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The Globalisation of Robert Lepage:
Québécois Cultural Politics and Contemporary Theatre Practice

by
Karen Paula Fricker

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of PhD

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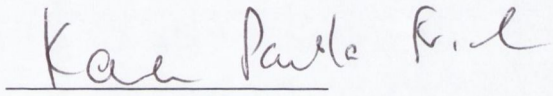

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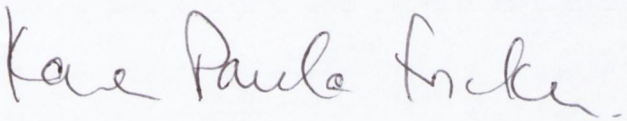
Signed: 

SUMMARY

This thesis is an analysis of four productions by the québécois theatre artist Robert Lepage, and of their reception. I chose these productions because they broadly cover the span of Lepage's career to date (1980s: *Vinci* and *The Dragon's Trilogy*; 1990s: *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*; early 2000s: *Zulu Time*) and because they demonstrate the changing contexts in which Lepage's work has been created and received. Early on, Lepage created productions for a known, local audience, which, because they were successful locally, began to tour internationally. Now he is a major international artist making productions that tour to many countries and cultures but continue to be created in Québec predominantly by francophone Quebecers.

Themes of identity and alterity are central to these productions, and indeed to all of Lepage's work. I read these themes as an expression of two interrelated factors: Lepage's personal struggle for self-realisation, and the problematically postcolonial status of his native Québec. The discursive production of personal and national identity mirror and perpetuate each other in the works. Lepage expresses themes of selfhood and otherness in the work through the recurrent character of a Québec artist on a journey towards self-realisation, which he acknowledges as an autobiographical figure. Using a Lacanian approach we can read these thinly fictionalised self-depictions as Lepage's attempts to "other" himself – to use the stage as a mirror through which he can see his own reflection. Read through postcolonial theory, these Québec travellers become synechdotal representations of the Québec nation itself. Québec audiences and critics have responded to the productions as resistant postcolonial expressions of Québec as a unique and internationally viable nation that has emerged despite an ongoing history of oppression. Following Žižek, we can read

the Québec public's identification with Lepage and his creativity as a means by which the nation processes its own identity struggles. Lepage becomes a stage on which Québec projects its desire to be a realised, globalised, successful nation.

Such postcolonial readings of Lepage's work are accomplished, however, via a selective understanding of Québec's past and present that occludes the history of its European populations as themselves colonisers, and the current status of the francophone population of Québec as dominant (arguably hegemonic) within an ethnically and linguistically diverse interculture. In Lepage's work, we see this ambiguity about francophone Québec's post/colonial status played out through non-québécois characters, locations, and cultures which function as mirroring others to Lepage's Québec travellers. Within francophone Québec, these are understood as self-aware expressions of a minority population aligning its situation with that of other minorities; while audiences and critics unfamiliar with or outside the production's sphere of local culture reference have found some of these representations objectified and colonising.

The global circulation of Lepage's productions throws the ambiguity of these representations of otherness into particular focus. Because the difficulty in locating a stable subject position is central to contemporary understandings of individuality, his stories of characters searching for self-knowledge have considerable appeal amongst privileged Western audiences. But differing responses to his representations of ethnic otherness indicates the risk of assuming a unified discursive community where one no longer exists. This disparity of response brings home the dialectical relationship between the global and the local and underlines the crucial role that context plays in the reception of cultural productions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dennis Kennedy has been a model advisor, accommodating the peculiarities of my professional life but providing all necessary rigour. The staff and fellow students of the School of Drama have provided a conducive intellectual community; particular thanks to Ann Mulligan for helping keep things in perspective. I thank Brian Singleton for his ongoing support and collegiality, and I will always be grateful to him and to Ronit Lentin for giving me the next step.

I thank Robert Lepage for the provocation and inspiration of his work, and for welcoming me to observe his creative process during the production of *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*. Thanks to the authors and creative team of that production for allowing me access, in particular Bruno Bazin, Sonoyo Nishikawa, and Louise Roussel. Thanks to Lynda Beaulieu, Micheline Beaulieu, and Valérie Lambert at RLI and Ex Machina for facilitating information and images. My deep appreciation goes to Michel Bernatchez for his generosity over many years.

Various stages of this research have been supported by the Ireland Canada University Foundation, the International Council for Canadian Studies, and the Trinity Trust Travel Awards Scheme. I gratefully acknowledge their support.

This thesis project has lasted eight years, and my interest in Lepage dates well before that. Many friends, colleagues, and family members have given me support and ideas along the way. I thank my fellow Lepagians Rémy Charest, Mark Fisher, and Lilie Zendel for sharing their enthusiasm and insights. Peter Berlin, Nicole Borrelli, Linda Cardinal, Jocelyn Clarke, Peter Crawley, Ali Curran, Loughlin Deegan, Nadine Desrochers, Kiara Downey, Stéphan Gervais, Alain Jean, Nik Quaife, Alisa Regas, Mary Rose, Brenda Silver, Tabitha Sparks, and Steven Tabakin have been supportive and patient friends, colleagues, and listeners. Special thanks to Patrick Lonergan for being a compassionate and thorough second eye, and to David Fancy for his superb intellectual companionship.

I thank Siobhán Colgan, Susan Conley, and Maura O'Keeffe for their friendship, David Binder for always leading the parade, and my sister Elizabeth for her compassion and strength.

This thesis is for my parents.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Robert Lepage is one of the most acclaimed international theatre artists of his generation, and a cultural figure of central importance to his native Québec. He works in theatre production as a collaborative creator, author, director, and designer of original solo and collectively created works (see table on the following page); he has directed existing plays, particularly by Shakespeare, at theatres in Québec and around the world; he has directed five feature films, three of which are derived from his stage work;[1] curated museum exhibits and seasons of theatrical and other artworks; and he has designed two world tour concerts for the musician Peter Gabriel. This thesis is a critical analysis of four of Lepage's original productions – *Vinci*, *The Dragon's Trilogy*, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, and *Zulu Time* – and of their reception. I chose these productions because they broadly cover the span of Lepage's career to date and because they demonstrate the changing contexts in which his work has been created and received. Early on, Lepage created productions for a known, local audience, which, because they were well-received locally, began to tour internationally; now he is a major international artist making productions that tour to many countries and cultures but which continue to be created in Québec, predominantly by francophone Quebecers. The thesis also includes shorter discussions of two other Lepage productions, *Tectonic Plates* and *The Far Side of the Moon*, and mentions many of his other productions and films.

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[1] *Le Confessionnal* (1995), *Le Polygraphe* (based on the play of the same name, 1996), *Nô* (based on a section of *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, 1998), *Possible Worlds* (2000), and *The Far Side of the Moon* (based on the play of the same name, 2004). Of these only *Possible Worlds* was not written by Lepage himself; it is an adaptation by John Mighton of Mighton's stage play.

TABLE 1: Robert Lepage's original stage productions[2]

YEAR	TITLE
1982	*En Attendant*
1984	*Circulations*
1985-91	*The Dragon's Trilogy*
1986-87	*Vinci*
1987-91	*Polygraph*
1988-90	*Tectonic Plates*
1991-95	*Needles and Opium*
1994-97	*The Seven Streams of the River Ota*
1998-2000	*Geometry of Miracles*
1999-02	*Zulu Time*
2000-ongoing	*The Far Side of the Moon*
2005-ongoing	*The Andersen Project*

Themes of identity and alterity are central to these productions, and indeed to all of Lepage's work. I read these themes as an expression of two interrelated factors: Lepage's personal struggle for self-realisation, and the status of his native Québec as "colonial/postcolonial/colonised."[3] The discursive production of personal and national identities mirror and perpetuate each other in the works. One of the primary ways in which Lepage expresses themes of selfhood and otherness in his work is through the recurrent character of a Québec artist on a journey towards self-realisation, which he acknowledges as an autobiographical figure. Using a Lacanian approach we can read these thinly fictionalised self-depictions as Lepage's attempts to "other" himself – to use the stage as a mirror through which he can see his own reflection. A continued focus on asexual and mother-obsessed characters in his work

[2] I include in this list productions made since Lepage joined Théâtre Repère in 1982. I consider original productions to be those created or co-created by Lepage, as opposed to existing works or new plays that he has directed.

[3] Chanady, Amaryll, "Rereading Québécois Literature in a Postcolonial Context," in *Québec Studies* 35, p. 34.

indicates an ongoing fear of full agency within the symbolic order (in psychological terms, fear of castration). Read through postcolonial theory, these Québec travellers become synechdotal representations of the Québec nation itself. Québec audiences and critics have responded to the productions as resistant expressions of Québec as a unique and internationally viable nation that has emerged despite an ongoing history of oppression by anglophone Canada. Following Žižek, we can read the Québec public's identification with Lepage and his creativity as a means by which the province/nation processes its own identity struggles. Lepage becomes a stage on which Québec projects its desire to be a realised, globalised, successful nation.[4] A triangulated circuit of meaning and influence has therefore developed between Lepage, Québec, and the rest of the world (what Lacan and Žižek would call "reality"): the artist and his native culture have become mutually reliant on each other to reinforce their interconnected identity projects.

Québec's continuing struggle to produce a coherent socio-political identity agreed on by a majority of its population is complicated by its unique history, and by the fact that this struggle has extended into an age which many would like to call "postnational".[5] Understandings of this struggle cannot but be inflected by the interpreter's position; as Luc Turgeon has argued, "the conceptualization of the québécois community has become a political issue in itself."[6] This provides some background to the potential contentiousness of reading Québec and québécois

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[4] See the notes at the end of this introductory section for information about the terminology I use to describe Québec.

[5] See, for example, Jacobson, David, *Rights Across Borders: Immigration and the Decline of Citizenship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), and Soysal, Yasemin Nuhoglu, *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[6] Turgeon, Luc, "Interpreting Québec's Historical Trajectories: Between *La Société Globale* and the Regional Space," in Gagnon, ed., p. 51.

cultural productions, as I do here, through postcolonial theory. Such an approach has been resisted by francophone québécois culture for a set of reasons stemming from the fraught inter- and intra-cultural relations in Canada and Québec, and the resulting lack of consensus on who is being oppressed, and who is doing the oppressing, in a Québec context. At the same time, postcolonialism has begun to be eclipsed in anglophone academia by theoretical approaches associated with globalisation theory, argued by some to be more sensitive to power relationships and flows of people, ideas, goods, and capital in contemporary global society. What I am advocating, however, is a reading strategy attuned to expressions of resistance and liberation by cultures that are (or perceive themselves to be) oppressed, which places these readings in a series of intercultural and interdisciplinary contexts so as to avoid the homogenising and potentially essentialising tendencies for which early postcolonial approaches have been critiqued. I align myself with Chanady's advocacy of a reading position which places Québec culture

> ... in a global context in which cultural practices do not occur in isolation, but enter into a complex global network. The earlier postcolonial homogenization of diverse societies in a critical grid (centre/periphery, colonizer/colonized)... [is] replaced by a comparative perspective in which a series of problematics linked to the issues of power structures and discursive constructions of identity and alterity serves as [an analytical] starting point...[7]

Such an approach is necessary when treating what has become the most controversial aspect of Lepage's work: its portrayal of non-québécois characters, locations, and cultures as mirroring others to his Québec travellers. Within francophone Québec, these are understood as self-aware and self-referential expressions of a minority culture aligning its situation with that of other minorities – that is, as postcolonial

[7] Chanady, p. 33.

expressions. Some critics unfamiliar with or outside of the productions' sphere of local cultural reference, however, have found these representations objectified and colonising.

The global circulation of Lepage's productions throws the ambiguity of these representations of otherness into particular focus. Because the difficulty in locating a stable subject position is central to contemporary understandings of individuality, his stories of characters searching for self-understanding have considerable appeal amongst privileged Western audiences: viewers identify with these characters and map their identity struggles onto them. But differing responses to his representations of racial and ethnic otherness indicate the risk of assuming a unified discursive community, as Lepage seems to, where one no longer exists. This disparity of response brings home the dialectical relationship between the global and the local and underlines the crucial role played by context in the reception of cultural productions.

In this and the subsequent two chapters I provide the relevant background to my argument via a discussion of four important areas. Here, I introduce our subject, Lepage, outlining his personal and professional background, and his use of his own life as material. In Chapter 2 I provide a background of Québec's political and cultural history, placing that discussion in the context of globalisation and focusing in particular on the negotiation of cultural difference in Québec and Canadian contexts. And in Chapter 3 I begin to explore the possible meanings of Lepage's work when read through the theoretical approaches of Lacan and Žižek and of postcolonial theory, introducing the themes that I expand on throughout the thesis.

EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP ON LEPAGE: MY APPROACH IN CONTEXT

There is an emerging canon of scholarly writing on Lepage, including several PhD theses, an edited volume of essays, a volume on his films, many articles in refereed journals, and discussions of his work in larger studies of theatre and of Québec culture. Some of these studies have focussed on Lepage's creative process and on the formal elements of his original work,[8] and there is a significant amount of writing on Lepage's productions of Shakespeare.[9] Some scholars have examined the autobiographical nature of Lepage's creative project, and the relationship of his work to Québec culture. My work differs from the existing scholarship in that it focusses both on autobiography and on Québec, combining psychological and postcolonial reading strategies. This thesis as a whole stands as a justification of this approach, of course, but some initial background and explanation is required, particularly as regards my use of biographical material, because including close commentary on an artist's life and his statements about the intentions and desires for his works is a potentially contentious academic strategy. It is certainly the dominant practice in theatre studies to consider theatre productions primarily on aesthetic, cultural, and formal terms, and to treat intention and personal significance as of lesser importance

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[8] For example: Fouquet, Ludovic, "De la boîte à l'écran, le langage scénique de Robert Lepage," PhD thesis, Université de Paris X, 2002 (Fouquet's volume, *Robert Lepage, l'horizon en images*, based on his thesis, was published in May 2005) and Dundjerovic, Aleksandar, *Theatricality of Robert Lepage: A Study of his Transformative Mise en scène*, PhD thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 1999.

[9] Most notably, Hodgdon, Barbara, "Looking for Mr. Shakespeare after 'The Revolution': Robert Lepage's Intercultural Dream Machine," in Bulman, ed., *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*; Knowles, Richard Paul, "From Dream to Machine: Peter Brook, Robert Lepage, and the Contemporary Shakespearian Director as (Post) Modernist, in *Theatre Journal* 50; Lavender, Andy, *Hamlet in Pieces, Shakespeare Reworked: Peter Brook, Robert Lepage, Robert Wilson*; Salter, Denis, "Between Wor(l)ds: Lepage's Shakespeare Cycle," in Donohoe and Koustas, eds, and "Acting Shakespeare in Postcolonial Space," in Bulman, ed.; and Steen, Shannon and Margaret Werry, "Bodies, Technologies, and Subjectivities: The Production of Authority in Robert Lepage's *Elsinore*," in *Essays in Theatre/Études Théâtrales* 16 (2).

if not irrelevant. In the case of Lepage, however, his work is avowedly autobiographical, and a significant parallel text has risen up alongside his *oeuvre* of theatrical (and other) creations, of interview material with journalists, students, and academics, and writings and statements by Lepage himself about the works and his relationship to them. Lepage creates in a process-based manner, developing his productions through a cycle of workshops-performances-workshops over many years, and often invites commentators to observe his workshop/rehearsal sessions. This has spawned another related parallel text, of interview material and analysis of his methodology – its sources, its rationale, and, again, its relationship to Lepage's own life. As Peter Lichtenfels points out, providing such access is part of the means by which Lepage promotes his work; he and other star directors, such as Peter Brook and Robert Wilson, are "highly attuned to people writing about them" and "encourage access as a way of disseminating their practice."[10] It is important to keep a certain skeptical distance from material culled from interviews and observation, and in particular not to prioritise Lepage's stated intentions, nor his own analysis of the significance of events and of his work. Such credulity is evident in the analysis of one of the most prolific commentators on Lepage's work, Aleksandar Dundjerovic, who often reports Lepage's opinions or versions of events as facts, does not define problematic terms, and in particular does not query Lepage's tendency to make universalising generalisations based on his own observations.[11] Caution is necessary

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[10] Lichtenfels, Peter, "Hamlet in Pieces, Shakespeare Reworked: Peter Brook, Robert Lepage, Robert Wilson," [review of Andy Lavender's volume], *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 13.3, August 2003, p. 84.

[11] Dundjerovic's work on Lepage includes his PhD thesis, mentioned previously; a volume, *The Cinema of Robert Lepage: The Poetics of Memory* (London: Wallflower, 2003); and several long articles. In his volume he asserts that "Lepage strives to achieve authenticity by telling stories about the life he knows," without naming a source or defining his understanding of

when it comes to personal material; at the same time, it is the assertion of my research that autobiography is a crucial element in the overall intertextuality of Lepage's work. Information about his life offered by himself and others is germane to this thesis in that it supports my argument that Lepage's overall creative project is a deeply personal one: he creates as a means of self-expression, self-invention, and self-analysis. This personal quest has become imbricated with that of the struggles of contemporary Québec for self-definition and cultural/political legitimacy in ways that it is my project to articulate.

The scholar who has treated the autobiographical aspect of Lepage's work most extensively to date is James Bunzli.[12] He identifies many of the important ongoing themes in Lepage's work – travel, art and the artist, the meeting of cultures – and introduces an important analysis of the role the audience plays in the creation of Lepage's productions. He classifies the totality of Lepage's work as a "postmodern" autobiography, a concept I both use and problematise in my own work.[13] But, as with

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"authenticity" (*Cinema*, p. 10). Nor does he justify his assertion that "Each culture where Lepage performs contributes something to the narrative and leaves an imprint on the *mise-en-scène*." (*Cinema*, p. 51) Presumably referring to comments made by Lepage, Dundjerovic asserts that Lepage's work was slow to be accepted in Québec and this was what led him to pursue international touring (*Theatricality*, pp. 83, 143), though much evidence indicates that Lepage's works were extremely popular and well-received by Québec audiences and critics from the beginning of his career (see my arguments later in this chapter). Most problematically, Dundjerovic argues without the support of references that "Lepage does not use intercultural *mise-en-scène* in the same way as any other practitioner" and that Lepage's interculturalism "is autonomous from the original cultural content or social mechanism... from which he is 'borrowing.' Thus, anything can become material for playfulness if it is justified by the actors' actions," (*Theatricality*, p. 129) a questionable series of assertions apparently justified by what Dundjerovic perceives to be Lepage's unique talent.

[12] Bunzli's work on Lepage includes a PhD thesis, *Looking into the Mirror: Decalage and Identity in the Solo Performances of Robert Lepage* (Bowling Green State University, 1996), and several long articles, including "The Geography of Creation: Decalage as Impulse, Process, and Outcome in the Theatre of Robert Lepage," (*TDR* 43), and "Autobiography in the House of Mirrors: The Paradox of Identity Reflected in the Solo Shows of Robert Lepage," (in Donohoe and Koustas, eds.)

[13] Bunzli, "Geography," p. 29.

many commentators, Bunzli's discussion of Québec is limited, and focuses mainly on Lepage as representative of a new generation of young Québec theatremakers who moved away from direct political engagement towards a more international outlook in the 1980s. Jane Koustas, co-editor of a book of essays on Lepage's theatre, takes this point further when she argues that Lepage is significant because he moves theatre beyond national boundaries entirely, calling his work "...global theatre for the computer-wired age."[14] Critics commenting on Lepage from within Québec also tend to use his work as evidence of the newly transnational outlook of the province/nation, often relying on universal categories of value and meaning that it is the work of postcolonial analysis to deconstruct, as with Bovet's assertion that Lepage's productions stage the conflict between "self-expression" and "the need for true communication with one's fellow men beyond the limits of time and space."[15] My argument, in contrast to those offered by Bunzli, Koustas, Bovet, and others, is that Québec is a crucially important context for Lepage's work. While Québec, and Lepage, indeed function in increasingly international contexts, this should not draw focus away from the unresolved and ongoing nature of the québécois national project, which affects the way the populations of Québec view themselves, each other, and their relationship to the rest of the world. Québec is present in Lepage's work on many levels: while espousing a global outlook, he has allied himself to his native culture by basing himself there, receiving Québec funding, and accepting his unofficial status as a québécois cultural ambassador. Québec is evident in the

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[14] Koustas, Jane, "Robert Lepage Interfaces with the World – on the Toronto Stage," in Donohoe and Koustas, eds., p. 188.
[15] Bovet, Jeanne, "Identity and Universality: Multilingualism in Robert Lepage's Theatre," in Donohoe and Koustas, eds., p. 4.

substance of Lepage's work as well: sometimes overtly as content, and sometimes as a ghosting presence via representational codes that those outside the francophone Québec context often find surprising and problematic. It is only by exploring the complex relationship between Lepage and Québec that this much-commented-on aspect of Lepage's work – his representation of otherness – can be fully understood.

NOTES ON SPELLING, LANGUAGE, CITATIONS, AND CURRENCY

The anglicisation of place names when writing about Québec is, unsurprisingly, the subject of some controversy. The Office québécois de la langue française argues that it is appropriate to keep the accents in French-language place names when citing them in other languages; while others argue that using French spellings alienates Anglophones and members of other communities. To acknowledge that most of the productions discussed here were originally created in French by French-speakers, I retain French spellings (Québec for the province and city; Québécois/e for a person; québécois/e for the adjectival form; Montréal instead of Montreal, etc). That being said, I will cite all of Lepage's productions using their English-language titles and have translated all quotes originally in French into English, to facilitate ease of reading (the original French is included in footnotes).[16] "Quebecer", the anglicisation of "Québécois", does not take accents.

No less controversial is the question of how to refer to the Québec political entity – to call it a "province," while factually true, is troublesome to some nationalists, whose insistence in calling it a "nation" is equally problematic to those

[16] Thanks to Céline Gagnon, cultural attaché at the Québec Government Office in London, for background and advice on these matters.

who see such usage as inaccurate, and as part of a continued push for sovereignty. I follow Ric Knowles' lead therefore in referring to Québec as a "province/nation,"[17] occasionally using simply "nation" when called for in specific discussions involving the nationalist viewpoint.

Many of the newspaper sources cited here were obtained from the archive of Ex Machina, Lepage's production company, and do not include page numbers. When page numbers are available, they are included in the bibliography.

Unless otherwise noted, sums of money are presented in Canadian dollars. As of 22 June 2005, $1 Canadian = €.67.

ROBERT LEPAGE: PERSONAL BACKGROUND

I will now introduce Lepage, his family background, his theatre training, and his use of personal material in his productions and films. The biographical material that I offer here is based on written sources including press interviews, scholarly works, and Rémy Charest's book of interviews with Lepage.[18]

Lepage's parents, Ferdinand and Germaine Lepage, were francophone Quebecers; Ferdinand served many years in the Canadian navy and Germaine served in the Canadian Women's Air Corps during World War II. Living in Halifax, Nova Scotia in the mid-1950s, the couple tried to start a family, but Germaine suffered

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[17] Knowles, Ric, *Reading the Material Theatre*, p. 41.

[18] Other than Charest, the sources I rely on for information about Lepage's life and professional development are André Ducharme, "Destin planétaire," *L'actualité*, June 2003; Mark Fisher, "The write lines," *The (Glasgow) Herald*, 27 March 1999; Brian D. Johnson, "Profile: Robert Lepage," *Macleans*, 11 September 1994; Simon Hattenstone, "The Jinxed Genius," *The Guardian*, 15 May 1998; Alberto Manguel, "Theatre of the Miraculous," *Saturday Night*, January 1989; John O'Mahoney, "Aerial Views," *The Guardian*, 23 June 2001; and "Robert Lepage: Canada's Renaissance Man," a multimedia resource on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's website: http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-68-1410/arts_entertainment/robert_lepage/, accessed 31 May 2005.

repeated miscarriages. They adopted two anglophone children and then moved to Québec City, where Germaine gave birth to two children: Robert in December 1957, and Lynda 13 months later. The older children were educated in English, while Robert and Lynda lived in French. Lepage calls his bilingual household "a metaphor for Canada"[19] and recalls how the family used to quarrel about whether to watch the iconic television programme "Hockey Night in Canada" in French or English. Up to four extended family members also lived at various times in the family's small apartment, which Lepage says gave him an early sense of the proximity of life and death: "Suddenly you get your own bed because your grandfather died in it the week before."[20] Lepage says his mother instilled the joy of storytelling in him: he grew up in a matriarchal environment, and he considers his productions "the search for the father's voice."[21]

Lepage was a physically small and shy child who experienced extreme trauma from age five, when he developed alopaecia and permanently lost all his hair. For many years he did not talk about this condition in interview, but has recently become more forthcoming on the subject. In 1995 he said that alopaecia has been

> ... the basis of my life. It completely sculpted my personality and my way of seeing the world. It was nothing like being in a normal world... You feel after a point that you'd be happier if you were crippled, because people don't make fun of people who are crippled. The main impact is realising the immense cruelty of the world towards anything that is not normal.[22]

Lepage wore a baseball cap in public during his youth and started wearing a wig at age 14. He experienced further personal difficulties at 15 when he tried drugs for the

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[19] Cited in Johnson, p. 59.
[20] Cited in Hattenstone.
[21] Cited in Fisher.
[22] Cited in Johnson, p. 59.

first time, and had a strong reaction to hashish that was laced with opium; he had hallucinations for several years afterwards and experienced a lengthy depression which added to his reclusiveness. He spent most of his spare time at home, watching soap operas and sitcoms on television, but also nurturing a growing sense of creativity by making models of Québec City and restaging the Woodstock concert with toy figures in his back garden. He has cited seeing a live concert by the group Genesis at the age of 15 as a formative and inspirational moment, and would go on decades later to collaborate with the group's lead singer, Peter Gabriel.[23]

Lepage now credits his sister Lynda for turning his life around by first taking him to the theatre as a spectator, and then persuading him to audition for a school play. She had to force him to attend his own opening performance, as she recalls:

> I will always remember that night – when I pushed him into the taxi, he was crying and I had pills in the other hand to calm him. In the end, I was so nervous for him I probably needed the pills more than he did. I will never forget that on the first line the audience began to laugh, because he was so good and funny. And that was the end of the nightmare.[24]

Lepage himself makes this point even more strongly: he says that the audience's laughter saved his life.[25] In theatre, he found "a hiding place much larger and infinitely more exciting than my parents' bedroom,"[26] where he could "disguise myself, hide myself behind a group."[27] This is a curious formulation: while appearing on stage would seem a form of exposure, Lepage describes it as a place to hide. These seemingly conflicting instincts – towards simultaneous self-revelation and disguise – are fundamental to the complex treatment of personal material in Lepage's theatre.

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[23] I discuss one of Lepage and Gabriel's collaborations, *Zulu Time*, in Chapter 9.
[24] Cited in O'Mahoney.
[25] See Ducharme, p. 77.
[26] Cited in Manguel, p. 38
[27] "...me déguiser, me cacher derrière un groupe." Ducharme, ibid.

LEPAGE'S THEATRE TRAINING

Lepage skipped his secondary school final exams and enrolled in the Conservatoire d'art dramatique in Québec City in 1975, from which he graduated in 1978. The Conservatoire was staffed by pedagogical descendents of Jacques Lecoq, who trained the students to approach their work as total theatremakers rather than solely as actors. As Lepage points out, there was a practical basis to this approach: in a small culture such as Québec, it was very difficult for actors to make a living solely through performing, and many Conservatoire graduates went on to be teachers and directors in small communities.[28] One of Lepage's favourite teachers at the Conservatoire was Mark Doré, who had been a student of Lecoq; his principle was to "find theatre in the things of daily life," an approach that Lepage found "liberating."[29] The Conservatoire also advocated a Grotowskian approach, which understands theatre as a means towards self-understanding, seeing the role as a "scalpel" to dissect the actor's self. Conservatoire training worked to help students rely on their impulses and to express themselves immediately through gestures.

Lepage was not a particularly successful student at the Conservatoire; his teachers criticised him for being emotionally reserved and not revealing enough of himself in his creative work. This follows on interestingly from Lepage's description of theatre as a "hiding place": his acting teachers apparently felt that Lepage's personality was *too* hidden at this early stage in his professional development, whereas in time Lepage would come to use personal revelation, albeit often veiled, as a basis of his work. After graduation, finding himself jobless, he and his close friend

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[28] In Fréchette, Carole, "L'arte è un veicolo," *Jeu* 42, p. 109.
[29] Cited in Charest, p. 139.

and classmate Richard Fréchette travelled to Paris to take a three-week course with the Swiss director Alain Knapp, who had probably come to their attention because he taught improvisation and directing at the École Nationale de théâtre in Montréal from 1974-76.[30] Knapp's home base was the Institute de la Personalité Créatrice in Montparnasse, where he taught an approach to theatre that was, in Lepage's words,

> ... very exacting, very difficult to grasp and demanded a poetic abandon that very few people could deliver. The work of the actor-creator, as he conceived of it, was a little like squeezing a lemon to get its juice. For Richard and me, his approach corresponded exactly to what we had dreamed of, to what we wanted to do. I had always been told I didn't commit myself enough, that I didn't know how to tell my own story, and there I was, suddenly being told the exact opposite. For Knapp, my reserve and control allowed me to act better, to tell my story better.

Returning to Québec City, Fréchette and Lepage formed Théâtre Hummm..., which made shows "based on collective improvisations and on observation, methods that were fashionable at the Conservatoire and in much of the québécois theatre world." Over the next several years, the pair made several small shows with Hummm... that played in the city's cafés and black box spaces; and Lepage worked as a director for hire for productions that toured to high schools and junior colleges (*Cégeps*) as well as theatres. He also became a star player in the popular Ligue National d'Improvisation (LNI), a comedy improvisation group whose shows were competitions structured like hockey matches. Lepage became well-known in Québec for his appearances in LNI shows, which were televised; in 1984 he was voted the most popular member of the Ligue. In 1980, Lepage was asked to direct a production, *L'ecole, c'est secondaire*, for Théâtre Repère, the only local company that created

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[30] See Lefebvre, Paul, "Robert Lepage: New Filters for Creation," *Canadian Theatre Review* 52, p. 35

multidisciplinary work – an approach that was then seen, in Lepage's words, as "very daring."[31] After several years, at a point when Repère found itself in financial and organisational trouble, Lepage and Fréchette joined the company, effectively merging Hummm... with it. Théâtre Repère's founding artistic director, Jacques Lessard, adhered to a creative method called the RSVP cycles, in which theatre is developed collectively through an ongoing process of brainstorming, improvisation, production, and revision. The RSVP methodology also advocates basing theatre productions not on abstract ideas but on concrete objects, or "resources." Lepage absorbed and adapted the RSVP method through his involvement with Repère, which became the crucible for Lepage's early work in collaborative creation, starting with *En attendant* ("Waiting") in 1982, a three-character work about actors stuck in a hiatus between jobs.

Lepage started to become known across Canada as a creator-performer with the success of *Circulations*, which used a map of the eastern U.S. as a creative resource for a collaborative work about a young woman who travels from Québec City to New York while grappling with an unhappy past. Created in 1984 for Repère, *Circulations* toured throughout Québec and the rest of Canada, and won the grand prize at the Quinzaine Internationale de Théâtre de Québec. In 1985, Lepage's career took a decisive leap forward with the premiere of *The Dragon's Trilogy*, a Repère collaborative creation in which he participated as director/co-creator/performer, which toured to 14 countries over six years. At the same time, he started work on *Vinci*, his first solo production, which premiered at Montréal's Théâtre Quat'Sous in

[31] Cited in Charest, pp. 156, 138, 140.

March 1986. Chapters 4-9 of this thesis continue this narrative through in-depth analysis of several of Lepage's productions, starting with *Vinci* in Chapter 4.

ART AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

As soon as he started to make his own theatre, Lepage employed personal, autobiographical material in it, and has acknowledged throughout his career that making theatre about himself helps him understand his life. "Everyone makes shows a little bit for therapy," he told Josette Féral in 1988. "Theatre helped me find myself."[32] He underlined this in 1999 to Mark Fisher: "There's no distinction between my work, my personal life, and my love life. My private life *is* my work."[33] The autobiographical relationship between Lepage and his work is rarely as straightforward as characters and events mapping exactly onto events in Lepage's life; rather he uses his own experience and his own preoccupations as creative springboards. As Bunzli argues, Lepage's projects are "built in response to a series of ongoing responses – personal, artistic, and political"[34] to what Charest has called "the chaos of [Lepage's] existence."[35] About the personal references in his work, Lepage has said "...that's why you do art – to know what you're about."[36] *Vinci*, for example, concerns an artist who travels to Europe to recover from the suicide of a friend and fellow artist; Lepage has confirmed in interview that this fictional trip was based on a real-life trip he took to Europe, prompted by his own friend's suicide attempt, though

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[32] "On fait tous un peu les spectacles par therapie... Le théâtre m'a aidé à me trouver." Féral, Josette, "Robert Lepage," in *Mise en Scène et Jeu d'acteur: Entretiens*, p. 140.
[33] Cited in Fisher. Emphases in original.
[34] Bunzli, "Geography", p. 98.
[35] Charest, p. 66, cited in Bunzli, ibid.
[36] Cited in Johnson, p. 57.

he has variously indicated that the friend died and that he survived but was maimed for life.[37] The larger point of the production, however, for Lepage, was an examination of artistic integrity:

> Integrity is the attempt to find out who you are, to figure out your morals.... I'm not saying that I can really know who I am, but I understood a little bit, travelling in Europe and doing research for *Vinci*... who I was artistically. I want to try to stay true to that; that's essential for a work of art.[38]

Polygraph, which Lepage co-wrote with Marie Brassard, is a fictionalisation of the real-life murder of one of Lepage's closest friends, for which Lepage was briefly a suspect.[39] Lepage fictionalised and adapted events and changed real names in the making of *Polygraph*, one of whose central characters, the actor François, is like Lepage a suspect in the crime. Later he called the play "an act of mourning, a way to untangle very, very dark feelings about that event. But it was also about filmmaking, about the ethics of telling a true story."[40] *Needles and Opium* is the only production in which Lepage named the central character, an actor, directly after himself, but in a 1992 interview he still resisted directly identifying himself with the fictional Robert, quickly changing the subject to the larger thematic frame suggested by the show's juxtaposition of Miles Davis and Jean Cocteau:

> [Robert] is myself, and not myself. He's a Quebecer, and what's so strange about our culture in Québec is that we are halfway between French and English... we are North Americans and European, and I

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[37] See Manguel, p. 38, and Hattenstone. This inconsistency illustrates the difficulty with relying on Lepage's public statements as facts.

[38] "L'intégrité est la tentative de découvrir qui on est, pour décider de sa morale.... Je n'ai pas le prétention de savoir vraiment qui je suis, mais j'ai compris un peu, en voyageant en Europe, en faisant des recherches sur *Vinci*... qui j'étais artistiquement. Je vais essayer d'être fidele à ça; c'est essential à un oeuvre d'art." Cited in Fréchette, pp. 118-119.

[39] Bizarrely, a québécois filmmaker tried to make a movie about the crime very soon after it happened, and included a main character who disguises himself with false eyelashes and a wig – quite possibly a reference to Lepage himself.

[40] Cited in O'Mahoney.

> thought it was interesting to add a third character that has a Cocteau and a Davis side.[41]

It is now generally accepted, however, that the fictional Robert, who in the show is recovering from a devastating romantic breakup, is an "autobiographical"[42] character and that Lepage was using the show to recover from the "meltdown" of one of his own relationships.[43] *Needles'* Robert and *Vinci*'s Philippe are instances of a prototypical figure which Lepage has placed in nearly all his original works, a Québec artist on a physical and personal journey who stands in for Lepage himself; other iterations of this character include the visual artist Pierre Lamontagne in *The Dragon's Trilogy*, the broadcaster Jacques/Jennifer in *Tectonic Plates*, and the nascent filmmaker Philippe in *The Far Side of the Moon*. Of these characters as they appear in his solo productions, Lepage has said that they "[speak] for me, in my voice."[44] Underlining their autobiographical nature, all of the abovementioned characters were originally played by Lepage himself.

Given these self-references, Bunzli argues that Lepage's "entire *oeuvre* to date pieces together an ongoing autobiography," but one that is "postmodern" and "fragmented."[45] Following Deborah Geis' theorisation of the split, decentred subject in postmodern theatre, Bunzli asserts that Lepage expresses an "identity as a postmodern subject" through "the interaction of character and persona" – that is, the fact that he creates fictional characters who represent him, and then performs them

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[41] Interview with the author, Québec City, 26 August 1992.
[42] Bunzli, "Geography," ibid.
[43] See O'Mahoney.
[44] Cited in Bunzli, "Autobiography," p. 23.
[45] Bunzli, "Geography," ibid.

himself, in the work.[46] Similarly, Ann Wilson argues that *Needles and Opium* and works like it are compelling, because they "render the self as complex"; in them

> the self-consciousness of the performer producing his identity in the context of a wide range of social forces disrupts the notion of a coherent self which can be told in a story.[47]

PLATE 1: Lepage in *Needles and Opium*

It is my view, however, that while individual works could be interpreted as postmodern expressions, we can trace a strong and coherent narrative through Lepage's work communicating an idealised vision of a desired ontological wholeness, which owes much more to high modernism than to the deconstructions of self associated with the age of poststructuralism. There are clear indications in the productions (and Lepage's commentary on them) of a belief system which holds as

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[46] Bunzli, "Autobiography," p. 37.
[47] Wilson, Ann, "Bored to Distraction: Auto-performance and the Perniciousness of Presence," *Canadian Theatre Review* 79/80, p. 37.

central tenet that a clear and unmediated sense of self is the goal of existence, and that a viable means for Lepage to achieve this is by performing characters and situations that represent him on stage. As Knowles has argued, a high modernist vision of the artist as guiding auteur "with a hand in and ultimate control over all aspect of the productions" is clearly the ethos of Lepage's present production company, Ex Machina, and Lepage's work, despite its emphasis on process,

> ... is most often remarkable for its discovery or construction of accidental, surprising, and unlikely similarities – parallels and connections among and across difference – rather than for any quality of disarticulating disjunctiveness.[48]

Lepage's modernist approach extends to his foregrounding of the audience as the essential entity that pieces together the potential connections that the work presents. The work has "no moral," according to Lepage; it is "a bath of sensations and ideas and emotions" which invites audiences to "do what they want with it."[49] As Knowles further remarks, this gesture tends "simply to displace [Ex Machina]'s creative responsibilities for meaning production onto audiences with something resembling the familiar modernist shrug: My name is Robert Lepage, and I don't know what it's about."[50] Despite (and complicating) this dismissive "shrug," there is an implicit – and coercive – humanist ideology present in the dependence on audience response, an assumption that all audience members are able and eager to intuit the responses necessary to complete the circle of meaning-making in the productions. The ways in which this ideology is communicated, and the difficulties

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[48] Knowles, *Reading*, p. 43.
[49] Bunzli, "Geography," p. 97, cited in Knowles, *Reading* p. 44.
[50] Knowles, *Reading*, ibid.

and lacunae in the assumptions it makes about uniformity of audience response, are some of the issues that I will be exploring throughout this study.

Having introduced Lepage himself and the personal nature of his creative project, I will now turn to his native culture, outlining the historical, political, and cultural circumstances that contributed to Québec's current status as a stateless nation, and describing the impact of this instability on understandings of difference and identity in Québec.

CHAPTER 2. HISTORY AND DIFFERENCE IN QUÉBEC

FROM SETTLER COLONY TO PROVINCE/NATION

France was the first settler nation of Canada and a distinct French-Canadian culture developed in eastern Canada from the 17th century. The French presence was challenged by the incursion of British settlers on Canadian land, and increasing conflict came to a head in 1759, during the Seven Years' War, when the British defeated the French at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, outside Québec City. In the Treaty of Paris in 1763, France relinquished any claim on Canadian lands, and Britain became the official ruler of Canada, but tolerantly allowed French to remain the official language and Catholicism the official religion of the area Québec now occupies. The 1841 British Act of Union bringing together Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Québec) was opposed by many in the latter region, creating a growing solidarity amongst French Canadians. The Catholic Church took a leadership role in Lower Canada, facilitating the development of what is widely understood to have been a highly religious, conservative, rural, anti-statist, and somewhat xenophobic culture.

It is important, however, not to overplay what has become the standard vision of pre-1960s Québec as a radically isolated society. There is a vital debate amongst contemporary historians, sociologists, and political scientists both about the conditions of life in 18th, 19th and early 20th century Québec, and about the political ramifications of differing claims about the province/nation's development. Since the late 1970s a strain of revisionism has emerged, similar to that which arose at the same time in Irish and Spanish studies, challenging the standard portrait of Québec as

outside the trends that shaped the rest of North America and challenging the centrality of the "national question" to its development. Such accounts problematise the standard tradition/modernity dichotomy, underlining that modernity is experienced in different ways in different cultures, and portray Québec as the "site of convergence of many cultures" rather than as wholly identified with French culture and Catholicism.[51] One aspect of this revisionism has been a positive assertion of Québec's *americanité*, understood by Yvan Lamonde as an attitude "of openness and mobility that speaks of Québec's acceptance of its place on the American continent."[52] Lamonde summed up this line of thinking in his now-famous equation: "Q = Fr + GB + $(USA)^2$ - R."[53] Controversially, Lamonde here portrays British culture as just as influential in Québec as French, American culture as twice as influential, and downplays the role of Rome and the clergy. I will discuss later in this chapter the ways in which revisionism has become a strand in the complex debates over otherness in the contemporary Québec context.

It was, ironically but understandably, the expression of an emergent Anglo-Canadian nationalism that sparked the birth of contemporary québécois nationalist identity. Concerned as they saw their economy and culture being threatened by the United States in the first half of the 20th century, and afraid that provincial governments did not have sufficient resources nor links to assert a unified Canadian culture, English Canadians turned to the federal government to act assertively in strengthening Canada's economic and cultural policies. It responded with, among

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[51] Turgeon, pp. 56, 58.
[52] "d'ouverture et de mouvance qui dit le consentement [du Québec] à son appartenence continentale." Lamonde, Yvan, *Ni avec eux ni sans eux. Le Québec et les États-Unis*, p. 11.
[53] Lamonde, Yvan, *Allégeances et dépendences. Histoire d'une ambivalence identitaire* (Montréal: Nota bene, 2001). Cited in Turgeon, p. 58.

other measures, the appointment of a Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, commonly called the Massey Commission, in 1949. This inquiry into the state of Canadian arts and culture resulted in the Massey Report, published in 1951, which recommended sweeping cultural reforms to assure Canada's continuing development as a strong and independent country: "We are now spending millions to maintain a national independence which would be nothing but an empty shell without a vigorous and distinctive cultural life," said the Report.[54] These reforms consolidated considerable cultural power in the federal realm by revamping the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (founded in 1936), creating various national cultural institutions, sanctioning federal funding for higher education, and creating the Canada Council for the Arts. These reforms sparked popular and alternative creative activity, as a generation of artists and writers (including theatremakers) attempted to articulate emerging, arguably postcolonial Canadian identities.

The Massey Report had a galvanising effect on French Canada, particularly its intellectuals, who saw its recommendations as encroaching significantly on provincial authority. Québec in its turn set up its own Royal Commission of Inquiry into Constitutional Problems, known as the Tremblay Commission, in 1953. The Report that resulted was a dense and somewhat contradictory document that at once re-endorsed traditional Catholic values and called for modernisation. Another element of the Tremblay Report was the definition of culture in a Québec context as

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[54] The Massey Report, cited in Handler, Richard, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*, p. 82.

national culture, which was "taken as an absolute value."[55] At the same time Québec was becoming increasingly modernised and secularised, which was in part the effect of the leadership of Premier Maurice Duplessis, who held office from 1936-1939 and from 1944-59. While Duplessis was conservative and isolationist (his time in office is known as *la grande noirceur* – the great darkness), the strength of his leadership of the provincial government had the effect of loosening the hold of the Catholic Church over education, public services, and the worldview of the québécois people. The introduction of television into Québec in 1952 also played its part.[56] University-based intellectuals began to question the "clericalism, conservatism, and insularism of Québec society,"[57] while the urban working class, as well, started to exhibit skepticism about the limitations of traditional Québec values.

The death of Duplessis in 1959 and the subsequent election of Jean Lesage's Liberal Party to provincial leadership in 1960 galvanised these growing dissidences into a decade of nation-building activity known as the Quiet Revolution. In order for the Québécois to become *maîtres chez nous* (masters of our own house), Lesage advocated the continuing empowerment of the Québec state so that it could take control of its economic, political, and cultural affairs. In his time in power Lesage oversaw a remarkable number of reforms, which included the creation of provincial hospitalisation, credit unions, and pension schemes, reforms in electoral and education policy, and the creation of departments of Cultural Affairs and Federal-

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[55] Handler, p. 91. See also Gagnon, Alain-G., "Québec-Canada's Constitutional Dossier," in Gagnon, ed., p. 130.

[56] In his film *Le Confessionnal*, Lepage depicts the opening up of Québec in the early 1950s, using the real-life visit of Alfred Hitchcock to Québec City as one of the metaphorical conveyers of this change. I briefly discuss *Le Confessionnal* in Chapter 5; Christopher Gittings and Bill Marshall provide thorough readings of the film's treatment of the changing Québec in their books *Canadian National Cinema* and *Québec National Cinema*, respectively.

[57] Dickinson, John and Brian Young, *A Short History of Québec*, p. 297.

Provincial Relations. In refusing federal funding for these reforms, he both created a high tax burden on the Québec population and increased tensions between Québec and the federal capital of Ottawa. Meanwhile Québec's participation in Catholic activity plummeted; in the 1960s church attendance dropped from 80 to 25 per cent.[58]

The intellectuals who had increasingly jostled against Duplessis' regime did not row in unilaterally behind the notion of an independent Québec state; in fact, as Karmis has argued, the end of the Duplessis era was the moment when the two "founding trends of the contemporary debate on national identity in Québec" found their form. On the one side, a group of intellectuals associated with the publication *Cité Libre* advocated Canadian identity and defined themselves generally as anti-nationalists; this is the strain of thought that would become identified with Pierre Elliot Trudeau, whose politics blended civic nationalism and multiculturalism. On the other, neo-nationalists grouped around the newspaper *Le Devoir* attempted to spur a move towards québécois nationalism whose "political objective became the constitution of a francophone global society in Québec,"[59] with paths dividing between those who advocated an autonomous but not necessarily separate state (the Québec Liberal Party) and those who advocated separation (the Parti Québécois).

Eventually Lesage's Liberal government articulated what had been an implicit larger demand: in its view Québec had status different from that of other provinces, in that it had a right to stand as a nation alongside Canada. The Ottawa government responded to Québec's call for recognition by setting up the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963-69), which recommended that the federal

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[58] Hobsbawm, Eric, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, p. 172.
[59] Karmis, Dimitrios, "Pluralism and National Identity(ies) in Contemporary Québec: Conceptual Clarifications, Typology, and Discourse Analysis," in Gagnon, ed., pp. 82, 85.

government recognise French language and culture. Trudeau, who held office as Prime Minister of Canada from 1968-1979 and 1980-1984, followed on from the recommendations of the Royal Commission by arguing that the province's concerns would best be met by officially transforming Canada into a bilingual country. Trudeau and his federalist associates felt that, if Canada could be transformed into a nation truly welcoming and accepting of the French language and culture, then a Québec state would simply be unnecessary because its interests would be absorbed into and protected by Canada. Gittings has called this the "federalist dream of nation."[60]

Trudeau's anti-nationalist intellectualism did not have much sway, however, in altering the force of Québec nationalism in the Quiet Revolution period. The articulation of a distinctly "québécois" culture dates from this time, in some ways in opposition to Trudeau's wielding of the concept of "French-Canadian." Culture played a central role in this national consolidation process, which constituted, in Gagnon and Allor's words, "nothing less than the production of the Cultural field both as the legitimating agency of government and as an emergent regime of social power..."[61] Artists and writers played a key role in the creation of strong national feeling: through their work, novelists (Herbert Aquin, Jacques Godbout), chansonniers (Felix Leclerc, Gilles Vigneault), essayists (Pierre Vallières), and playwrights (Michel Tremblay) all described or argued for the vibrant existence of a unique and valuable culture where, it had long been asserted, none existed. As the most obvious distinguishing characteristic of the French populations of Québec, the

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[60] Gittings, p. 105.

[61] Gagnon, Michelle, and Martin Allor, "Québec," in *Public 14*, 1996, p. 8. Cited in Erin Manning, *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home and Identity in Canada*, p. 127

French language became, for nationalists, the primary signifier of Québec identity, and ensuring that French would continue to be the legal language of the province became a focus of the nationalist movement. Québécois writers such as Tremblay celebrated the culture by writing in the distinctive colloquial idiom, called *joual*, and

> ... defense of the French language became the centrepiece of nationalism, replacing the church and legal institutions like the Civil Code as the essential *sine qua non* for the survival of francophone society.[62]

Political events escalated towards the crucial year of 1970, when the newly-formed Parti Québécois, under the leadership of René Lévesque and with Québec independence as its platform, won 23.1 per cent of the popular vote and seven seats in the National Assembly in provincial elections. The progress of Québec nationalism was bolstered by the support of the French government, which established special paradiplomatic status with the province/nation in the mid-1960s. Particularly symbolic were the words of General Charles de Gaulle, who "launched a message of emancipation" from a balcony of Montréal's City Hall on 24 July 1967: "Vive Le Québec! Vive Le Québec libre!"[63] What had been major progress for Québec nationalism was marred somewhat by the extreme events of the October Crisis, in which radical separatists under the banner of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) kidnapped a British consular official and kidnapped and murdered the Québec labour minister Pierre Laporte. Trudeau's government invoked the War Measures Act of 1914 and imprisoned many intellectuals, labour leaders, and artists.[64]

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[62] Dickinson and Young, p. 305.
[63] Balthazar, Louis, "Québec's International Relations," in Gagnon, ed, p. 451.
[64] Lepage irreverently treats the events of the October Crisis as a farce in his third feature film, *Nô*. The film juxtaposes the activities of a bumbling group of FLQ radicals in Montréal with the misadventures of a québécoise actress performing in a Feydeau farce at the Osaka World's

In the years following the FLQ crisis, official Québec focussed its energies on the continued assertion of a unique culture via multiple strategies, some of which I will discuss below. Despite those efforts, however, the totem of an independent Québec has continued to evade Québec nationalists, despite two referenda asking the Québec public if it wanted the provincial government to negotiate sovereignty-association with Canada. The results of those referenda – in 1980, 59.6 per cent of the voters voted "no", while 50.6 per cent voted "no" in 1995 – indicate the extent to which the province/nation continues to be bitterly divided on the subject of Québec's right and need to be sovereign from the rest of Canada.

The ongoing struggle for special rights and status has led to complicated and fraught relations between Québec, the federal government, and other provinces. Successive Québec governments have lobbied for varying levels of recognition and rights for the province, most based on the fundamental interpretation of the Canadian Confederation of 1867 as the establishment of a "dualism" between English and French Canada. This belief – that Québec has the right to special status amongst Canada's provinces, which would lead to "assymetrical federalism"[65] – has been at the centre of numerous controversies and crises in which the federal government, sometimes backed by other provinces, has contested this interpretation. One of the lowest points for Québec was the year 1982, when, in the aftermath of the first failed referendum and amidst heated debate, a Trudeau-led federal government unilaterally repatriated the Canadian constitution from Britain and agreed to a

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Fair. I discuss this film briefly in Chapter 7; both Gittings in *Canadian National Cinema* and Manning in *Ephemeral Territories* offer readings of *Nô* which place it in the context of québécois nation-building and globalisation.

[65] Gagnon, "Constitutional," pp. 129, 133.

Charter of Rights and Freedoms (the country's Bill of Rights) without the consent of Québec's national assembly. In Alain-G. Gagnon's view, this

> ... has led Québec into an era of subjugation in terms of its political liberty... [W]hile Québec persists in demonstrating that Canadian federalism is a façade, Ottawa continues to undermine the federal condition pertaining to the non-subordination of powers by substituting for them a set of principles that do not take into account Canadian diversity... Truly helpful reforms would respond to the fundamental expectations of Quebecers with regard to their diversity and would affirm a legitimate context for real choice..."[66]

The situation declined further with the defeat of the Meech Lake accord in 1990, an attempt to re-address the constitutional question via the acceptance by the other provinces and the federal government of a bottom-line list of five demands from Québec;[67] I discuss Meech Lake and its aftermath in Chapter 5.

While Québec nationalists feel that special status for the province/nation is a basic fact of Canada's history, the other side of the argument sees Québec's demands as anti-democratic and potentially undermining of the federalist ideal; there is a view that "Québec has had more of its fair share of influence in Ottawa, and is the spoiled child of the Canadian federation."[68] Other Anglo-Canadians, such as Joseph H. Carens, are more generous towards Québec, arguing that, remarkably, liberalism and nationalism have grown up alongside each other in contemporary Québec, and that Québec's demands for distinctness are philosophically and morally just. At the same

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[66] Ibid, p. 146.

[67] Namely, the recognition of Québec as a distinct society; additional powers to Québec over immigration; limits to federal spending in Québec; a Québec veto over constitutional changes or the right to opt out of them; and Québec's participation in the selection of Supreme Court justices. See Dickinson and Young, p. 355.

[68] Courchene, Thomas J. and John N. McDougall, "The Context for Future Constitutional Options," in Ronald L. Watts and Douglas M. Brown, eds. *Options for a New Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 33-51, cited in Ajzenstat, Janet, "Decline of Procedural Liberalism: The Slippery Slope to Accession," in Carens, ed., *Is Québec Nationalism Just? Perspectives from Anglophone Canada*, p. 126.

time, and demonstrating some of the complexities of Anglo-Canadian attitudes, Carens expresses a personal feeling that Québec should stay in Canada.[69]

NEGOTIATING NATIONALISM IN THE GLOBAL ERA

It is important to place the discussion of Québec's struggles for nationhood in a larger socio-political context, in order to underline the potential ambiguities and tensions inherent in asserting national status in the contemporary era. Across many fields and on many levels, the very notion of nationhood is being challenged as a dialogic construction – as "more fiction than fact".[70] Richard Handler argues that "...the search for an integral identity, or the attempt to formulate an undeniable interpretation of the true national culture, can never succeed – and hence must be repeated indefinitely";[71] while Homi Bhabha celebrates the "production of the nation as narration";[72] and Benedict Anderson proposes an understanding of the nation as an "imagined political community."[73] That proof of "nation-ness" exists in the possession of a unique and specifically located culture has come to be seen as a manufactured concept; a more current understanding of culture is "less a set of unchanging and coherent values, behaviours, and attitudes" than "a negotiation, symbolic competition or 'performance.'"[74]

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[69] See Carens, Joseph H., "Liberalism, Justice, and Political Community," in Carens, ed, p. 3-19.
[70] Hurley, Erin, "Céline Dion and the production of national feeling," unpublished conference paper, 2004, p. 1.
[71] Handler, Richard, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Québec*, p. 130.
[72] Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture*, p. 178.
[73] Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, p. 5.
[74] Simon, Sherry, "Translating and interlingual communication in the contact zone: Border Writing in Québec," in Bassnett and Trivaldi, eds., *Post-colonial Translation*, p. 59.

Globalisation further complicates the assertion of contemporary nationhood. Globalisation is a set of processes – political, economic, social, technological, and cultural – that are at once rendering the world and its communities more interconnected; creating a greater awareness and sense of connectedness; and creating new divisions of class, status, and power amongst the world's populations. New groupings, systems, and frameworks have come about through globalisation which challenge the nation-state as the primary organisational unit of society. As Hurley has argued, "...globalisation revalues the role of the nation-state, dissociates culture from nation, and restructures national identities."[75]

On the one hand, these challenges to the nation-state could be viewed as particularly challenging to aspirant nations which lack state status, such as Québec. It has equally been argued, however, that its aggressive jostling for economic, political, and cultural status since the 1960s has enabled Québec to participate effectively in the processes of globalisation; and that the constant navigation of identity politics on personal, societal, and cultural levels has rendered Québec and Quebecers well-prepared to navigate contemporary cultural terrain. The following discussion will explore these assertions.

