

1 The Boundaries of Shakespeare in Performance Criticism

This study has several aims. The first question it tackles is how to critically address the work of a director who has been engaged with Shakespeare's work, on occasion, across a long and illustrious career. Robert Lepage, the innovative and influential French-Canadian theatre director, is well known in theatre and performance circles, but when I mention his name to English-speaking Shakespeare colleagues, they often look at me quizzically. If his name is known, it is usually only in relation to either the production he directed of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the National Theatre in 1992 (in the mud) or his one-man show *Elsinore* from 1995 (Lepage's personal interaction with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). But thinking in terms of inclusion and how the canon of performances that are taken seriously by the established Shakespearean critical world can be expanded to include productions from traditions that work outside of Anglo-American expectations, I want to take a closer look at the work of this director. Scholars who are interested in Shakespeare and Tourism (Bennett, 2005; Ormsby, 2017a, 2017b) have considered in some detail the works that are supported by international theatre festivals. But what about an artist like Lepage, who produces shows specifically for that international festival audience while working consistently from a base in Quebec City, drawing on traditions and expectations that are particularly Québécois?

The second aim of this work is to look at the issues of representation and responsibility which have recently become central to Shakespeare in performance studies and have circulated around Lepage's work for many years. The resurgence of an international discussion of racism in all areas of public and private life, particularly in response to the death of George Floyd in the United States, has brought to light accounts of earlier similar debates. In the same way, here I want to put forward an examination of older approaches to questions of inter/multi/trans/cross-cultural theatrical experiments as a means of exploring, if not explaining, how thoughts on these topics have developed over time. Can past productions and the critical dialogue that surrounded them be recuperated in a way that might make them useful to current debates? This argument comes in response to three recent volumes which have been published on Lepage's work: Melissa Poll's *Robert Lepage's Scenographic Dramaturgy: The Aesthetic Signature at Work*

(2018), James Reynolds's *Robert Lepage/Ex Machina: Revolutions in Theatrical Space* (2019), and Karen Fricker's *Robert Lepage's Original Stage Productions: Making Theatre Global* (2020). While the first of these studies examines Lepage's work on extant texts, it excludes his early career and includes only one serious examination of a Shakespeare performance. In the second volume, Reynolds tries to present an overview of Lepage's work and working practices from 1994 to 2018 but only glances at his work on Shakespeare. In the final volume, Fricker puts more emphasis on Lepage's origins (pre-1994) but restricts her examination to his original productions. Therefore, there is a large gap to be filled in terms of analysis of Lepage's controversial but influential Shakespeare productions in both English and French. Like these three authors, I engage with this director's process but I also want to examine the context from which this material springs. Rather than placing his work into larger international theoretical and artistic debates about theatrical space and visual forms of communication, I want to focus on how and where this director first approached Canada's bicultural debate through Shakespeare's text.

2 Liberal Humanism and the International Shakespeare Director

I do not contest the notion that Lepage's work speaks to European theatrical traditions and concerns, but here I argue that it also relies on dated claims of universalism and a sense of empathy for other cultures which is very much a product of Quebec's cultural history. One of the key issues to address when dealing with Lepage's Shakespeare productions is the fact that he is working in two different languages and with at least four different theatre traditions. While the critical writing that addresses his early work (coming largely out of English Canada) took this director to task for his somewhat cavalier approach to intercultural sensitivities (Carson, 1993, 2000; Fricker, 2003; Harvie, 2000; Hodgdon, 1996; Simon, 2000), the French-Canadian critical writing on this director and his company tended to elevate the position of the artist and the principle of artistic freedom in order to further nationalist ends. Entire volumes of Quebec theatre journals were dedicated to preserving this work, and the tone is more celebratory than critical. Later

