

LUDOVIC FOUQUET

*The Visual Laboratory of Robert Lepage*

Trans. Rhonda Mullins. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2014. 404 pp.

MELISSA POLL

Thanks to over thirty years of making highly physical and visual theatre at home and abroad, Quebecois auteur Robert Lepage has been the subject of a breadth of scholarship, ranging from discussions framing his devised productions as borderless to examinations of his post-colonial appropriations of Shakespeare's texts. A brief survey of this work contextualizes my review of Ludovic Fouquet's *The Visual Laboratory of Robert Lepage*, outlining the landscape of English language scholarship within which Fouquet's work (originally published in French in 2005) is now emerging.

Current lines of enquiry in Anglophone scholarship have turned to Lepage's stakes in the global theatre marketplace—an economy that has flourished alongside contemporary advances in communication technology. In publications including “Cultural Relativism and Grounded Politics in Robert Lepage's *The Andersen Project*” and the forthcoming *Making Theatre Global: Robert Lepage's Original Stage Productions*, Karen Fricker considers how Lepage's work tempers its connection to the local in order to thrive on the international festival circuit and explores the implications of creating work specifically targeting this market. Similarly, in “Robert Lepage Inc.—Theatre for Festival Audiences,” Aleksandar Dundjerovic and Ilva Navarro Bateman examine the role played by de-territorialization, acculturation, and hybridization in Lepage's successful efforts to maintain his position on the international theatre circuit, positing that the Quebecois theatre-maker's broad following hinges on the fact that his work is always-already negotiating the local and the global.

The globalized present is, according to Hans-Thies Lehmann, partly responsible for the blossoming of postdramatic theatre, a form that, in its broadest sense, de-privileges dramatic text in favour of the language of scenography. This too has shaped twenty-first-century Lepage scholarship through increased interest in Lepage's stagecraft. Scholars focused on the use of cutting-edge technology in scenic design have devoted significant space to Lepage's scenography, among them Steve Dixon (*Digital Performance*) and Greg Giesekam (*Staging the Screen*). While Lepage's use of digital media has garnered much attention, his decidedly lower tech use of puppets and objects has been the source of a number of articles connecting his scenography to the modernist tradition. These include James Reynolds's piece, “Acting with Puppets and Objects: Representation and Perception in Robert Lepage's *The Far Side of the Moon*,” which investigates how the uncanny figures in Lepage's work with puppet-objects to create a unique perceptual state; and Christopher Innes's “Puppets and Machines of the Mind: Robert Lepage and the Modernist Heritage,” an interrogation of the ways in which Lepage's work with performers and architectonic space mirrors Edward Gordon Craig's evocative, minimalist aesthetic and his theory of the actor as Übermarionette. 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, offering a comparison of the material performance text featured in Josef Svoboda's *Hamlet* and Lepage's solo version of the iconic play, *Elsinore*.

Other recent studies have analyzed Lepage's work as it relates to devising, directing, and theatre-making processes, an increasingly expansive area in current theatre scholarship. Based on Lawrence and Anna Halprin's RSVP cycles as well as Jacques Lessard's Repère cycles, Lepage's devising system asks that actors work with a central resource to build a performance score. The score is then evaluated, revised, and performed publicly. James Reynolds's chapter in Simon Shepherd's *Direction* looks at Lepage's use of the cycles to spark creation and negotiate artistic control. For the nine-hour devised piece, *Lipsynch*, the resource was "a rough sketch of an airplane 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" ("Lepage and Authorial Process" 181). Reynolds examines issues surrounding authorship and authority, arguing that Lepage's position as the auteur or central author/designer/director at Ex Machina allows him to "retain possibly the most significant element of control from the outset" in an otherwise democratically-billed process of collaboration (179). *Lipsynch* is also the subject of Dundjerovic's contribution to *Making Contemporary Theatre*, in which he highlights a later stage in the devising process when Lepage asked each of the nine collaborators to create an hour-long vignette, punctuated by moments featuring the simultaneous use of four languages.