The Québec government has promoted an international definition of the nation from its earliest days, positing that interaction with "legitimate" nations would enhance the legitimacy of its own image. As Keating has argued,

> ... [a]n active external affairs policy not only projects Québec in the world, it also serves the interests of nation-building at home by defining national interests in relation to the outside and raising the

[75] Hurley, Erin, "Theatre as National Export: On Being and Passing in the United States," in *Performing National Identities: International Perspectives on Contemporary Canadian Theatre*, eds. Grace and Reiner-Glapp, pp. 160-161.

> prestige of the Québec state by placing it in the company of sovereign nations.[76]

Following on from the mid-'60s establishment of relations with France mentioned above, Québec developed an impressive paradiplomatic network, which, as of 2004, includes six general delegations, five delegations, six offices, nine branches, and four non-delegation specialised services.[77] These grew up alongside and often in tension with Canada's own international relations efforts. Québec's early moves to engage in foreign policy were very much part of the Quiet Revolution spirit of nation-building; the nationalisation of the electric power system, for example, required an influx of American capital and created links with American financial networks, and the establishment of a provincial department of education created connections between Québec and the rest of the *francophonie*. It was Paul Gérin-Lajoie, Québec's first Minister of Education, who delivered what became the province's *de facto* policy statement on internationalisation in a 1965 address to the Montréal consular corps. According to Gérin-Lajoie, it was

> ... not acceptable that the federal state be empowered to exercise a sort of monitoring and control of the opportunities available to Québec in its international relations.[78]

Ottawa reacted swiftly, acknowledging that Québec might negotiate treaties but refuting its right to sign them: "Canada possesses a single international personality within the community of nations." This conflict persists, with Québec continually jostling for greater powers over its international relationships, and the Ottawa

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[76] Keating, Michael, *Nations Against the State: The New Politics of Nationalism in Québec, Catalonia, and Scotland*, p. 125.

[77] Balthazar, p. 447. According to Balthazar, Québec's is now the most developed paradiplomatic network amongst the some 350 non-sovereign political entities that function within sovereign states.

[78] Gérin-Lajoie, Paul, cited by Claude Morin, *L'art de l'impossible. La diplomatie québécoise depuis 1960* (Montréal: Boréal, 1987), p. 28. Cited in Balthazar, p. 451. Translation Balthazar's.

government tolerating Québec's international relations efforts but always attempting to keep them in check as an assertion of its "primacy in the area of diplomacy."[79]

If its international relations policy is an indication of Québec's awareness of its place in the larger world, the province/nation has also been challenged by another characteristic aspect of globalisation – increased human mobility. Québec was the recipient of many immigrants in the immediate postwar years, and while immigration slowed to all of Canada, including Québec, in the 1960s and '70s,[80] the presence of new populations became a central concern of official Québec. New arrivals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds presented a challenge to the centrality of the French language in the province/nation, as immigrants tended to assimilate into anglophone culture. Thus, as Gagnon and Iacovino argue, "...[i]mmigration and integration became inextricably tied to the fate of the Québec nation," particularly given the declining birthrate. Many efforts were made to both stimulate immigration into the province and to encourage new arrivals to learn and use French. Québec created a Ministry of Immigration in 1968, whose budget was to grow from $2.8 million to $20 million over the next ten years and which worked to assimilate immigrants through programmes of "language acquisition and cultural adaptation."[81] Québec continues to be the only Canadian province with a distinct immigration department and policy, and despite its many other disputes with the

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[79] Balthazar, p. 452.
[80] Dickinson and Young, pp. 309-312.
[81] Gagnon, Alain-G. and Raffaelle Iacovino, "Interculturalism: Expanding the Boundaries of Citizenship," in Gagnon, ed, p. 374.

federal government has consistently been successful in negotiating for strong control over the selection and cultural integration of immigrants.[82]

Some critics, however, argued that these programmes' imposition of French was not in keeping with liberal policies of individual rights, arguments which reached a crescendo after the passage of several increasingly extreme bills attempting to copper-fasten French as the only official language of the province. The most controversial of these was the Charter of the French Language, or Bill 101, which the Parti Québécois enacted a year after it took power in 1976. The Bill requires immigrants to send their children to French-language schools; requires businesses with more than 50 employees to be run in French; and requires commercial signs to be in French. Many Anglophones saw the Bill as a hindrance to their liberties and left the province after it was passed,[83] but to nationalists such as Guy Boutiller of the Mouvement Québec français, Bill 101 was

> ... much more than a linguistic law. Witness to fear overcome, a charter of our ambition, the cement of union, it would be the rite of passage of a people on the march towards independence.[84]

Despite ongoing controversies caused by it and other language laws, Bill 101 has never been revoked; in September 2004 the Montréal *Gazette* called it "the lightning rod for three decades of language wars."[85]

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[82] See Carens, "Immigration, Political Community, and the Transformation of Identity: Québec's Immigration Policies in Critical Perspective," in Carens, ed., pp. 20-81.
[83] As Dickinson and Young note, net emigration from Québec exceeded immigration by some 80,000 people in the years 1977-79, doubtless because of Bill 101. Dickinson and Young, p. 311.
[84] Quoted in Dickinson and Young, p. 324.
[85] Perreaux, Les, "Forgotten law shaped province," *The Gazette*, September 24, 2004. The "forgotten law" is Bill 22, the Liberal Party's precursor to 101, which was made into law in 1974 but quickly overshadowed by the more extreme and controversial, Parti Québécois-backed Bill 101.

Closely aligned with Québec's policies on international relations and language is its highly-developed cultural policy. The newly-elected Québec Liberal Party created the Ministère des Affaires Culturelles (MAC) in 1961, only 10 years after the formation of its federal equivalent, the Canada Council. The development of the MAC was absolutely tied to Québec's emerging international affairs policy: the opening of Québec's first official office abroad, in Paris, was the direct result of a meeting between the first Québec cultural affairs minister, Georges-Émile Lapalme, and his French equivalent Andre Malraux, in late summer 1960.[86] In the Québec vision of cultural affairs, the state was to promote actively not only the creation of cultural products, but the promotion of those products outside the province: the Arts Council, an arm of the MAC, was created, in then-Premier Jean Lesage's words, to "... try to stimulate artistic expressions which bear a seal, a sign, a trademark, which calls the world's attention to them as PRODUCTS OF QUÉBEC."[87]

Just what such a "seal, sign, trademark" might be remains undefined in the document – because, of course, there is no definition for it. There is no essential "Québecness," no set of signifiers that can be isolated to sum it up. The descriptive "québécois" thus becomes an ever-expanding catchall for anything cultural that emanates from the province, and the more that cultural emanation is capable of "calling the world's attention" to itself, the more it is celebrated, at official levels, as representative of the nation. We see the circularity of this thinking indicated in the eclectic group of artists whose names are currently listed as proof of the vibrancy of Québec culture on the province/nation's official website: a selection which includes

[86] Balthazar, p. 450.
[87] Cited in Handler, pp. 105-6, emphases in original.

cultural workers as various as Denys Arcand, the Cirque du Soleil, Leonard Cohen, Céline Dion, Marc-André Hamelin, and Robert Lepage. Together these artists help their province send a potent message, the current official slogan of the Ministère de la Culture et Communications: "Québec, a culture that travels the world."[88]

Alongside its outward-looking cultural policies, Québec is an enthusiastic participant in economic globalisation. Between 1992 and 2000, exports from Québec to the US increased by 140 per cent, making it the US's eighth-largest trading partner, and exports from Québec to the rest of the world have increased by 80 per cent during that time period compared to 18 per cent for Canada overall.[89] Québec played a primary role in promoting both the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (1989) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, 1994), and was in fact the only Canadian province to vote in favour of NAFTA, though it was arguably the province with the strongest reasons to oppose the treaty,

> ... since its work force was more unionised [than other Canadian provinces] and its industrial base had a high percentage of low-wage industries, precisely those most threatened by competition with Mexico under NAFTA.

Perhaps the most obvious reason to oppose NAFTA was fear of the increased domination of the United States over the North American continent and worldwide; but Csipiak and Héroux have discovered through empirical research that many Quebecers are confident about the province's ability to maintain its integrity *vis-à-vis* the U.S., in part because the two economies are already considerably integrated, and in part because Quebecers have confidence in their culture's uniqueness and

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[88] http://www.mcc.gouv.qc.ca/publications/culture_quebec_eng.pdf, accessed 1 May 2005.
[89] "Globalisation and Cultural Diversity: What does Québec Want?", address by then-Québec Minister of International Relations, Louise Beaudoin, at Harvard University, 7 February, 2000. http://www.mri.gouv.qc.ca/fr/salle_de_presse/archives/allocutions/textes/2000/2000_02_07_b.asp, accessed 5 June 2005.

durability. The economic liberalism that the FTA and NAFTA represent was feared and resisted by older Québec elites because they feared Americanisation; but the current generation, particularly at high income and education levels, display a very practical "duality" in their cultural identity:

> [On] the one hand, economic liberalism is perceived in a very positive way, but on the other hand, strong cultural identity as expressed by Québec's nationalism manages economic liberalism, and not the other way around.[90]

Indeed, another important aspect of economic globalisation is the extent to which it dovetails with nationalist goals. Building up Québec as a strong and independent economic entity has been a clearly observable strategy of the separatist Parti Québécois. Given Québec's constitutional alienation from the rest of Canada, the province/nation embraced free trade much more quickly than other provinces or U.S., states, leading to the formation of what has been termed "Québec, Inc" – the province/nation's strategy to ally business and government:

> Québec, Inc. symbolizes the effort by administrative, corporate, and labor elites to steer the province's economic policies in a direction that overcomes Québec's subordinate status to Ontario within the Canadian federation and positioned Québec to take advantage of changing developments in the international economic arena... Overall, the evolution of Québec, Inc. has been colored by powerful nationalist values and the twin quest to reverse English Canada's economic hegemony over Québec and to fortify Québec's cultural autonomy as a distinct society.[91]

Stéphane Paquin argues that Québec's global economic success has advanced the cause for sovereignty, by helping convince Quebecers and others that there is a

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[90] Cspiak, James and Lise Héroux, "NAFTA, Quebecers and Fear (?) of Americanization: Some Empirical Evidence," *Quebec Studies* 29, pp. 39, 41.
[91] Yanarella, Ernest J., "Quebec and NAFTA: Free Trade and the Future of Sovreignty-Association," *Québec Studies* 19 (1995), p. 87, cited in Cspiak and Héroux, pp. 39-40.

"decrease in risks associated with Québec independence"[92] because Québec has become less dependent on the Canadian domestic market.

These trends and developments have fed interestingly into the debate about Québec's *americanité*. Embracing free trade with the rest of North America is one of the most evident means whereby Québec is affirming its unique existence as a province/nation with strong cultural roots in Europe but equally strong links to the continent where it is physically located. *Americanité*, however, is not the same thing as "Americanisation," understood by Lamonde as a "process of acculturation through which United States culture influences and dominates Canadian and québécois culture – and indeed culture worldwide..."[93] Québec has recently taken the lead in a multinational initiative to combat the potential negative effects of globalisation on the culture of small nations. The United States is studiously not mentioned in Québec's "Cultural diversity: the common heritage of humanity" campaign, most probably because of the province/nation's other strong links with the U.S. But the hegemonic encroachment of the American entertainment industry on cultural activity worldwide is clearly the backdrop to the campaign, which is encouraging the ratification of a UNESCO convention which would

> ... officially establish that cultural productions and property require a special status different from the status of other products and services that are subject to gradual liberalization and more extensive trade.[94]

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[92] Paquin, Stéphane, *La revanche des petites nations*, p. 8. English translation provided by Paquin.

[93] "processus d'acculturation par lequel la culture étatsunienne influence et domine la culture autant canadienne que québécoise – et mondiale..." Lamonde, ibid.

[94] "Create like no one else!," brochure produced by the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec, 2004, p. 4. More information on the cultural diversity initiative is available at www.mcc.gouv.qc.ca/international/diversite-culturelle, accessed 5 June 2005.

It will be interesting during the coming years to see if Québec's strong position on the cultural diversity issue will otherwise affect its trading position with the U.S.

UNDERSTANDING HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY QUÉBEC

Having examined Québec's political, cultural, and economic development and its relationship to the rest of Canada, I now turn to the fierce and ongoing debates amongst the province/nation's intellectuals, academics, and writers about the interpretation of these historical narratives. These in turn form part of significant contemporary problematics around Québec identity.

The traditional interpretation of Québec's history, as discussed above, is that of a culture that lived in darkness and underdevelopment up until the beginning of the Quiet Revolution, which represented a dramatic "leap" from an "old traditional, clerical, and closed society" into a "new post-industrial, secular" one. Québec, in this view, is a distinct culture, a "société globale" that needs to be studied on its own unique terms. In this view, because of Québec's isolation and because of consistent failures to achieve independence and legitimacy as a state, its pre-Quiet Revolution inhabitants lived in a state of subsistance or *survivance*, getting by as an ethnic group but not advancing towards achieved nationhood.

In the late 1970s, however, new currents of thought entered Québec historiography which queried this traditional narrative of isolation and uniqueness. Historians and social scentists argued that Québec's experience before 1960 was not one of crippling conservatism, and that in fact its experience was similar and in line with that of Canada and North America as a whole (the theorisation of Québec's *americanité* is one form of this line of thinking). These revisionist approaches criticised

traditional historiography as focussing on the experience of one group only – Quebecers of French-Canadian descent – and argued that the true story of Québec must be that of "the totality of people living" there.[95] Revisionists also assailed the binary positioning of tradition and modernity, arguing that modernity can be experienced in different ways and is not a monolithic concept. Revisionism, however, has itself become the subject of critique, most notably by Ronald Rudin, who felt that revisionism swung too far in the direction of homogenisation and comparativism. According to Rudin, revisionists could not admit

> ... to a history that includes episodes of xenophobia, the slow development of a modern and urban society, the presence of a considerably influential clergy, and a popular fear of consenting to a powerful state.[96]

While Rudin has in turn been criticised for doing little more than swinging the boom in the other direction by re-establishing a narrative of Québec as unique,[97] his intervention was an important one in promoting dialectical self-analysis amongst historians and social scientists.

One of the leading figures in contemporary québécois historiography is Gérard Bouchard, whose massive project has been to compare Québec's historical and cultural development to that of other new world collectivities (Canada, the U.S., Latin America, Australia, and New Zealand) in order to discern what is both similar

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[95] Turgeon, pp. 55, 57.
[96] Rudin, Ronald, "L'eclipse du national dans la nouvelle histoire du Québec," in Michel Sarra-Bournet, ed., *Les nationalismes au Québec du XIXe au XXie siècle*, p. 294. Cited in Turgeon, p. 60. Rudin's best-known work is *Making History in Twentieth Century Québec* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).
[97] See Turgeon, p. 60.

and unique about Québec's case.[98] Bouchard's leading rival is the political scientist Jocelyn Létourneau, who places Bouchard in a long line of "melancholy nationalists" who "carry their past like a cross." Létourneau argues that Bouchard's sovereigntist political stance irretrievably skews his interpretation of Québec's history into that of "the narrative of a broken political project." As Létourneau sees it, Bouchard's inquiry

> ... is not so much a matter of explaining why Québec did positively evolve in a particular direction... as of grasping why it did not, for a long time, evolve in the expected direction... Bouchard's whole interpretative project is framed around this question, which is loaded and overdetermined by the negative idea of Québec's incompletion...

For Létourneau, Québec's relationship to the past is summed up in the provincial motto, *Je me souviens* (I remember) – "the injunction to remember.... that defines [Quebecers'] relationship to the world."[99] The best future for Québec lies, he argues, in leaving the melancholy narratives of rupture and incompletion behind and accepting the essential ambivalence of québécois identity, which rather than being destabilising, could be the culture's greatest asset. There is much about Bouchard and Létourneau's approaches that are similar: both agree that the answer to Québec's problems lies in a reconsideration of the past, and in accepting the culture's heterogeniety. Where they part ways is on the issue of nationalism, with Létourneau scolding Bouchard for letting his personal political preference for separatism cloud his analysis. Here we encounter a central problematic in discussions of contemporary Québec culture: the oppressive centrality of the national question, and the extent to

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[98] Bouchard's works include *La nation québécoise au futur et au passé* (Montréal: VLB Éditeur, 1999); *Genèse des nations et cultures du nouveau monde* (Montréal: Boréal, 2003); and *La pensée impuissante: Échecs et mythes nationaux canadiens-français (1850-1960)* (Montréal: Boréal, 2004).
[99] Létourneau, Jocelyn, *A History for the Future: Rewriting Memory and Identity in Québec*, pp. 15, 41, 44, 9.

which it tends to skew every argument in its direction. These aspects of Létourneau and Bouchard's thinking also lead us into the fraught area of contemporary québécois identity politics.

Conceptions of québécois identity have been in rapid flux since the Quiet Revolution period, moving from the ethnic understanding of Quebecers as a race (referred to as *Québécois de souche* [of old stock] or *pur laine* [pure wool]); through a reconception, in the 1970s and '80s, of the French language as the central defining point of Québec culture; into a civic nationalism that "defines a group of citizens around rights from the standpoint of formal equality."[100] The attempt to reformulate Québec identity as being rights-based is troubled, however, by the ongoing national question. As in many contemporary societies, there is a deep tension in Québec society between liberalism and nationalism that first took form in the conflict between the liberal idealism of Trudeau's federalism and the force of nation-building in the Quiet Revolution period. As Québec has grown more ethnically diverse and as the question of separation has continued to simmer, so has the negotiation of identity politics grown more complex and entrenched.

In Beauchemin's view, as long as the national question persists, so will Québec never truly function as a pluralist society, because the nationalist cause will always be weakened by the interest claims of other groups:

> [F]ully recognizing the pluralism of the political community unsaddles the Québec political-national subject (of which Quebecers of French-Canadian descent make up the majority community sharing a common history) whose consistency and historical permanence [nationalist Quebecers] wish, in fact, to assert...acknowledging a Québec identity that is at once plural and fragmented and for which

[100] Beauchemin, Jacques, "What Does It Mean to be A Quebecer? Between Self-Preservation and Openness to the Other," in Gagnon, ed., p. 17.

> the nation no longer constitutes the sole horizon contributes to the erosion of a favourable argument for the political liberation of a historically positioned community.[101]

These tensions inherently bring into question the claims of Québec (and Canada) to be "among the most pluralist polities of the world."[102] Canada has operated a policy of multiculturalism since 1971, and the Canadian parliament passed an official Multiculturalism Act in 1985. This policy is based on the understanding that Canada is a culturally and racially diverse country whose citizens have the legal right to "preserve, enhance, and share their cultural heritage."[103] This vision of diversity posits the Canadian "mosaic" against the U.S.'s "melting pot," the idea being that Canadians with different cultural loyalties – natives, immigrants, Quebecers, and others – are free to celebrate and maintain their subnational and other cultural affiliations. The Canadian approach has been controversial, however, with critics arguing that it "implicitly constructs the idea of a core English-Canadian culture, and that other cultures become 'multicultural' in relation to that unmarked, yet dominant, Anglo-Canadian core culture."[104] Multiculturalism, its critics argue, was a defensive attempt to create a "universal identity marker"[105] for Canada:

> In the absence of any consensus on the substance of Canadian identity or culture, multiculturalism fills a void, defining Canadian culture in terms of the legitimate ancestral cultures which are the legacy of every Canadian: defining the whole through the sum of its parts.[106]

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[101] Beauchemin, pp. 19, 28.
[102] Karmis, p. 69.
[103] From section 3.1.a of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/multi/policy/act_e.cfm, accessed 29 May 2005.
[104] Mackey, Eva, *The House of Difference: Cultural Policy and National Identity in Canada*, p. 2.
[105] Gagnon, Alain-G. and Raffaele Iacovino, "Interculturalism: Expanding the Boundaries of Citizenship," in Gagnon, ed., p. 380
[106] Weinfield, Morton, "Myth and Reality in the Canadian Mosaic: 'Affective Ethnicity'", in *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 13, p. 94, cited in Gagnon and Iacovino, p. 380

The rejection of the Canadian model of multiculturalism by the Québécois is politically charged and has a long history: there is an ongoing opposition to multiculturalism by Québec nationalists because of their belief that it undermines Québec's claims to special status within Canada and reduces Québec to the level of any other cultural or interest group. Multiculturalism is seen as a direct assault on the québécois argument that Canada is at base a bicultural society, and is viewed as a remnant of Trudeauian federalism; indeed Canada's multiculturalism policy grew out of the 1960s Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, which was Trudeau's response to the Quiet Revolution.

Québec has, since the 1970s, developed its own policy model for dealing with polyethnicity and integration, which it calls interculturalism. Its advocates, such as Gagnon and Iacovino, argue that it is superior to the federal Canadian model because the latter "is based on the negation of any particular cultural definition," whereas Québec's interculturalism

> ... attempts to strike a balance between individual rights and cultural relativism by emphasising a 'fusion of horizons' through dialogue and consensus.[107]

Québec interculturalism explicitly defines the French language as the "centre of convergence" for different cultural groups and expects that, while maintaining their own linguistic and cultural traditions if they wish, members of different cultural groups will integrate into the larger community and participate in public life.[108]

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[107] Gagnon and Iacovino, pp. 380, 378.

[108] See *Au Québec pour bâtir ensemble. Énoncé de politique en matière d'immigration et d'intégration* (Québec: Ministère des Communications culturelles et de l'Immigration du Québec, Direction des communications, 1990) cited in Gagnon and Iacovino, p. 375.

While these attempts at honouring and accommodating new arrivals as well as the traditions and cultures of long-standing minority cultures in Québec (native Canadians and Anglophones) may be well-intentioned and genuine, it is striking to note how multiculturalism and interculturalism can easily become pawns in the larger ongoing debate about competing nationalisms in Canada and Québec, thus demonstrating the point that the ongoing national struggle inevitably skews any discussion of pluralism. Gagnon and Iacovino, for example, reject the Canadian model because it "has been and continues to be a product of nation-building efforts rather than a genuine commitment to the main tenets of ideological multiculturalism." They undermine this argument, however, by explicitly including promotion of the Québec nation-building project as one of their objects of promoting Québec interculturalism:

> Québec should be viewed as a host society in its own right, with its own historical and cultural development, *its own sense of nationhood*, and a distinct discourse with regard to the general orientations and choices of society.

In the final paragraphs of their article Gagnon and Iacovino make a remarkable final point – remarkable for the evidence it contains but even more so for its placement in their argument:

> The enduring problem confronting the Québec model [of interculturalism], one that would have to be taken into account in any future attempts at empirical verification, is the idea of competing interpretations of citizenship by those targeted for immigration in the first place. As Labelle and Levy have demonstrated in interviews with leaders of ethnocultural groups, there is continuing ambivalence with regard to the legitimacy of the Québec model in the eyes of ethnocultural groups.

In other words, the authors, having championed Québec as "a host society whose model of integration ought to be emulated by other liberal democracies",[109] they proceed to confess that the key players in their vision of integration – immigrants – are, in the limited research that is available, resistant to the model they are advocating.

The survey to which Gagnon and Iacovino refer was undertaken by Micheline Labelle in 1990 amongst leaders of Haitian, Italian, Jewish, and Lebanese groups in Québec. This survey revealed that the contradictions between Canadian and Québec immigration and integration policies engendered significant confusion and have not led to a strong sense of identification with Québec, and that some of these leaders found the Canadian model of multiculturalism more likely than Québec interculturalism to promote pluralism:

> The idea of a moral contract and a common public culture prompted doubts among some of the leaders and their communities as to a hidden wish for assimilation that haunts the francophone majority (defined as ethnic) in Québec.[110]

This sense of ambiguity around issues of welcome and assimilation were surely among the key factors that led to the resounding rejection, amongst Anglophones and Allophones [those who have a different first language than English or French], to the 1995 referendum on sovereignty-association: a full 95 per cent of those populations voted "no" to the prospect of Québec moving towards separation from Canada.[111]

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[109] Gagnon and Iacovino, pp. 385, 379, 385, 375. Italics mine.
[110] "La notion de contrat moral et de culture publique commune suscite des doutes chez ces leaders et leurs communautés quant à la volonté d'assimilation cachée qui hanterait la majorité francophone (définie comme ethnique) du Québec." Labelle, Micheline, "Immigration et diversité culturelle: les politiques québécoises," *Cahiers du PÉQ* 13, p. 10.
[111] Marshall, p. 264.

These statistics cast a particular light on a recent trend in francophone québécois intellectual discourse, which is the valorisation of Québec's internal diversity as a sign of its maturity and its inherent ability to navigate the complications of contemporary cultural terrain. For Lamonde,

> Québec identity did not need to wait until postmodernity to be multiple and traversed by the Other; it was transformed very early, confronted by difference and the task of integrating its elements.[112]

Létourneau argues that Québec has always been characterised by internal diversity and that this is what both defines the culture and keeps it vital: Québec culture is

> ... the product of a creative double tension between hybridities and lines of descent, on the one hand, and between centripetal forces (everything that tends towards a shared framework) and centrifugal forces (everything that tends towards diversification) on the other hand.[113]

For his part, Maclure argues that "movement and *métissage* [cultural mixing] are integral to québécois identity" and characterises Québec as "a community of plurivocal or dissensual conversation."[114] As is typical of this line of thinking, however, Maclure does not support his assertions with factual evidence or representation of the views of the internal others on whom this diversity depends. Rwanda-born and Québec-educated literary theorist Obed Nkunzimana takes a more critical view on the politics of diversity in Québec. He claims that it is inaccurate to describe the relationship between civic and ethnic nationalism in Québec as an active debate; rather

> What we have is two dialogues by the hearing-impaired, two sets of loyalties, it seems to me, which are at the same time entrenched and

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[112] Lamonde, p. 9, cited in Turgeon, p. 58.
[113] Létourneau, p. 62.
[114] Maclure, Jocelyn, "Narratives and Counter-Narratives of Identity in Québec," in Gagnon, ed., p. 47.

> unstable; two kinds of intellectual puritanism stripped of socio-political reality.

Nkunzimana characterises the discourse around immigration and the management of diversity in Québec to be laden with "illlusions and myths" around "the illusory dream of freedom and wealth for some, and the illusion of humanitarianism for others" when in fact what exists are "persistent misunderstandings" between *Québécois de souche* and new immigrant communities. He accuses those in the québécois mainstream who promote an idea of the community's pluralism of toeing a line of "political correctness," and cites the Haitian writer Gary Klang in assessing the state of play in contemporary Québec as that of "stalled diversity."[115]

Dimitrios Karmis agrees that the claims to functional interculturalism and cultural fairness in Québec do not stand up to scrutiny:

> There can be no fair intercultural dialogue when the majority's preocupation for integration, cohesion, and unity seems to be everything that counts. The 1998 [Parti Québécois] policy says practically nothing about Aboriginal peoples and non-ethnic cultural groups, it says nothing about the multicultural character of Québec, and it tends to erase the otherness that constitutes interculturalism and its merits. It includes many references to social cohesion, common values, and a common sense of belonging. It contains a lot less about the merits of recognition, diversity, and complexity.[116]

And in the little public discourse that does exist around the claims of native Canadians to land rights, social services, and compensation, Daniel Salée acknowledges that the Québec government's engagement with natives is strategic:

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[115] Nkunzimana, Obed, "Le débat postcolonial et le Québec," *Québec Studies* 35, pp. 63-87. "...on fait face à deux dialogues de mal-entendants, deux fidélités, il me semble, à la fois figées et instables ou alors deux sortes de puritanisme intellectuel denué de réalisme socio-politique." (p. 72). "... illusions et mythes... le rêve illusoire de liberté et de richesse pour les uns, et l'illusion humanitaire pour les autres... tenaces malendendus qui entourent la relation entre les 'Souches' et les 'Néo... rectitude politique." (p. 76). "une diversité inoperante," Klang, Gary, "Montréal Babel," *Humanitas* 22-23 (1988), p. 49, cited in Nkunzimana, p. 76.

[116] Karmis, p. 87.

> Despite the apparent openness of its official positions, the Québec state welcomes native claims to self-determination with a relative benevolence only so far as it can integrate them into the political, administrative, and institutional schemes it determines and controls.[117]

POSTCOLONIAL QUÉBEC?

I have demonstrated above that Québec's particular history and cultural/geographical positioning has contributed to deep internal divides about how the province/nation defines itself and copes with its various internal diversities. Postcolonial theories offer many useful strategies to understand and analyse these problematics; and yet Québec and québécois cultural expressions have only begun to be examined through postcolonial frameworks since approximately 2000, almost exclusively by scholars working outside the province/nation.[118] It is symptomatic of the complexity of québécois society that even a definition of terms regarding the province/nation's postcoloniality is a fraught task. In this section I explain the various difficulties and problematics associated with understanding Québec as postcolonial, and explore some of the emerging work which reads Québec in these terms.

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[117] Salée, Daniel, "The Québec State and Indigenous Peoples," in Gagnon, ed., p. 115. It was only in 1985 that the Québec National Assembly passed a resolution which "recognized the existence of 11 indigenous nations in Québec and acknowledged their ancestral rights..."(Salée, p. 100). The resolution, which sets out terms of Native autonomy and of mutual respect for rights and traditions, was the first of its kind in Canada, and was followed in 1996 by a federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples which sought to "work out fair and lasting terms of coexistence" with native Canadians, who are also now referred to as people of the First Nations. (www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/rpt/lk_e.html, accessed 2 May 2005).

[118] A dedicated issue of the journal *Québec Studies* (no. 35) in 2003 addressing the applicability of postcolonial thinking to Québec, and reading a number of Québec texts through a postcolonial approach, is the first collection of essays on the topic. The bilingual journal is published in Plattsburgh, New York by the American Council for Québec Studies.

Before I do so, however, it is important to define my own terms, making clear how I understand postcolonialism and postcoloniality and outlining the sorts of analytical tools I use in my study of Lepage's work. The approach that I am advocating acknowledges that postcolonialism is "at once a political, historical, and cultural phenomenon, and a 'metatextual' one, that is, a reading position." Colonialism initially involved the forced domination of some of the world's populations by others. I am interested in the material and political conditions that cause, and result from, such subjugations; in the discursive and intellectual strategies that are used to legitimate subjugation, and to break away from it; and in the ways in which the experience of colonisation is expressed through creative and intellectual activity. Colonisation is understood, in other words, as a set of material and discursive processes not necessarily contained to a specific temporal and spatial frame, and postcolonialism as

> ... the description of the influence of European (and American, to a lesser extent) imperialism in all its forms. It is the recognition of a dialectic between centre and periphery, at a specific site, constituted historically, politically, and socially.[119]

My approach takes on board criticisms of early postcolonial theory of the 1960s and 1970s as being excessively homogenising and reliant on binary constructions of first world/third world, coloniser/colonised, primitive/civilised. It places individual cultures in their historical contexts and examines how these histories inflect how each culture understands "otherness" and difference. It does, not, however, advocate studying cultures in isolation from one another, but rather acknowledges that contemporary cultures are linked by the forces of globalisation, which brings

[119] Richards, Marvin, "Coralling the wild ponies: Correspondences between Québec and the posctolonial," in *Québec Studies* 35, pp. 135, 148-9.

questions of power, agency, and representation into international circulation. It takes on board the forces at play in contemporary society that lead to a valorisation of the seeming "authenticity" of cultures emerging from a history of political and social oppression, what Graham Huggan calls the "postcolonial exotic."[120] A central problematic I address is what counts as "other" in a culture such as contemporary Québec, in which each population group could credibly classify itself as subaltern and oppressed; this has led, in Miron's words, to a "French-Canadian neurosis with regards to the Other," a concept that figures centrally in my analysis of Lepage's work.[121]

At present, Québec is a stateless province/nation positioned within the Canadian federation – a multi-culture that is itself riven by postcolonial, post-national problematics. A white settler colony that is still part of the British Commonwealth, Canada has throughout its history agonised over its perceived lack of national identity, and considered itself marginalised by more powerful and distinct national formations, particularly the United States. As Gittings has written, Canada is a

> … problematic signifier. Is the signified the territory north of the 49th parallel? The people – indigenous, white invader-settlers, multi-cultural immigrants? The state? The nation, or in Benedict Anderson's phrase, the 'imagined community'? All of these very different but interrelated signifieds have been organized under the signifier Canada… the nation or idea of Canada is necessarily indeterminate.[122]

Early postcolonial theory argued that the settler cultures of Australia, New Zealand, southern Africa, and Canada could not be considered postcolonial, since they lacked a history of violent invasion and resistance, a position countered by Stephen Slemon,

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[120] Huggan, Graham, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001).
[121] Miron, Gaston, *L'homme rapaillé* (Montréal, Typo, 1998), p. 221, cited in Maclure, "Narratives," p. 48ff.
[122] Gittings, p. 7.

who argues that "the 'neither/nor' territory of white setter-colonial writing" must be considered on its own terms. This consideration requires increased flexibility and sensitivity to the different ways in which postcoloniality is experienced:

> ... the *illusion* of a stable self/other, here/there binary division has *never* been available to Second-World writers... the sites of figural contestation between oppressor and oppressed, coloniser and colonised have been taken *inward* and *internalised*... the *ambivalence* of literary resistance is the 'always already' condition of Second World settler and post-colonial literary writing...

Because the "Second-World subject" is always in some way complicit with appropriation and oppression, she will never be outside the terms of her own critique: resistance "must necessarily cut across the individual subject," making the ambivalence so valorised by postcolonial critics such as Bhabha "the condition of [the] possibility" of Second-World texts,[123] in Slemon's view.

Slemon's description of the internalised otherness experienced by inhabitants of settler colonies is a powerful concept with relevance to representations by Robert Lepage; my analysis of Lepage's work makes use of this and other of Slemon's ideas. Indeed Québec arguably belongs in Slemon's list of white settler colonies; France, after all, preceded Britain as the original invader-settler of Canada. That Slemon does not include Québec in his discussion is symptomatic of a tendency in Canadian and québécois criticism to treat the two cultures separately (a tendency that supports, of course, the québécois argument for its culture's distinctness). In fact, Québec has

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[123] Slemon, Stephen, "Resistance Theory for the Second World," in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, eds, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, pp. 109, 110, emphases in original. The sectioning-off of countries into different groupings classified as "Worlds" is a contentious area, given both the advent of world-systems and globalisation theories that consider such stratification no longer relevant, and ongoing, competing redefinitions of the terms First, Second, Third, and Fourth World. Slemon's usage understands "Second World" to mean "white settler-colonial" (Slemon, p. 104); while this is a specific and debatable definition – indeed I query its apparent anglophone bias – his work is nonetheless useful in developing a reading strategy for works created in settler colonial societies.

often been excluded from postcolonial analysis for the same reasons as Canada: because, "as colonizers themselves of the 'new' world, Québécois claims to colonial victimhood are weak, even inauthentic."[124] Linda Hutcheon underlined this point when she argued that the solidarity asserted by 1960s and '70s québécois artists and intellectuals with invaded black colonies such as Algeria, Tunisia, and Haiti "[risked] bad faith" by ignoring Québec's "imperialist" past in Canada.[125] Indeed Québec (like Canada) has only begun to accept itself as a coloniser of Native lands. But such an argument as Hutcheon's, as Marvin Richards argues, "leave[s] out the history of British colonial policies in Québec" and risks creating an unuseful hierarchy of victimisation.

It is the history of identification with the anticolonial struggles of Caribbean and African colonies that, for some québécois critics and intellectuals, renders theories involving colonialism not particularly relevant to the Québec case, in that Québec is understood to have passed successfully through its decolonising phase in the 1960s-'70s. For example, Sherry Simon, a leading critic of québécois cultural production, dismisses a postcolonial approach to Québec as having outlived its "usefulness," given the province/nation's integration into North America and its status as a host culture for many immigrants.[126] Similarly, Jacques Godbout, one of Québec's best-known writers, declared in 1990 that, in the field of québécois cultural production, the "battle of decolonisation" had been won over two decades before

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[124] Richards, p. 134.
[125] Hutcheon, Linda, "Circling the Downspout of Empire," in Adam and Tiffin, eds., *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, p. 170.
[126] Simon, "Translating," p. 59.

during the Quiet Revolution.[127] A quite different reading of Québec's relationship to colonisation is offered by the "melancholy nationalist" school of thinking identified by Létourneau above. Writers and political leaders including Hubert Aquin, Pierre Vallières, André-J. Bélanger, and particularly Ferdinand Dumont have all variously engaged in psychological readings of the québécois character, diagnosing it as suffering from the particular "pathology"[128] of internal colonisation. Dumont argues that the repeated "traumas"[129] suffered by Québec as it struggled unsuccessfully to realise itself as a nation in the 18th and 19th centuries have given the province a collective inferiority complex. Even the Quiet Revolution, in Dumont's view, was a failure because it did not resolve the basic problem of québécois insecurity:

> I am tempted to think that, in desiring to free ourselves from ourselves, we have strayed further, through new vicissitudes, down the path of colonialism we have been following since the origins of our community.[130]

Underlying most such expressions is the call for separation: only by making that final break for "freedom" will Quebecers wake from their long "hibernation."[131] Thus, whereas for Simon and others, Québec's decolonising process is long over, for the melancholy nationalists, it has barely begun.

Adding to the confusion of these various and conflicting québécois understandings of colonisation is a larger resistance in francophone thought to

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[127] Godbout, Jacques, "Le chevalier errant," *Actualité* 15.19, p. 100, cited in Marie Vautier, "Les pays du nouveau monde, le postcolonialisme de consensus, et le catholicisme québécoise," *Québec Studies* 35, p. 15.
[128] Bélanger, André-J., *Quatre idéologies du Québec en éclatement: La Relève, La JEC, Cité libre, Parti Pris* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMF, 1977), p. 147, cited in Maclure, *Québec Identity*, p. 30
[129] Dumont, Ferdinand, *Genèse de la société québécoise* (Montréal: Boréal, 1993), p. 57, cited in Maclure, *Québec Identity*, p. 40.
[130] Dumont, *Raisons communes* (Montréal: Boréal, 1995), p. 79, cited in Maclure, *Québec Identity*, p. 43
[131] Dumont, *Genèse*, p. 336, cited in Maclure, "Narratives," pp. 39, 40.

postcolonial theory, which grew out of an anglophone intellectual tradition and has focused largely on the colonies of the British Empire. Nkunzimana argues that the absence of postcolonial analysis from Québec thought is "strategic," and stems from a suspicion of postcolonial theory as a "new hegemony threatening French and francophone space"[132] given the widespread adoption of postcolonial approaches in many anglophone, and particularly American, academic environments in the 1980s and '90s. Chanady further argues that it is Québec's status as "colonial/postcolonial/colonised" that explains its resistance to postcolonial thought. The focus of such thought on the construction of us/them, object/subject, civilised/primitive binaries forces hard questions about what counts as other in the Québec situation; about who is the victim and who the victimised. Such a focus on the "antifoundational deconstructions" of power and discourse might be threatening to a culture whose foundations are as unstable as Québec's:

> Whereas a society with well-entrenched cultural institutions and global cultural hegemony can afford to reflect critically on itself, a society that feels threatened by its marginality in a global context may feel a greater need for legitimation by celebrating its literary accomplishments and establishing an autonomous tradition in literary criticism.[133]

The predominant indigenous strains of thinking about Québec's cultural production arose at the same time as postcolonial criticism and is in some ways parallel to it. These theoretical approaches have moved beyond binary (French/English) or culturally exclusive thinking and celebrate Québec as a society of

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[132] "stratégique"; "... une nouvelle hégémonie qui menace l'espace français et francophone." Nkunzimana, p. 64.
[133] Chanady, p. 34.

hybridity and *métissage*.[134] Simon is a principal avatar of such an approach in her celebration of Québec culture as translational and dialogic:

> Québec cultural productions are... increasingly explicit in showing the interplay and exchange which are necessary to any process of creation. In other words, it is recognised that the life of culture is not to be found in *conservation*, but in the risky play of dialogue.[135]

Martin Allor makes definitive links between individual and collective expressions of his identity in his theorisation of québécois cultural production in the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on Simon's conception of "fictions of *l'identitaire*" (possible identities), Allor argues that Québec's cultural industries are at the forefront of "the production of a cosmopolitan community." This new community accepts that its people are culturally mixed:

> ... both and neither European and American; ethnically distinct and of mixed parentage; tied to the (increasingly urban) environment and culturally dependant; a *sujet-nation* linked to the project of sovereignty and/or a community linked through affective alliances of sentiment and a common passage in the quotidian.[136]

Though he describes a hybrid community, Allor's terms of reference seem to assume that his individual subject is a Quebecer of French-Canadian descent; his approach is representative of much of the critical writing emanating from Québec today in its celebration of *métissage* that still takes Franco-québécois culture as its unexamined central focus and starting point. Such approaches often focus on the aesthetic evidence of hybridity while not taking account of the material differences that can accompany the mixing of cultures in the context of late capitalist globalisation. This feeds into, and further renders problematic, the very particular ways in which visible

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[134] See Chanady, p. 32.
[135] Simon, "Translating", p. 60, emphases in original.
[136] Allor, Martin, "Cultural métissage: national formations and productive discourse in Québec cinema and television," in *Screen* 34: 1, p. 71.

difference and otherness tend to be portrayed in québécois cultural production. As we have seen, the Québec nationalist movement articulated a strong solidarity with similar movements in Africa and the Caribbean, with Quebecers paralleling their experience of oppression by anglophone Canada to that of black populations, a line of thinking summed up in the title of Pierre Vallières' influential 1968 polemic *Nègres Blancs d'Amerique*, or *White Niggers of America.*[137]. George Elliott Clarke argues that this has led to Québecois intellectuals to "frequently [deploy] white/Black racial metaphors to dramatize the conflict between liberalism and nationalism." For Clarke, because of the knawing insolubility of the national question, the "linking of Black and québécois subjectivities" has become entrenched and has led to "deplorable racial imaginings" by some québécois writers, including writers of colour. Even those writers who attempt to "interrogate... reductive visions" of race often "reinscribe romanticized or xenophobic constructions of the racial Other," according to Clarke, citing the works of, among others, the Haiti-born poet and novelist Dany Laferrière and the Québec novelist and playwright Michel Garneau. While these writers may be attempting to expose the tendency in Québec cultural production to associate blackness with "license, force, and transgressive sexuality," they "depict varying levels of anxiety or discomfort with the dream of the open society... their liberalism possesses, ultimately, a pronounced, ethnocentric tinge."[138] These observations provide the background for some of Lepage's depictions of ethnic difference, and

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[137] Similarly there is a long history of the Québécois likening their situation to that of Native Canadians and using the Native situation as a symbol of their own in cultural expression. See Chanady, p. 35.

[138] Clarke, George Elliott, "Liberalism and Its Discontents: Reading Black and White in Contemporary Québécois Texts," in Verduyn, Christl, *Literary Pluralities*, pp. 193, 195, 194, 197, 207.

pave the way for an investigation of the very different responses to his productions' depictions of otherness.

Another striking aspect of contemporary québécois criticism, and one that clearly evidences its distance from postcolonialism, is the continued reliance on the concept of universal ideals of truth, humanity, and aesthetic excellence. In this the québécois critical tradition follows on from, and plays into, the relative isolation and autonomy of Québec culture, as Chanady further argues:

> ....newer theoretical approaches to québecois literature do not necessarily challenge the presuppositions of a more traditional critical practice that constructs a national literature in terms of a relatively self-enclosed whole..."[139]

This bunkering instinct can also be understood in part as a resistance to the global dominance of the English language and American culture, as Richards argues:

> Cultural hegemony is sustained not only by the imperial army, but by the translation of the idiom or the particular into an international standard to which all must adhere.[140]

Maintaining the idea of a universal value by québécois critics is therefore a means of maintaining the specificity and particularity of their own culture. Chantal Hébert and Irène Perelli-Contos demonstrate some of the paradoxes of this line of thought in their assertion that Québec theatremakers in the 1980s and '90s were "opening up to the world in order to create for ourselves a heritage belonging not to a particular society but to all humanity."[141] Their criticism of Lepage's work, as I discuss in

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[139] Chanady, p. 33.
[140] Richards, p. 146.
[141] "l'ouverture au monde afin de s'approprier un héritage appartenant non á une société particulière mais a l'humanité." Hébert, Chantal, and Irène Perelli-Contos, "Une mutation en cours," *Théâtre/Public* Spring 1994, p. 72.

Chapter 4, is similarly marked by a reliance on the idea of universal values; as are Lepage's productions themselves, and his statements about them.

CHAPTER 3: READING LEPAGE'S WORK: A PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Having described the cultural context in which Lepage creates his work, I now bring the focus back to his autobiographical project, and outline the psychological theory through which I read his productions. As I have argued, Lepage's work is fuelled by a modernist/humanist ethos, not far under the surface of which are his personal concerns, his search for a sense of ontological wholeness. My analysis of the role that autobiography plays in Lepage's work relies on the psychoanalytic concepts of narcissism and castration, as theorised by Lacan and Žižek, and on Žižek's application of these ideas to cultural production. While narcissism is commonly understood as a pejorative term referring to self-obsession, Lacan considered that a basic level of narcissism is a universal human condition. In infancy, children perceive that they are of the same being with their mother, and indeed with the whole world; at the mirror stage (between 6-18 months of age) a person becomes individuated and realises that there are boundaries between him/herself and others. In some individuals, a secondary narcissism persists past that time and is an expression of the individual's desire to regress to an unbounded relationship with the mother. This narcissism is fuelled by the individual's belief in the existence of the Other, or in Lacanian terminology *l'Autre* – the possibility of unified wholeness that Lacan insists is always an impossibility, a mirage. The narcissist's desire for the Other manifests itself in its pursuit of "others" – people or objects who the narcissist hopes will fulfill that larger desire. These attachments always relate back to the obsession with self:

> The cathexis of others as part of the self is always the result of a sense of lack, of deficiency or inadequacy. Paradoxically, the narcissist, who appears to overvalue his or her self, does so because of a fundamental

> disappointment regarding the self, due to what is termed a 'narcissistic injury'.[142]

Narcissism is sublimated by adults through various means including artistic activity, particularly artistic activity that exhibits self-reflexivity. Drawing attention to the artificiality of an artistic practice is a way for the artist-narcissist to further draw attention to him/herself, while at the same time highlighting the distance between him/herself and the artwork-mirror in which s/he is attempting to spot his/her reflection. In his consistent use of his own experience as material and by casting himself as characters representing himself in many of his productions, Lepage is revealed as a narcissistic personality creating theatrical "self-objects"; that is, creating images of himself that he hopes will complete his sense of selfhood.

The next major phase in the individual's psychosocial development after the mirror stage is that of castration, which usually happens when children are between the ages of five and seven. This is not, in Lacan's reading, a physical event involving the loss of genitalia or fear of such loss (as Freud understood it); it is rather the process whereby an individual becomes a sexed subject. In this process the child (who in Lacan's theorisation is male) has imagined that the mother has a phallus just like he has a penis; then the father intervenes and indicates to the child that he cannot be the fulfillment of the mother's desires, revealing that the mother's phallus does not exist. In Lacan's view, this is a traumatic event which the child represses; this repression is then "overlaid by the symbolic (or Oedipal law)."[143] That is, this primary repression is part of the child's process of being introduced to societal norms, and the child holds onto his belief that he endured fundamental loss at the moment of

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[142] Raoul, Valerie, *Distinctly Narcissistic: Diary Fiction in Québec*, p. 19.
[143] Kay, Sarah, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction*, p. 95.

castration as a deep secret: this is the "fundamental fantasy" at the centre of most psychological processes. Lacan's account of castration has been the subject of significant feminist critique for its tendency to identify women as objects and presuppose the subject as male, and it was in responding to Judith Butler's objection to Lacan's discussions of castration and the fundamental fantasy that Žižek offered his own original account of these concepts. For Žižek, the fundamental fantasy is the child's response to the trauma of recognising that s/he was always already different from the mother and that the "passionate attachment" to the mother is an unattainable mirage:

> The need for 'passionate attachment' to provide for a minimum of being implies that the subject *qua* 'abstract negativity' – the primordial gesture of dis-attachment from its environment – is *already there*. Fantasy is thus a defence-formation against the primordial abyss of dis-attachment...[144]

'Castration' (Žižek uses the inverted commas to separate his account from Lacan's) is therefore reconceived not as the moment where the child accepts that s/he cannot be reunited with the mother; it is when the child realises this unity was never a possibility in the first place. For Žižek, as Kay argues, 'castration' is

> ... a cut in the real from which difference, sexuality, and the death drive are all born. The fundamental fantasy creates the space for the subject to seek to reach an accommodation with the pain and trauma of this cut.[145]

The deep truth that humans spend our lives repressing is not that we are suffering a fundamental loss: the truth we repress is that we like to *believe* we are suffering such a loss, as a way of coping with life's difficulties. Similarly, Žižek conceives of the death

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[144] Žižek, Slavoj, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, p. 289, emphases in original.
[145] Kay, p. 99.

drive not as the desire to die, but as the human tendency to obsess about death and loss so that it negatively affects our experience of living:

> ... the death drive... is the *very opposite of dying*, it is a name for the 'undead' eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and in pain. [146]

Žižek extends these ideas further in his ruminations on the concept of the real, which in Lacan's thinking represents that early state of existence before we enter into language; Lacan defines "the real as the impossible"[147] because it is beyond expression – we need language to communicate it, but as soon as we have language, the real slips out of our grasp. The real haunts adult existence as the inexpressible. Žižek's interest lies in the retrospective quality of the real; that is, as he sees it, "the Real is an entity which must be constructed afterwards so that we can account for the distortions of the symbolic structure." Žižek is fascinated by the idea of the real as something that "does not exist (in the sense of 'really existing,' taking place in reality)" and yet "has a series of properties." This chimerical quality of the real, that it does not exist but yet controls existence, connects it to the experience of a traumatic event, which is

> ... a point of failure of symbolisation, but at the same time never given in its positivity – it can be constructed only backwards, from its structural effects. All its effectivity lies in the distortions it produces in the symbolic universe of the subject...[148]

This is Žižek's formulation of the Lacanian concept of anamorphosis, the idea that there are elements of experience that can only be grasped by looking at them from an angular perspective, a backward glance – in Žižek's terminology, by "looking awry"

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[146] Žižek, *Ticklish*, p. 292, emphases in original.
[147] Lacan, Jacques, *The Four Fundamental Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, p. 167.
[148] Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp. 162, 163, 169

at them.[149] One of the ways in which looking awry takes place is through the creation of cultural products, which "explore the precariousness" of the imbalance between reality and the real while "sav[ing] us from its worst consequences." Culture, in other words, does not reflect reality; it reflects back to us the reality we have constructed for ourselves: "Culture stages the complex relationship between reality and the real. At its most sophisticated, culture also reflects how this staging works."[150]

We can start to grasp the relevance of these concepts to Lepage when we consider that he experienced the onset of alopaecea – the crisis that he says forms "the basis of my life" – at the age of five, the time when castration ordinarily happens. This layered a major trauma, particular to Lepage, on top of the fundamental trauma through which the child first beomes aware of sexuality, subjectivity, and death. He experienced an actual loss – the loss of his hair, which made him very different to those around him – at the same time as the experience of castration, which Lacan and Žižek have effectively theorised as a symbolic rather than actual event. Many aspects of Lepage's creative work suggest that this disrupted his experience of castration and marked the way he constructed his reality. Lepage's productions are his attempts to look awry at his own situation, to grasp this trauma retrospectively; they are his attempt to capture and stage the inexpressible real. Žižek's formulation of castration as the "cut in the real" through which death, sex, and subjectivity are all launched provides a useful means for analysing Lepage's repeated return to these subjects in his work, often in overlapping manifestations that deviate from societal norms. There is an ongoing trope of suicide, for example (*Vinci, Ota, Le Confessionnal, Far Side*) and

[149] See Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture.*
[150] Kay, pp. 58, 68.

death is a central event of many of the works, and/or an obsession of their central characters (*Tectonic Plates*, the *Trilogy*, *Le Confessionnal*, *Nô*). Another recurrent theme is mother-obsession and absent fathers, which we can relate to an incomplete experience of castration resulting in excessive connection with the mother and a sense of distance from the father (recall Lepage called his work "the search for the father's voice"). The one central father character in his *oeuvre*, Paul-Émile Lamontagne in *Le Confessionnal*, is a very negative figure – the secret at the heart of the film is that Paul-Émile raped his sister-in-law, perpetuating psychological and physical illness in the family. Nearly all of Lepage's self-identified characters have non-existent or repressed sexual lives, many as a result of over-identification with the mother (Philippe in *Vinci*, Pierre in the *Trilogy* and *Le Confessionnal*, Philippe in *Far Side*, Watson in *The Andersen Project*).

The constant return to similar themes and figures in the work is evidence of what Kochhar-Lindgren calls the "repetition compulsion" of narcissism: "As automaton, Narcissus repeats his frustrated desire for the phantom object until death puts an end to that desire..."[151] His work gives the impression of Lepage obsessively restarting narratives in an attempt to replay his own process of subject-formation and construct for himself a healthy subjectivity. This explains the continual trope of artist characters in the process of self-definition: these personal stand-ins are Lepage's attempts to visualise and actualise his own successful self-realisation. Production after production ends with the Québec traveller embarking on a new voyage (*Vinci*'s Philippe flying off a cliff; the *Trilogy's* Pierre announcing his intention to travel to

[151] Kochhar-Lindgren, Gray, *Narcissus Transformed: The Textual Subject in Psychoanalysis and Literature*, p. 44.

China; *Le Confessionnal's* Pierre crossing the Québec bridge; *Ota's* Pierre embarking onto Hiroshima Bay), reinforcing the sense of circularity and repetitiveness. The repetition is inevitable, because the feat that Lepage is attempting is impossible: what he is chasing is the nonexistent Other, the sense of unity that we can only imagine but never attain.

Given this, it would be easy to define Lepage's version of the real – the inexpressible element that shapes existence – as the awareness that this sense of unity is unattainable and is in fact a nostalgia for something that never existed. In this interpretation, Lepage creates productions which express a desire for this unity, repressing the suspicion that normalised adult subjectivity for him will always be a mirage. This reading of Lepage's psychology casts him as a modern-day Sisyphus, forever pushing the stone of self-realisation up a representational mountain. A more complicated and satisfying formulation, however, takes on board Žižek's understanding of castration not as loss, but as the belief that one has experienced loss. Perhaps the knowledge that Lepage is repressing is not that adult subjectivity is out of his grasp, but that he already possesses it. The real, for Lepage, is the fact that he was always already a part of the symbolic order. His access to this knowledge was initially disrupted because of his difficult experience of castration, which he tried to overcome by creating stage images of himself to serve as his "others" – as mirrors in which he could see himself and verify his existence. In his productions he returned compulsively to the subjects of sex, death, and the maternal, reinforcing an impression of his subjectivity as disrupted and incomplete. The success of his productions, meanwhile, brought him considerable agency in the world beyond his personal psychology; his professional profile is now that of an empowered, creative,

potent cultural figure. And yet he continues to represent himself on stage as an unrealised, emergent subject-in-formation, images that bely his current status. This suggests that his success has become part of the real that he is unable to face and must suppress, perhaps fuelled by the suspicion that were he to accept his status as a fully formed subject, the reason and impetus for his creativity would evaporate. He is caught in a loop of representation, agency, and power.

