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Melanie Bennett is a PhD candidate at York University in Theatre Studies and recipient of the Canada Graduate Scholarship. She holds a Master of Performance Studies from the University of Calgary. As an artist-researcher, Melanie's current creative practice in site-specific performance is a response to her research interests surrounding the value of ethnographic methodology in contemporary performance. She is currently in the process of devising *Garden//Suburbia*, a part auto-ethnographic/part relational site-specific project that takes place in and around her apartment in Toronto.

From Dream, to Dream, to Dream

By Heidi Bickis

Nevermore: The Imaginary Life & Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe. Catalyst Theatre, Edmonton AB, May 10, 2009.

Writer and poet Edgar Allan Poe, famous for his dark and macabre tales, is now Edmonton-based Catalyst Theatre's most recent muse. Their latest creation, *Nevermore: The Imaginary Life & Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe*, premiered in May 2009 under the artistic direction of writer/director Jonathan Christenson and designer Bretta Gerecke. *Nevermore* tells the tale of Poe's life—a dramatic biography shaped by Catalyst's unique style of musical theatre. Through storytelling, music, song, and larger-than-life costuming and props, the cast and crew brought to the stage an Edgar Allan Poe born of the fantastical and mysterious. As Christenson explains in the program notes, both the fantasy and the mystery were crucial for Poe's story: "The line between fact and fiction, dreams and reality, life and death has always been blurry in the work of Poe." This blurring became the basis for the play: "It is a version of Poe's story that unfolds according to the logic of dreams, where the lines between his life and his work remain fluid and where, as Poe himself said, 'all that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.'" The production captured the sense of the imaginary and the dream, but didn't push the boundaries of biography far enough, as promised in both the production's style and Christenson's remarks. The lines between dream and reality weren't blurred as much as absent altogether; the production had no sense of contrast between what is real and what is fiction—an absence that diminished the effects of the dark and fantastical imagery. The play was all dream; a dream safely contained in the conventional structure of biography without any threat from waking life, the unravelling of time or the mutability of space.

Catalyst's strength lies in its creation of imaginary worlds on stage. In *Nevermore*, the world created was a dream-space of horror, suspense, and mystery; a world brought to life by the great ensemble work of the cast, the Andrew Lloyd Weber-esque pop/classical/broadway musical style, and Gerecke's imaginative design. Herein lay the world of the dream: The action of the play unfolded was through storytelling and narration—a magical tour through a life. The telling of Poe's tale rested, for the most part, in the hands of the Chorus. Aside from Poe, played by Scott Shepeley, all the actors moved between their more neutral roles as Chorus and the various persons (and creatures) in Poe's life and fiction.¹ The Chorus recounted Poe's story to both the audience and Poe himself, filling in details of each event with song and monologue. They were figures of fate that whisked Poe away on his life's path, a path over which he had little control.

Adding to the dream-like feel, Gerecke had created a simple set with simple lighting design. A screen divided the front of the stage from the back (a division that seemed to separate past from present, dream from reality, although the effect of this division wasn't fully explicit) and the lighting moved from blues to reds. All the costumes were black and white, period-inspired, and accented with bold, exaggerated pieces and lines including excessively large hoop skirts and disproportionately large hats and head pieces. Talons and raven heads evoked the creatures from Poe's writings and occasionally swept across the stage.

The performance unfolded, however, according to the conventions of biography; a sequential telling of events that followed the rationale of "and then": Poe is born, and then he plays with his brother and sister, and then his father turns to the bottle, and then his mother dies, and then he is shipped off to a foster family and separated from his siblings, and then he is tormented by his classmates, and then he skins a cat, and then his foster mother dies, and then he falls in love, and then he goes to college but must drop out because he loses his foster father's financial support, and then he suffers heartbreak, and then his foster father dies, and then he goes to live with his aunt and is reunited with his siblings, and then his brother dies, and then he marries his cousin, and then she dies, and then he turns to drink, and then he reunites with his first love who is now widowed, and then he goes on a trip, ends up in a

The cast of *Nevermore*.
Sean McLennan

Ed and Fanny: Scott Shepeley and Beth Graham.
Bretta Gerecke

madhouse, and dies.

These two competing logics—the logic of dream and the logic of biography—worked against each other throughout the production. The former appeared in the style of the production—the costumes and props, the music and song, and the ensemble work of the cast—and the latter in the unfolding of the play on stage as a linear-based narrative and performance. In the end, dream beat out biography: the dream became the biography and thus was no longer a dream. The reliance on a linear narrative undermined the attempt to challenge standard biographical and historical tellings. The dream logic remained a surface effect and thus, its effects were lost. Missing were both crucial aspects of the dream logic: the distortion of time and space and the juxtaposition of the dream with reality—the moment of awakening—or in other words, a sense of contrast between the moments of fiction and those of truth. Dreams don't follow the structures imposed by narrative; they have their own non-structure.

In dreams, past and present happen simultaneously; one space easily morphs into another and events occur out of order. But *Nevermore* didn't explore this sense of the dream. Not only did the narrative unfold as a linear sequence of events, the action on stage created a feeling of moving forward in time. The places and times created on the stage (e.g. the site of Poe's birth, his family home, the schoolyard, his foster home, and the site of his death) happened and then passed. The events were kept separate. After each life-event, the stage was wiped clean, with the Chorus taking Poe and the audience into the next moment in time. The repeated image of a bloodstained handkerchief linking together the deaths of Poe's mother, foster mother, cousin, and brother was a reminder of the past.

The image didn't alter or disrupt the space of the stage or the present moment in the narrative. The rhythm moved only forwards, from beginning, to middle, to end.

And as the play moved forward, the dream carried on, and on, and on. Monotony took over.

Perhaps more troubling than dreaming is the moment of awakening—the moment where the dream is still fresh but reality begins to seep in.² The threat (or pleasure) of the dream happens with the dream's invasion into waking life and the appearance of waking life in dreams. The intertwining of dream and reality creates a sense of horror—an uncertainty of what's real and what's not. *Nevermore* remained solely within the safety of a dream that followed a structured narrative. Missing was the invasion of reality and truth. The performance lacked a sense of contrast, contrast between the humour and the horror, the beautiful and the ugly, as well as the world of dreams and the world of reality. With everything larger than life, the pain and horror of both Poe's life and writings were diminished.

Nevermore began as a dream, unfolded as a dream and ended as a dream. Poe, and thus the audience, were never awoken and never truly faced the horror of his life and writings. The costuming and singing was beautiful and fantastical; there were moments where the music sent shivers up the spine; and the actors' strong performance carried the audience away into the world of the play. But the tone and mood remained the same from beginning to end and by the second act, the magic of the performance and design began to unravel. Without a strong contrast between dream and reality, and fact and fiction, the production remained stuck in an imaginary world bound to the conventions of biography. What began as

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.

Heidi Bickis is a doctoral student in Theory-Culture at the University of Alberta in the Department of Sociology.

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. Festival 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*