

JEAN-PIERRE MIGNON AND *PEER GYNT*: A FRENCH DIRECTOR IN AUSTRALIA

Nothing could be more different from Patrice Chéreau's *Peer Gynt* than *Peer Gynt* staged by Jean-Pierre Mignon in Melbourne in 1990. This French director arrived in Australia in 1978. In 1980 he founded Australian Nouveau Theatre (ANT) which, until very recently, was based at the Anthill Theatre in South Melbourne. ANT has mounted more than fifty productions to date. Among them are Chekhov's great plays, Molière's *Tartuffe*, *Don Juan*, *The Misanthrope* and *The Imaginary Invalid*, Beckett's *Happy Days* and *Waiting for Godot*, Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and, for the 1992 Melbourne Festival, *La Vida es un Sueño (Life is a Dream)* by Calderon. Mignon has not worked exclusively with his own company. He has mounted productions for the Victorian Opera, for example, and the Sydney Theatre Company, including a highly acclaimed *Marriage of Figaro* by Beaumarchais, and in 1992 Strindberg's *Miss Julie*.

Mignon's artistic register thus encompasses European and Australian plays, classic and contemporary pieces and some of the major landmarks of the French cultural tradition, this component perhaps being the most important of them all for an understanding of his work as a whole. Of course, there is no such thing as a uniform *French* tradition. It is multi-layered and multi-directional. Like any national tradition, it embraces many cultures - popular and learned culture, artisanal crafts and fine arts, and marginal aesthetic movements as well as an aesthetic canon. The list would have to continue in order to indicate fully the complexities involved in the terms "national", "cultural" and "tradition". Even so, what Mignon takes from his culture of origin, not necessarily consciously (or what sustains him from it, unintentionally, like rain sustains the earth), is its comic tradition, which arguably realizes its fullest potential in Molière. Molière synthesizes, like no other French playwright, the refinements of

artistic elitism, as nurtured by the powerful state of Louis XIV, and the unadulterated “raw” intelligence of a people’s culture as expressed, during Molière’s time, through theatre *à l’italienne*, whether of the itinerant, rural kind or in its more domesticated guise inside urban theatre houses.

This successful hybridization of opposing social and artistic genres surely goes a long way towards explaining the unique quality of Molière’s comedy, its extraordinarily rich tonalities, ebullient confidence and steady aim, which hits its target at every shot. Its distinctive, robust character resurfaces in Mignon’s productions and ipso facto in his staging of *Peer Gynt*. Chéreau, as we have seen, embarks on a dark journey where destructive forces predominate. Mignon’s *Peer Gynt* makes fun of the lunacies and failings of human beings; and shows that those who overestimate their own capacities and, consequently, overstep the limits imposed by reason, convention and sense are not cause for despair. They are, on the contrary, cause for laughter which, if not always good-natured, always sings on an affirmative note.

Chéreau, particularly towards the end of his production, appears to interpret Ibsen through Beckett as Beckett was understood during the 1950s and even the 1960s (the “human condition”, “existential crisis”, “theatre of the absurd”, and related notions). The homology of interpretations is perfectly feasible, given the anxieties and austerities felt in France in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was also a time of renewed fear on a European scale of nuclear war. Mignon, on the other hand, playfully views the insanities of the world. This is why his productions bring out and accentuate the humour to be found in Beckett’s texts. We could say that the world view constructed through Mignon’s buoyant approach to Beckett has far less to do with the morose misanthropy often attributed to the latter and far more to do with the Molière whose *Misanthrope* sparkles with critical wit.

I asked Mignon to comment on what I perceived to be his special affinity with Molière. Here I referred to the way he had interpreted *Peer Gynt* (content, themes, issues) as well as to qualities of the staging or *mise en scène* (pronounced gestures and vivid mimicry and movement of the actors, who took the performance at a very quick pace from beginning to end).