Problematic depictions of otherness have been an enduring issue in Lepage's work. While early scholarship from Ric Knowles and Barbara Hodgdon highlights the Orientalism featured in Lepage's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at London's National Theatre, Karen Fricker and Jen Harvie have picked up on similar tropes in the transnational, devised epic *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* (Fricker, "Tourism"; Harvie, "Transnationalism"). Susan Bennett and Barry Freeman have likewise identified representational concerns in Lepage's oeuvre. Bennett argues that Lepage's 2009 production *The Blue Dragon*, a sequel to *The Dragons' Trilogy* set in China and co-authored by Marie Michaud, targets Western appetites for an exoticized Orient as a guaranteed ticket-selling strategy. For his part, Freeman reads aspects of Lepage's first Shakespeare production since 1998, 2011's *La Tempête* with the Huron-Wendat Nation, as reinforcing the archetypal Savage stereotype, an argument countered by my own assessment of the production, "Adapting 'Le Grand Will' in Wendake: Ex Machina and the Huron-Wendat Nation's *La Tempête*."

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Surveying over three decades of international praxis and production, Ludovic Fouquet's *The Visual Laboratory of Robert Lepage*, a translation by Rhonda Mullins of his 2005 publication *Robert Lepage, L'horizon en images*, initially promises to offer new insights into Lepage's oeuvre. Unfortunately, despite *The Visual Laboratory*'s strengths, including its complete chronological index of Lepage's work since 1979 and descriptions of productions often absent from English language scholarship, the publication's lack of theoretical support, contextualizing detail, and organization risks leaving readers—whether artists, scholars or both—unsatisfied.

In the first section of the book, "Puppet Theatre and Quarry," Fouquet covers the well-established ground of Lepage's brief tutelage under Alain Knapp, a Parisian director/teacher who stressed the importance of self-generated projects, and Lepage's work with Théâtre Repère, a Quebec City devising company. Fouquet soon demonstrates originality, though, by discussing the influence of Lepage's encounter with puppet theatre, suggesting that the auteur's signature use of scenic objects and long-held fascination with the configuration of stage space stems from his directorial experience with Les Marionnettes du Grand Théâtre de Québec.

As Fouquet points out, many of Lepage's productions are set in giant scenographic cubes similar to puppet theatres, including *Needles & Opium*, *A Dream Play*, and, most recently, *Hamlet/Collage*. Fouquet extends this discussion of Lepage's scenic architecture to productions that have gone largely uninvestigated in Anglophone scholarship, among them *Jean-sans-nom*, a musical adaptation of Jules Verne's *Famille-sans-nom*, a fictitious account of two sovereignty seeking brothers who resist British forces during the Lower Canada Rebellion.

Regardless of its strengths, "Puppet Theatre and Quarry" reveals cracks in *The Visual Laboratory's* approach. Fouquet undertakes an all-too-brief gloss of how Lepage's directorial approach recalls Edward Gordon Craig's articulation of the actor as Übermarionette, an argument he posits without adequate referencing. Fouquet also cites Lepage's use of bunraku and wayang kulit, an ancient form of Indonesian puppetry; however, he fails to address the potentially problematic politics linked to such cultural appropriations. By omitting references to the body of scholarship critiquing Lepage's depictions of the East, Fouquet robs the reader of an opportunity to fully contextualize and evaluate his argument. As well, Fouquet often moves quickly from show to show, providing little to no information about the narrative in question. Without intimate knowledge of Lepage's oeuvre, the reader is lost amidst the auteur's prolific output over a range of genres, including theatre, cinema, opera, and dance. Similarly, Fouquet regularly segues into citations without naming the writer/speaker, relegating vital information to the endnotes and thereby limiting clarity.

In Part Two, "Technological Echoes," Fouquet tracks Lepage's design aesthetics with great specificity, charting his initial experiments with flashlights and overhead projectors through to the virtuosic employment of digitized projections in solo shows such as *The Andersen Project* and *The Far Side of the Moon*. The research undergirding this account is thorough; Fouquet offers an index of Lepage's go-to devices, including Super Scan Zoom projectors and WATCHOUT, a program that synchronizes images over multiple displays.

