THE THEATRICALITY OF

Robert Lepage

Aleksandar Saša Dundjerović

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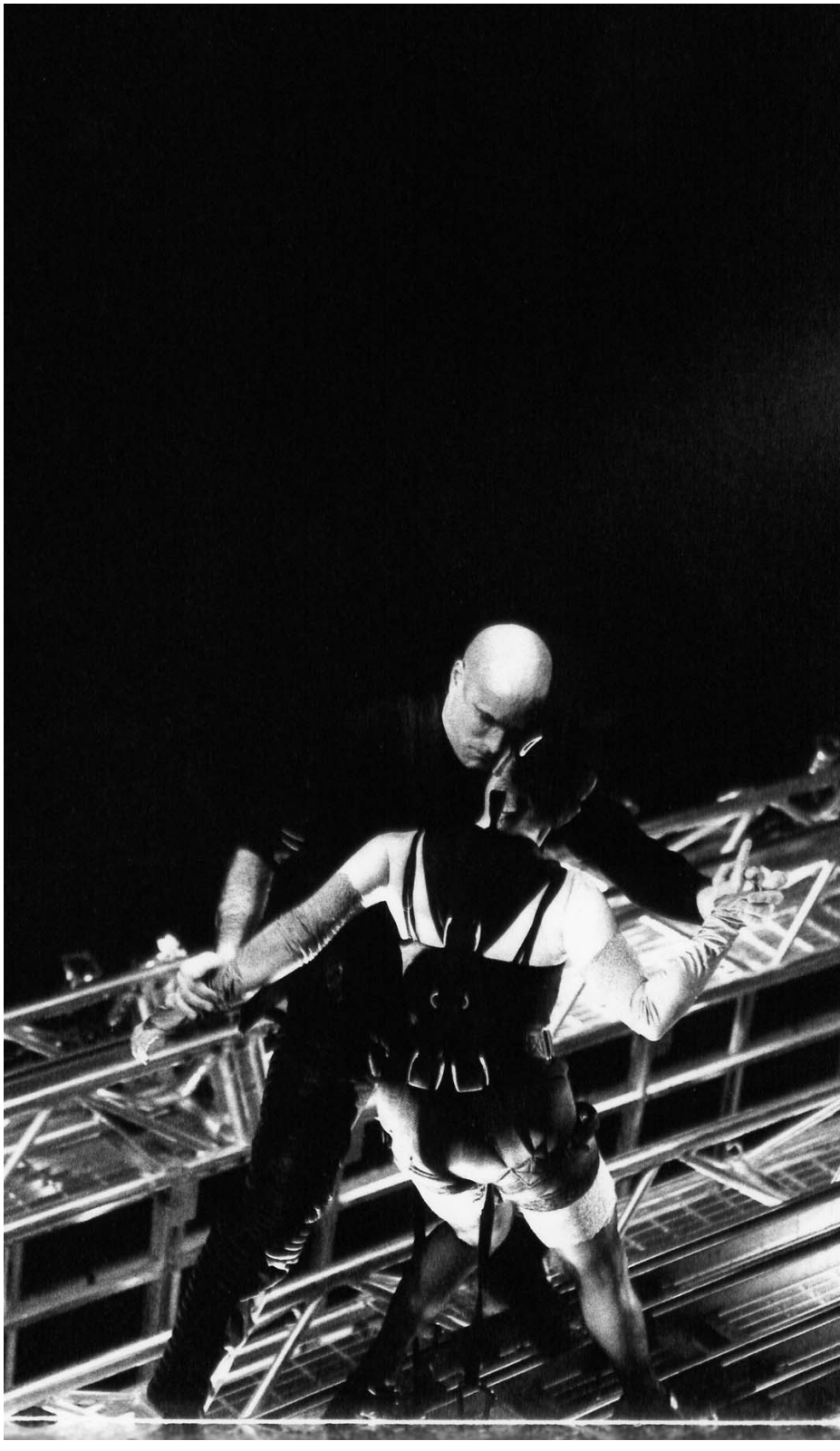

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This book is dedicated to my late mother, Vuka Dundjerović (1925–99), actress in the National Theatre in Belgrade, Serbia, whose love of theatre and whose enthusiasm and professionalism will always inspire me.