Mignon replied that his work in the theatre did not depend on intellectual decisions but operated on an organic, instinctive level. Its dynamic and impulses came out of the working process, in the scenes prepared with actors. I had made some remarks earlier on about the energy and, to my mind, the unexpected humour of his production, likening these

particular aspects of *Peer Gynt* to his productions of Molière. Mignon noted that Molière was not the only one to have developed these features. He also pointed out that Ibsen had changed style completely in the last scenes of his play. The scenes involving the Button Moulder, the devil-figure, and so on, were written, according to Mignon, in a different kind of verse. With this verse, Ibsen brought vaudeville to his play; and vaudeville was a new element, a new theatrical genre working in the play. The issue led Mignon to compare *Peer Gynt* to Beckett, especially the last Act, whose vaudeville humour illuminates the tragic situation at its core, exactly as occurs in Beckett and had occurred, before him, in Molière. In Mignon's view, what links Molière to Ibsen and Ibsen to Beckett is the counterpoint between comedy and tragedy, which counterpoint is the hallmark of all great theatre irrespective of cultural differences.

The linkages established by Mignon - Chekhov was also cited - prompted me to ask whether Molière was nevertheless an important touchstone for him because he was integral to his cultural "stock". I elaborated by saying that I thought the cultural sources and resources of directors were intrinsic to how they directed; further, that their cultural roots allowed them to develop a theatre practice with a specific character of its own. Mignon tended to agree with this broad principle, saying that Molière as well as the commedia dell'arte tradition in general were to be found in Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro* and Feydeau's *A Flea in Her Ear*, among many possible examples. Here Mignon alluded in particular to how the plots of both plays unfolded from a similar situation (in *Figaro*, Suzanne's writing a letter of assignation to the Count, her would-be seducer, at the request of the Countess).

However, Mignon did not believe that what he called "a snowball effect" was confined to one particular cultural context. This snowballing occurred generally and assured continuity in the *theatre*, which is why Molière is part of Ibsen and Ibsen part of Beckett. It would probably be true to say that, for Mignon, whatever rolls out of one cultural tradition rolls over into another, creating a tradition of the theatre as such.

How, given Mignon's idea of theatrical interaction, does he stage *Peer Gynt*? And does he have an open view, cultural barriers having disappeared from sight, because of his experience of cultural duality which, in his case, has generated freedom instead of conflict? "In his case" because duality or biculturalism can be experienced as tension and closure, as happens with non-professional immigrant groups and sometimes among artists - and certainly among those for whom immigration has meant an end, or virtual end, to their career. These questions, although not broached

directly in the material below, are nevertheless pertinent to it. Since, unlike Chéreau's *Peer Gynt*, I was unable to see Mignon's production repeatedly, what follows is not a detailed analysis but a very brief account whose main purpose is to continue the dialogue with Mignon that was begun in my opening pages. My interventions will sometimes distance his voice. But the words running between us will hopefully stimulate reflection on *Peer Gynt* played in quite different cultural spaces and separated by time as well as by the trajectory and goals of two directors whose initial links by birth have been severed by societies.

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The fundamental and most important element of Mignon's production is space which, as in Chéreau, is adjusted architecturally for the needs of performance. However, unlike Chéreau, Mignon does not rely on an elaborate scenography. Nor does he play off stage-space against audience-space. He resolves the problems of space posed when there is a proscenium arch by doing away with the latter altogether. Consequently, the theatre reserved for *Peer Gynt* was gutted. Its seats were pulled out and its stage reorganized. Long ramps resembling the hanamichi in Kabuki extended from the stage and ran right around the theatre. Platforms joined these ramps, creating focal points for action. There were, in other words, several "stages" and not one, central stage.

In addition, the entire theatre was covered in off-white calico (or similar cloth) which abolished distinctions between stage-space and audience-space. The whole space was playing space, the difference between players and spectators marked by the fact that spectators sat or reclined on large cushions or on the covered floor. The floor was graded, as is usual when rows of seats are built in a theatre. Yet - clever optical illusion - this refurbished place gave the impression that actors and spectators were more or less on the same plane and, therefore, more or less at eye level with each other.

Mignon explained that the idea came to designer Mary Moore in a flash, during rehearsals:

Her idea immediately seemed right because a painter begins with a white canvas on which you can then put colours; and you can always come back to neutral, to the white canvas. It allows your imagination to float. You can see waterfalls. You can see a desert. You can see snow. You can see

anything, and also the actors in the empty space. . . . The theatre, before, was horrible, with those horrible theatre seats, some blue, others red. . . . However, we were massacred for what we did. One of the theatre critics gave us a positive review. But you really do despise the audience when you say "there is a hell, unchristian hell". We lost thousands of people because of that, which is really completely stupid. Finally, I don't think it was very important, but even if it was unchristian, people can cope with a little "catholicism" for three hours.

