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As the Story Goes . . .

Peter Brook

In the rubric Texts around Theatre (TaT) we present various perspectives on theatre – historical and contemporary, intercultural and culture-specific, unexpectedly weird, unusually suspenseful, disturbedly gripping, fascinatingly enigmatic etc.

Through the following story renowned theatre director Peter Brook reminds us that what happens on the theatre stage has to be of interest to everyone in the audience, and he leaves us with the question: How can this be achieved?

God, seeing how desperately bored everyone was on the seventh day of creation, racked his overstretched imagination to find something more to add to the completeness he had just conceived. Suddenly his inspiration burst even beyond his own limitless bounds and he saw a further aspect of reality: its possibility to imitate itself. So he invented theatre.

He called his angels together and announced this in the following terms, which are still contained in an ancient Sanskrit document. "The theatre will be the field in which people can learn to understand the sacred mysteries of the universe. And at the same time," he added with deceptive casualness, "it will be a comfort to the drunkard and to the lonely."

The angels were very excited and could hardly wait for there to be enough people on earth to put this into practice. The people responded with equal enthusiasm and rapidly there were many groups all trying to imitate reality in their different ways. And yet the results were disappointing. What had sounded so amazing, so generous and so all-embracing seemed to turn to dust in their hands. In particular, the actors, writers, directors, painters and musicians couldn't agree amongst themselves as to who was the most important, and so they spent much of their time quarrelling while their work satisfied them less and less.

One day, they realized they were getting nowhere and they commissioned an angel to go back to God to ask for help.

God pondered for a long time. Then he took a piece of paper, scribbled on it, put it into a box and gave it to the angel, saying, "Everything is here. This is my first and last word."

The return of the angel to the theatre circles was an immense event and the whole profession crowded round him as the box was opened. He took out the paper, unfolded it. It contained one word. Some read it over his shoulder, as he announced it to the others. "The word is 'interest.'"

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"Interest?" "Interest!" "Is that all?" "Is that all!"

There was a deep rumble of disappointment.

"Who does he take us for?" "It's childish." "As if we didn't know . . . "

The meeting broke up angrily, the angel left under a cloud, and the word, though never referred to again, became one of the many reasons for the loss of face that God suffered in the eyes of his creatures.

However, a few thousand years later, a very young student of Sanskrit found a reference to this incident in an old text. As he also worked part time as a cleaner in a theatre, he told the theatre company of his discovery. This time, there was no laughter, no scorn. There was a long, grave silence. Then someone spoke.

"Interest. To interest. I must interest. I must interest another. I can't interest another unless I'm interested myself. We need a common interest."

Then another voice: "To share a common interest, we must exchange elements of interest in a way that's interesting . . . "

". . . to both of us . . . " "To all of us . . . " "In the right rhythm." "Rhythm?" "Yes, like making love. If one's too fast and one's too slow, it's not interesting . . . "

Then they began to discuss, seriously and very respectfully, what is interesting? Or rather, as one of them put it, what is *really* interesting?

And here they disagreed. For some, the divine message was clear – "interest" meant only those aspects of living that were directly related to the essential questions of being and becoming, of God and the divine laws. For some, interest is the common interest of all men to understand more clearly what is just and unjust for mankind. For others, the very ordinariness of the word "interest" was a clear signal from the divine not to waste a moment on profundity and solemnity but just get on with it and entertain.

At this point the student of Sanskrit quoted to them the full text about why God created theatre. "It has to be all those things at the same time," he said. "And in an interesting way," added another. After which, the silence was profound.

They then began to discuss the other side of the coin, the appeal of the "uninteresting," and the strange motivations, social and psychological, that make so many people in the theatre applaud so often and so vigorously what actually is of no interest to them whatsoever. "If only we could really understand this word . . . " said one.

"With this word," said another in a hushed tone, "we could go very far . . . "

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