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Solo Theatre Piece - Peter Brook

A. Theatre in Context: The theorist, the theory and the context.

Peter Stephen Paul Brook, has been one of the most influential theatre directors, producers and theorists of the past century. He was born in London in 1925 and has been most famous for his productions of Shakespearean plays.¹ However, Peter Brook has also been known for producing plays which contradict the 'normal' theatre, as he was largely influenced by the famous French theatre theorist; Antonin Artaud and his Theatre of Cruelty. Much like Artaud, Brook strongly believed that theatre was the only place where the audience could liberate themselves from the recognisable forms in their daily lives. As he also mentioned in his book, "The Empty Space", like Artaud, Peter Brook wanted the audience to "drop all its defences" in order to be filled with "a powerful new change".²

Peter Brook was largely influenced by world mythology and Asian theatre traditions. Throughout his life, he travelled and toured to Asian countries, such as India, China and Japan in order to see and be influenced by the theatre traditions of the world, which finally, reformulated his approach to productions and training.³

According to John M. Morrison, in his article 'My Theatre Workshop with Peter Brook', he explains how Brook's theatre "is about storytelling." and "*Faites simple*" (keep[ing] it simple). He also largely believes that the audience plays a very important role, hence his deep respect for it. He explains how the *audience was "essential"* and was "more than just a passive watcher and listener".⁴ Brook expanded all these conventions in his book "The Empty Space", where he discussed and expanded on his three types of theatre; The Deadly, The Rough and finally The Holy Theatre, aspects of which I have chosen to explore.

Another large influence on Brook's acting techniques on Holy Theatre was the Polish theorist Jerzy Grotowski. Brook and Grotowski both believed that theatre was a mean for an actor's "self-exploration", "self - study" and a possibility of salvation for the actor. According to both theorists, the actor, throughout his life, has to use every aspect of himself, both physical and emotional, in order to use it as his field of work and studying.

¹"Peter Brook Biography." Britannica.com. Ed. Encyclopedia Britannica. Web. 16 Jan. 2016.

²Brook, Peter. "The Holy Theatre." The Empty Space. New York: Atheneum, 1968. N. pag. Print.

³Zarrilli, Phillip B. Acting (re)considered: Theories and Practices. Routledge: 1995.

⁴Morrison, John M. "My Theatre Workshop with Peter Brook." The Guardian. The Guardian, 12 Feb. 2010. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.

Jeni Whittaker explains that Holy Theatre "seeks to *transcend ordinary life*."⁵ as it is explained in his book "The Empty Space", the aim of Holy theatre is to create a "holy place in which greater reality could be found." therefore generating a *life-changing experience* for the audience.⁶ One of the key aspects of Holy theatre was making the 'invisible visible' through *symbols and images*. As mentioned by Amy Muse, the general concern of this theatre is to make things such as "*human consciousness, states of being, dreams and ghosts*" visible.⁷

Throughout his extract on Holy Theatre, Brook emphasises that all means of theatre should be used. He explains that the actor can communicate through language such as the language of sounds, actions, movement and contradiction, overall meaning that the actor is not constrained to just the verbal language. He also adds that the actor should experiment with varying means and elements of theatre. Some examples are; masks, make-up, *silence and its duration*, attention lengths and *repetition*. The aim of these different elements is to see the altering meanings presented and if the invisible is made visible through the performer's presence.

Brook continues by explaining the importance of necessity and understanding the audience. When an actor wants to communicate 'invisible meanings' he needs *concentration, will, courage* and to call upon all his *emotional memories*. All these would allow the actor to create an invisible form which will be 'seen' by the audience.

Another important aspect of Holy Theatre is the staging. Peter Brook puts emphasis that he values the limitation of productions in terms of props and staging. His aim is to have the audience focus on what the actor says and does, rather than the stage itself. His *minimalistic theatre* is further emphasised by lighting as Brook states his "preference for bright lights with a minimum of changes", as well as his dislike of darkness.⁸

⁵ Whittaker, Jeni H. "Brook." A Teacher's Handbook: Brecht, Boal/ Brook. Cornwall: n.p., 2003. 62-90. Print.
Brook, Peter. "The Holy Theatre." The Empty Space. New York: Atheneum, 1968. N. pag. Print.

⁶ Brook, Peter. "The Holy Theatre." The Empty Space. New York: Atheneum, 1968. N. pag. Print.

⁷ Muse, Amy. "Holy Theatre; Or, Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible." Romantic Circles, May 2011. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.