There is emerging evidence, however, that Lepage has started to reconsider the relationship of his personal experience to his work. He has begun to acknowledge in interview that he returns repeatedly to subject matter in an attempt to process his own difficulties, as with his frequent theme of drug use:

> I never touched drugs after [my first bad trip]. Then I discovered that I'd buried these two years of my life because it was fucking me up so much. Eventually I realised so much of my work is about drugs, smoking opium and shooting up. It took me four shows to admit, my God, there's something that's not solved there."[152]

His most recent works reflect a more open and self-reflexive focus on psychological issues: *Far Side* is the first of his works to address narcissism openly, and makes clear that Lepage is critiquing this tendency in himself; and *The Andersen Project* treats the trauma of physical abnormality directly as a theme (I discuss these productions in my concluding chapter). Lepage appears to be growing in awareness of the mediating role that his creations play between his experience of the world and the terror of the real, which in his case is the terror of agency and achieved subjectivity.

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[152] Cited in Hattenstone.

Lacan and Žižek's ideas also suggest strategies to understand the relationship between Lepage's productions and the cultural contexts in which they were created, through their theorisation of the relationship between language and power. Lacan associates the symbolic realm of language with the father; the *nom du père* is that which confers identity on the subject.

> For Lacan, transcending Freud, the Oedipal crisis is not just a crisis of the body; it is refigured as a social crisis of language acquisition. The fear of castration is not just the fear of losing or lacking the male appendage; it is the fear of not having the power to participate in the male-determined logic of signification.[153]

The struggle to express ourselves through language is the struggle for agency in the face of the patriarchy. This insight provides a valuable means to connect psychological and postcolonial analyses: creative expressions that depict attempts to realise the self through innovative linguistic and/or artistic means often emanate from decolonising cultures, the struggle for expression standing in metaphorically for the struggle for independence and self-definition.

Those artists whose expressive efforts bring them success, particularly on an international arena, can be appropriated by the decolonising culture as proof of its viability, the artist becoming a synechdotal representation of the culture as a whole. This is certainly the case with Lepage: his success is seen as representative of Québec, and he "gives back" to the province/nation by foregrounding his cultural identity in ways that I will outline throughout this study. Using Žižek's formulation of cultural products as a filter between reality and the real – as an expression of what a culture likes to imagine its reality to be – Lepage's productions, among other cultural

[153] Reinelt, Janelle, "Introduction," in Reinelt and Roach, eds., p. 385.

formations, emerge as part of the ongoing process whereby Québec asserts its status as nation. The unspeakable real which these activities deflect is the indeterminacy of the Québec national project, the extent to which Québec arguably only exists on a national level via the belief of some of its inhabitants and the production of socio-political structures and cultural objects that can be labelled québécois. Lepage, for his part, has developed a complex relationship to the province/nation, which has become one pole in a dialectic between home and away. What I am suggesting, therefore, is not a clear two-way circuit of identity exchange between Québec and Lepage but a more complex formulation wherein each entity engages with and plays off the other in order to navigate its relationship to reality and the real.

Postcolonial theory, as well, is centrally important in analysing the complex interconnection between Lepage and Québec, particularly Slemon's theorisation of the "the radical ambivalence of colonialism's middle ground" communicated through Second-World texts.[154] Ambivalence is an very useful concept in analysing Lepage's cultural positioning as an internationally successful québécois artist. Toggling between cultures (local and global), a representative member of a population that can be understood as both oppressed and hegemonic, a cultural leader who continues to construct himself as a subject-in-formation, Lepage is an archetypically ambivalent figure. As a gifted and internationally ambitious theatre artist he emerged at the perfect time to both benefit from and feed Québec's globalising trajectory. Crucially, he has not left Québec behind, but has chosen to base himself there and to accept the government's positioning of him as favoured unofficial (and sometimes official) cultural ambassador. He performs the task of being a good nationalist, in other

[154] Slemon, p. 107.

words, by being exceptionally international. Though his theatre productions, at first clearly marked as québécois, have become less overtly legible as such, I agree with Lepage when he asserts that his theatre has remained "profoundly québécois."[155]

Part of the way in which this "Québecness" is communicated is via the recurrent figure of the Québec traveller, whose forever-incomplete process of self-realisation mirrors that of the province/nation itself. The productions also communicate their origins through the way they depict otherness, which has become the most controversial aspect of Lepage's work amongst anglophone critics but is rarely mentioned in francophone criticism. This disparity of response is indicative of a lack of a shared understanding of the relationship between culture and power in contemporary Québec, and the lack of a viable public discourse on issues of difference, tolerance, and representation there. This is the aspect of Lepage's works which identify them as Second-World postcolonial texts. If his productions are, in the eyes of some commentators, "compromised" by objectifying and stereotypical representations of visible and other difference, this problematic and the controversies that it raises help us understand the particular "entanglement of anti-colonial resistances within the colonialist machineries they seek to displace" in the Québec situation.[156] This is, I would argue, a more useful application of the concept of ambivalence to Québec than that of Létourneau, who argues that ambivalence is the always-already condition of Québec, "the only invariant providing continuity over time" and that Quebecers must embrace ambivalence as "an emancipated,

[155] Cited in Charest, p. 50.
[156] Slemon, p. 110.

consummated identity rather than an alienated or a constrained one."[157] As I have discussed, however, this is indicative of the tendency of Franco-québecois critics to valorise their culture's hybridity without taking on board the realities of the experience of Québec's other populations; Létourneau's theorisation is part of the ongoing problematic, not a strategy for solving it.

I will now trace briefly the trajectory of Lepage's relationships to Québec and to internationalism, which will be examined in closer detail in the following chapters, establishing how his international success has been both absorbed into, and sometimes resisted by, dominant narratives of Québec's process of development and national legitimisation.

Lepage's early productions have become part of the established narrative of Québec's theatrical development and more broadly of Québec nation-building, in that they are understood as one of the principal markers of a shift in 1980s Québec theatre and culture away from introspective neo-nationalism to new formal horizons, and to the world beyond the provincial borders. While the defeat of the 1980 referendum resulted in a loss of momentum for the sovereignty movement, it is now widely understood as a positive turn for Québec theatre, in that its artists moved away from what had become a stifling focus on political material. "Weary of championing a lost, self-defeated cause," Robert Lévesque explains, "Québec theatre decided to champion the only cause truly its own from the historical perspective, namely, theatre itself."[158] Some 47 theatre troupes were formed in Québec between 1980-1985, with the focus of practice shifting to an emphasis on formal

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[157] Létourneau, Jocelyn, "Impenser' le pays et toujours l'aimer," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 105, p. 363, cited in Maclure, *Québec Identity*, p. 77.
[158] Lévesque, Robert, "Québec Theatre Takes on the World," *Forces* 84, p. 56.

experimentation; to the experience of the individual, particularly the artist, as opposed to family or social themes; and towards "the insertion of Quebecers into the international scene."[159]

The paradigmatic figure of this movement towards re-theatricalisation, individualism, and internationalism in Québec theatre was Robert Lepage. After emerging in the early '80s he was quickly hailed as "the most talked-about theatre artist in Québec" and "one of the most original creators in Québec theatre."[160] In 2001, the foremost Québec playwright, Michel Tremblay, assessed Lepage's impact:

> In the early '80s we were still using the Québec language as our primary weapon. Then Lepage arrived who, instead of language, used these incredibly powerful but simple images. We were all flabbergasted that the little boy from Québec City managed to overturn everything.[161]

Lepage's productions did not leave language behind, but their combination of multi-linguality, a strong visual sense, and international themes gave them an appeal that extended beyond the local. Lepage and his collaborators, meanwhile, never made any secret that their goals for their work and their careers were international. This agenda mapped perfectly onto the globalising trajectory of post-referendum Québec, and the restlessly outward-looking central characters of *Vinci* and *The Dragon's Trilogy* came to be seen as embodying the national spirit of the time, the "passion for the elsewhere... best represented by Robert Lepage."[162]

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[159] Hébert, Chantal "The Theatre: Sounding Board for the Appeals and Dreams of the Québécois Collectivity," in Donohoe and Weiss, eds., *Essays on Modern Québec Theatre*, p. 36.
[160] Hunt, Nigel, "The Global Voyage of Robert Lepage," *TDR* 33, p. 25; and Lefebvre, p. 30, both cited in Bunzli, "Geography," p. 81.
[161] Cited in O'Mahoney.
[162] Lévesque, ibid.

These characters are also clearly legible as postcolonial figures, whose search for agency and self-definition maps on to that of the province/nation itself; and reading these productions through postcolonial theory helps us to understand how they illustrate the problematics of difference and power in Québec. As I discuss in Chapter 4, *Vinci* indeed embodied the internationalist spirit of its time, but also demonstrates an ongoing tendency amongst Quebecers to align themselves with Europe as the basis of their culture, demonstrating a postcolonial longing for roots and a simultaneous dissociation from their own status as colonisers of the New World. The production also introduced Lepage's personal project for his work in its establishment of the autobiographical Québec traveller figure whose quest for self-determination is strongly overlaid with universalist and humanist idealism. *The Dragon's Trilogy,* with its story of an extended québécois family struggling to overcome a corrupt and backwards society, is equally legible as a postcolonial text, one interestingly imbricated in revisionist québécois historiography. By making the scope of the *Trilogy* "pan-Canadian"[163] and by involving immigrant and anglophone characters in what starts out as a québécois story, the *Trilogy*'s creators agitated for a wider definition of québécois society. At the same time, however, the occlusions and objectifications of some of their representations reveal problematics in québécois understandings of otherness, as I discuss in Chapter 5.

The success of these shows led Lepage into the international arena, and since the late 1980s his original works have been funded by and for "international production consortiums" and have toured to major venues and festivals around the

[163] Fréchette, p. 117.

developed world.[164] The prototype of these international collaborations was *Tectonic Plates*, which I discuss briefly in Chapter 6, outlining how its attempts at a cross-national collaboration were hampered by lack of shared understanding of what constitutes "culture," and (following Jill MacDougall) arguing that the production is best read as a subtle critique, from a francophone québécois perspective, of difference in a Québec context.

Initially, Lepage presented his international success as absolutely in keeping with the Québec national project: in 1992, he said

> Québec is multiple, it is in the global village, and not just in the francophonie. It has to be part of the world! My nationalist act is to make theatre here and abroad, with my roots and my languages, my history.[165]

In 1994, however, overwhelmed by the complications of working for various international organisations, he formed Ex Machina, a new company in Québec City, and made it the base of operations for the creation of shows, nearly always with international co-producers. While rooting himself in his home city has streamlined Lepage's professional and personal lives,[166] it has only made his relationship to Québec itself more complex and more contentious. He benefits from significant government subsidy, and in turn official Québec can claim responsibility for his international cultural status and the publicity and prestige that this brings. He is

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[164] Knowles, p. 20.

[165] "Le Québec est multiple, il est dans le village global et pas seulement dans la francophonie, il doit faire partie du monde! Mon acte nationaliste est de faire du théâtre ici et ailleurs, avec mes racines et mes langues, mon histoire." Cited in Lévesque, Robert, "Un Archange sur la scène du monde," *Le Devoir*, 20 July 1992. Cited in Dvorak, Marta, "Représentations récentes des *Sept branches de la Rivière Ota* et d'*Elseneur* de Robert Lepage," in Bednarski and Oore, eds., *Nouveaux regards sur le théâtre québécois*, p 139.

[166] See Ducharme, p. 73, and O'Mahoney.

referred to as an ambassador for Québec culture,[167] and has accepted official appointments and honours that construct him as representative of the province/nation: he worked as commissioner, for example, of the 1999 Saison du Québec festival in Paris, and in 2003 received the Prix du Québec, the highest provincial honour given to figures from the arts and sciences, for "having transported his visionary artistic sensibility onto stages the world over." [168]

PLATE 2: The 2003 winners of the Prix du Québec. Lepage is in the top row, far right.

Lepage's international success has been embraced and championed by some Québec-based critics who argue that his productions are exemplary of contemporary

[167] See Armistead, "Pursuit of the Trivial," *The Guardian*, 5 October 1994.
[168] "avoir transporté sur les scènes du monde entier sa sensibilité d'artiste visionnaire." "Robert Lepage, André Forcier, et Raymonde April reçoivent les Prix du Québec 2003." *Le Devoir*, 19 November 2003.

Québec's hybridity and *métissage*. For Sherry Simon, internationalism "defines an essential, not a contingent, aspect of Lepage's work." Lepage's productions propose a redefinition of culture as a "category of enunciation"; and offer a vision of contemporary culture as "translational":

> Lepage's work nourishes our understanding of translation today as a reality and as an ideal that has more to do with discontinuity, friction, and multiplicity than it has to do with commonality, precisely because culture no longer offers itself as a unifying force.[169]

Sonia Poirer similarly argues that Lepage's productions, by presenting Québec as diverse and by raising and problematising questions of Empire as they apply to North America, offer a model for understanding difference:

> More than providing a mapping of hyphenated ethnic identities, the Québec-informed cultural innovations of Lepage negotiate the discourses of nationalism, sovereignty, *métissage*, and alterity within globalised practices of transcultural commodification and communication, and proffer the making of new Quebecers, the forging of a larger imaginary in which to situate the *fin-du-siècle* Quebecer subject.[170]

Such arguments are typical of québécois treatments of hybridity, however, in that they celebrate cosmopolitanism without necessarily taking on board the extent to which diversity is being narrated from a normative white viewpoint and how difference is being used to signal progressiveness without accounting for the material realities of life for those marked as Québec's others. In my analysis of *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* (Chapter 7), the 2003 revival of *The Dragon's Trilogy* (Chapter 8) and *Zulu Time* (Chapter 9) I discuss the ways in which these productions participate in and perpetuate specific québécois codes of representation as regards

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[169] Simon, Sherry, "Robert Lepage and the Languages of Spectacle," in Donohoe and Koustas, eds., pp. 215, 228, 229.
[170] Poirer, Sonia, *Beyond Nationalism: Re-envisioning Québec*, p. 111.

difference, and point to some of the problems that ensue when such productions enter into global circulation.

While Lepage has been lionised as an exemplary Quebecer for his internationalism, a tension has developed about what he is perceived to owe the nation, and concern has been expressed when he is seen to be dismissing or undervaluing his national commitments. He has been critiqued for focussing too much on touring and not enough on domestic performances, an issue I discuss in Chapter 7. And in 2001, Lepage became the centre of a controversy about the responsibilities that come with accepting government funding; this arose after Lepage barred several Québec theatre critics from a press conference, and made statements which some members of the media felt were an arrogant dismissal of the investment that the Québec government – and by extension the Québec taxpayer – had made to his career. One journalist went as far as to liken Lepage to "a black king reigning over a banana republic," a measure of how charged issues of responsibility to the nation are in a Québec context, particularly when international stars like Lepage are involved (and of the very particular usage of racial imagery in francophone québécois public discourse, which I explore further in Chapter 9).[171]

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[171] The press conference had been planned by the Montréal-based Festival de Théâtre des Ameriques to publicise upcoming performances of Lepage's production *The Far Side of the Moon*. After invitations to the conference had gone out, Lepage saw the invitation list and said that he would not allow three Montréal-based critics, Stéphane Baillergeon (*Le Devoir*), Luc Boulanger (*Voir*), and Robert Lévesque (*Ici*), to attend, acknowledging afterwards that he kept a "blacklist" and that these writers were on it, for reasons he said were "personal." (Hays, Matthew, "L'affair Lepage: from hissy fit to all-out war," *The Globe and Mail*, 24 April 2001.) When these critics started to raise a public fuss, Lepage simply cancelled the conference, saying to several media outlets that he did not need the press to sell his shows, and underlining that artists must be responsible to themselves and their vision. The media reacted with indignation: "Mister Lepage isn't accountable to anyone? That's a lie. Nothing could be more untrue. Monsieur Lepage is nothing BUT accountable because he is subsidised to the bone." ("Monsieur Lepage n'a de comptes à rendre à personne? C'est une leurre. Rien n'est

If these are some of the ways that we can continue to see Québec in Lepage's work, in what ways can we see the global? Can we speculate about the sources of his work's popularity with international audiences? Simon argues that what gives the work international appeal is the extent to which it mirrors audiences' experience:

> There is without any doubt a connection to be made between the transnational material which Lepage's works treat and their international success. The play of cultural references in the productions gives them a sure mobility. All audiences can recognise themselves in the dialogue that opens up between the local and the international.[172]

Simon's statement is universalising: the only audiences that have the opportunity to recognise themselves in Lepage's work are those who live in the privileged, developed cultures to which his productions tour and who can afford to buy tickets to them. That being said, her premise is sound: Lepage's productions appeal to privileged audiences because they communicate some of the experience of navigating

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plus faux. Monsieur Lepage n'a QUE des comptes à rendre parce que Monsieur Lepage est subventionné jusqu'a l'os." Nuovo, Franco, "Qui paie le banquet?", *Le Journal de Montréal*, 5 April 2001, emphases in original.") It was Nathalie Petrowski in *La Presse* ("Ses meilleures ennemis," 3 April 2001) who likened Lepage's behaviour to "Maurice Duplessis… (ou un) autre roi nègre..." The reference is to a now-infamous incident in which the then-Premier Duplessis, in the midst of provincial hydroelectric power scandals in the late 1950s, had a journalist from *Le Devoir*, the newspaper at the forefront of uncovering the scandals, forcibly removed from a press conference. This prompted André Laurendeau, a prominent *Le Devoir* writer, to forward a theory likening Duplessis to a neo-colonial "negro king" who answered to big business rather than the interests of the people. (See Clarke, "Liberalism and its Discontents," for an overview of the use of the "negro king" image in Québec public discourse). For the record, Michel Bernatchez, Ex Machina's producing director, maintains that much of this controversy was based on a misquotation of Lepage, who according to Bernatchez never said he was not responsible to the nation, but rather not to the media (interview with the author, Montréal, 13 July 2002), a point Ex Machina underlined later in April 2001 by unfurling a banner down the side of their headquarters reading: 'Artists are free and are not accountable to "mediacrity"' – the last word being a neologism in French as well as English. ("Les artistes sont libres et n'ont pas des comptes à rendre à la médiacrité." "Robert Lepage critique la 'médiacrité,'" *Le Devoir*, 26 April 2001.)

[172] "Il y a sans aucune doute un lien à faire entre la matière transnationale de la pièces de Lepage et leur réussite internationale. Le jeu des références culturelles inscrit dans les pièces leur donne une mobilité certaine. Tous les publics peuvent se reconnaître dans le dialogue qui s'y oeuvre entre le local et l'international." Simon, Sherry, *Le trafic des langues: traduction et culture dans la littérature québécoise*, p. 161.

contemporary globality. Internationalism is one element of this, surely; another is the way in which Lepage's work focuses on the experience of individual characters grappling for self-understanding and self-expression by trying to make sense of multiple and competing personal identifications: Pierre in the *Trilogy* is simultaneously an artist, a son, a lover, and a displaced Quebecer; *Tectonic Plates'* Madeline tries to create a coherent adult identity as a Québécoise, a woman, and an artist; *Ota's* Sophie is pulled in different directions as a nationalist, a jobbing actor, a girlfriend, and (perhaps) a mother. This is reflective of the destabilisation of previously established identity categories by globalisation; as Maclure argues, in globalisation "individuals enjoy a plurality of identity spaces" which include nation, "gender, sexual identities, ethnicity, social class, new social movements, generational positioning, and virtual communities."[173] Lepage's characters become representative of the contemporary challenges to selfhood, and appeal to audiences as such. Lepage's work offers reassurance amidst this confusion, in that the work is clearly underlaid by a humanist ideology that posits connectedness and coherence as the ideal state towards which all lives are heading.

Such an ethos is a far way off from the vision of postcolonial subjectivity described by Homi Bhabha, who, as part of his ongoing project to "rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial", celebrates the liminal and the marginal as the privileged sites for contemporary meaning-making. The postcolonial subject interrogates, mimics, slips and slides between definitions and frames, producing "a subversive strategy of subaltern agency that negotiates its own authority through a process of iterative 'unpicking' and incommensurable, insurgent

[173] Maclure, *Québec Identity*, p. 121.

relinking." Meaning is created "in between the sign, deprived of subjectivity, in the realm of the intersubjective."[174] The creative activity that Bhabha describes sounds theoretically attractive but literally unsustainable: how long can any subject remain intersubjective without slipping into a more comfortable position of signification; to what should the postcolonial aspire if not a more grounded position from which to speak? Robert Lepage's creative articulations are evidence of the insecurity of the liminal and the indeterminate. Speaking out of the forever-in-progress project of Québec cultural definition, Lepage's instinct is to ground, to look for logos. His productions are haunted by the nostalgia for lost origins, and driven by the idealistic belief that a grounded identity is not only desirable, but attainable.

[174] Bhabha, pp. 185, 191.

PLATE 3: "Virgin and Child with Sts. Anne and John" by Leonardo da Vinci

CHAPTER 4: *VINCI*

Vinci, created in 1986, was Robert Lepage's first solo work; though not as well-travelled or as widely acclaimed as the group work *The Dragon's Trilogy*, it helped make his name as "one of Québec's most brilliant young theatrical artists... a theatrical innovator whose work is changing the very language of the stage."[175] Looked at in the context of Lepage's ongoing creative path, *Vinci* was a foundational work on many levels, and a remarkably ambitious, adventurous, and accomplished work from a young artist – Lepage was only 29 when he created it. The resource for *Vinci* was a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, "The Virgin and Child with Sts. Anne and

[175] Fraser, Matthew, "Performance Art Redefines Theatre," *The Globe and Mail*, 11 March 1986. *Vinci* toured extensively in Québec, briefly elsewhere in Canada, and marked Lepage's European debut when it played in France and England. It won the best production of the year award in 1986 from the Québec association of theatre critics; the best production award at the Festival of Nyon in 1987; and the Prix Coup de Pouce at the 1987 Avignon "off" festival.

John," which Lepage had seen in the National Gallery in London on his first trip to Europe.[176] Otherwise relatively uninterested in visual art, Lepage was strongly attracted to the drawing:

> It was moving, carnal, sweet, and there was something ambiguous about the relationship between the Virgin and Child. But it was also a technical drawing for a painting. It's hard to explain the reaction I had to it. Later when I decided to create *Vinci*, it was not to explain, but to revisit that feeling."[177]

The painting as an expression of Lepage's own feelings and impressions, and his attraction to a depiction of an "ambiguous" relationship between mother and son, will figure in my analysis of the production.[178]

Vinci was about perception and representation, about the connection between vision, selfhood, and communication. Its principal character was a contemporary Québec photographer, Philippe, who undertook a physical and metaphorical journey through time and space to meet Leonardo da Vinci, who taught him important lessons about the connections between art, vision, and life.[179] As Robert Lévesque

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[176] Lepage told Carole Fréchette in interview ("L'arte è un veicolo," p. 114) that the drawing he saw was called "La Vierge et l'infant avec St. Anne" ("Virgin and Child with St. Anne") but the Leonardo drawing of that subject in the National Gallery includes the image of St. John as a child (it is a study for the 1510 painting "Virgin and Child with St. Anne," now in the Louvre, in which St. John is excluded). This drawing in the National Gallery dates from approximately 1507 and is commonly known as the Burlington House cartoon. See Martin Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: the Marvellous Works of Nature and Man.*

[177] "Il était émouvant, charnel, doux, et la relation entre la Vierge et l'Enfant avait quelque chose d'ambigu. Pourtant, il s'agissait d'un dessin technique d'un projet de toile. L'impression que j'en ai ressentie est très difficile à expliquer. D'ailleurs, si j'ai choisi de créer *Vinci*, c'est justement pour ne pas l'expliquer mais plutôt pour la faire ressentir." Cited in Fréchette, p. 114.

[178] The text of *Vinci* has not been published. I did not see the production performed live, and am primarily relying on a French-language script/promptbook, and on Linda Gaboriou's English translation of the script, both acquired from the archives of Ex Machina. I am also relying on a video of one performance of the production, which is, however, of a poor quality and incomplete. Page references to Gaboriou's translated text will appear in parenthesis after each quotation in this chapter.

[179] Enhancing the theme of travel, the production programme took the form of an "Itinerary" listing its nine named sections:

noted in his review for *Le Devoir*, however, the production was arguably less about the visual arts than about Lepage's own craft; in Lévesque's view it was "the fascinating result of a reflection on theatre itself."[180] Indeed the production involved many formal elements, from the foregrounding of the constructed nature of stage images to a playful treatment of translation, which reminded the audience of the constructed and artificial nature of theatrical representation. This quality of self-reflexivity was extended in the production's status as autobiography: Lepage has acknowledged in interview that Philippe's dilemma – he was in artistic and personal crisis following the suicide of a close friend and fellow artist – was closely based on his own experience.[181] By playing a character based on himself, Lepage was attempting to gain a vantage point on his life and see his problems and concerns clearly. Following Lacan's theorisation of the mirror stage, we can understand the desire expressed by Lepage in *Vinci* as that for a place from which he can see himself seeing: he placed a representation of himself on stage as an attempt to fix himself in his own look and thus experience the sense of fulfillment that comes from having that look returned as a gaze. As Lacan helps us understand, however, such attempts at self-knowledge through self-regard are impossible because (as when we look in a

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1. Le Décollage (Takeoff)
2. Big Ben, London (décalage) [Jetlag]
3. Virgin and Child with St. Anne, National Gallery, London
4. Burger King, boulevard Saint-Germain, Paris
5. Mona Lisa, Oil on Canvas 77 x 53 cm, Louvre, Paris
6. Le Camping à Cannes (Camping in Cannes)
7. Le Duomo de Firenze
8. Salle de douches, Firenze (Shower room, Florence)
9. Vinci

In fact the production includes several additional introductory and interstitial scenes beyond these nine named sections.

[180] "...le résultat fascinant d'une réflexion sur le théâtre." Lévesque, Robert, "Du dôme au crâne, l'écho de la vie," *Le Devoir*, 6 March 1986.

[181] See Chapter 1.

mirror) we do not actually see our self, but rather a reflection. The best we can hope for are brief moments where we trick ourselves into a moment of clear vision by establishing an elusive vantage point, a third place from which we can "look awry" at ourselves – see ourselves trying to see. There is a further paradox in Lepage's stagings, for, as the actor in his own play, seeing himself on the stage on which he stands is impossible; the audience therefore become complicit in Lepage's exercise. They become his spectatorial stand-ins, who provide the look that he hopes will enable his gaze.

Vinci thus revealed strongly narcissistic tendencies on Lepage's part, which battled against more artistically adventurous and culturally engaged impulses. On the one hand, the production employed playful verbal, aural, and visual techniques that started to call into question received Western ideas about the place of the individual subject in representation; in this it seemed in tune with currents of contemporary thought that refuse to ground discourse in theories of metaphysical origins. At these points the activity of the production was that of deconstruction: it foregrounded itself as a discursive practice in order to draw attention to the instability of subjectivity and representation. But as soon as the production opened up these issues, it quickly changed tack, and its activity became that of shoring up a stable subject position for its main character, and by association its creator. A strong narrative throughline emerged about the artist's search for self-understanding, and the production's final message was an affirmation of humanism as conveyed through the united body/spirit of the creator-persona of Lepage/Philippe. The production thus turned its engagement with ideas about subjectivity and representation inwards, making it into an affirmation of the importance of art itself.

The production's ambiguous treatment of the individual subject position also contains interestingly contradictory messages about the culture from which Lepage was speaking. On the one hand, that it portrayed a young Quebecer leaving the province to discover himself could be read as a positive statement about Québec's newly outward-looking attitude at the time the production was created. Philippe (and by extension Lepage) represented Québec's perceived place in the world. Nigel Hunt took this position in a 1987 *TDR* article, arguing that

> Philippe's journey... is very much the journey of today's Québécois. In the 1960s and 1970s Québec was resolutely insular and introspective, in reaction against the cultural and economic domination by Canada's English-speaking majority. By the '80s this struggle had largely paid off. Having fought to secure its own French identity, Québec could now afford to look beyond its own borders with renewed interest. Lepage exemplifies this new attitude.[182]

Such a reading paints contemporary québécois cultural history with broad strokes. It is equally possible to read the trajectory described by *Vinci* as a sign not of a newly "secure" québécois identity, but as evidence of the gaps in, and continued instability of, that identity. *Vinci* was the first of several of Lepage's productions to locate their québécois characters' roots in Europe: for the Québec traveller character here, and in *Tectonic Plates* and *Needles and Opium*, European locations and individuals become the "other" in their searches for self-realisation. Québécoise critic Jeanne Bovet calls Philippe's journey in *Vinci* "a historical return to his cultural roots: Europe, the old Continent, from which the first settlers left for the New World." This understanding is significant for what it excludes: that part of Québec identity described as its *americanité*. Both the production and much of the Québec reaction to it do not mention this Americanness, instead portraying Québec emerging from underneath

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[182] Hunt, p. 110.

the Anglo-Canadian colonial mantle via a symbolic and affirming return to its European origins. Such a singular depiction of Québec as a newly liberated postcolonial culture occludes the status of the French population of Québec as the region's original colonisers.

Thus, while the production reflected a newfound sense of adventurousness and internationalism amongst younger Quebecers, it did so while reifying a nationalist discourse of identity politics that placed Québec's roots firmly in Europe, and by claiming universality for what are not acknowledged as a selective and culturally specific set of values. Critics such as Bovet extend this discourse by celebrating the production as proof that "the great Renaissance artist [Leonardo] and the 'little québécois' photographer are akin, united in mankind".[183] Such an assertion seems intended to argue for Québec's empowerment, but it is also legible as evidence of an ongoing postcolonial insecurity, an attempt to assert Québec's legitimacy by reference to a subjective and unverifiable assertion of universal meaning and worth.

In their own way, the extraordinary claims made about the production by Chantal Hébert and Irène Perelli-Contos in a through-written critical volume largely about *Vinci* are further evidence of the postcolonial conditions in which the production was created and received. Hébert and Perelli-Contos can only support their assertion that *Vinci* demonstrates a fundamental paradigm shift in contemporary thought — "a 'new relationship' between the subject and object of knowledge"[184] that overturns the way subjectivity has been understood since antiquity – by isolating their discussion exclusively within québécois culture and

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[183] Bovet, pp. 6, 30.

[184] "... une 'nouvelle alliance' entre le sujet et l'objet de connaissance." Hébert, Chantal, and Irene Perelli-Contos, *La face cachée du théâtre de l'image*, p. 141.

outside of larger intellectual and cultural contexts. The dominant, unstated subtext of their volume is the apparent need to present Québec as a mature culture capable of producing theatre of global historical import.

I will support the claims made here via a close reading of *Vinci*, followed by readings of the production through psychological and postcolonial theories.

ART IS A VEHICLE

Vinci's contrary tendencies – towards deconstruction and towards an expression of humanist unity – were established in its first live scene, called "L'arte è un veicolo," in which Lepage appeared in the guise of a blind Italian narrator, nattily dressed in a tapered suit jacket, carrying a white cane, and wearing sunglasses. He spoke in Italian, and his words were subtitled in French (or English) on the screen behind him.[185] He directly welcomed the audience, introducing himself as the guide who would lead them through their engagement with "a very specific art form called theatre." (4) Thus the audience was informed that this play about travelling was intended as a metaphorical and pedagogical meta-journey into the conventions of stage representation. Indeed the guide then engaged in a mini-lesson on theatrical semiotics, explaining that this production was about a visual artist and that he had been invited to hold forth on various aspects of the visual arts, despite the fact that

> I am not... a visual artist myself. Nor am I an eminent highly-qualified specialist from a prestigious academy well-known for its innovative ideas on art and its many ramifications. In fact, I am a fictional character. But since I speak a foreign language, and am played by an immensely talented actor, the production crew felt you would take

[185] Most performances of *Vinci* had French as their base language, but some performances of a 1987 tour were in English.

> their artistic preoccupations more seriously if they were exposed to you by someone speaking with a European accent. (4)

We have already begun to consider the cultural politics communicated through a joking reference to the authority of speech conveyed "in a European accent." Germane here is how, by having the guide acknowledge that he was "fictional," Lepage winkingly noted the interlocking sets of referential and illusional conventions that audience and creators alike engage in during a performance. The guide drew the audience's attention to his status onstage as a sign, and to the distance between what he initially seemed to communicate as a signifier (knowledge, authority) and what he then came to signify (irony, self-referentiality, skepticism).

The guide went on to talk about different art forms – literature, visual art – while gesturing to a toy train that ran in circles around the stage. "The train which has been circling around since the beginning of the show," he says, "is a visual means of communicating the notion that: ART IS A VEHICLE." (5) The guide did not say the exact words you have just read, because he was speaking in Italian; a translation was projected onto the screen behind the guide, who pointed to the words with his white cane, at times seeming to move them around the screen by "pushing" and "lifting" them with the cane. He ended his address by likening the train to the words that appear on the bottom the screen in a foreign film: "Since art also serves the function of casting light on the chaos of our society, it is, to a certain extent, a subtitle." (6) The audience was reminded of the symbolic function of words, and observed words being reduced to their status as empty signifiers – as objects. The toy train was a metaphor through which Lepage represented the process of signified meaning being loaded into the signifier-words.

A more complex process of deconstruction was engaged here as regards the human form on stage. Invoking Peirce's classification of sign systems, Marvin Carlson has written of the iconicity of theatre, the tendency of things on stage to represent their literal, real-life meaning, particularly the human body:

> ... the one element that almost invariably involves iconic identity, no matter how stylised the production, is the actor, a human being who represents a human being.[186]

John Rouse complicates this formulation, however, by reminding us that the "real thing" the audience sees – the actor pretending to be a character – is of course

> ... not real; the character only exists in the possible world of the fiction, not the real world of the performance. Indeed, in order to 'ostend' the character, the theatre 'de-realizes' the actor, turning him or her into a sign that functions as an element belonging to the same class of concepts as the character, the class 'human being.'[187]

Audience members buy into the process of representation by tacitly agreeing to read the sign "actor" as the character; participating in this "referential illusion" is part of the spectator's "pleasure," according to Pavis.[188]

His treatment of stage fictions here indicated Lepage's interest in the "possible worlds" suggested by the entanglement of script, actor's body, and embodied character.[189] By having his character remark to the audience that he was a "talented actor," Lepage destabilised conventions and reminded audiences that the guide was something else other than either actor or character – he was a sign pointing towards

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[186] Carlson, Marvin, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life*, p. 78.
[187] Rouse, John, "Textuality and Authority in Theater and Drama: Some Contemporary Possiblities," in Reinelt and Roach, eds, p. 147.
[188] Pavis, Patrice, "Production, Reception, and its Social Context," in Whiteside and Issachroff, eds., *On Referring in Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 122, cited in Rouse, p. 147.
[189] *Possible Worlds* is in fact the title of Lepage's fourth film, which engages the favoured Lepage theme of the overlap between imagination and reality through its parallel story lines constituting alternative possible life stories for a man who, at the film's opening scene, is found dead but whose brain is kept alive.

both. Having broken down this representational practice by foregrounding its artificiality, Lepage's next gesture was a crucial one: he took the potentially empty sign of the figure of the guide and turned him into the vessel for a message about the importance and significance of art. Art is a vehicle, the guide said repeatedly, and its function is to convey messages which "cast light on the confusions of our society." Thus Lepage stopped short of breaking the representational process down completely: his guide maintained the guise of teacher even while acknowledging the artificiality of doing so. If he were to have dropped the mask of character completely, he would have revealed a figure multiply implicated in the creation of this piece and its meanings: the actor-writer-director-*subject* Robert Lepage.

Indeed it was the multiple codes and meanings inscribed on and communicated through Lepage's onstage body that eventually destabilised the scene and the production as a whole. The figure who delivered the text's messages about the potential instability, but eventual durability, of representation was literally Lepage, the creator of that text, himself. Thus Lepage added another layer to the game of "am-I-or-aren't-I" played by the Italian guide, when he said that he was not a character but a talented actor. Yes, but he was more than that again: the actor self-professing as talented was the person who wrote that line. One more reflexive inward turn remained: the actor performing his own text was actually talking about events that happened to himself. The suicidal artist friend, the trip to Europe, the galvanising encounter with a da Vinci painting: all these things were part of Lepage's own experience that became the material of this play. And out came the mask again: though the person standing on stage was recognisable as a representation of Lepage, he balked at total identification, but instead created a persona called Philippe. This

masking gesture enabled and encouraged readings of the production, such as those of Bovet and Hunt, in which Philippe became representative of his generation of Quebecers and of his culture as a whole. In such readings, the familiar literary and cultural trope of the heroic voyage of discovery and self-discovery became the dominant intertext. What is more interesting to me here, however, is the intertext created by the inscription of Lepage's own experiences on and through his own body, and the contrary impulses evidenced by his simultaneous extra-diagetic acknowledgement (in interview) and diagetic refusal of their source in autobiography. We see here at once a consolidation and refusal of author-ity.

VINCI AND VIRTUALITY

By referencing Leonardo in *Vinci*, and by making Philippe a photographer, Lepage honed in on two fundamental moments in Western culture in which modes of representing reality shifted: the Renaissance, when artists formulated theories of perspective that made individual perception the arbiter of reality; and the advent of photography in the mid-19th century, when it became possible to "[render] a precise moment in time."[190] His engagement with these themes, and the substance of *Vinci* itself, indicated an interest in a third perspectival shift, towards the virtual, in which many argue Western culture is currently engaged.[191] A person living in virtual reality, according to Gregory Batchen, is living in the gap between reality and representation;[192] this is the space which *Vinci* was preoccupied with evoking

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[190] Mirzoeff, Nicholas, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, p. 69.
[191] See Mirzoeff, *Introduction*, especially pp. 91-126.
[192] Batchen, Gregory, "Spectres of Cyberspace," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, Mirzoeff, ed., p. 272.

onstage, by continually drawing attention to its status as representation. With the production Lepage exploited theatre's potential as a zone of virtuality, understood broadly as "an image or space that is not real but appears to be."[193] While virtuality is a concept that has a long history, contemporary understandings of the term almost inevitably involve technology, such as electronica, screens, and computers. While a low-budget and relatively "low-tech" production, *Vinci* intrinsically involved technology through the projection of images onto a screen behind the live action, through the manipulation of props and the human form to themselves become reflective surfaces, and through Daniel Toussaint's live accompaniment on electronic instruments.

The integration of technology into many aspects of life has generated a contemporary fascination with and fear of the melding of the human form and technology to such an extent that humanity as we know it might be redefined or disappear. We see this manifest in an obsession with physical speed achieved with the use of technology, as "a kind of sublime violence that brings an unparalleled thrill, but also a sense of human renewal."[194] *Vinci* reflected and participated in the thematics of speed through onstage demonstrations – most of them low-tech tricks -- in which conventional understandings of time and space were played with, including the scene following on from "L'arte è un veicolo", in which the character of Philippe fictionally took flight.

This scene, called "Le Décollage (Take-Off)" simultaneously staged a visit by Philippe to his psychotherapist and one of the subjects of their discussion: the

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[193] Mirzoeff, *Introduction*, p. 91.
[194] Mansfield, Nick, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*, p. 150.

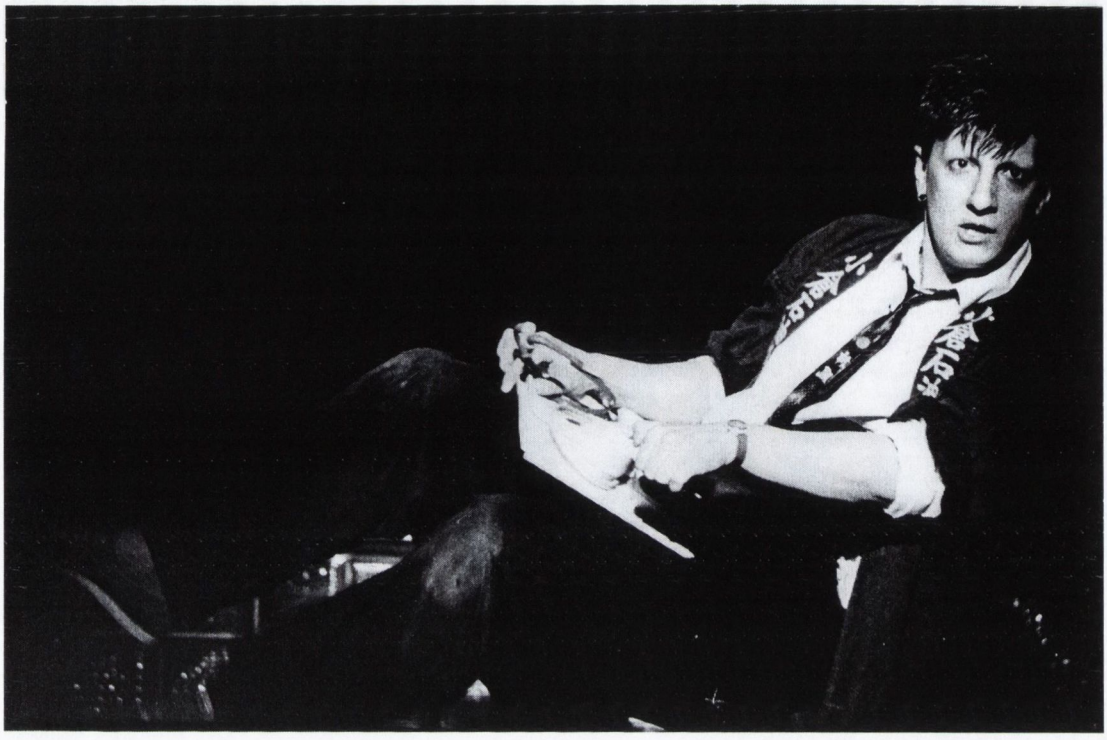

PLATE 4: Lepage as Philippe in "Le Décollage". Photo: Claudel Huot

character's first plane trip to Europe. The text is a funny, deadpan monologue in which Philippe unburdens himself about his work and his concerns around his friend Marc's suicide, and finally tells his therapist that he is quitting therapy and spending his money instead on a European vacation. As he spoke, the actor, sitting in a chair, leaned back as the live soundtrack simulated the noise of a plane taking off. He put a tray on his lap and ate an in-flight meal, then watched a movie; at the end of the monologue, he turned to face the opposite direction, and leaned forward, seeming to land, all the while continuing to talk about his problems. The scene thus functioned as the theatrical equivalent of a filmic fast-forward: the audience simultaneously witnessed an action (the flight) and an action that preceded and explained the action (the therapy session), while at the same time moving to a different fictional space – from Québec to Europe.

Lepage also established an image here that would recur throughout the production: the leap into the unknown. In his monologue, Philippe described a recent outing with some photographer colleagues: they all found themselves on a cliff near the St. Lawrence River, and the rest of his friends jumped into a bank of snow, but Philippe found he couldn't: "I was just afraid of letting myself go, of jumping off the edge into something I didn't really know and couldn't control." (11) His trip to Europe became the first in a series of personal leaps Philippe took in the course of the production.

The next scene, "Big Ben, London (décalage)" extended themes of perspective, speed, and time, and introduced Leonardo da Vinci's work as subject matter. The scene enacted a sightseeing bus tour, with the action taking place in silhouette behind the onstage screen; Lepage, wearing a cap and holding a microphone, spoke the tour guide's patter in exaggerated, London-accented English. There was a fairly broad cultural commentary engaged through the guide's patronising manner towards his passengers, whom he called "you little French Canadians." The scene also advanced themes of opposition and mirror images: the guide repeatedly advised his passengers that if they, unaccustomed to driving on the left side of the road, started to feel sick, they should, "Open the window. You're driving on the wrong side. You're Canadian, aren't you? Look in the mirror." (17) This statement was interwoven with voiceovers about some of the paradoxes inherent in Leonardo da Vinci's life and work – that he wrote from right to left as if in a mirror; that he was a pacifist but invented war machines – as images illustrating these ideas appeared on the screen. Meanwhile, the tour advanced to "Big Ben, the clock that became the very symbol of time" (19) and images of airplanes crashing into a miniature London skyline appeared on the screen,

thus reenacting the World War II bombardment of London which was undertaken using, it is implied, advanced versions of Leonardo's "war machines." A phrase was spoken in voiceover that, in variously altered forms, would become a mantra throughout the production: "Just remember that the difference between love and hate is finally a simple question of speed." (19)

This credo and the images that accompanied it were means by which the production argued its humanist vision of integrity and unity. The tour guide might have acted disparagingly towards the "little French Canadians"; Leonardo may have helped create destructive machines as well as images and instruments that glorified the human figure; but the larger point was that all humans are connected. This message was brought home through the image of the guide's human form superimposed on the clock face of Big Ben (suggesting the modern standardisation of time that enabled global interconnectedness) and on the famous image of Leonardo's Vitruvian Man (suggesting da Vinci's privileging in his writing of the human form and human perception as the central organising principle of the universe). This interpolation of images was another of the production's "fast-forwards" through time – from the Renaissance to the 19th century (when Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament were erected) to the present, when supersonic travel

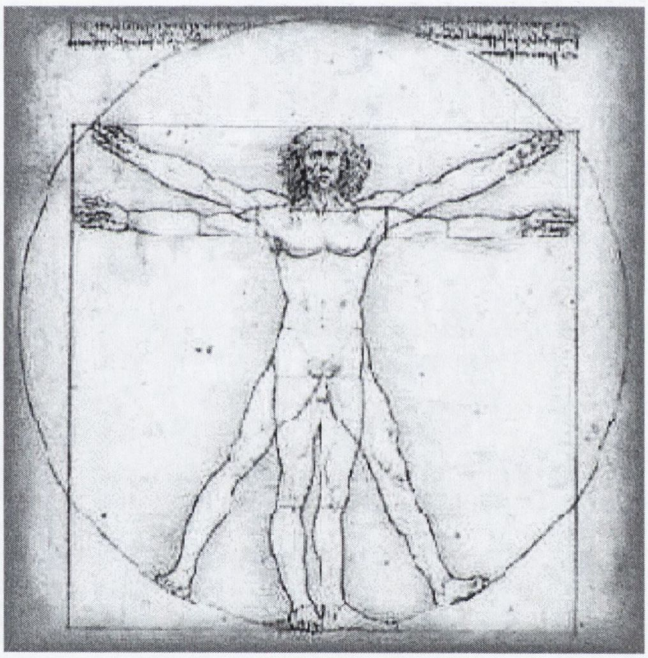

PLATE 5: Leonardo's Vitruvian Man drawing, ca. 1490

enabled a young North American artist to see the world and seek his artistic roots. The message was that time connects us, and that love and hate are part of the same human spectrum.

The next scene, "Virgin and Child with St. Anne," further advanced the production's humanist ideology and the connections it drew between the human form and technology. In it Philippe visited the National Gallery, took photographs of da Vinci's drawing, then set up a rudimentary darkroom and developed the photos, which were projected on the screen behind him as they developed. He discovered an unusual image on one of the photographs: "A detail. Like a fingerprint. Da Vinci's fingerprint. The mark of an artist." (16) Through technology – through a photograph – Philippe discovered *human* evidence of the artist's participation in his work. He had come one step closer to an interchange with his artistic hero; the next scene, which became the production's best-known, enacted an even more intimate encounter.

BURGER KING, BOULEVARD ST. GERMAIN, PARIS

The actor entered, wearing a long-haired wig, a capelet, and high heels, asked an unseen someone – we are to understand, Philippe – for the loan of a pencil, and struck up a conversation. She spoke in French with an Italian accent (indicated in the English-language script by idiosyncratic spellings). From her entertaining patter the audience understood that the action was taking place in a Burger King near the Sorbonne. This young woman was full of opinions about art and society; Québec critics have interpreted her dialogue as a joking commentary on the trendy élitism of

the French art world.[195] She advanced the production's themes of representation in her evaluation of the merits of McDonald's burgers over the Whopper:

> The Big Mac is much more revolutionarry. Did you know zat it is ze last step before the capsule? It is burger so concentrated zat it is no more food, it is ze idea of food. (18)

She scoffed at Philippe's usual choice of photographic subject, bathrooms, as "verrry frriigid": she prefers a warm medium, like painting. In fact she recently served as a model for a friend who painted her:

> I was placed in front of a landscape so empty and drry, it's looks like after ze atomic disaster. I was at an angle, tree quarters, like zis. Wiz my hands on my stomach, glowing wiz an inner light, as if I was carrying ze embryo of a new generation of child genius. And so zat everyone would understand I was ze only one to know my secret, he painted me a mysterious smile. (19)

As she spoke of her "mysterious smile," the lights darkened, a familiar landscape background appeared on the screen behind her, and she appeared unmistakably as the image of Leonardo's Mona Lisa. (see Plate 6, p. 99)

Bovet argues for the significance of this moment, surely one of *Vinci*'s cleverest visual tricks, thus:

> For a few seconds, all realistic parameters are shattered. The two dimensional surface of a painting suddenly gains the depth of real life, and time rushes back to the Italian Renaissance.[196]

In my view, however, this was not an isolated moment of "shattered realistic parameters" but an extension of the production's ongoing critique of authority and representation begun in "L'arte è un veicolo." What happened in the scene involving the Mona Lisa was more complex than a merging of "real life" and painting. Rather,

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[195] See Hébert and Perelli-Contos, p. 55.
[196] Bovet, p. 8.

PLATE 6: Lepage as Mona. Photo: Claudel Huot

theatrical representation, the artificiality of which the production had already highlighted, seemed momentarily to give way to a highly familiar representation from visual art, thus critiquing the conventionality of both. And the point did not seem to be simply that "time rushes back to the Italian Renaissance" but that several non-contiguous time frames seemed to align for an instant: the moment in this theatrical fiction in which the audience and Philippe saw the Mona Lisa, the fictional moment not long before this scene when this contemporary Mona sat for a portrait, and the historical moment when the real Mona sat for da Vinci himself. A critique of the conventionality of theatrical character is taken even further than in "L'arte...": here we had an actor in drag playing a theatrical character based on a fictional subject of a famous painting, whose "real" identity has been the source of fierce speculation for centuries. This was *Vinci*'s most complex deconstruction of the idea of a unified self, but was quickly followed by a scene, "Duomo, Firenze," which fully articulated the production's glorification of Renaissance humanism.

VINCI'S RENAISSANCE VISION

Lepage has often remarked that he is inspired by the Renaissance because it was a time when technological and artistic invention were co-mingled; his vision of his own creative centre, La Caserne, was that it would "look like the *ateliers* of the Renaissance" where artists, scientists, technicians, and architects all worked together.[197] His interest in Leonardo da Vinci stemmed from his impression of Leonardo as "a great genius" who was both an engineer and the creator of beautiful

[197] See Donnelly, Pat, "Building for success: Lepage's company gets a new high-tech home," *The Gazette*, 1 June 1996.

and poignant images of the human figure.[198] "Duomo, Firenze" literalised the idea, introduced in "Big Ben, London," that the basis of Renaissance creativity was the human form and human proportions, by having the Italian guide illustrate a tour around the Duomo through and on his own body. When he talked about the dome, the image of it was projected onto his head; he talked about the interior of the Cathedral and spread his arms to represent the nave and the transept; he told his listeners to "raise your eyes to the stained glass windows" (31) and images of stained glass were projected onto his dark glasses.

Lepage then made his most straightforward and forceful articulation of the humanist vision of *Vinci*: this was the moment in the production where the tone was the most serious; organ music played, and Lepage delivered the speeches in a tone and manner filled with reverence:

> It is as difficult for a cathedral as for a human being to be both truly grandiose and extroverted AND truly humble. This could only be achieved by architecture designed on a human scale, the architecture of the Italian Renaissance. (31)

This idea of a harmony between the human body and architecture was reinforced aurally when the guide sang three notes into the Duomo, and they mingled together to create a major chord. The guide told his listeners that if they, like him, could not see the elements of the Duomo that he was talking about (as, of course, the spectators of *Vinci* could not), they should see "from the inside" (31) as Leonardo did. The imagination was exalted here as the essence of the human spirit, and as something that expressed the commonality of human experience; if people embraced their imaginative capacities, they would come in contact with the greatness of the

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[198] "un grand génie." Fréchette, p. 115.

renowned humanist artist. While many other aspects of the production indicated a desire to overcome the limits of representation, here Lepage relied on and indeed celebrated representation as the highest expression of humanity.

Having evoked da Vinci's masterwork, the *Mona Lisa*, earlier in the production, in "Salle de douches, Firenze," Lepage evoked the artist himself. This was the production's climax, in which Philippe was given the insight that he sought in his European trip. He then put that insight into action in the brief final scene, "Vinci." The penultimate scene took place in a Florence bathhouse where Philippe came to shower after a night of camping. He stood with his back to the audience in front of a row of mirrors, tilted so the audience could see his face, and started to shave. By putting shaving foam on one side of his face and on his head, and then turning his face from side to side as he spoke, he created the image of an old man, Leonardo, talking to a young man, Philippe. Leonardo told Philippe that learning to accept and express contrary impulses – life and death, thinking and feeling – is what being an artist is about: "Art is the result of combat between your head and your heart. Art is conflict... Art is a paradox, a contradiction."[199] All of the people whom Philippe had met on his journey, it was implied, were in fact parts of his own personality, an idea reinforced by the fact that they were played by the same actor. At Leonardo's bidding, Philippe bathed himself, disappearing into a cloud of steam. In the final scene, Philippe appeared on the top of a cliff above the town of Vinci, Leonardo's birthplace, wearing a large set of wings, ran towards the audience, and jumped over the footlights, appearing to fly.

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[199] "L'art, c'est le résultat d'un combat entre ta tête et ton coeur. L'art c'est un conflit... L'art c'est un paradoxe, une contradiction." The relevant pages are missing from Gaboriou's script; the translation above, from page 44 in the French-language script, is mine.

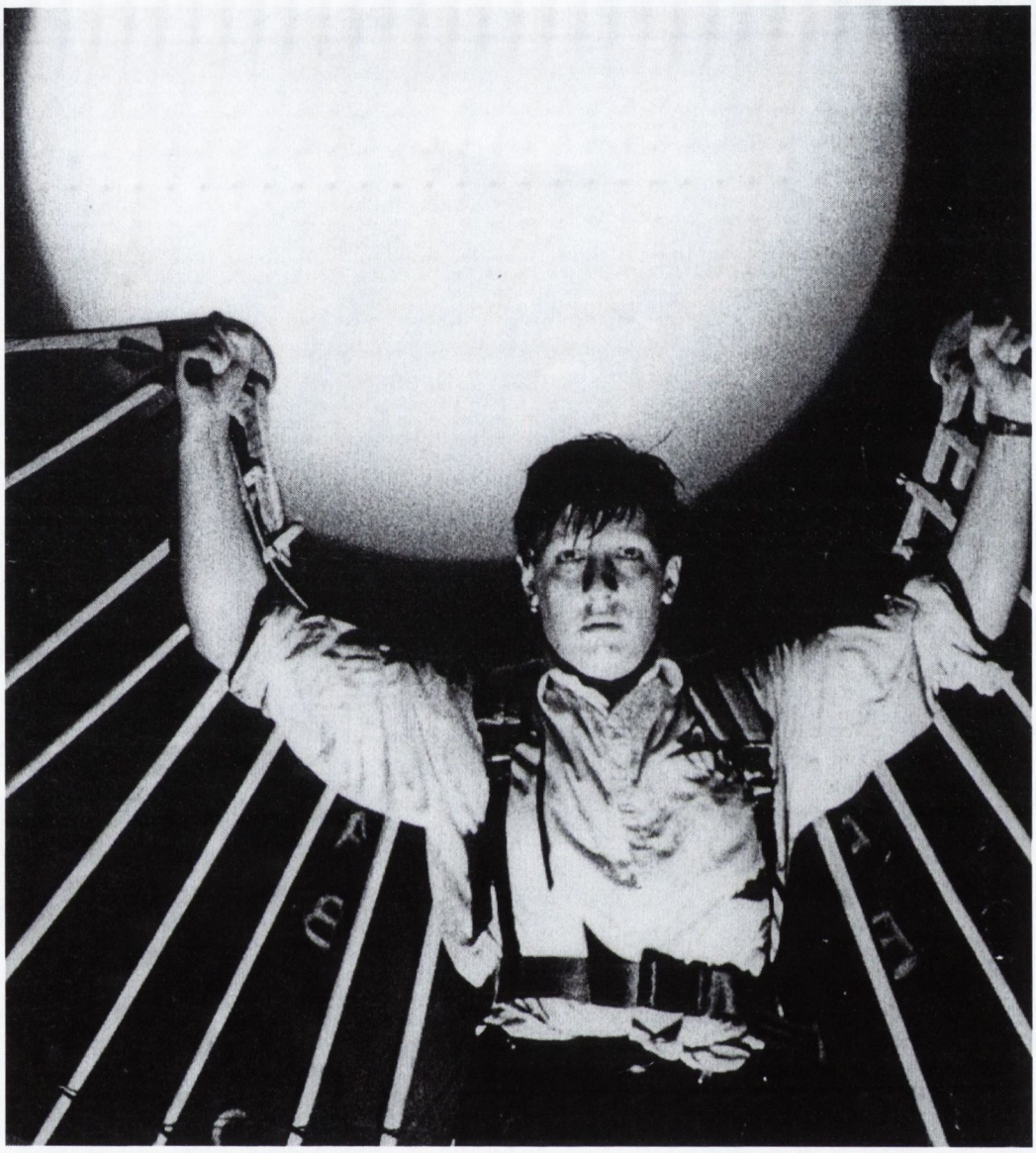

PLATE 7: Lepage as Philippe in "Vinci". Photo: Claudel Huot

These two scenes completed the articulation of a particular vision of art and humanism that had been expressed throughout the production. Philippe's problem, his artistic and personal blockage, was because of his inability to accommodate his own complexities and flaws. He felt stained by Marc's death; he doubted his artistic integrity; he could not find a way to take control of his own life. Leonardo, the

Renaissance master, helped Philippe through his crisis by telling and showing him that the way forward – personally and artistically – is to accept paradox. That Philippe accepted this message became clear when he lept away from the "humility" of Leonardo's birthplace towards the "universal grandeur" (38) of artistic realisation.

