

Robert Lepage's Scenographic Dramaturgy: The Aesthetic Signature at Work

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### **Declaration of Authorship**

I, Melissa Poll, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Acknowledgements

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Thank you to June, Lloyd and Holly Poll and Pat Law for their love and a lifetime of support. To my husband David and our little family, I am forever grateful.

Je tiens à remercier Robert Lepage et son équipe à Ex Machina, notamment Michéline Beaulieu et Véronique St-Jacques. Pour Mara Gottler, un ami cher de Vancouver ainsi que le créatrice de costumes pour *La Tempête* et *Le Rossignol et autres fables*, merci.

## **Abstract**

An inheritor of the scenic writing tradition established by theatre's modern movement, director Robert Lepage's scenography is his entry point when re-envisioning extant texts. When asked to detail his particular approach to staging, however, Lepage repeatedly defers to intuition, chaos and/or alchemy, positing that he has no method. My dissertation proposes a significant reversal to Lepage's claims as they reference his adaptations of canonical works and theorizes his approach as a three-pronged 'scenographic dramaturgy', composed of historical-spatial mapping, architectonic scenography and bodies-in-motion. By examining a range of extant text productions mounted by Lepage, including *La Tempête*, a collaboration between Ex Machina and the Huron-Wendat Nation; *Siegfried* at the Metropolitan Opera; and *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, Ex Machina's adaptation of Igor Stravinsky's *Le Rossignol*, this project will detail how the three components of Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy enable him to re-'write' canonical works through highly physical and visual performance text.

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## Foreword

Six years ago, I wrote the following letter:

July 30, 2008

La Caserne  
103, rue Dalhousie  
Québec, QC  
Canada G1K 4B9

Cher M. Lepage:

My personal litmus test for theatre has always been the behaviour of my arm hair – does a play rouse each tiny strand to attention or are they content to rest complacently by? It suffices to say, while viewing *The Andersen Project*, I became a very furry being. I found myself transported as Arnaud de la Guimbretière unfolded his delicious tirade at Café de la Paix, being drawn in by the cheekiness of the prose ('habituellement, ce qui fait hurler les Anglais, eh bien, ça fait jubiler les Français') and the virtuosity of such a perfectly paced and pitched performance. Above all though, what made the production visceral and affective was the visual world of the play. Whether through Andersen's sensuous disrobing of a mannequin or Rashid's staccato graffiti scrawling in a Paris metro station, the human need to assert thwarted physical desires and political unrest is

evocatively and indelibly written in the space and time of your production.

As you can see, I am interested in your work on two levels. As an actor, I am inspired by the marriage of spectacle and nuanced performance; as a scholar, I am fascinated by the rich thematic underbelly of your stories. My academic pursuit of all things ‘Lepagean’ has also been inspired by the impact of your work. This first became apparent to me when I travelled to London in 2005 to conduct research for my Master’s thesis (‘Canadian Theatre in London’, University of British Columbia, 2006). I soon discovered that the topic of your oeuvre not only elicited consistently enthusiastic responses but also allowed me to connect with a host of London critics, practitioners and academics. Whether over pints at a local pub or tea at Canada House, the subject of your devised performances prompted performers and administrators alike to open up.

This letter, then, is what I hope will be the initial thread in a unique conversation. In the fall of 2009, I will be beginning doctoral studies—my dissertation will continue the enquiry into your plays that I began during my Master’s thesis. It is my great hope that you will grant me permission to observe rehearsals for one of your upcoming projects as part of my research.

I realise, of course, that before granting such permission you will first want to be better acquainted with me. I have performed with various Vancouver companies including Bard on the Beach, the Arts Club and Théâtre la Seizième and currently teach an introductory theatre course at UBC. Upon request, I would be happy to provide specific references from any of the above.

It is with great excitement that I sign-off on what might be the beginning of a correspondence with you. Je vous remercie de considérer ma proposition et je vous souhaite tout le meilleur.

Sincèrement,

Melissa Poll

Three months later, I received a reply from Véronique St-Jacques, Robert Lepage's production assistant, which thanked me for my letter and informed me that 'there is a lengthy waiting list to witness the creation labs. Some people have been waiting for 5, 6 and even 7 years before being offered to join us' ('Observership'). Before signing off, she added, 'As you probably know, for the last few years Mr. Lepage has been working on operas and therefore it is highly probable that the future observerships will be on opera projects' ('Observership'). Though somewhat daunted by St-Jacques's reference to the very lengthy waiting list and the prospect of observing opera rehearsals rather than devising sessions, I had received a response, which seemed in many ways like a small but significant step.

One year later, I arrived at the University of London, Royal Holloway to begin my PhD dissertation on Robert Lepage. With a timeline clearly in place, and the enduring aspiration of watching Lepage and his talented collaborators at work, I decided that my knowledge of Ex Machina (drawn from much research but limited to one live performance—*The Andersen Project*) was in dire need of an upgrade. From September 2009 on, my live Ex Machina education began. This included three visits to La Caserne (the physical home base of Lepage’s theatre company, Ex Machina), one trip to Wendake, Québec and attendance at the following extant text productions staged by Ex Machina: *The Damnation of Faust*, an opera by Berlioz staged at the Metropolitan Opera; Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress* at the Royal Opera House; *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, a brief opera on tour at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, which marries Stravinsky’s symphonic poem, *The Nightingale* with a compilation of the composer’s short songs; the Wendake *Tempête*, a postcolonial re-envisioning of the Shakespeare play from Ex Machina and the Huron-Wendat Nation; and the first two productions in Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, co-produced by Ex Machina and the Metropolitan Opera in New York.<sup>1</sup> During this time, I also attended performances of the following devised works by Ex Machina: *The Blue Dragon*, a ‘spin-off’ of 1985’s *The Dragons’ Trilogy*,<sup>2</sup> set in contemporary China and co-authored by Lepage and Marie Michaud;<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this project, references to extant text productions or Lepage’s extant text productions signal existing texts written by playwrights, composers and/or librettists other than Lepage. Because this dissertation is primarily focused on Lepage’s productions of such texts, references to extant dramatic texts authored and/or co-authored by Lepage, such as *The Andersen Project* or *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, are not considered as a part of this group as discussed here.

<sup>2</sup> *The Dragons’ Trilogy* is a devised piece authored by Lepage and his collaborators at Théâtre Repère in 1985. A journey across time and space in twentieth-century Canada, *The Dragons’ Trilogy* is a story that begins with two young girls and their families, unfolding in the country’s earliest Chinatowns in Vancouver, Toronto and Québec City.

*Eonnagata*, a devised dance/theatre piece by Lepage, Sylvie Guillem and Russell Maliphant based on the eighteenth-century life of the cross-dressing soldier, the Chevalier d'Éon; *Lipsynch*, a nine-hour devised piece focused on the affective capacities of the human voice; *Totem*, Lepage's Cirque du Soleil production about evolution; and *Le Moulin à Images*, Ex Machina's 3D outdoor projection show celebrating the history of Québec and the city's four-hundredth birthday.

Amidst all of this, I woke up one morning to find a new message from Mlle. St-Jacques in my inbox. It was an invitation to observe rehearsals for *Siegfried* in 2011, the third opera in the upcoming Ex Machina-Metropolitan Opera co-production of the *Ring* cycle.

In many ways, this dissertation is the sum of all the events and experiences leading up to and following that invitation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The *Blue Dragon* follows Pierre Lamontagne, a once-struggling visual artist whose self-imposed exile from Québec to a rapidly globalizing China has afforded him temporary respite from his fear of artistic failure in Québec.

<sup>4</sup> During my initial observership at the Metropolitan Opera, I attended *Siegfried* rehearsals and viewed the production's opening night performance. After being invited to return for an observership for *Götterdämmerung*, I saw the first night performance of that production as well. Since then, I have seen the first of four productions in Ex Machina's *Playing Cards* series, *Spades*, the company's mounting of the Thomas Adès's *The Tempest* opera at an invited dress in the Grand Théâtre de Québec in June, 2012 and *Needles & Opium* at Canadian Stage in Toronto in December, 2013.

## Introduction

Renowned Québécois director, actor and playwright Robert Lepage is among the most influential performance makers of our time. He first earned widespread acclaim with the international tours of his devised productions, including the ensemble piece *The Dragons' Trilogy* (1985), which makes innovative use of scenography to craft twentieth-century stories unfolding across three Canadian Chinatowns, and *Needles & Opium* (1991), a highly physical solo show that interweaves the 1949 pilgrimages of Jean Cocteau and Miles Davis with a Québécois artist's quest to self-realise in Europe. Not only has Lepage collaborated with the largest theatrical producer in the world, Cirque du Soleil, creating *Totem* and the one-hundred-and-sixty-five million dollar Las Vegas production *Kà* (Fink) but he is also the first North American director to stage a Shakespeare production at London's National Theatre—1992's irreverent *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, set in a mud pit (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation). A sought-after opera director whose work has appeared at the Metropolitan Opera and London's Royal Opera House, Lepage has also made successful forays into filmmaking as a director and screenwriter (*Le Confessionnal*, *Triptych*). His global contributions to culture have been recognised through international awards ranging from the Europe Theatre Prize and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Eugene McDermott Award to his admission in the Order of Canada and France's Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. By extending his talents to re-envision extant opera and theatre texts while continuing to produce devised productions that use evocative scenography to explore the complexities of personal and cultural crossings (e.g., *The Far Side of the Moon*, *The Andersen Project*, and *Lipsynch*), Lepage has secured a position among the twentieth century's foremost theatre innovators.

This study takes Lepage's adaptations as its topic, querying his repeated assertions that when it comes to directing, he has no method and examining the ways in which he employs scenography to re-invigorate extant texts. Lepage regularly defers to intuition (in Charest 139), 'chaos' (in J. Tusa) and/or 'alchemy' (in Bureau 91) when describing his lack of process, stating:

I often say: 'We don't know what we're doing'. I always use the example of Inuit sculpture. In the tundra or in the Great North, Inuit sculptors find an attractive rock that they believe contains many stories, images, landscapes. They take it and they wait for the rock to speak to them. And one day, rather randomly, the sun is at a certain angle, the light hits the rock in a certain way and, suddenly, the sculptors see a face in the rock and they begin chipping away to reveal the figure within. (in Bureau 92)<sup>1</sup>

Contextualised by an exploration of these and similar claims from the auteur, this study goes on to propose what I see as Lepage's scenography-based approach to adapting extant texts. While numerous academics have theorised the methodologies, aesthetics and politics

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<sup>1</sup> My translation of:

*Je dis souvent: 'On sait pas c'est quoi qu'on fait.' Je prends toujours l'exemple de la pierre inuite. Dans la toundra ou dans le Grand Nord, les sculpteurs inuits trouvent une pierre qu'ils trouvent belle et ils soupçonnent que cette pierre est pleine d'histories, d'images, de paysages et tout ça. Donc, ils la prennent et ils la mettent là, puis ils attendent que la pierre leur parle. Et un jour, par hasard, le soleil est dans un certain angle, la lumière lèche la pierre et, tout à coup, on voit à peu près un visage, disons celui d'un original. Alors, là, ils essaient d'aider l'original. (in Bureau 92)*



(or lack thereof) driving Lepage's original work over the past thirty years, contemporary scholarship lacks an in-depth study of the process guiding Lepage's adaptations of canonical works. My project begins to address this dearth of scholarly engagement by offering a brief gloss of Lepage's opera productions and the related scholarship as well as providing a summary of academic engagements with Lepage's more well-known Shakespeare stagings. This survey foregrounds the argument at the core of my thesis that posits a significant reversal of Lepage's own position regarding his work through what I've termed 'scenographic dramaturgy'.

Though Lepage's stagings of canonical works have produced limited scholarly analyses in general, the most evident omission is his opera productions, which date back to the early nineties and have become, in the last decade, the focus of increasing amounts of Lepage's time and energy.<sup>2</sup> Lepage's inaugural opera production, a 1993 double-bill featuring Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, has been the subject of a book chapter,<sup>3</sup> Piet Defraeye's 'The Staged Body in Lepage's Musical Productions', and two production reviews exclusively, including Karen Pegley and Catherine Graham's 'Visualizing the Music'. The ten operas staged by Lepage since 1994 have received a similarly low level of scholarly attention. Though Joseph M. Ortiz has written a short review of Lepage's four-part *Ring* cycle in *Theatre Journal*, the only academic article based entirely on Lepage's adaptation of Wagner's iconic cycle is Matthew Wilson Smith's 'Gesamtkunstwerk and Glitch', which represents an important contribution to Lepage scholarship. Wilson Smith thinks through the implications of the *Ring*'s constant shifting between theatrical, cinematic and televisual perspectives, providing an analysis of the

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<sup>2</sup> See the table on pages 16-8 for an illustration of Lepage's shifting focus over the past thirty years.

<sup>3</sup> Like *Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung*, Lepage's production of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* was the subject of brief reviews in *Canadian Theatre Research* and *Opera Canada*.

digital technologies featured in the Ex Machina/Metropolitan Opera co-production and productively framing technological glitches in the performances as a reminder of the theatricality/liveness grounding Ex Machina's branch of twenty-first century total art (74). Like the *Ring* cycle, Lepage's staging of Thomas Adès's *Tempest* at Le Festival d'opéra de Québec and the Metropolitan Opera in 2012, has attracted nominal academic consideration, receiving only a handful of short *Opera Quarterly* reviews.

While there are a number of articles and book chapters based on Lepage's Shakespeare productions prior to 2000, publications focused on his first Shakespeare staging since 1999, 2011's *La Tempête* in Wendake, Québec, are limited to Barry Freeman's 'Another (Aboriginal) Treatment of *La Tempête*', which reads aspects of the production as reinforcing the archetypal Savage stereotype, and my own differing assessment of the production's interculturalism, 'Adapting "Le Grand Will" in Wendake: Ex Machina and the Huron-Wendat Nation's *La Tempête*'. Academic enquiry devoted to Lepage's earlier Shakespeare productions centres on the language, staging and politics of representation driving the auteur's engagement with England's foremost playwright. Karen Fricker's subject entry on Robert Lepage in the *Routledge Companion to Director's Shakespeare* provides a succinct survey of Lepage's Shakespeare productions and interrogates some of the common characteristics driving these adaptations, including radical textual shifts 'that 'literally re-author' Shakespeare's plays ('Lepage' 233). This is exemplified in *Elsinore*, Lepage's adaptation of Victor Hugo's translation into a ninety-minute solo version of Hamlet's existential struggle. Other publications include essays from Barbara Hodgdon and Ric Knowles examining Lepage's essentialising Orientalism in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at London's National Theatre, Lise-Ann Johnson's reflections on the devising process guiding Lepage's *Shakespeare's Rapid Eye Movement*

in Munich, and Andy Lavender’s incisive, first-hand account of the scenography-based creation of *Elsinore*. *Robert Lepage: The Aesthetic Signature At Work* aims to contextualise Lepage’s Shakespeare productions through what I have theorised as the director’s broader approach to adapting extant texts and operas, particularly in light of his thirteen-year hiatus and recent return to the playwright’s texts via 2011’s collaborative, intercultural *La Tempête* in Wendake, Québec.

Figure 1. Lepage’s Extant Text Productions: 1983 - 2012

Year	Productions of Extant Operas	Productions of Extant Shakespeare Texts	Other Extant Text Productions
1983		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Coriolan et le monster aux milles têtes</i>, Théâtre Repère, Q.C.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Carmen</i>, adaptation of the opera by Georges Bizet, Théâtre d’Bon Humeur; performed at Théâtre de la Bordée, Q.C.</li> </ul>
1984			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Solange passé</i>, by Jocelyne Corbeil and Lucie Godbout, Théâtre de la Bordée, Q.C.</li> <li>• <i>Stand-by 5 minutes</i> by Jean-Jacqui Boulet, Louis-Georges Girard, Ginette Gay, Martine Ouellet, Marie, Théâtre de la Bordée in cooperation with Théâtre de l’Équinoxe, Q.C.</li> <li>• <i>Partir en peur</i>, Théâtre des Confettis, Q.C.</li> </ul>
1985			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>À Propos de la demoiselle qui pleurait</i>, by André Jean, Théâtre Repère, Q.C.</li> <li>• <i>Histoires sorties du tiroir</i>, by G. Bibeau, Les Marionnettes du Grand Théâtre de Québec.</li> <li>• <i>Suite californienne</i>, by Neil Simon (<i>California Suite</i>), Théâtre du Bois de Coulonge (Sillery), performed at the Théâtre du Vieux-Port du Québec.</li> <li>• <i>Coup de poudre</i> by Josée Deschênes, Marin Dion,</li> </ul>

			Simon Fortin, Benoit Gouin, H��l��ne Leclerc, Th��atre Art��fact and Parks Canada; opened at the Artillery Park.
1986			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Le Bord extr��me</i>, Ingmar Bergman’s adaptation of <i>The Seventh Seal</i>, Th��atre Rep��re, Q.C.</li> <li>• <i>Comment devenir parfait en trois jours</i>, by Gilles Gauthier, based on Stephen Manes’s novel, Th��atre des Confettis, Implanth��atre, Q.C.</li> </ul>
1987			
1988		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Le songe d’une nuit d’��t��</i>, Th��atre du Nouveau Monde, Montr��al</li> </ul>	
1989		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Romeo &amp; Juliette �� Saskatoon</i>, Theatre Rep��re, Qu��bec; Nightcap Productions, Saskatoon</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>La Vie de Galil��e</i>, by Bertolt Brecht, Th��atre du Nouveau Monde, Montr��al</li> <li>• ��cho, based on Ann Diamond’s <i>A Nun’s Diary</i>,</li> <li>• co-production of Th��atre 1774 (Montreal) and Th��atre Passe-Muraille (Montr��al and Toronto).</li> <li>• <i>C’est ce soir qu’on saou��le Sophie Saucier</i>, by Sylvie Provost, Les Productions Ma ch��re Pauline (Montreal).</li> </ul>
1990			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>La Visite de La Vieille Dame</i>, Friedrich D��rrenmatt, National Arts Centre, Ottawa</li> </ul>
1991			
1992		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Le Cycle de Shakespeare: Macbeth, Coriolan, La Temp��te</i>, Th��atre Rep��re, Q.C.; <i>Le Man��ge</i>, Maubeuge; Am Turm Theatre, Frankfort; Festival d’automne de Paris, France.</li> <li>• <i>The Tempest</i>, National Arts Centre, Ottawa</li> <li>• <i>A Midsummer’s Night Dream</i>, National Theatre,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Alanienouidet</i>, by Marianne Ackerman and Robert Lepage, National Arts Centre, Ottawa</li> </ul>

		London	
1993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Erwartung/Bluebeard's Castle</i>, by Béla Bartók, Canadian Opera Company, Toronto</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Shakespeare's Rapid Eye Movement</i>, Bavaria State Theatre, Munich.</li> <li>• <i>Macbeth and The Tempest</i>, Tokyo Globe Theatre, Tokyo</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Nationale Capitale Nationale</i>, by Jean-Marc Dalpé et Vivian Laxdal, National Arts Centre, Ottawa</li> </ul>
1994	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Noises, Sounds and Sweet Airs</i>, by Michael Nyman, Globe Theatre, Tokyo</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A Dream Play</i> by August Strindberg, Royal Dramatic Theatre, Stockholm</li> </ul>
1995		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Elseneur</i>, Ex Machina, Q.C.</li> <li>• <i>Le Songe d'une nuit d'été</i>, Le Théâtre du Trident, Q.C.</li> </ul>	
1996			
1997			
1998		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>La Tempête</i>, Le Théâtre du Trident, Q.C.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>La Celestine</i>, by Fernando de Rojas, Ex Machina, Q.C.; Kungliga Dramatiska Teatern, Stockholm</li> </ul>
1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Damnation of Faust</i>, by Hector Berlioz, Ex Machina, Q.C.; Festival Saito-Kinen, Japan</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Jean-Sans-Nom</i>, adaptation of Jules Verne's novel by Jean Charlebois, Gestion Son Image, Montréal</li> </ul>
2000			
2001			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>La Casa Azul</i>, by Sophie Faucher, Ex Machina, Q.C.</li> </ul>
2002			
2003			
2004			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Busker's Opera</i>, based on John Gay's opera, Ex Machina, Q.C.</li> <li>• <i>La Celestina</i>, by Fernando de Rojas, Ex Machina, Q.C.; Ysarca, Spain</li> </ul>
2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>1984</i>, by Lorin Maazel, Ex Machina, Q.C.; Big Brother Productions, New York</li> </ul>		
2006			
2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Rake's Progress</i>, by Igor Stravinsky, Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels; Opéra de Lyon; San Francisco Opera; Royal</li> </ul>		

	Opera House, London; Teatro Real, Madrid		
<b>2008</b>			
<b>2009</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Nightingale and Other Short Fables</i>, by Igor Stravinsky, Ex Machina, Q.C.; Canadian Opera Company, Toronto; Festival d'art Lyrique d'Aix-en-Provence; Opéra National de Lyon; De Nederlandse Opera, Amsterdam</li> </ul>		
<b>2010</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Das Rheingold</i>, by Wagner, Ex Machina, Q.C.; Metropolitan Opera, New York</li> </ul>		
<b>2011</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Die Walküre</i>, Ex Machina/Met</li> <li>• <i>Siegfried</i>, Ex Machina/Met</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>La Tempête</i>, Huron-Wendat Nation/Ex Machina, Wendake, Q.C.</li> </ul>	
<b>2012</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Götterdämmerung</i>, Ex Machina/Met</li> <li>• <i>The Tempest</i>, by Thomas Adès, Ex Machina, Q.C.; Metropolitan Opera; Weiner Staatsoper, Vienna; Festival de l'Opéra de Québec</li> </ul>		

My theorisation of scenographic dramaturgy, summarised briefly here, identifies three central tools as the foundation for Lepage's approach to adaptation: architectonic scenography, bodies-in-motion and historical-spatial mapping.<sup>4</sup> Architectonic scenography refers to a dynamic stage space/set that shifts position, height, depth, and/or composition to suggest tone and atmosphere. Bodies-in-motion references Lepage's expansive view of the body's kinetic role in performance as an evocative site whereupon meaning is sculpted, developed and ultimately unfolds. Because scenographic dramaturgy references the total visual world of a performance, the specific bodies used on stage (their acting and

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase 'scenographic dramaturgy' has been employed to describe a wide variety of theatre and dance scenography (e.g., work by Nick Cave, Michael Levine and Carol Brown) in publications by Pamela Howard, Karoline Gritzner, Natalie Rewa, Carol Brown, Anne Niemetz, Margie Medlin and Russell Scoones among others. These authors' definitions of the term differ widely and do not inform my specific use of 'scenographic dramaturgy' as an auteur-generated form of adaptation in which visual and physical performance text functions independently of the dramatic text.

movement style, race, shape, size etc.) are considered here as they contribute to adapting a text. For its part, historical-spatial mapping denotes Lepage's use of time and place, which transcends the basics of 'setting' by investing in the zeitgeist of a particular period and, often, by overlaying one era with another to provide further meaning-making potentialities. Although Lepage's adaptations of extant texts sometimes favour conventional readings, his unique contribution to contemporary theatre praxis resides in how he develops his directorial vision via these three tenets.

The term adaptation is central to this dissertation's discussion of scenography's meaning-making potential and will be examined throughout upcoming chapters. Adaptation is viewed here as the broader category within which Lepage's process of scenographic dramaturgy fits—in other words, scenographic dramaturgy is a specific form of adaptation that Lepage uses to re-envision extant texts. Though adaptations are often defined by alterations to the dramatic text, *mise en scène* is increasingly being seen as an adaptive language and form of authorship in its own right, capable of reconfiguring canonical texts through non-logocentric means. As highlighted by Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, adaptation occurs 'not only between verbal [dramatic] texts, but between singing and speaking bodies, lights, sounds, movements and all the other cultural elements at work in theatrical production' (7). My study explores how Lepage adapts extant texts through evocative interactions between bodies, stage space and scenography rather than shifts to the written play or opera text. Additionally, the ways in which adaptation unfolds *within* specific media inform this enquiry. As Andy Lavender writes:

*Adaptation* describes not only a process of dealing with source texts and artefacts, reshaping them for different media and new audiences; it also describes the way in which

different media evolve by adjusting to changing technological arrangements and aesthetic affordances. ('Modal Transpositions' 499-500)

The development of media expressly for Lepage's scenography-driven adaptations will be considered here, chiefly *Ex Machina*'s use of new technologies, including Sensei software, which relies on motion detectors sensing light, sound and movement to dictate and shift the vibrant digital images characterizing Lepage's *Ring* cycle.

The subject of recent arguments linking the ubiquity of canonical works on twenty-first century stages with a dearth of new plays (Tompkins ix), adaptation is considered here through a re-evaluation of what constitutes authorship and an investigation of how adaptations are, in and of themselves, original works. By accepting that forms of authorship exist beyond the literary text, such as 'the arrangement of the stage, the shapes and rhythms of the bodies on stage, and the idiom and texture of the performance' (Shepherd 153), we can read Lepage's adaptations as new works. Moreover, the unique 'cultural osmosis' that regularly occurs between adaptors and dramatic texts (Sanders 13) further attests to their originality. As this dissertation's case studies will demonstrate by articulating the broader socio-cultural and political connections informing Lepage's adaptations, 'there is a filtration effect taking place, a cross-pollination'; adaptations are 'mediations through culture, practice, and history that cannot be underestimated' (Sanders 13). Linda Hutcheon, who posits that adaptations and source texts exist 'laterally not vertically' (Hutcheon xv), also notes that adaptations can be read productively as they relate to external factors. Hutcheon's theory feeds directly into this project's understanding of canonical plays not only as material, dramatic texts but also as re-membered, immaterial palimpsests of their own production histories. Explored in detail throughout my case studies, part of the



pleasure of interpreting Lepage's adaptations resides in parsing the new material (Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy) from the old (allusions to previous iconic productions) and then interrelating the two strands.

Alongside adaptation, dramaturgy is a central concept in this study. Though dramaturgy can be defined as a characteristic or function (encompassing the structure of a play text or the pre-production research on the historical, social and cultural background of a given dramatic text), Eugenio Barba describes it as a 'technical operation' that is 'inherent in the weaving and growth of performance and its different components' (*Directing and Dramaturgy* 8). Barba's definition is pertinent for the purposes of this project as it does not qualify dramatic text as the central source of meaning, privileging it over performance text; instead, Barba sees both dramatic and visual performance texts as potential contributors to a production's overall dramaturgy. Barba also resists logocentric definitions of dramaturgy, dismissing 'the idea that there exists a dramaturgy identifiable only in an autonomous, written text' ('Nature of Dramaturgy' 75).

This appreciation of the adaptive capacity of physical and spatial texts, such as scenography, has been accompanied by appeals for new terminology:

The text is no longer the central and superior factor, all the other elements like space, light, sound, music, movement and gesture tend to have an equal weight in the performance process. Therefore new dramaturgical forms and skills are needed, in terms of a practice that no longer reinforces the subordination of all elements under one (usually the word, the symbolic order of language), but rather a dynamic balance

to be obtained anew in each performance. (Lehmann and Primavesi 3)

The term ‘scenographic dramaturgy’ is a response to the call for articulations of new forms of dramaturgy that no longer privilege dramatic text. It refers to the expressive, dramaturgical interweaving of visual elements (scenography, lighting, performers, physicality, etc.) in performance to offer diverse meaning-making opportunities to spectators.

Though this study is guided by the aforementioned theoretical frameworks, my personal position as a bilingual Canadian theatre artist also colours this work.<sup>5</sup> Being an Anglophone Canadian with the ability to speak French fluently, I occupy the space of a cultural interloper. The attitude I often face when attempting to converse with Quebecers in French is best summarised by the following quote from a Francophone Canadian student regarding French immersion programs and the appropriation of language: ‘The Anglophones have taken everything from us, now they want to take our language’ (in Heller 166). As linguist Monica Heller notes, communication between bilingual Canadians of Québécois and Anglophone origins is ‘shot through with the political significance of the choice of language in which to interact’ (144). During my observership at the Metropolitan Opera, Ex Machina team members frequently responded to my questions in English, though I began these conversations in French. My accent, derived equally from French and Québécois instructors, flags my Anglophone background and may explain the lingual protectionism I experienced when attempting to interact with Lepage’s team members in

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<sup>5</sup> Born to Anglophone parents, I completed primary and secondary school in French immersion. Canada’s bilingual education initiative, launched by a group of Anglophone parents in St. Lambert, Québec in 1965, gave Anglophone families the option of having their children educated entirely in French from kindergarten through to the final years of high school, when certain English language courses were made available to them (Safty 474).

French. At the same time, as Chapter Four will demonstrate, because the extent of my bilingualism was never fully known to Lepage and his collaborators, I was often privy to semi-private discussions at the Metropolitan Opera which excluded Ex Machina's Anglophone American collaborators. My work navigates these conversations through careful ethical consideration, speaking to Lepage's strategic use of French as a locus of control at the Metropolitan Opera (where the primary languages are English, German and Italian) rather than detailing the conversations I overheard.

My research is also contextualised by my experience as a working theatre artist. Trained at the University of British Columbia in a conservatory-style bachelor of fine arts acting program, I worked for ten years as an equity actor, holding memberships in Canadian Actors Equity and the Union of British Columbia Performers. My acting CV consists primarily of English language theatre productions but also includes my experience as a co-deviser for Vancouver's Théâtre la Seizième, the city's only French language theatre company. This formative experience mirrored Lepage's approach to devising and included improvisation and play with central creative resources, giving me first hand insight into the practicalities and pressures of creating and acting in a devised piece, among them working on a fixed timeline, knowing when to cede total control to the director and collaborating productively with devisers whose ways of working and visions of the end product diverge significantly. Moreover, as a professional Canadian actor, not only do I bring my own practical experience to this project but I have also benefitted from personal connections in the industry. My friendship with Mara Gottler, a Vancouver-based artist who designed the costumes for Lepage's *Wendake Tempest* and *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, gave me privileged access to the dress rehearsal of the *Wendake Tempest* and has led to shared information about Ex Machina's ways of working and Lepage's artistic

objectives, which she has permitted me to cite here. My connection with Ms. Gottler has also led to a friendship with Bernard Gilbert, Lepage's opera production manager, who has been responsive to my questions about Ex Machina's work and Lepage's creative intentions throughout rehearsals for the *Ring* cycle and beyond. Combined with my position as a bilingual Canadian and the insights this affords me on Québécois culture, my privileged access to Lepage's collaborators is central to this dissertation's argument that Ex Machina's recent adaptations involve a progressive interculturalism.

Laid out over five chapters, including three case studies, this project interrogates Lepage's highly physical and visual dramaturgy at work. Chapter One articulates the three prongs of scenographic dramaturgy, situating Lepage's directorial approach in the aesthetic continuum established by Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig and illustrating the meaning-making potential of scenographic dramaturgy through examples from Lepage's extant text oeuvre. This chapter offers a theoretical foundation for the case studies that follow, sourcing Lepage's training, influences and oeuvre (including the devised works), and articulating my theory of Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy.

Chapter Two contextualises Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy as it figures in the evolution of auteur-ed re-envisionings of extant works, demonstrating that though Lepage's approach to adaptation shares similarities with his methodology for creating devised performances, his adaptations differ in their relationship to broader theatrical traditions. This chapter begins by tracing the emergence of auteur directors in film and theatre, including a discussion of French New Wave Cinema and a brief examination of Richard Wagner's '*Gesamtkunstwerk*' (or total art model) as it contributes to the aesthetics of auteur theatre. To contextualise my analyses of Lepage's *Tempête* on the Wendake First Nations Reserve and the *Ring* cycle at the Metropolitan Opera, references to Peter Brook's 1970

production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Patrice Chéreau's centenary *Ring* staging will be outlined as auteur-ed forerunners, highlighting the particular concerns of re-'writing' canonical texts by iconic auteurs and demonstrating the ways in which adaptations are embedded in their own unique historical continuum. This discussion also establishes my view that Lepage's work with theatre and opera texts is continuous, focusing on how scenographic dramaturgy involves a heightened adaptive theatricality that is currently essential to the evolution of both forms. Chapter Two goes on to examine two seminal conflicts surrounding authorship and authority: the Wooster Group's confrontation with Arthur Miller in 1984 over the use of excerpts from *The Crucible* in Elizabeth LeCompte's *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .)* and JoAnne Akalaitis's production of *Endgame* at the American Repertory Theater, which Beckett threatened to have cancelled due to deviations from the text's stage directions. References to Barthes's 'Death of an Author' and Foucault's 'What is an Author?' will further tease out the question: who authors performance?

The first of three case studies unpacking Lepage's position in the broader theatrical tradition of adaptation, Chapter Three examines how *La Tempête*, the aforementioned 2011 collaboration between Robert Lepage's theatre company, Ex Machina, and the Huron-Wendat Nation on the Wendake First Nations reserve, fostered moments of productive interculturalism both on stage and off through the three tenets of scenographic dramaturgy—architectonic scenography, bodies-in-motion and historical spatial mapping. Lepage's process of scenic re-'writing' responds to the evocative potential of individual performer bodies and a production's given physical location, in this case Wendake, a community with which Lepage was familiar as a boy. Drawing on intercultural theory, scenographic dramaturgy and postcolonial theory, Chapter Three includes a contextualising

survey of Québécois and First Nations Shakespeare adaptations in Canada. This chapter highlights some of the potential traps of staging intercultural adaptations, including power imbalances among collaborators and reductionist portrayals of difference. *Ex Machina* and the Huron-Wendat Nation's ability to avoid many of these traps will be analysed through examples illustrating how scenographic dramaturgy's three central components function as both a process and product fostering a progressive dialogue between cultures. Chapter Three also analyses the Wendake *Tempest* as it foreshadows Canada's Idle No More movement and the Parti Québécois' arguably xenophobic Charter of Québec Values.<sup>6</sup> In addition, by incorporating sections from an extended interview with costume designer Mara Gottler, this case study offers an inside view of the collaborative adaptation process for Canada's first French-language Shakespeare co-production between Francophone Québécois theatre-makers and First Nations artists. Shifts made to the production's physical performance text during preview performances are analysed, particularly as they emphasise the First Nations Caliban's perspective.

Based on my experience observing rehearsals of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* at the Metropolitan Opera, Chapter Four examines the ways in which Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy led to an innovative adaptation of Wagner's iconic *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, particularly Lepage's production of the third opera in the cycle, *Siegfried*. This chapter begins by outlining productions of the *Ring* cycle during Wagner's lifetime, with emphasis on 1876's inaugural performance at Bayreuth. Wagner's approach to directing, his aesthetic preferences and his vision for future *Ring* productions are weighed against accounts and reviews of the first Bayreuth production as well as Wagner's own reflections on the process

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<sup>6</sup> Introduced in 2013 by then Premier Pauline Marois, the proposed Charter of Québec Values would prohibit civil servants from wearing certain religious symbols including hijabs, niqabs, kippas and turbans.

and product, including his unrealised plan to ‘do it all differently next year’ (in Millington, ‘Faithful’ 270). Wagner’s vision for a *Ring* remount and the production aesthetic he espoused in his later years are then viewed through the lens of Appia’s scenic sketches for the tetralogy and Lepage’s Metropolitan Opera staging. Like all adaptations, principally those involving canonical texts, Lepage’s *Ring* is shown to exist in a dialectical exchange with a number of productions (including Wieland Wagner’s iconic post-war stagings and Ruth Berghaus’s abstract take in the late 1980s), many of which are explored as they connect to the Québécois director’s scenographic dramaturgy. Enhanced by lighting and video, Lepage’s set, built of twenty-four moveable planks, physically reconfigures to summon the four operas’ various locales (Valhalla, Nibelheim etc.) and shifting tones. Bodies-in-motion also figure centrally in the *Ring* through the use of acrobats to stage added scenes teasing out characters’ backstories and Lepage’s work with the African American baritone, Eric Owens, to physically characterise Alberich in a way that subverts Wagner’s anti-Semitic overtones. My discussion of the latter aspect of the *Ring* demonstrates the subversive potential of physical and visual performance texts in adaptations and is contextualised via production norms at the Metropolitan Opera, including the opera house’s limited casting of African American males from its inception in 1880 well into the nineteen-nineties and beyond.

In analysing the Metropolitan Opera/Ex Machina co-production of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, this dissertation offers the first account/analysis of Lepage’s directorial approach to opera from inside the rehearsal room, detailing his method of handling the conditions of production, including the Metropolitan Opera’s marketing machine and the privileged position of the singing voice as it sometimes threatens to undercut the range of physical movement seen on stage. These aspects of Lepage’s scenographic dramaturgy will be

explored, demonstrating how physical and visual performance text rivals its literary counterpart by ‘writing’ equally evocative adaptations of canonical works without ever putting pen to paper.

Chapter Five is organised to support my evolving argument that lesser known, atypically structured texts are most available to Lepage’s scenographic dramaturgy. This section begins with a brief outline of the open-ended dramaturgy featured in atypical operas, contextualizing my case study of Lepage’s adaptation of Stravinsky’s ‘unstageable’ source text, *Le Rossignol (The Nightingale)*, a fifty-minute opera categorised by the composer as a ‘symphonic poem’. Lepage’s 2009 production, *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, incorporates *Le Rossignol* into a broader program of short compositions organised around a common theme and stylistic period in Stravinsky’s oeuvre, contextualizing and highlighting the symphonic poem’s score. I will explore how Lepage’s adaptation creates a hyper-aestheticised, twenty-first century version of *Le Rossignol*’s nineteenth-century *chinoiserie*, and tracks different periods of cross-cultural contact through a technique known as *feuilletage*. By overwriting the production’s narrative with a scenographic conceit based on the evolution of puppetry—which features acrobatic shadow play, Taiwanese hand puppets and Vietnamese water puppetry performed in an orchestra pit flooded with twenty-seven tons of water—Lepage demonstrates how light, space, sound, movement and puppetry can shape and develop open-ended texts, providing the external dramaturgical framework necessary to expand an incomplete extant score into a full-length opera.

Beyond offering an initial analysis of Lepage’s approach to staging extant texts, this project promises to contribute to the growing body of research devoted to contemporary theatre-making and adaptation processes. In the last ten years, scholarship has undergone a



significant shift, with a number of academic publications focused primarily on directing and devising, or, more broadly, the *process* of making theatre (rather than solely on the *product* of this work).<sup>7</sup> These texts examine a number of factors characterizing the shifting landscape of twenty-first century theatre that are also central to this study's discussion of Lepage's extant text stagings, among them the de-privileging of dramatic text in favour of physical and visual modes of performance and a re-evaluation of the roles, hierarchies and ways of working that have defined much twentieth-century theatre. One text in particular has been seminal in foregrounding this new current in scholarship.

Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* has established the possibility of 'dissolving the logocentric hierarchy and assigning the dominant role to elements other than dramatic logos and language' (Lehmann 93). By stressing that theatrical production involves various kinds of writing, among them the vocabulary of physical theatre and kinetic stage space, Lehmann invites us to reconsider the essential tools necessary to make theatre. As demonstrated by companies including Complicité and Station House Opera, '*mise-en-scène* is not an execution of the text but its discovery' (Pavis 118). My upcoming analysis of Lepage's productions will demonstrate that although his stagings of extant texts begin, in part, with a play text, the dramatic text is one of a number of resources informing his interpretations. His scenographic dramaturgy is developed through a kinetic dialogue between performers, the stage space, scenography, props, machinery, media and the

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<sup>7</sup> Since 2010, the following publications have been released: *Devising in Process* (Mermikides and Smart), *Direction* (Simon Shepherd) *Making Contemporary Theatre* (Harvie and Lavender), *Contemporary European Theatre. Directors* (Delgado and Rebellato) and Radosavljević's *Theatre-Making: Interplay between Text and Performance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

dramatic text—though it does not favour the latter as the production’s primary meaning-making axis.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary theatre’s shift away from the centrality of the written text in favour of physical and visual performance modes has implications for the playwright and director, which will also be taken up here. Mermikides and Smart remind readers that theatre’s dethroning of language ‘should not be understood as a simple rejection of the word or the text’ and that Artaud, Grotowski and Meyerhold continued to work with play texts while ‘espousing the belief that the body was the locus of a deeper, more primal truth than language’. These artists’ rejection centred on the dramatic text’s authority as an extension of the playwright’s authorial control (Mermikides and Smart 9). For Lepage to engage freely with Shakespeare and Wagner and re-’write’ their work through the text of his choice (scenography), he must be emancipated from expectations of fidelity to these figures. Pavis unpacks the term and flags its problematic tenacity:

Fidelity... is the illusion that we have of reading, interpreting and performing the play according to the author’s intentions, as if there existed a correct reading, a reading that reveals a verifiable truth in the play or the interpreted work. It seems that at whatever historical moment, in whatever culture, common sense – and society with it – holds on to an idea of a

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<sup>8</sup> Though this study interrogates the ways in which Lepage’s extant text productions provide further insight into aspects of the postdramatic theatre genre and the process of devising, it does not cast his extant text productions wholly in these categories. Because his work with canonical texts begins with a play text and follows the dramatic text’s narrative thread, it deviates in some ways from standard definitions of postdramatic theatre. Nonetheless, Lepage’s extant text productions possess other characteristics common to postdramatic theatre including emphasis on ‘the visual’ in which ‘movement, rhythm, architectonics, aural elements... contribute to the fabric of the event’ (Harvie, ‘Introduction’ 12). With regards to devising, Chapter One explains how Lepage, whose default work mode is devising, employs a similar method to work with extant texts.

truth of the text, inscribed in it, incontestable, inalienable, and so to an idea of a necessary and possible fidelity of interpretation... the dogma of fidelity has thick skin; it reappears regularly. (119)

Chapters Three and Four investigate the challenges of adapting well-known canonical works with established readings as opposed to the directorial freedom afforded to auteurs of lesser-known texts. Lepage's respective engagements with Wagner and Shakespeare are, in many ways, an encounter between authors. Pavis quotes Vînaver's note that once fidelity to Wagner, Shakespeare or whoever the canonical source text author may be is abandoned, the nature of the encounter can have a number of outcomes, among them productive disruptions and powerful reframings of the present:

There is the great universal repertoire, the classics, through which the director can express himself intimately, make of them a personal and contemporary work, provided there is a catalytic operation whose aim is to make elements of the present react by the use of old substances, or the reactivation of the past through an injection of today's materials. (in Pavis 119)

The nature of collaboration, fluidity of roles, distribution of power, and approaches to acting in contemporary theatre-making processes have also recently attracted new attention from scholars which also relates to Lepage's work. Whether the performance at hand is a devised piece or an adaptation, Lepage's process is narrated as collaborative and company members are often asked to work outside their areas of expertise, be it a video technician training performers to interact with digital images, a technical director guiding

harnessed singers' vocal production as they 'float' on a virtual river or the head of wardrobe working with an electrician to properly sew LED units into costumes (Barbour 58). Moreover, *Ex Machina*'s process differs from other standardized theatre practices in that production meetings function as an open forum. The designers, choreographers, puppeteers, technicians and performers that attend are encouraged to raise questions and contribute ideas that speak to production elements outside their own specialties. With regards to acting systems used in contemporary theatre-making practices, my project also picks up on the broad questioning of psychological realism and the value of Stanislavski-based methods that have driven aspects of recent enquiries. Lepage struggled with the emphasis on Stanislavski's psycho-realism during his training and migrated towards a physical approach, which he retained in his career as a professional actor and director. Like other contemporary theatre-makers, Lepage 'is interested in conveying a sense of the real but not through the arguably stale trope of psychological realism' (Harvie, 'Introduction' 10).

Finally, this project extends central threads in recent Lepage scholarship from experts in the field. Through various publications, Karen Fricker has tracked 'the evolving ways in which Lepage treats issues of cultural specificity, the reflexive availability of [his] material to audiences across different markets, and the use of his own identity and fame... as content and as a form of branding' ('Cultural Relativism', Fricker 120). Fricker notes an inverse relationship characterizing the content featured in Lepage's global turn; as his work gains cultural caché on the international festival market, its content moves farther away from Québec-specific material, sometimes veering towards cultural blankness. My discussion of the Wendake *Tempête* looks at Lepage's 2011 return to a local context through a production crafted exclusively for the Huron-Wendat amphitheater. Inspired by

Lepage's personal connection to the Huron-Wendat reserve and offering an in-depth engagement with Québec's colonial history, particularly the treatment of Canada's First Nations people, the Wendake *Tempête* is a marked deviation from Lepage's otherwise decidedly international trajectory. The impetus and implications of Lepage's choice to work locally are examined in Chapter Three.

Focusing on Lepage's theatre-making process, James Reynolds also poses vital questions. In his recent publication 'Robert Lepage and Authorial Process', Reynolds examines issues surrounding authorship, authority and control and posits that Lepage's position within his own democratically billed devising process allows him to 'retain possibly the most significant element of control from the outset, accomplishing a level of authorship... which must be read as both formal and ideological' ('Lepage and Authorial Process' 179). My study looks at a similar issue in Lepage's extant text work, examining the nature of collaboration and the politics of authorship colouring *Ex Machina* productions. Chapter Four questions the ways in which Lepage's singular position as auteur overwrites contributions from his longtime collaborators. Moreover, Lepage's relationship to power is analysed in my *Ring* case study, which investigates the ways in which Lepage maintains control in situations where he is no longer working under his preferred home-court conditions at La Caserne (his Québec City based laboratory).

Ludovic Fouquet's *Robert Lepage, L'Horizon en Images*,<sup>9</sup> traces the evolution of Lepage's scenography, charting the director's early work with objects and puppets through to the first productions featuring video and, later, digital imagery. Though lacking the adequate referencing necessary to support his arguments, Fouquet's book also nods to

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<sup>9</sup> Fouquet's *Robert Lepage, L'Horizon en Images* is currently available in translation as *The Visual Laboratory of Robert Lepage*.

Lepage's physical approach to acting, positing that his formative experience working with the Marionnettes du grand théâtre de Québec between 1980 and 1985 left an 'indelible mark' on his conception of acting (Fouquet 7). My work dovetails with Fouquet's discussion of acting and, in Chapter Five, makes connections between Lepage's Lecoq-based training and his use of puppetry, arguing that he builds character from the outside in. For Lepage, performance begins with physicality, stepping into a character in a way that parallels putting on a mask or picking up a puppet. Fouquet's scholarship also addresses some of the early extant text stagings that fall beyond the perimeters of this study's scope, which focuses primarily on Lepage's opera and Shakespeare productions.

My work also intersects with publications by Aleksandar Dundjerović. Both our assessments of Lepage's creative process read form as content, focusing on scenography as a locus of meaning-making and paying particular attention to the ways in which Lepage employs a range of high and low technologies to craft his evocative performance texts (Dundjerović, 'Juliette at Zulu Time' 70). My work does not, however, view technology as a foundational creative resource in Lepage's adaptations. While Dundjerović argues that multimedia and new technology spark the ideas grounding Lepage's adaptations, calling Lepage's use of various medias his '*techno-en-scene*' (Dundjerović, *Theatricality* 199), I view technology as the means with which Lepage teases out an evocative and transformative physical environment characterising the central time and place (the actual resource) that defines each Ex Machina adaptation. Further to this, Dundjerović believes that Lepage's 'performance *mise-en-scene* is a way of achieving cross cultural communication with international audiences' (Dundjerović, 'Juliette at Zulu Time' 71) whereas my theorisation of Lepage's scenography sees physical performance text as implicitly culturally coded. Dundjerović's argument fails to note that cultural difference

manifests visually as well as through language and, instead, he assumes a universality of signs. Perhaps the greatest difference between Dundjerović's argument and my own is my theorisation of scenographic dramaturgy as a tool of ideological analysis with which Lepage not only stages but interrogates cultures. While Dundjerović articulates what mise-en-scene does in Lepage's work, my work does this as well as exploring how Lepage's scenography functions as a cultural force. The details of this progressive interculturalism and its investment in shared agency for all collaborators will be demonstrated in my upcoming case studies.

As surveyed here, the research areas driving my exploration of Lepage's extant text productions have been selected not only to advance Lepage scholarship and fill significant gaps, such as the absence of work surrounding his opera stagings and recent Shakespeare productions but, crucially, to provoke new questions with which to move adaptation studies forward. My dissertation highlights how dramaturgy can take shape through kinetic performance text and bodies-in-motion, positing that form *is* content in Lepage's adaptations. The adaptor's liminal status as 'invisible... not-quite-writer, not-quite-director' (Krebs 582) is reconsidered as I position the auteur as a scenographic adaptor and examine the ways in which his or her contributions represent, in and of themselves, original work. This study also highlights how adaptations can productively destabilise the generally circulated, collective cultural memory surrounding canonical source texts (Ellis 3); by using intercultural bodies and newly-developed forms of digital media, Lepage re-authors extant texts from a perspective that is uniquely *of* (though perhaps not set in) the present socio-cultural moment. Collectively, these strands of my research work to further expand our understanding of adaptation as a dynamic process and product that includes but also

extends beyond shifts to the dramatic text to offer new perspectives on known and lesser-known extant plays and operas.



## Chapter One: The Signature

Heir to the *écriture scénique* developed by theatre's modern movement, Robert Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy defines his work with extant texts. Through highly physical, visual staging techniques, Lepage is drawing on the scenic writing tradition established by early twentieth-century theatre artists to aesthetically re-'write' canonical works. A thorough interrogation of the central forces behind Lepage's artistic signature begins by relating his formative theatre experiences to the broader tradition of scenic writing in nineteenth and twentieth-century theatre practice, locating his scenography in the aesthetic continuum established by Adolphe Appia, Edward Gordon Craig, Bertolt Brecht and Josef Svoboda. This chapter will unpack the three central tenets defining Lepage's signature scenographic dramaturgy and how they function to make meaning in performance.

### Foundations

Lepage's interest in crafting original productions and dedication to working in a highly visual and theatrical mode can be traced to seminal experiences in his training and early career. As a young actor studying at the *Conservatoire de musique et d'art dramatique du Québec*, Lepage struggled with the acting program's emphasis on realism and emotive capacity, a system taking its cue from Stanislavski's psychological approach.<sup>10</sup> Preferring a more physical aesthetic, Lepage excelled in classes taught by Marc Doré, a Lecoq-trained instructor whose emphasis on 'the body, space and everyday objects' (Dundjerović,

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<sup>10</sup> Of his training and evolving understanding of acting, Lepage comments: 'At the Conservatoire, I was taught a definition of emotion, which I learned but never managed to produce on stage. And for three years, I was told that I acted without emotion'. Lepage goes on to note that in his first professional shows 'I managed to move the audience. I didn't really understand what made this happen and it took me a long time... before I could really distinguish the difference between the emotion that an actor feels on the stage and the energy he needs to generate that emotion in the audience'. (Charest 151)

*Theatricality* 9) would resound in Lepage's later use of bodies as text and his play with objects as the foundation for some of his devised works.<sup>11</sup> Of Doré, Lepage remarks 'For Marc Doré, theatre is a poetic act before being a psychological act. He didn't speak of poetry as uniquely a form of writing, but as a way of moving, of playing' (in Gilbert and Caux 12).<sup>12</sup> Doré's investment in embodied practice would have an enduring influence on Lepage's work.

Upon graduating from the Conservatoire in 1978, Lepage's inability to conform to North America's dominant, realist acting aesthetic left him without work so, alongside his classmate Richard Fréchette, he pursued further training with Alain Knapp in Paris, an experience that would indelibly colour Lepage's approach to theatre-making via the devised process. At a three-week Paris workshop, Knapp taught students his view on shaping a theatre career: to sustain their positions as artists, actors must take on the role of director and playwright, creating their own work rather than depending on interpreting others' texts. Through Knapp, Lepage also learned that producing devised theatre involves working 'on all aspects of production-making' (Dundjerović, *Theatricality* 9), thus fuelling his interest in scenography. During his time in France, Lepage would also visit Le Théâtre du Soleil, run by the Lecoq-trained director Ariane Mnouchkine. Mnouchkine's theatre, which put Lecoq techniques into practice, was a source of inspiration for Lepage. He comments:

With her first big collective creations at the beginning of the  
1970s, she [Mnouchkine] placed the actor at the centre of the

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<sup>11</sup> A deck of cards for a game of mahjong were among the starting resources for Lepage's devised work *The Dragons' Trilogy*. For his devised solo show *The Far Side of the Moon*, a washing machine played a seminal role (alongside the Russian/American space race and Lepage's recent loss of his mother).

<sup>12</sup> My translation of: 'Pour Marc Doré, le théâtre était un acte poétique avant d'être un acte psychologique. Il ne parlait pas de la poésie uniquement comme une forme d'écriture, mais comme une façon de bouger, de jouer' (Lepage in Gilbert and Caux 12).

creation process. She put an end to existing hierarchies at the heart of her troupe. For her, each project dictated the time required for its own development; a show wasn't ready until the troupe had explored every possible avenue. And finally, she had her abandoned ammunitions factory, a laboratory dedicated to building her oeuvre. In fact, if I was asked to name my dream company at that moment, Théâtre du Soleil would have certainly served as my model. (in Gilbert and Caux 12)<sup>13</sup>

The impact of Mnouchkine's theatre would be seen in various aspects of Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy, whether through its Lecoq-inspired physicality, consideration of the actor as creator or need for an extended rehearsal period.<sup>14</sup> This initial brush with Mnouchkine's theatre and Knapp's teachings on the performer's responsibility to create his own work would end Lepage's formal arts education, sending him into his professional career with a process placing high value on the artist's imagination and interests as key creative fodder.

Upon his return to Québec, Lepage founded Théâtre Hummm... with Fréchette, prior to becoming involved as an actor and co-deviser at Théâtre Repère, a company

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<sup>13</sup> My translation of:

*Dés ses premières grandes créations collectives du début des années 1970, elle plaçait le comédien au centre du processus de création. Elle avait abattu les hiérarchies au sein de sa troupe. Pour elle chaque projet dictait le temps requis pour son développement: un spectacle n'était prêt que lorsque sa troupe avait exploré toutes les voies possibles. Et enfin, elle avait la Cartoucherie, un lieu dédié à l'élaboration de ses oeuvres. En fait, si j'avais eu à ce moment-là à rêver d'une compagnie, le Théâtre du Soleil m'aurait très certainement servi de modèle. (Lepage in Gilbert and Caux 12)*

<sup>14</sup> Even when working with extant texts, Lepage's initial workshops employ prototypes and rehearsals can collectively extend over a period of several years. *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables* was in development for two years prior to its premiere. For more on this, see Chapter Five.

founded by his former Conservatoire instructor, Jacques Lessard. Through this experience, Lepage would gain a defining tool for his theatre-making approach—the use of an initial resource to spark the creative process. Lessard trained with Anna Halprin at the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, learning to craft collective creations through the RSVP cycles, a devised technique originated by Anna's husband Lawrence, a landscape architect. Through the respective steps of the cycle, Anna aspired to free dancers from their dependence on choreography and allow them to generate their own work by sourcing the creative impulse within (Worth and Poynor 54). As outlined by Anna Halprin, the cycle's principles are:

Resources - human and material resources available to inform/guide creation.

Score - like a musical score or score for dance; the score charts events, activities and things comprising the project [e.g., people, movement, set, props etc.].

Valuation – the use of analysis and feedback to shape the work

Performance - the piece in performance and its evolution over time. (Halprin 122-123)

Through his participation in Lessard's work with (and variations on) the Halprins' RSVP cycles, Lepage would once again experience theatre-making through the lens of a devised process while also discovering a set methodology with which to approach creating theatre. Further to this, Lessard's take on the RSVP model, the Repère cycles, 'demonstrates the effect of reducing the importance of words and increasing the importance of other theatrical forms of expression such as movement, light, sound, objects, etc.'

(Dundjerović, *Theatricality* 11).<sup>15</sup> Lessard's use of scenography as a dramaturgical tool, combined with Lepage's experience working as an actor for *La Ligue Nationale d'Improvisation*, would expose the young artist to the value of improvisation and scenographic experimentation as alternative play-'writing' techniques not hinging on dramatic text. Lepage would spend his tenure at Repère predominantly in the director's seat, honing his approach through the Repère cycles and subsequently gaining the artistic foundation with which he would strike out on his own.

When embarking on a collective creation project today, Lepage and members of his company, Ex Machina, employ a version of Lessard's Repère cycles by working with material and/or immaterial resources including objects, places and events (which could range from a flashlight to a scene in an airplane cabin or a life event such as the death of a parent).<sup>16</sup> This work usually commences with a *resource* Lepage has provided and/or resources brought in by the company inspired by a central theme/place/idea of Lepage's choice. Lepage will also often set limitations at the beginning of the process, which may take the shape of the languages used in the performance or the total number of vignettes comprising the production (Dundjerović, 'Performance Transformations' 170).<sup>17</sup> Led by Lepage, the company uses the *resources* to explore and experiment freely, without setting limits or specific goals. This work can take many forms, chiefly 'improvisation, writing games, drawing, dancing and/or singing' to tease out the performative possibilities of a

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<sup>15</sup> The Repère cycles are divided into the following stages: *Resource*, *Partition*, *Évaluation* and *Représentation*.

