

**PART II**

**PRODUCTIONS**



**PEER GYNT IN FRANCE**  
**DIRECTED BY PATRICE CHEREAU**

In 1896, Lugné-Poe staged *Peer Gynt* in Paris, the very first production of the play in France. From then on until May 1981, when Patrice Chéreau presented his interpretation of Ibsen's masterpiece at the Théâtre National Populaire in Villeurbanne, Lyon, *Peer Gynt* had enjoyed a mere thirteen French productions. This figure can hardly compare with the number of times other European plays have been mounted in France since the turn of the century. After Villeurbanne, Chéreau's production went to the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris for the 1981 winter season.

It is true that *Peer Gynt* seems to pose special difficulties because of its length, apparently rambling structure and call upon stark, striking images of mountains, deserts and mythical, magical or nightmarish landscapes, all of which give it the distant, other-worldly and epic quality that held delights for a visionary symbolist like Lugné-Poe but was daunting for lesser mortals nourished on theatrical realism or even on formally experimental theatre. Chéreau, then, rose to the challenge by mounting a mega-production equal in daring to the fantasies of the Norwegian author. His *Peer Gynt* defied decorum in that it was divided into two parts which were performed in a consecutive sequence over two days. The spectator, in other words, had to come to the theatre twice running to fit the pieces of Chéreau's creation together. The different parts were called Day One and Day Two, each playing for three and a half hours. This marathon, which refused to make any concessions to the rules of entertainment defined by the *théâtre bourgeois* of the nineteenth century, is nevertheless the apotheosis of nineteenth-century theatre - particularly as it had come to be at the end of the century - at this, *our* twentieth-century *fin de siècle*.

Chéreau, though, is not inspired by the symbolism that enraptured Lugné-Poe. He responds to the terrestrial desires which, in art and in the culture generally, were known by the name of naturalism; and thus his

spirit moves with Antoine and Zola, both of them great champions of Ibsen. Antoine's production of *Ghosts* in 1890, which he describes as having "the sombre grandeur of Greek tragedy", introduced Ibsen to France. No one was a more tireless campaigner and noisy publicist for naturalism in the theatre than Zola. Antoine and Zola's aim of bringing about a theatre capable not only of portraying real life but also of outdoing it, that is, of being *larger* than life, is magnified - perhaps to an unprecedented degree in the theatre - by Chéreau. Chéreau also surpasses their commitment to truthful representation through ordinary, unadorned "natural" detail. Chéreau, as if thumbing his nose with a grin at Antoine and Zola, puts a real pig and a real horse on the stage. The pig and the horse, albeit natural animals ridden by an actor playing a fictional character, do not simply represent themselves. They are the signs of tragic destiny in that they help carry Peer inexorably into his grave.

Such tricks and effects as the pig and the horse, although fulfilling specific directorial intentions, are flirtations, even whimsical references to nineteenth-century naturalism. They are, at the same time, humorous quotations of the artifices used by the *théâtre de boulevard* - the worst kind of *théâtre bourgeois* according to Antoine and Zola, and whose social and cultural values these naturalist purists abhorred. Yet naturalism always was paradoxical. It imitated nature through icons which, instead of looking natural, only stressed their own artificiality. It demanded high seriousness through representations which, by their very exaggeration for the purposes of mimesis, could not help but be comical. Today's audiences laughed at a real pig and a real horse on the stage of the Théâtre de la Ville, just as loudly, and with the same sort of complicity, as audiences did at a puffing engine on the stage of the Châtelet, a non-serious, *boulevard*-style theatre. The puffing engine had appeared several months earlier in a production of Offenbach's *La Vie parisienne* (first performed in 1866, and so well before the refinements of Luginé-Poe's *Peer Gynt*). The Châtelet is directly opposite the Théâtre de la Ville. It became famous for its productions of music hall and musical comedy, giving rise to the widely-used, familiar expression "*du Châtelet*", which means corn and kitsch. Chéreau's knowing exploitation of gestural and vocal gags, particularly through Gérard Desarthe who plays Peer, is both a return to, and a wink at, the Châtelet tradition. So, too, is Chéreau's use of painted backdrops, which he combines with a device that became the hallmark of naturalism in the theatre, namely, the extension of the decor beyond the visual field. The purpose of this illusionism was to suggest continuity of space, as in real life.

Yet Chéreau's amalgamation of modes does not altogether explain why the term "apotheosis" used above is appropriate for his work. The most important factor is the tight collaboration between Chéreau, Richard Peduzzi, his scenographer, François Regnault, who translated the Norwegian for this production, and every other participant, not least the actors. Although Antoine and Lugné-Poe executed works differently, they both conceived of the *mise en scène* as an orchestrated ensemble of specialists, the director at their head. Their expectations now meet in a *mise en scène* which is given maximum possibilities for collaboration. However, collaboration is no longer understood to be one between craftsmen, as was the case at the turn of the century, but between technologists. Peduzzi, scenographer-engineer, manipulates equipment worthy of Zola's conviction that science stretches theatrical semantics; and that science for society is progress.

While it is banal to say that a performance cannot exist without space, this banality cannot be repeated enough regarding any performance, let alone one thoroughly determined by Peduzzi's massive architecture. For this reason, my analysis starts with, and concentrates on, space. Secondly, Regnault's translation into colloquial French, and into prose and verse metres as close as possible to Ibsen's, divides Acts into Scenes (not in Ibsen) which are Chéreau and Peduzzi's guide for the division of space.

There is no need, here, to enter into theoretical problems on the relationship between a written text and the "text" which is the performance. *Peer Gynt*'s collaborators have simplified the difficulty. My enumeration of Acts and Scenes therefore follows their spatial and narrative organization. In other words, when I speak of Scene y, I mean the scene structured by the performance. If my reader wishes to check the narrative moments being discussed, her/his task will be facilitated: Peter Watt's translation of the Norwegian (Penguin) marks the transitions where Regnault-Peduzzi-Chéreau have marked them. My own translations are from the French script.

This is not the place for a critique of semiotic theory as it has been used in recent years for performance analysis. It is nevertheless useful to note the four principles of a critical nature as regards semiotics that underpin my analysis of *Peer Gynt*.

Firstly, a catalogue of semiotic categories, to which performance signs are made to correspond, produces a dictionary, at best a model, but eschews the whole which is the performance. My aim is the whole, that interaction of semiotic processes where one process is mediated by the next and, simultaneously, is transformed by all the others operating at the

same time. While, for the purpose of clarity in writing my analysis, I will give special attention to one sign-process - space, for example - it should be understood that reference to other processes such as movement, voice, light, and so on, keep the whole performance in mind.