In Lepage's formulation, then, all people may have many different spirits living within them, but it is only the exemplary human being – the artist – who accepts and exploits their presence. The play posits universality as an ideal state to which only such consummate beings as artists seem to have access. This is therefore, and paradoxically, a selective and elitist brand of humanism, one that places the artist apart from the rest of humanity. Everyone suffers, everyone doubts; the artist is the person who accepts and can use that knowledge as a basis for creation. This is a definition of art that is profoundly solipsistic: an instinct for creation that turns inward, towards the artist's inner state, not towards an engagement with the world around him. The formulation took another solipsistic turn when we consider that it was through Lepage's own body that a multitude of theatrical characters – the British and Italian guides, the Mona Lisa, Leonardo, and Philippe himself – were represented. It is not just any artist who represented an exalted form of humanism, but the creator of this show himself.

LEPAGE IN HIS OWN LINE OF VISION

The stage provides a fertile crucible for the impossible quest of self-knowledge. Lacan himself named the mirror stage "a drama,"[200] and indeed the

[200] Lacan, Jacques, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," in *Écrits: A Selection*, p. 4.

action of subjects as they create "others" through which to play out their fantasies of self-realisation – as they attempt to look awry at themselves – parallels that of audiences as they regard stage fictions. Janelle Reinelt argues that this helps create theatre's power and allure:

> ... spectators are in thrall to these representations... their desiring apparatus is set in motion each time a stage mirror simulates [the] experience of [projecting desire.][201]

Hébert and Perelli-Contos argue that Lepage knowingly invokes this "thrall" in *Vinci*. Through the theme of pedagogy – Philippe's dialogic encounters with individuals (Mona, Leonardo) which teach him valuable lessons about art and life – Lepage metatheatrically places himself in the position of teacher to guide spectators towards a new way of seeing.[202] In my view, however, the crucial pedagogical relationship in the production is not between Lepage and the spectator, but between Lepage and himself; while spectators are implicated in the process, it is in service of Lepage's personal project of self-knowledge. Justifying this argument requires quoting Barbara Freedman at some length:

> ...theatricality, psychoanalysis, and pedagogy alike provide a model for knowing ignorance through dialogue. Each is an interrogative performance art that stages knowledge as a structure rather than a substance; each is concerned with the structure of a recognition that reorganizes the relationship of ignorance to knowledge. Each has the goal of repositioning the desiring subject in relation to ignorance, knowledge, and subject supposed to know. The subject supposed to know is a mirroring other – whether teacher to student, analyst to analysand, or antagonist to protagonist – who feeds back to the subject her own message from an asymmetrical standpoint.... By functioning as a mirror to an unseen space within the subject, one can stage and displace that otherness so that, for a brief moment, she can know her blindness.

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[201] Reinelt, p. 386.

[202] See Hébert and Perelli-Contos, *La face cachée*, p. 128.

With *Vinci*, Lepage creates a very *theatrical* piece of theatre – a piece that "shows that it knows that it is showing"[203] – as a form of personal therapy and as an attempt to teach himself how to see himself. The production's scenes of learning through dialogue, and indeed the production as a whole, are Lepage's self-created mirrors; his theatre is his own "subject supposed to know," in which he as an artist and an individual engages in dialogue with himself in the hope that he might "displace his otherness" and "know his blindness." Lepage's projections of self within the theatrical process would seem to create a closed circuit were it not for his spectators, who are positioned to offer "assymetrical" outside feedback. Because Lepage is unable to see himself from the audience position, the audience themselves become stand-ins for the artist-as-onlooker, sitting in the audience providing him with the returned look he so desires. To be so identified with a creative artist is potentially a flattering experience for an audience member, but also an overdetermined, even coercive one. We are closely identified with the artist and presumed to share his preoccupations and aspirations. We become complicit in Lepage's narcissistic attempts at self-reproduction; we become the other to his grasping, incomplete subjectivity.

Philip Auslander's work on logocentrism and acting theory is useful here in unpacking the complex set of meanings generated when Lepage performs his own autobiographical work on stage. As Auslander points out, discussions of acting often reveal logocentric assumptions, with the logos assumed to be the actor's self; acting is praised as "honest" or "truthful" because, presumably, we understand that we get a

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[203] Freedman, Barbara, *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearian Comedy*, pp. 42-42, 69.

glimpse of the actor's "true" self through the work. In such an understanding, the signifier – the actor's body – is seen have a direct and predictable relationship to the signified – the actor's soul. Following Derrida, Auslander offers an alternative reading which disrupts attempts to name the relationship between signifier and signified as other than arbitrary. A semiotic reading of acting reads the actor's body not as a transparent container for his "true self" but as an "opaque medium... not a simple text to be read for content." Auslander works his way through acting theorists as diverse as Stanislavsky, Brecht, and Grotowski to expose their mutual, logocentric assumption that "the actor's self precedes and grounds her performance, "and offers a counter-formulation based on deconstruction, arguing that "the self is not an autonomous foundation for acting, but is produced by the performance it supposedly grounds."[204]

Lepage's practice bears out and extends Auslander's formulation. For Lepage, the goal of his self-created productions, in particular his solo shows, does not seem to be the use of self to create convincing, moving acting; rather, Lepage uses acting as a means to create *himself*. He places the signifier – his body – on stage; he creates a character who resembles himself and a performance text about his own experiences; and he then sets the representation machine in motion in hopes that what is signified will come to represent a complete picture of a realised human being, a subjectivity unmarred by the trauma that has so marked his own life. He posits the self as a work in progress rather than an extant, complete entity; but underlying this process-

[204] Auslander, Philip, "'Just Be Your Self': Logocentrism and Difference in Performance Theory," in Zarrilli, ed., pp. 53, 54.

oriented philosophy is a profoundly logocentric world view, which stubbornly insists that a unified sense of self is the achievable goal of a life's journey.

To come back to the language of Lacan and Žižek: there is always a blind spot in vision, even in the gaze or the knowing look, and the attempt to see beyond this blind spot is part of the process of denying one's already-extant subjectivity. For Lepage, it seems, the blind spot generated by his theatrical gaze is the dead-end in his relationship to theatricality. He puts himself on stage – he places his self-building project in his own view, the better, he seems to hope, to achieve it – but what he seems stubbornly unable to accept is that he will never have a clear view of himself because there is something standing in the way: representation. The Lepage on stage can never be the real Lepage, and no matter how many times he continues to stage himself, his own projections of otherness, and his own attempts to merge with the other, he will never completely bridge the gap between himself and his theatrical creations of himself.

The only way out of this loop is to acknowledge theatricality's limitations, and to allow ourselves to be taught by them. The spectator and stage looks are "locked in their imaginary embrace";[205] agency, and analysis, lie in accepting this as a deadlock and stepping outside it. Such an approach would accept that a series of slippery and power-laden negotiations are undertaken when plays are given body on stage and then viewed, and would take the lessons learned through an engagement with theatre, in which "positions are continually negotiated, transgressed, and

[205] Armstrong, Phillip, "Watching Hamlet Watching: Shakespeare and the Mirror Stage," in Drakakis, ed., p. 229.

exchanged," and apply them to human power relations, encouraging us to "risk... exposure to another gaze."[206]

Lepage, however, cannot extricate himself from the criss-crossing sightlines in a production where he is creator, subject, and (attempted) observer, no matter how commandingly his character Philippe soars above the world. His attempts at self-regard are part of his project to revisit his past, and reconstruct himself as a complete, untraumatised subject. He cannot see that these attempts are futile: hence his return in later works to similar themes (a quest for self-understanding, unknown parentage, suicide, identification with real-life artistic and scientific figures) and similar dramatic strategies (overt theatricality; playing himself) throughout his career up to and including his most recent works.

In *Vinci*, we also see the emergence of the intermingled themes of sexuality, parentage, and death, evidence of Lepage's difficult experience of castration and of his narcissism. The psycho-sexual world that Lepage depicts in *Vinci* is prototypical of his work in its emphasis on intense connection with mother figures and lack of paternal presence: Philippe's fears of flying and of travel indicate an overidentification with home, associated with the maternal and the womb. Indeed Lepage's impulse to create *Vinci* came from what he perceived as an "ambiguous" relationship between the Virgin and Child in da Vinci's drawing. Following Lacan, we can understand Lepage perceiving in that image a representation of the imaginary — the pre-Oedipal connection between mother and child that human subjects spend their existence trying to recapture. We will see this desire to re-establish an intense connection with the mother communicated again and again in Lepage's work, most

[206] Armstrong, p. 229.

recently in *The Far Side of the Moon*, in which the central character's mother-obsession is so overwhelming that at one point he actually "becomes" her on stage.

The production also introduces themes of ambiguous sexuality through its creation of an almost totally masculine environment; there is only one figure in it that is meant to be female, Mona, and she of course is played by a man. In "Décollage," Philippe reveals he has a girlfriend, but the only information he provides about her is that they spend their time together eating frozen dinners, suggesting that their relationship is frigid. (12-13) Once he leaves for Europe, she is never mentioned again; it is clear that Philippe's primary emotional relationship is with another man, Marc. Indeed Philippe seems over-identified with Marc – he calls him his "mirror," he feels culpable in his death, and he invokes him often as a touchstone in his attempts to realise himself. Marc can be read as a narcissistic, homoerotic extension of Philippe himself, his projection of his desire for self-realisation. Philippe's appearance at the end of the production, leaping while wearing giant wings, furthers this pattern of imagery: the production enacts a fantasy wherein Philippe merges with his other half, Marc, and triumphs. As Valerie Raoul argues:

> Narcissists frequently have fantasies of re-engenderment, of being reborn phoenix-like from the remains of their deficient self, through their own efforts. This is the ultimate dream of self-sufficiency and continuity. The narcissistic interpretation of the value of art is that it is a process of self-production and self-reproduction, rather than a production or representation of something else.[207]

The final image of Philippe in *Vinci* clearly evokes that of the phoenix rising: it is the image of the artist attempting to produce himself as an independent subject – to give

[207] Raoul, p. 21.

birth to himself through artistic practice. This leads us directly into the significance of *Vinci* as a postcolonial québécois expression.

VINCI AND QUÉBEC

As we have seen, the image of the artist creating him/herself is a frequent trope of decolonising cultures, the individual artist's struggle for self-definition standing in for that of the nation. Philippe's triumphant leap into the unknown can therefore be read as representative of Québec's situation at the time that Lepage created *Vinci*: poised to move past its self-definition phase into a more interactive relationship with the rest of the world. Yet Lepage's generation was not the first in Québec to create works which involved images of self-engenderment: as Raoul argues, such images appeared often in the work of québécois novelists in the 1960s and '70s, spawning the now-commonplace observation that such writers were attempting to write the Québec nation into being. In the 1980s, following the first failed referendum, the nationalist project lost momentum, and cultural expression, including theatre production, turned away from political material towards a concentration on the individual and on formal experimentation. *Vinci* – and indeed most of Lepage's early work – fits into and helped define this newer trend, but the recurrence of images of self-engenderment are evidence of the ongoing, circular nature of the Québec national project. Because independent nationhood (in Lacanian terms, full access to the symbolic register) had not been achieved, Lepage reverted to familiar tropes of representation involving self-creation.

While not explicitly invoking the language of postcolonial theory, many québécois critics have read *Vinci* as the expression of a decolonising consciousness: a

young subject of a colonised nation searches for himself by reaching out beyond his own culture, representing that culture's desire to achieve stability and legitimacy. But this discussion evidences the complications that Québec encounters by positioning itself as colonised while not taking account of its own complicity in the colonial enterprise. Bovet, for example, in her discussion of the production describes the Québécois as a debased population accustomed to an "all too familiar, uneven bilingual relationship"[208] with other cultures. In the production, Bovet argues, Philippe traces a backwards path towards Québec's cultural origins, going first to Britain (the dominant colonial power in Québec), then to France (the country which francophone Québec considers its cultural homeland), and then to Italy, the birthplace of the Renaissance and of Western humanist thought, which is, it is implied, the basis of québécois culture. This journey, according to Bovet, provides the kind of empowering message that Québec needs in order to complete and legitimise itself. But the trajectory that Bovet describes understands Québec identity as wholly based in Europe, perpetuating the racialised ideology of *Québécois pur laine* and selectively omitting the colonialism inherent in the French and English presence in Canada. Participating in this journey back to his European "roots" in fact enters Lepage into the long history of narratives of European enracination exposed by Deleuze and Guattari as a self-justifying and exclusionary discourse: "the tree and the root inspire a sad image of thought, ceaselessly imitating a multiple, based on a superior unity, from the center or the segment."[209]

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[208] Bovet, p. 7.

[209] Deleuze, Gilles, and Feliz Guattari, *Mille Plateaux, Capitalisme et schizophrenie* (Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1980), p 25, cited in Apter, Emily, *Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects*, p. 31.

Through his journey, Bovet argues, Philippe discovers that "a strong sense of identity is the only way to reach awareness of the unity of mankind and, therefore, achieve universality," a message which "may also seem to apply to the situation of Québec in today's world."[210] Claiming Québec's connectedness to idealised universal human family is a means of claiming cultural power for Québec; but claims of universality accrue power for one group by implicitly disempowering others. Universality is invoked here as a "pancultural virtue"[211] which erases or obscures material issues of responsibility and the actual facts of history. Underlying Bovet's argument is the assumption that Québec both needs and is privileged to receive inclusion in what she calls "the universality of the human condition,"[212] a universe that by her definition only includes Europeans and their descendents. This critical approach is weakened by the humanist and Eurocentric assumptions it shares with the production.

In its way, the main thrust of Hébert and Perelli-Contos' argument about *Vinci* is further evidence of Québec's particular postcolonial situation. They argue that the production overturns the basis of a humanist world-view by bridging the Cartesian separation between mind and body; this occurs in the production, they argue, when Leonardo teaches Philippe that "the painter's or artist's vision is not just a simple physical and optical relationship to the world: it is interior."[213] But what they are offering as evidence of a new worldview are hardly revolutionary formulations.

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[210] Bovet, p. 4.
[211] Apter, p. 30.
[212] Bovet, p. 12.
[213] "la vision du peintre ou de l'artiste n'est past qu'une simple relation physique et optique avec le monde: elle est intérieure..."Hébert and Perelli-Contos, p. 126.

That perception is an act of individual interior analysis is the basis of the Cartesian cogito. The idea that an artist's special quality is his unique vision is part of a discourse around human essences that dates from the Renaissance, and the glorification of the artist as uniquely sensitive is a concept we associate with high Romanticism. Such a reading, like Bovet's, takes universalist humanism as an unquestioned base cultural value. It draws on the production's engagement with forms of representation without placing them in the larger context of its status as a work of self-performed autobiography. Hébert and Perelli-Contos' reading of Lepage's work overall suffers from a sense of cultural isolation and defensiveness, and of their having entered so far into the artist's own terms for his creativity that they may have lost their critical objectivity.[214]

VINCI AND INTERNATIONALISM

As Apter has argued, globalisation complicates a discourse that attempts to locate and reify cultural roots, as multinational alliances and corporations render national borders more tenuous while at the same time prompting fears that such borders are more necessary than ever:

> The politics of roots and the psychic phenomenon of identification continue, perhaps more than ever, to condition cultural exchange and disciplinary formation. As economic protectionism has bolstered ideologies of cultural insularity, tariff wars, translation barriers, copyright disputes, and prohibitive insurance policies have become their own kind of market force in the politics of enracination. At the

[214] See, for example their 2000 article "L'oeuvre de Robert Lepage; Voyage(s) metaphorique(s) et décalages perceptif(s)", in which they assert that, because Lepage has declared that he sees his work as a total *oeuvre* rather than a series of discrete works, the only valid critical approach to his work is therefore an engagement with his larger themes and creative patterns. Those who accuse Lepage's individual works of being trivial or repetitive are compared to those who critiqued Picasso's constant use of blue, Magritte's many studies of melons and apples, and Cezanne's repeated representations at the same subject.

> opposite pole, the philosophical tradition of phenomenology has carried over a discourse of roots in a nostalgic politics of *heimat*, of ontological domesticity.[215]

These dual and seemingly conflicting tendencies – an idealisation of border-crossing, and the shoring up of rooted personal identity in the individual human body – are everywhere present in *Vinci* and the québécois discourse around it. Philippe is idealised, on one level, as the model internationalised young Quebecer, but his journey takes him backwards, into Québec's cultural past and an Enlightenment vision of selfhood, despite the production's gestures towards a deconstructed, flexible, mobile conception of identity.

The internationalisation of Lepage's career has rendered increasingly complex the connections between his expressions of selfhood and the Québec national project. The universalist humanism the productions espouse continue to give them a certain pan-cultural appeal; and yet their representations of otherness have grown increasingly problematic as Lepage's audiences have expanded beyond those who share references and assumptions with him. Despite these problematics he is held up by the government and media as an archetypical success story which bolsters Québec's claims to international politico-cultural legitimacy. *Vinci* laid the groundwork for such positioning, but is also evidence of the omissions and elisions that become necessary in order to maintain the Québec national project in a contemporary, globalised, and problematically "post-national" environment. In future chapters I will further explore the privileges and occlusions that have been necessary to maintain Lepage's status as an archetypical figure of Québec's globalisation.

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[215] Apter, p. 36.

CHAPTER 5: *THE DRAGON'S TRILOGY*

In the last chapter I examined an early work in which Lepage described a personal and artistic philosophy, placing his own self-realisation at the centre of his creative project. We also saw how *Vinci* became part of a narrative of Québec's own project of self-realisation, as critics and audiences mapped Québec's political trajectory onto Philippe's journey back to his cultural roots in Europe and to a new, empowered and masterful vision of the world. This chapter examines *La Trilogie des Dragons / The Dragon's Trilogy*, a group work created at the same time as *Vinci*, which became a spectacular international success. Like *Vinci*, *The Dragon's Trilogy* dramatised québécois characters interacting with other cultures, and became part of contemporary discourses around Québec's struggle for national status and its increasing cosmopolitanism.

From its conception, *The Dragon's Trilogy* was a work about diversity and cultural mixing that placed Québec and québécois creativity in settings beyond the province itself. That it was set in locations across Canada was not something that grew organically out of the process of creation; rather, in Lepage's words:

> ... It was imposed... We toured with *Circulations* to Toronto and Vancouver. In Toronto, there were people who expressed interest in doing a co-production with us... A Québec-Toronto co-production that did not have to go through Montréal – that was interesting... For *The Trilogy*, we gave ourselves the rule that the story would play out in Québec, Toronto, and Vancouver.[216]

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[216] "...il était forcé... Nous avois fait une tournée avec *Circulations*, que nous avons joué à Toronto et à Vancouver. À Toronto, des gens s'étaient montrés intéressés à coproduire un spectacle avec nous... Une coproduction Québec-Toronto, sans passer par Montréal, se serait curieux... Pour *la Trilogie*, nous nous sommes donné comme règle que l'histoire se déroulerait à Québec, à Toronto, et à Vancouver." In Pierre Lavoie, "Points de Repère: Entretiens avec les créateurs," *Jeu* 45, p. 179. The points made in these paragraphs about the development of the *Trilogy* are largely sourced from Lavoie's series of interviews with the production's creators.

The fact that the production took as subject matter the presence of a Chinese population in Québec grew out of Lepage's interest in Chinatowns, and from a family anecdote about a childhood friend of Lepage's mother who was married off to a Chinese man by her father to settle a gambling debt; this story ended up directly in the production in the character Jeanne's marriage to the Chinese laundryman's son Lee. Lepage also had a personal interest in Eastern cultures, shared with the five fellow artists with whom he created and performed the production and who are credited, with Lepage, as its co-authors – Marie Brassard, Lorraine Coté, Jean Casault, Marie Gignac, and Marie Michaud.[217] A related imaginative point of departure was a Québec City parking lot, which occupied the place where the city's Chinatown used to be; Lepage and his colleagues were taken with the idea of the many stories and histories that were metaphorically contained underneath a simple plot of sand and gravel: "... we agreed to start with this space, to make it speak, to explore it on the surface and in depth."[218] It was this source that inspired the collaborators to make the

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[217] The collective authorship of this and other of Lepage's productions is a complicated issue. Of the productions discussed in this thesis, *The Dragon's Trilogy*, *Tectonic Plates*, and *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* were all created using the collaborative technique Lepage adopted while working with Repère, based on the RSVP model. Lepage, however, was the director of all of these productions, with overall responsibility for shaping the material, and very quickly became the name and persona associated with their originality and success; as early as 1987, Diane Pavlovic noted that Lepage was "becoming a myth" in Québec, on the basis of *Vinci* and the early collaboratively created Repère productions including the *Trilogy* ("en passe de devenir un mythe," "Du décollage à l'envol," *Jeu* 42, p. 86). The productions all initially stem from his impulses and perceptions, and, as I am arguing, are for him a very personal means of expression. Thus, while not wanting to dismiss the contribution of the co-authors of the productions, I feel it is fair to refer to the productions (with relevant caveats) as a product of Lepage's creativity. At the same time, however, it is important to account for and analyse the cultural and individual forces that tend to consolidate authority for the work around Lepage alone. These issues are particularly germane to discourse around the 2003 revival of the *Trilogy*, in which its collective authorship was almost totally ignored, as I discuss in Chapter 8.

[218] "...nous nous sommes vraiment entendus pour partir de ce parking, pour le faire parler, pour l'explorer en surface et en profondeur." Lepage, cited in Lavoie, p. 178.

production's playing area a long rectangular box of sand, which initially represented a parking lot but also came to stand in for many other locations.

The production was developed over a span of three years, in three distinct versions. In its final realisation it was six hours long and divided into three sections called the Red, Green, and White Dragons, named after tiles in the game of mah-jongg. It followed the story of two cousins, Jeanne and Françoise, and their families, from their childhood in Québec City circa 1910, through their midlife experiences in World War II-era Toronto to then-present-day Vancouver. It juxtaposed many forms and styles of performance, from intimate naturalistic acting to expressionistic text-free passages of staging set to music. Dialogue was spoken mainly in French and English, with some Japanese and Chinese, with characters speaking in the language that would make sense in the lived context of the scenes, and without translation. That is, unlike some of Lepage's further productions, which were created in two versions, French and English, *The Dragon's Trilogy* was always performed in the same version, regardless of the native language of its audience.

Through the success of its touring the *Trilogy* helped establish Lepage as a major player on the international theatre scene, while at the same time advancing Québec's goals of international exposure and mobility, in that the production's success was often portrayed by the Québec government and media as representative of the province. The internationalism and cultural diversity represented within the *Trilogy* were far from uncontroversial, however, both outside and within Québec. Ironically, the production was critiqued on both sides of the Québec/Canada cultural debates; that is, it was alternately maligned for being too nationalist and too federalist. The cultural diversity represented within the production – that it portrayed

Chinese, Japanese, and British characters and cultural forms as well as québécois and Canadian – also generated varied responses. Within Québec it was largely welcomed as a knowing commentary on closed-minded attitudes there, and as an indication that those attitudes might be waning in the face of increasing cultural diversity. In the rest of Canada and internationally, however, many commentators read the production's representations of cultures other than Québec's as clichéd and stereotyped, and accused Lepage and his colleagues of appropriating Eastern cultures. As Harvie puts it, critics and spectators within Québec "were more prepared to recognise the play's perspective as québécois and to acknowledge the play's racist representations as self-conscious and self-critical" whereas critics in Britain, for example, "took the play's apparent focus on the Orient at face value and [criticised] it as Orientalist on that basis."[219]

The debate around the *Trilogy*'s representation of Asian cultures, and readings of it as an exploration of multiculturalism in Québec and Canada at large, has drawn attention away from its primary function: as a politicised expression of a decolonising culture. It is clear from their statements around the production that Lepage and his collaborators saw themselves as representatives of a subaltern cultural tradition performing their identity on a Canadian and international platform in order to, in Edward Said's words, "assert their own identity and the existence of their own history."[220] In Québec, francophone critics celebrated the production's theatrical innovations and its treatment of culturally specific material as proof of the culture's vibrancy, but did not apply the language or the reflexive tools of postcolonial theory

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[219] Harvie, Jennifer, "Transnationalism, Orientalism, and Cultural Tourism: *La Trilogie des dragons* and *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*," in Donohoe and Koustas, eds, p. 118.
[220] Said, Edward, *Culture and Imperialism*, xii.

in discussions of it, doubtless because of the overall resistance to postcolonial thought in francophone Québec discussed in Chapter 2. Its heterogeneous cultural surface and its treatment of Asian cultures prompted anglophone critics to bypass postcolonial frameworks and consider the production primarily through an intercultural lens. Another aspect of the production (and indeed of Lepage's work overall) which has not received critical attention is its reliance on melodrama as one of its primary, if seemingly unacknowledged, formal reference points. The production's creators drew on the emotive power and "allegoric turn"[221] of melodrama to help create a powerful postcolonial critique.

In this chapter I first will argue these points, before drawing on theoretical writings about theatrical interculturalism to analyse the use of "other" cultural source materials in the production, and to explore the complex politics that emerge when a culture which positions itself as subaltern engages in "othering." Another facet which complicates the cultural politics of the *Trilogy* was the extent of its touring. The widely differing interpretations of the production's representations point to what has become one of the major issues facing Lepage as his career develops into a global enterprise: located reception. If *The Dragon's Trilogy* was intended and understood locally as an ironic commentary on "the québécois mentality, stamped with xenophobia..." [222], audiences and critics outside Québec in some cases lacked the context in which to interpret its representations as ironic. As Carson has argued,

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[221] Gittings, p. 127.

[222] "la mentalité québécoise, empreinte de xénophobie..."Camerlain, Lorraine, "o.k. on change!", *Jeu 45*, p. 87.

> [v]iewed inside the country, the resonances of the images created were specific and emotive; viewed from outside the country, the issues of this debate became generalized, romanticized, and trivialized.[223]

Lepage, claiming to espouse a new internationalist vision of Québec nationalism, found himself facing the same accusation that had long plagued hard-line *québécistes*: that of racism.

MELODRAMA AND EMOTION

Though its roots lie as far back as Euripides, melodrama coalesced as a popular theatrical form in the late 19th century and was associated with exaggerated language and highly dramatic and event-filled plots whose "purpose [was] to delight and impress the multitude."[224] Sidelined in critical thought for most of the 20th century, melodrama became the subject of serious scholarly attention in the 1970s as part of the burgeoning of theatre studies, and of the increased prevalence of genre and feminist approaches to film studies. Peter Brooks made a seminal intervention in his 1975 volume *The Melodramatic Imagination*, arguing for melodrama as "a central fact of the modern sensibility."[225] Rather than considering it as a debased and populist genre – as poor man's tragedy – Brooks argued that melodrama was a specific response to a particular set of historical and cultural conditions, namely the rise of the bourgeoisie after the French Revolution and the subsequent need to preserve bourgeois values in the microcosm of the family. There is therefore a

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[223] Carson, Christie, " From *The Dragon's Trilogy* to *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*: The Intercultural Experiments of Robert Lepage," in Donohoe and Koustas, eds., p. 45.
[224] Carlson, Marvin, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present*, p. 215.
[225] Brooks, Peter, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, p. 21.

paradox inherent in melodrama, in its simultaneous gestures towards progressivism and conservatism, which has made it the subject of productively fertile ongoing debate in theatre, film, television and other cultural studies contexts. Because its sources are diverse and its qualities contentious, it is widely argued that melodrama is best considered as a mode or style rather than as a distinct genre.

Melodrama continues to be a popular mode, a site for the consideration of the status quo by ordinary people. As such it

> ... becomes a peculiarly significant public forum, complicated and immensely enriched because its discourse is aesthetic and broadly popular: a forum or arena in which traditional ways of feeling and thinking are brought into continuous, strained relation with powerful intuitions of change and contingency.[226]

Melodrama relies on strongly felt audience response: as Gledhill argues it "feeds on a demand for significance unavailable within the constraints of socially legitimate discourse but for which there is no other language."[227] Emotion is stirred up in the audience via "the externalisation of intensity into the semiotic systems of music, colour, and extremity";[228] all aspects of the *mise en scène* are mustered to give a sense of overall "spiritual crisis."[229]

The relationship between melodrama and emotion provides a useful framework in which to consider Lepage's productions, and indeed his overall relationship to his work, which we might call meta-melodramatic. Avowedly anti-intellectual, when discussing their work Lepage and his collaborators foreground the role of feeling and

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[226] Thorburn, David, "Television Melodrama," in Newcomb, ed., *Television: The Critical View*, Sixth Edition, p. 597.
[227] Gledhill, Christine, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in Gledhill, ed.. *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, p. 37.
[228] Bratton, Jacky, "Melodrama," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, Kennedy, ed, p. 841.
[229] Elsaesser, Thomas, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama", in Gledhill, ed., p. 49.

coincidence: *The Dragon's Trilogy* was created, according to its collaborators, through a process of brainstorming and development in which they relied on "luck",[230] the accumulation of impressions, and the overlapping of their dream and waking lives towards the creation of an organic, living entity:

> MARIE BRASSARD: [During a rehearsal] Marie Michaud told us about a dream she had. A man went into a store and became fascinated by a glass globe that he then stole. It was, for him, a symbol of eternity... a few days later, in the Old Port, I went into a junk shop... I was walking in the aisles when suddenly I heard "Sakura," the [Japanese] music that was inspiring us [during the rehearsal process]. In an empty asle, on a shelf, there was a glass globe there on its own, a glass globe made in China, with a light inside. This object became sacred for us... This production was easy to write, despite a few sleepless nights. We had the feeling that the story was there, that it was just our job to find it, and that all we needed to do was be attentive and sensitive, and then we'd know what to do. We just needed to let it happen...
> ROBERT LEPAGE: In the second creative period, we really had the feeling that we were not making anything up, that the show existed on its own, that we were unearthing it. The first period had laid down the rules. We allowed the show to grow itself. [231]

One of the company's most cherished anecdotes around the *Trilogy* involves the only performance of the *integrale* (six-hour version) at the 1987 Festival de Théâtre des Amériques (FTA) in Montréal. The performance was staged in a hangar in the

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[230] "hasard", Marie Michaud cited in Lavoie, p. 184.

[231] MARIE BRASSARD: "Marie Michaud nous a raconté un rêve qu'elle avait imaginé. Un homme entrait dans un magazin et il y était fasciné par une boule de verre qu'il volait. Il s'agissait, pour lui, du symbole de l'éternité... Quelques jours plus tard, dans la basse ville, j'entre dans un magazin de cochonerries... Je marchais dans les allées lorsque, soudain, j'entends Sakura, la musique que nous inspirait. Dans une allée vide, sur un rayon, une boule jouait tout seule, une boule de verre fait en Chine, avec une lumière. Cet objet a revêtu pour nous un caractère sacré... Ce spectacle a été facile à écrire, malgré les nuits blanches. Nous avions l'impression que l'histoire était là, qu'il s'agissait de la trouver, qu'il nous suffisait d'être attentifs ou sensibles, que tout nous disait quoi faire. Il s'agissait simplement de nous laisser aller."
ROBERT LEPAGE: "Dans la deuxième étape, nous avions vraiment l'impression de ne rien inventer, que le spectacle existait par lui-même, que nous le déterrions. La première étape avait mis en place toutes les règles. Nous avons laissé grandir le spectacle." Cited in Lavoie, pp. 184-85.

city's Old Port; towards the end of the production, in a scene in which the character Crawford imagines his homecoming to Hong Kong, the metal doors of the hangar rolled up, to reveal a Chinese junk passing by along the St. Lawrence River – an event which the creative team later revealed to be a complete coincidence, even though it fit perfectly into the imaginary world of the production. This fortuitous event was seen as emblematic of a theatrical moment in which creators, material, and audience had come together in a "miraculous" "state of grace" that was "... blessed by gods."[232] "We don't feel like we're magicians or anything," said Lepage, "but we feel like we're playing with a level of life which calls for these things to happen."[233]

Throughout his career, Lepage has continued to frame his artistic process as a quasi-spiritual pattern of instinct and affirmation, creating an overall sense of melodramatic affect which invites audiences and interviewers to invest emotionally in the productions as proof of "form in the world that is independent of human will."[234] The productions themselves contain many elements which work together to create a potent experience for audiences, a "moral and emotional heightening that is rarely encountered in the 'real' world."[235] Lepage's comprehensive approach to *mise en scène* layers elements, from music to visually-oriented staging to the thematic accumulation of images and impressions, which invites audiences to invest emotionally in the work and gives them an impression of having a privileged vantage

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[232] "état de grace" (St. Hilaire, Jean, "Bâtie pour bien vieillir, mais sans la magie de la version 1987," *Le Soleil*, 24 May 2003) "miraculeuse" (Hébert, Chantal, " 'O.K. on change?', ou *La Trilogie des Dragons*, un universe en puissance," *Jeu* 106, p. 125.); "magical...blessed by gods", quote from Jacques Lessard in O'Mahoney.
[233] Cited in Jacobson, Lynn, "Tectonic States," in *American Theatre*, November 1991, p. 22.
[234] Hauptmann, Ira," Defending Melodrama," in James Redmond, ed., *Themes in Drama 14: Melodrama*, p. 288.
[235] Thorburn, p. 604.

point on a world that looks like their own, but is seemingly imbued with deeper meanings and a sense of wonder.

MELODRAMATIC CHARACTER, SUBVERSION, AND NATIONAL ALLEGORY

Melodrama focuses on victims, on those who are subject to society but not in charge of it; thus, change can be imagined but rarely acted upon. The theatrical left has often turned to melodrama because its tendency to focus on polarities of good and evil from the perspective of the powerless makes it an "effective means of conveying revolutionary sentiment to mass audiences."[236] Filmmakers often use melodrama as a means to forward a critique of existing socio-political structures, recalling its roots as a bourgeois form constituting "a ideological weapon against a corrupt and feudal aristocracy."[237] Gittings argues that melodrama continues to provide an important model for Canadian and Québec film because it provides a useful microcosm, in the form of the family, through which the filmmaker can make a macrocosmic critique of national structures.

It is through this lens that Gittings reads Lepage's 1995 film *Le Confessionnal*, a family melodrama in which two half-brothers in contemporary Québec search for the truth of their parentage against the real-life historical backdrop of Alfred Hitchcock's filming of *I Confess* in Québec City. As Gittings argues, flashback is an important device in the "circular thematic and narrative structure" of melodramatic film, in that it allows the family (and national) past to be literalised on screen; Lepage exploits the potential of such shots in several "brilliant flashback and flashforward transitions" in

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[236] Gerould, Daniel, "Melodrama and Revolution," in Bratton et al, *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*, p. 185.
[237] Gledhill, "Melodrama," in Cook and Bernink, eds., *The Cinema Book*, p. 158.

which he moves between the two time periods of the film in single long panning shots. In Gittings' argument, *Le Confessionnal*'s crosscutting between

> the old, provincial, Catholic Québec of 1952 and the modern, secular Québec of 1989... represent[s] the becoming of the Québec nation... measur[ing] these processes through the past and present of the Lamontagne family.[238]

The central character in *Le Confessionnal*, Pierre Lamontagne, is to a certain extent an extension of the character of the same name in *The Dragon's Trilogy*, a character which Lepage has acknowledged represents himself. At the end of the *Trilogy*, Pierre tells his mother he is going to China to study art; *Le Confessionnal* begins with him returning from China for his father's funeral. This narrative connection between production and film has been noted by critics and scholars;[239] what has not received much comment is the extent to which the *Trilogy*, like *Le Confessionnal*, relied on and was structured by the codes and assumptions of melodrama. It too, utilised a circular temporal structure and staged flashback effects to make an argument about the role of the past in shaping Québec's present, and to reveal the positive effects of decolonisation on the Québec psyche. The *Trilogy* also deployed a typically melodramatic use of character as the central point of an externalisation of society in extremis:

> Rather than displacing the political by the personal, melodrama produces the body and the interpersonal domain as the sites in which the socio-political stakes its struggles.[240]

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[238] Gittings, pp. 129, 128.

[239] On Pierre standing in for Lepage, see Charest, p. 33, and Dundjerovic, *Cinema*, pp 53-57. On the narrative connections between *Confessionnal* and *Trilogy*, see Charest pp. 33-35, and Dundjerovic, *Cinema*, p. 66.

[240] Bratton, Jacky, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill, "Introduction," in Bratton et al, p. 1.

Melodrama's capacity to provide social critique depends on its creation of a situation of dramatic irony wherein spectators are given a long view on societal problems, a view that the characters themselves lack. In the *Trilogy* Lepage used

PLATE 8: The staging of the original Dragon's Trilogy, *with the audience on both sides of the playing area. Photo: Claudel Huot*

multiple means to give the audience the impression of having an over-arching perspective; first of all, in his use of a traverse staging configuration. The audience could see everything that was happening onstage and in the immediate offstage areas; all staging techniques and effects were thus performed in the complicit view of the spectators. The *Trilogy* also created dramatic irony through its epic scope, in that it treated a long period of time – some 75 years – and multiple generations of the same families, setting their individual stories against the backdrop of québécois, Canadian, and world history. The audience was empowered to piece together the ways that the individual characters' stories worked together, and what messages they

sent. Audiences witnessed the evolution of an initially dysfunctional and corrupt society into one on its way to being competent and international-minded, while at the same time retaining positive aspects of its traditions. While it was never stated directly in the production, it was clear that the source of Québec's problems was the fact that it was colonised and unable to shape its own socio-political destiny. Characters in the early parts of the production were typically melodramatic, in that they were broadly drawn and legible as representative figures rather than fully fleshed-out and psychologically credible individuals. As time moved forward towards the present day, characterisations became more fully articulated and naturalistic, thus representing Québec society's emergence from colonisation into self-realisation.

COLONISED QUÉBEC IN THE *TRILOGY*

Colonised societies are often depicted in artistic representation as feminised, with local males disempowered and neutered by the presence of the masculinised coloniser; as I have argued, such depictions figure significantly in *Vinci*. We also see these ideas played out in the first section of the *Trilogy*, which describes a society where gender roles, parenting, and authority are all dangerously askew. The pre-teen girls Jeanne and Françoise talk about their dreams of being mothers and having babies, but the only parents we meet are fathers – Jeanne's mother is dead, and we hear about Françoise's mother but never see her. The only relationship that resembles that of spouses in the section is one that skews traditional gender roles, between the Chinese laundryman Wong and the Briton, Crawford, who has moved to Québec to open a shoe store. The pair become partners in an illegal money-lending scheme and

grow to depend on each other – when Wong discovers he is dying, he wonders who will "take care of" Crawford.[241] Jeanne's father Morin has a confused and unhealthy attachment to her that is manifest in a flashback movement sequence, in which he summons Jeanne to help bury his wife but discovers the girl's own body under the blood-stained sheet. As Pavlovic reads this sequence, this stain constitutes a curse which elides marriage and death (the stain represents both the loss of virginity and the loss of life) which is then passed on to Jeanne in the form of her forced marriage to Wong's son Lee. (52) While this reading is useful, it is also important to note that it involves Morin mistaking his daughter for his wife.

As has been noted by many critics, the portrait of the Chinese and British characters in the first section of the *Trilogy* is highly clichéd. Wong is a stooped and shuffling laundryman who smokes opium in a mysterious underworld – the basement below his shop. Crawford is a fussy Brit who, as Harvie points out, is "made to bear the burden of a large portion of British colonial history – having lived in Hong Kong, the UK, and Canada."[242] Martin Hoyle, reviewing the *Trilogy* in *The Financial Times*, recoiled at this characterisation:

> The Brit (one Crawford – a Scot?) is portrayed in the crude and uncomprehending colours one associates with nineteenth century Japanese depictions of western devils and is satisfyingly killed off, for being a success, in a plane crash.[243]

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[241] This description of the *Trilogy's* plot and action is taken from the "reconstitution" of the production by critic Diane Pavlovic in *Jeu 45* (Pavlovic, Diane, "Reconstitution de *La Trilogie*," *Jeu 45*, pp. 40-82.) Because the text of the *Trilogy* was never published, this detailed description has become the primary record of the production. I am relying on it and also, to a lesser extent, on a live viewing of a performance of the revival production in Montréal on 8 June 2003, and on a videotape of a revival performance of 6 June 2003, understanding the revival version to be very similar, but not identical to, the original. All citations from the text, unless otherwise noted, are from Pavlovic, and will be noted by page numbers following the citation.

[242] Harvie, p. 113.

[243] Hoyle, Martin, "*The Dragon's Trilogy* (review)," *Financial Times*, 30 July 1987, cited in Harvie, ibid.

PLATE 9: Yves-Érick Marier as Wong in the original **Trilogy**. *Photo: Claudel Huot*

Certainly Crawford's arrival in Québec City sparks what can only be described as a renaissance of louche behaviour among its adult male population, but it is also made clear that the community's corruption preceded him. Wong started money-lending soon after he arrived in the city, and it is he who first offers opium to Crawford. In fact the production takes pains to contextualise Wong's and Crawford's activities as partially the fault of the xenophobic attitudes of the Québec people

towards them: Crawford explains to Lee that he and Wong lend money because it's the only way to earn the respect of the locals, who "do not open up to other cultures."[244] Morin, the representative local in this first section, is a highly unsympathetic character who becomes a spokesman for anti-immigrant racism in an early scene, in which he rattles off all the local prejudices against the Chinese.

PLATE 10: Marie Michaud as Jeanne observing Wong's sisters, played by Marie Brassard and Lorraine Côté, in the original Trilogy. *Photo: Claudel Huot*

In a flashback/dream sequence we discover that Wong's sisters are increasingly cut off from reality and imagine that they are back in China; but they are the only ones who continue to work – we see them washing sheets in barrels, keeping the family laundry going. Thus is it only the women in the society who continue to be productive, and only by completely divorcing themselves from its lived reality. What

[244] Direct quotation from the *Trilogy* revival videotape, supported by citation in Pavlovic, p. 49-50.

is first portrayed as a busy and normal society becomes a place where all the men – locals, immigrants, and coloniser alike – stop working and spend their days drinking, using drugs, and gambling. The production in fact seems less interested in placing blame directly on one character's (or population group's) shoulders than in depicting colonisation as a reprehensible phenomenon that rains down misfortune on all who are implicated in it.

Jeanne and Lee are so tied into this diseased world that they cannot escape it, even by physically leaving. In the second section we see them enduring a cold but functional marriage in Toronto, raising her daughter, Stella, the product of her illicit coupling with her childhood love, Bédard, whom she is forced to leave behind in Québec. Stella contracts meningitis and is severely brain-damaged, and Jeanne is diagnosed with breast cancer. Lee loves Stella but does not stand in the way of Jeanne consigning her to a Catholic asylum, because he respects Jeanne's status as Stella's natural parent. Jeanne then takes her own life, and Lee disappears from the production. In the third section, Stella dies in the asylum, the victim of institutional abuse. Both Lee and Jeanne are presented sympathetically; it is clear that it is their different cultures, as well as their fated pasts, that are keeping them from being happy together. It is a portrait of multiculturalism gone wrong, because it is built on the too-shaky foundation of the corrupt and colonised Québec society.

As Camerlain has noted, Jeanne is the production's most archetypically melodramatic character[245]: the victim of a series of terrible events that make her reject the present, as literalised on stage via her frequent flashbacks of Bédard riding his

[245] Camerlain, p. 95.

bicycle around their old neighbourhood. When Françoise visits Jeanne in Toronto and tells her about her happiness, the latter muses on the difference between them:

> You're in love and you have projects for the future. When I think of love, I think about the past. People never really live in the present. We live in three times, like a waltz.[246]

Jeanne cannot escape from Québec's corrupt and colonised past, but Françoise is a positive thinker who lives in the present and the future. Indeed, she is the character with the most agency and resilience in the production: she remains active after her husband's death, raising her son Pierre and continuing to be a strong presence in his life even when he moves a continent away from her. In order to discuss the production's third section, which moves forward to creators' "real time" and in which Pierre becomes central, it is important first of all to introduce the ways that language functions in the *Trilogy* as part of the creators' critique of colonisation in Québec.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE *TRILOGY*

The use of different languages in *The Trilogy* has been the focal point of commentary about the production, with critical views varying widely on the purpose and effect of its linguistic innovations. It is my view that the way the production uses language is part of its postcolonial critique, and participates in its melodramatic structures by thematically linking "true" linguistic communication with an idealised merging of cultures, as well as with emotional and romantic/sexual union. The melodramatic climax of the piece is also the moment in which linguistic problems are

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[246] "T'es en amour pis t'as des projets d'avenir. Moi, quand je pense à l'amour, j'y pense au passé. On vit jamais au présent. On vit en trois temps, comme dans une valse." Pavlovic, p. 61.

overcome through compromise and cultural blending. This is represented through the depiction of a "Japanese" ritual, apparently invented by the collaborators, in which a rope is knotted together, metaphorically representing the union of yin and yang and the sexual union of Pierre and the Japanese artist Yukali. This scene does the moral work of the melodramatic form, demonstrating to audiences that resolution is possible in that linguistic and cultural clashes can be overcome (a message given a politicised spin in that the compromise takes place between a Quebecer and a Japanese, rather than a Quebecer and an anglophone Canadian). This message is modified and repoliticised in a coda scene set in Québec City, which completes the circle of the plot and brings us back to a unilingual environment. Rather than ending on an image of idealised linguistic and cultural blending, this scene returns the story to traditional, matriarchial, francophone Québec.

As noted above, the *Trilogy* was performed in French and English, with some Japanese and Chinese, and did not provide translation between languages for audience members. This was a remarkably bold gesture for a production that was always going to tour in anglophone Canada. It began with a multilingual voice-over prologue, spoken alternately in French, English, and Chinese:

> I have never been to China
> When I was little, there were houses here
> It was the Chinese neighbourhood
> Now, it's a parking lot
> Later, it might become a park, a station, or a cemetery...[247]

The first staged scene in the production between Jeanne and Françoise was performed in rapid-fire, colloquial québécois that is difficult for non-natives to

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[247] "Je ne me suis jamais allée en Chine/ Quand j'étais petite, il y avait des maisons ici/ C'était le quartier chinois/Aujourd'hui, c'est un stationnement/ Plus tard, ça va peut-être devenir un parc, une gare, ou un cimitière..." *Jeu* 45, p. 38.

PLATE 11: Simone Chartrand (facing camera) and Vêronika Makdissi-Warren as Françoise and Jeanne in the 2003 revival of The Dragon's Trilogy. *Photo: Erick Labbé*

understand.[248] To the Québec critic Lorraine Camerlain, writing in *Jeu*, this scene was crucial to her being "conquered" by the imaginative world of the *Trilogy*.

> Why was I so moved by this scene? Above all because it was about pleasure and about language. About the pleasure that language can bring.

[248] Certainly, watching the revival version of the production in 2003 and subsequently a video of the same version, I did not catch certain important nuances that this scene conveys – that the girls talk about Crawford and seem to conjure him into existence before he actually appears on stage, for example, and this despite my considerable research on the production and the fact that I am conversant, if not fluent, in French. Michel Bernatchez, who produced both the original and revival versions of the *Trilogy*, confirmed in a phone interview on 29 November 2004 that the only passage of the original *Trilogy* which was ever supertitled was in a second-act scene in which Françoise types a letter to Jeanne. The company provided English-language supertitles of the letter when the production was performed in some anglophone environments, feeling that it provided necessary exposition that they did not want audiences to miss.

That the girls created an entire world simply through words and through a game with shoeboxes gave Camerlain a sense of being welcomed into a world she recognised and felt complicit with: "... I have rarely been so moved, so bowled over."[249] Already, language was being deployed in a way that was politically charged: to a local commentator, this first scene was highly successful in using language, chief among other theatrical means, to invite viewers in through a sense of familiarity and intimacy. Viewers who did not understand French would grasp the basic rules of the theatrical "game" that were being established, but would also perceive that they lacked the skills required to understand the substance of the dialogue and the details. As Godard comments, this "minoritising of English carries particular political force in nationalist Québec, where English is as foreign as, but more imperializing than, Chinese."[250]

The girls' dialogue segued directly into the first meeting between Crawford and Wong. Crawford knocks on Wong's door looking for the shoe store, called Petitgrew, that he is supposed to take over. Wong has some bad news:

> WONG: The store is burn.
> CRAWFORD: Are you telling me a star is born?
> WONG: The store is burn.
> CRAWFORD: I'm sorry, but I don't quite understand what you're saying.
> WONG: Petitgrew... (*With his candle, he sets on fire the paper that Crawford holds in his hand.*) (45)

Language is presented here as the cold face of cultural encounter and potential misunderstanding, and as one of the key conveyers of the production's message

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[249] "Pourquoi suis-je aussi sensible à cette scène? Avant tout parce qu'il s'agit de plaisir et de langage. Du plaisir que peut procurer le langage." "... rarement en ai-je été à ce point émue, bouleversée..." Camerlain, pp. 85, 83.
[250] Godard, Barbara, "Between Performative and Performance: Translation and Theatre in a Canadian/Québec Context," *Modern Drama* 43, pp. 348-349.

about the difficulties presented by colonial incursion into Québec. When Crawford interprets "the store is burn" as "a star is born" he is wildly off the mark: what he hears as some kind of mythic reference to new life is actually a factual account of real-life destruction. We have quickly moved from the harmonious and intimate shared language of the two girls to the possibility for misunderstanding because of a lack of a shared language (via, it must be said, a clichéd depiction of the particular pronunciation of English by some Chinese people). But the two men quickly find a way to get by, because Crawford understands but does not speak Chinese, and Wong seems to understand some English. Thus they enter into what is a familiar linguistic contract in Québec and other bilingual societies, in which each speaks in his own language, and communication and understanding are eked out provisionally. But, however practical, this linguistic compromise is tied into and implicated in the production's damning portrait of the corruption and dysfunction of colonised Québec. Cultures and languages are placed next to each other, but real fusion and understanding is not being achieved. Nor is it achieved in an even more complex multilingual scene in the second section, in which the Catholic nun Soeur Marie comes to Lee and Jeanne's home to take Stella to the asylum. The Sister is trilingual: she was a missionary to China, and so can speak Chinese, and is also conversant in Canada's two official languages. But the scenes involving the nun are comic-tragic displays of people talking to each other but not really hearing: the nun monologues incessantly and passionately in French about her experiences in Mao's China, Jeanne is lost in her world of sorrow, and Lee tries to argue his position in a language (English) which his wife barely understands: "Stella has a family. She must stay with her family. That's the Chinese way." (63) That Jeanne sends Stella away despite Lee's

argument is evidence of just how little understanding ever existed between the couple. In a trope familiar from much post-war modernist drama, their linguistic distance represents the spiritual and personal distance between them.

In the encounter between Yukali and Pierre, however, the couple find a way to move beyond their linguistic differences towards true understanding: what makes their encounter different is that they can surmount difference through the languages of art and, it is implied, love. Pierre, in his 20s, has come to work as an artist and to run a gallery in Vancouver. In another of the production's knowing prods at the idiosyncracies of Québec culture, Pierre is portrayed as an über-Francophile: he recognises Yukali's French perfume, "Chagrin d'Amour," because he has a "French nose";[251] he has his mother bring him bottles of French wine when she visits from Québec; and most of all, despite the fact that he lives in the far reaches of anglophone Canada and runs a business there, he still speaks only the bare bones of English. And yet he and Yukali, who does not speak French, find a way to communicate with each other by sharing their art works and talking from the heart about them. That the scene between them is intended as the central and climactic encounter of the production is underlined when Yukali shows her paintings to Pierre: a trilogy of dragons, green, red, and white, named and thematised just as the sections of the production are. If this production were an album, we are being told, this scene would be the title track. The production's celestial imagery ("A star is born"; Stella's name meaning "star"; the framing presence of Halley's comet) is also centrally present here in Pierre's artwork, an installation of lights called "Constellation." When Yukali comments self-effacingly at the low-tech nature of her own work, Pierre protests:

[251] Cited in Bovet, p. 14.

PLATE 12: Lepage and Marie Brassard as Philippe and Yukali in the original Trilogy. *Photo: Claudel Huot*

> PIERRE: Non, non, c'est pas la même chose. You, ton travail, ça part de... *(He touches his chest.)* You, you plug in you... toi, t'est branchée sur toi. Me, I plug in the wall. It's cold.
> YUKALI: But it touches me. I am working in the space inside. Small. You are working with the space around us. You put the universe in a small room. And here, I feel safe, secure, safe in your universe. (75)

As Yukali prepares to leave the gallery, Pierre tells her he is travelling home to Québec to take care of his mother because she is upset about Stella's death, but that he will contact her when he returns. In a following scene, the coming-together of Pierre and Yukali spiritually, artistically, and linguistically is represented through a ritual in a zen garden in which they walk towards each other repeating phrases in English:

PIERRE: My name is Pierre, and en français, it means rock, stone. It means pierre.
YUKALI: My name is Yukali, and in Japanese, it means precious stone, emerald. We are....
PIERRE: *(repeating)* We are...
YUKALI: Like two stones
PIERRE: Like two stones...
YUKALI: In a zen garden.
PIERRE: In a zen garden. (77)

The other actors bring onstage two ends of a thick rope, with a loop at one end; they bring the straight end through the loop as Pierre and Yukali explain, each in their own language, about a yin and yang ritual executed every year in a Japanese village.

PIERRE: Si le côté yin du village l'emporte, ce sera une année de fertilité, de douceur, et de sagesse. [If the yin side of the village wins, it will be a year of fertility, mildness, and wisdom.]
YUKALI: If the yang side wins, it's going to be a year of sun, strength, and brightness. But at this game there's no winners and no losers. (78)

The couple lie together in the sand as Pierre's "Constellation" reilluminates.