<sup>16</sup> For the nine-hour devised piece, *Lipsynch*, the resource was 'a rough sketch of an aeroplane interior; a screaming baby sits at the back of the plane, while an adult with a cultured voice sits at the front in club class' (Reynolds, 'Authorial Process' 181). Though *Elsinore* began with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the death of Lepage's father also informed the piece (Lavender 95).

<sup>17</sup> When creating *Lipsynch*, Lepage asked that each of the nine collaborators create an hour long section with moments featuring the simultaneous use of four languages, English, French, Spanish and German (Dundjerović, 'Performance Transformations' 170).

resource (Lessard 139).<sup>18</sup> This is the first of the two-part ‘*partition*’ or scoring process. The second phase of *partition* is synthesis. The material developed by each collaborator during the experimentation phase is organised and streamlined. In the *évaluation* stage, collaborators feed back to one another based on the work they’ve curated and presented, with Lepage making the final decision about which material will be retained for further development and/or synthesis.<sup>19</sup> This deductive process or ‘chipping away’ at the material continues until, according to Lepage, the narrative emerges (Lepage in *Rencontre* 92). When defining the final phase of the Repère cycles, performance or ‘*représentation*’, Jacques Lessard articulates the difference between Lepage’s approach and his own:

The performance [stage] is the theatrical production presented for the public. It’s the ultimate goal but it’s not always definitive and, granted that we’re always trying to present the most polished aesthetic product as is possible, there is always room for transformation. We can modify a production from one performance to the next, something that Robert does much more than me. It’s certain that the end product has a particular status, but our work is never finished. There is always room to perfect and improve it. (Lessard)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> My translation of: ‘*mais plutôt par des improvisations, des jeux d’écriture, des dessins, de la danse, du chant. On explore sans se donner de limites et sans but précis, ce qui nous amène à des expériences complètement libres*’ (Lessard 139).

<sup>19</sup> In Chapter Two, I will return to Lepage’s overall control and what this means for a process that is otherwise described by the company as collaborative.

<sup>20</sup> My translation of:

*La représentation est l’objet théâtral présenté devant le public. C’est un but ultime mais elle n’est pas toujours définitive et bien qu’on cherche constamment à présenter un produit qui soit le plus esthétique possible, il y a toujours place aux transformations. On peut modifier un spectacle d’une fois à l’autre, ce que Robert Lepage fait encore plus que moi. Il est certain que la représentation a un statut*

As Lessard notes, Lepage, who has always narrated his work as constantly in progress, is more interested in pushing the boundaries of performance than presenting a polished final product, a fact that, as Chapter Four will demonstrate, challenged the institutional norms at the Metropolitan Opera.

As this chapter will demonstrate, the use of resources also defines the initial steps in Lepage's staging of extant theatre texts though these productions begin with a dramatic text. Lepage searches the text as well as his personal creative reserves for a central resource, most often a place (which may or may not relate directly to the given narrative), as the jumping off point for his interpretation. Once Lepage has grounded his interpretation geographically and conceptually, he relies on bodies, objects and space in rehearsal to 'write' his interpretation of a given text (hence the title *Chantiers d'écriture scénique* or 'sites of scenic writing' for Ex Machina's 2007 publication relating the company's history and objectives).<sup>21</sup> In doing so, Lepage takes his place alongside Robert Wilson, Ariane Mnouchkine and a host of other past and present directors who have re-envisioned canonical plays through scenographic language.

### **Lepage on Lepage**

Prior to embarking on an exploration of the ways in which Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy is embedded in existing scenic writing traditions, a brief consideration of the auteur's repeated claims that he has no process contextualises my counter argument. Since

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*particulier, mais l'objet théâtral n'est jamais achevé. Il est sans cesse perfectible et peut s'améliorer.* (Lessard 143)

<sup>21</sup> Though the English translation of this publication's title is *Ex Machina: Creating for the Stage – From Page to Stage*, author Bernard Gilbert has said that the subtitle 'From Page to Stage' was added in error by the publisher, Talonbooks, since the phrase misrepresents Ex Machina's way of working and neither he nor co-author Patrick Caux had approved it (B. Gilbert, 'Interview').

the beginning of his career, Lepage has resisted the idea of a fixed approach to making theatre. Of his 1982 production of *En attendant* with Theatre Repère, Lepage commented, ‘*En attendant*, in a sense, united Jacques Lessard’s creative theories... with the intuitive method that we [Lepage and Richard Fréchette] were using in our show’ (in Charest 135). Lepage’s deference to chaos, intuition and/or magic has become embedded in his discourse since then. While Lepage noted ‘Directing is just finding where the winds are... You don’t decide the way the wind blows, you just try to find out where it’s blowing’ in a 1993 conversation with Christie Carson (31-2), he made the following comment of his creative approach in a 2008 interview with Bureau: ‘Things happen and they are miracles; we can’t explain these kinds of things. Everything aligned, there was a convergence of energies, of light, of speech’ (92).<sup>22</sup> Many scholars have accepted Lepage’s deference to intuition.<sup>23</sup> Dundjerović writes: Lepage’s practice ‘relies on a hidden text that is invisible at the beginning of the process but becomes more and more clearly visible throughout the creative process, through the use of intuition and personal impressions’ (*Theatricality* 208). For his part, Reynolds frames Lepage’s discourse as ‘unnecessarily mystifying’, citing its roots in the auteur’s distaste for what he views as rigid frameworks:

Lepage does not believe in frameworks; they carry the potential danger of creative limitation, and for this reason he frequently emphasises the role of intuition in his process... He foregrounds the role of intuition in practice through discourse—a step which effectively denies the ‘imprisoning’

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<sup>22</sup> My translation of: ‘*Quand ces choses-là arrivent, ce sont des miracles; on peut pas expliquer ces choses-là. Tout concordait, il y avait une convergence des énergies, de la lumière, de la parole*’ (in Bureau 92).

<sup>23</sup> In ‘Evaluating Performance’, Reynolds cites statements from Alison McAlpine, Virginie Magnat and Aleksandar Dundjerovic that demonstrate an acceptance of Lepage’s intuition rhetoric (283).



of being put in a particular role, in a particular context.

(Reynolds, 'Evaluating Performance' 281-282).

Though Lepage continues to explain away the notion of a definitive process shaping his work, my analysis of his adaptations indicate otherwise. This project's theorisation begins by exploring scenographic dramaturgy's links to broader theatre traditions and the ways in which it has defined Lepage's re-envisionings of extant texts.

### **Lineage**

While the literal translation of *écriture scénique* denotes scenic writing, French director Pascal Rambert offers a more comprehensive definition: '*écriture scénique* involves artists playing with theatre-making methodologies, technologies and resources to create a story. Theatre's creation process and its inherent tools—the text, body, space—ultimately write the show'.<sup>24</sup> The term *écriture scénique* was coined by French director Roger Planchon in response to Brecht's 1955 production of *Mother Courage*,<sup>25</sup> nonetheless, the tradition of scenic writing can be traced to earlier innovations pioneered by Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig. Both artists reformulated scenic design by offering alternatives to the two-dimensional painted flats and static scenery that dominated mainstream nineteenth-century productions. At the time, as Beacham notes, theatre 'had been confined to conveying external indications, to imitating surface reality, to, in a phrase, putting on a show'. 'Scenic illusionism' was undermining dramatic art (Beacham, *Appia: Artist and Visionary* 20).

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<sup>24</sup> My translation of: '*De spectacles dans lesquels les artistes mettent en jeu le mode de fabrication et l'ensemble des outils de la représentation: texte, corps, espace, lumière... Le processus de création devient la matière même des spectacles*' (Rambert).

<sup>25</sup> While Aleksandar Dundjerović suggests a Planchon-Lepage connection in 'The Multiple Crossings to The Far Side of the Moon', his discussion of the two artists is brief and indeterminate.

Appia, a Swiss architect, designer and theorist, whose central impact on scenography is found in his writings on theatre, secured his legacy in theatre production by championing a minimalist, symbolic aesthetic and re-envisioning how designers used light. Though he would only direct and design a limited number of productions during his lifetime, Appia's numerous scenic renderings for Wagner's operas (which I will revisit later in the context of Lepage's *Ring* productions), demonstrated the signifying capacity of light and kinetic scenery as well as both elements' ability to delineate and define space (Appia, *Texts* 7). Through this original work, Appia challenged prevailing beliefs that lighting existed solely to illuminate actors and the set and, instead, pointed to its ability to evoke mood.

Appia's exploration of bodies in space also represents a great part of his legacy. As a student of Jacques Dalcroze's eurhythmics (a cognitive system for teaching students music through corresponding physical gestures), Appia began to understand the dynamic relationship of bodies and space as a way to make meaning. Discussing the forest scene in Wagner's *Siegfried*, Appia identifies the actor's body in motion as a dramaturgical tool:

In order to create our setting, we need not visualise a forest, but we must represent in great detail the entire range of events that occur in this forest... [The director] will think of the forest as a particular atmosphere encompassing the actors, an atmosphere which can only be achieved *in relation* to the living and moving beings on whom therefore, he must concentrate... The production thereby becomes the composition of a picture in time... We shall no longer attempt to give the illusion of a *forest* but instead the illusion

of a *man* in the atmosphere of a forest. (Appia, 'Ideas on a Reform' 63)

By theorizing and executing a new scenic dramaturgy based in kinetic staging, Appia would come to influence the work of Edward Gordon Craig, who further developed *écriture scénique* by looking beyond pen and paper as primary playwriting tools.

As an actor, director, designer and theorist, Gordon Craig encountered the limitations of scenic two-dimensionality first-hand. Like Appia, his contributions to modern theatre include an evocative approach to scenic design and a radical new view of dramaturgy that links meaning-making to scenography. Craig rejected illusionistic scenery in favour of a minimalist, symbolist aesthetic, featuring moving walls and shifting platforms—fluid architecture. One of Craig's innovations was his use of moveable, self-supporting screens, which could be reconfigured into multiple scenic arrangements without being overtly representational. The screens' 'simplicity provided a ground for the spectators' imagination to work on, as distinct from the ornate scenery ordinarily used for fantasy settings, which presented someone else's imagining for their admiration' (Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig* 142). Craig's view of the importance of physicality and embodied performance emerges in an essay in which he frames the kinetic body and its trajectory on stage as the central means to telling stories in theatre, arguing that the 'father of the [first] dramatist' was not a dramatic poet but a 'dancer'.

Craig also posits that this original dramatist first turned to the 'material' of 'actions, words, line, colour and rhythm' (Craig 245) to make drama. In fact, Craig began his directing career with operas because the material 'gave him the space to focus on choreography and movement, innovative lighting and visual effects' (Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig* 172). As Patrice Pavis argues, the combined theories of Appia and Craig

demonstrate that ‘The breathing of a space and its rhythmical value form the core of the stage design, which is not a fixed two-dimensional object but a living body subject to time, music, tempo and a variation of light. The scenery... is considered in itself to be a world of meaning’ (‘Stage Design’ 354). In this, Appia and Craig demonstrate a kind of ‘theatrical authorship that was not literature-oriented but performance-oriented’ (Radosavljević 11). ‘Living’ scenography, which makes its own meanings separate from the text, set the stage for the artist whose scenic writing would inspire the term *écriture scénique*—Bertolt Brecht.

In the 1950s, the Berliner Ensemble’s touring production of *Mother Courage* arrived in Paris and, thanks to word-of-mouth praising the show’s innovative staging, artists flocked to experience Brecht’s new aesthetic (Bradby 107). A theatre innovator himself, Parisian director Roger Planchon was struck by Brecht’s use of scenography as a counterpoint to the scripted narrative; in order to produce his alienation effect, Brecht’s staging subverted the audience’s suspension of disbelief, reminding them that they were, in fact, watching actors act and should use this aesthetic distance to contemplate the larger political questions posed by his narrative (Whitton 243). In contrast to the supporting role played by scenography in the nineteenth-century tradition, Brecht’s model presented an original theatrical language that often went against the written text. Planchon sought out Brecht as a mentor and, consequently, reformulated his scenic aesthetic in response to the German auteur’s work and theories:

Brecht’s lesson was... far reaching. It encouraged Planchon to break away from the traditional view of *mise en scène* as an interpretative art geared to the text. ‘When I started working in the theatre’ he said, ‘we all thought that directing

a play involved just making a partial contribution. We were always asking ourselves: Am I swamping the text or am I underplaying it?' Brecht freed Planchon from this reticence by showing him the importance of *mise en scène* not merely as a way of representing a text but as a language in its own right, which Planchon calls *écriture scénique* or 'scenic writing'. (Whitton 243)

While Brecht's staging techniques were the first to be designated '*écriture scénique*' and laid important groundwork for twentieth and twenty-first century innovations in scenic design, a further artist's contributions to scenic language also made a significant impact on the evolving role of scenography in theatre.

Born in 1920s Czechoslovakia, Josef Svoboda brought numerous innovations to modern theatre, many of which are echoed in the Lepage's work.<sup>26</sup> As initially highlighted by Steve Dixon, the similarities between the two artists' scenographic styles include the use of projections, mixed media and technology new to their respective eras (e.g., while Lepage uses digital video, motion sensors etc., Svoboda turned to film projections in his scenography). Additionally, both directors have striven to achieve the artistic synthesis prescribed in Richard Wagner's vision of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (in which all elements of production design align to support a singular vision). Further to this, Svoboda's designs expand the interpretive potential of Appia and Craig's fluid scenography through the use of 'psycho-plastic space'. As defined by Svoboda, 'psycho-plastic space' is a dramatic space, which 'is elastic in its scope and alterable in its quality'; moreover, it 'relates with the

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<sup>26</sup> Steve Dixon's 'Space, Metamorphosis and Extratemporality in the Theatre of Robert Lepage' explores Lepage's place in Svobodian lineage. Dixon aligns the two artists via their use of new technology and offers a thorough argument linking the scenography featured Svoboda's *Hamlet* with Lepage's *Elsinore*.

psychological realities both of the dramatic action and of the audience' (Baugh 88-89). Like Lepage's approach to opera, Svoboda's staging often presents conventional readings of texts; nonetheless, his innovation lies in how he employs architectonic scenography to craft these readings. A key example of how Svoboda uses psycho-plastic space to interpret the inner lives of characters can be found in his 1963 design for *Romeo and Juliet*:

Kinetic architecture, platforms, frames... could form a seemingly infinite number of static spatial compositions or else go into an orchestrated series of movement... The mobile architectural scenography created a paradoxical impression of lyric grace and menace: the delicate, airy arcade suspended in air offset by the irresistible meshing of solid structures: a remarkably suggested projection of the antagonistic forces within the play. (Burian, *Svoboda* 126-128)

Here, Svoboda uses psycho-plastic space to materially represent the lovers' fragility, innocence and the weightless euphoria of first love (via the floating roofed walkway used as Juliet's balcony), juxtaposing this with the oppressive legacy of long-held family grudges and parents' authoritarian rule (as depicted by cold, towering buildings). In his 1965 *Hamlet*, Svoboda turned to moving walls (whose movements were recorded via scores) and a suspended overhead mirror to convey the Dane's skewed perspective: 'The spectator saw a double... vertical movement of menacing monolithic objects vividly conveying the sense of a crushing dehumanizing world with which Hamlet must cope' (Kennedy 202). In scenes featuring the ghost of Hamlet's father, the prince sees the murdered king as he looks in the suspended

overhead mirror (Popkin 34). Svoboda's staging suggests a psychological break with reality—Hamlet no longer sees himself in the mirror and is, instead, confronted by the image of his murdered father. This use of the king's mirror image as a stand-in for Hamlet also suggests that the prince's past (including his father's fate) is his future, thus foreshadowing his death at the hands of another.

Beyond Shakespeare's plays, Svoboda's kinetic scenery has served as a central interpretive tool in numerous other extant text productions. His scenography for *Das Rheingold*, directed by Götz Friedrich, featured a giant mobile platform that raised the gods (both literally and metaphorically) and, when lowered to depict the depths of Nibelheim, suggested the Nibelung miners' low social status as well as the oppressive, cramped working conditions they endured under Alberich's command.<sup>27</sup> For the Prague National Theatre's 1997 production of Goethe's *Faust*, Svoboda relied on a revolving stage and an overhead mirror, giving the lounging Mephistopheles a constant view of Faust's every action and the ability to intervene at any moment (Burian, *Czech Theatre* 95). Through this scenographic conceit, Svoboda offers a conventional reading of Goethe's text suggesting that the devil is omni-present and wields complete control over Faust's fate. Svoboda's scenic approach to crafting this reading demonstrates an early example of kinetic scenography's dramaturgical potential.

The contributions made by Appia, Craig, Brecht and Svoboda towards a meaning-making scenography have laid the foundation for Robert Lepage's scenographic

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<sup>27</sup> Such a Marxist take on Wagner's *Ring* is echoed in Patrice Chéreau's centenary production, which polemicalises power, corruption and capitalism. This will be discussed in Chapter Two.

dramaturgy.<sup>28</sup> Through scenic writing built on architectonic scenography, bodies-in-motion, and historical-spatial mapping, Lepage has taken an aesthetic cue from theatre's modern movement and continues to develop an approach wherein flexible, architectonic scenography is the blank canvas on which specific scenographic techniques collectively re-'write' extant texts.<sup>29</sup>

### **Architectonic Scenography**

By naming the first tenet of Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy 'architectonic scenography', I am referring to a dynamic stage space characterised by a set that shifts position, height, depth, and/or composition to suggest tone and atmosphere. These shifts occur through various techniques, including interactive digital video projections, computerised sets and/or manual scenic reconfigurations. The term 'architectonic scenography' also aligns Lepage's work with Craig's 'architectonic' sets, a technique first named by Denis Bablet in response to the English director's kinetic scenography (McKinney and Butterworth 112). As combined with evocative lighting inspired by Appia, the architectural transitions of Craig's sets suggested the mood and atmosphere driving individual scenes featured in his extant text productions (McKinney and Butterworth 112). This said, Lepage's architectonic scenography, which, like Craig's work, morphs to evoke different spatial configurations, is not only indebted to 'architectonic' design but also to Svoboda's concept of psycho-plastic space. Through his own version of psycho-plastic

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<sup>28</sup> Craig has numerous other theories that connect to Lepagean practice. In his article 'Puppets and Machines of the Mind: Robert Lepage and the Modernist Heritage', Christopher Innes points out Craig's advocacy for an autonomous, unified artistic vision as well as his metaphorical pursuit of the actor as puppet, realised through the theory of the übermarionette and mask work (129).

<sup>29</sup> Lepage's devised work offers various examples of architectonic scenography as a dramaturgical tool. The following productions are a sample of devised performances from Lepage and Ex Machina that rely on scenic plasticity to craft different milieux with different meanings: *The Andersen Project*, *The Far Side of the Moon*, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, *The Blue Dragon*, *Tectonic Plates*, and *The Geometry of Miracles*.



space (detailed below), Lepage expresses established and, in some cases, innovative interpretations of characters' emotional states. As my analysis of Lepage's extant text productions will demonstrate, in combination with bodies-in-motion and historical-spatial mapping, spatial plasticity offers Lepage an innovative avenue for presenting established and/or original readings of extant texts.<sup>30</sup>

In 1993, Lepage turned to architectonic scenography to extend and develop his first opera staging, *Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung* at the Canadian Opera Company.<sup>31</sup> The first section of this double bill, Bartók's one-act opera, *Bluebeard's Castle*, is unconventionally structured and seldom produced, demonstrating an increased availability to Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy.<sup>32</sup> *Bluebeard's Castle* focuses on Duke Bluebeard and his new wife, Judith. Although Bluebeard welcomes Judith into his castle, as she goes from room to room, opening seven different doors and discovering increasingly horrifying scenes, she begins to question her recent nuptials. Based on Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolist narrative, *Bluebeard's Castle* is mythical in character but maintains a keen meta-theatricality. To highlight the meta-theatrical question librettist Béla Balázs poses in the text of *Bluebeard's* prologue, which asks the audience, 'Where's the stage? Is it outside or in?' (Stewart), Lepage's set features the Brechtian device of an oversized frame, drawing attention to spectators' cognitive complicity in creating the drama. The set also transforms to reflect the grim realities of life in the castle and the terror experienced by Bluebeard's latest bride. As Judith opens the door to the first room, harsh red light reflects from within and projections create the illusion that the moaning walls are also bleeding as streams of blood trickle down

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<sup>30</sup> As specific references to scenographic dramaturgy in *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, *La Tempête* and *Siegfried* will figure prominently in my case studies, the upcoming discussion of meaning-making via Lepage's *écriture scénique* will focus primarily on other productions.

<sup>31</sup> Originally presented at the Canadian Opera Company in 1993 with a 2009 revival at Seattle Opera.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of Lepage's productions of open opera texts, see Chapter Five.

the set. Through this depiction of Bluebeard's torture chamber, Lepage keeps the Duke's murderous intentions at the forefront of his staging.

In his production of Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust* (staged at the Festival Saito Kinen in Japan in 1999 and New York's Metropolitan Opera in 2008/9), Lepage encountered yet another unconventionally-crafted and seldom produced work; because it contains sequences which present staging challenges, Berlioz's opera hybrid or *légende dramatique* is often limited to concert performances. Through architectonic scenography, however, Lepage addresses the scenic challenges presented by *The Damnation of Faust*, using interactive technology to provide meaning-making opportunities. To stage Berlioz's opera, which depicts Faust's deal with the devil and his consequent descent into Hell, Lepage and set designer Carl Fillion built a structure composed of twenty-four vertical quadrants or what Lepage calls 'a giant picture book' ('Auteur'). This structure is used simultaneously as a playing space and backdrop for fluid digital projections and video segments mimicking the lavish pictorial depictions of nature that define romantic opera production, including lush meadows and stormy summer skies. These digital projections also serve as a key interpretive device to suggest characters' inner lives. In the first scene, an elderly Faust appears in his library, lamenting his solitary existence. Faust's isolation is underlined as a digitally projected wall of books is replaced by video footage featuring a grey sky populated by an ominous flock of black birds. Worn by the performer playing Faust, motion sensors register shifts in the singer's voice and body enabling his pitch, pace and movement to dictate the birds' trajectory (Wakin). As the music swells and Faust's lament becomes particularly plaintive, the flock of birds expands and moves upwards, disappearing in the dreary sky; this interactive sequence mimics the singer's dynamic and melodic trajectory while also suggesting that Faust is desperate to escape his isolation.

Another instance of Lepage's architectonic scenography at work involves Mephistopheles's appearance to Faust in the forest. Because of motion sensors attached to the performer's body, Mephistopheles's sinister nature is relayed through an arresting image of death; as he passes different trees in the forest, they die instantly, rapidly withering and shedding their leaves.

Lepage's 2007 production of *The Rake's Progress* offers further examples of how architectonic scenography can 'extend and illuminate aspects' of the dramatic text (McKinney and Butterworth 96). In Lepage's staging, Tom Rakewell abandons his true love (literally Anne Trulove) and Texas homeland to conquer Hollywood. To frame Tom's judgment as faulty and disaster-bound, Lepage uses scenic metaphors. One scene, in which a disillusioned Tom snorts cocaine, features his movie-set trailer actually inflating and deflating before spectators' eyes. In this, architectonic scenography suggests that much like his deflated trailer, Tom's Hollywood career and vastly inflated ego are both on the verge of total collapse. A further metaphor unfolds in *The Rake's Progress* as Tom makes his first visit to a brothel and canoodles with the madam, Mother Goose, on a giant heart-shaped bed. As the scene ends, Mother Goose climbs on top of Tom and manipulates the bed so she and her guest are seemingly swallowed into its plush red centre just before the bed itself is sucked through a hole beneath the stage. While Mother Goose's bed serves as a signifier of the world of celebrity excess, it also functions to reiterate the play's overall theme; as critic Harvey Steiman observes, 'Tom is sucked into a new life, and it's no mistake that the direction they [Tom and Mother Goose] go is down'. Although the descent with Mother Goose is only temporary, it aptly foreshadows Tom's ultimate downward spiral.

## **The Performing Body as Meaning-Maker**

Corporeal physicality also offers a number of dramaturgical possibilities. Be it through bodies-in-motion, the physical challenges presented to actors via spatial constraints or the use of metaphorical acting machines (in which a kinetic set prompts a central meaning-making dialogue between actors and their environments) Lepage's approach to re-envisioning canonical work relies to a great extent on the performer's material presence as an axis for meaning-making. While Lepage often uses performers in their traditional mimetic capacity to 'play characters', his process also includes an expansive view of the body's role in performance, employing it as a site through which meaning is developed and ultimately unfolds. As Reynolds notes, 'rather than an aesthetic based solely upon kinetic devices, it is the expressive interrelation between the body and the environment' that Lepage's theatre seeks out ('Scenographic Acting' 14). Prior to analysing physicality in Lepage's oeuvre, I will explore how his embodied practice relates to physical theatre traditions. In discussing the work of Antonin Artaud, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Jacques Lecoq, my aim is not to suggest conscious imitation on Lepage's part but to analyse his use of kinetic bodies as following in a broader theatrical continuum.

In *The Theatre and Its Double*, French actor/director/theoretician and modernist Antonin Artaud advocates for a new theatre in which spoken text is no longer 'the major language' of theatre (117), commenting that 'it has not been definitively proved that the language of words is the best possible language' (107). For Artaud, the body's importance as a meaning-maker had been ignored by realist theatre movements and could be uncovered through a return to ancient embodied performance practices, including ritual. Artaud developed his ideas about the body on stage after a visit to the Louvre when he first

observed Lucas van den Leyden's 'Lot and his Daughters' (McKinney and Butterworth 34). Taken by the painting's affective communication of action, energy and narrative themes, Artaud began to contemplate if another language could, in fact, make new meanings and transcend the limitations of written text on stage: 'I say that the stage is a concrete physical place which asks to be filled, and to be given its own concrete language to speak' (26). Artaud's experience of the resonant non-textual language of 'Daughters of Lot' combined with his belief that words alone were not adequate communicators and text should therefore be 'exploited for its physical qualities' (McKinney and Butterworth 33) led him to theorise a new non-text based language, the 'spatial poetry' of bodies interacting with the stage space:

It must be said that the domain of the theatre is not psychological but plastic and physical. And it is not a question of whether the physical language of theatre is capable of achieving the same psychological resolutions as the language of words, whether it is able to express feelings and passions as well as words, but whether there are not attitudes in the realm of thought and intelligence that words are incapable of grasping and that gestures and everything partaking of a spatial language attain with more precision than they. (33)

Though Artaud wrote and directed plays based in such a physical language, his theoretical assertions had a more lasting effect on theatre-makers and theoreticians. Among others, Lecoq claimed Artaud's physical poetics as a significant influence on his work (Murray 32)—both artists believed the ultimate dramatic expression was born of kinetic bodies

rather than written text. As my chapter-length discussion of Lepage's production of *Siegfried* will demonstrate, like Lecoq, Lepage also honours Artaud's view of physicality as a central storytelling tool. By crafting scenes built entirely on orchestral passages and movement in the *Ring*, Lepage demonstrates the narrative and affective capacities of bodies-in-motion.

For his part, Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold had similar goals to Artaud in terms of utilizing the body as text. Though his contemporary, Constantin Stanislavski, favoured Naturalism, Meyerhold believed that actor training should comprise various disciplines (mime, ballet, fencing etc.) while also fostering an understanding of the body in space (Gordon 110-112). In his pursuit of a training model, Meyerhold developed a unique system to educate actors in scenic movement. This physical system, 'biomechanics', represents a series of exercises meant to teach performers how to: 'move in a circle, square or triangle', shape their movements to best accommodate 'acting platforms or proscenium boundaries' and 'work with props' (Gordon 107). This practice set a precedent for Lecoq's physical actor training and also laid the foundation for meaning-making via the interrelation of bodies and acting machines (as featured in Lepage's *Elsinore*, *The Damnation of Faust* and the *Ring* among others). Meyerhold believed actors' emotions could be sourced organically through specific movements. Moreover, Meyerhold's outside-in approach to acting, marked by a belief that physical 'play' leads to creation, inspired Lecoq's emphasis on 'jeu' (game/play) as a creative process (Murray 34) which, in turn, influenced Lepage's use of physical play/improvisation in crafting his scenographic dramaturgy.

As previously mentioned, during his conservatory training, Lepage found his comfort zone working with Marc Doré, a Conservatoire instructor whose Lecoq-based physical training came easily to the young Québécois performer. Lepage therefore emerged

from his extended formal training with Lecoq's techniques as his principle approach to performing bodies. Although Lepage would be exposed to various acting/staging techniques over the course of his career, the impact of Lecoq's embodied approach during Lepage's formative training would play a significant role in shaping Ex Machina's use of bodies-in-motion (Reynolds, 'Scenographic Acting' 14).

When it comes to the connection between Jacques Lecoq's work and Lepage's use of bodies on stage, two key links can be made—Lepage's creation of silent roles played by acrobats and/or dancers follows in the exclusively physical characterisations taught through Lecoq's neutral mask work. Moreover, Lepage's use of spatial confines to elicit specific movement in performance originates with Lecoq. Lecoq's actor training begins with neutral mask work performed in silence. This functions as a way to rid student actors of a reliance on gestural and facial expressions and enables them to access the body's potential as a text in itself:

Beneath the neutral mask the actor's face disappears and his body becomes far more noticeable... With an actor wearing the neutral mask, you look at the whole body. The look is the mask, so the face becomes the whole body. Every movement is revealed as powerfully expressive. When the actor takes off the mask, if he has worn it well... the mask will have drawn something from him, divesting him of artifice... Once he has achieved this freedom, the mask can be removed with no fear of falling back on artificial gestures. The neutral mask, in the end, unmask! (Lecoq 38)

Lepage often adds silent roles to productions as a means to convey particular tropes in his interpretation. The performers in these roles, who are often dancers and/or acrobats, rely entirely on their bodies to write scenographic text—whether they have been trained in neutral mask or not, Lepage selects such additional cast members based on the expressive ability of their bodies-in-motion (or, as Lecoq explains, their facility in employing the whole body as ‘the face’ [Lecoq 38]). Examples below from Lepage’s *The Damnation of Faust*, *Erwartung* and *Bluebeard’s Castle* will explore how kinetic body texts contribute to scenographic dramaturgy

The second facet of Lecoq’s approach that appears in Lepage’s extant text oeuvre is the use of spatial constraints. By confining students to a very small performance space ‘measuring one metre by two’ (Lecoq 65) and asking them to enact a situation where they are lost in an immense forest, Lecoq encourages a reliance on the body to ‘bring huge areas to life’: the actors ‘can be fifty centimetres apart while dramatically the distance is hundreds of meters; they can call to one another across a valley, or from the tops of hills, while all the time standing back to back’ (Lecoq 65). In such a situation, the body becomes a scenographic vehicle, summoning an expansive fictional space (while actually confined to small one) through specific gestures and movements, including large physical gestures such as hand waving or jumping up and down to attract attention from hundreds of meters away. These physical actions telegraph the size of an imagined space.

In rehearsals for Lepage’s *Shakespeare’s Rapid Eye Movement*, which combined abridged German adaptations of *Richard III*, *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for a Munich-based theatre company, Lepage frequently



turned to blocking that limited performers' playing space (L.A, Johnson 92, 128). This work mirrored Lecoq's spatial confines exercise. As my analysis of this production will show, by using limited playing space, Lepage encourages actors to embody the fictional space they are meant to inhabit in performance. Placing actors in a limited, cramped environment, encourages their bodies to adjust and take on the physical characteristics of being in this space (truncated movement, crouching, hunching etc.)—once they've arrived on the stage's larger playing area, performers can summon the physicality explored in such confinement exercises, embodying the specific fictional space the director wishes to represent.

The dramaturgical techniques that Lepage has inherited from Artaud, Meyerhold and Lecoq are at the forefront of the scenographic dramaturgy for his extant text productions. In *The Damnation of Faust*, Lepage focuses his scenographic dramaturgy on the signifying potential of bodies-in-motion. In both the cases discussed here, the body's role as primary communicator is integral to conveying the meaning of each scene. Lepage downplays Berlioz's triumphant 'Hungarian March' which celebrates war, by offering a counter-narrative; war's futility is emphasised as the female chorus members' musical tribute to their absent partners is accompanied by scenography representing death as a routine facet of battle. Portrayed from an aerial perspective (as if from the bird's eye view, looking down on the scene from above) soldiers on cables repeatedly march into battle by walking vertically up the set's back scrim only to fall lifelessly to the ground after a series of gunshots are heard. Through mute bodies and scenography, Lepage's production goes against the text (and score) to counter conventional interpretations of this scene, thus 're-writing' an extant work by offering spectators an embodied, uncommon (albeit not unique) reading—the heroics of war are easily superseded by the banality and anonymity of daily

slaughter on the battlefield. Lepage also employs an evocative embodied conceit for *The Damnation of Faust's* denouement. Prior to the first choral note being sung, Faust's arrival in Berlioz's underworld seemingly functions to characterise Hell as a great equaliser—through a large chorus of shirtless men bathed in projected images of crackling fire, Faust learns that in Hell all people are punished equally.

Lepage's production of *Erwartung*, Schoenberg's operatic monodrama, incorporates bodies-in-motion to represent internal action unfolding in the sole character's mind. *Erwartung* follows the story of a mentally unstable young woman who searches the forest at night for her lover's body. She first mistakes a tree trunk for her lover prior to discovering his actual corpse and then wanders away from the scene in a disoriented, panicked state. While Schoenberg's original *Erwartung* narrative is crafted for one performer, 'the woman', Lepage chooses to literally embody her psychosis by adding three acrobats to portray the imagined figures in her tortured mind. As the woman sings her aria, the three sources of her agony—her therapist, her murdered lover and his mistress—appear from an aerial perspective on the set's back wall (via rigged harnesses). Through a 'painfully slow' backdrop of acrobatic sequences, Lepage physically embodies Schoenberg's vision: the composer 'once remarked that the whole work... represented in slow motion everything that occurs in a single second of the greatest psychological stress' (Neighbour, 'Erwartung'). The Woman's emotional turmoil is writ large scenographically as she comes across her lover's corpse:

Biology and physics have seemingly been overcome for a brief period ... when the Woman's lover, now dead, rolls diagonally across the raked stage to downstage right, into a puddle of water. When the nude body of Noam Markus [the

dead lover] slowly and completely submerges into the water, the theme of physical absence acquires a body on the stage in the literal disappearance and erasure of his perfectly proportioned body. For her [the Woman] as well as for the audience, what is left remains an empty space, moments before occupied by a living body. (Defraeye 88)

In Lepage's production of *Erwartung*, spectators are not left to imagine the woman's torment; instead, they are confronted by the source of her psychological turmoil in material form.

By challenging performers through another technique, the use of spatial boundaries, Lepage has discovered a further method for mining the dramaturgical potential of actors' bodies. To seek out the hidden text (Dundjerović, *Theatricality* 43) in both his devised work and stagings of extant texts, Lepage turns to corporeal experiments or spatial 'play' to make meaning in rehearsals (as did Meyerhold and Lecoq). When directing Shakespeare, Lepage follows the Artaudian principle of investigating the possibilities of the actor's body in space, thus de-privileging the written text's assumed position as the stage's primary language; he instructs the cast to 'Be respectful of the work but not of Shakespeare... Each word is an object. Play with the sound and sense of the words. Treat them like toys' (in L.A. Johnson 92).

For his 1993 production *Shakespeare's Rapid Eye Movement* in Munich, which, as previously mentioned, featured German adaptations of *Richard III*, *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lepage faced a language barrier as his cast possessed varying levels of English and he spoke no German. To elicit the interpretation he had envisioned—a

frenetic representation of Shakespeare's dreams as fast-paced, kinetic and colourful (L.A. Johnson 137)—Lepage turned to the body and spatiality. When working with the actor playing Caliban, Hans Piesbergen, Lepage confined the performer to a small table. This clearly limited Piesbergen's range of motion and, more importantly, resulted in particularly short, sharp movements suggesting Caliban's confined quarters and overall oppressed existence. Further, Lepage seemed to mobilise Lecoq's notion that 'the analysis of animal movement brings us closer to the study of the human body and helps with character creation' (Lecoq 92) by telling the confined Piesbergen: 'Caliban is like a tiger in a zoo that traces the same path in his cage over and over again' (in L.A. Johnson 96). Through these exercises, Piesbergen's physicalisation began to suggest Caliban's years of imprisonment and built up rage; tension grew as Caliban stalked through the confined space, making his position as a potential threat to Prospero and Miranda clear.

Lepage also turned to the methodology of spatial constraints during rehearsals for scenes from *Richard III* featured in *Shakespeare's Rapid Eye Movement*. In this section of the production, bodies are effectively used to dramaturgical ends in a scene just prior to Richard's death featuring Richmond (Piesbergen) and Richard (Rufus Beck). Lepage turns to spatial limitations telling Beck that no matter what impulse he experienced, he had to remain seated. Through these corporeal restrictions, Lepage once again summons a fictional space through actors' bodies while also foreshadowing the new world order Shakespeare presents at the play's conclusion. In a telling juxtaposition, Lepage directs Richmond to pace about freely in the space; this open, boundless trajectory reinforces Richmond's position as a character foil, amplifying Richard's physical limitations and habitation of a static, trapped space. This embodied staging also foreshadows the withered

king's impending demise at the hands of his young, agile successor. Through Beck's physical choices, including using his chair to 'huddle in a fetal position, tied in a knot' (L.A. Johnson 100), fictional space appears to be closing in on Richard as the dramatic action is doing just that.

Lepage finds further dramaturgical potential in acting machines, by which I mean scenography that necessitates interactions between the performer's body and the set that often illicit emotional responses. An heir to Meyerhold's biomechanics, this scenic concept uses fluid, architectonic space (including sets that shift position, height, depth, and/or composition throughout a production) to prompt a central meaning-making dialogue between actors and their environments (McKinney and Butterworth 137-138).<sup>33</sup> Lepage presents his interpretation of the *Ring* by prompting singers to interact with his constantly morphing set, a ninety thousand pound structure composed of twenty-four vertical planks, which are reconfigured via computer control and manual manipulation. In act three of *Die Walküre*, the solemn mood established by the fallen heroes is offset by adolescent giggles and playful cavorting between Brunhilde and her Valkyrie sisters; each character sits astride a bridled plank and revels in the seesaw motions of her flying 'steed'. Through this interactive movement conceit, Lepage invigorates the women, using a real situation to prompt their bodies to communicate a meaning that breaks with conventional interpretations; while the Valkyries are traditionally still and solemn in this scene, their bodies enacting grief and stoicism, Lepage turns the tables by emphasizing the youth and

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<sup>33</sup> Lepage's one-man adaptation of *Hamlet, Elsinore*, offers an earlier example of the metaphorical acting machine at work. The way Lepage navigates his constantly shifting milieu, composed of a rotating central monolith/platform, is integral to his characterisation of the Dane. As Hamlet, Lepage adeptly negotiates his uncertain environment with a bravura demonstrating that his Hamlet is 'a Byronic type, sensitive but swift' (Lavender 109). This characterisation stems from Lepage's physical engagement with the set and is reminiscent of Meyerhold's biomechanics. For further discussion of this production, see Andy Lavender's insightful and succinct publication *Hamlet in Pieces*.

humanity of Wagner's warriors as they sing their battle cries and slide off their 'horses' with enthusiastic laughter. Similarly, Siegmund's terrified sprint from persecution in the forest takes on a new urgency thanks to a scenic reconfiguration that forces the performer (Jonas Kaufmann) to seemingly negotiate a maze of giant (digital) trees. As opera critic Anthony Tommasini notes, by having Kaufmann invest his whole body in navigating such difficult terrain, Lepage greatly enhances the dramatic tension of Wagner's score: 'It was an arresting realisation of action depicted in the opera only in fitful orchestral music' (Tommasini, 'Brunhilde').

In both Lepage's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *A Dream Play*, the playing space's surface presented significant constraints and challenges resulting in highly physical and visual performance text. For his production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, produced by London's National Theatre in 1992, Lepage created an acting machine by covering the stage floor in muddy water surrounding a pool. His purposes here are multiple but, in short, meaning-making revolves around the actors' physical struggles with the environment underfoot. Included among the possible interpretations of Lepage's sticky milieu are: young love as a filthy mess bound to destabilise its players; a return to the 'beginnings of life', complete with primordial ooze (Halio 124); and finally, a primitivist conceit forcing Shakespeare's 'civilised' characters to struggle within a crudely imagined version of life for early African tribes (Halio 124).<sup>34</sup> Lepage also turns to a conceit that adheres to the principles of the acting machine in 1994's production of August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* at Sweden's Royal Dramaten. Actors are forced to cautiously negotiate the confines of the

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<sup>34</sup> For discussion of Lepage's devised works and the meaning-making relationship between the actor's body and the stage floor, be it composed of sand (*The Dragons' Trilogy*), water (*Tectonic Plates*) or gravel (*The Seven Streams of the River Ota*), see Reynolds's 'Scenographic Acting' 14.

set, a tilted, shifting cube perched over a pool of water. Through this conceit, Lepage emphasises Strindberg's central trope, which posits the lack of human agency on earth and the gods' powers to arbitrarily choose anyone's given fate (Fouquet 60). In short, as demonstrated here, Lepage's acting machines serve multiple purposes; while the *Ring* set allows Lepage to suggest unconventional readings and draw out subtext, the shifting cube used in *A Dream Play* heightens the tension driving traditional interpretations. For its part, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* exemplifies the acting machine's potential as the creator of more open-ended readings, lending itself to a wide range of interpretations.

### **Historical-Spatial Mapping**

Though Lepage has refuted suggestions of a set methodology guiding his work, preferring instead to refer to his creative approach as 'chaos' (in J. Tusa), my exploration of what I will term the historical-spatial mapping aspect of Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy reveals that he does, in fact, consistently rely on a process to stage extant texts. As discussed earlier in this chapter, when beginning the process of conceptualizing an extant text, Lepage turns to the RSVP/Repère cycles' familiar primary tenet—the resource—to build his interpretation. I will demonstrate that Lepage's productions of canonical works are consistently inspired by the conceptual resource of an era-specific place, which goes beyond the basics of 'setting' by making a significant investment in the zeitgeist of a particular period. Questions of cultural and social context therefore define Lepage's historical-spatial mapping, extending further meaning-making potentialities from an established interpretive foundation.

Lepage's fascination with geography began at a young age and has coloured his dramatic aesthetic. His interest in the subject saw him planning to become a geography

teacher long before he discovered theatre (Armistead). His work draws heavily on his experience as an international traveller and frequently depicts the artist's literal and figurative quest towards self-discovery as played out in hotel rooms, airports and on airplanes. It follows suit that an artist whose greatest fear is losing his passport launched his professional career via works that consistently begin with place and time as the central resource (Harvie and Hurley 299). Lepage's 1985 production, *The Dragons' Trilogy*, centres on three Canadian Chinatowns: one in Québec City in the 1930s, another set in Toronto mid-twentieth century and the final Chinatown located in Vancouver in the 1980s. Lepage's 1994 transnational epic *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, finds its initial historical-spatial mapping in Hiroshima during World War II; from there, Lepage builds his narrative on the intersecting lives of various characters affected either directly (via concentration camps or the atom bomb) or indirectly (a child produced through the affair between an American soldier and a Japanese woman) by the war.

2008's *The Blue Dragon*, a spin-off from Lepage's seminal *The Dragons' Trilogy*, provides another example of historical-spatial mapping at work. Set in contemporary China, the narrative follows Pierre Lamontagne, a once struggling visual artist whose self-imposed exile from Québec has afforded him temporary respite from his fear of artistic failure. The realities of Pierre's life as an expatriate gallery owner in China, centring on his affair with a young Chinese artist, are complicated by the arrival of a Québécoise ex-flame seeking to adopt a baby. The production is permeated by the politics of contemporary China, focusing on the implications of the country's cultural commodification and ongoing economic ascent, which are characterised by poor labour conditions. Moreover, a lack of



personal freedom (manifest, for example in China's [now relaxed] one child policy) looms large in the social sector.<sup>35</sup>

Lepage's solo shows also often rely on historical-spatial mappings as their launch pad. *Needles and Opium*'s central story revolves around a heartbroken Québec artist who flees to Paris. The narrative is overlaid by the opposite trajectories of Jean Cocteau and Miles Davis in 1949, placing the French artist in New York City while the American musician journeyed to Paris. As the central Québécois character's thoughts are over-taken by Cocteau and Davis, an artistic odyssey of sorts unfolds, characterised by jazz music, drugs, exceptional prose and love affairs (whether through Davis's tryst with the French singer, Juliette Greco, or Cocteau's passion for New York). Another devised work relying on a geographic and era-specific axis is the 2000 production *The Far Side of the Moon*, which views two Québécois brothers' relationship through the lens of the Russian/American space race.

The pivotal role played by geography in Lepage's original work and his aforementioned artistic foundation in the resource-based methodology of devised theatre are echoed in how historical-spatial mapping figures in his interpretations of extant dramatic texts.<sup>36</sup> K. Jane Gibson describes his approach to staging extant theatre and opera

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<sup>35</sup> Chapter Five further examines Lepage's representation of cultural commodification in twenty-first century China.

<sup>36</sup> By arguing that regardless of the project, Lepage employs devised methodology as his directorial technique, I am not suggesting that he is unaware of other directing systems. Lepage's international experience with various performance genres and collaborations with other artists/directors such as Marie Brassard, Marie Gignac, Denys Arcand, Pedro Pires and Martin Villeneuve, demonstrate that he is clearly aware of a wide variety of approaches to directing; nonetheless, Lepage continues to gravitate toward the resource-based system defining his formative training.

texts as a ‘map-making process’ (18). An integral step in the process occurs when Lepage ‘asks his actors, and even opera singers’ to ‘see’ Shakespeare by getting down on the floor with magic markers to draw an ocean of images’ that materially evoke the tone of the play as they see it (22). In a video preview for *The Damnation of Faust* at the Metropolitan Opera, Lepage comments that the opera director’s job is not to ‘decorate’ the composer’s music but to ‘illustrate its energy’ and ‘extend’ the score (‘Damnation’), something that he has repeatedly done through scenographic dramaturgy. The key aesthetic referents in Lepage’s production of *The Damnation of Faust* came from his initial work with a given time and place resource. Ex Machina’s opera production manager, Bernard Gilbert, notes that by referencing the nineteenth century via Eadweard Muybridge’s ground-breaking ‘horse in motion’ footage alongside the romantic aesthetic that characterised European opera production in the mid-1800s, Lepage turns to ‘an avant-garde way of deconstructing the story linked to the period when Berlioz wrote the piece’ (Mehta). As the following analysis demonstrates, instead of reducing Berlioz’s opera to a single homogeneous reading based on the narrative at hand, Lepage turns to the composer’s position within a given socio-economic moment to offer various meaning-making possibilities to spectators.

Berlioz, who initially studied to be a doctor, maintained a keen interest in science and technology while championing the aesthetics of romantic opera through his adherence to the genre’s central characteristics (Macdonald) including its tragic hero narrative, the privileging of intuition over rationality and the ‘idealisation of nature’ (Samson). The medieval castles, fantastical nature scenes and choruses of devils elaborately represented in nineteenth-century opera houses contrasted significantly with the realities of working class

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life in a newly industrialised Europe. This tension became the central directorial conceit for Lepage's *The Damnation of Faust* scenography.

Lepage's set for Berlioz's *légende dramatique*, built of twenty-four vertical quadrants, creates grand romantic images through innovative technology including 'an interactive infrared network that blankets the stage space, detects and tracks body motion and vocal amplitude, and triggers effects and projections' (Wilson Smith 69). This technology produces effects like the projected curtains that billow interactively within each of the set's twenty-four quadrants as twenty-four ballerinas perform in their individual frames (Wakin, 'Techno-Alchemy'). Nature, a highly celebrated trope in romanticism and an important muse for Berlioz (Macdonald), is depicted through various scenes using either interactive imaging, digital video or both. One such segment features a filmed underwater dream sequence depicting Faust floating weightlessly in a love-induced ecstasy. Here, Lepage casts nature as the catalyst for a man's powerfully euphoric love. Once in the water, Faust floats in an other-worldly state, flanked by cherubic mer-women in flowing garments similar to his lover's. They swim around him as if in an underwater ballet, demonstrating the ways in which his adoration of Marguerite manifests itself. In another sequence combining nature and technology via projections, Faust's fervour for Marguerite is further incarnated on screen:

In Olga Borodina's aria... her blonde tresses appear to lift into flames, and with each movement, the flames—actually one image multiplied—burn higher and bluer as the tempo speeds up. While the Russian mezzo-soprano has a charismatically earthy voice, it's the visceral combination of

flames and the giant image of her plastered across the scrims  
that is most arresting. (Mehta)

These segments serve not only to represent the popular opera aesthetics contemporary to Berlioz but also to reinforce important narrative tropes. A secondary, less transparent meaning arises from these sequences as well; by using technology to depict nature, Lepage is alerting more history-conscious spectators to the paradoxical ideals defining the disconnect between nineteenth-century art and economics; while technology and capitalist 'progress' pushed aggressively toward new, mechanised methods of production, popular opera resisted pragmatism, residing in the realm of fantastic, escapist romanticism.

Beyond Berlioz's romantic aesthetic, Lepage's set references the composer's fascination with nineteenth-century technology. Resembling a giant reproduction of film or photography negatives, the set's quadrants use performers and film clips to depict movement sequences in progressive states. Eadweard Muybridge, a contemporary of Berlioz's who studied animal locomotion by deconstructing movement with photographed stills, would lay the foundation for early moving pictures. In keeping with his historical-spatial mapping (based in nineteenth-century Europe), Lepage projects the English photographer's 'horse in motion' footage onto each quadrant of the set and incorporates live acrobats rigged to appear as if they are riding the horses. Through his employment of such sequences interspersed with images representing romanticism's focus on the natural world, Lepage 'extends' the music's meaning (Lepage, 'Damnation') by suggesting, rather than literally representing, different characteristics of a given time and place. While this technique is not unique to twenty-first century opera production, it does demonstrate Lepage's ability to provide his spectators with meaning-making opportunities in genres

beyond the highly personal devised narratives that have established his work internationally. This said, his time/place technique does not always serve the chosen text.

Such is the case with Lepage's production of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*.

For Ex Machina's production, the auteur once again turns to historical-spatial mapping but here the connection is distant. Lepage comments:

It's the '40s and Stravinsky is living in Los Angeles, like many Eastern European composers, like Schoenberg. So what's that about?... I looked to see where he was and who he was hanging out with, and it was this easy transposition to set it in the American values of the '50s, Hollywood temptation and Vegas where they gamble for his [Tom Rakewell's] soul. ('Visionary's Progress')

Instead of setting *The Rake's Progress* in its usual milieu—London as depicted by William Hogarth's eighteenth-century etchings (which are the inspiration for Stravinsky's opera [Walsh])—Lepage's interpretation is set in the late nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties, moving from Texas oil country to Hollywood and Vegas. Lepage believed the Hollywood connection was relevant because Stravinsky settled in Los Angeles with his wife in 1941. Consequently, the composer became well versed in various facets of American culture by spending a great part of the next twenty years driving throughout the US on concert tours with his friend, the American conductor, Robert Craft (Smith and Buja). It is from Stravinsky's particular place/time perspective, an Eastern European first viewing the US on cross-country road trips that Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy attempts to find its axis.

This historical-spatial mapping becomes problematic as Lepage's deference to Stravinsky's biography is coupled with constant references to a loosely related Wim Wenders film. Both conceits bear a distant connection to *The Rake's* narrative and the latter, though viewed by Lepage as an exciting interpretive angle, obscures Stravinsky's narrative while demonstrating Lepage's universalised assumptions:

You've seen *Paris, Texas* by Wim Wenders?... Europeans have a way of depicting America that is completely different. It's not just criticism. There's a lot of beauty in there, a great love for American landscapes and desolation and all that. But the film is shot in a way Americans could not have. You shoot something else when you're American. It's that look I found interesting. We're sending back to America the image of itself and its film culture, how we see it. (Lepage, 'Visionary's Progress')

This statement not only sees Americans and Europeans through a broad, generalizing lens but also prompts questions as to who Lepage understands as the 'we' in his reference to 'how we see it'. By assuming his audience shares his personal views, which are a product of his own culturally coded constructs, Lepage is validating his personal conclusions about the significance of Wim Wenders's film. With performances in England, Canada, America and Europe, *The Rake's Progress* was viewed from a variety of cultural perspectives, none of which necessarily position Wim Wenders as the definitive, cinematic interpreter of American iconography abroad or are fluent in Wenders's depictions of the American Southwest.

So, while Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy succeeds in crafting a specifically Wenders-inspired milieu, the relevance of this conceit remains unclear. As depicted in *Paris, Texas*, which charts a man's self-revelatory journey from Texas to L.A., Wenders's America is a boundless Southwestern landscape marked by 'staggering beauty' (Ansen). Here, Lepage follows suit, depicting Texas as a wide-open landscape with little to no clutter on the stage. Through a video backdrop representing Texas's seemingly endless plains and star-studded sky, Lepage paints Tom's beginnings as humble. As *Paris, Texas* moves forward to depict the lead character's journey from Texas to L.A., Wenders summons expansive highways and the road signs that we learn are crafted by the main character's brother. Similarly, Lepage sends Tom's beloved, Anne Trulove, on the same journey as she attempts to recover Tom and return with him to Texas. Through lighting and sound effects as well as a life-sized prop car, Lepage depicts Anne barrelling along expansive stretches of Wenders-style highway, which are illuminated as the car's high-beams flash on the iconic road signs leading up to L.A.

Unlike the scenographic allusions to nature and technology featured in his production of *The Damnation of Faust*, Lepage's references to the composer's cultural/historical milieu fail to serve *The Rake's* narrative. As Tim Ashley suggests, Lepage's transposition to Texas and, later, Hollywood has limited relevance and decreases the production's stakes significantly: 'Stravinsky's viciously capitalist London is replaced by an unthreatening series of screen tests, location shoots and red-carpet parades. Later on, as ruin looms, Lepage makes points about television's erosion of cinematic glamour, which have nothing to do' with Stravinsky's Hollywood experience. Given the availability of a far higher stakes biographical resource—Stravinsky's European tenure during which he faced

exile to Switzerland, his wife's tuberculosis and the First World War—Lepage's choice of a Hollywood setting seems even more arbitrary. Moreover, beyond the minimal threat posed by Hollywood, Lepage's *Rake* also rings false due to repeated references in the libretto to London. As previously argued, Lepage's re-envisioning of operas works best with open-ended pieces set in flexible environments such as the *légende dramatique* (*The Damnation of Faust*) or monodrama (*Erwartung*). Stravinsky's traditional opera, set clearly in London and relying on specific details of the city during the eighteenth century, including the notoriously poor conditions endured by psychiatric patients at Bedlam and the syphilitic prostitutes populating local brothels, loses force in Lepage's transposition. In short, Lepage's choice of a place/time conceit undermines rather than illustrates *The Rake's* narrative.

Despite Lepage's repeated assertions that he has no directorial process and his work is ultimately the result of chaos or intuition, this chapter identifies a consistent conceptual approach in his stagings of extant texts. As presented here, Lepage's approach to directing extant texts relies on his signature scenographic dramaturgy, which is capable of supporting canonical narratives and offering new meanings through architectonic scenography, bodies-in-motion, and historical-spatial mapping. By charting Lepage's formative training, early professional experience and place within the scenic writing continuum, I have established the central tenets of *his* scenographic dramaturgy, though scenographic dramaturgy is not a term that I intend to describe Lepage's work exclusively.

In broader terms, scenographic dramaturgy is used here to rename *écriture scénique* in its contemporary form. This shift in language is not meant to differentiate between the sophistication of contemporary scenographic technologies and those past. Any performance



relying on highly physical and visual text, whether enhanced by cutting-edge technology or not, can lay claim to employing meaning-making scenographic dramaturgy. I have selected this term to describe my theory, rather than *écriture scénique* or scenic writing, as it highlights the evocative potential of scenographic design through the word ‘dramaturgy’, which is better suited to Lepage’s highly physical approach to extant texts. Through its use of ‘writing’, the term ‘scenic writing’ maintains a connection with text-based writing and, as such, implies a literal, fixed meaning whereas ‘scenographic dramaturgy’ articulates more clearly the essence of Lepage’s signature aesthetic—a non-literal, visual text open to various meanings.<sup>37</sup>

Prior to this project’s three central case studies, focused on *The Tempest*, *Siegfried*, and *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, the next chapter further evaluates Lepage’s scenographic dramaturgy not only as a meaning-making device and the axis for Ex Machina’s aesthetic signature but also as it comes to bear on questions surrounding adaptation, authorship and the auteur. additionally, Chapter Two delves further into the interpretive possibilities of historical-spatial mapping.