Preface

The Theatricality of Robert Lepage examines the creative process and transformative nature of Lepage's theatre directing and devising. This is not a critical study or a theoretical debate about theatre practice. This book examines the artistic and personal context of Lepage's way of creating performance as a director-author and deviser. His theatre requires *mise en scène* (meaning to put or make something in space) that is open to change and flexible in structure – a *mise en scène* founded on the performers' playfulness. One characteristic of Lepage's *mise en scène* is that it is not in any traditional sense an outcome of rehearsal. It is actually discovered only with the interaction of the audience and the actors during a performance. In this way, rehearsals effectively take place during performances in front of an audience. In collective creations, previews of work in progress are a way of assessing performance and how well it communicates to an audience. However, Lepage extends this concept of performance assessment to what he refers to as "open" or

"public rehearsals," where he allows an outside audience to observe the working process. In his creative process, the audience is a necessary partner, one needed to test the performance narrative. Like the theatre of Peter Brook, Lepage's theatre blurs the traditional boundaries between rehearsal and performance, transforming them into one continuous creative process.

It is impossible to settle on one definitive way of interpreting Lepage's collective and solo work, as this new, interdisciplinary art form moves between various artistic "languages." As a result, his *mise en scène* is a hybrid that crosses diverse media, combining written text with collectively devised material, mixing popular culture with mythological references, and openly quoting original sources, as well as subverting them within newly found contexts. On the surface, his theatricality consists of scattered imagery – visual, auditory, technological, musical, and, when necessary, textual. But if we look beyond the seductiveness of language and imagery, we see an exciting and provocative way of creating theatre. Chaos, accidental discovery, intuition, and invited disorder are all part of Lepage's creative process, but they are also forces at the root of live, spontaneous theatrical events.

Transformation and connection are the key elements of Lepage's theatricality, and this book will engage with the process of his transformation of his performance narratives. The transformation of *mise en scène* at the heart of his creative process is elusive and ephemeral and therefore difficult to evaluate. His creative process is cyclical, and his original productions evolve through a series of phases spanning several years of development. His performances are continuous works in progress, until they achieve their full development (by which time, they often stop touring).

Recently, a few books have examined Lepage's use of technology and imagery;[1] others have stressed the intercultural and semiotic discourses of his theatre;[2] and still others have examined the making of his least accomplished solo performance, *Elsinore*, through observation of his rehearsals.[3] For my purposes, the interviews are best, because they express Lepage's actual working process, giving detailed evidence of the transient nature of his work.[4]

My earlier book, *The Cinema of Robert Lepage* (2003), analyses his cinematic work on the basis of his theatre practice and introduces the concepts of transformative *mise en scène* and the cyclical creative process; in this way, I tried to communicate the transient and

experimental nature of Lepage's working process. Each of Lepage's film projects discussed in that book developed through a creative cycle on the basis of either an existing theatre performance of his own or an established theatre text. He thus grounded each one of these films on some form of theatre. Given this close relationship of Lepage's cinema and his theatre work, I thought it would be useful to more closely examine his theatricality, with a view to more fully understanding the nature of his transformative *mise en scène*.

The Theatricality of Robert Lepage identifies the key elements of his creative process: directing, devising technique, solo performance, the use of "resources," the creation of "scores," group dynamics, the role of the audience, and the impact of multimedia and technology. With a focus on key productions as case studies, I outline each of these essential elements with which Lepage engages as the author of his *mise en scène*.

The analysis of his performance spans the period from his first major directing of a collectively created process, *The Dragons' Trilogy* (1985–87 and 2003–), and his first solo show, *Vinci* (1986), to his more recent collectively created theatre project *Zulu Time* (1999–02). This time span captures the development and maturation of Lepage's creative process and illustrates his characteristic epic style of performance. After *Zulu Time*, he has concerned himself with musical theatre (*The Busker's Opera*), opera (*1984*), circus spectacle (*Kà*, with Cirque du Soleil), and his own solo show, *The Andersen Project*. The works analysed here – covered by the period of 1985 to 1999 – typically started as small-scale, studio-based experimental productions designed to evolve as they toured internationally.

