

## Theatricality of Marionettes in Robert Lepage's performance *mise en scene*<sup>1</sup>

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In not such a distant past puppets were seen only as part of children's theatre. However, they now have an important place in contemporary theatre as part of exciting and innovative performance language. Actors are trained to use puppets and objects and understand the modes through which puppets and animated objects live on stage. In contemporary performance, puppet theatre has cultural currency, visual signification and storytelling quality. Not only does puppet theatre have a rich tradition rooted in a popular culture (not only in European but also in Asian traditions) but it also has theatrical qualities that can communicate to contemporary audiences regardless of their cultural and language contexts. Like visual images, through movement, dance, and music, puppets can relate the stage experience to international audiences without the need for a specific verbal language as the main carrier of the communication process. Particularly in a collaborative devising process, puppets are objects used as part of the performance *mise en scene* (writing through performance) and they enter into a new/renovated experience through their interaction with all other theatrical elements. They can become whatever they are required to be. Their presence is borrowed as a host to a matrix of new meanings. This paper will focus on Robert Lepage, Canadian theatre author, and three of his productions – *The Seven Streams of River Ota*, *The Far Side of The Moon*, and *Zulu Time* – which employed marionettes as theatrical resources in the devising process and as part of the performance language.

Lepage rejected Stanislavskian realism and acting based on psychological truth of character driven storytelling favouring performance based on representation and symbolic reality. He prefers a theatricality that consists of multiple references to visual, audio, body/physical, spatial, objects, and brings them together into a live multimedia theatre. For Andy Lavender “Lepage is a pioneer of mixed media performance, in particular involving video and slide projections

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on the original research and material that has been published in Dundjerovic, Aleksandar *The Theatricality of Robert Lepage* (Montreal: McGill-Queens' University Press).

in his shows”.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Lepage’s theatricality is in between various media, from traditional (photography, slides, and puppetry) to contemporary (digital video and robotics). In Lepage’s theatricality, multimedia and new technology are yet another creative stimuli, resources for the performers to devise their stories. In his productions recorded visual and sound images allow the intervention of live action in a symbiotic way connecting man and a machine. This might suggest that Lepage is engaged with theatricality built on complex visual images and technological matrices. This is untrue. It would be a mistake to think of Lepage as solely a techno wizard, whose work is about sensationalistic manipulation of new technologies, employing expensive digital equipment that will ultimately go against the live performer.

Lepage’s theatricality functions within the combination of live and recorded imagery, it is a communication between performers and all the technology invited into the space, where in Johannes Barringer’s terms, ‘spatial perceptions are made through what is physically introduced into space.’<sup>3</sup> Technology is also, as Alison Oddey observes, contributing to the process of creation in devised theatre and influencing the development of the performance in its evolution.<sup>4</sup> Lepage likes to relate to technology at the same level as to the written text (when there is one), and performers’ creativity. This collage of live and recorded could be referred to as techno-en-scene, or technology that is in symbiosis with performer’s action in space. Indeed, Lepage’s techno –en-scene is hybrid theatricality that combines live performance with cinematic imagery, video and slide projections, and collaborations with digital technologies and artists from various disciplines.

Historically Lepage’s theatricality sits in the tradition of Adolphe Appia’s ‘total theatre’. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Appia elaborated the idea of ‘total theatre, and in fact foreshadowing multidisciplinary theatre, he claimed that theatre is the only art form that can bring together other art forms: text (music or speech), stage setting (the sculptural or painting), and theatre (architecture). Similarly to Appia, Edward Gordon Craig’s idea of total theatre refers to the independent and equal use of all theatre elements that have to be precisely employed on stage. This requires a ‘master’ artist to edit from the outside these elements. Because the performer can not be separated from his personal imperfections, the artistic precision demanded by Craig is only possible if the ‘body’ remains an inner aspect of the performance while it is controlled from the outside by the director as master puppeteer of a ‘technical body’ within the

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<sup>2</sup> Lavender, *Hamlet in Pieces*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Birringer, *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism*, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Oddey, *Devising Theatre*.

process as an ‘Uber Marionette’. It is theatre of silence favouring movement, gesture, and dance rather than words or sound suggesting at the dawn of 20<sup>th</sup> century that the ‘dancer/marionette’ would be the new performer of future theatre rather than the actor. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists found in theatre a venue that served as a platform for their responses to the world’s events, from where they could deliver their manifestos. RoseLee Goldberg refers to this collage of arts combined into theatre event as performance art.<sup>5</sup> Performance art became a permissive form of expression for personal stories, political ideas and new artistic styles that mixed media and forms of expression and challenged the traditional purist approach to theatre.

