
Introduction

Robert Lepage is one of the best-known and most productive figures in the contemporary international performing arts; the London *Daily Telegraph* has called him 'probably the planet's most venerated director' (Rees). He is active across performance genres, from original theatre productions to stagings of existing theatre and opera texts, to circus, ballet, film, and large-scale video installation. His creativity is at the centre of a small conglomeration of organisations in his native Québec City, which include Ex Machina, a not-for-profit production company; Robert Lepage Incorporated, a private organisation which manages Lepage's work for hire; and Le Diamant, a production complex opened in 2019 where Lepage will develop and present his work alongside visiting Québécois, Canadian, and international productions (Le Diamant replaces La Caserne Dalhousie, which was Ex Machina's headquarters from 1997 to 2019). Even before the mid-1990s, when Ex Machina was founded, Lepage productions were headline events in the locations where they have played, from London's Barbican Centre to the Théâtre National de Chaillot in Paris to the Brooklyn Academy of Music. In the media and critical discourses around his work, Lepage is celebrated as a star talent whose gifts reside in his capacity to bring together bodies, media, and objects on stage to tell stories in visually ravishing, complex ways that have a strong effect on viewers. His directorial signature is recognised as consistent across the variety of genres in which he works, and central to their value. His success is significant not just for him and the companies who produce his work, but for his stateless nation: his achievements are frequently held up in official discourses as evidence of the vitality of Québec itself. His has always been an autobiographically driven practice, in that his preoccupations and experiences serve as direct inspiration for his original shows and also tend to drive his choice of existing and canonical works. In particular, autobiography drives his solo productions, which treat the relationship

between his personal and creative identities and, taken together, present themselves as a narrative of his ongoing struggles to navigate the boundaries between the individual and the professional.

This series of opening statements is intended to establish some parameters of discussion about the subject of this book, but just as quickly I suggest another central premise: that Lepage is notable for his elusiveness and ambivalence about his work, about his own place in that work (personally and creatively), and about his role as a leading figure in global and Québécois arts. While discussing many other of his creative outputs, this book focuses on what I classify as his early- and mid-career original theatre productions – early being from the mid-1980s through the foundation of Ex Machina in 1994, and mid-career from 1994 to 2008. During this time he resisted taking full credit for this work, representing it both as the product of collaboration and, frequently, as the outcome of creative processes that have a life of their own. During this time the autobiographical nature of the work was also somewhat veiled, often through the use of characters that stood in for Lepage but did not exactly match him. As I will go on to explore, he skilfully uses such intimation of autobiography as a means of simultaneous self-revelation and self-concealment. On a corporate level, while Lepage is at the centre of all his enterprises, his signature is not consistently foregrounded as their defining and uniting quality: Ex Machina describes itself as a 'multidisciplinary company bringing together' a wide variety of creative and technical artists ('Ex Machina'), while Le Diamant is a 'venue for touring and multidisciplinary creation' (Le Diamant 'A Propos de notre mission').ⁱ In interviews Lepage resists the classification of genius that is often suggested to describe him, arguing for example to Stéphan Bureau that he lacks the quality of 'reflexivity' and the ability to 'create connections between everything and to find ideas' that he believes defines a genius, describing himself rather as someone who 'is listening' (125–6; see also Charest 69–73).ⁱⁱ Lepage describes Le Diamant and La Caserne as sites of refuge, where he can create work on his own terms and 'put down [his] suitcases' in the midst of relentless travelling (Le Diamant 'Mot de Robert Lepage'; see also Caux and Gilbert 18).ⁱⁱⁱ

This resistance to being classified is such a consistent position on Lepage's part that it has become definitional. This is a paradoxical stance – defining oneself by avoiding definition – and it is thus not surprising that paradox is a key term in discussions of Lepage's work, as I will go on to explore. I believe that Lepage has cultivated such paradoxical identifications to allow himself to continue to work as a creative artist on his own terms. Resisting definition, eluding the capture of binary positions, and moving restlessly between home ground (Québec) and multiple international locations is a professional/personal strategy which has enabled the growth and perpetuation of his career. Such a position is also 'fundamental' to Ex Machina's approach to creativity, he underlines in *Creating for the Stage*, a book about the company's work:

- i 'un lieu de diffusion et de création multidisciplinaire'. Translation here and throughout the book mine, unless otherwise noted.
- ii 'Un génie, c'est quelqu'un qui, je pense, est capable de faire tous les liens entre toutes les choses et de trouver des idées, par sa seule force de réflexion ... Je suis pas quelqu'un qui réfléchit; je suis quelqu'un qui est à l'écoute.'
- iii 'poser mes valises'.

'It was by refusing frameworks that we established our approach' (Caux and Gilbert 27). The success of these strategies is evident in the striking lack of journalistic and scholarly consensus about Lepage's work, and the disconnected nature of Lepage scholarship. While some assert that Lepage is a unique talent – to the extent, for some commentators, that his work exists outside of classification and context – others call him an imitator and a populariser. He is described both as a banner example of a transnational artist, making work which draws from and mediates between cultures, and as someone whose work cannot be understood outside of the context of Québec. For some, his resistance to being pinned down is the laudable centre of his creativity, while for others it represents an abnegation of responsibility. Methodological approaches to his stage work vary widely. Some studies focus on his approach to creating work as a director and collaborator,¹ and a subset of this work focuses on the intermedial aspects of his creativity.² Other scholars explore the relationship of his work to the Québec context,³ or liken his work to translation.⁴ A further area of Lepage studies explores questions of authorship, representation, and responsibility.⁵

