

forbade the use of his text.) In 1991 *Brace Up!* subverted the narrative and psychological slant of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* to produce a set of technologically brilliant comments on the play and its reception, at the same time taking its visual stimulus from Japanese theatre. Later work has included material using the work of Eugene O'Neill, Racine, and Gertrude Stein (*House /Lights*, 2000).

This interview with Nick Kaye, the postmodernist historian, attempts to elucidate LeCompte's 'meaning' in her work. It is illuminating for her refusal to adopt any explanations, which avoid the fact that she creates 'theatrical', not literary or philosophical, meaning, instead maintaining that the meanings of the Wooster Group's creations lie in the pieces themselves and nowhere else.

Compare this interview with writings by the following authors in this reader

- Bausch – a confrontational theatre approach
- Brecht – the roots of an anti-psychological stance
- Ethells – who acknowledges LeCompte as influence
- Foreman and Wilson – other deconstructive approaches to narrative
- Lepage – a similar eclectic approach to material
- Rainer – a contemporary woman postmodernist with a similar concern for process
- Schechner – North American antecedents

#### Further reading

- Gray, S. and LeCompte, E. (1980) 'Rumstick Road', *Performing Arts Journal* 11(2).
- Savran, D. (1988) *Breaking the Rules*, New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- Shank, T. (1982) *American Alternative Theatre*, New York: Grove Press.

## Robert Lepage

### ROBERT LEPAGE IN DISCUSSION

**RE** This is the end of a long but quite ordinary day for Robert: he's been rehearsing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* since 10.30 this morning, re-rehearsing his show *Needles and Opium*, which he has just performed, and is now rounding off the day with a light ten-mile jog through this Platform. I've been seeing Robert's work for maybe six years, since he brought a show to the ICA. Last year I was in a position to exercise my patronage – put the taxpayers' money where my heart is – and invite *Tectonic Plates* to the National. In addition, I've been able to pursue the real passion of a fan and ask Robert to direct a show for the National. This all begs the question of why I think Robert's work is so singular and so attractive. I think it's because the more I work in the theatre and the more theatre I see, the more I treasure and admire the characteristics about the theatre that can't be translated into any other medium. Robert Frost said that poetry is the bit that can't be translated, and that's what I think about theatre. I don't like theatre when it's a surrogate for TV or for debate or anything else. I like it when it's the thing itself and it happens to a live audience and employs a vocabulary of speech, gesture, music, space and light as the servants of expression and content. They are all things that you see in spades in the work of Robert Lepage. His work has a characteristic of the best art: it converts the commonplace into the magical and makes the magical real and accessible. He is a purveyor of dreams, and what's encouraging and exciting for me is that it's not that he works in a language or syntax that belongs to the world of performance art. It's absolutely, irreducibly, theatre. It uses

sometimes very simple, very primitive theatrical methods and translates into a language that is entirely original. His work also places a very strong emphasis on the work of actors and on the human being. It's very humane, funny, touching, and I think entirely wonderful.

A bit of biography: Robert has worked since the beginning of the eighties with a company called Théâtre Repère. He's an actor – you may have seen him in *Jesus of Montreal* – director, writer, musician. He's also the artistic director of the French Theatre of the Canadian National Arts Centre, which effectively means he's responsible for the National Theatre. And what he does in his spare time, I can't imagine.

Robert, how did you get interested in theatre?