Secondly, the notion of signs in theatre theory requires revision. The interaction of play-elements in a given performance produces meaning. But when meaning is defined as the relationship between signifier and signified in a hermetic system, the analyst is confined to this formal construction and to the purely descriptive method it entails. More attention should be paid to how semiotic processes or semioses function in terms of sociocultural meaning, which is absorbed ("encoded" in semiotic terminology) and, of greater importance still, changed by the performance-whole. By looking at a performance as a recipient of signs and, hence, as a passive, "flat" phenomenon where signs appear as so many pre-set pieces, semioticians have neglected the fact that the performance-whole is a dynamic which generates and *re-creates* signs.

Thirdly, a performance *interprets* signs, as does a spectator. Interpretation and, therefore, selection (interpretation is not to be equated here with hermeneutics) play a far more important role on both sides of the stage or playing space - the performance side(s) and the side(s) reserved for the audience - than semiotic theory has admitted to date. Moreover, there is a back and forth movement between performers and spectators. How one reacts affects what the other does, and vice versa. A complex process of interpretation occurs in the interaction between the two. It is to be noted, furthermore, that the audience "side" or space(s) holding the audience may become the arena of performance, thereby merging playing and audience space for whatever duration is required. This mingling of spaces and between performers and spectators strongly affects the back and forth interpretative movement between them. We shall see how important the use of audience space by performers is to the meaning of Chéreau's *Peer Gynt*.

Fourthly - and this is connected to the third point - spectators have a sociocultural existence and a sociocultural memory (witness the laughter at the *Châtelet* pig in Chéreau's production), which are active in how spectators respond to any production and in how every production is made, for whom it is made (which audiences? where?) and what orientation it chooses. The performance's orientation is a crucial component of the meaning that emerges from it, though always with respect to the spectator.

We can take the example of the pig to illustrate these points on memory and meaning. *Peer Gynt*, having fled his village, meets the Woman in

Green deep in the mountains. Her snout, when she first appears in II v, anticipates the image of the real pig that appears at the end of the same scene. This strong visual image of Pig is repeated and reinforced by the shape of the Troll King's head. The Troll King makes his entry immediately after the pig's exit. The pig-image is strengthened, once again, by the Woman in Green's reappearance in III ii. Its impact on perception and, by now, also on meaning, is extended through an aural image: the Woman in Green tells Peer that the misshapen creature he despises is his son, for "a pig can be recognized by its skin". Peer is the object of her indictment. The recurrence of pig images in one form or another jolts the spectator's memory back to her/his first incredulous view of the real pig. And this corny pig no longer seems to have been there just for fun, or merely to remind the spectators of entertainment conventions past and present. The spectator has begun to realize that the pig images accumulated during performance open a critical perspective on Peer, and not only on him. Since, besides being part of an aesthetic construction, they also operate in a cultural context which does not prize piggery, the spectator cannot avoid recognizing their socially negative associations. The memory required of any spectator for the duration of one performance is constantly doubled by a collective, social memory.

It should also be noted that I am by no means confusing or fusing actors and characters. My attention to acting detail points out the actors' *transmission* of meaning. However, I use characters' rather than actors' names to help the reader find her/his bearings. After all, the analysis below is verbal metalanguage, whereas Chéreau's production, like all productions, is built out of a plurality of "languages" in which words are not necessarily of uppermost importance. Furthermore, by referring to the characters in their fictional universe, I hope to avoid the cumbersome linking that occurs when the separation between actor and character is stressed (for example, Desarthe/Peer).

\* \* \* \*

Space in *Peer Gynt* is multiple: vertical, horizontal, diagonal, audience-space and wing-space. To these five spaces that are appropriated by the actors should be added a sixth - the paralinguistic space in which the cries of birds, the barking of dogs and the howl of wolves, wind or sea create volume, distance, or crushing proximity. The position and intensity of non-

verbal sounds are regulated according to play. Bird cries, for instance, seem to soar high above the spectators just as the decor outlining mountains and which gives the depth of perspective to the stage zig-zags and bangs into place. The imposing scenographic ensemble announces Peer's monologue in II iv. Towards the scene's conclusion a bird calls from the wings. By this time Peer is sitting on a horizontal plank the length of the stage and which is suspended half-way between the floor and ceiling. Peer turns towards the direction of sound saying "Mother, be quiet". Later, at the end of V vi, Ase's voice is heard off-stage from the same location where the bird called. Thus, not only does Peer associate that particular bird call with his mother, but the very source of sound allows the audience to coordinate bird and mother, whose voice, now that Peer's life is coming to an end, will not be still. Wing-space, at this very moment in the performance in Act V, is the actor's rather than paralinguistic space. However, since Ase is now dead, her voice now belongs to the non-human sphere of animals, trolls and supernatural emanations permeating a forbidding nature. Consequently, it now belongs to the fantastic, phantasmagoric universe that has pursued Peer from beginning to end.

Further examples of how and why non-verbal sound is emitted from either acting or paralinguistic space will be given with respect to other scenes. It is important to state, right here, that my classification of space into six types is for expository concision. These spaces merge in the dynamic of the performance. They criss-cross as the decor changes, which it does especially rapidly in Day One. Similarly, they criss-cross as the actors change position, or according to when and how the actors use the architecture (for example, when Peer is sitting on the plank). The actors' bodies also mould space. (Take, again, Peer sitting on the plank: his vertical body is etched out against the horizontal empty space behind him, making it look quite cavernous.) The production as a whole is built by this complex intersection of spaces and of movements in space.

The preceding paragraphs should have shown how one space connects with or becomes another. Further reference to II iv should also indicate how the simultaneity of different spaces mediates the criss-crossing of signs. Let us take Peer's plank again. It gives the horizontal, which contrasts sharply with the vertical of the walls surrounding him. His seated body accentuates the verticality of the framing sets. (Seconds earlier he was standing, an imaginary perilous drop beneath him. His standing body also accentuated the vertical lines of the set.) His words interweave with paralinguistic sounds such as the bird cry off-stage, or - minutes before - the shrill cry of eagles above Peer's head. Since Peer is standing when the

sound of eagles is heard, these sounds seem higher still. Hence three types of space - horizontal, vertical, wing-space - interchange and exchange meaning with gestures, mimicry and speech; with the oblique, low light from stage-right; with the cold, granite-grey of Peduzzi's constructions. And these monoliths connote the cliffs and chasms of a dangerous mountain-scape that dwarfs, crushes and kills.

Colour semiosis contributes, as we shall see, to the interpretation provided by all collaborators of this *Peer Gynt*. Sound semiosis, for its part, incorporates the crash of sets, the marked stamping or running of feet, the music made by instrumentalists on stage and/or in the wings, as well as the electro-acoustic throbs and pulsations produced by sophisticated technology and which appear to come from above the amphitheatre holding the audience. The fluctuations and tonalities of the production's sound scape move in and out of the various phonemes, intonations and cadences produced through both speech and song, the whole creating an extraordinary texture of tempi, beats and rhythms that deserves special study.

