

# Disability as a family affair

**MICHAEL BILLINGTON asks whether theatre is the right medium for an exploration of neurological or physical disorder. Peter Brook's new production in Paris provides a convincing answer**

PETER BROOK is obviously not the first person to spot the dramatic potential in the casebook studies of Oliver Sacks. They have already spawned a Frerret play, a Michael Norman opera and the film of *Awakenings*. But Brook's latest project, *L'Homme Qui*, based on *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat* and currently playing at the Bouffes du Nord in Paris, is not in any sense a conventional play. It is a series of stories about neurological disorders told with a hard compassion that makes us keenly aware of our common humanity and that graphically extends the possibilities of theatre.

The first thing to say, however, is that Brook avoids any kind of showy theatrical music: everything is as direct and simple as can be. We are confronted by a rectangular stage dotted with white chairs, tables, a camera and two TV screens. Four of Brook's regular actors — Maurice Benichou, David Benoit, Saïgü Rouyate and Yoshi Oida — who spent a year not just researching Sacks's book but also visiting a neurology clinic, alternate as doctors and patients. An on-stage musician provides factual, stringed accompaniment to moments of piercing sadness and occasional joy.

"To talk of diseases is a sort of Arabian Nights entertainment," runs the epigraph to Sacks's book. But what comes across on stage is not the exotic "otherness" of the patients but their dysfunctional humanity. Echoing the retrograde amnesia of Sacks's *Lost Mariner*, for instance, Maurice Benichou plays a man who has erased the last 27 years of his life spent in a hospital in La Rochelle and whose memory

stops short at his vivid youthful experiences of Paris. At one point the doctor confronts him with a mirror and he stares at his own ageing image with a baleful lack of recognition; we are moved to an imaginative empathy that gives a glimpse of what the loss of self entails.

This is the great lesson of the evening. Representation increases understanding: the acting out of a disorder sharpens our awareness. Sacks's book, for instance, offers several studies of visual agnosia. But it becomes a living reality when we see Saïgü Kouyate as a music professor mistaking a histologist for one of his students, when Yoshi Oida gazes at a rose with baffled perplexity or when the two of them, confronted by a TV image of rolling waves, see only a sequence of lines, colours and tones. The power of theatre is that it gives us, however momentarily, a patient's eye-view of the world's mystifying strangeness.

The potential danger of an event like *L'Homme Qui* is obvious: that sickness becomes there is a strong belief in the shamanistic power of the investigative healer. And that carries over into the Paris stage show. It appears at once to our curiosity, our compassion, our simultaneous hunger for cure and submission to the Nietzschean argument that "great pain is the ultimate liberator of the spirit."

But is theatre the right medium for an exploration of neurological or indeed physical disorder? It all depends on how the subject is treated. America a decade ago produced a rash of "disability plays", some of which came dangerously close to exploitation. But, against that, one can set experiences as varied and consciousness-



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heightening as Pomerance's *The Elephant Man*, Frerret's *A Kind Of Alaska* and now the group-researched and authored *L'Homme Qui*. What the list, in particular, proves is that there is something about the focus and intensity of theatre that brings case histories alive: you feel that the Bouffes du Nord team (including Marie-Hélène Estienne and Jean-Claude Carrière) are not out to manipulate us but to usher us into what Brook himself calls "the valley of acknowledgment."

This lesson answered the question of where *L'Homme Qui* fits into Brook's theatrical pilgrimage. In his late sixties, he remains as much of a pathfinder as ever; but he is increasingly fascinated by the process as well as the product and is more concerned with exploring the nature of man than with the fortitudes of showmanship.

It is tempting, for instance, to compare the new show with Brook's work 30 years ago on *The Marat-Sade*. Obviously that was a very different animal: a Peter Weiss play set in an asylum at Charenton that combined political debate with a visible display of madness. Once again, Brook and his

actors researched the subject thoroughly. But, without discrediting a magnificent production, one remembers less the internal dialectic than the tumultuous Breughelian vividness and violence of the attendant lunatics. Brook's command of theatrical effect was exhilarating: now he seems more interested in philosophical enquiry.

Obviously, he knows as much about staging as anyone alive: you only have to look at the physical clarity of *L'Homme Qui* or the way the 100-minute evening ends with kaleidoscopic, colour-filled close-ups of the cerebral cortex. But Brook, while an immensely practical man of the theatre, now seems as much a "philosopher" as a director. Even a work as rich, epic and multifaceted as *The Mahabharata* seemed part of a personal quest to discover whether there was some regenerative human instinct that would transcend cosmic chaos.

After exploring what Michael Rostonoff labelled "The theatre of dissatisfaction" in the sixties and venturing towards political nihilism, Brook now seems to be in a period of affirmative humanism. To me, the lesson of *The Mahabharata* was the

Shakespearean one that out of destruction and disorder comes harmony and peace. And, although *L'Homme Qui* has nothing so crude and obvious as a message, it is a deeply positive work that looks at the strange manifestations of sickness with love and respect. It is, in many ways, a quiet, cool, low-key show; but it sends you out into the night marvelling at the power of theatre to tell stories and feeling more at one with the human race.

Until early May at the Bouffes du Nord, Paris. Box office: (010 33 1) 46 07 34 90.

## Billington on l'Homme Qui

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