

# Peter Brook urged the audience to help him create theater

[Brook, from E1] linked to the breakthroughs and summits that defined theater directing in the modern era as an art form in its own right.

As much revered by the establishment as he was by the avant-garde, Brook was a recipient of three Tony Awards. Yet he was more in his element when working away from the commercial glare of Broadway and London's West End.

His productions synthesized the watershed movements of 20th century theater. The contemporary examples of Irish playwright Samuel Beckett and Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski were as palpable in his work as the influences of Craig, Brecht and Artaud. But his deepest debt was not so much to the aesthetic achievements of these path-breaking artists as to their revolutionary determination to make the stage once again a vehicle for discovery.

When I interviewed Brook at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater in 2017, he was 92 years old and on tour with "Battlefield," a production distilled from his marathon magnum opus, "The Mahabharata." His voice was meek but his mind retained its formidable clarity. Bundled in a scarf against the threat of an indoor breeze, he spoke effortlessly yet unhurriedly, his words flowing steadily as they lighted a path deeper into the core of his twin obsessions — art and existence.

## 'ALWAYS ON THE MOVE'

Brook was one of those rare divines, to borrow Portia's metaphor from "The Merchant of Venice," who followed his own instructions. The wisdom he exuded was that of a man on a perpetual quest. His approach to theater, mirroring his attitude toward life, was exquisitely — and undogmatically — attuned to the present moment. A central tenet for him was that "truth in the theater is always on the move" and therefore must be pursued afresh. Tradition was a valuable instrument in the chase, but it could also be a trap.

In his indispensable treatise "The Empty Space," Brook divided the modern theater into four categories: deadly, holy, rough and immediate. The deadly theater, the commercial branch that's built around box office and awards, "approaches the classics from the viewpoint that somewhere, someone has found out and defined how the play should be done."

But for Brook, not even the playwright was granted the final word. As countless moribund encounters with "faithful" productions made clear to him, "If you just let a play speak, it may not make a sound."

Although he found inspiration in the roughness of Brecht's political theater and the metaphysical mysteries of Artaud's holy the-

ater — and memorably integrated their disparate visions in his landmark 1964 production (and 1967 film) of Peter Weiss' play "Marat/Sade" — his own proclivity was for what he called the "immediate" theater, which derived its vitality from the dynamism of collaboration. Most important to Brook was the relationship between artist and audience, a partnership of equals, separated by "practical" rather than "fundamental" differences.

For Brook, "The artist is not there to indict, nor to lecture, nor to harangue, and least of all to teach. He is part of 'them.'" A "vital theater," he believed, must be rooted in a community, even if today's fractured society has made this possible only on a diminishing scale.

Peter Hall, another British directorial titan, records in his published diaries Brook's revealing answer to a question about the type of performers he was interested in: "He wanted actors whose main motivation was not being actors. Acting for them was a means to an end," Hall wrote. "Well, what was the end? Social? Political? Aesthetic? Challenged, he came down to a mystical endorsement of truth: Within the theatre truth burns between performer and audience."

Brook came into prominence by rethinking the way Shakespeare was revived. At Stratford, he made his name by treating what were then considered lesser plays — "Titus Andronicus," "Love's Labour's Lost" — as though they were new works. "Romeo and Juliet" was tackled with a youthful vigor and violence that proved shocking to those expecting the customary declamatory elegance.

His production of "King Lear," starring Paul Scofield (subsequently adapted into an experimental film), brought a Beckettian lens to Shakespeare's formidable tragedy. Brook trusted that, after the horrors of World War II and the rising threat of nuclear annihilation, audiences were up to the challenge of the play's apocalyptic vision and its understanding of evil as something recognizable in human nature.

In an interview with director Richard Eyre, Brook explained what he was after: "I think that what was quite clear was that 'Lear' had suffered like all the other plays from tradition. ... Because we hadn't got a true Elizabethan tradition: we had at that time a very, very bad Victorian tradition that took you far away from the plays. It had put a wrong pictorial stamp on the plays and a wrong moral stamp, because the Victorian tradition told you very strongly who were the good and who were the bad people."

Brook's cobweb-clearing 1970 Royal Shakespeare Company production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" famously ditched the forest

scenery for a white box and circus trapezes. Reactions to the daredevil antics were split, but imagination — a central theme of the play — was rekindled.

