

9 Electric Campfires: Robert Lepage

Since first attracting international attention with *The Dragons' Trilogy* (1985) and his solo show *Vinci* (1986, both with Théâtre Repère), Canadian theatremaker Robert Lepage has become a controversial figure in contemporary theatre, arousing vociferous support and vitriolic criticism in equal measure, hailed as a theatrical magician or condemned as a gadget-obsessed purveyor of empty spectacle. Like Svoboda, Lepage has restlessly experimented with a range of technologies, including kinetic scenery, lighting, and various types of projection, to create productions that, even when they do not use video extensively, frequently have a cinematic feel to them. Sometimes accused of imprisoning himself in technology, he argues that 'it is a tool that allows me to explore things' (Ouzounian, 1997). Lepage's handling of video is eclectic; unlike some companies previously considered, it would be difficult to identify a particular developing avenue of experiment, and individual examples of how he manipulates video are not in themselves particularly innovative. Nevertheless, the overall structure and look of his productions have led to him being identified as a leading proponent of a video/theatre hybrid.

The strong differences in critical opinion have partly been in response to his experimental approach to production. Lepage develops productions over many months, and early showings of 'works in progress' have sometimes seemed scrappy. The early three-hour version of *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* in 1994, for example, was described by one of the performers/devisers, Marie Brassard, as 'a catastrophe' (O'Mahony, 2001), but its final seven-hour version was widely celebrated as a masterpiece of contemporary theatre. Heavy technical demands have even sometimes led to last-minute cancellations, as when a snapped bolt prevented the premiere of *Elsinore* at the

1996 Edinburgh International Festival. The divided response also, however, reflects broader critical ambivalence about the emerging forms of hybridised theatre exemplified in this study. Due to the paradoxical nature of Lepage's engagement with technology and the effects on performances in his shows, he has become something of a lightning rod for criticism of such work.

Echoing charges sometimes made against companies already examined here, Lepage's productions have sometimes been described as formalist exercises and his own performing as emotionally cold. Rejecting what he sees as the emotionalism of Method-derived acting, Lepage himself acknowledges a certain coolness in his approach (derived from self-confessed shyness). Nevertheless, he asserts that the work is concerned with emotions and relationships, suggesting that much of it has responded, if indirectly, to traumatic events in his own life, such as deaths of family and friends and relationship breakdowns.¹ Moreover, he suggests video helps him achieve intimacy:

How do you maintain a sense of intimacy with a thousand people? You have to rely on technology to magnify you, to change the scale on which you work. With *Needles*, we were successful in creating a sense of intimacy in a big space and in general it works quite well. (Charest, 1997, 111)

While his mixing of media and 'high' and 'low' cultural forms, his play with fragmented identities, and his eclectic appropriation of stories and forms from different cultures have led to him being seen as an exemplary postmodernist,² Lepage has been described by former director of the Royal National Theatre Richard Eyre as a 'very traditional theatremaker' (Hauer, 1992). He himself talks about the need for theatre to revive the sense of communality associated with storytellers spinning their tales around the campfire (Charest, 1997, 124).³ For him, film is an extension of shadow puppetry, a development from the shadows cast while sitting by a fire telling tales, and his shows often combine shadow puppetry with other forms of object-theatre associated with storytelling traditions. And yet the sets also spin and fly about the place, along with the performers sometimes. As someone who trained in physical theatre and Commedia dell'Arte, he frequently argues that actors must recover the idea of playing, but the technical apparatus with which he fill his stages often demands split-second coordination between technician and performer, as the latter is flipped backwards through a revolving door or rises above a screen to match his real upper body to a screened lower body.

Although Lepage has directed films successfully, his career has been dedicated more to theatre than film. He argues that the coming of film 'liberated theatre' and that contemporary audiences have a 'sophisticated narrative vocabulary' that must be acknowledged when creating theatre (Ouzounian, 1997). Finding the constraints of the film industry inhibiting, he prefers the possibilities of continual experiment in theatre and values the live contact with an audience. In *Polygraph* (1987) he explores what he sees as the voyeuristic nature of film, with its one-way gaze, contrasting this with the interactive gaze of the live performer and spectator. (Note that he prefers to speak of spectators rather than audiences, seeing the latter term as suggesting a focus on text at the expense of theatre's visual aspects.) Nevertheless, he is excited by the visual emphasis, free play with time and place, framing capacity and syntax of film, seeing devices such as close-ups, flashbacks, dissolves and cross-fades as facilitating a mixture of epic scale and intimacy of individual moments. (Although Lepage generally uses video projection, his work is informed more by film and film genres than television.) Even when not using video, he employs equivalents of these devices, structuring productions through the dynamic montage of the equivalent of cinematic shots, in such a way as to give his productions a cinematic look. He advocates a new hybrid form of theatre and film:

There's not a lot of hope for theatre as it is today and there's not a lot of hope for cinema in the direction it's going right now ... And there's a place in the middle, I think, and there's a form of art and I don't know what it looks like and I don't know what's going to happen ... but I am sure it's going to happen. (Dundjerovic, 2003, 5)

Although Lepage has acquired individual fame as a multi-talented performer/deviser, his working methods derive from his early exposure to exploratory, collective theatremaking; he still develops projects, even his solo shows, through a strongly collaborative process. After training in the late 1970s at Québec's Conservatoire d'Art Dramatique, where he was alienated by a dominant Method approach to acting and became more interested in physical and visual approaches to theatre, he undertook further training in Paris with Alain Knapp. Knapp aimed to develop performers' writing and scenographic imaginations. He expected students to produce texts out of performance investigations, rather than interpret pre-written texts, and emphasised using intuitive rather than rational processes. Returning to Québec, in 1982 Lepage joined Théâtre Repère, a company that employed Ann and

Lawrence Halprin's RSVP Cycle approach to artistic creation (Resources, Score, Valuation, Performance). Through a collaborative devising process beginning with a range of materials – visual, textual, filmic, objects, or memories drawn from the performers, the company aimed to 'discover' a performance rather than set out with a specific narrative or theme in view. Lepage became convinced that literal and metaphoric transformations (for actors, materials, spaces and audiences) lie at the heart of theatre and rejected a theatre that treats 'plays like intellectual problems that need to be solved and only focuses on their socio-political or intellectual value' (Charest, 1997, 161).

