



Peter Brook and the Empty Space in an Age of Meta-Absurdism

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Author's Note: The term "Meta-Absurdism," developed through classroom conversations with theatre students at St. Louis Community College–Meramec, describes a contemporary cultural condition shaped by perpetual self-performance, mediated identity, and the instability of sustained presence in the digital age.

At the beginning of rehearsal, the room does not resemble what most audiences would consider theatre. Fluorescent lights hum above a black slatted floor scarred by years of entrances, exits, and hurried scene changes. Someone stretches against a cinderblock wall while another actor scrolls briefly through a phone before setting it face down beside a backpack. A stage manager flips through penciled notes. There is no scenery yet. No costumes. No fresnels guiding interpretation. An actor crosses the room holding only a chair, and another person watches the crossing.

Even in the absence of the eventual accoutrement, according to Peter Brook, theatre has already begun.

Few theatre practitioners shaped twentieth-century directing more profoundly than Peter Brook, whose 1968 book *The Empty Space* challenged many of the assumptions Western theatre had spent centuries building around itself. By the middle of the twentieth century, theatre had become deeply associated with architecture, spectacle, institutional prestige, elaborate scenery, and increasingly sophisticated technical production. Audiences often understood "serious theatre" as something housed inside major cultural institutions and supported by large artistic infrastructures. Brook questioned whether any of those elements were actually essential.

In the opening pages of *The Empty Space*, he offers one of the most influential definitions in modern theatre history: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage." The statement appears simple, yet it fundamentally reorients the art form away from decoration and toward *encounter*. Theatre does not begin with scenery, lighting, realism, or even a formal stage. It begins when one person performs an action and another person chooses to watch. A performer enters space. An audience gives attention. Through that exchange, theatre comes alive.

Brook's philosophy emerged during a century of intense theatrical experimentation. The early and mid-twentieth century saw directors, playwrights, and designers challenging nearly every convention inherited from nineteenth-century theatre. Realism had already transformed the stage by emphasizing psychological depth and ordinary life, but the movements that followed pushed further. Expressionists distorted reality to externalize emotion. Surrealists abandoned logical structure in favor of dream imagery and subconscious association. Absurdist playwrights fractured language itself, exposing the instability of meaning in the aftermath of war and existential crisis. Directors increasingly experimented with staging, movement, space, and audience relationship, searching for forms capable of restoring immediacy to performance.

Brook entered this artistic landscape asking a deceptively simple question: what elements of theatre are actually essential? His answer stripped the art form down to its most fundamental exchange. In *The Empty Space*, Brook warned repeatedly against what he called "Deadly Theatre," which he defined as performance emptied of vitality through repetition, institutional complacency, and inherited convention. Productions could become technically polished while remaining emotionally inert. Actors repeated gestures that no longer carried discovery. Audiences attended out of habit rather than genuine engagement. For Brook, theatre lost its power when it ceased to feel alive in the present moment.

That concern feels even more urgent in contemporary culture, though the crisis has evolved. Brook worried that theatre could become mechanical: technically polished but emotionally lifeless, built on repetition rather than genuine discovery. Contemporary culture faces a different problem. Instead of too little stimulation, we often experience too much of it. Attention has become fragmented across phones, streaming platforms, social media feeds, advertisements, notifications, and constant digital interaction. Many people now move through daily life while simultaneously documenting, curating, and performing versions of themselves online.

This shift has altered the experience of presence itself. A concert is recorded while it is happening. A vacation becomes content while it is still being lived. Even ordinary moments increasingly unfold with an awareness of possible spectatorship. Social media encourages individuals to think simultaneously as participant, performer, editor, and audience. The self becomes divided between direct experience and the construction of experience for others to observe.

Twentieth-century Absurdist playwrights such as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco responded to a world shaped by war, existential uncertainty, and the collapse of stable meaning. Their characters wait, repeat themselves, and struggle to communicate in environments where language no longer feels trustworthy. Silence dominates the landscape of Absurdism because the universe itself appears incapable of answering human questions.

