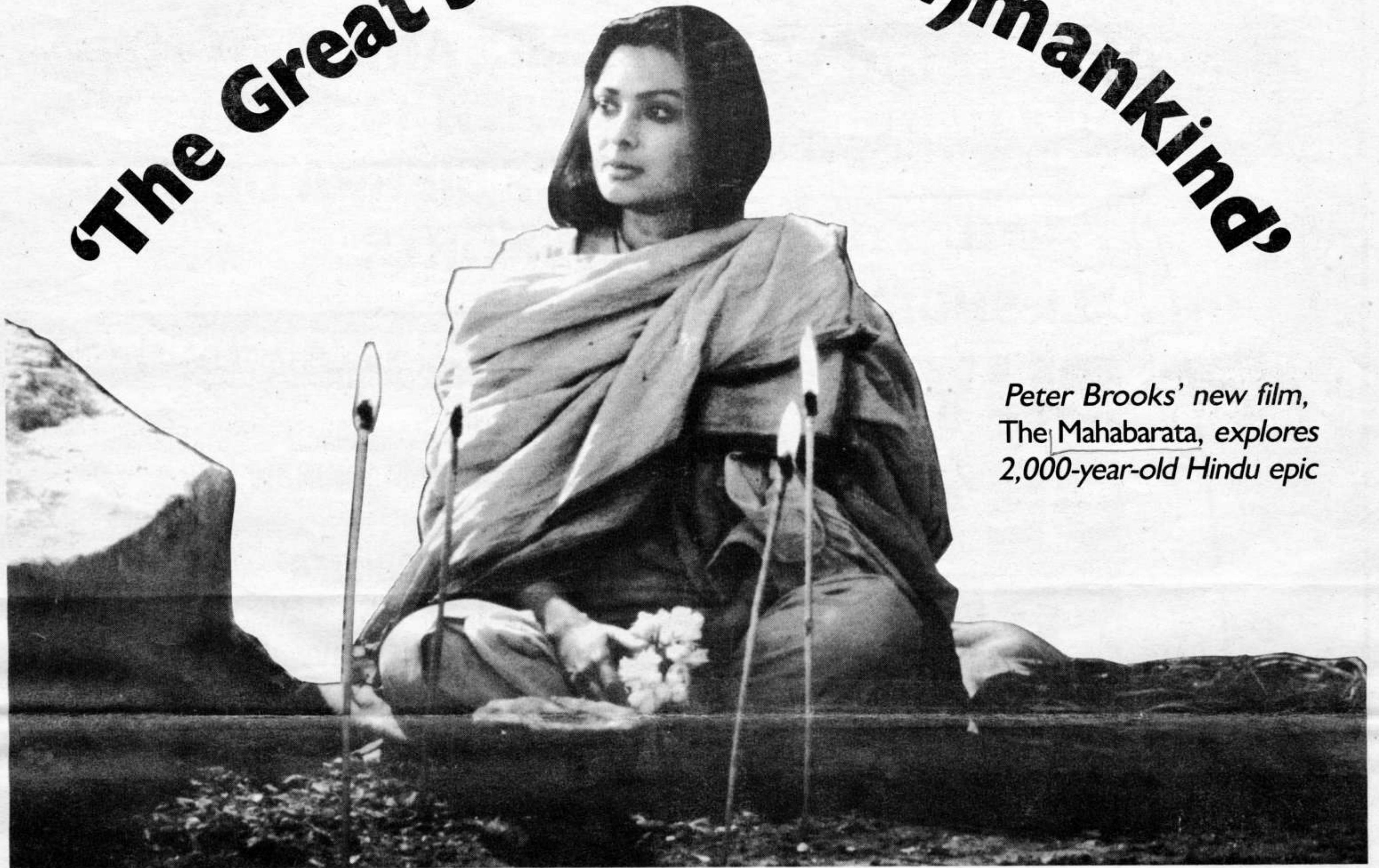


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'The Great Story of (Hu)manKind'



Peter Brooks' new film, The Mahabharata, explores 2,000-year-old Hindu epic

BY JENNIFER PETERSON

American audiences have become accustomed to "epic" films with big budgets, exotic on-location filming sites, thousands of extras and fancy special effects. It might take you by surprise, then, that the grand epic *The Mahabharata* is a highly theatrical production filmed entirely on a sound stage with a cast of 24. I found its comparative minimalism a welcome relief, however. Unlike a *Ghandi* or a *Dune*, this is an epic in the classical sense, one that relies on its story and the depth of its meaning more than swooping camera shots and empty visual embellishments.

