How might Robert Lepage's philosophy of the communion between actor and audience be applied in a New Zealand context?

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Philosophy
in English

at Massey University, Palmerston North,
New Zealand

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2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, thanks abound to my supervisor Dr Angie Farrow, a fabulous teacher and wonderful friend, who believed in me when I no longer could. Your gentle encouragement, blunt honesty, and practical help became inestimable.

My thanks go to Ants Heath, Rosie Otley, Glen Ashworth, and Patrick Arnold, without whom the practical component of this thesis would not have been possible. Moreover, I wish to thank Carol Seelye, Debbie Ormsby, Julie McKenzie, and Dr Julie Bunnell from Massey University for all of your help and administrative abilities.

A special thank you goes to Dr F. Elizabeth Gray; your time and regular discourse gave light to a multitude of ideas.

Finally, I am continuously grateful to my wonderful children, who found their patience and love sorely tried. Thank you both so much for your effervescent smiles and everlasting hugs.

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INTRODUCTION

We want to be accessible, to speak to the general public, and not to a select few ... I don't want to communicate, 'communiquer,' I want all of us to commune, 'communier' with the public, and the public with us. You know 'communier' in our religion? To partake of the body and blood of Christ? That's what I want us to do, but with the public. We give them our body and blood. We become a whole. We share an experience, not an idea.

(Robert Lepage in "Theatre Of The Miraculous" by Alberto Manguel, 37).

How might Robert Lepage's philosophy of the communion between actor and audience be applied in a New Zealand context?

While many directors wish to communicate with the audience, Robert Lepage endeavours to expand and transform this communication, developing his own concept of theatre, often referred to as a 'communion' between actor and audience. Having watched several of Lepage's productions, including *Tectonic Plates, Le Polygraphe, The Dragons' Trilogy,* and *Seven Streams of the River Ota,* as well as the films *Nô, Le Confessional* and *Possible Worlds*, I was inspired to

discover why his theatre resonates so profoundly with those who view it. Through my readings of Charest, Dundjerovic, Donohoe, and Koustas, and articles from *The Canadian Theatre Review* my immersion into Lepage's work continued, and I began to sense how personal and cultural elements intertwine in his productions. While in his work Lepage is often telling his personal story, he is also telling stories with a more multicultural and global significance. Lepage's theatre is also full of significant transformations that can often create a sense of mythic resonance for audiences, by mirroring their individual or cultural rites of passage. Furthermore, the theatrical narrative in Lepage's work continued to remind me of the varied and tumultuous cultural aspects of the country which I grew up in, New Zealand. I became fascinated by the idea of discovering Lepage's theatrical methodologies, with an express desire to find ways for my own theatre endeavours to emulate his, enabling me to create my own stories, based on a New Zealand cultural history.

Lepage's suggestion that the performer can connect with an audience, in a spiritual communion sense, resonates with me. I believe theatre should be more than telling a story; it should be a journey into the unknown: a mythical, magical journey of transformation, connection, and inspiration. Unfortunately, in my own theatre experiences I often witness a lack of connection between performers and viewers. It can seem like such theatre is driven by little more than a commercial desire for profit. While true that theatre can be simply a form of entertainment, as

Peter Brook demonstrated in his work on 'Holy Theatre', there is also great potential for theatre to develop cross-cultural understanding and to educate. It appears to me that Lepage also suggests that theatre is a place of transcendence, not linear and predictable, but a realm to explore a spiritual connection between people.

Lepage suggests that theatrical communion between actor and audience is comparable to a religious concept of communion. *The Collins English Dictionary* defines communion as a "ritual commemorating Christ's Last Supper by the consecration of bread and wine," and as "a sharing of thoughts, emotions, and beliefs" (169). In religion, communion is seen as the participation in a ritual event that then bonds a group of people as a community. In a similar vein, Lepage's theatre seems to develop the same participation. In both a religious and theatrical sense, communion concerns what we consciously know to be real and what we subconsciously perceive to be real. For Lepage, as for religion, communion relates to the participant taking a journey through the use of metaphor, and therefore awakening the subconscious. In this way, communion in both religion and the theatre of Lepage awakens for the audience images and associations that are poetic, and that help them to associate with the mythic.

Peter Brook, in his book *The Empty Space,* discussed the idea of a theatre that transcends time and space, a theatre that is alive for the audience, one that

provides an enhanced emotional and intellectual communication. Brook developed his theory of a 'Holy Theatre', which he compared with what he called the 'Dead Theatre' that he felt to be so prevalent in the twentieth century. Through a career spanning most of the last sixty years, Brook attempted to remove the 'deadness' in his theatre, as did Jerzy Grotowski during the same period, and Antonin Artaud before them. In the same vein, Robert Lepage, along with contemporaries such as Robert Wilson and Ariane Mnouchkine, are attempting to awaken the audience from the slumber of entertainment by provoking them with dynamic theatrical techniques, ambitious technologies, impressive physical scale, and rigorous storytelling. A discussion follows of the work of a variety of theatre practitioners including Brook, Grotowski, Artaud, Wilson, and Mnouchkine, to explore how their theatrical ideas relate to Lepage.

This thesis will develop the concept of theatre as communion through critical analysis, then practical exploration. The argument will consider how those who came before Lepage may have influenced his theatre, and how his work compares to his contemporaries. Furthermore, the practical component will analyse the viability of Lepage's theatrical concepts as utilised in relation to a New Zealand narrative. The express aim of this endeavour is to develop a working methodology for future theatrical work.

ROBERT LEPAGE

Robert Lepage was born in Québec City on December 12th 1957. He was raised in a bilingual household, as the third of four children. Lepage was a shy and reclusive child, due in part to the fact that at a very young age, and for no known medical reason, he began to suffer from extreme hair loss. First the hair on his head fell out, then his eyelashes, and finally his eyebrows. His smooth hairless features, even today, give him a very unreal quality of eternal youth. As a child, Lepage hid in his parent's bedroom, watching sitcoms as a means of disappearing psychologically from the world. At school, Lepage was made to take drama, and what he found was a hiding place much larger than his parent's bedroom. On stage he never had to feel shy, because if speaking ever made him uncomfortable he could use gesture. When both were not enough Lepage could move around, and use the space, the lights, and the props.

Lepage's theatrical experience grew, and after high school he studied from 1975 till 1978 at the *Conservatoire d`Art Dramatique*, in Québec, followed by an intensive three weeks at the Alain Knapp theatre school in Paris. Through his years of study Lepage was introduced to Konstantin Stanislavski's stage realism and to Vsevolod Meyerhold's impressionism. He learnt of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, and became fascinated by Jerzy Grotowski. Lepage was also introduced to the work of Peter Brook, a British contemporary theatrical practitioner renowned

for his experimental productions. Charest suggests that Lepage's work has "incarnated Peter Brook's idea of theatre as a moving object, a thing which draws life from its own evolutionary process, and which begins dying once it becomes too settled" (13). During a career that has spanned nearly thirty years, and continues to evolve, Lepage has slowly developed a theatre that is spontaneous, diverse, and ever changing, through a very particular and complex participatory relationship between actor and audience. By never remaining artistically static and by developing a theatre that is always moving, Lepage encourages his audience to work mentally and imaginatively with what they are seeing.

Robert Lepage has created a trademark theatre of images and objects, a theatre of juxtapositions, epic themes, and provocative innovation. This thesis will explore Lepage's ideas of a communion between actor and audience by looking at his methodology for creating theatre. Further, in the practical component I will attempt to develop this Lepagean methodology into a working collaborative performance piece.

CHAPTER ONE

The feelings that actors spill out on stage rarely, if ever, reach the audience ... and that emotion, those feelings, should be the audience's. I'm not against them being on stage too, I'm trying to get the public to feel them. That's my priority.

(Robert Lepage in the documentary, "Seven Faces Of Robert Lepage").

COMMUNION

Lepage states that the act of "communion is actually to share, it's not just to announce but to share it, to give a sensation of what you are saying" (McAlpine 156). The idea of a relationship between actor and audience having a strong dynamic of emotion is not new, being crucial to any notion of theatre. Robert Lepage utilises a particularly intimate relationship between the actor and audience, at times incorporating other theatre practitioners' ideas to create transformation in his work. In his theatre, Lepage attempts to achieve a dimension of emotional intensity, recognition, and poetic connection that is unique in contemporary theatre. Furthermore, Lepage has developed a theatre that goes beyond a prosaic communication between actor and audience by developing that communication into a spiritual connection, a communion. He is seeking a way to break down the

habituation of theatre, by bringing the audience both closer to the actor and to the immediacy of the action.

In this thesis the term communion is used to encompass and describe a particular relationship between the actor and audience that has become intrinsic to Lepage's theatre. With this in mind, the concepts of ritual, rhythm, repetition, displacement, and metaphor within Lepage's theatre are discussed in relation to how these ideas are then transformed to create counterpoints between the audience's expectations and their experience. Lepage is seeking a specific relationship within parameters that assume the audience is an extension of the ensemble, not separated from the performance. Just as the church congregation will participate in the act of communion, Lepage views the audience as taking an active part in the theatrical performance and will use "all the technical and visual tricks he can muster" (Al-Solaylee) to create, through the physical space of his theatre, a gateway into the audience psyche.

Lepage has criticised his own theatrical training, feeling that he was "taught by teachers who don't work anymore" (Gibson 21); like so many actors who have been through training institutions, Lepage found himself trying to be the actor his tutors had said he should be, rather than the actor that he believed he could be. Lepage states his greatest concern was coming to realise during his first few years as a professional actor that he was "performing for my teacher" (ibid), and so

Lepage quickly developed a unique way of promoting his career by regularly disobeying his teachers. This disobedience took the form of making what many considered unconventional choices about where to work, and how.

For example, over the next three years Lepage often performed 'theatre sports' on television, and here he found an audience who were 'alive', and who would throw things if the show became boring or began to drag. In addition, the live audience had the power to vote for the winner. Through theatre sports Lepage was able to discover a connection between actor and audience that may very well have been similar to that during Shakespeare's time. Just as the audience at *The Globe* in 1596 would eat and drink and talk to each other, and respond vocally to the actors, the modern audience in theatre sports are never passive, but can alter the direction of the performance through their laughter, suggestions, and heckling. It was during this period in his career – the early 80's – that Lepage's idea of the communion between actor and audience began to form.

For Lepage, the idea of a passive audience became intolerable, and in his theatre today non-involvement is discouraged. Lepage's audience is encouraged to make connections, and to make sense of the disparate cultures or associations they witness. Moreover, his audience is expected to engage with the performers, taking a productive and dynamic role in both the creative process and the performance. For example, in *Seven Streams of the River Ota*, first performed in 1994, the

audience are taken from a modern airport to an ancient shrine, from a dynamic stylised cabaret to a desperately slow assisted suicide, from spinning aeroplane propellers far above to a silently still telephone far below. Lepage states, "It is the shock of being surprised by something totally new combined with the shock of recognizing something very old. But the key is in the recognition" (Gibson 20). Audience participation was obvious in the Canadian Opera Company's 1995 productions of *Bluebeard's Castle* and *Erwartung*. In both operas a very dark world with primal emotions was created, which was "complex enough to engage everyone" (Corbeil), and enabled the audience to go "on a journey, unlocking its own doors, enriching itself in the process" (ibid). For Lepage it is in the actor sharing recognisable ideas in the performance that enables the audience to imaginatively participate.

As in a religious experience, Lepage tries to achieve a poetic relationship with the audience. In the act of Holy Communion the congregation receives the bread and wine so as to achieve a metaphorical link with the blood and body of Christ, while in theatre the audience imaginatively participates with the actor in an act of spiritual sharing. Even though the congregation knows the wine is not blood, through this sharing they accept the metaphor and therefore the whole experience is raised to a higher spiritual level.

During the *Heads and Tails of Theatre* seminar in Toronto on August 9th, 1997, Lepage mocked his own title of 'Mister International Theatre,' and told his audience quite clearly what kind of theatre he was doing and what kind he was not. He was adamant that he was not doing naturalistic soap opera theatre with its imaginary fourth wall. Instead, Gibson relates that "Lepage sees theatre in the same vein as an Olympic sport. Lepage spoke about how the Olympics put the audience in direct contact with myth – an athlete running faster than anyone before, a universal event, a meeting, a happening" (18). At the same seminar, Lepage asked whether: "Shakespeare's last three words from *The Tempest*, 'set me free,' suggest that he felt imprisoned, trapped by the Globe Theatre and by his own style of writing? Do theatre artists construct their own prisons and prevent themselves from growing?" (ibid). As if to answer his own question, Lepage discussed the reasons why Shakespeare called actors 'players', and suggested that a 'playful' communion of actor and audience took place. Play ensures a particular kind of free-flowing exchange in which all participants have an active engagement. For the people of Shakespeare's Globe, theatre was a living thing brought into existence through the active relationship of actor, audience, and playwright, close perhaps to Lepage's idea of 'sharing'.

Shakespeare's theatrical method was in clear contrast to that of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In this period European theatre saw the growth of the 'fourth wall' concept, in which the audience was separated from the

performance by a proscenium arch, as if they were watching a play by spying through a window. Although the audience may have been emotionally engaged with the action, they were often physically distanced and reduced to the role of remote observer. From early in the twentieth century, theatre practitioners such as Reinhardt, Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, and Brook challenged this concept and developed a theatre that began to remove the fourth wall barrier, both in the physical layout of their theatre as well as in the psychological aspect of the audience's connection to the performance.

Building on these directors' work, Lepage is adamantly opposed to what he defines as "the realistic Western theatre of soap opera psychology displayed behind a phoney fourth wall where the play is 'solved' for the audience by a director/designer decision" (Gibson 20). Lepage goes even further, stating that the "invisible fourth wall is responsible for the failure of our theatre to invite the audience on stage" (ibid). If either barriers or levels separate the actors from the audience, then the audience are forced into experiencing theatre clinically, as a medical student may watch an operation. Like many before him Lepage desires the audience to become a part of the show; instead of just watching through the window, they have been invited into the living room. Rather than the audience voyeuristically watching the performance, Lepage endeavours to have them actively participate in the creation of the story.

However, removing the barrier of the fourth wall was not a new idea, as people did this long before Lepage. For example, as early as 1901, German practitioner Max Reinhardt had already become disenchanted with the dull grey routine of naturalistic theatre trapped behind the fourth wall, stating "I know the playful, creative powers of the actor and I am often sorely tempted to save some of the old commedia dell'arte in our over-disciplined age, in order to give the actor, from time to time an opportunity to improvise and let himself go" (Braun 97/98). Reinhardt formed a small company called *Schall und Rauch* (Sound and Smoke) and began performing in a converted motel room. He set out with a vision of "transforming the flat-painted stage into a three dimensional space; operating audaciously with light and colour" (Reinhardt 16). Like Lepage, Reinhardt was concerned with removing the actor from the traditional bounds of theatre.

Artaud wanted to instigate a new kind of theatre, one that was not interested in the creation of an artistic entertainment, but rather "a communion between spectators and actors" (Fowlie). Artaud's idea of theatre was to move away from the stagnant theatre of the time, instead exploring a theatre of "mass participation" (ibid), where the audience was not just connecting with the work, but an entire culture was able to discover "its truest expression" (ibid). In his 'Theatre of Cruelty,' Artaud did not exclusively mean causing pain; rather he wanted a violent, physical performance that would shatter the falseness of the theatrical experience. His idea was to hurl the audience psychologically into the middle of

the action and force them to engage at an instinctive, primal level. While Artaud's theories were rather extreme and did not fully come to fruition during his lifetime, his ideas inspired other theatre practitioners such as Grotowski and Brook.

For Grotowski, the practical research undertaken with the 'Polish Laboratory Theatre' developed methods through which the actors could strive to achieve what he called 'total act': "the crux of an actor's art through which one reveals oneself completely to another (the spectator) in a self-reflexive act that does not distinguish between character and self" (Lavy 180). In 'total act', Grotowski articulated a dialogical encounter with the spectator in metaphysical terms, emphasising that spirituality and the discourse of the sacred were not the sole property of religion. Even when he borrowed from theological philosophies, such as Martin Buber's dialectic theory, Grotowski's new application of the theory left behind the religious elements, focusing instead on the themes of authentic encounter, sacrifice, and risk.

For Peter Brook, theatre existed in the here and now. As he so famously stated in *The Shifting Point*, "Theatre only exists at the precise moment when these two worlds – that of the actors and that of the audience – meet" (236). For Brook, theatre exists as "a society in miniature, a microcosm brought together every evening within a space. Theatre's role is to give this microcosm a burning and fleeting taste of another world, in which our present world is integrated and

transformed" (ibid). As Brook's work developed he came to realise that the audience was "the most vital and least considered element of the theatre process" (Brook, *Open Door*, 52). When Brook staged *Timon and Athens* in 1974, he removed the proscenium arch, and placed the front row of the audience on the same level as the performing area. His aim here was to give the audience the sensation of the performance "taking place in their midst ... The stage was not a separate world to that of the public ... It was the same space, the same world. Here, something can be shared between the actors and the audience" (Marshal 137). The second row were then raised, the third rose even higher, and so on. In this way the audience were looking down on the performance more in the vein of the Greek theatre rather than the more recognised theatre of the twentieth century.

