

The Machinery of Vision in the Theatre of Robert Lepage

By Anna Maria Monteverdi

Canadian-born Robert Lepage is one of the most acclaimed directors and interpreters of contemporary theatre. Together with the stage designer Carl Fillon and with the technical staff of his multimedia team Ex Machina, based in Quebec City in a disused fire station, he has planned and given life to some of the most emblematic examples of the dramaturgical use of scenography as well as the technique and integration of video onstage. From Needles and Opium (Les aiguilles et l'opium) to The Seven Streams of the River Ota (Les sept branches de la rivière Ota) to The Far Side of the Moon (La face cachée de la lune) he has more recently staged The Andersen Project, a solo show commissioned by the Andersen Foundation to celebrate the bicentenary of the Danish author's birth.



THE ANDERSEN PROJECT

The story-line

The story's main character is Frederic Lapoint, successful lyricist for rock singers, an albino from Montreal in the throws of an emotional crisis following a temporary separation from his wife, who is commissioned by the Opéra Garnier in Paris to rewrite Andersen's fairy tale, "The Dryad". It is the fable of a woodnymph that lives in the hollow of a tree and who renounces immortality in order to visit Paris for a day. The person who called him, in fact, aims to produce a children's musical. The other lead is the French manager who has to organise the event; extremely busy and always tied up in lengthy phone calls, who is obsessed with sex, which he satisfies by frequenting a red-light club run by a Moroccan graffiti artist, Rashid. Hans Christian Andersen in person also comes on the scene, with his passion for travelling and his unrequited love for Jenny Lind. In addition to being based on "The Dryad", reference is also made to another Andersen fairy tale, "The Shadow". All the characters, interpreted by the eclectic Lepage, coexist with a shadow that reveals not only their interior personality and ideal aspirations but also their material objectives and sexual deviations. A shadow that, if left unfettered, as in Andersen's tale, can lead to personal ruin. Frederic arrives in Paris full of hope but will remain disappointed; the manager is abandoned by his wife, while Rashid freely roams the Metrò to let loose with his spray can.

The set like a giant eyeball

For *The Andersen Project* Lepage and the young Le Bourdier on his first theatrical stage design project, having previously collaborated with Ex Machina by designing the sets for the film version of *The Far Side of the Moon*, together invent a decidedly original scenic structure, pulling references from Baroque stagecraft and demonstrating how it is possible to achieve the same perceptive illusion of virtual reality by using a combination of traditional craft techniques and optical effects. For the show Lepage creates a scenario comprising various levels of depth and action (as already experimented in *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*) in order to vividly recreate a period such as the late nineteenth century, so full of technical and scientific discovery; he attempts to theatrically recreate the effect of astonishment and wonder universally experienced by the new optical devices. Great use of depth is made, with the stage area blocked into different areas of action corresponding to as many scenic mechanisms within a framework, which enables the “tricks” (the machinery and the runners) to be concealed beneath the stage area and in the wings.

To the rear is a large cubic volume in perspective, a “panorama” (called “the landscape” by the technical crew) covered in a special cloth which, thanks to a pneumatic system, can either cling to the interior of its walls or can expand towards the exterior thereby distorting the image projected frontally onto its surface to give the effect of a shell or an eyeball.

The magic of this technique enables a mechanised and efficient integration of body and image (thanks to a slight raising of the central part of the structure), restoring the illusion of depth, or rather, a false 3D, with an invisible and rapid transition from one state to another (concavity-convexity); the moving back and forth of the entire panorama on tracks creates an additional depth of field to the stage area. The concept of three-dimensionality, as we know, is linked to stereoscopy: we have two eyes and we perceive the three-dimensionality of objects. We see one image but one eye views it differently from the other. After all, virtual reality is based on this three-dimensional perception, in that it makes a pair of eyes see two different images. Here, the perspective, manipulated much in the way that is characteristic of seventeenth-century stage design “loses its illusionist character and starts to become the instrument of identification between real space and the scenic space” (F.Marotti).

The genesis of the work: Hans Christian Robert?