This book draws from many areas of this scattered terrain: the work of all these scholars has helped me to identify the themes and problematics that are the central vectors of my engagement. A central principle of my approach is to join together the exploration of the effects of Lepage's work with discussion of the methods by which that work is made. Another element shaping my approach has been Lepage's own assertions about his creativity and working methods, evidence which invites consideration as well as critical distance. While he is resistant to being defined or contained, Lepage has been clear and consistent in statements about a central objective for his work, which is to keep theatre relevant and available to audiences whose sensibilities are being shaped by recorded and digital media. As he writes in the Foreword to *Creating for the Stage*:

The influence of film and television and the new dramaturgical possibilities offered by multimedia have turned narrative conventions upside down, opening the way to new forms of expression and new languages of staging that have only barely been explored. It is thus not simply the content and form of theatre that are being called into question by *Ex Machina*, but also the role that theatre will play in the new exchange of ideas in the twenty-first century. (7)

His project, as Lepage describes it, is an ongoing experiment in the creation of live performance that engages with new technologies, and with the ways in which these technologies are changing human perception and experience. Another key principle for Lepage is that he focuses more on the process of making theatre than on the signification that results. Terminology used by David Saltz in his phenomenological analysis of theatrical narrative is useful in articulating this approach. Saltz argues that, contrary to conventional understandings, theatre creates more than one fiction; theatre's meaning resides in more than the narrative spectators understand to have been enacted on stage, and in more than any message spectators might take away. What happens live on stage – the action, the real-life event – is the 'infiction' in Saltz's formulation; infictions are 'prescriptions to imagine'. The outfiction is the 'narrative content that we extract from the performance event' (214). For Lepage, the

infiction has always been more important than the outfiction. When he talks about how he makes his performances, the discussion focuses on playing, creativity, and lack of structure. He is very attuned to reception – to audiences' participatory role in the theatre event – but resists identifying any message that his work might convey: 'There's no moral', he said in an important 1994 interview. 'It's just putting people into a bath of sensations and ideas and emotions. And then they come out of it and do what they want with it' (Bunzli, 'Geography' 97). The interest for him is not the ideas or facts that an audience member might take away from his productions, but the creation of performances that crystallise and reflect back the particular way in which contemporary spectators experience the world. There are limitations to this approach: the danger of universalising statements about the place of technology in human experience, given inequities of access (the so-called Digital Divide); the totality of Lepage's abnegation of control over signification (surely what he puts into his baths of sensation, ideas, and emotions has an effect on what audiences take out of them?); and, following on from the previous point, the relationship of the subject matter and themes of his performances to their real-world contexts – that is, questions of cultural ownership and appropriation. But, by identifying a focus on infiction, on spectatorship, and on the emulation of a contemporary, mediated experience of navigating the world we come closer to an articulation of Lepage's terms of engagement and of the goals of his ongoing creative project. A final, key element is affect. Lepage's is a practice that foregrounds phenomenological effects over semiotic meanings: people go to the theatre 'to feel', he has said (qtd in Winters).

The ambivalence of the scholarship on Lepage – the extent to which scholars have struggled to classify his approach – is evident in the level of debate about whether his work is modern or postmodern, original or derivative. Duška Radosavljević characterises Lepage as a populariser, in the vein of Max Reinhardt, and paints this in a positive light: 'a theatrical and cinematic visionary whose work was a continuation of the previously established traditions, but hugely inspirational in its spectacular effect and entirely refreshing as part of the theatrical mainstream' (*Theatre-Making* 9). Greg Giesekam argues, in a more critical vein, that Lepage's strategies to incorporate recorded media into his work 'have been anticipated in the work of other practitioners' and that 'there is little sense of the sustained exploration of the broader implications of using film or video on the stage found in their work' (244). For Steve Dixon, while Lepage's work is 'stylistically postmodern and eclectic', it is firmly linked to 'the avant-garde and the modernists of the past' through 'his pioneering technological aesthetics, his formalist experiments with time and space, and his existential and spiritual concerns', as well as by 'drawing upon myths and grand narratives' (514). Dixon thus proposes Lepage as a bridging figure creating works that, while they might reflect the surface-level heterogeneity of postmodern cultural expression, are underlain by a modernist quest to make sense of and ground himself within his immediate experience and broader life-world, and by a desire to 're-ignite theatre for a new generation of audiences' (*ibid.*).

This conception of Lepage as a figure hovering between modern and postmodern – between the attempt to 'expose the truth or reality underneath representation' and the employment of 'representation *about* representation ... quotation as montage'

(Schneider 293, emphasis in original) – is a productive one that at once recognises Lepage’s indeterminacy but does not allow him to slip out of discursive sight. It’s something that Andy Lavender is getting at in his description of Lepage’s investment in ‘a pervasive sense of the “truth” of change’ (148), as is Izabella Pluta’s identification of a ‘Lepagean *aesthetic of movement*’ that is ‘based on *transformation*, a key process in his work’ (192, emphases in original). Marvin Carlson and Janelle Reinelt identify the openness of Lepage’s work to multiple interpretations and points of entry as one of its defining and positive traits, in that his productions present meaning as contingent and promote reflexive awareness among spectators of their own ability to change their lives and the world around them (189–90). In his discussion of Lepage’s 1995 film *Le Confessionnal*, Bill Marshall describes Lothaire Bluteau’s performance as the central character Pierre as ‘combin[ing] passivity and transformation: he is not a political actor ... but one who sees and changes’ (310) – a description that could as easily describe Lepage as Pierre. For the theatre critic Robert Lévesque, one of Lepage’s earliest and most acute commentators, the incapacity to pin down Lepage’s project registers as frustration:

It’s hard to talk about an artist whose shows are so famous and whose name is synonymous with success ... *Circulations*, *Vinci*, *The Dragon’s Trilogy*, *Needles and Opium* are good shows, but I wonder as I follow him, seeing since *Tectonic Plates* these frescos that last for hours, this ‘work in progress’ approach that he abuses: What does he mean, what is he telling us, what is this world that he shakes up like an air traffic controller? (*Liberté* 59)^{iv}

What is Lepage trying to say? Is the best response to this what Lavender, Pluta, Carlson and Reinelt, and Marshall suggest: that Lepage’s subject matter is the pervasiveness of change and the potential of transformation, to which he is an observer and a participant, evoking these phenomena in his work while not necessarily offering a comment on them? I believe this is a productive place to start, and I add to these observations that what Lepage communicates through his stage productions functions as much on the level of affect as it does through semiotic signification. As his statement above to Winters suggests, his signature does not work entirely on the level of the intellectual and thematic, and it is for this reason that he has been periodically discredited as being more preoccupied with scenography and stage trickery than ideas and arguments (see Billington ‘Megaton’, ‘Lipsynch’, ‘Blue Dragon’; Lévesque, ‘Trucs pour jouer’; Nightingale, ‘Threads’). His prioritisation of affect and his insistence on seeing theatrical production as a form of play also contributes to his being perennially infantilised by commentators, as with the characterisation of him as a wunderkind well into his forties and fifties (see CBC Arts; Waugh 453). Beyond asking, as Lévesque does, what the work is about, I believe we need to ask how it works – and what this

iv ‘Il est difficile de parler d’un artiste dont les spectacles sont si renommés et dont le nom est synonyme de réussite ... *Circulations*, *Vinci*, *La Trilogie des dragons*, *Les Aiguilles et l’Opium* sont de bons spectacles, mais je me demande, à le suivre, à voir depuis *Les Plaques tectoniques* ses fresques qui durent des heures, ces *work in progress* dont il abuse: que veut-il dire, que raconte-t-il, quel est ce monde qu’il agit comme un contrôleur aérien?’

combination of method and subject matter communicates about Lepage's perspective, and about the way many of us live now.

It is the contention of this book that Lepage's central, ongoing contribution to contemporary performance practices is his creation of productions that reflect spectators' privileged experiences of navigating contemporary globalisation. A further contention is that these productions reflect Lepage's own experience and render him a paradigmatic figure in the contemporary, globalised performing arts. I go on to further explore the concept and processes of globalisation in the following chapter, and as a working definition offer that of Malcolm Waters: globalisation is 'a social process in which the constraints of geography on economic, political, social, and cultural arrangements recede, in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding and in which people act accordingly' (5). Globalisation is a complex and much-debated phenomenon that is far from ideologically neutral. It is all about the breaking of boundaries – the circulation of goods, capital (in all its forms), bodies, ideas, and feelings around the world both literally and virtually at speeds unprecedented in human history. It is celebrated as a set of processes that are rendering the world and its communities more interconnected, creating a greater awareness of this connectedness, and offering unprecedented opportunities for contact with cultures and experiences other than one's own. 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 populations. The increased movement of resources, ideas, and bodies under the conditions of globalisation is raising complex questions about responsibilities, affiliations, and ownership. Globalisation is having a profound effect on many creative practices, including theatre: it enables travel, contact, and exchange that reshapes understandings of differences and similarities between cultures and individuals; allows artists access to new stimuli and source material; and broadens the expectations and experiences of audiences. Again, however, such benefits are not available to all; they are an élite cadre of artists whose work circulates in the international network of festivals and venues which globalisation has fostered. The processes of globalisation are raising new challenges for theatre artists as they attempt to navigate questions of representation, intellectual and creative property, responsibility to others, intermediality, and embodiment through their practices. The question of how to maintain creative autonomy and the capacity for social and political critique has become a pressing concern for artists working within the arguably totalising conditions of global neoliberal capital.

Born in 1957, Lepage came of age in an era in which the flows of globalisation were increasingly affecting human experience and perceptions. All aspects of his career and creative practice have been shaped by globalisation: it is a primary life-world for him. The conditions of globalisation determine his lived reality, and the circumstances of his creativity and productivity frequently appear in his productions as subject matter and theme, and shape his formal approach. We see this reflected in his work in its consistent representation of travel and the experience of being between places, and in the repeated image of him suspended in mid-air on book covers and in promotional images (figure 0.1). This emphasis on motion and the state of betweenness is also reflected in his foregrounding of the process of making work as



0.1 Robert Lepage in *Needles and Opium* (original version).

intrinsic to – perhaps even definitional of – its meanings. My goal here is to articulate globalisation not just as a complex and evolving set of processes but also as an affect, one that live performance has a particular capacity to produce. Lepage produces this affect by transposing cinematic techniques to live performance contexts, giving spectators the sensation of what John Tomlinson has named ‘the paradigmatic experience of global modernity for most people ... staying in one place but experiencing the “dis-placement” that global modernity *brings to [us]*’ (*Globalisation and Culture* 9, emphasis in original). Viewing Lepage’s productions, at their most accomplished, offers this travelling-without-moving affect – the impression of space contracting and a familiar relationship between space and time being destabilised. He creates these effects by imbuing bodies and objects on stage with multiple significations which converge at key points: spectators experience a pleasing rush of sensations as they are challenged to hold onto and make sense of this profusion of signification. Making meaning of such moments feels *meaningful*, in the sense of being affectively rich (I go on in the chapters that follow to further parse this dual sense of ‘meaning’). Again, Lepage’s focus is the production of this affect by inviting engagement with the complexity of what is on stage, far more than with the significations that result from this engagement. I call this technique spatial montage, a terminology I explore in Chapters 3 and 4, which treat Lepage’s transposition of cinematic techniques to the stage. Other scholars have drawn attention to this technique: James Reynolds, for example, calls it ‘semiotic condensation’ – moments on stage when an ‘accumulation of meanings reaches saturation point’ and ‘becomes overwhelming and affective’ (*Revolutions* 93). My argument, building on this, is that this sense of wonder stems from the chain of connections between what viewers see, the affect that comes from processing this, and their experiences of contemporary life, in which perceptions of the relationship between space and time are frequently destabilised and re-aligned.