Some contemporaries of Lepage, such as directors Robert Wilson and Ariane Mnouchkine, also strive for a heightened interrelationship between the actor and the audience. For Mnouchkine, the productions with the *Théâtre du Soleil* are often performed in 'found' spaces such as barns and school halls, because she believes the 'fourth wall' cannot be allowed to restrict theatre. In her work she talks about the need "to break through that shell of naturalism and find the theatre underneath it" (Copeland). Mnouchkine's aim, like that of Lepage, is to create a theatre of collaboration in which the audience is a central agent. Wilson, for all the overt politicisation in some of his work, believes "in the power of the stage to transform the lives of actors and audiences" (Rockwell). In their epic

theatrical works, which often perform at over six hours long, Lepage, Wilson, and Mnouchkine all "count on the audience's willingness to be absorbed into the slow, cumulative impact of the drama" (ibid). Wilson, like Lepage, is known for the extreme scale of the space and time elements in his work. His 1972 work *Ka Mountain and Guardenia Terrace*, for example, was staged on top of a mountain in Iran and lasted for seven days. With the ongoing success of Lepage, Wilson, and Mnouchkine's epic pieces it would appear that while audiences want to be entertained, they also desire to be taken out of their everyday lives.

THEATRE AND RELIGION

In *The Journal of Theatre and Religion*, Norman A Bert wrote, "I would like to argue that theatre is religion and that it is as religion – not as poetry, rhetoric, or entertainment but as religion – that theatre is best understood, practiced, and criticized" (Bert 1). As religion requires the presence of priest and worshippers, theatre requires the simultaneous presence of performer and audience. Bert stated that: "Like religion, theatre is practiced in a community for a community … those who attend come out of the larger community … and return to the larger community" (Bert 5). Seldom, if ever, would the entire population of an area participate in an event, be it religious or theatrical. The group that do

participate will later return to their homes, jobs, family and friends, and very subtly share what they have discovered with their community.

It could be argued that Lepage's theatre functions in much the same way as some of the more overt religious rites. Somewhat like a liturgy, Lepage's use of stories that resemble myths frequently have an educational and spiritual resonance, and through the ritual of the play the story's function is realized. Myth is a traditional story that serves to explicate part of the worldview of a people or to explain a specific practice, belief, or natural phenomenon. Ritual is the acting out of an established procedure that serves to link a society to myth. Lepage's theatre provides the audience with a tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between the mythic and the prosaic, and encourages the audience to see a connection between its own life and other realities.

In her *Canadian Theatre Review* article, *Seeing Double*, Gibson suggests that for Lepage "theatre is 'man in contact with gods and devils.' He wants actors to 'transfigure' themselves in performance, and he wants the audience to come out of the theatre 'cleansed and empowered' from experiencing that transformation" (18). Gibson then describes how Lepage's work is often mythic, poetic, or healing, and that Lepage has developed a process to make it so. Like several of his contemporaries, Lepage's creates productions that are often deliberately large scale, allowing different cultures to be seen in juxtaposition. In 1985, Lepage

received international recognition when he premiered *The Dragons' Trilogy*, a production where every aspect was counter-pointed with another. In *The Dragons' Trilogy,* the audience witness three young Chinese girls whose lives are pitched against French, Canadian, and English cultures. The girls travel from youth to old age through the seedy world of opium dens and shady business deals, as well as moving in and out of love. The stage itself portrays a large gravel parking lot, yet is further defined by an outer path that creates an illusion of a world inside the play and the larger world at the edges of the play, and with one dimension informing the other. The work shows a ritualistic journey from one place to another, shown through a Chinese dragon dance and the very ritualised way that the women in the play become the handmaidens of the Dragon. Even though the production is on the one level about adolescence and sex and growing up, the actors take the audience into a unique and sacred space through a very much larger rite of passage, that of cross-cultural integration and understanding.

The themes in *The Dragons' Trilogy* exemplify how Lepage takes recognisable and familiar scenarios, and elevates these scenarios to the scale of myth. He often achieves this by juxtaposing simple exchanges between characters with larger cultural issues or stories. The mythic power of Lepage's work has the ability to bring the mundane into a larger context of human understanding. Here the communion between actor and audience is enhanced, as myth can help the audience recognise itself in relation to universal principles. Lepage has the ability

to draw the audience into a communion of exchange and elevate it to the level of a universal truth.

RITUAL IN THEATRE

Central to the notion of communion is the experience of ritual. Certainly not all theatre is ritualistic, although all theatre does have ritualistic components. In the work of Herman Nitsch from the *Orgien Theatre* the title of 'performance' is used in the creation of work that is ritualistic, and seems partly a reproduction of traditional rites of passage rather than performance theatre (Sonesson 2). Nitsch incorporates fruit and flowers, blood and wine, internal organs, sacrificed animals, and naked people into his work, all of which are well-known religious ritual elements. While not as graphically as in the work of Nitsch, ritualistic behaviour exists in Lepage's theatre but with the idea of opening a dialogue; it's about one community meeting another community, and audience and performer are these communities. However, the ritual of communion in Lepage's theatre is not just about meeting; it is also about meeting in order to go beyond the normal theatrical experience.

Lepage establishes the idea of going beyond the normal to a heightened theatrical experience by developing a counterpoint for the audience between the

easily recognisable and the often spectacular. In *Zulu Time,* first performed in 1999, the audience encounter immediacy in the very physical actions of the piece, yet these physical actions develop to such a heightened sense that the audience become overwhelmed to a level that goes far beyond simply watching an interesting performance. In *The Far Side of the Moon,* first performed in 2000, the sheer contrast between the mundane set and the intensity of the production only work to heighten the theatrical experience. The same can be said for *Needles and Opium,* first performed in 1991, where the intensity of performance, shadow play, and projected images, were in direct contrast to the simple square frame of cloth used as the set. In Lepage's work he attempts to bring the audience closer to what is happening on stage by dissuading them from passivity. By utilising simple set elements and showing his audience the mechanisms of how his theatre works and enabling them to see the puppet strings, Lepage is reminding the audience of the reality of what they are viewing, while at the same time drawing them into the illusion of the work through the intensity of the actors performance. The audience is then pulled between two states; one is the profane state of a constructed stage, and the other is the sacred state of the performance itself.

A heightened theatrical experience emulates the heightened religious experience where the congregation need to go through certain acts of behaviour, as previously set out. The repetition of certain phrases, the rhythm of the action, the order and precision of the rites: all these elements conjure both historic and

remembered associations. The world of the Eucharist, like the theatre of Lepage, is not 'real', but it leads the audience into a heightened state of feeling and recognition. Nothing is hidden from the congregation or the audience, who in both cases willingly enter a space of metaphor. The intention behind a Lepagean theatre performance is that, like religious ritual, it should take the willingly parcipatory audience on a journey to another plane, a sacred place, which encompasses a different reality.

Aspects of ritual, communion, and the sacred space are also seen in the work of some of Lepage's contemporaries, such as Ariane Mnouchkine or Robert Wilson. For Mnouchkine, the audience takes an active part in an event, which no doubt explains why there is food served at most *Théâtre du Soleil* productions. Mnouchkine, like Lepage, is trying to reactivate her audience, typified by the theatrical ritual of banging that takes place at the opening of any *Théâtre du Soleil* production in Paris. As the audience wait outside the door there begins a thumping from inside the performance space, followed by three loud knocks, which is the traditional beginning to a French theatre piece. The audience enter the space where they find the cast still getting ready, often building the stage and erecting the seating. The audience are able to wander around, and even talk to Mnouchkine, who is usually the person that opened the door. This connection with the space may account for some of the power in Mnouchkine's work and creates "a sense of galvanising an audience" (Copeland). Reviewer Adrian Kiernander once stated

that what he enjoyed about Mnouchkine's work and that of a few other theatre practitioners, all of whom work with a very physical and visual tradition, "is that they're trying to reactivate audiences. If you think about Ariane's work you're not just going to watch something or listen to something, you're taking part in a whole event" (ibid).

For Robert Wilson, the audience connection to the event of theatre draws much from what Arthur Holmberg described as a "verbal magic" (73). This verbal magic comes in many ways from a ritualised use of language, designed to reach beyond our everyday lives and "establish contact with the divine" (ibid). Wilson's theatre uses ritualised language to stress sound, rhythm, and repetition to create an emotional experience that is often intentionally unintelligible. Like the religious concept of speaking in tongues, Wilson's use of ritual language can be associated with divine revelation. For Robert Wilson, the ability to understand the ritualised language in his productions is unimportant. Rather, the desire is solely to "establish contact with the transcendent" (ibid).

In Lepage's theatre, transcendence comes through ritualistic acts that are utilised as a mesmerising process, taking the audience into an almost trance-like state. This then immerses them into the production and creates the communion that is desired. One such moment within *The Dragons' Trilogy* came about when the actor playing the parts of both the Nun and the character of Stella went through

a provocative transformation. During the rehearsal period it was discovered that the actor playing the Nun had to change to the character of Stella, but without enough time to leave the stage. To solve the problem an entire scene was created, with metaphorical value given to each item of clothing removed: the coronet became a symbol for the mind, the surplice a symbol for the heart, and so forth. In an interview, Lepage stated that the cast, "invented a whole ritual to give the transformation meaning and it became one of the most beautiful moments of the entire six hours" (Charest 27). As the body of Christ is consumed in the Eucharist, the audience in *The Dragons' Trilogy* entered the psychology of the performance so completely that they felt they were participating in the transformation of the actor. Similarly, in *Seven Streams of the River Ota*, the actors coming in and out of doors ritualistically takes the audience into the sacred space. Here the play opens with sliding doors, and people moving in and out with patterned movements and precision. This ritualistic movement sets the scene for an almost religious experience, a ceremony, with the audience transported away from the normal world into another place. The audience become rhythmically enticed into a semi trance-like state.

In *Needles and Opium* Lepage connected the audience to the performance through ongoing shifts in scale, which often had a disorienting effect. In *Needles and Opium*, abstract shapes morphed into familiar objects right before the audience's eyes. The most spectacular of these events was a sequence where video

projection transformed the fire escape of a New York apartment building from background scenery into a symbol of Cocteau's seemingly effortless rise in fame, and then into a symbolic fall of Icarus. Throughout *Needles and Opium,* Lepage attempts to draw the audience into the work with an array of theatrical devices, including overhead projections, shadow play, and a giant syringe, all of which are in some way or another hallucinatory. The aim here is to draw the audience into "the psychosis of the central figure, whose drug use and therapy have caused [him] to lose touch with reality, and to open us [the audience] to the liberation of fantasy" (Innes "Craig"). Like a religious experience, Lepage's audience enters an altered state.

Furthermore, just as the religious ritual of communion has a lingering effect, the wheelchair funeral in *The Dragons' Trilogy* was bizarre but quite thought provoking. Here the character of the Englishman Crawford, now an old man and wheelchair bound, has metaphorically returned to his place of birth. He circles the stage area a few times via the outer path and, and then suddenly disappears, while his burning wheelchair continues to circle the stage. I, for one, still regularly feel the lingering effects of that theatrical experience. Although the wheelchair in *The Dragons' Trilogy* was just a wheelchair, the way it was paraded around the space, smoking and smouldering, carried a resemblance to a funeral procession and the act of cremation that was haunting. Through this simple act Lepage connected the audience to the performance in a very spiritual way. In the

article "Postmodern rituals at la Cartoucherie", Dr. Carl Lavery describes this approach to the spiritual relationship between the actor and audience as "a mode of performance attempting to transform its audience through an encounter with a type of difference/otherness that has an ethical dimension."

TRANSFORMATIONS

In the same metaphorical vein as the Holy Communion, Lepage talks of a theatrical communion taking place when "the audience is both struck by the image and aware of how it was made" (Gibson 18). Lepage's production of *Tectonic Plates,* first performed in 1988, makes use of the geological idea of drifting continents as a metaphor for the separation and displacement of people. *Tectonic Plates* therefore, became a "veritable feast of interrelated images and ideas, in which the symbols are the main course" (Groen). In *Tectonic Plates,* a film clip shows the character of Constance leading the character Madeline up some stairs to a small attic door in the roof. The attic door in the film clip becomes the lid of a grand piano on stage, through which the actors emerge to act out the scene as if inside a small attic space. Lepage believes that the audience should bear witness to how an image is created, be allowed to see the puppet strings, or watch the costume change, for then "the audience's imagination joins in" (Bennie). Whether he uses an actor playing two characters, simple puppetry, or cutting edge video

technology, Lepage endeavours to create intimacy between the actor and audience, by allowing the audience to watch as many aspects of the creative process as possible. In *Tectonic Plates* the use of symbols cultivated a sensation of separation, which in turn portrayed for the audience a common and global feeling of not belonging.

In *The Theatre and Its Double,* Artaud called for a communion between the actor and the audience through the use of gestures, sounds, scenery, and lighting to form a 'magic exorcism' which would subvert thought and logic, and shock the spectator into seeing the world around them in all its baseness. Artaud believed that serious theatre "upsets all our preconceptions, inspiring us with fiery, magnetic imagery and finally reacting on us after the manner of unforgettable soul therapy" (Artaud 64). Artuad's desire was for the audience to acquire a cathartic experience once their body and soul had been drawn through the maelstrom of his theatre. While the veritable 'fire and brimstone' desires of Artaud towards theatre should not be confused with Lepage's wish to energise an audience, there are many comparable themes running through both their theatre. These corresponding themes encompass a desire to transform the audience from a passive spectator into an active participant, through an intense altered state, with the ability to subvert the audience's preconceptions.

The technique of openly showing transformations taking place on stage is evident in all of Lepage's productions, and rather than hiding or disguising what is involved, Lepage reveals the theatrical devices used for creating the production. While the audience can see the mechanism of transforming an event or character happening, they are at the same time immersed in the transformation. Of course, this theatrical device of showing the audience the mechanisms of the theatrical production is not revolutionary; Bertolt Brecht began developing it in the 1930's. Brecht's intention was to encourage the audience to sharpen its conscious awareness of the work, wanting the audience to avoid identifying with only the emotional and sensational aspects of the performance. For Lepage, as with Brecht, the audience is invited 'onto the stage' to participate in the production by seeing the creative elements at work. However, Lepage uses the communion idea of audience involvement primarily to connect the audience with the performance in an emotionally intimate way, whereas Brecht used it to deter his audience members from intellectual passivity by sharpening their critical awareness.

When *The Dragons' Trilogy* was first staged, audiences were struck by the economy of means with which Lepage achieved his effects. Alistair Macaulay stated, "I was particularly struck by the way that lighting plucked out various areas from the surrounding dark, by the enchanting use of a few individual props to become series of different things, and by the recurrent symbolism of mah-jong dragons." Fiona Mountford of the *Evening Standard*, while negative in some of

her critique, wrote, "there are arresting t'ai chi-influenced tableaux and impressive sound effects." As the prologue ends, a voice suggests that perhaps the parking attendant is indeed a mythological Chinese dragon, whereupon some simple lighting and sound effects are used to transform before the viewer's eyes the attendant and his shack into this very dragon. Here, so early into the performance, "the audience cannot help falling into this theatrical universe in which its senses are played upon with something approaching magic" (Lefebvre 31). In *The Dragons' Trilogy* Lepage doesn't just light the stage, and the sound is never incidental; instead every aspect of the lighting evokes emotion within the audience, and every sound enhances the story.

Another Lepage piece that reviewers have described as magic is *Elsinore,* his one-man version of *Hamlet* that was first performed in 1995. Again, parallels can be seen in this Lepage production with the work of earlier practitioners. In one scene Lepage transforms on stage into Ophelia, with head and arms visible but wearing a cloth dress that stretches over the whole backdrop. This moment is comparable to Edward Gordon Craig's famous 1912 production of *Hamlet,* which opened with Claudius seated on a high throne, wearing a golden robe that flowed from his shoulders to completely cover the stage, and allowing only the heads and shoulders of other actors to poke through. A scene in *Elsinore,* in which a video sequence plays on the wall behind Lepage, is similar to another piece from the 1912 production, where Stanislavski records that the protagonist stood behind a

huge gauze with light casting an enormous shadow behind him, while on side screens more shadows were continually moving around and with him. Yet in Lepage's version, the magic of his theatre is seen in the clever use of both the mechanical and electronic devices, the moving rising floor, rotating wall, and the live video links.

DISPLACEMENT

In Lepage's theatre, the audience, while being drawn into the emotional journey of the play, is often distanced from the work through a sense of displacement. When the performance moves in an unexpected direction and we feel distanced from the work, or as Lepage would say 'displaced', we become aware of two contradictory truths in a single instant. In this way, Lepage uses transformation to create paradoxical elements whereby the actor shows the change to the audience, and in this way brings them closer to the reality of theatre without a mask, breaking down the illusion of theatre before our eyes.

This idea of displacement is an intrinsic element of Lepage's work, and is explained by Lepage thus: "I have an idea. I say it in a language people don't understand so they are interested to know what it's about. So I will say it again, but in another language they don't understand. But they understand a little more of

it ... they start to build up the story with me" (Hunt 28). Furthermore, in his piece *Autobiography In The House of Mirrors,* James Bunzli explained that Lepage's element of displacement "does not alienate audiences. Rather, it enjoins them to take an active roll in the creation of a piece's meaning" (95). In all of Lepage's work, the element of 'displacement' has been utilised as both an emotional and psychological resource that is designed to speak to the viewer, and to further establish a sense of communion between the actor and the audience. This displacement works for Lepage when an audience is witness to something physical, visual, or verbal, but only partially understands what they have seen or heard. Lepage then believes the audience are compelled to have a heightened interest in the work, and they will build the story in their minds, as they understand more and more. Lepage suggests the audience will then feel involved in the very creation of the story.