Given the above remarks on the numerous and swiftly changing spaces of *Peer Gynt*, it seems almost impossible to claim that the vertical and horizontal axes emerge as the dominant space-shapers of the production. Yet they do, precisely because, with them, Chéreau and Peduzzi can extend or narrow space overall. The interplay between extending and narrowing spaces generates the conditions for all the relations established on stage, for instance, the relation between the architecture, props and light. It concerns, above all, the relations between the actors. The counterpoint established between the extension and reduction of the space in which the actors must play also guides the production's philosophical argument which, of course, is not straight discourse: it is mediated by all the stage processes.

The production's argument, as expressed through language, has a triadic form. The first two elements of the triad are Peer's recurrent "Be yourself" or, paradigmatically, "Be true to yourself" and the Troll King's "Suffice unto yourself" or - also paradigmatically - "To yourself be - enough". These axioms create a prolonged dialogue that lasts for the duration of the Two Days. The dialogue is carried not only by explicit statements like these, but also through a progressively stronger undercurrent of lexical and situational irony. The third element in the triad which, on the one hand, links up with Peer's life principle and, on the other, with that of the Troll King, is Begriffenfeldt's axiom according to which "Being yourself" is the same as "Being beside yourself" (IV xiii). The lunatic asylum run by

Begriffenfeldt is both the realization of, and a metaphor for, his axiom: being yourself *egotistically*, as Peer and the Troll King understand living, leads to being beside yourself, that is, to madness and/or death.

When, at the end of Day Two, Peer, whose shoulders are stooped and whose body is shrunken (Desarthe's illusionistic acting is most compelling), looks up into the Button Moulder's face to ask querulously what "Being yourself" actually means, the Button Moulder's cryptic reply is: "Being yourself means slaying yourself" (V ix). Peer is on the brink of death. The synthesis of the argument set out in words spells death. How the production focuses on physical, moral and social devastation in Act V will be discussed at the conclusion of this essay. The last Act of *Peer Gynt* gazes upon these devastations which, irrespective of the metaphysical sheen that covers them, are shown to be concrete, palpable catastrophes. And this multiple destruction is shown to be the point of departure, the destination and the cohesive principle of the entire performance.

Now that the production's main philosophical content is clear, we can note that spatial shifts transform the appearance of what I described as "framing sets" above. These frames are held in place throughout the Two Days. Wide, flat pillars along stage-left are shortened by a long, low platform which is like a stage within a stage, and ends in steps. Behind the platform is a passage, which is walled in by a vast, grid-like backdrop. The grid is either partially blocked from view by mobile pieces, or disappears behind various backcloths. It is more exposed when it provides a wall for the lunatic asylum. When it becomes a wall, the grid is hemmed in by an equally vast cage-gate from which the lunatics, who are trapped in narrow space, gradually move outwards, some towards the audience. The same grid is the frontier of perspective from V ii till the end of the performance.

Pillars along stage-right, which are narrower than those opposite them and closer to the audience, are mostly used by Peer, notably at the beginning of III i, when he actually chops into the pillar nearest the audience with a gigantic axe. Peer uses the pillars in IV v, when, betrayed and abandoned by fellow merchants, he searches for roots to eat in the desert and finds them among the small plants tucked into the side of the second pillar. He uses them again in IV v, when he spits the roots out and sprawls against the second pillar, a knotted handkerchief around his head, lassitude in his arms, nonchalant wit in his voice. The pillars serve Peer in V vii, when he attempts to seduce Anitra, who is on her back in the shadows. They are particularly important for play from V ii, where they become Peer's hiding place, his space of fear. These pillars, then, are not

“dead” decor.

At stage-left - near the audience, though flat against the wings - stands a ruined tower borrowed from nineteenth-century iconography of the romantic or 1890s “decadent” kind. A heap of rubble at its base touches a plank coming down in a low diagonal almost to centre-stage. This diagonal line is echoed by a white curtain hanging further back. The curtain is like a collapsed sail. Above it is a horizontal plank. All these main frames are the basis for the ceaseless transformations of space, colour, sound and play that have a mesmeric quality, irrespective of the sharp jolts to the spectators’ perception brought about by the transformations at issue.

\* \* \* \*

Day One starts with the diagonal as Peer pushes Ase, who is on her backside, down to the floor-boards. The descending plank carves out a restricted area for their play. Dialogue continues beside it (Peer mostly on his knees, Ase sitting with her legs crossed), on it (when Peer, still on his knees, narrates his tale of the mountain goat), or under it. Peer curls into a foetal position under it when Ase scolds him. He then hooks his legs over the plank as - a truant child - he fiddles with bits of rubble and giggles or mutters to himself in mockery of her admonishments. Action on it occurs again as mother and son exchange affections, one curled into the other and vice versa (here images of maternity glide into those of sexuality), until Ase, who refuses to let go of Peer, is whisked up onto his shoulders, run in a semi-circle towards the horizontal plank, and hoisted up and dumped on it, her legs still kicking, her hands, which had been beating Peer, now gripping its sides.

As Ase heaves herself onto the plank to face Peer and also the audience, the white curtain swings backwards and up, showing rolling clouds of grey with burned orange tips. Shortly afterwards, the curtain is pulleyed forward towards the audience as Peer runs off. After shouting for help - Maria Casarès as Ase makes the situation very comic - Ase sits alone, tiny and still in this enormous concave shape, while two peasant women with bundles of straw on their backs appear and exclaim at how Ase is sitting on a roof. The curtain then sweeps higher, hiding Ase as the two women exit behind it. Thus the curtain breaks the production’s opening scene into three sequences and then marks the transition into the next scene where Peer makes it the focal point of his monologues. The clouds drifting across

it symbolize his desire to escape from uncomfortable reality. In the meantime, the diagonal plank does not become an irrelevant piece of furniture. Peer scuttles underneath it when he hears voices at the beginning of I ii, and hears, from there, the villagers' disparaging remarks about him. Here again, as often happens in the production, Peer defines his space of frightened solitude.

A sharp click releases the curtain which swirls down onto the stage, indicating that the scene is finished. Peer drags it out as the music and laughter of wedding festivities are heard in the wings. At the same time, a farm landscape slides across the back wall of the stage. Light, which until now appeared dimly and obliquely, irradiates the landscape from behind, giving the actors in this extended space the quality of sculptured figures. The bridegroom enters first, as if in shock, holding space alone as he blindly moves towards the spectators. A violinist, whose notes are discordant though sweet, comes into view at the very back. The guests follow, in twos and threes, attenuating space rather than filling it. A similar impression of emptiness is created by the sporadic noises of clinking and spilling beer mugs. Costumes in beige, black or faded colours harmonize with the soft, autumnal landscape open to view. Meanwhile, the wedding proper continues, not visually but aurally, off-stage, in wing-space.