**RL** I've never really been interested in theatre as such. In my adolescence I was more interested in theatricality. The reason, in my opinion, there's such a big difference between theatre and theatricality is that where I come from theatrical history is extremely young – about 50 years old or so – so we don't have any classics, our classics are borrowed. Also the fact that Canada's a bi-cultural country – two cultures that are *starting* to talk to each other. We did have a pool of good authors 20 years ago when I started to be interested in theatre. When I say that I'm more interested in theatricality, it's because I think the taste for young creators, actors or directors in Quebec, at least in the seventies, came much more from seeing rock shows, dance shows, performance art, than from seeing theatre, because theatre is not as accessible as it is here in Britain. And the theatre that was there was a theatre that was already dead: not reflecting anybody's identity, not actually staging the preoccupations of the people. I always come back to political things because it's important to understand what Canada's about culturally. For a long time anybody in English Canada who was an artistic director of a big theatre company had a British accent, and in Quebec those people had a French accent from France. I don't want to sound racist or xenophobic but it took some time before young theatre people became artistic directors or even directors. There's not a theatrical tradition but there's a lot of theatricality. A lot of my taste for theatre came from seeing concerts of Genesis and Jethro Tull. It sounds pretty superficial now, but theatre for a long time, at least in North America, has been dispossessed from its theatricality. It started to imitate film more and more and got stuck with cinematic realism. The theatrical fun was when Pina Bausch started to do tours and festivals in Toronto. In the late seventies or early eighties there was this movement of all these new directors who were theatrical, and it became a more exciting place to be.

**RE** I think a lot of your generation here felt that theatre was in some way an inadequate substitute for film. They thought film is where the action is, film is the language of the 20th century, theatre is the language of the 19th century. Certainly in the States that was a strong feeling, and you didn't feel that?

**RL** I think that film is an extraordinarily exciting place to be, to work in or to see. I think it's as exciting as theatre. But I think that it's more interesting to work in theatre and to borrow from film artistic ways of showing things or telling stories. For a long time theatre had been only using the naturalism from film – saying we need real food on stage, we need to pretend that there's a fourth wall. That's wrong. Theatre's theatre. There's no fourth wall; it's live, it changes every night. What I'm trying to say is that theatre borrowed all the wrong things from film. We're facing an audience now that knows what a flash-back or a flash-forward is, that has a very strong culture and education in how to tell stories in many different ways because of film and TV. Theatre has to go along with that and use that in a theatrical way. I'm afraid I see a lot of theatre that only borrows the realism, and only the people in the front rows get to appreciate it.

**RE** I don't know the origin of Théâtre Repère, but is that why you started to write your own work, because you felt existing texts were somehow too linear?

**RL** Not necessarily. I thought a lot of texts were inadequate because they didn't correspond to the time and place I was evolving in. That was a phenomenon that was happening in Montreal and Quebec City, where language was such a political debate. Words were so coloured with politics, at least in the seventies, that people turned to non-verbal theatre to try and get other messages across. Politics was so present in Canadian life in the seventies that a lot of the creative work in Canada was based only on politics of the mind, not politics of the body, of emotion, of relationships. I think an artist sometimes has to put words aside, to explore these types of politics. Also I got interested because I was very good at mime. I never thought I'd be working as an actor and as a director.

**RE** You went to the Jacques Lecoq School in Paris?

**RL** No, not to that school, I went to Alain Knapp who had something called the Institut de la Personnalité Créatrice – translated as a place for good manners. I wasn't there a full year, only a part. He had a way of approaching theatre in a very creative way. He never distinguished what a director and an actor do. He worked mainly on improvisations – things would happen spontaneously and had to be written as they were going. So you learned to be an actor and at the same time be a director because you had to see what you were composing, and you had to be a writer so that the structure was also working. His goal was to try to make total theatrical creators. Later on I started to move on to improv games and things like that. I went to school at Quebec City Conservatory, almost a monastery, for three years. Most of the teachers there had done Lecoq and worked in Lecoq's way and philosophy. The school was based a lot on physical work. When I came out of school, I was very good physically, but at that point the bourgeoisie had incorporated clowns and Commedia and all of that. There's a company in Canada

called Direct Film, that processes Kodak stuff. They have these clowns – so the only job you could get as a clown was with them.

