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a new and innovative account of Poe and his story ended up as just another bio-drama dressed up in the distinct world of the dramatic musical. Catalyst worked over the content, when what was needed was a working over of the form.

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Notes

1 The rest of the cast included Shannon Blanchet, Sheldon Elter, Beth Graham, Ryan Parker, Garrett Ross, and Vanessa Sabourin.

2 I draw this idea of awakening from Cathy Caruth who discusses the importance of awakening from a dream in relation to questions of trauma and memory in a reading of Freud and Lacan (see Chapter 5, 'Traumatic Awakenings' in Caruth (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.

Printemps du Lepage

The Blue Dragon, by Marie Michaud and Robert Lepage. National Arts Centre Theatre, Ottawa, March 25–April 11, 2009

Éonnagata, by Sylvie Guillem, Robert Lepage and Russell Maliphant. Fesitval TransAmérique, Montreal, June 2–4, 2009

Lipsynch, by Frédérique Bédard, Carlos Belda, Rebecca Blankenship, Lise Castonguay, John Cobb, Nuria Garcia, Marie Gignac, Sarah Kemp, Robert Lepage, Rick Miller and Hans Piesbergen. Luminato Festival, Toronto, June 6–11, 2009

By Lisa Wolford Wylam

Few contemporary theatre directors enjoy the magnitude of international celebrity granted to Robert Lepage, recipient of the Europe Theatre Prize in 2007 and the Governor General's Performing Arts Award in 2009. Lepage's epic productions have become a mainstay of the international festival scene, lauded for their virtuosic originality as well as the technical sophistication of their transformative *mise-en-scène*. As a paragon of the canonical avant-garde, Lepage is embraced by the most renowned theatre and opera venues of Europe and North America, a factor that often limits access to his work for theatre-goers in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada. Consequently, the opportunity to see three different Lepage productions in Eastern Canada in fewer than three months is rare and compelling.

Peter Brook claims that the acid test of great theatre has to do with the lingering effects of a performance in the observer's memory. If that's true, then *The Dragons' Trilogy* (1985), the production that established Lepage as a major talent, remains one of the most haunting and effective pieces of theatre I've ever witnessed. Nearly twenty years later, I still remember the poignancy of two young girls playing with shoeboxes, the simplicity and clarity with which multiple languages were interwoven, the spectacle of the cloth dragon puppets, ice skaters on a field of sand, and my utter astonishment when an actor transformed from one character to another in full view of the audience by removing her nun's habit piece by piece. The relative economy of the production's means, in which a sand-filled parking lot with a small attendant's shack served to evoke a broad range of locales, elicited an extraordinary creativity from its makers, prompting them to rely on the spectators' imaginations and the transformative capacities of the actors' bodies. I can't help but wonder whether the surfeit of resources made available to Lepage as a consequence of his success might paradoxically diminish Ex Machina's work by replacing physical ingenuity and an aesthetic of suggestion with a quasi-cinematic realism achieved by means of high-budget technologies. As the stage mechanics of Ex Machina's work have become progressively more elaborate, has the role of the actors' virtuosity been commensurately limited?

The Blue Dragon, created in collaboration with Marie Michaud, combines the striking theatricality for which Lepage is celebrated with decidedly atypical structural simplicity and narrative cohesion. Lepage reprises the role of visual artist Pierre LaMontagne, which he originated in *The Dragons' Trilogy* and subsequently revisited a decade later in *The Confessional* (1995). While the action of the *Trilogy* is set primarily within Canada's Chinatowns, *Blue Dragon* follows its Quebecois characters to twenty-first century Shanghai, where Pierre's erstwhile lover Claire Forêt (Michaud) travels in hope of adopting a child. The *Trilogy* concludes with Pierre leaving for China to study art. Two decades later, he is a gallery owner and sometime calligrapher, having abandoned his previous installation-based practice. Pierre's artistic sterility is mirrored by Claire's inability to conceive, having prioritized her advertising career in her younger, more fertile years. Although Claire's initial adoption plans are thwarted, the unexpected pregnancy of Pierre's young protégé and current lover Xiao Ling (Tai Wei Foo) renews her maternal aspirations. The fluidity of the female characters' sexuality, which opens possibilities for multiple plot resolutions, rescues the story from potential cliché by positioning the Quebecois characters as rivals for the young Chinese artist's favour. Much of *Blue Dragon*'s strength lies in the resonant juxtaposition of this domestic plotline with a lucid critique of Western consumerism and the anxieties surrounding China's vast economic and political power, moving beyond the Orientalism for which critics faulted earlier productions such as *Seven*

Rick Miller looking through a porthole while Nuria Garcia is walking on plane fuselage.
Érick Labbé

Streams of the River Ota. Xiao Ling, whose artwork begins with photographs of herself in different emotional states taken with a cellphone camera, confidently navigates Shanghai's urban landscape, determined to make her own choices rather than allowing either biology or others' desires to determine her fate.