critical writing which responds to Lepage's internationally acclaimed productions coming out of Britain and France tends to see his work as a reaction to their own theatre traditions.¹ This is particularly true for Lepage's Shakespeare work, which has often been compared with Peter Brook's in terms of theatrical style. As the other celebrated bilingual (English/French) producer of Shakespeare dealing with intercultural issues and casts, the comparison seemed sensible, but I would argue it is reductionist for both directors. When considering the cultural contexts that nurtured these two directors, they could not be more different. Brook came from a background that was privileged both financially and educationally, attending private schools in England before studying at Oxford University. Lepage, by contrast, dropped out of high school without obtaining his diploma and went immediately to theatre school at the age of seventeen. Brook's parents were Russian and Jewish; Lepage's were French Canadian and Catholic. Brook was exposed to the theatre at an early age; Lepage was not. Brook began his career directing at the Royal Shakespeare Company before leaving the country to set up his own company in France. Lepage struggled to be heard as part of an embryonic Quebec theatre. Lepage's early Shakespeare work, and his work with intercultural collaboration and representation in Canada, provides a useful case study because of the way that it demonstrates his eclectic approach, which combines a mixture of existing performance styles. This director's work is notoriously difficult to sum up and even harder to restrict to one area of critical engagement², so here I focus my analysis on two early productions, *The Dragons' Trilogy* and *Romeo and Juliette* and their context, along with two recent ones, *SLÁV* and *Kanata*, which resulted in controversy, to highlight the issue of cultural representation and appropriation.

According to Fricker, avoiding critical definition has always been an aim of this theatre artist: 'This resistance to being classified is such a consistent

¹ See Fricker (2020) and Reynolds (2019) for a comprehensive account of Lepage criticism.

² Fricker (2020) makes it clear in her excellent summary of the critical perspectives that shed light on Lepage's work how difficult it is to categorise his productions critically.

position on Lepage's part that it has become definitional. This is a paradoxical stand – defining oneself by avoiding definition – and it is thus not surprising that paradox is a key term in discussions of Lepage's work' (2020: 2). This short piece will not try to pin him down, but rather it will highlight his originality while challenging his credentials as an intercultural director. There are not many internationally renowned directors of Shakespeare who also have directed Peter Gabriel's concerts and Cirque de Soleil's world tours. Directors at the Metropolitan Opera rarely also produce Shakespeare at the National Theatre in London. Lepage has had a unique position in the theatre world, and the way that his career has intersected with and employed the Shakespeare canon is unusual, even potentially unprecedented. But like Fricker, I want to examine exactly those issues that Lepage is keen to avoid: 'representational, authorial and corporate responsibility' (2020: 8). 'Paradox' is the word she uses in her analysis of Lepage, but she also points out that once 'pushed beyond its breaking point, a paradox becomes a contradiction' (2020: 8). This study highlights how different Lepage's work is from that of Brook, to illustrate how what was paradoxically similar has become a contradiction. The key point of overlap between these two directors, for the purposes of this argument, is their mutual attachment to older approaches to representation and responsibility.

Thus this study, like Fricker's, aims to raise the problem of critical categorisation, but in this case, I would like to argue for Lepage's inclusion in the canon of significant Shakespearean directors not because his work has been linked to Brook's but because of the way it differs from this other noted bilingual director. The mutual interest these two directors have in the concepts surrounding interculturalism and their approach to an image-oriented epic form of theatre-making have inspired comparisons between the two. But where their approaches diverge is in their approach to language and extant text. I would also suggest that Lepage's work on Shakespeare cannot be taken out of the context of this artist's extremely varied body of theatre productions. This analysis provides both a personal perspective and one that is grounded in a particular historical situation that aims to augment recent work by Poll (2018), Reynolds (2019) and Fricker (2020) by adding an analysis of

his intercultural work and its reception that bookends the period these critics consider.

3 The Global Pandemic as a Spotlight

The combination of a world pandemic and international protests about systemic racism provide an extraordinary moment of clarity about current and possible future directions for the study of Shakespeare and performance in general and Lepage's work in particular. Theatre is under threat like never before. But the kind of theatre that Lepage and his companies (first Théâtre Repère and then Ex Machina) have created for the past three decades, which is designed for export to the international festival circuit, must face a foundational reconsideration. The pandemic lockdown created a perfect storm of circumstances which challenge the viability of the kind of social gathering that his theatre depends on. In the short-run, online distribution of past performances created a sense of plenty and prosperity for theatre audiences worldwide, as companies were able to gain wider recognition and access through free distribution of their work. According to Fricker, Lepage is a 'paradigmatic figure in the contemporary, globalised performance arts' because his productions deal directly with the huge changes that his audiences have experienced; they are 'productions that reflect spectators' privileged experiences of navigating contemporary globalisation' (2020: 6). But this work did not anticipate the pandemic, which has brought questions to light that have for too long hovered around the edges of criticism of international Shakespeare performance. What Fricker says about globalisation is even more true of the experience of life in lockdown for many:

While bringing new experiences, wealth, and pleasures to some, however, the benefits of globalisation are not shared equally; globalisation has reified divisions of class, status, and power among the world's population. The increased movement of resources, ideas, and bodies under the conditions of globalisation is raising complex questions about responsibilities, affiliations, and ownership. (2020: 6)

For directors like Lepage, the pandemic signals a radical moment for rethinking a theatre which depends on international travel and elite audiences.