Contemporary culture often feels absurd in a different way. The problem is no longer silence but saturation. Modern life produces endless streams of information, commentary, advertising, performance, and self-exposure. Individuals move constantly between physical experience and digital representation, often documenting moments while simultaneously living them. Irony

becomes a defense mechanism against sincerity because self-awareness never fully turns off. In this environment, theatrical performance no longer remains confined to the stage. The performance of identity expands into ordinary life itself.

It is here that Brook's "empty space" acquires renewed philosophical urgency. His work offers more than a directing methodology or rehearsal philosophy. It offers a way of thinking about human attention in a culture where uninterrupted presence has become increasingly rare. Brook stripped theatre down to its most essential exchange: *one person performing an action while another person witnesses it fully*. In an age defined by distraction, mediation, and perpetual self-performance, that exchange begins to feel almost radical.

Peter Brook, Presence, and Meta-Absurdism

This collision between mediated identity, fragmented attention, and perpetual self-performance forms the foundation of what I have termed [Meta-Absurdism](#).

Meta-Absurdism is a contemporary theatrical and cultural framework that emerged through classroom conversations with my theatre students at St. Louis Community College—Meramec about the evolution of Absurdism in the digital age. Meta-Absurdism describes a world shaped by heightened self-consciousness, mediated identity, perpetual spectatorship, and the impossibility of escaping performance itself. *In other words, whereas the Absurdist movement told us there was no meaning in life, Meta-Absurdism tells us there is so much meaning that we can't grab on to any of it*. Traditional Absurdism emerged from silence, existential uncertainty, and the collapse of stable meaning after two world wars. Meta-Absurdism emerges from noise. It confronts a culture overwhelmed by information, self-surveillance, irony, and endless mediation. If Samuel Beckett dramatized humanity waiting for meaning to arrive, contemporary culture increasingly livestreams the waiting in real time.

Brook's theatrical philosophy, therefore, becomes deeply relevant to the present moment because his work asks a question contemporary culture struggles to answer clearly: what does genuine presence require?

In *The Empty Space*, Brook divides modern theatre into four categories: Deadly Theatre, Holy Theatre, Rough Theatre, and Immediate Theatre, using each to evaluate theatre's relationship to vitality itself. Deadly Theatre emerges when performance continues outwardly even as genuine discovery begins to disappear inwardly, allowing institutions, aesthetic habits, and theatrical conventions to reproduce themselves long after they have lost their capacity to generate immediacy or risk. Productions still open successfully, audiences still attend faithfully, actors still execute rhythms polished through repetition, and directors still construct visually coherent worlds, yet something essential has quietly drained out of the exchange between performer and spectator. Brook's critique cuts sharply because he locates theatrical failure not in incompetence or collapse, but in the gradual normalization of safety, predictability, and emotional distance. Deadly Theatre survives precisely because it can remain technically accomplished while no

longer demanding genuine presence, vulnerability, or discovery from either the actor or the audience, replacing encounter with rehearsal of the already known.

This diagnosis extends into the twenty-first century. Social media platforms, for example, reward repetition disguised as novelty, encouraging users to refine recognizable versions of themselves through constant visibility and performance. Brook's emphasis on immediacy stands sharply against this logic because live theatre cannot be endlessly edited, filtered, revised, or algorithmically optimized. A performance unfolds once, in shared time, before disappearing again, requiring the actor to remain responsive to the audience in the present moment rather than constructing an endlessly manageable image for future spectatorship.

For Brook, this responsiveness does more than preserve theatrical spontaneity. It fundamentally alters the relationship between performer and audience by transforming theatre into a genuinely shared event rather than a polished product delivered unchanged to passive consumers. Immediate Theatre depends upon instability, attention, and exchange. Something must happen between bodies occupying the same space at the same time, and that encounter remains alive precisely because neither actor nor audience can fully control it in advance. Theatrical vitality emerges through this unpredictability, allowing performance to remain vulnerable to interruption, silence, tension, timing, and the shifting emotional atmosphere of the room itself.

