

The Multiple Crossings to *The Far Side of the Moon*: transformative *mise-en-scène*

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MULTIPLE CROSSINGS

It has been some thirty years since technology crossed the 'last frontier' and landed man on the Moon. The intervening era was marked by individual revolution, the information age, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of American global dominance, new millennium maladies, 'the war on terror', and 'sustainable development'. Lepage's fourth solo show, *The Far Side of the Moon*, encompasses these concerns either directly or indirectly and draws together many of his preoccupations as a theatre auteur: personalisation of the material, use of multiple media, cyclical narratives, transformation of space and form, and voyages into unknown 'territories'. Interestingly, the story in *The Far Side of the Moon* is about crossing personal and cosmic boundaries, about humanity's obsession with travelling to the moon and discovering what is hidden or unattainable by ordinary human action and ultimately projected into this obsession quest for self-discovery and understanding of one's own life.

Lepage is a theatre and film director, who also writes, directs and acts in his solo-shows. His first major theatrical project as a total creator was *Vinci* (1986), a solo show about a journey of self-discovery to Italy by Pierre Lamontage (Lepage's alter-ego), where he 'meets' with Leonardo da Vinci. The production successfully toured first nationally and then internationally, winning Lepage his first international award in 1987, le Prix Coup de Pouce du Festival d'Avignon, for best fringe production. Lepage's second solo show, *Needles and Opium*, was inspired by Jean Cocteau and premiered in 1991 in Quebec City. After Quebec City, the show opened in November 1991 at the National Art Center in Ottawa.

An international tour followed, and *Needles and Opium* came to the Royal National Theatre in London in July 1992, achieving success with critics and with the audience. After its initial two-year development, the production continued to tour internationally until 1995, with another actor playing Lepage's role. Lepage's third solo show, *Elsinore*, a re-working of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, opened in 1996. It is perhaps Lepage's most controversial solo show because the way it interfaced technology with the performer polarised the audience and critics into either praising or opposing the play. In 2000 as part of the Millennium Project, Lepage presented *The Far Side of the Moon* at La Caserne, his own production space in Quebec City before taking it on an international tour.

This article aims to investigate how, through the process of transformation, Lepage discovered the performance narrative of *The Far Side of the Moon*. Although this question may seem a little clichéd, as well as a presumptuous glorification of creative impulse and 'genius', it is a fact that Lepage's theatricality is founded on intuition, impulse and spontaneous discovery. At the same time, it develops through a process using the audience as a mirror reflecting the narrative as it is created. On Lepage's voyage across space and time, in order to 'find' his narrative, the role of the audience is essential; they are not merely spectators presented with refined, well-made art, but participants in an event that is being rehearsed and for which they are witnesses. Lepage began to work in this way in 1982 when he joined Jacques Lessard's Théâtre Repère in Quebec.

Lepage had already directed the collective creative project *The Dragon's Trilogy* (1986–89) with remarkable success, achieving international prominence as a director-author of magical visual imagery and theatrical expressiveness. He had also directed a number of collaborations mixing various arts forms, cultures, traditions, media and languages: *Tectonic Plates* (1988–91), *The Seven Streams of River Ota* (1994–97), *The Geometry of Miracles* (1997–99), and *Zulu Time* (1999–2001). Each of these projects, apart from crossing forms of narration, created theatricality through the collage of memories, counter-memories and hidden worlds, interfacing personal and collective histories.

In order to understand Lepage's theatricality at work, we have to theorise terms such as *mise-en-scène* and theatricality in the light of what they mean for Lepage's perpetual movement and change of narrative. This paper will examine the theatricality of Lepage's transformative *mise-en-scène*, looking at *The Far Side of the Moon*, where he appears as actor, director and writer. I will draw upon material from my own observations of the first phase of the rehearsal process of *The Far Side of the Moon*, at Lepage's production studio La Caserne, on interviews with Lepage and his collaborators, on a number of papers reviewing the phases of development of the performance and on my experience of the final phase as it was presented at Royal National Theatre in London in July 2001.

THE EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVE

1. Joyce McMillan in *Far Side of the Moon*, theatre programme (London: Royal National Theatre, 2001), p. 6.

2. *Who is this Nobody from Quebec*, dir. Debra Hauer, BBC (1992).

3. This was pointed out in Josette Féral's two books of interviews with relevant contemporary performance writer-directors, *Mise en scène et le jeu de l'acteur*, see tome 2, *Le Corps en scène* (Montreal: Editions Jeu and Brussels: Editions Lansman, 2001), pp. 160–85.