The story of *The Mahabharata* has been brought from India to the west by British director Peter Brook and French screenwriter Jean-Claude Carriere. The story itself is a part of Hindu culture, derived from a 2,000-year-old Sanskrit poem of the same name. Loosely translated, *The Mahabharata* means "the great story of mankind." It tells of the beginning of the world, and of the struggles of two legendary clans, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. It has all the qualities of a prototypical heroic story: good vs. evil, war, choices between devotion to family and pride, and spiritual teachings.

At times it seems purely fantasy, as in the incredible and horrifying childbirth of Gandhari, whose baby turns out to be a large metal ball which, after being cut up, planted in pots and watered, yields a hundred sons, the Kauravas. Often it waxes metaphysical, as in the crucial scene before the great war when Krishna delivers the Bhagavad-Ghita to Arjuna, advising him how

to look at conflict and war. The big question is, how is a jaded American audience to take what is going on; as entertaining, interesting vignettes or as deep spiritual truth? Are we supposed to take the words seriously, even though we are forced to use our imagination to fill in the sets or overlook the dubbed voices of the actors who don't all speak English? Perhaps it is best to follow the advice of Krishna, and "learn to see with the same eye a mound of dirt and a heap of gold, a cow and a sage, a dog and the man who eats the dog." In other words, maybe we need to acquire eyes that can accommodate the paradoxes of life and, in this case, the film.

"It's about you," the narrator proclaims to a young boy at the beginning of the story. Clearly it is meant to literally apply to everyone in the audience. Brook has stated that the film was designed for people who know nothing about the *The Mahabharata*. Rather than using all Indian actors, the film's multicultural cast hails from such places as

Bali, Italy, Japan, Poland, Senegal, Sweden, Trinidad, Turkey, and Vietnam. By doing this, the story is made universal; it takes on an awareness of human brotherhood and global ecology. Globalizing *The Mahabharata* seems to be the major achievement of Brook and Carriere.

One look at a list of some of Brook's other films (*Marat/Sade*, *Lord of the Flies*, *King Lear*) is enough to prove his fascination with weighty and ambitious undertakings, yet a story as massive as *The Mahabharata* might seem impossible to do justice to. The beginning part of the film is a jumbled bunch of tales about the origins of the two clans, and is somewhat hard to keep track of, especially since some of the actors play more than one role. In contrast, the latter portion is devoted to the action of the great battle and the conflicts therein, moving laboriously slow after the fevered pace of the beginning.

This film was originally a nine-hour play, and I'm not sure it translates as well onto

celluloid. The actors, most of whom were in the theater version, have retained the overstated voices and poses of the stage even under the close-up eye of the camera. Many subtleties of meaning are overshadowed by the flamboyance of Brook's stylization, undermining the integrity of the material's wisdom. Yet the film does work. It provides a compelling story with some enlightenment thrown in. It does not reach the level it seems to aspire to, but it comes closer to effectively portraying elements of the human condition using allegory than many other films which take the realistic approach.

This is a film which takes itself very seriously, a fact which allows for some uncomfortable moments when the shortcomings of a nobly small budget become obvious. I found myself snickering when what is supposed to be the largest battle in the history of the world is staged with maybe 10 guys running around in some fog, and when a cyclopean character, Ghatotkatcha, is filmed from the ground standing in front of a model mountain.

If there is a sense of humor underlying this film, I didn't catch it. For all its vibrant stylization and energetic performances, *The Mahabharata's* seriousness makes it difficult to tell how some moments were intended to be taken.

The Mahabharata is entertaining, at times mesmerizing, and may even evoke a little self-analysis. It's a film that remains in your thoughts for days afterwards. An amalgam of so many ideas of our confused culture, desperately glueing together a mishmash of beliefs and taking whatever seems interesting from traditional Indian faith and applying it to our own situation.

***The Mahabharata* opens tonight at the U.C. Theatre and runs until Aug. 21. Phone 843-6267 for showtimes.**

