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*Dramatic Publishing*

# The Conference of the Birds



By  
Peter Brook  
and  
Jean-Claude Carrière

Based on the poem by  
Farid ud-Din Attar

"The most exciting and provoking event of the theatre season... brilliant work that challenges most of our ideas of what theatre is, ought to be and can do. This exquisite piece represents the perfection of Brook's work." —Jack Kroll, *Newsweek*

"This is the supreme theatrical event of the season. The play itself is a flying carpet, gliding us aloft into a land of mystery, splendor and ritual. A nation of birds is in crisis, and urged on by one of their flock, the Hoopoe, they chart a path to find their king."

—Mel Gussow, *New York Times*

**The Conference of the Birds - Drama. Stage version by Peter Brook and Jean-Claude Carriere. Based on the poem by Farid ud-Din Attar.** Cast: 7m., 6w, with doubling, can be expanded. As the *Times* critic describes it, "The play itself is a flying carpet, gliding us aloft into a land of mystery, splendor and ritual. A nation of birds is in crisis, and urged on by one of their flock, the Hoopoe, they chart a path to find their king." There are moments of farce and despair as they attempt to cross the seven valleys with their disturbing riddles. Some die, some drop out, while others continue their quest. At last, the survivors come into the presence of the Great One where the secret is discovered—that they, themselves are the embodiment of the divine. *Bare stage w/props. Code: C55.*

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By  
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and  
JEAN-CLAUDE CARRIERE

Based on the poem by  
Farid ud-Din Attar



**Dramatic Publishing**

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JEAN-CLAUDE CARRIERE

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(THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS)

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# Preface

With important information  
for anyone interested in presenting  
this play.

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Peter Brook

and

Le Centre International  
De Creations Theatrales

and

## THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

*With material quoted at length from  
"The Center," a narrative by Margaret Croyden,  
and from Peter Brook.*

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*The theater is a search for an expression that is directly concerned with the quality of living and, in that search, one can find great purpose.*

*There are very few masterpieces in the world which have gone beyond subjective experience that really touches something that involves a real witness of man's essential experience . . . Conference has always been a challenge because it goes beyond one's capacity to penetrate it completely. Nobody can completely take hold of it, so that as something to work on, it's inexhaustible . . . Now in our early period we used fragments as bases of improvisations and so we never really touched the whole piece. We did three different versions of Conference: a show at eight p.m. and that one I call the rough*

*theater; the midnight Conference all by candle-light, which was exquisitely sensitive, and I call that holy theater; and then the dawn show, which was entirely ritualistic and musical. After the three shows we talked, and I said to them that one day perhaps we would do the work again and we will incorporate all three versions into one.*

Peter Brook

The play that follows is the end result of this and of an extraordinary theatrical adventure that began years before. It was described, in part, by Margaret Croyden as follows:

“When, in 1968, Peter Brook was invited to Paris by French actor Jean-Louis Barrault to create a workshop with actors, writers, and directors from diverse backgrounds and cultures, the idea for The International Center of Theater Research was born. Brook, who had been for a long time exploring new ideas in the English theater, became strongly impressed with the possibilities that might arise from conmingling different cultures, and by a group of artists that might be dedicated to researching the basic aims and fundamental aspects of the theater. Although the project was short, it had its effects. Brook did not forget the experience. It so whetted his appetite that, two years later, he teamed up with producer-friend Micheline Rozan and together they formulated the prin-

ciples for a group of their own: The International Center of Theater Research.

In an age when interest in the theater arts has shifted from stage to screen, when it is the newest work of currently famous film directors rather than plays on Broadway or the West End that seem to promise vitality, Brook has continued to give his creativity primarily to the theater, to living human beings in artistic interaction with a live audience. For Brook — and subsequently for the Center — the theater represents more than a love for the stage.

So it was that the Center became the vehicle for a group of international theater artists to participate in an exploration — through an art — that is involved with human relationships, relations with each other, with the material and the audience.