As Robert Lepage himself admits, *The Andersen Project* represents a ‘sum’ of all his work, not just the so-called one-man shows. In fact, here again we find the themes of solitude, of abandonment, incommunicability, of unsatisfied sexuality and romantic tension for a love or for a renown that is not realized, already present in *Needles and Opium*, *Vinci*, *The Far Side of the Moon*, and *Elsinore*; but we also recognize the figure of the independent artist, free of the imperatives of the art market, as touched upon in *Vinci* and *Busker’s Opera*; and the technical and visual solutions previously used in *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*. The recurring biographical theme is that of the renowned artist, as in *Vinci* (Leonardo), *La casa azul* (Frida Kahlo/Diego Rivera) and *Needles and Opium* (Jean Cocteau and Miles Davis), to which the contemporary character compares himself. The Danish author of children’s literature is thus backlit and visible through the lives of contemporary characters who find themselves faced with personal choices in part similar, though a century later.

The central figure becomes a kind of model before which the characters (mostly visual artists) love to face and examine themselves: Leonardo da Vinci (incarnating the union of art and technology) and Jean Cocteau (sublime example of artistic eclecticism) are among the topical themes in Lepage’s show, also in the form of iconographic citations or quotations from their works. The scenographic theme of the mirror image (or of the mirroring of characters) is an almost obsessive constant in Lepage’s shows and, according to the critic James Buzli, would introduce an unequivocal autobiographical element: the character and his manifold doubles would be none other than Lepage himself, who would speak of himself by literally creating a reflection of himself in their moral dilemmas, in their crises of love, their solitude, in their doubts on art and life. In *The Andersen Project* Lepage in effect reveals a surprising affinity with the Danish author Andersen, not least in their sharing the same love for travel and an insatiable sexual desire. “The Life of a Storyteller” by Jackie Wullschlager and his diaries, made available by the show’s commissioners, The Andersen Foundation, reveal a wealth of information. They in fact unveil unknown facets in the life of the nineteenth-century author; and it is these aspects that the show hinges on: the double life that would be hidden behind Hans Christian Andersen’s romanticism, that will never have him marry his beloved Jenny Lind: “*In the Romantic era men would write passionate letters to each other, yet it didn’t mean they wanted to sleep together; Andersen’s romanticism, though, went over the top and he wrote open love letters to a lot of young men. He also had great passions for a few women, although they were women he was pretty sure it would be*

impossible to love - Jenny Lind, for example, one of the great Swedish sopranos, whose touring schedule made a relationship out of the question. It was discovering that this man best known for writing children's stories had a double life, a strange, troubled personal history, that made me agree to do a show about him".

As Lepage himself points out, there are a number of points that his personality has in common with Andersen, other than a voracious sexual appetite: a troubled childhood, the question of language – always an underlying theme in his shows, inextricably linked with the fierce political arena of French-Canadian separatism - and the quest for international recognition of his work: *"It's hard to talk about what Andersen and I have in common without sounding pretentious, but there's a lot about him that I identify with - not least his insatiable sexual desire and constant mood of sensuousness. The difference between us is that I have a very intense sexual life and he never did. There is a connection between sexuality and creativity, and one of the themes in The Andersen Project is to do with the imaginative and sexual development of children. Reading fairytales to children expands their imaginations. As they grow older, they replace their bedtime stories with masturbation and sexual fantasy. I always worried that I was a sex maniac because I thought about sex all the time, but actually it's part of the imaginative process. If you're a storyteller and spend your time imagining things, your sexual imagination is likely to be just as vivid. Perhaps Andersen's sexual uncertainty reflects his difficult childhood. It's no coincidence that it was Andersen who wrote "The Ugly Duckling", a metaphor for the awkwardness of childhood and the blossoming of adulthood. I can identify with this, too: where Andersen was tall and ungainly, I had alopecia. Both of us experienced how cruel children can be. That can be tough, but being put through the mill very young can also be an advantage because you don't see the world in the same way. Another thing that connects us is the need to travel. A lot of artists in the 19th century felt that they had to travel outside their own country to be recognised. But Andersen felt he had more reason than most. First, he wrote in Danish, a language that, for a lot of people in Europe, was like speaking backwards. Second, he wrote for children, so he wasn't taken seriously. To be recognised, he had to go Germany and France to mingle among the great writers of the day.*

He'd come back to Denmark with all of that recognition. If you are a Quebecois artist, as I am, you feel the same impulse. Even an English-Canadian feels he has to be approved by London, Paris or New York. But Andersen sometimes did things for the wrong reasons - just like the heroes in his stories".