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<sup>37</sup> Although ‘scenography’ retains an internal reference to writing (when the suffix ‘graphy’ is understood as ‘writing’ rather than ‘field of study’), it will be used in this project.

## **Chapter Two: Auteurs and Authority: Contextualizing Lepage's Adaptations**

When referencing Robert Lepage's role as a theatre artist, journalists rely primarily on one term—auteur. Be it 'theatrical auteur' (Woodhead), 'celebrated auteur' (Nightingale 'Edinburgh'), or 'radically inventive theatre auteur' (Nicholls), print and online media have come to a consensus. Beyond its role as go-to shorthand for director-driven productions, the auteur title as attributed to Lepage prompts questions surrounding the term's meaning and the central concepts with which it is interconnected. This chapter explores auteur-ship, authority and adaptation and, in doing so, provides the contextual backdrop for Chapters Three, Four and Five's detailed interrogations of Lepage's extant text productions. By articulating non-logocentric definitions of adaptation and 'text', unpacking the term auteur through its Western film and theatre etymology and evaluating debates surrounding authorship and authority, I will demonstrate that when it comes to auteur theatre, highly physical and visual performance text *is* content. Though a classic narrative or score may be widely-known (e.g., the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the *Ring's* score), auteur-ed performance text, including Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy, renegotiates, re-contextualises and, therefore, re-authors canonical work by making meaning in new ways and, often, by making new meanings.

### **Emergence of the Auteur in Film and Theatre**

Further consideration of the interpretive means used to produce Lepage's adaptations should first be contextualised by a broader outline of auteur-ship.

Though theatre and opera directors have worked in an auteur-ly capacity for years (as exemplified by Wagner, Appia and Craig), the term auteur is most often used in reference to film. Beginning with Alexandre Astruc's 1948 article 'La Caméra-Style' ('The Camera-Pen'), French film critics began to take note of a new film-making style,

marked by what Astruc saw as an individual director's ability to create an original language which existed independently of the literary text (much like theatre's scenic writing): 'By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel' (Astruc in Caughie 9). In response to Astruc's theory, a group of young French film critics (among them François Truffaut and other seminal filmmakers-in-waiting) published essays in *Cahiers du Cinema* aimed at disrupting accepted notions of the film director as servant to the screenwriter's text and advocating a new genre of cinema led by a figure who 'transforms the material into an expression of his own personality' (Buscombe 23).<sup>1</sup> This discourse became known as 'la politique des auteurs' (Bazin in Fabe 121),<sup>2</sup> a phrase first coined by François Truffaut in his 1954 article 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema'. Anglophone audiences were introduced to 'auteur theory' in Andrew Sarris's 1969 book, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (Fabe 251). This understanding of director-driven cinema gained further momentum through the 1959 premiere of François Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*), an autobiographical film defined chiefly by its director's perspective, a product of his 'caméra stylo'.

As defined by John Caughie, the cinema auteur holds the following core beliefs:

That a film, though produced collectively, is most likely  
to be valuable when it is essentially the product of its  
director... that in the presence of a director who is  
genuinely an artist, a film is more than likely to be the

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<sup>1</sup> Core members of this group included Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette and Eric Rohmer (Fabe 120).

<sup>2</sup> Though the term 'auteur' was the product of French New Wave cinema, other directors' aesthetics contributed indirectly to the broader evolution of auteur cinema over time (including Sergei Eisenstein's early twentieth-century work and, later, Ingmar Bergman films, among others).

expression of his individual stylistic consistency over all  
(or almost all) the director's films... ; a distinction  
[exists] between the auteur and the... metteur en scene:  
the one consistently expressing his own unique  
obsessions, the other a competent, even highly competent,  
film-maker but lacking the consistency which betrayed  
the profound involvement of a personality. (Caughie 9-  
10)

Film directors whose work features this singularity of vision and its attendant stylistic signature include Akira Kurosawa (*Seven Samurai, The Throne of Blood*), Julie Taymor (*Titus, Across the Universe*) and Darren Aronofsky (*Black Swan, Requiem for a Dream*). While these auteurs rely on straightforward narratives as the foundations for their work, each filmmaker communicates story through a particular style and recognisably unique aesthetic, creating a type of performance text (or, in this case, production text) that defines a film overall. For example, in *Black Swan*, Aronofsky can (and purposely does) rely on a stock narrative that traffics in the cliché of female dancers viciously vying for a lead role because his signature aesthetic vision defines the film, not the plot. The ingénue's psychological undoing as shown by Aronofsky's distorted portrayals from her mind's eye view and his frenetic camera shots of her seemingly supernatural transformation into the fierce, red-eyed black swan are among the images creating the central text of the movie. 'In essence, the stylistic patterns he [Aronofsky] employs correlate with the foundations of his stories. His idiosyncratic style thus constitutes the substance of his work' (Stork).

Though auteurism is more often associated with film, the narrative of auteurship in theatre begins long before the cinema existed. Auteur-ed performances can be

traced as far back as Ancient Greece. Theatre auteurs ‘not only create their own scripts ... but also at times perform in their own shows’ (Innes and Shevtsova 15). As Gabrielle Cody argues, auteur-ship is ‘in a sense, at the root of ancient and classical theatre; Sophocles is said to have performed solo his own choreography. Molière... wrote himself into his productions’ (125).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, contemporary understandings of the theatre auteur include, but are not limited to, the work of actor-writers or actor-directors. Twentieth and twenty-first century auteur-ship in theatre is synonymous with productions featuring a dynamic, visual performance text born of a singular artistic vision, (a problematic definition due to the contributions of the auteur’s various collaborators, which will be addressed as it relates to the contexts of creation discussed later in this chapter). Directors such as Peter Brook, Elisabeth LeCompte and Ariane Mnouchkine consistently author productions that fit this paradigm, having established themselves via performance texts that bear their respective aesthetic stamps. Whether in extant text productions or when working with original material, each artist’s signature visual performance text is identifiable and stems from the auteur’s investment in embedding his or her vision in every aspect of production. For Lepage, scenographic dramaturgy is this performance text.

In light of contemporary perspectives on auteur theatre, Richard Wagner’s directorial approach to opera (particularly his own compositions) presents an initial incarnation of the auteur approach most relevant to twentieth and twenty-first century models. Wagner’s legacy as a revolutionary figure in opera history is in large part due to the emphasis he placed on unifying all aspects of production (costumes, scenery, music etc.) through a singular artistic vision. Wagner’s total art concept, known as the

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<sup>3</sup> Cody’s definition of the theatre auteur aligns with understandings of the term that see the director involved with all aspects of production, including playwriting and acting.

*Gesamtkunstwerk*, advocated for productions that brought together various disciplines, including music, dance, and painting in service of the regisseur's (director's) vision:

The stage presentation of his [Wagner's] operas had been an integral part of their conception, and the composer had passionately concerned himself with every detail of it... his insistence that singing, acting, design and movement had to be coordinated has shaped the subsequent course of opera and its resonance has been felt throughout the western theatre world. He can be praised, or blamed, for helping invent the 'art of the director'. (Carnegy 48)

Wagner's emphasis on scenic text and insistence that designers adhere to the director's overall interpretive choices would lead to a host of enduring shifts in production and rehearsal practices. Prior to Wagner, stage managers relied on stock costumes and scenery while rehearsals, particularly as we experience them today, seldom, if ever, took place.

According to Wagner's directorial model, the tradition of opera stage managers or '*opernregisseurs*' taking responsibility for blocking (hence Germany's enduring use of the term '*opernregie*' for opera director) was at odds with the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; instead, he suggested that the director be expected to study the score, libretto and notations with an eye to staging a production unified under his particular aesthetic vision (Carnegy 4). Wagner's view of the director/auteur therefore advocated for a close working relationship between the director and the production team. Wagner spent a great deal of time deliberating over which designers would best serve his production aesthetic. Once he had hired them, Wagner gave explicit instructions detailing his artistic vision and remained in close contact at every stage of the creative process.

On several occasions, because producing houses could not meet Wagner's expectation that 'every detail of a work's stage presentation should be true to its composer's conception' (Carnegy 13), he abandoned his post as conductor and installed himself at the helm of production, occupying the director-auteur role. In fact, Wagner was so dedicated to producing his works according to his singular vision, particularly *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, that he built the Bayreuth Festspielhaus (festival house/theatre) specifically to meet the demands of his operas. Wagner claimed no other German theatre could accommodate his vision, which included elaborate scenic machinery and the first sunken orchestra pit. More than a century later, Lepage would parallel Wagner's auteur-ly requirements not only through costly reinforcements added to the Metropolitan Opera's stage to support his ninety-thousand pound *Ring* set but also through the flooding of various international orchestra pits for his production *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, and the drastic reconstruction of the MGM Grand theatre in Las Vegas for his collaboration with Cirque du Soleil, *Kà*.

While Wagner's approach represents an early incarnation of the auteur's practice, the emergence of auteurs termed as such in theatre would depend on the unsettling of the literary text's (and the author's) privileged position in production. As indicated in film theory, auteur-ed work is grounded in the director's signature perspective, with or without a text-based narrative. On the heels of Strindberg's naturalism and Ibsen's realism, Appia and Craig would initially unhinge theatre's ingrained logocentrism by crafting scenography that favoured symbolism rather than literal representations of a play text. Craig believed that the theatre he envisioned 'could only be realised as the work of a single creator: the director who would be responsible for every aspect of a production' (Innes, 'Puppets' 128). He sought to dismantle 'the role of the director as mere explicator of the dramatic text' by employing evocative

staging to ‘transcend rather than represent reality’ (Sidiropoulou 12-16). For his part, Appia abandoned painted backdrops, turning to evocative lighting, three-dimensional sets and the concept of rhythmic space to revolutionise theatre production. Of this shift in thinking, Pavis states, the ‘fidelity argument... was considered true and incontestable, at least until the moment when, with the simultaneous invention of *mise-en-scène* and psychoanalysis... we came to question the very possibility of being faithful (to a text, to a word, to a person)’ (‘Fidelity’ 119). As discussed in the previous chapter, further developments towards a new type of text, scenic writing, occurred through the scenography-driven work of Meyerhold, Brecht, and Svoboda among others, allowing the director to visually interpret rather than merely literally represent an extant text.

As articulated in his 1938 book *The Theatre and Its Double*, Antonin Artaud was responsible for an important challenge to dramatic literature’s privileged position in theatre production. Artaud advised directors to invest in the potential of live action (or what would eventually be called performance text):

Let us do away with this foolish adherence to texts, to written poetry. Written poetry is valid once and then ought to be torn up. Let dead poets make way for the living. And we ought after all to be able to see it is our adulation for what has already been done, however fine and worthy it may be, that fossilises us, makes us stagnate and prevents us contacting that underlying power called thinking energy... theatre’s effectiveness and poetry is exhausted least quickly of all, since it permits the action of movement and spoken things, never reproduced twice.  
(Artaud 59)



In this, Artaud was not so much rejecting the dramatic text as the ‘authority of the word and by extension the playwright’, treating the ‘play text as a resource which could be cut up, its ‘authorial’ meaning challenged through juxtaposition with image, action, gesture and vocal delivery’ (Mermikides and Smart 9). Though Artaud’s theories were extremely influential on twentieth-century theatre practice, his own experiments with performance text would fail to wholly embody his vision of a new meaning-making, theatrical language. Instead, further work towards displacing the primacy of the dramatic text, which would consequently open the doors for auteur theatre, occurred via theatre’s movement toward existentialism in reaction to World War II.

Through the mid-twentieth-century work of playwrights including Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter, language’s privileged position in theatre was further unsettled by physical performance texts that existed independently of, or even outwardly contrasted with the written play texts of which they were born. While works by playwrights such as Beckett and Ionesco were text-based, the structure rather than the words featured in these plays occupied a dominant role in production. In *Waiting for Godot*, the importance of the reoccurring phrase, ‘Nothing to be done’ (S. Beckett 5) is not so much defined by the words’ literal meaning as by the line’s repetition. This repetition can be read as an aural performance text; the characters’ failure to progress is reinforced by the repetition of sounds while the actual words spoken are less pivotal. In his 1951 play, *The Chairs*, Ionesco demonstrates how characters’ anxieties are played out through spatial configurations. *The Chairs* opens on an elderly couple reconfiguring numerous empty chairs for imagined guests invited to a post-apocalyptic soiree. In this, Ionesco’s scenography communicates the existentialism at the play’s core; the empty chairs are arranged and re-arranged in an act of futility, channelling the pointlessness of life. Add to this the much-anticipated arrival of the

orator, whose attempts at speech result in indecipherable mumbles revealing that he is deaf and mute, and Ionesco's performance text speaks the play's existential crisis without language. By exploring the possibilities of such non-text-based modes of communication within their text-based works, Beckett, Ionesco and their peers contributed to an evolving understanding and appreciation of physical performance text, which would characterise most auteur theatre. Nonetheless, while these playwrights contributed to a de-privileging of the dramatic text, the highly personalised scenographic aesthetic that would become synonymous with auteur theatre had yet to reckon with longstanding authorial hegemony.

A growing interest in re-evaluating authorship arrived on the heels of post-war theatre. In terms of literary theory, there are two texts from the 1960s that exemplify this enquiry, 'Death of an Author', by Roland Barthes and 'What is an Author?' by Michel Foucault. In 1968, Barthes penned his seminal essay, condemning what he viewed as the tyranny of the Author/God figure over literature and arguing that texts should be open to other authorships: 'To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' ('Death' 212). Barthes notes instead that 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination' ('Death' 213). After systematically de-throning the Author as truth-maker, Barthes points to the reader's ability to make meaning regardless of the Author's intentions ('Death' 213). Meant in part to reckon with Barthes's 'Death of the Author', Michel Foucault's 1969 lecture-cum-essay 'What is a Author?' concedes that the Author/God is, in fact, dead, but further problematises author-ship by investigating the term author (including how it comes to bear on literary works). Foucault queries previous understandings of authorship in which the 'meaning and value attributed to the text depended' (286) on the Author. Instead, Foucault suggests we reconsider author discourse through the

‘author function’ (287), which moves away from inextricably linking the Author to the ‘truth’ or ‘meaning’ of a given text and sees authorship as a component of the text, rather than its definitive, all-knowing creator.

Thanks to the theatrical shifts brought about by theatre of the absurd playwrights and philosophy’s emancipation of the text from its author, theatre in the late 1960s continued to experiment with literary texts, sometimes foregoing dramatic text altogether. Allan Kaprow further developed the possibilities of performance text by excluding scripted plots entirely from his 1950s/1960s ‘happenings’ while Jerzy Grotowski radically adapted extant plays to focus on performance texts emphasizing the actor in space and drawing spectators into the production’s scenography.<sup>4</sup> Richard Schechner also made a significant contribution to the re-evaluation of the text’s primacy by re-envisioning Euripides’s *The Bacchae* as *Dionysus in 69*. For his 1968-1969 production, Schechner used the Performance Garage, an open concept, seat-less space in which there was no delineated separation of actors and audience. Employing fragments of Euripides’s text set to elaborate choreographed sequences (including a birth ritual where actors embodied the womb) Schechner encouraged interaction between audience members and actors, creating a meaning-making interchange between *The Bacchae*’s words and the physical texts unfolding in the Performance Garage. Kaprow, Grotowski and Schechner’s experiments endowed performance texts with the same or greater influence than literary text, thus setting the stage for the first generation of theatre auteurs identified as such.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Happenings’ were an early form of environmental performance art that used impromptu games and improvisations to emphasise the spectator’s role as central author/interpreter. In Grotowski’s 1963 adaptation of *Doctor Faustus*, audience numbers were limited so that each spectator could occupy a seat at the refectory tables set up for Faustus’s last supper (Bradby and Williams 119).

## A Note on Adaptation

Central to my study of Lepage's role as an auteur-adaptor and the upcoming discussion of directors who set the precedent are the reading strategies articulated by Julie Sanders, James Reynolds, Hans-Thies Lehmann and Linda Hutcheon. Sanders's work on the pleasure principle and how spectators indulge in the 'sense of play at the heart of inter-textuality' (24) will inform my enquiry into the ways in which Lepage's theatrical re-envisionings encourage spectators to make meaning through the process of identifying and connecting intertextual threads. Reynolds explains this pleasure as it relates to Lepage's productions specifically, citing an example from Lepage's devised work, *Lipsynch*:

Each of *Lipsynch*'s nine narratives reflects upon a different aspect of voice, speech and language. The title invites each narrative to be considered in relation to a loss of voice, ranging from total, physical loss, to a loss of synchronisation. But it also invites them [the narratives] to be compared, contrasted and connected to each other. The room for play in the arrangement of meaning is vast – potentially ending only when the spectator is satisfied with the level of meaning she has negotiated for herself. Consequently, Lepage performances can invite 'creative play' – the participatory pleasure of which lies in its creation of intimacy with the work. If the spectator reciprocates with the performance, her subjective engagement can achieve a level of authorship over meaning. ('Evaluating Performance' 88)

As in his devised works, Lepage's adaptations foster a similar creative play through scenic text that is open to numerous interpretations, be it the giant screen image of Marguerite licked by progressively brighter flames as she sings 'D'amour l'ardente flamme' in *The Damnation of Faust* or the uneven, tilted cube suspended over a pool of water that comprised the set for *A Dream Play*. Noting that 'instead of contiguity', postdramatic theatre offers 'disparate heterogeneity', Lehmann identifies this creative play as 'synaesthesia' (84). As posited by Jen Harvie, 'a significant, repeating feature of postdramatic theatre is that it encourages (or even necessitates) synaesthesia, the audience's gradual recognition and pulling together of correspondences across the work' ('Introduction', 14). As my upcoming discussion of Chéreau and Lepage's *Ring* stagings will demonstrate, when a production offers a broad cross-section of referents, spectators can enjoy the process of connecting these elements and authoring meaning.

### **Forerunners: Peter Brook and Patrice Chéreau**

As the narrative of auteur theatre arrives in the 1970s, there are a host of figures whose work is particularly relevant to Lepage. An analysis of the individual influences evidenced in Lepage's auteur theatre, including Ariane Mnouchkine and Robert Wilson, who Lepage references as his forebears (*Connecting Flights* 162), however, cannot be comprehensively undertaken within the parameters of this project. This said, in what follows, I hope to situate Lepage's extant text stagings in the continuum of auteur-ed adaptations in which the director must contend with an iconic playwright whose dramatic texts are often viewed as definitive and not to be altered. Two artists in particular figure predominantly in the genealogy of Robert Lepage's approach to auteur-

ing extant texts: Peter Brook and Patrice Chéreau.<sup>5</sup> The upcoming section of my dissertation serves to contextualise Lepage's work through descriptions of the ways in which Brook and Chéreau employed scenography to craft their own meaning-making performance texts for extant texts by Wagner and Shakespeare. The principles of analysis are harvested here and in my forthcoming discussion of work by Elizabeth LeCompte and JoAnne Akalaitis in 1980s for application at later points in this chapter as well as in this project's case studies.

Elements of Lepage's three-pronged scenographic dramaturgy (articulated via architectonic scenography, bodies-in-motion and historical-spatial mapping) are visible in the individual performance texts crafted by Brook and Chéreau. Moreover, the work of these artists demonstrates central characteristics of auteur theatre, including Brechtian staging, the dialogic intertextuality of the 'total theatre' aesthetic and encounters with authorial politics, all of which have important repercussions in Lepage's extant text productions. Though the following discussion does not intend to frame Brook or Chéreau as the first or only artists to approach auteur theatre through performance text, Brook's staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Chéreau's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* are emphasised here due to their particular relevance to the evolution of auteur theatre and Lepage's place in the continuum. These auteurs demonstrate that a 'theatre text need not be defined simply as a written medium, ... other authorings include the arrangement of the stage, the shapes and rhythms of the bodies on stage, and the idiom and texture of the performance' (Shepherd 153).

Set in an open white box resembling a squash court, Brook's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* made no attempt to realistically represent Theseus's Athenian court or the enchanted forest that prompts the lovers' sexual coming of age.

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<sup>5</sup> Innes notes that Lepage has personal connections with both Brook and Wilson, referring to comments in an article on *Elsinore* where Lepage mentions 'meeting with Wilson in Toronto and shortly thereafter Brook in Munich' (Innes, 'Puppets' 137).

Instead, Brook sought to enable his contemporary audience, who he assumed had some knowledge of Shakespeare's canonical comedy and would not be drawn in by traditional scenic illusions, to see the inner workings of the production's scenographic magic thus experiencing the spirit of play he hoped to emphasise. Through meta-theatrical devices, including wire trees operated by fairies perched overhead and trapezes visibly manipulated by stagehands (Bradby and Williams 148), Brook sought to engage with contemporary spectators who he viewed as particularly interested in exploring how scenography is crafted: 'Once, the theatre could begin as magic... Today it is the other way round... We must open our empty hands and show that there is really nothing up our sleeves' (Brook in Bradby and Williams 147-148). By showing his audience the strings, Brook confirmed the importance of the spectator as meaning-maker, a point he highlighted in the program for his *Dream*: 'There is a fourth creator in addition to the author, the director and the actor... from the friction between the actor's creativity and the spectator's imagination a flame is kindled' (in Thomson 124).

Like his meta-theatrical framing, Brook's emphasis on corporeality as performance text and his aesthetic layering of historical periods would also be seen in Lepage's work. Rehearsals for Brook's Royal Shakespeare Company production turned to 'exercises in non-verbal communication, using percussive and vocal music... circus and commedia dell'arte gymnastics as vocabulary' (Bradby and Williams 150). Through these exercises and the incorporation of acrobatics, trapeze work and physical sequences relying on hoops, sticks and balls, Brook 'hoped that Shakespeare's poetry could be liberated from the deadening familiarity of cliché by arriving at a synthesis of bodily and verbal poetry' (Bradby and Williams 151).<sup>6</sup> By having the cast run, jump,

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<sup>6</sup> Objects also play a role in Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy, though most prominently in his devised works (e.g., *The Far Side of the Moon*, *The Andersen Project*). For more on the role of puppets and objects, see James Reynolds's 'Acting with Puppets and Objects: Representation and Perception in Robert Lepage's *The Far Side of the Moon*'.

spin plates and walk on stilts in an expansive open space featuring firemen's ladders and overhead catwalks, Brook set a playful tone off the top of the production. 'With an explosion of percussion... the whole cast literally burst onto the stage, climbed up the ladders and swarmed across the top level of the set with such joy and energy that they swept the audience along with them' (Brook). The production also featured physicality that emphasised Jan Kott's influence on Brook's reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, demonstrating the evocative and sensual potential of kinetic bodies. Even during their arguments, Titania and Oberon exchanged heated embraces and Bottom arrived at the Fairy Queen's bower carried by a 'lascivious clutch of fairies' that 'seemed to hang on every impulse and erotic gesture' (Selbourne 237). Positioned between Bottom's legs, the raised, erect arm of a fairy flagged the donkey's desire.

When it comes to the layering of historical influences in Brook's *Dream*, New York Times critic Clive Barnes best articulates the effect in performance: 'Brook uses everything to hand - he is defiantly eclectic. It is as though he is challenging the world, by saying that there is no such thing as Shakespearean style. If it suits his purpose he will use a little kathakali, a pop song, sparklers borrowed from a toyshop, dramatic candles borrowed from Grotowski'.<sup>7</sup> Added to the wide-ranging references in Brook's *Dream* are the 'pantalooned Harlequin Puck', whose performance suggested the improvisational style of commedia dell'arte (Croyden), the lovers as 'mod kids humming love songs to loosely strummed guitars' (Barnes) and the use of Felix Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March' to underscore the departure of a besotted Titania and bewildered Bottom from the stage. By re-envisioning Shakespeare in such a radically aestheticised and physical way, Brook took a significant step forward for auteur theatre

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<sup>7</sup> Knowles notes that Lepage's *Dream* follows on the cultural sampling featured in Brook's production, a determined 'but unlocalised and ahistorical selective interculturalism', which borrowed freely from the east ('Dream' 198). Chapter Three provides further discussion of Lepage's cultural essentializing in Shakespeare stagings and other productions.



in England by celebrating theatricality and further destabilizing the long-time supremacy accorded to Shakespeare's text over all other elements of production. This investment in the meaning-making potentialities of scenography would be further developed via Lepage's signature performance text, scenographic dramaturgy.

Various aspects of Brook's *Dream* are reflected in Lepage's 1992 production of the same Shakespeare text at London's National Theatre.<sup>8</sup> Following in Brook's continuum, Lepage endeavoured to escape a clichéd rendering of the play by creating a physically driven performance text.<sup>9</sup> Through his transformation of the National's Olivier stage into a mud-drenched surface (which represented the messiness and uncertainty of love by literally unbalancing the lovers as they navigated the mucky terrain) and choice to cast circus performers, including acrobats and contortionists who performed various aerial feats, Lepage crafted a signature performance text. This kinetic text shifted the focus from Shakespeare's language to a highly visual scenography that relied on embodied sequences to summon aspects of the nightmare within the dream, among them Puck's scuttling crab-like movements and Titania's inverted suspension from the Olivier's ceiling as she sleeps in what Lepage envisioned as a vertically hung bower (Taylor). For the young lovers, the journey towards self-discovery occurs through an abrupt and frightening confrontation with their burgeoning sexuality—instead of shying away from the *Dream*'s erotic and dangerous underbelly, Lepage used swamp-like scenography to embody it. As Hodgdon notes, Lepage's production used Shakespeare's text 'as a machine for performing the body erotic' (74). Moreover, Lepage's *Dream* would also echo Brook's production by highlighting its own meta-theatricality. Timothy Spall's Bottom took to the Olivier stage, delivering Pyramus in

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<sup>8</sup> Lepage's production marked the first staging of a Shakespeare play by a North American at London's Royal National Theatre (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation).

<sup>9</sup> For further comparisons between Lepage's *Dream* and Brook's 1970 production, see Barbara Hodgdon's 'Looking for Mr. Shakespeare' and Ric Knowles's 'From Dream to Machine'.

an Olivier-like tenor. Moreover, audience members in the first rows of Lepage's *Dream* were all too aware of the fourth wall's absence, being sprayed with the mud characterizing Lepage's midsummer melee. Similarly to Brook, Lepage invites his spectators to experience Shakespeare from within the theatre machine, employing meta-theatricality so spectators can be complicit in the magic-making process and experience a canonical work from a different meaning-making perspective.

Not surprisingly, the following prediction from the *Sunday Times*' Robert Hewison proved an accurate harbinger as to how London critics would view Lepage's highly-physical rendering of Shakespeare's *Dream*: 'Someone is bound to fulminate against Lepage's Canadian bespattering of our literary heritage'. In fact, most English critics condemned the production as an assault on Shakespeare's text with Michael Billington noting that Lepage had entirely missed Shakespeare's authorial intentions, calling the production 'The most leaden, humourless and vilely spoken production of this magical play I have ever seen' ('Muddy Waters'). While most English reviewers failed to highlight what made this *Dream* a landmark production, particularly in relation to the evolution of auteur theatre, Benedict Nightingale offered a different view:

When weird and wonderful things are done with  
bedframes, chairs and other simple props; when Puck  
swings feverishly round and round on a rope above the  
distraught lovers; when Titania snoozes in her hanging  
cocoon, or when sinister shadows appear and fragment on  
the vast black mirror at the back wall, who would not  
submit? There is no more brilliantly imaginative  
production in town.

Nightingale's suggestion to 'submit' to Lepage's re-envisioning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* implicitly coaxes theatregoers to surrender long-held beliefs about how Shakespeare's text should be produced. Spectators are asked to make themselves available to the language of performance text that offers a viable avenue for the continued staging of canonical works.<sup>10</sup>

In his 1976 centenary production of the *Ring* at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, film and theatre director Patrice Chéreau demonstrated the importance of performance text in renewing iconic texts and securing their future production. Known for a body of film and theatre work offering its own unique visual performance text, Chéreau would be directing his third opera ever when staging the *Ring*. Wolfgang Wagner (Richard's grandson) sought a young director to re-envision the *Ring* cycle on the centenary of its inaugural production at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus and Chéreau was selected. The legacy of his joint production with conductor Pierre Boulez, resides in the director's allegorical reading, which re-envisioned the *Ring* in Marxist terms; Wagner's narrative became a cautionary tale against the capitalist greed marking the industrial revolution. A visual performance text based in historical-spatial mapping played a key role in Chéreau's interpretation and also made an indelible impression on the teenaged Lepage, who found himself 'glued to' Chéreau's *Ring* for its sixteen-hour television debut (Rees). Most importantly, Chéreau's performance text for the *Ring* crafted a dialogue between past and present that would re-emerge (though altered) in Lepage's 2010-2012 *Ring* stagings.

Unlike previous *Ring* productions at Bayreuth, which, with some exceptions, remained faithfully fossilised via nineteenth-century, romantic production aesthetics, Chéreau's four *Ring* productions covered various historical eras, beginning in

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<sup>10</sup> Whether intentional or not, Nightingale's use of 'submit' also re-configures colonial power structures by telling British audiences to 'submit' to the interpretation of the colonised.

nineteenth-century industrial Europe, drawing anachronistically from mythology and contemporary iconography throughout, and eventually arriving in the final opera at the luxury home of Gunther and Guttrune, which Chéreau reconceived as a European villa. These settings foreshadow Lepage's work with historical-spatial mapping—Chéreau's 1976 *Ring* initially unfolded amidst the industrial revolution, not only depicting a specific place and time but creating an atmosphere defined by the political and social conditions of that period. The Nibelung workers were re-conceived as the proletariat to Wotan and Fricka's corrupt bourgeoisie (Millington 'Chéreau'). Initially conceived as gods in Norse myths by Wagner, Chéreau transformed Wotan, Fricka and their family into the privileged one percent. To further this conceit, Chéreau re-invented the Rhine as a hydroelectric dam with the stage at Bayreuth displaying fragments of machinery and the flywheel of a steam engine. This was a central trope in Chéreau's reading—Wotan and his family participated in the selfish depletion of natural resources to expand their personal coffers, a crime for which they would eventually pay the ultimate apocalyptic price. The fallen gods' home was represented as a 'concrete fortress' (Nattiez 87) depicting the impenetrable world of wealth inhabited by Wotan and his family.

Although Chéreau's *Ring* set its allegorizing sights on those who profited most (and toiled the least) during the industrial revolution, the production also pursued a dialogue between the present and other pasts, including references to Nordic myths, the *Ring*'s production history, and the economic conditions that enabled a privileged, contemporary audience to fill the Bayreuth Festspielhaus for the centenary celebration. Chéreau believed that the *Ring*'s mythological foundations, derived in part from the *Völsunga Saga* eddas and the epic poem 'Das Nibelungenlied', 'heighten rather than diminish the social and historical dimensions of the work' (Millington, 'Chéreau').

So, although Chéreau's production would be the first to completely forsake the divine status of Wagner's characters, replacing the gods with fallen aristocrats and Wagner's race of Nibelung dwarfs with industrial workers, the centenary *Ring* was also peppered with traditional weapons and props representing symbols from Norse mythology, including swords, helmets, and shields (Raz 94).

In terms of contemporary context, Chéreau's *Ring* participated in the ongoing twentieth-century project of rehabilitating problematic caricatures of Jewishness in Wagner's work.<sup>11</sup> Wagner's appropriation by Hitler and the Nazi Party during the rise of the Third Reich and World War II as well as the composer's own anti-Semitic writings (see Wagner's 'Judaism in Music') had prompted various efforts to emancipate the *Ring*'s central villains, Mime, Alberich and Hagen, from what many scholars saw as Wagner's racist renderings. Chéreau took on this challenge by using regular sized-singers in these roles, not the dwarves called for by Wagner, and re-framing the nature of Mime and Alberich's evil deeds, highlighting that their malevolent behaviour was 'not because they were Jews, but because this was the only road left open to them by Wotan's obduracy; his criminality was that of those who enjoy power and make up the rules to suit themselves, theirs was that of the downtrodden' (Carnegy 356). The reconfiguration of Mime and Alberich was further justified by Chéreau's choice to characterise the Rhinemaidens as 'spiteful prostitutes who physically abuse and sexually tease an all-too-human Alberich to intense frustration'. In this Chéreau broke with tradition, which most often sees the Rhinemaidens portrayed as giggly youths.

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<sup>11</sup> Though there is no lack of scholarly consensus over Wagner's status as an anti-Semite, debates have persisted over the last twenty years regarding if the composer's racism is expressed in his works. In comparing the traits attributed to Jews in Wagner's anti-Semitic writings with the descriptions of Mime and Alberich articulated by the other characters and stage directions in the *Ring*, I am inclined to agree with Theodor Adorno and Wagner scholar Barry Millington who believe that, as stated by Chéreau 'Alberich and even more so, Mime, are figures Wagner uses to represent the Jews' (in Carnegy, *Wagner* 356). Both the text in Wagner's *Ring* opera and his essays, such as 'Judaism in Music', highlight the following as chiefly Jewish characteristics: 'off-putting physiognomy and behavior, cunning and calculation, greed, emotional shallowness, lack of homeland and native language and artistic sterility' (M. Tusa 114-5).

Instead, Chéreau refused ‘to exculpate the Rhinemaidens of their guilt in what’ was to follow (Raz 99). In this, Chéreau confronted one of the central questions challenging contemporary theatre auteurs: how do we reckon with racist and politically/culturally contentious representations in canonical works? Some options include ignoring, exaggerating or subverting them. Chéreau’s choice of the latter strategy, which made Alberich, Mime and Hagen working class humans instead of the originally scripted dwarfs, would go a long way towards diffusing Wagner’s anti-Semitism.

Chéreau’s *Ring* also engaged with twentieth-century politics by extending the production’s allegorizing targets to include its own spectators, an elite and wealthy group of festivalgoers. *Götterdämmerung* featured a contemporary setting, complete with characters clad in the tuxedos that paralleled those worn by members of Bayreuth’s first night audience in 1976. Moreover, the set represented Valhalla as a ‘little Festspielhaus’ (Nattiez) making Chéreau’s contemporary target clear—the privileged patrons in attendance at the *Ring*’s centenary.

The bridge that he [Chéreau] built between a sense of Wagner in his own age of industrial triumph and human degradation and the black-tie milieu of the wealthy in the Bayreuth audience was responsible for much of the hostility with which the production was initially received. Siegfried in a dinner jacket at the Gibichungs’ villa... could hardly have been more provocative. (Carnegy 356)

The production did, in fact, inspire general ire amongst spectators and reviewers alike. Some post-show comments were personal and vitriolic (e.g., after seeing the production one spectator commented ‘I began to feel once more my old hatred for France’ [in Nattiez 72]). Other objectors were more reserved with one ‘Professor Faerber’,

spokesman for 'The Association to Safeguard the Work of Richard Wagner', airing his distaste for Chéreau's attempt at 'innovation' (Nattiez 77-78). For his part, the *Guardian's* opera critic, Edward Greenfield, described the staging as a 'major fiasco', 'a joke', full of 'clutter' and 'dotty ideas' while other reviewers failed to read the staging's Brechtian text and assumed the scenery had to be moved by stagehands because it had 'broken down' (Millington, 'Fidelity' 273). This said, though many condemned Chéreau's work as a failure, on his terms (and those of an upcoming generation of opera scholars) it was a success. Chéreau had realised his goal of creating a performance text that offered contemporary spectators a rich set of meaning-making potentialities not previously associated with the canonical opera. As my case study of Lepage's Siegfried will demonstrate, Lepage *Ring* faced a similar reception.

Chéreau's production highlights a further trait of much auteur theatre; canonical works are often interpreted 'as an encounter between a lapsed world and an anxious contemporary one' (Zarrilli 514). By combining traditional images (such as weapons and wardrobe pieces similar to those featured in the original Nibelheim myths) with references to Wagner's own nineteenth-century world and other conceits unattached to the *Ring* as originally scripted (recasting the dwarfs as industrial workers etc.) Chéreau adds a layer of pleasurable meaning-making possibilities for spectators.

Chéreau's revolutionary staging presented these operas [the four Ring installments] in the context of the composer's own era, supplanting decades of modernist, determinedly apolitical Bayreuth productions that distanced the operas from their association with Nazism. Chéreau's staging reads the nineteenth century through and back into the work of Richard Wagner (1813-1883),

the overarching musical figure of his age. However, Chéreau does not attempt to recreate the experience of a nineteenth-century viewer. Instead, he uses the music and libretto of the *Ring* as a vehicle to explore the nineteenth century with twentieth-century hindsight, while inviting viewers to consider their present age through a clearly fantastical allegorical reading of an earlier period. (Raz 91-92)

The pleasure of this layered vision is experienced intellectually, creating ‘an understanding [of] the interplay between works’ while also ‘opening up a text’s possible meaning to intertextual echoing’ (Hutcheon 117). Instead of adhering to an aesthetic legacy frozen in 1876, which was the case with many productions preceding the centenary, the staging of the *Ring* in 1976 brought the cycle’s related production history to the stage. Pavis regards this as the ‘chemical reaction’ that occurs when the classics are re-invigorated through a contemporary perspective. He comments, ‘It is up to theorists and artists to decide what exactly they would like to reactivate from the past and thanks to what vision of the present. The intertwining of the reactivation of the past and of this vision leads to an interpretation that is original and unique every time, to an intimate signature of the director’ (Pavis, ‘Fidelity’). By bringing elements of its production history to the stage, the *Ring* prompted the audience to consider Wagner’s work not only as it was originally presented but also as it evolved over the course of a century, including how Wagnerian tropes surrounding power and corruption might speak to the contemporary socio-political climate. Chéreau incited spectators to think through the production and make connections in this way. Explaining the visual world crafted by Chéreau for the centenary *Ring*, conductor Pierre Boulez notes: ‘A work of



art is a constant exchange between past and future, which irrigates it as it irrigates us... it is impossible to interpret the past with any degree of profundity except by setting out from the present' (in Carnegie 355). In essence, this is the past/present component of historical-spatial mapping.

Many principles that are central to reading, locating and critiquing Lepage's *Ring* in its capacity as an auteur-ed work are exemplified in Chéreau's production. Lepage creates his own past-present dialogue through an attempt at historical-spatial mapping that combines seemingly exaggerated mythic iconography (breastplates, horned Valkyries) and repeated claims of a traditional *Ring* staging with costumes blending anachronistic elements and the cutting-edge technology of interactive images projected on the mechanised set. The appearance of the fire god (Loge) demonstrates this overlaying of periods in Lepage's first *Ring* production, *Das Rheingold*. Flanked by over-padded, caricature versions of Wagner's fur-clad giants (Fafner and Fasolt), Loge wears a post-apocalyptic, full body straight jacket, covered with belted restraints. The character is engulfed in fiery, digital flames and reveals a matchstick index finger—these elements appear via the LED units installed in the singer's gloves and costume.<sup>12</sup> Loge's costume is completed with a shock of spiked hair that mirrors director Peter Sellars's famous hairstyle, leading more than one critic to wonder if the hairstyle was an inside joke between directors (Tommasini, 'Levine Returns'). Here, Lepage provides an image that invites multiple interpretations. For spectators acquainted with Sellars and his work as an auteur-director of opera, there is a sense of implicit complicity when it comes to Loge's hair; nonetheless, Loge's coiffure, his full-body straight jacket and the giants' exaggerated costumes offer other meaning-making possibilities. While Lepage and costume designer, François St. Aubin are

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<sup>12</sup> The Montréal designer of these hand-made units, Philippe Jeans, explains that the costume worn by Loge, played by Richard Croft, contains the equivalent of the LED units found in a small lighting board.

clearly poking fun at traditional costuming for Fafner and Fasolt by having them dressed ‘like creatures from Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*’ (Pilkington), Lepage is also emasculating these characters, removing the external, physical threat they pose to the gods and offering a reading that reinforces the centrality of Wotan’s role in his own undoing. In Loge’s case, his spiked hair and postmodern ‘silver... space suit’ go beyond telegraphing Peter Sellars’s personal aesthetic to provide a stark contrast with the production’s ‘breast-plates and full gowns’ that riff ‘on the costuming of a much earlier era’ (Everett-Green, ‘*Rheingold*’). Loge’s costume suggests that the kinetic fire god is an otherworldly import whose advice and actions will have future implications for Wotan and his family.

Further echoes of Chéreau’s *Ring* can be seen in Lepage’s production. Lepage (and the Metropolitan Opera’s artistic director Peter Gelb) worked against Wagner’s anti-Semitic characters, casting the African-American singer Eric Owen as Alberich and co-developing a cruel but psychologically motivated characterization in an effort to subvert Wagner’s racist rendering. Drawn from my examination of how Chéreau’s *Ring* represents an evolving auteur theatre, Chapter Four’s in-depth analysis of Lepage’s interpretation of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* will take up the outcomes of these and other choices.

### **Auteurship and Authority in the 1980s: JoAnne Akalaitis and Elisabeth LeCompte**

While Chéreau, Brook and other artists made important contributions to auteur theatre in the 1970s, auteur/directors in the 1980s faced significant challenges. The era was defined by questions surrounding the usefulness of ‘loyalty’ or ‘fidelity’ to an extant text in production, the auteur’s right to re-author a canonical play, and the de-valuing of adaptations over ‘originals’. Two productions staged in the autumn of 1984 would fuel

these and other questions about auteur theatre because, unlike Brook and Chéreau's engagements with dead authors, these stagings relied on the work of playwrights who were alive, well and extremely resistant to what they viewed as tampering with their iconic texts. These events would influence the direction taken in future by auteur theatre in North America, therefore setting the stage for Lepage's auteur-ly practice and evolution.

The debate over authority and interpretation in theatre during the nineteen-eighties was sparked by the Wooster Group's *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .)*, in which the theatre company, helmed by auteur-director Elisabeth LeCompte, borrowed freely from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* without receiving production rights (Aronson, 'Wooster Group' 67). This appropriation of the text, however, proved to be a grey area since what the Wooster Group 'offered was *not* a production of *The Crucible*, but a new work in which a substantial portion of the play . . . was embedded' (Rabkin 144). Like the past-present dialogue previously discussed in the work of Chéreau, director Elisabeth LeCompte incorporated sections of *The Crucible* into her exploration of drug culture and politics as a meaning-making tool: 'I used Miller's play like an icon, like a piece of culture . . . it's almost like using a piece of the American flag in a mosaic. People remember when they saw the play, what they thought about it. It sets off all sorts of reverberations' (in Freedman). Regardless of LeCompte's intentions, Miller did not approve of the scene featuring his text in which the actors mimic a previously recorded video that they had shot while high on drugs (Hapgood 51). LeCompte re-staged this section numerous times in an effort to gain Miller's approval and, like the auteurs preceding her, used a pronounced meta-theatrical framework. The final incarnation of *L.S.D. (. . . Just the High Points . . .)* viewed by audiences replaced *The Crucible*'s text with an excerpt from *The Hearing*, a play by Michael Kirby that also focused on the

Salem witch trials; however, LeCompte maintained her sense of humour despite the situation. She saw to it that copies of *The Crucible* play text were attached to all audience seats and could be accessed as reference points should any of the performers 'slip back' into Miller's text, in which case a buzzer would be sounded by the production's master of ceremonies/onstage director figure (played by Ron Vawter), silencing the performers (Aronson, 'Wooster Group' 68-70). The production was forced to close soon after it opened as Miller threatened to sue the Wooster Group over what he saw as a violation of the play's spirit: 'I'm not saying that every production has to be the same... That would be boring. But if the playwright or his representatives say the spirit of the play is violated, that's got to be honoured. When the playwright's alive, he's got to know best' (in Freedman).<sup>13</sup>

The debate sparked by the Wooster Group's *L.S.D.* was followed by another major conflict over authorial rights between a playwright and theatre company. Though JoAnne Akalaitis and the American Repertory Theatre had purchased the rights to produce *Endgame* at Harvard in 1984, Samuel Beckett took issue with what he viewed as a violation of their contractual agreement. In an effort to re-contextualise Beckett's script via a contemporary milieu, Akalaitis commissioned a score by Philip Glass and set Clov and Hamm's Sartrean quarters in what was clearly the interior of an old subway tunnel (Hapgood 48). Although Beckett refused to view the production, his American agent and publisher made him aware of Akalaitis's deviations from *Endgame*'s stage directions and a groundbreaking dispute ensued (Hapgood 48). Beckett threatened A.R.T. with legal action, claiming they had failed their contractual

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<sup>13</sup> The incidents between Beckett and A.R.T. and Miller and the Wooster group were not isolated, with other examples including Tennessee Williams's initial refusal to allow a black actor to play Stanley in a 1974 production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in Berlin (Kolin 160) and Edward Albee's pursuit of legal action to shutdown an all-male version of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in Dallas in 1985 ('Albee Seeking').

obligation to reflect the ‘text and spirit’ of his play by refusing to follow his stage directions, which, as Beckett saw it, were integral to establishing tone and represented a non-negotiable aspect of the text to which directors must adhere (Rabkin 47). For Beckett, detailed stage directions functioned to keep the indeterminacy of *Endgame* intact, an aspect of the play that he felt was jeopardised by the specificity of Akalaitis’s set (Kalb 82).

News of Beckett’s legal threats spread and a debate over authorial control and freedom of interpretation appeared in *The Village Voice*, *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*, among others. Headlines included: ‘Enter Fearless Director, Pursued by Playwright’ (Gussow) and ‘Who’s to Say Whether a Playwright is Wronged’ (Freedman). Prior to *Endgame*’s scheduled opening a compromise was reached. Beckett drafted a statement that was included in the production’s program and all advertising that bore his name. While Beckett’s published note referred to Akalaitis’s staging as ‘a complete parody of the play’, adding that ‘anybody who cares for the work couldn’t fail to be disgusted by this’ (in Hapgood 49), the theatre’s artistic director, Robert Brustein, published his own statement in the program: ‘Normal rights of interpretation are essential in order to free the full energy and meaning of the play’ (in Freedman).

This case would carry lasting implications for auteur theatre by asking: Who is the author of a performance? Beckett set a precedent by demanding a strict adherence to his stage directions. While he believed that his stage directions protected *Endgame*’s indeterminate tone and, therefore, the play’s availability to diverse audience interpretations, it could be argued that he closed his work to the meanings of fresh performance texts from theatre-makers such as Akalaitis. These struggles over authorship and authority varied in their implications for auteur theatre. Because of LeCompte and Akalaitis’s highly publicised struggles, the stakes of producing

contemporary classics (such as *Waiting for Godot* or *All My Sons*) were writ large for theatre-makers. Staging these texts came at a considerable risk, including the suppression of auteur-ly performance texts (and therefore the ability to interpret), the threat of legal action and/or the financially crippling cancellation of a production's entire run. As articulated in the amended American Dramatists' Guild contract from 1985, which was updated due to conflicts between playwrights and producers over royalty rates (Bennetts), final authority resided with the playwright (Hapgood 43).<sup>14</sup> While this contract was conceived to protect the integrity of writers' original works (and still remains virtually the same today), it allowed playwrights to define fidelity through strict adherence to the text and production notes, allowing certain individuals and estates to assume strict control over their oeuvres (as exemplified by Beckett and, later, the Brecht estate).

Lepage would experience these challenges first hand through 'licensing issues' (Rizzo) that prevented him from proceeding with his 2004 interpretation of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*. Depending on the source consulted, Lepage's production of *The Threepenny Opera* was closed for one of two reasons: as reported in *The Age* the show was shut-down due to what the Brecht and Weill estates saw as a lack of faithfulness to the original text (Usher); alternately, in *The Theatricality of Robert Lepage*, Dundjerović states that Lepage never secured the rights to produce *The Threepenny Opera*, thus causing the closure (121).

As presented by the media in the immediate wake of the Akalaitis and LeCompte controversies, auteur theatre was recognised as vital to the survival of canonical works and began to shed its fringe status. Journalists resisted siding with auteurs over playwrights but did champion auteur theatre, all with an eye to framing

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<sup>14</sup> Critiques of contemporary writers' contracts frame this as a persistent issue. *Exeunt Magazine* has criticised the UK Writers' Guild for pursuing a 'way of working in which the writers hold the lion's share of the power and control over the making of work' (Dimitrijevic).

artistic creation as a collaboration between artists, not a competition between rivals. In his 1985 article ‘Auteur Directors Bring New Life To Theatre’, *New York Times* critic Frank Rich proclaimed: ‘the director’s theatre has now gained its most pronounced stronghold in this country’.<sup>15</sup> The article was inspired by Robert Wilson’s production *The Civil Wars*, a transnational, multimedia collaboration based on the American Civil War and Tadeuz Kantor’s *Let the Artists Die*, an evocative survey of the decimation of twentieth-century Poland featuring the return of undead soldiers seemingly risen from their graves, ‘the ashes of Auschwitz...pounding waves of music, [and] the ritualistic repetitions of suicides and murders’ (Rich, ‘Let the Artists Die’).

The 1980s would see the growth of auteur theatre through devised or extant text work by Peter Brook, Robert Wilson, Peter Sellars and a young Robert Lepage, among others. Charles Marowitz, an American writer, avant-garde director and the co-founder of London’s Open Space Theatre, provocatively summed up the zeitgeist of this shift, stating, the ‘only fidelity that cuts any ice in the theatre is a director’s fidelity to his personal perceptions about a classic; how well and how truly he can put on stage the visions the play has evoked in his imagination’ (7). And, though the specific moment when the term auteur crossed-over from film to theatre in English-speaking vocabularies has yet to be identified, by 1985 references to ‘auteur’ theatre would begin to appear regularly in scholarly and media discourse.

### **Auteurs, Authenticity and Fidelity in Music**

In the case of professional opera, conceptions of the director and auteur’s role continue to evolve. While opera production from the seventeenth century through to the late

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<sup>15</sup> Rich’s 1985 ‘Auteur Directors’ article also provides a list of ‘the best-known auteur directors’ in the United States, including ‘JoAnne Akalaitis, Ping Chong, Martha Clarke, Richard Foreman, James Lapine, Elisabeth LeCompte of the Wooster Group, Des McAnuff and Peter Sellars, as well as the Rumanian émigrés Liviu Ciulei, Lucian Pintilie and Andrei Serban’.

nineteenth century emphasised the importance of adhering to the scenic descriptions provided by the composer, the emergence of the opera director brought figurative interpretations to the fore (for example, Appia and Craig's turn to the power of lighting rather than the literal representation of a setting to establish and shift tone). Moreover, the steady transfer of film and theatre directors to opera over the last seventy years has seen an increase in the use of period updates (including Atom Egoyan's *Salome* set in a modern office building and Peter Sellars's *The Marriage of Figaro* set in Trump Tower) and the incorporation of complex scenic technology (from Sergei Eisenstein's *Die Walküre* in 1940 to Penny Woolcock's *Doctor Atomic* in 2009). Given this history, Lepage's work with digital images and period updates in his opera productions (e.g., *The Rake's Progress* set in 1950s Hollywood) follows a non-traditional but previously forged approach in terms of opera directing. Opera patrons are particularly resistant, however, to high-concept productions, which have come to be synonymous with the offensive label 'Eurotrash' in the U.S. Prior to the opening of Lepage's *Ring*, the president of the Boston Wagner Society, Dalia Geffen commented, 'We don't know how close to Eurotrash it will be. That's the big if. I don't think Americans are too fond of Eurotrash, and I don't think Europeans are either. We don't want any silliness' (in Wakin, 'Valhalla Machine'). Unlike theatre's gradual (if not total) acceptance of the auteur genre, interpretive liberties taken by auteur directors continue to be a source of contention for patrons and producers seeking 'authenticity' in opera.

Beginning in the 1950s, musicians and conductors working with classical music (up to and including Baroque scores and eighteenth-century operas) held fidelity to the composer's intentions at the forefront of their work (Butt). 'Authentic' music, which can range from performances produced with a renewed focus on the composer's original notes to the use of period instruments, became extremely popular during the



sixties and the movement continued well into the 1980s, (the same era in which the first criticisms of ‘authenticity’ in music began to arise). Though music’s preoccupation with ‘fidelity’ would wane in the lead-up to the twenty-first century, the repercussions of a looming ‘authenticity’ aesthetic continue to exert an influence on contemporary opera production today. As Chapter Four will demonstrate, Lepage’s auteur-ly production of the *Ring* is complicated by its arrival at an uncertain time in the trajectory of music’s relationship to historicity and the director.

Contextualizing Lepage’s scenographic dramaturgy through the evolution of auteur theatre highlights Wagner’s influence on directing; the vital role played by physical performance text in auteur theatre; and changing attitudes towards auteur-ed work and freedom of interpretation. Moreover, it suggests that ‘an auteur-based approach is a way of reading productions, of any sort, which looks for wholeness, for coherence of vision, for a real person infusing the work’ (Shepherd 172). As this chapter posits and upcoming case studies will further demonstrate, Lepage’s scenographic dramaturgy can be understood as his individual approach to auteur-ing theatre. For Lepage, scenographic dramaturgy interacts with extant plays and contexts (time, production history etc.) to produce a signature yet conceptually open performance text. In turn, this vivid scenography provides spectators with opportunities to author their own diverse meanings. While Lepage’s scenographic dramaturgy for *The Tempest* suggests a re-evaluation of colonial legacies, his *Ring* cycle aesthetically interweaves historicised production models and cutting-edge technology, giving spectators a unique meaning-making opportunity. My focus now turns to Lepage’s stagings of these texts with an eye to evaluating the ways in which his scenographic dramaturgy is available to a sustained meaning-making dialogue in production that also engages with the cultural, political and historical conditions in which his auteur-ship

unfolds. As Chapter Four will demonstrate, produced on Huron-Wendat land in collaboration with the Huron-Wendat Nation, Ex Machina's co-production of the French language version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is steeped in historical, political and cultural context.

### **Chapter Three: Adapting ‘Le Grand Will’ in Wendake: Ex Machina and the Huron-Wendat Nation’s *La Tempête***

In 2009, Konrad Sioui, Grand Chief of the Huron-Wendat Nation in Wendake, Québec, decided the province’s recent four-hundredth anniversary marked the right time to organise an event between First Nations peoples, Québécois, and Canadians acknowledging the country’s colonial past. Initially, he proposed a re-enactment of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, the seminal conflict in which British forces defeated French and indigenous soldiers to conquer New France. Due to threats of violence from extreme separatist groups in Québec, though, the performance was cancelled. Undeterred, Sioui proposed a symbolic ceremony on the Plains of Abraham; he envisioned a diverse gathering of Canadians to literally bury hatchets and sign friendship treaties (Boivin, ‘Hurons’). Then Parti Québécois leader Pauline Marois responded by calling on Ottawa to surrender the plains to Québec (Dougherty) and proposed a debate on the meaning of the historic battle instead. While independent artists eventually organised a twenty-four hour spoken-word festival on the plains, a separatist doctrine read at the event caused tempers to flare.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, Sioui’s vision of a reconciliatory gathering failed to materialise. Two years later, however, through the pairing of the Huron-Wendat Nation and Robert Lepage’s *Ex Machina*, a French language production of *The Tempest* recognizing colonialism’s repercussions for indigenous peoples took centre stage at the Wendake amphitheatre. Drawing on my experience attending *La Tempête*’s invited dress rehearsal on 1 July 2011, as well as interviews with members of the production team, reviews and scholarly assessments of the work, this chapter posits that the Wendake *Tempête* featured instances of progressive interculturalism.

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<sup>1</sup> The document read was the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) manifesto, penned by the radical separatist group responsible for a series bombings and the death of a liberal cabinet minister in 1970.

Inspired by Joseph Légaré's painting of the English actor Edmund Kean performing Shakespeare soliloquys in nineteenth-century Wendake and the bond Kean subsequently formed with members of the Huron-Wendat Nation, the Ex Machina/Huron-Wendat production of *La Tempête* endeavoured to forge an alliance between First Nations people and Québécois artists (Isabelle). Staged on the Huron-Wendat reserve outside Québec City, the production brought together Ex Machina's creative team and a group of ten First Nations artists, among them Innu singer Kathia Rock (Ariel), Métis actor Marco Poulin (Caliban) and the Sandokwa Dance Troupe, composed of seven Huron-Wendat adults and children, including the troupe leader Steeve Gros-Louis [*sic*], who also played Alonso (referred to as King Alphonse in Michel Garneau's translation).<sup>2</sup> By overwriting *The Tempest*'s island setting with the socio-political context of New France in 1608, *La Tempête* reconfigured power structures to re-envision Shakespeare's text. The staging's use of a colonial setting was in no way a trailblazing strategy nor did *La Tempête* entirely escape the problematic politics of representation that have marked Ex Machina's past productions.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, my primary focus here is on how Lepage responded to his First Nations partners and environment to collaboratively craft scenographic dramaturgy that gestured towards recognizing the repercussions of colonialism. In a province where cultural protectionism has led to policies that some find arguably xenophobic, *La Tempête*'s burgeoning yet flawed interculturalism merits investigation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Sandokwa Dance Troupe's name refers to the eagle, which, as seen in Huron-Wendat culture, acts as a messenger between the people and the Great Spirit', the creator and supporter of all life' (G. Sioui 6).