These conceptualisations of semiotic condensation and spatial montage build on

and advance the key concept of *décalage* offered by James Bunzli in a 1999 article analysing Lepage's creative practice.⁶ Drawing on Jeanne Bovet's earlier use of the term to explore Lepage's work, Bunzli defines *décalage* (French for 'gap' and part of the phrase '*décalage horaire*', or jet lag) as 'a concept that combines autobiography, coincidence, and paradox, and the performance moment' ('Geography' 84). The term resonates with Lepage's identity as a globetrotter: in order to maintain multiple international contracts, he travels very frequently and consistently navigates spatial and temporal displacement. Indeed, as Bunzli argues, part of the defining quality of Lepage's work is how it evokes such displacement in subject matter, form, and affect.

For Robert Lepage, *décalage* is the main impulse, the principle [sic] mode of working, and a major result of his productions, both onstage and in the audience. It is an acknowledgment of gaps, indeterminacies; it is a way of working that trades on impulse, intuition, and broad creative freedom; it results in a theatre of simultaneity and juxtaposition in which actor, image, 'text', and audience are brought into a dialogue, a questioning, and an active co-constitutive role. (89)

Bunzli represents Lepage's career as an ongoing attempt to establish and maintain working conditions in which he can enjoy 'the freedom to work in whatever way he sees fit' (82). A central element of this way of working, which Lepage borrowed from formative years working with the Québec-based Théâtre Repère, is resistance to the concept of creative work ever being complete – the suggestion that 'process *is* product' (89, emphasis in original). The 'paradox and simultaneity' inherent in such an asserted equivalence 'are key engines in the practice of *décalage*', Bunzli argues (*ibid.*). Bunzli traces the first appearance of the concept of *décalage* to Lepage's early solo production *Vinci*, in which a character names things about Leonardo da Vinci that cause a 'strange feeling of *décalage*', including the fact that Leonardo 'could not bear ... human suffering, and yet he invented war machines' (qtd in Bunzli 84). Other perceived paradoxes have been jumping-off points for Lepage's work: *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* grew out of his perception of contemporary Hiroshima as being full of sensuality, which was unexpected, given its associations with mass destruction (see MacAlpine 136); and *The Blue Dragon* is set in 'the effervescent paradox that is modern China' (Ex Machina "The Blue Dragon"). The concept of paradox is clearly a key mode of thought for Lepage that allows him to keep multiple possibilities of meaning and relationship in play; it promotes complexity.

Such an account prompts questions, however, about representational, authorial, and corporate responsibility: pushed beyond its breaking point, a paradox becomes a contradiction. It is possible to argue that da Vinci's creation of war machines contradicted his otherwise pacifist ethics, and to use this as a basis to explore the question of whether the artist has an ethical responsibility towards the ways in which their creations are put to use. *River Ota*'s focus on paradox, in the view of critic Paul Taylor, resulted in a piece which offered 'a dream world that cannot be contradicted rather than an argument that can' and which raised 'alarming' questions about Lepage's apparent lack of misgiving about making art out of atrocity ('Paradox'). Among the aspects of contemporary Chinese society that feature in *The Blue Dragon* are women's reproductive rights, the rapid transformation of the country's urban centres

in preparation for global events such as the Beijing Olympics, marketisation, and art-forgery rings. While Melissa Poll finds the production's representation of China 'nuanced' (*Scenographic* 159), critic Peter Crawley argues that, by offering up various phenomena as evidence of the paradoxicality of today's China without exploring them in depth, *The Blue Dragon* 'reduce[s] China to reassuring preconceptions'.

And what of these gaps and indeterminacies that Lepage acknowledges through his way of working: does he skip over them, or examine what contents and meaning may already be located there? Gaps are not necessarily entirely empty; the indeterminate may not always remain so. Valorising incompleteness, keeping things in motion, and committing to freedom above all else are also arguably strategies that allow Lepage to avoid acknowledging relationships to material, to collaborators, and to systems of identification and classification in which he is inevitably implicated. He frequently describes his productions as emerging independently and on their own terms: 'we often have the feeling,' he says in *Creating for the Stage*, 'that the play in its final form exists even before we begin to work' (Caux and Gilbert 31; see also 47, 51). Jen Harvie is critical of what she characterises as the ersatz postmodernism of Lepage's works which 'trivialise cultural specificity, both geographical and historical ... indulge the vague and nostalgic instead of documenting and interrogating the historically specific; and ... prioritise pleasure at the expense of achieving critique, deconstructive or otherwise' ('Robert Lepage' 229). In Ric Knowles's view, Lepage's foregrounding of process and audience response 'can tend simply to displace [Ex Machina]'s creative responsibilities for meaning production onto audiences with something resembling the familiar modernist shrug: my name is Robert Lepage, and I don't know what it's about' (*Reading* 44).

