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FROM OPERA TO THEATRE:
PETER BROOK'S LYRIC RECONFIGURATIONS
AT THE BOUFFES DU NORD (1981–2010)

Abstract. In 1980s Paris, Peter Brook's lyric productions at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, *La Tragédie de Carmen* (1981), *Impressions de Pelléas* (1992), and *A Magic Flute* (2010), profoundly reshaped the operatic repertoire. Through deliberate reductions to scores and librettos, the suppression of secondary characters and chorus, and a re-organisation of dramatic structure, Brook subordinates musical time to theatrical action, shifting opera toward a stripped, unified theatrical form. Drawing on archival recordings and personal performance experience, this article examines the dual process of adaptation-dramatization and dialectical reversal that generates newly “natural” operas, and situates Brook's work within opera's long history of tension between music and text.

Keywords: Peter Brook; opera adaptation; Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord; relationship between music and text

OD OPERY DO TEATRU.
LIRYCZNE REINTERPRETACJE PETERA BROOKA
W BOUFFES DU NORD (1981–2010)

Abstrakt. W latach 80. XX wieku w Paryżu, liryczne inscenizacje Petera Brooka w Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord – *La Tragédie de Carmen* (1981), *Impressions de Pelléas* (1992) i *Czarodziejski flet* (2010) – gruntownie przekształciły repertuar operowy. Poprzez celowe redukcje partytur i librett, eliminację postaci drugoplanowych i chóru oraz reorganizację struktury dramaturgicznej, Brook podporządkował czas muzyczny akcji scenicznej, przesuwając operę w stronę uproszczonej, spójnej formy teatralnej. Opierając się na archiwalnych nagraniach i osobistych doświadczeniach wykonawczych, niniejszy artykuł analizuje podwójny proces adaptacji-dramatyzacji i dialektycznego odwrócenia, który generuje

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nowe, „naturalne” opery, i sytuuje twórczość Brook'a w długiej historii tego gatunku, charakteryzującej się napięciem między muzyką a tekstem.

Slowa kluczowe: Peter Brook; adaptacja opery; Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord; relacja pomiędzy tekstem a muzyką

In Paris in the 1980s, the British stage director Peter Brook, newly established in the capital, went on to revolutionise both the perception and the practice of opera in France and across Europe. His productions, *La Tragédie de Carmen* (1981), *Impressions de Pelléas* (1992), and *A Magic Flute* (2010), considered as landmark productions, renewing the operatic landscape through the profound transformations he brought to the originals.¹

Following a meeting with Bernard Lefort, who was the director of the Paris Opéra at the time, Peter Brook was invited to stage a production for the institution. Lefort later admitted he was surprised when Brook, without hesitation, proposed *Carmen*, Bizet's opera.² Brook accepted on one condition which astonished the director: the new production had to be created at the theatre he owned: Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris. An unprecedented collaboration was thus forged between the two men, opening up a far broader exchange between the national institution and the director's more intimate Bouffes du Nord, a co-production conceived in both artistic and financial terms.³ It would give Brook complete freedom over the production's aesthetic conception as well as broad latitude in organisational principles. The productions would unfold within an intentionally “intimate” playing area, determined in advance to include the absence of an orchestra pit, thereby creating a new stage–audience dynamic. The work itself was shaped to the measure of the artists with whom the director surrounded himself, composers Marius Constant and Franck Krawczyk, and dramaturgs Jean-Claude Carrière and Marie-Hélène Estienne,⁴ and was then developed further in rehearsal, with singers and actors carrying the creative work forward. Instrumental and vocal forces (including chorus) would be reduced, and the overall duration condensed, in exchange for a highly efficient reorganisation of

¹ The original works are: *Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)* by W. A. Mozart and Emanuel Schikaneder (1791); *Carmen* by Georges Bizet, with Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy (1875); *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Claude Debussy and Maurice Maeterlinck (1902).

² Peter Brook, Jean-Claude Carrière, and Marius Constant, *La Tragédie de Carmen: d'après Georges Bizet, Prosper Mérimée, Meilhac and Halévy* (Paris: Centre International de Créations Théâtrales, 1981), 7.

³ “Présentation du Fonds du Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord—direction: Brook, Peter: 4-COL-14,” Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (archival note on the C.I.R.T. and C.I.C.T.).

⁴ On collaborators: Marius Constant and Jean-Claude Carrière for *La Tragédie de Carmen*, Marius Constant for *Impressions de Pelléas*, Franck Krawczyk and Marie-Hélène Estienne for *A Magic Flute*.

dramatic structure. These choices responded not only to Brook's aesthetic ideals but also to his demand to align his inner vision for the production with the practical realities of the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord.

