

CANADIANA

Literaturen/Kulturen – Literatures/Cultures – Littératures/Cultures

Band 1



PETER LANG

Frankfurt am Main · Berlin · Bern · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford · Wien

Klaus-Dieter Ertler
Martin Löschnigg
(eds.)

Canada in the Sign
of Migration and Trans-Culturalism

Le Canada sous le signe
de la migration
et du transculturalisme

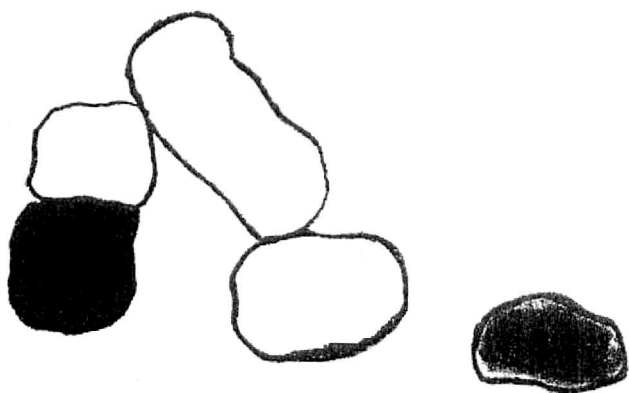
From Multi- to Trans-Culturalism
Du multiculturalisme au transculturalisme



PETER LANG

Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften

Voichita-Maria Sasu La trans-identité: Le cas de C. Stoiciu	125
Klaus-Dieter Ertler Migration et transculturalisme dans le roman <i>Les amants de l'Alfama</i> de Sergio Kokis	131
Adina Ruiu Du ,sauvage' au ,bon néophyte': le parcours d'une ,curiosité légitime'	141
Di Brandt Je jeliada, je vechiada: Canadian Mennonite Alteridentifications	153
Martin Löschnigg Historical Perspectives on Migrant Communities in the Contemporary Canadian Novel: The Case of Rudy Wiebe's <i>Sweeter than All the World</i>	183
Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink Globalisation et transculturalité – les années soixante et leur redécouverte (inter)médiatique au Québec	195
Katalin Kürtösi „Tout réinventer du théâtre“: Robert Lepage – a Portrait	207
John Kristian Sanaker Ying Chen de retour à Shanghai <i>Voyage illusoire</i> de Georges Dufaux	215



From the series *Inuit* (1999) by Andrea Maria Humpl.
De la série *Inuit* (1999) d'Andrea Maria Humpl.

„Tout réinventer du théâtre“¹: Robert Lepage – a Portrait

Katalin Kürtösi
(University of Szeged)

„Pour moi, il est très important de ramener la notion de jeu dans le jeu théâtral [...]“

„L'obsession de découvrir d'autres cultures est intimement liée à la découverte de sa propre culture.“²

Robert Lepage is without any doubt among Canada's best known cultural icons: contemporary theatre histories devote chapters to his work, and he is constantly being mentioned along with pundits of modern theatre such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Eugenio Barba and Robert Wilson, to name but a few. Not only is he a prolific director, creator, and actor, but his work in film (both as actor and director) and in staging operas is also remarkable – and he has also done choreographies for Peter Gabriel's concerts (*The Secret World Tour; Growing Up Live*). Lepage decidedly refuses to be placed in a pigeon-hole; instead, what matters to him are aesthetic qualities and a never-ending desire to know more and more cultures of the world. He grew up perfectly bilingually in Quebec city, and is fluent in three more languages beside English and French. In addition, he can at least understand another two languages, and read Japanese. As André Ducharme has emphasised, „[s]es spectacles brassent les langues, les cultures et, du coup, les conventions théâtrales.“³ The aspect of ‚play‘ („la notion de jeu“) in making theatre is of the utmost importance to him – watching his shows one has no doubts that this ‚jack of all trades‘ of today's theatrical art enjoys the fact that for him the impossible does not seem to exist: „son inventivité est sans limites“,⁴ as actress Sophie Faucher has remarked.