Lepage's performances are at the junction that brings together alternative avant-garde and established art theatre. His work, which was originally associated with the Quebec fringe circuit, became part of the international festival network and cultural centres such as Edinburgh, Avignon, Paris, Montreal, Tokyo, Sydney, and New York. Lepage's theatre has thrived in the international festival context; the major international festivals have subsidized his work though commissions and co-productions, often presenting his original projects as world premieres. *Zulu Time* combined his previous theatrical concerns with a new, commercial appeal and with experiments in a multimedia performance language dispensing altogether with the written text. Here, we may be seeing both the end of the old Lepage

and the beginning of his new approach to theatre, one of image-based spectacles designed specifically for mainstream commercial theatres.

Regardless of the size of the venue, however, touring has been essential to his theatre. From his early experiences of touring high schools in Quebec in 1980 to the 2005 commission to do the solo show *The Anderson Project*, scheduled to tour major international festivals and production venues, he has based his transformative *mise en scène* on his ability to transport productions, adapt to diverse audiences, and transgress cultural and linguistic obstacles. His multi-referenced and multifaceted theatricality cannot but make a claim to being all things to all people. And this is possible because Lepage allows audiences to project many diverse interpretations onto his work. As with any other travelling theatre, Lepage's transformation of theatrical forms and narratives has to be adaptable to the specific circumstances of its audience. To perform at all, he had to communicate – to be understood. But how does he accomplish this? How does he make his theatricality to be so stylistically versatile yet relevant to a wide diversity of cultures? This book attempts to engage the reader in Lepage's creative process and to explain the mechanisms at work behind his transformative theatricality. Inevitably, the question to focus on is How does Lepage achieve visually, emotionally, and intellectually stimulating performances through his now famous (or infamous, depending on how you look at it) work-in-progress approach? Rather than attempting to give a definitive or comprehensive reading of something so elusive and transient as Lepage's theatricality, my aim here is to stimulate debate about his unique approach to creativity and to offer up material for further study and to provoke interest in Lepage's theatricality among theatre students, practitioners, and theatre-goers alike.

The Theatricality of Robert Lepage

I've never really been interested in theatre as such. In my adolescence I was more interested in theatricality. The reason, in my opinion, there's such a big difference between theatre and theatricality is that where I come from theatrical history is extremely young – about 50 years old or so – so we don't have any classics, our classics are borrowed … When I say that I'm more interested in theatricality, it's because I think the taste for young creators, actors or directors in Quebec, at least in the seventies, come much more from seeing rock shows, dance shows, performance art, then from seeing theatre, because theatre is not accessible as it is here in Britain. And the theatre that was there was a theatre that was already dead: not reflecting anybody's identity, not actually staging the preoccupations of the people.

–Robert Lepage in "Robert Lepage in Discussion with Richard Eyre"

Chapter 1

Personal and Cultural Contexts

Robert Lepage's now celebrated production of *The Dragons' Trilogy* opened in its first version at the Implanthéâtre in Quebec City in 1985. At the beginning of the play, the characters voices are heard in the dark, whispering and translating "I have never been in China …" into three different languages: English, French, and Cantonese.[1] This motif opens the stage for fantasies and illusions about unknown, imaginary, and distant places where people exist in a plurality of languages. Journeys, flight, and dislocation – but wanting to connect – are key concerns in Lepage's approach to theatre. In 1995, he gave a series of interviews published as *Connecting Flights*, an important text that points to the transgression of traditional forms of theatre and the connectivity of theatre cultures in Lepage's performance practice. The development of Lepage's theatricality is inseparable from that of the company Théâtre Repère and the artistic significance and international recognition of *Trilogy*.

At the time *Trilogy* was first shown, Théâtre Repère was still regarded as a fringe theatre group, a theatre group at the margins. By the end of the first run of the completed, six-hour version of *Trilogy*, in 1989, this marginalized group had become a nationally and internationally recognized company. Before and during the first cycle of the performance, Lepage was known as a member of Théâtre Repère; after the production's international success, Repère was known as Robert Lepage's group. The critics reported favourably on his directing, with Sarah Hemming seeing Lepage as someone who had built "a bridge between the world of visual, physical avant-garde theatre, post-Pina Bausch, and the ancient tradition of the saga or epic story telling."[2] A cultural consciousness started to develop around Lepage's work and his directing, particularly with the 1988 staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which was popularly placed within the theatricality of Peter Brook. In 2003, when a new version of *Trilogy* started an international tour, Lepage had already become renowned as one of the world's leading theatre directors.