For the past decade, the Center has been the main commitment for its director, Peter Brook. There he has engaged in experimentation and research in a consistent, systematic, and radical way. But always involved irresistibly with Shakespeare, Brook has staged independent productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Antony and Cleopatra* at the same time as he



was developing the Center, whose goal is of a piece with his work on Shakespeare.”

*I have always said that Shakespeare is the source — because Shakespeare shows the unity between the popular and the esoteric — the “rough” and the “holy” theater. The holy theater deals with the invisible, and this invisible contains all the hidden impulses of man. The rough theater deals with men’s actions . . . it is down to earth, and it admits wickedness and laughter.*

*Outside of Shakespeare there is always the division between the two. People don’t believe that these two elements can be combined. But the mask of comedy and the mask of tragedy are, in fact, arbitrary masks. In real life, tragedy and comedy intertwine; so do the high and the low, and the spiritual and the gross. If theater is a reflection of real life, then there is a place for everything . . . Our research in Paris is directed towards trying to find a new form that can carry the same spectrum . . . Perhaps you might say that we are looking for passages — passages that connect the inner and outer worlds.*

Peter Brook

“Then came the renowned production of *Marat-Sade*, a study of revolution and madness,

an artistic milestone followed by the unorthodox, airborne *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

By the time *Dream* was produced, Brook was planning for the creation of the Center to explore new possibilities for work. He had assimilated a multitude of styles, ideas, and experiences throughout his theatrical career; he wanted a chance to clarify, distill, and discard. He needed a permanent home and a permanent group of actors with whom he could start from scratch, as it were, and whose vision would match his own.

From the beginning, Brook and his associates focused their efforts on what Brook considers to be the essential problem facing the contemporary theater: how to bring about a profound and meaningful relationship between actor and audience, a relationship that would expand and enrich the quality of people's experience. To find the answers, the Center would rethink every element of the theater in its essence . . . They would deliberately avoid the conventions, the preconceived ideas, the cut-and-dried formulas that stood in the way of a raw and immediate communication between the stage and the audience.

In 1972, the group undertook its most ambitious project — a trip to Africa. Brook and his troupe were to travel through five African countries, playing in villages that had never seen a theatrical performance. The 8,500-mile journey, which was to last one hundred days, began in the Sahara Desert and moved to the remotest towns of West Africa. They traveled in land rovers with electrical equipment, food and water supplies, cooking utensils, small baggage, sleeping bags, corrugated boxes, knapsacks, tents, clothing, blankets and bamboo sticks.

They also took with them one long piece, **The Conference of the Birds**, which they had been working on in Paris. **Conference**, by the twelfth-century Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar, has a simple story: a flock of birds undertake a search for God. In the course of the journey, the birds become discouraged, but the leader convinces them to remain firm. In the end, a few survive only to discover that they themselves are the embodiment of the Divine.

Brook's group played **Conference** in all kinds of environments, improvising as they went along: no fixed theatrical text existed. By that time, the piece had become a symbol of commitment,

as well as a symbol of the difficulties in touring Africa. For the trip turned out to be not only an experiment in theater, but in living, an involvement so total that most of the actors found it all consuming.”

*There were moments when we would go into a village with no starting point and with no sense of what our improvisation would be, and just do whatever happened to occur. And when that is done with people in a sufficiently alert state, and there is sufficient interplay between the performance and the people watching, then something happens which suddenly brings you to a living and breathing moment that is completely unified. For me, it is an extraordinarily rich and meaningful moment.* Peter Brook

“Despite such moments, Africa was backbreaking . . . They played at all hours of the day and night, in the burning heat and inundating humidity — setting up their carpet upon which the play was performed everywhere — in forests, temples, houses, squares and dirt roads. Indeed, Africa became the supreme test for the group. And still they stayed and worked, and in the end, the group became an entity with a character of its own.”

**Conference** continued to haunt Brook and he brought it to America where they played it

before farm workers and on Indian reservations. Then they took it to the Brooklyn Academy for a five week residency.

“The work at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) took on various aspects from playing in the streets of Brooklyn to improvisations with the audience and performances of **Conference**.