An example of displacement at work in a Lepage production can be readily seen in *Seven Streams of the River Ota.* Here Lepage has three characters using the same bathroom, at the same time, yet set in different times. As one character sat on the toilet, another had a shave, while a third was getting ready for a shower. This simultaneous action creates a displacement element in the work by relating to time and place, and forcing the audience to make thematic connections between the three performers and how they relate to each other through time and space.

In *Needles and Opium*, psychosis, drug use, and fantasy are combined with a clever use of the space to create displacement for the audience. The production counterpoints the lives and cultural backgrounds of American jazz musician Miles Davis and French poet Jean Cocteau. Forty years later a Francophone Canadian, alone in a hotel room in Paris, develops an imaginary shared experience with the other two. Because none of the three characters actually meet in real life, an image of misconnection, separation and displacement is created. The story suggests Jean Cocteau was flying to New York, high on opium while mourning his lover's death, and at the same time Miles Davis had just arrived in Paris where he instantly fell in love, and then just as quickly fell into a self-destructive heroin addiction. The young Canadian explains this to the audience as he makes frantic transatlantic telephone calls to his estranged lover, while taking cocaine and suffering from the effects of psychosis. It is the characters subconscious ramblings set against the reality of his surroundings that displaces the audience, providing them with a far greater background while encouraging them to take an active role in understanding the current story.

In the early stages of *Tectonic Plates* Lepage and his fellow collaborators began exploring a 'collective narrative', while using the thematic resource of displacement. They agreed to explore a variety of other staging aspects to enhance the sense of displacement, which included placing a large knee-deep pool of water within the acting arena, and utilising the idea of shadows. The collective had

already decided on the vital importance of using as many other objects of everyday life as possible, such as chairs, trains, music, art, food, drugs, grand pianos, and jigsaw puzzles.

To describe the sense of displacement that a physical object can create for the audience, I considered the simple jigsaw puzzles that were used extensively in *Tectonic Plates*. The first time the audience see a jigsaw puzzle it is scattered, yet there is a familiarity to the layout of the pieces, as though they have been laid out to represent an image or map of our planet. Flashes of a potential Europe, or India, pass before the audience, but in the same moment the audience begin to question what they are seeing, while trying not to see anything. Immediately, the audience is taken into a world of intrigue and desire, developing a juxtaposition between the temptation to see meaning and the attempt to place ideas elsewhere, causing a displacement in the audience's sense of self. The jigsaw puzzles return throughout the production, sometimes to tempt the viewer, but often to signify a variety of different ideas. Here the audience also find reference to the earlier idea that everything has something to say, and often more than one thing. The use of the jigsaw puzzle as a resource within the performance signifies many ideas and offers an intriguing displacement.

An array of further examples of displacement at work can be witnessed throughout *Tectonic Plates,* with perhaps the best example coming in the opening

scene. In this scene, a fantastic image of the displacement of language within humanity is shown by using a deaf mute to examine the communication barriers so often faced by many. Madeleine, in French, speaks the first line of the production, while the deaf mute Antoine enacts what is described. The next line is 'signed' by Antoine, and spoken in French by Madeleine, then in English by her Psychiatrist. Both Madeleine and the Psychiatrist speak the next line in their own respective languages as Antoine enacts what they say. The final line is then spoken in English only, as two Grand Pianos are pushed together, like pieces of a jigsaw or colliding continents. Antoine remains beneath the pianos and Madeleine climbs on top. This staging and use of lines creates a metaphorical comparison between the violent nature of the world we live in, and our attempts to understand and be understood. Here, it would appear that Lepage is working on many fronts simultaneously, causing the audience to question what we know, what we think we know, how we think we know it, and what moves us.

NARRATIVE

During the rehearsal process, the development of narrative is vital. Lepage will regularly use a collective story-telling technique, with his collaborators all having the opportunity to give input. This lets the narrative be propelled by the performers, which therefore enables the story to be told in varying ways. By

interweaving several stories, Lepage builds the possibility of comparison and contrast. His stories often have powerful emotional appeal: people on the brink of change, rites of passage, suicides, and funerals. The stories often draw from an inner perspective, which makes them very telling as they draw from a personal depth of experience, for Lepage and the other performers. Here Lepage's concept of communion enables multiple units to make a whole, utilising the composition of the smaller stories to invoke the magic, the mystical, and the myth within the larger narrative of the show.

Although Lepage's stories often have a personal testimony, they regularly touch on the epic. In *The Dragon's Trilogy* the global scale and extended story line give the work its sense of epic. This production tells the story of two young Chinese girls living in Québec City in the 1930s. One gets pregnant and is then gambled away by her father in a game of mah-jong, while the other joins the army, marries and has two sons. Meanwhile, in Japan, a geisha is made pregnant by an abusive Englishman, and the daughter of that baby will eventually develop a romantic attachment with the Chinese girl's son, while the illegitimate daughter will suffer a terrible fate. In Lepage's 2004 *The Busker's Opera,* a busker in a London Tube station shows he is worthy of a position as percussionist in any orchestra, the Rat Pack are at play in Vegas, verses of abuse are sung that break into Arabic and Hebrew, then there is folk-dancing, and a hilarious scene where two women roll around on a bear skin rug. Here it is the range of stories within the

story that develops the sense of epic. In *Elsinore*, we see a single actor play Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Polonius, and the gravediggers. The action seems to take place inside Hamlet's head, with the outcome as a test of ingenuity as well as interpretation. At times the work borders on anything from *Jekyll and Hyde* to a postmodern version of *The Exorcist.* Lepage's *Seven Streams of the River Ota*, is a seven-part, five-hour production that covers fifty years, and traces the lives of seven people living on three continents, while dealing with AIDS, the holocaust, and the aftermath of Hiroshima. In this piece it is the extensive time scale that imparts the epic quality.

While often quite convoluted, Lepage's narratives have the effect of globalising highly personalised stories and constantly forcing the audience into making metaphorical and thematic connections between personal and universal. In *Zulu Time* the story attains a feel of the epic from the range of sensory input the audience receive. *Zulu Time* provides a frenzy of sounds, strobe lighting, and trash videos, with actors playing robots, contortionists, and acrobats dropping from the ceiling. Drug traffickers, terrorists, and lonely flight attendants all depict an underlying theme of desire and sexual fantasy. On the other hand, Lepage's film *Possible Worlds*, released in 2000, creates a sense of the epic through the show's emotional range. *Possible Worlds* has been tagged in the press material as a 'cubic love story', and tells of George Barber, a man who never changes yet experiences his existence in a multitude of parallel lives. His true love, Joyce, is present in all

his lives, yet different each time. Finally George is murdered, scalped, and his brain stolen … and there are some aliens involved in the story as well. For the audience it is often the series of endless associations and the emotional range of the work and that cause the best understanding of Lepage's productions.

In 1992, Lahr quoted Lepage as saying that theatre audiences have the capacity to "read things in fast-forward, jump cuts" (190), due in many ways to the extensive availability of film in today's society. Where once theatre audiences had to be led step by step through a production, Lepage feels that modern filmic audiences bring to the theatre a wealth of understanding and are attuned to far more narrative technique. Lepage has embraced this new level of understanding, and he appears as the consummate storyteller, with stories that seem to reach out and take hold of their audience. Due to this understanding of the modern filmic audience, Christopher Innes suggested that Lepage's narratives often work at a deep subliminal level of communication and through abstraction give emphasis to inner meaning through "psychological actions, designed to draw spectators into the creative process" ("Machines"). When discussing this idea with Sydney reviewer Simon Nicholas, Lepage stated "I believe in the intelligence of the audience [and because of cinema] audiences are very educated about narrative form." Here Lepage has appreciated the way a cinematic narrative can help to maintain the focus of the theatre audience, and uses cinematic ideas and projections to draw the audience into the work. According to Lepage, modern

audiences have a developed understanding of visual narrative and heightened expectation of theatre because:

> Twenty-five or 30 [sic] years ago we would go to the theatre, the circus or the dance or the opera with a very specific set of rules. Now, people are exposed to more and more television and cinema and rock videos. The web has its own way of interacting and telling stories. We're being told stories in all kinds of crazy ways. The spectator's narrative vocabulary has evolved a lot. So you can allow yourself to do things in a live performance that you could never have done before (Lepage "KÀ").

To connect the audience to the performance through the narrative line, Lepage believes the story must touch on the mythic, but that "you can't create an epic saga if you don't confront your heroes with difficulty of some kind" (Lepage "KÀ"). In the *Cirque du Soleil* production *KÀ,* which premiered in 2005, Lepage's work leaves audiences with the impression they are inside a cinematic event as viewers, yet at the same time everything in the production is interactive, and 'in the moment'. While *Cirque du Soleil* productions in the past have been held together with a loose narrative, Lepage's input into *KÀ* saw the development of a protagonist in the story. For Lepage a sense of struggle is vital in the construction of any narrative, and while not the specific focus of *KÀ*, Lepage feels that in all his work some kind of confrontation or conflict is vital.

For Lepage, the mythic element of struggle, whether it be the colliding of continents, the exodus of a culture, the aftermath of atomic war, or the meeting in space of the superpowers, always appears in the narrative of his work. It is so

important to Lepage that it is already apparent in the planning for future work, with 2011 Metropolitan Opera production *Ring des Nibelungen* being designed to "evoke the dramatic and mythic coast of Iceland, a place where the land shook and spoke back to the early Viking settlers" (Lepage "The Metropolitan"). Lepage went on to state that, "the Ring's romantic power to evoke the conflicting forces between man and the divinities of nature makes more than a lot of sense. When you stage these works you are not only staging a new production, you must create a new world that explains the old one" (ibid). However, the idea of producing narratives of a mythic scale is not exclusive to Lepage, and can be seen in the work of an array of theatre practitioners. Many of the "most important avant-garde theater [sic] artists of the past 40 [sic] years, including Joseph Chaikin, Julian Beck, Richard Foreman and Robert LePage [sic], 'use dream, myth and ritual' in their work" (Jacobs). In this age of global warming, when extreme climate changes are making us more conscious than ever of the "fragility of this lonely planet" (ibid), a mythic narrative is vital in connecting Lepage's productions to a global audience.

In conclusion, the impact of communion in Lepage's theatre has evolved through a combination of various elements. These include aspects of displacement transformation, overlapping narratives, the use of mythic stories and themes, and the counterpoint between audience expectations and experience. Robert Lepage develops a theatrical communion between actor and audience, by utilising ritual to

promote a philosophy of interaction within his work. With this communion in mind, Lepage enters into his work with the desire to express a balance between the universal and the intimate, telling recognisable real life stories within a backdrop of global significance.

In Chapter Two I will consider how Lepage develops the communion between actor and audience by attempting to create a theatre that builds an intimacy between the actor and the audience, while at the same time seeming spontaneous and full of play. The communion in Lepage's work shows a truth that often reflects his life, his impulse, and his passion yet goes beyond the standard 'mask' of contemporary theatre, with the express aim of enhancing the communion between actor and audience through a 'mutual participation'.

CHAPTER TWO

An actor and an audience have a relationship of complicity, intimacy. Add the critic, and there's someone sitting on the side of the bed taking notes. We have to say to the press: either get out, or climb into bed and let's really get into it.

(Robert Lepage, "Lepage's Struggle To Stay Free" by Richard Ouzounian).

REACHING UPWARDS

Right from the beginning, Lepage's productions were infused with his own unique blend of life experience and theatrical know-how. He has been able to counterpoint his bilingualism, homosexuality, and other personal elements of his life with an array of stories that have an almost universal relevance, to create intimate stories that communicate with a global audience. Alison McAlpine claims that, "Lepage regards himself as a primarily intuitive rather than intellectual director, concerned with restoring to the stage the joyful element of 'play' and transforming the most vigorous traditions and conventions of theatre for our current intercultural and multimedia climate" (131). Lepage, it seems has reverted to the almost forgotten idea that actors are in truth players.

The ongoing balance between life and theatre is expressed in Lepage's work through the idea that humans are continuously attempting "to get in touch with the Gods" (McAlpine 143), and Lepage is adamant that plays should follow these human aspirations upwards. Part of Lepage's intuitive creation process is the idea of 'verticality', a concept that he uses again and again when developing his work. Lepage reminds us that during the nineteenth century, "scenery came from the flies and from above, and you got rid of things by flying them up. So it is a vertical form in a very physical and technical sense, not only in a philosophical or symbolic way" (ibid). Just as a participant in a church or cathedral feels that they are connecting to a higher level through the vertical architecture, which reaches to the gods, for Lepage, the concept of verticality seems vital.

The idea of verticality develops Lepage's desire for communion between actor and audience by translating the physical space into a metaphorical realm of spiritual aspiration. Within his productions people will regularly float, fly, and disappear into the heavens. This exploration into the vertical seems to offer liberation from the constraints of gravity. Fisher has been suggested that Lepage's production of *KÀ* developed the idea of verticality through the physical design of the work, which seems to be a direct "response to the rhythmic nature of cathedrals, with their uplifting, vertical spaces" ("KÀ"). To further amplify the sense of verticality in the work, both the ceiling and the proscenium height have been raised. Finally, in the middle of the stage a huge floating deck, weighing

80,000 pounds, can be raised into view. This deck lifts, tilts and spins throughout the production, revolving up to 360 degrees. One of the highlights of *KÀ* is when the huge stage area is flipped, starting on the horizontal and then tilting to face the audience vertically.

In previous work Lepage has explored variations on this idea of a stage platform able to rotate and tilt to become a vertical wall. In *Elsinore* the centre of the stage was dominated by a circular platform with a square central opening, which could revolve horizontally or vertically. This platform, at times appearing as a great wheel then later as a spinning coin, was seen as a bed when flat, a window or a door when upright, with a suspended throne in its centre at one point, and with white lace stretched across it at another. Prior to *Elsinore,* a simplified version of such a stage platform featured in the 1988 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* where a spiral staircase filled the vertical height of the stage, while a rotating platform in the shape of England filled the horizontal. Here the filling of both the horizontal and the vertical plane was reminiscent of Reinhardt's 1905 production of *the Dream.* In Reinhardt's work the set was built on a huge revolving platform, covered with tall trees, which held a second platform high above. The fairies in the production would sit upon the top platform, watching the action below, then be lowered or raised as required.

Despite these vertical and spiritual ambitions, Lepage's work still shows realistic images of everyday life. The actors have a natural pace, the language is familiar, real time is used as are long pauses to create emphasis. In a recent radio broadcast, Nigel Jamieson stated that what audiences were looking for in the theatre was "a heightening of life; we have the everyday life around us, and all art needs to heighten that so we experience things for this brief period of time more strongly" (Copeland). However, the idea of heightened reality on the stage is not a new concept, having a dynamic place in the theatre of many practitioners during the last century.

Yet for Lepage, the idea of a universal context is vital, and he utilises a variety of theatrical tools to develop this. He explores his personal bilingualism to its fullest extent, regularly having different languages spoken in his productions. In his solo shows Lepage will invariably explore the electronic and technical aspects of modern theatre, while his collaborative work is usually more focussed on the actor. While his ideas are often spiritual, Lepage is a materialistic practitioner who utilises vast stage panoramas, so that all of the acting space can be explored. Even the perspective on the objects in space changes, as seen in the 1987 premier of *Le Polygraph,* when the stage picture of a man against a wall suddenly becomes a "cinematic overview of the same scene with the simple use of a change of light and angle. The space changes and transforms. Whether audiences achieve personal metamorphosis cannot be guaranteed, but Lepage has drawn the

map" (Gibson 19). In Lepage's theatre, every visual performance plane will carry multiple dimensions, and within these multiple dimensions are set pieces and props that transform and change. The desire for a communion between actor and audience is explored in Lepage's work through the psychological depth brought about by actors having the naturalistic time to develop their characters, the use of apparently everyday language, and the placing of intimate relationships within a universal context.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

All of Lepage's devised and collaborative work contains some form of autobiographical element, and in this way his theatre has become an ongoing examination of Robert Lepage. It was James Bunzli who suggested that it is the "concept that combines autobiography, coincidence and paradox, and the performance event [which is able to create] a way of working, thinking, living, which gives Lepage's work a relentless indeterminacy and a dynamic, unique, imagistic inner life" ("Geography of Creation" 84). In the midst of writing Lepage is often talking about something that happened to him and he will suddenly think; "am I ready to say this – to reveal this. So then comes the theatricality," says Lepage, "the disguise of who you are" ("Who's This Nobody"). For Lepage his theatre is about disguise. In Lepage's theatre an aspect of his personal life is nearly

always being considered, be it his bilingualism, his homosexuality, his home city, or his family history, and he readily states that "most of his work contains some aspect of autobiography" (Canadian Press). Lepage realises the importance of not giving away too much of himself in his work, stating, "I try not to be too indecent in my version of events. You can't just take something personal and slap it on the screen or the page. You have to transpose things ... You can reveal your soul, but perhaps not the details of it" (ibid). In his work Lepage reveals a great deal about who he really is, and although this could be compromising, and is often quite dark, there will be just enough disguise to keep his personal life relatively private.