4. Jacques Lessard studied with Ann Halprin and modified the RSVP cycles to use them for collaborative devised projects in Théâtre RePeRe. Robert Lepage was a member of RePeRe throughout the 1980s and was introduced to Lessard's version of the cycles. For further reference on RSVP Cycles see Lawrence Halprin, *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Process in the Human Environment* (New York: Braziller, 1969).

It has been commonly accepted by critics that Lepage builds his *mise-en-scène* through 'layers upon layers of specific references and images' until he is able to capture contemporary experience.¹ For Richard Eyre, who introduced Lepage to the London theatre scene, Lepage exemplifies the fascination with a particular way of making theatre, where theatrical inventiveness uses all means available, borrowing from all artistic traditions and disciplines, making very complex imagery with very simple means.² In general, Lepage's productions have been unsympathetically received in their first phases by critics at the centre such as London, Edinburgh, New York, and in particular Montreal. Their expectations of artistic excellence based on his previous shows rendered the exploratory phases of *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* lifeless, closed down the tour of *Elsinore* before its time and were generally negative through the development of *The Geometry of Miracles*. The problem is evident: Lepage's way of working requires time and audience, it needs to be experienced as work in progress and yet it has to pass the merits of 'excellence' required by the critics from presumably 'high' art events; it desires to 'escape' the critics and the scrutiny of the theatre establishment and yet needs to be part of the international artistic touring circuit.

It is generally accepted by critics that the most interesting or the most contested aspects of Lepage's theatricality (depending on personal taste) are instability of narrative structure and transience of form. Most readings of Lepage's creative processes are presented as departures across various boundaries and borders (the edition of essays on Lepage's work was entitled *Théâtre sans frontières*) of culture, arts, media, or being in a perpetual state of 'take off' – as cultural tourist or adrift.

However, these observations are true only as the experience of a static position in one of the perpetual movements that Lepage's work takes. Lepage does not write his texts, but improvises them. He believes in coincidence and in theatre as a place for meeting.³ The free intuitive nature of Lepage's work is not working towards a deliberate set of socially or politically charged goals. Lepage only gives us an illusion of perpetual departures, a work that is constantly at the beginning of the journey; this is true of the early stages of Lepage's work but does not relate to the accomplished full circle of performance narrative. At some point, Lepage always stops his perpetual change and accepts the found narrative. Lepage's work cannot be measured in terms of what has been achieved in one performance but rather the overall cyclical development; the whole performance process that eventually, but not always, culminates with an accomplished production.

Lepage follows in the tradition where the author is in the service of performance rather than performance as a function of an author. His way of working emerged from the tradition of collective theatre popular in Quebec at the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s. Lepage was a member of Jacques Lessard's Théâtre Repère that based their work on the RSVP Cycles, a method of work founded in the late 1960s by Ann and Lawrence Halprin in San Francisco, drawing on synergy between dance theatre and environmental design.⁴ Alan Knapp's workshop on 'actor as



The Far Side of the Moon, photo: Sophie Grenier

author' (where the performer is the creator and writer of the text, rather than just the interpreter) had a profound effect on Lepage. Lepage accepts the Resource–Score–Valuation–Performance Cycles, emphasising the Performance part of the Cycle and developing the *mise-en-scène* on the performers' improvisations. This combined with Knapp's approach to the actor as creator, provides the basis for Lepage's transformative *mise-en-scène*. The narrative structure is replaced by cyclical scores, that could be described as recordings of action in a space, and are not based on conventional chronology, but have a logic of their own.

Traditionally *mise-en-scène* is preconceived and reflects the movement that is found in the dramatic text. It develops hierarchically, following psychological cause-effect analysis, and justification of action, using the previous section as a building block upon which to create the next level. Conventionally, it remains within the parameters of the director's or playwright's conceptualisation. Contrary to this, transformative *mise-en-scène* is flexible and open; it is evolutionary, and transforms over time using all the elements of theatricality as its own resources, being organically connected with the performers, their experience and their individual expression. It evolves with every presentation of the performance narrative, responding to audience reactions as indicative of how well their expression communicated, and borrowing from geographical and cultural locations to develop performance narrative further.

The form is in a constant state of change and fluidity until it reaches the levels of completeness once performers and audience find their

mutual 'space' of understanding. The creative phases, as cycles of the *mise-en-scène*, are perceived as artistic investigation, a search for the final narrative. During the life of the performance, the evolution of the *mise-en-scène* is accepted as a process rather than a product, and since the final outcome is unknown, the performance is in a constant process of rehearsal. The transformative *mise-en-scène* reinforces the idea that art develops its meaning spontaneously in front of the audience as opposed to being preconceived and planned. In this, Lepage echoes popular theatre traditions such as Ancient Roman Atelana, Mediaeval jesters, *commedia dell'arte*, the tradition of travelling actors and story telling, when he points to his own excitement with the ephemeral nature of theatre, to the 'completely spontaneous thing that happens one night and is never going to happen again.'⁵