The theme of sexuality voluntarily repressed or experienced as a conflictual state would therefore be the core theme of the show: *"My first idea for The Andersen Project was to do with masturbation. The theme came about not in a sleazy, crass way, but as a way of trying to understand Andersen. I don't want to shock - I just want to show Andersen's lucid vision of the human condition. And the theme makes extra sense because a solo show is the most solitary form of performance and masturbation is the most solitary form of sex!"*. Every solo show that Lepage stages deals with the main character's solitude. Solitude that manifests itself in the painful search for a way out through the other or through self analysis. From *Vinci* to *Tectonic Plates* (*Les Plaques tectoniques*) the character undergoes an exterior and interior transformation throughout the course of the show, thanks to a salvific mirroring with his other self. A recurrent theme of all his shows is that of looking within oneself, of examining oneself in a way that we have never before seen, of understanding the anguish that assails us and the contradictions of our life in order to overcome them. The initial cause is always a rupture, of an emotional, psychological or moral nature; the social drama - declared Victor Turner - begins with a loss: the drama, read in a ritual and anthropological sense, is in fact, according to Turner, "part of a disharmonious process that arises out of a situation of conflict". In *"From Ritual to Theater: the Human Seriousness of Play"* and in *"The Anthropology of Performance"*, Turner expounds on the theme of social drama, which occurs when in the course of a community's daily life a break in the traditional rules of living is created, generating opposition, which in turn transforms into conflict. In order to be resolved, this necessitates a critical reappraisal of particular aspects of the established, legitimate social-cultural order. Thus a rupture marks the beginning of the "social drama", the crisis opens the way for the "dramaturgical phase". All Lepage's solo shows stem from a deficiency, an imbalance, (in Greek, hamartia), from a bereavement (in *Vinci* Philippe is spurred by the idea of travelling following the suicide of his friend Marc; in *The Far Side of the Moon* the two protagonists meet on the occasion of their mother's death; in *Needles and Opium*, the protagonist experiences the anguish of being abandoned by his love), by a crime (*Polygraph*), by a marriage in crisis (*The Andersen Project*); in some cases such drama would hint at autobiographical episodes of an extreme and painful nature. *The Far Side of the Moon* was created soon after the death of Lepage's mother, scenically associated with the image of the moon, universally a female symbol. *Elsinore* (*Elseneur*) was inspired more by the death of his own father than by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Between Romanticism and Modernity: the triumph of technology

“The Dryad” was written on the occasion of Andersen’s visit to the Paris Expo of 1867, the year marked the death of Baudelaire, who had dedicated to modernity the essay entitled “Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne”. At the 1867 Expo important new technologies and improvements in already patented optical and mechanical instruments were presented, among which a great number of stereoscopic photographic items on display. The contrast between the characters in the show is precisely like the contrast between Romanticism and Modernism. As Lepage explains: “*The Universal Exposition of 1867 signifies the end of Parisian Romanticism and the dawn of Modernism. And in Modernism Andersen sees fairy tales, amazing machines, a masculine world, a realist, mathematical universe founded on objects that are very concrete ... I may be accused of Romanticism in both my private and professional life, but these are recurring themes in my shows: the fact that romantic individuals find themselves in a very concrete world where there is little space for poetry, for excess, for passions*”. If we want to find an ulterior connection between Andersen and Lepage in terms of their common fascination with technology, we need only look at Montreal, Lepage’s homeland, which in 1967 hosted an international Expo where the Czech set designer Joseph Svoboda, in his country’s pavilion, demonstrated a multi-projection video installation that further developed on the polyécran system invented for the Prague Expo of 1958.