During eight years with Théâtre Repère he was involved in creating works such as *The Dragons' Trilogy*, *Polygraph*, and *Tectonic Plates* (1989), and the solo shows *Vinci* and *Needles and Opium* (1990). In 1994, along with several former members of Repère, he established Ex Machina in Québec City. It is based in La Caserne, a creative complex that combines a performing studio with facilities for sound and video work, and offices for various artistic collaborators on Ex Machina projects.⁴ The company's name, Lepage noted, 'evokes machinery. But for me, machinery is not only the harness that makes Cocteau fly in *Needles*, it's also inside the actor, in his ability to speak the text, to engage with the play; there are mechanisms in that too' (ibid., 27). Lepage has also directed productions for many other companies internationally, such as the Royal National Theatre and the Opéra National de Paris, as well as undertaking the staging for Peter Gabriel's 1993 *Secret World Tour*.⁵

Certain recurrent figures and tropes are often linked with how Lepage wields both video and broader stage technologies, especially in his devised work. Many of his productions include characters involved in the arts: artists, photographers, filmmakers, actors, dancers, writers. Issues to do with representation and the role of the artist often circulate around them. The characters often embark on journeys – geographical, cultural and personal, providing opportunities for disorienting cultural and linguistic encounters. In *Vinci*, for example, a Canadian photographer travels to Britain and Italy (with Lepage playing the photographer and the characters he meets); in *Tectonic Plates* characters move between Canada, the US, Scotland and Italy, while the title derives from the geographical phenomenon of the separation and subsequent collisions of the continental shelves of Europe and North America, with attendant analogies about cultural collisions; and in *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* characters move between Canada, the US, Europe and Japan. In most productions there is a mix of

English and French, but other languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Italian and American Sign Language appear. All this partly responds to Lepage's own ambiguous linguistic background and the broader cultural and linguistic tensions and opportunities arising from Canada's Anglo-French history and its relations with the US.⁶ It is also symptomatic of the phenomenon of 'global souls' discussed in my account of *The Builders Association* – and which Lepage explored further in his 'techno-cabaret' *Zulu Time* (2000). Lepage himself also speaks of the need to go elsewhere the better to know oneself and to understand one's home culture. Discussing productions such as *The Dragons' Trilogy* (set in Canada's Chinatowns) and *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* (mostly set in Hiroshima), he states that the encounters with East Asian cultures therein are less concerned with revealing something about them than with showing the non-Asian characters discovering something about themselves.⁷

Lepage links all of this with the notion of *décalage* or displacement. In *Vinci* a British bus-driver tells his French-Canadian tourists that they will experience this when driving on the 'wrong' side of the road. It is also a term applied to jet lag. The general sense is of feeling dislocated, even to the extent of nausea or dizziness, as the familiar is removed or confused.⁸ Many characters in Lepage productions undergo such displacement and its associated feelings, especially those who may be seen as alter-ego figures for Lepage himself.

Such recurring character types, narrative patterns and thematic concerns, along with a fragmentary approach to narrative structures, are all significant factors in Lepage's handling of kinetic scenery, lighting and reprographic media (from OHPs, mirrors and slide projection through to video and live relay). Although the look and feel of his productions is different, Lepage recalls Svoboda's interest in how such technologies may contribute to a sense of dynamic polyscenicness. The shifting scenery and frequent use of mirrors, as much as the use of video or live relay, continually reframe characters and actions, producing new ways of viewing them. As with Svoboda, such devices also facilitate the prevalent fluidity of location in his work, with a rotating screen or a projection of some sort often being used to signal a shift of scene.⁹

Literal transformations – as walls and floors dissolve – function metaphorically in tandem with the existential instabilities and transformations of the characters and their identities. Lepage himself sees transformation – of actors, characters, scenery and props – as 'the whole basis of the work', suggesting that 'people come to the theatre, often unconsciously, to witness a transfiguration' (Charest, 1997,

134–5). Lepage's inventive handling of scenery and video is echoed in his play with objects. A row of shoeboxes or books may quickly establish the image of a Chinese neighbourhood or the Manhattan skyline, a grand piano represents a continental shelf or a gondola, and an ironing-board becomes a fitness machine or a motorbike.

When such openly acknowledged transformations are combined with inventive, yet simple, video usage, as when a glass porthole in *The Far Side of the Moon* (2000) becomes in turn a washing-machine door, the window of a space capsule and a fishbowl, Lepage's productions turn into a celebration of the empowering 'magic' of the imagination in theatre, a further development in the theatre of attractions tradition. Yet we should note that attention is usually drawn to the fact of such magic being created. As Bunzli notes, 'Story and telling coexist, giving a special focus to the interaction between creators and creation' (1999, 95). Lepage productions usually include open acknowledgement of the spectators, of the transformations that occur, and of the technologies that contribute to these, thus bringing the spectators in on the act, including them and their imaginations as co-creators in the transformations.

We will also see, however, that sometimes the embrace of technology and the cinematic may run the risk of turning the productions into displays of trickery. To illustrate both the inventiveness with which Lepage combines kinetic scenery, object theatre and the use of projection, and the danger of technological display sometimes taking over, discussion here will focus on three of his solo shows, *Needles and Opium*, *Elsinore* and *The Far Side of the Moon*, and his epic *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*.

Needles and Opium

Lepage employed a brief section of video alongside cinema-style title projections in *Polygraph*, a production which had a cinematic atmosphere and structure (with flashbacks, flash-forwards and close-up effects). *Needles and Opium*, however, was Lepage's first production to use video more comprehensively, along with film-like projections and shadow puppetry. A solo show drawing on Lepage's personal experience and the lives of Miles Davis and Jean Cocteau, the production combines breathtaking performance with imaginative, if essentially simple, uses of technology to produce an atmosphere in which 'décalage is everywhere' (Bunzli, 2000, 29).

As often with Lepage, it evolved out of a kind of archaeology of a particular place and time: his 1989 trip to Paris to do voice-over work for a documentary about Davis's 1949 visit there. Flying over, he read Cocteau's *Letter to the Americans*, written in 1949. Once there, Lepage stayed in a room in the Hotel Louisanne, which had previously been occupied by the performer Juliette Gréco, who appeared in Cocteau's 1949 film *Orphée* and with whom Davis had a brief, tempestuous relationship. Davis and Cocteau were further linked by their addictions to opiates: Cocteau's followed the death of his lover Raymond Radiguet, while Davis took to heroin on his return to New York after his affair with Gréco. Lepage drew parallels between their addictions and his relationship with the lover he left behind in New York during his own trip forty years later. Moreover, Lepage acknowledges more general affinities with Cocteau: his collagist approach, his use of popular culture in 'high' art-forms, his movement between different art-forms, including film and theatre, his fascination with transformations, appearances and disappearances, his espousal of a 'poetry of the theatre', and his exploitation of his personal life within mythic frameworks. Lepage suggests, 'he was criticised throughout his life for the same things as I am. He was considered an acrobat, an aesthete without substance, a formalist' (Charest, 1997, 164).

In *Letter to the Americans*, Cocteau describes himself as training his soul 'to be as well built and graceful as an acrobat'. The structure and scenography of *Needles and Opium* is shaped by this image, the use of mirrors in *Orphée* (where the poet walks into a mirror to enter Hell), and the fact that Cocteau wrote his letter while flying from New York, 'in this atmosphere which the plane ravages with its propellers ... profit[ing] from not touching the soil of any territory but being able to write in the nocturnal sky where there still exist realms of free expression'.