In a scene earlier in the third section of the play, we saw Pierre argue and break up with his Anglo-Canadian girlfriend, with whom he speaks French. She, Maureen, is fed up with his insecurities and introspectiveness ("You can't eat a piece of toast, Pierre, without telling me how you feel in relation to your toast").[252] Clearly, it seems, even French-speaking Canadians do not have the capacity to communicate effectively with Quebecers. It is only inspiration from ancient, non-Western spirituality, and from art, that an us-them, winner-loser mentality can be overcome, and a truly harmonious merging of cultures achieved. That Pierre, with his French ways, finds a way to connect with someone so far outside his field of cultural reference represents a positive message of fusion for a new generation of Quebecers;

[252] "...tu peux pas manger un toast, Pierre, sans me parler comment tu te sens par rapport à ta toast..." Pavlovic, p. 71.

but the fusion represented here seems to leave out the possibility of Canadian-Québec cultural mixing. It is on the one hand a positive message, but one that holds out little hope for connection between the "founding" cultures within Canada.

MOTHER QUÉBEC REIGNS SUPREME

I have been arguing throughout this chapter that *The Dragon's Trilogy* represents a critical commentary on the part of its creators about Québec's status as colonised. From its portrait of a corrupt, stagnant, traditional, and linguistically disconnected Québec City, it moves westward across Canada, finally describing an idealistic portrait of linguistic and cultural merging in Vancouver. Thus the production seems to be advocating, up to a certain point, multicultural and multi-lingual mixing as an important and progressive step in Québec's future (bearing in mind the crucial Franco-Anglo caveat communicated by Pierre and Maureen's failed relationship). A final scene, however, brings the action back to monolingual Québec City and underlines the importance of loyalty to the Québec nation. This scene transforms the traditional ending predicated by the melodrama form, which requires that the status quo be reinstated and the values of family affirmed: here Québec is portrayed as both progressive and matriarchial.

We discover Pierre and Françoise back in the parking lot where the production began. Naturally, they speak French to each other. They just miss the passing of Halley's Comet, and Françoise leaves a memento to Stella. Pierre then has some news for his mother:

> PIERRE: Mama, you know that grant I applied for to go to England?
> FRANÇOISE: Yes.
> PIERRE: Well I got it. But I don't want to go to England anymore.

FRANÇOISE: Really?
PIERRE: I want to go to China. [253]

On the one hand, this seems an odd choice of destination – given that he has just met and connected profoundly with a Japanese woman, it might have followed for him to travel to her home culture. But that he chooses China allows the creators to bring the production full circle, as immediately happens when Françoise repeats the first line of its prologue – "I have never been to China..." – now in a grounded context of plot and character. Françoise and her generation did not have the means to travel outside the country; they represent the conservatism and limitations of closed-off, colonised early and mid-20th century Québec. But they laid the foundations for the mobility of Pierre's generation. Bovet reads this scene against another of the production's late plot twists: that the dying Crawford tries to revisit Hong Kong but perishes in the attempt when his plane crashes into the Pacific Ocean. In Bovet's view,

> It is as if the québécois character, having strengthened his own identity and opened up to the world, is ready to take over and succeed where the Englishman failed. The political message is implicit: Québec's place in the world can only be ensured by a strong sense of identity coupled with open-mindedness toward other cultures.[254]

And, it seems, Québec's place in the world can only be ensured once the centrality of the mother-figure, and the French language, are affirmed. Pierre is prepared to head off to new horizons, but not without returning to the source, culturally and personally (a similar trajectory to that outlined in *Vinci*). This, perhaps inadvertently, turns Yukali into a *Butterfly* figure – having received sexual and spiritual sustenance

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[253] "PIERRE: M'man, tu sais la bourse que j'ai demandé pour aller en Angleterre?
FRANÇOISE: Oui.
PIERRE: Ben je l'ai eue. Mais c'est plus en Angleterre que j'ai envie d'aller...
FRANÇOISE: Ah non?
PIERRE: C'est la Chine." Ibid, p. 80.
[254] Bovet, p. 18.

from Yukali, Pierre leaves her behind for the real woman in his life, his mother, and then heads off to China.[255]

THE TRILOGY AND INTERCULTURALISM

The Dragon's Trilogy asserted that Québec has suffered profoundly from colonisation, but that it was finding a way to move beyond this legacy and to reach out to other cultures, led by its young people and its artists, while at the same time honouring its origins and the central place of the French language in Québec identity. It is hard to disagree with Lepage when he called it "a very Québec show" and "one of the most nationalist pieces ever written in Québec theatre."[256] It is fundamental to understand the production in this context first, before tackling the many formal and cultural issues that it raises, such as its treatment of Asian characters, cultures, and themes. In this I follow on from Harvie's assertion that the production's "handling of non-québécois characters is secondary in importance to the play's more thoroughgoing focus: the Quebecers themselves" and that criticism of what has been argued is its stereotypical and clichéd representations of other cultures "if not incorrect, [is] perhaps misplaced."[257] This is not to excuse or explain away such representations or to valorise artists' intent over an objective critique; but rather to argue that understanding the production as a nationalist expression is a necessary

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[255] This impression is amplified in the 2003 revival, which cut the line in which Pierre tells Yukali that he will contact her when he returns from Québec, so that Yukali leaves her paintings in his gallery seemingly with no assurances that she will see him or them again.
[256] Kelly, Brendan, "Into the Mouth of the Dragon," *The Los Angeles Times*, 9 September 1990; reprinted in the programme for *La Trilogie des Dragons* at Théâtre Périscope, Québec City, 6 September-6 October 1991.
[257] Harvie, p. 117.

and useful means to contextualise the extremely varied, and sometimes contradictory, claims that have been made about and for it.

To start with, claims that have been made about the production from within Québec, and the exalted status that it now holds in the province/nation's cultural history, must be considered within the socio-political framework of québécois nationalism. Sherry Simon has argued in a number of fora that the *Trilogy* is representative of "a new sense of the wider boundaries of Québec culture, and its necessary heterogeneity."[258] Her ability to frame the *Trilogy* as such depends on her reading of 1980s Québec as being characterised by a "reconfiguration of québécois cultural power and the realisation that immigrants were henceforth to be a part of the majority francophone world..." In her argument, the advent of Bill 101, the controversial language law which required (amongst other measures) children living in Québec to be schooled in French, led to a defusion of hardline nationalism and significant "new sense of the wider boundaries of Québec culture."[259] This attempt at a positive spin on Bill 101 is admirable, but not wholly accurate: as we have seen, the influx of immigration into Québec in the 1970s and '80s was highly controversial, with official Québec's attempts to integrate immigrants into francophone culture attacked from within as anti-nationalist, and from without as xenophobic and opportunistic. To portray this period as one of widening definitions of "Québecness" and the *Trilogy* as a sign "of the decentring of nationalist paradigms"[260] in 1980s

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[258] Simon, Sherry, "Robert Lepage and the Languages of Spectacle," in Donohoe and Koustas, eds., p. 218. See also Simon, "Culture and its Values: Critical Revisionism in Québec in the 1980s", in Lecker, ed; *Le Trafic des Langues: Traduction et culture dans la littérature québécoise*; and "Translating and Intercultural Communication in the Contact Zone: Border Writing in Québec," in Bassnett and Trivedi, eds.

[259] Simon, "Robert Lepage," p. 218.

[260] Simon, "Culture and its Values," p. 174.

Québec is to selectively interpret the historical record and the substance of the production itself; its seeming acceptance of diversification is in fact mobilised in service of an embattled but resilient Québec nationalism.

Arguments around the production's depiction of "other" cultures are even more complex and contradictory. Stanton Garner, playing the positive, celebrates the production as an exploration of Canada's "distinctive multicultural heritage," and as a "remarkable and varied theatrical spectacle" which "borrow[s] eclectically from sources as varied as cabaret, pantomime, Asian shadow theater, Chinese festival, and theatrical expressionism."[261] Most other commentators on this subject took a much more critical view of the *Trilogy's* cultural "borrowings," arguments that take us straight to the heart of similar and contemporary controversies about intercultural theatre. Godard has taken perhaps the hardest line in her assertion that the *Trilogy* "contributes to the perpetuation of Orientalism, to the longstanding Western identity-construction through such a process of othering."[262] This is a frequent argument made against Euro-American theatre productions that depict Eastern settings and material; Brian Singleton's consideration of interculturalism raises a number of points relevant to this discussion:

> Interculturalism... does not attempt to set up an 'us' and 'them' situation but embraces the pluralism and relativism of mass global culture. The postcolonial world has created new cultural arenas which go beyond those defined by the nation-state. It would be a huge task for European ex-colonisers, such as Britain and France, to erase the Orient from their post-colonial consciousness. The difference lies, however, in the treatment of the subject. Orientalism positions the

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[261] Garner, Stanton, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*, pp. 225-26, 227.
[262] Godard, p. 349.

> Orient as subject whereas the interculturalism of, say, [Ariane] Mnouchkine treats the occident as subject.[263]

As I have argued above, the subject matter of the *Trilogy* is clearly Québec itself and thus, if we accept Singleton's argument, it would be inaccurate to classify the production as Orientalist. Further, it is important to foreground that the creators of this production belonged to a culture which positioned itself as subaltern, both within the Canadian context and internationally; and the success of this production was truly unprecedented for a québécois company at that time. This is in contrast to the work of other theatremakers associated with interculturalism, such as Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine, who function in a socially empowered first-world context. As Carlson has argued, it is questionable whether it is accurate to call Brook's *Mahabarata* and Mnouchkine's *L'Indiade* intercultural at all, as those productions were performed in elitist circuits of production and distribution which service an expert, educated, first-world audience.[264] While such considerations become central in discussing Lepage's work from the 1990s onwards, these were not the conditions in which *The Dragon's Trilogy* was first presented. Then, Lepage and Théâtre Repère were starting to be recognised in theatre circles in Québec, and were virtually unknown outside their home province. They saw themselves, and within Québec were understood, as speaking from the periphery.

It is also important to take a nuanced approach to the *Trilogy's* treatment of plural Asian *subjects*; that the production involves such a multiplicity of Asian cultural references, as Garner suggests above, renders impossible any simple or

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[263] Singleton, Brian, "Introduction: The Pursuit of Otherness for the Investigation of Self," *Theatre Research International* 22:2, p. 96.
[264] See Carlson, Marvin, "Brook and Mnouchkine: Passages to India?", in Pavis, ed., *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, p. 82.

overreaching statement about what "other" cultures represent in the production. On the one hand, the representation of Chinese characters in the production, and its use of different languages, fits into Patrice Pavis' definition of multicultural theatre, which uses as its source "[t]he cross-influences between various ethnic and linguistic groups in multicultural societies..." in the creation of a performance "utilizing several languages and performing for a bi- or multi-cultural public."[265] Seen this way, the *Trilogy's* representation of Chinese characters functions as mimesis: there were Chinese people living in Québec City during the time the production depicts, and the creators focussed on their presence as a means to create a believable and pointed portrait of a society confronting difference – of the attempt to make a transition from mono- to multi-culturalism in the context of colonisation.[266] When Godard criticises the production for its limited and clichéd palette of references to China, in particular "the prominent position given to opium" which "perpetuates the stereotypes of Chinese criminality that were part of the "yellow scare"... mounted.... to rationalise a keep-Canada-white immigration policy,"[267] she fails to take into account that fact that the production's clichéd representation of the Chinese seems knowing, and is surrounded by the strategic use of stereotypes and clichés of many cultures including Quebecers themselves. As Harvie suggests,

> The strongest response to these charges of clichéd, Orientalist representation is that, rather than betraying the racism of the production, they portray the racism of its main characters,

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[265] Pavis, "Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?", in Pavis, ed., p. 8.
[266] This is the basis of Sherry Simon's analysis of the production in "Robert Lepage and the Languages of Spectacle," but she overextends this line of thinking by arguing that the *overall subject* of the production is the exploration of "the meaning of 'Chinese' through seventy-five years of social history of Québec and Canada" (p. 218).
[267] Godard, p. 350.

> problematising it by highlighting its naiveté, crudity, and extent, and emphasising its change over time.[268]

Godard further criticises the production for its "uni-directional" cross-cultural casting (all the actors were white Quebecers) which further misses the point that the production was consciously foregrounding itself as representative of, and about, a distinctly Québec point of view.[269]

There are other representations of "the Orient" in the production, however, than those which correspond to a relatively documentary reference, and which function as decoration, formal inspiration, and thematic shorthand. These depictions of certain elements of Asian cultures were decontextualised, idealised, and trivialised. That the production spoke from the (Western) periphery should not stop us from censuring the *Trilogy* for, at times, engaging in what Carlson calls

> ... the typical Western appropriation of Oriental material for purposes of exoticism, spectacle, or making indirect political reference, without any attempt to discover the voice of that material itself.[270]

For example, the production continually and indiscriminately slipped between Chinese and Japanese references, as when Wong's sisters appeared on stage to the sound of Japanese music.[271] Yukali's family line is tenuously attached to the overall production: they first appear in the second section via a flimsy narrative bridge – Jeanne hearing Japanese music on the radio – which prompts a shift of location to Japan. We meet a Geisha who is impregnated and deserted by an American soldier;

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[268] Harvie, p. 114.

[269] Cross-cultural casting will become an issue, as we shall see, in the 2003 revival, in which an altered casting policy became a key part of the production's troubled attempts to address what it acknowledged was its previously "naïve" vision of the Orient.

[270] Carlson, "Brook and Mnouchkine," p. 88.

[271] In an interview in *Jeu* 106, Marie Gignac commented on this slippage in the context of "mistakes and incongruities" that the company were striving to address in the 2003 revival. "Today, we laugh at ourselves and say, 'We mixed everything up back then.'" ("Aujourd'hui, on se dit en riant: 'On mélangeait tout à l'époque.'") (Hébert, "O.K. on change?", p. 127).

the Geisha is killed in the Hiroshima bombing but her daughter then gives birth to Yukali. This *Madame Butterfly* trope of the loved and deserted Japanese woman, which figures in the depictions of both the Geisha and Yukali, draws on and perpetuates over-familiar images, and is an unfortunate use of cultural cliché on the creators' part.[272] The introduction of the subject of the bombing of Hiroshima feels like a gratuitous reference to an event in world history that is evoked for its emotive power without being contextualised or justified. It is hard not to see the Japanese characters as shorthand for Japan as an idealised site of spiritual wholeness, gendered as female and penetrated by the Western male. A list of other problematic "quotations" from Asian culture includes the use of tai-chi as a formal device; and a sequence, late in the production which, as the dying Crawford imagines his childhood in Hong Kong, turns into a festive Chinese parade with lanterns and paper dragons, bringing an inescapable feeling of exoticism.

A final point on the production's treatment of otherness brings us to issues of selective interpretation of Québec's cultural past raised in the discussion of *Vinci*. The prologue of the *Trilogy* turns digging in the sand into a metaphor for the cultural work that the production does in excavating the history of Québec:

> ... If you dig the soil with your fingers
> You'll find water and motor oil
> If you keep digging
> You'll surely find bits of porcelain
> Jade
> And foundations of houses of the Chinese who lived here
> And if you dig even further
> You'll find yourself in China... [273]

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[272] The use of the *Butterfly* trope will reappear, more problematically, in *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*.

[273] "Si tu grattes le sol avec tes ongles/Tu vas trouver de l'eau et de l'huile à moteur/ Si tu creuses encore/ Tu vas surement trouver des morceaux de porcelaine/ Du jade/ Et les

Before they ended up in China, would Lepage's metaphoric diggers not first have discovered arrowheads and beads? As with *Vinci*, omitted from this fictional narrative is the foundational act of colonisation of native Canadian lands by French and English settlers. Of course, Lepage and his collaborators had the right to choose their story and to style it as they wished. But their choices are revealing. In 1987 Lepage and Gignac talked about their goals for the *Trilogy* with Nigel Hunt:

> HUNT: What interests you more, traveling to other places or the cultures you find there?
> LEPAGE: It's all linked together – the language, the traveling, the tourist side of it. But the human side also: finding your roots in someone else's culture... because Québécois have strange roots. I don't know where I came from... we're looking for our roots.
> ...
> GIGNAC: We are examining ourselves.... in the *Trilogy*, we were talking about ourselves through our vision of China.
> LEPAGE: It was a pretext for us. We said, we're going to do a show about the Chinatowns. But we knew what really concerned us was the people we knew, our families, our intimates.[274]

By referring to the production as a search for québécois "roots" Lepage again engages a discourse of cultural enracination which, in this case, connects the francophone population of Québec to a fellow immigrant culture – the Chinese – while not acknowledging that all immigrants to Canada were settling a land that was previously inhabited. When Gignac says that Repère was "looking for ourselves through our vision of China," she implies that non-québécois cultures function in the work as the Lacanian other, as a mirror of otherness in which the creators can see themselves and their desires. Arguably it is the indigenous population that is the true other of Canada's "founding nations", but that history is so deeply buried in the

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fondations des maisons des Chinois qui vivaient ici/ Et si tu creuses encore plus loin/ Tu vas te retrouver en Chine." *Jeu* 45, p. 38.

[274] Cited in Hunt, p. 116.

country's psyche that it not easily or comfortably unearthed. By leaving the natives out of their story and by representing newer immigrant populations as other to French-Canadian culture, Repère participates in what First Nations chief Phil Fontaine calls "the Big Lie"[275] that erases the presence of indigenous populations from Canada's history. This erasure becomes more problematic given assertions such as Hunt's, that "[t]he cultural collage of the *Trilogy*, and the struggle for a balance between cultural identity and assimilation, is, in fact, Lepage's version of the story of Canada."[276] As the claims about the *Trilogy's* historical sweep become more extravagant, so do its omissions seem more glaring.

THE TRILOGY'S RECEPTION IN CANADA AND BEYOND

I have argued that the depictions in the *Trilogy* prompted very different responses depending on the cultural position of the spectator, focussing mainly on the production's controversial depiction of Asian cultures. I will now turn to the different ways in which the production was perceived to represent Québec's relationship to the rest of Canada, for these are revealing both of intra-Canadian cultural politics at the time, and of Québec's evolving sense of internationalism and Lepage's place within it.

While the *Trilogy* is now considered a landmark in Québec's cultural development, early québécois response to the production was not homogeneous. When it first appeared, despite its clear nationalist focus, the inclusion of non-Québec

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[275] Cited in "Constitutional Discord: Meech Lake," a multimedia resource on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's website. http://archives.cbc.ca/400d.asp?id=1-73-1180-6496&wm6=1, accessed 11 June 2005.
[276] Hunt, p. 114.

locations and the English language displeased some Québec critics. Lepage's response to these claims is fascinating and worth quoting at length:

> CAROLE FRÉCHETTE: You've been criticised for having made, with the *Trilogy*, a 'festival show', pan-Canadian, totally in the federalist spirit. How would you respond to that?
>
> ROBERT LEPAGE: People make those criticisms in Montréal. There's never a question of federalism in Toronto. It is my feeling, on the contrary, that this show is very nationalist. Portraying québécois protagonists defending a nationalist idea isn't necessarily the best way to express nationalism. I think it's more interesting to present québécois artists who have to exile themselves in Vancouver. But I'm not *selling* that idea. I'm just saying that this is what you have to do: I have to tour in Western Canada and in the United States in order to get to the next level. For me, that's a nationalist proposition .[277]

The fictional Québec artist Lepage mentions, who finds it necessary to move to Vancouver, is of course Pierre, Lepage's stand-in in the production. Note how Lepage's discussion segues seamlessly from a discussion of the production to the character and then to his own situation. This is the clearest explanation we have of why Pierre ends up in Vancouver: he "exiles" himself there in order to reach his potential as an artist. This adds to the impression of the tortured relationship between artist and his source (mother) culture: advancement and maturation, it seems, are not possible at home. Leaving is the only way to succeed. This in turn sheds light on Lepage's vision of his career path. His productions must tour outside of Québec – it is the inevitable next step in order to "get to the next level," which he portrays as a

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277 FRÉCHETTE: "On t'a reproché d'avoir fait, avec *La Trilogie des Dragons*, un "show-festival", pan-canadien, tout à fait dans l'esprit fédéraliste. Qu'en penses-tu?" LEPAGE: "C'est à Montréal qu'on nous a fait ces reproches. Il n'a jamais été question de fédéralisme à Toronto. J'ai l'impression, au contraire, que ce spectacle est très nationaliste. Montrer des protagonists québécois qui défendent une idée nationaliste n'est peut-être plus la meilleure façon de témoigner du nationalisme. Il est davantage intéressant, je crois, de montrer des artistes québécois obligés de s'exiler à Vancouver. Mais je ne vends pas cette idée-là. Je veux simplement dire que c'est ce qu'il faut faire: je suis obligé de faire les tournées dans l'Ouest et aux États-Unis pour pouvoir accéder à un autre palier. Pour moi, ça, c'est un propos nationaliste." Fréchette, pp. 117-118.

nationalist obligation. If touring internationally makes him a good nationalist, "getting to the next level" in his career makes him an even better one – the more internationally successful the Quebecer, he seems to argue, the better for Québec.

But not necessarily for Canada. Negative reaction to the production in the conservative Prairie province of Manitoba was an indication of how Québec's struggle for cultural and political self-determination was an ongoing source of controversy and dissent within the Canadian nation as a whole, and is evidence that the *Trilogy* was not as universally successful at "exploit[ing] and explod[ing]"[278] inter-Canadian cultural and linguistic difference as has often been claimed. The *Trilogy* toured to Winnipeg, Manitoba's capital, in 1990, in the full heat of the controversy about Québec's constitutional status now known as the Meech Lake crisis. The background to this crisis was the controversial repatriation of the Canadian constitution in 1982 without the consent of Québec's provincial parliament. In 1987, Québec premier Robert Bourassa attempted to integrate Québec's specific claims as a special society into the constitution through the proposal of five conditions, the text of which was agreed on by the prime minister and the ten provincial premiers at Meech Lake in Ontario. The federal government and the provinces were then given three years to ratify the accord. In December 1988, the federal Supreme Court invalidated the French-language signage portion of Bill 101, but Bourassa overrode the decision, inflaming negative sentiments over the French language issue throughout Canada and focussing opposition to the Meech Lake proposals. Meech Lake was scotched for good by a member of Manitoba's provincial parliament, Elijah Harper, who effectively blocked the province's ability to act on the accord by

[278] Koustas, "Robert Lepage," p. 172.

filibustering so long against it that the deadline for ratification passed. Harper was the only aboriginal parliamenterian in Manitoba, and it was later acknowledged that his opposition had less to do with Québec's claims than with a lack of special status for Natives in the accord. The failure of Meech Lake reawakened québécois nationalism and started a snowball effect that led to the creation of Lucien Bouchard's sovereigntist Bloc Québécois party, and eventually the barely-failed 1995 referendum.[279]

When the *Trilogy* played at the Manitoba Theatre Centre (MTC) in May 1990, many audience members walked out, a response which a local reporter attributed to "the amount of French and smoke in the production" (the first minutes of the show involved the use of a fog machine). For MTC artistic director Steven Schipper, the problem had to do with local bias against the French language, which he decried:

> As a Canadian, I find that unacceptable. One of the things the play does is make a positive affirmation that as a cultural mosaic we can live together and thrive. It's too bad that the very people who really need that affirmation are saying, 'Sorry, if it's in French, I don't want to listen.'

Schipper, delicately, keeps his discussion at the level of language; but a Winnipeg audience's rejection of a production partly in French can also be read as resentment of the special status within Canada for which Québec continually agitates, status symbolised by the status of French as one of Canada's two official languages. Lepage was much more direct about what he saw as the root of the problem:

> The actors felt it's not surprising that the whole Meech Lake disagreement starts from here in Winnipeg. I think it's all connected. They walk out on *The Dragons' Trilogy* and Meech Lake.[280]

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[279] See Dickinson and Young, pp. 354-56.

[280] Prokosh, Kevin, "Bigotry blamed for play's reception," *The Winnipeg Free Press*, 23 May 1990.

Later that year, after the failure of the Meech vote, Lepage told *The Los Angeles Times* that he had been "shocked... by the manifestation of hatred" of Québec that the company had experienced in Winnipeg, and that this "fuelled the separatist" in him. But, in the same conversation, Lepage recuperates both audience response in Winnipeg, and the negative response of Quebecers to the production's use of English, into a vision of himself and the *Trilogy* as edgy yet positive forces of change in Québec and Canada:

> I think there's a lot of misunderstanding on both sides in the post-Meech period. We have to be careful... I think I am a [Québec] nationalist, but the nationalists think I'm fishy because I don't express my nationalism in an obvious way. *The Dragon's Trilogy* is about the Canadian mosaic, but it's French-Canadian impressions... It clearly shows a very distinct society.... [Some Québec audiences] were shocked because there was so much English in it. We answered that, of course, Québec is a French province, but it is surrounded by English and we use English a lot. We cannot pretend we don't hear English on the street. [281]

When the *integrale* version of the *Trilogy* was presented in Québec City in 1991, Théâtre Repère's programme included a reprint of the *Los Angeles Times* article in which these comments appeared, along with a 1987 *Le Devoir* essay in which Daniel Letouche argues that the production transcends location and makes as much sense in London as in Montréal.[282] These paratextual materials clearly indicated how the company wished the production to be viewed in their home city: as a progressive internationalist, and internationally successful Québec expression.

Lepage's views on an opened-up, globalising Québec aligned perfectly with the direction of Québec policy on culture, and the success of the *Trilogy* became a part

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[281] Kelly, ibid.

[282] Latouche, Daniel, "Des personnages qui s'imposent aussi bien à Londres qu'à Montréal," *Le Devoir*, 5 September 1987, reprinted in *La Trilogie des Dragons* programme, 1991, pp. 4-5.

of that official narrative, in a very material way. As Colin Hicks, director of cultural services at the Québec government office in London, argues, it was in large part the popularity of productions including the *Trilogy* that prompted the expansion of Québec's international cultural mission to include new offices, such as the one Hicks now runs:

> The impetus to create this service came from the success of the late eighties, most notably *The Dragon's Trilogy* by Robert Lepage, *Jesus of Montréal* by Denys Arcand, the "Montréal body hurtling" choreography of Edouard Lock at La La La Human Steps, the work of Gilles Maheu and Carbone 14, and the magical shows of Le Théâtre de Marmaille. The objectives were straightforward: to develop Québec's market share and to promote its image as a contemporary society.[283]

[283] Hicks, Colin, "Imagination Import: Reception and Perception of the Theatre of Québec in the United Kingdom," in Grace and Glapp, eds., p 155.

CHAPTER 6: *TECTONIC PLATES*

In the late 1980s Lepage's success and his rate of production increased. He accepted freelance directing work in increasingly high-profile theatres in Québec, elsewhere in Canada, and internationally. He continued to work with Théâtre Repère on several major shows which created the production model for his future work, in that they were co-created with international producing partners. *Polygraphe* (1987-1991), which he co-wrote with Marie Brassard, was co-produced with the English independent producer/presenter Cultural Industry and London's Almeida Theatre, and toured internationally for several years to locations as far-flung as Hong Kong.[284] *Plaques Tectoniques/Tectonic Plates*, his most ambitious project since *The Dragon's Trilogy*, was instigated by Cultural Industry's director Michael Morris, who organised co-funding by the European Economic Community for a "bi-continental work-in-progress"[285] which would be performed in Glasgow for its 1990 European City of Culture celebrations. Other co-producers included Montréal's Festival de Théâtre des Ameriques (FTA) and the Canadian National Arts Centre in Ottawa. Because it marks a significant point on Lepage's globalising trajectory as well as his complex relationship to his home culture, it is important to include discussion of *Tectonic Plates* in this thesis. Given that Jill MacDougall has already undertaken an exhaustive and convincing analysis of the production in her PhD thesis *Performing Identities on the*

[284] See Charest, p. 186.
[285] MacDougall, Jill, *Performing Identities on the Stages of Québec*, p. 213.

Stages of Québec, I will not engage in my own lengthy analysis but rather provide a brief discussion here, drawing primarily on MacDougall's account.[286]

The initial idea behind *Tectonic Plates* was that it was going to be an international, intercultural collaboration between artists from three cultures – Québec, Scotland, and Catalonia – and that it would involve all of their languages; that it was going to be developed over a span of four years and two continents; and that its overall subject would be continental drift and the relationship between Europe and North America (its starting creative resource was a jigsaw-puzzle map of the world). After premiering in 1988 at the Toronto World Stage Festival, it was to play in Glasgow in 1990 and then in Barcelona in 1992. But the production ended up being significantly less international in structure, and intercultural in focus, than this ambitious plan initially indicated. For financial and logistical reasons, Catalan actors did not join the process, and the production was never performed in Spain.[287] The participation of the Scottish actors was circumscribed from the start: the production went through two significant development periods in Canada before the cast was expanded to include four Scots and one Welshman (whom the Quebecers called "the Celts"). (250) The fundamental structure and themes as well as many of the characters that the Celts would play, were already set in place when they joined the

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[286] MacDougall's thesis was published as a volume by Peter Lang in 1997 under the same title; page references cited in the text here are to the thesis version. In addition to her thesis, I draw on my own viewing of the production, in London in 1989, and on Peter Mettler's 1992 film version of *Tectonic Plates*.

[287] Lepage explained in 1992 that the Barcelona component of the show did not materialise because planning began for the Olympic Games in Barcelona in the several years after the production was first mooted, and "the culture people who were interested in this project had their festival removed from them because all the culture money went to the Olympic cultural festival." "Robert Lepage in discussion with Richard Eyre, 19 November 1992," *Platform Papers* 3: *Directors*, p. 40.

company.[288] As a result, the Celts were called upon to participate in ready-made representations of their culture that made some of them uncomfortable, particularly that of a heavily symbolic figure of a "bare-breasted, sword-wielding, kilt-clad woman"[289] who played an important role in the self-discovery process of the Québec character Jacques/Jennifer.

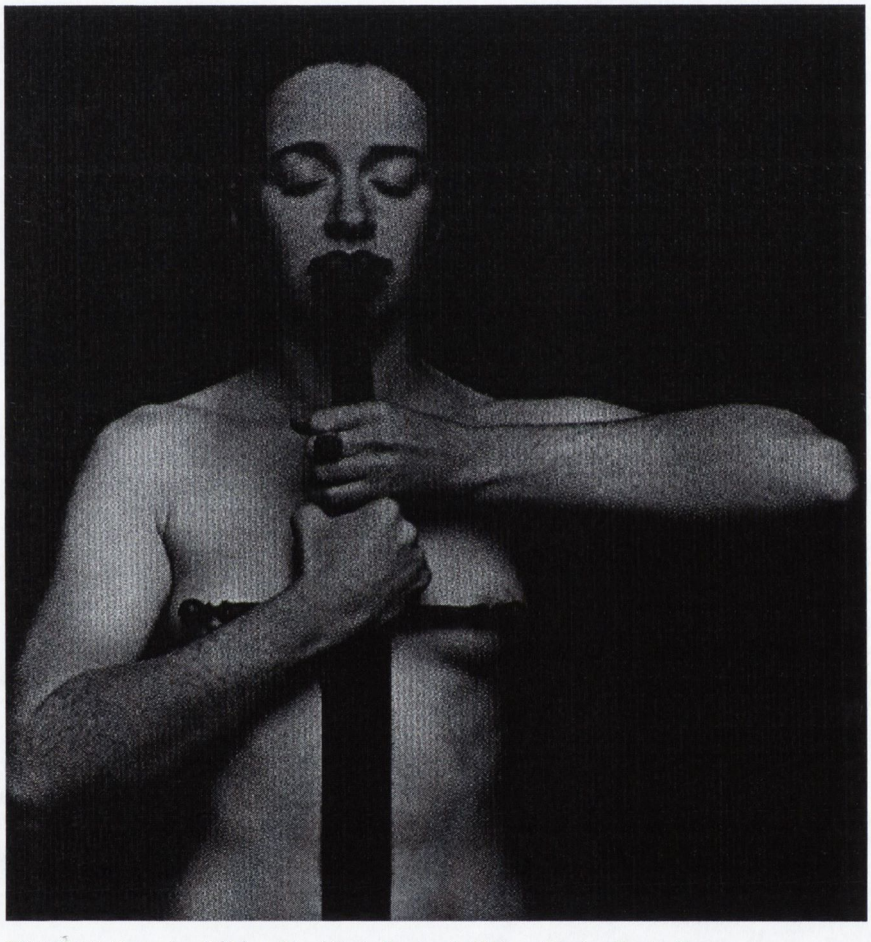

PLATE 13: Lorraine Côté as Skaddie in* Tectonic Plates. *Photo: Gavin Evans

[288] See Carson, Christie, "Celebrity by Association: *Tectonic Plates* in Glasgow," in *Canadian Theatre Review* 74; and MacDougall.
[289] Carson, p. 49.

It became one of the set-pieces of Lepage's discourse around *Tectonic Plates* that this character, created by Quebecers independent of Scottish input, significantly resembled the goddess Skaddie, who is said in myth to have created Scotland; this to Lepage was a "confirmation" of the effectiveness of his coincidence- and instinct-based creative process:

> When you confront that kind of coincidence you believe in the alchemy of art. You say OK, we're going to keep that character, now we know her name and where she comes from... the problem with a lot of artists is that they are looking for something and then they find it. It's the other way around. Artists are the people in the mirror; it's the flip side of society, of life.[290]

Despite what Lepage saw as a productive and confirming coincidence in the creation of this character, the Scottish actress Emma Davie still expressed discomfort in including her in the production:

> ... this mythological figure, this Skaddie creature. In Scotland that kind of grated with us a little bit. Although we liked it theatrically we didn't know how it expressed our identity.[291]

The Skaddie character was singled out by Scottish critic Joyce McMillan as the production's significant flaw: "...to a Scottish audience, this Rob Roy imagery looks like a joke."[292]

Beyond these difficulties around the representation of Scotland, observers of the creative process between the Québec and Celtic performers noted fundamental differences between the two groups about what constituted "culture" in the first place. The Quebecers were surprised that, in a initial group discussion in which

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[290] Lepage, Robert, interview with the author, 26 August 1992, Québec City. See also Wardle, Irving, "Théâtre sans frontières," *The Independent on Sunday*, 25 November 1990.
[291] Cited in Carson, p. 49.
[292] McMillan, Joyce, "Chopin and Changing," *The Guardian* (Northern edition), 27 November 1990.

Lepage presented the jigsaw map and asked the collaborators for their associations, the Celts continually brought the focus to political and geo-political issues – "apartheid and genocide, nuclear plants and nuclear war heads, droughts, famine, global pollution and dictatorship" – whereas the Quebecers' associations were more in the realm of "personal anecdotes." (250) Lepage told Edinburgh critic Mark Fisher that the Celts' seriousness took the Quebecers aback: "In Canada there are TV shows for that!"[293] As MacDougall argues, the Québec creators were eager to pass off such discrepancies as "cultural difference" (251) rather than delve into the ideological differences that they seemed to belie, and perhaps use the outcomes of such discussions as material. The Quebecers also consistently shied away from including direct political references in the production. At the same time, however, the project was dominated and steered by a subtle, perhaps unarticulated, local cultural strategy on the part of the québécois creators themselves.

The trajectory that MacDougall describes is of a production that started out being about geo-political issues – the relationship between nations and ethnic groups, between the Old World and the New World – and which ended up wholly driven by individual, personal stories of Québec artists on journeys of self-discovery – now-familiar themes in Lepage's *oeuvre*. The first presented version of the production, in 1988 in Toronto, involved five disconnected scenes, all of which treated the relationship between Europe and North America, largely through stories of individuals; the primary scenic element in Michael Levine's design was an onstage

[293] Fisher, Mark, "Celtic Soil Brother," *The List* (Edinburgh), 23 November – 6 December 1990, cited in MacDougall p. 251.

pool that, in this first version, largely represented the Atlantic Ocean.[294] In 1989, the production hit a major snag when the collaborators found themselves, during a workshop session, unable to come up with a performable version, and cancelled a long-scheduled appearance at the FTA with only days to spare – the first of several high-profile last-minute postponements and cancellations in Lepage's career.[295] When the shaken company regrouped in Québec City for their next workshop, Lepage announced that he wanted the production to focus on one of the characters that had emerged in the first version – Madeline, a Québec City art history student on a soul-searching visit to 1960s Venice; and that he wanted to play a character who was bi-gendered (the character who would become Jacques/Jennifer McMann). (237) What had been first mooted as a very open and free-flowing creative process, with each subsequent version of the production not necessarily relating to the previous, was therefore developing into a more structured and developmental format, with the understanding that consistent characters and stories would be created and extended through the versions. Critics responded positively to these innovations: "As often happens with Lepage," wrote Ray Conlogue in *The Globe and Mail* about the November 1989 Québec City version,

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[294] Levine would also, somewhat infamously, include a large onstage pool in his design of Lepage's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Royal National Theatre, London, in 1992. Much of the action took place with the actors sloshing through several inches of muddy water, raising concerns both about actor safety and audience comfort.

[295] Doubtless the most notorious of these was the cancellation of *Elsinore*, Lepage's one-man *Hamlet*, at the 1996 Edinburgh International Festival, on the same day it was meant to open. *The Guardian's* Michael Billington considers this one of the "great theatrical disasters" of our time, because audience expectations were very high and the cancellation happened quite late in the day ("The show must float on," *The Guardian*, 23 October 2003). In Chapter 9 I will discuss the cancellation of performances of *Zulu Time* in New York as a result of the events of 9/11. The opening date of *KÀ*, which Lepage directed for Cirque du Soleil, was postponed for more than six months in advance of its eventual opening in March 2005.

> ...self assurance can become vapid or disconnected... when it is not linked to a personal story or a conflict with which he personally identifies... the striking emotional resonance of the Jennifer character – so unlike everything else in the show – identifies this as the creator's lodestone."[296]

In its final version, the production centred around three québécois characters – Jacques/Jennifer (played by Lepage), Madeline (played by Marie Gignac), and Antoine (played by Richard Fréchette). Initially, they were university friends in a love triangle – Madeline loved Jacques, who was in love with the deaf-mute Antoine. Their stories were thematically linked to the historical real-life figures of Georges Sand and Frederick Chopin and the Romantic movement, and its renaissance in 1960s neo-romanticism and the music of Jim Morrison and the Doors. The onstage pool came less to represent the ocean than the human psyche: several of the central characters were engaged in psychotherapy, and one of the productions' main themes was the idea of the submerged layers of the individual personality, as critic Mary Brennan noted: "Always, it seems, we are going to be governed by what happens under the surface – whether that superficial layer is the earth's crust or our own veneer of acquired behaviour patterns."[297] The Scottish and English critics who saw the production's final version understood it as a story of individuals which aspired to make larger points about the human condition; they also tended to attribute the production's content and its message wholly to its director, who had already gained a reputation as a rising international star: "Lepage is a structuralist intellectual in full display," said John Peter in *The Sunday Times*,

> ... telling us that neither structuralism nor intelligence can heal the gaping wound which is life. I don't think he cares whether you agree

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[296] Conlogue, Ray, "Long-awaited *Tectonic Plates* drifts towards dramatic brilliance," *The Globe and Mail*, 26 November 1989.

[297] Brennan, Mary, "*Tectonic Plates* (review)," *The Herald*, 27 November 1990.

> or not, but there is something thrilling about his erudite, doom-laden arrogance.[298]

The production was created largely in the context of late 1980s Québec, which was in the midst of what MacDougall calls a "nationalist renaissance" given controversies over the constitution and language laws that led to the Meech Lake crisis. While on the surface, *Tectonic Plates* seemed to steer clear of politics, MacDougall argues that its eventual focus on "the narcissistic and pathologically divided self" described "a trajectory leading back to the collective identity problematic" (10); that is, it was possible to read the troubled individuals at the centre of *Tectonic Plates* as representative of Québec itself. For MacDougall, its creators' seeming denial of politics was in fact a "subtle strategy of projecting québécois difference by performing the problem of language itself." (290) The production, in her view,

> ... play[ed] with the motors of national anxiety: the fear of losing the language, and the concomitant fear of disappearing as a distinct society. The Repère (sic) treat[ed] these themes with a highly sophisticated sense of irony. Through their use of languages the actors ultimately propose[d] a new twist to the old problem of bilingualism and québécois cultural identity. (265)

The three main characters were all Quebecers struggling for – but not literally finding – a voice. There was Madeline, the by now-archetypical Lepage figure of the Québec artist on a journey of self-discovery, who started out pursuing the "talking cure" of therapy but instead becomes a painter, "expressing her voice through the visual medium." (284) Antoine was mute. And Jacques/ Jennifer, the production's most complex and intriguing character, had a therapeutic breakthrough, early in the

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[298] Peter, John, "Reflecting our split lives," *The Sunday Times* (London), 2 December 1990, cited in Carson, Christie, "From *The Dragon's Trilogy* to *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*: The Intercultural Experiments of Robert Lepage," in Donohoe and Koustas, eds., p. 63.

production, in which he saw himself being simultaneously castrated by Skaddie and inhabited by her spirit. He henceforth lived as a woman and moved to New York, where he hosted a Radio-Canada talk show about literature and the arts.

PLATE 14: Lepage as Jacques/Jennifer. Photo: Gavin Evans

As a feminised male, Jennifer was an ironic representation of colonised Québec, who, because she spoke in the standardised, international French of the Canadian national broadcaster, was also thematically tied to the French *faux pères*, who deserted the Québécois "in the wilds of the new world." (273) And yet, Jennifer found that her new gender gave her a voice; she was identified with Georges Sand, but in reverse – while Sand needed to dress as a man to make her way as a writer, Jennifer only realised herself when she took on the guise of a woman. This was to a certain extent a positive statement by the Repère creators against the frequent association of their colonised nation with domesticated, powerless males dominated by priests and monarchs. The character of Jacques/Jennifer took this negative, sexist, and homophobic image and turned it on its head.[299] Jennifer's story ended tragically, however; she met an Alaskan bachelor who initially was drawn to her as a woman but ended up strangling her to death when she revealed her biological sex to him. The production's heavy emphasis on non-verbal codes of communication – semaphore signals, sign language, movement, projections onto the pool, objects coded with metaphorical meanings – as well as Jennifer's fate constituted a commentary on the difficulties of language as a reliable means of communication, which was open to a reading as a specific postcolonial commentary on Québec's situation. (270-280) Jacques/Jennifer, a figure representing Québec, attempted to, and up to a certain point, managed to overcome the limitations of language and a subjected victim position by taking her lot and redefining it on her own terms – a

[299] Bill Marshall similarly reads a tendency in Québec films towards "narratives of failed masculinity or of alternative gender and sexual identities" as positive national expressions in that they "may point to the historical specificity of Québec's position as 'minor' rather than 'major' culture, and to the desirability of exploring the positive implications of that status rather than rejecting it as deficiency." Marshall, p. 109.

liberatory and defiant message to Quebecers to take control of their own destinies. Her eventual fate warned of the serious potential risks involved in such border crossings.

The production's most subtle and effective commentary on the problematics of language, MacDougall argues, came in a brief exchange between Madeline and a famous pianist she met in Venice:

> 'Are you an artist?' he questions. 'No, just a student,' she replies. He presents himself as William Reese, virtuoso. 'Are you French?' asks the pianist in a very upper-class British accent. 'Non, Québécoise,' she mumbles. 'And you, you are English?' The pianist hesitates and then says, 'Uh, no, Welsh.' (286)

This exchange, MacDougall reports, got a big laugh in Ottawa even though it did not refer specifically to Anglo-Canadian culture; the joke, which was comprehensible and funny across cultures, was the problem of cultural difference itself:

> It is in the uncanny moment of the shift... that the subject is discovered. The laughter indicates both recognition and surprise. The spectators savor the joke of being caught in the jostling of positions along binary gaps: minority/majority, personal/political, self/other. (296)

This reference also prodded, ironically, the extent to which Québec nationalism thrives by creating and reinforcing binaries, by positioning Québec culture as the underdog "us" to the majority anglophone Canadian "them." Identity, it was saying, is much more subtle than being just one thing or the other.

It was this type of prodding, MacDougall implies, that led to the production's muted reception in Québec itself. A certain strain of local response to the production saw it as evidence that Lepage was too reliant on visual and technical means and was thus endangering the status of the French language as the primary signifier of québécois identity. Part of what made the Québec critics respond more positively to

The Dragon's Trilogy, which itself involved considerable play with language, than to *Tectonic Plates*, was the fact that the former was grounded in the story of two québécoise girls and that it was clearly a project that used other cultures as a means to investigate Québec culture and the Québec sense of self. (220) *Tectonic Plates'* commentary on Québécois culture was more coded, more ambiguous, and conveyed less positive messages about the culture.

Significant in the discourse that developed around *Tectonic Plates* were the high and sometimes contradictory expectations that were mounting around Lepage. As MacDougall points out, "[i]t is hard to be a legend in one's own time, especially in Québec," (222) a small culture of six million people where nearly everyone in the arts world knows each another and where a bad review can ruin a career. When Lepage started creating *Tectonic Plates*, he was only 30, and was already being called "the reigning king of Québec theatre" by the Toronto press.[300] In Montréal, however, the *lune de miel* (honeymoon) with local critics, who had adored *Vinci* and the *Trilogy*, was coming to an end. *Polygraphe* received mixed reviews, *Echo* (1989) bombed, and many commentators noted that Lepage was taking too much on.[301] The 1989 cancellation of *Tectonic Plates* at the FTA fuelled a growing distrust between Lepage and the Montréal press; and when he and his collaborators showcased the production later that year in Québec City, Montréal reviewers were not invited. "I think it's easy to understand Robert's attitude towards the media right now," commented Repère's

[300] Comment in *The Globe and Mail*, cited in Wardle, "Théâtre."
[301] Beaunoyer, Jean, "Attaqué par la critique, Lepage réplique avec une grande oeuvre," *La Presse*, 25 November 1989.

producing director Michel Bernatchez. "In Québec, we go from one extreme to the other with our idols."[302]

The extent to which Montréal criticism of Lepage's work had already become prone to infighting, internal references, and meta-commentary is striking: Jean Beaunoyer led his *La Presse* rave of the 1990 Montréal version of *Tectonic Plates* by wondering how anyone could condemn, denounce, or ridicule the production – thus acknowledging even to those who did not know in advance that such a reaction had occurred (and apparently referring to Robert Lévesque's negative response to the 1989 Québec City version in *Le Devoir*).[303] Lévesque, subsequently, did not launch fully into his negative review of the 1990 version before taking a swipe at Beaunoyer's critical credentials and commenting on what he argued was a passion for "the Lepage phenomenon" that approached imbecility and blunted the capacity for real criticism.[304] Discourse around Lepage was becoming highly personalised, politicised, and commodified; having named Lepage a Québec icon, critics had committed themselves to discussing him -- and attacking him – on those terms. Such possessiveness was not restricted to Montréal. There was a certain self-congratulatory quality in Irving Wardle's assertion, in an *Independent on Sunday* preview article about *Tectonic Plates*, that through Lepage "Canadian theatre had at last found an international voice",[305] given that it was Wardle himself who had compared Lepage to Peter Brook in his review of *The Dragon's Trilogy*, the first-ever commentary on

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[302] "Je pense qu'il est facile de comprendre l'attitude de Robert (Lepage) actuellement avec les medias. Au Québec, on passe facilement d'un extrême à l'autre avec les idoles." Cited in Beaunoyer, ibid.
[303] Beaunoyer, "Les plaques tectoniques: merveilleux!", *La Presse*, 22 March 1990.
[304] "la phénomène Lepage." Lévesque, Robert, "La tectonique du phénomène Lepage," *Le Devoir*, 24 March 1990.
[305] Wardle, "Théâtre."

Lepage's work in a major British outlet.[306] If Lepage was now a major player on the international theatrical map, Wardle had played a major role in placing him there; and by framing Lepage's work in hyperbolic national terms (the "international voice" of Canada) Wardle reinforced the context in which Lepage's work was increasingly viewed outside his home culture.

Perhaps the most memorably cutting criticism of *Tectonic Plates* was a comment made by Toronto critic Robert Wallace to MacDougall after the World Stage Festival premiere: "I'm afraid this is just an international festival commodity." (255) According to MacDougall, Wallace was responding to the production's slickness and commercialism and its reliance on "gadget artistry" over substance. As MacDougall points out, a growing discrepancy was becoming apparent between the Repère collaborators' breathless understanding of their process as "a transcendent network of signs waiting to be discovered"(226) and the holes in the universe they described. The basic metaphor of *Tectonic Plates* "spins off to the level of an "imaginary planetary community" – the idea that all the continents were connected before they split and drifted apart. And yet "whole chunks of the *mappa mundi* are missing" – the universe the production treated was solely based on a European-American axis. (221, 263) Even within that frame, there were considerable omissions and erasures: the one scene in the four-year collaboration that treated the colonialism inherent in the European presence in America was cut in the final version. The personal stories and dramas that version described were those of people of first-world privilege and means; the material reality of a world of tectonic divisions were wholly absent. And yet, while "denying any political agency" and refraining from mentioning any

[306] Wardle, "Masterpiece of revivalism," *The Times* (London), 18 June 1986.

specific geopolitical event or conflict, the theme of the work enabled Repère to "co-op[t] any political event which might occur during the four years" of its creative process. As MacDougall notes, the programme of the 1989 Québec City version:

> ... juxtapose[d] earthquakes in Armenia, Japan, Algeria, and California to political tremors in Eastern Europe, in China and in Canada. The 1990 Montréal theatre bill refer[red] briefly to the Meech Lake talks and the rebirth of québécois separatist sentiment. (248)

In the words of Lepage, in the 1991 Ottawa programme, "It its our hope that these *Tectonic Plates* will project a profound vision of human relations in your home, neighbourhood, city and country, and on a much larger scale, in your soul."[307] It is important to underline here how many critics were sufficiently engaged to participate in such "projections." For *The Herald's* Mary Brennan the production was about "images jostling, matching up or fragmenting, just as people do in their relationships in various subterranean strata..."[308] And Conlogue, despite caveats, admitted that

> ... [a]t a time when the peoples of the world are being thrown together as never before, *Tectonic Plates* has a special ring of truth. It attempts to be, and partially succeeds in being, a play about an entire planet."[309]

Tectonic Plates is significant to this overall discussion, then, because it was Lepage's first major group collaboration that was not, ostensibly, made with Quebecers about Québec-specific material. It was his first international co-production and thus the first time he directly faced the challenge of making work for audiences who would not necessarily share the same set of cultural references. What resulted was a production

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[307] "Prélude," National Arts Centre Programme of *Tectonic Plates*, cited in MacDougall, p. 264.
[308] Brennan.
[309] Conlogue, "Long-awaited...". In fairness to Conlogue, he was commenting about a early version of the production, that did include a depiction of colonisation, about which he commented favourably: "A striking image early in the show details a group of Europeans discovering the delights of exotic foods, while a starving African lies semi-nude on the table in front of them. As the table splits apart (as dining tables are wont to do), she and the tablecloth begin to sink out of sight – while the diners debonairly slice small pieces off her haunch and arm, chatting brilliantly."

that skillfully avoided direct socio-political and geo-political reference but was shaped in such a way to give an impression of topicality and issue-specificity, a strategy that proved extremely successful with Canadian and international critics. At the same time the production was coded with specifically Québec content legible to those attuned to its specific cultural concerns and hot-spots.

Tectonic Plates also marks a specific moment in Lepage's ongoing attempts to expand and diversify his pool of collaborators. Here, an ambitious plan to bring together distinct groups of artists from specific cultural backgrounds was not successful; on reflection, this failure is not surprising. Particularly in the case of the Celts, asking artists who do not necessarily know each other to come together and stand for or speak from a cultural position is a tall order. From MacDougall and Carson's descriptions of company discussions, it seems clear that the *Tectonic Plates* collaborators backed away from the deeper and more profound questions about culture and ideology that the collaboration presented. Lepage did not attempt again such a codified process, instead attempting to create a single collaborating group for each production. As we will see, however, his continual stated desire to make these groups multi-national and multi-disciplinary was not realised, resulting in collaborative structures dominated by Quebecers from a theatre background.

CHAPTER 7: *THE SEVEN STREAMS OF THE RIVER OTA*

In 1989 Lepage was appointed director of French language theatre at the National Arts Centre of Canada (NAC), at which point he left his position as co-artistic director of Théâtre Repère. He continued in his position at the NAC until May 1993, remarking to the press on his departure that "[i]t's too early for me to decide what a Canadian national theatre is."[310] During his time at the NAC, while remaining nominally based in Canada, Lepage worked as a director for hire at theatres and venues around the Western world and Japan.[311] The hectic pace of this travel wore on him, and in 1994 he declared his intention to ground himself more firmly in his native Québec City with the formation of a new company, Ex Machina, whose first production, created between 1994 and 1997, was *Les Sept Branches de la Rivière Ota/The Seven Streams of the River Ota;*[312] and the renovation of La Caserne Dalhousie, a former fire station which opened in 1997 as a multi-arts centre and Ex Machina's home base.

Lepage emphasised that his return to Québec was an affirmation of his connection to and need for his home culture:

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[310] Curtis, Nick, "Wunderkind with a seven-hour itch," *The Evening Standard*, 20 October 1994.
[311] Among the productions Lepage directed during this period were *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Royal National Theatre, London, 1992); *La Vie de Galilée* (Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, Montréal, 1989); *Map of Dreams* (Bayerisches Staatsschauspielhaus, Munich, 1993), *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* (Globe Theatre, Tokyo, 1993); and the operas *Bluebeard's Castle* and *Erwartung* (Canadian Opera Company/Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1992). He also created and toured his second solo piece, *Needles and Opium*, between 1991-1994, throughout North and South America, Europe, and Japan.
[312] Specific information in this chapter about the creative and production history of *Ota* comes from my first-hand observation of the production's development and performances between 1994 and 1997. Some of the material in this chapter has appeared in my essay "Tourism, The Festival Marketplace and Robert Lepage's *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*," in *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13 (4). Thanks to David Bradby, Maria Delgado, and Frédéric Maurin for their comments on that article in its developmental phases.

> The meetings and exchanges I have abroad enrich my work and the work of my company, work that remains profoundly québécois. This is what has motivated me to return to the province of Québec and more precisely to Québec City, where I grew up and which inspires me much like the Plateau area in Montréal inspires the playwright Michel Tremblay. It's from Québec that I want to make contact with the rest of the world.[313]

Dundjerovic claims that one of Lepage's reasons for relocating to Québec was in fact a direct criticism from Michel Tremblay, who said that Lepage's work was "not relevant to québécois culture, but concerned with international festival trends."[314] This remark dovetails interestingly with a comment by Ian Lockerbie about the reception of Tremblay and Lepage in Scotland: by the mid-'90s, Lockerbie points out, despite the fact that Tremblay's plays were always glowingly received by Scottish critics,

> ...it was Lepage and not Tremblay who was invited to open the prestigious Edinburgh International Festival with the premiere of *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*. And it was Lepage's productions, never those of Tremblay, for which London-based critics were willing to make the trip to Scotland. [315]

In the short span of ten years, Lepage had become not only the most highly regarded and best known Québec theatre artist of his day, but an international theatre figure of considerable power and status, whose name alone could "open" a production at the world's leading theatre festivals. And yet, he expressed concern about the censure of a major Québec artist and cites this as a reason for a significant shift in his practices and a reaffirmation of his local cultural affiliations. Maintaining a balance between

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[313] Charest, p. 50.
[314] Dundjerovic, *Theatricality*, p. 149.
[315] "...c'est Lepage et pas Tremblay qui a été invité à ouvrir le prestigeux Festival international d'Edimbourg, avec la première des *Sept branches de la rivière Ota*. Et ce sont les spectacles de Lepage, jamais ceux de Tremblay, qui font se déplacer les critiques londoniens jusqu'en Écosse." Lockerbie, Ian, "La réception de Michel Tremblay et de Robert Lepage en Écosse," *L'Annuaire Théâtrale* 27, p. 225.

local responsibilities and global aspirations was to become one of Lepage's primary challenges from the early 1990s forward. As we have seen, Lepage's international outlook has largely run in synch with and been aided by that of Québec itself; his relocation in Québec marked a new level of intimacy between Lepage and official Québec discourses on internationalism and culture, an intimacy which has brought its own tensions, expectations, and contradictions.