The constants in his theatre: the machine of vision

The Andersen Project has all the characteristics of a theatrical play that appears to revel in self-quotation; this allows us to establish the variants in Lepage’s theatre, always contained, however, within a few poetic and stylistic constants. In general, the theme that best identifies the work of Lepage is that of the machine, in the double meaning of scenographic apparatus and actor: within this machine, producer of film and video images and a continuous metamorphism of the scene, the actor is an essential mechanism.

The scene integrates images and mechanisms of movement in a single theatrical device in which man is still at the centre of research; theatre in a multimedia perspective can thus revert to being a “laboratory of anthropological experimentation and an integral culture, where art and technology rediscover their common etymology”. An example of a dramaturgical machine is *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*: over a period of 50 years various stories intersect, beginning with the period in history that marked the bomb on Hiroshima, to arrive at 1995 before going back in time again to 1945, following a non-linear narrative. Over this half-century, stories of people who experienced either directly or indirectly the tragedy of Hiroshima are repeatedly interwoven. This dramaturgical “mosaic” finds its parallel in a multilayered structure of screens where images from memory are deposited, literally represented by the flash light from a camera used by the protagonist, an American photographer hired to document the collateral damage to population and building structures. The link between the actions and the images that are back-projected or multiplied to infinity by mirrors and the integration of the video device onstage is evidently the characteristic of the show, in a successful visual solution that ideally transports in a space-time where the confines between spiritual and material, natural and artificial vanish to the benefit of a new humanity that takes part in history, the memory of which is entrusted to the store of tragic and violent images, but upon which there always exists the possibility of “rewriting” the scenario, to give them a present-day sense of the here and now.

On this subject Béatrice Picon-Vallin remarks that the real theme is actually the “treatment of memory”, of which the same machines used on stage, which modify the original image, are emblematic. The scenic machine is a performer and extraordinarily visualized in *Elsinore* where a single actor impersonates all the other characters of the tragedy thanks solely to a metamorphic set that is mobile and dynamic, and to the lighting (a scenic solution that recalls Gordon Craig’s screens).

The scenic machine acts as the protagonist also in *The Far Side of the Moon*: with original music by Laurie Anderson. This show by Lepage, voted best Canadian production of 2001, was inspired by the Soviet and American space launches. The exploration of the moon (until Galileo, “the Earth’s mirror”, as recounted by the Prologue) is the metaphor which Lepage uses to talk about another quest, that of interior space, intimate and private: it is the story of two brothers, one a meteorologist, the other a vendor of subscriptions long attracted by the theme of extraterrestrial exploration. Separated by different styles of life and character (Anglophone and Francophone?), they meet again following the death of their mother. The moon and the mother figure, with all their relative mythical and symbolic connotations, are the two central themes of the show, that continually

interweave. Lepage creates a metallic backdrop of dark grey that covers the entire width of the stage area, the interior of which conceals localities separated by panels that run silently on tracks; on its wall images taken

from documentaries on the exploration of the Moon and Super8 footage depicting the character's life are projected. A variety of objects and localities are intermittently glimpsed through the sliding panels: a wardrobe, an elevator, a series of rooms. This backdrop also has a corresponding "physical" fourth wall: an enormous mirror that stretches the length of the stage, on a rotatory mechanism that transforms it into a scenic property as well as a reflective ceiling that, in the show's finale, gives the audience the impression of a double body that dances seemingly in the almost total absence of gravity. Thus technology in theatre, as it appears in all its vividness in *The Far Side of the Moon*, introduces an unexpected oxymoron: it is "archaic", imperfect and potentially dangerous. It takes three days and a crew of fourteen to set up the show.

The apparatus employed, more than sophisticated high-tech solutions, recall the mechanisms and the ingenuity of Renaissance theatre, an historical period noted for its inventive solutions related to the mobility of sets, the apparatus was a real union of marvel and *ars mechanica*.

In Lepage's show is a veritable triumph of the ancient concept of *techne*, it's as if there were another show within the show: light and sound technicians and engineers, but also numerous stagehands give life, both onstage and off, to this crafted and functional theatrical machine, handling it with skill; in an instant, invisible stage hands physically move the panels, positioning the set and its props and pulling the projectors with cables. Lepage's theatrical machine derives its movements from mankind, from which it often borrows its semblance and its changeable character; it is like a living creature in its dynamic movement, and the subject that inhabits its space essentially animates it.