I remember that I thought people took the theatre as a kind of religious ceremony, something



Photo by Jeff Busby, Melbourne

expressing the joy of the occasion as if the problem as a whole was a religious festival. This attitude, from the kind of physicality to which it is so often most clearly seen when the wedding scene is compared with the scene in the toll-kitchen. The wedding ceremony, quite right as it is, while the scene in the toll-kitchen and wedding scene held together the religious festival, even if it was not a religious festival, and the scene in the toll-kitchen and wedding scene had a narrative purpose in that they map out the sequence of events which Peer finally runs off with Ingrid. The continuity between spaces is just as important for building up a sense of urgency in which Peer's passion for Solveig bears like a drum. Peer's

anything, and also the actors in the empty space. . . . The theatre, before, was horrible, with those horrible theatre seats, some blue, others red. . . . However, we were massacred for what we did. One of the theatre critics gave us a positive review. But you really do destroy the audience when you say “three and a half uncomfortable hours”. We lost thousands of people because of that, which is really completely stupid. Firstly, I don’t think it was very uncomfortable, and even if it was uncomfortable, people can cope with a little discomfort for three hours!

I remarked that I thought people looked comfortable enough, lounging around and looking around them to follow the performance; also that the white, snow-like space had a fairy-tale atmosphere which prepared spectators for the tale that would be told them. They could sit, stretch, relax and listen.

A number of important points came out of this exchange, not least of which is the negative impact a theatre critic can have on both company and audience (in this case, by driving audiences away!). It is also clear that a director’s artistic intentions will not necessarily be perceived by her or his public from exactly the same angle, nor even be evaluated appropriately. In addition, the perception of spectators depends on whether they are looking from the “inside” and, therefore, in terms of the parameters defined by the work, or from the “outside”, that is, in respect of other conditions impinging on the work, for instance, the issue of creature comforts raised by our theatre critic.

Let us, however, focus on the “inside”, endogenous considerations foregrounded by Mignon and which constitute the aesthetics of his production, “empty space” being its essential component. Needless to say, this space is never empty. It is filled by the actors’ ceaseless motion which, as the performance progresses, shifts from sheer physical vitality (some of it, as in the opening scenes between Peer and his mother, expressing the joy of being alive) to a feeling of restlessness, as if the production as a whole was externalizing Peer’s psychological fragility. This transition from one kind of physicality to another is to be seen most clearly when the wedding scene is compared with the scenes in the troll kingdom.

The wedding scene takes place right across the whole theatre, all ramps and platforms being used to create the sensation of changing events or environment, and the hustle and bustle and noise of communal activity. These changing, different spaces have a narrative purpose in that they map out the sequence of events until Peer finally runs off with Ingrid. The continuity between spaces is just as important for building up a sense of urgency in which Peer’s passion for Solveig beats like a drum. Peer’s



Photo by Jeff Busby, Melbourne

erotic desire is articulated through the way he moves in on her; and is then “stated” bluntly when he bites her behind. This “kiss” is given in a knowing and provocative manner, the actor communicating his pleasure through mimicry and gestures that solicit the audience’s complicity in his action. The incident is calculated to be as funny as possible so as to show that it, too, is part of the celebration of life and love in which the spectators, by their close proximity to everything happening around them, are totally enveloped.

The verve, excitement and laughter generated until this scene and sustained right through it have an anxious edge in the sequences between Peer and the Troll King’s daughter and between him and the Troll King. For instance, the slight waltz Peer dances with the King’s daughter when he meets her is mocking, but also suggests awkwardness and even fear. His body, when he meets the King, is menacing. Peer’s vulnerability, which his aggressive attitudes can scarcely hide, is accentuated by the shadows falling over him. A small light bulb set at Peer’s feet is the only light shed upon him. However, although the visual effect is one of sobriety, the dialogue between Peer and the Troll King on the difference between man and troll is full of punch. A troll dance, where all concerned, including Peer, wiggle their bottoms as if dancing the twist, is caricatural, and anticipates the vaudeville humour that Mignon discerned in Ibsen’s text and which he plays to the full at the end of the production.