Following on from the increasingly international production and circulation of *The Dragon's Trilogy* and *Tectonic Plates*, *Ota* marked the full maturity of Lepage's international production structures; it was created by and for some 23 festivals, venues, and producers in 12 countries, and became part of what is now called the international festival circuit. The birth of the modern festival is linked to the post-World War II rise of tourism, and I will engage here with theories around tourism to explore the creation and themes of *Ota*, arguing that the production constructed itself – and its audiences – as tourists. With this production many aspects of Lepage's theatremaking we have observed in development come clearly into focus: what was planned to be his most international and formally ambitious production became, as his other major group works, based around themes and techniques of melodrama and around characters linked through love and family. The surface of the production was a baroque mixture of different cultural, technological, and linguistic elements, prompting some critics to laud it as evidence of a new "translational culture... in which idioms are in constant contact and interlap [sic]"[316] and which reflected a new "transnational subjectivity";[317] ideas which have a particularly progressive resonance

[316] Simon, "Robert Lepage," p. 227.
[317] Poirer, p. 111.

in a Québec context. Underlying and driving the production's thematics and creative progress, however, was a (by-now-familiar, for Lepage) Romantic/high modernist understanding of life as a journey towards self-realisation; of the artist as the representative and exemplary figure of the human struggle for self-expression; and of the theatrical process itself as a search for a production's ideal and complete form. Despite its claims of universality, this production as others was plagued by the privileged, first-world assumptions of its creators and again, as in the *Trilogy*, featured objectified and clichéd representations of Asian cultures and Asian characters. In discussions of the work, Lepage continued to align himself and Québec with the position of the aspirant traveller in claiming that the production's naïve depiction of otherness knowingly reflected his culture's immaturity and lack of experience. This continued positioning of himself as a spokesperson of a decolonising, subaltern society ignores his power and status on local and global cultural scenes, and Québec's increasing cultural power and agency.

THE PRICE OF INTERNATIONALISM

The renovation of the Caserne and the foundation of Ex Machina offered the opportunity for Lepage, and Québec, to meld internationalism and nationalism. Lepage emphasised in his discussions of the Caserne that it was intended as a point of convergence for local and international artists. His goal was not only to streamline and centre his own working life, but to enliven and bolster the creative possibilities for artists in the province of Québec and particularly the capital, which exists in the shadow of the larger and more cosmopolitan city of Montréal:

> Now it is time we tried to import artists and ideas from elsewhere, and grow things on our own ground, using our own *savoir faire*... We still have lots of things to prove, and the firehall [Caserne] could be an interesting workshop for that.[318]

This for Lepage was a gesture of leadership and his way of lending his new international savvy to Québec culture:

> I sense the need, more than ever, to work here, to come back home because I know, probably because I've travelled a lot – I've been able to make comparisons, I've seen our shortcomings, our weaknesses, but I've also seen what our strengths and advantages are..." [319]

PLATE 15: La Caserne Dalhousie

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[318] Conlogue, Ray, "Lepage sets the stage for the theatre of his dreams," *The Globe and Mail*, 15 April 1995. On the Caserne as a resource for Québec City's artistic community, see also Martel, Denise, "La Caserne misera sur le potentiel de Québec," *Le Journal de Québec*, 23 September 1995; and Donnelly, Pat, "Building for Success," *The Gazette*, 1 June 1996.

[319] je sens le besoin, plus que jamais, de travailler ici, de revenir chez moi parce que je sais, peut-être parce que j'ai voyagé beaucoup, j'ai pu comparer, j'ai vu effectivement où sont nos lacunes, où sont nos faiblesses, mais j'ai vu aussi où sont les forces et les avantages que l'on a..." "Entrevue: De la scène à la politique. Entretien avec Robert Lepage," *Argument* 1(2), 2001, p. 101.

Ex Machina's funding structures, as well, rely on both domestic and international sources – a necessity, the company underlines, because the government support it receives does not come close to meeting its needs. As of 1996, more than 70 per cent of the company's total budget came from sources outside of Canada. [320] By cultivating and extending relationships with international and domestic organisations interested in Lepage's work, Ex Machina developed a system of production funding which resembles that used in the film industry, and which came to full fruition during the creation of *Ota*. Because Lepage's productions are created over time, involve large casts and technical teams, and need considerable development time before box office revenue becomes available as an income source, large tranches of funds are required before the creative process begins. Thus, in the case of *Ota*, as soon as Lepage had broadly conceived an epic collaborative project about the city of Hiroshima, four producers, working for Ex Machina from London, Toronto, Paris, and Québec, began to sell the production to potential co-producers, who paid into the total $1.8 million budget in exchange for performances in their venue and credit in printed materials. The 23 co-producers which came on board were mostly venues and festivals, as well as one corporate sponsor (Beck's Beer), and one non-venue-based production company (Cultural Industry in London, run by Michael Morris, the instigator of the *Tectonic Plates* project, who has since become Lepage's London-based producer). Less than 10 per cent of the costs of *Ota* were covered by Ex Machina's subsidy, according

[320] Donnelly, ibid.

to producing director Michel Bernatchez, who underlines that the company is under-funded by the government, particularly at the federal level.[321]

Lepage and Ex Machina's unabashedly international ambitions for their productions – "what we want to do is tour our shows," Lepage told Charest[322] – have opened them up, however, to a critique of what is argued to be their opportunism and questionable use of government resources. Jennifer Harvie and Erin Hurley argue that internationally ambitious artists such as Lepage and the Cirque du Soleil "exploit" the Québec nation for funding to establish their practice, and then "repeatedly evacuate the specific, if shifting, nationhood of Québec" by creating and touring work that is vaguely internationalist in theme and setting.[323] Pointing out that the Caserne was built without a public performance space, Harvie and Hurley argue that Québec audiences' access to much of Ex Machina's work in the 1990s was highly limited: of the 28 short runs of *Ota*, only two took place in the province of Québec and only one of the 20 runs of their subsequent production, *Geometry of Miracles*, was staged in Québec.[324] This lack of contact with Québec audiences, in Harvie and Hurley's argument, therefore means that the company "is not promoting a québécois cultural nationalism." Instead, "... in the guise of a vague cultural pluralism, it is promoting a Western metropolitan elitism in pursuit of major and diverse commercial investment." Harvie and Hurley accuse Lepage/Ex Machina of

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[321] See Lamontagne, Gilles G., "Robert Lepage, le voyageur dans sa caserne," *Topo Magazine* 44, p. 11.
[322] Charest, p. 114, cited in Harvie, Jennifer, and Erin Hurley, "States of Play: Locating Québec in the performances of Robert Lepage, Ex Machina, and the Cirque du Soleil," *Theatre Journal* 51, p. 306.
[323] Harvie and Hurley, p. 314.
[324] www.exmachina.qu.ca/ENGLISH/ex.asp?page=GeoDiffus, accessed 2 November 2004.

considerable opportunism when they argued that the international characters, settings, and languages of *Ota* worked

> ...less to explore and articulate cultural differences and more to accrue diverse international production investment from – and international performance contracts in – different nations whose languages and settings are used in the show.[325]

Such an argument of strategic internationalism is questionable on a number of levels. Firstly, it ignores Lepage's ongoing interest in and use of international themes and settings throughout his work and before he had access to significant domestic or international funding. Secondly, the locations and cultures represented in *Ota* are not mirrored in its touring venues and funding sources: over 50 per cent of the plot of the final version took place in Japan, but only one of its 23 co-producers was Japanese (Tokyo's Bunkamura Theatre). Sections of the production's action were set in Amsterdam and Prague, and yet the production did not tour to nor received funding from Dutch or Czech venues or sources. Were we to follow this logic, the small number of the production's performances in Québec would be somewhat justified by the relatively limited investment that Québec sources made in it.[326]

But such literalism misses several larger points, the most fundamental of which is that if there is a current of exploitation running between Lepage/Ex Machina and Québec, it most decidedly runs both ways. Québec's and Lepage's international ambitions have very much run in parallel, and Québec has benefited enormously from the international scope and success of Lepage's work. Harvie and

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[325] Harvie and Hurley, p. 307.

[326] Also, assumedly, the number of domestic performances required of a subsidised company is written into its grant: if Ex Machina performed *Ota* relatively infrequently in the province of Québec, we must assume that this was with the understanding of its government funding sources.

Hurley themselves argue as much when they state that via Lepage, "Québec logs into international commercial and cultural network and enlarges its ideological parameters to become 'pluralist, modern, and open to the world.'"[327] Rather than an uneven exchange, this would in fact seem a healthy sponsor/client partnership. There are also curiously conservative assumptions underlying Hurley and Harvie's arguments that work funded by a particular culture should be somehow easily identifiable as the product of that culture, and that promoting "québécois cultural nationalism" necessarily means significant direct contact with the Québec people themselves. Clearly, we see Lepage and the Québec government hewing out a place for him amongst the nation's cultural *élite*: creating work with like-minded artists in his *atélier*, performing there for small and personally selected audiences, providing the headline name for performances of Québec national vibrancy abroad – but this arguably does not make these undertakings less validly québécois than more populist projects. And while *Ota* may be less obviously stamped as a Québec work than Lepage's previous touring productions, it does involve some Québec content, characters, and linguistic references, and moreover is absolutely identified with the now-famous name, reputation, and style of its creator, who works quite purposefully with official Québec to associate himself with its overall international project.

This being said, Harvie and Hurley's assertion that the bias of *Ota's* narratives and places of production are "Western, northern, and metropolitan"[328] is doubtless accurate. This critique can be applied as a whole to the production context in which, with this production, Lepage has firmly ensconced itself and which his style and

[327] Harvie and Hurley, p. 302.
[328] Ibid, p. 307.

form of production wholly suits – the international festival network. It is to this network that I now turn, in order to outline the ways in which its systems both embrace and enable the humanist world view and élitist Western assumptions and elisions that many of Lepage's productions display.

THE FESTIVAL NETWORK AND TOURISM

Festivals are a complex, and undertheorised, field within theatre studies. Festivals are a crucially important site for the production, distribution and reception of theatre productions on local, national and international levels, and are proliferating throughout the developed world – there are over 400 in Europe alone.[329] Yet theatre scholars have only begun to chart the "unexplored territory" they represent.[330] A form of public celebration and ritual that, at its point of origin in 5th century BC Greece, "drew all its social virtue and artistic value from its scarcity," has become a descriptive that covers everything from community pageants, to massive annual high-art institutions (the Edinburgh and Avignon Festivals) to the spin-off, anarchic reactions to those monoliths which have themselves become institutional (the Edinburgh Fringe and the Avignon "Off"), to annual big-city seasons of performances (the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave and the Festival d'Automne in Paris) for which the term festival "merely applies to a funding or producing organisation."[331] In Knowles' influential argument, the primary function of contemporary festivals is commerce:

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[329] Maurin, Frédéric, "Still and Again: Whither Festivals?", *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13 (4), p. 5.
[330] Bradby, David and Maria M. Delgado, "Editorial," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13 (4), p. 1.
[331] Maurin, pp. 8, 10.

> International festivals are first and foremost marketplaces.... manifestations of a theatrical version of late-capitalist globalisation: postmodern marketplaces for the exchange of cultural *capital*.[332]

Taken together, those individual marketplaces form an international marketplace, a "global flow" of goods, information, capital, and ideas.[333] The festival network, a loose association of arts organisations throughout the developed world for which co-producing and/or presenting touring productions forms all or part of their artistic and commercial programme, has developed as a result of the burgeoning of festivals worldwide.

The first major modern festivals – Edinburgh and Avignon – were founded in 1947, directly after and as a direct result of the end of World War II, and were

> ... shaped by a modernist belief in the inestimable value of cultural activity as a means of allowing communities to re-envisage and reimagine themselves following epochs of profound trauma.[334]

As Dennis Kennedy has argued, there is a direct connection between the post-World War II rise of tourism and birth of the modern festival.[335] Tourism provided newly-formed festivals with audiences seeking enlightenment and self-improvement through contact with high culture. Audiences flocked to festivals to access the "truths" that great works of theatre could give them. Such cultural improvement fit into the belief system underlying tourism in its heyday – the 1950s through the 1980s:[336] that travelling offered self-fulfillment through contact with otherness. By

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[332] Knowles, Ric, "The Edinburgh Festival and Fringe: Lessons for Canada?", *Canadian Theatre Review* 102, p. 89. Emphases in original.
[333] Appadauri, Arjun, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, p. 32.
[334] Bradby and Delgado, p. 2.
[335] Kennedy, Dennis, "Shakespeare and Cultural Tourism," *Theatre Journal* 50.
[336] Between 1950 and 1980, argue Lash and Urry in *Economies of Signs and Space*, package holidays to the Mediterranean formed the backbone of organised travel – in 1980, about 5 million such holidays were sold in Britain. By the end of the 1980s, purchase of package holidays was on the decline marking, they argue, a crucial shift in touristic practice away from

escaping ourselves and our workaday, "civilised" life, and coming in contact with other, "purer" cultures (or quality cultural productions) through travel, the promise was that we would become different, and more fully developed, people. In Chris Rojek's argument:

> ... modernity identified leisure and travel experience with the business of "self-making." Leisure and travel were seen as spheres of activity in which self-realisation could be pursued in a more authentic way than in work and family life.[337]

Through travel, the promise was, we could escape and become better people; but the trouble, of course, is that the one thing we couldn't escape while travelling was ourselves – our own ideas, preconceptions, and illusions. Thus travel is often accompanied with a discomfiting sense of 'anti-climax'[338] and *déjà vu*, of things not being everything we had hoped them to be. Further, tourism inevitably alters the sites it peddles as authentic and untouched: tourism transforms landscapes, cultures, whole economies – but it never seems to transform what we most want it to: ourselves.

Now, some scholars tell us, we live in post-touristic times, which does not mean that tourism is over, but that it is all around us. In our age of disorganised capitalism, tourism has become so pervasive that it has come to "structure and hegemonise contemporary and social and cultural experience," as Lash and Urry have argued.[339] The easy availability of travel, the de-differentiation of space and culture, and the general commodification of all aspects of contemporary society have

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organised touring towards more individualised and flexible traveling – the "end of tourism," in their argument, and the birth of post-tourism.

[337] Chris Rojek, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel*, p. 5.

[338] Rojek, p. 122.

[339] Lash and Urry, p. 257.

eroded the boundaries between home/away, work/leisure, and commodity/value, and tourism has dissolved into the very fabric of contemporary life. This has fostered, the argument goes, attitudes of post-touristic irony and detachment: people now travel with a playful awareness that the activity will not change or improve them. This line of thinking, however, only goes a certain way towards explaining the continuing attraction of travel. Tourism continues, after all, to be enormously popular: it is the world's largest industry. People are still travelling, in their droves, still seeking after the new; the idealistic promises of tourism continue to haunt the contemporary world, as Rojek has argued:

> The globalisation of culture tinges our experience of escape with the shadow of familiarity. And yet our dreams of escape continue to entrance us, and we are nagged by the feeling that our lives will be catapulted into a completely different realm by the activity of travel...[340]

No measure of ironic detachment can fully erode society's "dreams of escape": consumerism is insatiable, and so is the imagination, and tourism must attempt to satisfy them both. Resiliently, the tourism industry has responded by segmenting into specialist areas such as adventure travel, eco-travel, heritage travel, and educational and cultural travel. This diversification represents the tourism industry's assimilation of the problem of the personal in tourism: rather than idealising the destination, such travel experiences acknowledge that the tourist always brings her self with her, and zero in on the personal engagement and edification that the travel experiences can provide.

Festivalgoing now forms one of the specialised nodes in the tourism market; new modes of artistic production and distribution have arisen, and existing modes

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[340] Rojek, pp. 177, 203.

have altered, to service the festival industry. Touring dates to festivals can supplement the budgets and lengthen the running life of productions, and increasingly tours are proposed and confirmed in advance of production, rather than arising from the success of a given production in its home location. The festival network has now become so developed as to serve not only as a model for distribution but for creation: some artists, including Lepage, now create works exclusively through and for the network. As we have seen with *Ota*, festivals and other organisations buy into Lepage's original productions before they exist, based on the promise of his involvement alone, and productions then tour for the whole of their creative life, never coming to rest on any "home" venue.[341] This was, as Hurley and Harvie have commented, the case with *Ota*: while the bulk of the creation process took place in Québec City, the production's performing life was international and peripatetic.

Any production presented in a festival is radically decontextualised: it plays in a brief run to audiences who may not be from the same culture of the production's originators and who will possibly be unfamiliar with the artists and cultures involved. Productions presented in the festival context, therefore, construct audiences as tourists, whether or not audience members have actually travelled long distances to the festival destination. Through the festival brochure, spectators are offered a road map of viewing possibilities, a series of potential new experiences. Even a local audience member seeing a locally-created production will have a different experience

[341] Other artists and companies that create shows within and for the festival network include Robert Wilson and Theatre de Complicite; Deborah Warner and Fiona Shaw's *The Wasteland* and Heiner Goebbels' *Hashiragaki* are other recent examples of network-generated productions.

during a festival rather than outside it: the makeup of the audience will be altered, the show programme and lobby signage will be different, and – if festival organisers have done their job right – there will be a heightened atmosphere, that "extra something" that makes festival-time special. As a touristic practice, the festival network requires a constant supply of novel experiences for the consumers who patronise it. Thus festival marketing strategies use words like "unique," "innovative," and "journey,"[342] and touring shows are pervasively marketed as local "premieres" even though they might have been on the road for years.[343]

Knowles has argued that certain generalisations can be made about productions that function best in the festival context: "often inscrutable, high modernist" works that represent the "self consciously high cultural avant-garde" and are often "'about' theatre itself." If works display identifiable cultural differences, they "tend to be packaged for consumption as exotic or, as in high modernist formalism, treated as energizing but local variants on a (therefore more important) universalist or transcendent humanism...", as was the case, Knowles argues, with *Ota*.[344]

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[342] The following quotes are representative: "If you truly love the theatre, and truly desire a theatrical experience that is unique and compelling..." (Harbourfront Festival, Toronto; www.harbourfront.on.ca/worldstage); "...exploring the planet, discovering new worlds... no time for nostalgia!" (Festival de Théâtre des Ameriques, Montréal; www.fta.qc.ca); "the encounters are ongoing and are being renewed..." (Avignon Festival; www.festival-avignon.com); "opens new vistas for new paths in the arts..." (Ruhr Triennale; www.ruhrtriennale.de); "innovative development, presentation of new works..." (Perth Festival; www.perthfestival.com). Websites all accessed 24 August 2002.

[343] For example, the Canadian premiere" of Gregory Burke's 2001 play *Gagarin Way* and the "first American visit" of Steppenwolf Theatre Company to Toronto in the Harbourfront Festival's 2003 programme; the "American premiere" of the Gate Theatre Dublin's 2002 production of *Pride and Prejudice* in the 2003 Spoleto Festival USA; and the "Australian debut" of Ronnie Burkett's 1998 production *Tinka's New Dress* at the 2002 Melbourne Festival.

[344] Knowles, "Edinburgh," pp. 89, 92, 91.

OTA AS TOURIST

As an overall assessment of the meanings *Ota* created, Knowles' comment is certainly accurate: as with Lepage's other productions, *Ota* communicated, and indeed its creative process was driven by, a belief in the possibility and necessity of individual human connection, which became representative of a universal interconnectedness. This governing belief system, coupled with an emphasis on physical and visual means of storytelling, helped create a production that slotted easily into different festivals without requiring or demanding special knowledge of its originating culture or cultural presuppositions. In fact, the production created its own "micro-culture" (a term I borrow gratefully from MacDougall's description of Théâtre Repère[345]) of travel and development, which drew on themes and tropes of travel in the work, and invited and welcomed the participation of individual tourist/spectators. Travel is an intrinsic theme of Lepage's work, standing in as a metaphor both for personal and national development. This metaphor also extends to the development of his productions as ongoing, collaborative works in progress. As we have seen with the *Trilogy*, the notion that the ideal form of the production is "out there somewhere" and that the work of the artists involved is to journey towards its discovery is a fundamental tenet of this working process. In the early days of the *Ota* creative process, Lepage asserted that

> The show exists... It has a subconscious of its own, a content of its own. Before we even write it or explore it, it exists somewhere, and what the actors are doing when they are improvising, they are discovering -- they are digging...[346]

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[345] See MacDougall, p. 246.

[346] Robert Lepage, interview with the author, Chicago, June 1994. In another interview he reinforced this viewpoint: "We have all these ideas... it's all connected somewhere, secretly –

Thus Lepage configures his productions *themselves* as tourists, travelling the globe, gaining experience, and constantly improving themselves towards an ideal state.

As Lepage sees it, it is through the connection along the way with other tourists – in the form of festival audiences – that a production's growth is facilitated: audience feedback helps the production on its journey towards an ideal form of completeness. He speaks of the symbiotic relationship between his productions and the people who watch them; it is only after a production has been shown to spectators that its creators can come to understand how it works and what its meanings are. This is turn adds value to the viewing experience:

> People want to see live risks, not risky stuff, but people risking something for real. They need to see people drop the ball every once in a while to be reassured it's a game... (audiences) have to feel that their presence is changing the course of things, of the development that goes on onstage.[347]

If festivals construct audiences as tourists, then, Lepage's festival productions reflect an understanding that tourism, and spectatorship, are personal acts of creative perception, as Kennedy has argued:

> ...the touristic site is only the occasion for the adventure: seeing the Acropolis, touching its stones, is ultimately a prompt for an event that occurs in the mind of the visitor, as the meaning of a performance occurs in the mind of the spectator.[348]

As with the segmentation and personalisation of contemporary tourism, Lepage's creative strategy knowingly acknowledges the role of individual experience in the touring/viewing process: the personal experience of watching the show effectively

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it's out of our control. There are these connections and we are trying to unearth them." (Québec City, April 1995).

[347] McAlpine, Alison, "Robert Lepage", in Delgado and Heritage, eds., p. 146.

[348] Kennedy, p. 175.

becomes part of the production's meaning. Audiences are invited to map their own participation onto a production, most of whose characters are artists, whose overall subject matter is the human life-journey towards self-realisation, and which is itself engaged in a ongoing process of creative development. Thus the productions' meanings close in on themselves, and in so doing create a context for themselves within the decontexualised festival world. Lepage's works generate a narrative framework into which audiences can place their own experience. They shrewdly engage with audiences' "dreams of escape" by inviting them into the volatile, live process of making the work. They feed on audiences' longing for the imagined satisfactions of tourism, offering a sense of connection in disconnected times.

In a global festival context, such a closed system is useful. Productions that tour to festivals are called on to appeal to audiences who often have different cultural backgrounds and assumptions than their creators, both across and within markets. *Ota's* stories of artist characters journeying towards self-realisation invite and rely on audience identification, reassuring audiences that a shared desire for self-knowledge brings all people together. Such identification, however, erases difference, and in the case of *Ota* was facilitated by objectified representations of Eastern cultures which become the staging ground for the characters' voyages of self-discovery. Lepage's self-referential meaning-making system, then, is not so closed as to exclude outdated visions of the East as the West's exotic opposite. And so we find ourselves back to one of the paradoxes of tourism: the journey to self-realisation relies on an other against which the touristic self can define itself. Even if tourism – and theatre – are creative transactions played out in the mind of the (cultural) traveller, they are crucially connected to, and implicated by, grounded cultural realities.

I will now turn to a more specific overview of the development of *Ota* to support my arguments about the universalist assumptions, inward focus, and Orientalism of its content, and to highlight an aspect of the production – its use of language – that formed an effective critique because of its cultural specificity.

OTA'S CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Lepage has a personal interest in Asian cultures which, up to this point in his career, was most clearly manifest in *The Dragon's Trilogy*. Following on the success of that and other productions, opportunities arose for him to travel to and work in the East. On his first trip to Japan, he visited Hiroshima, a city that surprised and inspired him:

> Like most people, I was expecting a city which bore the scars of its devastation, engulfed in a dark and destructive atmosphere. I was shocked instead to find instead a very alive, sensual, optimistic and extremely beautiful place which, of course, contains memories of the catastrophe... a place where you are confronted with sensuality and eroticism, despite the name being an international symbol for death and destruction... I returned to Québec, considerably influenced by these ideas, and we decided that Ex Machina's first project would be something about Hiroshima. We wanted to explore this theme of devastation and destruction coupled with rebuilding and survival.[349]

Lepage created a discussion document for potential funders, outlining an ambitious and international project which, when complete, would consist of seven *boîtes* ("boxes", or sections), each of which would be set in a different country in a different decade of the 20th century and would concern a different artistic discipline. A theme connecting the production on a number of levels was renaissance – both in terms of the idea of life returning to a city after its destruction, and in the conception of a

[349] Lepage, Robert, "Yin Yang, Transcendence, and Writing for the Theatre," Royal National Theatre Programme, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, 1996, p. 1.

Renaissance *atélier* where different art forms, artists, and technicians worked together: "It will be theatre that rubs shoulders with other art forms."[350]

In the meantime Lepage brought together a group of collaborators, which included two long-time friends and colleagues, Marie Brassard and Marie Gignac, and other québécois performers with whom he had worked or whose work he had admired, Éric Bernier, Normand Bissonnette, Anne-Marie Cadieux, Normand Daneau, and Ghislaine Vincent.[351] While Lepage continually referred in interview to this creative process representing a diversification and cultural broadening of his practice,[352] this claim seems exaggerated when we consider that there were only two non-Quebecers among the acting and creative team: the America-born and Switzerland-based soprano Rebecca Blankenship, who was originally intended to perform only as a singer in the production but quickly became one of its core collaborators; and lighting designer Sonoyo Nishikawa, the only Japanese person involved in the production. None of the performers had a particularly in-depth knowledge of Chinese or Japanese culture or theatrical forms. One has to wonder why Lepage assembled a culturally homogeneous group of Western actors when his stated intent was to create a formally and culturally heterogeneous piece whose initial inspiration was Japan. The answer probably lay in his desire to work in a group who shared similar cultural and linguistic references and in most cases were

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[350] "Il s'agit donc ici un théâtre qui se serait frotté aux autres arts." Lepage and Ex Machina, "Hiroshima – Description générale." This is an unpublished production document made available to me by members of the *Ota* process.

[351] Patrick Goyette and Richard Fréchette joined the project as collaborators from 1995 onwards, and Macha Limonchik participated as a collaborator from 1996 forward. Dramaturg Gérard Bibeau is also credited as one of the creators of the production. This was the first of Lepage's major collaborations in which he did not participate as a performer.

[352] See Charest, p. 26; Gregson, Stephen "Hiroshima Mon Amour," *Plays International*, October 1994, p. 10; Montessuit, Carmen, "Pour Robert Lepage, Hiroshima aura été l'aboutissement d'un parcours," *Le Journal de Montréal*, May 1997.

familiar with his style of working; and to create opportunities for Québec artists. But this choice, naturally, reverberated throughout the production, and contributed to its point of view remaining primarily Western – at times troublingly Orientalist – and to its preoccupation with forms of theatre (as opposed to a wide assortment of creative forms as Lepage had originally hoped.)

The scope of the collaboration was inherently epic, and the challenge that the collaborators faced was how to turn Lepage's ambitious set of impulses, anecdotes, and ideas into a meaningful piece of theatre. Following on from Lepage's original outline, the collaborators worked in each creative period to improvise, shape, and script sections of material, and then to connect the individual sections together into a coherent whole. Underlying their concerns, and seemingly unquestioned, was the belief that an overall connectedness was necessary in the first place. It was apparently a shared assumption amongst the collaborators that the side-by-side development of material treating different time periods and genres needed eventually to be connected into a recognisable and emotionally resonant story or overlapping stories. There was an overall nervousness around postmodern narrative indeterminacy. Lepage, in talking about the production, often referred to it being "baroque,"[353] in that the individual *boîtes* came to take on specific and unique forms and paces, from hyper-realism ("A Wedding") to politically-edged farce ("Les Mots/Words") to surreal flashback ("The Mirror"). But this variety of tone and style, as well as the production's internationalism and interculturalism, stayed on the surface; the substance of the production and its message was the emotional and personal

[353] See Montessuit; Charest, pp. 45-48; Croyden, Margaret, "Lepage Makes a Splash in *The River Ota*," *TheaterWeek*, 2-8 December 1996.

interconnectedness of a group of individuals, almost all of them Westerners. The base narrative form, as with the *Trilogy* and *Tectonic Plates*, was theatrical melodrama; *Ota's* story lines eventually all concerned individual characters at highly-charged, pivotal moments in their lives, all facing experiences or choices related to birth, death, or lineage.

Initially, the collaborators tried to hold the production together through a central character, a Czech artist named Jana Capek, whose life would bring her to different locations and situations. They imagined her as "one of those ageless women, finely attuned to the century's great moments."[354] Michael Billington perceptively questioned this choice early on, after the production's world premiere in Edinburgh in August 1994:

> I kept wondering if any one woman can carry the burden of being a representative of the century. Brecht created a mythical archetype in Mother Courage, but then he was a great dramatist. So far Jana seems too enigmatic and thinly characterised to shoulder the burden of history.[355]

By 1995 the collaborators agreed that one character could not hold together the production's narrative sprawl. "She became overloaded with all the things we wanted to say," explained Lepage.[356] Jana remained in the production as one of its ensemble of featured characters, but not its central focus.

From that point the narrative through-line became the ties of blood and friendship between the characters, starting with the encounter of a Japanese woman, Nozomi, and an American man, Luke, who met and became lovers in 1946 Hiroshima, symbolically linking East and West.

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[354] Lepage et al, "Hiroshima Project," p. 1. This is another unpublished production document.
[355] Billington, Michael, "Megaton Symbol," *The Guardian*, 17 August 1994.
[356] Lepage, Robert, interview with the author, April 1995, Québec City.

PLATE 16: Anne-Marie Cadieux as Nozomi in Ota. *Photo: Claudel Huot*

Nozomi's house in Hiroshima, represented by Carl Fillion's set of a Japanese facade with seven sliding doors, also became a central linking point. Following on from Luke and Nozomi's union, we jumped 20 years ahead, as their son Jeffrey Yamashita arrives in New York searching for his half-brother, Jeffrey O'Connor, Luke's son by his American wife. We then moved 15 years further forward to witness Jeffrey O'Connor, suffering with AIDS, commit assisted suicide in Amsterdam. And so forth through to the present day, in which a québécois dancer, Pierre, arrived in Hiroshima to study butoh and took a room in the house now owned by Nozomi's daughter, Hanako, a blind translator. It was only in a final creation period in 1997, added on beyond the original ending date of the production because the collaborators still felt their work was not finished, that they decided to revert to the original idea of having

a central character whose story connected all the others. They chose to have this character be Hanako, an idea they borrowed from the filmmaker Francis Leclerc, who made an hour-long film of the *Ota* material in early 1997 and made Hanako its central figure. Blinded by the atom bomb, she was present as a small child in the first *boîte* when Luke and Nozomi met; and the drama of the final *boîte* became Hanako's resistance to her brother Jeffrey Yamashita's insistence that they sell the house in Hiroshima. This final version of the production, as with the *Trilogy*, took on a circular structure, starting with the arrival of one North American man (Luke) in Hiroshima, and ending with the departure of another, Pierre.[357]

This circular structure reinforced the impression that the production, overall, was driven by the melodrama form, as did its focus on the fraught and interconnected lives of individual characters, which eventually became, like the *Trilogy*, a family story. As we have seen, the melodrama of the *Trilogy* functioned as a critique of Québec's status as a colonised nation. *Tectonic Plates*, more international and more diffuse than the *Trilogy*, eventually focussed around journeying, introspective Quebecers, and through its treatment of the negotiation of cultural differences and the character of Jacques/Jennifer offered a commentary on québécois cultural and linguistic politics. *Ota*, more international and more epic again than *Tectonic Plates*, is also more difficult to read as a directed and focussed critique. While other aspects of the production reflected considerable creativity and skill, and often

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[357] Except this time, of course, Pierre was returning home from the East, not setting off for it. The Pierre in *Ota* was, initially, intended to be the same character as the *Trilogy's* Pierre Lamontagne, but as the production developed, his biography became so different from that of the first character that they made this Pierre into a freestanding figure named Pierre Maltais. Pierre Lamontagne's story was continued in *Le Confessionnal*, which Lepage was filming at the same time as he was creating *Ota*.

succeeded in creating compelling moments of emotional connection between performers and audience, these moments did not lead to any significant insight other than an affirmation of a (politically questionable) global human connectedness, creating an experience that for critic James Frieze was "intense but strangely vacuous."[358]

Many other critics, however, in both scholarly and popular outlets, responded extremely positively to the production's evocations of personal and collective memory and to the emotional power of its images, and bought into its universalising vision. The production, according to Robert Brustein in *The New Republic*, was a "masterpiece" which "attempt[ed] to show how suffering and sensitivity to suffering are human qualities that somehow manage to unite people."[359] For Scott T. Cummings in *Theatre Journal*, Lepage's "mesmerising magnum opus" argued "for reconciliation in interculturalism as the transcendent value to emerge from the end of 'the American century.'"[360] Peter Marks in *The New York Times* found it an "ambitious, rambling, exhilarating portrait of human resilience amid the cultural shifts and multiple apocalypses of the mid-to-late 20th century... as sweeping and untamed and whimsical as the modern world itself."[361] For Charles Spencer in *The Daily Telegraph*, the production "reflect[ed], and celebrate[ed], the human capacity for change and renewal... what one remembers most vividly is the characters' capacity for love,

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[358] Frieze, James, "Channelling Rubble: *Seven Streams of the River Ota* and *After Sorrow*," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 12 (1), p. 137, quoted in Harvie, p. 121.
[359] Brustein, Robert, "The Journey of Robert Lepage," *The New Republic*, 10 February 1997.
[360] Cummings, Scott T., "*The Seven Streams of the River Ota*," *Theatre Journal* 49 (3), pp. 348, 353.
[361] Marks, Peter, "Restless Tribute to Human Resilience," *The New York Times*, 4 December 1996.

friendship, and survival."[362] And for *The Observer's* Michael Coveney, Lepage had become something of a modern-day guru, whose productions helped spectators map the confusions of contemporary existence: "We still need the epic ambition of Robert Lepage to join up the dots in our hectic modern lives."[363]

In a provocative short essay in the Montréal arts magazine *Parachute*, Jim Drobnick argued that it was important to take the production's emotional power seriously. Drobnick classified *Ota* as being of a different order than the "anniversary culture" represented in recently erected museums and monuments to the events of the 1940s, and the debates about the "politics of memory" that they elicit.

> Lepage's work operates on a different register than can be engaged solely via the issues of representation or meaning; it is one which implicates diverse layers of experience on the much more emotional and sensorial level of affect. In some ways Lepage takes up the challenge of what to do after the deconstructive strategies of the avant-garde – shock, disruption, estrangement, reflexivity – have been banalized and assimilated into mass cultural style.[364]

The role of emotion is indeed an important element of Lepage's artistic project and the melodramatic strategies through which he engages audiences. In an interview with Laura Winters of *The New York Times*, Lepage was very clear about his conscious employment of emotion as a device in *Ota*: "People go to the theatre not to feel good. They go there to feel."[365] It is certainly clear from critical and audience response that *Ota* was a moving experience for many who saw it; it remains questionable, however, to what creative or ideological end this emotion was elicited. One wishes that

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[362] Spencer, Charles, "Lepage proves he can still work magic," *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 September 1996.
[363] Coveney, Michael, "It's a ferocious fandango of sparring and sex during a long night's journey into day," *The Observer*, 29 September 1996.
[364] Drobnik, Jim, "Robert Lepage, Ex Machina," *Parachute* 87, p. 56.
[365] Winters, Laura, "The World is His Canvas, and His Inspiration," *The New York Times*, 1 December 1996.

Drobnick had more space to elucidate his claim that with *Ota* Lepage "absorbs his spectators in a compelling emotional experience and, at the same time, comments on and decenters its power to do so from *inside the experience itself*"[366] beyond his point that the show's slow pace, novelty, and surreal quality kept spectators absorbed but short of hypnotised. For in the production itself it is hard to locate the internal commentary on emotionality that Drobnick so firmly argues is present: it contains a series of moments of intense emotion (the death of Jeffrey O'Connor by assisted suicide; Jana's reconnection with childhood trauma via an imagined vision of her friend Sarah singing an aria from *Madame Butterfly*; the final, climactic "kimono dance", in which various characters reappeared in a wedding kimono that had hung on stage throughout), that were each soon followed by a blackout and act break (or in the case of the kimono dance, the end of the production). These served as emotional climaxes for audience members, not framed by analysis or internal commentary. They were part of the larger strategy of audience inclusion that Lepage activated in the production, which invited spectators to empathise with its artist characters and, through its evocation of connectedness, to stimulate personal memories and feelings of connection with their own loved ones. But this is a sense of inclusion that, again in Lepage's work, turned inward, towards the individual experience and the representational and theatrical process itself; it did not, in most instances, invite connections to the world outside the production.

One section of the production, however, did develop into a robust cultural critique, no doubt because the collaborators were intimately familiar with and invested in its subject matter, Québec cultural politics.

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[366] Drobnik, emphasis in original.

MULTILINGUALISM AND QUÉBEC CONTENT IN *OTA*

As might be expected from a production created by an almost totally québécois ensemble, it is through language that *Ota* made its most effective socio-political commentary. As Dvorak has argued, the production used many means to foreground the use of language and "the fragility of communication."[367] Characters frequently struggled to communicate in languages that were not their own. When Luke first arrived at Nozomi's house, he read out an official request to photograph it in halting, American-accented Japanese. Sarah calmed Jana in the concentration camp by speaking a few words of the girl's native Czech to her; they then switched to German. What we heard most often in the production, though, was English spoken in myriad of foreign accents: Japanese, Dutch, Czech, and québécois. As Dvorak argued,

> This diversity of accents.... represents the role that English plays as a deterritoralised code, as the lingua franca of interplanetary communication.[368]

This multilingualism, in other words, was a commentary on the globalisation of culture, in that it recreated mimetically the *mélange* of languages and accents that characterise lived experience in Québec and indeed around the world.[369] It was also a means for the collaborators to comment on the domination of English on international communications systems.[370]

As well as using language mimetically, the production offered a hyper-theatrical commentary on language as a flawed and politicised form of

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[367] "la fragilité de la communication." Dvorak, p. 143.
[368] "Cette diversité d'accents... signale le rôle que joue l'anglais en tant que code déterritorialisé, en tant que *lingua franca* de la communication interplanétaire." Dvorak, p. 144.
[369] See Dvorak; see also Simon, "Robert Lepage and the Languages of Spectacle."
[370] As Tomlinson observes, "over 2/3 of the world's scientists write in English, 3/4 of the world's mail is written in English and of all the information in the world's electronic retrieval systems, 80 per cent is stored in English." Tomlinson, p. 79.

communication, in the *boîte* called "Words/Les Mots" which concerned a québécois theatre group touring a production to Japan. This was the first material the collaborators developed in the production, and turned out to be its most durable, in that it remained in its basic form relatively intact throughout the production's many iterations. It developed into a sophisticated and entertaining critique of the performance of identity and the politics of representation in a Québec context, taking swipes at diplomacy and language politics along the way. The collaborators chose to include characters who were diplomats as a commentary on their experience of touring productions supported by the Québec and Canadian governments. Brassard explained:

> [Having diplomat characters] came from the fact that we have been touring a lot, and Robert wanted to talk about theatre and our personal experience of theatre, which is touring; we are often invited to these openings and receptions, and very often there are diplomats there welcoming us, so these people are really part of our lives as actors... he wanted to explore these people.[371]

In "Words" the job of diplomat was ironically compared to that of actor: both are about playing roles, about representing a point of view that might not necessary correspond with one's own. Through the development process the collaborators honed in on this aspect of the material and brought it into focus as a direct comment on Québec. Initially, they had their fictional theatre company travelling to contemporary Hiroshima to perform a play by Yukio Mishima, *Madame de Sade*. But while developing the 1996 version, the collaborators shifted the time and location of the *boîte* to the 1970 World Expo in Osaka, and had the play-within-a-play become a Feydeau farce, to enable a commentary about the globalisation of cultural politics and

[371] Brassard et al, Interview with the author, December 1996.

about Québec's colonised status. "Mega-events" such as World Fairs, Expos, and the Olympic Games are occasions which enable the performance of nation on a world scale; they serve as consolidation points for national pride and opportunities to disseminate chosen images about the nation to the rest of the world.[372] 1970 was a year of considerable turmoil in Québec: nationalism tipped over into violence with the FLQ kidnapping of two politicians and Trudeau's invocation of the War Measures Act. That a Québec company would be performing not a québécois but a French play at a World Expo in that year was a highly ironised (and yet credible) situation.

One of the themes of the *boîte* was translation: the Japanese translator Hanako was a central character, and throughout, different literal and metaphoric meanings of translation were explored and performed. As Simon has argued, the "whole section [was] in fact a 'staging' of language, a foregrounding of words..."[373] Sophie had difficulty reaching her boyfriend Michel by phone from Osaka because the Canadian operator did not speak French – an ironic jab at Canada's claims to be a bilingual country. The audience watched a swathe of the fictional theatre company's performance of *La Dame de chez Maxim's*,[374] but from behind, through open onstage doors, seeing and hearing Hanako in her backstage translator's booth following the script and providing simultaneous Japanese translation. The next scene offered a further behind-the-scenes view of both theatre and "the joys of diplomacy" as the Canadian attaché Walter and his wife Patricia sought out Sophie in her dressing room

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[372] See Maurice Roche, *Mega-Events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture.*

[373] Simon, "Robert Lepage and the Languages of Spectacle," p. 226.

[374] A pastiche of elements from Feydeau's plays created by the *Ota* collaborators.

and praised her performance, even though Patricia said privately that while Sophie was pretty and photogenic, "she's not very good."[375]

PLATE 17: The restaurant scene in "Words." The translator's booth was to the stage left of the pictured area. Photo: Claudel Huot

The metatheatricality of the *boîte* reached its crescendo in a restaurant scene, in which Walter, Patricia, and Sophie's conversation, in French, was translated live into English by a translator occupying the same booth as had Hanako in the Feydeau scene.[376] At a crucial point in the conversation, however, translation failed. Sophie, exasperated by Patricia's false praise, broke down her guard and admitted what she really thought about the Feydeau play:

> ... c'est nul. Le texte est nul, le décor est nul, les acteurs sont nuls! Vous êtes diplomate vous? Expliquez-moi donc ça qu'on fasse venir un metteur en scène français à une pièce française, et que c'est ça qui

[375] Bernier, Éric et al, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, p. 75

[376] That this translation was there to serve a theatrical more than a functional purpose was underlined by the fact that it was retained even in when the production was performed in francophone markets.

> représente le Canada à l'exposition universelle d'Osaka? Je vais vous le dire, moi, c'est quoi, c'est parce qu'on est colonisé... Ça me donne envie de sacrer, tabernac d'hostie de calice de saint-ciboire!!! À part de ça, même de Gaulle l'a dit, 'Vive le Québec libre, calice!!'
> [... it's shit. The text is shit, the sets are shit, the actors are shit! You're diplomats? Explain to me, then, why we're bringing a French director with a French play to represent Canada at the World Expo in Osaka? I'll tell you why, it's because we're colonised... it makes me want to curse...]

Sophie here invoked the unique lexicon of Québec curse words, which refer to elements of the Catholic mass: tabernacle, host, chalice, ciborium. The English translator, however, either could not or would not translate these words, and in their place said "expletive": "It makes me want to...'expletive' 'expletive' 'expletive' 'expletive'... It was de Gaulle who said 'Long Live Free Québec, expletive!' " After a stunned pause, Walter mildly delivered the final punch line: "Ben, je pense pas qu'il ait dit calice, là...", which the translator speaks as "Well, I don't think he said 'expletive'..."[377]

The collaborators here made a series of strong political points, through the situation, through the substance of Sophie's argument, and through the way that the *boîte* overall was staged, that would be available to audiences regardless of their knowledge level about Québec. There were also internal layers of humour and irony embedded in this sequence that rewarded a certain level of specific knowledge. Sophie argued that her company's performance of Feydeau in the context of the Expo was proof of ongoing cultural colonisation: the implicit question was why they would not be performing a Québec play that reflected the interests and realities of their culture, rather than one that reflected a nostalgic colonial connection to France. There was some self-rewarding dramatic irony in the fact a Québec theatre company asked

[377] Bernier et al, pp. 87-88.

this question diegetically while performing Québec-specific material on the "world stage" that the festival circuit represents. The company referred to Québec's culturally insecure past while at the same time asserting their own status as evidence of the nation's current cultural vitality. The translator's cleaning-up of Sophie's profane language came across on one level as an extension of the *boîte*'s thematics of translation, as it dramatised the distance between words and meanings by actually staging the presence of the mediating figure, the translator. The translator's unwillingness or inability to translate Sophie's expletives referred to the minoritisation of French in the Canadian context, and to an impression on the part of Quebecers that they are not understood, linguistically or otherwise, by Anglophones.

For those who were familiar with Québec culture, there was the additional level of complicity involved in hearing this unique version of the French language spoken on stage, and in seeing and hearing important events from Québec's history discussed on stage in a not-uncontroversial manner. To make reference in such a highly farcicial context to the events of the FLQ crisis and the sacred (to nationalists) words of General de Gaulle was to engage a politically charged and risky critique. As Gittings has argued, the events of 1970 created a history which

> ... has produced an understanding of the people, les Québécois, as an oppressed community exploited by the English majority with the complicity of the French comprador class.[378]

Walter and Patricia were representative of such complicity: francophone Quebecers, they now worked in service of the Canadian federal government. That Sophie went on to have sex with Walter represented her, and Québec's, abjection to the federal powers-that-be. The political focus of the *boîte* dissolved somewhat when Patricia

[378] Gittings, p. 176.

discovered Sophie and Walter *in flagrante*, causing the theatrical and political aspects of Sophie's life to collapse into each other: the costumed actors from *La Dame de Chez Maxim's* reappeared on stage and took a bow with Patricia and Walter, complete with canned audience laughter, as Sophie looked on, dazed. The remainder of the *boîte* considered the personal ramifications of these events on Sophie, in keeping with the production's overall focus on the emotional lives of individual characters, and "Words'" cultural critique stopped there.

Lepage was apparently unsatisfied, however, with where he had left this treatment of language politics and the FLQ era, and returned to the "Words" material in his 1998 film *Nô*, which develops the parallel story of Sophie's boyfriend Michel, not physically present in *Ota*, a tortured-intellectual separatist back in Montréal who engages in a bungled bomb plot with his radical separatist colleagues. Michel and his friends' activities play out in parallel with those of Sophie, Walter, and Patricia in Osaka as, in Gittings' words, "Lepage's representation of nationalist politics as theatre." Footage of the pregnant Sophie miscarrying her baby in 1970 is intercut with footage of the now-bourgeois Sophie and Michel watching the results of the 1980 referendum (in which Québec historically said "no" to separation) on television, making what Gittings feels "is a rather heavy-handed point about the failure of québécois separatists to carry the embryonic Québec nation to full term."[379] A full discussion of *Nô* is outside the sphere of this research; the important point here is that in "Words," the *Ota* collaborators turned the production's overall self-reflexive quality into an engaged critique, in contrast with other of the production's references to foreign cultures and historical events.

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[379] Gittings, p. 191.

INTERCULTURALISM AND *OTA*

As mentioned above, part of what Lepage was interested in exploring, and eventually felt like he was expressing, through *Ota* was the "baroqueness" and heterogeneity of contemporary culture. He described his approach to his work at this point in his career as a "pizza" style of creation – that is, the borrowing of different cultural references and mixing of them in a single theatre piece:

> It's a direction that the company and I are more and more interested in pursuing.... It also has to do with the CNN global village in which we live, where we know everything about everyone almost instantly. It's a world in which we borrow more and more and in which we develop more and more ties between cultures. We are necessarily moving in the direction of more superimposition, more integration.[380]

Many critics responded positively to the heterogeneity of Lepage's work, seeing it as a timely expression of contemporary global culture: "Lepage, as he expresses it himself, is 'dramatizing cultures' instead of individuals," wrote Ray Conlogue. "His 'actors' are the mass migrations of peoples and ideas that make today's world so unstable, so rootless, and so full of possibilities."[381] For Simon, Lepage's work is "about the way cultures travel, about the clash and interpenetration of cultures," particularly in its use of multiple languages:

> Lepage's plays enact a kind of code-switching, using varieties of language interaction for specific kinds of effects. As such, they propose a vision of 'cosmopolitan globalism' as a dialogue among differences.

One recognises here that strain of discourse around globalisation which exalts the transience and mobility of cultures without considering the privileges necessary to experience this transience as a positive and exciting, rather than materially

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[380] Charest, p. 47.

[381] Conlogue, Ray, "It is a New Renaissance and We Have to be Ready For It," *The Globe and Mail*, reprinted in 1994 Edinburgh Festival official programme, p. 17.

destabilising, experience. Simon's comments also typify the québécois idealisation of Lepage as a "transnational intellectual" whose mobility and flexibility argue for the province's own global viability.[382]

The later versions of *Ota* represented a benign and privileged vision of a globalising world, a vision achieved in part through representations of other cultures that were objectified, simplified, and naïve. As we have seen, many of the *Trilogy's* representations of Asian cultures could be understood as internal, coded references to local cultural interactions whose naïvete was deployed intentionally, as a critique of Québec itself. Such contextualisation was not present in *Ota*: the production was not about Québec or the Québec point of view but about a set of interlocking family stories whose backdrop was a wide sweep of 20th century global history. While many critics embraced the production's ambitious sweep and its humanist, universalising vision, others objected to some of its representations and questioned the wiseness and effectiveness of a representational net cast so wide.

It is important to emphasise that, at earlier stages in the production, the *Ota* collaborators evidenced a desire to ground and research the cultural references in the production that were foreign to them, and chafed against representing cultures and cultural forms about which they knew little. Early on, they imagined material investigating the intercultural roots of butoh in post-war Paris;[383] and successfully resisted setting material in China (which Lepage had wanted) because they felt that they did not know enough about the country and its culture to represent it

[382] Simon, "Robert Lepage," pp. 215, 227.
[383] See Lepage et al, "Hiroshima Project."

PLATE 18: Éric Bernier as Pierre practices butoh in Ota. *Photo: Yves Dubé*

properly.[384] As the production developed, though, the collaborators' primary cultural focus became the micro-culture of the production itself – its plot lines, characters, and overall organisation – and their desire or ability to contextualise other cultural materials lessened. Tropes and individual representations entered the production which objectified Eastern cultures and extended Orientalist stereotypes, presenting Japan as the exotic staging ground for its Western characters' personal journeys, as a site for spiritual and personal renewal. Its Eastern characters perpetuated familiar

[384] Some of the collaborators discussed this discomfort with representing China in a group interview in New York in December 1996.

typing of the Japanese man as meek and indirect (Jeffrey Yamashita) and the Japanese woman as a deserted lover, extending the *Butterfly* trope engaged in the *Trilogy*. In *Ota's* final version, images of a Japanese woman being loved and deserted by a Western man both opened and closed the production. Both of these *boîtes* foregrounded the gaze of the Western man on the Japanese woman, through Luke's photographs of Nozomi, and Pierre's observation of Hanako which became the source of his butoh performance. These representations naturalised and seemed to justify thematically the stereotypical representation of Asianness as "an object to be looked at."[385] As both Frieze and Harvie have argued, attempts to discern an element of conscious, critical metatheatricality in such representations run aground in the midst of the production's "decadent" hypertheatricality.[386]

In addition to the uncritical deployment of the *Butterfly* trope, the structuring of the final version of *Ota* around the character of Hanako was problematic in that the character was underrealised, existing only in relation to Western characters and as a plot device to tie the production's many strands together. Because the production was not engaged in a critique of identity, racial or otherwise, as constructed or produced by society – on the contrary, its entire project was the opposite, the reification of the notion of the individual life-journey towards a unified and inherent identity – these representations of Japanese characters remained clichés. It could be argued that, because the Japanese characters were played by Western actors who swapped between many roles throughout the production, a case was being made for a more flexible definition of identity, but because the cast was all-white, the

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[385] Moy, James, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America*, p. 84, quoted in Frieze, p. 137.
[386] Harvie, p. 121; see also Frieze, p. 137.

representation only went one way. White was presented as the unquestioned normative state, and multiple casting primarily functioned to underline the Western actors' talent and prowess in playing so many and different characters. Similarly, the production appropriated catastrophic events from recent world history as a means towards character and audience catharsis, using them as a backdrop for the advancement of its plot lines rather than engaging with or exploring their specific circumstances and meanings.[387] As Billington, reviewing the 1996 version in London, commented:

> ... there is a whiff of cultural colonialism about the idea that the show is about Westerners who come to Hiroshima to find themselves 'confronted by their own devastation and their own enlightenment.' The more we know about Hiroshima the better, but the idea that, having first destroyed it, we should then use it as spiritual salvation sticks in the throat.[388]

The connections that the production created affirmed that family and love are powerful ties that bind people together, but did not interrogate, for example, what forces in the world might drive people apart and create calamities such as war and holocaust that were the production's starting points.

Lepage, in talking about the production, contextualised it as part of his ongoing project of personal and cultural self-examination:

> My fascination with the East also helps me understand the West... how can you understand the West, the culture of the twentieth century, when you're a Quebecer with virtually no cultural means at your disposal? You need a mirror, and one of my first mirrors was the East. In *Seven Streams*, mirrors are pervasive...[389]

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[387] This point grew out of a conversation with Conall Morrison; many thanks to him for offering his insights on the production.
[388] Billington, Michael, "Grand Stage Lepage," *The Guardian*, 24 September 1996.
[389] Cited in Charest, p. 36.

At this stage in his career, for Lepage to position himself and his culture as isolated and disadvantaged feels disingenuous. These comments were made to Rémy Charest in the context of a series of interviews conducted in, among other places, a Japanese restaurant in Stockholm and a train between Montréal and Québec City, as Lepage juggled the creation of *Ota*, performances of *Needles and Opium*, the direction of Strindberg's *The Dream Play* at Stockholm's Dramaten Theatre, and the editing of his first feature film in Paris. At this stage in his career, Lepage had considerable "cultural means at his disposal," and Québec was flexing its power as a fast-globalising and economically free-standing para-political entity. There is a sense of disconnection between the cultural privilege and agency that Lepage enjoyed at this stage in his career, and his alignment of himself, in this and other interviews, with a sheltered and tentative Québec culture.

Ota's lack of analysis, in the view of other critics, marred the production and gave the impression of a lack of intellectual or ideological rigour. "Everything is precise, clean, smooth, the picture of containment. It has the whiff of planetary ecumenism ... We travel all over the world and stay on the surface," wrote Brigitte Salino in *Le Monde*.[390] Ian Lockerbie noted a similar strain of criticism of *Ota*, and other of Lepage's works, from Scottish and English critics:

> They criticise his productions for the kind of dabbling associated with the globetrotter's excessive haste... He gives the impression of a

[390] "Tout est précis, net, lisse, à l'image du contenu. Il souffle comme un parfum d'oeucménisme planétaire [...] On voyage autour du monde en restant à la surface." Salino, Brigitte, "Huit heures de théâtre pour raconter Hiroshima de 1945 à 1997," *Le Monde*, 12 November 1996, p. 12, cited in Tessier, Guy, " 'De la dithyrambe pure à la critique acide': La France accueille Robert Lepage....", *L'Annuaire Théâtral* 27, p. 173.