Put more simply, live theatre derives much of its power from risk. *Theatre becomes dangerous the moment an actor stops controlling the scene and begins genuinely risking themselves inside it.* An actor who enters a scene fully present, responsive, and emotionally available places themselves in genuine danger of being altered by the encounter itself. The audience senses that vulnerability immediately. Without the possibility of surprise, instability, discomfort, or emotional consequence, performance may remain technically accomplished while losing the tension that makes theatre feel alive.

This principle shaped Brook's directing as profoundly as his writing. His 1970 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* rejected illusionistic realism in favor of theatrical play, placing Shakespeare's actors inside a white box resembling both a rehearsal chamber and a gymnasium rather than constructing an elaborate forest designed to imitate nature. Trapezes descended from the ceiling as actors swung visibly through the open white space, transforming the stage into an environment shaped less by scenic illusion than by movement, rhythm, language, and the audience's willingness to participate imaginatively in the construction of the world itself. Brook trusted spectators to become active collaborators in meaning-making rather than passive consumers of decorative realism, and this shift altered twentieth-century directing profoundly by relocating theatrical transformation away from scenery and toward relationship, collective attention, and live encounter between performer and audience.

That collaborative imagination becomes increasingly significant in a culture shaped by digital spectatorship. Contemporary media environments encourage endless consumption while reducing opportunities for shared embodied attention. Screens compress experience into

individualized streams. Theatre resists this compression because live performance demands co-presence. Audience members breathe within the same atmosphere. Silence acquires physical density. Time unfolds collectively rather than algorithmically.

The contrast becomes particularly visible when examining contemporary performance works through the lens of what I have termed Meta-Absurdism. Bo Burnham's *Inside* offers one of the clearest examples. Alone inside a single room during the COVID-19 pandemic, Burnham constructs a performance environment in which the boundaries between observation, performance, confession, and self-consciousness continually collapse into one another, with cameras, lighting rigs, editing choices, and moments of visible technical construction remaining deliberately exposed inside the frame. Songs pivot rapidly between sincerity, irony, despair, parody, and emotional exhaustion, often destabilizing one emotional register before the audience can settle fully into it, while Burnham himself functions simultaneously as performer, director, editor, critic, and spectator of his own unraveling.

Viewed through the framework of Meta-Absurdism, *Inside* becomes a portrait of consciousness trapped beneath perpetual visibility and unable to stop performing itself. Beckett's characters waited endlessly for revelation from beyond themselves, while Burnham's contemporary consciousness collapses inward beneath endless self-observation, transforming existential waiting into a performance that can no longer stop documenting itself.

Similarly, *Severance* dramatizes identity fractured through systems of institutional performance. Employees undergo a surgical procedure separating their work selves from their external selves, creating consciousness divided against itself. The result resembles a corporate adaptation of Absurdism shaped by digital alienation and bureaucratic control. The sterile hallways, repetitive rituals, and recursive language evoke Expressionism and Absurdism simultaneously, yet the underlying anxiety feels distinctly contemporary. The crisis no longer concerns whether existence possesses meaning. The crisis concerns whether coherent selfhood can survive continuous compartmentalization.

Brook's ideas illuminate these contemporary works because his theatrical philosophy centers attention itself. The "empty space" becomes newly significant in a culture saturated with distraction, self-curation, perpetual visibility, and mediated performance. Brook stripped theatre down to its essentials in order to recover human encounter from theatrical excess, while Meta-Absurdism emerges from a contemporary condition in which genuine encounter becomes increasingly difficult to sustain beneath constant spectatorship and self-conscious performance.

For this reason, theatre continues to matter in ways that extend beyond entertainment or aesthetic tradition. A live performance cannot be paused, revised, filtered, or algorithmically optimized while it is unfolding. Actors and audiences remain vulnerable to one another inside shared time, shared space, and shared attention, allowing theatre to preserve forms of presence contemporary culture increasingly struggles to sustain elsewhere.

Brook offers neither nostalgia nor technological rejection in response to this condition. Instead, he returns theatre to its simplest and most demanding requirement: attention between human beings.

An actor enters an empty space.

Another person watches.

Nothing mediates the exchange except time, breath, gesture, and shared presence.

In an age saturated with performance, this may now be one of the rarest experiences contemporary culture can offer.