The composition recalls northern painters of the classical period, its rustic elegance evoking a de Hooch. But its emotional atmosphere is disorder. The invisible musicians, stamping feet and voices filling wing-space produce sonorities which are half-way between folk music and its caricature. These off-stage sound patterns extend the configuration on stage of increasingly drunk young men, simpering young women, and reserved, puritanical elders. Violence increases when Peer, who enters from front left, is progressively driven back towards the diagonal plank, bullied, harassed, derided. The long distances held between the actors emphasize that the social structure is not a community, but a place of alienation.

The same perspective on Peer's society is to be seen when Solveig and her family enter by the diagonal plank. Veritable strangers to the village, they are treated indifferently. A similar indifference characterizes their attitude to each other. (Helga, who clutches Solveig, is an exception to the lack of contact between the people.) The psychological separation between the local inhabitants, which is suggested in how they are placed in twos and threes, only ceases when Peer becomes the subject of collective humiliation. [Plate 1] It is operative when Peer - again on his knees, again on the horizontal line which signifies oppression - bounds up to Solveig,



Act I Scene iii  
Photo by Birgit, Paris

veers away from her (gestures she repeats in counterpoint) and finally falls at her feet. Solveig is about to brush past the sloping hills and barns facing her. Peer turns furious circles on his knees, shouting he will go mad if she does not dance with him, obstructing her path, as he will her life, in the mystic union she eventually effects with him.

Desarthe's obsessive head-shaking, his agitated hands, his pigeon-toed feet and averted gaze - and these are constants in his rendition throughout Day One - give a Peer, semi-village idiot and semi-neurotic, who is branded by rejection. Rejection takes multiple forms. It is presented, in social terms, through the image of a brutish, God-fearing, troll-and-devil-fearing peasantry whose protestant individualism Peer adopts as his life principle; and which Day Two austere exhibits step by step. For instance, the parable of the positive-negative in V x is carefully articulated, vocally and visually, in the open vistas of the last Act. It shows how Peer has inverted the God-law of his ancestors into troll-law. At the same time, it stresses the ambiguities between religion and superstition, individualism and self-reliance and egotism, all of which are integral to Peer's social origins. Chéreau's *Peer Gynt* bids farewell to charming folk-tales.

Rejection is expressed metaphysically by the fixed sets, a metaphor for an estranging - and estranged - cosmos: the domestic landscape on the horizon is also dominated by it. Peer experiences moral and psychological rejection. The villagers treat him as a misfit. But Peer turns himself into a misfit and then an outcast by fabricating myths and fantasies that clash with his small world. These imaginings feed his dreams of becoming an emperor. The small world of his village restricts him. But neither the great plains of America nor the deserts of Morocco and Egypt (Act IV) can fulfil his yearnings and dreams. Furthermore, Peer - a peasant turned capitalist turned pauper - does not know how to fulfil his dreams. Multiple rejection, which is the flip side of multiple alienation, is concentrated in Peer, though is everywhere in the production.

The wedding scene thus prefigures all of Day Two. And it has a specific counterpart in V iv, where the fixed architecture, an orange pillow, bits of bric-à-brac and a battered pram wheeled slowly by a bent, black figure at the back, depict the desolation of old age as Peer and the villagers know it. The physical distances which were observed during the wedding are greater still in this scene, where former noise is replaced by silence and former agility by decrepit movements. Almost all the figures reassemble in shadows that hide faces, light now a long tunnel through the centre of the stage tapering in at the back.

The occasion on Day Two is an auction of Peer's belongings which, as

Peer discovers on his return home, are like relics of the legend that he had become. As Peer stumbles onto the stage, barely perceptible in the gloom, his tired gestures show the futility of his and his compatriots' respective histories. They have emptied these histories of all reality, turning them into mythology. Peer tells the villagers the tale of his odyssey through the world. And, although emblematic, he tells it as if it were just another one of his many fanciful tales. This one time, however, the tale Peer tells is true. It falls on deaf ears. Peer tells his story from the stage within the stage, where he is reduced to a bystander of his own life. His body leans against the huge wall in black - vertical on vertical - while the villagers, who are just as blind to his presence as he is to theirs, drift past just below him and disappear. Peer's personal failure is a social failure which is not his alone. The auction, like the wedding, assembles men and women for acts of callousness, self-centredness and destruction.

The wedding scene, then, is a pivotal scene for the entire production, and in more ways than one. It ends when Peer suddenly bursts from the back of the stage with Ingrid on his back. As he gallops up the steep steps of the auditorium, still carrying Ingrid, the men rush for cudgels (off-stage) and chase Peer through the aisles. Audience space becomes the mountain that the women scrutinize, clustered together on the edge of the stage. During this event - the one act of solidarity that the spectators witness or hear - Ase's voice rises above the din, the only voice besides Solveig's (to be heard in support of Peer later on in the production) that does not clamour for revenge, or retribution, or barter, which are the hallmarks of the social relations others enter into with Peer wherever he goes. Ase's refusal, here, to share her countrymen's harsh outlook confirms her generous words earlier in Act I about her son and about human kind in general. The audience discovers later on that Solveig's refusal to conform to the villagers' views is more radical still. After marching down the amphitheatre through the audience with skis on her shoulder and stocks in her hand (III iii), Solveig arrives on stage to tell Peer boldly and crisply that she has abandoned the village's "airless, hemmed-in domain". We shall return to the question of how the two women's opposition to the norms of their society is situated by the production as a whole.