⁸ Lavender, Andy. Hamlet in Pieces: Shakespeare Revisited by Peter Brook, Robert Lepage and Robert Wilson.

B. Practical Exploration and Development of the Solo Theatre Piece:

My personal practical exploration of Holy Theatre started as a "Formless Hunch".⁹ From the beginning, I knew that I wanted to bring upon a topic which was 'out of the ordinary', a topic which is experienced in everyday life, but is barely spoken about. Therefore, I chose to speak about a personal experience which brought upon my *emotional memories* and allowed me to speak about something which I was deeply interested in changing my audience's viewpoints within their society. Through my piece, I wanted to make the objectification of women and the barriers created, due to the different genders, visible. My final aim became clear over several developments of ideas, physical explorations and feedback from my peers.

When practically exploring the selected aspect of 'Holy Theatre' and making the 'invisible visible', I understood the importance of *minimal movement, symbols and imagery*. Through exercises which Peter Brook had created, I understood how the actors can create images and symbols through simple and minimal movements, which could finally have a great impact on the audience. Furthermore, I understood how the emotional state of the character/actor not only affected his facial features, as well as his/her body. Therefore, as stated in his theory, the amount of *will, concentration and courage* of the actor possessed also affected his acting. This aspect of acting is something that I tried to incorporate into my final piece.

The exercise, from Jeni H. Whittaker's handbook, which I found was the best representation and impactful was what I called "Minimal movement, many meanings". The exercise required a number of volunteers to go on space and choose an emotional space. In the first 'stage' they could not use any body part, they could just sit completely still. In the second step the volunteers could use one body part which allowed me to understand how the subtle and small movements, emerging from inner state, can be a very successful indicator of communication.

In continuation, we also looked at exercises for making the 'invisible-visible'. One of Brook's most important exercises is 'The Tightrope'.¹⁰ My exploration of the exercise further allowed me to understand the importance of an actor's physical movement, personal experiences as well as the actor's *will and concentration* to transmit 'a message'.

Furthermore, I also explored the use of silence. Using my written monologue, I used different lengths and amount of silence in order to see the impact it created. After several trial and errors, I understood that silence was a great way of making the monologue more impactful, increase the tension, as well as to allow the audience to reflect on what is taking place on stage.

⁹ Brook, Peter. *The Shifting Point: 40 Years of Theatrical Exploration ; 1946 - 1987*. London: Methuen, 1988. Print.

¹⁰ Firstrunfeaturesnyc. "Peter Brook: The Tightrope: - Educational Trailer." YouTube. YouTube, 12 Nov. 2013. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.

After researching and understanding Peter Brook's 'Holy Theatre', I found it difficult to choose one specific aspect. However, it all became clear when I wrote my devised monologue. I chose to make it *simple and repetitive* in order to make my message clear. The repetition of 'Dear guy on the street', according to feedback from my peers, allowed the audience to imagine itself either as the guy on the street or the woman talking to them. The repetition also allowed the audience to self-reflect, as well as creating a stronger emotional impact. Therefore, the use of *emotional memories* created a connection between the audience and the actor, which in conclusion allowed the audience to reflect and experience a *life-changing experience*.

Originally, I had thought of doing a monologue from Shakespeare's 'Much Ado About Nothing'. I had chosen Beatrice's speech (Act 4 - Scene 1) because it is still seen as one of the most feminist monologues of all time. However, when practicing the monologue I felt that it was not as impactful as a devised piece. As an actress, I did not feel a connection to the character and thus I was not able to use my *emotional memory*.

After writing my monologue based on a personal experience, I tried to demonstrate what I wanted to make 'visible'. Primarily, I wanted to show the confusion, dilemma and frustration that the woman is feeling. Her monologue can be seen as a letter of complaint to a guy who flirted with her on the street, however, the implied impact was to make the male audience realise the perspective of women. My vision was to leave the audience stunned and reflective of their approach towards women.

After feedback from my peers, however, I came to realise the true intention of the piece; it was a letter of complaint towards the objectification of women, as well as the mental barriers created by the different genders.

