Experts Illuminate the World of ‘Tierno Bokar’ During Residency Arts Initiative Symposium

By Ellen Rapp

Peter Brook’s Columbia production of Tierno Bokar tackles dense historical and social and religious themes. To complement the production, the Columbia University Arts Initiative has been hosting symposia accompanying films and other events. During Brook’s month-long residency to foster further dialogue on many of the issues addressed in the play, two broad themes, the higher callings of the theater, and the power of silence, were the points of two recent talks by Brook and General Studies Dean Peter Awn.

A Conversation with Peter Brook

In an April 5 talk at Miller Theatre, addressing an enthusiastic house, renowned director Peter Brook spoke about the usefulness of silence, the elements that make for good theater and theater’s place in the political world.

He began with a nod toward the ‘conversation’. “Every theater event is like a conversation,” he said. “There must be some form of common ground between the performance and the audience.”

Noting that Tierno Bokar was both unfamiliar to modern audiences in terms of setting, yet so close to us on every level, Brook told the audience that he was not there to talk about the play. Instead, he asked, “What would you like to hear about?”

For the next hour and a half, Brook responded to audience members’ questions. When one audience member asked euphemistically how Brook would deal with issues of truth in light of what the audience member described as a political “Dark Age,” the director spoke about the purpose of theater: “a small number of people who have an intense reason for coming together—to approach something in the direction of truth.”

“The basis of theater,” he continued, “is a confrontation between conflicting elements, brought together in a way that you can look at them without prejudgment. Gradually, through action, people’s contradictions are brought more and more completely into the light.”

Brook said that when choosing a project, a director must ask, “Does this have any meaning for me?” He gave the example of looking at a theatrical work previously mentioned by an audience member. The play is “about someone old who wants to be young again. As someone who is 80, I can truthfully say that this doesn’t have any meaning to me.”

Brook also discussed the role of silence as a powerful force in theater. “Noise, movement, and rhythm are all parts of life, but silence is the equal opposite,” he said.

The power of silence can occur offstage as well. Brook described a play he directed in London during the Vietnam era called US. (The title means both “United States” and “us,” as in the collective consciousness, he explained.) Although audience members tended to be sharply divided in their views on the Vietnam War, said Brook, “At the end of the play there was silence, sometimes lasting 15 minutes. Then someone would speak— it would be something more; worth listening to, and there would be intelligent debate. That is a political theater.”

Discussing theater as a force for altering social phenomena in the world, Brook compared it to lightning a match during the New York City blackout. “The match can help someone find a key they dropped, but it won’t stop the blackout,” he said. Nonetheless, Brook continued, “there are tiny, specific things that we can do to make a difference. For instance, in parts of Africa, a little play making people aware of the danger of AIDS is more useful than the greatest production of Beckett. We need to weigh what is useful.”

He closed with a story about a recent theatrical tour of Africa. “Coming into these villages from far away, we couldn’t immediately find common ground with the people there. But, drawn by curiosity, people came to the performances, and through a lot of trial and error, Brook and his actors found ways to communicate with them. ‘We learned how to find common ground,’ he said. ‘We learned the meaning of simplicity. And, sometimes, the meaning of silence.’”

Introduction to Global Sufism: A Talk by Professor Peter Awn

In another event, Dean Awn, also a professor of religion, spoke on April 7 at the Miller Hall about the history of Sufism, the mystical school of Islam.

Throughout the history of religious, noted Awn, “we have often seen references to a dramatic difference between humankind and the Divine.” According to Awn, Sufism is based on a different paradigm that is “a relationship of loving intimacy with God.”

“The earliest phase of Sufism was ‘heavily ascetical,’” said Awn. “Individuals believed they could become one with God by rejecting all aspects of the material world—sexuality, wealth, family. These were considered distractions from the ultimate goal!”