In *The Far Side of the Moon* the audience witnessed a very personal "partly autobiographical one-man show' (Kennedy), which probably touched on the two most personal aspects of his life to date, the death of his mother and the conflict between himself and his slightly older brother. After performing *Far Side* at the Sydney Festival, Lepage held a forum and revealed that, "when he writes a character, he invests part of his personality" (Nicholas). In the performance of the work, the two brothers, both parts played by Lepage, are in fact "aspects of himself" (Telegraph). Lepage claims to be an eternal optimist, though in this work he regularly "invests his dark side" (Nicholas). His real life brother, who just like the stage brother, is a photographer, "has very little hope" (ibid). *Far Side* is not just a piece of theatre; it incorporates all of the mentioned autobiographical aspects of Lepage's life, and makes them available for an audience. Through

Lepage's intimate insight into the working of the characters the actors develop a more intensive performance that in turn creates for the audience a more personal connection to the work, and a heightened sense of connection to the actor.

Furthermore, Lepage is quite narcissistic, placing his own personal interests into his work. For example, Lepage is, and always has been, fascinated by space and in particular Russia's forays into it, seeing the Russian space-race dream as "a place for notions of neo-romantic heroism" (Nicholas). However, Lepage feels that the most important moment in space exploration was not when man first walked on the moon, but rather the Apollo 8 mission when we first saw Earth from space. Lepage sees our sojourn into space as the ultimate narcissism, "we sent something so far away, just to look back at ourselves" (ibid). Just as Shakespeare always represented the moon as a mirror, another strong theme in *Far Side,* and many of Lepage's works, is narcissism.

For Lepage, the mirroring of his life on stage creates energy which goes beyond that found in the recreation of another playwright's work. When he is questioned on why he works as both a writer and director Lepage simply states, "I feel I am not a very interesting artist when I am only writing, or acting in plays by someone else" (Lefebvre 32). Lepage suggests working on another playwright's script limits his vision to a tunnel, yet "It is peripheral vision which allows me to introduce my audience to a whole world, and not only one of its dimensions"

(ibid). In this sense Lepage sees his peripheral vision as a way of opening both his eyes, and his audience's eyes, to the potential around him, and not limiting himself to one idea. For Lepage, his peripheral vision helps him to create the most interesting theatre.

Another autobiographical element is that Lepage's work regularly considers aspects of his family and their folklore. In *Le Confessional*, which first performed in 1994 and went on to open the Directors' Fortnight at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival, the father is a taxi driver, just as Lepage's own father was. A scene depicted in *The Dragons' Trilogy* mirrors a rumour that Lepage's own great-uncle at one time became so indebted to Chinese gamblers he was forced to barter his pregnant daughter. The one-man show *Needles and Opium,* while weaving together the stories of love and addiction during the lives of Miles Davis and Jean Cocteau, also touched on "the meltdown of one of Lepage's own long-term relationships" (The Guardian). The fractured theme of *Tectonic Plates* became in many ways a reflection of the fractious divisions that had begun to show within *Théâtre Repère*, between Lepage and fellow director Jacques Lessard, where the once complementary co-founders had largely split the company into two separate groups. Lessard had "decided to do classics" (ibid), but the classics were proving quite unsuccessful, while Lepage felt he had "ended up on the small side of the budget promoting the company around the world" (ibid). Michel Vais, in his piece on Lepage, suggested that when viewing Lepage's work we see a style, a creative

universe, a personal mythology, which is "that of the artist who sets out innocently to discover the world, overcoming difficulties [and who] brings tenderness and laughter in the wake of his perseverance".

For Lepage, *Le Polygraphe* connected to a personal aspect of his life in the most bizarre fashion. In October 1980 a friend of Lepage's was murdered and Lepage was one of the suspects. The police interrogated him and came up with a possible scenario for the murder, which they called a 'script' and in which Lepage was the assassin. Once the real murderer was found, the inspector told Lepage that police often use this method of scripting during their murder investigations. What the police called 'dramatizing the events' is very similar to *Le Polygraphe,* and Lepage's fictional reconstruction of events leading up to a crime. Within the production certain elements of the real murder and the police procedure have been used, but adapted to serve the purpose of the play. However, in *Le Polygraphe* no mention is made of the real crime, no real names are given, and the puzzle is not even solved. The police always assume that the crime is the starting point; in *Le Polygraphe* death is the finale. In *Le Polygraphe* as in Lepage's other work, it may be the continual use of personal experience that gives the production a resonance of truth and builds a certain intimacy with the audience. By anchoring the resource of his personal history to universal themes, he builds a kind of paradox in the experience of the spectators. We are at once psychologically tied in to a story of immediacy and personal truth, as well as to one with a mythic scale.

Lepage has said that there is a difficulty in performing your own story in front of an audience, embodying yourself on stage, performing work that shows so many "personal narratives" (Telegraph). While this autobiographical element requires a raw edge from Lepage's theatre, it is this rawness that in turn creates a heightened intimacy between the audience and the actor. In all his solo shows, Lepage has brought a fearless honesty to both the ongoing investigation of his creative process, and the tension between opening himself up to the unknown, at the same time as he probes into his most intimate suffering.

Lepage talks of the inspiration he has received from Canadian performance artist Laurie Anderson. He sees her as someone who has "translated information and imitation into communion and this is very different from communication" (McAlpine 156). Like Lepage, Anderson will regularly draw on autobiographical elements of her life when devising work. Further, Anderson is also concerned with theatricality in her work as well as the creation of a good story. By utilising a multi-layered format in her theatre, Anderson, like Lepage, incorporates the spoken word together with visuals, music and choreography, to develop projects that are often risky and 'in the moment'. She attempts to provoke the audience out of its complacency by describing the world through new yet familiar language. Like Lepage, Anderson also uses computers, sound equipment, and other forms of new technology to estrange us from the world we know. The audience then

becomes caught in a paradoxical relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar, and are lured towards new rhythms and perceptions.

Anderson wrote the music for *The Far Side of the Moon*, and though she came late to the development process, she had much to offer. In the early eighties, NASA set up a secret training programme for a group of civilians who were artists, journalists, or teachers, to prepare them for planned missions to the moon. Anderson was one of these civilians. However, after the Challenger disaster the programme was disbanded, and though not a space traveller, "Lepage recognised a like-minded soul in Anderson and the two became friends on international circuit of performance artists" (Nicholas). Through their skill in successfully combining a variety of media forms together, both Lepage and Anderson are concerned with inventing, or creating, a performance that is beyond the 'norm' of conventional theatre.

Anderson, like Lepage, has an intimate, casual, beguiling, and informal playing style offset with a very mechanical, altered voice and robotic images, her *O Superman* being a classic example. While watching something recognisable in her work the audience also witness a universe of mechanisation and mise en scène in the background (Anderson). Although Anderson's work is very performer based, there is a high degree of technological embellishment, which makes the audience experience two realities. While Lepage works in a very different way, he

also uses technology as a way of drawing attention to scenes of human intimacy. An example would be the inconsequential dialogue between people that is set within giant playing areas, overshadowed by a giant screen, or a lake of water. Lepage takes simple ideas and frames them within a bigger context in order to connect the intimate to the global as well as the actor to the audience.

Within the intimate, highly personalised storytelling there is also an attempt to achieve physical scale. Anderson and Lepage achieve visual and emotional perspective by juxtaposing straightforward human stories with projected images or electronic enhancement in the physical space. The audience becomes part of a beguiling world of technological possibilities of meaning that go beyond what the human voice and body can do. Examples of this are readily found in their *The Far Side of the Moon*, with music and backing tacks becoming an intense part of the performance, with actor's spacewalking across the stage, and a hole in the wall becoming a washing machine or portal in the blink of an eye. However, neither Anderson nor Lepage ever loses the audience through abstraction. Their stories have a familiar resonance, drawn from their own autobiographies, and remind the audience of what they already know, and that perhaps they are all recognisable characters trapped in a world that is often unknowable.

IMMEDIACY

Live theatre, possesses an immediacy that a film simply cannot recreate. This idea of immediacy defines theatre as distinct from film, from TV, and indeed most other human activities, apart from a sports event or musical concerts. "It is sometimes said that contemporary theatre has become too safe, that there is far more innovation to be found in modern cinema – and it has been suggested by one critic that Lepage might as well have made a film of *Elsinore*" (Brown, M). In many ways however this misses the point. In *Elsinore,* the power of the imagery came from the live performance and would not have had nearly as much impetus on the screen. During his conversation with Tousignant, Lepage said that compared to theatre, what he had always hated about cinema "is that cinema is always the ghost of your ideas. If I tour a play for 10 years, even if it's an old play, me, myself, right now – what's going on in the Middle East or whatever – will have a different echo on how I'm going to be telling the story." For Lepage, it is the bringing together of people with the possibility of a collective conversation, combined with all the danger of human error, that shifts and grows and has the potential for a heightened poetic exchange – always new, always 'right now'.

In *The Empty Space*, Brook wrote of two theatre styles, 'Rough Theatre' and 'Holy Theatre', coming together to form a theatre that he called, 'Immediate Theatre'. In this explanatory model, Lepage's theatre is a type of collective, social

event where "the audience feels privileged to witness something ephemeral and theatrical" (Gibson 20). However, for the audience to understand the work they need to realise that, "the actors are playing, that what the audience is witnessing is the unfolding of a process" (ibid). For Lepage, this is what his theatre is always about: immediacy. Lepage's theatre is live, risky and exciting.

This idea of immediacy and the audience being caught up 'in the moment' is not new, with Max Reinhardt being the first modern director to explore the idea extensively. In the 1912 production of Reinhardt's *Oedipus Rex* at Covent Garden, the chorus was made up of a regiment of London's acting students, filled out further with hundreds of boy scouts. At one point, Reinhardt rushed this vast chorus through the audience, sweeping the room with emotion, and producing an overall impression of the audience being part of the excited crowd, running to scream their adulation of Oedipus. The critic for the *Telegraph* concluded that with "no curtain, no footlights, no orchestra ... the modern convention by which a play is seen only like a picture in a frame was therefore abolished. We saw much of Oedipus as you see the action of everyday life passing beside you and about you" (Styan 83). This introduction, by Reinhardt, of the performer within the audience space became labelled forevermore as 'the device from Berlin'. In this production, the final exit of Oedipus was considered by many as unforgettable, as the King, sightless, his eye sockets streaming with gore, made a stumbling exit down the central gangway and through the audience, against a drawn out cry from

the back of the stage, which moved members of the audience so much they had to hide their eyes.

This sensation of immediacy, be it a production of Reinhardt, Brook, or Lepage, causes the audience to feel closely connected to the work. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Angela Bennie quotes Lepage as saying that, "The audience joins in the performance through their imagination, and the coincidence of their presence there at that time and at that performance and at that moment" (n.p.). For Lepage, this connection through coincidence is not a random conjunction of unrelated events, but a creative tool openly explored. He will use coincidence on a regular basis and then wait to see what happens, inviting coincidence both in the rehearsal room and the performance space, believing that from the chaos of coincidence comes a greater truth. In Lepage's theatre, the greater truth is a connection between ideas that could not consciously be anticipated, nor could they be deliberately manipulated.

The most recognised, and talked about, example of coincidence in Lepage's work is during an early performance of *The Dragons' Trilogy*. On June 6th 1987, the show had just moved to a hangar space at the port of Montreal, close to the St. Lawrence River. Towards the end of the first performance the back curtain was opened to reveal the river and quay, where Lepage had placed barrels with inscriptions in Chinese letters. At that very moment, with the sun dipping below

the horizon, a Chinese junk with its sails spread wide, was gliding down the river, right in front of the hangar. The audience at the time, who were already enraptured by the production, found the beauty and precision of this moment overwhelming, and gave a standing ovation. Even now, years later, people still talk about the 'junk moment,' even though it was not a well-orchestrated effect, but instead total coincidence.

Lepage sees the coincidence in his theatre similar to the concept of a sports game, where there are always elements of coincidence, chance and chaos. In a sports game the players have set positions, set moves, set plays that have been practiced, but in the moment anything can happen. In the same way, Lepage's theatre thrives on chance, and the underlying risk of failure. However, Lepage exploits this live, organic element of his theatre to the fullest, for it is through chaos that anything is possible, while coincidence retains for Lepage the elements of surprise and enlightenment in his work. It is the combination of chance, chaos, and coincidence in Lepage's theatre that have become the mechanism for revealing the synchronicity of life, the almost spiritual connection of people, and a deeper communion between the actor and audience. Lepage achieves a form of immediacy through actor training, enabling the performance to look like it is happening right there and then, as if for the first time. At times performances contain actual improvised scenes, yet even the rehearsed scenes can have an

improvised feeling, a feeling of the language being made up as the play unfolds, even though the audience know that the work has been significantly rehearsed.

In English there is the notion of a game in the word for actor, 'player'. In German the word for actor is 'Schauspieler', and literally means one who shows his playing. In French when one speaks of actors one speaks of 'acteurs', of 'comédiens', of 'une pièce de theatre'. In French, one does speak of the actor playing, but the concept of a game is far less obvious. Lepage feels that, "we see 'acting' on stage more often than 'playing'" (Charest 55). For the French-speaking Lepage the concept of communion connects implicitly with the idea of playing a game.

Trained as an actor, Lepage thinks deeply about acting, actor training and the actor's rehearsal process. An important key to appreciating Lepage's work as a director, is understanding how much he is influenced by his work as an actor. He thinks like an actor, who by his own definition is a player, and his idea of play extends to every aspect of his theatre. He plays with all the elements as an actor plays: he takes lights, set, costumes, props, language, space, time, character, and plays with them. He will turn them upside down, make them larger and smaller, and change them from one thing into something else entirely. This playfulness helps create the feeling of immediacy for the audience, as it encourages them to feel vital and present and regularly surprised.

NUDITY

Lepage will often incorporate nudity in his productions, believing that this will allow the actor to be freed from social confines, and therefore more able to delve into the essence of the story's truth. Lepage believes that "Nudity is the presence of things in their pure state. When the character is nude, he is free of his social envelope, of what socially defines the envelope of his body" (Charest 76). In this way an actor is given freedom to explore a character more completely once his or her clothes have been removed, because the character and the performance become vital. Once a character is nude on stage an audience "can no longer distinguish social classes by external appearances. You can only distinguish people by their behaviour, by the details that most intimately reflect their personal identity" (Charest 76). Nudity enables the actor to explore the very core of the character, and the very core of the performance.

When confronted by nudity on stage, the performance reaches a personal level that in turn creates a very personal response; in this way Lepage reminds the audience of its own nakedness. Lepage states: "Nudity has something to say to the public. It can have an eroticising effect on the audience, of course. But aside from that, it's touching to see a naked person on stage" (Charest 77). Without clothing there is nothing for the actor to hide behind, and the concept that his theatre is not

hiding and that everything is available for the audience to see is something Lepage believes vital to his work.

There is also a metaphorical nakedness in a great deal of Lepage's theatre. Characters often speak their most intimate thoughts. The audience see characters engaged in very private discourses with others. The audience watch at a remove, but at the same time are drawn into the characters' intimate lives. The audience are privy to truths about characters that give a certain voyeuristic privilege. In the film *Nô,* released in 1998, there is a scene that depicts two characters (a married male ambassador, and a female actor whose character is pregnant) waking to find themselves naked in bed together. As the two characters quickly dress, a vast amount of their story is told through their disjointed conversation. As the woman rushes around she seems to realise a need to say something, and mumbles "About last night." The man in a perfunctory manner replies, "Thanks, it was great." Neither character is interested and the sex was meaningless, but the resonance for the viewer into their unhappy lives is vast.

Suddenly, the audience is no longer the complacent viewer of theatre, but is privy to a very private discussion and therefore a participant in the story, and this communion between the viewer and the viewed is a vital aspect of the work Lepage creates. Again, the communion between actor and audience has religious overtones. The bible tells of Adam and Eve's nakedness in the Garden of Eden,

and that when humans are before God on the day of reckoning they will be naked. Just as Christianity states that we will be seen before all humanity in all our nakedness, the nudity in Lepage's theatre has the capacity to let the audience see intimate and personal aspects of the performance.

THE UNIVERSAL

Argentinean-born Canadian writer Alberto Manguel stated, "Culture is what identifies a nation. This is your passport to the rest of the world" (*Canada World*). For Lepage, a communion in theatre means finding a common language that goes beyond words, that goes beyond action, and that communicates across the cultural divide. It is a quest for an understanding of the world beyond conscious reality. Rather than being insular and defensive, Lepage has promoted Québec's cultural identity through the act of making cross-cultural theatre. Just as Brook took the stories from other cultures and created theatre with universal appeal, Lepage's theatre regularly crosses cultural boundaries. In this vein, Lepage believes it is possible for "Québec culture to have access to the English speaking market without losing its identity" (Rayment).

When Lepage was criticised by French reviewers for the Québecois accent and idiomatic expressions in *Le Confessional,* he celebrated the linguistic

problems that had been evoked. In an interview with Rémy Charest, Lepage stated: "the question is, quite simply, what does more to promote the French character of Québecois culture? An English lecture or a show that's one third French?" (53). Although Lepage senses that, "Language can be an obstacle to comprehension," he goes on to state "there is danger in making too many compromises" (Donohoe 252). For Lepage there is an ongoing desire to highlight the difference between his home and France, as well as the rest of Canada.

By utilising language and cultural familiarities to arouse the audience's emotions, and then using unfamiliar language and cultural ideas to displace them, Lepage strives to create a deeper spiritual experience for the audience. For Lepage an important part of his theatre is to "ignite the audience's imagination so it will dig deep and connect with that deep structure" (Bennie). He will deny fulfilment in order to tease, thereby driving the audience to seek a deeper understanding. Thus, Lepage is able to transcend the commonplace experience of the audience and create a heightened experience, developing for the audience a 'deeper' emotional connection.