5. Louise Roug 'The Man in the Moon', *Los Angeles Times* (23 October 2000).

THEATRICALITY AND SPATIAL TEXTUALITY

As a director who acts and writes, in his solo shows, Lepage is fully engaged in the exploration of the theatricality of the performance. Theatricality can be understood as the combination of the elements constituting a theatre production: performers, sound, light, colour, texture (materials), space, objects, technology, and medium. Roland Barthes uses this conceptualisation of theatricality.⁶ For Barthes, theatricality is relevant to the vocabulary or 'language' of theatre, which consists of all the elements used on stage as theatre signs. Barthes explains theatricality as the conditions of a theatre performance present within the dramatic text, pointing out that historically in great theatre works, the written text (Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Brecht) was always accompanied by a voracious theatricality. Barthes states that theatricality is 'theatre-minus-text, it is a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument; it is that ecumenical perception of a sensuous artifice – gesture, tone, distance, substance, light – which submerges the text beneath the profusion of its external language.'⁷ Every aspect of theatre mechanisms combine to become the means by which the performance is conceived and communicated. Lepage as a total author utilises theatricality in Barthes' notion of theatre-minus-text, sculpturing and 'writing' throughout performance, using the essential elements of any theatre *mise-en-scène*: space, actor, and object to communicate experiences to the audience through theatrical language.

6. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: North Western University Press, 1972), p. 26.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

In the summer of 2000, while performing his solo show, Lepage staged *Métissage*, a multimedia installation, at Quebec City's Museum of Civilisation. The theme of the installation was cultural and biological cross-fertilisation. In French, the word *métissage* means cross-breeding, but it was translated into English as 'crossings'. Crossing into different 'territories' – cultural, social, geographical etc. – can also refer to crossing into different artistic disciplines. In performance, *métissage* is not only relevant to a text, but to textuality. Textuality invites a plurality of texts; it is a matrix of meanings formed within and outside of the material for the performance. Spatial textuality is inseparable from the

- performers' action and space. Hanna Scolnicova explains that 'the physical space in which a performance takes place is its "theatre space". Within a given theatre space, the production will create its own theatrical space, which, in theatre, might be confined to the stage alone or appropriate the aisles and balconies or even extend to encompass the audience sitting in the auditorium.'⁸
- In the programme for *The Far Side of the Moon* Lepage explains his method of working by referring to *écriture scénique*:
- I consider myself a stage author, understanding the *mise-en-scène* as a type of writing. For example, in this work, the ideas of the *mise-en-scène* alternate with the ideas in the actors' lines, one leads to the other. . . . What I find fascinating about the act of creation, is that you fill a space with objects that have no relation to each other, and because they are there, 'all piled up in the same box', there is a secret logic, a way of organising them. Each piece of the puzzle ends up finding its place.⁹
- Robert Lepage's theatricality is similar to what the French director/author Roger Planchon referred to as *écriture scénique* (scenic writing). Planchon believed that *écriture scénique* is on an equal footing with the author's written words.¹⁰ The idea of *écriture scénique* revolves around discussions held in the early 1960s concerning the adaptation and modernisation of a classical text to be used in contemporary theatre. Planchon claimed that he had learned from Brecht the concept of 'total responsibility' of scenic writing over the stage performance. The next development following *écriture scénique*, spatial textuality, utilises multidisciplinary and multicultural references, new technology, popular culture and mass media as giant sources of playfulness.
- Space and resources are central to Lepage's transformative *mise-en-scène*. The space is inhabited by theatrical resources that will create the narrative through the rehearsal process: everything can become a resource that can initiate the creative process as long as it has personal relevance to the actor-creator. These elements such as psycho-physical action, space, objects, words, audio (sounds and music) and visual (video, film, computer projections) images, lighting, color, texture, rhythm equally create spatial textuality. At the centre of Lepage's directing is the performer's playfulness, an actor playing with resources that can either be emotional – stories – or physical objects.¹¹

ORIGINS: MOON PROJECT

The Far Side of the Moon montages a non-linear story into binary oppositions about two brothers whose lives oppose each other (similarly to the film *Le Confessionnel*, 1995) and the death of their mother with man's journey to the moon. The moon is a symbol for jealousy and separation between two brothers and two nations, the USA and the Soviet Union. There are also two sides of the moon, one that shines and is visible to us, and a hidden one whose face is scarred by comets. The main character, Philippe, like Lepage, was born in 1957 when the Soviets started to explore space with the *sputnik* satellites. Philippe, a

8. Hanna Scolnicova, 'Theatre Space, Theatrical Space, and the Theatrical Space Without', *Themes in Drama*, 9 (1997), p. 10.