The core of the work in Brooklyn was the “Theater Days” — whole days that the public spent with the group. A “Theater Day” was divided into three sessions: in the morning, the actors would demonstrate exercises and invite the audience to participate; in the afternoon, improvisation and free form; and in the evening, different versions of **The Conference of the Birds**.”

When it was over, Brook evaluated the experience:

*What's really serious and important is this: the only true work comes through real experience. If we had touched the quality of this night's performance one month ago, two months ago, it would have been a springboard for something even more. But things are exactly what they are . . . This clarity we achieved tonight*

*could never have arisen through theory, but only through the experiences we've gone through together. We are trying to make a work about theater and about life. It has to be true in a theater form, and yet be something far beyond theater . . . The work only becomes meaningful when we serve something other than our egos. This is when theater takes on the promise of something more than just a poor thing to get involved in . . . If the work seems to be reaching this point at this moment, it must not be thrown away. From what has happened tonight will come the force to reunite us again.*

Peter Brook

And this was to happen some years later.

**"Conference**, now adapted with Jean-Claude Carriere and designed by Sally Jacobs, opened first at the **Avignon Festival** and then at the **Bouffes du Nord** that same year, to superb notices. It bore not the slightest resemblance to the improvisational performance seen at the Brooklyn Academy six years earlier. There **Conference** had been in a state of constant change, where in Paris it was a completely realized production replete with individualized "birds," including a proud falcon, a wistful

dove, an arrogant peacock, and a story-telling hoopoe. Although the fable is predominantly serious, under Brook's direction elements of the rough and the holy come together.

Brook has paired down speech and gestures to the minimum and the adaptation is precise, clear, bareboned; the rhythm and sound of the words are tailored to the actors' needs and their long-time experience with language and syllables. Avoiding "mystical" pretentiousness, Brook has introduced farcical elements which result in a certain lightness in the midst of seriousness, satire in the midst of sadness, and joyousness in the midst of the mysterious."

*We never aimed to discover some synthetic international style, although we worked on all styles. The whole of our work has been to purify, to clarify, to simplify. In fact, what we have striven for is an absence of style.*

Peter Brook

"Brook, at the Center, has taken for his model the world of Shakespeare and his fellows. Like them, he, too, has searched for an absence of style and for the elements that would make his theater popular and elitist, lowbrow and high-

brow, lusty and pure. In so doing, he has resisted obvious theatricality and relied on the simple story, and on suggestion rather than illustration, evocation rather than denotation, and on signs and signals rather than decoration. Brook and the Center claim to be *deeply committed to one goal — to find out how to make visible on stage what is invisible in human experience. Because after all, life is the meeting of two worlds — the visible and the invisible*, Brook said. *In life, the invisible remains invisible no matter how powerfully it acts on us. In theater, both the visible and the invisible can be seen.*” \*

**The Conference of the Birds** about which major critics have said “this exquisite piece represents the perfection of Brook’s work,” and “this is the supreme theatrical event of the season,” is passed to you. The play that follows is what was finally achieved by a twelfth-century poet, Peter Brook, Jean-Claude Carriere and Le Centre International de Creations Theatrales. When it was presented at La Mama Theatre in New York City, it received some of the most favorable reviews the New York critics have



accorded any play. Even so, there should be nothing final about that achievement. For you — the actors, directors and designers to whom the play is given — it should be a beginning.

\*All of the above quotes, other than those from Peter Brook, are taken from *The Center*, a narrative by Margaret Croyden.



## CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

*A Full-Length Play*

*For a Variable Cast*

Each bird may be played by a separate actor or by an actor using a "bird form." (Your imagination will determine the exact "form.") Doubling is possible by having one actor use several "bird forms."