Robert Lepage was born in Québec into a family with two adopted anglophone children from Nova Scotia. At the age of seven he suffered from alopecia, a disease which left him without hair, eyebrows and eyelashes. At school, other children mocked him, stealing his cap to show that he was bald. These experiences made him sensitive to any form of discrimination at a very early age. As a teenager, he tried drugs as well as antidepressants, and he was scared to appear in public: „La dernière chose que je voulais faire, c'était du théâtre, parce que j'avais peur de me montrer. Puis j'ai compris que c'était un art où je pouvais me

déguiser, me cacher derrière un groupe.⁴⁵ In 1975 he started to study at the Conservatoire d'art dramatique in Québec. Since Richard Fréchette and he were the only two students who did not receive any offers after graduation, they decided to stage shows themselves and founded the Théâtre Hummm in 1977.⁴⁶ Their first shows already revealed the typical features of Lepage's work, i.e. a puzzling virtuosity, baroque poesy, powerful images, and the extensive use of technical possibilities. As Lepage himself defined his background, „[j]e viens d'un courant poétique où la forme a autant à dire que le jeu.“⁴⁷ In line with experimental theatre practices of the times, Lepage was fascinated by the possibilities of collective creation. One of the very first shows of the new company was an adaptation of Orwell's *Animal Farm* in 1979. Lepage also worked for the Théâtre de la Bordée in Québec, before he joined, together with Fréchette, the Théâtre Repère in 1982, staying with that company until his nomination as artistic director for the French section of the National Arts Centre, Ottawa (1989-1993). Harvie and Hurley have pointed out that by means of this appointment the Canadian federal government attempted to appropriate Lepage as a national cultural representative, (303) and similar intentions may well have caused the provincial government of Québec to provide him with a ‚laboratory‘ in the Caserne of Québec city (305-306), where in 1994 Lepage founded Ex Machina, a company for multidisciplinary artistic production: Ex Machina is an auteur-centered theatre company dominated by Lepage; its self-generated productions tour widely and play predominantly at international theatre festivals [...].⁴⁸ Presently, he is still working within this framework, but has accepted invitations to direct in Europe (London, Stockholm, Munich, etc.).

Lepage's idea of the theatre contains elements of the ‚classical‘ avant-garde, of the collective creations of the alternative theatre movement (which started in the late 1950s), and also of post-modern interculturalism. For him, the art of the theatre is above all „l'art de la transformation à tous les niveaux“⁴⁹ and „un art qui bouge“.¹⁰ In an interview after the première of Strindberg's *Le songe* in Stockholm (17 September, 1994) he summed up his views concerning the theatre as follows:

Généralement, le théâtre est le lieu de la littérature. Tout commence autour d'un texte. Mais je me sens revenir plus que jamais à cette idée du théâtre comme lieu de rencontre entre l'architecture, la musique, la danse, la littérature, l'acrobatie, le jeu, etc. Dans tous mes spectacles, c'est ce qui m'intéressait le plus: rassembler des artisans, associer des formes et des disciplines diverses. Cocteau ou Vinci étaient ce genre de rassembleurs – des formes, d'artistes, ou de disciplines – et c'est ce qui m'a incité à parler d'eux.¹¹

For Lepage, the creative process itself is far more interesting than its result. As Richard Knowles puts it: „Lepage's productions are always presented as works-

in-progress, always changing, never satisfyingly complete, fixed, or finished.¹² In the course of preparing the shows, improvisations and suggestions by the actors are always welcome: „[Lepage] privilégie la méthode de la création collective basée sur l'improvisation.“¹³ While Gordon Craig, one of the most influential figures of theatrical innovation and avant-garde in the early twentieth century, considered the actor to be an ‚Übermarionette‘ (a super-puppet), the actor for Lepage is a ‚machine‘: „Je raconte des histoires avec des machines. L'acteur en soi est une machine. Je sais que plusieurs acteurs n'aiment pas qu'on parle d'eux comme étant des machines mais lorsque tu fais du théâtre, c'est un peu ça.“¹⁴ His shows prove that he agrees with postmodern artists for whom

[...] technology is not part of the problem to be repressed, as for the modernist, but part of the solution – part of the mechanics of repression. Unlike the modernist director, for whom the actor embodies nostalgia for the verities and unities of the ‚natural‘, the postmodernist director is likely to treat the body as part of the *technology* of theatre.¹⁵