> shooting star which amazes as it passes overhead, but leaves no trace of its origins.[391]

In a 1997 essay, Robert Lévesque, as ever one of Lepage's most prescient, if most conflicted critics (he writes of experiencing something akin to "tortured love" for an artist he likens, in the space of paragraphs, to both an archangel and an imposter), censures Lepage for ceasing to take risks in works such as *Ota*:

> What does he want to say, what story is he telling, what is this world he navigates like an air traffic controller?... His *dramatis personae* are comprised of nice young people, not particularly culturally sophisticated, almost to a one... Every one of Lepage's characters is a naïf. [392]

Though hyperbolic, Lévesque's criticism is acute. Because of its epic timescale and geographic sweep, *Ota* did not allow for significant character development, and presented a series of individuals all experiencing the sense of being lost in the world. Each *boîte* built towards a moment of high emotion in which individual characters experienced a moment of connectedness with a lover or family member, often underlined by musical accompaniment or a striking staging device. Then the story moved on to another lost individual and another emotional high point; the accretion and interconnectedness of these mini-melodramas created a sense of strong emotional affect for many theatregoers. But a larger message, or a sense of accumulated wisdom, was not forthcoming.

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[391] "...ils reprochent [aux productions] de Lepage d'avoir un côté touche-à-toute attribué justement à la trop grande hâte du globe-trotter... L'impression créé par Lepage serait, par conséquent, celle de l'étoile filiante qui émerveille au passage, mains qui ne laisse aucune trace spécifique de ses origines." Lockerbie, p. 226.

[392] [Q]ue veut-il dire, que raconte-t-il, quel est ce monde qu'il agite comme un contrôleur aérien?... Son dramatis personae est fait de jeunes gens gentils et dotés de peu de culture, presque inclutes... Tout personnage de Lepage est un naïf." Lévesque, "Robert Lepage: Le magicien," in *La Liberté de blâmer: Carnets et dialogues sur le théâtre*, pp. 59, 61.

CHAPTER 8: *THE DRAGON'S TRILOGY*, 2003 REVIVAL

In the years since *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, Lepage has continued to split his creative time between productions for Ex Machina, filmmaking, and work as an independent director-for-hire under the aegis of his own for-profit company, Robert Lepage Incorporated.[393] His biggest success in recent years has been the solo production *La Face Cachée de la Lune/The Far Side of the Moon*, which I discuss in my concluding chapter. The two most recent large-scale, multi-actor collaborations, *La Géometrie des Miracles/Geometry of Miracles* and *Zulu Time* (the latter of which I discuss in Chapter 9), have had a mixed reception critically and have not toured as extensively as previous productions. This forms part of the context for the announcement, in late 2002, that Ex Machina and the Festival de Théâtre des Ameriques (FTA) were to co-produce a revival of *The Dragon's Trilogy*, which would premiere in May 2003 at the FTA and then be available for international touring. It is hard not to see this as an attempt to revisit the artistic triumph and touring success of the *Trilogy* in its first incarnation(s). In mid-2002, Ex Machina's producing director Bernatchez framed the decision to bring the *Trilogy* back as part of Lepage's desire for Ex Machina to be a company with a touring repertoire, and also as a means for Lepage to take something of a break:

> He wanted to be one of those companies that have shows that last forever and are able to stay around, so that's part of it... Also he wanted a year where he could slow down...[394]

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[393] RLI was founded in 1988 and now is currently run out of offices in the Caserne by Lynda (Lepage) Beaulieu, Lepage's sister.

[394] Bernatchez, Michel, interview with the author, 13 July 2002.

Clearly for Lepage and Bernatchez, re-staging the *Trilogy* seemed less of an effort than making a new piece; at this early stage they were viewing the production as a clear-cut revival of extant material, performed by a new and younger cast with some creative participation by the production's original collaborators.

This approach shifted as Lepage and his new team entered the rehearsal process and confronted the production's subject matter and themes. Print materials disseminated by the FTA and Ex Machina foregrounded the original production's "näive" representation of the East and described the revival as an attempt to redress and update this point of view.[395] In fact, the revival did not come to constitute a coherent updating, but Lepage's stated desire to revise it is significant, as is the local press' apparent lack of interest in Lepage's revisionist stance. The 2003 *Trilogy* generated a highly uniform discourse of nostalgia and positive nation-building, in which the production was framed as an experiential teaching tool wherein a new generation could be edified by their contact with a living monument from the nation's recent cultural past – "a work which changed the face of theatre in Québec" in the words of FTA director Marie-Hélène Falcon.[396] This response illustrates the problematics of history-creation in postcolonial societies, particularly stateless nations such as Québec: the *Trilogy*, whose original creative purpose was to break down and reconstruct received images of Québec society, had in the space of two decades itself become a valued cultural artifact, part of Québec's accepted identity, and to challenge the narrative of its importance was clearly a disruptive proposition for local

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[395] Festival de Théâtre des Ameriques and Ex Machina, "*The Dragon's Trilogy*: The Orient Revisited," press release, 2003.
[396] "une oeuvre qui a changé la face du théâtre au Québec." Cited in St. Hilaire, Jean, "Acte de transmission," *Le Soleil*, 22 May 2003.

commentators. The *Trilogy* revival and its reception also demonstrated the extent to which the cultural capital of Repère and Ex Machina has accrued exclusively around Lepage; what was consistently framed, in its original creative lifespan, as an ongoing collaborative process had now become a product of considerable value tied to the unique talent of the "director, auteur, and guiding genius"[397] Lepage. I explore these concerns in the brief chapter that follows.

"*LA TRILOGIE DES DRAGONS:* THE ORIENT REVISITED"

The above heading is the title of the 2003 FTA press release for the *Trilogy*, which reads, in part:

> Since the original production of *La Trilogie des Dragons*, the work of Robert Lepage has often been presented in Asia. The naive, intrigued tone of his initial mounting of the first *Trilogie* – a gaze focussed on an imaginary China reminiscent of North American Chinatowns of the 1930s – no longer exists. For the past 15 years, Lepage has incorporated into several productions his understanding of an Eastern universe explored again and again, an Orient with which he is intimately familiar. He is thus presenting a revised and updated *Trilogie des Dragons*, one that includes Asian artists and a new generation of performers, as well as staging and sets that have evolved over time.[398]

This argues that Lepage's productions since the *Trilogy* have come to reflect a more sensitive and nuanced representation of Eastern cultures; one must assume, given its subject matter, that *Ota* is central to this argument. It will be clear from my analysis above that I would find this claim disputable; while *Ota* featured more fictional Japanese settings and included aspects of stagecraft which imitated Asian forms, it displayed a "tourist gaze"[399] which perpetuated clichés and uneven power relations.

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[397] Knowles, *Reading*, p. 43.
[398] Festival de Théâtre des Ameriques and Ex Machina, ibid.
[399] Harvie, "Transnationalism, Orientalism, and Cultural Tourism," p. 111.

It is interesting, however, that in this statement Lepage seems to be responding to criticism of his work as Orientalist; this is in keeping with the claims he makes in interview that he is attuned to and in ongoing conversation with commentators on his creative practice.[400] While it was exactly the "naïve" viewpoint of the original *Trilogy* that provided a mediating context for many of its objectifications of Asian cultures, Lepage here seems to acknowledge that, time and experience having moved on, so too would the *Trilogy*'s vision of "the Orient."

The fact is, however, that most of the *Trilogy* revival's representations were the same as those of the original: it ended up being very similar to the original *integrale*, with a few changes in plot evident only in the final section. It is disputable whether those changes and revisions that did occur solved as many representational problems as they created new ones. An attempt was made to update the production's representational strategy by having actors play characters that matched their cultural background. Thus, Japanese-Canadian actor Emily Shelton was cast in the roles of the Geisha, Yukali's mother, and Yukali; and the Briton Tony Guilfoyle played Crawford.

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[400] Lepage often talks in interview about how response to his productions, critical and otherwise, shapes their ongoing development. In 1995, he said of *Ota*,

> People always think I'm being a nice guy, saying that what people write about us is important, that I am putting on an act, but it's true, because it is part of the show. We don't know what we are doing. I'm not saying we're discovering a new continent, but Christopher Columbus didn't know what was on the other side, you know?... You have to listen to what people are saying, see through their insults sometimes, and see what they're really getting from the show... There is a trend now that directors say that actors shouldn't read their reviews... but I say, No they should, to know what people are saying because this is entertainment – even if it is a work in progress, this is entertainment, and people, audiences, often know more about what we're doing than we do. (Interview with the author, Québec City, 19 April 1995).

Bunzli notes that Lepage tends to refer to public rehearsals and early performances as opportunities to '"verify" the effectiveness of the work in progress. "Geography," p. 96.

PLATE 19: Emily Shelton as the Geisha in the 2003 Trilogy *revival. Both photos on this page: Erick Labbé*

PLATE 20: Shelton as the Geisha and Jean-Antoine Charest as her American lover.

But this strategy was not employed in a uniform manner: Éric Leblanc, who played Wong and Lee, appeared to be Asian or Amerasian, but is in fact Franco-québécois; and the roles of Wong's sisters were played, as before, by actors with stockings pulled over their faces.[401] This was one of many of the production's "Asian" staging elements, props, and tropes which remained as in the original: the movement passage that emulated tai-chi; the Geisha and Yukali as Butterfly figures; Wong's shuffling gait and "Charlie Chan" diction. These were externalised, distant impressions of otherness, contextualised somewhat in the original *Trilogy* by the fact that its creators were expressing their distant, self-consciously objectified view of the Orient. The casting of Shelton and Guilfoyle came across as a half-hearted and confused partial commentary on the production's representational practices; it makes literal and seems to sanction what the production was at otherwise at pains to represent as knowingly objectified.

The majority of changes in the production came in the third and final section, the White Dragon; this was the part of the show that was most extensively debated by its original creators at the start of the revival's creative process.[402] The idea came up in discussion, for example, that the White Dragon might be moved forward temporally so that it took place in the revival's real time, 2003, because this was the section that most concerned art and the artist's quest and, as Marie Gignac put it, "we were... tempted to put in the things that are preoccupying us now."[403] As Gignac noted, however, this would have created some mimetic challenges, including that

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[401] See Bourdages, Étienne, "Trois fois trop pour trop peu," *Jeu* 109, p. 143.
[402] See Hébert, "O.K. on change?"
[403] "...nous sommes... tentés de y'mettre nos preoccupations actuelles..." Cited in Hébert, p. 128.

Françoise, in 2003, would have been in her nineties, and thus it would not have been plausible that she could travel to Vancouver independently to visit her son. Such difficulties in the internal logic of the story may have contributed to the White Dragon eventually being set, in the revival as in the original, in the 1980s. In fact, the revival production heavily underlined the '80s setting, through costuming, hairstyles, and music: Pierre and Yukali wore pencil-leg jeans, and Françoise a trenchcoat with shoulder pads and a Princess Di hairdo; a film festival audience was done up in black leather, body piercings, and mohawk hairstyles; and a song by The Police played in the background at a party.[404] The switch in time period had the effect of introducing a critical distance between the material and the present-day audience, which was given an additional ironic, perhaps even parodic, edge by the exaggerated costuming. This undermined somewhat the section's earnest and idealistic tone, in particular the scene of Pierre and Yukali's symbolic coupling, which in the original was crucial to delivering the production's cultural message. This scene was the only one which critic Kate Taylor singled out as problematic in her otherwise positive review of the revival:

> ... the text collectively written by the original performers sounds painfully simplistic while the Japanese fertility symbol that accompanies their union looks ludicrously overblown. The Japanese story often feels like an afterthought."[405]

Overall, the stance the revival took towards the original material was not clear: on the one hand, through the modified casting, it seemed an attempt to update its representations, to offer a current québécois point of view on the world. On the

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[404] A scene set at the Vancouver Film Festival, to which Crawford travels to see himself in a documentary about aging junkies, is where most of the new material in the section was introduced.

[405] Taylor, Kate,"*Trilogy* revives brilliant ideas," *The Globe and Mail*, 5 June 2003.

other, by keeping its representations in the past, its impulse was to historicise its former viewpoint, to look back fondly (or perhaps critically) on the way that a certain group of internationally ambitious Québec artists, and by extension perhaps a whole generation of young Quebecers, saw the world.

SELLING AND RECEIVING THE NEW *TRILOGY*

Such confusions were not present, however, in the FTA's approach to marketing the production, nor in nearly all of the reviews and other articles written about it by the québécois and Canadian press. There was a clear investment at both production and reception levels in not disrupting the established understanding of the production as a valued part of Québec's cultural identity.

The 2003 FTA was a particularly celebratory occasion, as it was the tenth edition of the biennial festival first held in 1985. The *Trilogy* revival became part of this celebratory atmosphere, and was presented in press materials as evidence of the strong ongoing relationship between Lepage and the FTA. As discussed in Chapter 5, the original *Trilogy* was a collaborative creation that changed consistently in the three years of its development. The version that Ex Machina and the FTA chose to revive was the complete or *integrale* version, which, 2003 FTA materials asserted, had its "world premiere" at the 1987 FTA and then toured through 1992.[406] While this account is factually true, it is selective, reflecting a value system that, by not mentioning them, effectively downgrades previous versions of the production as merely phases in the development of the final product. The goal, clearly, was to foreground the FTA's involvement and thus to bolster the sense of event around the

[406] Festival de Théâtre des Ameriques and Ex Machina, ibid.

revival; this is in keeping, as argued above in the context of *Ota*, with the need of festivals to market their offerings as unique.

We are reminded here of Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of cultural production as a "site of struggles where what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition" of writers and other artists.[407] This involves a process of legitimation whose agents – who in the context of theatre production include creative artists, producers, festival directors, critics, and audiences – are all implicated in the struggle to validate particular creative artists. That validation takes the form of what Bourdieu classed "cultural capital"[408] – the largely symbolic accrual of recognition and prestige. In Huggan's words, these processes

> ... present the consecrated text or canonical writer as a quasi-permanent presence, a *fait accompli*. While consecration, in Bourdieu's sense of the term, describes the end-effect of an accumulation of symbolic, rather than material, capital, it also mystifies the material conditions under which symbolic forms of recognition and legitimation are sought, acquired, and negotiated.[409]

The framing of the *Trilogy* revival as a "triumphant return"[410] is evidence of Lepage's ongoing canonisation as an exemplary global artist of Québec origins – as an agent of considerable cultural capital. The original success of the *Trilogy* is a large part of what propelled Lepage into this consecrated status, but, in keeping with the cultural logic outlined by Bourdieu, the conditions of production around that original were considerably mystified in the run-up to the revival. For example, its status as a collaboratively created work was downplayed and essentially written away in the FTA press release, when it declared that

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[407] Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 42.
[408] Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, p. 2
[409] Huggan, pp. 212-213.
[410] Radz , Matt, "Lepage's *Dragons* breathes fiery perfection," *The Gazette*, 24 May 2003.

> Fifteen years later, the creative genius of Robert Lepage is focussed once again on a collective work that he is now approaching with a more personal vision.

Authorship of a work referred to *inter alia* in the same press release as a "veritable saga," "masterpiece," and "mythical performance,"[411] is thus reassigned to Lepage alone, a rhetorical gesture at once prompted by and intended to bolster his consecrated status.

The *Trilogy* revival, in fact, raised complex concerns around issues of authorship. A collaboratively created performance text that was never published became, 15 years later, the base material for a new production that – Lepage at least claimed – was going to involve significant changing and updating. And yet only one of the original collaborators other than Lepage, Marie Gignac, was closely involved in the revival, in a capacity credited in the programme as "Dramatist's Assistant/Assistance Dramaturgique." Her role was to help reconstruct a workable text for the new cast, and to participate in rehearsals as a "living memory"[412] of the original production. Gignac also became the lead spokesperson for the revival, as Lepage did not grant interviews in the run-up to the FTA. Several months before rehearsals of the revival were to begin, Gignac explained that the text for the revival would be based on an extant 45-page script, a videotape of a past performance, and on the reconstruction of the production in *Jeu* 45. What would be different, according to Gignac, would be an updated and more sophisticated technical approach, and perhaps some changes to plot, character, and theme:

> We're not making a new production, but we're going to try some things. Everything will be played with and decided on in the course of

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[411] Festival de Théâtre des Ameriques and Ex Machina, ibid.
[412] "memoire vivante." Dumas, Éve, "La Trilogie des Marie," *La Presse*, 17 May 2003.

> the work, with a new team, younger actors who have been hired as actors. We remain the authors of the show (Marie Brassard, Jean Casault, Lorraine Côté, Robert Lepage, Marie Michaud, and me). And the authors of the production will be consulted regularly.[413]

The creative and legal situation that Gignac describes here sounds complicated and tricky. On the one hand, new young actors had been brought on board as actors not as authors; but these actors would be involved in the process of updating and changing the production, with the surviving authors[414] retaining approval over changes, even though among them only Gignac and Lepage were actually present in the rehearsal room. While it is impossible to know exactly what happened behind the scenes of any creative process, it is significant that the revival ended up being very similar to the original *integrale;* it seems likely that the complex creative structure that Gignac described above became unwieldy. In any event, in the eyes of the popular and trade press, such internal negotiations of authorship were immaterial: in almost all instances the *Trilogy* revival was attributed to its director alone as opposed to a group of co-authors or collaborators.[415]

Preview articles about the production dwelled heavily on the historic status and import of the *Trilogy*. 2003 FTA programme copy furthered a discourse of

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[413] "Nous ne referons pas une nouvelle mise en scène, mais nous allons essayer des choses. Tout va se jouer et se décider en cours de travail, avec une nouvelle équipe, des comédiens plus jeunes qui ont été engagés comme interprètes. Nous demeurons les auteurs du spectacle (Marie Brassard, Jean Casault, Lorraine Côté, Robert Lepage, Marie Michaud, et moi-même). Et les auteurs du spectacle vont être consultés régulièrement." Hébert, "O.K. on change?", p. 129.

[414] Jean Casault died suddenly in 1987 of an allergic reaction while touring with the *Trilogy* in New York and was replaced by different actors in further performances of the production.

[415] For example, "Robert Lepage's *La Trilogie des Dragons*" (Sidnell, Michael J, "Where We Are Now: Festival de Théâtre des Ameriques, 2003," *Canadian Theatre Review* 117, p. 66); "Robert Lepage's remount of his 1987 epic," (McNulty, Charles, "North to the Avant-Garde," *The Village Voice*, 11-17 June 2003); "Le spectacle-fleuve de Robert Lepage," (Dumas); "Robert Lepage's *Trilogy* (Whiting, Jason, "The Dragon Comes Home," *The Globe and Mail*, 21 May 2003); "Lepage's *Dragons*" (Radz)

reverence through its insistence on the phrase "In the beginning...", evoking the story of the creation of the world in Genesis:

> In the beginning, there was nothing, or almost nothing... in the beginning, there were three Chinatowns... in the beginning, there was Françoise and Jeanne..."[416]

Perhaps most revealing, however, was the title of Luc Boulanger's preview article in the Montréal weekly *Voir*: "*La Trilogie des dragons*, 16 ans plus tard: Je me souviens."[417] By evoking the provincial motto Boulanger identifies the *Trilogy* as an artifact of central importance to Québec's identity: to remember the original *Trilogy*, it is implied, is to do honour to the idea of Québec itself. The title also ties the critic himself into this important piece of history; and Boulanger was not alone in using the revival as an opportunity to indulge personal reminiscences.[418]

Reception of the revival production was extremely positive: all nine performances in the 600-seat purpose-built performance space at the Usine d'Alstom sold out and received standing ovations, and every breaking local and national review was glowing.[419] It is clear that the success of the original overdetermined response to the revival: nearly every critic opened their review by discussing the fame and success of the first *Trilogy* and the "event-ness" of this production – Matt Radz in *The Gazette* breathlessly reported of a sea of *vedettes* (local celebrities) at the opening,[420] and Taylor in *The Globe and Mail* praised Lepage's "bravery" for

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[416] Festival de Théâtre des Ameriques, *La Trilogie des Dragons*, production programme, June 2003.
[417] "*The Dragon's Trilogy*, 16 years later: I remember." Boulanger, Luc, *Voir*, 15-21 May 2003.
[418] See St-Hilaire, Jean, "Bâtie pour bien vieillir, mais sans la magie de la version de 1987," *Le Soleil*, 24 May 2003.
[419] Information on audience response thanks to Julie Mongeau, international press attaché, FTA 2003.
[420] Radz.

"submitting this almost-mythical work to the test of time."[421] For Solange Lévesque in *Le Devoir* the revival's importance lay in its status as a piece of living history and its potential as a pedagogical tool:

> Robert Lepage and Repère's first major collective work will not sink into oblivion nor become just a favourite memory. This new production allows further generations to discover for themselves the show that helped make québécois dramaturgy known on five continents and, at the same time, will familarise them with Québec and with certain major events of world history of the last century. [422]

Given the tendency of the *Trilogy* to over-simplify and decontexualise events from world history such as the Hiroshima bombing, Lévesque's suggestion that the production could function as a history lesson for young Quebecers is slightly alarming, but clearly indicative of the local need to classify the *Trilogy* as a positive, productive living artifact.

The only complaint against the production launched by several newspaper critics was a certain tentativeness in the acting,[423] an argument expanded by Ludovic Fouquet in the quarterly theatre magazine *Jeu*, who stressed that these were young actors stepping into epic roles that their predecessors had created as well as performed: to him, their effort was too obvious, and lacking in the ease and naturalness that characterised performances in other of Lepage's productions.[424] Also in *Jeu*, Étienne Bourdages stepped outside the fold in a stinging review which, while

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[421] Taylor.

[422] "Cette première grande oeuvre collective de Robert Lepage et de Repère ne devait pas tomber dans l'oubli ou devenir un souvenir fétiche. La nouvelle production permettra aux jeunes générations de découvrir le spectacle qui a contribué à faire connaître la dramaturgie québécoise sur les cinq continents et, par la même occasion, de se familiriser avec le Québec et certains événements majeurs de l'histoire du monde au siècle dernier." Lévesque, Solange, "Heureux retour des *dragons*, *Le Devoir*, 27 May 2003.

[423] See Lévesque, "Heureux," and Michel Vezina, "Les Dragons de l'art," *Ici*, 29 May – 4 June 2003.

[424] See Fouquet, Ludovic, "La mémoire du dragon," *Jeu* 109, p. 140.

at first seeming to dwell in the same over-determination as other responses, ended up turning the renown of the original into one of the foundations of his critique. Having been too young to have seen the original, but having heard so much about "a quasi-mythic show" Bourdages acknowledges high expectations, but finds himself disappointed:

> The more the night went on, the more the revival of the *Trilogy*... had, for me, something of the quality of a theatrical product – something comfortable recalled in leisure, like an old-style musical or a pleasant memory. The production doesn't ask for much of an investment from spectators... it doesn't challenge a single preconception.

While acknowledging the skill of the stagecraft and design, Bourdages said he felt emotionally distant from the production and wondered if the problem was that theatremaking had so moved on in the intervening years that the *Trilogy's* staging, previously heralded as groundbreaking, no longer had the capacity to move contemporary spectators; he also criticised the production's use of "dated clichés" in its depiction of Asian cultures.[425]

Bourdages here questioned what so many of the other critics seemed to accept as read: that a production created at a particular cultural moment can continue to communicate and make meanings in culture when temporally decontextualised. The majority of critical response to the *Trilogy* revival was as if Québec, its history, and the production itself had stood still in time; and thus implicitly as if the culture was still in need of the same mirroring effect and jolt of empowerment that the production gave in its first incarnation. This response illustrates how, in Québec, the "time of the

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[425] "un spectacle quasi-mythique." "Plus la soirée avance, plus la reprise de *La Trilogie*... a, pour moi, quelque chose d'un produit théâtral, quelque chose de confortable qu'on passe en revue comme de vieux succès musicaux ou de bons souvenirs. Le spectacle ne demande d'ailleurs pas un grand investsisement de la part des spectateurs... [il] n'ébranle aucune conviction." "clichés datés." Bourdages, pp. 142, 143.

nation" does not move forward in the linear, novelistic fashion that Anderson describes as typical of the modern nation.[426] Rather, time in Québec doubled back on itself, reversed back to the previous moment of success, rather as Lepage himself does in his compulsive return to his past theatrical themes in an attempt to restart his personal story towards an elusive satisfying conclusion.

The Dragon's Trilogy has not been a particular success on the international touring circuit. In the two years after its Montréal premiere, it played in only eight locations (Zagreb, Berlin, Limoges, Madrid, Québec City, Bergen, Hamburg, and Warsaw); this is in contrast to, for example, *The Far Side of the Moon,* which played in 17 venues in 2002 alone.[427] Bernatchez attributed the *Trilogy's* difficulties in touring to changes in urban geography and to "the new economy": because of its traverse staging configuration, the production requires a large, open playing space, but the disused industrial spaces that the production toured to in the late 1980s had largely been taken over by technology companies, according to Bernatchez. Thus Ex Machina and its potential presenters were left to rely on movie studios and large, conventional theatre buildings, which were harder to procure.[428] While this may be the case, it seems likely that a further part of the problem in booking the production stemmed from potential presenters' perception that it represented dated and culturally confused material.

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[426] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1993).
[427] See www.exmachina.qc.ca.
[428] Cited in St. Hilaire, Jean, "*La Trilogie des Dragons*: Victime indirecte de la nouvelle économie," *Le Soleil*, 18 December 2003.

CHAPTER 9: *ZULU TIME*

Zulu Time, created and performed between 1999 and 2002, was Lepage's boldest attempt to date to create a performance that reflected and expressed contemporary global culture. It also was a concerted effort to shift his creative emphasis from auteur to curator: subtitled "A Cabaret for Airports," *Zulu Time* was initially conceived as an open-ended, high-tech assemblage of creative offerings, from video production to computer music to robots to circus to more traditional scenes of theatre, created and performed by an international company of artists from a variety of artistic and technical disciplines. The idea behind the production grew out of Lepage's considerable international mobility; as he put it, "...I spend two-thirds of my life in an airport... I therefore wanted to talk about our connection to time and space in an airport."[429] The production was set on a massive steel scaffolding that was made to represent several locations in the trajectory of air travel: X-ray queues, raised walkways, and an airport café; the interior of a plane; bedrooms and cocktail lounges in chain hotels; and a golf course underneath a flight path. The production's fictional setting, therefore, was the space of travel, reflecting the integration of mobility into everyday life that Lash and Urry argue is characteristic of our post-touristic age. It was partly its airport setting that attracted musician Peter Gabriel to the production as co-producer and creative collaborator:

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[429] "... je passe les deux tiers de ma vie dans un avion ou un aéroport... J'ai donc voulu parler de notre rapport au temps et à l'espace dans un aéroport." Cited in Blais, Marie-Christine, "Dernier appel pour les passagers de *Zulu Time*," *Le Soleil*, 30 May 2002.

> For people in previous generations, train stations were sites of departure, travel, separation, reunion, that we often saw used as backdrops or settings. For us, it is airports that have that function...[430]

For anthropologist Marc Augé, airports are the archetypical "space of supermodernity," in that they "cannot be defined as relational and historical, or concerned with identity," and are representative of

> ... a world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions... where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing.... a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral...[431]

Augé recorded these thoughts in the slim but influential volume *Non-Places*, through which, as Tomlinson puts it, images of the streamlined and impersonal terminals of Paris's Roissy airport run like a "leitmotiv." Tomlinson rightly critiques Augé for considering airports from the passenger's perspective only, and nostalgically comparing the "contractual"[432] nature of airport relations with "the complicities of language, local reference, and living know how" that apply to what Augé classifies as "anthropological"[433] (as opposed to "non-") place. What Augé does not take into account is the experience of airports for

> their more permanent denizens – the check-in clerks, baggage handlers, cleaners, caterers, security staff and so forth who work there... we must assume that [the airport] is experienced by them with all the anthropological richness, the tacit rules of living know-how, the subtleties of daily interpersonal contact, the friendships, rivalries and so on that apply to any other place of work.[434]

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[430] "Pour les gens des générations précédentes, les gares étaient devenues des lieux de départ, de voyage, de séparation, de renouveau, qui ont beaucoup servi comme décor. Pour nous, ce sont les aéroports qui ont cette fonction, mais nous ne les représentent pas beaucoup." Cited in ibid.

[431] Augé, Mark, *Non-Places: Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity*, pp. 77-78.

[432] Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture*, p. 111.

[433] Augé, p. 94, cited in Tomlinson, ibid.

[434] Tomlinson, pp. 111-112.

It is this insight of Tomlinson that informs the popular culture trend of television series and big-budget films dramatising the behind-the-scenes life of airports. While pitched as light entertainment, series such as *Airline* and *LAX* and films like *The Terminal* nonetheless take as their jumping-off point that airports are communities that involve complex human interactions and are front-line sites for negotiations of mobility, power, and responsibility.[435]

Lepage espoused a similar vision of airports when talking about his inspiration to create *Zulu Time:*

> Whether you're in Frankfurt, Heathrow, or Japan, there are amazing things that happen [in airports.] They are their own culture, with their pilots and air hostesses, cooks and mechanics... with their own class systems that are very precisely defined.[436]

In the same interview, however, Lepage indicated that he was more interested in the surface appearance of the airport as a complex life world than in delving into that world in depth: the setting would allow him "to talk about the phenomenon of pluriculturalism without having to adhere to the discourses of economics or

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[435] *Airline UK*, a reality television series about the behind-the-scenes experience of employees of EasyJet, first aired in 1999; it was followed in 2003 by a US version, *Airline*, about Southwest Airlines. *LAX*, created in 2004, is an NBC television drama about Los Angeles International Airport, starring Heather Locklear and Blair Underwood. Episodes have concerned international drug trafficking, asylum seekers stopped at passport control, and government wrangling in airport business. Steven Spielberg's film *The Terminal* (2004) was a sanitised and saccharine fictionalisation, starring Tom Hanks, of the true life story of Merhan Karimi Nasseri, an Iranian national who has lived in Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport since 1988, at first forced to because he lacked the appropriate papers to travel internationally, later by choice out of fear of the outside world. Nassami's plight has made him famous and himself a tourist destination, with people visiting the airport to ask for his autograph.

[436] "Il s'y passe des choses incroyables que vous soyez à Francfort, à Heathrow ou au Japon... c'est une culture avec ses pilotes et ses hotesses, ses cuisiniers et ses mécaniciens,... avec son propre systeme de classes, et celles-ci sont bien délimités." Cited in St. Hilaire, Jean, "*Zulu Time*: Planète des Solitaires," *Le Soleil*, 29 April 2000.

politics."[437] The production, as it developed, came to reflect this stated desire to represent the complexity of contemporary life without examining or interrogating the material relations underlying that complexity. The version of the production presented in Montréal in 2002 presented images of individuals from evidently different racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds in ways that perpetuated received ideas about power and status in globalised society, and without contextual materials to indicate the creators' position on what they were presenting.[438] Response to this aspect of the production differed significantly depending on the cultural background of the commentator. Several Anglophones and members of immigrant communities who wrote about the production responded very negatively to what they felt to be its objectified and stereotypical depictions of race. No review written in French, however, commented on these issues, focussing instead on the production's technical and technological elements and on what it seemed to be saying about contemporary society. These francophone responses seem to have come closer to capturing what Lepage and his collaborators intended as the production's meanings, while those who came from outside the creators' immediate sphere of cultural reference (francophone Québec and French-language culture) seemed, in some cases quite spectacularly, to miss the intended point. These differing responses demonstrate a lack of collective understanding and shared discourse amongst Québec's communities about what constitutes cultural difference and what are appropriate

[437] "de parler du phénomène pluriculturel sans tenir de discours économique ou politique." Cited in ibid.

[438] The Montréal version of the production was not claimed by its creators to be a "final" or "definitive" articulation of the material, but as it became the last version to be presented, it stands as its most elaborate and polished presentation. While charting the overall development of the production, my main focus here is this Montréal version, which I viewed live at Usine C on 6 and 7 July 2002.

terms of representation of otherness in culture. They are a further indication of the difficulties that Lepage encounters by assuming that he is speaking into a single, globalised discursive community when in fact he is creating images that come from and require a specific set of cultural understandings. Francophone commentators repeatedly used the language of universalism in talking about the production; that is, they described it as aspiring to the communication of "universal" aspects of human experience.[439] But the very variety of responses to the production underlines how difficult it is to achieve consensus on what constitutes a "universal" meaning or value, and brings home the fact that the global can only be made material in the space of the local. In fact, what was being explained as "universal" about the production was intensely personal: one of the production's fundamental problems was that Lepage seems to have lost perspective about the boundaries of his individual experience and the status of the world at large. Here is a fuller citation of the initial quote above:

> ... I am the privileged witness to a certain reality, which is to spend two-thirds of my life in an airport, to express myself in different languages, to integrate myself in several cultures. I therefore wanted to talk about our relationship to time and space in an airport. For, despite our cultural differences, we are all heading towards a universality of concepts of... time and space."[440]

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[439] "...artists brought together by a Lepage determined to take on the universal imagination of today" ("artistes... reunis par un Lepage décidé à en découdre avec l'imaginaire universal d'aujourd'hui,") Schmitt, Olivier, "Le premier cabaret technologique de Québécois Robert Lepage," *Le Monde*, 25 October 1999; "Lepage aims to stage the universal and intercultural quality of [language]" ("Lepage vise à mettre en scène l'aspet à la vois universel ou interculturel de code [linguistique]..." Koustas, Jane, "*Zulu Time*: Le paratexte paradoxical," *L'annuaire théâtral* No. 34, p. 89

[440] "... je suis le témoin privilégié d'une certaine réalitié, qui est de passer les deux tiers de ma vie dans un avion ou un aéroport, de m'exprimer dans plusieurs langues, de respecter plusieurs codes de conduite, de m'intégrer dans plusieurs cultures. J'ai donc voulu parler de notre rapport au temps et à l'espace dans un aéroport." Cited in Blais.

Lepage here slips effortlessly from "I" to "our," at once acknowledging that his experience is "privileged" but then arguing that this experience can nonetheless stand in for universal truth. The figure of the québécois traveller which we have traced through Lepage's work may not have been overtly visible in *Zulu Time*, but he was in fact omnipresent: the production represented a projection of Lepage's life world onto the stage. This personal and privileged vision then entered into a larger discursive field which became overlaid with ideas and imagery legible as references to Québec's situation in the world, and which evidenced colonising impulses on the part of the francophone québécois population towards minority cultures, and which, in assuming universal access to specialised cultural codes, exposed and fed local cultural resentments. It is considerably ironic that this, on the surface Lepage's least evidently québécois production to date, became the one that most acutely reveals the fractures and tensions in Québec society.[441]

The development of the production also further reveals the expectations that have developed around Lepage's work since he has become a major figure on the

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[441] It is because of the contentiousness of the issues raised by the production that I take pains in this chapter to explore and explicate, without, I hope, overly preferencing, the intentions of the production's creators. The production unearthed resentments which led to emotionally-charged exchanges, which themselves reveal the extent of a lack of consensus on cultural issues in Québec. Some of the readings of the production, I would argue, were limited by entrenched positions. It is in an attempt to step back from the heat of these debates, and indeed my own cultural preconceptions and biases, that I delve here into background material in order to provide context for the representations in the production that were most contentious. In addition, I refer, later in my argument, to a letter written by Ex Machina's producing director Michel Bernatchez defending the production against its most virulent critic, Rahul Varma. Bernatchez wrote this letter in response to Varma's review of *Zulu Time*, but never sent it to the magazine that had published Varma's review, *alt.theatre*. Bernatchez gave it to me in November 2004 with the understanding that I would use it in my research. The letter, arguably, is a contentious source in that it could be used as a means to divine the artists' intent; in it Bernatchez sometimes takes on the "voice" of Ex Machina in defending the production. However, he stressed to me that it was his personal response and that it had not been co-composed by all the production's creators. I use it, therefore, as privileged access into a possible reading of the production's images.

international theatre scene. With *Zulu Time* Lepage attempted to move in new formal directions and to reshape his artistic practice in response to changes in the culture around him. However, audiences and producers responded to early versions of the production negatively because it did not look or feel like what they were used to from Lepage. As a result, he reverted to older creative patterns in an attempt to make the production more recognisably "Lepagian", but the changes did not, perhaps, go far enough: what resulted was a production that sent very mixed messages.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF *ZULU TIME*

Zulu Time, like all of Lepage's collaborative shows, was developed in a series of rehearsal/workshops punctuated by public performances. It was first presented at the Zurich Theater Spektakel (an annual festival of new theatre and dance) in August 1999; then at the Maison des Arts in Créteil outside of Paris in October, 1999, as part of the Festival d'Automne. While Ex Machina originally hoped that the production would tour extensively, as previous shows had done, their usual cadre of presenters did not respond positively to these two initial presentations. Thus the company decided to schedule a series of longer sit-down runs for the show. It was presented in a new form at the Carrefour international de théâtre de Québec (a biennial festival) in February 2000. It was then to have appeared, after another development period, as the performance centrepiece of "Québec/New York," a major festival of Québec arts in New York City in September 2001, but the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon forced the cancellation of the Festival and all its component elements. This cancellation was extremely costly for Ex Machina and contributed to *Zulu Time* becoming the most expensive production in the company's history. It

found a new performance context as part of the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal in June 2002, but further performance dates that Ex Machina desired for the production never materialised, perhaps because of its mixed reception in Montréal; and perhaps because of the production's large size and expensive running costs.[442]

The production began its life in 1998 under the working title *Cabaret Technologique*, when Lepage invited international artists and technicians, including the Austrian video artists Granular Synthesis, and the French videographers Philippe Sorin and Lydie Jean-dit-Pannel, to present their work to him at the Caserne in Québec City. As Kurt Henschläger of Granular Synthesis later commented, the initial idea behind the production was that it was to be free-flowing and without structure:

> As Robert [Lepage] told it to us, you would walk into the space and a cabaret would be going on for hours, endlessly. It would have a series of numbers, a stream of events, but it wouldn't matter when you'd walk in or leave. The concept changed later, and became more theatrical again.[443]

Lepage chose to work in the cabaret form out of a desire to "move out of the theatre realm" which he defines as "a homogeneous group of people doing the same craft."[444] Cabaret as we know it was developed at the turn of the 20th century in Berlin, and grew, as Peter Jelavich has argued, out of the inability of existing art forms to express the texture of modern urbanity:

> The fragmentation and intensification of sense experience in everyday metropolitan life transformed the perceptual apparatus of modern urbanites to such an extent that they were no longer capable of the continuous reflection demanded by conventional drama. Stage presentations thus had to become as multiform and disjunct as the

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[442] Bernachez, Michel, interview with the author, 13 July 2002. According to Bernatchez, the production's total costs up to and including the Montréal run were $1.6 million Canadian.
[443] Cited in Shewey, Don, "A Bold Québécois Who Blends Art and Technology," *The New York Times*, 16 September 2001.
[444] Cited in ibid.

> presentation of everyday life in the streets, shops, and offices of the modern metropolis.[445]

At the turn of the 21st century, Lepage and his collaborators attempted to update the cabaret form by incorporating into it new forms of art and technology; and yet the overall impression of urban life communicated by the production strongly echoed that of the modernist era when cabaret was first developed. One of the principal themes of *Zulu Time* was isolation and alienation: as one critic read its final version, it was about "futile attempts to connect";[446] for another, the show concerned "the absence of personal communication in our wired world."[447] Lepage called it "a poem on modern solitude."[448] I was indeed put in mind of the crowd flowing over London Bridge in Eliot's *The Waste Land* watching Lepage's world-weary global travellers brush hurriedly and anonymously past each other on *Zulu Time's* hydraulic walkways. Like Eliot's poem, *Zulu Time* seemed to describe a latter-day *Inferno*, in which death and violence lurked not far under the anonymous surface of everyday life. Plane crashes, surveillance, rape, and random terrorist attacks were all depicted in the production as seemingly unavoidable aspects of contemporary society.

This vision of depersonalised modernity may be well established in cultural representations, but it was certainly novel for Lepage, whose stage productions reflect a worldview that emphasises human connection, rebirth, and possibility. This newly dark attitude is partly a result, Lepage told an interviewer, of the time he

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[445] Jelavich, Peter, *Berlin Cabaret*, p. 24.
[446] Wehle, Philippa, "*Zulu Time* by Robert Lepage," New York Theatre Wire, http://www.nytheatre-wire.com/pw02074t.htm, accessed 20 December 2004.
[447] "...l'absence de communication personnelle dans un monde informatisé." Koustas, p. 82.
[448] Cited in St. Hilaire (2000), "*Zulu Time*."

spends in airports. As does Augé, and with similarly "Baudelairean"[449] melancholy, Lepage offers Paris' Roissy Airport as an emblem of contemporary isolation:

> The new terminal F at Roissy – it's very chic, super high-tech, but there is something depressing about it. Everything is designed so you won't feel lost; and as a result, you feel more lost than ever.[450]

At the same time as Lepage offered airports as sites of isolation, however, the production evidenced a contradictory impulse familiar from his past work: the depiction of airports and air travel as sites of imminent connectedness, as evidence of the ways in which humanity, in the contemporary age, is coming together. These ideas were brought into the production via Lepage's choice of structuring material: the system, known as Greenwich Mean Time, which standardises timekeeping worldwide. In military and aeronautical fields this system is called "Zulu Time", and is denoted by an alphabet, as Lepage explained to *The New York Times*:

> Each letter refers to the international radio transmission code that aviators use: A for Alpha, B for Bravo, C for Charlie. And of course the last one is Z for Zulu. Zulu Time is the military's universal clock. When they bombed Belgrade, bombers leaving from San Diego were synchronized with bombers from Italy, and they were all on Zulu Time. The show reflects this idea, that the notion of time and space has been unified.[451]

This system became the formal backbone of the *Zulu Time* production, which in its final form was to be made up of 26 vignettes, each named and thematised after one letter.[452] This alphabet and the airport setting were Lepage's metaphorical means of

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[449] Augé, p. 92.

[450] "[le] nouveau terminal F de Roissy (Paris), très chic, super high-tech, mais qui inspire quelque chose de désespéré. Tout est conçu pour qu'on n'y soit pas perdu; pourtant, on s'y sent plus perdu que jamais." Cited in Soldevila, Carlos, "L'homme de l'heure," *Elle Quebec*, July 2002, p. 54.

[451] Cited in Shewey, "A Bold Québécois," p. 6.

[452] By deciding to make one vignette for each of the 26 letters of the alphabet, the production's creators deviated slightly from the real-life Zulu Time system, which divides the world into 25 time zones (the half-zones on either side of the International Date Line are each delineated as

communicating his observation that "despite our cultural differences, we are all heading towards a universality of concepts of... time and space."[453] In interview Lepage's position on this "universality" comes across as ambiguous and perhaps confused: at times he seems to be celebrating an unprecedented sense of global unity, while at others expressing the sense of anomie and depersonalisation mentioned above.

The confusion in Lepage's thinking about the production are further evident in his selective reading of the Zulu Time system: to understand this system as proof of world unity is to ignore its status as a remnant of high colonialism in contemporary culture. Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) was adopted as the world standard at the 1884 International Meridian Conference in Washington, D.C., a move which enabled greater integration and advancement of transport systems but was also an act of imperialism.[454] As Lal has argued, the imposition of GMT and its gradual adoption by countries the world over represented an act of "temporal colonisation" whose effects were more subtle and thus less commented on than its "spatial" equivalent. In his words, the advent of GMT "paved the way for the elimination of alternative conceptions – local, mythic, pastoral, theistic, and countless others – of time."[455] Far from standing in for global unity as Lepage would like it to,

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distinct named zones). The letter "J" is left out of the system because it was not found in many languages at the time the system was created. (www.maybeck.com/ztime/ , accessed 15 April 2005.) And, in fact, the production was never seen in its full, 26-vignette-long form. In Zurich and Paris 22 vignettes were shown; the version shown in Québec City in 2000 had 16 vignettes; and the 2002 Montréal version included 25 – "Victor" was cut at the last minute, according to Bernatchez, because Lepage felt the production was running too long.

[453] Cited in Blais.

[454] Coordinated Universal Time is now the official name for this system, though GMT is still accepted colloquially.

[455] Lal, Vinay, *Empire of Knowledge: Culture and Plurality in the Global Economy*, pp. 17, 28.

Zulu Time is arguably a metaphor for cultural oppression and power inequities, themes that would become prominent in the heated discourse around the production.

There is also something paradoxical in the use of the Zulu Time alphabet – or indeed, any formal element – as a structuring principle in a production that was originally intended to be free-form. Indeed one of the principal challenges with which its creators grappled was its balance of structure and openness. What shifted and remained unclear throughout the production process was whether viewers were intended to consider the vignettes as unrelated to each other, or were meant to read the production for emergent plots and themes. Initially Lepage's intent was the former, and the production in each of its versions did retain, in part, a cabaret sensibility – it was a series of turns that included torch songs, video clips, musical numbers, and comedy routines. When the production was first performed in Zurich, however, it was poorly received, with critics commenting negatively on what they felt was its lack of humanity: it was a "black hole of presence" according to the *Neue Luzerner Zeitung*.[456] For *The Globe and Mail's* Philip Anson, the production's attempt at a plot, about drug smugglers dying in a plane crash, was frustrating because it lacked a moral, and its use of strobe lights, videos, gymnastics, and robots was "embarrassingly amateurish."[457] Reviews were somewhat less negative two months later in Créteil, but critics continued to have problems with the production's

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[456] "...boîte noire de la présence." Review cited in "Le dernier Robert Lepage reçu sévèrement à Zurich," *Le Soleil*, 26 August 1999. No author cited for the *Neue Luzerner Zeitung* review; the *Soleil* article is also not attributed to a specific writer.

[457] Anson, Philip, "Lepage's latest show a technological flop," *The Globe and Mail*, 24 August 1999.

dependence on poorly executed technological effects and on the weakness and misleading quality of its attempts at narrative.[458]

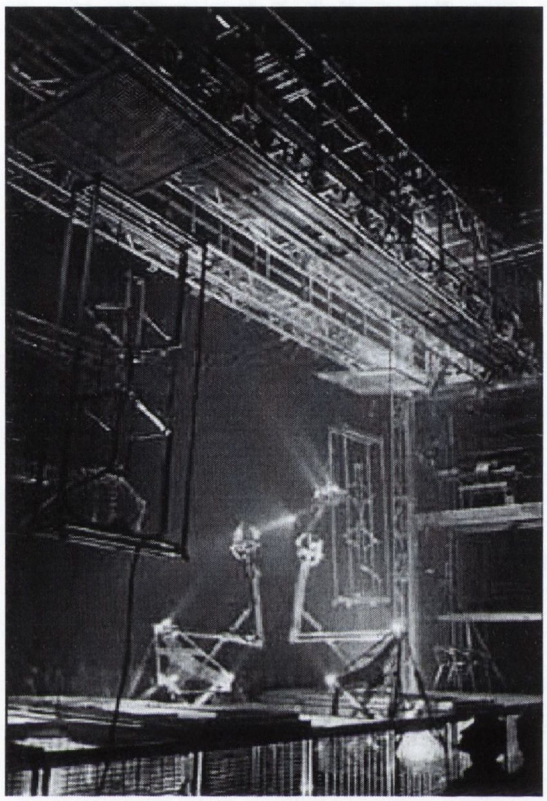

PLATE 21: A scene from an early version of **Zulu Time**, *picturing some of the robots which were subsequently cut out of the production. Photo: Emmanuel Vallette*

According to Bernatchez, the feedback that the company received at this stage from presenters and venue managers familiar with Lepage's work was that

> ... the show wasn't theatrical enough – it wasn't text-based, and what's more, in its first version it wasn't relying on actors' performances. So most presenters in our traditional network didn't like it.

Bernatchez describes Lepage and his collaborators' subsequent work on the production as "trying to get the human back in that huge machine."[459] It was the next version of the production, that presented at the Québec Carrefour in 2000, which

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[458] See Rioux, Christian, "La dernière création de Robert Lepage à Paris: une quincaillerie technologique," *Le Soleil*, 21 October 1999; and Schmitt.
[459] Bernatchez, 13 July 2002.

received the strongest reviews. While commenting that the production was "excessive" and "grandiose," David Cantin in *Le Devoir* admired that Lepage offered his "impressions of the current era" rather than "judging" or "answering back" and remarked that the work was "coherent."[460] Pat Donnelly in *The Gazette* called it "a high tech dazzler that makes time fly,"[461] and for *The Globe and Mail*'s Kate Taylor it was Lepage's most interesting show since *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, which "represents the natural progression of Lepage's work away from a conventional script – never his strong point – toward performance art."[462] And yet, despite this positive response, Lepage later criticised the Québec version, along with earlier incarnations, as having "more machines than people"[463] in it. Lepage was clearly conflicted about the production, initially pursuing the idea of a free-form technological spectacle, and then speaking out self-critically against that impulse.

PETER GABRIEL'S CONTRIBUTION

It was at this point that Peter Gabriel became part of the development of *Zulu Time*: he attended a performance at the Carrefour, and subsequently joined the production team as a collaborator. Via his company, Real World, he also became co-producer of the abortive New York version and, a year later, the Montréal version of the show. His input resulted in the addition of several new pieces of material and thematic strands; his arrival also coincided with the emergence of a newly inclusive

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[460] "excessive... grandiose"; "ses impressions sur l'époque actuelle... plutôt que de juger ou répondre"; "cohérente." Cantin, David, "Envergure et démesure," *Le Devoir*, 18 May 2000.
[461] Donnelly, Pat, "For Lepage, lust is in the air," *The Gazette*, 18 May 2000.
[462] Taylor, Kate, "At last, another great show from Robert Lepage," *The Globe and Mail*, 20 May 2000.
[463] Cited in Perusse, Bernard, "*Zulu Time* cabaret broadens festival," *The Gazette*, 30 May 2002.

and expansive world view communicated through the production, which echoed that of Gabriel's *Growing Up* world concert tour, which Lepage staged and which toured between 2002-2004.[464] The dominant theme of Gabriel's *Up* album, on which the tour was based and which Lepage stressed in his staging of *Growing Up*, was the circular pattern of life, from birth to old age to death and then rebirth: the concert took place on a round stage and was filled with visual images of spheres and circles.

PLATE 22: Peter Gabriel's "Growing Up" concert. Note Gabriel on bicycle at right. This was one of several toys that Lepage had Gabriel play with during the concert, emphasising the theme of the child in the man. Photo: York Tillyer

At the same time as the concert tour, Gabriel's interest in interconnectedness had extended to arguing for the links between humans and primates: this informed

[464] Gabriel is an internationally renowned pop-rock musician who, since the 1980s has run his solo career and the Real World record label out of his headquarters in Wiltshire, England. From 1967-75 he was the lead singer of the progressive rock group Genesis; Lepage has said that it was attending Genesis' famously theatrical concerts as a teenager, rather than stage plays, that gave him his passion for the theatre. The two men first met in 1991, when Gabriel attended a performance of *Tectonic Plates* in London, and Gabriel subsequently invited Lepage to participate in a project that he was then planning for a theme park that would focus on the connection between the arts and sciences (the project was never completed). Lepage staged Gabriel's 1993-94 *Secret World* concert tour as well as the *Growing Up* tour.

one of the songs on the *Growing Up* tour, "Animal Nation," and prompted Gabriel to collaborate with primate researchers in Georgia (U.S.) in working with apes to improvise music and to communicate through the Internet. In Gabriel's view,

> It's all too easy to forget that we ourselves would be identified as apes by any extra-terrestrial visitor to the planet, and if were to visit another planet and found two species that shared over 98 per cent of the same genes, we too might believe that they would share over 98 per cent of the same potential abilities. Humans generally don't accept this, which is why I like to refer to us as the Arrogant Ape."[465]

Lepage commented in 2001 on how these aspects of Gabriel's thinking had come to influence *Zulu Time*:

> Working on a scene called 'P for Papa,' two actresses immediately go into a psychological relationship with their father. Then Peter [Gabriel] comes in and says 'I see "P for Papa" in relation to the origin of man. Who are the forefathers?' Suddenly you shift your perception.[466]

A separate project that Lepage worked on at the same time as *Zulu Time* indicates that he, too, was considering the connections between humans and animals. In 1998 he was invited by the Musée de la Civilisation in Québec City, which is located next door to the Caserne, to curate its millennium exhibition. The overall subject matter of the exhibition, called *Métissages* (cultural mixing), was the changes that globalisation was bringing to conceptions of the individual and culture, and the "moral and ethical" questions that have arisen as a result.[467] Among Lepage's contributions to the exhibition, which opened in May 2000, was a "Theatre of Anatomy", a simulated medical auditorium with video installations which raised questions about the use of animal organs in human biotechnology. According to project director Pauline Beaudin, the subject of animal gene research and the

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[465] Cited in *Growing Up* tour programme, Summer 2003, p. 30.
[466] Cited in Shewey, "A Bold Québécois," p. 6.
[467] Lepage cited in "Robert Lepage est partout," *Le Soleil*, 3 May 2000.

considerations it raises about what constitutes human life were central preoccupations of the creative team from the beginning of the project.[468]

These projects and the interests they reflect seem to have fed into the inclusion of monkeys and animal intelligence as a trope in *Zulu Time*. A video clip of Gabriel "jamming" musically with apes appeared in the Montréal version of the production; and in one vignette ("Oscar") new to the Montréal version, the performer Jinny Jacinto appeared in a monkey suit. The monkey became one of the "archetypes" that, according to Ludovic Fouquet, Lepage felt were a unifying element in the Montréal version of the production. Critic and theatre artist Fouquet observed the rehearsal process leading to the Montréal premiere of *Zulu Time*, an experience he recorded in a journal-style article for *Jeu*. It is important to underline that Fouquet reports on his own impressions of what he saw and does not speak directly for the production's creative team; however his observations are a valuable resource, among others, in attempting to understand the production's action and imagery. What Fouquet describes in his article is a production finally finding a thematic through-line. "I was able to see the thread that brought all the elements of the production together," writes Fouquet. "I saw the birth of the resolution." According to Fouquet, Lepage had a flash of insight only two days before the production was supposed to play before Montréal audiences:

> Lepage notes a current running through the show, in which one can 'follow the archetypes (the muslim, the Zulu, the golfer, the monkey)...' ... [Lepage] goes back over the tasks that remain to be completed... with a new ease, because now we have seen the production in its essence. Even if there are elements yet to be

[468] Beaudin, Pauline, "Un processus de conception en spirale qui conjuge fond et forme," *Métissages racontée par ses artisans*, p. 21

> discovered, the object itself is standing on its feet and is there to be molded.[469]

This quoted comment makes clear that Lepage felt that the recurrence of thematic figures in the production was a key element to its potential to communicate to audiences. This is a point of view that moved far away from his original vision of a free-form spectacle; but one that, perhaps, put him into a familiar creative comfort zone after a difficult development process and negative reviews. Lepage calls these figures "archetypes," invoking the Jungian concept of a storehouse of images and figures that comprise a collective unconscious and which are recognised across all cultures, an approach that has been criticised for its universalising assumptions and its reliance on affect and subjective response rather than objective analysis.[470] The invocation of the concept of archetypes extends the universalising tendency that characterises much of Lepage's work; response to the production revealed just how divisive and lacking in collectively agreed meaning these images were.

THE REAL WORLD?

Overall, the vignettes in the Montréal version of *Zulu Time* offered a series of impressions about contemporary life and travel. In "Echo," for example, a pregnant woman received an ultrasound while, on another part of the stage, a contortionist writhed within a pliable white sphere which eventually broke open – a poetic,

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[469] "J'ai pu voir surgir le fils reliant entre eux tous les éléments du spectacle, voir naître littéralement le propos." "Lepage constate un creux dans le milieu du spectacle, moment où l'on 'suit les archétypes (le musulman, le Zoulou, le golfeur, le singe...)... On fait ainsi le récapitulatif de ce qui reste à modifier... avec une aisance nouvelle, car le spectacle est désormais perçu dans son intégralité." Fouquet, Ludovic, "Notes de répétitions de *Zulu Time*," *Jeu* 107, pp. 163, 168.