9. Je me considère comme un auteur scénique, au sens où la *mise en scène* alternant avec les idées de répliques, les unes conduisent les autres. . . . Ce qui me fascine dans l'acte de création, c'est que l'on remplit un espace avec plein d'objets qui n'ont aucun rapport les uns avec les autres, et parce qu'ils sont là, 'tous empilés dans la même boîte', il existe une logique secrète, une façon de les organiser. Chaque morceau du casse-tête finit par trouver sa place. [*The Far Side of the Moon*, theatre programme, Traydent Theatre, Quebec City (February 2000). (Translated by the author.)]

10. David Bradby and Annie Sparks, *Mise-en-scène: French Theatre Now* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 41.

11. Lepage often mentions that theatricality is about playing and that contemporary theatre has lost its sense of playfulness, by being 'professional' and 'product oriented'.

dreamer with an unpublished Ph.D. who works in a telemarketing job, is juxtaposed to his rich gay brother Andre, a weatherman on a local TV station. This story is projected onto the American and Soviet race to the Moon, and with philosophical explorations of man's narcissistic need to look at himself and escape his loneliness. Through video, puppets, illumination, music, and technology, the characters try to give sense to the universe and to man's place in it.

In the production Lepage plays both brothers and the mother. Being of unconventional and even androgynous appearance, Lepage utilises his body as a theatrical resource for transformation and crossing between genders. Lepage's bilingual heritage resulted in his ability to work and live within two cultures simultaneously and to be permanently on the borders between French and English Canada.

The Moon Project started as a production idea that received a millennium award from Canada, as a project combining arts and science in a celebration of human achievements in the twentieth century. It was part of the millennial milieu and its accompanying flourishing of events celebrating human achievements world-wide. Once Lepage secured the funds, he chose to devise a show around set themes – humanity's ultimate experience in the past millennium, the journey to the moon. He grafted onto this voyage to the moon his personal childhood memories, fantasies and desires, as well as his grieving for his lost mother.

As with other devised projects, in approaching *The Moon Project*, Lepage began by establishing performance dates and venues. The production followed the usual pattern of Lepage's international co-productions with a number of international partners – companies, performing venues and festivals with which Lepage arranged in advance his touring. The major international partners included Berlin Festspiel; Cultural Industry Ltd (his UK producer is Michael Morris founder of Cultural Industry), Northern Stage in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (UK), The Royal National Theatre (UK), and The Sydney Festival (Australia) among others. As is usually the case in Lepage's projects, the venues and co-producers buy into the project before it is complete and in this way international touring becomes an organic part of the performance's development.

The first exploration phase – which I witnessed when I interviewed Lepage – started in the winter of 1999 at La Caserne studio, Lepage's multidisciplinary space in Quebec City. The rehearsal space resembled a research lab. On one side there was a performing area with multi-purpose screens and a see-through mirror; on the other side, there was a huge table with various research materials and technical equipment: video and audio equipment, projectors, and computers. All around that space were a number of references to journeys to the Moon: video tapes, the film *Apollo 13*, books, magazines from that time, Bundraku-like puppets in very realistic NASA astronauts' costumes. The set was made of all the objects that you could find in a Laundromat: ironing boards, baskets with clothes, a washing machine, objects familiar to Lepage and conducive to play and improvisation. There was also a story board with titles written on it and grouped in three acts under 'lune', 'soleil', and 'terre', with themes as freely associated ideas to be developed later on



The Far Side of the Moon, photo: Sophie Grenier

into events through improvisation. Looking at this space it became evident to me that the future performance as *mise-en-scène* was being written there, using the full spectrum of theatrical means. The stories, as ever, are waiting to happen, to be discovered.

The Moon Project also owes much to a number of Lepage's close collaborators. Originally, a script was to be written by Adam Nashman, who ultimately became a script consultant, and Laurie Anderson contributed an original score. Puppetry design was done by Pierre Robitaille and Sylvie Courbron, and Lepage learned how to use the 50cm high astronaut puppets in the production. Carl Fillion provided in-house visual consultancy and images were produced by Jacques Collin and Veronique Couturier.

THE CYCLES

The time factor is essential for ideas to mature, but even more for connections to surface and for images to get the necessary depth and meaning. Transformation, flexibility and openness of the *mise-en-scène* in spatial textuality allows for the response received from the audience and critics to change the performance. Lepage affirms that he is affected positively, rather than negatively, by critics because the critics, as well as the audience, are part of an ongoing creative process. *The Moon Project* was first performed in French, under the title *la face cachée de la lune* [sic], on 29 February 2000 at Théâtre du Trident in Quebec City. Lepage used this performance as the resource for another cycle, and prepared the second phase that opened at Toronto's International Festival at the Harbourfront Centre in April in the same year as *The 12th House*.¹² This was in fact the preparation for an international tour and

12. The production was referred to by a number of different titles during its gestation process, one of which was *Buzz Aldrin*, but *la face cachée de la lune*/*The Far Side of the Moon* was the final title.

a new cycle of the performance narrative that would start in the United States and continue in Continental Europe, Australia and the United Kingdom, as *The Far Side of the Moon*.

