
'Tierno Bokar' Arrives on Campus

By Kristin Sterling

For more than five decades, Peter Brook has been an unconventional pioneer in the arts world, revered for his work that spans theater, film, opera and non-fiction writing.

This is why it is particularly meaningful that only now, and only at Columbia University, Brook and his international theater company are integrating their work into the life and culture of a large urban university through a month-long residency organized by the Columbia University Arts Initiative.

The centerpiece of this resi-

dency is the U.S. premiere of *Tierno Bokar*, a theatrical exploration of the power of tolerance, set in 1930s French-ruled Africa. The work is a co-production of Brook's International Center of Theatre Creation (ICT) in Paris and his Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, and was adapted by Marie-Helene Estienne from the West African writer Amadou Hampaté Bâ's *Life and Teaching of Tierno Bokar, the Sage of Bandiagara*. For more information on the performance, which runs through April 26, go to www.tiernobokar.columbia.edu.

The production is based on

the life of Tierno Bokar (1875-1939), a Sufi sage, a member of a distinguished clan and a spiritual leader in his village in Mali. His clan, exponents of repeating a Sufi prayer 12 times, was embroiled in a debate with a rival clan that advocated repeating it 11 times, which devolved into a conflict over power and leadership in the Tidjani Sufi Order. When Bokar eventually became a follower of Hamallah, a member of the rival clan, he was cast out by family, relatives and clan, branded a traitor and forbidden to teach or pray publicly. His enemies further ostracized him by

collaborating with the colonial powers, portraying him as a fomenter of rebellion against French rule. Bokar died impoverished and isolated.

Brook's Columbia residency, which is in partnership with Barnard College and the Harlem Arts Alliance, comprises a series of diverse educational activities. These academic symposia, discussions and film screenings, among other events, complement the performance, but are of interest all on their own. All the events are designed to appeal to students, fac-

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ulty and community members and draw on Columbia's wide-ranging academic resources and foster a dialogue about the social, political, religious and historical questions raised by the production.

"Through all of these events, which will take place in various Columbia and Harlem venues, we will constantly explore Brook's

idea that the only meaningful theater emerges from the idea of community, that it must reflect not the ideas of the elite or the lowest common denominator, but rather those in a community 'who see theater as a possibility for themselves of renewal,'" says Gregory Mosher, director of the Columbia University Arts Initiative and for-

mer Lincoln Center producer and director.

Voza Rivers, chair of the Harlem Arts Affiance, talked with WNYC's Brian Lehrer about the importance of Brook's performance and residency to Columbia and its surrounding community: "This is a tale set in Africa. It has a special resonance for people in the Harlem

community, in particular, because Columbia University is in Harlem. And for our community to have an opportunity to see Peter's work — with a cast that comes from eight different countries — around a religious figure, a peaceful man, a man of talent, a man of understanding, is just so timely."

Added Mosher: "No university has ever made such a commitment to a project like this, and we have enormous hope that the reverberations will be far reaching and long lasting."

University faculty — from such diverse fields as religion, French, theater and international affairs— are among those playing an active role in the residency. Gregory Mann, an assistant professor of history at Columbia who was set to participate in the April 7 panel discussion "Tolerance in the West African Muslim Tradition," said, "Having *Tierno Bokar* produced on campus, by Peter Brook, with such a fabulous cast and a great crew is like receiving a wonderful crew gift. The play *Tierno Bokar*, brought to Columbia as an artistic endeavor, as an act of theatrical and spiritual searching, makes it clear that Africa still has much to teach the world about what are — or should be — universal values of tolerance."

Other special events have included "Prologue" and "Epilogue" discussions led by Louis Brenner, a Columbia alumnus and a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London; a discussion with Brook at Miller Theatre; an "Introduction to Global Sufism" by Peter Awn, dean of the School of General Studies; as well as screenings of films such as Brook's *Lord of the Flies* and African actor Sotigui Kouyate's (who plays the role of Tierno Bokar) *Genesis* and *Keita, l'Héritage du Griot*.

"We are using these screenings not only to discuss Peter Brook's work, but also as a springboard to other topics, like art's place in politics, which is so relevant today," says Garth Bardsley, SOA'06, who is one of the students directly involved with the residency as an organizer of the film screenings. "Most people in the U.S. don't know that Sotigui is one of Africa's most important actors."