<sup>3</sup> Other postcolonial readings of *The Tempest* include Aimé Césaire's 1969 *Une Tempête* and Simon Phillips's *Tempest* for the Queensland Theatre Company in 1999 (discussed further in an upcoming section of this chapter). Césaire's adaptation reconfigures Shakespeare's narrative from the perspective of African slaves in Martinique.

<sup>4</sup> The Francophone Québécois have expressed a longstanding desire to protect their culture, making French the province's official language in 1977's provincial language charter. During the twenty-first century, this commitment to protecting Québec's culture prompted the Francophone Québécois to question how reasonable accommodation policies could pose a significant threat to their identity. The most serious protectionism saw Hérouxville, a small rural town in Québec, creating what they viewed as a

This chapter begins with a brief outline of the central fields driving my analysis of the scenographic dramaturgy featured in *La Tempête*: non-logocentric adaptation, intercultural theory and postcolonial theory. A survey of early contact-themed Shakespeare productions in Canada will follow, highlighting some of the potential traps of staging postcolonial interpretations, including power imbalances among intercultural collaborators and reductionist portrayals of difference. Lepage's ability to avoid many of these traps by working collaboratively will be interrogated through examples illustrating how scenographic dramaturgy's three central components—bodies-in-motion, architectonic scenography and historical-spatial mapping—function as both a process and product fostering progressive dialogue between cultures.

Because scenographic dramaturgy does not consider different texts (dramatic, scenic etc.) hierarchically and understands *mise en scène* as a language in its own right, it is presented here as a process of adaptation. With scenographic dramaturgy, an adaptation can be written in how the 'sounds, noises, lights, changes in space are used... the variations of the lights, the variations of rhythm and intensity which an actor develops following certain precise physical themes (ways of walking, of treating the scenic objects, of using make-up or costume)' (Barba, 'Nature of Dramaturgy' 75). Though the Wendake staging of *La Tempête* uses Michel Garneau's 1970s language-based 'tradaptation', this chapter focuses on the cultural and political repositioning resulting from the production's scenographic dramaturgy.<sup>5</sup> Adaptations and source texts are understood here as existing 'laterally not vertically' (Hutcheon xv); spoken text is

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pre-emptive strike against immigrants—a code of conduct banning female circumcision and stoning. Though such xenophobic concerns were somewhat diffused by the 2006 Bouchard-Taylor commission, an investigation concluding that Québec's language and culture were in no way at risk, debates were reignited in 2013 by Premier Pauline Marois's proposed Charter of Québec Values, which prohibits civil servants from wearing certain religious symbols including hijabs, niqabs, kippas and turbans.

<sup>5</sup> In 1978, Michel Garneau produced the first in a series of what he termed Shakespeare 'tradaptations', which reinvented Shakespeare's texts via an initial incarnation of *joual*, an off-shoot of French as it was first introduced to North America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As compared to Garneau's tradaptation of *Macbeth*, *La Tempête* is less revisionist and polemic, written in a 'no-name-brand, generic French' (Salter, 'Between Wor(l)ds' 64).

not privileged over other forms of performance text, including those that speak without words through physical, aural and/or architectural language.

A collaborative project between the Huron-Wendat Nation and Ex Machina employing an implicitly imperial dramatic text to engage with Québec's colonizing/colonised past and the Huron-Wendat Nation's position within this history, *La Tempête* also lends itself to a reading employing both intercultural and postcolonial theory. Following the definition of intercultural theatre, the production stages a point of contact between cultures, a site 'for the continuing renegotiation of cultural values and the reconstitution of individual and community identities and subject positions' (Knowles, *Interculturalism* 5). Nonetheless, as seen in work such as Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, a production performed in French and English that appropriated the Indian religious narrative only to gloss 'over the religious and cultural significance of the epic' to represent 'an unapologetic neo-colonialism and Orientalism' (O'Toole 10), intercultural theatre can hinge on the aesthetics of the exchange rather than the culture's attendant historical, political or geographical context. Because body texts are central to crafting Lepage's visual score, there is a risk that physical performance text will act as mere ornamentation fashioned for Western consumption in *La Tempête*. With its insistent stress on historicity and specificity, postcolonial theory offers ways of 'relocating the dynamics of intercultural theatre within identifiable fields of socio-political and historical relations' (Lo and Gilbert 44). By employing postcolonial theory in my analysis, I will explore how *La Tempête* creates opportunities for Québécois and First Nations performers to appropriate Shakespeare, known in Québec as 'le grand Will' due to his simultaneously revered and imperially-thorny position (Lieblein 'Le Re-Making' 178). Whether through physical performance text or the decentering of Shakespeare to question Aboriginal and Québécois relations within the nation-state of

Québec, *La Tempête* is a clear site of intercultural contact interwoven with postcolonial theory's historicizing context, begging the questions: who benefits? Who has agency?

### **Forerunners at home and abroad**

The longstanding implications of English colonisation are integral to understanding the continuum in which Lepage is producing *La Tempête* in Wendake, Québec. From the outset of Britain's occupation of New France in the eighteenth century, British colonisers began soliciting touring Shakespeare productions from America and the United Kingdom with an eye to assimilating the French speaking population.<sup>6</sup> Britain's appropriation of New France and initial efforts to suppress local culture prompted enduring tensions surrounding Québécois identity, language and sovereignty. These tensions would be played out in various home grown approaches to producing Shakespeare in Québec and would lead to a broader tradition in which Shakespeare productions became vessels for asserting Québec's burgeoning national identity and resisting imperial power structures.

Though much scholarship examines textual re-appropriations of Shakespeare in Québec, particularly Michel Garneau's 'tradaptations', Lepage's use of scenographic dramaturgy to re-envision Shakespeare's texts is not without Québécois forerunners. Following Québec's Quiet Revolution, Robert Gurik wrote *Hamlet, Prince du Québec*. In his *Hamlet*, scenography functions to allegorise Québec's position in Canada,

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<sup>6</sup> In 1823, the English publication *Canadian Magazine* theorised:

Were it possible, by means of a well-regulated English Theatre, to draw some of the French Canadians to the representation of some of [Shakespeare's] best pieces, the effects would doubtless be salutary... This will not appear insignificant or frivolous, if we once reflect, that the first objects of Canadian imitation have been our dress and external behavior. (in Doucette 80)

satirizing the key players opposing Québec's quest for sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> Hamlet embodies Québec while the cartoon-like masks worn by other characters indicate their allegorical roles; Polonius is Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson while his daughter Ophelia is Québec (Lieblein, 'Pourquoi' 101-102). Gurik's scenography also casts and depicts Hamlet's father in a subversive way; 'the ghost... is a screen projection of General [Charles] de Gaulle just as he appeared in July 1967 on the balcony of Montreal's city hall' shouting 'Vive le Québec libre!' (Le Blanc 15). This slogan, first proclaimed by the French president in the aforementioned circumstances in Montréal, represents a seminal moment of postcolonial protest for Québec nationalists keen to sever ties with Anglophone Canada and the United Kingdom. At the play's conclusion, Gurik's stage directions make it clear that Horatio (founder of the nascent Parti Québécois, René Lévesque) would be assuming control of Hamlet's [Québec's] 'kingdom' and not the foreign interests represented by Fortinbras (Stevenson 72). Primarily through its scenography, though minor shifts to the text occur (Stevenson 71), Gurik's *Hamlet* represents the first Québécois production to demonstrate 'not that Québec artists could do Shakespeare but that they could undo it' (Lieblein, 'Le Re-making' 180).

While the 1970s saw the majority of Shakespeare productions taking shape through textual adaptations in Québec, the 1980s featured highly visual and physical Shakespeare productions. In keeping with the failed sovereignty referendum of 1980, these productions were focused on the limits of their own theatricality rather than talking back to British colonisers. It would not be until the 1990s and beyond that radical re-appropriations of Shakespeare's texts driven by scenography would reappear in Québec. During this period, the province's immigrant population began to produce innovative scenographic renderings of Shakespeare's texts in an effort to articulate their

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<sup>7</sup> After Premier Maurice Duplessis's staunchly conservative regime, the election of Jean Lesage's Liberal government in 1960 ushered in a period marked by significant shifts towards secularism, liberalism and modernisation.



unique identity struggles while challenging what they perceived as xenophobia amongst members of the Francophone Québécois community.

The artistic director of Pigeon's International, Lisbon-born, Portuguese-Canadian Paula de Vasconcelos, relied on her own immigrant experience in Québec to co-develop 1996's *Le Making of/de Macbeth* with playwright Jean-Frédéric Messier (Salter, 'Blood' 82). The narrative focuses on the challenges faced by a female director in Québec as she prepares to stage *Macbeth*. Unlike Garneau's previous *Macbeth* tradaptation, which is rooted in asserting a singular Québec identity through joul, Vasconcelos chose to question how Shakespeare might act as a meaning-making vehicle for new Québec immigrants who speak neither English nor French as their first languages but want to make their voices heard nonetheless (Lieblein, 'Le Re-making' 184). Of the production, Salter writes:

A kind of postmodern metaperformance, it highlights the 'making-of-the-play/production' while staging occasional scenes from Shakespeare's play before eventually deciding *not* to stage Shakespeare's play in its entirety. As a 'making', it opens up questions for the end-of-the-millennium about the status of canonical Western texts, the sense of ending, the sense of a new world perhaps being born out of blood and chaos, and about whether contemporary artists can find ways to speak in many languages and performance modes *not for* Shakespeare but *through* him in order to assert their own politics of location. ('Blood' 67)

Vasconcelos's reconfiguration of *Macbeth* would be one of many radical Shakespeare adaptations helmed by Québécois immigrants over the past twenty years. Other examples include Oleg Kisseliov's *Le Songe d'une Nuit d'été*, set in a bleak Beckettian world populated by 'hard luck clowns' and fairies clothed in rags and bandages. A Russian-born immigrant, Kisseliov's production 'gave voice to the dispossessed', approximating the difficult experience of forging one's identity in a new country with ties to nothing and no one (Lieblein, 'Le Re-Making' 188). Another Québécois immigrant hailing from Russia, Alexandre Marine, created a 1995 *Hamlet* that featured Yorick coming back to life, Hamlet dropping his pants, and numerous dance sequences. Both Kisseliov and Marine brought an exciting irreverence to Shakespeare, asserting their hybridised Québécois identities through productions that 'offered brutal, not beautiful Shakespeare, implicitly resisting what Shakespeare in the institutional theatre had become. Their aggressiveness was expressed in the lighting schemes, which often made one squint to see [and] in the physical risks taken by the actors' (Lieblein, 'Le Re-Making' 188).

The recent upsurge in Shakespeare productions featuring Aboriginal performers in Australia and New Zealand also provides seminal questions with which to explore Lepage's Wendake *Tempest*. Though examples vary, including Noel Tovey's 1997 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (the first professional, all-indigenous Shakespeare production in Australia) and Ngakau Toa's New Zealand production of *Troilus and Cressida* in Maori, which played at London's Globe to Globe Festival, the staging most pertinent to Lepage's work in Wendake, however, is Simon Phillips's 1999 production of *The Tempest* for the Queensland Theatre Company.<sup>8</sup> Like Lepage's production,

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<sup>8</sup> Since the late 1990s, other Aboriginal Shakespeare performances in Australia have included The Bell Shakespeare Company's production of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1999, which cast the Montagues as Aboriginals; La Boîte's 1999 production of the same play with the Capulets as Aboriginals; and Belvoir Street Theatre's *As You Like It* (Schafer 69-70). In 2012, the Globe Theatre/Cultural Olympiad presented

Phillips's *Tempest* featured Aboriginal performers and a marked shift to the play's conclusion. Among the challenges faced in this production, which included an all-Aboriginal cast of spirits and an Aboriginal Caliban, was the risk of depicting indigenous culture in a way that not only followed on problematic nineteenth-century representations of indigeneity in Australian theatre but also reinforced the romanticised renderings of Aboriginal culture used by the country's tourism industry (Schafer 73). Though Phillips's production was received as a successful intervention by some, for others his use of the Aboriginal Jagera Jarjum Dance Troupe in non-speaking roles devoid of agency read as tokenistic.

Other points of contention surrounded the play's conclusion. Phillips had fashioned three possible endings to the production:

One was a bleak conclusion of alienation and despair whereby he [Caliban] would remain in a corner of the stage drinking... In the alternative ending, Caliban would pull off his nameplate, [a costume piece harkening back to the actual identifying plates distributed to indigenous people by early colonisers] throw it into the air and run off stage, calling out in his indigenous language that he is coming home. (Cox 76)

The third ending, which Phillips ultimately selected as the conclusion to be viewed by spectators throughout the run, brought Caliban and Prospero together in a reconciliatory embrace. This conclusion was the subject of critical complaints centring on its failure to represent historical reality. As European descendants themselves, many audience

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select Shakespeare sonnets performed in the Nyungar language of southwest Australia by Aboriginal performer Kyle Morrison (Laurie).

members and critics were all too aware of the fact that the coloniser never left Australia and, therefore, Caliban would face an arduous assimilationist road ahead (Cox 77).

When it comes to First Nations forerunners to Ex Machina's *La Tempête*, select indigenous companies in Canada have employed Shakespeare as a vehicle to examine contemporary struggles within their communities. Given that Shakespeare is known to many Aboriginal Canadians through his use as a tool to 'aggressively assimilate' generations of children forced into residential schools, Aboriginal productions of Shakespeare's texts are infrequent (Hong).<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare in The Red, a Winnipeg-based touring company, and the Manitoulin Island group De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre, whose work has served as outreach for at risk Aboriginal youths, have employed Shakespeare's texts to positively assert Aboriginal identity. For his part, Yves Sioui Durand runs the only Francophone Aboriginal theatre company in Canada, Ondinnok, and wrote *Hamlet le Malécite* about a young First Nations man struggling with his racial identity. Toronto's Native Earth Performing Arts, a company dedicated to Aboriginal performance, has also adapted Shakespeare. Yvette Nolan and Kennedy C. MacKinnon's *Death of A Chief* offers an all-Aboriginal adaptation of *Julius Caesar* that explores gender roles and band politics.

As the first early contact-themed Shakespeare adaptation driven by a Francophone Québécois company, the Wendake *Tempête* can also be contextualised via productions that demonstrate the potential challenges of setting a Shakespeare text in colonial Canada. Created for the Canadian Players in 1961, David Gardner's touring production of *King Lear* presented Shakespeare's narrative through portrayals of Inuit

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<sup>9</sup> Opening in the late nineteenth-century in Canada, residential schools were created by Anglophone Catholics with the mandate of eradicating Aboriginal culture. Shakespeare played a major role in this assimilationist initiative, being studied as the authoritative English voice (Hong). First Nations people were viewed by the British as a cultural threat and the Indian Act of 1876 incited harsh measures to assimilate Canada's Aboriginal people, including the seizure of their land and the involuntary placement of First Nations children in residential schools.



Figure 2. Lepage's 2011 co-production of *La Tempête* with the Huron-Wendat Nation, featuring Alphonse (Steeve Gros-Louis), Ariel (Kathia Rock), Prospero (Jean Guy), Miranda (Chantal Dupuis), Ferdinand (Francis Roberge), Gonsalve (Normand Bissonnette), and Antonio (Frédéric Bouffard). (Photo: David Leclerc)

people struggling with French colonisation. Characters were played by white actors clad in 'mukluks and snow goggles' (Grace 143), trafficking in reductive and essentialist portrayals. In the late 1980s, a more progressive early-contact-themed production appeared—Lewis Baumander's postcolonial *Tempest* in Toronto's Earl Bales Park. Set on the Queen Charlotte Islands at the time of Captain James Cook's arrival, Baumander's *Tempest* cast Ariel and Caliban as Haida, played by Monique Mojica of the Kuna and Rappahannock Nation and Cree performer Billy Merasty (Peters 197). This production has been critiqued for failing to include Aboriginal designers, reinforcing imperialist ideology, and subjugating First Nations characters (Buntin); nonetheless, Mojica's defiant Ariel highlighted Prospero's 'otherwise uncontested assumptions of symbolic legitimacy' (Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia* 140) and the masque scene was effectively interventionist, portraying a potlatch in which European

guests ‘from hell... initiated the death of native peoples and the destruction of their culture’ (Gilbert and Tompkins 27).<sup>10</sup>

### **Lepage and Shakespeare**

Lepage’s direction of Shakespeare’s plays has been coloured by his scenographic dramaturgy and frequent productions of *The Tempest* from the outset. To date, he has staged full productions of *The Tempest* for the Globe Theatre (1993, Tokyo, Japanese), Théâtre du Trident (1998, Québec City, French) and the Huron-Wendat amphitheatre (2011, Wendake, French). His most recent production was Thomas Adès’s *Tempest* opera for the Festival d’opéra de Québec and the Metropolitan Opera (2012, Québec City/New York, English). Excerpts from *The Tempest* are also included in Lepage’s *Shakespeare Cycle* (Théâtre Repère, 1992, French) and *Shakespeare’s Rapid Eye Movement* (Munich, 1993, German).<sup>11</sup> Lepage also staged a workshop production of *The Tempest* at the National Arts Centre (1992, Ottawa, English) and, in 1994, a production of Michael Nyman’s *Tempest*-inspired opera, *Noises, Sounds and Sweet Airs*, at the Tokyo Globe (Fouquet 370). Lepage’s approach to staging *The Tempest* hovers around a few central conceits. Meta-theatrical framing devices, such as setting the production in a rehearsal room, have been employed to stage scenes from *The Tempest* in the *Shakespeare Cycle* and *Shakespeare’s Rapid Eye Movement*.

additionally, the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde production and *The Tempest* opera were staged using a meta-theatrical conceit. In the latter, Prospero imagines himself as ‘an

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<sup>10</sup> Within a year of the Wendake *Tempête*, Peter Hinton directed an all-Aboriginal cast in an earl-contact-themed *King Lear* for Ottawa’s National Arts Centre. The production team featured a sole First Nations contributor, Suzanne Keptwo, who would suggest prior to the production’s opening that she was afforded minimal agency as the production’s ‘aboriginal adviser’ and that the NAC’s *Lear* risked doing more to reinforce stereotypes and imperialist ideologies than to subvert them (Finken).

<sup>11</sup> The *Shakespeare Cycle* combines scenes from *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus* and *The Tempest* while *Shakespeare’s Rapid Eye Movement* is a theatrical ‘collage’ of dream scenes from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Richard III* and *The Tempest*.

impresario of 18th-century opera. On the island Prospero has recreated La Scala, the opera house from his hometown, Milan' (Tommasini, "'Tempest' Makes Debut').

Lepage has also crafted postcolonial interpretations in his staging of the Adès opera and, as this chapter will demonstrate, the Ex Machina / Huron-Wendat co-production.

Other Shakespeare productions staged by Lepage, including Théâtre du Nouveau Monde's *Le songe d'une nuit d'été* (Lepage's debut at a major Québec theatre) and *Roméo et Juliette à Saskatoon*<sup>12</sup> (a co-production with Saskatoon's Night Cap Productions) were defined by scenic writing. In *Le songe*, architectonic scenography materialised via a rotating platform in the shape of England on the stage floor (Lieblein, 'Pourquoi' 105), with Québécois performers literally treading on an imperial symbol. The scenographic dramaturgy for *Roméo et Juliette à Saskatoon* featured an important directorial intervention; the Québécois Capulets and Anglo-Canadian Montagues were transported to the plains of Saskatchewan, complete with Western Canadian iconography including cowboy hats, pick-up trucks and a set fashioned to resemble the Trans-Canada Highway. Physicality has also played an important role in Lepage's meaning-making scenographic dramaturgy for Shakespeare. He used Jacques Lecoq's physical exercises and spatial constraints, such as confining the actor playing Caliban to a restricted stage space, to elicit embodied characterisations in *Shakespeare's Rapid Eye Movement*. Moreover, *Elsinore* featured an evocative one-man acting machine, which constantly reconfigured in tandem with the spoken text and actor's manipulations, making 'the playing rather than the play... the thing' (Lavender 105).<sup>13</sup>

Beginning in the 1990s, Lepage's Shakespeare productions, including the aforementioned *Elsinore*, would elicit significant criticism focusing on Lepage's

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<sup>12</sup> My translation: *Romeo and Juliet in Saskatoon*

<sup>13</sup> Other Shakespeare productions crafted by Lepage include: *Coriolan et le monstre aux mille têtes*, 1983, Théâtre Repère/international tour; *Le Cycle Shakespeare: Macbeth, Coriolan, La Tempête*, 1992, Théâtre Repère/international tour; and *Le songe d'une nuit d'été*, 1995, Trident.

portrayal of others, de-privileging of the text and trafficking in contentious ‘universality’. To create his 1992 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at London’s National Theatre, Lepage cherry-picked iconography from various cultures with a principal focus on aesthetics. Alongside his ‘deliberately’ multicultural cast, featuring ‘Anglo-Indian, Anglo-West Indian, Anglo-African and Québécois performers’, the production used live Indonesian music to aesthetically reference China and Japan interchangeably (Dundjerović, *Theatricality* 165). In his *Dream*, Lepage read ‘alterity assimilatively’ (Tiffin 100) and presented reductive portrayals of others, appropriating difference without considering its attendant historical materiality (Hodgdon 85-86). Lepage’s de-privileging of the text in this *Dream* would also be the source of marked criticism, particularly from the British media. *The Independent*’s Paul Taylor noted ‘Lepage has little time for the text’ and ‘he goes to great lengths to distract you from it’. Further arguments problematizing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Elsinore* posited that Lepage relied on the cliché of ‘Shakespeare’s universalism’ by choosing not to locate his scenographic dramaturgy in a concrete place (Knowles, ‘Dream’ 205). Knowles further posits that Lepage’s use of placelessness ‘makes the ways in which... *Elsinore* can be interventionist... unclear’ (‘Dream’ 205). As my discussion of *La Tempête* will demonstrate, Lepage’s politics of place and representation shift in this production, demonstrating their capacity to subvert Shakespeare’s implicitly imperial text.<sup>14</sup>

## **Context**

Select events defining relations between Aboriginals and Francophone Québécois in Québec and Canada also provide the context necessary to interrogate the Wendake

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<sup>14</sup> For more on Lepage’s past Shakespeare productions, see Hodgdon (1996), Knowles (1998), Lavender (2001), and Fricker (2008).



Tempête. Prior to England's colonisation of Canada, France was the first country to colonise regions of Québec and Canada in the early seventeenth century. And, while peaceful relations and intermarriage between Europeans and Aboriginals marked this period, colonisers from New France introduced First Nations people to alcohol, creating a strong dependency amongst indigenous people that drove New France's fur trade. When Great Britain officially took over the colony in 1763, the French settlers and Aboriginals were initially marginalised by the aforementioned British attempts at cultural assimilation; nonetheless, of the two groups, the Aboriginals would ultimately suffer the most. Soon after the conquest, British colonial authorities recognised that life on the colony would be improved if the French were on-side and, therefore, chose to 'recognise and protect French religion, legal institutions and civil society' through the 1774 Québec Act (Papillon 111). Canada's First Nations people faced far harsher treatment; many were evicted from their land and their children were often physically and sexually abused in residential schools.

The repercussions of this abuse continue to plague First Nations people today. Those who attended the schools had no model for family life and, consequently, struggled to parent their own children. Moreover, the self-perpetuating cycle of sexual and physical abuse has had devastating effects on generations whose parents and grandparents were victims of residential schools. Due to the continued lineage of abuse, many Aboriginals have turned to drugs and alcohol as a means of self-medicating. This, in turn, has increased national rates of fetal alcohol syndrome, placed an enduring strain on Aboriginal relationships with non-indigenous Canadians and contributed to the enduring marginalisation of First Nations people in Canada (Tait and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation 156).

More recent events affecting relations between the Francophone Québécois and Aboriginals prior to the Wendake *Tempête* in 2011 include the repeated clashes that have arisen surrounding both people's federal status as minority groups seeking self-determinism.<sup>15</sup> The failed Meech Lake Accord represents one such impasse. In 1987, Québécois legislators put forth a patriation package aimed at enabling the province to protect its unique Francophone culture through a distinct society clause added to the Canadian Constitution (Geddes). To be passed, the package would have to be approved by all provinces. The accord was ultimately defeated in 1990 due to Manitoba and Newfoundland's lack of support. While the accord's failure cannot be exclusively tied to Aboriginal interests in Manitoba as the Premier of Newfoundland failed to call a provincial vote on the issue, Meech Lake's collapse brought the marginalised position of Canada's First Nations people to the fore. Elijah Harper, an Aboriginal member of the Legislative Assembly in Manitoba, refused to back the accord stating, 'Our particular concern was with the further imposition of the Big Lie that Canada was made up of two founding nations, two official languages' (in Geddes). Aboriginal Canadians, a community often invisible to the 'two solitudes', had emerged and staked their unique national claim. Harper argued that if Québec was to receive distinct society status, so should Canada's First Nations people.

Beyond federal conflicts, First Nations people, who represent a slim one per cent of Québec's population overall and live within the province's Francophone majority (A. Gagnon), have also struggled to assert their rights, whether by reckoning with cultural intolerance or disputes over ancestral land claims. In 1990, both issues came to a head through the Oka Crisis, a dispute between the mostly Francophone Québécois residents of Oka and a nearby Mohawk community. Mohawks set up barricades to prevent the

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<sup>15</sup> Although sovereigntist Québécois view self-determinism as tied to secession from Canada, the majority of Canada's First Nations peoples aspire to self-govern without separating.

town of Oka from expanding a nine-hole golf course onto an Aboriginal burial site that had not been legally allocated through previous land treaties. After a member of the Québécois provincial police was killed and a Mohawk warrior was severely beaten during physical confrontations stemming from the dispute, the Canadian Armed Forces were sent to Oka. Though the golf course was never built, the events constituting the Oka crisis, including racially intolerant responses from the non-Aboriginal Francophone Québécois population in the media (Papillon 116) and Amnesty International's report stating that Canada needed to better protect its Aboriginal peoples against human-rights violations (Aubry) highlighted the presence and desires of Aboriginal communities: 'In Quebec, especially for nationalists, the episode was a reminder that not everyone agrees on the territorial boundaries of the political community nor on the role of the provincial state' (Papillon 116).

Given the history of Francophone Québécois and Aboriginal relations, an intercultural interpretation of *La Tempête* on Huron-Wendat ground is a progressive step. My discussion of the Wendake *Tempest* not only posits that this collaboration between the Huron-Wendat Nation and Ex Machina sees agency symbolically returned to the reserve's community but also that the production envisions the once rival groups possibly confronting their sovereignty struggles together. In the lead-up to the production, Québécois and Aboriginal nationalists faced a series of challenges including the Bloc Québécois's loss of official party status and the failure of various bills that sought to improve education, employment and substandard living conditions for First Nations peoples. The following section examines how Lepage's *Tempête* serves as an apology for the past, and a particularly timely treatment of Canada's Aboriginal and Québécois people in light of political and cultural unrest contemporaneous with the production.

## La Tempête's Historical-Spatial Mapping

As posited by Gilbert and Lo, the actual ground occupied by an intercultural performance speaks, in part, to the power dynamics at work within the collaboration:

Intercultural theatre stages a meeting of cultures in both physical and imaginative realms... Space is neither neutral nor homogenous; it inevitably colors those relationships within its limits... We need to ask, then, how the physical space/meeting place inflects intercultural collaboration: Whose ground are we on? (47)

*La Tempête's* location in the amphitheatre on Huron-Wendat land was part of Lepage's long-time goal of collaborating with the Nation's people (P. White). As a child, he spent much time at an Aunt's home bordering the reserve and formed the idea. Since inheriting this home in the last decade, Lepage has taken up residence there whenever possible (Desloges), attending pow-wows and participating in local events.<sup>16</sup> Out of respect for the Huron-Wendat people, *La Tempête* was expressly crafted and framed as a site-specific performance that would not tour internationally, a marked departure from Ex Machina's usual production model.

The conceptual framework for *La Tempête* also demonstrated a shift in Lepage and Ex Machina's focus, featuring a level of political consciousness and provocative questioning sometimes apparent in Ex Machina's Québécois-centred narratives but never before featured in their engagement with a minority group outside the Francophone Québécois.<sup>17</sup> Given Lepage's problematic past with the politics of

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<sup>16</sup> Lepage entered a number in the 2009 Festival de canotgraphie de La Haute Sainte-Charles, a local interpretive freestyle canoeing competition (Boisvert).

<sup>17</sup> A non-text based forerunner to the Wendake *Tempête*, Lepage's 2010 devised collaboration with Cirque du Soleil, *Totem*, includes a theatrical system of representation that offers 'an investment in Aboriginal ways of knowing the world via its depiction of not only animals and humans, but all aspects of

representation, including various instances of marked Orientalism (detailed briefly in this chapter and thoroughly in Chapter Five), his staging of an interventionist *Tempest* on the Wendake First Nations reserve signals a politically progressive step in Ex Machina's work. The troubled history of Québécois/Aboriginal land disputes, punctuated by events such as the Oka crisis, further contextualises *La Tempête* as produced on Huron-Wendat ground; the performance confronted long-standing cultural tensions surrounding land ownership in Québec.

Layered on the production's actual geographic location in Wendake is the central thread in Lepage's historical-spatial mapping for *La Tempête*: New France's founding of North American colonies in the seventeenth century, which coincides with Shakespeare's writing of *The Tempest*. The way in which Lepage depicts this time and place is rooted in his selection of cultural resources and the given era, location and/or perspectives they encompass. In this, Lepage returns to the historical-spatial mapping discussed at length in Chapter One, including *The Rake's Progress*'s use of American iconography from the 1950s as featured in the Wim Wenders film, *Paris, Texas*, and *The Damnation of Faust*'s juxtaposing of imagery signalling nineteenth-century opera's romantic aesthetic alongside projections of Eadweard Muybridge's 'Horse in Motion' footage, which serves as an indicator of the rapidly evolving technology also defining the era. In his program notes for *La Tempête*, Lepage characterises Shakespeare's narrative as a 'fantastical allegory surrounding the meeting of the old and new world'

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nature, as being interconnected and interdependent' (Fricker, 'Images of Indigeneity' 3); nonetheless, Fricker notes that *Totem*'s representational system fails when it comes to the performances by the production's two indigenous artists as they appear to have been cast for reasons of authenticity and are portrayed differently from the other performers (Fricker 'Images of Indigeneity' 16). *Totem*'s presentation of Hopi-Tewa hoop dancer Nakotah Larence and Laveau deviates from the production's theatrical system of representation, inviting an ethnological gaze on these two performers specifically, which views people as exhibited bodies (Fricker, 'Images of Indigeneity' 4). 'As such, the production extends the discredited tradition of the display of native bodies in popular entertainments which reached its heyday in late 19th- and early 20th-century ethnological displays and Wild West shows' (Fricker, 'Images of Indigeneity' 4).

(Lepage in Ex Machina 3).<sup>18</sup> To create the world of this mythic parable, Lepage turned to a local figure.

One of Lepage's central inspirations for *La Tempête* is the work of nineteenth-century artist Joseph Légaré, whose historical paintings of seventeenth-century Québec depict colonial France and Aboriginals with a mythologizing eye to the 'grandeur of the past' (Porter 102). A proud French nationalist, Légaré was a dedicated follower of Louis-Joseph Papineau's nationalist Patriote movement and was arrested and jailed for his participation in the 1837 rebellion against British rule. Throughout his career, Légaré grappled with his identity as a French patriot in a British colony; his art was an outlet for expressing his investment in a partially mythologised past. In his 1854 painting *The Battle of Sainte-Foy*, based on a 1760 battle in which the French, Canadian and First Nations people joined forces to decimate the English, Légaré glorifies and romanticises the event, offering evidence of his own 'nationalist fervour, a fervour that the artist manifested in his life as in his work' (Porter 102). As viewed in another painting featured in *La Tempête*'s program, *Joseph Ourné*, this romanticism also colours his various portraits of Aboriginals, in which he depicts striking First Nations figures amidst idyllic seventeenth-century landscapes set in New France.<sup>19</sup>

Légaré participates in the edification of a French-Canadian mythology. This mythology is crafted in response to the political events marking the 1830s and develops according to his constant need to demonstrate the unique national identity of New France's people.

Alongside other artworks of the period, his

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<sup>18</sup> My translation of: '*La Tempête est une allégorie fantastique de la rencontre entre l'ancien et le nouveau monde*' (Lepage in Ex Machina 3).

<sup>19</sup> *Joseph Ourné* depicts a striking First Nations woman who was the daughter of an unknown First Nations chief.

representations of a mythologised French-Canada converge around one common characteristic: the idealisation of the French Regime and the habitants of New France... the principal protagonists are the Aborigines and the Europeans. (S. Garon 45)<sup>20</sup>

Légaré's work would also explore the period following Britain's acquisition of New France; these paintings aligned the Aborigines and the Québécois in the wake of English colonisation and depicted colonialism's repercussions.

In various interviews, Lepage discusses how he 'was inspired by Joseph Légaré's painting of the English actor, Edmund Kean, performing Shakespeare soliloquys for the Huron-Wendat people' (Desloges, 'L'île du magicien').<sup>21</sup> Lepage's interest in *Edmund Kean Performing Before the Hurons* centred, in part, on the fact that the painting was based on an actual encounter between the Huron-Wendat Nation and the actor when he came to Canada. In fact, one of the performers in the cast of Ex Machina's *La Tempête* is a direct descendant of the chieftain who met Kean (Gottler). In the painting, Légaré depicts the English actor standing on a rock and performing in front of a large group of Hurons, backed by an expansive natural landscape. As the painting was based on a documented historical event, Lepage pursued the story. In 1826, Edmund Kean left England after an affair with a politician's wife and,

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<sup>20</sup> My translation of:

*Légaré participe de son côté à l'édification d'une mythologie nationale canadienne-française. Cette mythologie particulière se forge à partir des événements politiques marquants la décennie 1830 et se développe suivant une volonté constante de signifier la spécificité de la nation. Les représentations collectives canadiennes-françaises mythifiées convergent vers une caractéristique commune: l'idéalisation du Régime français et des habitants de la Nouvelle-France... les principaux protagonistes sont les Amérindiens et les... européens.* (S. Garon 45)

<sup>21</sup> My translation of: 'Le créateur [Lepage] s'est... inspiré d'une toile de Joseph Légaré qui montre le grand acteur anglais Edmund Kean en train de jouer du Shakespeare à Wendake dans les années 1800' (Desloges, 'L'île du magicien').

subsequently, found himself in Wendake and suffering from severe depression, exacerbated by recent episodes of excessive drinking and drug use. At this point in history, the Huron-Wendat people had suffered from numerous assaults including the loss of their land to the Jesuits and faced the impending collapse of their culture. In Wendake, Kean began performing Shakespeare monologues, leading him to form close ties within the First Nations community. Soon after, his friendship was rewarded with an honorary chieftom and an Aboriginal name, ‘Alanienouidet’, meaning strong wind on drifting snow (Playfair 265-266).<sup>22</sup>

At first consideration, using this narrative as an interpretive thread for a production of *The Tempest* produced on Aboriginal land appears to be an ill-conceived Eurocentric over-writing of an already privileged Western text. Without this interpretation, Lepage’s Wendake *Tempête* is in an optimal position, literally and figuratively, to focus on the Huron-Wendat people and the history of their territory. Lepage’s use of the Kean thread as well as the story behind Légaré’s aesthetic are both paratexts, meaning they are not immediately legible in the visual/enacted in performance text of *La Tempête*.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Lepage’s interest in Kean stems primarily

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<sup>22</sup> Having co-written a play with Marianne Ackerman in 1992 based on Kean’s tenure in North America, *Alanienouidet*, Lepage’s eagerness to revisit and mine this trope in his re-construction of *La Tempête* demonstrates how he brings varied resources to familiar texts and, in the process, finds new points of entry for canonical plays he has staged on numerous occasions; ‘We must find pretexts for mounting a repertory piece many times. These are not static tableaux but diamonds, sculptures with various facets that we continue to discover with each glance’ (Lepage in Desloges, ‘L’île du magicien’). (My translation: ‘*Les pièces de répertoire, il faut trouver des prétextes pour les monter plusieurs fois. Ce ne sont pas des tableaux, mais des diamants, des sculptures avec plusieurs facettes que l’on découvre d’une fois à l’autre*’ [Lepage in Desloges].)

<sup>23</sup> This concept is the continuation of Génette’s paratext, which encapsulates all texts surrounding, but not directly referenced, in a book:

Text rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions, themselves verbal or not, like an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations. One does not always know if one should consider that they belong to the text or not, but in any case they surround it and prolong it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to make it present, to assure its presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and its consumption, in the form, nowadays at least, of a book. (261)



from the English's actor's connection with the Huron-Wendat people (Gottler), a point of inspiration for the production. This connection also informs one of the two concluding conceits for Lepage's production which, as my discussion of bodies-in-motion will demonstrate, ultimately brings Caliban and Prospero face to face in accordance with Légaré's depiction of the Québécois and Aboriginals as the story's central, allied protagonists oppressed by English colonialism.



Figure 3. Josephte Ourné c. 1840, oil on canvas by Joseph Légaré. Photo: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, © National Gallery of Canada

Nowhere was the Wendake *Tempête*'s material representation of this alliance more evident than in its costumes. Légaré's painting 'Josephte Ourné' (Figure 3), which appeared in *La Tempête*'s program, offers a clear example of how the artist aligned Europeans and Aboriginals through an aesthetic hybridity. Referred to by Légaré as the daughter of an unknown First Nations chief, Ourné wears an elaborate coat echoing seventeenth-century Western fashion while her accessories, including glass beads and a

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Like Génette's literary paratext, 'theatre paratexts' (my term) comprise all the text surrounding a play/production that are not explicitly legible in performance or, in other terms, are not actually verbalised.

feather, signal First Nations iconography. Ariel's costume features a similar interweaving of First Nations and European aesthetics. By combining a doublet and Renaissance pumpkin pants with a leather corset and feathers, costume designer Mara Gottler married European fashion with iconic 'Indian' accessories. Prospero and Miranda's costumes also follow on Légaré's idealised version of New France, appearing as if filtered through Prospero's nostalgic gaze, meant to mythically unite the old world and the new. In an email exchange, Gottler commented: 'We were trying to evoke what Prospero remembered of his past court life as reinterpreted through his present life experience.' Clothed in an immaculate white shift that in no way indicated the wear and tear of island life, Miranda wore feathers in her hair and a European-style suede corset. Prospero's costume also amalgamated a romanticised version of his past and present lives; his European shirt and breeches appeared beneath an elaborate cape-coat, in the tradition of the ceremonial garb worn by a shaman.

The theatre space and set also made significant contributions to *La Tempête's* historical-spatial mapping. Responsible not only for directing *La Tempête* but for designing the set, Lepage brought Prospero's island milieu to life via scenography that made the site central and honoured First Nations peoples' connection with the land.<sup>24</sup> A Greek-style open-air amphitheatre with a stage surrounded on three sides by audience members, the Wendake playing space opens onto the woods and backs the Saint Charles River. In the Wendake *Tempête*, as theatre critic J. Kelly Nestruck describes it:

Shakespeare's fantasy world spills out over the thrust stage and flows deep into the woods behind, which lighting designer Louis-Xavier Gagnon-Lebrun and sound designer Jean-Sébastien Côté have filled with hidden

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<sup>24</sup> Lepage's design collaborators include Louis-Xavier Gagnon-Bebrun (lights) Jean-Sébastien Côté (sound) Mara Gottler (costume) and David Leclerc (images).

lights and speakers. Depending on the scene, the trees glow blue or pink or green and crickets or birds are heard, creating a truly enchanting environment. ('Lepage's Tempest')

Here, the production's performance text intervened in the imperialist ideology of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Though Prospero may be the central player in Shakespeare's text, *La Tempête* re-envisioned this hierarchy with the natural world occupying a vital position. Because the Wendake amphitheatre has no walls or ceiling, nature (whether embellished by light and sound or not) was the lynchpin in Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy. In an email exchange, *La Tempête*'s assistant director Christian Garon commented:

The four elements were always in the mise en scène...  
We designed the set considering all the elements of nature. The forest was our background. The sound of the river just behind and the birds became a part of the music.  
The rain, the clouds, the haze or the moon completely changed the atmosphere.

In this, scenographic dramaturgy incorporates the always-already vital state of indigenous land for its people. Since the forest figures as an important character in *La Tempête* (as detailed in the examples below), the production can be read as espousing broader aboriginal spiritual ideology, in which humans occupy a position in the great chain of relationships 'that is no more and no less important than other lifeforms' (G. Sioui 114), among them plants, water, air, fire and earth. This belief system also focuses on the importance of 'consciously and frequently acknowledge[ing] these other peoples who, directly or indirectly, contribute to... subsistence, education, well-being, and

happiness' (G. Sioui 28).

When it comes to Huron-Wendat epistemology specifically, *La Tempête*'s natural aesthetic connects to the Nation's unique belief that 'non-human peoples [including nature, animals etc.] can be more *human* than actual humans' (G. Sioui 31). As discussed by Georges Sioui, the Huron-Wendat view of nature as 'more human' relates to lore about injured hunters and/or lost children nourished back to health or protected by the forest and its animals. These stories emphasise what the Huron Wendat view as the emphathetic, transparent characteristics of animals and plants. When Lepage's cast of ornately dressed Europeans arrives on the island, this view of nature's transparency is reinforced; the European's artificial aesthetic is thrown into high relief by the production's natural setting. At such an early hour on a July evening, since the sun has yet to set, the stage is mostly illuminated by natural outdoor light.



Figure 4. Miranda (Chantal Dupuis) and Ferdinand (Francis Roberge), *La Tempête*, 2011 (Photo: David Leclerc)

## Architectonic Scenography

Through ever-shifting projections, light, and sound, architectonic scenography at once contributed to *La Tempête*'s romanticised aesthetic while also establishing an underlying tension that complicated the production's idyllic re-envisioning of New France. Covering the circular stage, various lush, kinetic projections appeared and functioned as extensions of the world created in Légaré's paintings, among them a verdant meadow and a sandy beach complete with turquoise waves. These images were juxtaposed with aspects of the scenography underlining the realities of contemporary Wendake and the land's colonial history. Seen in Figure 5, The gorgeous blue waves gently lapping at Miranda and Prospero's feet during their first scene were thrown into high relief by the real sounds of the Saint Charles River. Running directly into the Saint Lawrence, this river was first mapped by Jacques Cartier in 1534 and its shores later became the site of New France's first village. Featured in the program for *La Tempête*, Légaré's *Cascades of the River Saint Charles at Jeune Lorette* 'marked a new departure in Canadian painting... [in which] artists responded to national aspirations of expansion, with landscape paintings featuring the rivers and streams of the West' ('Water and Identity'). When aurally accompanied by the real thing, *La Tempête*'s pristine water projections served as a reminder that prior to colonisation and industrialisation, the Saint Charles had yet to endure the extreme contamination that would lead to its long held twentieth-century status as Canada's most polluted river (Québec).<sup>25</sup> A similar juxtaposition occurred in the cacophonous tempest scene as violent streaming rain was projected on the stage floor-cum-dark-and-brooding ocean, which ultimately caused the Europeans to wash ashore. Bathed in early evening light, the calm Wendake forest seemed to contain the furious storm scene like a sage, old

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<sup>25</sup> Over the past fourteen years, the City of Québec has invested in a major project aimed at rehabilitating the Saint Charles River (Québec).

witness, watching the moment of first contact unfold from a position entrenched in the last four hundred years of Wendake history.

By creating this aesthetic friction between present day Wendake and his own idealised view of New France, Lepage challenges his spectators to think vertically. He comments: ‘Metaphorical storytelling is when you’ve seen a piece of theatre and you say, “There was this thing going on, but at the same time there was another level that’s going on, then there’s this other level and things seem to be connected in a vertical way: things are piled up.” Something like *Needles and Opium*, for example, has layers... that are connecting... and that connection is a vertical one’ (Lepage in *In Contact with the Gods* 144). In the Wendake *Tempête*, Lepage’s scenographic dramaturgy is multi-layered and, therefore, so is the adaptation’s content. The spectator’s work begins by parsing apart these sensory worlds and thinking through their connections.

Through his use of vertical stage space, Lepage also highlighted tragic and comic moments in his production.<sup>26</sup> As Lecoq notes:

Vertical movement situates man between heaven and earth, between zenith and nadir, in a tragic event. Tragedy is always vertical: the gods are on Mount Olympus. *Bouffons* are also vertical, but in the other direction: their gods are underground. (87)

In the storm scene, Antonio and his entourage bob up and down vertically at great heights, harnessed into the stage’s fly system. This physicality is an apt metaphor for the gods’ (and Prospero’s) control over the characters’ fate. Moreover, watching the actors fly seemingly uncontrollably out of the proscenium frame tells spectators that something is amiss and creates an atmosphere of lurking danger. Ariel occupies a giant

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<sup>26</sup> Other productions demonstrating Lepage’s scenographic use of verticality include *The Damnation of Faust* and *Needles and Opium*.

perch/bird cage that is lowered in and lifted out of various scenes.<sup>27</sup> Her cage somewhat precariously descends into the playing space only to be rather shakily withdrawn, demonstrating not only the uncertainty colouring Ariel's position as Prospero's go-between but also giving us a moment of literal 'deus ex machina'. In terms of flagging the production's *bouffons*, verticality also plays a major role in *La Tempête*. When the lights first come up on the forest in Act III, scene 2, we hear Trinculo but it takes some time to locate the pig-tailed jester in the foliage. He is perched high up a giant tree, so high, in fact, that it seems Prospero's magic may have played a role in Trinculo's unnatural location. His plummet to the earth, later mirrored in his drunken cavorting with Stephano, demonstrates the pull of the underworld.

While verticality is used intermittently to establish tone and character, horizontal playing space characterised the production's central action, with the performance area broadening exponentially as areas surrounding the stage were revealed and used for different scenes. Beyond the previously mentioned inclusion of the forest surrounding the amphitheatre, the playing space was also supplemented with a second stage that appeared through lighting at strategic points in the production. 'Just behind a circle of tree trunks around the stage that conjure the ship's masts... there is also a second platform where certain silent scenes take place' (Nestruck, 'Lepage's *Tempest*'). In the second scene of *La Tempête*, known for its particularly tedious chunks of expository text shouldered by Prospero, Lepage uses this second stage to embody the story through a mimed re-enactment. As Prospero recounts the details, a group of nuns appear on the shore to see off a much younger version of the magician and the tiny bundle he clutches, representing baby Miranda. Entrances made by Caliban and the Sandokwa dancers from

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<sup>27</sup> The idea of dreams and magic as 'vertical experiences' (in L.A. Johnson 86) has been used by Lepage in both the National Theatre's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Shakespeare's Rapid Eye Movement*. In the former, Puck climbs up and down a lamp cord to descend into the playing space while, in the latter, most characters entered and exited the scene through various small windows located at the top of a tall vertical wall.

the amphitheatre's vomitorium also contribute to a sense of inclusivity; spectators are aligned with these characters as they materialise from within our midst.



Figure 5. Ariel (Kathia Rock) Prospero (Jean Guy), Miranda (Chantal Dupuis), and Ferdinand (Francis Roberge), *La Tempête*, 2011 (Photo: David Leclerc)

### Embodied Texts

Also central to my reading of *La Tempête* is the marked shift made to the production's blocking during the lead-up to opening night. At the invited dress on July 1, 2011, Caliban appeared empty-handed as Prospero addressed him during the play's epilogue, a speech that is often directed to the house. For all but one of the preview performances and from opening night on, however, Caliban held Ferdinand's axe—lowered, at his side—in this scene (Gottler).<sup>28</sup> Through these two different stagings, the production

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<sup>28</sup> This description of the final scene is based on my viewing of *La Tempête*'s invited dress rehearsal on July 1, 2011. Mara Gottler's notes for various preview performances reflect that the axe-less staging of the play's conclusion was seen again in at least one preview performance (Gottler). J. Kelly Nestruck's review of the July 7 opening night performance and a later email exchange confirmed that Lepage incorporated an alternative staging of the conclusion where Caliban held an axe. This was further substantiated by an email exchange with Julie Burelle, a Québécoise PhD candidate, who viewed the production's July 28 archival video as part of her research on First Nations identity in Québécois performance.



offered striking revisions that centred on the silent moments following the play's epilogue, spoken by Prospero.

While Shakespeare's epilogue is written as Prospero's apology to the audience and quest for approval, Lepage uses this moment to lay bare the tensions between Prospero and Caliban. The first interpretation saw Prospero waiting for a reaction after speaking the text to the axe-less Caliban apologetically. The stage was otherwise empty and still, featuring no sound and low lighting. The lights went to black as the men continued to stare silently at one another in what could read as mutual acknowledgement. Support for this reading can be found in Lepage's comment surrounding intercultural contact in the play: 'Encounters take place in *La Tempête* itself, a play that will bring these human exchanges to the stage in a rich and symbolic way' (Isabelle). Moreover, given the production's central historical-spatial mapping, beginning with Samuel de Champlain's conquest in 1608, this concluding moment, which featured a First Nations character and a French man simultaneously facing an uncertain future under new circumstances, summons the period following Britain's acquisition of New France wherein the descendants of French colonials and Aboriginals found their 'charms all o'erthrown' (5.1.1). Both groups had been reduced to minority status by the British, who were eager to eradicate French and First Nations culture from Britain's newest colony.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Shakespeare's conclusion, the Wendake *Tempête* sees Prospero remaining on the island, facing his own subjugation at the next coloniser's hands. In this, Caliban and Prospero are aligned, a potentially insensitive proposition given that First Nations people were initially colonised by New France. As represented in the Wendake production, however, this final moment sees a marked alteration in *The*

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<sup>29</sup> In Simon Phillips's 1999 intercultural *Tempest* in Brisbane, Shakespeare's conclusion was adhered to; Caliban, Ariel and the spirits remained on the island while the Europeans left. This drew criticism as it did not reflect the attendant reality of colonial Australia, which saw many Britons take up permanent residence in the country.

*Tempest*'s extant power structures. Lepage's blocking puts the men on equal planes and equal terms both literally and metaphorically. How Prospero and Caliban move forward and if they do so together is left as a question for the audience to grapple with.

The axe-less staging of the final moment between Prospero and Caliban also has contemporary significance, reverberating in Québec's real time setting of 2011—the men simultaneously face each other as well as the uncertain future ahead. The spring and summer of 2011 saw marked upheaval for Québécois and First Nations peoples, including the Bloc Québécois's loss of official party status and the collapse of various bills, including the Kelowna Accord, dedicated to improving the standard of living for Aboriginals. This evocative staging of mutual acknowledgment between Prospero and Caliban, therefore, resonates through the present as well as the past;<sup>30</sup> Canada's two longest standing, sovereignty-seeking federal minorities were yet again encountering individual challenges to their self-determinism. As depicted by *La Tempête*'s bodies-in-motion, the production seemed to promise that they could face these challenges together.

The second staging of the play's conclusion, which would be retained for the production's run, featured Prospero speaking the epilogue to Caliban as an apology; however, in this version, Caliban is carrying Ferdinand's axe. As recounted by J. Kelly Nestruck:

Having abjured his 'rough magic,' the tables have turned and Prospero is now at his former slave's mercy... The lights go down on Poulin's Caliban considering how to move forward after years of oppression, whether to seek revenge, sink into resentment or rise to reconciliation.

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<sup>30</sup> Though used here by Lepage, such a layering of past and present is a feature of many Aboriginal plays.

There is tremendous power in this moment - it's a  
quandary we all still struggle with in Canada, first nations  
or not.

Caliban was not poised and ready to strike Prospero in this moment, which would amount to a re-inscription of the violent savage stereotype, but instead, he held the axe in a lowered position. As noted by Barry Freeman, the presence of Caliban's axe attempts to 'interrupt a reading of the play as purely imperialist' by drawing attention to Prospero's oppression of Caliban through this 'unexpected moment of political and moral judgment [with] the audience cast as jury' (7). Here Prospero is the French and English coloniser writ large, representing colonialism's devastating legacy, including the loss of First Nations land and the decimation of Aboriginal populations caused by war and European diseases, the abuse endured in residential schools, and the consequent cycle of alcoholism and mistreatment faced by many indigenous Canadians today.

In light of this history and the substandard conditions faced on contemporary reserves, *La Tempête*'s second conclusion served to remind non-indigenous spectators of the very real potential for a First Nations uprising—a concluding image that is simultaneously prescient and problematic. Considering Canada's subsequent nation-wide Idle No More and Sovereignty Summer movements, both of which are protests advocating for indigenous sovereignty in response to poor living conditions, racial intolerance and a lack of agency over ancestral lands,<sup>31</sup> this ending would prove more fact than fiction in the months and years following the Wendake *Tempête*. As Caliban

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<sup>31</sup> The [former](#) Assembly of First Nations National Chief, Shawn Atleo, sums up the situation as follows:  
The gap between First Nations and... Canadians has, seemingly, over the last few generations just grown so deep... A lot of it has to do with maybe even 'out of sight, out of mind' — not knowing what's happening in places like northern Saskatchewan or northern Manitoba... The images of communities where there's slop pails, no running water, no reliable power ... it's just not a story that is well understood. (in Stastna)

pondered First Nations retribution or reconciliation with axe in hand, (a moment championed by Poulin when it was first incorporated into the production [Gottler]), *La Tempête*'s performance text highlighted the plight of indigenous Canadians as its concluding image. Though I cannot speak directly to Lepage's reasons for re-blocking the conclusion, his choice to opt for a final image that emphasised Caliban's right to retribution without drawing parallels with the struggles of the Québécois demonstrates that the production's primary focus was centred on the repercussions of colonisation for First Nations peoples, not the Québécois. Of course, by crafting such a final image, Lepage and Ex Machina ran the risk of appearing to speak for First Nations people and, beyond Poulin's enthusiasm over a conclusion that empowered Caliban, it is unclear if the final scene's blocking was discussed with other collaborators beyond Poulin.

Above and beyond the interventions created by physical texts in *La Tempête*'s dual conclusions, embodied practices also acted as agents of subversion in the production. This further demonstrates that interventions are not exclusively crafted through 'verbal/textual counter-discourses' but are also indebted to 'the body and its signifying practice' (H. Gilbert, 'Dance' 134). The production's treatment of the masque scene, in which Prospero consents to Ferdinand and Miranda's marriage and instructs Ariel to arrange a celebratory dance, offers a clear example of embodied imperial resistance. As employed in Shakespeare's text, the masque is an assertion of Prospero's power. He fears that Miranda will lose her virginity before the marriage ceremony is performed, warning Ferdinand that if this is the case 'barren hate/Sour-eyed disdain and discord shall bestrew/The union of your bed with weeds so loathly/That you shall hate it both' (4.1.20-23). In light of Prospero's emphatic warning, the masque functions not only as an assertion of his control over his daughter's sexuality but as a moment in which he uses his magic to subdue any carnal rumblings

felt by Ferdinand and his bride to be. Of the spirits gathered for the performance, Venus and Cupid are conspicuously absent, and, consequently, so are the dynamics of passion and desire that they represent (Magnusson 64). When Ferdinand and Miranda are finally left alone, waiting to be reunited with the other Europeans, they fail to capitalise on a rare opportunity for intimacy and, instead, settle on a decidedly unsexy game of chess (64).

In contrast to Shakespeare's narrative, the *Ex Machina/Huron-Wendat* staging of the masque was imbued with a dangerous sexuality that Prospero could not control. Sent off to gather the 'rabble' (4.1.37), Ariel returns with the Sandokwa Dance Troupe, the aforementioned Wendake group who perform their own choreography. The dance performed by the Sandokwa troupe features two male performers bedecked with deer antlers, battling one another in an evocative and dangerous mating ritual. Given Prospero's assumed control of his daughter's sexuality and Lepage's decision with the dance troupe to present one deer dancer as older than the other (via a slightly more limited range of movement), this conceit reads as a metaphor for Prospero's conflict with Ferdinand, who represents an impending threat to Miranda's virginity. As the male dancers circle each other in a tension building, opponent-assessing ritual, the female dancers form a circle around them. Prospero, Ferdinand and Miranda are excluded from the circle, reinforcing their lack of agency and emphasizing the fact that control resides with the First Nations spirit world. After the circling has built significant tension on stage and in the audience, the deer dancers charge simultaneously, locking antlers in a climatic moment highlighted by the defeated performer's piercing cry. Considering the charged sexuality of the dance and Prospero's fear for his daughter, this painful exclamation foreshadows the piercing of the 'virgin-knot' (4.1.15) and Prospero's loss of control over Miranda. This scene represents a reconfiguration of power as Ariel not

only subverts Prospero's wishes by titillating the young couple but forces Prospero to confront his ultimate powerlessness over his daughter's virginity.