At the same time, Lepage's theatre is also a theatre of images and of poetic visions – and a theatre in which the audience, too, participate in the creative process:

Il faut inviter le spectateur sur scène [...] Le spectateur participe parce que le spectacle se développe à son contact. [...] c'est à la suite de la confrontation avec le public qu'on écrit. On n'écrit pas pour lui faire plaisir, mais on écoute ce qu'il a à nous renvoyer. [...] Pour moi, [...] la première, c'est le premier jour d'écriture, c'est là que ça commence, tout le reste n'est finalement qu'un travail préparatoire.¹⁶

The other decisive element of Lepage's theatre, beside its collectivism, is its interculturalism, which „[i]n the strictest sense, [...] creates hybrid forms drawing upon a more or less conscious and voluntary mixing of performance traditions traceable to distinct cultural areas.“¹⁷ This attitude is present in most of postmodern artistic creations, be it fine arts, literature, or the theatre. The old cultural centres of the world have lost their dominant position (this process started with modernism and the avant-garde), the division lines between genres and various ways of artistic expression have become blurred, and interdisciplinarity is a must – art in general has become not only more international, but more global, too. In the theatre, this development is visible both in the form of international festivals, when it is the shows which travel, and in the form of ‚globe trotter‘ directors such as Robert Wilson or Lepage himself, who holds that „[t]raverser les frontières géographiques, c'est aussi traverser les frontières artistiques et, au fil de ces voyages, il faut peut-être tenir un carnet de bord.“¹⁸ Theatre semiotician Marvin Carlson calls this process a ‚modern ‚pilgrimage‘ theatre inaugurated by Wagner in Bayreuth.“¹⁹ The result is a thorough interpenetration

of cultures, the extensive use and at the same time the challenging of stereotypes (especially ethnic ones):

The only constant of cultural production today [...] is pluralism and hybridity: the increasing cultural diversity of the population of cultural producers, the diversity of media mobilized by performance and theatre (video, dance, drama), the collage of cultural themes and sites.²⁰

After this brief survey of Robert Lepage's career and theatre concept, let me deal with some of his shows – shows that I have seen myself during the past ten years, namely the renewed version of *The Dragon Trilogy* (2003), *Les Aiguilles et l'opium* (1993), *national CAPITALe nationale* (1993), and *La face cachée de la lune* (2003). (Due to limits of space, I omit the films, i.e. *Le polygraphe*, 1987; *Les plaques tectoniques*, 1988; *Jésus de Montréal*, 1988; and *Confessional*, 1994.)

It was *La Trilogie des dragons* which made Robert Lepage's name well known not only across Canada, but also in Europe, the United States and Mexico, touring around the world for five years (1985-1990) as it did, and winning eleven prizes during that period.²¹ *La Trilogie* was renewed for 2003's Festival de Théâtre des Amériques. Sherry Simon explains the intellectual climate behind this multilingual and intercultural performance, emphasising that

The Dragon Trilogy was developed by Lepage and Le Théâtre Repère during the early 1980s, a period which saw a crucial shift in conceptions of ethnicity in Québec. While immigrants had traditionally become integrated into the anglophone community in Québec, the period after law 101 saw a reconfiguration of Québécois cultural power and the realization that immigrants were henceforth to be part of the majority Francophone world.²²

The six-hour show is the product of collective creation: the text was written by Marie Brassard, Jean Casault, Lorraine Côté, Marie Gignac, Robert Lepage and Marie Michaud, while the *mise-en-scène* was Robert Lepage's work. It is more like a 'saga' than a traditional theatrical performance, as it investigates the meaning of being Chinese in Canada, more specifically in Québec city, in Toronto and in Vancouver at various times in the twentieth century. Limits of space prevent me from rendering the story line in more detail – suffice it to say that the central idea is to represent the meeting of East and West in everyday life and in the context of major historical events, like the Depression years, the second World War, the mid-fifties with the tenth anniversary of Hiroshima and, finally, the seventies, when Pierre, the aspiring young Québécois artist, opens a gallery in Vancouver and falls in love with Youkali. They can communicate only in basic English. The play focuses on the processes taking place when peo-

ple from different cultures meet, coexist and communicate. As Sherry Simon concludes,