### THE BIRDS

*THE HOOPOE*

*DOVE*

*FALCON*

*FIRST EXOTIC BIRD*

*SECOND EXOTIC BIRD*

*PEACOCK*

*OWL*

*GUILTY BIRD*

*HERON*

*SPARROW*

*DUCK*

*PARTRIDGE*

*PARROT*

*NIGHTINGALE*

*DOUBLE BIRD*

### THE CHARACTERS

Two Kings

Three Slaves

A Female Attendant

A Dervish

Two Travellers

A Hermit

A Chamberlain

A Walking Bird

A Beggar

Two Princesses

A Saint

Two Thieves

A Bat

An Astrologer

Various Men

*Time: The Past*

*Place: Unknown*



# The Conference of the Birds

The house lights dim.

The stage lights come up to reveal the BIRDS.

## HOPOE

One day the birds of the world, those we know and those that nobody knows, all gathered together for a great conference. When they were met, the hoopoe, trembling with emotion, placed herself in their midst. "Dear birds, I am troubled. Wherever I look, I see nothing but quarrels, desperate fights for a scrap of territory, wars for a few grains of corn. This can't go on. For years I have travelled by sea and by land. I have covered vast distances and I know many secrets. Listen to me. We have a King. We must find him. Otherwise we are lost."

BIRDS

A King! We've had enough of kings! What's the use of another king?

HOOPOE

Listen, feather brains! I'm speaking of our true king. He lives behind the mountain called Kaf. His name is Simorgh. He's the King of birds. He is close to us but we are far from him. The way to him is unknown and only a man with a lion's heart dare take it. I can't make the journey alone. But if I don't reach him, I'll die of shame.

HERON

Are we sure the Simorgh exists?

HOOPOE

Yes. One of his feathers fell on China in the middle of the night and his reputation filled the world. This sign of his existence is a token of his glory. A drawing was made of this feather and there's a trace of it on every heart. Look!

(He unfolds a piece of silk on which is drawn a feather. The BIRDS come close to look at the drawing. Next to the feather there are a few Chinese letters.)

DOVE

What's written there?

HERON

"Seek knowledge, even in China."

(Very excitedly, the SPARROW cries out:)

SPARROW

Yes! Let's go! I am very impatient to know my sovereign. I've sunk to the bottom of the well and I'll snatch at any cord! Let's go!

(Proud, head erect, with a soldier's bearing,  
the FALCON speaks:)

FALCON

I, the falcon, have a king's hand for a home. I'm strict, I'm disciplined and I perform my duties to the letter. Why should I wish to see the Simorgh, even in a dream? I do not feel called to this journey. The hand of a king is honour enough for me. My only wish in life is to stay close to him.

HOOPOE

A wise man keeps well away from kings.

(A KING enters. The HOOPOE places  
himself beside him and tells a story.)

HOOPOE

This king gave a slave a robe of honour. The

slave went through the streets wearing it. The day was hot and a gust of wind covered him with dust. So the slave wiped his face with the sleeve of his robe. Like this.

(The HOOPOE makes the gesture of wiping his face and adds:)

HOOPOE

At once, the King had him impaled.

FALCON

So?

(The HOOPOE points as another KING enters.)

HOOPOE

Another king learned that a beggar had fallen passionately in love with him and was proclaiming his love throughout the kingdom.

(The BEGGAR appears, chanting:)

BEGGAR

I love my king. I only love my king . . .

(The KING interrupts him:)

KING

Hey! Come here!

(The BEGGAR throws himself down before  
the KING and the KING says:)

KING

Since you love me with such devotion, choose:  
either you go into exile or you have your head  
cut off.

(Agonized, the BEGGAR hesitates  
for a moment, then says:)

BEGGAR

I prefer exile.

KING

Cut off his head!

(One of the BIRDS stands up and  
asks the KING:)

FIRST EXOTIC BIRD

But he's innocent! He loves you! Why must he  
die?

KING

He's no true lover. He prefers his head.



(The Beggar's head is cut off.)

(The FALCON, who has listened attentively,  
asks the HOOPOE once again:)

FALCON

I'm listening. I don't understand what you're  
trying to say.

(The HOOPOE makes a third KING  
appear, saying:)

HOOPOE

A king had a handsome slave whom he loved  
dearly. He gave him the most beautiful clothes  
and never let him out of his sight.

