
THEATRE

“Tell Me Lies About Viet Nam . . .”

Peter Brook & “US” — By FRANK KERMODE

I SAW *US* at the Aldwych on 21st October, the day of the Aberfan disaster, and a good moment to join the Anti-Death League. The newspapers and especially the television, forced by shock or the simple inadequacy of the media, into understatement, sounded right, McLuhan-cool, on the black mud and the dimly perceptible writhing of the rescue workers. The hot questions, bishops blaming the Coal Board and, perhaps, parents blaming God, not to speak of theatrical men blaming smugly cultured London housewives—all this would doubtless come later. But for the moment there were bodies to be carried from the classrooms; in the spectators emotion and thought sank into a shadowy pattern of tragedy, miming as it were for those parents the necessary acceptance. Aberfan, as reported in the media, sought and found its tragic paradigm. Later there could be arguments about that; perhaps what had seemed tragic was, in truth, Absurd; perhaps the tragic was our way of limiting our freedom to see Aberfan as a diagram of unfulfilled revolution, an allegory of the unburied past. For the religious there could be the belated production of texts, of typological comforts. But at first, at the moment of impact, Aberfan was represented to us as a tragic extreme case: a viscous, bone-shattering intruder into the human world, choosing its time (just after prayers) and its place (the school where we transmit our fictions of benevolence and control) and demanding the most elementary social response, of solidarity and acceptance.

At the Aldwych they had mislaid their cool. The hooded figures who stumbled hotly into the first-night audience, urging involvement, had been dropped, but they will quite rightly remain part of the folklore. They stand for the whole production; cutting them makes no difference to the hot and impure that remains. It would have been logical, though doubtless inexpedient, to follow through and abandon the whole project, since if that bit was a mistake everything else must be. As it is, the sole reason

I can think of for urging anybody to see *US* is that it has some bearing on the strange crisis into which not our world but our theatre has somehow argued itself.

Mr. Peter Brook is a director of genius, whose intellectual resourcefulness and authority are not less impressive because they operate in entirely theatrical terms. The attendant danger is of theatrical excess, which can in the long run produce, by a kind of Alexandrian perversity, the opposite of theatre. Disciplined and complex stage manoeuvres become part of a plot to destroy drama, and whatever kind of truth drama can have. Even in the famous *Lear*, a tremendously disciplined and resourceful production, there were evidences of theatrical self-indulgence at the expense of the play and the legitimate expectations of the audience. And now one sees an intelligible but deplorable degeneration even from *Marat/Sade*. There the brilliantly sustained succession of theatrical *coups* lapsed, with awful doctrinaire deliberation, into the boring conversations of the principals, and tedium became almost a novel theatrical effect. Here there is almost nothing else but ill-written words illustrated by stunts and charades, scattered, noisy bright ideas which in their disconnection soon lose their impact, and the only question is which half engages the mind or the emotions less: the first, which is noisier and more active but sillier, or the second, which is dominated by a tirade by Miss Glenda Jackson so lacking in spontaneity and imagination that one cannot think it would make its mark in a one-night television late show. The script, incidentally, is by more hands than have co-operated in a single London production since about 1590, except in revue, and Mr. Brook is so intent on his theatrical breakthrough into the explicit, the factual, and the tedious, that he seems to have forgotten how good plays work. The first necessity is to see that they are well written, and to remember that there is nothing in the least ignominious about the traditional set of an audience's ex-

pectation. You can modify it, surprise it, even wreck and rebuild it, but you cannot ignore it, unless you want to forfeit all the advantages of dramatic performance, which the theatre presumably exists to provide.

IF ONE SOUNDS unduly impatient, that is because Mr. Brook has established the tone of the discussion. *US* is worrying, though not at all as it was meant to be. As an instrument to help us find out what we feel about Viet Nam it is useless; any such intention is defeated by its theatrical failure. But as an indication that an important theatre and our best director are devoting much of their energy to a practical demonstration that they are dominated by a bad theory, it works. Raw exhortation, fact represented as raw, have no more place in the theatre than raw cruelty; they are theoretician's follies. It is useless to scream at us that the reason why we cannot distinguish between these "facts" and more comfortable fictions is that we own Minis and wall-to-wall carpeting. These "facts" are also fictions in the theatre, and they happen to be a great deal more comfortable, in their tedious way, than the fictions of, say, *Hedda Gabler*. Mr. Brook has long been thinking that the theatre makes things too easy for us. In *King Lear* he omitted the passage where the servant offers to bring Gloucester egg-whites for his bleeding face, preferring his own, or Jan Kott's, fiction to Shakespeare's, and presumably on the ground that Shakespeare's was too comfortable. In *US* we are denied the comforts of design or structure and given only a stage set on to which, or so it appears, is poured at random whatever came into the minds of many authors. If the idea of a play is such that nothing of this kind can be said in it, then, they suggest, we must do away with that idea. But of course such anti-plays depend absolutely upon everybody's having the idea of a play in his head. Without it, one would make nothing whatever of what was going on in *US* or in any other theatrical performance. And in so far as it labours to destroy that idea *US* gets closer to saying nothing whatever. It almost succeeds. So it can hardly do other than, to quote its own thin reiterated refrain, tell us lies, or nothing whatever, about Viet Nam.