Although his visually powerfull theatricality comes out of the subjective experience of Québécois life, it transcends the local cultural context, becoming globally relevant to international audiences. The embodiment of this globally readable, visual culture in his theatre reflects Jean Baudrillard's proposition that we live in a world of "simulations," or a hyperreality, where signs and images form their own reality that has no reality beyond itself. Such a world can be accessed by any culture, regardless of language or national characteristics.[3] Lepage points out that "Quebeckers have that need to be understood, and to have access to the market, to be invited all over the world so that people follow you and don't say 'Oh, it's not in English I don't want to see it'. You have to do this extra effort to get the story clear, to illustrate it, to give another layer to it."[4] In saying this he was expressing a response to Quebec's cultural politics by striving to escape the linguistic enclosure and to connect with the world. This need to translate and the urgency to be understood forced "theatre authors" in Quebec to invent a type of theatricality capable of communicating beyond the constraints of verbal language. He remarks that this urgency was missing in English Canada, where there was no need to translate text and culture into a theatrical expression independent of the verbal language.[5]

Lepage's theatricality is a cultural intervention, a reaction to the isolation of living in a francophone "island" in North America. This chapter details his life in the sociocultural context of Quebec, within the matrix of late-twentieth-century Quebec's cultural politics and

national identity, and the ways these elements intertwine to shape his theatricality. His theatre is deliberately made for touring, communicating with the world, regardless of language. He tells a personal story in the visual language of theatre, a language that helps him to be understood by, and connect with, different audiences globally. Although his *mise en scène* enters into dialog with both local and global cultural milieus, this communication is not without conflicts and collisions. We explore, in this chapter, the conflicts between, on the one hand, Lepage's personal and artistic contexts and local perspective and, on the other, globalization and his need to communicate Quebec's and his own stories to the world. If his theatricality is both locally subjective and in transition to a global perspective (touring and performing for international audiences), then we need to understand its origins in the personal and sociocultural texts that shape his *mise en scène*.

Language and Identity

Robert Lepage was born in Quebec City in 1957, to a working-class family which included three other children. His mother was a housewife and his father, a cab driver. During the Second World War, Lepage's mother lived in London while his father was in the navy. It was during this time that his mother and father became fluent in English. Initially unable to have their own children, his parents adopted two English-speaking ones. Some years after the adoption, Robert and Lynda were born. As a result, he grew up in an unusual family, "because it was a mix of all kind of things: children who have been adopted and children who were biological … and the two adopted children were adopted in English Canada, so they were brought up in English and we were brought up in French."[6] In the home, English and French were constantly mixed and in collision; there were even arguments over the choice of English or French TV channels. Lepage liked to see his family, with its bilingual mix, as "a metaphor for Canada, a cultural metaphor."[7] However, behind this metaphor lay a reality of conflict. Lepage's family environment differed from that of other, "typical" Québécois households – a bilingual upbringing was exceptional in the francophone cultural environment that was Quebec City.

The linguistic tension in Quebec is not surprising. The English language could be seen as a symbol of lost territory, political oppression, and the dominant bourgeoisie. In 1945, the celebrated Canadian

author Hugh MacLennan coined the term "two solitudes" to describe the relationship of the French and English communities in Quebec.[8] This term has led to much debate and is still used today as shorthand for the continuing tensions between the French and the English or their various cultural points of reference. Historically, the use of the English language in Quebec was loaded with cultural, economic, and political meanings and was strongly associated with financial centres of power such as the affluent anglophone minority in Montreal. During the post-1960 Quiet Revolution in Quebec, the socio-political role of language and national identity affected the development of a homegrown Québécois theatre. It became a self-conscious medium for the political discourse on sovereignty, an "actor" in socio-cultural events, emphasizing an ideology aligned with nationalist and separatist causes.