Though the French language version of "Technological Echoes" reads smoothly, the English translation features a propensity towards long-winded, descriptive passages, many of which feel superfluous. Organization is a central weakness here as Fouquet jumps back and forth through time to identify stylistic similarities in productions spanning three decades of work. The resulting confusion could have been tempered by an initial introduction to each production. Moreover, Part Two's omission of certain pertinent details undermines Fouquet's efforts to align Lepage's scenographic practice with that of other artists. His comparison between the virtual design featured in Mark Reaney's production of *The Adding Machine* at the University of Kansas and Lepage's one-man *Hamlet, Elsinore*, seems arbitrary without mentioning that Reaney garnered international praise from theatre-makers and computer technicians alike for the ground-breaking interactivity in his 1995 production. As a second example, Fouquet notes that the set for Lepage's production of *La Casa Azul*, a play by Sophie Faucher based on the writings of Frida Kahlo, is reminiscent of Joseph Svoboda's *Laterna Magika*, but fails to stipulate that he is referencing the performance at Expo 1958 rather than Svoboda's correspondingly named non-text based theatre company or the building in which it is housed. Readers unacquainted with Svoboda's work and legacy are set adrift.

Fouquet's third section, "Experiments in the Visual Laboratory: Echoes of Chaos," interrogates Lepage's devising process by detailing a typical rehearsal day at Lepage's Quebec City laboratory, La Caserne. Fouquet does this skilfully, highlighting Lepage's practice of using

technicians and the set from an early stage in the process and working on numerous projects simultaneously. Unfortunately, “Echoes of Chaos” goes astray in other ways. Fouquet’s reference to Orientalism fails to cite Lepage’s previous essentializing engagements with the East and betrays a misunderstanding of the term. Whether or not this is an error in Mullins’s translation, Fouquet seems to be describing Lepage’s obsession with *chinoiserie*, a fantastical Asian imaginary rooted in aesthetics (textiles, china etc.) and conceived by Europeans during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Though *chinoiserie* is implicated in Orientalism as articulated by Edward Said, Fouquet appears to be exclusively referencing the aesthetic preoccupation rather than the reductionist politics of representation.

In the fourth section, “The Visual Laboratory in Conclusion,” Fouquet offers an overview of Lepage’s recent and current projects, and, as in the rest of the book, illustrates them with a number of stunning production stills. This itemizing of Lepage’s projects is thorough and loosely connects back to Fouquet’s discussion of scenography; nonetheless, his tone shifts here, providing brief, review-style assessments that offer little insight into the actual productions. According to Fouquet, Lepage and Michaud’s *The Blue Dragon* “didn’t work” while *Eonnagata*, a dance production created and performed by Lepage, Russell Maliphant, and Sophie Guillem “fell flat” (323). Given Fouquet’s impressive knowledge of Lepage’s canon, these critiques leave the reader feeling short-changed and wishing for the more nuanced appraisal that Fouquet clearly has the ability to provide.

Ludovic Fouquet brings a rare wealth of knowledge to *The Visual Laboratory of Robert Lepage*, one that covers great stretches of time and geographical space. From the book’s incorporation of a wide range of production images to its facility with a vast canon, Fouquet’s commitment to Lepage’s work is evident. The way he delivers this knowledge, however, risks keeping readers at a distance.

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**JEAN O'HARA, ed.**

***Two-Spirit Acts: Queer Indigenous Performances.***

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2013. 138 pp.

SPY DÉNOMMÉ-WELCH

*Two-Spirit Acts: Queer Indigenous Performances* is a new anthology compiled by editor Jean O'Hara that features plays by Muriel Miguel, Kent Monkman, and Waawaate Fobister. It explores different notions of gender, sexuality, religion, and mythology, while highlighting some of the contradictions that emerge from these discourses. These points are emphasized in Tomson Highway's foreword, as he draws attention to the historical and colonial impacts of Christianity on Indigenous worldviews of gender and sexuality. He argues that "within this superstructure, anyone who is not male heterosexual—i.e., women and gays—is out of luck, is in danger" (xiv).