Of course, in staging the wedding masque with First Nations performers, *La Tempête* risked playing into reductive and exoticised notions of Aboriginal others. In examining the implications of the masque as performed by the Jagera Jarjum Aboriginal Dance Group in the Queensland Theatre Company's 1999 production of *The Tempest*, Elisabeth Schafer notes:

While an Aboriginal spirit world might appeal visually... there is a risk that this may reduce spirituality/spirit awareness to decoration, mystical otherness, and cultural sampling. An Aboriginal takeover of the spirit world of *The Tempest*... also leaves the Aboriginal performers to deal with what most modern audiences traditionally find the play's most tedious section, the masque. (73)

I maintain that this same critique cannot be levelled at *La Tempête*'s use of the Sandokwa dancers. Positioned within Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy as physically and culturally authoritative figures, the First Nations performers in this production reinforced Aboriginal power. As described above, the deer dance featured in the Wendake production's masque was by no means a tedious, decorative moment; instead, this physical battle was charged with danger and sexuality, controlled entirely by Ariel and the Sandokwa dancers, not Prospero. In fact, the Sandokwa dancers offered a significant counterpoint to the production's otherwise highly glossy, picturesque aesthetic as seen in Figure 6. In scenes where they appeared alongside the bright and ornately dressed court characters, the Sandokwa dancers' costumes productively undercut the fantasy. Dressed in realistic, seventeenth-century Aboriginal costumes,

marked by simple shapes and subtle beige tones, the dancers' arrival and performance of traditional Huron-Wendat songs created a tension highlighting the fact that the fairytale world inspired by L egar 's romanticised vision of New France was just that, a fantasy.



Figure 6. Members of the Sandokwa Dance Troupe and Ariel (Kathia Rock), *La Temp te*, 2011 (Photo: David Leclerc)

The agency of First Nations characters and the anxiety they incite among the Europeans also features in the Wendake production's rendering of the Act 3, Scene 2, banquet scene. As described by Freeman, Ariel's appearance, marked by her thundering, amplified voice and the stage's flash of crimson, was arresting:

All the libation, food and cheer of the banquet evaporated,  
and the wooded area surrounding the Wendake  
amphitheatre, which had been lit up in the warm autumnal  
colours of harvest, glowed now in a brilliant, scarlet red.  
Suspended above, speaking in a piercing, digitally

distorted voice, and framed by the angry spectacle of the whole natural scene of the grove, Ariel struck a terrifying pose and we saw the merciless, cruel, life-devouring side of the trickster. (6)

Again, scenographic dramaturgy demonstrated the agency and strength of First Nations characters in this production. Here Ariel claims justifiable revenge on the Europeans, who, much like the hellish guests in Lewis Baumander's Toronto *Tempest*, are having an uproarious time appropriating a First Nations celebratory feast. As in *La Tempête*'s second concluding scene featuring an axe-wielding Caliban, Québécois, Anglo-Canadian and First Nations spectators were confronted with Canada's problematic colonial history and the suggestion of warranted retribution by First Nations people.



Figure 7. Étranglé or Trinculo (Jean-François Faber), Prospero (Jean Guy), Ariel (Kathia Rock) and Caliban (Marco Poulin), *La Tempête*, 2011 (Photo: David Leclerc)

### **Imperial Resistance through Body Texts**

The highly physical performance texts featured in *La Tempête* also figure in two broader discussions. Because my definition of scenographic dramaturgy hinges on the



visual and aural score crafted by performing bodies in action, as considered here, scenography is always-already political in its use of physical bodies, particularly when indigenous performers are involved. Does *La Tempête*'s scenographic dramaturgy adhere to the Western theatrical tradition that has 'relegated or restricted indigenous... performers to the realm of folklore' (Balme 168)? In this section, I argue that scenographic dramaturgy resists this tradition in that performers worked with Lepage to create physical texts defined by their respective strengths and ideas. These physical performance texts also speak to the often-contentious subject of acting Shakespeare in Canada. Canadian Shakespeare training assumes indoctrination in formal Eurocentric acting traditions and body cultures. The Canadian embrace of Eurocentric acting tradition privileges the voice over all else and, though the actor's physicality remains important to characterisation, any movement that compromises the voice or text will not survive beyond the rehearsal hall. Denis Salter problematises the limits of such 'natural acting' as defined by British training legacies:

'Natural' acting has tended to function, I think, as a (mostly invisible) strategy of surveillance, designed to keep unnatural—meaning, unregulated and potentially dissident—discursive formations securely in their place... Acting Shakespeare unnaturally is, however, a very dangerous thing to do: actors behaving this way will be routinely censured for not understanding Shakespeare, for not respecting traditions, for not being trained properly, and for not possessing that ineffable quality known as stage presence. In brief, they will be censured not just for being unnatural but also for being aberrant, perhaps even

subversive. ('Acting Shakespeare' 121)

Given that 'natural' acting is privileged at Canada's Stratford Festival, the largest classical repertory theatre in North America, many Canadian artists therefore see this style as the gold standard of acting aesthetics, limiting opportunities for actors performing outside this aesthetic paradigm nation-wide. In the case of his Wendake *Tempête*, Lepage resisted the hegemony of a British model meant to keep distinctly postcolonial performances off the stage and, instead, welcomed what might be considered 'unnatural' acting by working with indigenous performers to craft embodied texts that decolonise the stage.<sup>32</sup>

Among Ex Machina's collaborators for *La Tempête* are the seven First Nations dancers in the Sandokwa troupe, including Steeve Gros-Louis, who also plays Alphonse; the axe-juggling acrobat, Francis Roberge as Ferdinand who literally splits an offstage tree in two by throwing his axe from centre stage; and circus acrobat Jean-François Faber as Trinculo, known in Garneau's translation as Étranglé. Roberge and Gros-Louis were tentative with the text, slipping into monotone deliveries at points; nonetheless, these performers' unique physical talents became the primary mode of communication. In fact, embodied sequences from their own work were incorporated into the production, whether with the Sandokwa Dance Troupe (Gros-Louis) or The Lumberjack Acrobats, a company consisting of Roberge and Faber (Faber). For his part, Faber also struggled with aspects of the humour in Étranglé's spoken text but the liveliness of his kinetic performance text, which featured increasingly difficult gymnastic feats including back flips, high-speed tree-scaling and barrel-rolling, became essential to Lepage's visually-driven re-authoring of *La Tempête*. A Wendat performer trained at École Cirque in Québec, Faber had experience incorporating his specific

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<sup>32</sup> This same de-privileging of the spoken text in favour of embodied texts, including the performance of contortionist Angela Laurier as Puck at the National Theatre, would result in various criticisms of Lepage's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

physical strengths into productions, having been directly recruited by Cirque du Soleil to bring his self-styled acrobatics and cube juggling routine into *Les Chemins Invisibles* and *Wintruk* (Nadeau).<sup>33</sup> A collaboration that clearly suited both artists involved, *La Tempête* led Lepage to hire Faber as an acrobatic consultant for his 2013 remount of *Needles & Opium* with the Toronto theatre company, Canadian Stage. In this way, even after *La Tempête* had closed, Lepage's efforts to decolonise the stage continued, productively manifesting in an Anglophone Canadian theatre.

When *La Tempête*'s physically adept performers joined forces to embody scenes featuring marked performance texts, they joined their director in collectively talking back to Eurocentric performance models that privilege dramatic text at the expense of embodied performance. This was exemplified at the outset of *La Tempête*. As the production began, many of the performers descended from above the stage, harnessed and relying on their acrobatic training to violently embody the storm scene as they thrashed through the air. In this frantic, thundering scene consisting of competing cries of 'yare!' and 'down with the topmast' (1.1.34), Lepage and the performers overwrote Shakespeare's authorship and subverted what Salter might call the 'natural' Eurocentric tradition of over-enunciating dialogue. As the performers' bodies crashed through the air and they cried out, physical performance text took a more essential position than Shakespeare's dramatic text while the scene's central event and meaning remained intact. By refusing to adhere to established Western codes surrounding what it means to 'act Shakespeare' and, instead, opening the production to a variety of physical performance vocabularies that de-privilege Shakespeare's written text, *La Tempête* offered embodied forms of intervention.

*The Tempest*'s inherent imperialism was further undercut by the decision to

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<sup>33</sup> Many of the stunts and pratfalls performed by Faber in *La Tempête* can be seen in an online video of his work with The Lumberjack-Acrobat (Faber).

make Caliban's body a site of resistance. Played by Métis actor Marco Poulin, Caliban was at no point the 'puppy-headed monster' (2.2.154-155) described by the inebriated Étranglé and Stéphano. Instead, Poulin's Caliban was a powerful, physically assuming presence. Throughout the Wendake production, Poulin literally carried twenty-five feet of chain on his compact muscular figure, largely unconstrained by its weight. Clanging against the stage wherever he wandered, Caliban's shackles served as an aural reminder of the physical power at his disposal. Moreover, in the drinking scenes with Étranglé and Stéphano, Poulin's Caliban was at no point the compliant servant; instead, even when kissing feet, he maintained his dignity through strong, upright posture. As he lowered his upper body, his spine stayed erect; his back never rounded in submission. Unlike Étranglé and Stéphano's drunkenness, Caliban's inebriation served to heighten his anger, making the threat of his plotting against Prospero real. This rendering of Caliban subverted the noble and ignoble savage stereotypes. Nestruck describes Poulin's characterisation as 'no noble savage cliché' (Nestruck, 'Lepage's *Tempest*') and, despite Freeman's overall reading of the production as essentialising, he concedes that at times Poulin's Caliban strikes 'a lucid determined figure' (5). Poulin's Caliban does not approach the Europeans' offer of alcohol with initial awe and trepidation. He is self-possessed, shrewd and always keenly planning the re-appropriation of his land from Prospero. In this, *La Tempête* demonstrated resistance to reductive portrayals of indigenous culture, crafting a powerful, show-stealing Caliban.

*La Tempête*'s intercultural considerations extended not only to characterisations but also to the performance modes and performing bodies incorporated into the production. At first glance, the casting of local, Huron-Wendat dancers as the fairies/spirits could be viewed as tokenistic or as an aesthetics-driven attempt to present 'traditional' performance forms; nonetheless, further research demonstrates that there is

a culturally layered history behind the Sandokwa performances. Of the folkloric dances presented by the Sandokwa troupe founded in 1976 (Gros-Louis), Wendat historian, anthropologist and curator, Louis-Karl Picard-Siouï, responded to my email on the production commenting:

Folkloric and traditional dances are two separate things, done by different peoples in different contexts. Folkloric dances in Wendake were created around the middle of the 20th century and were inspired mostly by the pan-Indian movement and Buffalo Bill's Circus, not by Wendat traditions. Today, a lot of Wendat look at those dances as a travesty, because they have no direct meaning with our worldview and spirituality, and often use traditional songs out of context (and rhythm) for their steps. Others would say, however, that they are a true living Wendat tradition because they have been passed on for some generations now, and those who dance them have been doing so since they were kids, as their parents often did. Personally, I see it as a contemporary art form, one that doesn't have much to do with our traditional culture; nonetheless, given their development by Wendat people over the decades, we can certainly consider them as original Wendat creations.

Because the dances are an appropriation of a Western form reconfigured since the mid-twentieth century by Huron-Wendat people, their inclusion in the Wendake *Tempête* demonstrates a willingness to dispense with discourses of authenticity and include hybridised indigenous performance modes. Authenticating discourses were further

subverted through casting choices including Lepage's decision to have Huron performers Steeve Gros-Louis and Jean-François Faber play Shakespeare's shipwrecked Europeans. Kathia Rock's performance also contributed to the production's non-essentialising interculturalism; she is a Maliotenam-born, Innu singer-songwriter, playing Ariel as a Huron and performing her own Innu translations of Michel Garneau's previously 'tradapted' Shakespeare songs.<sup>34</sup> Collectively, the hybridity of *La Tempête*'s performers and performances demonstrates the 'rhizomatic potential of interculturalism... to create representations that are unbounded and open, and potentially resistant to imperialist forms of closure' (Lo and Gilbert 47).<sup>35</sup>

Forms of closure did, however, play out in the assembly of *La Tempête*'s design team, which was exclusively composed of people of European descent.<sup>36</sup> Because the production's distinctive scenographic dramaturgy took centre stage in the adaptation and focused largely on representing Wendake's people, land and culture, Lepage and his company ran the risk of appearing to speak for the Huron-Wendat, not with them. An official collaborative platform was not in place for *La Tempête*, making Lepage and his team the dominant force in the equation. Ex Machina's production practices in Wendake, however, reflect a step towards empowering its collaborators and lessening power imbalances. Referring to both her 'bible' (a binder containing all costume and hair designs, a scene breakdown and a quick change plot), and Ex Machina's show 'bible' (a binder including *La Tempête*'s script, scene breakdown, blocking, props, set

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<sup>34</sup> Maliotenam is a First Nations reserve located adjacent to Sept-Îles in Québec.

<sup>35</sup> Though *La Tempête* demonstrated non-traditional casting and a progressive exchange between the Huron-Wendat and the Francophone Québécois, it did not reflect the attendant multicultural reality defining the province today. In 2006, Statistics Canada's census reported that 11.5% of Québec's population was born outside of Canada and 8.8% belonged to visible minorities (Potvin 270); nonetheless, because the majority of Québec's visible minorities live in Montréal, I have interpreted *La Tempête*'s casting as a reflection of reduced diversity in Québec City (visible minorities made up just two percent of the population in 2006 [Ibbitson]) and Wendake (visible minorities were less than one percent [Statistics Canada]) rather than as a purposeful exclusion of racial groups on the part of Ex Machina and/or the Huron-Wendat Nation.

<sup>36</sup> Beyond the Sandokwa Dance Troupe, four of the ten named characters in the Wendake *Tempête* were played by actors with First Nations heritage.

placement and all lighting and sound cues) costume designer Mara Gottler comments:

Steeve [Gros-Louis] and his company agreed to the costume designs, upon consultation... If they had questions, they posed them, to their satisfaction... Because they had access to my bible as well as that provided by Ex Machina, they seemed comfortable with the final concept. And they certainly were comfortable with the blocking and choreography for this show.

Essentially, Steeve Gros-Louis and the Sandokwa dancers had access and an invitation to give feedback on the complete score plotting out *La Tempête*'s scenographic dramaturgy. By making show bibles available, Lepage and his team demonstrated an awareness of the importance of their collaborators' comfort levels and an openness to negotiating any shifts deemed necessary by Steeve Gros-Louis and/or the Sandokwa dancers.

Though Lepage's *Tempest* features a romanticised portrayal of seventeenth-century New France, the production is historically layered, taking on board the current state of Aboriginal/Francophone Québécois relations through its physical location on a contemporary provincial reserve and proposition that the time is ripe for a possible reconciliation. Where Lepage's production demonstrates closure, however, is in reflecting the attendant multicultural reality defining what it means to be Québécois in the twenty-first century. Québec, particularly Montréal, boasts large numbers of immigrants from China, the Middle East and Africa among other countries. Given the province's demographics and *La Tempête*'s efforts to resonate in the present as well as the colonial past, Lepage's depiction of the Québécois as exclusively European and First Nations partially subverts the production's progressive politics. Lepage's

exclusion of Québec's ethnic minority groups in his representation of the Québécois people is symptomatic of a larger issue that continues to create tension amidst the contemporary Francophone majority and other minority groups: the preservation of French language and culture and its relationship to incidents of protectionist xenophobia amongst the Francophone Québécois.

With its early contact-themed setting and casting of First Nations performers as Ariel, Caliban and the fairies, *La Tempête* could initially be read as a return to a well-worn colonial interpretation of the play. Yet, as re-'written' by scenographic dramaturgy, the production demonstrated a significant shift from Ex Machina's previously essentialist portrayals of others. By engaging with the Huron-Wendat community for a site-specific production in Wendake, which saw Aboriginal bodies empowered in performance and shifted *The Tempest's* conclusion to give a First Nations Caliban agency over Prospero, Ex Machina offered a progressive treatment of a federal minority group outside the white, Francophone Québécois. Beyond the material signs of this new politics on stage, a closer look at the company's off-stage approach to crafting the production's scenographic dramaturgy further demonstrates an effort to facilitate intercultural exchange—be it the availability of show 'bibles' to members of the cast and/or the invitation to collaborators to give feedback. Though by no means a collaboration where both parties had equal artistic control, the Wendake *Tempête* avoided authenticating discourses, integrated hybrid performance modes and provided its Huron-Wendat collaborators with access to all aspects of the production, encouraging creative input. Chief Konrad Sioui, whose thwarted quest for symbolic reconciliation between First Nations peoples and the Francophone Québécois in 2009 introduced this essay, recently referred to Robert Lepage as a friend and neighbour of the Huron-Wendat community (Desloges). My question now is whether this meeting of



cultures will remain an isolated occurrence or serve to signal an increasingly progressive intercultural politics in the future work of Robert Lepage and Ex Machina.

Chapter Four moves beyond Lepage's engagement with Shakespeare texts to the culmination of his work as an opera director to date, the staging of the sixteen million dollar production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the Metropolitan Opera from 2010-2012. Chapter Four will not only look at the ways in which Lepage confronts the opera's inherent anti-Semitism through innovative casting but also how his interpretation speaks to Wagner's desired production aesthetic, which the composer referred to as 'deeds of music made visible' (Wagner, 'Destiny').

## Chapter Four: Making Music Visible: *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the Metropolitan Opera

Among the most iconic orchestral preludes, the overture for Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* begins with eight contrabasses faintly intoning one deep note—a sustained E flat. Selected by Wagner to signal the genesis of a mythical world in the depths of the Rhine's bed, this elemental-sounding E resounds for close to two hundred bars, being progressively taken up by the orchestra's double basses and then developed through a series of tonal variations played by contra bassoons, cellos and woodwinds. Gradually, Wagner's first musical leitmotif, built on an undulating cascade of notes in the E flat chord and suggesting the gentle ebb and flow of a rippling river, pours over the sustained initial note, first softly and then with an incremental swelling of volume and pace. As the crescendo continues to build momentum, horns chime in brightly and the orchestra begins to adopt a more rapid, pulsing tempo. Gradually, the force of the music surpasses its earlier suggestion of placid ripples, evoking a strong, solid current that reverberates with such power that it seems on the verge of bursting the opera house walls. At the peak of this seemingly uncontainable musical swell, three Rhinemaidens appear, their bright voices bubbling forth and ringing out through a series of alliterative intonations that mark the crest of four minutes of mounting dramatic tension established solely through music.<sup>1</sup> In this evocative overture to his four-part *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Wagner's score demonstrates the philosophy that would be his final word on staging his aptly named 'musik dramas': music, not the libretto or narrative, is the primary source of drama.

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<sup>1</sup> In Lepage's production, digital imaging and voice sensitive technology create and increase the volume of bubbles that appear to be escaping from the Rhinemaidens mouths as they sing.

Featuring a sixteen million dollar budget, six years in development and a forty-five ton set, Ex Machina's mounting of the *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the Metropolitan Opera hinges on Robert Lepage's aesthetic approach to the Wagnerian philosophy that in opera, music *is* drama. Based on my experience observing rehearsals at the Metropolitan Opera in October 2011, this chapter posits that Lepage's production of *Siegfried* physically embodies what Wagner termed 'deeds of music made visible' ('Destiny') through scenographic dramaturgy that develops Adolphe Appia's late nineteenth-century theories on Wagnerian staging.<sup>2</sup> Central to this discussion are the ways in which Ex Machina's evocative, architectonic set expands Appia's design principles for the *Ring* cycle by changing spatially and compositionally to represent Wagner's musical motifs. This chapter will focus on Lepage's efforts to physicalise the music's drama through embodied performances from singers and body doubles, and the historical-spatial mapping conceit that aspires to Wagner's unattained aim that the *Ring*'s 'timeless kernel of myth and legend could assume some kind of modern rather than nostalgic depiction' in production (Carnegy, *Wagner* 56).<sup>3</sup>

My upcoming analysis not only sets out to examine Ex Machina's co-production of *Siegfried* as it demonstrates Wagner's visual aesthetic but also as it reflects Lepage and Ex Machina's encounter with a prominent North American opera company. Following Ric Knowles's cultural materialist approach to analysing performance, this chapter will explore the ways in which the ideological work done by *Siegfried* is 'mediated by the cultural and, particularly, theatrical conditions through which it has

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<sup>2</sup> My engagement with *Siegfried* includes attendance at the opening night performance of the opera on Oct. 27, 2011 and a three-week 'observership' during which time I observed rehearsals led by Lepage and the conductor, Fabio Luisi, on stage at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. This chapter has also been informed by my second three-week observership of *Götterdämmerung* in January, 2012 as well as live viewings of each of the four *Ring* cycle operas. Further to this, I have drawn on journalistic accounts of *Siegfried*'s presentation as part of the full *Ring* cycle presentation during the Metropolitan Opera's 2012/2013 season.

<sup>3</sup> This chapter does not posit, however, that *Ring* stagings should adhere to Wagner's vision or conform to assumptions that he holds the ultimate authority with regards to producing his own operas.

been produced... and through which its meaning is produced (as opposed to being merely received)' (Knowles, *Material Theatre* 10). Read through this theoretical lens, Ex Machina's co-production of *Siegfried* will be analysed as a product of large scale contemporary opera's conditions of production, among them: extant hierarchies among the creative team, dominant singer training methods, the institutionalised conditions of marketing and production operating at the Metropolitan Opera, and established notions of the director's role in opera. Whether hinging on broader issues, such as the Metropolitan Opera's decision to spend sixteen million dollars on a high-tech *Ring* cycle that it would market as traditional, or smaller details, including how the current hierarchical jockeying in opera between directors and performers affected *Siegfried*'s blocking, Lepage's production will be examined as it belongs to and results from a greater ecology.

To contextualise the upcoming discussion surrounding how Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy writes the Met's millennial *Siegfried* with Wagner's evolving theoretical vision as its foundation, an understanding of how Wagner's early total art model and his later Schopenhauerian music-as-drama philosophy ultimately came together and continued to develop in production aesthetics over the twentieth century is imperative. By locating the Ex Machina/Metropolitan Opera production of *Siegfried* in the aesthetic continuum inspired by Adolphe Appia's seminal theories on Wagnerian scenography and surveying the ways in which Wagner's mature theoretical shift has been embodied by some of the most groundbreaking stagings in the cycle's nearly one-hundred-and-fifty year production history, this introduction will further undergird my argument that the Ex Machina/Metropolitan Opera *Siegfried* offers a contemporary development in the expressive scenographic tradition articulated by Appia and anticipated by a mature Wagner.

## **Wagner's Evolving Aesthetic**

First appearing in his mid-nineteenth-century essays 'Opera and Drama' and 'The Artwork of the Future', Wagner's initial theory for a new art form that synthesised music, theatre and design became known as the *Gesamtkunstwerk*:

Wagner described how the... 'purely human' arts—dance (movement and gesture), tone (music), and poetry—could be combined so that each might find fulfilment in the other. When they are cultivated separately, he argued, each art can have no function beyond the display of technical accomplishment. Only in combination can each find its true purpose—music provides the dance with rhythms and melodies that give form and pattern to its movements and gestures, while poetry provides what Wagner called the shores that contain the potentially limitless realm of music. The visual art of architecture, painting, and sculpture can provide the physical environment for performance. (Williams 65)

Wagner forged this theory partly in response to his desire to emulate what he viewed as Greek tragedy's total art model—the synthesis of dance, music and drama that best showcased each discipline—and partially as a reaction to the nineteenth century's arbitrary approach to staging operas. As discussed in Chapter Two, prior to Wagner's emergence on the European opera scene, the coordination of stage traffic fell haphazardly to various individuals (including the librettist, ballet master or stage manager) and, consequently, reflected staging's status as an after-thought rather than a central unifying device (Ashman 29). Wagner's insistence on significant reforms,

including a unified design concept and attention to crafting stage pictures through blocking, would establish the director's role as integral to realizing opera's dramatic potential. Moreover, through his active participation in all aspects of production, Wagner would highlight the importance of the director's overall artistic vision, setting the stage for future theatre auteurs, such as Lepage.

Wagner's pursuit of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was also coloured by his interest in theatre. Because his stepfather worked as a professional actor, the composer was exposed to theatre from an early age. This influence would materialise through his insistence, in his total art theory, that acting hold equal importance to music and scenography. Moreover, his characters would be written with an eye to acting prowess and embodied performances. Wagner was so adamant that opera singers learn acting techniques that he implored Germany's king, Ludwig II, to establish a training institution where young singers would undergo extensive acting training and, prior to studying music, become well versed in characterisation by performing in text-based plays (Kühnel 625). Though the institution never came to fruition, Wagner's work towards incorporating acting values in opera included the addition of pre-production reading rehearsals, efforts to abolish stand-and-deliver performances (known in opera circles as the 'park and bark' technique), the incorporation of a movement coach for singers and the pursuit of a more 'natural' acting aesthetic (Ashman 31).

For Wagner, natural acting implied a departure from the clichéd posturing popular in nineteenth-century opera. He comments, 'Those screams, which are almost the only thing heard of the tune in our common operatic style, have always been accompanied by violent movements of the arms, employed at last so uniformly that they have lost all meaning and can but give the innocent spectator the absurd impression of a marionette' (Wagner, 'Parsifal' 307). To guard against melodramatic posturing, the

composer emphasised an economy of movement and hired ballet master Richard Fricke as his collaborator on the 1876 production of the *Ring* in Bayreuth. Fricke coached performers in body language specific to their characters and how to move in their costumes, stressing that ‘we have to guard against simple passivity as well as against meaningless gestures of hands and arms. Doing too much is worse than doing too little’ (Fricke 32).

When it came to the visual world of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, however, Wagner struggled to articulate the scenic form that best suited his unified concept of opera production and was unable to successfully work with designers to unearth a fitting visual representation for his music (Ashman 33). Having spent a portion of his early career in Paris, Wagner became well-acquainted with the aesthetics that he viewed as counterintuitive to his operas, including the overly decorative, highly historicised settings crafted by pictorial artists for the nineteenth century’s most popular genres, German romantic opera and grand opera (Carnegy, *Wagner* 40). In an effort to find an alternative, Wagner turned to the landscape painter Josef Hoffmann for his 1876 staging of the *Ring*, hoping Hoffmann’s painting would bring the *Ring*’s mythic world to life without the ostentatious detail so common in opera productions of the period (Carnegy, *Wagner* 76-77). Wagner was, however, clear on what he envisioned for the special effects featured in his operas; regardless of the expense, he wanted the most realistic representations possible.

Staged in his custom-made festival house in Bayreuth, Wagner’s 1876 production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* would grapple with the trappings of nineteenth-century style and solidify the composer’s view that the world of the *Ring* was ill-suited to the period’s popular opera aesthetics and stage technology.<sup>4</sup> Because Wagner

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of Wagner’s theatre in Bayreuth and its innovative layout, see Carnegy’s *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*.

struggled to articulate his vision for the inaugural Bayreuth production, his design team deferred to German romanticism's detailed and historicised production values, relying on Wagner's narrative sources for the *Ring* to inform the production's aesthetic. As the *Ring* is based on Icelandic myths including *The Saga of the Volsungs*, the *Poetic* (or Elder) *Edda*, and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* as well as the old Norse myths, *Thidriks Saga of Bern* and *the Nibelungenlied*, the 1876 production (and numerous others that followed its aesthetic lead) was marked by aesthetic reference to Icelandic and Germanic mythology, leaving the composer ultimately at odds with his own production. Though Wagner called for 'non-realistic, timeless' costumes, designer Carl Doepler adhered to the historical model popular during the era emulating 'precisely what the ancient Teutons wore'; while his designs 'replicated their models with historical exactitude, they evoked the very style of grand historical opera that Wagner had been so concerned to distance himself from' (Millington, 'Faithful' 271). Scenic design presented a similar problem. Wagner had asked for sets mirroring 'the characters' actions and states of mind' (Carnegy, *Wagner* 77) but since his request conflicted with the dominant design aesthetic of the era, Wagner found himself working with pictorial sets akin to those he had rejected in Paris. By placing performers within this 'illusionistic scenic environment where little or nothing was left to the imagination, he ensured that, visually, the settings could never express the inner spiritual world suggested by the music' (Beacham, 'Appia and Staging' 116).

Wagner was also dissatisfied with the production's crude special effects. Attempts to surround the sleeping Brunhilde with real fire were aborted due to safety concerns. The combination of steam and red light used as an alternative appeared highly artificial, failing to evoke the scene's danger (Williams 128). In the hopes of creating a realistic forest cave, the technical director, Carl Brandt, had detailed images of foliage



projected onto transparent hangings (Carnegy, *Wagner* 99). As assessed by Fricke, the illusion had ‘a jarring effect, since it is too unnatural’ (30). Alongside Brunhilde’s ring of fire and forest cave, the *Ring* calls for an enormous dragon. Wagner commissioned a puppet to be made in the UK, which was ultimately the source of great comedy for the audience and Wagner’s collaborators due to its cartoon-like appearance (Fricke 95).<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, after the Bayreuth productions, Wagner was rightly convinced that nineteenth-century technology and the popular aesthetics of German romanticism and grand opera were incapable of producing the mythic world of Nibelheim. And, while finances impeded Wagner from making good on his post-*Ring* cycle promise in 1876 that ‘Next year we’ll do it all differently’ (in Millington, ‘Faithful’ 270), his evolving appreciation of Schopenhauer’s theories on music would ultimately lead to his production of *Parsifal*, featuring sets driven by an expressionist conceit that would come much closer to reflecting the production aesthetic he would eventually envision for the *Ring*.

Though Wagner had initially read *The World as Will and Representation* in 1854, Schopenhauer’s theories would influence him gradually over the next three decades. Schopenhauer defines the world as having two components: the will and representation. His concept of the will—our inchoate desires—denotes the world as it is, which Kant classified as the unperceived noumenal world, calling it the ‘*lor thing-in-itself*’ (Schopenhauer 436). The phenomenal world is theorised in direct contrast to the noumena, composed of our sensory perceptions of things or representations. Wagner was strongly influenced by Schopenhauer’s reading of music as the only art form that directly reflected the metaphysical will in a dualistic world:

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<sup>5</sup> Fricke’s initial reaction to the creature was recorded in his rehearsal notes: ‘The rest of the dragon has finally arrived. When I saw it, I whispered to Doepler, “Throw this thing into the farthest storeroom. Leave it out. This worm will be the end of us”’ (Fricke 95).

Music is as *direct* an objectification and copy of the whole *will* as the world itself, nay, even as the Ideas, whose multiplied manifestation constitutes the world of individual things. Music is thus by no means like the other arts, the copy of the Ideas, but the *copy of the will itself*, whose objectivity the Ideas are. This is why the effect of music is so much more powerful and penetrating than that of the other arts, for they speak only of shadows, but it speaks of the thing itself. (Schopenhauer 336, emphases in original)

For Wagner, Schopenhauer's explanation of music as an absolute expression of the will meant that the score spoke the central dramatic language in his operas, making every other element, including the performers and scenography, responsible for amplifying and reiterating the music's drama, hence his call to make 'deeds of music visible' (Wagner, 'Destiny'). This does not mean, however, that Wagner's new Schopenhauerian outlook overrode his previous interest in the *Gesamtkunstwerk's* unified productions values: 'What he regarded himself as doing was not so much rejecting one overall theory of opera and replacing it with another as accepting a radical shift of emphasis within his earlier theories, preserving the same constituent elements as before but giving them a new order of priority which placed music at the heart' (Magee 51).

Early evidence of Schopenhauer's impact on Wagner's music can be seen in *Siegfried*—the first score Wagner wrote after his exposure to Schopenhauer's work (Magee 52).<sup>6</sup> *Siegfried* makes innovative new use of the leitmotif, a signature musical

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<sup>6</sup> Though the libretto for *Siegfried* was written prior to Wagner's Schopenhauerian turn, the score was not.

theme accompanying characters, central tropes or objects in the operas (i.e., in its totality, the *Ring*'s score contains motifs for Siegfried's character, the sword, and the ride of the Valkyries, among others). Though the leitmotif was not a new invention and had featured in previous works by other composers, Wagner's use of musical themes is distinct as it constructs 'the entire musical fabric of the score' (Grey 88), making the appearance, reappearance and modulations of leitmotifs the opera's central dramatic component. Although instantly recognisable in any form (regardless of key or instrument), leitmotifs would develop alongside the characters they represented, rising an octave in tender moments or moving into a minor key to foreshadow trouble ahead (Metropolitan Opera). Wagner's musical themes were crafted to give the listener clues to the actions, thoughts and emotions of the scene (Metropolitan Opera). Moreover, leitmotifs functioned to establish continuity between operas in the *Ring* cycle. The sword theme is used throughout the cycle to connect three generations of men—the theme is first heard in *Das Rheingold* to represent Wotan's power and then recurs with slight modulations through the other three operas, linking Siegmund to his son Siegfried and then recurring to mark Siegfried's death. Crafted to guarantee the music's dramatic prominence throughout the opera, such leitmotifs would also provide a series of expressive, auditory signposts to represent on stage.

Wagner's experiments with an evocative aesthetic, and continued work towards embodied performances in the 1882 staging of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth, would convince the composer that his work was best suited to a minimalist aesthetic focused on music. Instead of the historical exactitude and lavish décor popular in nineteenth-century opera, Wagner made simplicity, unity and, above all else, music central to *Parsifal*'s costumes and set. On his decision to opt out of a crown, sceptre, and expensive robes for one

character, Wagner comments: ‘We resigned this grandiose effect to a future opera, and abode by our undeviating principle of reverent simplicity’ (Wagner, ‘Parsifal’ 309). An 1887 essay on Wagner’s *Parsifal* production emphasises how the composer’s scenic use of ‘vertical and horizontal lines’, shadows and light, and ‘a great void’ of open stage space (L. Beckett 92) successfully reflected the contrasting musical themes dictated by the score; through these and other aspects of *Parsifal*’s scenography that were guided by music and suggested rather than literally represented the setting, Wagner discovered what he believed ‘to be the right kind of “visibility” for his musical deeds’ (Carnegy, *Wagner* 119).

In terms of acting and embodied performance, Wagner worked with the singers, concentrating on fluid physicality and discovering a range of movement previously unseen on stage by German opera spectators. Some singers found their characters’ trajectories through the subtlest gestures meant to unfold alongside and, therefore, punctuate the music: ‘Whereas in operatic pathos we had accustomed ourselves to throw wide our arms as if calling for help, we found that a half-uplifting of one arm, nay a characteristic movement of the head, was quite enough to emphasise a somewhat heightened feeling’ (Wagner, ‘Parsifal’ 307). Other performers experimented with more dynamic physicality—Wagner quickly accepted a proposal by one of the flower maidens that she make her entrance by running terrified through the forest (Carnegy, *Wagner* 115). In his staging of *Parsifal*, Wagner also sought to craft a production that abandoned the presentational acting style of nineteenth-century opera, which saw singers delivering intimate love duets to the audience, rather than to each other; instead, Wagner encouraged performers to sing to one another and make eye contact in a way that reflected their characters’ connection.

Overall, *Parsifal* represented Wagner's crowning achievement, offering 'the evocation of mood' and 'delineation of symbol' (Carnegy, *Wagner* 119) that came closer than any other production he had staged to giving his music a visual representation that he deemed effective. Through aesthetic minimalism and the elimination of the 'false pathos of conventional operatic acting' (Williams 144), Wagner had begun the work of unearthing a scenographic style that best expressed his music. Nonetheless, beyond technical difficulties in the transformation scenes and the painters' deference to pictorial realism (Williams 144), Wagner had yet to comprehensively develop his burgeoning scenographic aesthetic, which placed music at its interpretive centre. Ultimately, the work of articulating a theoretical approach to creating the visual world of the *Ring* remained in the hands of future theatre-makers.

### **Adolphe Appia's Wagnerian Aesthetic**

Although *Ring* productions staged by Cosima Wagner (Wagner's wife) and Angelo Neumann in the years immediately following Wagner's death did little more than reproduce the original Bayreuth production, the twentieth century welcomed an artist dedicated to 'free[ing] Wagner of Wagner' (Ashman 34) by following through on the composer's unattained goal to 'do it all differently' (in Millington, 'Faithful' 270). Through his detailed designs and scenarios, Adolphe Appia was one of the first artists to emancipate *Der Ring des Nibelungen* from what Wagner's grandson, Wieland, viewed as the 'sin of fossilisation' at Bayreuth (Ashman 34).

Appia first saw the *Ring* in a production modelled after Wagner's original staging in Dresden. He was inspired by what the production achieved musically but also found himself frustrated by the fundamental stylistic disconnect between the *Ring*'s music and the production's reliance on popular, nineteenth-century design aesthetics

that hampered the expressive potential of the score. Moreover, while Appia championed the radical shifts made to the theatre auditorium at Bayreuth (including the sunken orchestra and dimmed lights discussed in Chapter Two), he challenged the traditionalist belief that directors should adhere strictly to Wagner's Bayreuth production aesthetic in the name of authenticity: 'Does the vision he [Wagner] applied to the stage match all the power he unfolds in his score? Today nobody could hesitate to say that the master put his extraordinary work in a traditional stage frame of his period. And while everything in the auditorium of Bayreuth expresses his genius, everything behind the footlights contradicts it' (Appia, 'Essays' 110).

Driven to resolve the aesthetic challenge of Wagnerian opera staging, Appia would dedicate ten years to theorizing and sketching a new form of scenography meant to reflect the drama inherent in the composer's music. (Figures 8 and 9 show the contrast between Appia and Hoffmann's designs for *Siegfried*.) A confirmed Schopenhauerian, Appia believed that music was the 'primary force in opera... and that whatever the description of the stage instructions, it [music] alone held the clues to the staging, whose business it was to be the opened eye of the score' (Carnegy, 'Designing' 53). These principles, which follow on Wagner's mature, Schopenhauerian privileging of music over all other elements of production, led Appia to articulate the role of scenography in *Music and The Art of the Theatre* through a hierarchical relationship between music, the actor and the setting:

A dramatic idea requiring musical expression in order to be revealed must spring from the hidden world of our inner life, since this life *cannot be expressed* except through music, and music can express only that life. By means of the spoken word, [the dramatist] endows it with

a practical dramatic form and composes the poetic-musical text, the *score*; this text imposes an already living role upon the *actor*, a role he has now only to take on. The proportions of this role determine the form of the setting through *three-dimensionality* (the point of contact between the living actor and the inanimate setting); the nature and extent of the *three-dimensionality* determines the *spatial arrangement* of the setting which in turn controls the *lighting* and *painted scenery*. (*Music 26*, emphases in original)

Appia developed this theory by first recording the essential actions that Wagner's 'text and score required of the performer in terms of his location and physical movement within the scenic environment' (Beacham, 'Appia and Staging' 126). Relying exclusively on this information, he would then draft a set design. This model saw music and libretto generating the actor's physical interactions with the three-dimensional stage space, giving the setting an expressive capacity through its contact with the performer. In other words, the performing body's ability to relate with the three-dimensional environment it also dictated would, therefore, produce 'the visible embodiment of the music-drama which the composer had conceived' (Beacham, *Appia: Artist and Visionary* 23). Because his new theory saw scenography as an extension of the actor and the actor as the material expression of the music, Appia looked to enhance the meaning-making interactions between the actor and the stage space through sets and lighting.

Due to the importance Appia placed on the interactions between performers and the stage space, his three-dimensional, multi-level sets were crafted to create opportunities for performers to engage physically by featuring blocks, ramps, stairs and

surfaces of various lengths and widths. Appia openly rejected painted flats, pictorial realism and any attempts at crafting scenic illusions as the actor's three-dimensional presence amongst such scenery only further highlighted its one-dimensionality. By espousing strict scenographic minimalism including the use of few if any set pieces and stripping away scenic details, Appia was able to develop 'a plastic setting... as expressive to the eye as Wagner's music was expressive to the ear' (Kernodle 226). Although lighting would be responsible for scene changes in such spaces, delineating and differentiating areas of the stage (Beacham, 'Appia and Staging' 131), it would play a vital role in terms of expressing the music's inner drama. Through shifts in intensity, colour, and direction, lighting, the scenic design element that Appia viewed as the most expressive, embodied evocative shifts in tone and mood produced by the music.

Appia also brought focus to what he viewed as Wagner's use of scenic leitmotifs, which paralleled the composer's repetition and variation of central musical motifs: 'Appia viewed the setting of Brunhilde's rock as something akin to a visual leitmotif... Functioning, therefore, like one of Wagner's musical themes, the visual form of Brunhilde's rock associates different episodes with one another, allowing them to assume greater levels of meaning with each appearance' (Buller 44). For Appia, the *Ring's* repeated return to a select number of settings, including the forest, the Rhine and Brunhilde's rock, provided a concrete way to link musical leitmotifs with physical spaces while also signalling an opportunity to evocatively vary scenography to reflect the shifts occurring in musical themes at different points in the *Ring* cycle's progression. Moreover, in Wagner's repeated return to select *Ring* locales, Appia discovered a means to achieve overall scenographic unity. Feeling that each setting portrayed in the *Ring* cycle should arise from the same minimalist scenic foundation, Appia felt that one unified set could, with the essential assistance of the actor's body



and its expressivity, represent every scene in Wagner's four-part *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (Appia, 'Comments' 91).

Given his innovative new approach to theatre production, Appia needed to establish a director figure to helm his vision. In his theoretical writings aimed at remedying the scenographic disconnect featured in early stagings of Wagner's operas, Appia broke ground by combining the roles of director and scenographer, calling for a 'scenic artist' or 'designer-director' to oversee and coordinate every aspect of the production (*Appia*, Music 41). In his call for such a hybridised artist who would work imaginatively with the scenic materials while taking care to completely forego scenic illusions (*Appia*, Music 41), Appia privileges this figure's authority: 'The essential aim of his directing will always be to persuade the members of the production staff that their mutual subordination alone will produce a result worthy of their efforts. His influence must be magnetic, rather like that of a genial conductor' (*Appia*, Music 41). As detailed by Appia, this designer-director not only follows on Wagner's call for a central unifying force in production to ensure an overall unified approach to making music visible, but also foreshadows auteurship and the hierarchical implications of one figure possessing overall artistic control.



Figure 8. Design for Siegfried, 1875 (Josef Hoffmann)



Figure 9. *Siegfried, Act I*, 1893 (Adolphe Appia)

### **Appia's Inheritors**

Although Cosima Wagner repeatedly rejected Appia's ideas for stagings at Bayreuth, in his 1903 landmark collaboration with designer Alfred Röllert in Vienna, Gustav Mahler's production embodied Appia's theories.<sup>7</sup> Through the use of coloured light to paint the stage, the scenographic consideration of space rather than a reliance on two-dimensional pictorial settings and the 'elimination of anything visual that did not relate to an understanding of the music as the core of the drama', including such elements as Brunhilde's horse (Carnegy, *Wagner* 163), Mahler's staging demonstrated for the first time that the *Ring*'s score should dictate production aesthetics, not nineteenth-century romanticism (Carnegy, *Wagner* 158-164). This echoed the *Ring*'s early twentieth-century disassociation from Bayreuth's fossilised productions via Appia's minimalist aesthetics. In the aftermath of World War II and the Third Reich's appropriation of the Wagnerian canon (which, with few exceptions, prompted a marked return to traditional

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<sup>7</sup> Following Appia's death, Emil Preterorius would stage the *Ring* in Bayreuth in 1933, drawing on designs laid out in *Music and the Art of the Theatre* (Carnegy, 'Designing' 59). Prior to his death, Appia would see his designs brought to life in Oskare Wälterlin's production of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* at the Municipal Theatre of Basel. Due to audience outrage at the productions' deviation from tradition, plans to mount *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* were quickly abandoned (Beacham, *Appia: Artist and Visionary* 183-185).

*Ring* stagings in Germany), Wagner's oeuvre would eventually transcend its Nazi associations through evocative, minimalist stagings. During the 1950s, Wieland Wagner produced an Appia-inspired staging at Bayreuth that stripped the *Ring* of its German roots and focused, instead, on making his grandfather's deeds of music visible (Figure 10). Staged on a circular disc acting as the *Ring*'s central metaphor, the set featured a strict economy (Ashman 40), with the destruction of Valhalla and the flooding of the Rhine represented solely by lighting in *Götterdämmerung* (Carnegy, *Wagner* 292).

In 1976, the Bayreuth festival demonstrated its continued interest in unconventional approaches, commissioning French theatre director Patrice Chéreau for the centenary *Ring*.<sup>8</sup> Though Chéreau's *Ring* did not subscribe to every aspect of Appia's scenographic approach, particularly in its allegorical slant, which re-envisioned the *Ring* as a cautionary tale against capitalist greed (Carnegy, *Wagner* 355), the set's minimalism and steely industrial angles pay homage to the economy and multi-level performer playground featured in Appia's *Ring* designs.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Chéreau would push the boundaries of physicality to embody Wagner's leitmotifs, including the appearance of a Brunhilde so shamed by her forced marriage to Gunther that her physicality embodied the music minor's turn. As seen in Figure 11, Brunhilde entered 'like Baudelaire's wounded albatross... in a billowing white dress with her head, hidden by her long hair, hung low and her free arm, in its huge sleeve, trailing like the grounded bird's useless wing' (Carnegy, *Wagner* 361).

Over the last thirty years, landmark *Ring* productions have materialised alongside numerous other stagings adhering to Wagner's 1876 mounting of the cycle. Although purists celebrated Otto Schenk's traditional offering at the Metropolitan Opera in the 1980s (which emulated Wagner's Bayreuth production and is clearly part

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<sup>8</sup> The teenage Lepage would be 'glued to' Chéreau's *Ring* for its sixteen-hour television debut (Rees).

<sup>9</sup> Chéreau's production is discussed at length in Chapter Two.

of the baggage with which Lepage's *Ring* must contend), Ruth Berghaus's 1985-1987 abstract rendering in Frankfurt (Figure 12), which abandoned narrative cohesion and critiqued more problematic aspects of the *Ring*, gained an influential position in the production's history. Berghaus's production upended the traditional Wagnerian staging values inspired by romantic realism (Millington, 'Berghaus'). Her *Ring* used scenography to underline Wagner's music, focusing on signs in the relationship between actors and the set to reflect the music's drama. When Sieglinde finally escapes from Hunding's hut to pursue her true love, her 'sense of liberation, of new horizons opened up is palpable as the hut is raised to the flies and a spacious panorama revealed' (Millington, 'Ring' 491). The two decades following Berghaus's innovative *Ring* production have witnessed a peppering of new stagings, some acclaimed for their unconventional approaches, including Vera Nemirova's new Frankfurt cycle (Figure 13), in which all four instalments share a single set composed of amorphous, steeply sloped discs (Laurson). Many of the productions that broke ground and live on in the collective memory reflect Appia's understanding that the written score contains only a 'portion of the drama' (Appia, *Music* 11)—evocative visual performance text is essential to offering a complete *Ring*.

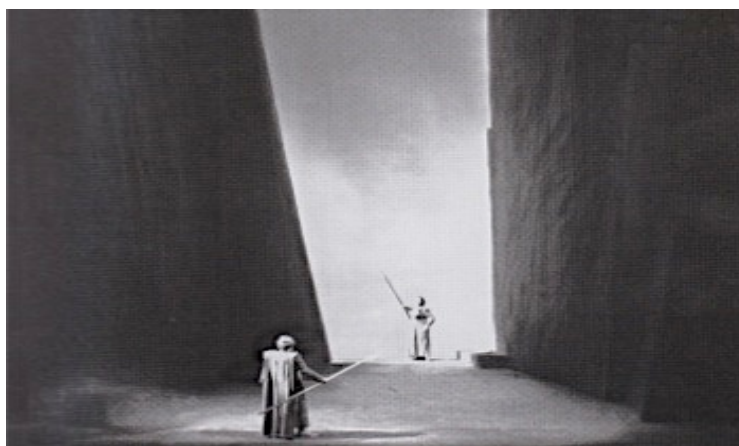


Figure 10. Photograph of Wieland Wagner's *Das Rheingold* at Bayreuth, 1951

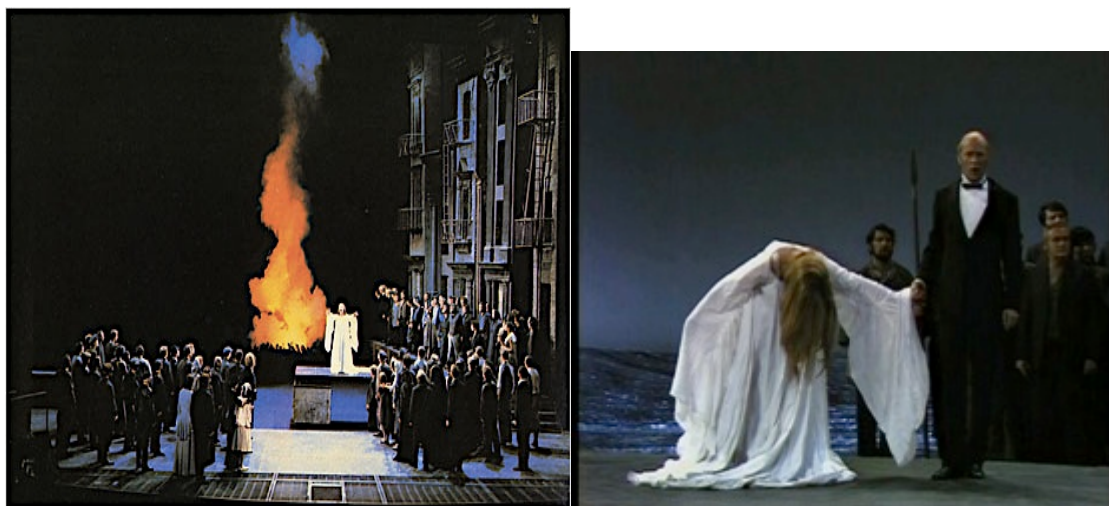


Figure 11. Photographs of Patrice Chéreau's *Götterdämmerung* at Bayreuth, 1976



Figure 12. Photograph of Ruth Berghaus's *Die Walküre*, 1986



Figure 13. Photograph of Vera Nemirova's *Ring*, 2012

### **Lepage's *Siegfried*: A Twenty-first century Response to 'Music Made Visible'**

In a 2012 interview with *The New York Times* opera critic, Anthony Tommasini, Peter Gelb responded to critiques of the Metropolitan Opera's production of the *Ring* cycle, commenting 'Robert Lepage may be the first director to execute what Wagner actually wanted to see onstage' (in Tommasini, 'Rage Against the Machine'). Though this statement contradicts Gelb's previous claims that Lepage's *Ring* follows the tradition established by Wagner's 1876 mounting of the cycle, it holds particular interest when examined against Wagner's mature production aesthetics and Appia's scenographic pursuit of making music visual through performing bodies. My analysis of Lepage's *Siegfried* follows Wagner's initial discovery of the evocative potential of minimalist aesthetics through *Parsifal* and Appia's comprehensive theories for staging the *Ring*. This interrogation of the architectonic scenography, bodies-in-motion and historical-spatial mapping featured in *Siegfried* not only positions Lepage as the heir and innovator of the aesthetic continuum inspired by Schopenhauer, anticipated by Wagner and realised by Appia, but also fosters discussion of the broader effects of Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy introduced in previous chapters.

#### **Architectonic Scenography**

Much like Lepage's mounting of the *Damnation of Faust* and *The Rake's Progress*, the conceptual process for the *Ring* began with an exploration of place. Lepage and his Ex Machina team members travelled to Iceland, home of the previously mentioned poetic and prose eddas that inspired Wagner's *Ring* narrative but also, contrary to Wagner's wishes, influenced the designs for the inaugural production at Bayreuth. Lepage describes the terrain as 'a land of fire and ice and weird phenomena that you don't see anywhere else. It's like another planet. And it's a great place to build a Valhalla. ...It's

a place where nature speaks to you, so it gives you a plethora of ideas for image, set design, music, sound effects' (B. Gilbert, 'Behind the Ring'). The trip to Iceland led Lepage and set designer Carl Fillion to two ideas: 'One was that the scenery... would come from the landscape of Iceland, and the other was a desire to create one basic set that could be used throughout the four operas of *The Ring*... This meant designing one set that could display the thirty plus locations that appear in it' (B. Gilbert, 'Behind the Ring'). Inspired by the idea of Iceland's shifting tectonic plates, Lepage and Fillion came up with a single set that would transform physically to summon the *Ring*'s various settings and act as a screen for interactive video projections. In their deferral to the *Ring*'s original production aesthetic, Lepage and his Ex Machina collaborators risked engaging with the historicised and myth-based conceit that Wagner had so pointedly resisted. As far as the set was concerned, however, Ex Machina's deference to tradition would translate into the minimalist, evocative aesthetic that Wagner ultimately envisioned for the *Ring*.

An initial description of the final *Ring* set resulting from Lepage and Fillion's ideas hardly calls up the expressive minimalism theorised by Appia. Composed of twenty-four fiberglass and aluminum planks and weighing in at forty-five tons, Lepage's set is operated by computers as well as a hydraulic system mounted to an axis 'that spans two 26-foot-high offstage steel towers' (Lentz).<sup>10</sup> In short, at first glance, Lepage's machine is a complicated and visually overwhelming contraption, a fact that, alongside its propensity to malfunction in performance, prompted the Metropolitan Opera singers to come up with the somewhat ominous nickname 'the machine'. And

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<sup>10</sup> Each of the set's twenty-four planks 'is 2 inches wide, 29 inches long, and weighs 726 pounds. The axis is 5 inches wide. The planks can revolve a full 360 degrees. The set, which sits directly upstage of the deck where most of the action takes place, changes position every five to ten minutes throughout *Das Rheingold*' (Barbour 54). Due to the set's weight, the stage at the Metropolitan Opera had to be reinforced with sixty-five foot steel girders. When asked the price of the reinforcement, Peter Gelb would only divulge that the amount was in the six-figure range (Wakin, 'Met Reinforces its Stage').

yet, in performance, Ex Machina's *Ring* set visually embodies Wagner's leitmotifs and the characters' inner lives through shifts to the planks' architectural configurations as well as compositional changes to the video images and light projected on the set's surface. In an interview with *The Avant Garde Diaries*, Ex Machina's production manager, Bernard Gilbert comments: 'Throughout the process we discovered that the visuals reflect and mirror the leitmotif system that Wagner invented for his music... The evolution of the planks from the beginning to end of *The Ring* evolve in a parallel manner to the evolution of the music throughout the opera'. As examples from *Siegfried* will demonstrate, Lepage's set fulfils Wagner and Appia's call for 'the visible embodiment of the music-drama' (Beacham, *Appia: Artist and Visionary* 23) and reflects the unified overall conceit sought by both artists.

As Lepage discusses in interviews, the movements and configurations of his set's twenty-four planks work largely in relation to performer bodies to establish the mood of Wagner's leitmotifs:

We said, 'What if we give ourselves a set of rules, that are at least in the same nature as those leitmotifs? Let's say we have a very classical bare stage, with 24 movable planks. What different combinations can we make to find an image to accompany that leitmotiv?' We just kind of played with that, with acrobats, dancers and body doubles, until shapes came out naturally. So with one shape we said, 'Okay, those are the hands of the giants. What are the giants about?' They're just two giant hands saying: 'We want to be paid'... Every time a shape triggered that kind of rich argument, we would keep it.



We discovered a forest, and a staircase down to  
Nibelheim, and the spine of the dragon, and the horses of  
the Valkyries. (in Everett-Green, 'Wagner to New York')

Lepage's scenography combines two different techniques for highlighting leitmotifs—form and composition. In terms of form, in *Siegfried*, Lepage's planks shifted into various formations to evoke the musical themes associated with Mime, Fafner's cave, the forest and Brunhilde's rock. For Mime's underground dwelling, the planks created a downstage, subterranean enclave on stage right. As occupied by Siegfried and Mime, this small, restrictive space clearly indicated the oppressive nature of their life together and embodied the dark, minor tone of Mime's musical theme. Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy reconfigured the planks to create Fafner's cave; the stage left planks formed a giant, cave-like formation from which Fafner-as-dragon emerged. With its hefty overhang, this configuration emphasised the weight and drama of Fafner's booming drum-based theme as the dragon first appeared beneath the impressive and oppressive rock formation.

The two lighter leitmotifs featured in *Siegfried* were embodied by vertical plank configurations, opening up expansive spaces for the actors and images to move more fluidly through the space. For the forest scene when Siegfried encounters the wood bird, the planks served largely as a backdrop, standing upright so spectators could easily view the digital bird's flight across the forest. Moreover, the vast open space represented the feeling of freedom Siegfried experienced when hearing the wood bird's theme, a blend of shimmering muted strings supported by woodwind solos (Millington, 'Leitmotif'). As Wagner's narrative returns to Brunhilde's rock where Siegfried conquers the fiery ring and discovers his true love awakening from the sleep enforced by Wotan, Lepage had the planks reassemble into a mountaintop setting. Unlike the distanced aerial

perspective featured in *Die Walküre*, the planks were configured in *Siegfried* so that the lovers appeared on a wide horizontal plane. Essentially, this formation offered a close-up of Brunhilde's rock, giving the characters the space and distance to play out their expedited courtship game, which ultimately sees Brunhilde running across the expansive stage space to embrace Siegfried as Wagner's sweeping love theme reaches its peak.