Just as *The Dragons' Trilogy* in 1985 crossed cultural and language barriers, Lepage's most recent work *Lipsynch* (a collaboration piece between Lepage and Théâtre Sans Frontières that first performed in February 2007) is performed in English, French, German, Spanish, and takes place in Québec, Nicaragua, the

Canaries, London and Newcastle. With its simple set and integrated video use, the show explores the idea of lip-synching in movies, while also playing with the production of automated voices and sound dubbing. In *Lipsynch,* Lepage is able to slowly remove the perceived language barriers between cultures to show humanity as a singular entity. In this way his work transforms the vigorous traditions and conventions of theatre for the current intercultural climate. Moreover, Lepage's theatre continually shows how cultural and linguistic disparities, as well as personal and global conflicts, can paradoxically express similarities between people.

On the other side of universality is individuality, and Lepage uses universal themes to confront a wide range of individual experiences. This use of both personal and global themes in Lepage's work works to build a "metaphorical bridge between cultures, thus enabling the very Québec stories that he tells to be viewed and affiliated with by audiences around the world" (Rayment). In *The Far Side of the Moon* Lepage tells the very private story of two brothers and their dysfunctional relationship, while at the same time investigating the limits of human perception in relation to the Cold War space race. In this production, Lepage juxtaposes the personal reconciliation between two brothers with the monumental historical resonance created by the first thaw in the relationship between the superpowers, as the United States and Soviet Union partake in a 'handshake' in space. Similarly, in *Le Polygraphe* the audience see personal

stories: characters like Christof who suffers from the loss caused by his close relative Anna's suicide, or Francois who lives a double life as a historian-by-day and waiter-by-night while constantly under supervision as a murder suspect, balanced alongside the constant radio and television news reports of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

To further connect the individual to the universal, Lepage uses themes of vastness to develop a plot with global significance. His theatre is made up of stories that consider the movement of the world's land masses, the exodus of peoples from one country to another, space travel, and nuclear holocaust, all the while taking the individual stories and connecting them to the world. This complex metaphorical balance is seen continuously in Lepage's work. In *The Dragons' Trilogy* the audience witnesses a Chinese laundry where teenage girls giggle about boys, set against the backdrop of Canadian, English, and Chinese cultures colliding. *Tectonic Plates* follows the life of Madeleine, a French Canadian painter, while using the movement of the Earth's crust as a metaphor for the conflicts between cultures. *The Andersen Project,* first performed in 2005, balances the life of Hans Christian Anderson against an exploration into loneliness, guilt, and the relationship between creativity and destructiveness. Lepage presents large-scale universal ideas to the audience in a very intimate way, with themes of mythic proportions playing out for the audience in a living-room style of conversation, which at times even seems to be improvised on the spot.

Lepage places big ideas on the stage, using technology as the tool to build his productions up to a mythic scale. Huge staging elements open the entire stage space to the audience. Lepage uses every aspect of the stage in every conceivable dimension: vertical, horizontal and diagonal, with actors who walk, float and fly across the space. Within the multiple dimensions are pieces of set, props and performers that turn, transform and change. Even the perspective on the objects in space changes; this can be seen in *Le Polygraph* when the stage picture of two men standing next to a wall suddenly became a filmic 'overview' of the same scene from above with the simple use of a change of light and angle. Through this use of transformation of perspective and scale, Lepage regularly provides the audience an opportunity to undergo their own personal kind of metamorphosis.

TECHNOLOGY

In Lepage's theatre, one of the means he uses both to play with scale and verticality, and to bring the audience closer to the immediacy of the stage performance is technology. While Lepage will often incorporate an array of technological devices in his theatre, he also acknowledges the limitations of the computer as a theatrical device. When asked for his thoughts on integrating technological apparatus such as computers into his work, Lepage was adamant that, "computers can communicate very efficiently; but they can't engage in

communion" (Adriaansens and Brouwer 3). For Lepage, computers and the like are certainly not a focus in his theatre, but tools to be explored, as he seems to sense that film and projected images fill a role for contemporary theatregoers that are familiar and recognisable.

Lepage is concerned with people coming together to share a live experience, and utilises computers and other technological devices to achieve this. According to Walter Benjamin, "the theatre offers the experience of immediacy, during which the performer and the spectator are both physically present to each other within the same space and time, cinema ... lets that presence occur through the mediation of a technical device" (Quinz). Within theatre circles, contemporary practitioners are creating new works that specifically take into account the impact of technology on how modern audiences view theatre. Robert Wilson, for example, has developed a theatre of huge visual scale with the use of projected images, while Pina Bausch creates a theatre style that explores technology to give dance a contemporary resonance. Ariane Mnouchkine quite deliberately reserves her use of technology for sinister depictions of Western society, while Heiner Goebbels explores the relationship between projected and live image and sound. For Robert Lepage, technology is yet another element of a multi-layered, collaborative, multi-media style of theatre creation, which often incorporates the deconstruction and adaptations of existing texts. While Lepage on the *Ex Machina*

website recognises that he is accused of imprisoning himself in technology, he also states that technology allows him to explore things.

Lepage is adamant that contemporary theatre and cinema audiences have rapidly evolving receptive capabilities. He has often commented on this issue, believing that, "today's audience consists of 'gymnastic' thinkers – able to process and make sense of complex imagery" (deLahunta). Lepage then discusses the ways in which theatre directors can tell better stories by "using people's evolving intelligence" (ibid). Since the beginning of his career, Lepage has regularly explored the use of technology in his theatre. Through Lepage theatre has taken on "a new dimension, which surpasses definition" (Vaïs). His productions have become a playground to try new things and explore the potential of existing technologies, hence his willingness to incorporate all forms of live performance into his work, and the demand for audience flexibility that goes along with that.

Lepage seems fascinated by reflection on stage and explores this tool through both the old and the new, using a simple mirror or the projected video image. An example of simple mirror reflections can be seen in *Le Polygraphe* with a mirror suspended above a mortician's table, and again in *The Far Side of the Moon* a huge revolving mirror looms above the stage allowing for a series of scenes "which are transcendental and visually spectacular" (Nicholas). In *Elsinore* technological reflection is seen with Lepage using a live video projection of

himself so as to play the parts of both Hamlet and Horatio at the same time. Through the use of reflection Lepage shows both sides of a character, allowing the audience to see right inside them.

While Lepage brings many technological and filmic elements into his theatre, there is always a risk as technology can backfire. In his production of *Elsinore* for example, Lepage created a surprising integration between theatrical conventions and filmic technology, which even included projected credits at the end. Unfortunately, as happened at the Edinburgh Festival, a simple stuck pin in the hydraulics was able to cause the entire performance to terminate.

It has become imperative to Lepage to keep his theatre moving forward and to keep exploring modern technologies to help this movement. Otherwise Lepage believes that audiences will become bored. Lepage believes that "people are extremely up-to-date, even if they are not educated or well cultured. They have a very modern way of connecting things" (deLahunta). Through innovative use of technology, and an ongoing commitment to explore new ideas while reinventing old ones, Lepage has become well known throughout the international theatre community for his ability to tell compelling stories on stage. This was no doubt a fundamental consideration in his being asked to write and direct *KÀ* for *Cirque du Soleil*, a production that calls for more technical effects than any previous production by that company, which is renowned for it's creative innovation.

When viewing Lepage's work it becomes obvious that he has always had a very cinematic way of looking at theatre. In conversation with Isa Tousignant, Lepage stated that when doing theatre he had "always borrowed a lot from film's narrative vocabulary" (n.p.). Lepage feels that his really good shows had worked because he had "revitalized the theatrical narrative" (ibid) through the use of filmic elements in the live performance. When asked by Tousignant why the adaptation of film narrative worked so well in the theatre, he described how theatre was free "because nobody goes, and it's not the chronicler of our times anymore; it's just this crazy thing we do to try to tell stories." Lepage, it seems, sees film as a medium full of preconceptions and audience expectations, whereas his theatre is free of those constraints.

Lepage's stage work evolves and is often still being written years after the first performance took place, until it becomes very polished. But once this happens Lepage often feels it is a pity that it "can't be recorded" (Tousignant). Many of his theatre productions have eventually been made into films, such as *Le Polygraph, Le Confessional, Nô, Tectonic Plates, Seven Streams of the River Ota,* and *The Far Side of the Moon.* However, Lepage soon came to realise that films become "obsessed with a totally different aspect of the story" (ibid). Though Lepage feels some stories are better told in film, others are better told on stage.

As well as being Lepage's first English-language film, *Possible Worlds* is his first filmic adaptation of another artist's work, John Mighton, a multi-talented playwright, mathematician, physician, philosopher and poet. Lepage told Tousignant:

> *Possible Worlds* is surreal in a Lynchian kind of way - Ideas of relativity, spirituality, Nietzchean fatalism, science, love and how they all fuse in post-modern life, bounce off one another in a captivating game of reflective ping-pong, heightened by a choreographed, careful acting style. Flowing, languid, watery themes are translated in a style of delicious ethereality, conjuring, at a near-subconscious level, endless symbolic possibilities.

However, Lepage is only interested in a surreal style of story telling if it informs the real world of the audience. *Possible Worlds,* with all its ethereal qualities "streams into consciousness with complete ease" (Tousignant).

For the contemporary audience, a fascinating aspect of the world we live in is the speed of scientific development, communication, and travel. This aspect of our lives has become a central theme in many of Lepage's pieces. His 1991 bilingual *Romeo and Juliet* had the Trans-Canada highway as both setting and main theme. Both *Needles and Opium* and *The Dragons' Trilogy* evoked an underlying idea of airplane flights. Communication was an intrinsic motif utilised in *Tectonic Plates*, and space and space travel was the predominant subject matter in *The Far Side of the Moon.*

In his more recent work, *Zulu Time*, Lepage "interrogates the whole air-travel culture of our society - where however far you fly, the hotels are all the same and there is no escape from the self" (Innes, "Craig"). Performed in a vast empty barn in Québec, which was filled with vast amounts of machinery, the title *Zulu Time* refers to airline flight schedules. The actors, performing as mechanised robots, move in an erratic dance that carries them up and down a scaffolding wall, on parallel catwalks, and sometimes even upside down. The whole set gives the impression of elevators and moving escalators, and enables the audience to witness humanity channelled in a world of mechanised actions. Furthermore, a scene in a hotel room, stabbed by the effect of strobe lighting, shows a lonely traveller experiencing a very sexual dream, with a female contortionist he can never quite touch. For the audience the "resulting dehumanisation, intensifies the deep yearning for emotional connection that global travel denies" (ibid). It is this yearning that creates a heightened connection to the piece, and an intense under-standing of the plight of people living in our increasingly technological world.

Although Lepage is predominantly a maker of theatre, he has an abiding interest in the excitement of film. He is always looking for the technological possibilities of creating a crossover between the two, developing cinematic elements into his theatrical productions. Gillian Kime states that Lepage is far more than simply a theatre maker. Kime suggests that Lepage "uses a text and transforms it into something resembling a theatrical film." Furthermore, Kime

senses that Lepage uses text simply as "the basis for creating a technological masterpiece." Lepage capitalises on film in large part because it is a medium with which we are all familiar. Film also has an ability to connect immediately with our unconscious imaginings. Huxley and Witts said, "for Lepage, theatre has the logic of a dream, and he uses the technology of the stage, and film and video to achieve his ends, which are often concerned with intuition rather than literal ideas and themes" (246). In *The New York Observer*, John Heilpern suggested Lepage layered together "technology and theatre [sic] more inventively than anyone". By using film, Lepage encourages the audience to work on several levels: they must respond to the live action, as well as to the projected image that has already been lived. The incorporation of filmic elements forces audiences to work harder both intellectually and imaginatively. When most people go to the theatre they often respond most strongly to a visual image, and when accompanied by music it somehow moves them even more. Lepage has used technology to developed this idea to a point where the penetration resonates profoundly with the contemporary audience.

Space, back projection, lighting, filmic elements, projection of written texts, and sound effects all combine for Lepage to create a theatrical world that is very much 'in the moment'. Lepage then uses technology, as a means of plugging into what the audience already knows, and regularly utilises these devices to further explore the very intimate aspects of his characters' lives, juxtaposed against much

bigger stories, with universal significance. The mixing of technologies creates a sense of Grotowski's 'total theatre', which has almost become Lepage's insignia. The audience is often simultaneously in a live as well as a 'has been lived' scenario, in two universes. This is another paradox within his work as the audience enter a profane and sacred time, the 'now' or present moment, simultaneously with the reflective moment.

In conclusion, it seems the communion of Lepage's theatre is produced in many ways from an intimate exploration into Lepage's personal life, balanced against universal stories that are often told through a variety of technological means. Yet at the same time Lepage's work has a playfulness that draws the audience beyond the standard 'mask' of theatre towards a heightened sense of the immediacy of the work. The existence of both present and projected time is a strong feature of the ritual of communication and is used typically in much of Lepage's work. In the next chapter I will consider some of the specific methodologies used by Lepage to achieve his theatre of communion, with the express aim of enhancing the communion through a mutual participation between actor and audience in the creation, development and performance of his work.

CHAPTER THREE

The theatre is something wild, without rules ... chaos is necessary. If there is only order and rigour in a project, the outcome will be nothing but order and rigour. But it's out of chaos that the cosmos is born ... This is where true creation lies.

(Robert Lepage in "Connecting Flights" by Rémy Charest, 88).

METHODOLOGY

Lepage's methodologies for creating theatre are intrinsically connected to his desire for the actor to feel the audience responding emotionally to the work, and for the audience to feel emotionally connected to the actor. Lepage insists that the audience should be told of theatre: "it will wake you up, it will energise you, it will make you work, and you will go back home and you will feel energised" (McAlpine 148). At the *Heads and Tails of Theatre* seminar in Toronto, Lepage spoke about *Seven Streams of the River Ota*. He outlined the marathon seven-hour running time of the show in terms of "the audience's desire to be challenged 'emotionally, intellectually, poetically,' in order to get a gymnastic workout, to feel their bodies not dulled by entertainment but

energized and alive. And the actors need that kind of feedback from the audience" (Gibson 20). In Lepage's theatre the actors 'feed' off the energy of the audience, and if the audience is complacent, then the actors will be too.

Lepage works with a 'Laboratory Theatre' creative process, a concept that over the last century has created some of the greatest advances in western theatre. This laboratory style is seen in the likes of Stanislavski and Meyerhold's *Studio Theatre*, Grotowski's *Polish Laboratory Theatre*, the Jacques Lecoq *International School of Theatre*, and Peter Brook's *Centre for International Theatre Research.* Within this laboratory theatre context Lepage is able to experiment with different ideas, and take time to bring ideas into his work, or throw them out. When he set up Ex Machina, his base of operations in Québec, he was adamant that it would be "a place where people don't feel that they have to produce to be productive" (McAlpine 154). For Lepage there is little or no censoring of ideas: "If someone suggests you could fly in to the theatre, he'll make it happen" (Fisher, "Extraordinary"). Lepage will take all suggestions and explore them, he never stifles the ideas of fellow artists, and will encourage his collaborators to voice their views, impressions, and visions.

The specific Lepage methodology of theatrical development began to originate in 1982 when he gained employment with *Théâtre Repère*, in Québec. Under the direction of Jacques Lessard, he was introduced to a form of theatrical

creation called the 'RSVP Cycles'. Created by architect Lawrence Halprin, the RSVP Cycles were intended for use in developing user-friendly workspaces. Soon afterwards they were utilised by his partner Anna Halprin, director of the *San Francisco Dance Company*, as a means to instigate and create performance dance. For Lessard, the RSVP Cycles became a model that could be utilised for devising theatre, where the:

> **R**esource is a motivational tool to instigate artistic creation.
>
> **S**coring is the improvisations around the resource.
>
> **V**aluation is the selection and evaluation of the improvisations.
>
> **P**erformance is the presentation of the work in progress.

It is important to note that the emphasis for Lessard was one of self-discovery, and the performances are in order to solicit audience response. This response then becomes a resource for further creation, enabling each part of the RSVP cycle to be just as vital in developing consecutive creative cycles. Dundjerovic sees that the "essential elements of this way of working are founded on collective work, spontaneous playfulness, accidental discovery, free association, impropriations from resources, simulations, multiple actions, absence of narrative structure and character" (23). It would seem therefore, that the RSVP Cycles allow complete personal freedom in the creative process.

Under the direction of Lessard, the use of the RSVP Cycles involved a working methodology, which would question "the hierarchy of the director through the elaboration of script, characters, *mise en scène* and decor, together with the company as a collective venture" (McAlpine 130). In this way the production no longer follows one vision but the collective dream, allowing the work to become much more available on a wide spectrum of levels, to both the actor and the audience. In the theatre of both Lessard and Lepage, the director is no more vital than any other member of the collective, unlike Lepage's experience of directing in Germany, where the director holds a great deal of responsibility, and the director's leadership must be absolute. For Lepage this totalitarianism created an impossible environment to work in: "This kind of authoritarianism is completely antithetical to my way of working" (Charest 58).

Lepage, however, felt that Jacques Lessard was using the cycles, "in a very methodical way" (McAlpine 134). Lepage decided to instigate the use of a freer form, "trying to adapt the rules of it to our feelings and our intuition" (ibid). Over the decades the RSVP Cycles have been adapted, revised, and re-created, with Lepage being able to develop from them his own unique way of working, which has become an "intuitive method of spontaneous creativity" (Dundjerovic 23). For Lepage, the RSVP Cycles created a balance between expressionism, and the existing flows of narrative. Lepage always felt "it found

its way better like that; it was closer to the intuitions and feelings of the people using it when we weren't strangled by the rules" (McAlpine 134).