So anyway, all the things I'd learned in school had been incorporated by the *théâtre bourgeois*. I had to find a way of using what I knew. I think my main talent was the ability to gather people around an idea and devise pieces, and slowly we developed this group called Théâtre Repère. It's rather strange because now I have this burden on my shoulder of having all of the success, the merit of this thing, but also all the criticism; in fact it's a collective venture. I'm not trying to be falsely humble or coy or whatever (and that wouldn't be very convincing in the mouth of someone who just did a solo piece) but I truly believe that theatre is a meeting place. I don't think film is, necessarily. Film is a much more individualistic type of event. I believe that we can go through another renaissance in theatre. I'm not saying I'm trying to create a renaissance in what I'm doing, but I believe in the spirit of Renaissance, I think it's still alive and still possible. A lot of structures in the way our society permits or organises culture do not allow that, but as artists we can allow that to ourselves.

**RE** In each of Robert's shows, there is at least one, but generally about thirty images which really burn themselves on the memory. One of the things about your work, for a fellow director, is that one just feels very jealous. You sit there thinking 'I wish I'd thought of that'. But it's partly because these moments are all very simple. Anyone can think of a Lycra screen doing all those things (in *Needles and Opium*) – it's in a sense a traditional device – but anyone didn't think of it. Let me take a moment in *Dragons' Trilogy* which was recently at Riverside Studios. There's an extraordinarily moving moment (I can't tell you the whole story, it would take four and a half hours) but there's a Chinese man, married to a French Canadian woman who has been won in a bet. They have a retarded daughter, and a French-speaking Chinese nun comes to this rather unhappy couple to take away the daughter to a special home. This nun chatters away in a mixture of Chinese, English and French for a long time; it's a funny and touching scene. The child's suitcase is brought out, and gradually, as the nun speaks, the mother starts to put the child's clothes into the suitcase. She takes off the nun's habit, puts it in the suitcase, and the nun becomes this retarded child. It's the most extraordinary metamorphosis, terribly moving, and the most brilliant piece of bravura acting and direction. I was asking Robert how it came about and he said 'I think it was because we didn't have enough actors to go round'. I'm also fascinated by a moment in *Tectonic Plates* which, as an idea and as a realisation of that idea, made me cry because it was so perfect. There was a pit of water in the Cottesloe theatre. The story was a complicated interweaving, including Chopin, George Sand, Jim Morrison and the Doors and many other things, some of it set in Venice. There was an image in the second half when you were in Père Lachaise cemetery and a statue came to life. The shroud was taken off this statue and laid into the pool, and as it was laid there, a huge image of George Sand appeared on it. Of course it was just a simple carousel projector from above with a small slide.

It was exquisitely beautiful because it was there on the water but only realised because the sheet was there. Now, I want to know how do you arrive at that? I don't think you sit at home thinking 'That's a good idea, how can I work it into the show' . . .

**RL** I think there's an important word that has lost its sense in the theatre, and that's the word 'playing'. It's become a profession, a very serious word, but the concept of playing has disappeared from the staging of shows. The only way you can attain these ideas is if you play. I think we're trying to be grown-ups and taken seriously and all of that, and everything that's childish or inventive about us we put aside. I always give this example, and you probably all went through similar things . . . My father was a cab driver so he didn't have any money, but at Christmas they would buy some sophisticated toy I'd wanted badly, and I'd start playing around with it and after three days I'd be completely bored and have more fun with the box it came in. If you play around you get these ideas. Text and story-writing is very sacred, but, the thing with the nun really came about because she was playing both parts and didn't have time to go out and come in again, so we used that to become a moment of poetry. For it to work it meant that every element of clothing that we took off her had a line that went with it – we wrote to justify the costume change, which is a sacrilege in the world of writing for the theatre. You never start from form. You always work by the sacred word and of course you have problems if you don't reinvent it. I'm not saying it works every time, but I think theatre is a place of form. You explore mediums until one day you express something very profound that has some echo in the audience. Sometimes it doesn't work but at least if you put that word 'play' back, the audience is much more moved and feels much more stimulated and excited by something that allows them to be inventive with the actor. There are two ways of being attentive to a show, either you can watch in a very passive way or in a very active way. We have learnt, probably for budget reasons, that we want to give the audience their money's worth. We say 'They come here to relax, they don't want to think.' But it's not true. I believe in the intelligence of the audience, I believe that the audience wants to create. You have to give the audience food, not things that are already masticated and organised and painted. Sometimes I think I can do beautiful, magical images that are very stunning but they're too high-tec, they don't give the audience the opportunity to invent them. I think I've achieved something when it's extremely simple but triggers in 300 people in the house 300 different versions, like a word does.