But in the late eighteenth century, a Sufi woman named Rabia al-Adawiyya argued that focusing on asceticism ‘could be as much of a distraction as hedonism,’” said Awn. She is said to have run through the streets of Basra, located in modern-day Iraq, carrying a container of water and a flaming torch to douse the fires of Hell, the torch to burn up Paradise, so that God would love “without focusing on punishment or reward!” What emerged was what is known as Love Mysticism, in which the mystic experiences a union between spiritual guide and their disciples.

By the 19th century, spiritual manuals on Sufism abounded, Awn explained, and the Sufi might choose to repackage them into ritual form, thereby making them broadly available to the Islamic community. “Sufi orders have also succeeded in moving from one ethnic area to another, so that Islam has been inserted into cultural areas where you’d think it was impossible to make headway.”

Today, Sufi ideas and practices have made their way to Europe and the United States as a professor of religion. And, according to Awn, he appreciates the diversity of Sufism. He described it as a “world in itself” that is “a container of water and a flaming torch that is used as a heretic.”

Sufi scholar Tierno Bokar, you’re seeing an articulation of values of almost every historical period of Islam’s” said Awn, as he looked at the play as an anti-Sufist piece—but rather, as a look at how Sufism has evolved.”

New Antipsychotic Drug Shown to Prevent Brain Loss in Schizophrenia

By Craig La nathe

For more than two million individuals who suffer from schizophrenia, antipsychotic drugs have stemmed its debilitating symptoms such as paranoia, anxiety and hallucinations. However, a study by the New York University College Medical Center (CUMC) have revealed the efficacy of a new drug not as a treatment for symptoms, but as a preventative for the future.

Schizophrenia has long been known as a disease that causes progressive worsening of symptoms and deterioration in function, but only in the last 10 years have researchers found that the brains of schizophrenics are also progressively deteriorating.

A new brain imaging study of recently diagnosed schizophrenia patients has revealed that the loss of gray matter typically experienced by patients can be prevented by a new antipsychotic drug, olanzapine, but not by haloperidol, an older, conventional drug. The study, published in this month’s issue of General Psychiatry, also confirmed previous studies that show patients who experience less brain loss do better clinically.

“This is a major break-through,” says the study’s leader, Jeffrey Lieberman, director of the New York State Psychiatric Institute and chairman of psychiatry at CUMC. “The drugs we use for schizophrenia can’t cure people who’ve been sick for years, but this study shows that the newer atypical drugs when started early can prevent the illness from progressing.”

Gray matter contains the bulk of the brain’s cells, with billions of connections among them. Loss of gray matter in patients with schizophrenia has been linked to social withdrawal and progressive deterioration in cognition and emotion—which are among the symptoms least responsive to medications.

To find out if antipsychotic drugs could slow the initial brain changes in new patients, Lieberman and colleagues at 14 sites in North America and Europe measured brain volume and cognitive changes in 265 first-episode schizophrenia patients and 58 nonschizophrenic volunteers over a two-year period. Half of the patients received olanzapine, and the other half took haloperidol. Lieberman initiated the study when he was professor of psychiatry at the University of North Carolina, which also coordinated the research.

The study found that, on average, patients treated with haloperi- dol lost about 2 percent of their gray matter or about 1.2 cubic centimeters. No changes were detect- ed in the olanzapine-treated patients and the non-schizophrenic volunteers. Patients who lost gray matter particularly in the frontal lobes of the brain, also had greater problems with cognitive functioning, as measured by tests of verbal fluency, verbal learning and memory.

Lieberman noted that the deterioration was inevitable, but now clinicians can prevent the acute episodes of psychosis in schizophrenia, you can actually slow down the rate of gray mat- ter,” Lieberman says. “It also gives us hope that we will be able to completely forestall the disease in the future by interven- ing the disease at its very early stages.”

Lieberman adds. “In three to five years, we should have ways to identify which adolescents will become schizophrenic, and we can then begin to test the preventative powers of the new treatments.”