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## This Flattened Battlefield

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, May 25th, 2017

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Each work of art sets its own parameters, the criteria by which it asks to be experienced. *Battlefield* (written by Jean-Claude Carrière, adapted and directed by Peter Brook and Marie-Hélène Estienne) defines its aesthetic with its scant production design: a bare stage, a cloth-covered floor the color of dirt, a few sticks, a shroud. This telling of a fraction of the *Mahabharata*, India's great epic poem, is as minimal as its setting.

Thirty-five years ago, Peter Brook's production of the "full" *Mahabharata* redefined Western theatrical experience. It was an impossible production: nine hours long, performed by scores of actors and musicians. It also ignited controversy around cultural appropriation, which persists and has deepened in intervening years.

The current production of *Battlefield*, in Los Angeles at [The Wallis](#) until May 28, conversely, is all too possible. It is obviously designed for touring. Four actors, one drummer, a few props: the whole thing fits into a suitcase. The acting style, like the dramaturgy, is minimal. There is no physical battle in *Battlefield*. All action is recounted, or occurs off-stage, or is indicated. What battle there is – the presumed battle of the human heart, the ethical battle of healing and governing a nation after a great war – is likewise talked about rather than performed.

There is no crime in this: it is the aesthetic rule the piece has set for itself. But the result is not emotionally charged, nor passionate, nor intellectually groundbreaking. There are one-and-a-half good theatrical ideas here: an interaction with the audience in the front row, and, at the end, a pay-off of the drummer's continuing presence, in which the ineffable is unspoken yet heard.

We would not be here but for the pedigree and marquee name of Peter Brook. An unrecognized director, who would have been brave enough to take this on, might have crafted a production that could have been better and more deeply felt, yet would not have attracted touring bookings or support. Such is the international theatre touring business today.

It's all in the barren stage, alas. That dirt-colored cloth may stand for earth, but the production played upon it is an epic distance from the actual dirt-covered floor of Brook's famed theatre in Paris, the Bouffes du Nord. He has staged vivid theatre there, theatre that grows from earth and mud. When I saw Brook's primal *Carmen* at Bouffes du Nord, I smelled the soil, and felt my aorta coursing with torrid blood. In *Battlefield*, however, we have a flattened sequence of a grand epic,

and, with the exception of proper names, cultural semiotics are stripped away. Cultural appropriation has become cultural exfoliation. We are left with an image of what once was dirt, yet now is easily rolled up and put away.

*Information and tickets [here](#).*

*Photo: Battlefield, Directed by Peter Brook. Pictured: Sean O'Callaghan, Jared McNeill, Ery Nzaramba, Karen Aldridge and Toshi Tsuchitori. Credit Kevin Parry. Courtesy, The Wallis.*

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