In contrast to the minimalist design of the original *Trilogy*, the two-level metal set of *Blue Dragon* smoothly reconfigures, with the addition of visual projections, to hyper-realistically depict various locations: an airport, Pierre's loft, a nightclub, and a Shanghai neighbourhood. The visual poetry for which Lepage is justly famous is much in evidence throughout this production, most spectacularly in one of three dances choreographed by Tai Wei Foo in which she performs against the backdrop of a vast projection screen that flashes kaleidoscopic effects with each movement of her arm and trailing sleeves, an image that marks the position of contemporary China at the intersection of ancient traditions and advanced digital technologies. Conveyor belts similar to those used in *The Geometry of Miracles* are most interestingly employed in several fragments when the actors ride bicycles, straining against their resistance. The use of the conveyor device in a nightclub scene, where jewel-toned cocktails endlessly circle past Claire and Xiao Ling, on the other hand, seems like gratuitous technophilia. The understated realism of the acting style adopted by both Lepage and Michaud is in contrast to the charismatic dynamism of Tai Wei Foo's performance, suggesting elements of political allegory in the way each of the three protagonists strives to attain conflicting desires. While some critics faulted the incorporation of three alternate endings as contrived, I found the Brechtian device effective in subverting heteronormative expectations of narrative closure, and structurally justified in its mirroring of a

parable spoken by Pierre at the beginning of the piece.

If *The Blue Dragon* invites Lepage to revisit and extend past accomplishments, *Éonagata* challenges the 52-year-old auteur to move far outside his comfort zone, dancing alongside iconic ballerina Sylvie Guillem and choreographer Russell Maliphant. The collective star power of this unique ensemble ensured that audience expectations were high, perhaps impossibly so; dance aficionados who anticipated something similar to Guillem and Maliphant's prior collaborations in *PUSH* and *Broken Fall* were withering in their assessment of *Éonagata*. They complained that the dancers held back to avoid overshadowing Lepage, while theatre audiences protested the lack of linear narrative and the perceived

deficiencies of the dancers' textual delivery. Given the artists' varied commitments, *Éonagata* took more than two years to come together—created in short but intensive periods of rehearsal. While this intermittent process may have contributed to a lack of cohesion, the hybrid performance is intellectually provocative and replete with stunning images, accentuated by Michael Hulls' lighting and couturier Alexander McQueen's memorable costume design.

Based on the figure of Chevalier d'Éon, perhaps history's most celebrated transvestite, *Éonagata* offers a decidedly postmodern reflection on the constructedness of gender identity, with each of the three performers representing different stages in the life of the notorious eighteenth-century diplomat and spy. Maliphant, muscular and compact, is identified with the young d'Éon, who disguised himself as a Lady in Waiting to Empress Elizabeth and successfully influenced Russian policy toward France, then returned home to fight as captain of the dragoons. Guillem, with her delicate features and long red hair, evokes d'Éon's life in the court of Louis XVI, commanded to live as a woman and clothed by the dressmaker of Marie Antoinette. Lepage first performs d'Éon's martial prowess with sword and staves, then dons whiteface and a widow's cap to depict the Chevalier in old age. *Éonagata* mines the resonances between the Chevalier's ambiguous gender and the conventions through which male Kabuki performers dance female roles; this gives rise to several of the performance's most haunting images. For example, Maliphant emerges from within a vast female puppet that is dressed in an exquisite gold silk kimono. It turns its face toward him in a silent exchange while he is still half-encased in its garb. In another moment, Maliphant and Guillem dissolve into one another's shadows behind the translucent veil of a backlit kimono.