For Brook, who is in his nineties, there is no need for reinvention. His approach to performance is well documented critically, largely because of his own publications, through which he makes clear his aims and goals (something that Lepage has never done). His most recent volume, *Tip of the Tongue* (2017), written at the age of ninety-two, is particularly useful in highlighting the difference between these two men. Brook loves and trusts language; Lepage sees language as a curtain draped around culture that can be used to divide and confuse. The subtitle of Brook's book, *Reflections on Language and Meaning*, is the core of what separates the theatre of Lepage from the elder statesman of the theatre, particularly in terms of their Shakespeare direction. Brook is steeped in traditional literary approaches to Shakespeare and performance coming out of Oxford and the Royal Shakespeare Company, even when he rebels against them. Lepage has no training and very little interest in these traditions. His reputation as the next Peter Brook came from his production at the National Theatre in London of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in English and *Le Cycle de Shakespeare: Macbeth, Coriolan, La Tempête* in French, which toured Europe from 1992 to 1994. But Lepage's initial interaction with bilingual Shakespeare was rather more problematic. His first foray into cross-cultural collaboration within Canada, while directing Shakespeare, took place on a much smaller scale in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in 1989, in a production of *Romeo and Juliet* which he co-directed with Gordon McCall. Working for the first time on a Shakespeare play outside Quebec and in English, a clash of cultures was perhaps inevitable. This early experiment did not foreshadow the extremely popular and critically acclaimed Shakespeare productions that were staged just three years later. An examination of the processes involved in Lepage's earliest work with Shakespeare can shed some light on his approach to language and cultural representation, revealing a deeply politically motivated approach, despite his denial of any interest in politics.

4 Developing Methods of Creation and Criticism

To understand where the inspiration for Lepage's internationally celebrated Shakespeare productions came from it is essential to look more closely at

Lepage's first global success, *The Dragons' Trilogy*. By analysing the working methods of this director in his home environment, taking into account the social and political context of this period in Canadian history, it is possible to see why Lepage found his Shakespearean voice in both languages and on national and international stages in the early 1990s. In 1992, working in both English and French, presenting his work on large established national and international stages, Lepage was stepping out of the alternative theatre in Quebec for the first time and into the international Shakespearean circuit of renowned directors that included not just Brook but others working on intercultural issues. Sherry Simon presents the accepted critical view that I am keen to challenge:

The theatre of Robert Lepage is 'internationalized' in its very essence. Lepage has invented productions which, though constructed out of materials gathered from local contexts, are put together into performances that transcend these origins. This use of cultural collage places Lepage in the company of 'intercultural' theater artists Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook, Robert Wilson and Ariane Mnouchkine (Pavis 1). These directors have all used elements of distant cultures like the *Noh* tradition, *Kathakali* dancing from India, or African performances, as elements of their own theater. Like the other directors mentioned, Lepage uses the clash of traditions to construct his plays and *mise-en-scène*. (2000: 217)

Similarly, Andy Lavender makes a direct comparison between Lepage and two of these directors in his book *Hamlet in Pieces: Shakespeare Revisited by Peter Brook, Robert Lepage and Robert Wilson* (2001) using the response of each of these auteurs to Shakespeare's great play as a guiding principle. As a director himself, Lavender delves into the working process of each director and tries to adapt his critical approach in a way that is appropriate.

Both of these critics seek to elevate and explain Lepage's work through comparison to older more established directors. Alexandar Dundjerović, himself a director and an immigrant to Canada, looks at the way that Brook and Lepage are connected through their approach to older theatrical forms;

'Like the theatre of Peter Brook, Lepage's theatre blurs the traditional boundaries between rehearsal and performance, transforming them into one continuous creative process' (2007: x). But Dundjerović also looks to locate Lepage in his own social context and tries to define his work through its rehearsal and performance practices. Fricker points out why context is key when analysing this work:

Alongside this broader framing of Lepage's work within shifting conceptions of contemporary theatre directing, it is also useful to place his practice specifically in the context of Québécois culture and theatrical practices. Understanding the relationship between Lepage and his particular milieu sheds light on the fundamentals of his approach, and also usefully complicates a tendency to describe him as exceptional when in fact he is part of an evolving tradition. (2020: 29)

