirateurs*! Peter Brook is an inspirational director with a highly talented and experimental team, but *surely* the experience doesn't have to be *so* intense, with crisis after crisis, all conducted at maximum emotional intensity (not by him, necessarily, but by the small retinue of protectors and acolytes). Everybody (who could get in), pupils, teachers - a few French teachers too) loved it - and I *mainly* tried to, but my enjoyment was tempered by all the ensuing problems, none of which seemed to warrant such a fuss. I was FIFTY, dammit! Too old for that sort of lark!

21 Let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung…..

I liked one comment of his, *Peter's*. He was telling the pupils that Pollonius says that though Hamlet is mad, there is method in it. Brook said that in theatre, method must come similarly from "madness". That certainly applied to most of our endeavours and particularly to our *own* school drama! I just wished at the time that they hadn't had to unleash *their* particular forms of madness quite so readily on others. But then, it's ART, innit!?