Within the rehearsal space Lepage will allow an idea to grow, having freed it from the restraints of rules or a script, while exploring the idea's potential through improvisation. The actors then bring ideas into the rehearsal space, the company develops these ideas through the creative process, and as these ideas evolve they create further ideas, and therefore instigate further creation. An analysis of the RSVP Cycles in relation to four of Lepage's works comes from a review of Dundjerovic by Peter Dickinson, explaining how Lepage uses:

> **R**esources in *Le Confessional* to ask: Where do I come from?
>
> **S**coring in *Nô* to contemplate: Where am I going?
>
> **V**aluation in *Le Polygraphe* to examine: What is truth?
>
> **P**erformance in *Possible Worlds* to discover: What is my real world?

RESOURCES

In 1906 Max Reinhardt began work on Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and the first item Reinhardt introduced to the cast was a large black leather armchair. Reinhardt

claimed, "the heavy armchair tells you all you need to know. The dark colouring reflects the whole atmosphere" (Styan 20). Through the use of this simple resource Reinhardt was able to bring a sickening sense of moral oppressiveness to the performance, which was further increased by the continuous sound effect of rain that dominates the play.

A century later, Robert Lepage sees a resource as a solid tangible object that allows for an interaction between the actor and the object while also enhancing the emotional connection between the actor and the audience. A resource will often become a metaphor within the production, as well as a vehicle through which the audience can freely associate with the actor's feelings, memories, and impressions. In this way the resource becomes a building block for the show that will link the metaphors throughout the work, and develop the communion between actor and audience.

Lepage states, "it doesn't matter where you begin, as long as it's not with a theme, but with a sign, a resource" (Manguel 34). Lepage explains the difference between a theme and resource as, "the survival of the artist, that's a theme. A resource is something solid" (ibid). For Lepage a resource could be big or small, it could be obvious, or it could be something very personal. Invariably Lepage utilises normal household items as his resources, such as a chair, a table, an egg, or a deck of cards. He explains resource further, suggesting, "if someone

says that he sees in a fried egg something that has died so that someone else can live, I can't argue with that. It's a feeling" (ibid). Lepage takes seemingly normal, everyday objects and transform them into the extraordinary. For example, in *the Far Side of the Moon* one such ordinary object is an ironing board, which later becomes various pieces of gym equipment and then later still doubles up as a bed for a CAT scan machine. The resources Lepage uses in his performances return again and again, they create links between ideas, expand the story, and as already outlined develop an emotional link between actor and audience to develop a stronger communion.

In *Tectonic Plates,* the idea of displacement became the essential theme of the performance; it was a theme that Lepage hoped would speak to the viewer. The solid tangible resources came from everyday dining chairs, a pool of water, grand pianos, and scattered jigsaw puzzles. Bunzli noted that the "Reactions to tangible resources in turn become resources themselves. These reactions, intuitive and/or emotional, are not to be debated, but rather are to be put into action" ("Geography of Creation" 88).

The main physical resources in *Tectonic Plates* were a number of jigsaw puzzles and two grand pianos. The jigsaw puzzles were used as both a metaphor for the tectonic plates, and the promotion of the underlying concept of displacement. The two grand pianos were climbed on, crawled under, hidden

within, and regularly pushed together then separated, just as the plates of the planet separate or come together. For *The Dragons' Trilogy,* the principal resource was a parking lot, resulting from the discovery that the Québec City Chinatown was once situated where a huge parking lot now stands. In *The Dragons' Trilogy,* the parking lot became a metaphor through which the theme of Chinese settlement in Canada could be explored. In *Vinci,* a cartoon depiction of 'St Anne, the Virgin and Child', which Leonardo da Vinci painted in 1499, became a physical resource for the work's theme, which was a "dramatized interrogation on the function of art and the contradictions within the artist" (Manguel 38). In *Le Confessional,* Lepage's mise-en-scène is a catalogue of resources that became the material for the emotional structure of the narrative of both film and play, including taxis, photographs, the church, confession boxes, apartment walls, oriental symbols, water, wine, blood, and paint.

To further enable the audience to enter into the emotional realm of the production, Lepage will provide a human resource for the audience. Lepage calls this a vehicle, or portal, and utilises this human resource in his work as it "enables the audience to enter the performance, irrespective of how fantastical the presentation may be," thus, "the audience relates to the character, that in turn relates to the larger than life experience" (Nicholas). One such regularly used vehicle is a type of historical or fictional character who plays a key role in much of Lepage's work. Pierre Lamontage is this fictitious character, invented by

Lepage to be the linking character whose journey the audience share, whose eyes the audience see through, and who "the audience can hopefully relate to" (ibid). When chatting to Rémy Charest, Lepage referred to Lamontage as "all purpose because he is relatively young and an artist, which allows us to place him almost anywhere, in almost any circumstances" (30). The character of Lamontage becomes in some sense a doorway, or as Lepage suggested, "a key for the audience, who therefore identify more easily with him and can use him to gain access to the play's core" (ibid). Via Lamontage, the audience has their curiosity stimulated, as the intimate connection to Lamontage provides the audience with the opportunity to discover emotional aspects of the production that may otherwise be lost to them. By gaining access to the core of the production, the audience is enabled to be a part of the journey, and the audience's journey is vital to Lepage.

SCORING

When Lepage studied with Swiss Director Alain Knapp in Paris in 1980, he learnt "improvisation that looked as if it was written" (Bunzli "Geography of Creation" 86). For Knapp, the scoring of a theatrical performance became the result of improvisation, where the relationship on stage between the actors would cause a theatrical construction to take place. According to Knapp, "A

character cannot be defined outside the active experimental territory that he shares with others. He manifests himself in his relationship with others" (ibid). Lepage was influenced by this idea of a theatrical 'relationship,' and began investigating a concept where the actor had a personal involvement with the audience as well as with other actors on the stage. This was achieved, in part, by the improvisational tone of the performance, which made the audience feel they were connected with something present and evolving, rather than fixed and preordained.

The improvisation of 'Theatre Sports' became an important part of the Lepage process and was central to his training with Knapp while in Paris. The key idea in Lepage's discovery of his own creative process seems to come in the actor's multi-faceted awareness. "Awareness of process. Awareness of the audience. Awareness of choice. Awareness of responsibility" (Gibson 21). When improvising, an actor must let himself or herself go, and truly commit to the performance. While this is risky for the performer, the audience are aware of the spontaneity, while never personally feeling at risk. In this way the energy from the risk on stage will transcend the boundaries between actor and audience, allowing the audience to feel invigorated.

The scripting of Lepage's work comes through improvisation rather than the writing of a text. Lepage states categorically that when one does a piece of

theatre the very last step should be writing the script; the writing should never be the first step. In *The 7 Faces of Robert Lepage,* a documentary by Michel Duchesne, Lepage stated:

> When you set a play down in writing, print it, publish it, it should be the very last step, not the first one. Performances are actually part of the writing process. But ... more and more plays are written and published without ever being put on. And theatre departments in various universities actually make their students read such plays, plays that haven't gone through the production process, that haven't gone through the meat grinder. Plays that haven't found their voice yet. Nowadays, authors are resisting the input of the producer, the actors. They're ignoring the true nature of theatre.

Lepage believes that too often a theatre text is printed without ever being tried out, work-shopped, or put through the trials of presentation to an audience. Lepage is adamant that it is the process of evolving the production, followed by the presentation of the work, which will tell you if a script really does work. It is only once an audience has seen and responded to the production that Lepage will know if it really works, if it makes sense, and if it tells the right story.

The philosophy of 'text' in a Lepage production is never simply the concept of writing a story. As he says, "to write, to create ... you have to be able to amplify the stories you hear, give a large dimension to the stories you invent ... so, memory no longer distorts facts by filtering them" (Charest 15/16). Rather than simply telling a story, one must give the story a push, in order to discover just how far the story will go and to find out what boundaries there are. Lepage

goes on to state that when telling a story, it is vital to never allow one's memory or one's understanding to limit the possibilities. He believes that memory distorts facts and makes it "harder for history to be transformed into mythology ... [it is] the blurred, invented aspects of story-telling that give it its beauty and its greatness" (Charest 16). Lepage believes that "misperception has often helped [him] to see that our memories are often false ...[people] add and remove colours and people completely unconsciously" (ibid). Lepage revels in the unreliability of memory and believes that it is this very same unreliability that gives us the opportunity to create the most wonderful theatre. Instead of complaining about his memory, Lepage believes "we should rejoice in it, use it as a creative tool" (ibid).

Lepage goes on to suggest that often it is not even the story that has the greatest impact on the audience; it is the gaps in the story, the empty spaces and the pauses where nothing much happens, that intensify the communion aspect of his work. In his interview with Rémy Charest, Lepage went so far as to compare his own father's stories to those of Elizabethan theatre, when he said his father's "most beautiful stories were often told in the empty spaces ... it was thanks to the scene changes that the most beautiful Elizabethan monologues were written" (26). Lepage believes that so often in theatre: "what is done to fill the moment can become great art in itself" (ibid). As in real life, it is the moments between that can change or give you the time and the energy to understand the world

around you. For Lepage, it is during these moments of nothing that true communion takes place, when the performers will need to give "this extra effort to get the story clear, to illustrate it, to give another layer to it" (McAlpine 150). It is during these moments of silence that there is an urgency that fills the air. It is this emergency that connects us to the performance, which in turn enables the performers to invent, develop, and embroider the text.

In Lepage's work it is often in these moments of silence that the performers will come up with something really special, and enjoin the audience through communion into the heart of the performance. It is this energy that keeps the performance alive, and that becomes an intrinsic value in any Lepage work. Lepage believes there is nothing worse for an audience than to come into a theatre and watch a stagnant show. Lepage is adamant that the theatre has so much potential to truly invigorate the audience, to truly connect them to the performance. For Lepage, the concept of communion in the theatre is about the audience being a part of the show, part of the emotional journey, and part of the roller coaster ride that theatre can be. An audience should not just passively 'view' the work when instead they can experience the performance to the very core of their being.

For Lepage, the performances are simply another step in the writing process; often a new work is advertised as being a 'work in progress'. On

opening night the performers in a Lepage piece may still not know how the play will finish, and this fact is seldom fully appreciated by the companies and festivals that are co-producing so much of Lepage's work. Lepage has a problem similar to that which has plagued Peter Brook for so long, in that producers rarely understand why on opening night the production may not yet be finished. Producers inevitably want a finished product, but this is in direct contrast to Lepage's desire for communion, and his creative process. Most producers fail to accept that until an audience has viewed, evaluated, and responded to a work, that the work can be truly complete, and as every audience differs so too will their valuation.

VALUATION

Lepage suggests that the creation of the text is part of the process that creates the entire production, and as the production grows, so too will the text. Often this growth and creation is ongoing. There is no beginning, middle, or end to a Lepage work; it continues to grow, to develop and change, through trial and error. The beginning may become the end, the end the beginning; there may be new material developed for the middle, and the middle may never be seen. This vibrant chaos that Lepage seems effortlessly to generate comes at a price, in that his expectation of actors has often led to dissent, and his penchant for last-

minute changes is legendary. According to Lepage's long-term collaborator and close friend, actress Marie Gignac: "Two days before the opening of *Seven Streams* he suddenly decided that a character who had been a painter would become a Buto dancer. In two days, the poor actor had to learn Buto dancing [a Japanese movement form that requires years of training]. I have literally seen people cry" (*The Guardian*).

Almost on a nightly basis Lepage's work can change, with different emphasis and valuation placed on ever-changing aspects of the work. The production of *Seven Streams Of The River Ota* developed from a ninety-minute play into a seven-hour epic. *Hamlet* developed from a script for a large cast into *Elsinore*, a three-hour monologue. Lepage's theatrical philosophy is an ever-changing, ever-expanding set of concepts, and like his theatre, his ideas will change to encompass the piece he is working on. At the same time, there are underlying concepts that continue to permeate his work. The theatre of Robert Lepage has a life of its own, and goes a long way towards incarnating "Peter Brook's idea of theatre as a moving object, a thing which draws life from its own evolutionary process, and which begins dying once it becomes too settled" (Charest 13).

Far from being settled in its development, the collaborative approach employed by Lepage for *The Far Side of the Moon* saw an array of designers,

technicians and actors involved in the creation of the piece, right from its inception. In this style of theatre creation it's important not to let the text dominate the work, so as to allow for the freedom of thought to come through. Lepage feels that if the collaborative group are able to experiment, he finds "the show itself ultimately dictating what it wants to say" (Nicholas). While most directors direct from the outside and "just want to make it look good," Lepage will direct from within the performance, enabling his "personal style of 'bringing unity' to come to the fore" (ibid).

PERFORMANCE

The provocation of the audience to be a part of the creation process, to return to the theatre as the work continues to grow and change, ideally gives to the audience a sense of ownership. They have become part of the conspiracy of the production, and like the actors, the designers, and the director have a kind of 'insider's knowledge' of the work's evolution. This intimate relationship causes a sense of being in the middle of the rehearsal space, or in the middle of an improvisation, or in the middle of someone's lounge.

In *Tectonic Plates*, Lepage decided that just as the universe is always expanding it was essential for the show to always expand. *Tectonic Plates*

became a performance that would not only grow over time, but a production that would also travel. First performed in 1988 in Toronto, the piece moved on to New York, through to London, Barcelona, and Glasgow, until finally being made into a film in 1992. Lepage once stated, "we decided we would make the form of the work ... something that would be expanding" (Burrows 43). As with the previous work of Lepage, something close to fanaticism characterised the creating of the work, to allow for the continual expansion and growth of *Tectonic Plates* as it moved from one place to the next, emulating the reality of our world as it moves through time and space, continuously changing.

A working example of Lepage's communion achieved through the audience directly contributing to the creation of the work not exemplified above can be seen in the development of *The Dragons' Trilogy*. In 1985, when Lepage began work on this production, he incorporated a twelve-month rehearsal and performance aspect into the time frame for the work. *The Dragons' Trilogy* was presented to audiences, feedback was given, and the work was then rehearsed further. Then, a second version was presented, and then a third. The outcome was a five-and-a-half hour production that had enabled the audience to participate in the very creation of the work.

This concept of an ongoing rehearsal process continues for Lepage and can be seen even in his recent production of *Lipsynch*. After nearly three years

in development, in February this year the production premiered in Newcastle, before touring the Canary Islands; in June a five-hour version was performed in Montreal. There is more development work planned for the next twelve months, and by August 2008 the scene will have been set for "an expansive soap opera on a grand scale" (Fisher "Extraordinary"), as there are plans for the production to be nine-hours in length.

Again, Lepage is not the first or only practitioner to work in this manner, be it theatre, film, or music. The desire for an ongoing process of development can be seen in the work of Jean Cocteau and also Alain Resnais (a highly original filmmaker working during the second half of last century). One of Britain's most renowned contemporary directors, Mike Leigh, works in a similar vein, as does Laurie Anderson whose work is "ever evolving and reinventing" (Goldberg 7). Furthermore, from as early as 1973 Augusto Boal was using a government literacy program to develop a theatre that worked as if in a continual rehearsal. In this, "the spectators feel that they can intervene in the action. The action ceases to be presented in a determined manner, as something inevitable … Everything is subject to criticism, to rectification. All can be changed" (Brown, J. 526). For Lepage, this openness to change and growth abounds, and is an intrinsic production value in all his work.

TIME AND REALITY

Time is another production value that Lepage appears to find intrinsic to the beauty and surprise of his theatre. He is interested in how the misperception of time and reality draws the audience into a heightened sense of engagement, which in turn intensifies the desired communion effect. Firstly Lepage develops how long a period of time the piece will cover (expansion), secondly he explores the bending of time (compression), and thirdly he investigates the illusiveness of time (misperception). Keller states, the way Lepage "explores the presence of multiple times in any situation, event, or body, is aimed squarely at inventing a new kind of viewer, one who recreates themselves, and situates themselves within historical time as an active agent literally inventing new meanings" (n.p).

By showing the audience an extended period within a person or family's life, they become more involved in the development of the story. A Lepage piece will frequently show up to three generations of a family, as in both *Seven Streams of the River Ota* and *The Dragons' Trilogy*. In this way the audience are empowered to appreciate time more expansively, via the experience of witnessing many generations of a family. As a character's life unfolds on stage the audience connect them with a context of family, culture, and generations; the audience then become emotionally attached to the character through an understanding of who they are and where they have come from. The audience

begin to see present time in the context of past and future. In this way the audience emotionally invest in the outcome of the story. This emotional investment by the audience then further develops Lepage's desired sense of communion between the actor and the audience.

An ongoing use of numerology in connection to time is incorporated into Lepage's development process. Lepage will focus on a number until it becomes an intrinsic part of the work. This is obvious in a show like *The Dragons' Trilogy* with the number three: three girls from three families, three cultures, three countries, three languages, three time periods, three dragons, and three acting spaces. Also consider *Seven Streams of the River Ota* where the numbers three and seven are repeatedly used: with seven acts over seven hours, showing three generations on three continents. It appears that Lepage uses numerology to attempt to affect the audience at a spiritual, superstitious, subliminal level. For my own production, this idea of generations of a family being shown became the initial idea that built the foundation for the rest of the work, developing to a point where at one stage we were considering four generations over a period of ninety years.