With Davis's music creating a moody atmosphere, the performance largely alternates between Lepage's readings from Cocteau's letter, elliptical evocations of the Davis/Gréco relationship and Davis's battle with drugs, and sequences in the hotel room where 'Robert' tries to reach his ex-lover on the phone.¹⁰ When not in the room, Lepage spends much of the performance as Cocteau suspended in a harness from the flies, between two rotating 'propellers' (large ceiling fans, tilted to face the audience). Beyond the flying equipment, the setting is simple: a chair, a hanging light bulb, and a large suspended Lycra screen which tilts or revolves to create different wall-effects and onto which various projections play. Some are straightforward illustrative

projections: a starscape; the effect of Venetian blinds for the hotel room; an image of Cocteau from *Life* magazine; and place and time titles throughout.

More complex, almost filmic, shadow-play images are ingeniously created with an overhead projector located behind the screen. Much of the Davis story is imparted through such shadow-play. Scene Five, for example, consists of parts of a trumpet being placed one by one on the OHP and then being assembled to form a trumpet; the sharp silhouette of these is then balanced by a more shadowy Lepage moving up to the screen and standing with a trumpet. Scene Fifteen illustrates Davis's addiction and its effects in stunning fashion. While Davis's music plays, OHP-produced shadow images of a watch and a trumpet being



Figure 32 *Needles and Opium*

pawned appear; then a spoon, a packet of heroin, and finally, a huge syringe. The silhouetted figure of Lepage steps up to it and is seemingly injected by a syringe twice his size – with the liquid spilling out over the screen.

Equally powerful, and proto-filmic in the style of early Forkbeard Fantasy, is the use of the OHP to show Cocteau seemingly ascending the exterior of a New York skyscraper. Suspended in mid-air, Cocteau describes New York as 'a tall giraffe, spotted with windows'. A coloured, hand-drawn sketch scrolling across the OHP appears on the screen behind him, producing the effect of a camera panning up a building. Having revelled in critics calling him an acrobat, Cocteau says that his work would 'give you such a vertigo that you would never forgive me'. At this, Lepage goes into a series of somersaults, while the OHP transparency is rapidly rewound, creating the vertiginous effect of Cocteau hurtling towards the ground past the windows of the building. (The technique recalls how Méliès filmed the tumbling horse and carriage in 1905.)

Compared with such inventive quasi-cinematic devices, the actual use of video in the production is relatively straightforward. It is used primarily in relation to the Davis story. After Cocteau's somersault, film footage of Gréco appears as one of her songs is heard. As the romance begins, further filmic shadow-play produces the effect of a bird's eye shot of hands meeting over cups of tea and cigarettes. In a scene entitled 'Miles Crosses the Atlantic', video shows an underwater swimmer playing a trumpet, creating an effect that is both sensuous and bizarre. As the swimmer heads for the surface, Lepage rises up behind the screen, to match up with the screened image. The video then moves to a collage of jazz performers. Subsequently, after the syringe shadow-play, a projected title indicates that Davis and Gréco only met again a few times, on the set of Louis Malle's 1957 film *Elevator to the Gallows*, for which Davis wrote the score; a sequence from this duly appears on the screen.

Video also appears briefly at the end of a sequence in which Robert speaks about his low self-esteem to a hypnotherapist (addressing the audience, in fact). After recounting the Orpheus myth, he links it with his own grief over the loss of his lover and talks of seeking a balm to heal his wounds. Implying that the hypnotherapist rejects this, telling him instead to open up his wounds, 'open the gates of Hell', he asks how to do this. The screen fills with video of circular patterns that gradually resolve into a spinning spiral pattern recalling both Marcel Duchamp's Rotoreliefs and the use of such spirals in hypnotism. As

the screen tilts backwards and eventually flips, Lepage falls into the spiral and disappears – echoing Orpheus' descent into Hell in *Orphée*. Images of Cocteau are then projected onto the whirring propellers, before the text describes his experience of opium and the hellish effects of attempting to detoxify.

The production's restless use of the technology to evoke the dream-world atmosphere of Cocteau's films reaches its culmination in this fusion of Robert and Cocteau's poet. Nevertheless, behind the pyrotechnics and the surrealist effects, eventually it resolves into a powerfully emotional evocation of lost love, as it concludes very simply with Robert sitting alone in his hotel room writing a letter to his lost lover. Structurally paralleling Cocteau's letter, its poetic, imagistic language also takes on echoes of Cocteau and the Orpheus myth, while his reference to himself as a Romeo banished from his 'dear Juliet' recalls Davis as much as Shakespeare.

Elsinore

Lepage saw his next one-man show, *Elsinore*, as 'a sketch, prior to one day creating the real painting':

... the technology available to me this time has enabled me to 'X-ray' certain passages of *Hamlet*, and while the action apparently takes place only in the protagonist's head, it occasionally has the look of an electro-encephalogram. (*Elsinore*, Programme note, 1996)

Lepage, who by this time had also mounted productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest*, wanted to reintroduce playfulness into Shakespeare:

I don't pretend that I can offer the absolute Shakespearean experience. On the contrary, *Elsinore* is more a statement of the playfulness of *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's play uses Players, they do a play – there's a Player King, a Player Queen – it's all about playing. (Eyre, 1997)

Lepage compressed the text greatly, relying on assumed audience familiarity and arguing that such compression into key scenes and speeches reflects the dynamics to which audiences are accustomed by television. Although described as a work in progress, the complex set and multimedia approach, which required over twenty collaborators in design, video, multimedia and so on, hardly suggested a modest

experiment. For many reviewers of its first tour, in which Lepage himself performed, *Elsinore* seemed to show him at his best and at his worst.¹¹ Staged on 'a set that is a cross between a Ferris wheel and the Berlin Wall', full of 'technical dazzle', for many critics it was all show and no substance, 'wizardry without enchantment, stage management, not theatre', 'hollow, offering nothing more edifying than the chance to watch an admired director show off'.¹² The combination of kinetic scenery, video projection and straightforward sleight of hand provoked frequent comparison with magic shows. Responses took on the air of a personal assault on Lepage and the sort of marriage between theatre and video he had been pursuing:

As he delivers the great soliloquies with all the passion of a robot you realise that this is the theatrical equivalent of a pop video, hip, clever and meaningless. Are you moved by this *Hamlet*? No. (Spencer, 1996)¹³

The cinematic aesthetic and video usage led Lyn Gardner to think, 'Hell, why didn't he just have done with it and make a movie of *Hamlet* rather than a theatre piece that looks like a film?' (Gardner, 1996)

Such responses were not confined to newspaper reviewers or to Lepage's performance. When Peter Darling performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1997, Tamsen Wolff in *Theatre Journal* claimed 'events are scrambled to no foreseeable end' in a 'magic show designed to display one conjuror's mastery of illusion' (1998, 237). For her, 'this family album of rapid-fire snapshots of *Hamlet* remains almost baffling in its emotional blandness' (240).

