



Jean-Pierre Voos

ARTISTIC LEANINGS AND A VAGABOND KISS  
AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-PIERRE VOOS  
(Part 1 of 2 Parts)

By Frank A. York and Georgina B. York

G.Y. You have enjoyed a long and varied career at the forefront of experimental theatre. What first attracted you to directing?

J-P. I was a student in another profession at London University for 9-10 years. Gradually, as I was pursuing my studies, I knew I wasn't cut out for it. As a young man, I was looking for other things more fulfilling in life.

Partly because I shared a flat with people who were in music, I went through a phase of thinking maybe I should study music. Being a bit too old to be a performer on an instrument with any hope of getting anywhere — by then I was about 24 or 25 — I thought about conducting. I became a conductor to a certain point, and conducted amateur choruses and professional soloists in pieces like Faure's *Requiem* and Mozart piano concerti and things of that sort. And then I reached a certain level of fulfilment in that, and I knew it wasn't going to be my life.

I went into student politics, but soon became a bit cynical about politics. It was during the years when Britain had "never had it so good". It seemed Britain had settled in for a long period of domination by one party. Again, I felt it wasn't for me.

Quite by accident I was taken to the theatre in London — by musicians. I had only been to an opera once or twice with my parents. That was virtually my total experience with theatre apart from Greek plays at my secondary school. We used to do Greek plays in Ancient Greek there every three years. I'd seen there was a certain quality to that experience which drew people from all over Britain. It was in an open air theatre, a scale model of the Epidaurus Theatre. I hadn't performed with them, but I'd been an assistant and a guide and involved with the productions.

But I was taken, as I say, to see some remarkable shows in London: one by Peter Brook and another directed by Peter Woods. And I thought, this is really the medium which could reach a lot of people, and say things to people, and mobilise my leanings towards the arts, like the visual arts, which I'd dabbled in, and music, of course, as well as politics. All could roll into one very neatly, and I could try and change the world.

Well, I was still at University and became involved in the theatre club of my college and I started directing. I directed three plays over about three years. They were deemed to be unusual or a success, and I suppose that went to my head.

F.Y. And this was the catalyst for the change.

J-P. Yes! I got my degree and promptly left the profession! I decided I would start at the bottom of my new one. I was Assistant Stage Manager to the Pitlochry Festival, in Scotland, performing six plays over six months. Obviously, I learned a lot. I was older than the other four or five assistant stage managers. They were usually 18 or 19 and I was about 28 or 29 so I was given more responsibility, perhaps. This led me fairly quickly back to directing.

I directed the actors in modern plays when they had time off because they got bored with their six plays after a few months. As all actors, they wanted to keep doing something new. The main director had gone back to London, and I was left just doing the productions and directing the actors on the side, occupying ourselves with new plays like that. This is how I discovered Pinter and N.F. Simpson, and we put on their plays for the local community and the Mayor of the town. They were unofficial, of course, done in our spare time and performed on Sundays. But it reinforced my convictions that one can say things, and do things, and draw people and reach people through theatre.

So I matured fairly quickly and applied for a job in a nearby repertory theatre in St. Andrews (which happens to be like the mecca of golf!). It has a very small theatre called The Byre. Funnily enough, byre means cowshed<sup>1</sup> in Scottish. So my first job directing professionally was an appointment as the resident director of The Byre Theatre. And I was reappointed for a second year. In those two years I put on about thirty plays, because it was a repertory theatre.

At the beginning of the season we had about two weeks to put on a play, then we ran it for two weeks. And during those two weeks we rehearsed the next play. Gradually, towards the middle of the year, we'd rehearse for three weeks and run them three weeks. And then in summer we would run them monthly, but perform twice nightly. Towards the end of the year, with days getting shorter and colder — this is in Europe, remember — the system shrank again to three weekly and fortnightly. This may not be very interesting in detail, but it meant that in any one year one had to rehearse and present about fifteen plays. It was remarkable to be responsible for so many plays!

I had to pick the actors in the south, in London. It's a little bit like the situation we get up here sometimes, with professional companies that pick their actors from the south — from capital cities down there, somewhere — to come and do a season in the north. The distance is nothing like the same, but in those days, in the 60's, it was still a long way from London.