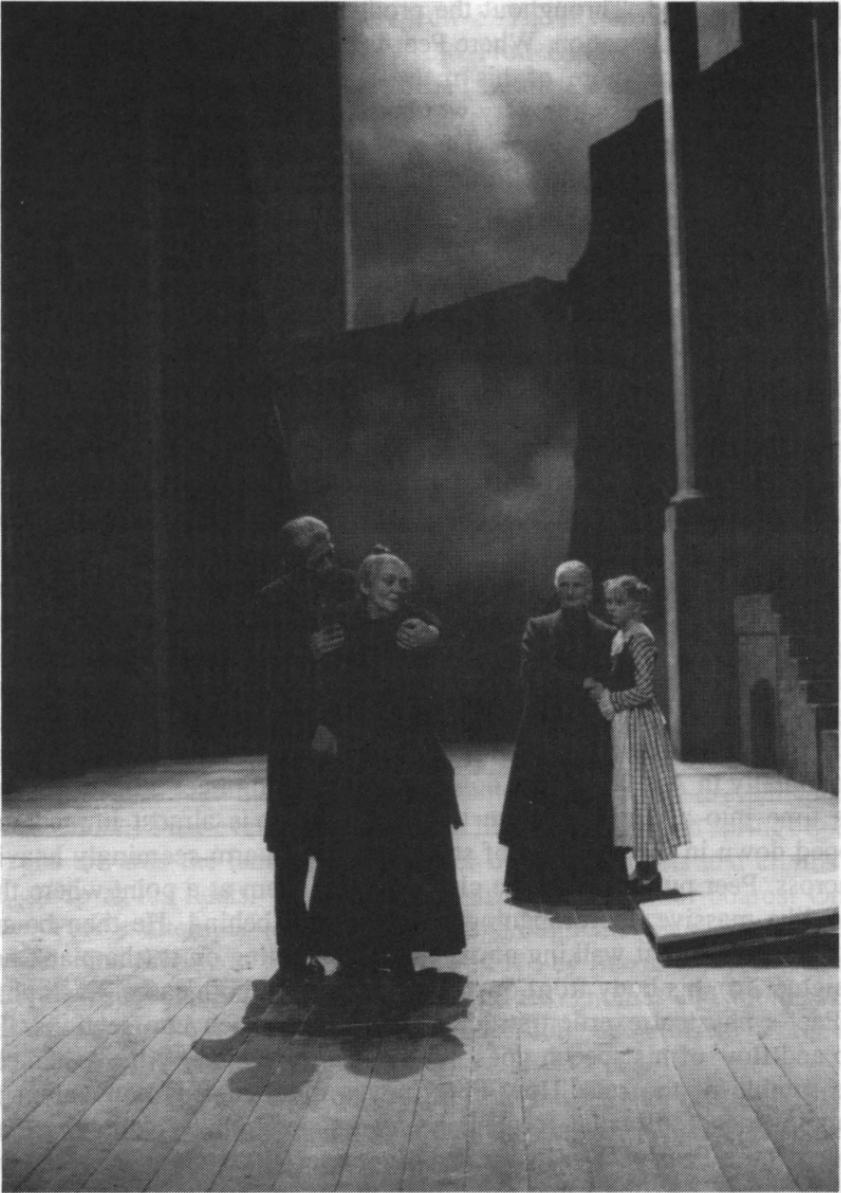
Act I establishes the domestic, social, cultural and geographic contexts in which Peer's biography is to be situated. Acts II and III concentrate on how he begins to forge his Self. Act II is announced from behind the audience, that is, from the top rows of seats occupied by spectators. Ingrid and Peer are on opposite sides of the auditorium. Audience space now divides them, as do their antagonistic words. Their first seven exchanges

are made in the dark, as they go down the amphitheatre steps towards the stage. The darkness in which they make their entry is in sharp contrast with the spotlight that had lit their exit from the wedding. Peer's appearance on stage is synchronized with his violent outburst to Ingrid that he has faith in no one "except for one". This "one" is the unutterable Solveig, who secretly isolates Ingrid from Peer. (A key phrase underlying a sequence's thrust, and which coincides with a given actor's frontal position to the spectators, is a systematic procedure of the production.) The human alienation that spectators cannot help but notice is intensified by the alienation brought about by Nature and which Nature seems to personify. A curled mountain, rock formations etched on its base, clicks into place across middle-stage, its impressive power a warning to all who may dare to transgress its authority.

Alienation is aggravated, yet again, as the curled mountain moves out while three higher, jagged mountains, with gaps and fogs between them, crash deeper into the stage. The scene (II ii) is Ase and Solveig's search for Peer. Solveig's parents take the role of dispassionate spectators. Ase's calls are timed into four movements, the last occurring at the top of the stairs, her voice carrying into the wings. Solveig's are mute as she stares far into the heights formed by the audience. While proxemic relations between the actors repeat the patterns of distance established in previous scenes, they are established here along diagonal lines. Two miniature figures on top of the high central mountain - a man, followed some length away by a woman - provide a mirror image, an allegory and even a parody of the image projected at floor level below the mountain. At the same time, these tiny figures give a sense of the enormous distance crossed by Ase and Solveig and which the spectators have had to cross to keep up with them. [Plate 2]

A similar optical illusion and juxtaposition of images recurs in IV xii, when a figurine of a nineteenth-century bourgeois stands on the Sphinx's enormous head. Visual incongruity, in this case, does not function in terms of spatial depth. It elongates the vertical axis, and points allegorically to the discrepancy between Peer's grandiose ambitions and his reality. Moreover - additional incongruity - Peer, who wants to be an emperor, is about to meet Begriffenfeldt, who will offer him an empire. That empire is a madhouse.

No sooner have eye and mind seized II ii, than II iii is introduced by snow-capped peaks, their base shrouded in white smoke (representing fog). Loud moans in the wings herald the arrival of the three writhing, sliding herd-women whom Peer will as good as rape. Sexuality is in profile and predominantly on the horizontal, as it is when the Woman in Green or



Act II Scene ii  
Photo by Birgit, Paris

Anitra is involved. Throughout the production, sexuality is shown to be another form of alienation. Where Peer is specifically concerned, physical desire is just one more of his many spontaneous desires that end in sadness and emptiness, the very words that Peer uses after he has had his pleasure with the three women. The arbitrary nature of Peer's actions and his adventurer's attitude to all things including sex are clear again in II v, which is announced by glaciers and the Woman in Green. Peer sniffs her while crawling on hands and knees, as she does, and imitates her grunts, squeals, wiggling backside and related movements that designate a pig and a troll in one. These comic-grotesque procedures lead to brutal and brutish fornication in front of the glaciers. The glaciers are not simply a setting for action. They express visually the precarious, ice-burning quality of Peer's sexual and other urges. When a real pig abruptly materializes, these urges take Peer, on its back, into the kingdom of the trolls. The glaciers also comment symbolically on Peer's uncoordinated, egotistical desires which come to fruition in trolldom, that is, in the living out of the motto "To yourself be - enough".

Where Scenes iii and v of Act II show how Peer behaves in relation to his desires, Scene iv synoptically catches their dimensions: Peer's aspirations are as big as mountains. The three women drag themselves along the floor and vanish, moaning-sobbing, into the wings to stage-left. Peer is suddenly seen to the right, wedged between the low, snow peaks of II iii and the towering cliffs previously used in II ii. The plank used horizontally in Act I thunders down, barely missing Peer's head. It dives, this time into a diagonal, nose to stage-right. It is almost immediately dipped down in the direction of stage-left, Peer's arm seemingly heaving it across. Peer pushes aside the cliffs, leaving them at a point where they look like massive doors opening from the grid behind. He then bounds onto the plank, first walking on its edge, then sitting on it (the plank now straightened), his body front-on to the audience in both cases. Each phase of Peer's physical exertion structures his long speech into sections. The ebb and flow of his speech goes into the score created by the avalanche-like rumble of the sets. How Peer moves mountains is convenient for changing decor. But the forceful heavy images quickly following each other denote Peer's "You come from greatness/Peer Gynt, one day you will be great". At the same time, they undercut Peer's pretensions. His rhetoric in this sequence terminates in a gag: Peer hits his head on the side walls and falls flat on his face. Desarthe and Chéreau follow Ibsen's stage direction, exploiting it thoroughly so as to ridicule Peer beyond any hope of reprieve.