Underlying much of the criticism is a suspicion not just of the technology, but also of the whole exercise of directing and performing a one-man *Hamlet* (something Robert Wilson had also recently undertaken). Lepage's resolutely anti-psychological playing (and his unlyrical, French-accented delivery of Shakespeare's poetry) was the antithesis of what critics seemed to desire from productions of *Hamlet* – with the performing virtuosity of an Olivier or Gielgud being replaced by technological virtuosity, and a unified interpretation of the play seemingly supplanted by a fragmentation of text, action and character. Yet in many ways the production harked back to Edward Gordon Craig's notion of playing *Hamlet* as a monodrama, in which other characters are effectively figures inside Hamlet's head, and Lepage's use of mobile screens even contained distant echoes of Craig's 1912 Moscow production. Steen and Werry also argue that his anti-psychological approach and the playing with technology multiplied possible ways of

interpreting the play and challenged conventional attempts to constrict it to an 'authorised' meaning, suggesting, 'the avowed and visible presence of technology highlighted the process and production of simulacra, of proliferation of image and sign' (1998, 146). As with other productions discussed in this study, the use of video contributes to more metatheatrical reflection on the way in which action, characters and imagery are always already mediated even in productions which make no use of electronic media.

Although *Elsinore* employed nine slide-projectors, six cameras and four video-projectors, Lepage claimed it was 'extremely low-tech. It looks extremely high-tech, and there's been a lot of high-tech in the workshops and in the rehearsal room, but I've replaced traditional shadow-play by simple live video work. It's very, very basic' (Eyre, 1997). At its simplest, Lepage's handling of projection recalls how companies such as Forkbeard Fantasy employ film to allow one performer to play several characters. Lepage's movement between playing Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and the others is often aided by video and slide projection. For example, in the second scene, featuring Gertrude and Claudius, images of the outer elements of Queen and King playing cards are projected onto the set – with Lepage adjusting his pose and occupying the central position in the 'card' as he plays them. Video is also used for scenographic purposes, for depicting Hamlet's father's ghost, and for rhetorical emphasis through devices such as close-ups and freeze-frames.

The way live relay is manipulated also assumes a broader metaphoric function. In a production where Hamlet's first words are 'Denmark's a goodly prison in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons', the set and live relay combine to create an effect that recalls Michel Foucault's parallels between a society under constant surveillance and Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison:

at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells. ... All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone ... constantly visible. (Foucault, 1995, 200).¹⁴

The shifting walls and floors of the set create not just an image of the instability, the *décalage*, that unsettles Hamlet's world and mind, but

also frequently produce a sense of confinement; and the projection onto them of images filmed from both in front of and behind the set (as if by CCTV) conveys the atmosphere of spying and intrigue pervading the Danish court.

The central feature of Carl Fillion's set is a 5m x 5m steel structure, called the 'monolith' by the production team. It contains a revolving circular section, in which there is a further removable rectangular panel (referred to as the 'portal'). Supported by four aircraft wires, the monolith can swing into many different configurations in relation to the stage floor and two further mobile screens that flank it. It can become a sloping floor, a wall, a roof, and a ship-deck, with the portal operating as a door, a window, a table or even a grave-mouth. When the monolith is vertical and aligned with the screens, together they form the battlements of Elsinore and become a projection surface (with dimensions similar to that of a cinema screen); at the beginning, for example, stonework projections are overlaid with projections of film-like production credits. When used as a doorway or window, the open portal allows Lepage to straddle the division between the stage and backstage. Conversing with Horatio, Lepage sits sideways along its lower edge, as though on a windowsill, alternately angling his face out to the audience (as Hamlet) or (as Horatio) slightly behind the monolith. A camera behind the monolith records him and relays his enlarged image onto the front – producing a disconcerting picture of the live Hamlet sitting on the knees of a filmed Horatio three times his size.

Lepage saw the monolith as like another actor, and in this production perhaps more than any other, his idea of the actor as machine and machine as actor came to the fore. Watching, it was at times difficult to decide whether the actor was under the control of the machine or vice-versa: but this also became a provocative reflection on the relationship between Hamlet and the monodrama in which he was engaged. The same could be said of the video; for all that the production became, at one level, a display of the performer's 'acrobatic' virtuosity in working with the technology, at times he seemed to be dominated by the blocking demands of the live recording.

These demands and the ingenious ways in which set and video combined will be illustrated through discussion of a few scenes. The third scene, in which Hamlet encounters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, exemplifies how video was employed consecutively in different ways. Initially, the monolith is vertical, with the portal open. Hamlet stands in view just behind this, alternately addressing an imagined Rosencrantz

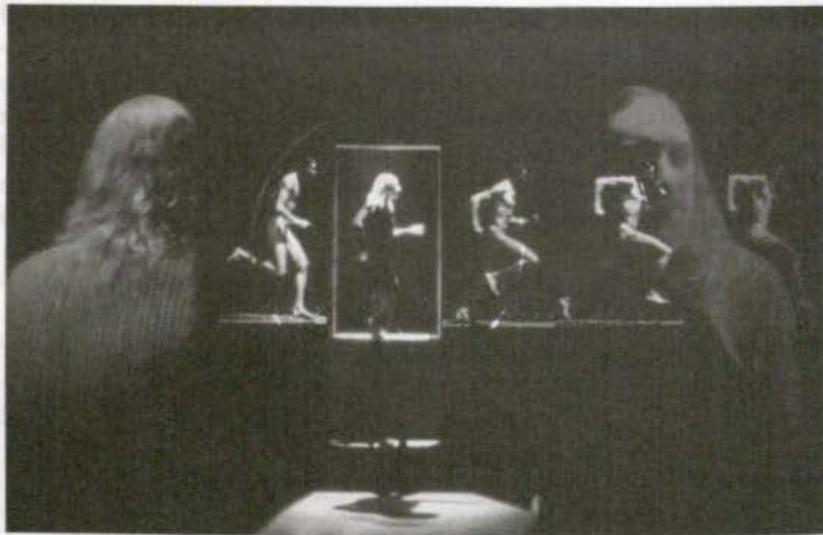
and Guildenstern, as though they are on either side of the portal: all their dialogue is cut, so that effectively Hamlet delivers a brief monologue, condemning Denmark as a prison and asking them the reasons for their appearance. Two cameras behind the monolith film him from either side. The differently angled shots are projected in enlarged close-ups onto the front panels – creating the effect of him being seen from the two different points of view of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

As Hamlet recounts his loss of mirth and describes 'this most excellent canopy, the air' as appearing like a 'foul and pestilent congregation of vapours', a celestial backdrop is projected; standing in the portal, Hamlet is spun round by the revolving central disc – a literalising image of his *décalage*. Coming to a standstill, he embarks on the well-known speech:

What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving how express and admirable! ... (*Hamlet*, II.2)

As he delivers this standing side-on in the portal opening, images of a naked running man flicker across the set – recalling Eadweard Muybridge's famous 19th-century studies of the human form in motion that are seen as a precursor of early film. These give way to an image of Leonardo da Vinci's classic study of human proportions, known as Vitruvian Man – projected onto the performer. We might see this as a productively ironic citation of the epitomes of Renaissance and post-Enlightenment study of the human 'form and moving'; or it may seem a rather obvious steering of the audience's response to the speech. Whichever, the video functions here, uncommonly for Lepage, in choric commentary mode. That Lepage sees it as a significant symbol of Hamlet's story, indicative of a gap between a world of reason and science and Hamlet's experience of a world out of joint, is suggested by the fact that the image was reproduced in the programme and publicity leaflets for the production.