With a company of only eight or nine, we would produce all those plays. Often I found I had to perform, because the play had more than eight or nine characters. I found myself taking small parts and then bigger and bigger parts as my plays became more ambitious. So, in a sense, I learned acting as a necessity in my own plays.

F.Y. How did you find that experience?

J-P It was not something I always enjoyed, as my concentration was diverted from the whole picture. I was responsible for the sets, costumes, directing the actors, steering the company — the lot. The only things we didn't do was publicity, promotion, selling tickets, all that front-of-house stuff. I had to do a fair amount of acting in those two years. Still, I found that very valuable, knowing what it feels like to be an actor and go through all the hoops an actor has to go through.

G.Y. How did your new career develop from there?

J-P I directed in repertory companies for some five or so years — from '60 to '65 — and then I formed a company in London where, over the next five years, we presented some 50-odd plays. There were three directors. We took it in turns. George Ogilvie, who is an Australian, was an actor with me. When he left Lecoq School in Paris, he came to London and performed in one or two of my plays. Then he became a co-director with me, as did Corin Redgrave, Vanessa's brother. We rehearsed plays alternately for a while, and in the space of those five years we were presenting a lot of the new works on the London scene.

The policy was to mount plays that had never been performed in English or in England before, so they were London or English premieres. That drew the critics and meant we could employ quite well known performers for a while because the plays were deemed to be "interesting". Whereas these experienced actors were, in fact, satisfying their bank managers and earning their living in television and film or in established theatre companies, they would come to our small, experimental theatre company because the works were professionally — for them — very challenging works to get their teeth into. So this way we got a very good quality of

actor. And yet at times we found ourselves with no play for a month or so — we didn't have one ready, didn't have the means or have a grant in time to put on a play in a certain month. It's quite a headache to keep a theatre open year round in London.

G.Y. How did you find appropriate new plays to present?

J-P. I was constantly dealing with literary agents — play agents. Also, we had very good links with Eastern European cultural legations in London. Obviously, they were very keen to cultivate us because we were their foothold in Britain where we would do their plays. We were always invited to their endless cocktail parties to meet eminent people from, say, Czechoslovakia, Poland or Hungary. And without getting involved in super-power politics, we did unearth in London a few interesting authors. In that way I also met Andrzej Wajda, the film director, Grotowski and people like that, who were at that time almost unknown in England. The Poles asked me to look after them because I spoke French and they couldn't speak much English, so I got to be quite friendly with them and we did some work together.

The long and the short of it is, when we were not putting on our own plays, I had time on my hands. We had to pay the rent, look after the bricks-and-mortar, the personnel. It was very important that we had something to present. So we decided we would put on foreign works — invite foreign companies over, or if they happened to be coming over to England anyway, we'd make sure we presented them in London in our theatre first.

People like the La Mama Troupe (that was the original La Mama company) came over and made a name for Ellen Stewart by its great success at the Edinburgh Festival. Immediately after the Edinburgh Festival we presented them at the Mercury in London. It was a tremendous success and really put the whole La Mama organisation on the map. Not only the Troupe, led by Tom O'Horgan (of *Hair* fame), but new playwrights such as Sam Shepard and Rochelle Owens.

After that we had the American Theater Project, which is now Circle Rep. in New York. Marshall Mason came with more new playwrights such as Lanford Wilson, and astonished us with the quality of their work.

And then we had a group called Quidam from Czechoslovakia. They came almost like refugees, or at least they were very impoverished, looking for something desperately, and we happened to have a free month so we presented them in our theatre.

And we would have run all these plays for six months, but we couldn't. We only had the odd single month free.

Then another company, Le Grand Theatre Panique of France (which became Le Magic Circus) — Jerome Savary — came over and created a sensation because the first full male nude was presented more or less by accident in the theatre. I was standing in the audience that evening and I was certain that we were going to be closed down or hounded out the next day, but the police never intervened. Instead, very soon afterwards the Lord Chamberlain ceased to exist as a censor. Nobody seemed to mind. What it actually did was fill the theatre to capacity as soon as it got out, especially with a badly focused photograph in one of the papers. We managed to run that play for four months! It was another coffer filler for us.

