

**PATRICK CAUX and BERNARD GILBERT.**

**Trans. NEIL KROETSCH.**

***Ex Machina: Creating for the Stage***

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Straddling the categories of glossy industry brochure and aesthetic manifesto, *Ex Machina* offers general-interest readers a fascinating introduction to Lepage and his company Ex Machina, and a highly accessible way of enhancing appreciation of their work. This colourful, generously illustrated work will also give practitioners considerable insight into Lepage's practice, although not a complete comprehension of it, while scholars will find much of the material useful. The book has a pleasingly increased distance from Lepage's voice when compared with other, interview-based contributions to the field. While Caux and Gilbert are listed as authors, fourteen other writing collaborators are identified for credit, and Lepage is not among these. The company thus shares more of a foreground usually dominated by Lepage, and the balancing of impresario and ensemble that must be considered a main aim is realised to a commendable degree.

Part 1 presents a company history, describes key working principles and creative attitudes in devising, and rehearses Lepage's description of his process as chaotic and "based mainly on intuition" (7). Fresher and less trodden material follows regarding the work of the actor, the use of technology, and experiments with narrative. A glimpse of Ex Machina's day-to-day working life at The Caserne concludes Part 1, offering a delightful insight into the difficulties of the international festival circuit. Inserted text boxes offer brief contextualisation of terms such as Melodrama and Dramaturge, contextualising specialised references, and facilitating general readership. One must hope that Ex Machina work from a more rigorous understanding, as these Sidebars are limited by their brevity. Although considerably shorter, Part 2's exploration of Lepage's opera work is the newest and arguably the most exciting material presented. The company's claiming of a role in the "rejuvenation" of opera should attract critical attention (67). The overall historicisation positions Ex Machina's heritage and trajectory through reference to a range of theatrical traditions. The familiar touchstones of Lepage's early mentors are here, but Copeau, Brecht, Lecoq, Mnouchkine, and Brook are invoked more extensively in this endeavour; on occasion, this feels too much like

a land grab. Both innovation and influence are accounted for, but scholarship will find cases of oversimplification. Lepage's complex oeuvre deserves complex critical appreciation; applying "two models" of "the collective piece and the solo show" as marking "all" of his work could prevent this (15), as could the blunt division of work into creative or commissioned projects (53). Future scholarship might profitably challenge such undemanding categorisations, or resist the historical frameworks claimed here.

Lepage's claim that *Ex Machina's* work calls "into question" not only theatrical conventions, "but also the role that theatre will play in the new exchange of ideas in the 21st century" is, while laudably bold, not particularly substantiated (7). The final image of the book shows a map of the world, with Quebec occupying the point of command historically taken by Greenwich. The gesture towards a post-colonial exchange of ideas is there, but the book misses the opportunity to engage fully with the context/s of Lepage's practice. Given that his work has had a consistent engagement with ideas of national identity and Quebec's sovereignty (not to mention interculturalism, globalisation, media, technology, and so on), this will be a lacunae for the scholarly reader. Similarly, while Caux describes Lepage's desire for "theoretical reflection" on key principles as driving *Ex Machina*, the "possible theoretical framework" underlying the work is not fully elucidated (11). The book identifies many creative principles, but they are not brought into a coherent framework. Frustratingly, the foregrounding of chaos prevents this level of statement being realised. *Ex Machina* begin work "in absolute chaos without benefit of guides or landmarks"—an atmosphere which a coherent framework would apparently nullify (30). And yet this is contradicted by the creative principles *Ex Machina* identifies, which show a repetition of themes and tropes contrary to this idealisation of a blank creative slate. Therefore, the question of Lepage's "distinctive signature," and the extent of his authorship within collaboration, haunts the book (15). There is further inconsistency in Lepage insisting that hierarchies in theatre "must be done away with" (50), even as he is positioned at the top of a diagram showing *Ex Machina's* management structure, and titled as "President / Artistic Director / Director" (80). In sum, this book inspires more than it analyses, celebrates more than it consolidates—addressing much, while leaving much to be addressed. It is, therefore, in step with Lepage's oeuvre, achieving notability even as its contradictory edges indicate the potential for further development.