The production was over three hours long when it opened in Quebec City and was 're-written' to be two hours and forty-five minutes long for the festival in April. By the time it went to California, the show was just over two hours long and when it reached New York in September 2000, it was around two-and-a-half hours long. During the Australian tour in January 2001, the running time was two hours and fifteen minutes, which was the same duration as when *The Far Side of the Moon* opened at the Royal National Theatre in July 2001. The change of production times points to the elimination and synthesis of various scores in the process of making the spatial textuality. Since the performance is written in the space and the story line is found as a response to the audience, the timing of the performance is flexible and often unpredictable.

The reviews after Toronto's first phase in April 2000 were mixed, but generally unfavourable. Kate Taylor pointed out that the written script is 'rich with themes of ambition, yearning, achievement and defeat' and the dialogue has an 'amusingly pedestrian tone'. Lepage's Philippe is, according to Taylor, 'pathetic without being touching' and overall the 'show is painfully slow'.¹³ Robert Crew found the script to be 'shallow and banal and at times has the feel and the heft of sketch comedy'.¹⁴ However, the critics were generally impressed by the final image, which remained as one of the key images throughout the performance's development – Lepage floating in the Laundromat as if in the Cosmos, still connected to the earth by the 'umbilical' cord while trying to set himself free.

The story line, as presented in Toronto, was centred on Philippe and his fantasies and failures. In this cycle, the performance narrative was disjointed and unfocused, and Lepage was exploring the set of references that would be synthesised and dramaturgically improved for the next cycle. The French version presented in Quebec City had relied on the language to a greater extent than this new English version; therefore, Lepage needed to make adjustments to the language, mainly in terms of rhythm and poetic expressiveness. The narrative merely suggested, but did not develop relationships with the other characters 'hidden' in the story, particularly with André, the younger brother. André would surface in the next cycle as an independent character, as important to the story as Philippe. The cycle as presented in London in July 2001 deepened the crisis between the brothers over their recently deceased mother. The problem of what to do with her effects became more relevant to the spectators' emotional experiences. This was a family drama projected onto the background of the cosmos and the space race. In this new phase, Philippe's engagement on his Ph.D. and his dream of recording life on Earth in order to establish communication with extra-terrestrial life become 'touching', both sad and funny. In a review following the London premier in July 2001, John Peter points out that the play 'uses emotional intelligence as a tool of self knowledge', claiming that '*The Far Side of the Moon* is a piece of poetry in action, verbal and visual'.¹⁵ However, without the criticisms to the previous

13. 'The air's a bit thin on Lepage's moon'. *The Globe and Mail* (21 April 2000).

14. 'Too little too late from Lepage', *The Toronto Star* (20 April 2000).

15. 'The music of the spheres', *Sunday Times* (15 July 2001).

developmental phases, it would have been impossible for Lepage to search for the connections between poetic, verbal and visual expressions and communicate them to the audience.

ACTOR-CREATOR

The solo show *The Far Side of the Moon* follows Alan Knapp's tradition, where the actor is not an interpreter but a creator, employing all theatrical resources in multiple roles as actor, director, playwright and designer. Lepage points out that Knapp's method of work, when pushed to its limit, looks as if it is written, while it is actually improvised in front of an audience.

The main thing that I brought back with me (from Knapp) as an actor or as a stage director is that you have to know how to tell a story, how to write, how to structure. It is important to work with the intelligence of the actors. Very often actors are brought to play the emotions of the story or to play the characters, but they are actually very interesting writers. . . . If you believe what Planchon or what Alan Knapp say, directing is writing and stage design is writing, then you also have to consider acting as part of writing.¹⁶

16. Robert Lepage, Personal Interview, Quebec City (December 1999).

A personal point of reference or Lepage's response to different impulses serve as a starting point for a project: in the case of *Vinci*, Lepage draws on the emotional impact of his first sight of Da Vinci's sketch at the National Gallery in London, entitled *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. The mix of languages – Italian, French, and English – is used to combine different sounds. Travelling from Quebec to Europe, as a way of self-discovery, is used to connect events. The function of translations from languages and cultures, and the obvious contradictions between what is said, translated, and presented challenges the audience's perception of reality. From *Vinci* onwards, form and content are one and the same thing, and the *mise-en-scène* becomes the way to find and communicate narration. 'In *Vinci* I wanted to talk about the form and the content as a whole that cannot be separated'.¹⁷