Of course, the twist-like movements belong to the second half of the twentieth century and not to that of the nineteenth. This semiotic process, then, situates *Peer Gynt* socioculturally, placing it in our time and roughly sketching an image of man or troll today. The fact that the King and his entourage are dressed in ordinary shirts and trousers rather than in specially designed “troll” costumes shows how they double - or are the double of - “normal” human beings. The dialogue on man and troll, which virtually concludes that there is no difference between them, is thus sustained visually.

From here on, a series of visual and gestural jokes keep play big. At the same time, they contribute to the restlessness I referred to earlier. Among these jokes are the chattering white monkeys Peer encounters during his travels, and who throw white fluffy balls (supposedly coconuts) at him from the tops of cartoon-like palm trees; the mock-Hollywood harem Peer acquires in the desert (the women’s gestures parody the worst features of neo-colonial films on such “exotic” subjects); the imaginary horse Peer rides, like a child on a hobby-horse; Begriffenfeldt’s saying “Here’s a knife” to Peer while making the sound of a knife flying through the air; Peer’s coronation with straw towards the end of Act IV, which ends with

small lights flashing on and off as they do on a Christmas tree.

When the production is looked at retrospectively, Act IV appears to be a prelude to Act V. A violin whistles as if it were the wind. Peer weathers a storm made with lights. The segment where Peer drowns the Cook in the sea exploits burlesque comedy: thus Peer holds the Cook by the hair while the Cook holds his nose to the sound of "glug, glug, glug" as he is meant to go under. The devil-figure who haunts Peer in Act V is austere dressed as a parson and greets Peer with his arms outstretched in benediction. The devil-parson's eyes do most of the acting for him, their rolling upwards, squinting, and so on, creating a farcical situation in which Peer is the prime dupe. The Button Moulder is very slick in a dark business suit. In his case, hands and feet rather than eyes are of principal importance. Gestures made with them are clear and smooth. His face is impassive. The whole image recalls Molière's famous hypocrites and, as in Molière, unmasks worldly aplomb, showing the fraud beneath it. It would be true to say that all the vignettes combined carefully by Mignon for the last Act and presented by the actors with impeccable timing are examples of exposed deceit of one kind or another. In fact, Molière's presence is so strong in the concluding Act that when the production is taken from the end back to the beginning, Molière seems to loom larger than before. As we have seen, Mignon's conscious, intentional point of reference was not Molière but Beckett, through whom, in any case, in Mignon's notion of cross-influence, Molière passes.

The production closes with Solveig cradling Peer's head in her lap, this gentle, maternal gesture mirroring the opening movement between Peer and his mother. Peer has come full circle. Solveig and Ase are one. Suddenly, at the end of the production, spectators realize fully the significance of Peer's running round and round the white space, cutting off the corners made by ramps and platforms and moving in closer and closer on them. These circles are the production's principal metaphor for its content, which has to do not only with Peer's fate but also with that of the people close to him. Yet this comic tale does not end with a sad moral, nor even - in this spectator's view - with a moral of any kind. It simply states the last event of its narrative, the echoes of the laughter it stimulated still too potent to allow a shift of mood.

Mignon had this to say on the coupling of Ase and Solveig:

Yes, it's true. It's there in the text, mother/wife. Ase is much more interesting. She is richer, less caricaturized . . . Solveig is very discreet, even retiring, as are most of the characters in the play; and there is something caricatural about her, as happens with the others. The people at the beginning