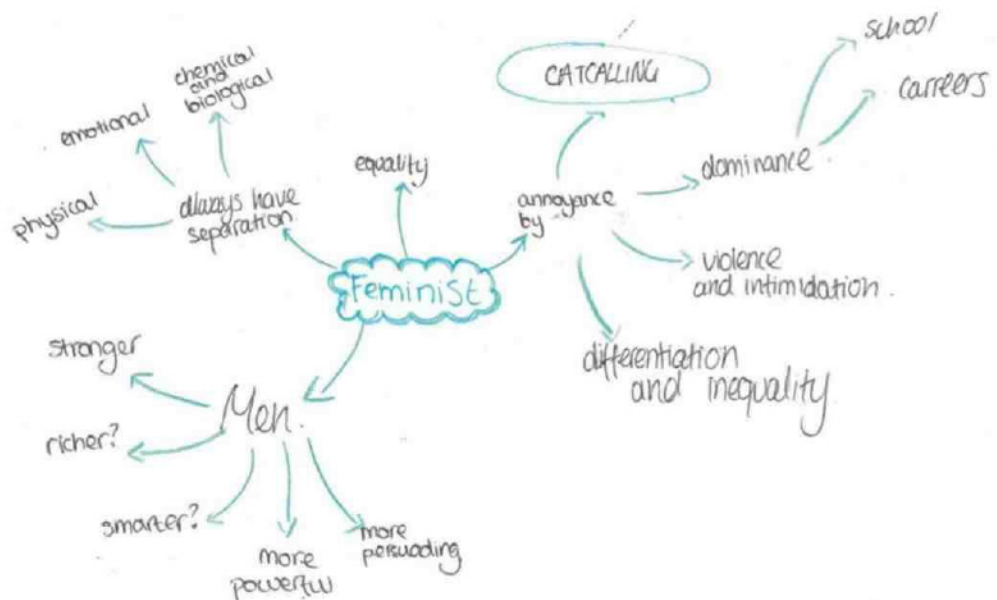


Figure 1. Brainstorm ideas for monologue. (Personal drawing)

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, my simplistic monologue and the use of repetition created an emotional and touching piece. However, I had not yet been able to make the objectification and barriers 'visible'. Therefore, I chose to use the physical and symbolic aspect of Holy Theatre to create a message. Primarily, I thought of using actual people as 'guys on the

street', however, that would be against Brook's viewpoints on minimalistic staging, as well as the male actors/ passers taking away the attention. I attempted the monologue with direct audience address but felt it did not carry the strength I intended for it, as it appeared as if I was addressing one particular person. Feedback from peers informed me that it was better if I was addressing the whole male race, as it allowed all members of the audience to feel impacted and directed to throughout. Therefore, I decided on using male mannequins which provoked several symbolic meanings. Firstly, male mannequins are objects, therefore emphasising the theme of objectification but ironically from the perspective of a female. Secondly, mannequins can be seen as the 'ideal male' due to their physical appearance, which once more creates an ironic and perhaps contradicting message to the audience as they also represent the external 'ideal' sex with little consideration for what is 'inside'.

When thinking about a way of making the 'social barriers' visible I thought of creating a

barbed-wire dress for me to wear in order to symbolise the constraint women feel. Figure 2,¹¹ shows my initial inspiration and was close to what I imagined the dress to look like. The dress would be a symbolic image of the emotional barrier created as well as a physical barrier to keep men like the 'guy on the street' away. This, however, seemed to take responsibility away from the male gender which was not my intention. Due to the difficulty in terms of practicality, movement and also because the unclear symbolism, I chose to not include it in my final piece. Another idea that came to mind after the wire dress was to wrap barbed wire around the mannequins. The symbolic message became clearer when placing it on the mannequins. Barbed wire around them would symbolise the potential danger they stood for and the how daunting breaking the barriers can seem. Also, it focused on their responsibility rather the women's fears which the dress

Figure 2. Inspiration for barbed wire dress.

essentially did. However, the practicality of it did not allow me to include it in my final piece as barbed wire was too heavy and difficult to handle and made it impossible for the mannequins to stand up. Thus, I decided to use "Keep Out" tape around them. The tape would convey the same message and it was far cheaper, simpler and safer to use.

¹¹<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/bf/2d/70/bf2d70aaf59730127f8b13e77c9afafc.jpg>

In my exploration of the stage design, I came across several problems and developments. Initially, I wanted to place the audience on a thrust stage, where the mannequins would be in corner.

The main factor in this stage would be the projected backdrop showing Ermou Street, the street in which I was approached by the 'guy on the street' (seen in Figure 3⁽¹²⁾, 4 & 5.).

Figure 3. Ermou Street - Idea for backdrop.