The fluctuations of depth in the four consecutive scenes just cited give

the illusion of an ever-opening perspective. The major contrast, in spatial terms, is the inward-closing area of the Troll King's court in Scene vi. Here, density is created through crowded figures emerging from the dark at the back and, simultaneously, from the abruptly opened trapdoor, which is in shadow. Numerous pig and monster masks, heavy costumes in shades of grey, an iron cage (from which Peer will be released), a piano (wheeled in, its base notes rumbled out by the Woman in Green), pots, pans, steaming buckets, thick books for consultation on how to deform Peer, scissors and other surgical instruments - this multi-layered configuration is thickened further still by the gloom. Dully-lit bulbs, encased in what to all intents and purposes are mini-cages, hang low over the rites of perversion and sadism into which Peer is initiated. The four bulbs, the only sources of light in this scene, whizzed down at the beginning of the scene.

Peer is invaded from all sides at every move he makes. He is interrogated by the King, who flashes a torch that is around his neck into Peer's face. The philosophical dialogue where the King distinguishes man from troll is carried on in a similar, interrogatory manner. Peer is hit, pushed down, then pushed perilously close to the trap's void. He is thumped into it. He tries to clamber out along the diagonal plank that had been lowered down in Act I. The diagonal plank now snaps and rolls into the hole, with Peer still trying to escape on it. Whereupon the trolls draw the trapdoor up against his neck, pinning him down for their operation. (These movie-like stunts communicate danger and indeed *are* dangerous for the actors.) Peer eventually extricates himself as the trap springs open. He runs towards the ladder in the corner of the fixed sets and climbs it, one group at his heels, the other clamouring on the floor-boards. Once again, Peer's attempts to find freedom through his own efforts are a chimera. The ringing of bells, which are pulled by Ase and Solveig, as the audience discovers in Scene viii, disperses trolls, gnomes and goblins. But Peer's failure to be (to exist and survive), let alone be "himself" (forge his own identity), foreshadows Day Two.

If space is narrowed down considerably in the kingdom of the trolls, it is reduced further still in the two subsequent moments that decide Peer's future. The first is his meeting with the Great Curve or Voice (II vii), after which he goes deeper into the mountains to build a hut. This hut is wheeled onto the stage with Peer banging on its roof. The second decisive moment is Ase's death (III iv), after which Peer leaves Norway. Peer's encounter with the Great Curve, the ghost and Peer's double who tells him to detour, occurs in an enclosure blocked by the vast curtain used in Act

I. This time, the curtain billows outwards, recedes and falls, while a new element, a white moon on its clouds, adds to the sensation of mystery. No one is present until Peer's head protrudes from under the heavy fabric. Spectators then see his arm, clutching a forked stick, then his torso. Finally, his whole body slides through. As soon as Peer is out, the curtain becomes the Voice to which Peer's every action is a response. He swings his fork, throws it to the floor, swivels his body and punches the air in his battle with the Voice-curtain, which lunges forward intermittently and finishes by swallowing him up. Henceforth, Peer continues to detour, which by the end of the production means that Peer's deviations result in his finding neither himself nor others.

Ase's death breaks the last of Peer's ties. Narrow acting space, which once again suggests Peer's folding into his own ego, is now locked in by a fire curtain. Ase's bed comes up from the trapdoor, and Peer from the first rows in the audience. Substantially static, III iv shows Peer to the side, behind, in front of his mother's bed-coffin, that is, anywhere but with her, physically and emotionally.

Momentary gestures of tenderness underline the prevailing sense of bleakness. So, too, do Peer's attempts to alleviate his mother's fear of dying when he plays at spurring on a horse by standing on the end of Ase's bed slapping his thighs and whipping a rope, or when he plays at being a horse by pretending to drag the bed along the boards. All these actions concentrate space into an even smaller area. When the fire curtain goes up as the bed-coffin goes down, bleakness is not dispelled. It is, on the contrary, reinforced by the indigo backdrop dotted with stars that stares at the audience and concludes Day One. But then bleakness in Day One is continually present in the actors' eyes, which rarely meet, or cannot be seen to meet in the gloom. Peer, particularly, gazes obliquely; or simply talks with his eyes closed.

\* \* \* \*

The exclamatory though cold register of Day One continues in Day Two. My observations will be confined to the principal structural aspects of Day Two, which also lasts three and a half hours.

The varieties of space, and hence the complexities of spatial interaction, diminish in Acts IV and V. Audience space serves the actors four times: the Moroccan thieves run through it (IV iii); Peer arrives at the auction from it (V iv); the Thin Man tries to exit from it, but is stopped, at the

tenth row, by Peer's "Wait, wait!" several feet below (V x); the churchgoers walk up, singing, through it (V x). The churchgoers filed past Peer on stage, and on either side of him, without, however, seeing him.

By the same token, the use of machinery to form height is less frequent and, generally, less rapid. What it creates are a stone fortress (IV ix); three sets, which flash by - like slides on a screen - showing the silhouettes of pyramids, palm trees, men on horses and thus denote Egypt (a prelude to IV xi); a construction with two hieratic figures on it in profile, their faces destroyed, designates the colossus of Memnon (IV xi); the Sphinx, also in profile, and with a pyramid smaller than it standing behind and to the side (IV xii). Subdued lighting etiolates the desert tones of these constructions. Where scenography in Day One explored depth, these pieces are flat - photographs or cinema "stills". Once again, a naturalistic principle is observed: the view is blocked, while selected parts of the decor give the eye an escape route. (Antoine, following Zola, called these *échappées*.) Low-lying sand dunes (to be found in IV v, the scene of the horse mentioned above, and in IV viii) have a similar function. All these constructions which appear at the very back of the stage frame "open" space.

On the other hand, space is contracted only once, by a semi-transparent veil with gnarled trees painted on it, providing an unexpected touch of northern landscape (IV vii). A scene showing Peer and Anitra exploiting each other sexually is played out in front of it. Anitra's seated handmaidens can be discerned behind it (another kind of *échappée*). Or their standing bodies are half visible outside it, when they voyeuristically observe the couple's antics. These tricks for the eyes are complicated by carpets, cushions and other insignia of Arabic culture. The view is too much, to this spectator's mind, like an early colonialist's idea of exotica, which is not critically placed by the actors' performance. For instance, Peer's parody of Anitra's dance in Scene vi is cheap, although it is executed according to the principles of vaudeville humour chosen by Desarthe/Chéreau for Peer throughout Act IV. The attempted gaiety of these scenes does not diminish their brittle, even complacent, quality.