G.Y. Was there a particular turning point in your career as a director?

J-P. I noticed that the quality of the performance was greatly increased if it came from within an ensemble situation. I had always done either repertory with one group — many plays being cast with the same actors and changing the casting every fortnight, or month or whatever it was — or I had been presenting plays with an *ad hoc* company which was chosen for their appearance, or their reputations, or their voice quality or their suitability to a part, but it was still *ad hoc*. Some of them might have worked together before, but it was unlikely.

These people who came from abroad were *ensembles*. They had been together for some time. They had learnt to work together, and there was a peculiar quality in their work which was detectable and very obviously an advantage. And I thought, why go on all my life doing *ad hoc* plays, perhaps getting more money, or more famous actors, or more success or whatever it was? I wasn't particularly interested in that. I was more interested in the quality of the theatre. So I decided I would stop The International Theatre Company. After five years I felt I had done my bit.

At the same time, I'd been giving workshops, and teaching, and giving lectures and, generally speaking, dealing with younger actors at the City Literary Institute, at the Dance Centre of London, at a venue called The Artists' Place and another called The Arts Lab. And so I had quite a few young students that I was working with. I decided I'd stop this bricks-and-mortar responsibility of The Mercury and move on to try to make an ensemble with some of these people. Twelve of us went to a chateau in the south of France that had been offered to us by a lady who said to us, 'I love artists! Come along to my chateau and do something at my

place for a while. We have artists every year. We had musicians last year, you know.’ So I thought, why not!?’ Twelve of us went down there. We soon ran out of money and found ourselves having to busk and having to present unfinished segments of our shows to the local town and the local festivals, but the thing caught on.

G.Y. And that was the beginning of the group called KISS?

J-P. Yes!

G.Y. Was there significance in the name ‘KISS’?

J-P. It was not an abbreviation, or anything like that. It was created in the early 70’s at the time when there was Flower Power and all that sort of thing. So it was just ‘a kiss’ — an approach to the audience, in a way.<sup>2</sup>

F.Y. And the actors: who were these twelve people?

J-P. They were multi-nationals, coming from Denmark, France, England, New Zealand, Australia — Nola Rae, who’s a mime, is an Australian; she was with us — and so on. They were nearly all English speaking and we performed all our plays in English although we were living in France for three years. Then we moved on to Denmark, to Belgium and then to Holland. So we’ve had four bases.

While there were changes every year (about 30 percent would leave and we’d have to find a few more to top up the company), there was still a continuity. An *ensemble* came out of that. One man, John du Feu, was an actor with me for eight or nine years and then became the dramaturge of the company. He worked with me for about thirteen years in all. At the moment he’s running The Shopfront youth theatre company in Sydney. An actress who’s in Australia, Jepke Goudsmit, worked with me eight or nine years. She’s now running The Kinetic Energy Company at The Edge in Sydney. And others — seven, six, five years, and so on down the line. So it was like an extended family of, on the average, about ten or twelve actors and myself. Sometimes we went up to 17 or 19, and once we went down to five!

KISS lasted fifteen years and we lived in four different countries. But we were never residents of that country — only visitors. Wherever we went, we were always treated as foreigners.

G.Y. Was that an advantage or disadvantage?

J-P. In a way it was a disadvantage if you were trying to get money out of the local government or the state system. On the other hand, it was particularly interesting to be vagabond artists.

F.Y. You’d have a lot of freedom.

J-P. We had a certain freedom. And we could always bring a certain quality to the people around us that they were not accustomed to. We were like a breath of fresh air or something new — a new voice. We did a lot of touring. It was all touring. I never again wanted a theatre **building** around my neck. We were itinerant, never knowing from one year to the next who was going to be our host.

In 1980, KISS came to Australia. It was our first tour outside Europe. We came with some Greek plays: *The Oresteia*. We performed at the Adelaide Festival, Melbourne and Canberra. And then our producer said, 'Would you like to go to the tropics?' So we said, 'Sure!' And he said, 'Well, there's a place called Townsville . . . ' And we thought, wouldn't that be great to perform in the tropics!