As *The Globe and Mail* critic Marsha Lederman notes, in *Siegfried*, three-dimensional technology was 'applied in a major theatrical environment for the first time - without the need for glasses to experience it'.<sup>11</sup> By combining this glasses-less, three-dimensional technology with interactivity, Lepage has also discovered a way to embody Wagner's leitmotifs while innovating Appia's theories on music made visible. The stage space visibly responds to performers' bodies through motion sensors, allowing the interactions theorised by Appia to become an actual two-way dialogue (discussed in the upcoming 'bodies-in-motion' section). Moreover, the set possesses its own ability to create a dynamic interchange without the actor through the interplay of the planks' shape shifting and the projection of an interactive, three-dimensional composition.

For its visual sleight of hand, the 3-D technology being deployed at the Met will also interact with the movement of the set. The set uses a bank of projectors, motion-capture cameras and computers to fashion the images. The tilt on the stage allows for hundreds of different projections, changing in slivers of a second, at the different depths to help create, say, the colour, shading and contour of a rock, or at least to convince the eye. The

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<sup>11</sup> Lepage did earlier experiments with cruder three-dimensional scenography on *La Tempête* at Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in 1998.

imagery is rendered in realistic detail using fractals: fractured geometric shapes that keep iterating reduced-size copies of themselves according to mathematical formulas. When the fractals are programmed into the computerised light system, the result is a dense symphony of geometric detail, giving the illusion of three dimensions. (Wakin and Lohr)

This effect unfolds as ‘a moving piece of scenery rotates along a horizontal axis, and the computer-generated projections follow it in real-time... The audience has an altered point of view, the projection being presented to them from the bottom to top - which tricks viewers’ minds into perceiving objects as three-dimensional’ (Lederman).

Through interactive technology that enables the music’s shifts and the planks’ reconfigurations to trigger changes in the three-dimensional images projected on the set, Lepage creates a three-dimensional dialogue between the scenic elements independent of the performer’s body; projected images ‘animate the pale grey planks—a neutral palette surfaced with fiberglass resin-topped plywood and coated in a pale grey epoxy—further transforming them into other worlds. Motion and sound-detecting equipment, along with a special encoder to correct perspective distortion, distributes the imaging ... across the stage’ (Lentz).

Lepage uses this technology during the final portion of the orchestral overture for *Siegfried*, in which no performers are present, making elements of the scenic design solely responsible for the music’s embodiment. *Siegfried*’s overture features a ‘subdued drum roll and a pair of brooding bassoons, setting the scene in the dark forest, where the dragon Fafner’s lair is situated, and, at the same time alluding to the crafty scheming of the dwarf Mime’ via contrabasses (Millington, ‘Leitmotif’). Through Lepage’s use of

motion sensors, these shifting musical leitmotifs and the set's reconfiguration into a giant vertical wall trigger the appearance of an underground world populated by three-dimensional snakes, grubs and other subterranean bugs. As different leitmotifs are brought to the fore, interactive sound technology highlights them, allowing different creatures to navigate the planks in ways that best parallel the music, be it scuttling speedily or slowly slithering along. Before the vertical wall of planks rotates fully to reveal Mime forging a sword in the first scene of Act I, Lepage adheres to Wagner's appeal for 'deeds of music made visible' ('Destiny') and, without a performer, gives the music a physical presence on stage through the atmosphere it dictates. The 'snakes and other creepy-crawly creatures [that] seem to be writhing through a thickly wooded terrain' (Silverman, 'Eye-Popping') dynamically embody the dark tone of the forest and foreshadow the numerous conflicts Siegfried will soon face while also capitalizing on the central role that nature plays in the opera.<sup>12</sup> Here, Lepage creates a dialogue between the set's compositional images and its fluid reconfiguration; as the planks shift to evoke the act's primary setting, the three-dimensional visual images they relay are actively setting a foreboding tone.<sup>13</sup>

Through compositional changes to the images projected on the *Ring* set, Lepage also fulfils Appia's requirement that the *Ring* locations assume greater levels of meaning with each appearance. In Bernard Gilbert's words:

Wagner composed certain orchestral themes that returned

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that interactive technology can replace the performer on stage; instead, my argument highlights the fact that Appia's desire for interactivity can now be carried out through interchanges between three-dimensional scenic devices. The performing body is an essential component in opera and theatre; nonetheless, the fact that evocative, interactive scenography can create its own dynamic performance text is worth noting.

<sup>13</sup> In many ways, this self-sufficient scenography aligns with Edward Gordon Craig's actorless theatres: In Craig's most extreme concept actors were to be dispensed with altogether; the stage itself being mechanised, so that performances could be a purely abstract interplay of moving shapes and shifting light. In more conventional terms this translated into a completely flexible performance space with non-illusionistic scenery. (Innes, 'Puppets' 128)

throughout the opera and are associated with certain characters. These motifs shifted slightly with each return in order to represent a significant change in the personality or path of the character. The visuals displayed and the way in which the planks of ‘The Machine’ function have similarities to Wagner’s leitmotif system. ... For example, we return to Brunhilde’s rock four times throughout the opera yet each time the rock looks a little different than the last. Lepage strongly believes that the creative process takes you somewhere that is unknown at the onset. (‘Behind the Ring’)

Brunhilde’s rock does, in fact, transform with each scenographic return to it in the Metropolitan Opera’s *Ring* staging, particularly when it comes to the setting’s reappearance in *Siegfried*. When revisited in Lepage’s production, the rock remains encircled in vivid, crackling images of flames embodying Wagner’s magic fire leitmotif. Once Siegfried has successfully crossed the fiery boundary, breaking Wotan’s spell, he discovers Brunhilde arising to greet daylight ‘with a flurry of harps... in a bright C major’ (Millington, ‘Leitmotif’). Lepage establishes the mood of this bright new day by emphasizing the rich colours encircling Brunhilde—she arises from her sleep surrounded by ‘verdant’ grounds that foreshadow the young love about to develop through the blooming red flowers populating the space (Tommasini, ‘Dragons’). As the scene progresses and the love leitmotif is introduced to express the mutual attraction between Brunhilde and Siegfried, the lighting becomes progressively warmer and the images increase in intensity, like a barometer reflecting the growing passion felt by the lovers. Beyond the aforementioned wide expanse of the Metropolitan Opera’s stage

open for Siegfried and Brunhilde to enact their burgeoning love, the increasingly vivid projected images that cover the planks' movie screen like surface, provides a visual expression of the growing connection between Siegfried and Brunhilde.

### **Historical-Spatial Mapping: An Uneasy Pairing of Convention and Innovation**

Lepage's set for the *Ring* was not only inspired by his experience of the Icelandic landscape but also his introduction to the local climate. Through the weather's ever-changing conditions (Icelanders have appropriated the New England saying 'If you don't like the weather, just wait five minutes'), Lepage found what he regarded as an apt atmospheric parallel for Wagner's characters and constantly evolving leitmotifs.<sup>14</sup>

Wagner sought scenography that would reflect the *Ring*'s mercurial atmosphere, whether to establish a scene's tone or parallel characters' individual emotional journeys:

Wotan's anger is reflected in the thunder and lightning accompanying his appearance... The spring moonlight flooding into the dark prison of Hunding's hut speaks for and with the lovers' transcendent ecstasy. The moonlight penetrating the dark waters of the Rhine heralds a dawning consciousness. The darkness in which the Norns spin the fate of the world, the fire surrounding the sleeping Brunhilde and the sun she greets upon her awakening are all significant elements of the drama.

(Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art* 78).

Through his experience in Iceland, Lepage aspired to create 'a world of mists

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<sup>14</sup> After his visit to Iceland, Lepage also noted, 'Because there are almost no trees or vegetation, you see the weather formations for days and days in advance' (in Barbour 55).

and lightning, and fire and water, an elemental realm’ (in Everett-Green, ‘Wagner to New York’). Icelandic winters are ‘marked by frequent changes in weather and storminess’ while, during the warmer seasons, ‘the sun stays above the horizon for almost 24 hours and the interplay of light and shadows on mountains, lava fields and glaciers yields an ever changing landscape. However, even during the middle of summer the sky is frequently cloudy or overcast’ (Icelandic Met). To craft the *Ring*’s ever-changing weather, Lepage literally makes the music visible by working with technology that enables the sound from the orchestra to dictate the climate on stage. Lepage comments that when Siegmund is running through the forest in *Das Rheingold* (the second *Ring* opera, which is set in the winter) ‘We ... see the snowstorm as it’s actually being produced by the music coming from the pit. A bunch of pixels and particles are there, and the wind twirls them and moves them around, all according to the music. It’s not pre-recorded; it’s live swelling that comes from the orchestra!’ (‘Completing the Circle’).



Figure 14. Siegfried (Jay Hunter-Morris) and his horse on the Rhine with Hagen (Hans-Peter König), Gunther (Iain Paterson) and Gutrune (Wendy Bryn Harmer) looking on, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 2010-2012, (Ken Howard/Ex Machina/Metropolitan Opera)



Figure 15. Brunhilde (body double) engulfed in the ring of fire, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 2010-2012, (Ken Howard/Ex Machina/Metropolitan Opera)

Though Lepage relies on different seasons for other *Ring* instalments, *Siegfried* clearly unfolds during the spring.<sup>15</sup> Beyond the ‘underworld teeming with bugs, worms and snakes’ (Hoelterhoff) used to represent Mime and Fafner’s sinister leitmotifs and the blushing flowers serving to reinforce Siegfried and Brunhilde’s budding relationship and its attendant love theme, Lepage capitalises on Wotan’s entrance in Act III, using the overcast and cloudy aspects of an Icelandic spring to represent the character’s inner state. Disguised as the Wanderer, Wotan appears on the mountain range en route to question the earth goddess Erda about the gods’ fate. Musically, this section contains the ‘symphonic development of a number of major motifs, notably the dotted rhythm pervading the prelude, associated with Wotan... [and] the flattened mediant harmonies of the Wanderer’ (Millington, ‘Leitmotif’). As the scene begins, the sky is awash in dark tones and Wotan stands gazing at himself in a projected moonlit lake, mirroring

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<sup>15</sup> High-speed glacial winds and a violent snowstorm established the atmosphere in *Die Walküre* as a troubled Siegmunde ran through the dense forest (established by the set’s planks) to escape Sieglinde’s enraged husband Hunding.



Siegfried's earlier behaviour. Suddenly, the vibrant wood-bird flies across the set, pursued by Wotan's two dark ravens (Rice). Symbolizing the youth and promise no longer within Wotan's reach, the glowing lake and Siegfried's lively yellow bird stand in contrast to the dark, rainy sky and ominous ravens, effectively reflecting Wotan's conflicted state and foreshadowing his upcoming conflict with Siegfried.

The fact that Lepage's scenographic approach to the music-made-visible aesthetic advocated by Appia and Wagner aspires to timelessness and is fluent in the high-tech language of contemporary large scale productions created a foreseeable problem for the Metropolitan Opera. Meant to attract a broader and younger audience to the opera house, Lepage's set and digitised staging 'became a lightning rod for critics of the production, who said it overpowered the characters and distracted from the music' (Wakin, 'Ring After Oiling'), particularly those who lauded the Metropolitan Opera's conservative 1989 homage to Wagner's Bayreuth staging directed by Otto Schenk.<sup>16</sup> In fact, though Peter Gelb has asserted his commitment to 'bringing the latest theatrical technology to the Met' (Tommasini, 'Rage Against the Machine'), publicity for the company's *Ring* demonstrates the tension between high-tech scenography and tradition by using fidelity rhetoric as a pre-emptive strike against the loss of long-time, conservative patrons. In many ways, Gelb and Lepage have made good on pre-production promises that the Metropolitan Opera's latest *Ring* cycle will present Wagner's mythic milieu in a style that is 'extremely respectful' to the Bayreuth original (Lepage in 'Das Rheingold') with costumes, props and select scenic illusions that reside safely within the realm of 'tradition', granted, this 'tradition' draws on the historicised

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<sup>16</sup> In their discussion of the Metropolitan Opera's co-production of the *Ring* with Ex Machina, Symonds and Karantonis note, 'innovation in operatic productions is as much a strategy for revenue raising and securing future audiences as staging conventional revivals' (12).

Teutonic aesthetic that Wagner clearly rejected.<sup>17</sup> By honouring aspects of the 1876 production, Lepage is, in fact, trafficking in material aesthetics that hamper his *Ring*'s overall evocative scenographic dramaturgy and conflict with the aesthetic economy that defines his architectonic scenography.

Though Wagner's wish for simple, timeless costumes has 'been vindicated over and over again in productions after his death' (Carnegy, *Wagner* 84), including Wieland Wagner's restaging of the cycle in 1951, the Metropolitan Opera's millennial cycle features costumes inspired by the original, historical renderings that were a disappointment to Wagner at the Bayreuth inaugural performance. François St-Aubin's costumes for the Met's *Ring* offer the same 'pseudo-historical kitsch' crafted by Carl Doepler in 1876 (Carnegy, *Wagner* 83). Unlike the highly historicised costumes rejected by Wagner in 1876, however, St-Aubin's designs were expressly called for by Lepage: 'Because Robert wanted the public to be able to understand the Ring, we had to find a way of telling a complicated story in as clear a manner as possible... Costumes provide the audience with markers' (St-Aubin in Brisson). The obstacle with this 'traditional' conceit, beyond the fact that it mirrors the costumes that caused significant tension in Bayreuth, is that St-Aubin's designs undercut the evocative, Appia-inspired minimalism defining most other aspects of Lepage's *Ring* and compromise the authority that Wagner's gods and monsters otherwise communicate.

By far the most exaggerated mythical costumes in Lepage's cycle appear in *Das Rheingold*, with Bryn Terfel struggling to establish Wotan's power despite attire that too ostentatiously attempts to be commanding—an overly muscled, breast plate and a

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<sup>17</sup> Musicologist James Young articulates how a return to the Bayreuth tradition is antithetical with a return to Wagner's vision: 'Critics nostalgically refer to what they call a "traditional" [*Ring*] production. But they cannot mean we should be given what Wagner in Bayreuth actually had—for one thing, we know what Wagner thought of what he got' (124). Though my study does not privilege authorial intention, the divide between 'Ring tradition' as dictated by the aesthetics of the 1876 production in Bayreuth and Wagner's actual vision relates to the Metropolitan Opera's rhetoric for the millennial *Ring*, which frames the production as 'traditional'.

long wig ‘right out of a storybook “Ring”’ (Tommasini, ‘New “Ring”’). St-Aubin’s designs for *Siegfried* also undercut the characters’ authority and distract from the prevailing, Appian aesthetic defining Lepage’s staging.<sup>18</sup> Though Jay Hunter-Morris plays Siegfried as a boisterous, testosterone-fuelled teenager, his long, blond wig, inspired by Emil Doepler’s Bayreuth sketches, makes him appear more like the hero on the cover of a romance novel than a fearless Wagnerian youth (Figure 17) and clearly works against Lepage’s steely, industrial set. Hans-Peter König also faces an overly historicised costume as Fafner. His excessively furry pants and bulky, padded shoulders have the effect of creating an overly round, cartoon-like silhouette subverting the impending threat he represents to Siegfried. Beyond undercutting characterisations, St-Aubin’s costumes also ignore the practicalities of navigating a multi-level space. Like Doepler’s costuming of Wotan in Bayreuth, St-Aubin’s design for the god-turned-Wanderer has Wotan dressed in a long, period cloak with numerous layers of fabric and a wide brimmed hat shielding his face (Figure 19). Though he eventually performed his blocking with confidence, Bryn Terfel was encumbered by his Wanderer costume in rehearsals, experiencing difficulties scaling the planks’ cliff-like formations in his long cloak. Deborah Voigt encountered similar difficulties as Brunhilde: she often pulled the hem of her voluminous and lengthy period gown from under her feet as she navigated her mountaintop space (Figure 18)—hardly the behaviour of an assured female warrior, particularly given her sleek surroundings.

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<sup>18</sup> Appia’s approach to costumes mirrored the overall minimalism he espoused. In his notes on staging the *Ring* he comments, ‘The production of Wagner’s *Ring* can only rather indirectly be based on the mythical source from which it springs... The only way to accomplish this is to keep the setting and the costumes as rudimentary as feasible. Such a scenic picture is not opposed to the manifestation of the world of heroes but rather should express it with great clarity’ (Appia, *Music* 216)



Figure 16. Carl Doepler's costumes sketches for Brunhilde and Siegfried, 1876



Figure 17. Jay Hunter-Morris as Siegfried, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 2010-2012, (Ken Howard/Ex Machina/Metropolitan Opera)

Figure 18. Bryn Terfel as Wotan and Deborah Voigt as Brunhilde, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 2010-2012, (Ken Howard/Ex Machina/Metropolitan Opera)



Figure 19. Bryn Terfel as the Wanderer, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 2010-2012, (Ken Howard/Ex Machina/Metropolitan Opera)

In Lepage's pre-production statement, 'We're actually faithful to the very first production of the Ring, sticking as close as possible to the early staging ideals' ('Completing the Circle'), he is not only referring to the costume design for his mounting of the tetralogy; many of the creatures featured in the *Ring* are also subject to Bayreuth's inaugural design concept in the 2010-2012 Metropolitan Opera production. At the beginning of Wagner's *Siegfried*, the young hero appears with his new 'pet' bear, which terrifies Mime and chases him off stage. In Lepage's production, a performer tethered to a leash and costumed in a bear suit fleetingly appears over the top of the planks prior to disappearing. Lepage seems aware of the suit's disruptively fake appearance, drastically slashing the bear's time on stage and, therefore, robbing the narrative of a comic moment that also has the potential to reveal a justified cause of the antagonism Mime directs towards Siegfried. Cutting the bear scene short subverts a

possible opportunity for spectators to see the treatment Mime faces from Siegfried, thus providing greater insight into the relationship between the characters.

Most important among the creatures in *Siegfried*, however, is the dragon. Fafner transforms himself into this beast to protect the ring as he comes face to face with an armed Siegfried. Seeming to take his cue from Wagner's custom-made puppet for Bayreuth, Lepage pursued a literal representation of the giant dragon, resulting in a large helium-filled creature with exaggerated features. Like Wagner's 1876 dragon (which the composer would regret retrospectively), Lepage's puppet drew significant laughter from the audience during the invited dress and first night performances in a scene that otherwise represented the rising dramatic tension and inherent danger in Fafner's leitmotif.<sup>19</sup> Though Lepage had a smoky haze spreading across the stage floor and eerie green and blue lighting covering the set, the dragon's comic air was only amplified by its appearance amidst this otherwise subtle, evocative milieu and subverted any tension. Again, like Wagner, who ignored his collaborators' arguments against attempting to realistically represent the dragon on stage, Lepage's choice to use a puppet undercut the music's (and the scene's) tension as the creature appeared. This was noted by several critics: 'Fafner the dragon... emerged from his cave as a yellow eyed, snaggle-toothed serpent, a caricature of a monster' (Waleson, 'Gods and Monsters'). Having 'a little bit too much of *Sesame Street* about it to inspire fear' (Hoeltherhoff), Siegfried's mortal enemy was easily undone. Because the dragon deflated extremely slowly on first contact with Siegfried's weapon, the scene failed to demonstrate the hero's prowess or bravery and, instead, served to prolong the audience's initial chuckles. As one critic commented, 'Fafner in the guise of a dragon looks no more menacing than a Thanksgiving-parade balloon' (Rosenberg).

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<sup>19</sup> Critic Vivien Schweitzer cites this moment as 'chuckle-inducing' in her review of the 2013 remount of *Siegfried* at the Metropolitan Opera.



Figure 20. Siegfried (Jay Hunter-Morris) and the dragon, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 2010-2012, (Ken Howard/Ex Machina/Metropolitan Opera)

Lepage's simply rendered, video characterisation of Siegfried's songbird provides a telling counterpoint to the dragon. By placing the voice of the songbird (Mojca Erdmann) in the orchestra pit and visually embodying the creature on stage via a dynamic, three-dimensional video image that soars through the forest, Lepage invests in a conceit in line with production's overall Appian aesthetic as well as Wagner's later espousal of scenographic minimalism. Here, Lepage is again taking Appia's principle of creating space through dialogue between the performer and the set a step further. Spectators perceive the forest and its inhabitants through Siegfried's reactions to his environment. As crafted by a fluttering, yellow video image, the scene's songbird is seen to be 'reacting to what Siegfried says' and even appears to perch on the hero's lap at one point in the production (Repentigny).<sup>20</sup>

Despite the comic appearance of the puppet-dragon, Lepage's staging of *Siegfried* does offer solutions to Wagner's desired special effects without veering into the territory that Appia explicitly guarded against—scenic illusion. This middle ground

<sup>20</sup> My translation of: '... et donne même l'impression de réagir à ce que lui dit Siegfried' (Repentigny).

is evident in visuals such as Brunhilde's ring of fire. Lepage's depictions of nature are knowingly metatheatrical, as spectators first view the planks rotating to form the mountaintop where Wotan has left his sleeping daughter.<sup>21</sup> By then painting the set with coloured light and video, the dying flames of Wotan's fiery ring are nearly naturalistic, appearing to realistically lick the outer circle that surrounds the rescued Brunhilde's lush, verdant mountaintop. As the colours intensify in tandem with the young lovers' heightened senses and movements towards one another, Lepage satisfies Appia's call for an evocative three-dimensional environment. Highlights from the many critical appraisals naming *Siegfried* as the strongest production in the Metropolitan Opera's cycle acknowledge this expressive marriage of new technology and natural imagery: 'Here, Lepage's visual invention surpassed anything he had devised for the first two operas...Lepage's specialty—deployment of technological resources to create visual effects— bore its most succulent fruit in Act II. The planks here rose to become a huge movie screen depicting Fafner's forest in saturated emeralds and blues' (Cohn); 'Lepage makes the most effective use so far of the malleable "Ring" set... the planks form stable surfaces for Pedro Pires's inventive video images, especially in Act II, set in the depths of the forest with verdant trees and flowing streams' (Tommasini, 'Dragons').

### **Bodies-in-motion: Singing Actors and Backstories through Body Doubles**

Though Lepage makes use of performing bodies in his other *Ring* installments to present acrobatic feats and aerial perspectives, including the gods' journey over the rainbow bridge to Valhalla and Loge and Alberich's descent down the long staircase to Nibelheim, performer bodies in *Siegfried* serve to establish character backstories

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<sup>21</sup> This layer of metatheatricity exists throughout Lepage's *Ring* cycle; spectators witness the planks' constant reconfigurations into different locales. As the curtain rises on Lepage's *Das Rheingold*, spectators view a line on the horizon, which then begins to move, evoking the rippling Rhine prior to reconfiguring to represent the heights of Valhalla.



beyond Wagner's narrative. During the first half of the overture for *Siegfried*, Lepage has performers silently enact the action that, in his mind, has unfolded between the final scene of *Die Walküre* and the first scene of *Siegfried*. As the curtain rises, we see the dying Sieglinde laid out perilously on a rocky cliff (created by another plank formation) with the infant Siegfried in her arms. Suddenly, the dwarf Mime appears and snatches the baby from Sieglinde, rushing off to let her die alone and childless. In the sequence that follows, a young Siegfried (played by a child) emerges from the wings and dashes across the stage, happily thrusting his sword at imaginary monsters while a doting Mime shuffles after him.

Lepage's use of these two physical sequences offers a characterisation of Mime that differs productively from Wagner's. In *Siegfried*'s libretto, Mime explains to the teenage hero that although he is not Siegfried's father, he nursed Sieglinde during childbirth and through her final hours—this is Wagner's only reference to Mime's history with Sieglinde and, in past productions, its status as a fact has remained ambiguous. Through the added baby-snatching sequence and subsequent scene featuring a playful, young Siegfried dashing across the stage with his guardian in fretful pursuit, Lepage develops Mime's character, emphasizing his malevolence but also adding a parental connection with a junior Siegfried in a way that acknowledges Mime's status as a kidnapper but also demonstrates the loss and loneliness leading to his act. Mime's cruel act is tempered by his clear psychological motive for taking the child— isolation. This complicates Wagner's otherwise one-dimensional, anti-Semitic characterisation of Mime as a 'hypocritical, cowardly, and repulsive' Jewish dwarf (Coren 20). Though Lepage's Mime will still knowingly attempt to sacrifice Siegfried in exchange for the ring, Lepage's use of bodies-in-motion to establish a longstanding family bond between Siegfried and Mime works towards crafting a complex human

character out of Wagner's otherwise one-dimensional caricature. Moreover, Mime's scene with Sieglinde also complicates Siegfried's backstory, making his slaying of Mime a form of retribution rather than a callous act. Of Lepage's scenic additions during the overture, one critic writes: 'Though the title character can seem like a heartless bully who kills his surrogate father after dispatching the dragon, the production's prologue puts everything in perspective. I won't spoil it for you; just don't be late' (Stearns).

Prior to considering Lepage's work with the singers in *Siegfried* and how his direction contributed to an embodied acting aesthetic, there are certain mitigating factors differentiating the theatre director from the opera director that bear note. Theatre directors working in opera are likely to encounter a broader range of acting technique and talent than the standards they've become accustomed to when staging non-music based dramas (Wolf). Wagner's 1850s 'A Communication to my Friends' highlights this challenge, insisting that opera performers should focus on dramatic nuance, putting 'the actor in the forefront' and leaving the singer 'as the actor's aid' ('Communication'). Defining a character's dramatic journey in opera involves setting blocking without compromising vocal production and eliciting more than generalised emotion from performers who may be solely focused on sound production and quality (Citron).

As the director is still a relatively new presence in the opera world, with Wagner being the first to fully take on the role, Lepage also faces the challenge that in opera, extant power hierarchies do not necessarily see the director ranking above singers. Traditionally, singers occupied a position directly below the conductor (the central authority in mounting a production). While this hierarchy continues to shift, the odds of encountering a senior singer who sees themselves as the ultimate authority on decisions

relating to their own performance are high (Dellamora and Fischlin 4). Given Lepage's rehearsal style at La Caserne, which often involves collaborating with longtime associates whose working techniques are familiar, the opera presents significantly different directorial territory. As an opera director, Lepage must earn the trust of performers who may have played a role for several years and may be rooted in a given interpretation that they see no reason to change. Lepage also faces added challenges including joint casting decisions, meeting performers only when rehearsals begin and the sudden exchange of one singer for another in casting and/or performance, as demonstrated by Ben Heppner's cancellation for *Siegfried* (Jorden), Eva-Marie Westbroek's mid-performance withdrawal on the first night of *Die Walküre* and Gary Lehman's stepping down from the title role in *Siegfried* one week prior to the production's opening night. Unlike in theatre, where making the decision to replace an actor would definitely involve a director, if not position him or her as the primary decision maker, protocol at the Metropolitan Opera sees that these types of executive decisions are made by the artistic director.

Despite the unique challenges faced by a theatre director crossing to opera, throughout the *Ring*'s run, performances in Lepage's *Siegfried* have won considerable praise. Referring to the acting as 'superb', classical music critic David Karlin notes that the uniformly strong characterisations featured in *Siegfried* are largely to Lepage's credit. Lepage's work with the singers did, in fact, have a significant impact on performances, particularly through acting values in line with those highlighted by Wagner and Appia. Lepage's direction emphasised fluid physicality, an economy of gesture and an investment in finding and establishing the character's body through every rehearsal and run of the production.

Much like Wagner and Appia, Lepage views opera's traditional stand-and-deliver style as counterintuitive to developing a dialogue between performers and their environment. Instead, he advocates dynamic physicality in his *Ring*. Through his architectonic set's various configurations, which vary drastically in terms of levels, height, depth and width, Lepage is building on the kinetic environment first championed by Appia by compelling performers to engage with their surroundings. In cases where singers were keen to challenge themselves by navigating the set's multiple surfaces, Lepage would build physical feats into their blocking. When Terfel's Wotan reintroduces himself as the troubled Wanderer in *Siegfried*, Lepage creates a tension between the character's once fearless nature and his despair: 'In one of the production's finest moments, the Wanderer walked to the very edge of the highest plank in the configuration, which jutted out over the void like a rocky promontory... [He then] called for... Erda with the desperate last-ditch ferocity of Lear howling on the heath' (Waleson 'Gods and Monsters'). Terfel takes a physical risk when striding out onto the single plank raised high above the stage floor; nonetheless, his performance never betrayed this fact and he was commended for his 'athleticism' as the Wanderer (Tommasini, 'Spin Cycle').<sup>22</sup> As Siegfried, Jay Hunter-Morris also relied on physicality to characterise the seventeen-year-old demi-god. Like Terfel, he navigated the plank formations adeptly and with confidence. Moreover, Lepage encouraged Hunter-Morris to continue to physically embody the adolescent in scenes when he wasn't scaling planks or saving Brunhilde from her fiery perch. This resulted in an overall youthful demeanour and boisterousness that, despite Hunter-Morris's forty-something age, had critics lauding his performance as the young warrior. While the *Wall Street Journal* commends Hunter-Morris's 'appealing goofiness, youthful impulsivity and bumptious

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<sup>22</sup> Terfel lost thirty pounds when playing Wotan during the *Ring*'s extended run between 2010 and 2013 at the Metropolitan Opera.

self-confidence as Siegfried' (Waleson 'Gods and Monsters'), the *New York Times* comments, 'Youthful and athletic, his physicality conveyed the character's boisterous, belligerent persona' (Schweitzer). Lauded for his physicality in the majority of reviews, Hunter-Morris was the only performer who performed a complete physical warm-up (with stretches etc.) alongside his vocal warm-up.

If the form of Lepage's set provides a high-tech update of Appia's multi-level stage space and its late nineteenth-century ideal of interactivity, the visual composition of Lepage's *Siegfried* scenography goes even further in increasing interactivity between the performer and the stage environment. Through motion sensors, Lepage creates scenery that extends the actor-set dialogue by reacting to the performer's touch. In turn, this allows for an economy of performer gestures, much like the minimalist acting aesthetic used by Wagner when staging *Parsifal*. Because the set reacts back, there is no need for actors to exaggerate gestures in an attempt to overcompensate for static scenery—Lepage's setting physically reflects any reaction to touch. Added to this is the fact that the scenography directly reflects the slightest difference from one performance to the next: 'machines allow us to make use of a bit of luck or spontaneous improvisation, so for instance movement, silence, or the singer's vocal density, which is never quite the same from one performance to the next, directly dictates the images being projected... Humans drive the electronic play' (Lepage in Machart). Again, in this Lepage has created a scenic environment where the music is embodied through scenography. Moreover, 'performances are not derivative': 'rather than according a performance the status of a finished artwork, [Lepage] treats it as just one element within a continuing cycle of development' by using technology that responds to individual performances as they unfold rather than pre-recorded videos (Reynolds, 'Authorial Process' 177).

Beyond the previously discussed scenario between Siegfried and the songbird, other notable interactive sequences also emphasise physical interchanges between the natural world and humans. During forest scenes, Lepage's staging brings Appia's crucial note to mind: 'we should no longer attempt to give the illusion of a *forest* but instead the illusion of a *man* in the atmosphere of a forest' ('Texts on Theatre' 118). As Siegfried walks among the trees, accompanied by Wagner's forest murmur leitmotif, interactive leaves scatter in response to his footsteps. Interactive technology also takes on a prominent role when Siegfried gazes into a pool of water, questioning his identity—Lepage's interactive technology allows his reversed image to gaze back. Siegfried then submerges his cupped hands into the same pool to take a drink, causing interactive ripples to peel forth from his touch. Wotan later performs a similar gesture as he pauses to lament his loss of youth and power. Now the solitary Wanderer, Wotan, touches a magic, moonlit lake, watching as 'concentric circles ripple outward' from his touch (Cohn). The technique behind this ripple is demonstrated off the top of the cycle as the Rhinemaidens appear underwater:

The position of each plank is controlled electronically, allowing them [the Rhinemaidens] to move independently or in unison, just as Craig had a score for his screens and Svoboda had one for the placement of his columns and modules for *Hamlet*. But what is new here is the fact that the mobility of what is on the stage (planks and actors) makes it possible to manage and change the projected images and to make it feel as though the set is alive, as though it is a reactive surface, or a tactile surface, like a touch screen: this is how the mermaids from the opening,

suspended from bungee cords and seemingly perched on an underwater cliff, make the pebbles around them move as their tails move or as they change position. This is what Lepage means when he says that the set breathes or paints itself. Lepage is continuing in his quest to have the actor guide the image and erase his shadow, which he began in *The Andersen Project*, but this time with a set far more malleable than the shell. (Fouquet 311).

Lepage also uses interactive technology, particularly motion sensors that cue digital images, to work with performers whose concerns about proper vocal production limit the degree to which they physicalise character. In opera, ‘the director must restrain his stage business to avoid excessive action [on the part of the singer]... music takes precedence over drama’ (Tucker 391-392). As Fafner, Hans-Peter König was resistant to blocking that could compromise vocal production, a regular concern for opera singers that can often supersede the director’s vision. This became especially problematic in *Siegfried*; once the balloon dragon deflates, Fafner appears in his human form to convey a few dying words to the young hero. Even when laid out on the stage, though Fafner was facing his death, König resisted any movement that would imply his character’s imminent demise, be it gasping for air or clutching at his painful wound. Ultimately, Lepage was able to enhance this dramatic moment through a combination of directorial mischievousness and scenography—as König appeared at the opening of Fafner’s cave, motion sensors cued video images that turned the forest stream directly above König’s head to run a vibrant red that dramatically saturated the planks with Fafner’s blood and attracted spectator focus as the giant sang his dying notes.



Figure 21. Hans-Peter König as Fafner and Jay Hunter-Morris as Siegfried, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 2010-2012, (Ken Howard/Ex Machina/Metropolitan Opera)

Lepage's Lecoq-inspired, external approach to acting, referenced in Chapter One, was his way of pre-empting 'park and bark' performances in the *Ring*. While Wagner's method for discouraging presentational, static acting at Bayreuth entailed detailed work with performers on character analysis, motivation, stakes etc., Lepage subverted presentational acting aesthetics by focusing on blocking and physicality in the rehearsal process, supporting his belief that characterisation and motivation would arise from embodied practice.<sup>23</sup> As described by Gilbert, during the initial rehearsals for the *Ring*, Lepage began immediately with the body and, as is his practice, built performances from the outside in:

It all started with the blocking. Prior to meeting the singers, Robert Lepage did his homework (reading the libretto, listening to the music, etc.). When rehearsal began on any given scene, he first placed entries, exits and scenic movements for all characters. Scene by scene,

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<sup>23</sup> A later section of this chapter returns to the topic of blocking and places it in the context of the conditions of production.



he placed each singer and directed all movements, explaining why as they went along, answering the singers questions, etc. Singers often felt insecure since Robert was placing them without, at first, saying much about their intentions. Often, motivations became clearer on the 2nd or 3rd rehearsal on a given scene. Since the set was not available in the rehearsal room, we worked with props, mock-ups and floor taping. Characters were built from there, i.e. motivations, emotions, relationships appeared from the initial blocking. After the team (singers, musical staff, assistants) went through the whole work once, they worked each scene again. Chorus, supers, acrobats were gradually added to the soloists. Normally, in the B Level Rehearsal room, we were able to go through each of the 4 operas 3 to 4 times. Each time quicker (with less stops); the last time being a run through of each act. ('Ring Question', emphases in original)<sup>24</sup>

Gilbert's reference to the singers' distress demonstrates that they were not accustomed to beginning the rehearsal process with blocking and movement. They were, instead, expecting the institutionalised norm—a Stanislavkian approach to the first week of rehearsals through table work, which has become common practice for many Western theatre and opera organisations (Thomas xxviii). For initial rehearsals, the cast gathers around a table and carefully analyses 'all motives, implications, relationships, characters, through-actions, super-objectives, etc.' before working on their feet and

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<sup>24</sup> As an observership auditor, I was invited to watch rehearsals once the company began working on stage. The B Level Rehearsal Room is in the basement of the Metropolitan Opera.

setting blocking (Thomas xxiii).<sup>25</sup> As Gilbert's citation implies, in Lepage's case, work on objectives, characterisations and stakes 'appears' through repeated scene runs and questions posed by performers rather than table sessions focused explicitly on discussion of the text.

While Lepage's high-tech scenography demonstrates the evolution of Appia's interactivity, in some respects, his staging follows on the acting aesthetic privileged by Wagner, which remained fairly uniform before and after the composer's exposure to Schopenhauer's theories. Lepage is faithful to Wagner's stage directions (Tommasini, 'Zambello and Lepage'), which explicitly call for precise gestures from characters, either to highlight a particular melodic line or phrase of text. Wagner had a 'practice of composing gesturally or mimetically significant music, whereby stage action and musical gestures are interconnected'; he would 'shape and correlate text, music, gesture, and stagecraft' (Syer 5). In having performers recreate these gestures and beginning rehearsals with blocking, Lepage demonstrates his outside-in approach to acting. By embodying the characters' physical actions, performers begin to inhabit the character, from which point objectives, actions and stakes come into view. As Giovanni Fusetti, a graduate of L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq, states: 'For Lecoq, everything starts from the body. He does touch human emotions, but in a way that philosophically is quite peculiar, because it states that the reality outside is more real than the reality inside' (Fusetti and Wilson 94). By physically experiencing how the character exists in the world, the actor discovers his character.

This approach contributed to praise for many of the performances in *Siegfried* and the *Ring* cycle overall. Hunter-Morris and Deborah Voigt (Brunhilde) are

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<sup>25</sup> By 1950, Stanislavki began to see the problems in 'table work'. He 'saw that even the most patient and sensitive directors (including him) could not avoid becoming creator despots by their need to merge the actors and designers as quickly as possible with the director's previously imagined impression of the play'. He realised that 'unintentionally the practice of table work had begun to deprive the actors and designers of creative initiative' (Thomas xxiv).

celebrated for delivering a ‘shifting and rapturous 30-minute love duet’ in *Siegfried*, which, under Lepage’s direction, sees many of Wagner’s stage directions realised in full at the prescribed moment (Tommasini, ‘Dragons’). These include, ‘In great excitement he remains with his gaze fixed upon her... with the last words he has involuntarily let go of Brunhilde... Brunhilde throws herself into Siegfried’s arms’ (Wagner, *Siegfried* 56). Though not always vocally flawless as Brunhilde, Voigt embodies her character’s complicated emotional state, a fact that seemed to win over her critics: ‘Voigt poignantly captures Brunhilde’s confusion as she grapples with the loss of her godhood and realises that no armour will protect her from the threat of Siegfried’s love (Tommasini, ‘Dragons’). For his part, Hunter-Morris ‘inhabits his character so completely’ that his is the ‘best-acted’ performance in the production (Stearns). Other performers are equally successful with Lepage’s directorial focus on movement, Wagner’s stage directions and the use of digital interactivity. Complementing the dramatic charge of Lepage’s *Siegfried*, *Opera News* focuses on the Wanderer (Bryn Terfel) and Alberich (Eric Owens): ‘the performers’ movements and reactions gave a sense of the complex history that had provoked their mutual animosity’ (Cohn). This history was developed as Lepage, the singers and the production’s innovative scenography followed on Wagner’s stage directions to embody the music’s mood when the Wanderer and Alberich meet: ‘The mood breaks forth as from a sudden dissolving cloud and lights up the Wanderer’s figure. Alberich recognises the Wanderer, shrinks back alarmed, but immediately breaks out into a violent anger’ (Wagner, *Siegfried* 26). Owens’s performance, celebrated throughout the cycle, demonstrates unparalleled specificity here. He clearly physicalises the character’s decision to confront the Wanderer, shifting rapidly from a contracted, cowardly posture to attack mode, standing tall with his chest inflated.

Performing bodies would also play an important role with regards to questions of anti-Semitism in Wagner's *Ring*. Like any artistic team facing the *Ring* cycle, Peter Gelb, Robert Lepage and the Metropolitan Opera's principal conductor, James Levine, were presented with Wagner's problematic caricatures of Jewishness through Alberich and Mime. Their decision on how to move forward would be influenced by the professional and cultural climate in which the *Ring* was produced and received. Enduring debates have centred on sensitivities around the issue of anti-Semitism in opera and questions surrounding producing works that arguably traffic in problematic renderings. *The Death of Klinghoffer*, an opera by John Adams that dramatises the 1985 hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship and the murder of a Jewish-American passenger by the Palestine Liberation Front, prompted outrage when it was produced. Many viewers 'felt it unduly favoured the Palestinian point of view' (Ross, 'Klinghoffer'). Moreover, after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, the Boston Symphony cancelled its plan to perform excerpts from the same opera. In 2010, charges of anti-Semitism in Wagner's *Ring* sparked protest when a production of Wagner's cycle opened at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles. 'One [protester's] banner read: "Wagner: Loved by Nazis, Rejected by Humans." Another said: "L.A. County: \$14 Million to promote Nazi Wagner, Layoffs for Music Teachers"' (Ng). Most recently, after discussions with the Anti-Defamation League in 2014, the Metropolitan Opera decided to cancel all simulcasts of its upcoming production of *The Death of Klinghoffer*. Peter Gelb noted that he did not think that the opera was anti-Semitic but, referring to the Israel-Palestine conflict, stated that going forward with the broadcast 'would be inappropriate at this time of rising anti-Semitism, particularly in Europe' (in Cooper). Given these reactions against Wagner's *Ring* and Adams's *Death of Klinghoffer*, the decision made by Gelb, Levine and Lepage to cast Eric Owens, an

African-American singer, as Alberich points to consideration of the potential challenges of producing the tetralogy and a conscious effort to diffuse them. The effectiveness of this casting as a means to subvert anti-Semitic readings of Alberich would hinge, in part, on broader casting/representational norms in twenty and twenty-first century opera.

For African-American male performers, breaking colour barriers is a continued challenge in the U.S. entertainment industry, particularly at the Metropolitan Opera. Though singer Robert McFerrin was scheduled to be the first African American to perform in a leading role at the opera house in 1955, the company made the last minute decision to engage a Black female singer (Marian Anderson) three month's prior to McFerrin's planned debut.<sup>26</sup> In an article charting the history of Black male performers at the Metropolitan Opera, musician and scholar Wallace Cheatham identifies a possible link between the decision to replace McFerrin with Anderson in 1955 and the insecure 'position and image of black males in opera' thirty-two years later (6). By 1987, thirty-two years after McFerrin's debut in 1955, the Metropolitan Opera had cast only four African-American male performers in lead roles (Cheatham 3). Just under ten years later, the status quo had not shifted. In her 1997 article 'Black Male Singers Feel Like 'Invisible Men' of U.S. Opera', Verena Dobnik presents the continued difficulties faced by African American male singers in the country: 'This season [1996-1997], the Met, with almost 200 men on its solo roster, has one black tenor, two baritones and a rarely used countertenor. At Chicago's Lyric Opera, there isn't a single black male cast in a leading role, and the Houston Grand Opera has one, a bass-baritone'. Dobnik also references conductor James Levine's twenty-fifth anniversary performance at the

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<sup>26</sup> Theories on why McFerrin was supplanted by Anderson include that the Metropolitan Opera felt engaging a female African-American singer would result in a smoother transition for its patrons (Cheatham 6). Other sources cite the influence and power of persuasion of Anderson's agent, Sol Hurok (Keiler 419).

Metropolitan Opera in 1996, which lasted eight hours and featured ‘scores of singers’ but ‘not a single black man sang’ (Dobnik). Most recently, in a 2012 joint interview, the editors of *Blackness in Opera*, Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor, reiterated the ongoing nature of the problem: ‘A long-standing problem is that while black women have had the most success as singers in opera (and it is not like there is an over-abundance who have made it to the top at any given moment), there are fewer black men who have been able to break into this profession... There is *much* room for improvement here’ (emphasis in original).

Because of the limited performance opportunities afforded to Black male opera singers in the United States and at the Metropolitan Opera, having Owens play Alberich, a central role in the *Ring* cycle, adds an incisive, metatheatrical layer of meaning to the character’s position as an outcast. Tommasini writes, ‘his race lent an intangible depth and complexity to the portrayal. This Alberich truly seemed an outsider, someone who has been wounded by prejudice and is hungry for revenge’ (‘Casting’). This is representative of a larger culture shaping contemporary opera:

Directors and conductors who make casting choices, along with opera audiences, can truly never be ‘blind’ to a singer’s race. It is a major component of any artist’s presence and personality. And productions these days can take advantage, in a sense, of the racial makeup of cast members to deepen our understanding of certain roles and stimulate new takes on a complex opera. (Tommasini ‘Casting’)

Of course, casting Eric Owens does not, in and of itself, subvert the anti-Semitism that is at play in Wagner’s dramatic text and, arguably, traffics in another form of racism,

substituting one minority for another. Nonetheless, Owens well-drawn and unique portrayal of Alberich announced ‘the emergence of a new major Wagner singer’ whose performance promises to become ‘part of the history of opera’ (Ross ‘The Depths’), helping to destabilise Alberich as a stereotypical, one-dimensional caricature.

A villainous dwarf who is debatably one of Wagner’s most anti-Semitic caricatures, Alberich is powerfully re-appropriated here through a defeated physicality, palpably summoning the character’s loneliness and pain. As the isolated Alberich is overwhelmed in his attempts to navigate the mocking, young Rhinemaidens, Owens is far from a lecherous villain, reading in his stark stillness as dejected, rejected and hungry for what, in Lepage’s production, seemed to be warranted revenge (Tommasini ‘Casting’). Owens’s ‘chilling and uncommonly dignified Alberich’ was viewed by *The New York Times*, among other publications, as destined for ‘the annals of Ring greatness’ (Tommasini, ‘Spin Cycle’).<sup>27</sup> Again, although not attributable to the casting of Owens exclusively, the Metropolitan/Ex Machina co-production of the *Ring* cycle did not prompt any protests surrounding what is arguably anti-Semitic content in Wagner’s *Ring* (Lewin).<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, movie theatre simulcasts of the Metropolitan

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<sup>27</sup> Of Owens’s performance in the *Ring*, *Opera News* columnist Oussama Zahr writes: His role debut as Alberich in Robert Lepage’s new production of *Das Rheingold* at the Met in 2010 made him a star... On record and in live performance, there have been fine interpreters of the part, singers who have taken the role of the avaricious dwarf far enough beyond caricature to prove that there is more to him than Wagner’s queasy anti-Semitism. But the integrity of Owens’s musical line transmitted itself to the character, and the soulfulness of his voice elevated Alberich beyond mere evil. In Owens’s interpretation, Alberich is motivated not by indiscriminate malice but by disdain for the injustices he has been dealt — by the alluring Rhinemaidens who have spurned him; by the beautiful gods who have excluded him; by Wotan, who has punished his theft of the gold by stealing it from him. With his multi-dimensional performance, Owens had the breakout success of his career.

<sup>28</sup> Wagner scholar Mark Berry agrees that the lack of discussion in New York was surprising, ‘I agree that you’d think the issues raised by anti-Semitism might be mentioned, but it really depends: there isn’t necessarily much space for such matters. And I don’t know how much writers in NYC... would wish to evade them’.

Opera's *Ring* were not run in Israel due to an unofficial ban on performances of Wagner's music.

In the context of Lepage's past work and the arguably extant xenophobic attitudes held by some in Québec, the decision to cast Owens also demonstrates a progressive shift. Lepage's depiction of a Black character in his 1999 cabaret production *Zulu Time* was extremely problematic. Not only did Lepage have Métis actor Marco Poulin appear in blackface and body paint to portray a bewildered, primitivised Zulu tribesman but he also paralleled this character in a later sequence, featuring a performer in a monkey costume. These scenes inferred a parallel between the Zulu warrior and the monkey, creating a problematic connection. As Fricker notes, this portrayal reflects a broader 'lack of shared agreement in Québec about what constitutes acceptable and normal terms of reference to ethnic and "racial" difference' (9).

The casting of Owens also signalled a progressive shift as contextualised alongside cultural norms in Québec. Quebeckers have continued to use blackface in the twenty-first century and, more importantly, many see no problem in doing so. Recent incidents of White Quebeckers appearing in blackface include: four separate vignettes featuring blackface on the comedy show 'The Bye Bye' between 2010 and 2011 (Dauphin); students appearing in blackface, holding stuffed monkeys and using Jamaican accents to mimic Hussein Bolt at an Olympics-themed gathering at the University of Montreal (Monpetit); and a skit at the Gala Les Olivier, (a Québec comedy awards program that draws approximately one million viewers) featuring the White performer Mario Jean in blackface as Boucar Diouf, an African-Canadian comedian. When journalist Nydia Dauphin addressed these incidents in a Huffington Post article, 'Why the hell are Quebecois comedians wearing Blackface?', instead of prompting apologies or further conversation about racial politics in the province, she



was criticised by local media for calling the White Quebeckers racist (Dwivedi).

Whether at his own suggestion or Gelb's, in agreeing to cast Owens and working with him to craft such a physically nuanced performance text, Lepage helped to challenge extant practices at the Metropolitan Opera as well as his own past politics of representation and established ideas in Québec surrounding acceptable expressions of cultural difference.

Though the cast of *Siegfried* gave strong performances overall, Lepage encountered a challenge with the performer playing Mime, Gerhard Siegel, which was complicated by contemporary opera's established conditions of production. Over the course of his career, Siegel has played Mime in at least ten productions, traveling between Vienna, London, Bayreuth and New York, among other cities to offer his signature interpretation of the role. In 2007, *The Sunday Times* announced that Siegel was 'the optimum casting worldwide for this role at the moment' (Canning). Typecasting of this sort is commonplace in international opera productions as is the understanding that a performer essentially brings his or her set characterisation to a given production (particularly given short rehearsal periods). As familiar as Lepage is with the world of opera, for his co-production of *Siegfried*, he had conceived of a different characterisation of Mime as a conflicted kidnapper-cum-father (which is demonstrated by the supplementary scenes exploring the Mime-Siegfried backstory during *Siegfried's* overture). Despite Lepage's efforts in rehearsal to work with Siegel towards this characterisation, for the most part, the singer continued to play Mime as he always had—as an archetypically greedy, 'Jewish' villain. In theatre, a characterisation that defies the director's vision might be attributed to a lack of acting range or mistrust of the director but in opera the conditions of production prescribe a different set of norms. Ultimately, Siegel did his job as established by international industry standards:

the singer arrives for rehearsal with a strong interpretation in mind, takes blocking and perhaps minor acting notes from the director while deferring to the conductor on all other matters. On opening night, he presents his signature interpretation of the character, (an interpretation which, as far as opera's working model is concerned, led to the initial job offer).

Lepage's attempts to simplify the character and subvert Siegel's stock portrayal of the 'hate-filled hunchback' were only partially successful (Holfer).<sup>29</sup> While some critics lauded the aspects of Siegel's performance that demonstrated the stereotypical characterisation, others seemed to have glimpsed Lepage's efforts to add nuance, and demonstrated interest in this different take on Wagner's one-dimensional dwarf. Of the former group, comments included: 'Gerhard Siegel's Mime was exceptional, a despicably squirming portrayal' (Walport) and 'As the clever, conniving Mime, he giggled and grovelled, schemed and threatened, using every tool at his disposal. Among the most impressive is his razor-sharp diction, each consonant spat out like someone expelling sunflower seed husks for rhetorical effect' (Fonseca-Wollheim). Those commending the more nuanced aspects of the performance noted that Siegel 'replaced traditional cackling and whining with fervour worthy of a Siegfried' (Reich). Further praise related to the combination of Siegel's singing and Lepage's prologue notes includes:

The best singing of the night belonged to Gerhard Siegel as Mime, the evil dwarf who raises the title character as a troubled boy and apprentice smith. Mr. Lepage staged the opera's Prelude, showing Mime stealing baby Siegfried

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<sup>29</sup> In my conversation with Bernard Gilbert, Siegel's characterisation was never explicitly described as anti-Semitic. Instead, Gilbert commented that Lepage's concern with Siegel's portrayal centred on the singer's propensity to be 'too busy and inflexible' in the role (B. Gilbert, 'Interview').

from a dying Sieglinde, and including a quick montage of the young warrior growing up. Mr. Siegel sang the part with an unending sense of melody, using great skill to actually sing where other character tenors merely screech.

(Pelkonen)

Others commended both aspects of the characterisation: ‘As Mime, the Nibelung dwarf who raises Siegfried and covets the magical golden ring at the centre of the tetralogy, Gerhard Siegel gave a rich portrayal of his character’s greedy, conniving and bumbling tendencies as well as his almost pitiable side’ (Bernheimer, ‘Siegfried’). Whether critics perceived Siegel’s characterisation as stereotypical, more complex or a combination of both, ultimately his performance in *Siegfried* was generally lauded, with no critiques of the racist undertones colouring Wagner’s original conception of Mime or Siegel’s portrayal.

### **Reception & Conditions of Production**

Like many non-traditional re-envisionings of the *Ring*, Lepage’s staging took a critical lashing in the media. Alex Ross, the opera critic for *The New Yorker*, not only pronounced that ‘Pound for pound, ton for ton, it [Lepage’s *Ring*] is the most witless and wasteful production in modern operatic history’ (‘Diminuendo’), but he also penned a later piece summarising the production’s negative critical reception:

Anthony Tommasini, in the *Times*, called it ‘the most frustrating opera production I have ever had to grapple with’. Justin Davidson, in *New York*, wrote, ‘There’s hardly a moment in any of the four episodes when you sense the director’s passionate involvement with the

characters or their moral dilemmas'. Brian Kellow, in *Opera News* (published by the Metropolitan Opera Guild), announced that 'we are in the midst of a very bad period', and went on to quote my 'Ring' review. Heidi Waleson, in the *Wall Street Journal*, perceived 'no sustaining vision'. Jeremy Eichler, in the *Boston Globe*, tapped in the final nail: 'In their fetishization of technological brilliance at the expense of just about everything else, Lepage's productions remain a chilling, cautionary tale'. ('Encircling the Ring')

These excerpts are among the most acerbic critiques of Lepage's *Ring* and were no doubt selected by Ross as they support (and cite) his view. As the citations used throughout this chapter demonstrate, Lepage's *Ring* was not met with exclusively negative reviews. My analysis would be remiss, however, not to note that journalistic responses to Lepage's *Ring* were highly critical overall. This reception can be explained by numerous factors, among them issues of taste and the ways in which opera spectators and critics have been traditionally conditioned to privilege certain performative elements over others (e.g., park-and-bark delivery rather than nuanced physical performances); notions of Wagner's Bayreuth production as the definitive, authoritative staging; and the conditions of production at the Metropolitan Opera, which, as discussed below, undercut rehearsal time and did not support Lepage and Ex Machina's way of working. Moreover, most opera patrons are not accustomed to Lepage's work-in-progress approach to production. When the bridge to Valhalla failed to materialise on the first night performance of *Das Rheingold*, the fact that it appeared during most other

performances and created a stunning aerial perspective does not negate the first night's failure.



Figure 22. The rainbow bridge to Valhalla in *Das Rheingold* Der Ring des Nibelungen, 2010-2012, (Ken Howard/Ex Machina/Metropolitan Opera)

What these reviews fail to measure is Lepage's success in working towards a heightened, digital theatricality in opera or the ways in which his production questions the form's traditions and constraints. Much like Chéreau's *Ring*, which was the subject of immediate critical ire, Lepage's production works to push boundaries in opera production. As cited in Chapter Two, the steady influx of film and theatre directors to opera over time and the use of increasingly sophisticated technology on stage signals that opera is changing as a mode of performance. Acting and physical performance text are emerging as important values in opera. Lepage's concern with opera's increasing investment in theatricality and his attempts to see these values realised in Wagner's *Ring* follows his approach to iconic texts by Shakespeare and Ibsen. Though opera production is still in its infancy relative to theatre, Lepage's interest in both forms hinges on an increased theatricality (scenographic dramaturgy) that overwrites, or at least contends with, preconceived notions of how the works of major writers/composers should be produced. Thanks to Lepage's successful realisation of the music-made-visual

aesthetic through Appian scenography, it is my belief that much like Chéreau's 1976 production, Lepage's *Ring* will be viewed retrospectively as groundbreaking.