It's fair to say that Shakespeare was catapulted into the modern era with a staging that was a celebration of both the childlike wonder and mature virtuosity of the art of theater.

## EPIC TO MINIATURE

"The Mahabharata," Brook's epic production created with co-director Marie-Hélène Estienne and dramatist Jean-Claude Carrière, theatricalized for Western audiences the vast Hindu epic. The nine-hour work, a culmination of Brook's directorial investigations and experiments, was heralded as a masterpiece when it premiered at the Avignon festival in France in 1985. But charges of cultural appropriation were leveled by critics who felt the spectacle of exoticism dehistoricized sacred myths.

Brook refused to let this criticism deter his intercultural commitment. He was adamant in his 2017 interview with me that his position had remained unchanged: "Shakespeare is played in every part of the world. It comes from England, but the English have never said that it belongs to us exclusively," he said. "When I first encountered the poem, I saw that this was one of the masterpieces of humanity, but for complicated historical reasons it had hardly emerged from India. I felt, and this is a pure piece of romantic imagination, that we had been called to be the servants of the epic."

But if Brook had no misgivings about his approach to world culture, he grew less enamored of working on such a monumental scale. His late works were born out of the desire to communicate from a place of bare theatrical necessity.

In "The Man Who," inspired by Oliver Sacks' "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat," Brook tackled the mysteries of the brain in a compact 100 minutes. He staged "Hamlet" with eight actors, no intermission and roughly a third of the original play cut — raising the hackles of purists just as his scaled-down version of Bizet's "Carmen" had done decades earlier. He gravitated quite naturally to Beckett's briefest works. Even "Battlefield," derived from "The Mahabharata," was a mere 70 minutes.

Although he was effortlessly eloquent, Brook understood that speaking about artistic work wasn't the same thing as doing it. "I really don't see it in terms of accomplishments or achievements," he said when asked by an interviewer about his career. Up until the end, his imagination was ignited by the infinite possibilities of empty space.



Photographs by MATTHEW MURPHY La Jolla Playhouse

"LEMPICKA" at La Jolla Playhouse with Edén Espinosa as the title character.

# Forward thinker, endlessly complex

A Broadway-bound musical celebrates Art Deco-era artist Tamara de Lempicka.

BY ASHLEY LEE

LA JOLLA, Calif. — The best-known Tamara de Lempicka painting is a self-portrait. The renowned artist, wearing a silver helmet and a matching scarf, is in the driver's seat of an emerald green Bugatti, her gloved hand resting nonchalantly on the sports car's steering wheel.

She is glamorous, confident and commanding; she is visibly at ease with being the center of attention. In fact, she seems to be staring right back at the viewer, eyeing others while simultaneously being seen.

The piece, created in 1928 for the cover of a fashion magazine, has since been hailed as the definitive image of the modern woman, the auto age, the Art Deco style. Is it *that* important that Lempicka did not actually drive a glamorous green Bugatti but a little yellow Renault instead?

As she told *Houston City Magazine* in 1978: "I painted the car green because I prefer it so."

The audacity to legitimize her own gaze — within her work, among her lovers, about herself — was groundbreaking for a female artist in 1920s Paris. A hundred years later, this singular boldness pulses through "Lempicka," a Broadway-bound musical that's as ambitious and complex as the painter it frames onstage.

"For how absolutely dynamic she was, her story has been untold," director Rachel Chavkin tells *The Times*. "Tamara was a living intersection of so many movements and events of her time: She was queer, she was her family's breadwinner, and she came of age between the two world wars, the exact moment that women were finally busting out of a whole series of historic constrictions. She really was in this relentless quest of herself, her voice and her desire to have it all, which is something that stood out to me and still resonates with women today."

Running through July 24 at La Jolla Playhouse, the stage show begins with Lempicka and her aristocratic husband seeking refuge from the Russian Revolution in Paris, where she rose to fame as an in-demand portraitist among members of high society. Throughout the roaring decade, she became known for her impeccable technique and her mixing of influences: Cubism and Neoclassicism, stillness and speed, past and future.

Likewise, the "Lempicka" score combines contemporary musical theater, power ballads and electro-pop bangers. One song, performed by George Abud as Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, sounds like it could've been borrowed from Lady Gaga or Robyn's set list.