[...] throughout this immensely inventive and powerful play, the meanings of cultural identities are constantly put into question – ‚Chinese‘ moving from stereotype, to rich repository of cultural memories, to historical actor, and then becoming interwoven with the identities of the Québécois characters. [...] There is a constant crossing of boundaries from within and without as the play progresses across Canada. [...] the barriers of foreignness are forced open to reveal the interactions which construct identities, ideas, and projects.²³

The play is full of movement – not only in the physical sense of the word, but also in the sense of changing between languages, cultures and subcultures. The text itself is in French, English and Chinese, with each of these languages holding an equal share in the play. The creators seem to have taken great delight in the fact that a vast majority of the audience would not be able to understand the Chinese parts; indeed, it is the sound, the music and the rhythm of that language alone that matter to them:

Lepage's theatre [...] suggests revisions to the idea of translation as the transfer of one culturally-bounded product to another. [...] Pitting languages one against the other – at the risk of devaluing language, of declaring its relative inefficacy – is one of the ways that Lepage's productions express their mode of existence in the world, as circulation, as confrontation with diversity.²⁴

The performance functions as a tour in the course of which these diverse states of human existence can be discovered. The duration of the show (six hours) is an important part of Lepage's strategy, and so is the venue: Usine d'ALSTOM is actually an abandoned railway hangar, and is not easy to access. Therefore, the audience have to leave not only their everyday lives behind them, but also their familiar spaces, and are thus coerced to form a special community which is cut off from the city.

While the *Trilogy* was Lepage's first work to become famous, *La face cachée de la lune* is one of his latest plays. Like *Vinci* and *Les Aiguilles et l'opium*, this is a one-man show in two acts, which is performed in a traditional theatre space. In the background of the play is the space race of the 1960s, a decade in which Russian and American scientists and astronauts surprised the world with new discoveries several times a year. Lepage wanted to pay tribute to the astronauts, whose function within this project was that of a human resource, yet the conquest of space is embedded in the story of two brothers, thus making the play a kind of saga again, a TV weatherman and a scholar who investigates the narcissism of people involved in the space programme. At the beginning of the performance, Lepage makes the audience part of the world of the stage:

thanks to huge mirrors on the stage, the audience can see their reflection behind the actor. The play presents episodes from the life of the researcher, who is not only fascinated by the moon but also discusses the question of extra-terrestrials. In addition, he has to solve practical problems which result from the death of the brothers' mother. Yet the general tone of the play, which contains many ironic remarks, is neither nostalgic nor melodramatic, but rather philosophical. Lepage is an inventive artist of the highest order: household objects such as a washing machine in operation, may serve to demonstrate high or low pressure turbulences in the weather forecast or the cabin porthole in the spaceship, while an ironing board turned upside down may function as fitness centre equipment.

While preceding shows, such as e.g. *Les Aiguilles et l'opium*, openly reveal Lepage's fascination with the possibilities offered by modern technology and the media, *La face cachée* is more restrained in this respect. However, the stage is used as if it were a movie-screen, and indeed there is also a film version of the play which was shown at Toronto's International Film Festival in the autumn of 2003.

The stage-as-screen idea was already present in *national CAPITALe nationale* (1993), which is based on a bilingual play by Jean Marc Dalpé and was commissioned by the National Arts Centre. For this show, Robert Lepage acted as set designer and *metteur en scène*: the thirty-five scenes, performed without intermission, were framed by sliding panels that revealed only parts of the stage, thereby creating a filmic effect. Lepage's mastery of various stage techniques, however, could not compensate for the inadequacies of the script (Dalpé's text was re-worked by Vivienne Laxdal), and the clichés of the story which aimed at giving the audience an image of the monotony and heartlessness of everyday life in the capital city of Canada. The performance was not well-received, and most surveys of Lepage's work omit it.