When Lepage was growing up, the powerful effect of clerical nationalism, conservative ideology, and Catholicism could still be felt in aspects of life, particularly in family and cultural politics. The period from the 1930s up to 1960 was the time of Duplessiste Quebec, often referred to as the "Grande noirceur" (the great darkness). Maurice Duplessis became premier of the province in 1936 and remained a significant force up until his death. He was against communism, the Labour Party, syndicalism, and internationalism of any sort and founded his political values on gaining the support of the rural areas. Duplessis enjoyed great support from the Catholic Church, to which he gave control of education and health. During the Duplessis era, clericalism had significant control over the public consciousness and social sphere. The main political and socio-cultural changes in Quebec did not begin until after the death of Duplessis in September 1959.

Quebec City was, of course, one of the oldest cities in North America, with a strong nationalist centre: the identity of Quebecers was defined by being white, Catholic, and French. The insularity of Quebec culture – its need to remember its past in a specific way (the official version of history) and its use of the French language to protect itself, culturally, against English colonialism and dominance – led to the politics of nationalism and, often, intolerance for any differences. Lepage remembered that in his childhood his older, adopted brother, David, was often bullied at school for being an anglophone. For Lepage, David embodied the tension inherent in the Canadian identity: he had a French last name and an adopted French family but came from English Canada. Likewise, since Lepage's family was

bilingual, David, like any Canadian, could not simply identify with the dominant socio-cultural environment. This cultural and linguistic environment, combined with Lepage's being gay, allowed him, from his earliest experiences, to assume the viewpoint of otherness. The questioning of language and identity that became so accentuated in his theatre work came from his own experience of living in a marginalized culture, and the conflict between the local, inner perspective and the international, outer one shaped his practice of exposing Quebec's character to the world and to outside influences. His later life and work reflect the same cultural framing within Canada, one of "in-betweeness," or of being in-between mainstream French and mainstream English cultures, yet not quite belonging to either one. Lepage never belonged to either of these two centres, and being in-between these two spheres of influence shaped his artistic persona. He viewed Quebec's history as subjective – one of the stories – and he never referenced his understanding of Quebec's national identity locally but only in response to the outside world. He situated himself in a "nonlocation," where his subjectivity was informed by multiple readings (for Quebec, he was an outsider, and for the world, he was a Québécois). He exploited his cultural plurality well. He could work in the global context, taking his multicultural work both to French and to English Canada and later to the international stage.

The shift in emphasis in Quebec's theatre – from the reworking of text, to the use of new writing, and then to collectively created and live devised performance – was not a sudden movement but a gradual process. In the 1980s, plays and performances responded to the concerns of specific social segments, moving away from the more generally accepted nationalist agenda. The primary concern of artistic exploration became the forms of expression and their communication. Montreal's Carbone 14 became the leading proponent of performances based on theatrical imagery. In Carbone 14's approach, as Robert Wallace observes, the "'concrete' language of the stage (corporal movement, music, light, and other scenographic elements) is understood as more important than spoken language for the purposes of creating and communicating meaning."[9] In fact, Carbone 14, as well as dance theatre LaLaLa Human Steps and Cirque du Soleil, developed ways of communicating through a performance style that overcame the obstacles of language and territory and attracted international audiences and critics. The goal of Québécois collective theatre and performance groups was to create a means of

transcultural communication. Explaining this shift in emphasis, Lepage points to the political function of language in Montreal and Quebec City: "Words were so coloured with politics, at least in the 1970's, that people turned to non-verbal theatre to try and get other messages across. Politics were so present in Canadian life in the 1970's that a lot of the creative work in Canada was based only on the politics of the mind, not the politics of the body, of emotions, or of relationships. I think an artist sometimes has to put words aside, to explore these types of politics."[10]

Later, toward the end of the 1980s, the orientation of devised theatre in Quebec shifted from a collective method of working to a collaborative approach to production. The reason for this change was the transfer of creative responsibility from the actor-writer to the director and designer, with the phrase "collaborative methodology," instead of "collective methodology," being used to describe the new work.[11] The practice of playwrights directing their own work started to penetrate mainstream theatre in Quebec. The theatrical organization as production company began to use the collaborative approach, with the playwright, director, and designer working as a production team to radically rewrite the text. Director Gilles Maheu and Carbone 14, as well as collectives such as Théâtre Go and Théâtre Expérimental, followed this model and influenced Lepage's directing after his break with Théâtre Repère.