The performance opens to reveal Lepage on a bare stage, deftly brandishing a sword in each hand, rectangular bars of light flashing strobe-like around him. With a percussive thunderclap, the clear light divides into bars of blue and red, revealing Maliphant and Guillem in leotards patterned with vertical lines that accentuate the gendered differentiation of their lithe bodies. Lepage proves surprisingly adept with the choreography, though the most striking movement sequences involve Guillem alone or in tandem with Maliphant, as when the two dance an achingly beautiful *pas de deux*, melting into one another as if trying to fuse male and female elements within the Chevalier's psyche. In contrast to *The Blue Dragon*, with its contemporary setting and subtle political critique, *Éonnagata* unfolds in a mythic register, one in which masculine and feminine are represented through iconic symbols such as sword and fan, and staff and circle. McQueen layers rich fitted doublets and filmy silks over the performers' striated unitards; the movement and texture of the fabrics encasing sleek-muscle bodies comprises much of the production's visual allure. Yet no costume element is more resonant than the sculpted silhouette of the rubber crinoline cages worn by all three performers, which simultaneously evoke European court fashion and Samurai armour while also suggesting the ways rigid gender norms imprisoned d'Éon, whose biological sex was a matter of public speculation. *Éonnagata* concludes with the chilling image of Chevalier's autopsy; Lepage stretched out on a mirrored table as white-masked morticians prepare to dissect the corpse, definitively establishing its male sex.

The day after concluding the run of *Éonnagata* at Festival TransAmériques, Lepage arrived in Toronto for the dress rehearsal of his newest epic, *Lipsynch*, at the Luminato Festival. In a public discussion the morning of the Toronto opening, Lepage spoke candidly about the ongoing process of restructuring the nine-hour devised piece, including significant reordering of elements the night before. This process of continuing to restructure a performance throughout its run is characteristic of Lepage, a strategy to extend ensemble development past the initial rehearsal period, and has created controversy in the past among spectators unhappy at paying high ticket prices to view a work-in-progress. Although the actors adapted smoothly to the reworked structure, more rehearsal in the Bluma Appel Theatre would surely have benefitted the stage technicians, whose multiple reconfigurations of the sleek modular set expanded an already daunting run-time. The duration of *Lipsynch* is less surprising when compared with the six hours of the original *Dragons' Trilogy* and the seven-hour running time of *Seven Streams of the River Ota*. However, critics have often faulted the unwieldy dramaturgy of these devised epics, asserting that plot and dialogue in Ex Machina's performances fail to rise to the level of Lepage's visual poetry and innovative *mise en scène*. His process in directing *Lipsynch*

differs from earlier collective projects such as *Dragons' Trilogy*, which Lepage initially rehearsed from within the ensemble, casting another performer in the role he had created once the structure was established. Because of his commitments to perform in *The Blue Dragon* and *Éonnagata*, Lepage did not travel with the *Lipsynch* ensemble on all its foreign tours.

Lipsynch is structured in nine acts, each of which bears the name of a central character whose story it narrates. The point of departure for the ensemble's creative process was an exploration of the human voice, metaphoric ground of identity and agency, here examined through various manifestations and professional milieu: opera and jazz singing, radio announcing, film dubbing, sound mixing and speech therapy, just to name a few. The plot unfolds gradually through accretion, as details emerge that illuminate the intersections of the nine primary figures' lives. Only in the final chapter do the relevant connections among these disparate stories fully emerge. The first segment, titled "Ada," opens with soprano Rebecca Blankenship centre stage, singing a haunting aria from Henryk Gorecki's *Symphony #3*. As she concludes, lights come up to reveal a hyper-realistic airplane interior. Ada (Blankenship) enters through the rear of the aircraft, pausing to retrieve a toy dropped by a crying infant before taking her seat in the front of the cabin. The child's persistent crying gradually draws the attention of other passengers when its mother fails to respond; she is ultimately revealed to have died on the journey. Ada first comforts the orphaned child and later adopts him when no surviving relatives come forward. The mystery surrounding the deceased woman and the parentage of her son is central to the somewhat melodramatic plot of *Lipsynch*, with the final chapter, "Lupe," revealing how the young Nicaraguan mother came to board the flight from Frankfurt to Montreal.

The opening chapter centres on Ada's relationship to her adopted son, showing the infant's growth through a sequence of technically flashy vignettes depicting the pair together at different stages of the child's youth in trains, buses, and subway cars, all ingeniously depicted through reconfiguration of the modular set. Jeremy, the son, is played by popular Canadian actor Rick Miller, who convincingly evokes the boy's adolescent rebellion and his adult fascination with the life of his birth mother (whom he knows nothing about, except that she was a singer). As an adult, Jeremy becomes a film director, with much of the play's action following his efforts to make a feature film about his mother's life as he imagines it. The first chapter concludes with Jeremy boarding a flight to America to study film and to learn more about his mother's life. The scene shows the aircraft exterior, with Jeremy's face visible through one window. He sings the Gorecki aria as a duet with Ada, who watches from outside as the plane prepares to take off. Lupe (Nuria Garcia) walks atop the fuselage, balancing precariously, arms outstretched. While *Lipsynch* features many visually stunning moments, none equal the haunting emotional resonance of this passage, with its wistful reflection

on the power of familial bonds.