This analysis combines these approaches to look at Lepage's early work and context but compares this director to himself. By creating a comparison between his work directing Shakespeare, in a cross-cultural production, with his work devising a new production with Théâtre Repère at around the same time, it is possible to develop a critical method which may suit other directors who approach both Shakespeare and their own devised work. The assumption in Shakespeare performance criticism is often to question what directors have brought to 'our' understanding of the texts but here I want to look at what Shakespeare's dramaturgy has done for this director. By choosing to tackle Shakespeare, in more than one language and one country, Lepage positioned himself quite differently in the Anglo-American critical world and in the European theatrical critical tradition. The role of the artist in the European tradition is based on the notion that the director is more than simply an interpreter of the texts. The tradition of the auteur in the French press and critical discourse is central to understanding responses to Lepage's work outside Canada. Looking at his work in this way helps explain why the comparison with Brook has been so enduring but also why it needs to end.

5 Challenges for the Twenty-First-Century Artist and Critic

In the twenty-first century, the role of both the artist and the critic is changing, and another aim of this analysis is to trace how these changes are taking place using Lepage as a case study. While times have changed, in many ways, Lepage's working method has not altered as much as it could or should have. Because his career was linked to the reputation of older directors' work, Lepage benefitted from the expectations audiences had for the work of an earlier generation. But his insistence on the special place of the artist in society (and the special place of Quebec within in Canadian society) reached an impasse in 2018. Two productions, one depicting African American slaves, *SLÁV*, and the other telling the stories of Canada's Indigenous people, *Kanata*, were criticised by members of these two artistic communities. Lepage's explanations for both performances centred around ideas of empathy and universal human truths. These legitimating strategies were seen as insulting, involving the erasure of the cultural communities whose stories were being told. *Kanata*, as a co-production with Adriane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil from Paris, was meant to show the coming together of two great intercultural directors. Instead, it highlighted the limitations of their ways of working and their attitudes towards the representation of others. In fact, while *Kanata* was cancelled entirely in Canada, an alternative version of this show was eventually staged in Paris, which focused on the importance of artistic freedom, demonstrating the difference between these two cultural communities.

However, this international performance did not allow Lepage to escape the controversy at home. Philip S. S. Howard, in a recent article about the controversy that surrounded Lepage's production of *SLÁV*, details the history of what he calls 'antiblackness' in Quebec, using this incident as an example. In essence, he critiques the performance of resistance inspired by this production and points to the underlying cultural and social trends that it highlights. The history Howard charts, of misguided efforts to include Black francophones in the nationalist project by the White community in Quebec, speaks of repeated attempts to erase difference out of a sense of universalist empathy. The notion that the White Québécois considered

themselves *les Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (the White negroes/niggers/Blacks of America – Howard debates the translation) can certainly be seen as taking empathy too far and in entirely the wrong direction. But using the analysis of the reaction to a show the critic has not seen raises another problem that Lepage highlighted himself during the controversy: how can a critic participate in a debate when he has not heard what is being said on-stage? Given that Lepage's work is created in response to audience interaction over time, how can it proceed when the audience refuses to engage in debate?

Like Howard, I want to look to the controversy around the cancellation of *SLĀV* and *Kanata*³ as a means of pointing out that Lepage's work has come up against the limits of the liberal humanist notion of universality and intercultural theatre as it was critically defined at the end of the twentieth century. Like Howard, I did not see either of the performances in question and rely on accounts of the controversy that I have read from a distance, but this stands in contrast to my involvement with the two earlier case studies documented here. These are productions which I saw and researched in some detail, interviewing the participants and engaging with the interviews of others. The shift from active researcher, audience member and involved participant in the social and cultural struggles being depicted on stage to a faraway critic relying on mediated material to gain an understanding of an event I did not witness is also designed to make a point. It seems to me that this is the way that criticism of Shakespeare in performance is inevitably going. Having recently written a review for *Shakespeare Bulletin* of Lepage's *Coriolanus* at the Stratford Festival, which I saw live in 2018 and on my laptop in 2020, I am keenly aware of how recorded performances are inevitably stripped of context to some degree. If inclusion is about making experiences available, then my contribution to this debate must be to document what I was lucky enough to see and hear. Easy cross-comparisons between intercultural productions recorded and distributed online are challenged here by direct experience of the creative process and

³ It is important to point out that *SLĀV* was performed several times before it was cancelled, and *Kanata* was staged in France to mixed critical and audience reception.