After all, in recognition of the metaphor so often used by Leonardo: man himself is a machine, a bird is a machine, a building structure is a machine, the entire universe is a machine.

Telephone-Home

The characters in Lepage's stories communicate their own solitude or they practise self-analysis, or maybe they seek comfort in a telephone conversation in a phone booth in an attempt to hold on to their love after being abandoned by them, or they discover some previously unearthed dramatic truth. It is undoubtedly a reference to Jean Cocteau's telephone drama, *The Human Voice (La Voix Humaine)*.

In *Needles and Opium* the protagonist tries, from Paris, to put himself in touch with his lover who is in America, but all he achieves is a three-sided dialogue with an Anglophone telephone operator and her Francophone counterpart, resulting in a general linguistic lack of understanding. In the play's finale, the actor's body turns, hung from a cable suspended above the proscenium arch, sucked into the projected images of works from Duchamp and Cocteau while still clutching the telephone as we hear the unanswered ringing interspersed with the strains of Satie's *Gymnopédies*. In *The Far Side of the Moon* one of the two brothers sells subscriptions to a newspaper by telephone; by chance his voice is recognised by a female friend who reveals to him that his mother did not suffer an embolism but chose to let herself die. These dialogues at times involve the presence of a telephone booth: in *Busker's Opera* appear two booths placed very close to each other but the characters are geographically distant for the purpose of the script. The face of the lead character is shown in detail, filmed by a television camera and projected onto a large screen, which in this way televises the personal drama by taking on the falsified, repetitive contours of a soap opera.

For the *Secret World Live*, Peter Gabriel's musical tour, Lepage creates a series of extraordinary sets thanks to the use of live video. Once again, a telephone booth makes its appearance (the traditional British phone box) for the track entitled *Come Close to Me*. The scenario that Lepage invents is significant: Gabriel and the vocalist are placed at opposite ends of a long narrow platform, united by a telephone cable-umbilical cord and each hold a receiver in their hand. For the duration of the track they each try to leave the booth or draw closer or move apart from each other by pulling on the telephone cord.

In *The Andersen Project* the telephone dialogue features on a number of occasions: Frederic calls home because he is feeling homesick and is gripped by a feeling of abandonment. The manager, while waiting for his daughter in the school hall, calls his therapist to talk about his current domestic situation. His wife, in fact, has left him (via the telephone...).

Theatre as a body of images composition

The characters' solitude is broken either by talking to themselves or conversing with other characters on video, or by interacting with their own shadow. In each case the issue is that of creating a scenic integration of image and body. For each show Lepage elaborates a different form for this dialogue which, however, never fails to privilege the craftsmanship involved in the theatrical aspect of projection and offers a magical illusion thanks to the ability of the actor to create a bridge between the threedimensional physical form and twodimensional electronics.

The technologies of the image unite perfectly with the concept of “stage machinery” in his form of theatre. In *Elsinore Hamlet*, placed within an opening on the rotating platform, has two web cams positioned on each side of him: turning from one side to the other, alternating from right to left, he offers his profile to each camera, which then transmits his live image onto the two side walls; this is the moment where he meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who do not make their entrance in person as this is a one-man show. The use of live images transmitted via web cam in certain moments would suggest that the video can be interpreted as a mirror: it brings to mind the private/public confession via web cam of the artist Frederic/Robert in the prologue of *The Andersen Project*, or the moving dialogue via video between the Prince of Denmark and Horatio, where Hamlet reveals his alter ego, his own ‘mirror’, the hidden side of his own character.

In *Needles and Opium* we see an interplay between objects projected by an overhead projector, the body and shadow-play. The performance space multiplies, taking in the space behind the screen in addition to that created within the parameters of the screen through the live projection and overlay of images with shadow.

In *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* the stage machinery becomes a series of screens on which video images and shadow-play are both front and back projected, creating a crafted composition of images that perform in strict relation to the flesh-and-blood characters.