Video, abetted by a body double, is used ingeniously in the final duel scene with Laertes. Again, action mostly occurs behind the monolith, with the open portal providing glimpses of some of it, while video projection onto the side screens conveys the rest. The scene begins with a close-up of Laertes rubbing poison onto his foil. Lepage then fights against a body double who has a micro-camera in the tip of his foil, so that a very filmic action sequence is created, with shots of Hamlet's swordplay appearing from the point of view of his opponent.¹⁵

Figure 33 *Elsinore*

Other cameras capture Lepage as he pauses to deliver the various interjections of Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes. (Here, as throughout the production, digital modification of his miked voice aids the transitions between characters.) When the Queen and Claudius die the video images are frozen on their moments of death – replacing the usual pile of bodies that accumulates at the end of most productions of *Hamlet*.

Inventive combinations of kinetic scenery and video projection are complemented by simple, yet evocative, moments of transformational play with objects, of a kind commonly found in Lepage productions. In particular, his handling of the Mousetrap ‘play within the play’ makes ingenious use of musical instruments to represent the various figures of the play, and his playing of the Laertes/Claudius interview, with the portal serving as a revolving table, is an effective piece of showmanship.

The continual play with setting and imagery, as well as enabling the piece to be produced as a one-man show did, contrary to some reviewers’ assertions, suggest various interpretative avenues, while refraining from expressing a univocal view of the play. The overall conceit of the play as a monodrama played out in Hamlet’s mind has already been noted; a picture of Denmark’s instability, along with its destabilising effect on Hamlet, also emerged strongly, along with the parallels between the court and a panoptic prison. Closer investigation would

also show how themes of incest and what Lepage calls Hamlet’s lack of blind passion (with which he identifies) circulate through the production. Furthermore, there is a provocative ambiguity over the extent to which the performer/Hamlet is in charge of the play that he sets in motion or is subject to it.

This tension or oscillation between the performer’s (and character’s) mastery of the set and his subjection to it does, however, lie behind some of the reservations raised about the production even by critics sympathetic to Lepage’s overall approach. The topsy-turvy world of shifting locations and constant role-switching demands great versatility on the performer’s part, and this might be seen as emblematic of Hamlet’s own situation. But, in effect, particularly when Lepage was performing, the show gradually assumed the air of a magician’s display, as one ‘trick’ was topped by another one. This could then produce a sense that the show increasingly became about Lepage’s inventiveness as director/performer, rather than about Hamlet and the Danish court. This does suggest grounds for qualifying Steen and Werry’s otherwise convincing arguments that much of the critical response was a reaction against its challenge to the conventional ‘authority’ (in the Derridean sense) of such a canonical Shakespearian text. They further suggest that it challenges the authority vested in director and actor, and the way dominant critical practice looks for a degree of unification between these three sites of authority. While such an argument is attractive, I am not convinced that the production undermines authority altogether. While the demands of dealing with the challenges of the set and video sometimes make Lepage’s mastery of it all quite precarious, his overcoming of the challenges – which, after all, he as director has set himself, only enhances his combined authorship/authority as director and performer, even if he avoids the sort of seamless joint *interpretative* authority of director and actor that they ascribe to productions based on dominant approaches to texts.

Of course, the sense that a production may be more about the performer’s encounter with the text, rather than an illustration or fulfilment of the text, is commonly found in postmodern theatre, and we have already seen it as a key aspect of The Wooster Group’s work. Lavender makes the point:

The spectator’s pleasure really takes wing when the staging itself rather than, solely, the show’s over-familiar content becomes available for enjoyment. This is part of the novelty, the excitement, that we seek. ... It also defamiliarises the material, another source of pleasure. (Lavender, 2001, 147)¹⁶

As we have seen in the case of reaction to some of The Wooster Group's work, especially *To You, the Birdie!* and *Brace Up!*, critics often resist this sort of approach to certain 'sacred' texts of the canon.

The Far Side of the Moon

The general response to Lepage's next solo show was more generous, perhaps because it was not 'misusing' a canonical text, perhaps because it seemed more 'personal', and perhaps because it seemed less dominated by flamboyant use of video and other technology – even though it made considerable use of both.

As with previous solo shows, the production's origins lay in Lepage's personal life – his feelings about his mother's death two years previously, but these were refracted through engagement with a broader thematic framework concerning lunar exploration and the space race. The core narrative plays out the reactions of two brothers (both played by Lepage) to the loss of their mother. Philippe, in his early 40s like Lepage, is a perpetual student writing a doctoral thesis on the effects of the Moon landing on the popular imagination. Diffident, unsuccessful in career terms (his thesis is continually rejected), and living an isolated life in a small rented flat, he is contrasted with his gay younger brother, André, a successful television weatherman who lives in an expensive house with his lover. While Philippe is totally shaken by his mother's death, André takes it in his stride and disdains what he sees as his brother's messy life and emotions; he doles out positive thinking mantras and tells him he needs to get out more.

While Lepage does have a brother, Philippe and André cannot simply be mapped onto Lepage and his brother. The tensions shown between them are as much a way of exploring different aspects of Lepage's own character and his own mixed emotions over his mother's death. Moreover, the personal story is complicated by layering it against an exploration of the space race between the US and the Soviet Union. A prologue recounts how the Moon was once thought to be a giant mirror reflecting the Earth, and how its hidden, far side was the object of speculation – until a space probe revealed it to be pock-marked with craters. Taking up the notion of the Moon's hidden disfigured face, and suggesting the American and Soviet space race was the product of narcissistic rivalry rather than a project of scientific enquiry, Lepage draws parallels with the sibling rivalry of two

brothers who each 'finds in the face of the other an image of his own disfigurement'.