Lepage’s theatricality can be viewed as a bridge between performance art and traditional theatre. The flexible and open *mise-en-scène* became an alternative to the fixed and closed *mise-en-scène* because it allowed different points of view and different artistic expressions to find their home within the performance. ‘New Theatre’ or ‘Performance Theatre’ in the early 80s, according to Goldberg, included all media; using dance or sound to round out an idea or to refer to film in the middle of a text.<sup>6</sup> She defines this as ‘performance-theatre’ and way of devising as ‘performance *mise en scène*’. Breaking down the barriers between recorded media and live art, and borrowing from film and traditional arts, opened the possibilities for new hybrids to be created. Since performance-theatre could invite a variety of forms and styles, communicating through different media, it was more open and flexible for personal expression.

Lepage’s theatricality consists of hybrid forms made of new media, interdisciplinary arts, multiple cultures and technologies introduced into the physical space of a theatre. It is important to point out that his *mise-en-scène* remains, foremost, a live multimedia event, taking place at a moment in time, it is spontaneous, serving as a gathering place for different arts and audiences. It reflects post-modern visual culture in a way that, as Nicholas Mirzoeff explains, is a unification of visual disciplines (film, paintings, pop videos, internet, and advertising) into one visual culture.<sup>7</sup> However, he combines contemporary visual culture with traditional Asian theatre forms such as *No* and *Kabuki*, often quoting directly by inserting Japanese puppet theatre *Bunraku* and Javanese shadow puppet theatre into performance *mise-en-scène*. His intercultural theatre is created as a means of communicating stories that are not dependant on verbal language, and can connect with audiences from different cultures. Like visual – cinematic images, puppets embody meanings that transcend the

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<sup>5</sup> Goldberg, *Performance Art*.

<sup>6</sup> Goldberg, *Performance Art*.

<sup>7</sup> Mirzoeff, *An Introduction*.

constraints of verbal language. To connect with the world outside francophone Quebec, Lepage had to replace verbal language with a new theatre language that has the capability for cross cultural and non-verbal communication. The theatrical use of puppets, either as traditional (*The Seven Streams of the River Ota*) or modern (*The Far Side of the Moon*) objects or as electronic machines (*Zulu Time*) are integral to the way the story is told because they are part of this new theatrical language. As a cinematic image, puppets have agency to be recognized cross culturally. In Lepage's multimedia performance puppets as objects enter into a process of cultural hybridisation. In other words, they are not kept in their authentic context (as any other art in intercultural exchange) but within a new set of meanings defined by the performance narrative.

Lepage's description of a rock concert on Sunday afternoon in a park in Tokyo, refers to his own appropriation of cultural hybridisation and superimpositions of cultures. "You see Elvises, Marilyn Monroes, Led Zeppelins, etc. But they filter the music in a very different way from us. Our Elvis impersonators do everything they can to reproduce the King, but they do it less well than he did. So they do Elvis Japanese-style, giving him a specifically Japanese character. They don't imitate the West. They seem to transcend it. These games of superimposition create a kind of 'pizza' style of working. (...) They have no problem performing the role of a samurai to the music of Brahms or mixing very disparate techniques in the same show."<sup>8</sup> Lepage's intercultural mise-en-scene is neither decorative nor primarily aesthetic in function, which has been the major criticism of his 'playing' with other cultures, - but is a way of communicating with the international audiences. Lepage's free interpretation and 'borrowing' from other cultural resources appropriates any emotional or material content that can become the starting resource for a performance. Lepage is not into exploring performance as piece of theatre anthropology. Any cultural content and artistic tradition can become resource and material for devising. In *The Dragons' Trilogy* occidental actors are openly playing Oriental characters, and in *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* Japanese traditional puppet theatre *Bundraku* and *No* are directly quoted in the epic performance.