Within this configuration, theatrical action had to take precedence over the music in the work itself. In contrast to Carl Dahlhaus's assertion that "in opera, music is the primary factor that constitutes the work of art," Brook reverses this hierarchy, relegating the music to the background, behind dramatic action.⁵ Once that point is granted, the narrative can unfold without being interrupted by long musical developments, narrowing as much as possible the temporal gap between action and its perception by the audience. Inevitably, such an approach rekindles a centuries-old debate over the nature of opera as a genre. Defined by Isabelle Moindrot as a "hybrid art" in which theatre and image "unite and disunite," opera's history has been shaped by the emulation, in fact the rivalries, among the arts that compose it.⁶ What, then, does each discipline contribute to the others? What place does the British director accord them in his productions? Is he, in effect, engaged in a "de-operatisation" (*désopératisation*) of these lyric works?⁷ Such cuts can be disconcerting and did provoke anger: at one performance of *A Magic Flute*, audience members "whistled" the missing notes of the overture back into the hall even as they booed. For many, these interventions seemed to violate what they regarded as the sacrosanct integrity of the composers, Mozart, Bizet, Debussy, and their works.

As far back as one can go, Brook's relationship with opera seems to be marked by deep ambivalence. At the age of twenty-two, he became "director of productions" at London's Covent Garden, a post he held from 1947 to 1949.⁸ His aim was to "jolt that outdated, slumbering institution into the world of the present."⁹ He met stiff resistance and was dismissed after two years. Four decades later the reforming impulse remained intact, but it no longer targeted the institution alone: it now addressed the genre itself, which Brook repeatedly described, in lectures and in *The Empty Space*, as a kind of "dead art".¹⁰

⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, "La dramaturgie musicale," in *Histoire de l'opéra italien*, vol. 6, ed. Giorgio Pestelli and Lorenzo Bianconi (Liège: Mardaga, 1992), 95.

⁶ Isabelle Moindrot, *La représentation d'opéra: Poétique et dramaturgie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 5–14. This idea draws on eighteenth-century debates and Gluck's reform with Calzabigi.

⁷ Pierre Longuenesse, *Le modèle musical dans le théâtre contemporain: L'invention du poème théâtral* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2020), 111.

⁸ Brook's duties at Covent Garden (1947–49) included supervision of operas across two seasons and staging assignments.

⁹ Peter Brook, *Oublier le temps*, trans. Dominique Eddé (Paris: Seuil, [1998] 2003), 65.

¹⁰ Peter Brook, *L'espace vide*, trans. Christine Estienne and Franck Fayolle (Paris: Seuil, [1968] 1977), 34–35.

This article sets out to identify and analyse the stages of opera's transition, in Brook's work, towards theatre—first as a process of “adaptation-dramatisation” in Muriel Plana's sense, which observes that, in adaptations into theatre, it is common to pare back characters and to reorder or conflate scenes so as to reinforce dramaturgical continuity and foreground the unities of time and place.¹¹ Brook's undertaking is coupled, however, with what I term a “reversal”: a dialectical process through which the resulting works are neither the simple sum of theatre and music nor merely plays “set to music” but emerge as newly regenerated creations animated by an unbroken continuity of dramatic action.

The analysis draws on wide-shot archival recordings (not commercially released) lent by the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, as well as on my personal experience: I sang the role of Pamina in the premiere production and rehearsals of *A Magic Flute* (2010–2011). I therefore had access to many testimonies and unpublished documents. Primary sources on the topic are held chiefly at the BnF in Paris and at London's Victoria and Albert Museum.¹²

1. ALTERATIONS TO THE LIBRETTOS AND SCORES IN THREE LYRIC WORKS: *CARMEN, PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE, AND THE MAGIC FLUTE*

Peter Brook and his collaborators made substantial cuts to the original works, tightening the plot and profoundly transforming their overall structure. This constitutes a practice of reduction, which Gérard Genette theorises in *Palimpsestes*, notably through two procedures: amputation (the removal of entire scenes) and multiple excisions (partial cuts within scenes).¹³ The working scores used for *A Magic Flute* and *La Tragédie de Carmen* bear material witness to this reconfiguration with cross-outs, pasted-in passages, and handwritten annotations that alter the original versions.¹⁴

One major effect of these interventions is the redistribution of roles and the elimination of secondary characters. Often marginal to the dramatic economy, such figures disappear in favour of a tighter focus on the principal roles. Their functions

¹¹ Muriel Plana, *Roman, théâtre, cinéma: Adaptations, hybridations et dialogue des arts* (Paris: Bréal, [2004] 2018).