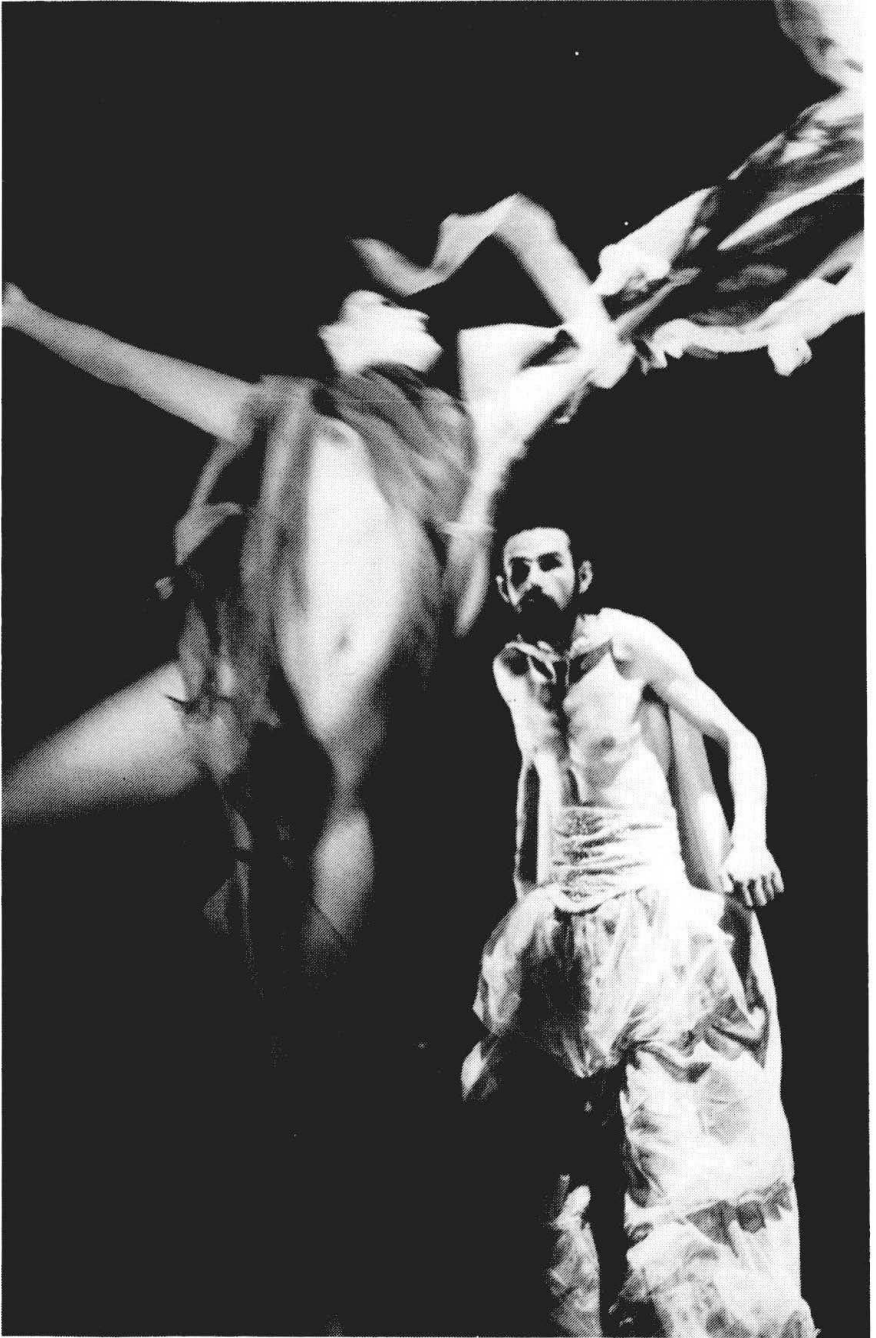
We presented other plays here: *Salome* and *Bon-Beau-Cher*. We had a wonderful reception. We thought, really, Townsville was quite hospitable, wonderful people, fantastic climate, Magnetic Island on our days off and things like that. So we remembered Townsville. And when we came back in 1982 and '83 for a second tour, we certainly asked to include Townsville, and again came up with all our plays.