The idea was shortly dismissed, however, due the darkness created. As mentioned earlier in section A, Brook "disliked darkness" and he wanted the lighting to be minimal and thus not be a very important factor of the staging.

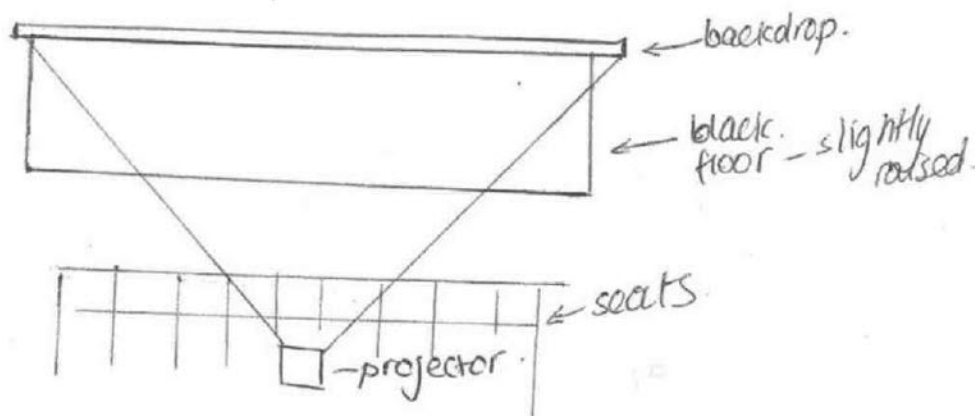
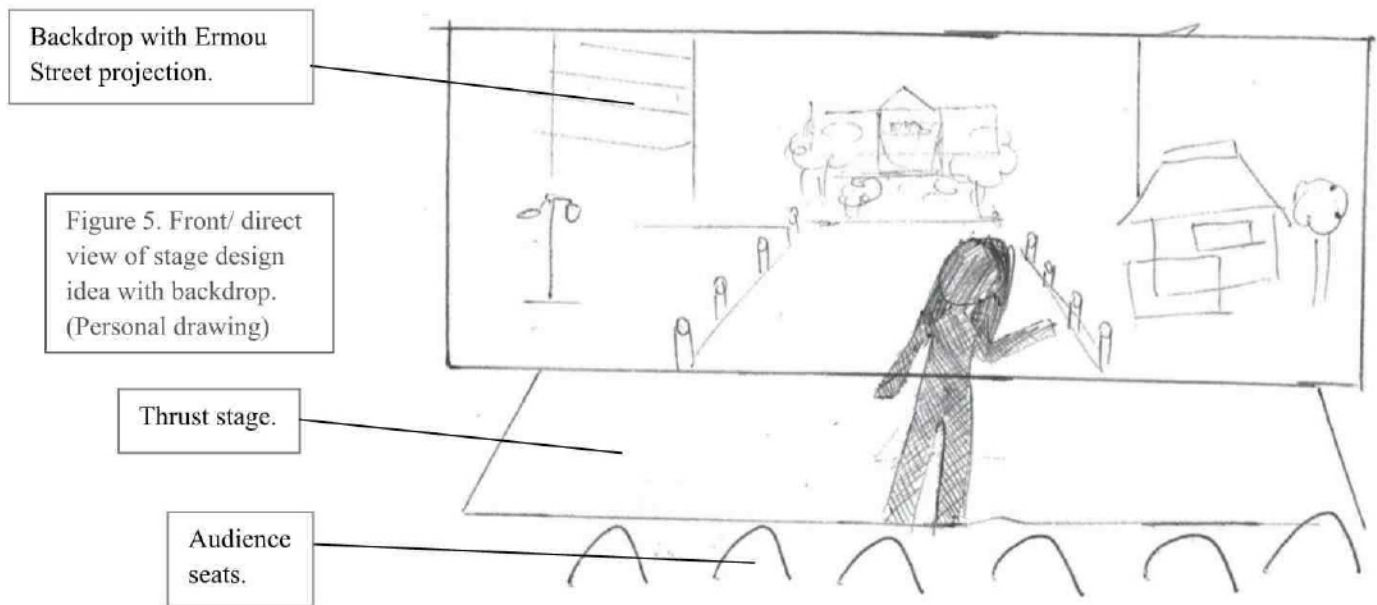


Figure 4. Aerial view of stage design idea with backdrop. (Personal drawing)

¹²http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_2NJH9cN8Rkl/S70VMT3vu1I/AAAAAAAAADPg/w15RIGRhZbk/s1600/mini-IMG_6140.JPG