However seductive the assertion that process and product have the same value, this commitment to 'relentless indeterminacy' (Bunzli, 'Geography' 84) has also had significant material implications for producers, festival directors, and spectators, particularly in Lepage's mid-career period. Creating productions as they toured internationally over the span of many years sometimes resulted in early performances that were chaotic, messy, and incoherent. As I explore in Chapter 5, Lepage and Ex Machina's argument that this is a necessary part of the process and that audience feedback helps them understand and grow the work was hard to square with the prestige berths in international festivals in which these performances were presented, and the high ticket prices that came with this. Agreeing with Bunzli, then, that a defining aspect of Lepage's career has been the pursuit of conditions in which he can work on his own terms, the chapters that follow explore his ongoing efforts to do so, keeping in play the innovations in creative and production strategies that have resulted, as well as the ways in which Lepage's insistence on freedom affects those he works with and those who view his productions. While focused on Lepage, and specifically on his early- and mid-career original productions, this study treats themes and problematics that resonate with those of other artists and companies working today in the field of globalised performing arts: the relationship of globalisation to personal and national identities; the role of authorial signature in collaborative work; how artists reflect technological evolution and changes in human perception through their work; and the relationship between creativity and commodity under the conditions of neoliberal

capital. By exploring these themes I intend to open up understanding of the ways in which globalisation is affecting early twenty-first-century theatrical practices and industries more broadly, while identifying those aspects of his practice and experience that are particular to Lepage.

The next two chapters of the book are organised around key points of tension in the processes of globalisation and explore the two early-career original productions that established Lepage's reputation. These include, first, the relationship of the local to the global, which I explore in Chapter 1 through discussion of the breakthrough group-created piece, *The Dragon's Trilogy*, which toured from 1985 to 1992. Chapter 2 examines the place of individual subjectivity within global processes and flows, and focuses on Lepage's first major solo production, *Vinci* (1986–87). The following two chapters focus on Lepage's creative methodology, starting from the premise that modes of human perception and of creative production exist in dialectical relationship to each other, and, further, from Lev Manovich's assertion that 'cinematic modes of perception, of connecting time and space, of representing human memory, thinking, and emotion' underlie late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century ways of seeing the world (86). In Chapter 3 I introduce the cinematic paradigm through which I read Lepage's approach to dramaturgical construction and explore his increasingly adventurous use of techniques of spatial montage in works created in the late 1980s and 1990s: *Tectonic Plates*, *Polygraph*, and *Needles and Opium*. Chapter 4 explores the effects of these cinematic techniques, calling on affect theory and Jacques Rancière's theorisation of spectatorship, and delves into debates about rights of representation and cultural objectification in Lepage's work, with a particular focus on *River Ota*. In Chapter 5 I focus on Lepage and his collaborators' moves to adapt their producing structures in the context of the global performing arts festival network, drawing on Scott Lash and Celia Lury's analysis of the role of branding in the global culture industries (2007). Chapter 6 broaches questions of legacy and explores the ways in which *Ex Machina* both works within and attempts to withstand the neoliberal values of individualism, entrepreneurialism, and resistance to external regulation.

Throughout this study, Lepage himself appears and disappears as a central focus: he is the driver of all the creative practices discussed here; the source of much of the material treated in his productions, often their identified subject, and sometimes their performer; and the not-entirely-willing spokesperson for a particular approach to theatrical creation. Throughout, we see him resisting capture and classification in any number of discursive and organisational frameworks: national, gendered/sexual, professional/economic/neoliberal. In Chapter 7, as a coda, I offer four snapshots of Lepage in which, by design or by circumstance, he emerged from between layers of discourse and found himself exposed: three are moments of staging from his solo productions, while another is a period of controversy in the summer of 2018, when two of Lepage's productions, *Slàv* and *Kanata*, prompted interrelated and escalating debates about representation and cultural appropriation. All leave questions open about where Lepage and his work may head in the years to come.

In the remainder of this introduction I locate myself in this study and further introduce my methodological approach; place Lepage's original productions in the larger context of his creative work; offer an overview of existing research on Lepage;

and consider the contemporary reconceptualisation of the role of theatrical director and where Lepage fits within this, with specific attention to the evolution of the director-function in Québec.

My approach and methodology

My engagement with Lepage's work began in 1990, when I saw Théâtre Repère's production of *Tectonic Plates* at the Royal National Theatre in London, where I was living after graduating from university in California. I connected with the piece on the level of content – its story of young people drifting around Europe in search of inspiration and connection resonated with my own – but I was also struck by its form. So many of its elements were new to me and captivating, from its use of multiple languages (including semaphore signs) to convey meaning, to its multi-dimensional approach to scenography: chairs hanging from the flies of the Cottesloe Theatre formed part of the stage picture as I looked down from the balcony, and I'd never seen a show before in which actors walked through and performed whole scenes in a pool of water.⁷ All of this created an atmosphere in which bodies and objects were constantly changing and transforming. A particular point of fascination was Lepage's cross-dressed performance as Jennifer McMann (figure 0.2): he played with subtlety and left the audience to fill in the emotional subtext, as I now know is his signature approach to acting. When I returned home to the United States, I wrote to Repère and asked them to send me anything that had been written about the company: a thin, letter-sized manilla envelope arrived, holding about twenty photocopied pages and a brief note from an administrator. I was surprised both that the company would respond to a random inquiry from a recent graduate and that so little had been written about work that seemed so important. In the summer of 1992, as I built a career as a theatre critic, I interviewed Lepage in advance of a run of his production *Needles and Opium* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

This began a productive artist–journalist relationship that resulted in me shadowing the creation of *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* from 1994 to 1996 and editing the production playscript for publication by Methuen. This editorial process involved working with assistant director Bruno Bazin and producer Michel Bernatchez to videotape and transcribe successive nights of performances at the 1996 Vienna Festival – at which the production was a headline event – because very little of the text was written down. I was also called on to update the production's English-language surtitles, because significant amounts of material changed in the days before and during the Vienna run. This was a disorienting and instructive experience, exposing a disconnect between the acclaim enjoyed by Lepage and *Ex Machina* and the playful, aleatory, and sometimes stressful behind-the-scenes realities. I wrote considerable thick description of staging and scenography in the playscript and was aware of the weight of this responsibility: these elements were central to the production's meaning-making but would not be captured in a script that included only spoken dialogue.



