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Behind-the-Scenes Comments From The Director and Playwright

Mathur, Rakesh The Mahabharata is one of the great literary masterpieces of all time. It dates back to the 2nd and 3rd century BCE and consists of 100,000 stanzas, which makes it the world's longest poem. Recently, playwright Jean Claude Carriere and Russian-born producer/director Peter Brook, who directed "Lord of the Flies" and "King Lear," joined forces to produce a stunning stage version of this gargantuan parable that last year took the world of theater by storm. Carriere's French script of the Mahabharata has now been translated into English and will soon to be rendered in Hindi. The English edition opened in Zurich in August, 1987, and completed a successful, worldwide tour to Los Angeles, New York, Adelaide, Perth, Copenhagen and Tokyo. Jean Claude Carriere and Peter Brook share some insights about their production of this timeless epic.

Jean Claude Carriere: "In order to adapt the Mahabharata, to transform an immense epic poem into a play, we had to draw new scenes from our imaginations, bring together characters who never meet in the poem itself-all this within the context of deep respect for the shape and sense of the story. Each of these characters has a total commitment, each probes in depth the nature of his actions, each considers his dharma and each confronts his idea of fate.

"In the second play [It is three plays in one: "The Game of Dice," "Exile in the Forest" and "The War"], which involves long years of exile, we had to find some way of concentrating fast and fluid action in space and time without destroying its energy or its mystery.

"The careful choice of language led us to a problem which would be repeated in the stage decor, the music, the costumes, the colors and the props: one might call it 'the Indianness.' I had to write in French without writing a French play. I had to open my language to rhythms and images of the East."

Peter Brook: "The Mahabharata is the closest mythological reflection of our own times. It explores the roots of warfare with the same concrete reality as Shakespeare's characters. The Mahabharata shows the conflict of people trying to live together. It is for today. What we are trying to do is to celebrate a work which only India could have created but which carries echoes of all mankind.

"I think it has extraordinary relevance to today's world, because today everyone is concerned with the question of war and conflict, and no contemporary writer, no contemporary work, has gone beyond the first level of horror. And the Mahabharata, while facing very realistically the first level, the depth of, the extent of the horror that there is in human violence, carries a scheme of understanding so rich that it gives contemporary man a possibility of understanding.

"We saw that for several thousand years India has lived in a climate of constant creativity. Even if life flows with the majestic slowness of a great river, at the same time, within the current, each atom has its own dynamic energy. Whatever the aspect of human experience, the Indian had indefatigably explored every possibility. We were touched by the love that Indians bring to the Mahabharata and this filled us both with respect and awe at the task we had assumed."