Another idea which I dismissed, before deciding on the mannequins was to create men on the street through the use of torches. My idea was to have a 'catwalk' stage with the audience on both sides and to create a smoky atmosphere, using a smoke machine. The performance space would be dark and torches would light up in several parts of the stage in order to signify the men passing by on the street. This staging idea would allow me to have clear sightlines throughout the monologue and would allow me to portray my frustration and confusion, as once I 'touched' the light it would switch off and another one would light up. This idea, however, was dismissed due to the lack of means such as the smoke-machine, as well as a catwalk stage which could light up torches from above. Furthermore, I also dismissed the idea because the audience would be paying more attention to the lights rather than the words, as well as making the lights into an important staging element, which goes against Brook's theories.

In continuation, after I decided on placing the four mannequins on each corner of a proscenium stage it became clearer for me on where my focal point will be directed. Throughout the process of creating the piece, I also thought of talking to the camera instead of the mannequins, however, I thought it would more impactful to talk to a mannequin symbolizing the whole 'male race'. Furthermore, when deciding on the type of stage and the positioning of the audience, I wanted to make sure that the audience was an *essential part* of the 'experience' on the street. Originally I thought of placing them between the mannequins so that they felt they were 'people on the street'. However, according to feedback from peers, the audience focused more on following me around the stage than the message that I was trying to get across. Therefore, I chose to place my audience on the sides of the stage. As i a traverse space, this would allow the audience to feel as if they are present, as well to reflect and tune into their emotional memories.

Finally, my peers played a very important part in the development of my piece through their feedback and advice. Primarily, my peers, some of whom were part of the theatre class and some had no experience, allowed me to reflect on and understand the true impact and intention of my piece. Moreover, throughout rehearsals, multiple peers told me that I had to create a build-up of tension and they helped me by advising me on which 'points' to emphasise my frustration and confusion. Furthermore, another peer commented on the stiffness of my movement and he emphasised on trying to bring my 'inner need' through my body in order to send my message across. The same peer said to not think about my movement, but rather let it happen naturally. I incorporated all this feedback into my final piece, which I believed helped to achieve intentions and get my message across .

C. Evaluation of the solo theatre piece and reflections.

Overall, I think my solo theatre was able to incorporate most of the key elements that I chose to explore of Brook's 'Holy Theatre'. According to members of the audience, the most impactful and successful factor of Brook's theories which I included in my intention was the 'life-changing experience'. Male and female members of the audience told me that my piece changed their perspectives on the objectification of women as well as the barriers which they face. Most female audience members mentioned that the piece allowed them to reflect on their personal life experience and felt a 'connection' with the actor. Male audience members, however, saw the piece as a way of self-reflection and re-evaluated their approach towards women. A particular comment by an audience member made me realise that I had achieved my intended impact as they stated that they were "Impressed by my boldness to speak about such a topic". Finally, I believe that through the incorporation of the mannequins and the 'stay away' tape, I was able to make the 'invisible' objectification and barriers visible.

However, like in all performances, there were many difficulties faced. Primarily, as an actor, I found it very difficult to use minimal movement in order to send my message across. At times, I felt unsure and challenged by certain movements which I did and did not do, as it pushed me into a new way of acting. Especially when directed towards the mannequins, I found it difficult to incorporate as much emotion as possible, as well to think about my movements and words. Throughout my piece, I also found it frustrating to think about my positioning, as I did not want to turn my back totally to the members of the audience.

Finally, what I think was successful was the incorporation of the mannequins and the lighting. Once again, according to the audience, the mannequins created a chilling effect due to the difference in height, emphasising the intimidation that the character felt, but also made the invisible 'guy on the street' visible. The minimal blue lighting, as well as the staging of the mannequins also allowed the audience to concentrate more on the actor rather the stage itself.

In conclusion, Peter Brook's theories allowed me to see theatre, in terms of acting, designing and directing, in a new perspective. The aspects of *symbols, imagery, repetition and emotional memory* from 'Holy Theatre' which I incorporated into my piece expanded my experience of theatre, but also taught me to have a greater understanding and importance of the audience. Even though I was not able to reach the level of acting and theatre that Brook would require, I believe that my performance was as close to Brook's techniques and techniques as I could acquire in this short period of time. Overall, his minimal staging and acting showed me how theatre can become a mean of communication to teach and present different viewpoints of everyday life.

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