**RE** The pool in *Tectonic Plates*, you said that Michael Levine, the designer said you must have this pool . . .

**RL** Of course if, after a while the pool gets in the way, we put it aside, we don't suffer. I believe a lot in intuition and in spontaneous propositions, mainly from actors because actors are extremely intuitive people. They often stutter and

can't clearly explain theatrical ideas as well as writers or directors, but they can actually express intuitions, and that's what we have to look for in theatre. Sometimes it's completely clumsy, you come in with this image and you work on it and consider it and at some point it always comes out, that there's this inner connection between us, all these layers underneath our feet, secret connections that we have to discover. Then we work on the coincidences. When you work alone it's more difficult because it's much more egocentric, almost therapeutic. But these ideas come from coincidence and intuition. For *Needles and Opium*, I was interested in Jean Cocteau and fascinated by the fact that he wrote a book on a plane. In those days it took 15 hours to fly from New York City to Paris, so he had time to write a book. I was amazed because I only deliver one tenth of the contents of the book, but it's very fascinating. I read it on a plane to Barcelona and had the physical sensation of flying while this guy was on this old 1949 plane. So you start to investigate the effects it has on you, the coincidences. You say, how come I feel moved and inspired by this piece of work, which I might just have read, found interesting and put aside? It's the fact that you're in midair, in a privileged place, these events indicate to you what you should be using. I've done it so much, and worked with so many people that I don't have as much fear or apprehension about going into it. Of course, a lot of actors or writers who participate in my works are often destabilised when we start.

Talking about *Tectonic Plates*, I can't explain it, it made an impression on me intellectually, this thing of continents that are moving. It's just an intuition. Then everyone in the company gives their impression and at one point we see all these story lines. I didn't know anything about Romanticism before we did this show, or about Jim Morrison or Chopin. I mean, I knew *something* – I'm not totally uncultivated – but then you get so obsessed and so creative when you delve into a world you don't know. The thing that's interesting is to discover a text, an author. That's something I do when I direct actors. The main indication I give when I work on a text is: Discover what you're saying. The audience wants to discover things and it's in a state of discovery that the actor is on the wing.

**RE** You've had prolonged experience of directing conventional existing texts, some classics, in large theatres not dissimilar from the National, and at the moment you're working on an existing text (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), which you have directed before, in Victor Hugo's French translation. If you've got a given text, is that an inhibition or is it simply like the pool?

**RL** It depends on the text of course. Dealing with Shakespeare we're dealing with an avalanche of resources, a box of toys to be taken out. There are some authors that are so infinitely rich and give so much permission, because theatre is the platform of allowing things to be expressed, emotions to meet. What's so extraordinary about Shakespeare is that this man was so intuitive, he gives us the story of mankind. I think he offers a lot of permission to the actor, the translator, the director. You don't feel in a literal environment when working with Shakespeare,

Dante or authors like that. Probably that's also one of the responses to the theatrical crisis in the past decade. In France for example, Mnouchkine is restaging all the Greeks – people are going back to these fundamental texts.

**RE** Is that because they're poetic texts and the verbal imagery in the text resonates sufficiently . . .

**RL** Yes but also there's something about these texts that are doubtful. I did the Scottish play two months ago in Toronto, the first time I directed Shakespeare in English. There are all of these theories about how maybe Shakespeare did not exist and these fifteen women wrote the plays . . . there's something doubtful about the property and the invention. The essence of Romanticism and the Renaissance is that you're building a new world on the ruins of the old one, and that's creative, that's rich. All these people. Shakespeare and the Greeks, built a new world on an old one.