In addition to the central figures of Ada, Jeremy and Lupe, *Lipsynch* introduces a range of characters whose lives intersect with theirs: the neurosurgeon Thomas (Hans Piesbergen) whom Ada eventually marries; Ada's former speech therapist (John Cobb in drag), and her caretaker Sarah (Sarah Kemp), an ex-prostitute traumatized in childhood from having been raped by her brother; Marie (Frédérique Bédard), a Montreal jazz singer on whom Thomas operates; and Marie's schizophrenic sister Michelle (Lise Castonguay), an elfin woman subject to hallucinations. Two further chapters, one dealing with the funeral of sound technician Sebastian's (Carlos Belda) father and the other following the investigation of Scotland Yard detective Jackson (Cobb) into the death of Sarah's brother, are tangential to *Lipsynch*'s central themes and could be productively eliminated. In contrast to the romanticized fiction of Lupe's life depicted in Jeremy's film, the final act unflinchingly details the sequence of events through which the young Nicaraguan girl was sold into prostitution. A particularly harrowing fragment depicts Lupe's rape by projecting film of a woman's naked breasts and torso onto the body of the clothed Garcia, multiple pairs of male hands invasively grabbing her flesh. While the realization of this action is technologically innovative, the political implications of yet another narrative grounded in the exploitation of brown women's bodies are markedly less so. The mystery of Jeremy's parentage is answered in a way that consolidates all but one of the major plot threads. *Lipsynch* concludes with a reverse Pietà; first Ada and then Jeremy cradling Lupe's broken body, an image of haunting beauty that mirrors the opening chapter in its emphasis on the love between mother and son.

Although he's directed several films, two of which explicitly extend narrative threads from earlier devised epics, Lepage has announced he has no plans to continue as a filmmaker. Instead he has transferred the aesthetics of cinema to his work as a stage director, with elaborate mechanical sets and digital projections becoming increasingly more central to his work since the early nineties. The visual effects are exquisitely beautiful, as demonstrated in the luminous snowfall of *The Blue Dragon* and the haunting airplane sequences of *Lipsynch*. Yet the most transcendent moments in Lepage's productions always arise when technology is put in service to the actor's transformative power rather than usurping it, when God (so to speak) is located not in the machine but in the actor's testimony. While such moments are by no means absent from Ex Machina's current work, I still sometimes long for the magic of that open field of sand, where a man in a pilot's uniform balanced atop a briefcase with his arms outstretched was all that was needed to evoke a plane in flight.

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Defying Tragedy: Hope in *His Greatness*

His Greatness. By Daniel MacIvor. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2007.

by J. Paul Halferty

Daniel MacIvor's new play, *His Greatness*,¹ is at once a departure and a continuation of his previous work. Unlike what has come before, it is a mediation and homage to both the plays and life of a historical figure—one of the twentieth century's most celebrated American playwrights, Tennessee Williams. It also veers from MacIvor's signature theatricality, sharing more in form and style with Williams' *oeuvre* than his own. And yet the play continues MacIvor's interest in exploring the subtle but nevertheless profound connections that constitute human relationships inside and outside the theatre. In keeping with both Williams' work and his own, the characters in *His Greatness* are isolated beings that struggle with illusions and the "primary and related energies of love and death" (Williams 119); however, unlike Williams' plays, the human condition is not tragic because these characters' acts belie hope in redemption. In true MacIvor fashion, this idea is intertwined with a philosophy of the theatre that is present throughout his body of work: that the theatre's felicity is found in how it fosters and enacts empathetic connection between people through performance.

The majority of MacIvor's plays establish their most tangible relationship to "reality" through their acknowledgement of their own theatricality in performance. This is not the case with *His Greatness*, a play marked by differing invocations of "reality" and "realism." As MacIvor tells us in the play's Foreword, it is partially inspired by the real-life account of a friend who met Tennessee Williams when the playwright was in Vancouver for the premiere of his play *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, which was staged at the Vancouver Playhouse in 1980.² Following Williams in form and style, the play is prototypical realism: it has a two-act structure, takes place in one room in a twenty-four hour period, and, with the exception of its Prologue and the concluding monologue (important framing devices that I will return to), it does not break the fourth wall. *His Greatness* appeals to Williams not only in form and style, but also in figure. Although the Playwright, the central character in this three-hander, is never called "Williams," he is described as an older gay man and famous American playwright who, like Williams in the story MacIvor was told, is in Vancouver for the premiere of his latest play.

The play's primary concern is the relationship between the Playwright and his Assistant, "The once and former muse" who has with age become "The nursemaid" (MacIvor 7).