(The beautiful SLAVE enters, very pale.)

(The HOOPOE takes an apple and balances  
it on the Slave's head, saying:)

HOOPOE

Each day the slave put an apple on his head and  
the king practiced his archery.

(One of the BIRDS asks:)

SECOND EXOTIC BIRD

Why is the slave so pale?

FIRST EXOTIC BIRD

Wouldn't you be?

HOOPOE

When the arrow reached its mark, all the court  
applauded the king.

(The KING shoots two arrows which hit the  
apple. ALL applaud. Each time, the HOOPOE  
replaces the apple on the Slave's head. The  
KING shoots a third arrow.)

HOOPOE

But, unfortunately, one day the slave was  
wounded.

(The arrow wounds the SLAVE. He sways  
and staggers. The KING explodes angrily:)

KING

Scandal! I'm the best archer in the kingdom.  
It's his fault. He must have moved. Finish him  
off!

(The SLAVE is killed.)

(The FALCON asks the HOOPOE:)

FALCON

Why do you always answer me with stories?

HOOPOE

A tyrant is never a king.

(The BIRDS flutter excitedly. The  
HOOPOE speaks to the audience:)

HOOPOE

To escape the journey, the birds found countless excuses. And to convince them to go, the hoopoe told countless stories. But often nothing could outweigh their fears.

(The DUCK leaves the other BIRDS  
and cries:)

DUCK

No, no, no! Go, if you wish. I, the duck, I'm not going. I who am purity itself. I who live my life in water. Who can live on water like me? I've marvelous powers, for sure. No, no. I'm not going.

(The PARTRIDGE comes to join the  
DUCK and says:)

PARTRIDGE

Nor me, neither! I, the partridge, and . . . life is precious stones. Love of jewels has lit a fire in my heart. This love has bound me to

the mountain where I find my stones. Impossible to leave it.

DUCK

Water's my food and water's my dwelling.  
When I have worries, water washes them away. I don't like dry land. How can I leave my water?

PARTRIDGE

I eat jewels and I sleep on jewels. I love jewels for jewels are eternal. Either I find precious stones or I die.

HOOPOE

Farewell, duck; farewell, partridge.

(The DUCK and the PARTRIDGE  
leave the conference. The HOOPOE  
turns forcefully to the OTHERS:)

HOOPOE

Listen to me. The Simorgh is hidden behind a veil. When he appears outside the veil, even for an instant, his face is as radiant as the sun and he casts thousands of shadows on the earth. These shadows are birds. You . . . you are no more than the shadow of the Simorgh. So does it matter if you live or die?

If the Simorgh had wished to remain hidden, he would never have cast his shadow. But he did and as no one can look him in the face, he made a mirror so that all can see his reflection.

DOVE

What is this mirror?

HOOPOE

It's your heart.

SECOND EXOTIC BIRD

Why do you always speak in riddles?

HOOPOE

Can't you guess?

(The excitement and agitation grows.)

(The HERON asks:)

HERON

I'm very impatient to go, but I'm afraid. What exactly is this king? Please try to explain.

HOOPOE

Look at this princess.

(Enter a PRINCESS accompanied by a  
FEMALE ATTENDANT.)

HOOPOE

One day, while taking a walk, she saw a slave of extraordinary beauty and her heart was hers no longer.

(The SLAVE appears. The PRINCESS is very struck, but the SLAVE does not see her. The WAITING WOMAN asks the PRINCESS — it is one of the BIRDS that puts the questions and it is the HOOPOE who answers for the PRINCESS — :)

WAITING WOMAN/DOVE

What is it, princess?

PRINCESS/HOOPOE

I am drunk with love. I'm ready to sacrifice my honour and my life.

WAITING WOMAN/DOVE

For love of a slave?

PRINCESS/HOOPOE

Yes, it's forbidden I know. Yet if I don't speak with him, I shall die in anguish.

WAITING WOMAN/DOVE

What do you wish exactly?