**RE** That's a wonderful metaphor for the whole continuing process of theatre, isn't it, particularly in this country where you're very conscious of the mountainous tradition, and every time you do a Shakespeare play you've got this huge baggage piled up behind you and you are building on the old world.

**RL** I think also it's something about the global theatrical community. Theatre's a world that is built on ripping other people off. It's a normal tradition. Mummenschanz, an extraordinary mask and mime company from Switzerland, have this recipe for this kind of plasticine they use for their masks. Everyone wants to know the recipe. You have to show the strings. If you don't see the strings, at some point you have to understand that there *are* strings, there are people taking make-up off. You have to share that.

**RE** One of the things I like about working in the theatre is that it's completely pragmatic, it's empirical, and you always say 'Does it work?' That's why I like British actors a lot, because they come from a completely empirical tradition. Some people, certainly from the perspective of German theatre, they're pragmatic to a fault. Is that your experience of working with British actors (and you're indemnified against slander)?

**RL** I think the first thing you identify when you start working with British actors is that they're so professional, the system is centuries old, and you're shocked by how available actors are to the director. You want them to be crazy, to say shut up, listen to me. That's what they do where I come from – there's all these crazy people running round the room and you say 'Hey, focus.' British actors are extremely focused. It's an interesting phenomenon, not just in the theatre but British society in general has the reputation of this cliché of phlegmatism. Is that an English word?

RE Yeah.

RL Most certainly is. There's this theory that England's history, not in its theatre, but its history is so bloody – Jack the Ripper, Richard III – the culture is so bloody that it kind of assassinated death. It took the sexy thing of violence out of it. I'm amazed when I see British productions of a Shakespearean tragedy, to see this extraordinary balance between seeming cold but actually boiling inside, as if the British theatre is also referring to this extremely boiling and violent past but is actually living in a very organised and cold society. I think that the British actors I love have that quality – it's very close to Japanese theatre where everything is happening inside and it takes half an hour for an actor to cross the stage. You can feel the intensity and it's something that is lacking in North America because we're used to doing theatre or film that is crazy. An actor has to be crazy, to be generous, and there's a modesty that has been lost in theatre in North America.

RE I think it's something to do with our greatest export being class and our obsession with class. As an English person you grow up being taught that you have to take on class roles that are allocated. There's a sense in which every English person is educated as an actor.

RL It's very present in the theatre, that hierarchy. In the rehearsal room there's a hierarchy which you don't necessarily feel in other countries. Here, using words betrays where you're from, what part of the country you're from, it's very distinct. People don't talk a lot here. They don't say things before they can formulate them into very organised and pristine sentences.

RE That's not entirely my experience. You must have some very articulate actors in your company.

RL It all depends with whom you hang out.

RE I don't know if you've worked in Germany, but if you think the British theatre is hierarchical, the German one is virtually feudal. The autocracy of the director is extreme.

RL Yes, in France and Germany right now the new auteur is the director. People don't talk about the piece, they say the new Chéreau or the new Stein. It's interesting, for example the Latin countries like metaphors. They like this show, *Needles and Opium*, because it's a metaphoric kind of storytelling, but they're not as excited by something like the *Dragons' Trilogy* which is more a traditional way of telling a story, where you follow characters in chronology. That seems to appeal more to the anglophone countries. I wonder if it's to do with the language or culture. In the past six years maybe half and half of the shows I've produced

have been either like this or like the *Dragons' Trilogy*, and it's difficult because even if you are fascinated by multicultural casting as I am, it's difficult to have a show to tour all the countries. Even if you think of Europe getting together and merging, in fact there are very strong cultural ways of telling stories and approaching theatre and it will take centuries before they change.

### Audience question

What do you want to do in three years' time?