The appropriation of other cultures as the object - and in this way use of puppets as theatrical objects constitutes the 'text' of a performance, where the performance is 'written' through the process of constant transformations of the space and action. These transformations are often implemented through the most simplistic technical means, but with the most thrilling aesthetic results. In the same way, a devising process necessitates the actor to become a playwright, to e subject and object of own performance. Therefore, it is not surprising that

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<sup>8</sup> Charest, *Connecting Flights*, 45.

in most of his productions Lepage is seen as a total author who works with performers as 'Uber Marionettes'. Since the development of the theatrical space is an ongoing process, mobile and transformative, the scenography evolves organically from playfulness with theatrical objects. In this way puppets are not only objects but scenographic elements that define the space. The critics' worldwide response focused on the simplicity and imaginative theatricality, on the emotional content which was transmitted regardless of the linguistic barriers through the actors' interaction with theatrical objects. Lepage implements history, traditions, cultures, languages, and individual emotions as theatrical objects in composing this performance, using them as resources from which he incorporates developed scores into the 'mise - en - scene'.

Marie Brassard points to Lepage's 'alter ego' in the performances which is used as a standard 'stock' character, a type, to probe the new circumstances and discover the unknown material from within the subject matter. "We wanted to improvise something that could take place in China, and we had a character whose name was Pierre La Montagne, he is a young artist who is a recurrent character in the plays. In a certain way he is Robert's alter ego, or an artist's alter ego, just this representative of ourselves in the shows."<sup>9</sup>

The 'hologram' of *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* was written on a sheet of paper with resources that indicated various starting points for devising. On the original drawing, there were seven boxes and written inside each box was the name of a country: China, Czech Republic, Germany, Japan, Sweden, United States, and Canada. Throughout the three years of performance of *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, these initial ideas surfaced in one way or another. In fact, most of the starting ideas materialised in the final version of the play. Each resource corresponds to one idea or combination of ideas in the seven boxes.

Each one of the initial boxes is present in different fragments of the final performance, embodying in one way or another all the ideas related to them. For example, the words 'gun powder' and 'magician boxes' were written next to the box containing China. In the sixth part, Jana Capek narrates the Chinese legend of the invention of gun powder. In the mean time, the story is played "behind the screens by three - quarter life - size puppets manipulated by actors wearing black clothes and hoods."<sup>10</sup> Throughout this section, *Bunraku* puppet theatre was used, to narrate the legend of gun powder.

The magician's box associated with Lepage's first box, reappeared in connection with Teresinstadt, a Nazi death camp for artists. The idea of people

<sup>9</sup> Brassard, personal interview.

<sup>10</sup> *The Seven Streams*, theatre programme.

disappearing into the magician's box was used as the central solution in part four, Mirrors, where little Jana used the magician's box to escape from Teresinstadt. The second box, Czech, had two names written next to it: Karl Capek and Ian Letzel. Out of these two names, Jana Capek's name was created. Ian Letzel was the Czech architect whose building was the only one to survive the blast of the atomic bomb. Today this building is known as the A - bomb dome and is preserved as a museum in Hiroshima. Karl Capek was a Czech playwright whose brother, a pianist, was sent to Teresinstadt. The idea of having a survivor of the Holocaust was further developed by the actor/author's research on Teresinstadt. The concept was collectively conceived and then presented through a child's point of view. The whole event took place in Jana's memory/dream. This remembrance was inspired by Ada's visit to Jana in Hiroshima. Ada is the daughter of Sarah, the woman who mothered Jana in Teresinstadt and later committed suicide.

The words 'Austria' and 'Teresinstadt' were written next to the third box, labelled Germany. The idea of Teresinstadt incorporates Holocaust survival, and the magician's box which appears to be connected with the two previous boxes. Written next to the fourth box was '1945', the year of the A - bomb; and 'miniatures', relevant to the doll figure given to Luke O'Connor by Nozomi. This doll connects with Nozomi's wedding kimono, which outlines the action from the beginning to the end of the performance. The fifth box, Sweden, became part three, A Wedding, placed in Amsterdam in the final presentation. Next to it, the words 'Bergman's Seventh Seal' and 'audience' were written. Both of them indicate the presentational side of part three, the assisted suicide of the AIDS - stricken Jeffrey<sup>11</sup> The intimacy of this section, where the audience witnesses Jeffrey's death, is relevant to the starting indications written next to the box. The sixth box, USA, had 'Manhattan project' written next to it. This box became part two, Two Jeffreys, located in New York and attempts to capture the feel of the sixties and seventies. The use of space suggests a loss of privacy where everything is packed into communal living, and pressed with economical and existential hardship.