Otherwise, space in Act IV is figuratively obliterated when a miniature ship gliding against the whitish backdrop (Scene ii) explodes into fire and smoke. This *coup de théâtre* (and piece of kitsch, too), which is also an ironic quotation of such "stagy" effects, is followed by another: monkey-actors bounce up and down in nets placed high up towards the front of the stage. Peer is levered up on a swing, kicks, fights, is inundated with pellets of excrement, grunts and groans, and swings down and out to

stage-left. It is impossible, in our mass-media world, not to think of Tarzan.

Chéreau and Peduzzi's propensity for theatrical-cinematographic effects reaches its climax in V i. An exact replica of a ship-deck, mast and all, seems to heave upon heavy seas as raincoated figures dash out of the trapdoor and from the wings. Meanwhile, Peer sits impassively on a suitcase, in profile to the audience. Apart from the acoustics, which create a tempest, the tempest is fabricated through the actors, who teeter and swing as one, with or without ropes, and in whichever direction the imaginary sea rolls them about. Only the unknown Passenger's feet are steady, indicating, by this, that he is a supernatural being. Like all the other figures, he also appeared from the open trapdoor, where he - joke - lit a cigarette.

As the mast cracks, the sea, thus far rendered through bodies, voices and mimetic sound, "materializes" in a voluminous black curtain that spills out along the floor, sending the sailors flying into the trap. Stupendous waves later - and a tiny, tossing ship on the horizon as well - Peer's diminished torso is suddenly seen clinging to an overturned boat (Scene ii). Up pops the Cook, whom Peer drowns without fuss. Immediately afterwards, the Passenger's head appears from the other side of the boat. The laconic dialogue between him and Peer is accompanied by burlesque actions: Peer, for example, paddles with his hands, while his strange companion swims backstroke. This short sequence makes Peer and his circumstances look ludicrous, but it humanizes the feat of technology (and, in retrospect, a whole array of engineering skills) witnessed by the audience. The Passenger and Peer are then swallowed up by the waves which keep rolling and rolling for one full minute, as if signs and portents of annihilation and doom.

From here on till the end of Act V and thus of the performance, the fixed sets stand in place, untrammelled by the workings of sophisticated machinery. The open trapdoor, though, becomes a centralizing element. The funeral occurs around it (Scene iii), during which time Peer sits, hands limp, on the edge of the platform within the fixed sets and merges into obscurity. (The opening of this scene is skilfully ambiguous: Whose funeral is it? Did Peer drown?) Peer peels the onion - a metonymy of his Self - kneeling in front of it (Scene v). And when he finishes stripping away its layers of skin he discovers that nothing at all is contained in them. The trap also stands for a waste-bin when Peer throws the pieces of the onion into it. These are fragments of his non-being, remnants of the unachieved dictum: "Be yourself". Since the trap served as a grave in Scene iii, it now represents Peer's imminent extinction. He will soon

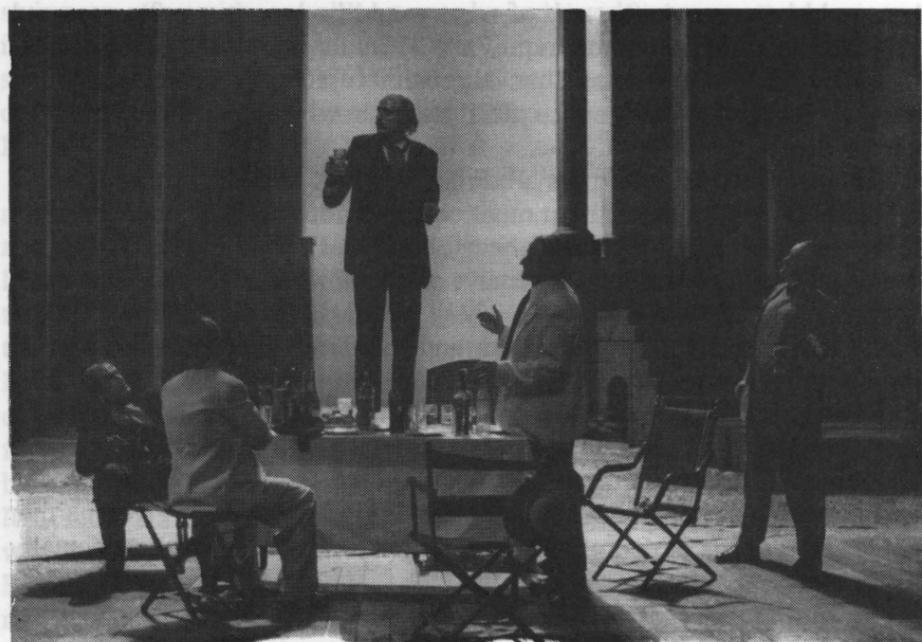
discover "non-being" in the ultimate sense of the term.

The trap is also a metonymic representation of memory, the past and the unconscious in that, from it, emerge - in the form of voices - the words Peer should have spoken, the deeds he should have done and the fears and songs he should have expressed and sung (Scene vi). The women incarnating these voices recall the composition of II iii. Their words remind spectators of IV i, among other scenes, where a wine-laden table on which Peer, first brandishing a bottle, and then a glass, proclaimed that he would be emperor (though of what would he be emperor?), appeared and disappeared through the trap. [Plate 3] By the end of the performance, then, the trapdoor draws together - through its associative, coagulative and even symbiotic functions - the crucial stages in which Peer forged his self-destruction.

The trap shuts, once and for all. From V vii till the conclusion, space is moulded by the tunnel of light mentioned previously. This tunnel appears to be narrower and longer still because of Peer's walking up and down within its confines with his successive partners, who are, at the same time, his secret doubles or alter egos. These partners are the Button Moulder (who comes twice), the Thin Man and the Troll King. The process of doubling, which conveys either a metaphysical or psychosocial meaning, is brought out by how the actors perform their parts. Doubling with metaphysical meaning predominates. The second kind, which emphasizes psychosocial meaning, is expressed through the Troll King. In each case - and for the first time of considerable duration - Peer and his given partner show camaraderie or complicity. For the first time, moreover, Peer actually looks his companions straight in the face.