RL I don't really know – I guess I'll always work in a very spontaneous way and I'm booked for the next three years on a lot of things, but I can never envision the future. I don't have any future projects. I have commitments but I don't have any things I want to explore. I always bump into other people's good ideas.

■ ■ ■

### Source

Lepage, R. (1992) 'Robert Lepage in Discussion with Richard Eyre', *Platform Papers* 3: London, Royal National Theatre: 23–32.

### Robert Lepage (1957–)

Artistic Director of the French Theatre of the Canadian National Arts Centre. Born in Quebec, he graduated from the Quebec Conservatoire in 1978, and in 1982 joined Théâtre Repère, where he has pioneered his major work, which has been seen in Europe: *Polygraph* (1981), *Tectonic Plates* (1988), and *Needles and Opium* (1991), his one-man show. In 1992 he directed Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for London's Royal National Theatre, which caused a certain outrage among the conservative UK critics by setting the play in a mudbath. He has continued producing theatre, which has the logic of a dream, using the technology of the stage, film, and video to achieve his ends, which are often concerned with intuition rather than literal ideas and themes. He often writes his own material and constructs visually powerful images against which to perform. He is interested in the colliding, clashing, meeting and overlapping of ideas, hence his major work *Tectonic Plates* utilises the ideas of continents, cultures and personalities colliding in the act of transformation. He works often from improvisation, and is a representative of a Canadian generation that is post-nationalist and open to the world. His work has an originality that uses traditional theatre means to produce performances of strong visual and conceptual complexity. Even when he works with established texts such as Shakespeare, Lepage

creates a performance where he has become the author of the total artefact, often illuminating where others merely interpret.

In this interview with Richard Eyre, then director of the Royal National Theatre, Lepage talks about his disillusion with modern theatre writing, leading to the devising of his own work. He also stresses the element of 'play' in theatre, which creates the eclecticism of his performances.

Compare this interview with writings by the following authors in this reader

Appia – an earlier visual approach to theatre

Bausch – a comparable approach to staging dance theatre

Beck – an oppositional view of the function of performance

Beckett – an earlier total theatre writer

LeCompte – a similarly eclectic approach to material

Wilson and Anderson – similar concerns with visual theatre

#### Further reading

Charest, R. (1997) *Robert Lepage, Connecting Flights: In Conversation with Remy Charest*, London: Methuen.

Lavender, A. (2001) *Hamlet in Pieces – Shakespeare Reworked: Peter Brook, Robert Lepage, Robert Wilson*, London: Nick Hern Books.

## F.T. Marinetti

### THE FOUNDING AND MANIFESTO OF FUTURISM

**W**E HAD STAYED UP ALL NIGHT, my friends and I, under hanging mosque lamps with domes of filigreed brass, domes starred like our spirits, shining like them with the prisoned radiance of electric hearts. For hours we had trampled our atavistic ennui into rich oriental rugs, arguing up to the last confines of logic and blackening many reams of paper with our frenzied scribbling.

An immense pride was buoying us up, because we felt ourselves alone at that hour, alone, awake, and on our feet, like proud beacons or forward sentries against an army of hostile stars glaring down at us from their celestial encampments. Alone with stokers feeding the hellish fires of great ships, alone with the black spectres who grope in the red-hot bellies of locomotives launched down their crazy courses, alone with drunkards reeling like wounded birds along the city walls.

Suddenly we jumped, hearing the mighty noise of the huge double-decker trams that rumbled by outside, ablaze with coloured lights, like villages on holiday suddenly struck and uprooted by the flooding Po and dragged over falls and through gorges to the sea.

Then the silence deepened. But, as we listened to the old canal muttering its feeble prayers and the creaking bones of sickly palaces above their damp green beards, under the windows we suddenly heard the famished roar of automobiles.

'Let's go!' I said. 'Friends, away! Let's go! Mythology and the Mystic Ideal are defeated at last. We're about to see the Centaur's birth and, soon after, the first flight of Angels! . . . We must shake the gates of life, test the bolts and hinges. Let's go! Look there, on