Through the use of dreams or drugs or simple theatricality, Lepage's characters step out of themselves and into the lives of people from the past or future. In *The Dragons' Trilogy* there are moments at the start of each scene

showing a brief synopsis of the coming scene, as if in fast-forward. In *Seven Streams of the River Ota* there is the wonderful bathroom scene with three people using the space at the same time, while portraying three separate time frames. In *Vinci* the audience sees a contemporary person meeting with Leonardo himself. *Needles and Opium* presents a collision between Miles Davis and Jean Cocteau, even though at the time it is set they were on opposite sides of the Atlantic. The focus here is again on an interface between time and space, with Lepage distorting time, or memory, or reality, to connect the audience with the performance more fully. These collapses of time and space intensify the audience focus and involve them deeper into the work. One of the more famous Lepagean moments of merging realities is in a sequence from *Le Confessional* where the audience viewing of the live production in the present day seems to merge with Lepage's fictional spectators within the play watching Alfred Hitchcock's film *I Confess* in 1952.

Another production value which Lepage feels is vitally intrinsic to the beauty and surprise of theatre is the theme of drug use, with its various effects, and the opportunity it creates to alter time and reality. Drugs have been present in almost all of Lepage's plays, and it is "important for its metaphorical qualities and because it allows for the transformation of perception, in characters as well as in audiences" (Charest 71). Through the use of drugs and the effects that they create, human beings are able to fly on the stage, walk through walls, become

larger than life, or smaller than a fly. The performers are able to go on dreams that take the audience on a special journey, which they could never see in a standard 'fourth wall' production. Through the device of characters portraying drug use and its effects, rooms rotate, furniture runs away, and characters step out of themselves and into the lives of people from the past or future.

In a Lepage production the audience are provoked to enter into an altered time state, and to come to their own conclusion about what they have witnessed; in a similar way the Catholic Mass uses metaphor and theatrical devices to transport the audience to the time of Christ. Like Lepage, I have developed a fascination with incorporating dream sequences and drug use into my work, for the wonderful theatre opportunities they create to develop a heightened sense of reality, and the way this intensifies the unconscious connection between actor and audience. In my piece I chose to include an ongoing dream sequence in an attempt to emulate Lepage by subverting the audience's sense of a progression of time.

LAYERING

The communion between actor and audience that has often become a focus within all the practical applications of Lepage's work, concerns the multi-

layering of narrative. Once multi-layering is achieved, the audience will feel the story on a variety of levels, through the soundscape, the visual artistry, the story, and the action. Yet one must take care that "if you're going to be telling stories with sound and vision you have to assure yourself that one is not contradicting the other. Or one should be a counterpoint to the other: you always have to play on two levels" (McAlpine 149). Layering story upon story, theme upon theme, and image upon image, Lepage possesses a remarkable ability to combine ideas and objects into a complex whole. By "clearly delineating a scene in three words, two gestures, one image" (Vaïs), Lepage encourages the audience towards sensory attentiveness.

Edward Gordon Craig preceded Lepage in utilising a layering effect to create a greater level of connection to the audience, by first removing the layers of the production. Often Craig was attempting to develop specifically a non-literary and multi-media style of theatre, as seen in his 1905 production of Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. First, Craig omitted all stage directions from his original design concept, and then all the dialogue, thus "reducing highly verbal discussion to repetitions of the name of Cleopatra's servant, as an echoing and multiplying whisper: Ftatateeta … Ftatateeta" (Innes, "Craig"). Although this appears at odds with Lepage's extensive texts in works like *Elsinore*, the effect of the multilingualism in much of Lepage's theatre "gives speech a physical, objectified texture … removing verbal meaning" (ibid).

Lepage has stated categorically that his ideas for a theatrical development are specifically "in reaction against a word-culture" (ibid). His more recent work, like *Zulu Time*, is almost wordless, with the full-length production to date containing only two very brief moments of pre-recorded dialogue. The first words in the production come from an airplane's safety instructions and are repeated in different languages, and played over a scene of three men copulating with an airhostess. The second words are the voicemail messages of would-be lovers talking on a telephone dating-service.

While all Lepage's work shows this multi-layering effect, the concept is strongly exemplified in *The Far Side of the Moon*. In this work Lepage performs numerous roles, incorporating cinematic themes, multi-media, and puppetry. The production then travels back to childhood and forward into space. Sydney theatre reviewer Simon Nicholas wrote that *The Far Side of the Moon* is "multi-layered." He then quoted Lepage as saying "theatre needs to be multifaceted as an audience should be able to relate to a variety of aspects" (Nicholas). This multi-layering is most noticeable in the seemingly standard stage backdrop. What looks like a concertinaed black wall has a round window in the middle, which at different times becomes a washing machine, then a fish bowl, a space portal, and a CAT scan machine. "In another case of not believing what one is seeing, the use of multimedia makes a formally invisible outline of a lift appear seemingly from the void. However, this use of clever staging and visual

complexity is not just for the sake of it, but rather enhances the depth and impact of performance" (ibid). Above the stage is a huge revolving mirror, and "This deceptively simple device allows for a series of scenes, which are transcendental and visually spectacular" (ibid). In the final scene, Lepage even 'space walks.' This final "breathtaking" (ibid) moment of zero gravity brings to the production emotional depth, by adding a layer that is both reflective and full of hope.

In conclusion, it would appear that Lepage utilises a multitude of styles, production values, and methodologies, and he develops any or all of them within any given piece. Lepage told Rémy Charest, "I find myself more than ever returning to the idea of the theatre as a meeting place for architecture, music, dance, literature, acrobatics, play, and so on. In all my shows, this is what has interested me most of all: gathering artists together, combining different styles and disciplines" (22). In my practical project, I considered what aspects of Lepage's methodologies and production values were the most appropriate influences in the development of my own Lepagesque work. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on how and why my choices were made.

CHAPTER FOUR

I really didn't think it would travel at all. It's such a personal, strange object. I think it has to do with that weird paradox that if you want to do something that everyone identifies with, and if you want to touch universal themes, you have to be extremely local.

(Robert Lepage on "The Anderson Project," Telegraph, 4 October 2003).

THE PRACTICAL PROJECT

In February 2007, as part of the Wellington Fringe Festival, I drew together a small group of people to develop a production with the working title of '*Generations.*' I hoped to ascertain whether Lepage's philosophy of an actor and audience communion could be applied in a New Zealand context. Initially there were five people who were going to work on the project. Unfortunately, this number quickly diminished to three. This became my first drawback.

The remaining collaborators were myself, Ants Heath and Rosie Otley. Ants has been regularly performing around New Zealand since attaining a Diploma in Performance in 1997, specialising in Physical and Experimental Theatre. He is a

regular street performer, is accomplished with masks, and is working towards a B.A. in theatre at Victoria University. Rosie, though only 14, first appeared on stage at the age of seven. While Rosie has only been in three previous productions, she attends regular tutoring sessions. My reason for choosing Rosie came from her natural stage presence, her commitment, and from my desire to incorporate differing ages and genders in the work. My choice of Ants came from knowledge of his theatrical experience in improvisation and alternative theatre.

PRODUCTION VALUES

Once the planning began in earnest the first obstacle was immediately apparent. I realised that I could not cover all of the production values that I feel Lepage brings to his work, due in main to the huge time constraints I was under. Lepage will often have the luxury of developing his work over a period of two, three, even four years. I on the other hand had around six weeks during which time the actors also had other commitments. So I decided to limit my practical project to an exploration of communion using these five Lepagean values: Intimate Narrative, Layering, Mythic Overtones, Physical Scale, and Displacement.

My first concern was to find a narrative that would achieve a particular kind of quality and resonance in my work, namely the development of a communion

between the actor and the audience. I required a story that was highly intimate and personal, but one that also had a universal overtone. I decided early on to focus on a story about New Zealanders fighting and dying in other people's wars. I felt that this would relate to my heritage, and to my sense of being Kiwi.

I decided on a Kiwi story because I felt this would enable me to create something familiar for the actors and for the audience, which would thereby develop a significant emotional connection between us all. I wanted to create a rite of passage, something mythical, a hero's journey that would emulate some of Lepage's narratives. I was searching for a tale of triumph and transformation pertinent to New Zealand, but which could also resonate in other cultures. Lepage regularly incorporates different cultures in his work, weaving their stories into the main narrative, and I needed to find a way to express a Kiwi perspective as well as to contrast this with other cultural perspectives.

I also chose to exploit my fascination with Lepage's ongoing use of numerology in relation to the layering of time. I concluded that Lepage uses numerology in association with timelines in his work, as a means of connecting the audience to the actor through a sensation of rhythm. Therefore, the periods that have become the focus of *Generations* are Galipoli in 1915, Italy in 1945, and Vietnam in 1975. By looking at three generations of three soldiers from three

wars, separated by three lots of three decades I hoped to emulate Lepage's time elements.

I wanted to achieve physical scale, thereby enabling me to create the idea of a world that is mythic, but also the idea of the expansive New Zealand landscape. I began to consider the dialectic between the sheer emptiness of New Zealand, with its vastness of countryside and rural environment, in comparison to the very crowded and claustrophobic sense of a war with large battles and the movement of people. Lepage's productions are often performed in large spaces such as sports halls and exhibition centres. Vast screens for projecting images, floor space that facilitates ambitious movement and promenades, and structures that climb upwards as well as horizontally are common in Lepage's work. While I knew it would be impossible to mimic this kind of scale in my own production because of the lack of time and resources, I also felt that, like Lepage, we should be mindful of the physical space as an agent of communication.

I have talked previously about the powerful effect of displacement in Lepage's theatre, discussing how displacement upsets the audience's habitual response, forcing them to watch the performance at a more imaginative and intense level. Moreover, displacement can undermine our expectations, stir emotions, and create a charge of energy that keeps the action alive. As rehearsal progressed at least two devices were explored in *Generations* that were designed

to establish a sense of displacement within the audience's consciousness. The first device was the use of an immortal soldier. It was felt that the immortal soldier, a man of every war, would instigate a sense of displacement as the audience questioned who he was, and why he had never died. In a sense he was first and foremost a Kiwi soldier, but at a deeper level he also stood for every soldier from every war, a universal character. The second device used was the layering of a universal narrative with that of a more personal family story. Although the intimate story was not from my own history, it resonated with my ancestral past. The story changed much along the way, moving from a tale of two brothers to the story of a father and son. The use of juxtaposition between the narratives of an immortal character and a mortal father and son was designed to create both a theatrical resonance and an emotional displacement. The audience are made to shift between time and place in ways that disrupt the idea of logical progression.

Lepage will use technology to create a gateway into the audience's psyche through a sense of displacement. He uses technological devices of light or shadow to develop physical scale, hydraulic stage apparatus to extend the performance space in all directions, projected images that take the audience away from the immediate space into any required universal or intimate realm, and live video leads to explore the sensation of multiple worlds. Furthermore, technology is the tool Lepage regularly uses to build his productions up to a mythic scale. For my own production however, it was imperative to consider the possible risks of a

highly technical show undermining the potential communion aspects I wanted to explore, if handled correctly. Moreover, I needed to ascertain the viability of a highly technological production in relation to my limited resources of time and money. Here my technological ambition for the production began to deteriorate as I realised that I simply could not emulate Lepage. Instead I had to make do with a shadow screen and simple lighting techniques to achieve visual effects. When I revisit this piece in the future I will be more open to the idea of cameras, live video leads, and projectors.

THE REHEARSAL PERIOD

As the rehearsals developed it became clear to me that many of my ideas had in fact been brewing inside me for years: stories from my childhood, histories of my family, thoughts of war and its futility. As the practical project began in earnest these ideas began to solidify and take direction. During the six weeks leading up to the performances we discussed, improvised, wrote, and developed ideas utilising the Lepagean values of audience feedback, resources, displacement, layering, technology, dreams, drugs, the expansion and compression of time, and above all the deeper emotional connection between actor and audience.

The working name for the piece, *Generations,* came about more through necessity than anything, as once the marketing for the performance began the work had to have a name. My first discovery came almost immediately in the writing of the media release as many of our ideas were in the embryonic stage and far from finalised. The *Generations* media release read as follows:

> *For over one hundred years generations of New Zealanders have fought and died in other countries. Fighting the enemy ... whoever that may be. So who is the hero, which side is right, and does anyone really win? This story covers ninety years and four generations of New Zealanders at war from Gallipoli through to Iraq, over-lapping the generations as it goes. It starts with a Solder in a dream sequence during World War One while waiting to be shot by a firing squad. World War Two finds another solder calling on his New Zealand ancestry in his hour of need. A hospital in Vietnam sees war through the eyes of the New Zealand staff as they treat wounded Vietnamese locals, and take morphine to hide their fear. Finally, 2005 finds an 'American' solder being tortured by an Iraqi integrator with a surprising twist. All is not what is seems.*

Rehearsals continued and the work developed. A week from opening I felt happy with what we had achieved. From the darkness a young woman sings 'I didn't raise my son to be a soldier.' During the song, a poignant story in itself, two brothers part company as they head overseas to war. Then a World War One trial scene overlaps with the song, and as the World War One soldier is convicted, the woman is killed in an explosion. During the confusion the World War One soldier escapes, ending up in the middle of a World War Two battlefield. The World War One and World War Two soldiers meet without realising they are father and son. Here we see two soldiers from two different times, thrown together by fate. They fight, chat, steal a German tank, and finally end up under artillery fire.

The World War One soldier is injured and the World War Two soldier carries him to hospital. It transpires that it is in the middle of Vietnam, where a nurse cares for them. She is the grown daughter of the World War Two soldier. The World War One soldier is given morphine and begins a tirade of half stories to prominent figures in history, whom he could never have met. The nurse realises that the soldiers are talking about the wrong war, whereupon they are arrested and interrogated. Just as the audience are beginning to understand what is happening the piece returns to the firing squad and the World War One soldier is shot.

It was hoped at this stage the audience would get the sensation that in the moment before death the soldier's potential future had flashed before their eyes, rather than the normal idea of the past. The audience have been privileged to see the protagonist's life, even though it didn't happen, and they would be encouraged to think about what could have been if only he had lived, if only he had never entered this war.

The storyline continued with a photographer taking a photo of the World War One soldier, and then a photograph is taken of the World War Two soldier. Then the photographer takes a photo of the Vietnamese nurse as she is interviewed about her work, and speaks of her feeling of hopelessness. As the photographer moves away he becomes a journalist in Iraq looking for a story. He is captured, imprisoned and interrogated. But here we see things from the opposite point of

view, that of the interrogators. He is just a man doing his job, going home to a wayward teenager, and struggling with his duty. Finally the piece finishes, with the interrogator releasing his prisoner and then going away to commit suicide. The supposed terrorist speaks the final line of the piece: 'I am an intelligent man, but I just don't understand this world any more'.

The creative process to date had developed many emotionally complete characterisations, there was a clever use of the theatrical space, and we had incorporated a number of simple, sharp and poignant counterpoints, (for example, the female voice against the backdrop of war and brutality). The young woman singing was working well and proving very evocative, and we were attempting to develop a layering of images over her singing scenes, which would express the time periods between World War One and World War Two. The scenes between the soldiers were filled with plenty of humour and comradery, with much mileage from the banter between the two soldiers still to come in terms of presenting the human face of war, while also connecting the idea of war and its futility to the audience. The scene with the injured soldier, full of morphine and in hospital, was expanding and full of possibility, and we were exploring the sense of displacement that his drugged state was creating by developing this sequence to tell a second story. Our Iraq sequence at the end was proving to be a powerfully provocative piece, and the show's final moments were quite traumatic.

Although time was of the essence, the collaborative group felt the piece was developing well, and we began to pat ourselves on the proverbial back. However, I realised that our creative process had lost sight of the core principle in the Lepage methodology we were trying to utilise. While initially we were developing our piece through the use of the RSVP Cycles, we had reached a point where both the resource and improvisation aspects were being sidestepped. From the resource point of view, we thought we had started with a number of tangible objects, but in reality we had started with a number of themes. Concepts of war, loss, futility, and struggle were apparent in the work, but none of these concepts held the status of 'resource' that Lepagean 'cycle' methodology required. Moreover, though we had initially developed all of our work through improvisation, quite quickly we had fallen into familiar routines of scripting our ideas, and handing pieces of typed paper to each other as completed scenes.

I found myself on a daily basis writing scripts, as I seemed incapable of working without them. As the constraints of time increased, my desire for a finalised 'scripted' production began to overshadow the creative process. Lepage does not write scripts. I, on the other hand, had huge issues in working without one. I began to realise how respectful I had always been of a scripted play, and how 'sloppy' I was being with my own. I hit a wall in the work, and though I wanted to work within the Lepagean sense of improvisation it became very difficult.

Around this time, for a small invited audience, we had a showing of the work in progress. Brothers were separated first by war and then by time. A World War One soldier is killed by a British firing squad, a World War Two soldier is killed by Allied bombs, Vietnamese are getting injured by their own people, and the Iraq terrorist shows a story of humanity, by stating 'my father fought in World War Two, he was on your side then'. Immediately it became obvious that neither the actors nor the audience to date really knew what the story was saying. Although the stories were layered on top of each other, and the work had an overriding sense of displacement, there was little in the way of clear narrative through-line. This was a story of soldiers going overseas and fighting and dying for other countries, and asking why. However, this story was not a quintessentially New Zealand story. The piece showed well the idea of people fighting, but not the idea of New Zealanders fighting other people's wars. There were interesting moments and engaging characters but the story was too loose and non-specific. The pathos between the characters was successful, but it needed to be much more rigorous in its narrative, and structurally the Iraq piece at the end seemed unrelated to the other work.