The use of language in Lepage's collective creation is a response to the tensions of communication in a multilingual context. In 1969, the *Official Languages Act* gave equal status to the English and French languages in Canada, and bilingualism became official policy. However, the cultural battlefield between what came to be termed the anglophone and francophone spheres of influence and the ongoing theme of the possible secession of Quebec from Canada remained a dominant component of Québécois society. The Parti Québécois, whose platform endorses Quebec's status as separate from Canada, got elected in the province in 1976 and passed Bill 101, which made the crucial move of establishing French as the working language of Quebec and requiring immigrants to learn French to better integrate into francophone society. The most recent variants of Quebec nationalism are arguably less insular than those of the Quebec City of Lepage's youth, including an appreciation of intercultural values. Lepage's perspective is close to this latter view, favouring a plurality of languages and identities.

For him, Québécois national identity is not defined on its own terms, as separate from Canada, or, for that matter, from the world, but in response to English Canada and to the experience of being juxtaposed with other cultures. He often uses language to create simple misunderstandings or as a device to reveal political and cultural confusions over the meanings of terms when translated from French to English, as in *Tectonic Plates*, or when spoken with different accents, as in *The Dragons' Trilogy*. The collision of personal and collective identity also supplies an important dynamic force that propels the action in his *mise en scène*. An exploration of an inability to communicate or to be understood is part of Lepage's multilingual approach to performance. Jeanne Bovet remarks that, "in Lepage's plays, multilingual conversations are marred by misunderstandings and prove incapable of ensuring real communication. They are progressively and successfully replaced by other non-verbal languages: the language of the body and the language of art, which ultimately merge to allow not only communication but true communication between human beings in an altogether sensorial and spiritual process."[12]

Lepage acknowledges that linguistic problems are the main issue Quebec artists have to deal with: "how do you get your message across if the audience doesn't understand your language."[13] As Lynn Jacobson explains, "the seventies and eighties saw a widespread move away from text-centred theatre."[14] Theatre practitioners, authors, scholars, and playwrights, such as René-Daniel Dubois and Normand Chaurette, helped constitute the trend of "the new baroque," which brought postmodern interpretation to bear on the plurality of readings and possible disjunctions within the cultures and the narrative of contemporary existence. The linguistic situation prompted Lepage to provide an answer by working within the scope of bilingual or multilingual productions, emphasizing language as sound and working with the performers' physical and vocal expressions as separate from narrative and textual structures. Words as sounds are "resources," theatrical objects that the performers can play with. Lepage explains that, "To me and the actors I work with, the performance is what's most important. Words are sometimes just a way of saying music."[15] Mixing the languages and projecting their translation, making a simultaneous collage of diverse languages (English, French, Italian, German, Serbo-Croatian, Chinese, Japanese, etc.), using language as a sound or music, rather than as a locus

of meaning, can provide material for the actors' improvisation and creation of *mise en scène*.

Memory and Storytelling

Many critics and scholars have compared Lepage's theatre to what Jennifer Harvie calls his "cultural tourism" in the theoretical framework of globalization. They have also remarked on what Harvie calls his romantic notion of "a world-view where communication across cultural borders is not only possible, it is practicable."[16] These critics have called attention to what Lepage describes as his commitment to theatre "as a form of cross-cultural understanding."[17] However, Lepage has wanted more than to enhance understanding. His cross-culturalism is an outcome of his storytelling; he is an epic storyteller who needs to communicate his stories to those who do not share his language. This interest in creating and telling stories is, in fact, an interest in the live oral narration of his own and others' cultures. During childhood, Lepage often heard stories from his mother about the war in Europe and about the life in old Quebec City. It was her personal recollection of these stories, distorted through the lens of memory and transformed through time, and not their veracity, that attracted Lepage.