[470] See Baird, James, "Jungian Psychology in Criticism: Theoretical Problems," in Strelka, ed.; and von Meurs, Jos and John Kidd, *Jungian Literary Criticism 1920-1980*.

metaphoric representation of birth as the journey into life. "Juliet" and "Romeo" were serio-comic representations of the human mating game; while "Hotel" and "November" were more serious portrayals of urban anomie and violence. "Delta" and "X-Ray" parodied aspects of air travel, while "Kilo" depicted a terrorist bombing. "Fox Trot" and "Whisky" were straightforward cabaret musical turns, while "Tango" turned the cabaret number on its head (pun intended) by having three actor/musicians perform while suspended upside down.

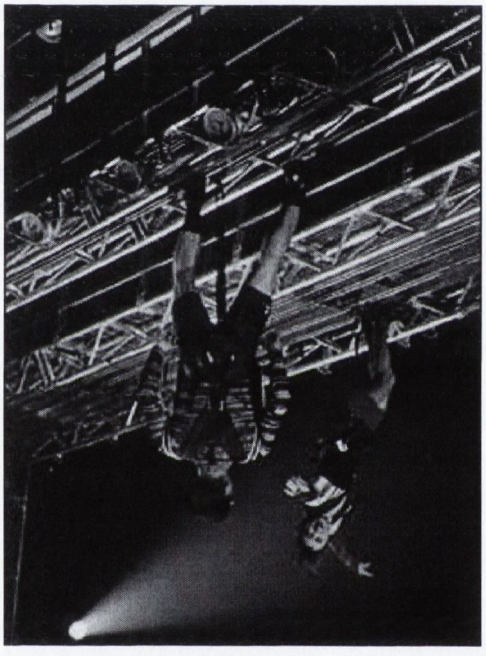

PLATE 23: Marco Poulin and Claire Gignac in "Tango."
Photo: Emmanuel Vallette

Within these images were mingled several depictions of people of non-white ethnic origin which prompted very different responses amongst commentators. The production's form meant that the possibilities of characterisation were limited: virtually no dialogue was spoken, so that the company needed to rely on the appearance, costuming, and behaviour of characters for information about them. The bulk of the characters represented privileged participants in contemporary globality:

pilots, cabin staff and airline passengers, most dressed in chic business attire. In a pattern now familiar from Lepage's past work, though he had intended to create an international and diverse creative team for the production, it ended up dominated by white Quebecers. Nine of the ten cast members of *Zulu Time* were white (the other, Jacinto, is brown-skinned and of Peruvian descent); thus, the privileged inhabitants of its airport world were almost all Caucasian. The production did represent some non-white characters, but they were presented almost exclusively as of lesser power and status, and were played by white actors dressed and made up to appear non-white. What audiences observed, therefore, was a group of white actors occasionally "dressing down" as non-white. That there were virtually no non-white people to perform similar feats of self-disguise left whiteness unexamined as a norm.

Nearly all the production's depictions of non-whites placed these characters in positions of lesser power and status than the white characters portrayed. Images of women of apparently Indian-subcontinent and Middle-Eastern descent in the production showed them in positions of servitude and subjugation: a woman in a sari hoovered the stage; in "Yankee," a woman in a burhka sang plaintively and dipped water from a well as the familiar image of "bombs over Baghdad" from the 1991 Gulf War played on video screens. One of the most striking images in the production was in the vignette called "India," in which text appeared on a video screen quoting statistics which indicated that the 6th billionth person in the world would be born in our lifetimes and would be a woman from India.[471] On the screen, a huge

[471] This information was out of date and overly definitive. According to the United Nations, the 6th billionth person in the world was born in 1999. While it is impossible to know exactly where he/she was born, the odds favour a developing country, such as India. www.un.org/esa/population/publications/sixbillion/sixbillion.htm, accessed 15 April 2005.

photographic image of an Indian woman appeared, which was "played" by a white male percussionist: every time he struck his electronic drum, the image of the woman opened her mouth and spoke; as his playing grew faster and more intense, she ended up rapping to his music. The technology was impressive, and it seems clear that the collaborators intended the message of this vignette to be one of positive cultural mingling: there was an upbeat, celebratory feeling to this image of an Indian woman rapping to high-tech music. But the image unwittingly conjured the titular question to Gayatri Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" As Spivak argues, Indian women are doubly denied a voice in contemporary society, by the patriarchial nature of Indian culture and by Western liberal culture, both of which construct them as exploited victims.[472] The image here supported Spivak's analysis. The subaltern spoke – but not by herself or about herself: she was manipulated by a white man to speak nonsense sounds that communicated a vision of world culture that wiped out specificity and difference.

The most provocative evocation of ethnic difference in *Zulu Time* came in its only representation of a black man. The figure in question was a white actor (Marco Poulin) wearing all-over black body paint and dressed in the traditional native attire of a Zulu warrior, from headdress to exposed upper body to spear and shield. This costuming echoes that of the natives in the 1964 British film *Zulu*, best known as Michael Caine's first major film appearance and for what one film historian called its "dubious... racial conservatism."[473] The film recounts the true story of an event during the 1879 Zulu War, in which a British garrison of less than 200 men held off an

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[472] See Spivak, Gayatri, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Nelson and Grossberg, eds.
[473] Pines, Jim, *Blacks in Films: A Survey of Racial Themes and Images in the American Film*, p. 78ff.

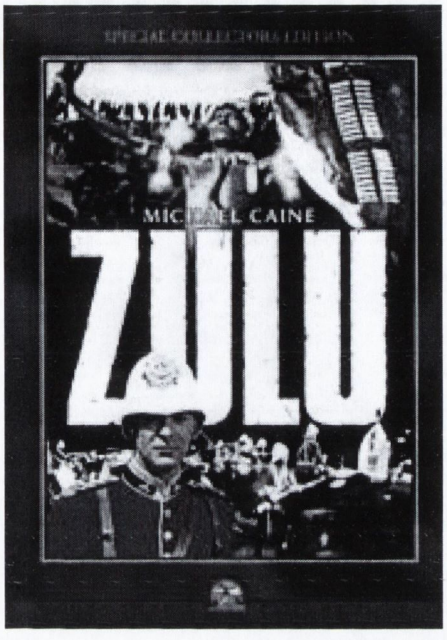

PLATE 24: A poster for the film **Zulu**. *Unfortunately, Ex Machina does not have any photographs of the Zulu in* **Zulu Time**, *who was costumed similarly to the Zulu who appears above the title on this poster.*

attack by thousands of Zulus. A scene from the film, in which a British battalion leader repeatedly shouts "fire!" as hoardes of Zulus run into gunfire and are killed, was played as an in-flight movie in one of *Zulu Time*'s early scenes of air travel. Poulin as the Zulu first appeared live in the vignette "Mike," standing in front of a microphone and examining it quizzically – it was clear this object was unfamiliar to him. He picked it up and held it over his head like a spear, generating loud feedback and causing distress to passers-by. He then reappeared in the production's final vignette, "Zulu," to lead the whole company, mostly dressed as pilots and air hostesses, in a Bantu song and an African dance which then shifted into a scene of contemporary club-style dancing to techno music.

This representation of the Zulu became the focus of several strongly-worded critiques by immigrant and anglophone commentators on *Zulu Time*, one of which prompted an angry defense of the production by its producer, Bernatchez. It is clear from these commentaries that part of the problem stemmed from formal issues, namely the ambiguity around the connectedness and relative importance of the production's various scenes and images. But beyond this, the very different readings that commentators derived from the production's images, the strength of some reactions, and the rancour in the exchanges that resulted, are indications of a deeper cultural problem. This aspect of the production struck a raw nerve about difference and power in Québec, in particular around the meanings of colonialism in a contemporary québécois context.

Postcolonial theory thus provides a useful means of analysing the production, and the conflict around it. A postcolonial analysis reveals the production to be much more about, and reflective of, Québec culture than its creators' universalist claims suggest. Considering the production as the expression of a culture (francophone Québec) that constructs itself as colonised and oppressed allows us to read the Zulu, who first appears as radically "other" to the world of the production, as perhaps not entirely other at all. He becomes legible as a (repressed) part of the same – a representation of the past of the (over-) civilised and anonymous contemporary society that was the subject of the production's critique. The regimentation of the production's structure via the Zulu Time system was a metaphor for the sense of constraint and lack of individuality and human connection that has come with globalised modernity. The production's structured and predictable format – 26

words, 26 vignettes – represented control and oppressive conformity; the alternatives to this oppressive worldview come from the human imagination – the characters' flights of fantasy, such as the flight attendant's imagining of rough sex in "Uniform" and the pilot's imagined vision of seduction by a contortionist in "Romeo." But the most significant deviation from this temporal structure in the production was the Zulu, who came from and represented a purer and more organic vision of culture: he was that part of culture that had been suppressed or forgotten but which erupted into and eventually healed the present moment.

Read this way, the production articulated Québec's continuing sense of unrealised and interrupted nationhood, and communicated an anxiety about the loss of cultural distinctiveness in the face of bland globalised supermodernity. As Marshall argues, this sense of present time being invaded by the past is characteristic of the narration of postcolonial nationhood in that "the temporal schemes involved include a teleology of progress but also the persistence of tradition, even irrational atemporalities: a realism and a romanticism."[474] In Bhabha's formulation, the time of the nation is inherently divided between history and the present moment:

> In the production of nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative.[475]

The Zulu was a figure from a different temporal formulation, who had been repressed but who reappeared to disrupt, perhaps productively, the mechanised, depersonalised present.

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[474] Marshall, p. 8.
[475] Bhabha, p. 145.

The problem that some commentators had with this representation of the past, however, was that it participated in a discourse which constructs and objectifies the non-Western other. The Zulu's role was to represent a purer and less technological culture than the contemporary West. He became the sole figure in the production with the cultural wherewithal to bring the production's fragmented world together into a heartwarming finale of unified song and dance. The Zulu, in other words, was clearly the noble savage, whose "obligatory counterpart," in Todorov's words, is "the critique of one's own society." His function here was to represent an exotic point of contrast to the Western, contemporary culture that was the production's subject matter. In Todorov's formulation, such exoticism is the diametric opposite of nationalism: whereas the nationalist viewpoint defines its country as superior to all others, with exoticism, "the country with superior values is not my own." Exoticism is therefore a form of national self-criticism; what *Zulu Time* criticised about Québec was the extent to which it is still colonised – to which its past is still denied. What is problematic about such representations, as Todorov argues, is that this critique is undertaken through the objectification of the other, whose only value in the formulation is his otherness:

> No one is intrinsically other; an individual is 'other' only because he is not myself. By saying he is other, I have not yet really said anything at all; worse, I know nothing about him... [476]

Such exoticising representations extend what JanMohamed has termed the "manichean economy of colonialist texts," which transforms "racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference" regardless of whether it posits the racial

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[476] Todorov, Tzvetan, *On Human Diversity*, pp. 271, 264.

other as of higher or lower moral status than the dominant culture. Seen in this light, *Zulu Time* functions within JanMohamed's definition of colonialist discourse, which:

> ...'commodifies' the native subject into a stereotyped object and uses him as a 'resource' for colonialist fiction. The European writer commodifies the native by negating his individuality, his subjectivity, so that he is now perceived as a generic being that can be exchanged for any other native (they all look alike, act alike, and so on.) One reduced to his exchange-value in the colonialist signifying system, he is fed into the manichean allegory, which functions as the currency, the medium of exchange, for the entire colonialist discursive system.[477]

Even if *Zulu Time* portrayed the Zulu as the noble savage, who possessed more wisdom than anyone else in the production, the production's creators maintained the upper hand in that they constructed the native, and chose to make him the only image of a black man in the production, thus denying any possible alternative or contemporary lived realities for blacks in their world. Read in this context, *Zulu Time* demonstrated the complex and conflicting impulses and power struggles within Québec regarding otherness. The figure of the Zulu was an expression of the temporal discontinuities of a postcolonial culture, an expression which indicated that the production's francophone creators considered themselves still colonised; but it was also a colonising gesture, a seeming attempt by representatives of the francophone majority in Québec to assert power over another population by constructing it as other to themselves.

Commentators from immigrant and anglophone backgrounds responded negatively to the production's presentation of non-white characters, arguing that by not commenting or editorialising on uneven power relations, it was exploiting and endorsing them. For Rahul Varma, the figure of the Zulu was part of "a collection of

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[477] JanMohamed, Abdul, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonial Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12, pp 61, 64.

constructed images of the Other" which revealed "more about Lepage's expanded beliefs and fantasies than the actual cultures and people he depicts..."[478] *The Globe and Mail's* Alan Conter argued that the production "dabbles in cultural pastiche – most of it embarrassing, some of it painful" and wondered"[w]hat was [Lepage] thinking?"[479]

Perhaps even more troubling to Varma and other commentators were the connections the production seemed to be making between the Zulu and monkeys. Kate Bligh argued that the staging encouraged audiences to create connections between the Zulu and the monkey played by Jacinto, who appeared on stage in the vignette "Oscar" and ended up standing at the microphone where the Zulu had previously appeared:

> The monkey and the Zulu shared stage position and gesture. There was a pattern, a pattern of associations that were not clarified or contextualised and whose interpretation is still troubling to me... I guess I just expected some more meaningful association-creation or cultural curation from an artist from *le pays des nègres blancs.*[480]

The "pattern of associations" that Bligh refers to is that of the racial slur likening monkeys to blacks, historically associated with 19th century attempts, via early anthropology, to argue for the superiority of certain population groups and the inferiority of others by differentiating between their appearances and likening some groups to animals. Such thought became associated with Aryanism and with eugenics, and led to the creation of what many argue now is the discreditable and artificial category of race. Bligh's reference to *le pays des nègres blancs* nods to Pierre Vallières' *Nègres Blancs d'Amérique,* which likened the plight of Quebecers in Canada

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[478] Varma, Rahul, "Robert Lepage's *Zulu Time*: A Dehumanizing Show," *alt.theatre* 2:4, p. 5.
[479] Conter, Alan, "Beating the African drum ever so tangentially," *The Globe and Mail,* 27 June 2002.
[480] Bligh, Kate, "*Zulu Time*" (review), in *Canadian Theatre Review* 112, p. 72.

to oppressed black populations in other colonies. Bligh's implication is that, given this history of positive links between québécois and black populations, a Québécois of French-Canadian origin such as Lepage might have been expected to exhibit more sensitivity towards the representation of a black character than to seem to parallel his presence with that of a monkey. For Varma, the images of the Zulu struggling with contemporary technology, the woman dressed as a monkey, and the video of Gabriel teaching a monkey to play the keyboards

> demonstrate a colonial mindset, one that hasn't yet freed the white man from a paternalistic desire to civilise others – the animal, the woman, and the natives.

It is hard to believe that the creators of *Zulu Time* were unaware that connections between monkeys and blacks have a troubled historical precedent and are widely considered problematic and outdated. Because of the overall ambiguity in the production around issues of coherence, it was not clear whether the images were meant to be related to each other. From his vantage point close to the creative process, Fouquet indicated his understanding that the images of the monkey and the Zulu were thematically connected:

> ... the presence of the Zulu, like that of the monkey Oscar, or the bonobo apes from Peter Gabriel's documentary, appears as parts of a reflection on nature, animality, and animal intelligence facing a world of machines and solitude.[481]

This comment can be informed by the work that Lepage and Gabriel were engaged in, separately and together, on animal intelligence and the connections between humans and animals; it seems likely that they considered the presentation of images

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[481] "... la présence du Zoulou comme celle du singe Oscar, ou des singes bonobos d'un documentaire signé Peter Gabriel, s'imposeront comme constituants d'une réflexion sur la nature, l'animalité, l'intelligence animale face au monde des machines et de nos solitudes." Fouquet, p. 166.

of humans alongside monkeys to be a positive, inclusive, even progressive gesture. Perhaps, also, they might have felt that including a comic gag (a person in a monkey suit) added a knowing and satiric quality.

Bernatchez indicated his understanding, however, that the images of the monkey and the black man were not related, and argued that Varma's connection of these images was evidence of the writer's own troubled relationship with power:

> [Ex Machina has] trouble understanding why [Varma] includes the scenes involving apes in [what he argues is the production's] derogatory depiction of Africans – does he himself equate Africans with apes?... For the artists involved in the production, the Zulu warrior was seen as a dignified character... We thus remain puzzled at the reason why Mr. Varma so aggressively attacks Robert Lepage as a colonialist. Could it be that it is Mr. Varma who has failed to free himself from a sinister, colonized mindset? It seems to us, in any case, that he prefers to revel in a self-imposed status as victim, and to invent imaginary enemies like us, enemies which are much more practical to attack because they are much less menacing than actual racists, colonialists, imperialists and militarists. [482]

The bitterness of the sentiments exchanged here between immigrant critic/artist[483] and francophone Québécois producer channel deeper cultural resentments; they belie ongoing conflicts within Québec about what group has the right to claim the status of colonised and victim.

Bernatchez then offers a striking alternate reading of the depiction of the Zulu, which, he argues, far from being colonialist, constituted a *critique* of colonialism

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[482] Bernatchez, Michel, "In reply to the article 'Robert Lepage's *Zulu Time*: A Dehumanizing Show' by Rahul Varma." Unpublished letter.

[483] Varma was born in India and emigrated to Canada in the early 1980s. He is a produced and published playwright and since 1986 has been artistic director of Teesri Duniya Theatre, a "multicultural company with a mandate to produce socially relevant theatre examining issues of cultural representation and diversity in Canada." Teesri Duniya publishes *alt.theatre*, which published Varma's critique of *Zulu Time*. Little, Edward, "Biography of Rahul Varma," www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5399, accessed 16 April 2005.

in contemporary society. The key to reading the figure of the Zulu as such was the clip from the *Zulu* film, whose images

> ... are an explicit illustration of the horrors of colonialism and racism. They are also used in parallel with another scene [in the production, in which] a Zulu warrior scares off a handful of white people by generating terrifying sounds with a microphone, a symbolic turning of the tables showing a non-white terrorizing occidentals with their own technology. Audiences were free to interpret this scene as a metaphor of recent events, and to see the historical slaughter of Zulu warriors as a metaphor for the root cause of these recent events.[484]

In Bernatchez's explanation, then, the image of the Zulu brandishing the microphone stand was a reference to the "recent events" of 9/11; the Zulu could be read as a reference to the Muslim extremists who "terrorized occidentals with their own technology" when they hijacked American airplanes and turned them into weapons. This in turn is contextualised by the reference to the *Zulu* film, which, Bernatchez assumes, audiences would have understood as being deployed critically. The film is notorious for its pro-colonial, pro-British viewpoint: it depicts the British soldiers who held off the Zulu attack as heroes, without offering the possible counter-reading that the Zulus were defending land that had been taken from them by invasion and kept from them by force. Bernatchez explains the inclusion of the film as knowing reference to a dated cultural text which by its very existence demonstrates "...the horrors of colonialism and racism."[485] Bernatchez thus describes the production as a sweeping critique of Western imperialism, drawing a through-line from the 19th

[484] Bernatchez, "In reply."

[485] Several anglophone commentators, however, missed this point and argued that, by including the film clip, the production's creators were endorsing the film's colonial viewpoint. For Conter, the inclusion of the film *Zulu* "...isn't so much a cultural hybrid as awkward appropriation." Bligh describes the scene from the film as depicting "a battle between hundreds of Zulu warriors (a faceless mass) and a batallion of... Welsh fusiliers, which included lingering close-ups of their noble profiles and barely-suppressed emotions" indicating that she understood that the film's depiction of the British as heroic was meant to be taken seriously.

century Age of Empire to the contemporary conflict between Muslims and the U.S.-led West. Nothing in the production connects the Zulu dramaturgically or through image to the terrorists of 9/11, who are not literally represented on stage but only alluded to through the image of a Muslim bomber in the vignette "Kilo" (whose story does not exactly match that of the 9/11 bombers, as they boarded planes in street clothing while the Muslim in "Kilo" is dressed as a pilot). Bernatchez's reading assumes an interpretative community which understands contemporary U.S.-led globalisation as a force of imperialism that perpetuates power inequalities and the oppression of subaltern (and largely non-white) populations; but which will, in turn, not find problematic that different non-white populations (black and Muslim) are being made to stand in for each other. This is a complex reading that attempts to present *Zulu Time* as politically and socially progressive, but it is notable that only one commentator offered anything close to a similar take on the production, and that he, Don Shewey, had interviewed Lepage and Gabriel for a *New York Times* feature article on the production and thus gained close access to their intentions. As Shewey understood it, the production's creators positively exploited the conventions of casting actors across multiple roles, and of intermediality, to create an ironic commentary on cultural relations in our globalised world:

> [A] lounge singer morphs into a Zulu warrior wearing the same makeup and carrying the same spear and shield we've seen in a corny colonialist in-flight movie – an image that contains both the comforting cliché that 'we're all connected' and a critique of that cliché, suggesting that we also carry around partially-digested, media-distorted understandings of one another's culture.[486]

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[486] Shewey, Don, "Set Your Watch to Now: Robert Lepage's *Zulu Time*," *American Theatre*, September 2002.

Shewey here assumes a knowing gaze that can read the Zulu as both a stereotype and a deconstruction of that stereotype, but not even members of the creators' own discursive community read the figure as such. Few francophone commentators made any mention at all of the production's depiction of non-white characters nor of animals, and those that did read them as mildly ironic and/or reflective of the production's overall presentation of contemporary *métissage*. For Jean St-Hilaire in *Le Soleil*, the production presented the airport as a space where

> ... nature and culture, animality and humanity, primitive and modern technology (not to mention weaponry) confront each other and sometimes merge.[487]

Le Devoir's Hervé Guay, on the other hand, singled out "Kilo," in which a Westerner dressed as a Muslim and vice versa, as not a celebration of cultural mixing but an "ironic" commentary on it.

> It is not without irony... that Lepage presents an Occidental woman dressing in a burka in order to hide that she is transporting cocaine, at the same time as a muslim puts on the uniform and takes up the briefcase of an airline pilot to blow up the plane he boards."[488]

Guay thus seems to read the vignette as a comment on the rise in fundamentalism and racial profiling following 9/11 – it showed that appearances are deceiving and that someone we understand by outward appearance to be Muslim or Caucasian might be anything but. While taking up the material in different ways, both St-Hilaire and Guay's readings share a universalist assumption that people, despite differences,

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[487] "...nature et culture, animalité et humanité et techiques – pour ne pas dire armes – primitives et technologies modernes se choquent en s'hybridant parfois." St-Hilare, Jean, "*Zulu Time*: La planète des solitudes," *Le Soleil*, 28 June 2002.

[488] "Non sans ironie... Lepage montre une Occidentale qui se couvre d'une burka afin de passer en douce de la cocaïne alors qu'un musmulan porte l'uniforme et la valise d'un pilote de ligne dans le but de faire sauter l'avion dans lequel il prend place." Guay, Hervé, "Pantomime en l'air," *Le Devoir*, 27 June 2002

are essentially linked by their common humanity.[489] Overall, the very different responses to this material – that it was read as colonialist and anti-colonialist, racist and progressive – are an indication of the accumulation of factors, material, discursive, and otherwise, that make Québec not a model of universal values but of cultural disunity.

[489] Guay, also, does not mention the production's convention of white actors playing non-white characters, which, it could be argued, undermines the scene's power as a demonstration of the surface nature of otherness. Perhaps for Guay, however, this convention added to the irony, in that it was another layer demonstrating how ethnicity can be taken on and off like a costume.

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

Since *Zulu Time*, Lepage has kept up a hectic pace of professional activity. He has undertaken freelance directing assignments, including a new opera by Loren Maazel based on Orwell's *1984* at the Royal Opera House (London) in May 2005; and Cirque du Soleil's *KÀ*.[490] Ex Machina has co-produced several productions which Lepage has directed but not written: *La Casa Azul*, *The Busker's Opera*, and *La Celestina*.[491] At the same time he has created two original stage works, both solo shows: *The Far Side of the Moon* and *The Andersen Project*. *Far Side* offers itself as a fitting subject for the conclusion of this study, as it sees Lepage extending and altering many of the tendencies and themes I have been examining. In it he moves

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[490] *KÀ* is a mammoth project and has received copious international publicity. Played in a purpose-built 1,951-seat theatre at the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas, each performance involves 105 technicians, 75 performers, and eight musicians, and tickets cost between $95-150 U.S. The official budget for the project was $165 million U.S., though it is rumored to have cost over $200 million, and is said to be the most expensive piece of live theatre ever staged in North America. (See Glaister, Dan, "Spend! Spend! Spend!", *The Guardian*, 27 January 2005, and Goldman, Dan, "Cirque du Soleil's New Vegas Show," *The Gazette*, 17 September 2004). It extends Lepage's interest in non-Western cultures: in the ancient Egyptian worldview, the "ka" was a person's spiritual double or life force. The Cirque production has an "underlying theme of duality": it is the story of twins "on a perilous journey to fulfill their shared destiny... underscored by the opposing powers of fire to create and to destroy." (www.cirquedusoleil.com/Cirquedusoleil/en/KA/main.htm?bandWith=Hi, accessed 17 June 2005). Critics were mixed on the production. One found it visually spectacular and "richly detailed", but "overload[ed]" with effects (Swed, Mark, "Epic, Extravagent," *The Los Angeles Times*, 5 February 2005). Another argued that the production had not been successful in marrying "the Cirque brand and Mr. Lepage's more cerebral aesthetic," and that "it's the power of hydraulics that emerges triumphant in this stylish, technically dazzling entertainment." (Isherwood, Charles, "Fire, Acrobatics, and Most of All, Hydraulics," *The New York Times*, 5 February 2005).

[491] *La Casa Azul* is a play by and starring Sophie Faucher about Frida Kahlo which toured from 2001-2003 in Canada, the U.S., Mexico, and Europe. *The Busker's Opera* is a music theatre piece based on John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, adapted by Kevin McCoy (who is Lepage's romantic partner) and Lepage, with music written and performed by its 10-member cast; it began touring in early 2004, to Canada, Europe, Australia, and the United States, and at the time of writing is still touring. *La Celestina* is a stage adaptation of Fernando de Rojas' 16th century dramatic novel, produced by a number of Spanish theatres and municipal organisations, which played in Spain and Portugal in 2004.

into the previously uncharted personal territory of his childhood, while at the same time indicating a new level of awareness of the limitations of his use of theatre for personal examination, and a desire to move beyond the representational tropes that have characterised his previous original work. At the same time, the production demonstrates the limitations of Lepage's attempts to realise himself personally through representation. It is also his first original production not to lend itself to a postcolonial critique: it forges new cultural territory, away from québécois cultural politics towards the depiction of the individual subject navigating global terrain. It sees Lepage, who has up to now studiously avoided commenting on geopolitics in his work, undertaking a mild critique of American-led globalisation, while at the same time offering an idealistic vision of a world beyond binary oppositions.[492] *The Andersen Project* had its world premiere only months before this study was complete and, like all of Lepage's work, is likely to change considerably as it tours. I mention it briefly in this chapter because its concept and themes offer further indications of new directions for Lepage's work.

THE FAR SIDE OF THE MOON

The Far Side of the Moon is Lepage's best-received and most successful production since the original *Dragon's Trilogy*.[493] First performed in 2000, it continues

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[492] My account of *Far Side* is based on several viewings of the production, in Glasgow (April 2001), London (July 2001), Montréal (June 2003), and Dublin (October 2003), and on the unpublished English-language script, provided by Ex Machina. Page references to the script appear in parenthesis after quotations in this chapter.

[493] In 2001, *Far Side* won the London Evening Standard Award for Best New Play and the London Critics' Circle Award for Best Director, and four Masques (Québec's theatre awards) including the honour for best play. In 2004 Lepage made a film of *The Far Side of the Moon*, which follows the stage version closely; it was chosen as Canada's entry in the Best Foreign Language Film

to tour in 2005, with the québécois actor Yves Jacques now performing the roles originated by Lepage.[494]

The production was originally called *The Moon Project*; Lepage's impulse to create it came from reading the American astronaut Buzz Aldrin's book *Journey to the Moon*. In March 1999, in an early stage of developing the production (and while he was also creating *Zulu Time*), Lepage said that *The Moon Project* was going to be about

> ... trying to deal with your own reality having been to the moon. I've had the impression I've been to the moon, and I'm not just interested in the same things any more. People expect me to continue in one direction, and I want to go in a more jazzy, risky area. I have to find out who I am, what other stories I want to tell. That's why I'm doing something about the moon. It's an unexplored area where I don't know the rules.[495]

The experience of being to the moon, one presumes, is Lepage's reference to his international success and fame. This is a similar sentiment to that which he expressed in the early developmental phases of *Zulu Time*: a desire to break his own rules and do something new; at the same time, he underlines the basis of his work in the personal – in "find[ing] out who I am." In the months after making this statement, however, Lepage experienced both the negative response to the early, experimental phases of *Zulu Time*, and a more personal difficulty, the death of his mother in late 1999. Both seem to have affected the development of *Far Side*, in that its form and content did not deviate as far from Lepage's norm as this early comment indicated it might. The production became another in a series of Lepage solos in which he processed a personal trauma through the performance of a self-identified character.

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category for the Academy Awards, but was not one of the five finalist films chosen to compete for the Oscar.

[494] This continues a pattern begun with *Needles and Opium*, of Lepage originating the performance of his solo productions and then hiring another actors to perform the shows: Marc Labrèche performed *Needles and Opium* in 1994-1995, and Peter Darling performed *Elsinore* in 1996-97.

[495] Fisher, "The Write Lines," p. 14.

What sets *Far Side* apart is the level of awareness that its creator seems to possess about the relationship between his work and his life, and the new areas of personal experience that it treats. His discussion of the production in 2000 indicates these changes:

> The moon is a very powerful symbol of motherhood. I lost my father seven years ago and that's always very tough. But losing a mother is more visceral. All these things of your childhood come back to you. I always tried to bury my childhood, never really wanted to discuss it, or to look back. I wasn't a very happy child. My life really began when I was 17 and started to do things I really wanted to do and study theatre.[496]

Lepage's past productions focussed on his experiences as an adult – travelling, romantic hardship, the death of friends and family members. This was his first production to treat his childhood, and in particular his relationship to his mother; in it he comes closer to confronting the profound traumas he experienced as a child, which he here acknowledges that he "buried." He also reveals a new awareness of the trope of self-regard in his work, and attempts to move beyond it by, paradoxically, making it the production's theme. The subject of *Far Side*, communicated both through its content and form, is narcissism: it is the story of two brothers from Québec City, each in his own way self-obsessed, who struggle to connect with each other following their mother's death. The narrative focus is the older brother, bearing the familiar Lepage stand-in name of Philippe: he is a 40-something postgraduate student who has been trying for years to complete a doctoral thesis which "attempts to demonstrate that Man's interest in space travel is motivated not by curiosity but by narcissism" (2) – the first time that Lepage has named the concept directly in his work. By naming narcissism and by making it his subject,

[496] Aidilman, Sid, "Lepage goes to the moon," *The Toronto Star*, 18 April 2000.

Lepage attempts to use the production as a means to examine, accept, and move beyond it. But these attempts are self-defeating: he indulges and extends the narcissistic patterns inherent in his theatrical approach even as he tries to overcome them, and, even more thoroughly than in his past work, draws the audience into this inward-focussed circuit of representation.

PLATE 25: Lepage as Philippe in **The Far Side of the Moon.**

The production begins with an non-diagetic prologue in which the actor speaks directly to the audience and introduces the theme:

> Until the invention of the telescope and the first observations of Galileo, people thought the moon was a gigantic mirror... much later, in the 20th century... the world was stunned to discover that the moon had a second visage... this evening's performance tells the story of the competition between two brothers, each brother discovering in the face of the other a mirror image of his own vanity and his own disfigurement. (1)

Lepage here communicates an understanding of narcissism generally in keeping with that of Lacanian psychology: it is the attempt to see oneself in the other. Just as the

moon was first understood as a reflection of earth, so do narcissists look to others in hopes of seeing themselves. He hints here at the critique of narcissism that will become a central focus of the production: overall, through its content, *Far Side* argues that narcissism is a trap that blocks new insights and keeps the subject from an engaged relationship with the rest of the world. But other elements of the production send contradictory messages, extending the patterns of self-regard and the desire for mastery that are inherent in Lepage's particular engagement with the solo theatrical form. As argued in Chapters 3 and 4, Lepage creates solo productions as an attempt to other himself, to locate a place from which he can see himself seeing. This involves the audience, in that Lepage displaces his desires onto them: his stagings construct the audience as possessing the look that can enable his gaze. This creates an uneasy power dynamic, which in *Far Side* takes on new levels of complexity. On the one hand, its prologue functions as an assertion of authority. By appearing on stage as himself and informing the audience about what they are going to see, the author attempts to control the audience's gaze: "I see you seeing me," the prologue says, "and everything you're about to see is a product of my vision." But at the same time, the autobiographical nature of the material subverts this assertion and gives power to the audience, sending an opposing message: "Please see me, so I can know I really exist." Lepage adds yet another layer of meaning by staging the prologue in front of a large, mirrored panel, so that the audience see themselves as they watch him, implicating them in his investigation of self-regard: "See yourself?", this gesture asks. "You're looking for yourself in me, just like I am in you." Here Lepage extends the ongoing pattern in his work of flattering, but coercive and universalising, inclusiveness: the assumption behind this device is that all audience members are

motivated by the same desires as the artist himself.[497] Rather than moving beyond narcissism, this complex, criss-crossing exchange of looks extends it.

The production further engages viewers by continually shifting the terms by which it addresses them. After an initial, wordless scene in a laundromat, the action switches to Philippe's thesis defense, and the audience is fictionally placed in a lecture theatre and referred to as an academic panel. When the scene shifts to the Montréal Cosmodome, viewers are addressed as space travel enthusiasts listening to the address of a visiting cosmonaut. When Philippe's brother André stands in front of a projected image of the earth and talks about cold fronts over Québec, they become television viewers of the Weather Channel. Thus the production disrupts conventional understandings of viewer identity by exploiting the two-way traffic of the gaze, casting not just its solo actor, but its audience, in multiple roles. These clever techniques keep the audience included in Lepage's deeply paradoxical attempt to break out of a narcissistic pattern through a form whose inherent narcissism he can toy with, but never conclusively escape.

This production takes Lepage's exploration of personal material to new areas through his explicit engagement with the theme of motherhood. Smothering and intense mother-son relationships are a representational trope of Lepage's work, from Françoise and Pierre in the *Trilogy*, to *Elsinore*'s engagement with the bond between Hamlet and Gertrude, to Sophie and Pierre in the final boîte of *Ota*.[498] *Far Side* both

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[497] This dynamic takes on a different dimension when someone other than the author performs the work. When Yves Jacques performs *Far Side*, the power relations become simpler, in that audiences are seeing a simulation, not a performer acting out his own experience in order to process it.

[498] Pierre Maltais in *Ota* is Sophie's son, with whom she is pregnant in the "Words" *boîte* discussed in chapter 7. In one version of last *boîte*, "Thunder," Sophie comes to visit Hanako and Pierre in Hiroshima, and reveals herself to be very engaged in her son's life.

continues this pattern and attempts to step outside of it. In the fiction of *Far Side*, Philippe enters a contest to send a video into outer space; this is the principal means by which the audience is given access into the character's emotional life. Videoing a closet full of his dead parents' belongings, he focuses in on

> ... a pair of ladies' shoes that belonged to my Mom. She had dozens of them, because it was important to have a pair that would match each evening gown. 'Cause she was a very, very elegant woman... (9)

In the next scene the actor appears as Philippe's mother, wearing these pumps, a flowered dress, and a woman's wig, and plays with Philippe as a child, represented by a child-sized puppet dressed as an astronaut.

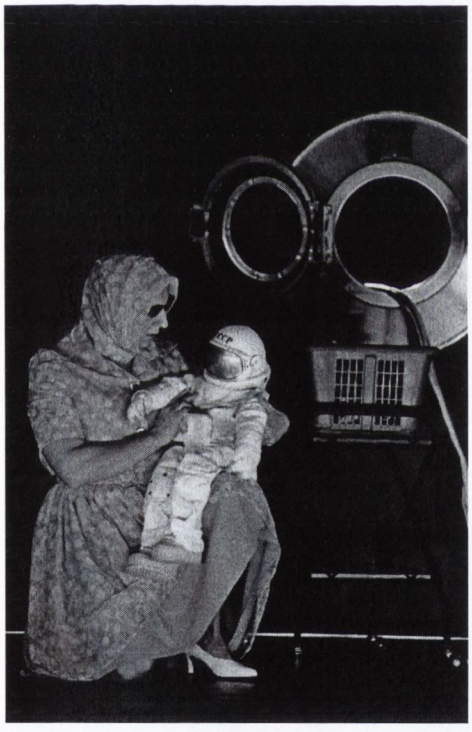

PLATE 26: Lepage as Philippe's mother in **Far Side.**
Photo: Sophie Grenier

Lepage later uses a visual trick that allows Philippe to metamorphose into his mother: a television with a bright white screen makes a tight circle on stage, temporarily blinding the audience and obscuring what is happening behind it; meanwhile the

actor switches costumes and then appears as the mother, now physically debilitated and in a wheelchair. By creating fictional scenes in which the character representing him "becomes" his mother onstage, Lepage creates his most literal representation to date of the desire to escape adult subjectivity and make the impossible journey back to unity with the maternal figure. This experience functions as a purgative rite of passage for Philippe: as the production continues, he gathers the courage to take a plane flight for the first time (thus moving beyond the maternal space of home), to present a paper at a conference in Moscow. Discovering that he has overslept and missed his lecture slot, he addresses the empty room about the project he had come to discuss, an elevator that would connect Earth and the moon:

> I think we should build it on the far side of the moon, where it is impossible to see the earth.... that way, it would force us to stop looking at ourselves all the time and experience the ultimate vertigo... A vertigo that is comparable to the one you experience when you've lost both your parents and you discover that, even though they meant the world to you, they were only blocking the view and keeping you from seeing the horizon. (23, ellipses in original)

One of the ways that Lepage indicates that Philippe is undergoing a profound personal change is by having him speak these words while he is alone. There is no one else present to serve as the other for Philippe: he is breaking free of his narcissism and accepting that he does not need the regard or approval of other people in order to live his life. This insight allows Philippe to leave his anger behind and have an honest conversation with his brother, and sets up the production's visually arresting final scene, in which Philippe, waiting in an airport for his return flight, seems to float in space, a simple visual trick achieved by reflecting in a tilted mirror the image of the actor rolling on the floor. This extends, but also alters, Lepage's tendency to end his productions with his self-identified central characters setting out on another voyage:

this journey seems to be different from the others, in that Philippe has begun a process of self-acceptance, an experience so liberating that it allows him to defy gravity and float freely without a particular destination or goal. The recognition of self-regard and the preoccupation with parental approval as self-defeating traps are new insights in Lepage's work; the irony, of course, is that this articulation is itself trapped within representation. However much Lepage might express through a self-identified character the desire to look beyond himself, he is doing so in the context of a representational system that depends on and perpetuates narcissistic self-regard. As long as he continues to process his experiences through theatre, he cannot realise the liberated subjectivity he imagines for Philippe.

Another element of *Far Side* new to Lepage's work is its treatment of culturally specific material and of language. Arguably, the production could be read as a commentary on the two sides of Québec's identity, via the differences between the brothers. Philippe is a homebody who has never travelled outside the province/nation, and telemarkets for the Québec newspaper *Le Soleil*. He is therefore associated with the European, Francophone, traditional aspects of québécois culture. André is more Anglicised, or, perhaps, globalised: he works for a global conglomerate based in the U.S. (the Weather Channel), has a boyfriend with an English-sounding name (Carl), and is full of psychobabble and pop culture references – he believes in "currency psychics" who can "read" your wallet "and tell if you respect money" and when his brother tells him about his video project for aliens, calls him "cuckoo for Cocoa Pops." (6, 25) These attitudes and affiliations associate André with Québec's *americanité*, that part of its culture that embraces its presence on the North American continent. This contrast, however, was not noted by reviewers, even

those who wrote about the production in Québec[499]; Philippe's and André's differences were understood as individual and personal, not reflective of any larger cultural tendencies or attributes. This is striking, given how eager commentators, particularly in Québec, have been to claim Lepage's work as québécois. The reason doubtless lies first of all in the production's unilinguality. *Far Side* is played exclusively in a single language, French or English, depending on the performance market;[500] this is in contrast to past productions such as *Vinci*, the *Trilogy*, and *Ota*, in which switching between languages within the space of a single performance was used as a metaphor for cultural difference generally and Québec's position in the world specifically. With *Far Side* the opportunity was there to use language to accentuate the differences between the brothers. Philippe, assumedly, would speak in French virtually all the time, whereas André could be imagined to switch between languages: English for his weather broadcasts, perhaps, and French for conversations with his brother. That Lepage did not angle his material in this direction indicates a move away from the theme of difference as manifest in Québec.[501] Those details in the production that were culturally specific (that the brothers lived in Québec City, for

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[499] I base this assessment on having read the press dossiers for the production's runs in Québec, Montréal, London, Toronto, and Dublin.

[500] That is, the performer speaks in English if the spectators are Anglophone, French if they are Francophone, with individual promoters in non-Anglophone or Francophone markets deciding which performance language they prefer.

[501] The only commentary that I could locate which read *Far Side* as a commentary on Québec was a review of the film version by J. Kelly Nestruck in the *Ottawa Citizen*; Nestruck argues that the film "takes the province's ideological and political turmoil and plays it out in the context of a family." This bears out my argument, in that Nestruck, presumably an Anglophone, received the film through translation in the form of subtitles; it is entirely in French. It seems likely that the experience of negotiating linguistic difference put Nestruck in the mind of québécois cultural politics. See Nestruck, J. Kelly, "Lepage at Home on *The Far Side of the Moon*," *The Ottawa Citizen*, 25 June 2004.

example) functioned at a fairly surface level, locating the production in Québec but not commenting further about the significance of this placement.[502]

With Québec out of the interpretative frame, the production was understood, across many viewing markets, as a meditation on the experience of the individual in a globalised world. Joyce McMillan called it

> ... a complex study.... of key 21st century questions about attachment and detachment, intimacy and narcissistic isolation, in an affluent western city; and at a deeper level, about how human beings deal with the 'other', whether that 'other' is a beloved mother, a deeply irritating brother, an 'enemy' civilisation on the other side of the earth, or the great cosmos itself.[503]

McMillan's comments bring us directly to the central problematic in Lepage's work of the representation of other cultures. Lepage treats otherness differently here than in past productions, in which he introduced representations of foreign cultures (the East in the *Trilogy* and *Ota*, the Zulu in *Zulu Time*) to provide a point of contrast for the subject culture, which was explicitly or implicitly Québec. Here he sets up a binary in which his own culture is not implicated, between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Unlike past productions, in which he and his collaborators avoided direct comment on geopolitical issues, Lepage here offers a critique of the U.S. as a contemporary force of Empire. The production parallels Philippe and André's rivalry with the Soviet-U.S. space race: scenes advancing the brothers' story are intercut with archival

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[502] This had the effect of localising its humour: the ability to appreciate some of the production's jokes depended on the audience's knowledge of Canada and Québec. Philippe's question, when a Montréal barman attempts to shut down early – "...have we moved to English Canada overnight?" – got a big laugh in Montréal, where Franco-Anglo difference is a familiar cultural flashpoint, but did not provoke any reaction when the production played in Dublin. This contrasts interestingly with the conversation between Reese and Madeline in *Tectonic Plates* (discussed in Chapter 6), where a similar joke about cultural difference was pitched to resonate across markets.

[503] McMillan, Joyce, "Glimpses of the Far Side," in *The Far Side of the Moon* production programme, Royal National Theatre, July 2001, pp. 19, 21.

video clips and audio recordings of rocket launches and space voyages. The U.S. is portrayed as grasping and colonialist: the prologue explains that the reason why NASA scientists called the far side of the moon "disfigured" was out of resentment that a Soviet space probe got there first: "...from now on, most craters located on the far side of the moon would bear the name of Russian cosmonauts, poets, and visionaries." (1) In a long monologue to the unwilling Montréal barman, Philippe further depicts the U.S.'s motivation for space travel as less noble and more mercenary than its rival's: "a cosmonaut sounds like someone who's inspired and an astronaut sounds like someone who's... very well funded." (14, ellipses in original) There is a certain irony in Lepage making an anti-American critique, given the benefits that globalisation in general, and the interest of American audiences and presenters in particular, have brought to his career.[504] But he has doubtless chosen his target wisely: given the U.S.'s dominance of contemporary global economic systems and its aggressive foreign policy, audience members from numerous cultures (including many Americans) would probably not object to a description of the country as colonising. It is also important to note that *Far Side* does not carry its U.S./bad, Soviet/good binary through completely in its depiction of the two brothers. Philippe is identified with the Soviet side, but he is a flawed figure, self-absorbed, bitter, and judgmental; and the production takes pains to humanise the America-identified André and to give him his own process of self-discovery

[504] Nine of the 52 separate runs of *Far Side* have been staged in the U.S.; the only country where the production has played more frequently is France. *The Busker's Opera* and *Geometry of Miracles* have played more frequently in the U.S. than in any other country (three of 13 runs, and six of 20 runs, respectively). See www.exmachina.qc.ca.

alongside Philippe.[505] And, far from completely demonising the United States, Lepage has the country be a source of Philippe's redemption, when he wins the U.S.-based space video contest (and finds out via a letter from New Mexico with an Elvis stamp). These plot points, combined with the fact that both brothers were played by the same actor, communicated an overall message that the desirable and attainable end result of a process of self-acceptance is *détante* and compromise. The production's final vision was of an idealised world in which "othering" no longer featured.

THE ANDERSEN PROJECT

The limited information available about *The Andersen Project*[506] indicates that it continues trends established in *Far Side*: of Lepage extending his range of autobiographical material, of a move away from themes of québécois difference, and of a critique that could be construed as Lepage biting the hand that feeds him. The production, in Fisher's words, "is a satire of the very grant structures that keep [Lepage] going." The central character is a québécois songwriter, Frederic Watson, who comes to Paris to collaborate on an opera about Hans Christian Andersen. One of the production's satiric points is that the producer from the Opéra Garnier chooses his collaborators for purely strategic reasons, to maximise the amount of potential

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[505] In the brothers' final phone conversation, it is André who appears on stage; in it he breaks a pattern of defensive lying, and reacts with compassion when his brother becomes overwhelmed with emotion.

[506] *The Andersen Project* was commissioned by the Danish government as part of its celebrations of the bicentenary of Hans Christian Andersen's birth in 2005. It premiered at the Théâtre du Trident in Québec City in February 2005 and played in May 2005 at the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen. Among its co-producers is BITE:06 at the Barbican Centre in London, where it will play in January 2006 as part of ongoing touring. I have not seen the production; my discussion of it is based on interview material with Lepage in the Théâtre du Trident programme; Ex Machina's website; and Mark Fisher's review of the production in *The Guardian*, supplemented by further description provided personally by Fisher.

funding, without apparent interest in cultural exchange or artistic integrity: "Lepage creates a spot-on sendup of the 21st century arts bureaucrat," says Fisher, "who'll jump from Beckett with the Irish to Andersen with the Danes as long as there's money there."[507] This is a critique in which Lepage, one assumes, includes himself: Watson is his *alter ego* in the production, like him a québécois talent-for-hire working on Andersen as a subject despite – as Lepage has acknowledged in interview – little previous knowledge of or interest in the writer.[508] Thus the production extends Lepage's narcissistic representation of his own concerns and experiences, but gives it an interesting new twist. His past productions have depicted emerging, struggling artists; here he addresses the particular concerns of successful, globalised creative figure. This theme is advanced in *Andersen* via a depiction of Hans Christian Andersen himself, who is portrayed in his later years, grappling with fame, sexuality, and mortality.[509] The Andersen material in the production is based on a real-life trip that the writer made to the Paris Exposition of 1867, during which he wrote the story "The Dryad," about a nymph who finally fulfills a wanderlust when she travels to Paris, but dies as a result.

As in *Far Side, Andersen* finds Lepage moving into new areas of self-exploration and self-exposure having to do with an early sense of isolation that extends into his adult life:

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[507] Fisher, Mark, "The Andersen Project (review)," *The Guardian*, 25 May 2005.
[508] See Lepage, Robert, "Mot du Metteur en Scène," *Le Projet Andersen*, production programme, Le Théâtre du Trident, February 2005.
[509] See "Autour du Project Andersen," in *Le Projet Andersen*, production programme.

PLATE 27: Lepage as Watson in **The Andersen Project.** *Photo: Erick Labbé*

> Thanks to my previous solo shows, I already knew that I couldn't just be interested in Andersen, but that I had to identify directly with him... it was finally via a few candid revelations gleaned from here and there in Andersen's personal journal that I realised that he and I were very like each other, more than I even wanted... he had an overriding feeling since he was a very small child that he was different than other people, a perception that brings suffering and isolation but which also helps us realise that each one of us is unique... at the least I've started to understand that my desire to tell stories not only allows me to let my imagination flow but also gives me the opportunity, like Andersen, to leave my isolation for a moment and try to be accepted by the rest of the world.[510]

The production makes physical abnormality a theme: in Fisher's reading, it suggests that "the creative urge is a desire to escape from earthly torments: [people] teased Andersen for being ungainly, Watson for being albino, and Lepage, by implication, for his alopaecia."[511] This is the first time that Lepage has made reference (however oblique) to having alopaecia in a production, an indication of continuing psychological progress begun in *Far Side* to deeper and more repressed personal material.

Andersen, like *Far Side*, does not engage in themes of québécois difference: while Watson is a Quebecer, this appears to be a glancing self-reference to Lepage himself that does not make larger points about the culture. Like *Far Side*, *Andersen* is performed in a single language. While, in this early version, the idea of otherness is primarily played out through the individual psychological lives of the main

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[510] "Je savais déjà, grâce à mes solos précédents, que je ne pouvais pas simplement m'intéresser à Andersen mas que je devais plutôt m'identifier à lui... Ce sont finalement quelques révélations candides glanées ici et là dans son journal personnel qui m'ont fait comprendre que nous nous ressemblions beaucoup plus que je ne l'aurais voulu.... il y avait surtout ce sentiment depuis la plus tendre enfance d'être différent des autres, un sentiment qui fait souffrir et qui isole mais que peut avoir l'avantage de nous faire réaliser que chacun de nous est unique.... j'aurai au moins compris que mon désir de raconter ne me permet pas seulement de dégorger mon imagination mais me donne l'occcasion, comme lui, de sortir un moment de mon isolement et tenter de me faire accepter par le reste du monde." Lepage, "Mot du Metteur en Scène."

[511] Fisher, "The Andersen Project."

characters, Ex Machina's project description notes a character which is as yet only a nominal presence: a "graffiti artist of North African descent" who advances the theme of the contrast between "recognized and underground art forms."[512] This character seems ripe to become a symbol of difference via both his artistic leanings and his ethnicity; it will be interesting to chart its development to see if Lepage's approach to the representation of ethnic otherness has shifted since the negative reaction to *Zulu Time*.

LEPAGE, QUÉBEC, AND THE GLOBAL ARENA: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

After 40 years of struggle and two defeated referenda, there is still a forceful lobby to create an independent Québec nation-state separate from Canada. The continuing strength of the separatist movement was confirmed in June 2005 with the surprise resignation of Bernard Landry as leader of the Parti Québécois (PQ) and the subsequent announcement of a contest for the party leadership. Though 76.2 per cent of delegates at a party policy convention indicated their approval of his leadership, Landry said this was not a sufficiently unified front: "the next person who leads the sovereigntist troops must be strongly supported without equivocation."[513] Polls in midyear 2005 found the PQ running 19 points ahead of the ruling Québec Liberal Party, which was seriously weakened by a scandal over kickbacks from a federal scheme to promote Canadian unity, rumoured to have been "little more than a

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[512] See Ex Machina, "The Andersen Project," http://www.exmachina.qc.ca/ENGLISH/ex.asp?page=Andersen, accessed 18 June 2005.
[513] "Race is on to lead PQ in Québec." http://ottawa.cbc.ca/regional/servlet/View?filename=ot-landry, accessed 23 June 2005.

vehicle to reward loyal Liberal supporters."[514] At least two of the candidates who have put themselves forward for the PQ leadership race have promised to hold an immediate referendum on Quebec sovereignty were the PQ to take power.[515]

The question of Québec statehood is clearly not going away. It seems likely, however, that his culture's ongoing struggle for self-realisation will not feature in the substance of Robert Lepage's work as it has in the past. From the evidence of *Far Side* and *Andersen*, it seems that Lepage's "postcolonial period" may be over. As discussed in Chapter 9, *Zulu Time* presaged this shift, in Lepage's stated desire to make a production about the experience of contemporary globalism, but was tripped up by representational codes that belied difficulties in Québec around the definition and representation of cultural difference. The production was therefore, in its way, marked by Québec's problematic postcoloniality. With these two latest solo productions, Lepage has moved beyond themes of québécois cultural difference to a focus on the individual subject in a global context. This is not to say that representations of otherness and difference may not reappear in his work, but rather that his frame of reference has shifted away from material that can be read as direct or indirect references to Québec. What remains to be seen is whether he will shift his representational codes to take account of the broader and more diverse public who now view his work. The negative response to *Zulu Time* stands as evidence of the problems that can ensue if such account is not taken, while the enormous success of *Far Side* can be attributed, at least in part, to a story whose theme and message

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[514] "Federal sponsorship scandal." http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/groupaction/, accessed 23 June 2005. See also "After Landry," *The Economist*, 11 June 2005, p. 50.
[515] As of the date of writing (24 June 2005), six candidates have entered the leadership race, and Richard Legendre and André Boisclair have promised an immediate referendum upon election. The PQ will elect its new leader in November 2005.

appealed broadly across cultures and whose "othering" tendencies were relatively uncontroversial and benign.

These new productions also reveal Lepage to be taking his engagement with personal material in his work to newly introspective depths. By treating his relationship with his mother in *Far Side* and his physical condition in *Andersen*, he is working back through his personal experience to the deepest trauma of his childhood: his troubled experience of castration. It was at that point that Lepage first experienced the profound sense of isolation and otherness that his teenage discovery of theatre helped him to, in his own words, "bury." Theatre became the centre of Lepage's life, the place where he processed his personal concerns and created stage images of himself as a means to restart and correct what he perceived as his flawed subjectivity. His productions brought him considerable agency and power, and yet he continued to depict himself in them as a subject forever-in-formation, resisting acknowledgement of his changing circumstances. Originally conceived as the conduit through which he could face up to the real (in the Lacanian sense) of his existence, his productions became the screen shielding him from the real, preventing him from accepting his status as an active, realised subject. Now, after 20 years of theatremaking, he has found his way back to, and is unburying, the foundational trauma at the centre of his psychology. Facing up to his fundamental experience of difference could be an important step for Lepage out of his narcissistic loop of self-regard. It could bring him closer to the terrifying real of a creative project without his own self-construction as its centre.

The current progress of his work finds Lepage moving beyond self-protecting patterns into riskier territory. With *Andersen* he has chosen to tell the stories of artists

whose concerns and circumstances map more accurately onto his own. *Far Side* found him hitting the now-familiar wall of representation, as he launched his self-identified character into a mature, adult existence that his autobiographical theatrical approach, by its nature, prevents him achieving for himself. But its tentative foray into social critique represents productive new ground. Through it, he reached beyond his own experience and demonstrated the agency that he has for so long, through his work, denies he posesses. For Lepage, fully claming that agency may mean leaving the peformance of himself behind.

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