0.2 Robert Lepage as Jennifer McMann in *Tectonic Plates*.

Complex questions of authorship and authority circulated around this publishing process: Lepage is listed as one of thirteen authors in the playscript, and yet the production is widely referred to as the product of his singular vision and imagination. While the version we documented was intended to represent the culmination of the production's development, in fact *River Ota* entered another development phase in 1997, resulting in a revised staging that its creators came to consider the production's definitive version (I explore this process further in Chapter 5).

A proposed plan for me to publish a behind-the-scenes account of the making of *River Ota* never saw fruition, for a number of reasons, including the rightful scepticism of a number of the production's collaborators, who had reservations about a young Anglophone's capacity to capture their way of working (the rehearsal process was mostly conducted in Québécois French, which at that point I struggled to understand). Their concerns, as I understood them, went beyond language: the larger question was how anyone could perceive and describe all the elements, decisions, and

feelings in a creative process that spanned four years and grew to a production that was over seven hours long. I understand now that I was grappling for a methodology to document the making of theatre and performance which has since emerged as the field of rehearsal studies through the pioneering work of Gay McAuley (*Not Magic*, 'Emerging'), and which is also being explored through practices of embedded criticism, in which visitors (journalists, academics, artists, and/or students) observe rehearsal-room activities and write about them, usually in the serial form of a blog (see Costa 'The Critic as Insider'; Fricker 'Going Inside'; I further discuss the potentials of embedded criticism vis-à-vis Lepage's work in Chapter 5). The desire to make use of the knowledge, research, and questions I'd amassed about Lepage led me to the PhD programme in Drama and Theatre Studies at Trinity College, Dublin. My dissertation read a number of Lepage's early- and mid-career productions through post-colonial and psychoanalytic theory, exploring the relationship of his indeterminate personal identity to Québec's unresolved statehood. This volume draws on and is intended to contribute to the burgeoning application of theories of globalisation to theatre and performance practices, and also draws on theoretical and methodological approaches from cinema, affect, and queer studies.

An important methodological point – which connects to the larger theme of elusiveness I've established – is the process-based, iterative nature of Lepage's creativity. Calling on his training in collaborative creation (which I discuss in the following pages), Lepage built his early career and reputation through productions developed in successive iterations, in concert with audience feedback. This presents a challenge to researchers, particularly given that the scripts of early productions were not published. Visits to the Ex Machina archive (which has grown, since I first received that envelope with twenty pages in it, to a sophisticated multi-media resource with dedicated staff) allowed me to gather considerable documentation about these early- and mid-career productions, including reviews and other journalistic accounts; photographs and videos; and, in some instances, unpublished scripts.⁸ I also call on live viewing of a number of the productions I write about here (*Tectonic Plates*, *Needles and Opium* [both versions], *Elsinore*, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, *Geometry of Miracles*, *Zulu Time*, *The Dragon's Trilogy* [revival version], *The Far Side of the Moon*, *The Andersen Project*, *Lipsynch*, *The Blue Dragon*, *Playing Cards: Spades and Hearts*, and 887), and note my points of reference to each production which I discuss. My understanding of the productions is thus a result of reading and viewing all these materials with particular attention to the ways in which the productions developed and changed over time. Journalistic reviews of productions at various points on their trajectory formed an important part of this research process: while a review of a production of course reflects one person's perception, reading a number of reviews against each other offers insight into how significations may be differently understood in different contexts of presentation and reception. Journalistic sources such as interviews and preview articles are further useful in charting the ways in which Lepage frames his practices: he is skilful in suggesting ways of reading his work and shaping his public persona through engagement with the media, as I explore in particular in Chapter 5. My embrace of journalistic sources doubtless reflects my own professional affiliations: in the years during and since my doctoral studies I have continued to work as a

journalistic theatre critic as well as an academic, and occasionally engage with Lepage in that context (see Fricker 'Robert Lepage's show 887').

My methodology thus takes on board the iteration-based nature of Lepage's method, in that I consider productions at various points in their development, as well as explore the implications of the work-in-progress model for the touring and reception of Lepage's shows. It is also important to underline at this point that while Lepage's creative signature is at the centre of his production and touring enterprise, he always works with others – performers, designers, dramaturgs, technicians, and producers – and resists ownership of his work, depicting it as collaborative, self-generating, and created largely via spectator interpretation. Part of my project here is to unpack Lepage's complex relationship to questions of authorship, while honouring the work of the many others who contributed to the productions discussed here.

Lepage's original stage productions in context

While making some reference to productions and professional developments since 2008, my discussion in this book focuses on Lepage's original works created before that time, because, in my view, an understanding of his contribution to theatre necessitates significant consideration of his early- and mid-career original stage productions, and because the scholarship as of yet lacks such an account bringing together formal, contextual, and reception-based approaches. It is important to underline that since the beginning of his career Lepage has directed existing works (plays and operas), as well as created original productions, and that his staging of canonical texts in particular helped to establish and extend his reputation. Since the founding of Ex Machina in 1994 the variety of his creative work has continued to expand to include dance, circus, and multimedia/technology-led forms (see Reynolds, *Revolutions* 3–4). I here provide a brief overview of his productions of existing texts and the way in which he and his collaborators have developed professional structures to allow him to work on in a variety of creative modes on self-determined terms.⁹ Following the success of early original productions, including *The Dragon's Trilogy* and *Vinci*, Lepage accepted invitations to direct Shakespeare (*Le Songe d'une nuit d'été*, 1988) and Brecht (*La vie de Galilée*, 1989) at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, a leading Montréal theatre. These productions advanced Lepage's career by associating him with the cultural capital which those texts and that institution bring with them. Over the subsequent decade he moved back and forth between directing existing plays at mainstream theatres and creating and touring original productions. Between 1992 and 1995 he focused in particular – indeed, somewhat obsessively – on Shakespeare, directing twelve productions of Shakespeare's plays or works derived from them. These included *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the National Theatre in London in 1992 (making him the first North American to direct Shakespeare at that institution); the Shakespeare Cycle, three plays (*Coriolan*, *Macbeth*, and *La Tempête*) translated and adapted by Michel Garneau (touring from 1992 to 1994); and *Elseneur/Elsinore*, a solo adaptation of *Hamlet* that was one of