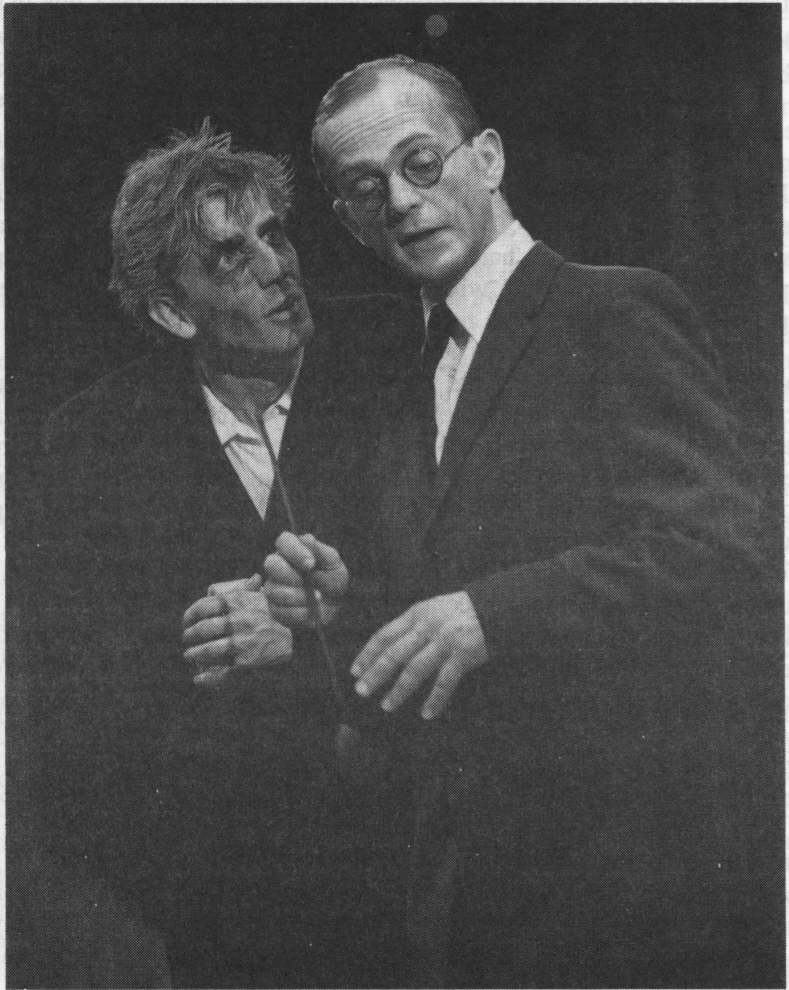


Photo by Jeff Busby, Melbourne

of Act IV - the American, the Frenchman - are caricatures. They are cardboard characters, which is important because this is an epic play. But everything revolves around Peer.

The issue of how it might be best to understand Solveig was treated by Mignon with reference to his interpretation of the play as a whole:

In mounting *Peer Gynt*, I wanted to talk about Ibsen's intentions, which are rather difficult to get across today. My impression was that the play was written as a satire of the Romantics. It was also an attack on the people who extrapolated from the Norwegian Romantic movement and made a nationalistic movement out of it. So it's a satire that has lost its flavour today. Our task was to speak to an Australian audience in 1990, which is why we sometimes had to deviate from Ibsen's original intentions but in such a way as to say some new things *with* his text. My feeling is that Ibsen's contemporaries must have laughed at moments where it would be impossible to laugh now. The Romantic aspects satirized have to do with flight into dreams and flight away from reality, as well as with withdrawal into yourself. This is, for example, what the people who wanted to reconstruct the Norwegian language from ancient dialects were doing. We don't grasp these points today. Take, for example, the character in the asylum, Huhu, who is invited to go as far back as the ape. This kind of satire [on the search for origins to justify a nationalistic cause] escapes us today; and so we really had to move away from what Ibsen meant by it.

More questions on what he wanted to say to a contemporary Australian audience led to Solveig:

We nevertheless kept the major Romantic technique, which was to focus on the principal character - on Peer Gynt. What was pertinent for today was the relationship between egocentrism and individualism. It's what gives us today's yuppies. It's very important at the present time to create a feeling of sympathy for a character for whom, I believe, Ibsen's contemporaries had no sympathy; to keep an audience's interest till the end by developing traits that attract the audience to the character and, at the same time, allow it to be objective about him. I found this to be the most difficult thing to do.

There was another problem, and that was Solveig. I could swear that, when the play was created in 1867, people must have burst out laughing when Solveig reappeared in Act IV and sang about how she was still waiting for Peer. You can't do that today. It's not right, otherwise the character becomes a symbol. And what about the woman? . . . I think that, where sexism is concerned, Ibsen was progressive in relation to his time. Moreover, his works after *Peer Gynt* show it. Even so, he dragged a rather enormous sexist tradition behind him compared with what we would like to achieve today. Although [this tradition is] there, making Solveig ridiculous was out of the question. Peer lives withdrawn into himself right through the play. He refuses to face reality. It takes him ninety years to try and understand that there is something else besides himself. . . . It was very difficult to find the balance between this egocentrism and Solveig.