¹² Archival sources: “Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord,” Fonds 4-COL-14; “Jean-Guy Lecat,” Fonds COL-388, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; “Peter Brook Collection,” Fonds THM/452, Theatre & Performance Archives, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

¹³ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 7–16.

¹⁴ Annotated working scores of *A Magic Flute* and *La Tragédie de Carmen* (author's copies via performers; author's note).

are sometimes reassigned to other performers or taken over by the music itself. In *A Magic Flute*, for example, two actors share duties originally assigned to the “three ladies,” and in Pamina’s act 2 suicide scene it is the music that interrupts her gesture, whereas in the original, the vocal intervention of the three boys would have done so. In parallel, repetitions characteristic of operatic form, notably reprises and refrains, are largely removed to reduce extended interruptions and maintain dramatic continuity.

These revisions and reworkings require new musical transitions. Marius Constant and Franck Krawczyk ensure continuity by different means: Constant largely reuses pre-existing music (*La Tragédie de Carmen*, *Impressions de Pelléas*), while Krawczyk incorporates Mozart pieces from outside *The Magic Flute* (for instance, the *Adagio für Glasharmonika*, K. 356, and the *Fantasia in D minor* for piano). Finally, the composers suppress introductions and concluding cadenzas of musical numbers, breaking with the traditional operatic “number” format in favour of uninterrupted dramatic-musical flow. These reductions are not mere cuts but constitute a process of scenic re-creation in which rhythm, narrative economy and dramaturgical scope are reconsidered. The cut is thus far from negative: it becomes the vehicle for a work coming into being.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF THE LYRIC WORKS UNDER BROOK'S ALTERATIONS

The cuts trace a new landscape for these lyric works. Their structural modifications unsettle the boundaries of the genres to which they belong. As these changes accumulate, a new, stripped playing area emerges, freed from the ornaments of opera so as to liberate the theatrical stage.

2.1 *LA TRAGÉDIE DE CARMEN*: FROM OPÉRA-COMIQUE TO TRAGEDY

Originally an *opéra-comique*, *Carmen* becomes, in *La Tragédie de Carmen*, a fully tragic work drawing on both Elizabethan and ancient theatre¹⁵. Brook himself claims an affinity with Greek tragedy, seeking to extract from the original libretto a tightened intrigue centred on an inescapable fatality: destructive love, jealousy, and death.¹⁶ The principal characters, Micaëla, Carmen, Don José and Escamillo, are caught in

¹⁵ Jean Spenlehauer, “Le texte: une pratique sur deux modèles,” in *Les Voies de la création théâtrale*, vol. 13, ed. Georges Banu (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1985), 173.

¹⁶ Peter Brook, *Le diable c'est l'ennui* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2015), 73.

a tragic dynamic in which their destinies intertwine with no possibility of escape. As Jacqueline de Romilly notes, the essence of tragedy lies in “the inexorable rise of a threat up to its fulfilment.”¹⁷ Don José, consumed by jealousy, kills Carmen after a struggle of will and resistance.

By contrast, characters such as Le Dancaïre, Mercédès, Frasquita, Le Remendado, Moralès, and Zuniga belong to the world of opéra-comique. Their presence, often tied to lighter scenes, owed much to the conventions of the genre and to the specific vocal distribution practices of the nineteenth-century Opéra-Comique in Paris.¹⁸ Brook’s removal of these secondary figures, as well as of the chorus, erases local colour, costumes, and scenic bustle, breaks with the codes of the opéra-comique, and recentres the drama on the ineluctable tragic fate of Carmen and Don José.

2.2 IMPRESSIONS DE PELLÉAS: A SYMBOLIST STAGING?

The story of *Pelléas et Mélisande* unfolds in an imaginary land, Allemonde, at an indeterminate medieval moment, populated by secondary figures whose presence remains unexplained. Debussy’s lyric drama, steeped in Maeterlinck’s symbolism, subordinates intrigue, psychology, and historical time to a oneiric language.