We decided to solidify what we had, bring in a tangible resource, and utilise the technique of improvisation by incorporating the resource into the work. While this was not following the true sense of the Lepagean methodology, with only a week till opening night the issue for me was time, and I concluded we would not

be able to completely start again. However, there were radical alterations made over the next few days, and these included the dropping of the Iraq story, and sharpening the piece in terms of narrative.

The resource incorporated in the piece was chosen more from a whim than from careful consideration. During a conversation I began tapping my fingers on a small filing cabinet. The noise took my interest, and I began beating harder. The sound reverberated through the room, and was reminiscent of the gunfire sound effects we had been trying to incorporate. At once the cabinet was dragged into the rehearsal area, emptied of contents, and utilised in differing ways. It provided a sound scape, a shield to hide behind, a platform to stand on, and a barrier to move around. At one point we discussed the possibility of littering the theatre with filing cabinets, even making the audience sit on them or climb over them to get to their seat. We began in earnest to try and acquire as many four draw filing cabinets as we could find, as soon as possible.

My next concern came with the realisation that the work was losing sight of the communion aspect intrinsic to the original development concept. Many of the individual scenes were developing well, and we had established both empathy and emotional connection for the audiences with some of our characterisations. Yet the piece lacked clarity in terms of its story. Therefore, I went back to the drawing

board, and considered what I felt would be the very first question asked by Lepage of any theatre he creates, 'what is the piece saying and how is it saying this'?

I wanted this to be a quintessential New Zealand story, and began to question how I could tell this story out of the elements we already had and what new elements we needed to include. I asked myself, how and in what way is the New Zealand war story poignant? A greater interrogation of this question was needed, to get to the point of why these wars are so futile for New Zealanders. What I now needed more than anything was to get the story to resonate for a New Zealand audience.

Why did New Zealander's fight these wars for other countries with so much zest? We are a small nation, compared to the rest, and per capita how much can we really do? It seemed New Zealanders are often out to prove they are as good as anyone else. In New Zealand there is often a huge desire to be egalitarian, shown in our need to be considered equals. This need seems to come from our size and sense of having no developed individual identity. In New Zealand we seem torn between taking other countries' identities as our own, and always searching to prove who we are.

The immortal soldier became a narrative device to flesh out the story of being a Kiwi, from the first settlers through to today. The rehearsals began taking shape, with the performance opening as a monologue from the soldier:

> "G'day. You're not from round here are ya?
> Sorry, don't mean to be rude … but it's just kind of obvious.
> Me? I'm a New Zealander mate. How long? I don't know … all me life."

But now another question was posed: Who was he talking to? Was he talking to Hitler, to God, to a refugee from Cambodia, or was he just some crazy old man at the bus stop? Moreover, an immortal soldier in the midst of the work certainly created a sense of displacement, but as yet this was of little relevance to the progression of the story. We realised that displacement was not in itself enough and we needed at least some logical narrative as well. In the vein of *The Rhyme Of The Ancient Mariner*, the idea of the immortal soldier telling the story of his life became one of a normal Kiwi bloke just sitting around chatting to whoever would listen. Rather than focusing on him, the focus became the story about New Zealand ancestry, 'I came here in 1845 …' and the soldier begins telling about his forebears settling in New Zealand, farming, and raising a family.

Initially I was concerned by the growing irregularity of the monologue, but then I became interested in exploring Lepage's delight in the fallibility of memory.

Often people complain about memory, calling it unreliable, yet Lepage feels "we should rejoice in it, use it as a creative tool" (Charest 21). At another time Lepage stated that to create, "you have to be able to amplify the stories you hear, give a large dimension to the stories you invent. ... so, memory no longer distorts facts by filtering them, which makes it harder for history to be transformed" (Charest 19). With this in mind we stopped worrying about the logic of the piece, concerning ourselves instead with inventing, exaggerating, and layering our ideas.

As the production developed it was concluded that with the soldier being immortal, and telling a story by relying on memory, there was no longer a need for the story to be chronological, utilising the Lepagean idea of the illusiveness of time. Lepage once stated it is "the blurred, invented aspects of storytelling that give it its beauty and its greatness ... misperception has helped me to see that our memories are often false, or close to being false" (Charest 20). In *Generations* the immortal soldier's story was no longer a story from beginning to end, it was a conversation, a 'stream of consciousness.' His story could ramble, and as he thought of something, he would say it.

Next, we began to cut the monologue up and place bits of it throughout the show, interspersing the monologue with scenes we had already set. I found that by mixing up the narrative it sometimes helped to make the following action coherent, and sometimes work in counterpoint to it. I then came to realise that if

the soldier couldn't die then the worst thing possible would be watching his countrymen die. The immortal soldier would be unable to make a connection to others, as every time he got close, they would die. The story of an immortal soldier going through time finally began to work, and began to exemplify some of the communion aspects of Lepage's theatre. It tapped into the audience's sense of the mythic, while carrying a very particular life story. Like many of Lepage's characters, the immortal Kiwi soldier was both of the past and the present, of the mythic and the immediate.

THE PERFORMANCE

True to Lepage's desire for a process of continual rehearsal, no sooner would an idea show coherence in my project than another idea would turn upside down, and changes were still taking place ten minutes before the end of closing night. Over the three performances the show developed a great deal, and those audience members that saw the opening and closing nights agreed it had changed considerably. However, once opening night was completed the changes were more connected to pace and energy and focus, as we talked to audience and decided to explore some areas further or allow other areas to expand.

Any glitches in the production were always going to be covered by the strength of the main actors who were both experienced performers. Given the opportunity to continue developing the production I would definitely want to go back to my primary research, and flesh out what I already had. Some of the immortal soldier's monologues were really poetic, using unfinished sentences, imagery, metaphor, and often being non-sequential. They certainly gave the work a surreal coherence. With more time, or an opportunity to redraft the piece, I would really want to get inside this character's head. I would also focus on his story, further creating through him the 'vehicle' that Lepage develops, as this was still lacking in *Generations*. While there were elements that worked well in terms of the theatricality of the piece, what probably let the work down was story structure. A greater dramatic tension and a richer, more complex narrative were needed.

I feel that *Generations* was lacking in its exploration of the psychology of the individual story. We were missing the personal element so very pertinent in Lepage's work, and therefore were not developing the idea of the individual or the universal ethos. The father and son scenes in *Generations* were good. They were unique individuals but were also characters that everyone in the audience recognised. We understood and empathised with them and with their conflict. However, the audience was left wanting more, as the father and son scenes were snapshots of a much bigger story. In future development I would certainly keep

these characters but explore a more extensive layering between the father and son narrative, and the contrasting story of battle to create a greater sense of comparison. I believe this would draw the audience into a specific and highly individual relationship with the actors.

Although a great deal was achieved with the simple use of the rear gauze cloth, with more time there were many technological devices that we would have explored. In the same way as the path around the pit in *The Dragons' Trilogy* created a kind of border, the gauze in *Generations* created another world, a universal space within the performance. The potential was then for image referencing that would have made the time referencing much sharper; for example, the songs and the singer were not always clearly connecting the audience to a specific time reference. Given more rehearsal time we would have been able to develop projected images to counter-point the narrative. In this way the action taking place on the stage would be either enhanced by or offset by the projected image. An intimate dialogue about home could be played against an image of chaos and large-scale destruction, or sitting around a campfire laughing about roasting marshmallows could be shadowed by the images of tanks driving past, or a gun battle could be shown in the foreground against the image of a child's first birthday candle being extinguished. These juxtapositions would have been effective in both the layering of narrative and the displacement of the audience.

The one aspect in *Generations* that I felt above all else was desperately missing was the ongoing input of a writer. Although Phil Braithwaite came to a couple of runs and suggested many ideas, *Generations* needed the through line that a writer offers to a production. While Lepage does not agree with writing a script, a writer would have brought a single overriding idea to a production, which connects the start and the end and all the elements along the way. People who study Lepage often forget what an excellent writer he must be to so cohesively connect all the strands of the stories together. Scriptwriters have a very definite way of looking at a piece that a performer doesn't always have. They consider narrative and metaphor, while a performer considers theme and character.

After the *Generations* performances there were mixed reviews, and quite mixed audience response to the production. On some levels it would appear the production worked well, intrinsically connecting with the audience at quite an emotional level. In a recent review on Lepage, it states categorically that "all his presentational flash would be worthless were it not founded upon a deep, meditative sensitivity, not just to individual human traits but seemingly to the very fact of being human" (Financial Times). Although I had hoped for a spiritual connection in *Generations*, I feel the show failed to achieve this.

Generations consisted of many vignettes rather than a series of intertwining narratives, which made it very different from Lepage. In *Seven Streams of the*

River Ota Lepage's action 'unfolds at a slow, though not a tedious, pace, and does not force grand resolutions. Although the events depicted span 50 years and three continents, it is the spirit of Japan ... which informs the piece ... the overall experience combines cramp and a fundamentally inexpressible enlightenment' (Financial Times). I felt that *Generations* did not achieve an inexpressible enlightenment. This is not to say there wasn't the potential to go further if there had been time. Also, while my original idea was to build layers of narrative, the father and son story was almost too Kiwi by itself, and needed to be set against another countries' cultural stories, to establish the sense of a global relationship and comparison.

While the philosophy behind Lepage's theatre is concise, and the working methodologies he uses are a simple four step developmental process, Lepage's theatre seems very specific to him; while other practitioners have regularly attempted to emulate his work few have had the ongoing success that he has experienced. In the next chapter I will bring forth the conclusion to this thesis, explaining in much more detail what I have learnt from this process, and where I see potential for further development of my own theatre practice with regards to Lepage's ideas.

CONCLUSION

During an interview with Robert Lepage in 1994, Rémy Charest referred to Lepage's 'Genius' ... and Lepage laughed. Lepage then questioned how anyone could take seriously the critics who "cry genius one day and, soon after, consider you an idiot."

(Robert Lepage talks with Rémy Charest, "Connecting Flights" 67).

A HARD ACT TO FOLLOW

Like Rémy Charest, I sense the genius in Lepage, and Charest is by no means the only person to have referred to Lepage as a genius; it is a title that has followed him for most of the last two decades. Much of the time what Lepage does is explore time-honoured theatrical devices and use them to serve his unique vision and imagination. Lepage plays with fly wires, he plays with light and shadow, he tells stories that entertain, and he creates spectacles that dazzle.

In my opinion, Lepage's genius comes from his ability to put certain elements together that achieve in his work emotional intimacy and mythic scale. Lepage, it seems, can be bombarded with ideas and yet continuously discover a

through-line for the story, which brings together intimate narratives, universal themes, and thematic juxtapositions. What I discovered about myself throughout the practical component of this thesis was that while I have a certain theatrical ability, I could not hold together the many dynamics of a Lepage work while sustaining a coherent vision. To paraphrase Max Ernst, you need two eyes to be an artist, one that looks out into the world and sees everything, and one that looks inwards and sees the real you. From my point of view it seems I looked out quite well, but looking in can be quite troublesome.

The concept of ritual in Lepage's theatre is intrinsically connected to the familiar. The parallels between Lepage's theatre and religious ritual can easily be seen through rhythm, symbol, metaphor, rites of passage, the universal journey, sacred space, and the idea of proceeding to a higher plane. Again these approaches are not specific to Lepage, but when these elements are added to his idiosyncratic style and vision, it makes for highly distinctive theatre.

I wished to explore this idea of displacement in my piece, and to establish paradoxical elements. I sensed that the actor would be able to bring the audience closer to the reality of the work by breaking down the illusion of theatre before the audience's eyes. However, we failed to establish the connection desired, and though much of the work had potential, on the whole the production had a very disjointed feel, rather than creating a sense of displacement.

While I desired to create a theatrical work that concisely developed much of what Lepage expresses in his work, it became an impossible task. I was under huge pressure to get the work done in time, there were personal circumstantial issues that hindered my work, and I was extensively encumbered by a limited acting body. For Lepage, none of these aspects seem problematic, as although he is extremely busy he appears to have almost unlimited time and resources at his disposal. Furthermore, Lepage has an excellent environment for working in, where he can produce his work at a leisurely pace.

Lepage works in a laboratory type of theatre, where he will get a group of people together and spend a long time working with ideas. After time he will bring people in to show where he is up to, then go back to work developing the piece. Then one day, often years down the track, he has a production ready to perform. Lepage simply has more time; he doesn't need to rush for a deadline and have the work completed. If a festival piece is still in the process of being developed Lepage says that it's just not ready, and that this is what we have.

In my work I was unable to fully utilise the idea of an intimate narrative, and this needed to be explored far more thoroughly. I struggled very much with developing the narrative through-line as well, and there was a definite lack of narrative layering in my piece. More time spent developing the relationships in the piece, building what kind of action would most express the theme, and allowing

the dialectics in the story to be fully expressed and expanded would have been helpful. Yet what was really missing for me was a strong sense of identification with the characters from the audience. We needed to ask two questions: 'Why should the audience care?' and 'How could we make them care?' Lepage, I believe, instinctively asks these questions when shaping a narrative because he understands about emotional dynamics and the twists in the tale that will keep the audience engaged.

As a production, *Generations* was so much about this place and time that I didn't incorporate other stories that would have given the work variety and points of cultural comparison. I believe that my initial instinct about the Iraq story was probably correct; however it was not the right story and there was no place for it here, as it focused away from New Zealand rather than towards it. But suppose an Iraq person had just immigrated to this country, and the counter-point to the other story is that New Zealand hasn't really involved itself in Iraq? Maybe the point of New Zealand's maturity as a nation is that we have finally been able to pull back from war, and are mature enough now to feel that we don't have to fight other people's wars.

What Lepage does is create continuously developing ritual, repetition, familiarity and connection throughout his work. Again, this reminds me of the Catholic Mass where every detail of the ritual has a representational value, the

blood, the bread, and so on. Nothing just stands for itself; everything is a metaphor for several things. Lepage's skill of drawing from the very personal elements of his own life and the deeper strata of his unconscious gives his work a specific resonance. It is as if he knows his characters at a profound level and is able to then translate this knowledge into dialogue and action. Now that I have had first hand experience of crafting my own stories, I am humbled by his skill.

Due to the time constraints I faced, what I created was inevitably going to be a flawed product. Yet the point of *Generations* was not to create a definitive piece, but to develop a work in progress, from which I could learn more about Lepage, which I did. In Lepage's work there is a definite 'something' that was not in mine, and I have concluded that it is his ability to dream. Lepage never limits his dreams, and will explore them fervently. I too had dreams, yet I was forever pushing my dreams down, feeling they were not possible, or impractical, or simply not possible to achieve in the time.

A THEATRE OF DREAMS

My original concept had come from a factual New Zealand story of two brothers who served in the Second World War as part of the Maori Battalion. During a skirmish one of the brothers was shot, and the other brother went AWOL

for a few days to try and find the body. As it transpired the brother had been wounded, but was not dead. In the end both men returned to allied territory and remained on active duty until the war's end. Recently, I have started to question if I can find a parallel in a story from another culture to set against the Kiwi story. In the town in which I grew up there was a man we all called 'Nick the Greek'. As a young teenager Nick had escaped from a German work camp by swimming across the Nile. At 13 years of age this youth had emerged from the river with nothing to his name but the shorts he was wearing. He then made his way to New Zealand, and became a respected businessman.

In the next draft of *Generations* I would develop at least three stories that would inter connect and provide points of contrast. The first story is of a young boy at home on the farm, safely surrounded by family and friends, living within a quiet green expanse. He sits on a hillside singing with gusto the songs his father sang as he worked the land. As the young boy watches over the farm on a frosty morning, he awaits his father's return, while projected images of war overshadow his life.

The second story is of the father, a young kiwi soldier at war. He has been separated from his battalion, and is now lost and alone somewhere in Northern Africa. Shot and dying in the dark ominous surroundings of a German occupied

area, he knows his brother is searching for him. All he can do is wait, wishing he could see his son once more.

The third story is of a teenage youth, a young Greek boy whose entire family was killed before his eyes. He has escaped from the Germans in an area where nobody even speaks his language. As he drags himself, exhausted, from the river Nile he comes face to face with a wounded soldier, who is dying in a hollow against the backdrop of a desert wasteland. When the soldier dies saving the Greek boy's life there is a sense of duty formed, and this teenage youth vows that he will travel to New Zealand, to see this 'desert' of green he just heard about, and to tell the young child about the father's sacrifice.

My process of discovery included thoughts of a young man doing a haka and calling on his ancestry in his time of need. I see in my mind a lone figure on stage in mid battle cry; slowly other presences are noticed, until finally a full squad of young men complete the haka. In this one scene I could see shadows of the actor being utilised to create the multiple spirits that surrounded him. As he is searching both the physical and spiritual world, he would also delve into the intimate story of his relationship with either his son, or his brother, and the inevitable turmoil that family face.

The exercise of producing *Generations* proved to be both frustrating and enlightening. The attempt to achieve communion between actor and audience depends, as I discovered, on a highly poetic communication, plus a rigorous audience involvement that is sensory, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. My failure to achieve this at a level that satisfied me, had as much to do with a limitation of personal skill as it had to do with material and time resources. However, I have learned that to place communion at the centre of a theatrical experiment, can lead to a theatre that challenges assumptions, creates deeper emotional connection, and encourages authenticity.

My stories, though always important to me, were never really given an opportunity to become the focus they required. Instead I chose another direction. I regret that I did not obey my own instinct as Lepage does.

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