The film series continues in the coming days with screenings of Brook's *Marat/Sade* on April 14; as well as Kouyate's *Golem, l'Esprit de l'Exil* on April 13, *La Vie sur Terre* on April 20, and *Keita, l'Héritage du Griot* on April 25. Other upcoming events also include an April 9 lecture titled "Religion and Politics in the Theater of Peter Brook," by Michael Kustow, author of *Peter Brook: A Biography*, and moderated by

Mosher. A complete schedule of events is accessible at www.tiernobokar.columbia.edu/events.html

In addition to these special events, most of which are free and open to the public, Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL) has created a Web site of classroom resources for Columbia faculty and students, at ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/tiernobokar/. Among the resources is an essay outlining the issues that should be considered when approaching *Tierno Bokar* as well as interviews with faculty members Awn, Ousmane Kane, associate professor at the School of International and Public Affairs, and Mann. Video interviews cover topics ranging from Sufism and Islam in West Africa to Amadou Hampâté Bâ and the message of *Tierno Bokar*.

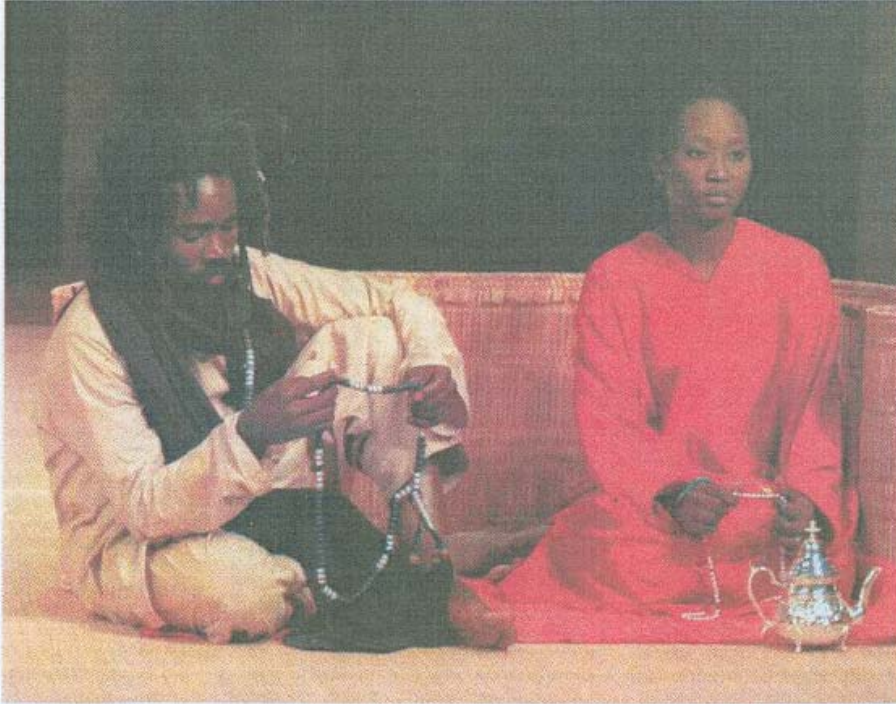
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—Gregory Mosher
director, Columbia University
Arts

The comprehensive Web site also includes a bibliography of print and Web resources for further study; a timeline of West African history spanning from the Songhay Era in the 1400s to present day; a glossary of key people and terms related to *Tierno Bokar*; slideshows ranging from maps of West African Empires and ancient and modern Mali, to esoteric writing; and film footage from Susan Vogel's *Living Memory: Six Sketches of Mali to Keita, l'Héritage du Griot*.

This semester, the Columbia: University Arts Initiative has spear headed various events, including organized bus tours of "The Gates" exhibit in Central Park and a speaker series. The next event in the series is April 8, when Jonathan Safran Foer, author of *Everything Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, will be in conversation with Jeffrey Brown arts correspondent for *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*.

For complete information about the Brook residency, performances events schedule, and classroom resources, visit www.tiernobokar.columbia.edu



Courtesy of Images of US

Top photo: Abdou Ouloguem, left, and Djeneba Kane both play multiple characters in the performance of *Tierno Bokar*. Above: Peter Brook, left, receiving a plaque from Ademola Olugebefola of the Harlem Arts Alliance, which is a partner of the residency