"Tamara drew on many, many styles of all time periods, but never with the intention to emulate any single one," says composer and book co-writer Matt Gould. "She was always trying to create something new. It only felt right to do the same thing musically."

In recent years, Lem-



ART in a perilous time: Espinosa as Lempicka and George Abud as futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.

## 'Lempicka'

**Where:** Mandell Weiss Theatre, 2910 La Jolla Village Drive, La Jolla  
**When:** 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays. Ends July 24.  
**Tickets:** Starting at \$25  
**Contact:** [lajollaplayhouse.org](http://lajollaplayhouse.org), (858) 550-1010  
**Running time:** 2 hours, 30 minutes (one 15-minute intermission)

picka's work has become incredibly sought-after; at a 2020 auction, one of her pieces sold for \$21.1 million. Her paintings have inspired high-end fashion collections, fronted advertising campaigns and appeared in Madonna music videos. Her work continues to appeal because, clothed or otherwise, her models were always strategically positioned, as if demanding both space on the canvas and the attention of anyone who sees it.

"The way she found inspiration in the body, with these sharp angles and long lines, is so elegant and beautiful," says choreographer Raja Feather Kelly. "It's similar to a gesturing technique called *épaulement*, a French term for when ballet dancers shift their shoulders to play with light and create depth. Our dancers use it with a real precision to re-create Tamara's paintings onstage."

Lempicka remains radical for subverting the conventions of the female nude — a category long dominated by male artists — and framing her subjects as empowered, desirous beings. Take Rafaela, the sex worker who repeatedly modeled for Lempicka: According to Artzy's Alexxa Gotthardt, "Lempicka celebrates female sexuality and allure in her depictions of Rafaela, presenting her as virile, voluptuous, and in full control of her own pleasure; in 'La Belle Rafaela,' the subject twists in delight as her hand grasps her own breast."

The musical reenacts the first time Lempicka paints Rafaela. Portrayed by Edén Espinosa and Amber Iman, respectively, this initial creative collaboration leads to a romantic relationship — and a standout Act 1 closer in which a thrilled Lempicka acknowledges her shifting sexual orientation.

The production also recreates *Le Monocle*, the historic nightclub that was a haven for queer Parisians, and includes the openly gay singer and club owner Suzy Solidor (Natalie Joy Johnson) as a supporting character.

Still, Lempicka stays married to Tadeusz (Andrew Samonsky), and not only because coming out would kill her career, or worse; rather, her desire for her muse doesn't detract from her attraction to her husband. This framing is key, as it is rare for a major musical to center around a bisexual protagonist, especially one who makes this self-discovery as an adult.

"It was very important that we weren't telling a story about a woman who was a closeted lesbian because she was afraid or didn't want to leave the father of her child — no, she had many affairs with both men and women throughout her life," says lyricist and co-book writer Carson Kreitzer, who is also bisexual.

Adds Gould, who is gay, "This is not a musical where the conflict is about a love triangle and which person she's going to choose. But instead, it's: I love them both, so why can't I have both?"

Just as the real-life figure painted her models with evident dimension, "Lempicka" aims to faithfully represent its multifaceted subject — an ambitious goal, since the artist "was such a creature of savvy reinvention and deliberate myth-making," says Kreitzer. Lempicka was famously vague about her age, often referred to her daughter as her sister, and asked her kin to call her "Cherie" rather than "Mom" or "Grandma."

Lempicka has previously been portrayed onstage. An immersive, multistory theatrical experience was named after her and ran in L.A. for a whopping nine years. But it was not actually about her, as it was based on a book about her visit to Gabriele d'Annunzio's infamously debauched estate, written by the Italian poet's housekeeper. "This is not my work, my art," Lempicka said of the book in 1978. "All that people will remember or know about me is this servant's lies."

Kreitzer and Gould worked with the artist's estate, now headed by great-granddaughter Marisa de Lempicka, to portray her with as much nuance and interiority as possible, but they admit it's only an introduction to her life and legacy. Still, it's a promising start.

"I've had conversations with people who didn't know who she was, saw the show and then did their own deep dive into her beautiful body of work," says Espinosa. "My biggest hope for this show is that Tamara is honored and known and revered — not only as the artist she was but also as the woman she was — because she has deserved that for so long. It makes me so happy to hear that people are now wanting to know more about her."

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