

Document Citation

Title	A classic transformed
Author(s)	Misha Berson
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The Mahabharata, Brook, Peter, 1989

MOVIES



A tale of two families: Two warring families are at the heart of the Indian verse epic *The Mahabharata*.

A CLASSIC TRANSFORMED

Peter Brook's version of "The Mahabharata" transforms the Indian epic into a universal myth

THE MAHABARATA. Directed by Peter Brook. Aug. 10th-16th at the Castro, SF.

By Misha Berson

WHEN RENOWNED director Peter Brook and dramatist-screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière decided to adapt *The Mahabharata* for the stage, they faced a tremendous challenge. This sweeping epic poem of India, written in Sanskrit some 2,000 years ago and concerned with love, death, greed, courage, revenge, faith and just about every other human condition you can name, runs to 100,000 verses. That makes it eight times the combined size of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, tales *The Mahabharata* in some ways resembles.

It took Brooke and Carrière ten years to distill this elaborate story of two warring families in ancient times down to watchable size. Last year, the collaborators condensed it even further, into the potent three-hour movie version that opens this week at the Castro Theatre. What made both *Mahabharatas* risky was the idea of two Anglo-European artists transforming what is essentially a holy book, a wellspring of wisdom and spiritual sustenance for millions of Hindus, into

a secular story for all of us.

Of course, there's nothing especially new or suspect about dramatizing *The Mahabharata*. Portions of it, and the companion Indian verse epic, *The Ramayana*, have been the source material for centuries of classical Indian, Balinese and Javanese puppet and dance dramas. But the context for these traditional performances has been largely religious: The stories are performed as offerings to the gods, as demonstrations of faith. What Brook and Carrière have done is to respectfully strip away much of the cultural and religious specificity of the Indian poem, and reconfigure it as a piece of universal mythology. Brook underscored this intention by recruiting a multilingual, multi-ethnic, international cast of actors from 36 different countries to play it. Only one of the performers was from India.

In 1985, the stage play of *The Mahabharata* made its much-heralded French-language debut in a rock quarry, as part of the Avignon Festival. I was able to see an English version of the same production two years later at the Los Angeles Festival. (The show moved on to a successful run in New York.)

Watching Brook's epic unfold on the unadorned stage of the old Desilu Studio, one had the sense of theater history in the making. The audience was packed with celebrities, and just about everyone lasted the whole nine hours. The global stew of accents, per-

formance styles, ethnicities and costuming; the raga-inspired music emanating from an international crew of musicians; the spurts of vivid stagecraft and sheer audacity of the undertaking all proved captivating.

But while *The Mahabharata* was an impressive achievement on several levels, it also lacked something as play and myth. Detaching the tale from its ethnic, religious and cultural roots couldn't help but diminish its resonance. And without the sumptuousness and humor of Balinese and Indian performances, it seemed a stark, clinical effort at times. In their determination to march through the spectacularly convoluted plot, the authors skipped too lightly over the poem's psychological insights and the enigmatic precepts at its very heart — like the ambiguous nature of karma, for example. The essential characters and deeds were all there, but not the soul.

When I heard Brook had made a three-hour film record of his *Mahabharata*, I wondered how further compression would affect the work. Happily, I found the film quite an improvement on the stage version. While all the hoopla surrounding the live event is of course missing, this *Mahabharata* mixes spiritual and dramatic concerns more effectively. It is now a more gripping tale, and a more emotionally engaging one.

The \$13 million production was shot in a French studio, on bare-bones sets resembling ancient cave-like palaces. Like the play, the film script employs a story-within-a-story framework. Vyasa (Robert Langdon-Lloyd), the Indian bard, appears to a young boy (Antonin Stahly-Vishwandan) and offers to tell him the history of his people. With the help of the elephant-headed god Vishnu (Bruce Meyers), Vyasa relates the venerable conflict between two related aristocratic families, the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

In shorthand, it goes like this: The eldest of the five Pandava brothers, Yudhishtira (Andrzej Seweryn), loses his entire kingdom in a gambling match with his cousin Duryodhana (Georges

Corraface). Forced into exile, the Pandavas eventually go to war with the Kauravas to reclaim their land. But just as the battle is about to begin, the great warrior brother Arjuna (Vittoria Mezzogiorno) has second thoughts about fighting with his relations. The god Krishna (Bruce Myers) counsels him that taking action is a spiritual necessity even if it causes pain and suffering, and death is little more than illusion. (This extended dialogue within the original text is known as *The Bhagavadgita*.) Buoyed by Krishna's counsel, Arjuna leads his troops on, and the Pandavas prevail.

Brook still doesn't attempt to explain or justify the Hindu conception of the world in Western terms, and he still gives short shrift to karma. He does, however, imbue his cinematic tale with a new visual clarity and more psychological depth. The extensive use of close-ups allows for a greater intimacy with the actors, and gives us an appreciation of all those expressive and beautiful African, Asian and European faces. After several years in their roles, the actors seem more deeply in tune with the material — and some are clearly more comfortable speaking their dialogue in English.

Visually, the film echoes Indo-Asian traditions without precisely copying them. Chloe Obolensky's vibrant costume and production design draws on a palette of saffrons, ochres, crimsons, deep blacks and dusty whites — earth colors, earth textures. The clothing photographs especially well, due to the keen cinematography of William Lubtchansky.

In some ways *The Mahabharata* seems a rather old-fashioned movie. It is resolutely theatrical and actor-centered, a bit melodramatic and entirely lacking in the big-budget special effects we have become used to. But in a way, that works in its favor. Brook has managed to preserve something of the simplicity of his stage epic while also deepening its impact. In this case at least, the film brings an ancient and — for most of us — foreign tale closer to our understanding. ■