Played in a dry style which is tempered by whimsy, pathos and buffoonery - this in a current of intermingled nuances - these scenes evoke tragedy without, however, becoming tragic. Their potentially tragic force is checked by the irregular flow of gags. The Thin Man, for example, is something of a high-camp caricature with his prim movements, long nails (which he clips, at one point, under Peer's nose) and weary feet. One of them is a club-foot which he ostentatiously unties while sitting on his suitcase. This is the foot he rubs vigorously. Another example gives us Peer and the Troll King putting their own hats on the other's head, noticing the error, and hastily correcting it.

Gentlemen's costumes on the supernatural creatures emphasize the sober and the comic aspects in one stroke. A pig's head on a tramp's outfit is downright funny. Humour is transformed into uneasiness when Peer and the Troll King, who stand side by side, look and sound like derelicts. The emptied space with its tunnel, where lighting makes the whole decor look



Act IV Scene i  
Photo by Birgit, Paris

unreal, constantly generates tension. Distress, however suppressed or distanced, is inscribed in Desarthe's body, particularly in his shoulders and insecure legs. It is embedded, too, in his weakened voice, which musters strength to shout "No! No!" in the face of invading nothingness.

Peer's near-last moments are moving, despite the lofty derision - let us call it - which gnaws into the fifth Act. The final sequence, which sees the reappearance of the hut that Peer was building earlier on, has a similar emotional undertone. Solveig walks in a straight line out of this hut, a Bible in one hand, a blind woman's stick in the other. Once again, her meeting with Peer is presented in an aggressive-defensive, backwards-forwards motion. The ambiguity of these movements is resolved when Peer falls to his knees and curls, foetus-like, against Solveig's legs. Solveig, at this point, is crouching on the floor, her back and arms curved, and her knees bent and open, as if giving birth. In this flashback to Act I, Solveig and Ase fuse into the one image. Solveig sings her lullaby and then lifts Peer to his feet in order to direct him back to the hut. Behind its open door, a sombre, narrow space awaits them (a visual counterpart of the gaping trapdoor) as Peer, eyes still closed, is supported by Solveig and leans against her stick. Blind Oedipus: Chéreau's quotation of a great tragedy closes his drama of a little man. A woman's opposition - the opposition referred to previously - retreats into silence and becomes endurance. But a woman's opposition to her society and its values seems to have no other alternative than to be expressed in the form of motherly love.

Chéreau gives us a maternal *Liebestod*. Wagner's Ring cycle, which Chéreau directed at Bayreuth (1976-1980), leaves many traces in his *Peer Gynt*. So too - and via Ibsen's pessimism - do Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, those other Nordic philosophers of decadence who, like Wagner, enjoyed a *succès de scandale* at the turn of the century. Yet in this spectacular - and specular - tussle between the tribulations of the ego (Kierkegaard) and the machinations of the cosmos (Schopenhauer), the latter's World as Will and Idea pre-empts everything, and dominates all. Chéreau takes Peer at his word: "I'll watch the battles of heroes for greatness, for good/but I'll remain unmoved (*au sec*) like a pure spectator" (IV ix).

Heroes, however, do not exist in Chéreau's construction. In their place gesticulate creatures who are belittled in more ways than one, starting with the stage architecture. The cosmos of pure spectatorship that Chéreau erects on the stage demystifies the myth of pure individualism, among other myths denounced somewhat sardonically by the production. But it

is replaced by a grey nuclear zone of untouched monuments from which the very presence of people has disappeared. Peer jokes about existence preceding essence (IV v). Chéreau, like Peer, forgoes materialist thinkers on existence to joke and play with essences, and with one great essence in particular - Death - on which his production is a long meditation, *au sec*. Ibsen, Antoine and Zola were, in their own ways, materialist thinkers. And they were plagued by the crisis of individualism, which was manifest in social decay. Antoine and Zola, in particular, found a solution in what they thought was science: in the principles of observation, documentation and detachment. Chéreau adopts their conceptual/theatrical principles, supersedes them by far and modifies them through Ibsen. Ibsen's ironic smile at science understood as pure observation is given theatrical expression when Peer jots down notes - "pure" facts - in the desert.

The vision of an implacable destiny, which Ibsen and Zola shared but articulated differently, finds its apotheosis in Chéreau's apocalypse. It is everywhere in the production and perhaps, paradoxically, most explicit in the lighting, which effaces the human visage. Spectators beyond the tenth row simply cannot distinguish faces; and, for the most part, they must strain to distinguish between characters. Human effacement has rarely had such eloquence in the theatre.

Chéreau's great monument of, and to, the twentieth century - the last of its theatrical kind, perhaps? - belongs to Chéreau's directorial vocabulary, as he has used it until now. But it is not just Chéreau's individual idiom, not just his personal *Weltanschauung*. This great monument captures a mood prevalent in our own *fin de siècle*. The organization of any artistic work implies the existence of a particular public or publics. That is to say, a work, both in its preparation and its "finished" state, contains some idea of which expectations it can meet, and from whom they come. Leaving aside aesthetes who valorize form by devaluing content, it is probable that Chéreau most speaks to and for audiences who - at a conceptual level, at least - accept doom as an unalterable truth, as a fact, pure and simple. Desarthe's urgent "No! No!" rings out in protest. Perhaps the actor is also protesting against his director: against a totalizing viewpoint on a devastation so horrendous that only monuments can withstand it and stand unscathed.

**PEER GYNT in Two Days by Henrik Ibsen**

Translator: François Regnault

Director: Patrice Chéreau

Decor: Richard Peduzzi

Costumes: Jacques Schmidt

Music: Fiorenzo Carpi

Lighting: André Diot

Sound: André Serre

General Direction: Yves Bernard

Props and Special Effects: Danka Semenowicz

Make-up and Masks: Reiko Kruk and Dominique Colladant

**Cast**

Peer Gynt: Gérard Desarthe

Ase, his mother: Maria Casarès

Solveig: Catherine Rétoré

The Bridegroom: Miloud Khetib

Ingrid: Chantal Bronner

The Woman in Green: Nada Strancar

Solveig's mother: Madeleine Marie

Solveig's father: Jean-Claude Jay

Helga: Sabine Thomas

The Three Herd-Women: Paule Annen/Dominique Blanc/Micheline Kahn

The Voice: Gérard Desarthe

The Troll King: Henri Virlogeux

Dr Begriffenfeldt

The Passenger } Roland Bertin

The Button Moulder

The Thin Man: Didier Sandre

Kari: Paule Annen

**And** (in order of appearance in various roles)

Claudine Mavros; Roland Amstutz; Andrzej Seweryn; Gilles Gérardin;  
Benoît Régent; Patrice Finet; Pierre Baillot; Muni; Bruno Cardoni.

**Musicians**

Roger Germser; Christophe Guiot; Antoine Ladrette; Gérard Vidal;  
Bruno Sansalone; Christian Boissel.