By this I do not, of course, mean that it is too anti-American, or not anti-American enough, or even that it is nonsense, though I think it may be, to say that the terror of American arms in Viet Nam is a kind of extension of our own wickedness, the way we privately feel about our wives. It is true that in the presence of a marriage guidance counsellor we might invent the kind of euphemism satirised in the play, the briefing that never mentions blood or

napalm. The colossal pop-art G.I. who hangs over, and later almost engulfs the stage, has a bomb instead of a penis, as the advertisers think we would like to wear our cars. But the business of the theatre is to refine, rather than to generalise, and this is merely a proclamation of original sin. The point is not that the play gets the war wrong, or gets original sin wrong, but simply that the techniques of propaganda are distinct from those of the theatre; *US* ends by being neither a demonstration nor a play. Whether the subject is Viet Nam or Aberfan, we learn, when the terms of reference are so specific, much more from the newspaper and from the television blur than the theatre can ever hope to tell us.

The company seemed somehow to know this; or so one accounts for the rigidity of the actors, for their obvious suspicion that what they were given to say was inaccurate in tone, without resonance, lacking in the emotional flexibility which makes actors flexible. I noticed that the music reflected this. The music of *Marat/Sade* shared in and enhanced the intensity of the content of the play. Here it ceased to be dull only at one point, where a tediously familiar theme was, at the opening of the second half, varied by eerie melismata from a muted trumpet. This bonus of mystery came from a formal quality totally absent in the rest of the play: a theme we have heard many times before was transformed, a relation was established between old and new. Such relations establish ease, strength, confidence, in player and audience; but in *US* they hardly exist. Glenda Jackson told us, with emphasis, that the events described were not to be thought of as signifying merely what happened in Viet Nam; and this point, in principle acceptable, though hysterically stated, was invalid in the theatre because the general falsity of the presentation made a lie of everything that was said, made the positive recommendations false and the actors involuntary hypocrites, as bogus as the mildly liberal G.I.s and the lazy corrupted Western journalists were represented as being. In such a context the burning of a butterfly becomes a disagreeable indulgence on the part of the player who does it. Where nothing relates to the truth, the scene in which a naked man, representing Viet Nam, is plastered with paint, and the paint rubbed off on to a sheet of paper, becomes a night-club stunt, an advertising trick, something odious. It tells us nothing about Viet Nam, though it happens to be a reasonably accurate image of the way the play was written.

SO ONE REMEMBERS noise, frantic drilled movement, intellectual content so feeble and diffuse that it came as a shock to realise that its ex-

ponents were stating that they took a very severe view of *us*, the muddled spectators. You lot down there, they were saying, there is no health in you. It is a defensible proposition, and one that, in its own way, the theatre has a right to defend. But that right is dependent upon an ancient contract, upon shared conventions and agreed communications here ignored, and not to be replaced by impudently censorious posturing.

US, then, fails not because of its subject, but because of its breakthrough into sheer non-drama. A bad producer, enslaved to convention, could not have made it. But in destroying or ignoring conventional accretions, Mr. Brook has rejected too much, and nothing holds the piece together save modishness, the most impermanent of adhesives. All these fragments

of mime, easy allegories, stunts, charades, banal poems, need, if they are to cohere, some vastly publicised and impermanent fiat of fashion-ability; without it they are neither fact nor theatre, and achieve accidentally the kind of effect that *1066 and All That*, in the comic vein, achieved on purpose. Aberfan was cool, penny-plain; this is hot, tuppence-coloured, false. The slave of a smart theory, it is auto-destructive. A good play "about" Viet Nam would have an author, and might not even mention the place. In *Macbeth* the equivocating fiend lied like truth, and became the patron demon of the theatre. Mr. Brook, to whom such arguments are perfectly commonplace, has, with perverse theatrical skill, hit upon a way of making truth sound like lies.

Coming Out Fighting

"I hope when the fighting starts you'll be by my side
On the barricades" I told my friend. He said
"It depends what the fighting's about." What the fighting's about?
Fighting is about fighting, the crunch is about the crunch,
War about war—all that matters is
Who's by your side on the barricades.

So,

Seeing you, love, plumped out with bearing your child,
Sagging with the years of sorrow, new tired lines
Etched in that trusting face, I look at you
Knowing there are so many beautiful girls in the world,
Younger than you, and slimmer, nicer to know—
And give them up. Love isn't looks or grace,
Not cars or villas, not night flights to Madrid—
I'd rather lay my pudgy hand on yours,
Stained, now, and work-worn, than lay whoever you like—
Bardot, La Lollo, Loren. I see now
What always looked me straight in the face, so
Trustfully, love, trustfully, love, love
Is about love.

Philip Hobsbaum