One of Ex Machina's key challenges in working with the Metropolitan Opera was negotiating the institutionalised norms defining the performance-making process, a challenge that affected the production's scenographic dramaturgy. Having collaborated with large companies in the past, Lepage now insists on a particular way of working. As articulated by his producer, Michel Bernatchez:

Robert came to realise at some point that big structures, the ones who could pay him well and invited him, were not producing his shows the way he wanted them to be produced. Generally speaking, they were expecting developed concepts prior to rehearsal, which is not his way of working. So what we now say to people who want Robert's services is that Ex Machina and Ex Machina's production space have to be involved in one way or another. So most of the time we end up getting co-productions. We're involved in a way that we can bring over the artists for a least a part of their rehearsals. Robert's collaborators, set designer, image design assistants are also automatically working with him... Ex Machina is part of everything. (in Lavender, 98-99)

After their trip to Iceland and during the initial stages drafting scenic templates for the *Ring*, Lepage and Fillion worked at La Caserne developing a prototype of the machine.<sup>30</sup> For the next stage of creation, Lepage, Gelb and the stagehands' union,

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<sup>30</sup> Fillion notes that this is an integral aspect of Ex Machina's process: 'We always work with prototypes in a laboratory... You cannot just draw it, build it, and put it on a stage. You have to work with prototypes

Local 1, had agreed that Ex Machina and the Metropolitan Opera would divide the set's construction between locations in Québec (Varenes and La Caserne) and New York. When 'Lepage's team changed plans for the set—using steel instead of a lightweight material and moving the construction of another piece of machinery to Quebec... according to the Met—the union filed a grievance' (Wakin, 'Dispute').<sup>31</sup> This would represent the first challenge in the process. Though the union grievance was settled it came at a high price; Gelb 'declined to discuss the cost of the [steel] reinforcement, saying only that it was in the six figures' (Wakin, 'Steel Supports').<sup>32</sup>

Rehearsals marked another challenge. Unlike companies focusing on text-based productions, at Ex Machina, actors, technicians and the set are involved from the beginning of the process, breeding an environment where blocking, scenography and performances evolve through an interconnected dialogue. Lepage does not create a physical and visual performance text prior to rehearsals. Instead, scenographic dramaturgy sees him guiding the performance text's development through the dialogue between actors, sets and objects that occurs in the rehearsal room. The rehearsal space 'is arranged to accommodate' the creative process and, from the beginning of the process, 'the computers are connected and video projectors are set up, ready to be used at a moment's notice in order to explore ideas coming out of the rehearsal process' (Dundjerović, 'Performance Transformations' 172).<sup>33</sup> This is only slightly different when an extant text, be it dramatic or musical, is present. The written text becomes one resource among many that informs, but does not dominate, the theatre-making process.

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and models, to do the research to know if you're putting on something that's completely wrong' (in Barbour 56).

<sup>31</sup> The set was built by Scène Éthique, the Montreal-base scenic fabrication company. This in itself is rather unusual, as the Met normally builds its own sets.

<sup>32</sup> The terms of the settlement remain private.

<sup>33</sup> Andy Lavender notes that during rehearsals for *Elsinore* at La Caserne, Lepage and Fillion worked with a prototype of the set from the first day of rehearsal. A small group of stagehands joined them to manually run the set (or 'the machine'). The sections, scene lengths and order were decided by the scenography. Lavender states: 'according to this view... the production writes the play rather than the other way around' (105).

At the Metropolitan Opera, blocking rehearsals did not feature a prototype of the set and, therefore, saw Lepage directing singers without the scenic resource that was the meaning-making axis of his production.<sup>34</sup> Bernard Gilbert comments:

When we were working on *The Nightingale* in Toronto, Aix, Lyon and Amsterdam, we were able to rehearse many weeks, full time, with the whole cast (singers, puppeteers, chorus) and scenography. This is impossible at the Met, where the rehearsal room is too small to build the set, and where stage time with the whole production is limited, because of the rep system. ('Ring Question')

At the Metropolitan Opera, Lepage spent most of his time in a rehearsal room that presumed his work with performers began with a conventional approach based on table work and psychological realism, not embodied scenographic engagement. Without the set pieces, objects and multi-level playing spaces that were so integral to his performance-making process, Lepage would turn to blocking and character analysis, biding his time with uneasy performers until his scenographic dramaturgy could begin (B. Gilbert, 'Ring Question').

When the time came to begin rehearsing on the stage with the performers and running crew, the schedule, provided to the observership candidates, demonstrates the time constraints:

STAGE REHEARSAL – SIEGFRIED - OCTOBER 2011

Friday Oct 7 - 13h to 17h = technical work / 18h to 23h = music rehearsal, piano rm. 2

Sunday Oct 9 - 9h to 11h = tech / 11h to 18h = music rehearsal piano 2 (no light no video)

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<sup>34</sup> Blocking rehearsals with the director occur separately from singing rehearsals.



Tuesday, Oct 11 – 9h to 10h30 = tech / 10h30 to 14h30 = music rehearsals, piano 3-4-5 rm. (with lights and video)

Wednesday, Oct 12 – same as Oct. 11

Friday, Oct 14 – same as Oct. 11

Sunday, Oct 16: 9h to 17h = technical work (without the singers)

Monday Oct 17: 9h to 10h30 = tech / 10h30 to 14h = orchestra rehearses on stage 1-2-3 (with lights and video)

Tuesday, Oct. 18 – same as Oct. 17

Wednesday, Oct. 19 – same as Oct. 17

Thursday, Oct. 20: 8h30 to 10h30 = tech / 10h30 à 16h30 = piano and singers (lights - video - costumes)

Friday 21: 8h30 to 10h30 = tech / 10h30 to 16h30 = general orchestra (lights - video - costumes)

Monday 24 : 8h30 to 10h30 = tech / 10h30 to 16h30 = Final Dress.<sup>35</sup> (St-Jacques, ‘Siegfried’)

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<sup>35</sup> My translation of:

RÉPÉTITIONS SUR SCÈNE – SIEGFRIED – OCTOBRE 2011

Vendredi 7 : 13h à 17h = technical work / 18h à 23h = répétition piano 1 (no lighth, no video)

Dimanche 9 : 9h à 11h = tech / 11h à 18h = répétition piano 2 (no light no vidéo)

Mardi 11 - mercredi 12 - vendredi 14 : 9h à 10h30 = tech / 10h30 à 14h30 = répétitions piano 3-4-5 (with lights and video)

Dimanche 16 : 9h à 17h = technical work (without the singers)

Lundi 17 - mardi 18 - mercredi 19 : 9h à 10h30 = tech / 10h30 à 14h = répétitions orchestre 1-2-3 (with lights and video)

Jeudi 20 : 8h30 à 10h30 = tech / 10h30 à 16h30 = générale piano (lights - vidéo - costumes)

Vendredi 21 : 8h30 à 10h30 = tech / 10h30 à 16h30 = générale orchestre (lights - vidéo - costumes)

-Lundi 24 : 8h30 à 10h30 = tech / 10h30 à 16h30 = Final Dress

As per this schedule, the singers' time on stage with the set was limited to forty-and-a-half hours over the three weeks leading up to opening night. And, while twelve of those hours did not include the orchestra, the remainder of the time saw the entire company, including the musicians, rehearsing together. When the orchestra was present for a rehearsal, sessions were focused on working through as much material as possible with no time for singers to experiment or practice moving on/with the set exclusively. Given that *Siegfried* is a five-hour opera, each hour of the final production received a brief total of 2.4 hours rehearsal time with the director and set exclusively. As it stands, the Metropolitan Opera's production schedule suits the needs of productions featuring basic blocking, which can be established in the rehearsal room and easily transferred once on the stage set. This schedule is not suited to the development of a highly physical and visual performance text based on singers' forging a kinetic interchange with a computerised set. For the running crew, time is stretched even more tightly. Due to the Metropolitan Opera's repertory system, the crew has a maximum of forty hours over three weeks to work with the set without the singers. Gilbert notes that despite the fact that the *Ring* 'set is computerised, there are also stagehands in every scene, manning cables and ropes' (in Davidson). Within the forty hours, the crew must learn the technical choreography to support the planks' movements in each scene. This differs significantly from rehearsals at *Ex Machina* where the technicians, set and performers work together from the outset (or as close to the outset as possible).

A further challenge faced by *Ex Machina* at the Metropolitan Opera involved the expectations of the technical team. Like the staff at most other large theatres or opera houses, the crew at the Metropolitan Opera understood directors in a way that dovetails with Ric Knowles's description:

Directors are understood, at least by their boards and backers, to deliver theatrical productions as ‘products’ for the consumption of audiences who are understood to be the consumers of the theatre industry. These directors are most often trained to function within rehearsal processes as autocrats, creative geniuses whose vision shapes a theatrical production that actors, designers, and technicians – who are constructed in this model as the theatre’s working class – are trained to deliver. The standard English-language teaching texts for directing that are most readily available... casually employ metaphors of the director as ‘a good general’, ‘a ship’s captain’ ... and ‘a guiding genius’; and they invariably describe the director’s job as beginning by arriving at a single and unifying intellectual or creative concept’ (*Material Theatre* 25).

Lepage’s directorial approach differs significantly from this model, a fact that caused tensions at the Metropolitan Opera. The company’s production team and technical director, John Sellars, arrived at the opera house prepared to encounter ‘a good general’ who would give explicit directions with regards to running the set.<sup>36</sup> Contrary to these

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<sup>36</sup> Lepage faced similar challenges when production rehearsals began for *Shakespeare’s Rapid Eye Movement in Germany*. In an interview, he commented that he felt pressure to act like a commander, explaining:

I don’t work that way, and I’ll always remember the assistant director the first day we arrived at the theatre, which was like a week after the first readings. We arrived at the theatre and the technicians were there and nothing was happening... And he said, ‘Well, that’s because you’re not screaming. You have to scream at them. If you don’t scream, nothing is going to happen’. And I said, ‘But I’m not a screamer’. And he said, ‘OK, then I’ll scream’. And it was like that for two months and it was excruciating. (‘Arts Desk Q & A’)

expectations, Lepage and the members of his Ex Machina team were more interested in pushing the boundaries of opera production via a work in progress than in creating a definitively finished product for the Metropolitan Opera. Moreover, Ex Machina prefers for their producers to stay at some distance once the creation process begins, giving them more freedom, but ‘the Met was much more involved, hands on’ (B. Gilbert ‘Ring Question’). Unlike many of the other co-producers with which Ex Machina works, ‘for the *Ring*, the research and development, creation and production processes were all joint ventures with the Met’ (B. Gilbert, ‘Ring Question’).

Ex Machina’s challenges at the Met were further exacerbated by Lepage’s own struggles to establish some distance between himself and his Metropolitan Opera collaborators during *Siegfried* rehearsals. In discussions surrounding ‘the Machine’ and its unpredictable movements in rehearsal, Lepage and his Ex Machina collaborators would physically form a closed circle and conduct conversations in French. Often this occurred while the Met’s technical director, John Sellars, and other crew members stood nearby, waiting for an opportunity to be invited into the conversation when it reverted to English. This allowed the Ex Machina team to make private decisions regarding the set, which the crew would then somewhat blindly follow. Although this strategy may have seemed to Lepage and his collaborators like a pre-emptive strike against resistance from the Met staff, it ultimately backfired.

Though the least technically problematic of Lepage’s for *Ring* productions, (in one performance of *Die Walküre* the projections disappeared and a Windows logo appeared on the set) on the opening night of *Siegfried*, the ‘machine’ did malfunction. During a transition into Brunhilde’s mountaintop setting, in which Deborah Voigt is tethered to the bottom side of the upstage the planks, awaiting her reveal in an inverted position, the set jammed and, for a lengthy period, seemed as though it would not rotate.

As Tommasini writes: ‘During the scene change to a mountain summit... there were crashing sounds from backstage, which took attention away from the glorious orchestra’. Little did the critic know that these noises were the sounds of panicked crewmembers trying fruitlessly to right the machine’s orientation without harming Voigt. Ultimately Voigt emerged unscathed and the set finally rotated; nonetheless, the incident revealed the Met crew’s lack of understanding concerning how the set functioned and the best ways to proceed when it misbehaved. Since the crew had been excluded through language from many conversations between Lepage and the set’s designer, Carl Fillion, their lack of familiarity with the highly complex set follows suit. In a particularly telling comment about the production’s run, John Sellars stated ‘It wasn’t without blemishes... but we figured out what they were, and we dealt with it... [in time] the set became consistent and predictable’ (qtd. in Baron). This correctly implies that Sellars and his team were not helped in the process of ‘figuring out’ the machine in rehearsal and would instead reckon with a steep learning curve during the production’s run.<sup>37</sup> Though Lepage may have sought to protect his authority and artistic vision by keeping the Met staff at a distance, his decision to exclude them had serious repercussions in performance.

Though the least technically problematic of Lepage’s four *Ring* productions, on the opening night of *Siegfried*, an error occurred with the set.<sup>38</sup> During a transition into Brunhilde’s mountaintop setting, in which Deborah Voigt was tethered to the concealed underside of a plank where she awaited her reveal in an inverted position, the set became immobile and, for a lengthy period, seemed as though it would not rotate. As Tommasini writes: ‘During the scene change to a mountain summit... there were

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<sup>37</sup> This is not to say, of course, that intimate knowledge of the set would have prevented every unplanned incident in performance, particularly since there were occasions in rehearsals when the set malfunctioned and the staff at Ex Machina were puzzled as to why.

<sup>38</sup> In one performance of *Die Walküre*, the projections disappeared and a Windows logo appeared on the set for an extended period.

crashing sounds from backstage, which took attention away from the glorious orchestra' ('Dragons'). These noises were the sounds of crewmembers trying to right the machine's orientation without harming Voigt. Ultimately Voigt emerged unscathed and the set finally rotated; nonetheless, the incident revealed the Met crew's lack of experience with the set. In a particularly telling comment about the production's run, Sellars stated 'It wasn't without blemishes... but we figured out what they were, and we dealt with it... [in time] the set became consistent and predictable' (in Barron). This implies that Sellars and his team did not have the time necessary to 'figure out' the machine in rehearsal and would instead reckon with a steep learning curve during the production's run.<sup>39</sup>

Having brought his machine to New York to stage the *Ring* cycle, Lepage encountered an even bigger machine—the contemporary opera institution. Despite its innovations, Lepage's *Siegfried* would largely be a product of the Metropolitan Opera's conditions of production, demonstrating that 'when creating a piece of theatre, the way it is made, the process's ethics, aesthetics, ecology etc., become dramaturgical concerns, as they inform and shape the materiality of production' (Trencsényi and Cochrane). Whether linked to large issues, such as the Metropolitan Opera's decision to stage the *Ring* using its standard production schedule, or minute details, like Jay Hunter-Morris's pre-performance stretching routine, Lepage's *Siegfried* belonged to and resulted from a greater ecology. This system and *Siegfried* were defined by a series of established institutional concerns, among them the fact that opera is in the midst of an identity crisis—its need for a mass audience contradicts its elitist lineage (and the elitist coffers to which it is attached). Moreover, opera does not yet have the experience to properly support and mount highly physical and visual productions aimed at bringing in a

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<sup>39</sup> This is not to say, of course, that intimate knowledge of the set would have prevented every unplanned incident in performance, particularly since there were occasions in rehearsals when the set malfunctioned and Ex Machina staff were puzzled as to why.

younger generation. Relying on a standard rehearsal period that gives the director a minimal amount of time with the performers on set is counterintuitive to efforts to push opera's stylistic boundaries and incorporate physicality. My next chapter, '*The Nightingale and Other Short Fables: Re-Authoring Atypical Opera*', not only examines the availability of atypically structured opera texts to Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy but also interrogates alternative rehearsal and production models that best support his theatre-making process.

Lepage's production of *Siegfried* would represent the high point in the Metropolitan Opera's 2010-2012 *Ring* cycle, seeing *Ex Machina* make a significant contribution to the high-tech evolution of the music-made-visible aesthetic espoused by Wagner and theorised by Appia. Through architectonic scenography, motion sensors and interactive, three-dimensional imaging, Lepage would develop a way for scenic space to engage in a dialogue with the actor as well as foster a meaning-making interaction built exclusively on the tension between scenic form and composition. Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy would also enable him to subvert Wagner's anti-Semitic characters and break ground through casting choices that challenge the Metropolitan Opera's production norms. With regards to operational, working conditions, however, Lepage and his *Ex Machina* collaborators faced a system that, despite some flexibility, was at odds with their way of working. As my interrogation moves into an exploration of Lepage's stagings of operas that are more dramaturgically 'open', particularly *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, and the venues that welcome them, the results of Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy in production will be further examined alongside the social, cultural and professional conditions (or external dramaturgies) that shape it.

## Chapter Five: *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*: Re-Authoring Atypical Opera

What becomes of an ‘unstageable’ opera? Previous chapters have focused on how Lepage’s three-pronged scenographic dramaturgy has re-‘written’ canonical texts, interrogating the ways in which his scenography-driven adaptations have developed, re-interpreted and, in some cases, upended established readings of works such as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. What this thesis has yet to do is examine scenographic dramaturgy as it crafts physical and visual performance texts for the lesser-known, seldom-produced operas with which Lepage frequently works:

I’ve been offered *La Traviata* and *The Magic Flute* and all that and I don’t do them cause I’m not good at that. I’m better when I get the dogs. I like working with tough stuff, stuff that hasn’t been solved so when people come up to me and ask me to do *Erwartung*... I go ‘ah’ and I really work on it. I find solutions that don’t seem to be part of the toolbox that usually comes with the repertoire. (Lepage, ‘Q’)

Building on the preceding chapter, which posits that Lepage’s *Siegfried* realised Wagner’s music made visible aesthetic despite the institutionalised conditions of production at the Metropolitan Opera, my final chapter will argue, through a case study of *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, that Lepage’s scenographic dramaturgy offers an effective method for re-envisioning and reviving seldom-produced operas with non-traditional dramaturgical structures, particularly when said re-envisionings are



crafted with the support of external producers and, in part, at Ex Machina's home base, La Caserne.

The atypical, loose dramaturgies featured in many of the operatic works directed by Lepage, including *Erwartung*, *Bluebeard's Castle*, *The Damnation of Faust* and *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, make them readily available to auteur-generated performance texts. An initial unpacking of the dramaturgical openness featured in these operas and a brief survey of how Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy productively completes these works will contextualise this chapter's case study. Through a close examination of Lepage's production of *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, a 2009 Ex Machina co-production that filled various international orchestra pits with twenty-seven tons of water and saw opera singers performing Vietnamese water puppetry, I will then explore the role played by the three central elements of Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy—bodies-in-motion, historical-spatial mapping and architectonic scenography—in providing Stravinsky's open-ended opera with dramaturgical structure.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will also highlight the ways in which Lepage's pursuit of scenographic dramaturgy for Stravinsky's symphonic poem contextualises his past engagements with Asian countries and indicates the auteur's burgeoning sense of responsibility surrounding his aesthetic use of other cultures.

Addressed in Chapter Two, open theatre texts are defined as extant works that 'more than most, are only completed by the decisions made in the performance-making process' (Turner & Behrndt 30). Examples of open play texts include select works by Sarah Kane, such as *4:48 Psychosis*, which forgoes character and scene delineations and stage directions, making it highly available to different interpretations. August Strindberg's 1901 symbolist piece, *A Dream Play*, offers an earlier incarnation of the

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese water puppetry is known in Vietnam by the name Múa Rối Nước Kịch.

open text—the play dispenses with Aristotle’s unities (time, place and action) and features characters that ‘split, double, multiply, vanish, solidify, blur, [and] clarify’ (Strindberg 24), resulting in radically different interpretations from one production to the next.<sup>2</sup> Though I will argue that a similar style of text exists in opera, composers and opera scholars have yet to name this form, relying instead on case-specific terms such as opera-oratorio, monodrama, symphonic poem or *légende dramatique*. Discussions of dramaturgy in opera scholarship are largely confined to the relationship between words and music, centring on issues such as the ways in which the positioning of arias and recitatives supports the narrative arc, the orchestra’s ability to establish the atmosphere referenced in the libretto and how words can be made most ‘susceptible to music’ (Zeiss 180).<sup>3</sup> Some recent scholarship has, however, begun examining the differences between the expressive forms featured in opera, among them poetry, song, dance and spectacle, arguing that ‘apparent divergences’ between these forms need not be resolved or unified in performance but produce an aesthetic tension or dramaturgical ‘unsettledness’ that can be productively mined through physical performance texts (Levin 26). Nonetheless, because these discussions do not consider the ways in which some scores might be more available or open to material interpretations through auteur-ed performance texts, my work begins by defining what I will refer to as open-ended or flexible opera texts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Max Reinhardt’s 1921 interpretation of Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* saw actors ‘move silently across the stage on felt-soled shoes to have a dream effect’ (Törnqvist 258) while Ingmar Bergman’s 1977 production featured a minimalist approach with no castle. Lepage’s scenography conjured Strindberg’s dream via another conceit:

This production floats in mid-air, on a stage formed by three sides of a hollow cube, tilted towards the audience so that the actors stand on a steep rake. The scenery (according to Strindberg’s wishes) is provided by projections which dissolve in and out of one another, imbuing the action... with an uplifting sense of transparency and weightlessness; and as the projections change, the half-cube rotates, so that what was the floor is now a wall, and a window has become a trap-door. (Hanks)

<sup>3</sup> This follows on Wagner’s idea of ‘music-made-visible’, which, as discussed in Chapter Four, links the physical/visual embodiment of music to evocative performance texts such as those conceived by Appia.

<sup>4</sup> While my interrogation of open-ended dramaturgy suggests the existence of a problematic ‘closed’ binary, the concept of ‘unsettled’ opera implies the existence of an equally problematic ‘settled’ opera

My theory of open-ended or loose dramaturgy in opera considers the common characteristics of extant musical compositions deemed atypical and, through examples from Lepage's opera productions, interrogates how these works rely on material performance texts to provide the structural 'links or bridges' necessary (Kerish 288) for stylistic, thematic and scenic cohesion in performance. The first common characteristic relates to structure and content; deviating from the usual four to five act operatic structure, most open-ended operas privilege characters' inner emotional journeys. Staged by Lepage in 1993 as part of a double-bill with Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* adapts Maeterlinck's 'Ariane et Barbe-Bleue' into a brief one-act opera for two performers with libretto by Bélazs.<sup>5</sup> This opera is a symbolist meditation on desire and death following a disturbed collector of wives and his latest victim. As it begins, *Bluebeard's Castle* focuses on the conflicting lust and anxiety brewing in Bluebeard and his new wife Judith as they arrive at his castle. Judith then opens each door in the castle, revealing progressively disturbing sights, including a bloody torture chamber. She ultimately discovers Bluebeard's previous wives alive but entombed in the last room, where she too is about to take her place. A symbolist opera, *Bluebeard's Castle* 'concentrates on bringing forward the inner emotions of its characters' in bold terms: 'the text is... heavy in its symbolism' (Temperley).

The Symbolists' charting of inner emotional journeys 'by means of suggestion and imagery grew into naked exposure: it became Expressionism. The subjects of Expressionist opera were most usually sex and violence' (Temperley). Exemplifying Expressionism, *Erwartung* is a thirty-minute monodrama for a single character battling

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text. I have used the term open-ended opera as, in opera, 'open form' refers to the use of blank verse in Italian opera (Fabbri 131).

<sup>5</sup> Staged initially by Lepage for the Canadian Opera Company, *Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung* was remounted by François Racine in various cities, among them Hong Kong, Melbourne, Toronto, Cincinnati, Edmonton, Vancouver, Québec and Montréal (Seattle Opera). Most recently Lepage's double bill was 'recreated' by François Racine at the Seattle Opera in 2009 and will return to the Canadian Opera Company for the 2014/2015 season (D'Ornellas).

a mental breakdown instigated by her partner's infidelities (whether imagined or not) and her suspicion that, during a psychotic episode, she may have murdered him. Unlike Wagner's *Ring*, *Erwartung*'s 'sections are not linked together by thematic development or recapitulation, and there are no recurrent or associative motives' (Simms 97). In this, Schoenberg sought to 'find a means of expressing the multiplicity of contradictory feelings that can arise simultaneously from the unconscious' (Neighbour, 'Erwartung'). Reflecting a deep engagement with psychology, *Erwartung* gave Schoenberg a means to investigate the woman's emotional journey between anxiety, hope, fear and despair as she searches the forest for her lover, finally emerging only to physically stumble over his still bleeding body. From this moment, the action is exclusively psychological: 'After disbelief has given way to horrified certainty her reaction passes through three main phases: an initial outburst of love and grief, paroxysms of jealousy and rage, and finally contemplation of an empty future ending in a dream-like resumption of her search' (Neighbour, 'Erwartung'). For this reason, *Erwartung* requires a lead singer with considerable acting ability, a factor that also dissuades potential producers (Gorrell 93). Seldom staged, both *Erwartung* and *Bluebeard's Castle* present evocative musical collages rather than conventional dramatic plots.

Like *Erwartung* and *Bluebeard's Castle*, *The Damnation of Faust* features a similarly atypical structure though it precedes the symbolist movement. A collection of twenty brief scenes, 'requiring a fresh, unifying vision to shape it into a coherent whole' (L. Johnson), Berlioz's *légende dramatique* was originally mounted by Ex Machina in 1999 for the Saito-Kinen Festival in Matsumoto, Japan and restaged in 2008 at the Metropolitan Opera. Based on Goethe's *Faust*, Berlioz's adaptation follows the protagonist as he signs a deal with the devil to regain his youth and find love. Reconfigured into an opera decades after the composer died (Scott 70), Berlioz's

original *légende dramatique* was never intended for stage production and features oratorio structure, relying mostly on solos and choral music performed by large choirs composed of adults and children. Opera critic Andrew Clements comments, ‘Berlioz... intended it [*The Damnation of Faust*] for the concert hall; the pacing of the score, with its extended orchestral interludes and ballads, and character pieces for many of the solo vocal numbers, hardly suggests a living, breathing piece of theatre’ (Clements). Like *Erwartung* and *Bluebeard’s Castle*, *The Damnation of Faust’s* music, sung by Faust, Brander, Marguerite and Mephistopheles, charts characters’ emotional journeys. Whether the scene at hand features Faust alone in his study pondering mortality and the possibility of suicide or Marguerite’s impassioned aria, ‘D’amour l’ardente flamme’, sung as she worries that her lover will never return, Berlioz’s focus is trained on how characters manifest drama internally.

As a result of this focus on characters’ internal lives, open-ended operas often feature little outward dramatic action. *Bluebeard’s Castle* is prototypical in this respect—husband and wife are on stage throughout the opera and the physical action consists exclusively of seven doors being successively opened. There are no scene changes. For this reason, Bartók’s one-act opera ‘is unusually successful as an opera for the ears alone’ (Griffiths) being performed most often in concert. Influenced by Freudian theory, *Erwartung* keeps physical action to a minimum as well, centring primarily on the main character’s psychological unravelling as she sings her thirty-minute aria, alternating between stillness and neurotic shuffling about the stage:

The only dramatic event, her [The Woman’s] discovery of his [her lover’s] murdered body, occurs at a fairly early stage; the rest of her monologue passes from recollection of their love... As the composer remarked, the whole

drama may be understood as a nightmare, but the point is immaterial because the reality explored is purely psychological. There is no realistic time scale: past and present co-exist and merge in the woman's mind as terror, desire, jealousy and tenderness cut across one another in confused association... Schoenberg's extraordinary score depends to a considerable extent upon a rationality beyond conscious control. (Neighbour, 'Erwartung')

*The Damnation of Faust*, described as 'ecstatic but static' (Bernheimer, 'Faust'), also lacks action. As written, Berlioz's *légende dramatique* features extended orchestral interludes and 'strange hollow patches... you couldn't sit down to listen to Berlioz's work safe in the knowledge that it would progress from an introduction to a first subject to a bridge passage and so on' (Nichols). Though musically compelling, these lengthy passages run the risk of disrupting *The Damnation of Faust's* overall narrative flow.

A further characteristic that has led to years of neglect of open-ended operas is the view that their scenic requirements are too abstract and/or beyond the parameters of most opera houses' production capabilities, earning them the reputation of being difficult to produce and resulting in limited production histories of staged mountings. A symbolist opera, *Bluebeard's Castle's* stage directions call for evocative rather than representational scenography, relying primarily on mood-establishing lighting to craft and shift the production's atmosphere. Stage directions include: 'the fifth doorway brings a flood of radiance, which the sixth withdraws, as though a shadow were passing over... a lake of tears is revealed' (Bartók in Griffiths). Alongside bleeding walls and Bartók's call for Bluebeard's castle to emit four 'deep, heaving sighs... like the night wind in long gloomy corridors' (in Leafstedt 77), these symbolist elements prompted

the Hungarian Fine Arts Commission to officially deem *Bluebeard's Castle* 'unstageable' in 2011 (Bagnoli 203). In the hands of Lepage, however, the interpretive latitude featured in Bartók's stage directions would prove an asset.

Also known as unstageable, though never officially labelled as such, *Erwartung* has faced similar resistance by opera companies due to the challenge of crafting scenography meant to express 'the multiplicity of contradictory feelings that can arise simultaneously from the unconscious' (Neighbour, 'Erwartung'). Moreover, Schoenberg's monodrama features a particularly difficult set change; in the fourth scene of *Erwartung* a house must appear in the background and the forest has to vanish without bringing down the curtain. As noted by Schoenberg, 'This problem isn't easy to solve' (Schoenberg 139). Written in 1909, *Erwartung* would not receive its first staging until 1924 and, soon after, developed a reputation for the 'almost insurmountable difficulties' it presented in production (Gorrell 93). Since then, Schoenberg's monodrama has been presented far more frequently in concert performances than in staged productions (Neighbour, 'Erwartung'). *The Damnation of Faust* also developed a reputation for presenting extreme scenographic challenges and went largely un-staged for most of the twentieth century. Calling for twenty changes in scenic locale (Myers, 'Damnation') and scenes including Mephistopheles and Faust's ride into the abyss, *The Damnation of Faust* opened as an opera in Monte Carlo where it was an 'artistic success but a box office failure' (Holoman). Since then, Berlioz's *légende dramatique* has proven too daunting for many directors and opera houses, calling for a full ballet company and scenes occurring in heaven and hell.

With the rise of auteur directors on opera stages, however, and their growing use of cutting-edge technology, neglected works have begun to re-emerge. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, practitioners 'did not yet have the technical means' to fully

support complex stage poetry and music through scenography (Lehmann 60). As presented in my previous chapter's discussion of the *Ring*, the combination of contemporary digital technology and Appia and Craig's ideas on the evocative potential of scenography, has led to groundbreaking developments in our assessments of what is and is not stageable.<sup>6</sup> In the five years since Lepage's 2008 mounting of *The Damnation of Faust*, Berlioz's *légende dramatique* has seen a handful of international productions, two of which relied heavily on digital technologies to craft scenography. Terry Gilliam's 2011 production for the English National Opera used digital imaging as a dramaturgical tool to refract Faust's story through twentieth-century German history while Stephen Langridge's production for the Chicago Lyric Opera relied on animated digital projections and mechanised LED beams to transplant the action of Berlioz's narrative to Eastern Europe during the fall of communism in the 1980s (Pang).

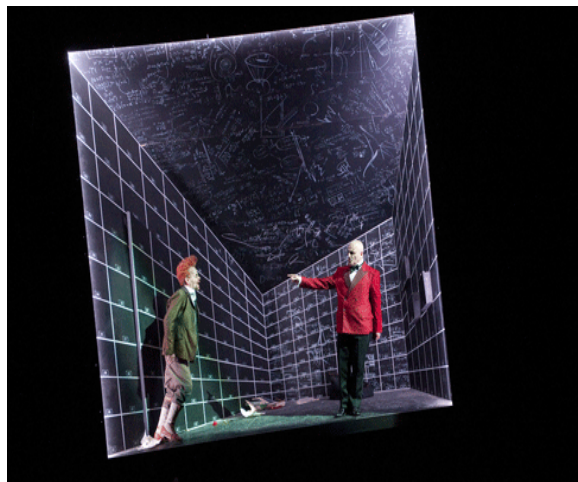


Figure 22. *The Damnation of Faust*, E.N.O., 2011 (Photo: Tristram Kenton)

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of the evocative employment of scenography include Craig's use of a single set and screens, whose movements were tracked via scores, to expressively summon the various locations called for in *Hamlet*. Appia's belief that Wagner's music could be made visible through scenography is described in practice in Chapter Four.





Figure 23. *The Damnation of Faust*, Chicago Lyric Opera, 2009 (Photo: Dan Rest)

Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy contributes to the open-ended operas surveyed here by providing a dramaturgical framework through scenography. As operas that favour introspection over outward action, *Erwartung*, *Bluebeard's Castle* and *The Damnation of Faust* offer Lepage theatrical terrain with which he is well acquainted. In his article aligning Lepage's aesthetics with those of Edward Gordon Craig, Innes identifies both directors' interest in symbolism's focus on inner psychological states:

Craig and the Symbolists emphasised inner meaning that privileged spiritual or emotional values, subliminal communication, and abstraction as radical alternatives to Victorian materialism and the Naturalistic drama associated with it. Lepage's productions exemplify the same qualities. Indeed *Needles and Opium* can be read essentially as a programmatic manifesto for this type of theatre... the piece is not just autobiographical, in using a present-day Francophone North-American, named Robert,

and playing off Lepage's personal experience as well as his own name. Distortions of reality signal that the action is taking place in his mind, and the other characters become elements of his consciousness. The aim of the piece, as Lepage tells the audience quite explicitly towards the end of a long concluding speech, is to draw us in to the psychosis of the central figure whose drug use and therapy have caused him to lose touch with reality, and through doing so to open us to the liberation of fantasy. (126-127)<sup>7</sup>

The 2013 remount of *Needles & Opium* saw Lepage author a study of shifting internal emotions and co-conceive the three-dimensional cube set with which to elucidate it: 'It's like an M.C. Escher painting come to life, transforming from one hotel room to another as it spins; with the help of perfectly pinpointed projections, it tumbles us from the boulevards of Paris to the back alleys of New York' (Nestruck, 'Rebirth of Cool'). Having developed the evocative scenography to embody the fluid, abstract moods in his own symbolist play, Lepage brings a practical grounding in the genre to his work with 'unstageable' operas.

For *Bluebeard's Castle*, Lepage focused on establishing and building tone, atmosphere and dramatic structure through light. As Judith opens the first five doors in the darkly lit castle, the light emerging from beyond each door grows in intensity and brightness. This mirrors the musical build of Bartók's score and the budding connection between Bluebeard and his new wife—when the couple arrives at the fifth door 'the light brings their shadows together despite their physical distance' (Pegley and Graham

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<sup>7</sup> See *Needles & Opium* in Chapter One for a synopsis.

75) and the music reaches its climax. The fleeting quality of this connection, however, becomes apparent as the music moves to a minor key, the lights darken and Judith discovers Bluebeard's ghostly wives. Lepage located his production of the abstract *Erwartung* in a mental hospital by placing the singer in a straight jacket and embodying her hallucinations through acrobats appearing from a cinematic, bird's eye view perspective on the back wall of set. The three acrobats play the woman's psychiatrist, her lover and her lover's mistress. At one point, the Woman's 'lover and his mistress, both completely nude, slowly emerge from an opening in the wall onto the bed, writhing underneath the sheets. The two lovers roll over each other' repeatedly while the bed revolves as well (Defraeye 87). As the Woman's mental tormentors come to life, the increasingly skewed progression of her thought process as well as the score's internal drama finds a visual parallel through Lepage's physical performance text. Having combined *Erwartung* and *Bluebeard's Castle* into a double-bill, Lepage employs the set to link the two pieces structurally and physically:

Its floor, ceiling, and walls slope up, down, and in,  
forming a cloistering stage-within-a-stage that focuses  
relentlessly on the psychological dramas inside. Not just  
something for singers to stand on or in front of, this set is  
designed to be interacted with—in Lepage's realisation of  
Bartók's operatic duo-drama, it practically acts as a third  
character. (Borchert)



Figure 24. Bluebeard's Castle, 1993 (Photo: Rozarii Lynch/Canadian Opera Company)



Figure 25. Erwartung, 1993 (Photo: Rozarii Lynch/Canadian Opera Company)

Lepage also capitalised on the interpretive freedom provided by the flexible dramaturgy of *The Damnation of Faust*, an openness that Clements explains as ‘the hazy dramatic boundaries, and the latitude for interpretation that Berlioz’s recasting of the Faust legend allows, [it] gives a maverick creativity... the freedom to flourish’. Scenes such as Faust’s lament in his library and Marguerite’s ode to love gained a dynamic quality through vocally sensitive motion detectors worn by the singers. A flock

of projected crows swirled and shifted direction on a giant screen dictated by variations in Faust's tone during his opening aria. Moreover, a large close-up of Marguerite's face appeared on the upstage screen, growing in intensity and licked by increasingly tall flames as the fervour driving her love song built steadily. From Faust's corruption onwards, the on-screen depictions of nature seemed to wilt with one tree actually expiring before spectators' eyes as Mephistopheles crossed its path, giving way to video segments suggesting an era being redefined by rapid, soulless technological and industrial change.<sup>8</sup> Lepage projected footage directly on the set from *Studies in Motion*, the earliest moving picture crafted by Berlioz's contemporary, Eadweard Muybridge. Overall, Lepage created a highly physical and visual scenographic text supporting and aligning the disparate elements of Berlioz's dramaturgy with a visual world that ran parallel to Faust's moral undoing.

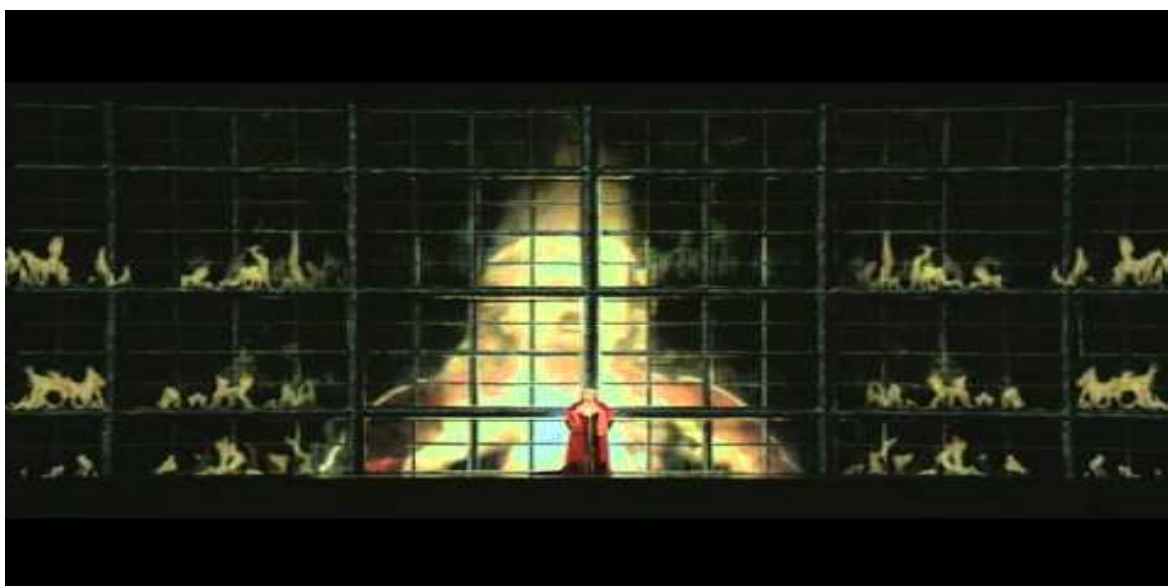


Figure 26. The Damnation of Faust, 2008 (Photo: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera)

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<sup>8</sup> Motion sensors worn by Mephistopheles (John Relyea) allowed the tree to die as he crossed its path.



Figure 27. *The Damnation of Faust*, 2008 (Photo: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera)

As these examples demonstrate, open-ended operas are characterised by irregular dramaturgical structures, scenic challenges and the privileging of internal conflict over outward action, all of which contribute to an increased interpretive malleability. An open opera's translation to the stage hinges on the director and designers' ability to create a vivid visual text that not only reflects the score's evocative development but also aligns scenes, acts and orchestration. (Though such unity is not always productive, in the case of unstageable operas, their fragmented state often prevents their production. Mounting them in unified productions will bring them back into more frequent rotation, perhaps leading to less curated stagings.) The openness of texts like *Bluebeard's Castle*, *Erwartung* and *The Damnation of Faust* invites us to consider these works in performance as 'compositions in time and space' as opposed to 'viewing them solely in terms of literary form and content' (Turner and Behrndt 30). Like the aforementioned works by Bartók, Schoenberg and Berlioz, Stravinsky's *Le Rossignol* is a work in which the dramatic text/libretto does not provide the primary structure for performance, giving Lepage and his collaborators the opportunity to

cultivate dramaturgy through production.<sup>9</sup> What follows examines the ways in which Ex Machina used space, light, sound, music, movement and puppetry, to develop and shape Stravinsky's brief score into an opera.

### **Making *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables* from Stravinsky's *Rossignol***

Written between 1908 and 1914, Stravinsky's *Le Rossignol* adapts Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, *Nattergalen*, into a brief 'symphonic poem' or 'conte lyrique', a form for orchestra in which a poem or story provides the narrative thread (MacDonald). Andersen's *Nattergalen* is an allegory centering on a Chinese emperor who rejects a real nightingale in favour of a dazzling, mechanical nightingale toy, delivered to him by three Japanese emissaries. After banishing the real, forest-dwelling nightingale from his court, the Emperor soon falls seriously ill and Death arrives to claim him. Aware of the Emperor's distress, the Nightingale rushes to his side to sing him back to health. This placates and ultimately staves off Death, prompting the Emperor to reconsider the value of natural beauty. *Nattergalen* was inspired by Andersen's feelings for Jenny Lind, an opera singer known as the 'Swedish Nightingale' who refused the affections of Andersen and the Danish king, preferring to pursue her career (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 14). Andersen's resistance to the industrial revolution and its new technologies is also layered into *Nattergalen* through the juxtaposition of a bejewelled mechanical imitation of the Nightingale and the life-saving flesh and blood original: the Emperor is saved from Death by a living creature, not a machine. With libretto from Stepan Mitussov, Stravinsky's adaptation of Andersen's story runs at a brief fifty minutes in performance, not long enough for a full production without the addition of one or more

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<sup>9</sup> References to Stravinsky's one-act opera *The Nightingale* will appear by the composition's original French title *Le Rossignol*; references to *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables* and *The Nightingale* denote Lepage's production, which combines the fables and *Le Rossignol*.

complimentary musical selections. For these reasons and because it falls outside the technical definition of an opera, *Le Rossignol* is rarely staged as such.

Beyond its length, *Le Rossignol* features many of the characteristics defining open-ended operas. When he began composing the piece in 1908, Stravinsky did not envision a fully staged opera and, instead, anticipated publishing *Le Rossignol* as a selection to be performed exclusively in concert. In 1913, however, Aleksander Sanin, a founder of the Moscow Free Theatre, approached Stravinsky about writing an opera for him to direct. The composer responded by offering to complete *Le Rossignol* (Walsh 199). Because he had taken a five year break from composing the piece, working primarily on commissions for the ballet master, Sergei Diaghilev, and Les Ballets Russes, Stravinsky's aesthetic interests had shifted away from opera when he returned to his *conte lyrique*: 'Opera does not attract me at all. What interests me is choreographic drama, the only form in which I see any movement forward, without trying to foretell its future direction' (Stravinsky in Taruskin, *Stravinsky* 982). This resulted in a significant stylistic disconnect between *Le Rossignol*'s first act and the final two.

[Stravinsky] felt he could no longer return to the gentler impressionistic idiom of the one completed act. He managed to rationalise the resulting stylistic incongruity on the basis of the setting of the second and third acts: the 'artificial' ambience of the Chinese court as opposed to the natural beauty of the opening *paysage*... The orchestration of the new scenes matched the brash harmonic idiom, exploiting striking colour contrasts in



place of the rich and subtly blended sonorities of the first.

(Taruskin, 'Nightingale')

This pronounced stylistic shift often has a jarring effect—yet another reason why *Le Rossignol* is seldom produced as a fully staged opera. The first scene's pastoral ease is countered by the second act's 'Chinese March', which creates 'a pompous, forceful... militaristic tension' summoned by 'declamatory brass fanfares... and percussive clashes' (Kang 192-197), a feature of 'the musical and rhythmic plasticity' that Stravinsky had been encouraged to foster at Les Ballets Russes (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 8).

Not only did Stravinsky's newfound interest in dance and hostility towards opera (Walsh 170) prompt him to take up a new musical style but it also led him to resist operatic structure and privilege dance as he crafted the staging for the last two acts of his symphonic poem. *Le Rossignol*, also referred to by classical music critic John Terauds as a 'dance-opera', incorporates large orchestral interludes meant for ballet sequences but featuring little dramatic action. Ultimately, like *Erwartung*, *Bluebeard's Castle* and *The Damnation of Faust*, as a dramatic text, Stravinsky's conte lyrique focuses primarily on the central character's emotional development. Similar to *Erwartung*, Stravinsky's *Rossignol* represents a subset of the turn-of-the-century symbolist movement—Russian fantasy, 'the mystical Russian offshoot of symbolism' (Temperley). And though this genre features opulent music, exotic locations and characters as stylised as those in 'a puppet show', Russian fantasy operas also employ their theatricality to represent characters' emotional states (Temperley). Outward action is minimal—the internal narrative unfolds as the Emperor begins to appreciate the merits of natural beauty, seeing the value of the real nightingale over the machine. Directed by Sergei Diaghilev, the first production of *Le Rossignol* placed the singers in

the orchestra pit, where they were invisible to the audience, while dancers played the characters on stage (Tommasini). Given its lack of dramatic action, privileging of dance and brevity, *Le Rossignol* has been rarely produced as an opera, lending itself more easily to concert-only performances that forgo staging altogether. Stravinsky's friend and colleague Robert Craft once commented, 'Le Rossignol is not a viable opera' (125).

For these reasons, particularly the opera's brevity, Ex Machina's staging of *Le Rossignol* is the culminating point in a larger production, divided into three sections. The program begins with a series of other short musical compositions by Stravinsky that converge around a similar subject and period in the composer's life. Written between 1908 and 1918 and predominantly linked to themes surrounding animals, the *Other Short Fables* consists of 'Ragtime', and 'Les Fables'—composed of 'Pribaoutki', 'Deux Poèmes de Konstantin Balmont', 'Les Berceuses du Chat', 'Quatre Chants Paysans' and three solo pieces for clarinet, which were used as transitions between one song and the next.<sup>10</sup> Though 'Ragtime' and the three solo pieces for clarinet were inspired by Stravinsky's initial taste of jazz after the First World War (B Gilbert, *Rossignol* 10-12), the other works hearken back to older Russian folk songs (Garafola 66), a symptom of Stravinsky's longing for Russia during his wartime exile to Switzerland. Like *Le Rossignol*, many of the compositions featured in Ex Machina's *Other Short Fables* are atypical in form, mixing 'ritual, myth, cantata, dance, narration, melodrama, oratorio in a way that was never easily classified' (Joseph 136). 'Pribaoutki', 'Deux Poèmes de Konstantin Balmont', 'Les Berceuses du Chat', and 'Quatre Chants Paysans' offer brief melody cycles drawing on Russian folk music (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 10-12). Between these brief fables and *Le Rossignol*, Lepage inserted the longer, twenty-minute, piece 'Le Renard' ('The Fox'), a 'burlesque in song

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<sup>10</sup> These song titles translate as follows: 'Deux Poèmes de Konstantin Balmont', 'Two Poems from Konstantin Balmont'; 'Les berceuses du Chat', 'Lullabies for Cats'; and, 'Quatre Chants Paysan', 'Four Peasant Songs'.

and dance' that Stravinsky based on Russian folk tales (Griffiths). Also known also as a 'farmyard ballet' (Griffiths), 'The Fox' is a closet cantata crafted for street theatre; Stravinsky imagined roving players enacting the character roles while the singers sang (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 12).

Together, *Le Rossignol* and Stravinsky's *Short Fables* gave Lepage and his co-producers, the Canadian Opera Company, Festival d'art Lyrique d'Aix-en-Provence, Opéra National de Lyon and De Nederlandse Opera, a flexible foundation upon which to build an opera.

### **Historical-Spatial Mapping**

Historical-spatial mapping for Ex Machina's *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables* hinges on *chinoiserie*, traditionally a fantasy European interpretation of various Asian aesthetics stemming from the expansion of trade with East Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Lepage fashions his *chinoiserie* by creating a layering of the West's aestheticised ideals of an essentialised 'East' from various periods—a chronicle of how different periods of globalisation coloured shifting European conceptions of Asian cultures. In *Le Rossignol, Renard et autres fables*, a book on the making of *The Nightingale* with the subtitle *Une chinoiserie pour le XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (a *chinoiserie* for the twenty-first century), Lepage notes that Ex Machina's *chinoiserie* is 'a version of the Orient that grew out of nineteenth-century European romanticism... there is a baroqueness to the piece' (in Bowness). This 'baroqueness' materialises through Lepage's purposeful conflation of Asian iconography, mixing Japanese, Indonesian, Vietnamese and Chinese influences in a way that corresponds with the distancing effect of what Singapore-born theatre and dance director Ong Keng Sen has termed the 'new *chinoiserie*':

Often, I take traditional, classical Asian dance as a base and invent off it. There's a line of work that I am now exploring, the idea of *chinoiserie*: playing with globalisation as a phenomenon that existed several hundred years ago, the trading of goods, artwork, and cultural movements, looking at how we trade in the exotic. In art history, *chinoiserie* can be said to be an empty screen on which Europe could project its fantasy of Asia. When we worked with *The Makioka Sisters* (based on the novel by Tanizaki)... we found that it worked only when European actors played the Japanese sisters... The piece was predicated on the misuse and abuse of 'authentic' elements. (63)

Lepage chooses to use and misuse elements of Asian cultures similarly in *The Nightingale*. *Chinoiserie* not only establishes Lepage's usual engagement with a geographical location and a range of historical periods but also employs puppetry to provide an aesthetic distance that draws attention to Lepage's metatheatrical representations of Asian cultures. A discussion of Lepage's previous traffic in Orientalism and reductionist portrayals grounds further exploration of the scenographic dramaturgy featured in *The Nightingale*.

### **Context**

In past, Lepage's aestheticised representations of an undifferentiated, singular 'East' have hailed from a place of ignorance and elicited warranted criticism for their Orientalism. Beyond the aforementioned critiques by Knowles and Hodgdon citing the

Orientalism featured in his 1992 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, his 1985 devised piece, *The Dragons' Trilogy*, also elicited criticism related to its politics of representation. *The Dragons' Trilogy* is based on life in three Canadian Chinatowns: one in Québec City in the 1930s, another set in mid-twentieth-century Toronto and the final Chinatown located in Vancouver. Though Jen Harvie perceived a useful self-critique of Québécois xenophobia in the piece's use of exclusively white Québécois performers to play both a Briton and two Asian characters, she also noted that at times the 'handling of other cultures in the play is... relentlessly clichéd, so that, instead of productively exploring other cultures, it reinforces diminishing and often naïve perceptions of them' ('Transnationalism, Orientalism' 113). Québécois critic Jean-Luc Denis's appraisal paralleled Harvie's latter point, finding fault with the production's oversimplification of cultures and lack of vision. A similar critique would be posited of Lepage's collectively devised piece, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*. Based in part on the World War II bombing of Hiroshima and the opera *Madame Butterfly*, the 1992 production has been accused of portraying Japan as 'a vehicle for Western Fantasies, denying the East's own autonomy and self-determination' (Harvie, 'Transnationalism, Orientalism' 123). As assessed by James Frieze, the production left scholars asking: 'Is [*Madame*] *Butterfly* deployed ironically, or merely for her inter-cultural, hyper-theatricality?' (137).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The current stalemate in discourses on Orientalism in music has largely precluded my pursuit of this line of enquiry. Published in 1989, Carl Dahlhaus's largely influential *Nineteenth-Century Music* succeeded in broadly extricating music from debates surrounding Orientalism for the upcoming decade, framing the validity of musical chinoiserie as the 'function it serves as a legitimate departure from the aesthetic and compositional norms of European music' (302). Dahlhaus's argument looks to sever 'musical exoticism from its social and political contexts - as if art's fictitious and imaginative elements rendered it ideologically neutral' (Head 211). Though such 'received wisdom' held sway throughout the 1980s, in the 1990s, Susan McClary and Ralph Locke produced respective studies of French opera in the nineteenth century 'that accorded new significance to musico-theatrical orientalism beyond its customary interpretation or (non-interpretation) via scholars like Dahlhaus' (Head 211). By the mid-1990s, music scholars were questioning chinoiserie through the lens of gender studies, feminism and post-colonialism, linking it to the line of imperialist thinking first articulated by Said, which identifies the essentializing of the Asian 'other' by Westerners as a means to confirm their own positional superiority. Though the study of imperial tropes in European musical chinoiserie would maintain momentum throughout the 1990s, in

In his retrospective comments on *The Dragons' Trilogy*, Lepage notes that Ex Machina's early portrayals of Asian cultures were the product of an uninformed aesthetic preoccupation rather than an attempt at irony or purposeful self-critique:

None of us had been to China. So we created a mythical China, a series of clichés on what we thought China was... it was our China that we invented... drawn exclusively from Canadian Chinatowns... Since then, we've all been to China and we know what China is; it's not the China from the *Dragons' Trilogy*, certainly not. If we made a similarly themed show today it would be radically different. (in Bureau 173)

His recent work supports the latter point; as discussed in Chapter One, the sequel to *The Dragons' Trilogy*, *The Blue Dragon*, uses Asian iconography to a different end, representing an examination of the West's unsteady relationship and anxieties about 'the rise of China as an emerging military and economic power' (Hudson and Varney 145). The central character, Pierre, wants a contained, traditional China, a place that remains safely in the fixed realm of Western fantasies of a singular East, like traditional Chinese calligraphy and his dragon tattoo. In his relationship with Xiao Ling, he is confronted by the fluidity and strength of her (and contemporary China's) identity; her photo essay of 'selfies' demonstrates that she cannot be defined by one-dimensional Orientalist tropes. As Woford Wylam notes, 'much of *Blue Dragon's* strength lies in the resonant... lucid critique of Western consumerism and the anxieties surrounding China's vast economic and political power, moving beyond the Orientalism for which critics faulted earlier productions such as *Seven Streams of the River Ota*' (140).

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the last decade, opera scholarship has largely abandoned discussions of how politics are wedded to the chinoiserie aesthetic, preferring instead what Matthew Head critiques as 'the safari mentality, in which orientalism is observed but not significantly evaluated' (223).

Gilbert's publication on the *The Nightingale* reveals that Ex Machina's opera also examines the West's reductionist gaze but uses a different lens. Lepage's *chinoiserie* is inspired by what Sen calls a hybrid in which cultures are 'decontextualised, misused, abused, misunderstood — perhaps purposefully' (63):

The Far East is a source of great fascination for occidental artists. Before the modern means of communication and the democratisation of travel, images of these far off countries were limited to artistic representations... [depicting] an imagined fantasy image of Chinese and Japanese aesthetics. These sources did not convey a precise or realistic image of the vast continent that intrigued occidentals... In the nineteenth century, European literature experienced an Orientalist period, a style that Hans Christian Andersen... contributed to. Inspired by a fantastical China, the writer created a 'fake Chinese aesthetic', a *chinoiserie*. (Lepage in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 29)<sup>12</sup>

Though Lepage has clearly been given to essentialising other cultures in past through productions such as *The Dragons' Trilogy* and *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, I

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<sup>12</sup> My translation of:

*L'Extême-Orient exerce une grande fascination sur les artistes occidentaux. Avant les moyens de communication modernes et la démocratisation du voyage, les images de ces lointaines contrées se limitaient à des représentations artistiques... et on fantasmait beaucoup sur ce qu'était l'esthétique chinoise ou japonaise. Ces sources ne donnaient pas une image précise, ni réaliste, de ce vaste continent qu'occupaient les puissances occidentales... Aux XIXe siècle, la littérature a connu sa période dite orientaliste, style auquel Hans Christian Andersen... a contribué. S'inspirant d'une Chine fantasmagorique, l'écrivain faisait à son tour du 'faux chinois', une chinoiserie. Un siècle et demi plus tard, Robert Lepage, parmi d'autres artistes occidentaux, ne s'est jamais caché de son grand intérêt pour l'Extême Orient, surtout la Chine et le Japon. (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 29)*

will argue that *The Nightingale* is part of a broader shift in the auteur's work that, through its process (though not necessarily its material product), demonstrates a new sensitivity to diverse cultural contexts and history. Though not necessarily legible to spectators, Lepage and his collaborators crafted their 'twenty-first century *chinoiserie*' from a place of knowing rather than the position of ignorance that led to previously reductionist representations.