The last box, Canada, had 'aura - photo' written next to it. This relates to each person's aura, and gave the idea of seeing from the outside what goes on inside a person. The idea of a photo booth was used throughout part five, Words, to point out the difference between what goes on inside a person, and what the outside world is allowed to see. From these boxes and the supporting ideas around them came a set of material and abstract resources. They were realised through physical objects, which became the core of improvisations.

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<sup>11</sup> Referring to Ingmar Bergman's film 'The Seventh Seal'.

Having the performers play with ideas is like a digestive process where ideas are taken in and transformed through playing with objects (and marionettes are used as objects) into scores – scenes.

The solo-performance is another form of expression where Lepage uses marionettes. In *Needles and Opium* (1991) and *Elsinore* (1995) Lepage performs as a man/machine, as a live actor who is connected to a machine on stage and able to produce various transformations and images to narrate the story. However, it was in his most accomplished solo-performance *The Far Side of the Moon* (winner of numerous awards including the Evening Standard's prize for best show in London in 2001) that Lepage used puppets as objects in the storytelling process. In this show, Lepage is simultaneously outside of the performance as a puppeteer (manipulating technology) and an object in the performance as a puppet. The narrative in Lepage's solo-shows is very subjective; he writes the text by using the stage to engage with his personal moments of pain and grief. *Needles and Opium* came after serious break up with a lover of many years, *Elsinore* after Lepage's father's death and combined his feeling of personal guilt and animosity towards his family ( combining this with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ) , and the starting point for *The Far Side of the Moon* (2000) was the death of his mother. This personal resource connected with the myth of man's journey to the Moon and mankind's obsession with death, loneliness and narcissistic self-reflection that created starting resources for devising process.

The story in *The Far Side of the Moon* is about two brothers whose lives oppose each other (similar to the film *Le Confessionnal*) who are brought together after the death of their mother. The main character, like in *Vinci* called Philippe, is Lepage's alter-ego, was born (like Lepage) in 1957 when the Soviets started to explore space with the *sputnik* satellites. Philippe, a dreamer oppressed with 'big idea', is obsessed with quest to find a way to communicate with extraterrestrials and video record for them the lives on earth. He is juxtaposed to his wealthy and gay brother André, a weatherman on a local TV station. If Philippe is introvert, Andre is extrovert, this social framing is, to use Erving Goffman term, 'front' points to individual's social performance that functions within general and fixed fashion intended for those who are observing.<sup>12</sup> Thus, setting two brothers within the social framing of Western consumerism and materialism implies that everything 'visible' is important to André's front, as a successful man (with a job and a career) and everything 'invisible' is relevant to Philippe's front as an unsuccessful man (intellectual and academic without a career) . This relationship between brothers has analogy in the Moon that is a symbol of this relationship having two sides, one close - visible to us and the other far – a hidden one from us whose face is scared

<sup>12</sup> Goffman, *The presentation of self*, 32-33.

by comets. Through video, puppetry, film projections, music, and physical objects, the characters try to give sense to the universe and to their place in it. They need someone else to be a witness to their existence.

The first rehearsal phase started in the winter of 1999 at La Caserne, Lepage's multidisciplinary space in Quebec City. Lepage's collaborated with a number of independent performance artists on puppetry, visual images, sound editing. Laurie Anderson contributed an original score. Pierre Robitaille and Sylvie Courbron created the puppetry and overall visual design, and also trained Lepage on how to the 50 cm high astronaut, a *Bunraku* look-alike puppet, how to play with it and use it in various ways throughout the production. The puppet was transformed as any other theatrical object to represent an astronaut, a baby in a pram, and Philippe as a boy in the launderette. The rehearsal space was more of a research lab than stage. On one side there was a performing area with multi-purpose screens and a see-through mirror. On the other side, there was a huge table with various research materials and technical equipment: video and audio equipment, projectors, and computers. All around that space were a number of references to journeys to the Moon: video tapes, the film *Apollo 13*, books, magazines from that time, *Bunraku*-like puppets in very realistic NASA astronauts' suits. *The Far Side of the Moon* elaborated many of Lepage's typical theatrical devices: the use of film projections, mirrors, puppets, slides, sliding panels and the transformation of multiple characters.