17. Quoted in Raymond Bernatcez, 'Un pas de plus vers le théâtre global', *La Presse* (6 March 1986).

By making symbolic connections and associations with his life, Lepage brings the audience through a simple story into the world of mythology. The death of his mother serves as a departure point, a starting resource, as much as the journey to the moon. Initially, Lepage wanted to do a show about Buzz Aldrin exploring the experience of being the second man to land on the Moon, forever in the shadow of his most famous colleague, Neil Armstrong. However, Aldrin wanted to recreate events very much according to his own memories and priorities. For Lepage this was an obstacle, and after talking to Aldrin on the phone, he realised the differences between a military pragmatic attitude of conquering a new territory and the romantic quest of reaching the moon.

Lepage needed to make a personal link with the story of man's journey to the moon, to make this myth relevant to himself by finding his own personal resource. The creative process begins in an environment

inhabited by resources that are relevant to the actor–creator and to the themes he is exploring. The storyboard in Lepage’s rehearsal studio had written ‘boxes’ with dates and a list of important events that had taken place from the 1960s onwards. Because there was only a theme to be explored and no story line as such existed yet, it was important to invite into the creative process all relevant elements that could help in finding a new ‘world’ by making the connection between different events across space and time. Finding connections between a washing machine and space travel is a way of personalising the mythology of man’s obsession with reaching the Moon. In order to materialise amorphous ideas that only exist in one’s head, one needs to find a provocation–resource, an object or anecdote that can initiate playfulness. Lepage explains that unless he finds an object that triggers playing he cannot express his ideas.

One day I have this washing machine that somebody found and brings in and I say there is my show, my show is about this because here is some centrifugal force, it’s a miniaturisation of the centrifugal forces of the universe. It’s a space ship it’s a Hubbell, but then I also know that this object brings me into other areas that will make the story closer to me. If I use this it means it takes place in the Laundromat so if it takes place in the Laundromat and it’s about the moon what’s the connection then? There’s a time connection so this Laundromat should be set in 1969, where was I in 1969, what is my relationship with the Laundromat, what’s my relationship with the moon? And eventually it becomes a show about when I was young I was collecting marbles and the marbles would stay in my pocket and my mother would wash them and the marbles got stuck in the motor so the washing machine breaks down and my mother has to go to the Laundromat to wash all the clothes because the washing machine is broken. If course if I’m young and I go to the Laundromat those things are spaceships for me. Suddenly I talk about my mother, I talk about me when I was young, so that way you invite people into the myth. . . . So people walk into the mythological implications of walking on the moon through a simple story because you have to take the mythical and bring it down on the ground for the people, otherwise they can’t have access, otherwise I do something where I float in the air for two hours dressed as an astronaut and I pretend that I’m Buzz Aldrin.¹⁸

18. Robert Lepage,
Personal Interview,
Quebec City (December
1999).

In the performance, the washing machine became a central theatrical resource that connects the personal with the universal. The washing machine takes a number of meanings, becoming a spacecraft, the window of an airplane, a fishbowl, a womb. All the props from the Laundromat have a function in different contexts. The ironing board becomes an exercise machine, suggesting a gym full of equipment, or a space platform for the astronauts’ walk. The use of mirrors and sliding doors reveals and hides different spaces, transforming environments and reflecting the image of the performer. Film and video projections play with perceptions and points of view as well as bringing in the historical frame, the space race between Americans and Soviets. The simplicity of using just a few props to create events and define the space is a landmark in Lepage’s directing. The unity of these elements is in the relevancy that they have as resources for the performer –



The Far Side of the Moon, photo: Sophie Grenier

Lepage; and in the main idea that transpires from the fragmented structure of looking secretly at someone who thinks he is alone but who at the same time wants to communicate with something that is not there.

THE PORT FOR CROSSINGS

The spatial textuality and theatrical resources in Lepage's solo shows, particularly *The Far Side of the Moon*, can be metaphorically equated with the port from where the multiple crossing takes place. Very often Lepage's transformative *mise-en-scène* happens as a transatlantic or transpacific journey that brings together North America, Europe and Asia. By doing this, Lepage invents a transatlantic or transpacific location, a score, a theatrical reality that has its own artificial space and time. This could be related to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotope applied to literature, as a creation of artificial expression of the spatial and temporal relationship.¹⁹ Lepage's chronotope, because it is fundamentally a score, offers the possibility of different interpretations of time and space by the characters. The narrative has its own departure and arrival points, and the character has to travel the distance between these two points. Journey, voyage, and discovery are also present on the level of themes as well as structure in Lepage's productions.