Since childhood, he has demonstrated a strong interest in the outside world. His favourite subject in school was geography. As he points out, in the theatre "all my work is about geography so it could be that geography includes cultural differences between two countries, it includes travelling but it also includes the geography of space. It's not just going to Europe in a plane, it's also the geography of the human environment and what that means and how does it have an influence?"[18] Tellingly, Lepage had a childhood fascination with the cab tours arranged by his father, which became a significant influence on the way Lepage later told his stories. To supplement the family income, his father would make trips around Quebec City, ferrying visitors to various historic sites and narrating diverse facts about them. Lepage would accompany his father, listening to the stories, which were an intoxicating mix of local myth, fiction, and fact and often adapted by Lepage's father to suit the occasion. In Lepage's semi-autobiographical film *Le confessional*, one of the key characters, a cab driver (resembling Lepage's father), suggests a suspense story (an allusion to Sophocles' *King Oedipus*) to

Alfred Hitchcock, who is a passenger in the rear of the cabbie's car. *Le confessional* is, in fact, both Lepage's own life story and a re-enactment and personalization of the myth of King Oedipus. Lepage's ability to keep his childlike sense of wonder, a sense of tapping into the unknown, is the main theme of his devised productions. Each of his projects inevitably deals with a character entering a new country or a new environment that significantly changes his or her life, and Lepage's use of intercultural references in his *mise en scène* has the naïveté of a first discovery, of stories told on a car journey and transposed through a set of personal references.

It was hardly a coincidence that Lepage's main fascination with theatre came out of his experience with live, improvised, and unstructured performance, where the actor-narrator gives a personal account of events and establishes his or her own relationship with the story. Lepage points out that, to create, you have to be a "mythomaniac," that is, "you have to be able to amplify the stories you hear, give a large dimension to stories you invent. This is how you transform them into legends and myths."[19] Lepage explains,

> Generally speaking, our society has lost its oral memory. Instead, we rely more and more on written or visual documents to immortalise the past, to store the things we remember, our history; and, as a result, our memory does not function any more because it no longer has to make the effort to store things. So, memory no longer distorts facts by filtering them, which makes it all the harder for history to be transformed into mythology … Poetry and art depend on our ability to recount events through the imperfections of our memories. If we rely on records, written texts and photographs, we re-experience events essentially as they happened. This kind of truth is interesting to archivists and historians, but mythology has been largely eliminated from the process. It's not so important if a fishing story is true or not. What really counts is how we transform events through the distorting lens of memory. It's the blurred, invented aspects of story-telling that give it its beauty and greatness.[20]

Lepage confirms the observation of the French literary critic and semiotician Roland Barthes that, in our culture, everything can have its form of narrative. In this way, culture is the sum of narratives arranged in social patterns that we accept and identify with.[21] Thus, in the national consciousness of Quebec, remembering the past and dealing with the trauma of lost territory and a fictional national identity constitute an important narrative. This has a direct effect on Quebec's theatre and film. For Lepage, creating a narrative of the

past is not about fixing and preserving events through memory but about allowing memory to give personal interpretations of, and hence distort, the events of the past. The plurality and transformation of narratives in Lepage's work are an outcome of such memory, and the fact that this memory creates fictions and is unstable allows a plurality of possible existences. Narrating for Lepage is, thus, a way of finding out who he is by telling audiences about himself and involving, inviting the outside world. As Nick Mansfield suggests, "the subject is always linked to something outside of it – an idea, or principle or the society of other subjects."[22] Fundamentally, Lepage uses the theatre for storytelling and exposing his subjectivity to the world.

Theatre as Self-discovery

Theatre is a good medium for self-help, where playing out the performer's own personal fears and hidden self through an imaginary character proves to be a liberating and empowering experience. A need to talk about himself, not directly but through other characters, took Lepage to theatre as a place where he could hide but also be himself at the same time. In his youth, Lepage suffered from alopecia (loss of body hair), which made him somewhat reclusive. His natural shyness and predisposition to depression made the attraction of performing problematic. "I still had to surface from my depression, and this I owe to my sister, Lynda, who pushed me really hard to act in my first play … First of all, I never went out of the house at night, and I couldn't see myself performing to a hall filled with people … I didn't want to go. But she forced me to and in the end I did it, and it was a great success. And then I began to crave this appreciation which had liberated me from my state of withdrawal."[23]

This was the first time Lepage discovered theatre as a self-liberating experience. What helped him overcome his personal anguish and low self-esteem was as much the immediacy and unpredictability of performing as it was creating in front of an audience. Performance theatre was not about presenting what was rehearsed perfectly but about the showing of something not ready, something raw and in the process of becoming. Throughout his career, Lepage often found himself on the borderline of having to perform and not knowing exactly what would happen. In fact, the theatre came to be a replacement for his psychoanalysis sessions and proved to be a cure for his

depression. Lepage devises from within the material by inventing an alter ego, a character who allows his subjectivity to interact with the world outside. The presence of the audience gave Lepage the recognition needed to authenticate his existence.