Incidents in the brothers' lives are interspersed with talks by Philippe about early cosmonauts and a Russian space pioneer, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, who a century ago developed basic theories of rocket propulsion. Inspired by the Eiffel Tower, Tsiolkovsky also dreamed of an enormous space elevator, which would reach 20,000 miles into space. Attempts to understand and reach the Moon become a metaphor for Philippe's attempt to discover the truth about his mother's death: he is shocked to learn that she may have committed suicide. The weightlessness experienced by astronauts also becomes a metaphor for Philippe's own sense of aimless floating through life. Towards the end, he suggests that Tsiolkovsky's tower-elevator should be built on the far side of the Moon, since from there the Earth would not be seen. He compares the vertigo such an event would induce with the experience of losing one's parents: 'You discover that, although they meant the whole world to you, they were just blocking the view and keeping you from seeing the horizon.'

The idea of hidden sides, whether of the Moon or of people, is reflected in the set and in the way Lepage employs its transformability, along with video, to play with appearance and disappearance. The two principal elements of the set are a rear stage-width wall made up of sliding panels that are used to reconfigure locations, and a similarly sized mirror-wall, which at first reflects the audience back to itself, before being flown into position above the stage, where it later contributes to a visually stunning climax to the performance. As well as representing walls, a blackboard, an elevator door and so on, the rear panels are used for video projection.

Perhaps the most versatile and emblematically significant element of the set is a round glass washing-machine door located in one of the panels. Doubling as a porthole for a space capsule, it provides a literal route between inside and outside and between the domestic and lunar storylines. This is exploited immediately after the prologue, when Philippe piles a basket of clothes into it (these later turn out to have belonged to his dead mother). Filmed from behind the wall and projected onto the panel beside the 'door', an enlarged view of the laundry being inserted appears, as if from inside the 'washing-machine'. As Lepage peers inside, the live relay shows his head. After running the machine for a while, Lepage opens the door again and climbs in. To a soundtrack of cosmonauts conversing, the video projection shows Lepage 'floating' inside the machine, before moving on to show cosmonauts

floating weightlessly in a spacecraft. After further images of a rocket being launched, the dirty laundry reappears. Lepage then embarks upon Philippe's Tsiolkovsky lecture, which includes the telling quotation: 'Earth is the cradle of man, but man should not spend his life in a cradle.' (Later, Philippe is shown being 'born' from the porthole as a doll and being carried around by his mother – played by Lepage of course; his subsequent attempts to escape her cradle parallel the attempts of space travellers to escape Earth's cradle.)

The sort of transitions between different elements of set, text, performance, and video seen here foreshadow their fluid interplay throughout the show. They also suggest the characteristic spatial and temporal fluidity of Lepage's filmic storytelling, as locations cross-fade into each other and the brothers' story is depicted through flashbacks. As well as serving again as a washing-machine door, the glass door also becomes the window of an aeroplane, a clock, and a bowl with a (projected) fish swimming around in it. It is further used for projection when Lepage plays a doctor examining the young Philippe. Donning a white coat and spectacles, Lepage arranges an ironing-board so that it resembles the back of a chair, in which the audience is to imagine the young Philippe sitting. As if from Philippe's point of view, the looming face of the doctor peering into the young boy's eyes is seen on the glass door.



Figure 34 *The Far Side of the Moon*

Most of the pre-recorded video consists of clips related to space travel and lunar landings. At one level this serves as quasi-documentary supplement to the narrative, but the way space travel is depicted also informs the spectators' understanding of the characters. Philippe has a romantic view of the Soviet space programme, having as a child heard the first man to walk in space, Aleksei Leonov, speaking about his experiences. At one point Lepage, working with a tailor's dummy and Russian military uniform, adopts the persona of Leonov and describes how he did drawings in space and turned them into paintings on his return to Earth. The contrast between Philippe's appreciation of Leonov's artistic vision of space exploration and André's more pragmatic, scientific way of seeing the world is immediately drawn out, as Lepage transforms into his brother delivering a weather forecast in front of a video image of Earth seen from space.

Although video provides a point of transition here, it is worth noting that in this show Lepage generally does not use video for simple temporal or spatial shifts; he does not, for example, use it to show childhood memories, or to enable scenes between André and Philippe (there are no *Elsinore*-like conversations between stage and screen). Spatial relocations are enacted through theatrical means: he chalks floor numbers onto a panel and it is transformed into a lift; he flips the ironing-board about as various kinds of exercise machine and André is located in a gym; he dons a wig and headscarf and wheels a doll about in a shopping trolley to become his mother at the laundrette.

One very effective use of video recalls his handling of OHPs in *Needles and Opium*. Philippe enters a competition to make a video that will be sent into space to show extraterrestrial beings what life on Earth is like. Wielding a camera, he takes putative spectators on a tour around his flat, while his running commentary reflects the empty life he lives there. No video is in fact shown, and Lepage simply evokes the various elements of the flat in the imagination of the spectators. After an interlude in which he falls back into playing his mother, Philippe returns to making his video. Lepage flips the ironing-board over and squats on it as though it is a motor-scooter. He becomes Philippe riding through the Plains of Abraham, a large park in Québec City, with a video projection of parkland scenery rushing by providing a diorama-like background. Recalling being there in 1972, when Apollo 17 landed on the Moon, he remembers feeling that he could see the Moon bleeding and being overcome by his sense of the overwhelming nature of the cosmos. Transported to 1972, he runs home in a panic – while

the park scenery transforms expressionistically into dizzying kaleidoscopic imagery.

Soon after, when he resumes his documentary, Philippe addresses his potential extraterrestrial audience, commenting,

You've probably already picked up 50 years of television. You should know that TV offers a distorted image of life on earth ... For me the only thing that could describe the intricacies and subtleties of the human soul is poetry ... there's not much poetry on TV. So I decided to read a poem.

He recites a moving poem by the French Canadian poet Émile Nelligan, *Looking at Two Portraits of my Mother*. At the very moment when Philippe is making a video, he suggests a preference for poetry over the distorting power of the televised image. Similarly, Lepage, for all that he employs video in the show, tends to place greater emphasis on a more general poetry of the theatre to explore his subjects – no more so than in the final sequence of the production. After flying to Moscow to deliver a lecture on Tsiolkovsky, only to discover he is a day late, Philippe speaks to his brother on the phone. André stands in a pool of water in Philippe's flat: their mother's goldfish, which André was supposed to be caring for, has died. There is a comic pathos behind their mutual attacks on each other's fecklessness. When André opens Philippe's mail and reveals that his PhD thesis has been rejected again, it would seem all is set for a downbeat ending. Then he discovers a letter informing Philippe that he has won the video competition: 'The whole cosmos will see you.' After they agree to meet up soon, Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata is heard playing and Lepage stretches out on a line of chairs and begins to writhe slowly; the floating mirror wall tilts into position to reflect his body out to the audience, looking as if he is floating in space. For all that it is drenched in sentimentality, visually this is a breathtaking moment of resolution, 'a sublime fusion of performance, direction and set design' (O'Brien, 2003). Where in earlier sequences there was a sense that Philippe's aimless floating through life had led to an anxious weightlessness, it as though now he has transcended earth's cradle and is floating free of his past.