Crossing cultural and geographical boundaries to create a performance was first explored by Lepage in 1989. His Quebec based Théâtre Repère collaborated on an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* with an English-speaking company from Saskatchewan. The result was a bilingual production developed in two different regions of Canada separated by more than 4000km and brought together for the joint production. The production was co-directed by two distinct and

19. Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. Notes towards a Historical Poetics' in *The Dialogical Imagination. Four Essays* (ed. M. Holquist) trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

confrontational traditions within Canada: Gordon McCall, director of Nightcap Productions from Saskatchewan, and Lepage, director of Théâtre Repère from Quebec. *Romeo and Juliette* was the first production made through an interchange between the two dominant cultures within Canada, both working from their own cultural centre. Lepage worked with Quebec-based French actors developing scenes with the Capulet family, while the Montagues rehearsed in Saskatoon with English speaking actors directed by McCall.

The spatial textuality in *Vinci* is created by following a travel itinerary through Europe, mixing various scores that deal with different spaces and times in various locations across Europe. The character departs from Quebec (North America) in order to resolve his situation in the new port of arrival, and then returns to the departure point bringing with him a new understanding. One of the important aspects of the spatial textuality in *The Far Side of the Moon* is the space race between Americans and Soviets who want to leave their respective ports and be the first to arrive at a new port, the moon, in order to report their findings at their own centre. This score is reflected by the competition between two brothers, particularly in the character of Philippe who is in perpetual transition between two points, fantasy and reality, Earth and moon. Furthermore, the whole play is the journey between two distant poles, arts and science, and an attempt to connect them through the characters' lives and destiny.

Lepage extends the onstage symbolism of moving and mobility to the human body itself. The characters conceived by Lepage for his solo shows are unable to depart from their surroundings, being almost literally strapped in their place. Lepage quite physically and literally often resorts to theatrical imagery of the body being tied and bound in the stage, either suspended in the air like in *Needles and Opium*, joined with a stage machine as in *Elsinore*, or juxtaposed to visual projections and puppets, as in *The Far Side of the Moon*. Lepage's solo show *Needles and Opium* used a hotel room to create a world from which there was no exit. Lepage explains that his work reinforces the paradox that the more technology is used to help communication, the more it isolates us. He comments that 'people are now more isolated than ever because they are alone in a room on the Internet, talking to someone somewhere else, but they are completely isolated. They use false names or false personalities or false gender.'²⁰ Generally, during the international tour of *The Far Side of the Moon*, theatre critics observed that the play reflects human loneliness and uses the moon as a metaphor for our condition. The force of gravity holds humanity entrapped to the sphere of the Earth, but an astronaut would freely float in the space were it not for the cord rooting him to the Earth. The last image of *The Far Side of the Moon* presents Lepage at the same time attempting to hold on to that cord and break free.

20. Robert Lepage, Personal interview, Quebec City (December 1999).

IN SEARCH OF VISIONARY CREATIVITY

Lepage works from intuition, and acknowledges the fact that a large amount of our ideas, memories and impulses derive from our unconscious. The world of meanings and symbols is based on our reading of them,

which is rooted in perception, in the way we process and generate information. For this reason, the creator-actor in rehearsal must be open to acknowledging often hidden elements, and bring them to the surface. For Karl Gustav Jung, this is the point where art and science meet. Jung recognises two modes of artistic creation: psychological and visionary. Jung explains that, 'the psychological model works with materials drawn from man's conscious life, made of all general human experiences, emotions, events.' As such they are implemented as the raw material, which is 'clarified and transfigured by the poet.' The difference between this and the visionary mode is that the latter derives from primordial experiences, dreams, unknown depths of the human soul, 'from the hinterland of the human mind, as if it had emerged from the abyss of pre-human ages, or from a super-human world of contrasting light and darkness.'²¹ The characteristics of Jung's visionary mode are relevant to coincidental discovery in spatial textuality. The constituting categories connected with the visionary mode that could be directly applicable to Lepage are: presentation of freely associated events, dreams, action related to reminiscence or primordial experiences, contrasting forces of death and rebirth, universal collective experiences, presentation of opposing principles, experimenting with the subconscious mind. The audiences are witnessing these evolutions – the moment of becoming known from unknown, as Lepage comments: 'when I was saying that the audience always comes to theatre to witness evolution, transformation, mainly discovery, it is not that they will discover something but they will see the energy of discovery, the people invested with the energy of discovery.'²²

21. Carl Gustav Jung, *The Spirits in Man, Art and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 90.

22. Robert Lepage, Personal interview, Quebec City (8 December 1999).

The title for *The Far Side of the Moon* comes from the invisible side of the moon as a metaphor for humanity's hidden nature, for the not visible scarred side of the soul. Likewise, the visible side of the moon becomes a reflection of human narcissism – the need to be observed, seen and acknowledged. This premise was not theatrically expressed at the beginning of the production's development, but Lepage arrived at its visual and emotional signification through the transformation of the *mise-en-scène* and theatricality. Transformation is a process of crossing between different states, and for Lepage, creating *mise-en-scène* is similar to a voyage into a performance narrative yet to be discovered.