### ***Chinoiserie* by Design**

*Chinoiserie* for *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables* is established through the layering of Western aesthetic conceptions of Asian cultures including European interest in textiles and aesthetics that resulted from twelfth and thirteen-century Silk Road pilgrimages and the nineteenth century's fascination with the aesthetics of Asian art and design. Though the scenographic dramaturgy featured in *The Nightingale* may initially appear to veer toward Orientalism, it productively overlays Stravinsky's compositions with references to periods of globalisation that have fuelled Western conceptions of the 'Orient' and, by placing viewers at an aesthetic distance, asks spectators to consider the shifts in conceptions of *chinoiserie* over time. The costume design for different segments of *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables* purposely moves through the history of European encounters with eastern countries including East Asia, Southeast Asia and the Russian Far East:

In concept, we had to travel from peasant Russia to the court of the Emperor of China. There are really three different segments, three worlds. My costumes were linking these universes. My family is of Slavic origin. This led me to Russia, which inspired the *Fables*. The



introduction clearly has a Russian flavour. *The Fox* goes through Mongolia eastward. We finish our journey [with *The Nightingale*] in China, Japan, Vietnam. We had to explore all this geography.<sup>13</sup> (Gottler in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 28)

When asked specifically how Lepage wanted geography to manifest in her designs, Gottler responded: ‘The women in the shadow play were Russian peasants. The men in *The Fox* fable were Mongol tribesmen. And *The Nightingale* had mainly Chinese and Japanese figures’ (Gottler ‘Question’). In this, Lepage’s scenographic dramaturgy represents early European contact with Asian cultures that resulted from twelfth and thirteenth-century travel on the Silk Road routes, which facilitated trade with China and Japan by way of land travel from Russia through Mongolia (Brotton 2). This travel is evoked through the transition from kerchief-ed Russian peasant women in muted colours to more brightly dressed Mongolian men in tunic-length deis, arriving finally at the vivid *chinoiserie* featured in *The Nightingale*. Through this visual performance text Lepage suggests that early cultural exchanges occurred to ‘a much lesser extent than their contemporary counterparts’ (Singleton 83)—the aesthetic differences featured in each group’s costumes, including a gradual increase in colour and detail as the journey progresses from Russia to China, emphasises the physical and ideological distance between cultures, contextualizing the production’s arrival at the exaggerated *chinoiserie* of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>13</sup> My translation of:

*Dans le concept, il fallait voyager de la Russie paysanne à la cour de l'empereur de chine. Il y a vraiment trois différents segments, trois univers. Mes costumes devaient lier ces univers. Ma famille est d'origine slave. Cela m'a menée vers la Russie, source d'inspiration des Fables. L'introduction a nettement une saveur russe. Renard passe par la Mongolie en route vers l'est. Nous achevons notre périple en Chine, au Japon, au Vietnam. Nous devons exploré toute cette géographie.* (Gottler in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 28)

Upon ‘arriving’ at *The Nightingale*, spectators are surrounded by a *chinoiserie* in which many Asian cultures are merged to represent an imagined Western gaze. Costumes are used as the central text to depict an imagined East fashioned by the European imagination. From the sixteenth century onwards, Europe imported goods, including precious Chinese silks that travelled via East India trading companies. In *The Nightingale*, costumes are used to suggest the result of contact with many Asian countries, through the silk textiles that became popular as a result of European exploration during this period. During a visit to her shop to view *The Nightingale* costumes, Mara Gottler explained that the costumes for *The Nightingale* were inspired by clothing worn during the Qing Empire, from 1644-1911, with the Emperor (Ilya Bannik) clothed in a blue robe embellished by an adorned black ceremonial collar featuring a metal-silk tapestry weave (Gottler, ‘Interview’). The performer singing the Nightingale (Olga Peretyatko), who either holds the delicate bird puppet in her hand or fixes it to an extended overhead wire, embodies her character’s dedication to service, wearing a cream dogi with a light, armour-inspired outer-layer, meant to suggest that she is a Japanese samurai from the Edo period (Gottler, ‘Question’).



Figure 34. *The Nightingale, The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, featuring Olga Peretyatko and Ilya Bannik, 2009 (Photo: Michael Cooper)



Figure 35. *The Nightingale, The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, 2009 (Photo: Michael Cooper)

As *The Nightingale*'s narrative progresses, the scenography becomes more vibrant and technically complex, illustrating Ex Machina's '*chinoiserie* for the twenty-first century' (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* cover).<sup>14</sup> Costumes are increasingly ornate and colourful, with chorus members dressed in court robes and the round, black hats with upturned brims that were an aesthetic signature of the Qing period and signified the wearer's position as an official (Power Museum). This visual text culminates as the chorus performs a collective group reveal, exposing individual Taiwanese glove puppets concealed within their sleeves (Figure 35). In this section of *The Nightingale*, Lepage purposely over-aestheticises his scenography, intensifying the distancing effect established by puppetry. 'There is so much detail at work... that there are times the senses are overwhelmed by Lepage's omniscient vision' (Terauds). Like Sen's aforementioned '*new chinoiserie*', Lepage's version manipulates 'the discussion to the point where [spectators] have to deal with the process of exoticising, the process of beautifying, the politics of aesthetics... it is not beauty for beauty's sake but, rather,

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<sup>14</sup> Bernard Gilbert, the opera production manager for Ex Machina, has published a book on the process of creating the *Short Fables* titled *Le Rossignol, Renard et Autres Fables*, with the subtitle *Une chinoiserie pour le XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (a *chinoiserie* for the twenty-first century).

beauty as alienation, beauty as a way to start to discuss some of these issues. It's very self-conscious' (Sen 63). Here, Lepage's performance text is at the height of its metatheatricality, asking spectators to prise apart and/or connect *The Nightingale's* representations of early *chinoiserie*, seventeenth to nineteenth-century *chinoiserie* and twenty-first century *chinoiserie* to make meaning—a return to Lehmann's synaesthesia.



Figure 36. *The Nightingale, The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, 2009 (Photo: Michael Cooper)

### ***Chinoiserie* through Puppetry**

Lepage's interest in bringing puppets and opera singers together, a further aspect of his *chinoiserie*, is not without precedent, having become a popular approach to opera for contemporary theatre auteurs. From productions like Peter Sellars's puppet adaptation of the *Ring* cycle at Harvard in the 1980s to Julie Taymor's 2004 use of puppets in the

Metropolitan Opera's production of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, which is one of the company's most popular stagings, various theatre auteurs have taken advantage of what puppetry has to offer opera. After viewing Julie Taymor's innovative use of puppetry in her 1992 production of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* at the Festival Saito-Kinen in Matsumoto, Japan, Lepage began to look for an opportunity to incorporate puppets into an Ex Machina opera (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 19).<sup>15</sup> Because he saw puppetry as the solution to representing *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*' various animal characters, Lepage hired Michael Curry, the puppet designer for Taymor's *The Lion King* and *Oedipus Rex* and a collaborator on his 2005 Cirque du Soleil production *Ká*.<sup>16</sup> Inspired by *Le Rossignol*'s setting, a kingdom bordering the water, Lepage and Curry turned to Vietnamese water puppetry as the main conceit (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 22) and placed *Le Rossignol* as the culmination of Ex Machina's opera program, setting it in a water-filled orchestra pit. Lepage turned to physical and visual performance text to reinforce *Le Rossignol*'s central position in *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*.

Lepage's engagement with Vietnamese water puppetry would ultimately draw on various cultural influences, incorporating Bunraku and Taiwanese puppets; nonetheless, unlike *The Dragons' Trilogy* and *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, this work began from a place of intimate knowledge. Lepage, Curry and the production's puppetry choreographer, Martin Genest, travelled to Vietnam and the where they

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<sup>15</sup> A collaboration with Jean Cocteau, Stravinsky's *Oedipus* opera was also atypically structured. An opera-oratorio divided into six episodes, Cocteau insisted that each episode featured a didactic spoken summary (Sadie 24).

<sup>16</sup> Lepage became familiar with puppetry at the beginning of his career by working with Josée Campanale, director of the company Les Marionnettes du Grand Théâtre. This experience informed Lepage's work: 'Between 1980 and 1985, he mounted four shows for the Marionnettes du grand théâtre de Québec. The experience was important for him in that it helped him to develop his own theatrical language through a process of discovery' (Fouquet 7). Since then, Lepage has employed puppets in *The Far Side of the Moon*, *Coriolanus*, *La Casa Azul*, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* and *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*. More generally, he has relied on innovatively imbuing inanimate objects with life as a central element of his aesthetic signature (Reynolds, 'Evaluating Performance' 122). (Examples of object play can be seen in Lepage's *The Dragons' Trilogy*, *The Andersen Project*, *The Far Side of the Moon* and others.)

became immersed in the form. Of their time in Vietnam, Genest comments, ‘We saw shows, visited various theatres, and met Vietnamese water puppet masters... who gave us an initiation in the form’ (in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 30).<sup>17</sup> Mara Gottler provides further details of the excursion saying, ‘They were allowed backstage so they learned how the puppets were actually manipulated... I saw lots of photos from the trip’ (‘Nightingale Question’). In this and alongside further research on Bunraku at the Museum of Anthropology in Osaka, Japan (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 2e), Lepage and his collaborators demonstrate the sense of responsibility that now surrounds their work with diverse cultural influences. *The Nightingale* deliberately decontextualises Asian forms of puppetry through *chinoiserie* yet its creators showed an investment in knowing, understanding and sharing the historical conditions and contexts in which these forms were embedded with their collaborators.

Beyond Vietnamese water puppetry, *The Nightingale* makes strategic use of numerous other forms. For the earliest musical pieces featured in *The Nightingale*, Lepage relies on the ‘most low-tech style of puppetry... calling on shadow theatre, which works on a vertical, two-dimensional plane with a limited colour palette’ (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 23).<sup>18</sup> The scenography charts Asian puppetry’s evolution in the broadest sense, from full body shadow play with acrobats through to Ex Machina’s innovative use of white shadows (detailed below) as the program continues. Serving as the production’s focal point, *The Nightingale* is presented in three dimensions, ‘full colour and on a horizontal plain’ (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 23).<sup>19</sup> The visual performance text offers a further nod to Lepage’s puppet theme through play with

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<sup>17</sup> My translation: ‘*Nous avons vu des spectacles, visité des theatres, rencontré des maîtres, pour nous initier... au métier*’ (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 30).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>18</sup> My translation of: ‘*La pantomime fera appel au théâtre d’ombres, qui implique un plan vertical en aplat, donc deux dimensions et une palette limitée de couleurs*’ (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 23).

<sup>19</sup> My translation of: ‘*Le concept sera développé en trois dimensions, pleine couleur, sur le plan horizontal*’ (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol*).

scale—from the first act to the third, the characters have the same singer-operators but are represented by puppets of increasing size. They first appear as Vietnamese water puppets, a form that originated in 1211 C.E. (Gaboriault 31); next, they are represented by Bunraku puppets, developed during Japan’s Edo period.<sup>20</sup> The opera culminates as the singers embody the roles they had previously represented through puppetry.

As a closer examination of *The Nightingale* will demonstrate, the effect of puppetry provides the production with an externally positioned dramaturgical structure based on a general representation of the evolution of Asian puppetry over time. This connects Stravinsky’s various short dramatic texts and *Le Rossignol* through the scenographic over-writing of a narrative arc. This external dramaturgy hinges on the strategic ‘act of assemblage’ (Pearson and Shanks 55) of the various musical pieces and forms of puppetry selected for use in *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*. Lepage’s song list is curated to highlight different points in Stravinsky’s musical evolution through the style of puppetry best suited to each composition, all the while adhering to a chronological survey of the history of puppetry. Lepage comments, ‘as the show moves ahead, we pass from the origins of theatre [shadow play] to today’s puppet language’ (in B. Gilbert *Le Rossignol* 16).<sup>21</sup>

This being said, it should be noted that the puppetry timeline is extremely broad. The production’s eighty-five minute running time and *Ex Machina*’s desire to pair scenes with the individual genres of puppetry to which they were best suited resulted in large gaps between some transitions, such as the jump within ‘The Fox’ from shadow puppetry hailing from approximately 9 B.C.E. to a fourteenth-century genre featuring fabric cut-outs. This broad survey and lack of specificity are part of Lepage’s conscious

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<sup>20</sup> The Edo period, marked by feudal military rule, lasted from 1603 to 1868.

<sup>21</sup> My translation of: ‘à mesure que le spectacle avance, nous passons des origines du théâtre au langage marionnettique d’aujourd’hui’ (in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 16).

work towards a *chinoiserie* that purposely conflates time and place, an aesthetic choice investigated in an upcoming section of this chapter.

After *The Nightingale*'s title piece 'Ragtime', which acts as a musical prologue, the shadow play begins: 'In "Pribaoutki", four nonsense Russian rhymes for voice and chamber ensemble, and in "Four Russian Peasant Songs" for small female chorus and four horns, the costumed singers perform onstage' while a troupe of puppeteers uses their hands to create shadow images of 'cats, old men, a woodcock, a partridge and even a fidgeting, crying baby' (Tommasini, 'Spin Cycle'). This ancient form of puppetry, known as shadowgraphy or ombromanie, is described by Philippe Beau, resident shadowgrapher for *The Nightingale*:

Chinese shadows are the most ancestral form of spectacle. Historians have written that prehistoric humans practiced shadow puppetry on cave walls, using fire, the sun or the moon as a light source. A gestural language existed, before the appearance of vocally articulated language, which reveals humans' fundamental need to communicate... Robert Lepage understood that he could use shadowgraphy as an evocative narrative system. (in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 37)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> My translation:

*Les ombres chinoises sont la forme de spectacle la plus ancestrale qui soit. Des historiens ont écrit que les hommes préhistoriques les pratiquaient sur les murs des grottes, en utilisant le feu, le soleil ou la lune comme source de lumière... un langage gestuel a existé avant l'apparition du langage articulé, ce qui révèle la nécessité profonde de l'être humain de communiquer... Robert Lepage a compris qu'il pouvait l'utiliser comme un système narrative d'une force évocatrice. (Beau in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 37)*





Figure 28. Philippe Beau, Shadowgrapher, (Photo: Philippe Beau)

Shadowgraphy is particularly well suited to the fables because Stravinsky employed these songs to experiment with a rhythmic idea from Russian folk verse involving a ‘moveable accent, which could be played off against the natural accents of speech, as well as against the musical metre, to make yet another extra rhythmic tier’ (Sadie 15). The complex musical syntax developed in Stravinsky’s seemingly simple Russian folk melodies is paralleled and underlined by the simple yet deceptively intricate shadowgraphy featured in *The Nightingale*. During the shadow work that accompanies ‘Pribaoutki’ and ‘Four Russian Peasant Songs’, a carefully choreographed finger flick, the sudden bend of a knuckle joint or a quick flap of finger-made wings works to punctuate the new rhythmic accent scheme featured in the score. Lepage’s production of *The Nightingale* highlights Stravinsky’s syncopated displacement of accents through movement choreographed to match and heighten the piece’s irregular rhythms, ‘showcasing the composer’s complex music in a whole new light’ (Coulbourn).

In ‘The Fox’, Lepage’s puppetry-based performance text further establishes the aforementioned chronological through-line and elucidates the narrative, a storyline marked by an intricate score; ‘The plot is interrupted for unannounced and unidentified

digressions and flashbacks, and the characters—impersonated by one voice, now by another, now by voices in tandem or tutti—are fragmented and absorbed into the musical’ (Taruskin, *Stravinsky* 1292). For the first act of ‘The Fox’, which was originally crafted for a pantomime-style street performance, Lepage pairs the narrative with shadow puppetry, a form also created for public street performances. Versions of this style of shadow puppetry can be traced to China in 9 B.C.E. as well as to performances of the Mahabharata and Ramayana in India during the same period (Gabouriault 3). Building on the fables’ use of simple shadowgraphy, this more advanced form of shadow play relies on acrobats’ bodies and paper cut-outs, inspired by the leather objects incorporated into Chinese and Indonesian shadow theatre traditions alongside Turkey’s shadow theatre, which emerged in the fourteenth century (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 36).<sup>23</sup> This form of puppetry served as an important solution to the convoluted plot featured in ‘The Fox’. As the sung narration began and the crafty Fox stalked the Cock, the cast of characters, including the Ram and the Cat (the Cock’s protectors) were clearly established through shadows combining cut-outs and the acrobats’ bodies; ‘suddenly the nonsensical lyrics made perfect sense—or rather, one no longer cared whether they made sense or not’ (Bernstein). As explored in the upcoming discussion of bodies-in-motion, the acrobats established each character through specific physical vocabularies; the deceptive Fox slinked about while the Cock fussed and pecked his way toward imminent danger.

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<sup>23</sup> Lepage was inspired by Andersen’s fascination with ‘an exhibition of chinoiserie at the Tivoli in Copenhagen, where you could see little Chinese shadow theatres’ (Lepage, ‘Aix en Provence’), hence *The Nightingale*’s incorporation of pi ying shadow play. The tradition is closely related to Turkey’s karagöz and Indonesian wayang kulit. All three inspired *The Nightingale*, creating shadows through the interaction of human bodies and physical objects, often made from tanned animal hides (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 36). Lepage developed a ‘deep interest in Indonesian wayang kulit’ while working with Les Marionnettes du Grand Théâtre de Québec (Fouquet 7).



Figure 29. 'The Fox', *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, 2009 (Photo: Michael Cooper)



Figure 30. The Fox is dead (white shadow). 'The Fox', *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, 2009 (Photo: Michael Cooper)

In the second act of ‘The Fox’, the Ram, the Cat and the Cock take vengeance on their persecutor, tearing the Fox to bits. As this occurs, the score offers an ornate version of the composition’s opening march (Craft). Lepage’s scenography mirrors the music’s thematic development by complicating the shadow play seen in act one, presenting a new development in shadow puppetry. Created by Ex Machina for *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, the barnyard animals appear in the second act of ‘The Fox’ through ‘white shadow’:

For the second part of the Fox, we developed a more modern language with Michael [Curry] and Étienne [Boucher]. The light on the screen was now projected from the front, making what we’ve called white shadows. The cut-outs, held by rods, are white. The acrobats are less visible. They have to rely more on their hands... The Fox ends with mirrored cut-outs that create the effect of reflecting the animals’ silhouettes. (Lepage in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 51)<sup>24</sup>

While mirroring the orchestral development of Stravinsky’s score, the use of white shadow also represents a further step in Lepage’s broader dramaturgy. The over-arching performance text charting the evolution of puppetry, which began with ancient shadowgraphy has moved forward in time to a twenty-first century form of shadow play crafted by Ex Machina—white shadow (Figures 30 and 31).

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<sup>24</sup> My translation of:

*Dans la deuxième partie de Renard, avec Michael et Étienne, nous avons développé un langage plus modern. La lumière sur l’écran vient maintenant de l’avant... pour faire ce que nous avons appelé des ombres blanches. En effet, les découpes, tenues par des tiges deviennent blanches. On voit moins les corps des interprètes. Il faut utiliser plutôt leurs mains... Le Renard se termine avec des découpes miroirs, qui créent un effet de réflexion des silhouettes des animaux.* (Lepage in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 51).



Figure 31. 'The Fox', *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, 2009 (Photo: Michael Cooper)

In adopting this multi-layered approach to performance, Lepage is mirroring a technique that Béatrice Picon-Vallin calls *feuilletage* (or leafing through) (95). In *feuilletage*, the director uses performance text (whether scenographic, dramatic or both) to layer material from a number of historical periods. Singleton explains how *feuilletage* operates in Ariane Mnouchkine's 2010 production *Naufragés du Fol Espoir*, which begins on the eve of World War One with a silent film crew shooting an adaptation of a Jules Verne novel. The narrative moves through the twentieth century, delivered by a transhistorical, narrative voice throughout:

*Feuilletage* operates precisely between the borders of Orientalism, interculturalism, and globalism, revealing similarities and differences, and charting how the representation of Otherness took on different guises, ultimately evolving theoretical paradigms from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. (Singleton 90)

In *The Nightingale*, Lepage's *feuilletage* is essential to his scenographic dramaturgy; by aestheticizing his production through the evolution of *chinoiserie* over time, he simultaneously structures *The Nightingale* through scenography and, by creating this external architectural-dramaturgical structure, he also offers a view of Asian cultures as refracted through the lens of the Western gaze over time, with the evolution of puppetry skipping from the ninth century BC to the fourteenth century. Ultimately, in the final section of *The Nightingale*, Lepage's ornate aesthetic summons a nineteenth and twenty-first century *chinoiserie*.

Beyond the work it does linked to the production's various chronological periods, puppetry also creates a metatheatrical distance between spectators and the action as they watch in *The Nightingale*. Though *chinoiserie* establishes the various geographical places occupied by performers, puppetry's natural distancing effect makes spectators aware of the theatre-making process. Lepage notes 'There are no strings with these puppets... but this is a production that shows all the strings. It's very simple. Part of the poetry of the piece is that everything is exposed' ('Operatic *Chinoiserie*'). This exposure is established even prior to the material puppets' appearance. During the shadow play and fables section of *The Nightingale*, a gap at the bottom of the large scrim where shadow puppets are projected allows spectators to see the shins, feet and even full bodies of the acrobats as they contort their bodies to become the characters in 'The Fox' (Figure 33). The second part of *The Nightingale* features Bunraku, which Jan Kott describes as follows:

The aesthetics of this art consists in evoking an absolute illusion, and in its equally absolute destruction. Bunraku is simultaneously a theatre in which the puppets act human dramas ... and a metatheatre, whose protagonists

are the manipulators operating the puppets, the narrator and the samisen; ... [bunraku's] dramatic action consists in revealing the theatrical illusion. (100)<sup>25</sup>

As noted by Behrndt and Turner, in general, newer forms of dramaturgy are less focused on the story and seem to be more centred on the mode of telling (189). By employing puppets as a scenographic tool with which to dramaturgically link the musical compositions featured in *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, Lepage capitalises on puppetry's inherent alienating quality and draws attention to the production's mode of 'telling'. This alienation technique is developed as Lepage plays with scale throughout *The Nightingale*. In a shift that lends itself to a productive aesthetic self-consciousness, the characters first appear via sixteen-inch tall Vietnamese water puppets but are replaced in the second scene by Bunraku puppets that stand at one metre in height, more than double the Vietnamese water puppets' size. In metatheatrically signalling his attention to process, Lepage invites spectators to a pleasurable task—they are welcomed to analyse the various cultural strands and layers featured in the visual and physical performance text.

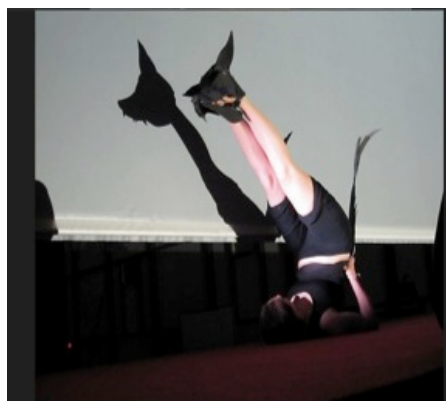


Figure 32. 'The Fox', *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, 2009 (Photo: Michael Cooper)

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<sup>25</sup> The samisen or shamisen is a stringed Japanese instrument used to accompany Bunraku performances.



Figure 33. ‘The Fox’, *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, 2009 (Photo: Michael Cooper)

### **Bodies-in-motion**

For auteurs staging opera, puppetry offers practical solutions to the norms of opera performance, which may seem particularly challenging to theatre directors. Key among puppetry’s strengths is its ability to marry movement and music on stage. In his study of how operatic voices are shaped through systemised pedagogies, Konstantinos Thomaidis observes the ‘noble posture’ phenomenon. Referred to in jest as ‘park and bark’, this rigid posture, in which the torso remains completely immobile, is considered in opera to be the best possible stance for optimal vocal production. The dominance of this theory is supported by some of the behaviours witnessed during *Ring* rehearsals,<sup>26</sup> opera singers resist blocking that could compromise their ‘noble posture’ and vocal production in any way, be it moving quickly across the stage or simply leaning down to retrieve a fallen sword. Puppets present an immediate solution to this problem, having a broader capacity for movement in performance than singers, who have been taught to

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<sup>26</sup> See Chapter Four’s discussion of Hans-Peter König’s characterisation in the *Ring*.



favour stillness as a way to optimise vocal quality. Demonstrating his awareness of this,

Lepage comments:

Puppetry is a very open poetic form that we can invite into theatre, dance, and opera... Puppets liberate performers from the limitations of the body. They can, for example, overcome gravity to fly or endure the worst physical abuses; they are nearly without limits. This liberation of the performer's body is particularly resonant in opera, a universe where the singers are subject to strict physical limitations linked to maintaining the vocal quality. With puppetry, this problem is gone; a singer can, for example, make their character run while singing without experiencing any shortness of breath. (Lepage in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 19)<sup>27</sup>

Though Lepage asked the opera singers in *The Nightingale* to make subtle movements, vocal quality was not compromised as they crafted a dynamic, physical performance text. Tommasini comments that the unique physical demands of the production 'did not inhibit the beguiling singing' of any cast member ('Spin Cycle').

By using puppets, Lepage has also found a way to honour Stravinsky's score and the musical aesthetic for *Le Rossignol*, which, due to the influence of Les Ballet

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<sup>27</sup> My translation of:

*La marionette véhicule une forme poétique très ouverte que l'on peut inviter dans le théâtre, dans la danse, dans l'opéra... la marionette permet de libérer l'interprète de son corps. Elle peut, par exemple, s'affranchir de la gravité pour voler ou subir les pires sévices; elle est pratiquement sans limites. Cette libération du corps de l'interprète trouve une résonance particulière à l'opéra, un univers où les chanteurs sont justement soumis à des limitations strictes pour assurer la qualité de leur chant. Avec la marionette, ce problème est évacué: un chanteur pourrait, par exemple, faire courir son personnage tout en chantant sans avoir de problème de soufflé ou de voix. (Lepage in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 19)*

Russes and Diaghilev, features a pronounced stylistic disconnect from the end of the first act on, and is engineered for choreographic spectacle. Unlike the inaugural production's separation of music (singers in the pit) and movement (dancers on the stage) to accommodate the physicality called for in *Le Rossignol*, Lepage's staging punctuates Stravinsky's shift to energetic music as the smaller puppets featured in the first act of *The Nightingale* are replaced by boisterous water dragons off-set by larger Bunraku characters, whose 'extreme classical look' and style of movement possesses a sophistication that an opera singer 'might struggle to create in performance' (Curry). The fluid grace of Bunraku puppets, marionettes explicitly crafted to embody music played by a shamisen, is linked to the conventions of the form. Factors such as how 'the unique shape of the kimono sleeves' affect the puppet's arm movement: 'Because exposing the arm outside of the sleeve is considered ill-mannered for a young woman, the arm is moved carefully in a roundabout movement' (Ueno-Herr 304). Moreover, to shorten distances travelled, the puppet can 'glide through the air while the feet are moving' (Ueno-Herr 303). In training the singers-cum-puppeteers, Curry has clearly established these conventions, as a delicate movement ballet ensues when the Bunraku puppets first appear at court in *The Nightingale*, embodying the Emperor and his courtiers with an assured yet graceful royal gait.

Using puppetry effectively mitigates another hurdle faced by opera singers. The artistic director of opera programs and an acting instructor at the Manhattan School of Music, Dona D. Vaughn, articulates this challenge, commenting: 'Some acting techniques work well for the singer, while others, such as method acting, with its emphasis on emotional recall, do not work unless the singer has spent years learning his emotional parameters'. Vaughn goes on to highlight the possible repercussions of method acting in opera: 'Singers cannot always risk vocal distress by fully embracing

the emotional realism and immediacy of the moment dictated by text or the dramatic scope of the music. Perhaps those in the opera industry demanding “naturalistic” acting from the opera singer have forgotten that *opera is not a natural world*’ (Vaughn). Known for his resistance to generating emotion through method techniques (Charest 155), such as emotional recall, Lepage’s preferred acting aesthetic is rooted in Lecoq’s outside-in approach to characterisation through mask work, which relates directly to puppetry. A ‘close cousin’ to puppetry, Lecoq’s mask play is an ‘effective route to puppet play: the masked performer acts as a self-manipulated figure, his or her normal bearing, voice and mannerisms subsumed in the dictates of the mask’ (Francis 35). These elements of mask play are taken to a productive extreme through puppetry in *The Nightingale*. By incorporating puppetry, Lepage finds a way to circumvent the demand on singers to generate emotions from within, something that is often beyond the scope of opera performers’ professional training (Isherwood, ‘Operatic Acting?’) and, as previously mentioned, risks compromising vocal quality. A marked departure from Stanislavski’s realism, where emotions are manufactured internally before surfacing, puppetry offers singers a productive alternative. Considering puppetry’s role in Western theatre, Roland Barthes comments: ‘Emotion no longer inundates, no longer submerges, it becomes reading material... In Bunraku, the puppet is not controlled by strings... The puppet no longer apes the creature... the *inside* no longer rules the *outside*’ (‘Bunraku’ 136, emphases in original).

Lepage’s use of puppets is not, however, an attempt to disguise singers’ physical presence in performance. Of his shared goals with Lepage, *The Nightingale*’s puppet designer Michael Curry comments: ‘I’ve been training the principal singers and chorus members how to create life in puppets without losing their own life. One thing that’s unique about the way we’re presenting this opera is that we’re not in any way hiding the

singers'. Though Vietnamese water puppeteers usually remain behind bamboo curtains, Lepage and Curry felt that the singers featured in *The Nightingale* should be visible to the audience at all times (Curry). Regarding the process of creating *The Nightingale*, Lepage comments, 'puppetry creates its own universe, full of conventions, far from realism. Opera doesn't function otherwise' (19)<sup>28</sup>. By encouraging the singer-puppeteers to 'live' alongside the puppets, Lepage and Curry productively capitalise on puppetry's inherent metatheatricality.

Shadow work also plays a vital role in *The Nightingale*. After Stravinsky's initial work with Les Ballets Russes, the composer had become particularly interested in musical ideas as embodied by dancers' movements (Pasler). By using acrobats to create full body shadows in 'The Fox', Lepage demonstrates how advanced choreography and fully embodied performances enhance Stravinsky's music. 'The intricate choreography... with the tumbling figures married to elements like the sneer on the fox's puppet face, gave the narrative an exuberant physicality that beautifully matched the lively, often bumptious character of the music' (Waleson, 'Spell-binding'). Though their gymnastic ability added a layer of excitement to *The Nightingale*, the acrobats' characterisations of Stravinsky's musical themes were particularly effective, bringing the smooth-operating fox to life through a languid, self-assured gait while embodying the Cock through bolts of busy energy punctuated by moments of terrified stillness. A critic for *The Globe & Mail* notes, 'The joy of the performance came not only from the animal grace of the acrobat... but also from the harmony of music and gesture - each squiggle in the orchestra; each flourish of the voice finding a perfect expression in the acrobats' bodies' (Bernstein).

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<sup>28</sup> My translation: '*La marionette crée son propre univers, pétri de conventions, loin du réalisme. L'opéra ne fonctionne pas autrement*' (Lepage in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 19).

## Architectonic Scenography

In *The Nightingale*, Lepage demonstrates an interest in working with architectonic scenography that is decidedly ‘low-tech’. Like Appia and Craig, his work here is defined by light, shadows and angles. His scenography is transformative through the shapes it makes and the silhouettes that materialise. While his *Ring* made music visible through cutting-edge technology, in *The Nightingale*, it occurs through puppets and shadows.

Given *The Nightingale*’s various songs and settings, Lepage’s scenography has to shape-shift rapidly while reflecting the evocative musical textures of Stravinsky’s various compositions. Lighting plays a major role in establishing atmosphere in this production, particularly since the flooded pit and location of the orchestra on stage, alongside the forty-member chorus (Baillie), keeps scenic elements to a minimum. Further to this, because opera houses seldom light their orchestra pits, designer Étienne Boucher and his team faced the challenge of an extensive lighting re-hang in every venue, finding ways to illuminate *The Nightingale*’s central point of action—the middle of the pool (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 52). additionally, because the shadow puppetry sequences demanded set lighting levels, the light surrounding the screen had to remain static throughout most of *The Nightingale*’s first act. Despite these challenges, Boucher’s lighting effectively established tone and atmosphere as it played off the water in each act of *The Nightingale*.

Though the light for Act One was fairly static, Boucher did take advantage of any opportunities he saw to make slight shifts in the design. As previously mentioned, much like Wagner, Stravinsky felt physical gestures had a vital role to play in punctuating music: ‘The sight of gestures and movements of various parts of the body producing the music is fundamentally necessary if it is to be grasped in all its fullness’

(Stravinsky 72). While watching rehearsals for the first act of *The Nightingale*, Boucher noticed that the conductor's gestures were causing ripples in the water. He decided to use the reflection of these waves on the screen situated above the musicians; it became 'a choreography of reflections that evolved in relation to the conductor's movements' (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 53).<sup>29</sup> In this play with reflections, Boucher highlights the pool's presence, creating anticipation in spectators for the moment when the first water puppet emerges.

When the Fisherman/Narrator appears in the pool at the outset of *The Nightingale*, Boucher's lighting clearly establishes mood and time of day. The opera begins in the pre-dawn hours. Though the moon still hangs in the sky, the Fisherman/Narrator (played by Lothar Odinius) cuts through the fog and ethereal turquoise water in his small sampan. Perched on a tree, savouring the ephemerality of the moment separating night from dawn, the Nightingale greets the Fisherman with a peal of pristine notes. As the Chamberlain, Cook and courtiers arrive, the ambient light increases, swelling into a bright and lively atmosphere that marks an important day at court. Because Stravinsky's *Nightingale* occurs over a full day, the next scene segues into preparations for the Emperor's party and the emissaries' arrival at the porcelain palace in the evening. Because the characters are gathered to fête the Emperor, Boucher establishes a party atmosphere—it is clearly night but the emissaries appear under the type of bright lights that are synonymous with red carpet jaunts. When the chorus is positioned at the edge of the stage and the Taiwanese hand puppets are revealed, the lighting creates effervescent reflections of the chorus members and their puppets in the water. Finally, when the Emperor takes to his chamber to rest, the sudden, surprise attack of Death is accompanied by a piercing special on the bed. This bright white light

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<sup>29</sup> My translation: 'une chorégraphie de reflets lumineux qui évolue en relation avec les mouvements du chef' (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 53).

brings the severity of the situation to the fore.



Figure 34. *The Nightingale, The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, 2009 (Photo: Michael Cooper)

Carl Fillion's orchestra-pit pool is also integral to *The Nightingale*. Beyond its physical requirements, among them an assembly process that takes eight hours (Baillie) and a constant monitoring of the heating system to ensure the singers' comfort (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 47), the pool also contributes to the production's atmosphere.<sup>30</sup> Because the stage space is packed with the orchestra, chorus and a cast of featured singers, in the first act of *The Nightingale* the pool ran the risk of appearing like a dead space; however, with Boucher's lighting and the gently rocking waves, the water fostered a child-like atmosphere as spectators took in Stravinsky's musical fairy tales. Further contributing to this was the puppet play facilitated by the pool. There is a sense of delight when the Fisherman's sampan first appears cutting silently through the

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<sup>30</sup> During the *The Nightingale's* run for the Canadian Opera Company, it played in repertory with *Madame Butterfly*, meaning that the orchestra pit would have to be drained on alternating days and re-assembled as a swimming pool on others.

surrounding water or ‘when the baby water dragon comes splashing around his mother like a newborn puppy’ (Keillor). Fillion’s pool also creates tension. When Death explodes and nearly smothers the Emperor from below his bed, another architectonic conceit created via a large inflatable skeleton puppet and underwater air pump, the splashes resulting from the Emperor’s panicked thrashes and Death’s swollen limbs instantaneously destroy the peace established in the preceding silent bed chamber moment. In this, Lepage has found a way to visually and aurally establish the real threat posed by Death. Spectators do not simply watch two singers stand and deliver but witness the wild, thrashing movements of a man facing imminent death while his attacker looks on from a position of total control.

### **Conditions of Production**

In his review of *The Nightingale*’s opening at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2011, opera critic Anthony Tommasini wondered if the performers cast in Lepage’s production ‘ever anticipated that one day they would be asked to perform demanding vocal parts, in Russian, while sloshing around in 12,000 gallons of water as they deftly manipulated puppet versions of the characters they were portraying’ (‘Spin Cycle’). Variations on this question could be posed of many collaborators on *The Nightingale*, including the costume designer asked to create water-proof ensembles for singers and puppets (Mara Gottler), the scenographer enlisted to build a set that transformed from a playground for shadowgraphy to a pool for Vietnamese water puppetry (Carl Fillion), and the musicians asked to abandon the orchestra pit in favour of a position on stage. For Lepage, an integral aspect of realizing these challenges is working in the style he has fostered at Ex Machina since its inception in 1994.



With non text-based dramaturgies, such as Lepage's scenographic approach, different work is required in the rehearsal room to create and hone a production:

New dramaturgy challenge[s] the role of predetermining factors, such as the text as the pivot of signification and the 'concept' (or a prefixed interpretational frame) as the structuring principle that governs rehearsals. Instead, a more process oriented, explorative investigation of all sorts of materials and questions, from which the performance gradually emerged, [is] called for. (Imschoot 58)

For this reason, Lepage's work on *The Nightingale* spanned a three-year period and continued after the production's premier in Toronto in 2009. Gilbert notes 'in Toronto, Aix, Lyon and Amsterdam, we were able to rehearse many weeks, full time, with the whole cast (singers, puppeteers, chorus) and scenography' ('Ring Question').

Rehearsals and workshops with puppet prototypes began in September 2007, with possible producing companies being invited to view the work in progress that spring (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 27). All designers were hired by 2007, and production meetings involving the entire company, which provided opportunities for collaborators to feedback on any aspect of the work, began soon after. After the extended creation and rehearsal phase, culminating with the 2009 premier in Toronto, the production underwent an additional three-week rehearsal phase in 2010, with two weeks in the rehearsal hall and a week on stage at the Grand Théâtre de Provence prior to opening in Aix-en-Provence in June (B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 27). Given that most opera companies have four weeks of rehearsal prior to moving to the theatre and production

meetings are not open to general feedback from all collaborators, Lepage's way of working deviates significantly from common practice.

Beyond an extended rehearsal period, Lepage also 'insists on having virtually complete control over what goes on stage' and, since the late nineteen-nineties, has worked with Ex Machina as his producing partner for all opera projects to ensure production conditions are conducive to his working process. At La Caserne, Lepage and his team have the freedom to play with 'ideas for as long as it takes to realise a conceptual and physical structure for the show. They work out the bugs and produce a virtual mock-up that companies can look at after they've commissioned the production, or while they're deciding whether to sign on' (Everett-Green, 'Conversion'). Ex Machina's partners for *The Nightingale* honoured this way of working. Gilbert comments 'For *Le Rossignol et autres fables*, the Canadian Opera Company, Aix en Provence, Lyon and Amsterdam were present during the whole process [as it unfolded at their respective theatres], and gave much needed information for the production to fit in each of their schedules, rules, logistics, etc.'. He adds 'but, basically, once they agreed to our budget, they stayed at some distance from the creation process. We had more freedom, as long as we fitted into the predetermined frame' ('Ring Questions').

The last of my case studies, Chapter Five demonstrates the ways in which Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy can serve as an external dramaturgical map for loosely structured and seldom produced opera texts, among them Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*, Schoenberg's *Erwartung* and Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*. Lepage's production of *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables* gleans its shape from a broad survey of the history of Asian forms of puppetry as well as a chronology of Western contact (and aspect of the appropriation) of Asian cultures, running from early Silk Road trade routes through nineteenth-century forms of *chinoiserie* to Ex Machina's own

twenty-first century version of the aesthetic. Perhaps most important, is this chapter's observation that although Lepage's stagings may not always legibly reflect their politics of representation, knowledge of the ways in which he pursues his scenographic dramaturgy can. Aspects of his stagings such as the overtly aestheticized *chinoiserie* in *The Nightingale* could easily be confused for Orientalism, particularly given the bald essentialism and cultural cliché featured in Lepage's earlier oeuvre; nevertheless by visiting Vietnam to learn the origins of Vietnamese water puppetry and sharing numerous photos with his collaborators, Lepage demonstrates a sense of responsibility surrounding Ex Machina's engagement with other cultures. Although this work may be invisible to those who are not familiar with the evolving politics undergirding Lepage's productions or recent shifts in his theatre-making process, Lepage's efforts to imbue Ex Machina's theatre with a progressive interculturalism, whether implicitly or explicitly, are not negated.

## Conclusion

As examined in this study, Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy is embedded in the broader theatrical continuum of scenic writing. Chapter One articulates the central tools defining scenographic dramaturgy—architectonic scenography, bodies-in-motion and historical-mapping—and theorises each element's lineage. Architectonic scenography is the evocative use of amorphous stage space and scenery to establish tone. This tool finds its roots in Appia's pursuit of music's visual incarnation through scenography and Craig's expressive use of transformative, architectonic scenery. For the *Ring* and *The Damnation of Faust*, Lepage uses interactive digital technology to create unique visual scores dictated by the performer's pitch, pace and movement whereas in *Bluebeard's Castle*, elements such as the bleeding, groaning castle walls offer a more low-tech demonstration of how architectonic scenography underlines an extant text's tone.

Lepage's work with bodies-in-motion is indebted to Artaud's physical poetry and Meyerhold's interest in the meaning-making possibilities born of performers in dialogue with acting machines; these influences are evident as the exhilarated Valkyries ride their giant planks-cum-horses in the *Ring* and when three silent dancers materialise in *Erwartung* to embody the hallucinations at the centre of Schoenberg's monodrama. Jacques Lecoq's physical theatre has also coloured the signature physicality featured in Lepage's adaptations. Like other auteurs trained in the Lecoq tradition (including Ariane Mnouchkine and Simon McBurney), Lepage employs Lecoq's techniques to enable performers to play the size and scope of a given fictional stage space. In rehearsing *Shakespeare's Rapid Eye Movement*, Lepage employed temporary spatial constraints, physically training the actors to embody the space they were meant to represent.

Completing scenographic dramaturgy's triffecta is historical-spatial mapping, which references the use of time and place to aesthetically ground a production.

In Chapter Two, my dissertation goes on to link Lepage's adaptations to auteur theatre and, in doing so, explores the third tenet of scenographic dramaturgy, historical-spatial mapping. As understood here, auteur theatre is defined by a distinct, aesthetic signature (which relates to its namesake, auteur cinema). The ways in which Wagner revolutionised both opera and theatre through his director-led approach to production and theatre's growing influence on contemporary opera production serve to link my case studies, which include Lepage's *Wendake Tempête*, the Metropolitan Opera/Ex Machina co-production of *Siegfried* and *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*. Theatricality is positioned as the central source of continuity in Lepage's operatic and Shakespearean adaptations. Given theatre's postdramatic turn and opera's growing investment in digital spectacle and acting ability, scenographic dramaturgy has much to offer both forms. This argument is grounded by an examination of how highly physical and visual performance texts coloured auteur-ed forerunners to Lepage's adaptations, including Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Patrice Chéreau's 1976 *Ring*. Both directors re-'authored' extant works through their signature scenography. Brook's empty white box became a physical playground for actors and drew indiscriminately on Indonesian culture in a way that is echoed by Lepage's cultural sampling in his 1992 staging of the same text (Knowles, 'Dream Machine'). Initial reactions to Chéreau's radical Marxist *Ring* expressed outrage but retrospectively, his powerful re-authoring of Wagner's cycle would be seen as revolutionary. In time, Lepage's *Ring* could experience the same treatment. Lepage's adaptations are usefully contextualised by questions surrounding authorship and authority in auteur adaptations. When adapting

Shakespeare and Wagner, Lepage is not only contending with major figures but he also faces spectators' preconceived notions of how these figures' works should be produced.

study also offers new lines of enquiry with which to interrogate Lepage's politics of representation. As demonstrated in my case studies, though Lepage's adaptations may initially appear to traffic in reductionist portrayals, a progressive intercultural politics may be unfolding below the performative surface through the theatre-making process. At first glance, the incorporation of an 'inauthentic' dance hailing from the Buffalo Bill show in the Wendake *Tempête* could seem culturally insensitive; nevertheless, the cast's view of said dance as embedded in their recent cultural history and the director's willingness to make his production bible available to all collaborators alongside an invitation for feedback, demonstrates a productive interculturalism. Lepage's work has often been criticised for its Orientalism, a critique that might come to mind when viewing the highly aestheticised *chinoiserie* featured in *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*. What careful research of *Ex Machina*'s intentions and process will reveal, however, is that the production explores the West's gaze on 'the East' through representations of *chinoiserie* over time. In order to craft a hybrid *chinoiserie*, Lepage and his collaborators travelled to Vietnam and Japan, researching the origins of the forms of puppetry they were about to purposely appropriate. This ensured that *The Nightingale*'s *chinoiserie* developed from an intimate knowledge of the original art form as opposed to an imagined version of 'the East'.

This observation has implications for broader theatre studies as well. My discovery flags the importance of process when analysing a work. Although a production may appear to engage in problematic politics on the surface, research into the theatre-making process may reveal a different set of objectives.

Beyond its relevance to Lepage scholarship, this study presents ideas and arguments that engage with issues in theatre studies more broadly. As articulated in the first two chapters of my dissertation, scenographic dramaturgy provides a response to performance's non-logocentric turn and answers calls, such as those put forth by Lehmann and Primavesi in 'Dramaturgy on Shifting Grounds', for a language with which to interrogate and validate non-logocentric forms of dramaturgy. In doing so, scenographic dramaturgy works towards collapsing hierarchies, including the enduring privileging of the dramatic text over 'spectacle' and literary theory's preference for 'source texts' and 'originals' over adaptations. More radically, my research implicitly (and now explicitly) proposes a related reconsideration of the term adaptation to include stagings that rely purely on scenography to re-'write' canonical works. If dramatic language and scenographic language are to occupy an equal position in theatre, the title 'adaptation' should not include one form of writing while occluding the other. As understood and unpacked here, performances are, in and of themselves, 'compositions in time and space' (Turner and Behrndt 30). Though Lepage's re-envisionings of canonical works may not change a word, they radically re-envision and, in some cases, resuscitate existing texts through the language of scenography.

This project also contributes to contemporary debates surrounding auteur theatre. Michael Billington has argued that auteur-ed theatre productions feature a hierarchy where 'individual style and idiosyncratic signature becomes more important than the work itself' (Billington, 'Auteurs'). Echoing Billington's statement, the Metropolitan Opera's music director, James Levine, defines auteur-ed operas as productions driven by an 'exterior allegorical gimmick' (in Wakin). Peter Gelb's *Ring* rhetoric for the media, which centred on repeated assurances that Lepage would 'tell the story' and assertions that *Ex Machina's* production would not be 'some high-concept

Eurotrash staging' (in Tommasini) seemingly served as an ultimately unsuccessful, pre-emptive strike against the contemporary opera world's view of auteur-ly productions. This dissertation looks towards a new understanding of auteur theatre, working to further Robert Wilson's argument that the auteur's responsibility is 'to create, not to interpret' (89).

Body text is understood as integral to this scenographic language. Picking up on Konstantinos Thomaidis's 'The Vocal Body', which focuses on physicality and the voice, this study investigates breaks with traditional singer training models. As discussed in Chapter Four and Five, opera singers are often hesitant to physicalise their performances due to the possible negative implications of movement on vocal production (Lepage in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 19). This was a challenge faced by Lepage when staging the *Ring* as some performers would not execute the blocking suggested due to its physicality. And yet, in Lepage's 2012 *Tempest* opera staging, the performer playing Ariel delivered an electrically kinetic performance while singing one of the most difficult roles in the extant opera canon. As Ariel, Audrey Luna garnered consistent acclaim for her singing *and* her physicality—two aspects of the singer's performance that have, for some time, been viewed in traditional opera circles as mutually exclusive. Working with choreographer Crystal Pite, Luna married Adès's acrobatic coloratura role, which resides in the stratospheric range for sopranos, with an equally acrobatic physicality.

As noted by Thomaidis in his study of the relationship between the operatic voice and movement, 'movement and space as partners, as impulses' impact on the voice positively. Moving freely allows the singer to avoid 'the fixation of the voice and embrace its ever-changing character' (Loc. 1578). The reception of Luna's performance demonstrated the freedom she gained from her physical performance text. Eric Myers



notes, ‘Not only does Luna nail every note, she presents such a quivery, highly stylised physical characterisation that she seems, appropriately, not of this earth’ (‘Tempest’); similarly, Mike Silverman comments, ‘Audrey Luna not only sings all those high D’s, E’s and F’s with aplomb, she also bravely entrusts herself to various harnesses, wires and acrobats to keep her from falling as she repeatedly defies gravity’ (‘Magic in Music’). The success of Luna’s performance as well as the effectively embodied characterisations in Lepage’s *Ring* (such as Hunter-Morris’s Siegfried and Terfel’s Wotan) speaks to the need for further research on alternatives to the established ‘park and bark’ performance model. How might opera singer training productively incorporate movement work such as dance? In what ways can a choreographer be used in opera rehearsals to facilitate embodied performances?

Despite its strengths, this theory of Lepage’s scenographic dramaturgy also demonstrates certain weaknesses, the first of which involves Lepage’s position within *Ex Machina*. As narrated here, Lepage is often positioned as the singular creator or auteur, authoring all aspects of the performance. The contributions of his longtime collaborators, among them Carl Fillion and Étienne Boucher, are sometimes acknowledged but these artists’ labour is not thoroughly investigated. This topic could be productively addressed through a study of auteur theatre and the contributions of collaborators in the performance-making process. Lepage’s recent devised work, *The Blue Dragon*, was billed as co-written by Lepage and Marie Michaud; nonetheless, the third performer in the production, Tai Wei Foo, took part in improvisations that became part of the play text. Further questions regarding unacknowledged collaborator input and the relative invisibility of the team of artists who have spent their careers crafting Lepage’s aesthetic signature offer a productive avenue for future scholarship. Discussions based on the singularity of Lepage’s artistic vision also highlight a further

gap in this study: Ex Machina's future. As Lepage moves forward with plans for his first Québec City performance space, which will open in 2016 in the D'Youville district, questions arise surrounding the fate of Ex Machina when Lepage eventually slows his frenetic creative pace and limits international projects.<sup>1</sup> The issue of legacy is pertinent here. In what ways does Lepage envision a future for Ex Machina when he is no longer at the helm? Who, if anyone, is being positioned as the heir? How might the Lepage brand survive Lepage? Further gaps present in this study include my theorizing of bodies-in-motion; though my discussion of scenographic dramaturgy considers kinetic text, it does not pursue questions of the sensory, phenomenological body in performance. This is an area that could be usefully explored and applied to Lepage studies.

As I consider the ways in which this study establishes avenues for future scholarship, the following comment from Lepage resonates most:

In opera, the historical hierarchy is very strict. The convention is that the orchestra is confined to the pit, that the diva is at the front of the stage, that dancers, comedians, acrobats do their work behind the singer, with the scenic décor appearing even further in the background... This convention provides a fixed image of

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<sup>1</sup> Plans for Lepage's first Québec City performance space, which was to be built into the side of Québec's Cape Diamond cliff, first made news in 2007. Due to the project's estimated cost of one hundred million dollars, however, a new location had to be found (Bourque). This prompted Lepage to select the old YMCA and two adjoining buildings in Québec City's D'Youville district as the alternative in 2011. Though the provincial Liberal government initially said they would provide thirty million dollars in funding for the space in 2012, strains on the economy have seen the project, as well as its private funding campaign, put on hold indefinitely; nonetheless, recent headlines in Québec have indicated that news on the government's funding decision will be imminent (M. Gagnon). Beyond providing a performance space for Ex Machina, Le Diamant would be the company's new home base, with the theatre for young audiences company Les Gros Becs taking over La Caserne (Boivin, 'Gros Becs'). Le Diamant's theatre, 'Le Théâtre Diamant', would not only host Ex Machina productions but also operas, circus performances and productions attached to Le Carrefour Internationale de Théâtre, Québec City's international theatre festival.

the world represented. As if things needed to be fixed. But the society in which we live wants this hierarchy to shift, to remain fluid. And we must also represent this fluidity on stage' (Lepage in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 47).<sup>2</sup>

Here, Lepage demonstrates the awareness he brings to his production strategies, recognizing the current need for fluidity within performing arts organisations. For opera to move forward and evolve as a genre so must its conventional hierarchies and production practices. Lepage's process for theatre and opera sees all members of the company operating with more fluidity rather than tethered to individual roles. As demonstrated in Chapter Four, this may lead to a lighting technician working with a seamstress to build a costume containing an LED unit or, as in Chapter Five, to opera singers learning the art of puppetry. *The Nightingale's* irregular format and Lepage's main scenic requirement to produce it, the flooding of the orchestra pit with twenty-seven tonnes of water, attracted companies, performers and designers who were interested in pushing the boundaries of 'unstageable' opera and re-configuring the parameters within which 'traditional' opera is produced. While his collaborators on *The Nightingale* had to demonstrate flexibility with regards to opera's extant conventions and economics (hence his many co-producers), so entrenched were the hierarchies and conventions at the Metropolitan Opera, that although artistic director Peter Gelb demonstrated a willingness to take risks, Lepage's way of working could not fit the institutionalised production model at the Metropolitan Opera. Many of the extra

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<sup>2</sup> My translation of:

'À l'opéra, la hiérarchie historique est encore très stricte. La convention veut que l'orchestra soit confiné dans la fosse, que la diva soit le plus possible à l'avant-scène, que les danseurs, comédiens, acrobates évoluent derrière, avec le décor encore un plan plus loin. Cette convention donne une image figée du monde représenté. Comme s'il fallait fixer les choses. Mais la société dans laquelle nous vivons veut que cette hiérarchie bouge, demeure mouvante. Et il faut représenter ce mouvement aussi sur scène'. (Lepage in B. Gilbert, *Le Rossignol* 47)

expenses incurred by the *Ring*, including the reinforcement of the Metropolitan Opera stage, could have been avoided had Ex Machina had the overall production and rehearsal time necessary to craft a scenography-based production according to their practice.

Building on the current wealth of scholarship focused on theatre-making processes, this project begins to question the disconnect between the material requirements of physical theatre and the institutionalised ways of working that are the norm at large theatres and opera houses. Standard practice in theatre and opera is for the company to first begin working on the set one to two weeks before the production's first night. Conversely, a typical rehearsal process at Ex Machina will have performers working with a version of the set, the central material with which the performance is created, from the earliest point in rehearsal. For Ex Machina, being restricted to eight to ten days total with the set is comparable to withholding the dramatic script from a text-based theatre company until one week prior to the opening night performance—the performers would not have the time necessary to explore and become comfortable with the production's central resource. For *The Nightingale*, Ex Machina was given 'five weeks full time on stage with scenography in Aix and Amsterdam' (B. Gilbert 'Ring Question'). When producing productions for a company like the Metropolitan Opera, however, Ex Machina is subject to an entirely different way of working that undermines their process. If large venues such as the Metropolitan Opera are to continue investing in productions built via scenographic dramaturgy, their existing production practices will need to shift to accommodate these new and evolving performance-making processes. This creates a need for scholarship interrogating long held, institutionalised norms at large theatres and possible alternatives more suited to contemporary performance-making.

Of his plans for 'Le Diamant', Ex Machina's proposed, new Québec City performance space, Lepage comments:

We're going to start not only presenting our own work in our own city, like we should have been doing all these years, but we'll also kind of have our repertoire... So we'll be providing all of the old stuff and try to rediscover it maybe in a new light, in a more simple way—try to shed skins and... find the essence of what these pieces were about. ('Back to Basics')

In fact, Lepage has already begun revisiting and adapting his own extant texts in a way that seems particularly concerned with a more progressive politics of representation. Lepage's initial attempt to update his representations and offer a contemporaneous Québécois perspective was the revival of *The Dragons' Trilogy* in 2003, which replaced the white actors, who originally played the production's Chinese and Japanese characters, with Asian performers/co-adaptors. Lepage's next auto-adaptation, 2013's remount of *Needles & Opium*, featured the addition of the Afro-Canadian professional dancer, Wellesley Robertson III, to play Miles Davis (a character who was referenced but never seen in the original production). Robertson's physical and visual body text, crafted on, in and around the kinetic set, gave Davis a rich, significant voice and agency though the character never speaks a word. These adaptations may prove fertile ground for an enquiry focused on the ways in which Lepage's revisionist scenographic dramaturgy is, to a great extent, a response to hauntings arising from problematic depictions of difference in his original productions.

Lepage's auto-adaptations are not exclusively dictated by a desire to revise problematic representational politics. In 2015, he is scheduled to revisit *Bluebeard's*

*Castle/Erwartung* for the Canadian Opera Company. *Lipsynch* was also recently used as source material; Lepage and Pedro Pires drew three stories from the nine-hour epic to create their 2013 film *Triptych*. As Lepage adapts other pieces from Ex Machina's repertoire, my theory of historical-spatial mapping, supplemented by Picon-Vallin's *feuilletage*, also offers a useful avenue for further enquiry. Questions that I posited of Lepage's historically layered scenographic dramaturgy for *La Tempête*, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables* are pertinent as the auteur begins to adapt his own repertoire. They include: From what present is the director adapting the past? Which tools are essential to this process? How does an extant text's production history haunt and/or revive its own re-production? As Lepage embeds his personal performance canon in the city where much of his work was born, the answers to these and other questions promise to write Ex Machina's next chapter.

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