IMAGES, TRAMPOLINES AND A LICENCE FOR THE EXTRAORDINARY

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-PIERRE VOOS

(Part 2 of 2 Parts)

By Frank A. York and Georgina B. York

F.Y. I wonder if you could give us some of your perceptions of theatre and its relationship to the other dramatic art forms.

J-P. I am a great believer in live theatre. But I also think it must tackle the problem of audiences, not by competing with television and film and the other art forms that draw the public away, because it can't. It can't financially. The theatre is always a very poor relative. The other media, like television and film, pay much more than the theatre. Actors and technicians are lured toward the other media to pay the bills and to lead a decent life like normal working people.

To combat that, I don't think theatre should only pursue the approach that is generally termed "psychological realism". Psychological realism is really the best style for, and perhaps the only one that can survive in the other media. You do anything that is fantastic or strange on the little box and it really looks pretentious. I've sometimes seen what might be very interesting ballets with very good music on the small box. Because of the surroundings in which you're viewing it, because of the size of the screen, because of the lack of the third dimension, whatever it is, it just looks self-indulgent, and one wonders why it has been broadcast at all.

On the other hand, psychological realism, story lines with a strong story of, say, conflicts of power interest or love interest, be it a "soapie" or a dramatic piece, come over very well on television and certainly on film. You can get tremendous excitement generated in people, even show wonderful scenery, beautiful photography, interesting cutting rhythms, all these things.

But when it comes down to it, I believe that the strength of theatre lies in its magic, and its magic is the knowledge that it's happening in the here and now, at the same time and in the same space as the audience, and there's something live and sharing about it which communicates itself so strongly. We see it in sport, for instance. Hundreds of thousands of people go to attend sports

meetings, whatever they may be, because of the thrill of seeing other people undergoing some risky operation, taking risks with their bodies, stretching the limits. Now I think if theatre were to stretch the limits physically and vocally more, and permit itself to be fantastic, or magical, or strange, or weird, or haunting and deal in terms of images, and **not** always have to rely on this business of psychological realism and telling a story, then I think people would find it a very exciting medium.

G.Y. As a teacher of actors as well as a director, how does this philosophy affect your students?

J-P. I'm not saying that's the only form of theatre. I would like to see our students well employed as soon as possible when they leave the university. If there aren't many companies doing experimental theatre, there's no point in my gearing them up to Grotowski-type or Barba-type theatre. At present these don't exist very much in this country...yet. But there **are** movements in that direction.

I have to prepare the students to be very employable in the traditional theatres, and the traditional theatres are putting out one-, two- or three-act plays or musicals. I think it's important that our actors can stand their ground—be seen to move well and be heard properly (have a good voice and project that voice). These attributes of control of the body and control of the voice are both necessary to the traditional theatre now—increasingly so—and to any more fantastic or strange theatre that these people **might** find themselves pursuing later, should they want to. So in that sense, it incorporates my view that, indeed, theatre should be dealing in images rather than in stories. This doesn't mean that I am against the literary side, but I would like to redress what I perceive as an imbalance.

F.Y. And yet the text is the actor's normal point of departure.

J-P. I recognise that the written text, the play, can be a wonderful, exciting, stimulating trampoline for actors, but that's as far as it goes. The actors have to be able to bounce off a script. I get very irritated by productions in which actors only perform the task of spokespersons for some author who has been merely getting his or her **ideas** on paper, expecting some wretched characters to spout out their philosophies.

I think that good plays are those that stimulate actors to interpret them and make them live. Otherwise, you might as well read the play yourself, and your own mind's eye, and your mind's ear and your whole imagination will clothe the play far better than anybody else's production will. There are no limits to the "expenses"

in your head. You can have a fantastic imagination and it doesn't cost anything.

G.Y. Sam Shepard had that point of view, as in *The Tooth of Crime*. The actor's input...

J-P. (Interrupting) That's right! It's so important! Which doesn't mean that I don't like to hear texts well spoken, and rhythmically correct, and beautifully enunciated and clear. Most of the plays I've directed by choice have been poetic, I suppose because poetry incorporates the same sort of attitude to crystallising emotions and carefully preparing its images. It's the same attitude that I have towards theatre: that theatre should crystallise the attitudes of life in order to prepare very telling, very cutting images that **haunt** people. And I think that a poet does the same thing, really, in his lines. If you look at a list of the plays that I've done, here or earlier, many of them are, in fact, verse plays. Certainly, many of them are by poets.

It's not that I repudiate the importance of literature, but I refuse to admit that it's of paramount importance. I think it's a base line that can influence the drama fundamentally. But there are other lines. One of them is the dance. One of them is sheer voice quality (I don't want to call it music), but the quality of the voice itself can generate responses in an audience which the semantic side of words never could.

F.Y. Such as your production of *Medea* in Ancient Greek.

J-P. Precisely!

G.Y. And do you see your students carrying these approaches and philosophy into the profession?

J-P. Provided that jobs can be found for our students when they graduate, provided they are fully equipped, I would like to stimulate them to try to improve or change the situation they're going to find out there. I would rather like to send out pioneers and innovators. This is why, in the second year of our new Performing Arts course, students choose if they are going to be actors, directors or designers/technicians. I'm hoping to turn out a few—even if it's just a few a year—young directors that will go out and change the somewhat moribund state of theatre as it is at the moment: people who will give new life to theatre rather than keep the old life going, innovators, people who will take initiative.