Ex Machina's inaugural productions and toured internationally from 1995 to 1997. He gained 'notoriety as a radical director of Shakespeare' (Reynolds, *Revolutions* 14) for his approach, which always involved a significant intervention or hook – from the different levels of Québécois French in the Shakespeare Cycle; to the setting of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in an on-stage mud pit; to the treatment of Shakespeare's text as but one element of *Elsinore*'s elaborate stagecraft. International opportunities to engage with Shakespeare included *Shakespeare's Rapid Eye Movement*, a collage of Shakespeare texts about dreams, at the Bayerisches Staatsschauspiel in Munich in 1993; and several productions at the Tokyo Globe Theatre (*Macbeth* and *The Tempest* in Japanese in 1993; the Michael Nyman-composed *Tempest* song cycle *Noises, Sounds, and Sweet Airs* in 1994). This intense concentration on Shakespeare was instructive for Lepage, Reynolds maintains, increasing his appreciation for complex texts that 'impose dynamic viewing' (*Revolutions* 15). In the 1992 programme for the Shakespeare Cycle, Lepage wrote that Shakespeare's plays are 'like sculptures, are multidimensional, and must be replayed ... until every possible facet is discovered' (Théâtre Repère 'Lepage, Repère'). This focused engagement with Shakespeare ended abruptly in 1995, which is likely due to difficult experiences around *Elsinore*, including a devastatingly negative review by Robert Lévesque and the cancellation of an entire run of the show at the 1996 Edinburgh International Festival.¹⁰ Save a 1998 French-language production of *La Tempête* (co-produced by Ex Machina, two Québec City theatres, and the National Arts Centre in Ottawa), Lepage would not engage with Shakespeare again until 2011, when he again directed *La Tempête* in French, this time in collaboration with the Huron-Wendat nation on the Wendake reserve outside of Québec City.

Lepage's other notable productions of classic texts include a 1994 staging of Strindberg's *Ett Drömspel* at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, and a 1998 Ex Machina–Royal Dramatic Theatre co-production of Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina*, which Ex Machina subsequently revived in 2004 in a Spanish-language version co-produced with several theatres and festivals. Lepage's first foray into opera was a well-received 1992 double-bill of Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Schönberg's *Erwartung*, co-produced by the Canadian Opera Company and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. He has directed opera increasingly frequently in his mid- and mature-career periods, in Ex Machina co-productions with leading institutions including the Opéra National de Paris, London's Royal Opera House, the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, and the Metropolitan Opera in New York. In the only volume-length study to date about Lepage's productions of extant texts, Melissa Poll argues that, despite Lepage's claims that there is no 'definitive process shaping his work' (*Scenographic* 23), he has a consistent approach, characterised by the use of 'scenography to reinvigorate and reconfigure existing works' (2).¹¹ This approach starts with the identification of a specific time and place as the 'interpretive axis' (24) around which he shapes the production; Poll calls this 'historical-spatial mapping' (3). Lepage's 1999 staging of *The Damnation of Faust*, for example, was inspired by 'the lush, romantic aesthetic' of the mid-1800s (25), when Berlioz wrote the piece, as well as by emergent nineteenth-century technologies, including photography and film (25–6). Building on such conceptual frameworks, Lepage then leads his design team in the creation of mobile scenography and encourages the cast to

develop embodied, physical scores for their performances (3): 'Lepage's strategy for adapting an extant text relies on the ways in which the set, sound, performers' bodies and text interrelate' (23). Through her research, which included rehearsal observation of Lepage's productions of *Siegfried* (2011) and *Götterdämmerung* (2012) at the Metropolitan Opera, Poll found that Lepage casts performers 'for their ability to author unique physical texts that are incorporated into the performance', and refers to these physical texts or scores as 'co-determined' by the performer and Lepage (33). She expresses concern that credit for the performers' contributions, which she classes as authorship, 'is often absent from Ex Machina's production materials' (ibid.) – a line of questioning that has arisen frequently around Lepage's work and which I address in Chapter 6 of this book.

