

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

Nigel Edgecombe
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.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Page	1
CHAPTER ONE	Page	7
CHAPTER TWO	Page	40
CHAPTER THREE	Page	72
CHAPTER FOUR	Page	97
CONCLUSION	Page	117
WORKS CITED	Page	125
BIBLIOGRAPHY	Page	133

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.