Lepage's performance mise-en-scene is often framed by a proscenium or projection screen where live presentation and visual spectacle take place alongside each other. This visual boundary or framing of the space and live action, gives the mise-en-scene a cinematic quality. Steve Dixon observes that live multimedia theatre frames another space by including projection screens, monitors and computer generated images.<sup>13</sup> Framing of another space is a way of extending physical space through the use of media and technologies that is invited into the creative process from the beginning. Lepage's use of multi media in techno-en-scene is more about integration and hybridisation of forms and media than about making an independent art from. With digitalisation the technologies are becoming more compatible despite the differences each medium has. As Lepage observes: "The people who work on a lighting board in the theatre and editing board in film, they're using the same tools now. The sound guys are using the same tools as those who are doing images, so these guys are still kind of fighting because they don't talk the same language and all that kind of thing ... but I think that we are moving slowly towards some kind of integration and unity."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Dixon, *Digital Performance*

<sup>14</sup> Lepage, interview by author, 2002.



The idea to devise techno-cabaret came out of Lepage's *Elsinore*. In *Elsinore* he attempted to explore the use of different technologies by becoming a transformable puppet connected to the stage as a human-machine in order to tell a story by playing all major characters in *Hamlet*. Through techno-en-scene, Lepage edits live performance, interactive video technology with film projections and machine like stage set. He succeeded in exploring the technological possibilities but generally failed to make performance very relevant to the audience's experience. He came back to this idea to do the performance through a collage of media by combining art and technology in techno theatre *Zulu Time*.

Lepage initially invited Peter Gabriel, with whom he has collaborated over the last 12 years, as a guest artist with his musical performance *Ab Ovo*; Gabriel later became a co-producer. Kurt Hentschläger and Ulf Langheinrich from Austria and their company Granular Synthesis presented project *Sound Machines* which manipulated fragments of time –seconds into visual and sound images. In *Le Procès* (an adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial*) Louis-Philippe Demers and Bill Vorn used small and large robots that interacted with the audience, flew over them and had their own choreography to techno music. These robots are marionettes and part of the performance mise-en-scene; they are modern day puppets programmed and manipulated by the artists as animated objects. Lydie Jean-Dit-Pannel from France participated with a video projection on three screens of *I Am the Sheriff*, a multimedia design and video art described by critics as 'kitsch', 'hypernaive' and 'maximalist electronic art'. Gordan Monahan from Ontario offered *Sound Machines*, a computer controlled sound performance incorporating hundreds of acoustic instruments that included boxes and washing machine drums.

*Zulu Time* was set up in an airport. The environment of an airport provided an ideal home for techno-en-scene, where scores with live performing, acrobatics and circus-like acts are integrated with multi media and new technology. The physical resources were based on the equipment that can be found in an airport. The main features in the theatrical space were to be two towers, like rocket launch pads, connected by a small bridge composed of two parts that could be elevated along the towers. These elements became a spatial concept that was redeveloped into scaffolding with walkways that move horizontally and vertically. Actors resembled marionettes, not only because of the walkway that framed their physical existence, but also because they were suspended in the air and connected to the main frame by strings that allowed them to move through the air and be suspended upside-down. The audience was placed on both sides of the stage machinery. The performance mise-en-scene combined live performance, video projections, acrobatic dance, techno music, and robots.

*Zulu Time* took place in non-locations: spaces common to air travel such as airplane cabins, airport's endless walkways, stairways, anonymous bars, airport shops and food courts, and identical hotel rooms. The 26 scenes (from A-Z following alphabetic order) are fragments of narratives, snapshots about the current state of humankind taking place in different parts of the world. Initially the performance narrative follows a day in a life of an airplane crew experiencing both real and fantasised events: - loneliness in hotel rooms, a drunken woman sexually violated by an imaginary man suspended in harnesses, fantasy of tango dancers suspended upside down, rape and ultimately a terrorist attack on an airplane and death. The scenes of the 'main' personae in the airport 'story' were full of sado-masochistic acts, voyeurism, fetishism, drugs, loneliness, dreams and fantasies. However the events which they experience are self made, constant disruption and endangerment are, what Slavoj Žižek calls 'symbolical fiction', that makes them resort to acting out fictionalized 'real life' actions of violence.<sup>15</sup> After observing *Zulu Time* in Paris in 1999 Patrice Pavis ascertained that the live body and human presence were destroyed by the foreign body of technology.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, Lepage confirms his position that the use of animated objects and technology offered a distinction to a live performer accentuating the liveness of the performers.

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<sup>15</sup> Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

<sup>16</sup> Pavis, "Afterword:", 187-202.

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