

The World is Only Defined by Your Perspective
The Theatrical Art of Robert Lepage

Text by Nai-Wen Lin

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On stage is a circular glass window that alternately becomes a fish bowl, a dryer/washer, and the surface of the Moon through projections, which turns the space behind this circular window into a living room, a laundry room or a space hatch. This is the set of Robert Lepage's *La Face cachée de la Lune/The Far Side of the Moon* from 2000 (which was presented at the 2003 Hong Kong Arts Festival).

Perhaps we have all dreamed of travelling to any place in the world in an instant. Lepage makes it a live scene before your eyes: It is neither a magic door nor a supernatural jump, but a change of scenery from the window that he uses to transform your stance and perspective of seeing the world.

Shifting Media sans Boundary

I am reluctant to call Lepage a "multimedia theatre" director. Lepage is often seen as a theatre director who has excellent command of film techniques, and he has made several films (although he thinks the two media are distinctly different). Yet it is narrowing to define Lepage as a "multimedia theatre" director. Shadow play, puppetry, juggling, opera, dance, talk show, live broadcast, or any format may become an element of his theatre. In *The Far Side of the Moon*, an ironing board turns into a trolley, a surgery bed, a fitness equipment or a motorcycle, while a mirror transforms the actor's rolling on the ground into space walk in a magical showcase.

Lepage sees the 8.5-hour *Lipsynch*, which was featured at the 2010 Taipei Arts Festival, as a voice show. The creation is centred around the examination of sound. From the heart sounds the fetus hears in its mother's womb to the language that becomes the "ciphers" of communication, or from the sounds that evoke private memories to the opera music that is elevated to art, the production is a textured portrayal of voice, word and language, and of the various kinds of communication and echoes that exist within and without. For Lepage, theatre is a journey of exploration rather than a fixed art form.

Maybe the boundary only exists in your mind. When you think "theatre can be..." or "theatre cannot be...", such ideas limit your imagination of theatre.

Cross-Border, Cross-Cultural, Multi-Disciplinary

Born in Canada in 1957, Lepage entered the Conservatoire d'Art Dramatique at age 17 and became one of the only two graduates of his class who did not join a professional theatre. He was once regarded as an actor who could not produce any feeling on stage, which eventually opened up a wider path for Lepage. He created, directed and performed in a number of solo works including *Vinci*, *Needles and Opium*, *Elsinor*, *The Far Side of the Moon* and *The Anderson Project*, all of which moved the audiences

tremendously. He discovered that "[an] actor must find the energy that will produce an emotion in his audience, not feel it himself."

Lepage is a multi-faceted creative artist: a famous theatre actor, and an outstanding creator of multi-disciplinary arts; a director of film, rock concert and opera as well as a visual artist. He has navigated between art and business, directing the US\$ 200 million production *KA* by Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas, and serving as the stage director of two world tours of American rock singer Peter Gabriel. He has also collaborated with the Bavarian State Opera in Munich on *Shakespeare Rapid Eye Movement*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's works, and directed Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York in celebration of the bicentennial of the composer's birth.

Lepage grew up in French-speaking Québec in Canada, and he speaks fluent English and French. He was never held back by the conflict of cultural identity, but set off to explore the world. For years he travelled, created, toured and immersed himself in heterogeneous cultures. He spent ten years learning about Indonesian culture; he also worked in Japan and loves the Han characters. *The Dragons' Trilogy*, which propelled Lepage into the spotlight, is set in China Town; *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* is set in Hiroshima, Japan. In *Lipsynch*, the cast speak English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and German in a microcosm of united nations.

Lepage voyages between different cultural perspectives of seeing the world, the way he shifts between different media and points of view in his theatre to cultivate his unique storytelling.

The Endless Possibility of Discovery

Since 1994 Lepage has run Ex Machina, a multi-disciplinary improvisation collective that breaks the barriers between different media and art. It is widely known that Lepage's work process differs from that of the conventional theatre director. Many have discussed Lepage's use of the RSVP cycle – a methodology of performance process created by 1950s American choreographer and educator Anna Halprin and her husband Lawrence Halprin, a landscape architect and environmental planner. It has had significant impact on Lepage's creative method and vision.

Lepage stresses instinct and chaos, accidents and spontaneous developments, and the collective unconscious. In thought-provoking formats, his works unearth the metamorphosis of the stage and the new order that transcend existing limits. He says the answer must be found in working rather than in one's brain, as the answer is not in one's possession.

Lepage's genius is of a headache-inducing kind for most producers, since he cares more about the "completion of phases" of the process more than the "completion" of the "work". He sees theatre as a constant evolution before the audience and that each manifestation is unique. "The theatre is an adventure that's bigger than we are," he says.

If you think life should be orderly and full of discipline, norms, timelines, plans and few accidents, you should liberate yourself in Lepage's theatre. You will see the only real stagnation lies in your own point of view – your mind is free once you change your perspective.

Translated by Nicolette Wong