The Seven Streams of the River Ota (1994–97)

Created to mark the 50th anniversary of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (and presented in Tokyo in 1995), the production is an

intricately structured exploration of the interlocking lives of three generations of characters during the half-century following the destruction of Hiroshima. In a brief prologue Jana, a Czech Holocaust survivor who becomes a Buddhist nun in Japan, describes it as being about people 'who came to Hiroshima and found themselves confronted with their own devastation and their own enlightenment. For if Hiroshima is a city of death and destruction, it is also a city of rebirth and survival' (Lepage and Ex Machina, 1996, 1). It developed over a two-year period from a three-hour work in progress into a seven-hour epic, consisting of seven parts (echoing the seven streams whose confluence at Hiroshima forms the River Ota).¹⁷

The set, simple in appearance, yet complex in operation, is based around the exterior of a long tile-roofed Japanese house, the facade of which consists of seven sliding screens made of rice paper. In front of this are a low wooden porch and a raked stone garden. Although this anchors the play in Hiroshima, where Parts One, Six and Seven are located, the action moves around the world as different screens slide open to 'reveal' other locations: a New York apartment, an Amsterdam library, a concentration camp, a theatre in Osaka, and so on. In keeping with the production's focus on photography, the tightly lit opening and shutting of the screens often resembles a camera shutter revealing snapshots of the characters' lives. At times shadow-play occurs behind the screens or video is projected on to them. A set of mirrors behind them is used to great effect in an evocation of the ghetto at Terezin and a concentration camp. Video is used relatively sparingly, and yet, as often with Lepage, an open theatricality is paradoxically combined with the sort of tight focus shots, cross-fades, lighting effects, music and employment of extra-diegetic inserts that remind us of film.

There is much to do with interculturalism, with comings together and wrenching apart of lives, and with the interweaving of individual lives and historic events. In a show that attempts to harness together Hiroshima, Nazi concentration camps and the AIDS pandemic, a sense of loss is never far away. This is countered by a sense of spiritual or artistic quest on the part of several characters, and, disturbingly for some critics, by gently absurd comic encounters or scenes of an erotic nature. Lepage traces this concern with the reaffirmation of life and sensuality in the face of death and destruction back to his first visit to Hiroshima in 1993, when he discovered that one of the first steps in the reconstruction of the city had been to build 'a Yin bridge and a Yang bridge, one with phallic shapes and the other with vaginal shapes' (Charest, 1997, 90).

Threaded through the complicated narratives of destruction and rebirth is an apparent concern with issues around representation, with the characters including a photographer, an artist, an actor, a television journalist, and a translator. This is also reflected in the diverse representational forms and incidents in the performance: at various points characters rehearse or perform theatre, opera, dance, Bunraku puppetry, and a magic show; characters frequently photograph themselves or each other, and a television documentary is filmed and edited. Implicit links are also drawn between flash photography and the atomic flash that destroyed the inhabitants of Hiroshima while leaving their ghostly images imprinted on the ground.

There is also much play with translation, with English, French, Japanese, German and Czech being spoken – sometimes translated, sometimes not. Drawing links between Lepage's approach to intercultural engagements, representational modes, and physical and linguistic translation, Sherry Simon suggests that the production embodies

a kind of 'translational culture', one in which idioms are in constant contact and interlap. Lepage's plays enact a kind of code-switching, using varieties of language interaction for specific types of effects. As such, they propose a vision of 'cosmopolitan globalism' as a dialogue among differences. (Simon, 2001, 227)

Following Jana's brief prologue, Part One establishes the axis around which the various lives intersect as it depicts a brief affair between Nozomi, a widowed survivor of Hiroshima, and Luke, a married American Army photographer. The first scene consists of a wordless interplay between video and mime. While an image of the Torii (arch) of Miyajima is projected onto the screens, Luke and a boatman appear in silhouette behind them. They load a camera and tripod into a boat and depart. While video pans across the Bay of Miyajima, Luke takes photographs. Luke is charged with recording the post-Hiroshima landscape – interpreted as the destroyed buildings; Nozomi, whose house he comes to photograph, demands that he photograph her disfigurement also. (The audience is never shown her disfigurement, as she always performs with her back to the audience, or in silhouette.) This introduces an element that recurs throughout the production – the taking of photographs and recording of history. The play becomes an ever more complex picture of the human remains of World War II, as various lives and tales become linked through this initial encounter between conqueror and conquered, photographer and subject.

As Part One sketches a growing relationship between Luke and Nozomi, live scenes at Nozomi's home alternate with brief sequences where video provides a background to mimed or silhouetted action. Three video sequences depict succinctly Luke's movement between the world of American occupation forces and Nozomi's world as a survivor. In Scene Three, for example, a silhouetted soldier mimes painting one of the screens: the computer-generated 'painting' transforms into a video of an American Air Force plane. The soldier 'paints' a semi-naked woman onto its fuselage, and it flies off, with the soldier running after. In Scene Five, video of the Japanese countryside forms a backdrop to a mimed train journey in which Luke gets into a fight with other American soldiers. After a scene in which Luke photographs Nozomi in her wedding kimono but draws back from taking their growing intimacy further, another interlude employs video for what might be seen as a subjective insert. Nozomi's mother-in-law contemplates some old photographs. One, recording a wedding procession, appears on the central screen, before turning into a video as she touches the groom's face. As she kneels, watching the wedding video, the bride and groom clap their hands twice, and

hands clap off stage in synch with the video image, the Mother-in-law tapping with them. The scene freezes on the screen; the Mother-in-law stands up, cries out harshly, and slaps her hands against the screen several times; each time she slaps, the image grows smaller, until it's small enough for her to put her hands on it and 'drag' it into the portfolio, which she closes up and takes off-stage (Lepage, 1996, 10).

The video here provides an imaginative insight into the mother's thoughts as she replays her dead son's wedding in her mind and anticipates her upset over Nozomi's subsequent lovemaking with Luke. A brief and tender scene depicting this is followed by further video of a train, as Luke finally departs – shown again in silhouette.

The nine scenes are very brief, and yet the rhythm provided by the alternation between the Luke/Nozomi scenes and those employing video contributes to a strong sense of a drama unfolding over a period of time; the play with shadow, silhouettes and video create a sense of fleeting action, while the filmic approach to editing and the use of video evoke the atmosphere of classic wartime movies. The impression is of a condensed cross between Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (an operatic influence acknowledged subsequently when a concentration camp inmate sings an aria from it) and Resnais' 1959 film, *Hiroshima mon*

amour, which also centred on a romance pursued in the shadow of the Bomb – between a Japanese man and French woman.