What we can offer is a more European approach, which is perhaps more eclectic, and not solely governed by the British attitude, which the rest of Australian theatre seems to have inherited. I may be

wrong, but the impression I get is that Australian theatre is an extension of British theatre. Its ways and its approach are very British. I think I'm **very** fortunate to have lived some years out of Britain and worked in other theatres, for that experience was very significant for me.

On the other hand, British theatre has certain advantages. It has a certain efficiency and neatness of approach which is well worth acquiring.

G.Y. The Continental approach incorporates Stanislavsky, for example.

J-P. Yes, yes! But Stanislavsky is also incorporated in British theatre. It's still the fundamental approach to NIDA and other proper drama schools. What other innovators have done in Eastern Europe, in Italy, in Denmark is usually **not** incorporated. **That** is very much to do with image work, and the voice and the body, again. It's extending it all. It's going further.

There was a man called Roy Hart—he's dead, now—who did some very extraordinary things with the voice: managed to produce, with untrained singers, a voice of quite exceptional quality and timbre. Sometimes he did this by using a broken voice that sounds very harsh, and sounds very damaging, but in fact doesn't do any harm, and sometimes by harnessing the natural harmonics of the voice. Recently, David Hykes, who visited Australia last year, has been following along the same lines with the Harmonic Choir in New York. Roy Hart left England because he couldn't get the right support for his research. And he established himself in the south of France where they now have a very thriving centre for this vocal approach, which people like Peter Brook, Grotowski and other famous directors will consult and send their actors to. But he had to leave England because England was too old fashioned and didn't encourage that sort of new approach.

G.Y. Will your work with your students then incorporate a wider practical experience, and will it look at radio, television and film rather than concentrate on more academic study?

J-P. We're increasing the academic study because there's still room for it. But, also, we're increasing the opportunity for people to have a go at radio, film, the dance (as such), theatre (I mean, the **stage**) and t.v. There's a whole part of their work called Media Studies, where they practically put on short anecdotes or interpret short scenarios in these five media. What is the difference in acting technique between these media? (and there is a big difference between stage, television and film)! What is the difference artistically? What is the peculiar quality

that each medium demands? What **is** there about dance that you can't do in any other medium? What **is** there about theatre that cannot be done in any other fashion? And it's a very good exercise for them to dwell upon, and ponder, and try to solve and come up with some answers. Because if they can discover what is so peculiar about theatre that it cannot be done in any other medium, **that** is the thing they **should** concentrate on, to my way of thinking. And there is my teaching philosophy, if you like.

F.Y. I was just about to ask about some of the productions you put on when we got embroiled in philosophies and approaches. How do the productions you've mounted in Townsville reflect these aspects you've been discussing?

J-P. There's been a wide range of productions, you know, from heavily classical in Ancient Greek, like the *Medea* you mentioned before, to the very provocative and popular like *The Breasts of Tiresias*. "*Breasts*" was a museum piece. I wanted to do that to show the origins of Surrealism, which has affected so much theatre and drama today—like the Monty Python shows, *The Young Ones*, *The Goodies*. Surrealism has a very strong influence.

The *Zim Zoom Show* and *Randomania* were something else.

G.Y. It was an experimental aspect.

J-P. Well, they're experimental in **form**, but the actual content is to do with presenting people to people, rather than characters to people. It's really being yourself. You have to be yourself, although you're sometimes playing crazy games, sometimes you're singing, sometimes you're performing some weird act on stage. The sum total of what the audience receives is not a message from an author, but the message is: "These are people! Aren't they great to watch?" At the end of *Randomania* or any of those shows audiences get the feeling that they know the actors, and perhaps they like those people, and they could go on watching them for a long time, not because of what they're saying or what they're actually doing, but because it's real people that are very much alive—**very** much alive!—living on the edge (some sort of risk). And some of the stuff they do is entertaining, too. Sure. I come back to this thing about live theatre: one of its strengths is that it is dealing with living people, and living people are still more interesting than mere spokespersons!

G.Y. What about future productions?

J-P. I think I'd like to go on swinging between one extreme and the other, and cover what's in between as best I can. To compensate, perhaps,

for the certain degree of isolation here—which in one respect is a good thing because we can concentrate on our work and get on with it—I think we should do extraordinary things. I don't think we're like a local repertory theatre, having to serve the needs of North Queensland or Townsville, as such. We needn't serve the needs as they perceive them, anyway, but the needs they **don't** know about. If you don't know the taste of a pear, if you haven't tasted it, no one can describe it to you. So it's up to us to bring tastes—strange, extraordinary but expanding things—in the performing arts that people have not sampled here, which they may well not like, but they ought to sample them before they decide.

F.Y. How much room is reserved for traditional works?

J-P. Oh, the students must do traditional works! That will be the bulk of their employment when they leave here, let's face it. But there's room for everything. I think there ought to be a wide range. And certainly, if there's something we **can** do which is a bit extraordinary and a bit unusual, we should do it—because nobody else will! I don't mean that as a duty to the community, but as a duty to the students to sample something not "way out" for the sake of being "way out", but unusual in order to give them the licence that they need.

People need a licence. If they know that they can do **this**, or that somebody has done **that**, then they'll think, "Ah! Well, maybe I'll do **the other**!" in relation to it. But if they haven't any idea that something has been done before, very few people will conceive afresh of new approaches.

Actors need a licence. When they come to create something on their own, innovating something, they're not just repeating what everybody else has done, but advancing the theatre a little bit further.

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