Most of the people who came in 1982 and '83 had decided they were going to emigrate and stay in Australia. We knew that — it was sort of planned. And, indeed, I would have gone back with only two out of eleven. I decided I'd draw the line and even discourage those two from staying with me, and I'd start again with a completely new group. I'm always looking for a challenge. I thought it would be a challenge to reproduce the quality, dedication, intensity (and perhaps success) of KISS with a completely new group of people. So I went back to Europe with a group of eleven young Australians, and we remoulded KISS from scratch.

F.Y. And what subsequently happened to KISS?

J-P. With the new group of eleven, we remounted some old shows, put on some new ones and met with gratifying success around Europe. Finally, I arranged a tour of Germany. I was beginning to get a bit concerned that I was going to spend all my life running KISS. I couldn't find close enough kindred spirits who would accept the responsibility for the company. I could easily find them as actors, as dramaturges and colleagues, but no one who would take it over. And I just didn't want to have to spend the rest of my life with one company.

Also, I wanted to get back to dialogue with people my own age. I had grown to be a cross between a teacher, a father confes-



KISS in Action

sor, an older brother, a counsellor . . . However, I always studiously avoided being anybody's lover. Well, that's not quite true. My daughter was born of an actor in KISS, but she was not an actor in KISS at the time.

I could see no development for me. I wanted to be free of that burden of being Director-Producer. One wants a change. For me, it was like a seven year itch, but twice over. After all, I had run KISS for about 15 years.

So I thought, well, I'll wind it up. And let's wind it up on a peak, not in a trough. The troughs came regularly as in any venture, of course, but I opted to end it on a good tour. So we amicably decided to end it on the German tour, with a bang. It left a good taste in our mouths.

F.Y. But after all that, don't you miss the cultural excitement and stimulus of Europe?

J-P. I have no hankering for going back there just to see things. I've seen so many plays, so many operas, so many exhibitions, I don't feel terribly the urge. Of course there are interesting things being done in Paris, London, Germany and elsewhere. But I'm going to stay here because there's space here, and there's space in people's minds as well. People here are very receptive and there is room for consolidation as well as experimentation. In Europe, it's overcrowded — it's harder to make an impact. It's not a question of being a big fish in a smaller pond, but it's that the waters in Europe are thick and difficult to cut through, whereas here, if you have an idea, you can immediately put it into practice and test it out and see how it works.

To do something worthwhile, you don't have to be moving in the maelstrom of society. Even in Europe there are a few centres which are relatively isolated. Eugenio Barba's company, Odin Teatret, in a little village called Holstebro, in Jutland, Denmark, is actually carrying out theatre research of world class importance. As a theatrical research centre, people come from all over the world to this place, and yet it's the most isolated little corner. And I don't believe for one moment that the performers keep trotting down to Copenhagen or Berlin or over to London to see what the rest of the world is doing. They're just getting on with their work. Therefore, we can do that here. It doesn't matter where you are as long as you have the right people around you, who are committed to the same line.

<sup>1</sup> The theatre facility at James Cook University, where Dr Voos heads the Performing Arts course, is also called The Cowshed.

<sup>2</sup> Thirteen years after the company was founded, a Sydney promoter ran a competition to see what people thought the name KISS might mean. The winning entry was Kangaroos in Silk Stockings. The all Australian KISS which returned to Europe in 1983 actually used the presumed meaning for a brief period.

Jean-Pierre Voos was the Founding Director and creative force behind the International Theatre Research Group, KISS. He is currently Senior Lecturer at James Cook University, where he heads the Performing Arts course. He is Founding Director of the Townsville theatre company, Tropic Line.

## SYLVIA KELSO

### SYMPOSION — PAESTUM

They are drinking  
With garlands  
Pipes and lyres.  
One  
Cherishes his boyfriend  
Long fingers arching, electric, delicate  
Behind the contentious head.  
Another  
Twists on a couch, the torso  
Up on an elbow, thrust  
Of archaic beard.  
What is it? What's happening? News?  
They are alert as dynamite  
Instant as fleas.  
Hard to accept  
They've been painted on this tombstone  
Twenty-five hundred years.