On the contrary, *Les Aiguilles et l'opium* represents an integral part of Lepage's prolific work, connecting as it does various artists from the past with an end-of-the-millennium ambience. This one-man-show in two acts focuses on Jean Cocteau's *Lettres aux Américains* and Miles Davis' visit to Paris. During performances, Lepage was dangling from ropes in front of a framed, elastic white screen, as if he were in a painting or a live film. He was acting mainly in front of the screen, presenting scenes from Cocteau's journals. Sometimes, he moved behind the screen, shadow-acting or bulging it, and thereby offering memorable visual images on the stage. The very simple set and elaborate technical equipment provided Lepage with limitless possibilities for using theatrical

space and choosing freely between various forms of artistic expression: theatre, literature, music, painting, film.²⁵

In this short portrait – or rather sketch – of Robert Lepage I have tried to place his theatrical work in the contexts of the twentieth-century avant-garde, the alternative theatre movement and of post-modern theatre. These three forms of theatrical creation have laid great emphasis on bringing different cultures and forms of artistic expression together. Lepage started his career in the alternative theatre movement, in which collective creation was the dominating form. His earliest widely known play, *La Trilogie des dragons*, however, is not only an excellent example of collective creation but also shows an intercultural approach, contending that ethnicity in Quebec society needs a different interpretation. In his shows, Robert Lepage seamlessly blends not only different cultures, but different languages as well. As a participant in international theatre festivals and a guest director in well-known European theatres, Lepage embodies what intercultural theatre is about.

Notes

- ¹ Robert Lepage, cited in Rémy Charest: *Robert Lepage. Quelques zones de liberté*. Québec: L'instant même/Ex Machina 1995, 124.
- ² Ibid., 66, 55.
- ³ André Ducharme: „Destin planétaire“. *L'Actualité* (1 June 2003), 72.
- ⁴ Cited ibid., 73.
- ⁵ Ibid., 77.
- ⁶ This date is given by Ducharme, 78, while Charest and Perelli-Contos/Hébert claim that it was founded in 1978 (cf. Charest 1995, 209; Irène Perelli-Contos, Chantal Hébert: „L'œuvre de Robert Lepage. Voyage(s) métaphorique(s) et décalage(s) perceptif(s)“. – In: Dominique Lafon (ed.): *Le Théâtre québécois 1975-1995*. Montréal: Fides 2001, 265-280.
- ⁷ Ducharme 2003, 75.
- ⁸ Jennifer Harvie and Erin Hurley: „States of Play: Locating Québec in the Performances of Robert Lepage, Ex Machina, and the Cirque du Soleil“. *Theatre Journal* 51 (1999), 305-6; 303; 300.
- ⁹ Perelli-Contos/Hébert 2001, 268.
- ¹⁰ Ducharme 2003, 77.
- ¹¹ Charest 1995, 32.
- ¹² Richard Paul Knowles: „From Dream to Machine: Peter Brook, Robert Lepage, and the Contemporary Shakespearean Director as (Post)Modernist“. *Theatre Journal* 50 (1998), 189-206.
- ¹³ Ducharme 2003, 75.
- ¹⁴ Cited in Knowles 1998, 203.
- ¹⁵ Cited ibid., 204.

- ¹⁶ Cited in Perelli-Contos/Hébert 2001, 273.
- ¹⁷ Patrice Pavis (ed. and introduction): *The Intercultural Performance Reader*. London, New York: Routledge 1996, 8.
- ¹⁸ Cited in Charest 1995, 32.
- ¹⁹ Cited in Sherry Simon: „Robert Lepage and Intercultural Theatre“. – In: Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Yiu-nam Leung (eds.): *Canadian Culture and Literature and a Taiwan Perspective*. Edmonton: Research Institute for Comparative Literature, University of Alberta, and Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Tsing Hua University 1998, 129.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 126.
- ²¹ For a precise account of the three main stages of production and of the tours and prizes see Charest 1995, 213-214.
- ²² Simon 1998, 129.
- ²³ Ibid., 132-133.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 139.
- ²⁵ On *national CAPITALE nationale* and *Les Aiguilles et l'opium* see my review „From Euripides to Carbone 14. Notes on Montreal Theatre, 1993“ in *Matrix. Writing Worth Reading* 41 (1993), 37-44.