With *Impressions de Pelléas*, Brook moves towards a more realistic reading by stripping away symbolist elements. He recentres the intrigue on Golaud, Mélisande, and Pelléas, suppressing background characters and the mannered repetitions that in Maeterlinck create suspense and strangeness. Language serves direct communication, anchored in the reality of human relations. The staging marks the turn as well: the timeless, mysterious universe gives way, on the stage of the Bouffes du Nord, to a bourgeois nineteenth-century salon reminiscent of Debussy’s. A grand piano, armchairs, and period carpets structure the space, while a shallow basin of water on stage preserves a trace of dream. Mélisande, whose origins remain undefined in the original, is sung in alternation by Asian sopranos, rooting her otherness in the orientalist imaginary of Debussy’s era. In effacing much of the mysterious, atemporal weave of the libretto, Brook trades the symbolist dimension for a more legible, linear reading centred on the protagonists’ trajectories.

¹⁷ Jacqueline de Romilly, *La Tragédie grecque* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, “Quadrigé,” 2014), 46.

¹⁸ Rémy Campos and Aurélien Poidevin, *La scène lyrique autour de 1900*, preface by Christophe Ghristi (Paris: L’Œil d’or, 2012), 309.

2.3 *A MAGIC FLUTE*: SUPPRESSING THE MARVELOUS

The marvellous that initially suffuses *The Magic Flute* is gradually pared away. The opera's magical elements, such as unknown realms, the Queen of the Night, enchanted instruments, lose emblematic figures of the supernatural such as the three ladies and the three boys. Correspondingly, Brook removes the fairy-tale sets envisaged in Schikaneder's libretto.¹⁹ In line with his wider approach, the suppression of characters and chorus brings with it the erasure of traditional sets and iconic elements: the stage, emptied of ornament, lays the narrative bare. This progressive transformation subtly alters the very nature of the operatic genre, nudging it towards a more pared-down, theatrical expression.

2.4 A STAGE ON THE WAY TO DISAPPEARANCE: FROM AN "AESTHETIC OF CLUTTER" TO THE "EMPTY SPACE"

By deleting characters, and with them the décor and traditional trappings of each lyric work, Brook also erases the ostentatious, spectacular dimension of operatic performance. Yet that dimension is intrinsic to opera.²⁰ Catherine Kintzler, in *Théâtre et opéra à l'âge classique*, even characterises operatic aesthetics as an "aesthetic of clutter." Opera mobilises large forces, chorus, ballet, "the whole caboodle", because opera's imperative is to "show":

The imperative of presence, of display (avowed in the abundance of stage directions in the author's hand) entails an obligation to change place; it renders operatic temporality a temporality without depth.... Opera often presents itself as a kind of collage, a string of scenes where the interval brings no real breathing-space, only the possibility of shifting point of view, from shot to reverse-shot.²¹

Kintzler's observation concerns not only scenography but also operatic poetics. By "collage" she evokes the operatic build of juxtaposed "numbers", each forming a distinct scenic and musical universe. In *The Magic Flute*, for instance, we pass from an exterior landscape to a chamber within Sarastro's temple, then to a sacred wood where the Temple of Wisdom rises. *Carmen*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Pelléas et Mélisande* likewise parade multiple locales before our eyes.

¹⁹ David J. Buch, *Magic Flutes and Enchanted Forests: The Supernatural in Eighteenth-Century Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 332–58.

²⁰ Damien Colas, "Perspectives," in *D'une scène à l'autre. L'opéra italien en Europe*, vol. 2, *La musique à l'épreuve du théâtre*, ed. Damien Colas and Alessandro Di Profio (Liège: Mardaga, 2009), 29.

²¹ Catherine Kintzler, *Théâtre et opéra à l'âge classique: une familière étrangeté* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 12.

In Brook's lyric productions, the places that the characters traverse are not depicted naturalistically but evoked by bamboo poles and simple stage props, suggesting a chamber, a temple or a prison. In avoiding the many scenic changes that opera typically requires, Brook effectively imposes a unity of place on the performance.²² He also subordinates musical time to theatrical time to forge a new unity in which music and action work in synergy. The absence of ensembles and choruses produces a kind of temporal plausibility: in *The Magic Flute* the chorus traditionally interrupts the action to announce Sarastro's arrival; in *A Magic Flute* a single piano chord will herald his entrance with a new musical colour.²³ By further removing *da capo* repeats in certain arias and duets, musical time no longer dilates as it does in many operas. The reduction of instrumental forces reinforces this plausibility: where a piano can, via the pedal, sustain harmonic resonance, an ensemble or orchestra contributes a harmonic richness that can heighten the sensation of temporal dilation. Finally, the multitude of characters and choruses that once surrounded the principals and generated secondary intrigues have been stripped away. What remains are the principal threads of the story.²⁴

Against opera's "aesthetic of clutter", Brook proposes the trivial yet radical "empty space",²⁵ bringing the classical unities of time, place, and action to the fore and intensifying the works' dramatic energy. Whereas from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries theatrical pieces were primarily adapted into operas,²⁶ Brook reverses the current: he rewrites operas for the theatrical stage. His work thus inscribes is embedded within opera's long, fertile tension between music and text. The modifications to librettos and scores, made in the name of theatrical energy, reach into the works' musical economy.