Part Two opens with a video sequence that immediately marks a strong change of mood and location – from the tragedy of Hiroshima to a vibrant New York twenty years later. The video is an extract from an Abbott and Costello routine ‘Who’s on First’, which revolves around confusion over names. Its knockabout nature foreshadows the farcical tone of much of Part Two, in which most of the action is crammed into a bathroom shared by the tenants of an apartment block. The tenants include Luke, who, unseen, lies dying from cancer in a room he shares with his son Jeffrey. In a Menandrian twist, a newly arrived Japanese-American tenant is also called Jeffrey and is later revealed to be the product of Luke’s liaison with Nozomi. The two Jeffreys, ignorant of their relationship at first, embark on the Abbott and Costello routine as they discover their shared name. Among their fellow tenants is a Dutchwoman, Ada, whose mother died in a Nazi concentration camp, but not before she had befriended a young Czech girl, Jana – the Buddhist monk of the prologue. Twenty years after this New York meeting, Ada and Jeffrey 2 (along with his Japanese wife, Hanako) attend Jeffrey 1 as he undergoes an assisted death in Amsterdam (having suffered from AIDS). A further twelve years on, Jana, Ada and Hanako gather to dispose of the ashes of Jeffrey 2 in the waters of the River Ota, attended by Hanako’s son, David. Also with them is Hanako’s boarder Pierre – whose story echoes that of Jeffrey 2 in reverse. He has come from Canada to study Butoh in Japan – where 27 years earlier his actress mother had a brief affair with a Canadian cultural attaché, Walter. In such a tangled tale, it comes as no surprise that David and Pierre become lovers briefly and that at the end it is suggested that Pierre and Hanako make love.

Were it not for their setting, the twists and turns of the plot could easily lend themselves to farce, and Lepage himself nods a wink in this direction both in his handling of life in the New York apartment block and in his framing of Walter’s affair with Pierre’s mother, Sophie, against the performance of a Feydeau farce in which she was acting. There is also a certain comedy of recognition when, towards the end, Sophie and Pierre, and Walter and Ada encounter each other in the Hiroshima Peace Museum.

While the epic scope of such a production and its concern with technologies of reproduction and representation may have lent themselves to considerable play with video, in practice, its subsequent use is limited to a few scenes in Parts Five and Six.¹⁸ Part Five, set in Osaka in

1970, introduces Walter, his wife Patricia, Sophie and the Feydeau company. On three occasions characters photograph themselves in a station photo booth; each time live video feed provides an enlarged image of their behaviour inside the booth. In one instance Sophie’s lover, after a bitter parting with her, is seen striking himself on the face. In another Hanako is shown protecting her face as the camera flashes – while on the centre screen an image of an atomic blast appears. This is quickly replaced, however, by video feed of Jeffrey 2 and Hanako kissing and laughing as they take their photo. The interpolation of the parallel between atomic and photographic flashes seems somewhat facile. It is perhaps more surprising given the subsequent critical use of video in Part Six. Set twenty-five years later, it shows Patricia, now a filmmaker, interviewing Jana about her choice to live in monastery near Hiroshima. After a lightweight interview, Patricia and the camera crew are shown recording reactions shots and room tones, and then editing the tape. Feeling that it needs livening up, Patricia suggests superimposing a shot of the Atomic Bomb Dome onto Jana’s bald head.¹⁹ The implicit critique of this handling of such subject matter seems at odds with Lepage’s own earlier juxtaposition of the camera and atomic flashes.

This exemplifies potential reservations concerning the production as a whole. The intricacy of its plotting, the inventive theatrical means employed, and the modulation of tone and atmosphere, evoke delight, as so often with Lepage; and it is easy to be seduced by the message of survival and renewal which is threaded through the complicated narrative. Yet it is difficult to escape the feeling that the production sometimes falls into either aestheticising or rendering banal the historical events that provide the springboard for the narrative. As Simon says, ‘One would wish for a more nuanced and problematised confrontation of these historical “events”’ (Simon, 2001, 224). Equally, the running concern with representation, allied with the interplay between the different nationalities and cultures presented, may be seen as ‘metatheatrically emphasising the ways in which representations are culturally produced instead of naturally given’ (Harvie, 2001, 123). Yet, as Harvie also argues, ‘its critique of those practices is disappointingly limited’ (122). In particular, it is difficult to reject the argument that, for all that the production sometimes implicitly critiques the outsiders’ attempts to come to terms with Japan, the representation of characters such as Nozomi and Hanako and of Japanese art-forms such as Bunraku and Butoh ends up reinforcing Orientalist views of Japanese culture and behaviour; it appears as an idealised exotic Other, a site of

ceremony, spirituality and sensuality – and a feminised one at that, given that no Japanese men are represented.

Lepage is a prolific director and the four productions discussed here are not the only ones in which he has employed video, but they do give a representative impression of his approach. For Lepage, video functions for the most part on a par with lighting, music, objects, machines, shadow-play and puppetry, and with his eclectic approach to performance styles: it is a device to be wielded at will as he seeks to create highly atmospheric, cinematically fluid productions. It may be used scenographically, dramatically, subjectively, intertextually, for multiplying the range of characters, and for rhetorical emphases. Most of these approaches have been anticipated in the work of other practitioners, and there is little sense of the sustained exploration of the broader implications of using film or video on the stage found in their work. That said, the constant inventiveness with which he employs video within the governing aesthetic of transformation that informs his productions does mark his work out from much other multimedia work. Although the facility with which he creates his mesmeric stage pictures has sometimes been portrayed as simply postmodern facileness, Lepage's development of a cinematic theatre of attractions has contributed to a growing acknowledgement that theatre may be productively influenced by a cinematic aesthetic without losing a sense of being highly theatrical.

Conclusion

This study started off with questioning the undifferentiating, ahistorical ways in which critics have sometimes responded to so-called multimedia performances. Through illustrating something of the diverse ways in which film and video have been used in theatre, it has argued that the tendency to deploy simplistic binaries around the live versus the mediated in discussing such work can only be misleading. It has aimed to demonstrate that film and/or video can provide extremely versatile means for practitioners to extend their approaches to scenography, dramaturgy and performance in ways that make creative demands on spectators' imaginations. While noting the tendency of such work to exploit visual and performative aspects of theatre more perhaps than much text-based theatre and to often include more simultaneous material, it has rejected easy assumptions that this either disempowers spectators or underestimates their powers of imagination; rather, it suggests that such work often demands a more active, flexible spectatorship which brings to bear strategies for dealing with the material acquired through exposure to theatre, film, television and computer screens.

In Chapter 1 the emergence of three early traditions of working with film was noted: a theatre of attractions approach; an approach that made use of film's capacity to provide images of the 'real' world outside the theatre; and one based on the idea of film being able to access the subjectivity of characters. Much subsequent work has pursued similar paths, while developing them down various byways and using different methods. More recent work has also troubled standard distinctions between the 'real' world and the subjectivity of characters. Moreover, there has been greater use of video to create more overtly intertextual work, and a related tendency to use