In *The Far Side of the Moon* the grey panels that run on tracks that cross the length of the stage area enable pre-recorded together with live images to be projected, generated from both upstage and downstage thanks to the positioning of web cams. In this show the performance space encompasses its visible frontal area while simultaneously animating the hidden zone that the main character passes through via the opening of the washingmachine/porthole/moon/uterus.

The images in slow-motion are like those made by astronauts in zero gravity. Moon exploration thus becomes a metaphor for an interior discovery.

In *The Andersen Project* Rashid spray-cans designs on walls. The graffiti artist adds some obscene elements to the portrait of the Danish author Andersen, who emerges from the whiteness of the cyclorama.

All the graphic artwork here is actually created live by a technician employing a system of image enhancement and manipulation of existing photographic material, a device that Lepage had already used in *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, when the American soldier in Hiroshima painted pin-ups on the fuselage of the bombers. The image was a freeze-frame on which traces of colour and drawings were superimposed. And an instant after that the bombers took to the sky.

Again, in *The Andersen Project* the character is positioned behind the cyclorama, literally drawn into an image of an imposing grand marble staircase realized in 3D graphics. Lepage the actor performs a couple of movements that simulate the climbing of stairs and, while he appears to ascend, the overall visual aspect of the scene undergoes a change. This interaction, however, is false: the actor actually follows the movements of the computer-generated image as he himself does not have any real or direct control over it (which would otherwise be the case had he recourse to sensors that received the plotting of movement). The panorama created by Lepage in this case immediately brings to mind ideas from the treatise entitled “*Perspectiva pictorum et architectorum*” (1693) by Andrea Pozzo, and those of Bibbiena, and a twentieth-century reference to the blown-up panorama-style photos of beaches and gardens full of iridescent colour by Massimo Vitali from a highly centralised, geometric perspective.

Robert Lepage in metamorphosis

The Canadian theatre director Robert Lepage was born in Québec City in 1957. He has gained universal acclaim at major festivals worldwide for his theatre, characterized by the use of video and film projected images and by a narrative form that resembles that of cinema. Following theatre studies at the Conservatoire d'Art Dramatique in Québec, Lepage begins his career with the Théâtre Repère, where he both directs and acts in *The Dragon's Trilogy*, on 75 years of Canadian history experienced in Chinatown (also performed in English, Chinese and Japanese). Then follow *Vinci* (1986) and *Le Polygraphe* (1987). With *Tectonic Plates* (1988) Lepage moves on from the Théâtre Repère with *Needles and Opium* (1991); *Geometry of Miracles* (1998) on the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright and the Russian philosopher Georgi Gurdjieff, and *The Tempest* (1998) built with 3D imaging. Lepage has been the only North American artist to have directed a Shakespearean play for London's Royal National Theatre (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1992). Lepage's theatre is without frontiers in the sense that it is finally liberated from the constraints of language and genre: he stages bilingual or multilingual productions: *Polygraph* in French, English, Spanish, Italian and Japanese, *Romeo and Juliet* (1989) with actors who recite in two languages onstage, in reference to new linguistic-political divisions. He creates an epic theatre (seven hours of *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* from which he also produced a version for television), while he alternates live performance with film directing original

works such as *The Confessional*, a full-length feature screened at Cannes in 1995, or films based on his own stage productions: (*No set in Japan*, *Polygraph*), the directing of operas (*The Damnation of Faust* by Berlioz for the Tokyo and Paris Opera Houses), and staging rock concerts (sets for Peter Gabriel's *Secret World Tour* in 1993). As did Bob Wilson, he stages a *Hamlet* with a solo performer: *Elsinore* 1995, also known as "Lepage's one-man *Hamlet*". More recent productions include: *Zulu Time* (techno-style cabaret: the stage architecture features a triumphal arch in which dance, music and acrobatic performances are situated at varying heights, filmed by a series of 22 web cams) and *Que viva Frida*, based on the biography of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo.

His theatre production company, "Ex Machina", (www.exmachina.qc.ca), is a multidisciplinary structure that houses artists from all walks active in multimedia and the theatre community.

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