The performance that results is the outcome of these operations and proceeds further through the performers' contribution, the last stage before the emergence of a new work in its own right. Only through the successful alloy, over time, of musicological and dramaturgical writing with the play of living theatre does the dialectical shift from opera to the theatrical take place, resulting in a new stage work in its own right.

²² Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire du théâtre*, 4th ed. (Paris: Armand Colin, [1996] 2019), s.v. "Unités (trois)," 623–26.

²³ Explanatory note on the dramatic function of numbers retained in Brook's stagings (author's observation from *A Magic Flute* rehearsals, 2010–11).

²⁴ Jacques Scherer, *La dramaturgie classique* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014), 139.

²⁵ Brook, *L'espace vide*.

²⁶ Colas, "Perspectives," 5–44.

3. NEW WORKS

The work remains unfinished until the performers, at once present yet invisible within the creation process, enter. Just as instrument making has shaped musical interpretation, so the formation of a truly engaged company of actors and singers is decisive for Brook's project. Each singer and actor must accept being part of an ensemble, one element among others. To foster a company spirit, Brook first seeks to establish a "climate of trust,"²⁷ no small feat in a milieu rife with rivalries, judgements and suspicions. He is helped by several structural advantages: with fewer secondary roles, the cast is smaller, and each artist can rely on more generous rehearsal time. As a result, it becomes easier to meet the director's demands, above all to listen differently to one's partner, to calibrate one's acting and vocal production to them, and to blend.

These working rules build mutual listening, among performers and with the audience, and gradually establish a "natural" singing and acting. Brook states it repeatedly, notably in a lecture condensed in *Points de suspension*: to make a "natural opera,"²⁸ more intimate, where the alloy of speech and music would recover the very sources of opera, a kind of idyllic equilibrium of voices.²⁹ In practice, such personal discipline can prove trying for performers who sometimes chafe at constraints they feel limit the free deployment of their voices. Yet the absence of a conductor grants space for personal initiative in rhythm, tempo, and acting—and for the "free figures" of improvisation. The director expects their proposals, takes them up, and finally integrates them into the show. They are not co-authors but fully stakeholders.

Despite the "collective creation," and even though rooted in canonised operas, history tends today to retain *La Tragédie de Carmen*, *Impressions de Pelléas*, and *A Magic Flute* not as Bizet's, Debussy's, and Mozart's works, but as Peter Brook's. The shift in attribution is reinforced by the material traces left behind: published scores of *La Tragédie de Carmen* and *Impressions de Pelléas*; the printed libretto of *La Tragédie de Carmen*; and Brook's own films re-staging *La Tragédie de Carmen*.³⁰

²⁷ Peter Brook and Pierre MacDuff, *Climat de confiance* (n.p.: L'Instant même, 2007).

²⁸ Peter Brook, *Points de suspension. 44 ans d'exploration théâtrale* [1987], trans. Jean-Claude Carrière and Sophie Reboud (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 244.

²⁹ Carl Dahlhaus, "Tradition et réforme dans l'opéra," in *L'esthétique de la musique* (Paris: Vrin, 2015), 138.

³⁰ Brook et al., *La tragédie de Carmen*; Marius Constant, Jean-Claude Carrière, and Peter Brook, *La Tragédie de Carmen: adaptation d'après Georges Bizet, Meilhac et Halévy, Mérimée, piano-vocal score* (Paris: Éditions Salabert, 1982); Marius Constant, *Impressions de Pelléas: d'après "Pelléas et Mélisande" de Claude Debussy et Maurice Maeterlinck, pour chant et deux pianos, score* (Paris: Éditions Musicales Durand, 1992); *La Tragédie de Carmen*, directed by Peter Brook (co-prod. Antenne 2, Channel Four Television, Bavaria Atelier Munich and Alby-Films, 1983).

As a result, *La Tragédie* is now revived by lyric companies and performed in concert venues, ensuring its survival and durable inscription in performance history. These hybrid works, these “natural operas”, opened the way, at the Bouffes du Nord, for a new movement driven by a rising generation keen to reclaim opera, even at the cost of its reversal.³¹

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³¹ For example, *Compagnie La vie brève, Le Crocodile trompeur* (2013) and *Traviata, vous méritez un avenir meilleur* (2017) (author's note).

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