I asked Mignon whether he thought that it was necessary to distinguish between egocentrism and individualism; also whether he thought that Ibsen had called into question the notion of individualism which had been of such importance to the Romantics. Mignon replied that he thought Ibsen had a positive as well as a negative view of individualism. The positive version of it in *Peer Gynt* was projected through the tale of the young man in Act III who cuts off his finger in order to avoid being sent to war. This brief episode in Act III is picked up in Act V. Peer returns home to a funeral - the funeral of the man who had cut off his finger. We learn that he had led a life of great hardship but great generosity, especially towards his children. Mignon explained that he had deleted this episode from Act V (and, therefore, the reference to the man earlier on) because he thought that the audience would have difficulty in sustaining interest throughout the Act which, to his mind, was problematical enough with fewer details. However, Mignon stressed that the man's story, while paralleling Peer's, was also in opposition to it. In Mignon's words, "The man lived for himself as an individual, but lived with love and faith and passion for others". Peer had not done this.

It is clear from Mignon's account of the parallel stories how he distinguishes between egocentrism and individualism as these categories concern *Peer Gynt*. And what his account raises in a very precise and important way is the issue of how absences and silences in a production can be as relevant to its sociocultural meaning as its representations. Mignon's decision, after spending time on the funeral scene, to eliminate it for the sake of tightness and, therefore, greater communicability with the audience, cost him - and the audience - as he acknowledged with some anguish, depth of exposition of what he perceived to be the major themes of the play. An unrealized potential left the field open for the comedy that held sway and, in my view, undercut the tragedy which Mignon saw working in counterpoint in Ibsen.

Yet the decision was made with a contemporary audience in Australia in mind. Does this suggest that the cultural climate in Australia in 1990 was conducive to comic genres, and particularly to burlesque, vaudeville and farce? And does it show a concordance between the sociocultural values embodied in the stage work and its imputed or expected audiences? One of the main values upheld by the production might be called realistic, individual - but neither individualistic nor egotistical - apprehension of the world, which is anything but Peer's approach.

Mignon had no doubts as to Peer's exploitative, unscrupulous self-centredness, to which the Troll King draws attention early and again late

in the play. As he sees it, Peer confuses self-sufficiency with rapaciousness and in this is like a modern capitalist or modern yuppie whose motto could well be "Live for yourself and crush others". How do audiences receive this message as Peer incarnates it? Is their laughter critical as well as the laughter of complicity? Mignon's vibrant production opens up, all over again, the problematical issue of laughter and its shading - when it is merely "fun" or satirical, high-spirited as well as serious, high-spirited but vacuous, and so on - all shadings not only being a matter of theatrical genres but of how they are determined culturally.

It was important, in the context of the discussion on *Peer Gynt* for contemporary audiences, to ask why Mignon had chosen to stage it, a rare choice, especially given that *Hedda Gabler*, *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* are taken to represent Ibsen, and not only in Australia. Mignon replied:

The play is rarely performed because it represents enormous risks, starting with those concerning Peer, Solveig and the caricatural figures when viewed from a present-day perspective. Still, it's very important to be able to deal with an unfamiliar Ibsen, an Ibsen who precedes *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* and who is really in the middle of the nineteenth century and shows himself to be a precursor of modern theatre. You can find Strindberg, Bulgakov and Beckett in him. He brought a goldmine to the middle of the nineteenth century, going against the current of romanticism. It is important to know about this in Australia today. It is not a great play, dramatically and theatrically speaking. There are strong moments; but we have lost a lot of its original intentions and meanings. It is also over-written. It contains too many words. Even so, it's a work worth communicating to others.

PEER GYNT by Henrik Ibsen

Australian Nouveau Theatre

Translator: May-Brit Akerholt

Director: Jean-Pierre Mignon

Designer: Mary Moore

Lighting: Nigel Levings

Music: Sam Mallet

Cast (in order of appearance)

Robert Menzies (Peer Gynt); Julie Forsyth (Ase); Louise Newey;
Jennie Robinson; John Howard (Troll King); Jo Kennedy (Solveig);
John F. Howard; John Penman; Sergio Tell; Jacek Koman; Ian Scott;
Jane Conroy; Hope Csutoros.

NOTE

Paraphrased passages and transcribed extracts are from my interview in French with Jean-Pierre Mignon in Melbourne, in December 1990. The use of French was determined by factors of no relevance to the present text, Mignon being perfectly fluent in English.