We cannot understand or appreciate Lepage's work without also knowing something about theatrical conditions in Quebec. Lepage was not the only one to use theatre as a medium for individual self-discovery and self-recognition. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, finding a new voice was a strong part of the socio-cultural movement influencing Quebec's theatrical milieu. Quebec's theatre was caught between its colonial past and its national self-rediscovery, between aggressive Americanism and the European heritage of Quebec, and between the modernism of traditional theatre and the postmodernism of devised performance. The residue of the Quiet Revolution, the October Crisis of 1970, and the failed 1980 referendum on sovereignty association between Quebec and Canada heavily dominated the collective consciousness of Quebec.

However, the international popularity of Québécois theatre in the late 1980s and 1990s was not the result of Canadian or Quebec cultural politics, nor even a sudden explosion of long-awaited talent. The movement to liberate the theatre from cultural neo-colonial dominance was started by Michel Tremblay in the late 1960s. The arrival of the "new Québécois theatre" in the 1960s, with playwrights Michel Tremblay, Jean-Claude Germain, and Jean Barbeau, marked a radical shift from the theatre of their predecessors, mainly because they used Québécois dialects in their plays. Popular speech on stage liberated the theatre, enabling it to use domestic influences and give the Québécois way of life a voice. For the first time, Québécois playwrights presented the concerns and familiar settings of Quebec on stage, along with the popular dialect *joual* (Montreal's working-class French). The new Québécois theatre then began to reflect the political consciousness of the province, equating cultural freedom with national identity and political liberation.

Establishing cultural freedom in the province was difficult. Throughout the nineteenth and a good part of the twentieth century in Quebec, as in other Canadian provinces, the theatre was kept alive by touring companies and by amateur theatre, and there was, in Quebec, a long-standing tradition of officially viewing theatre as high art, a medium for representing "serious art" from France. Up until the end of the 1960s, directors imported 90 per cent of their

theatrical translations from France, and Quebec playwrights modelled the structure and themes of their plays on the latest offerings in Paris and London. Lepage was well aware of this colonial legacy: "For a long time anybody in English Canada who was an artistic director of a big theatre company had a British accent, and in Quebec those people had a French accent from France."[24] Theatre embraced and enhanced cultural colonialism and was seen as a reminder of the colonial establishment, of which the wealthy and cultured French audience was an integral part. In the late 1960s, there was a transition in the dominant repertoire of institutional theatres from the works of French playwrights to those of Québécois. Annie Brisset tells us that "The desire for a language of one's very own fills a distinctive function necessary for the institutional recognition of the new playwrights … Language is the separating instrument that gave *Québécois* theatre its own identity and subsequently ensured its autonomy vis-à-vis the French playwrights."[25]

In the seventies, the emphasis on the written word and text influenced alternative theatre practitioners to rebel against imposed structures and, often, to replace the authorship of the playwright with that of a collective. Collective creation and experimental theatre became a popular trend in Quebec. Robert Wallace recounts that, between 1958 and 1980, "virtually thousands of collective creations were produced by Quebecois theatre companies working under the umbrella organization L'Association Québécoise du Jeune Théâtre."[26] Developing in opposition to mainstream theatre, Jeune Théâtre worked from collective creations, popularizing a robust, direct, and physical style of acting, in contrast to the intellectual and more refined, mainstream style.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, breaking away from the traditional way of making theatre was a political act. As it moved into the 1970s, Québécois theatre was co-opted by the independence-oriented Parti Québécois. As Chantal Hébert remarks, the "new *québécoise* dramaturgy," as it has been called, "pointedly rejected foreign influences, especially French, and served as a cure for alienation as well as an impetus for collective affirmation."[27] Theatre served as a tool for the political debate on national identity until the mid-eighties. Language in the theatre reflected socio-political conditions in Quebec, taking on an ideological function, as a medium representing national identity. Collective creations in the seventies were, to an extent, burdened by expectations, obliged to create an appro-