

Cottesloe

Nicholas de Jongh

The Long Way Round

WATCHING Peter Handke's *The Long Way Round*, a so-called "dramatic poem", is rather like trying to jog through porridge and about as useful. In its 25-year history I doubt whether the National

Theatre has ever before presented a piece of work which shakes hands with gibberish; welcomes gibberish as a friend and in the end extols gibberish as something with which you may live contentedly ever after.

Dimly you perceive that Handke is attempting to take up the old, crucial battle against the lures of materialism, and to offer a balm in which old family resentments will be quite dissolved. But the form and the manner in which Handke attempts to grapple with the dilemma is destructive

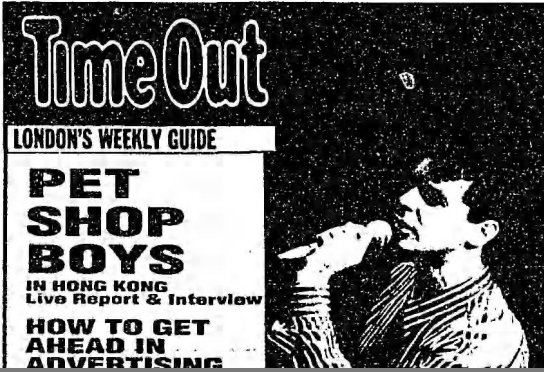
to his grand ambition. Handke proceeds in the wake of T.S. Eliot, particularly the ritual ceremonials of *Murder In The Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion* (a chorus of construction workers announces "Victory is only a name") and Eliot's extended, elegiac paragraphs of poetic monologue. A series of dramatic contrasts and oppositions are anticipated. Gregor, a bespectacled and successful writer, like Handke himself, is set to return to the provincial place where he was born and reared, there to face appeals from his brother to waive his share in the parental inheritance so his sister can set up her own business.

Whether Gregor is visiting his construction worker brother on the site where he labours, or reaching home where his brother, sister and a comfortable old peasant woman live, Handke fails to range the characters against each other. The poem is composed as a series of rhetorical declamations and injunctions, romantic aspirations, surreal visions and mystical or stoic assurances.

The language in which Handke expresses himself may have undergone some dilution or transformation in Ralph

artist, soothes the family into harmony is the nadir of Handke's method. "A tree-top is the true weapon of liberation," Nova offers. Well perhaps, you think as the porridge threatens your eyes and mine, but how and why? Or the tautological "Illusion is vision and vision is true." Or the climactic "The quivering of your eyelids is the quivering of the truth." Truth, whatever it may be in the territory of porridge, leads to the reverent placing of a toy gold crown upon the head of Hans's son, a gesture replete with the phoney grandeur and portentiousness that characterises the three and a half hour purgatory.

Paul Unwin's production is staged on a series of handsome and evocative sets by Bunny Christie — a white backcloth is rolled up to reveal first the construction site and then the village to which the artist returns. A passionate lucid gravity characterises the delivery of Tilda Swinton's Nova and Andrew Rattenbury's Gregor, while Deirdre Halligan's old woman has a wry Irish piquancy about her. Sadly David Bamber's Hans, however confident and fluent, is no manual worker. But then this was no play.



de Jongh on The Long Way Round

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