Lepage explains that 'to write, to create, you have to be a bit of a mythomaniac, you have to be able to amplify the stories you hear, give a larger dimension to the stories you invent. This is how you transform them into legends and myths'.²³ Talking about *The Far Side of the Moon*, Lepage points out that you have to be open so that coincidences can happen. The process cannot be controlled and the author has to be exactly the opposite from a 'control freak', and allow himself to listen to his intuition and let the process take him on. Lepage does not have fixed ideas for the play in advance. The ideas are discovered in the rehearsal room where Lepage places himself surrounded with 'lots of crutches and gadgets and stuff', utilising these 'crutches to hide behind and work out what it is you are trying to say and convey'.²⁴

23. Rémi Charest, *Connecting Flights* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 19.

24. Jo Litson, 'Playful Theatre of Coincidence', *Australian* (29 December 2000).

25. Robert Lepage, Personal Interview, Quebec City (December 1999).

When I do a show I do not know anything about my subject, with time I learn, and at the end I know a lot. When I am performing it, re-writing it, I know very little, I know what I know at that moment. So what people witness is someone in search of, discovering the subject.²⁵

Unlike other Quebecois companies such as Carbone 14, LaLaLa Human Steps or even Cirque du Soleil, who consciously draw upon various traditions and art forms to devise their material, this is not a conscious choice for Lepage. Lepage does not set out in advance to achieve specific production goals; they are rather an outcome of the process he goes through in creating his *mise-en-scène*. In this way, his work process is similar to Bob Wilson who likes to start with a 'blank canvas' and does not like to talk beforehand about the piece, but rather allows the piece to talk to him during rehearsals.²⁶ Lepage's theatricality comes out of playfulness, intuition and coincidences, from the actors' improvisations which are 'sculptured' into the performance's *mise-en-scène*. In spatial textuality, the author creates the environment in which the future play can happen; and the creative environment should help to recognise the moment when creative process is happening on the spot. Inhabiting the space with theatrical objects allows Lepage to simultaneously create from within the space (actor-creator) as well as to observe from the outside (director-author). In spatial textuality, the author 'borrows' from the plurality of art forms, quoting from a variety of resources – anything goes if it feels right at the moment. Lepage is a montager – or even a bricolager – involved in all aspects of the theatre making process, utilising all means of theatre as an art form to tell a story. The selection of what will stay and what will be discarded from the improvised material depends on the connection with the audience, on the audience's perception of the material, which is not necessarily what the author set out to say. Lepage explains that 'the more you perform, the more the story is being sculptured and you really discover what the show is about, that is part of the seduction, the charm – watching something grow'.²⁷

Sometimes, this spontaneous discovery results in productions that are unable to find their performance narrative such as *Elsinore* or *The Geometry of Miracles*. Being unable to create a coherent narrative has often resulted in critics accusing Lepage of lacking humanity, intelligence, depth and truthfulness. *The Far Side of the Moon* had critics divided not over its aestheticism but over the validity of its narrative, which some claimed was shallow and emotionless. Because of the transformative nature of Lepage's *mise-en-scène* and the fact that his narrative is constantly revisited and reinvestigated throughout the performance run, having its own journey through space and time, Lepage's way of working has often been misunderstood. His theatre is linked to the ancient theatre traditions of performer-audience dialogue found in the travelling performers, jesters and *commedia dell'arte*, where the audience 'writes' the performance narrative – following the old premise that for whom you are telling a story will not only define how you are to tell the story but what will you tell. This audience response introduces new material that becomes imprinted on the narrative, adding yet another layer that is then taken to another cultural context. As Brook did before him, Lepage's dialogue with the audience understands performances as rehearsals where theatre possesses liveness and immediacy, where the audience witnesses creativity at a given moment in front of them. Lepage's theatre should be understood as a process not a product, rough and openly flawed, but invested with the

26. Peter Laugesen, interview with Bob Wilson and Tom Waits, *Woyzeck*, Programme (Copenhagen: Betty Nansen Teatret, November 2000).

27. Louise Roug, 'The Man in the Moon', *Los Angeles Times* (23 October 2000).



The Far Side of the Moon, photo: Sophie Grenier

energy of discovery and authenticity, where the meanings are constituted by the performers and spectators alike. In each of his journeys between worlds Lepage learns something new from the audience about the performance and about himself.