In the early phase of his career, it was largely the case that Lepage created original productions for his own company (understanding Théâtre Repère as such) and directed extant texts for other organisations. A key reason for forming Ex Machina, as Reynolds argues in *Robert Lepage/Ex Machina: Revolutions in Theatrical Space*, was to create a producing structure that could consolidate these activities. Institutional theatre systems, involving set rehearsal periods and timelines and with design processes happening alongside but separate from performer rehearsals, are not conducive to Lepage's preferred way of creating. At the same time, he is drawn to larger institutions: Reynolds recounts a formative encounter between Lepage and the revered Québécois playwright/director Jean-Pierre Ronfard while Lepage was still in theatre school. When the younger man asked Ronfard why he worked at major institutions when he was known as an experimentalist, Ronfard replied, as Lepage recalls, 'what is the use of [experiment] if you don't try and bring it into the mainstream?' (qtd in *Revolutions* 69). Lepage took Ronfard's words on board, making Ex Machina the conduit through which his particular way of working intersects with existing theatres and opera companies. Since its founding Ex Machina has co-produced all of Lepage's theatre and opera work: 'it has to happen in his house, with his conditions, with his crew, and costs and everything that goes with it', explains his frequent collaborator, dramaturg Peder Bjrman (qtd *Revolutions* 34). For the 2018 co-production of *Coriolanus*, for example, the Stratford Festival altered its repertory rehearsal system so that members of the acting company could travel to Québec City for two workshops and so that Lepage could rehearse the show in Stratford in concentrated blocks of time – a collaboration that took years of advance preparation and scheduling (*Revolutions* 70). As Reynolds argues and I further explore in Chapter 6, through such activity Lepage and Ex Machina destabilise and expand the conventions of mainstream theatrical production.

Lepage scholarship: an overview

As this account already suggests, scholarship about Lepage's work has been shaped by his particular approach to creativity. His own accounts of his life and creative

work are important primary sources: in these he resists articulating a methodology, gravitating rather towards an interview format mingling accounts of his personal/professional experience and influences, commentary about Québec, and his observations of contemporary culture. Rémy Charest's book of interviews, *Quelques Zones de liberté* (1995, published in English in 1997 as *Connecting Flights*), covers Lepage's early career up to the advent of *Ex Machina*, while *Stéphan Bureau rencontre Robert Lepage* brings the narrative up to date at that point (2008) while delving deeper into Lepage's troubled childhood and adolescence.¹² Partly in response to the blossoming of scholarship about Lepage's work, *Ex Machina* published *Chantiers d'écriture scénique* (2007, published in English in 2009 as *Creating for the Stage*), an articulation from within the company of Lepage's approach to creativity.¹³ He has also given a number of extended interviews published in scholarly anthologies (for example, McAlpine in Delgado and Heritage; Innes in Shetsova and Innes) in which he expounds on his inspirations and influences. Given his work-in-progress approach, rehearsal-room observation is a key tool for researchers, and Lepage welcomes such engagement to the extent that the position of observer has become an institutionalised part of *Ex Machina*'s practice, informing work by many scholars, including myself.¹⁴

An early strain of scholarship that emerged in the 1990s focused on Lepage's creative methodology and adopted the position (following Lepage's lead) that it is so *sui generis* as to exist largely outside of other practices and cultural/social contexts; the work of Aleksandar Dundjerović falls into this category. While breaking ground as the first edited collection about Lepage's work, James I. Donohoe Jr. and Jane Koustas's *Theater sans frontières: Essays on the Dramatic Universe of Robert Lepage* extended this tendency to represent Lepage's creativity as without precedent and context, as with the unproblematised assertion in their introduction that Lepage 'proposes theater beyond translation' that 'brings the audience to a space outside geography and cultural identity' (2). While a number of the essays in Donohoe and Koustas's book made a significant contribution to the emerging field, its mingling together of numerous theoretical and methodological approaches and discussions of various aspects of Lepage's creativity – original stage productions, opera, productions of Shakespeare, and film – with no internal organisation or meta-narration (the chapters appear in alphabetical order by their author's last name) contribute to the impression of Lepage studies being propelled by the chaos that Lepage so frequently remarks is central to his creative process.

Perhaps the most consistent seam of research on Lepage's work is that which focuses on his directorial approach, exploring the ways in which direction functions as a form of authorship. As I discuss further below, Irène Roy published the earliest substantive study of Lepage's theatre in 1993. Using an approach based in semiotics and linguistics, she argues that Lepage's work makes an important contribution to 'the evolution of contemporary theatricality' by privileging objects over words (12).^v Lepage's stagings, Roy argues, open up a gap between what is presented and how to interpret it (which she likens to the Saussurean distance between *langue* and *parole*); the 'particular and dynamic agency of this variability [has the capacity] to engender

v 'l'évolution de la théâtralité contemporaine'.

something new' (61).^{vi} Chantal Hébert and Irène Perelli-Contos have authored numerous publications (separately and together) exploring Lepage's contributions to a Québec tradition of *écriture scénique* (writing in space), while Dundjerović's several books and numerous articles focus on Lepage's creative approach. Doubtless because it is based on a well-known textual source, the *Hamlet* adaptation *Elsinore* has received more scholarly scrutiny than many other of Lepage's productions, including compelling accounts by M.J. Kidnie, Ric Knowles ('From Dream'), and Andy Lavender. A subset of the research on Lepage's direction-as-authorship focuses on intermediality. Ludovic Fouquet's book-length study, *The Visual Laboratory of Robert Lepage*, focuses on the adaptation and emulation of technological effects in Lepage's work, as do Dixon and Giesekam's studies already quoted. Dixon usefully suggests a historical continuum between Lepage's work and that of past stage innovators, including Svoboda and Piscator, while Giesekam places Lepage's work in dialogue with that of the Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment, and Station House Opera, among others. Piotr Woycicki persuasively argues for Lepage's place among stage directors and companies working in a post-cinematic mode, a line of thinking that dovetails with my own theorisation of spatial montage, while Pluta focuses on the relationship of the actor's body to technology in *The Andersen Project*, and Aristita I. Albacan's volume looks at the solo shows in particular.

Having made a significant contribution to studies exploring questions around responsibility, authorship, and body-object relationships in Lepage's stage work, Reynolds more recently turned to theorising Lepage's stagings of global mobility ('Hypermobility'), and with his volume *Robert Lepage/Ex Machina: Revolutions in Theatrical Space*, already mentioned above, provides an overview of Lepage's career from both creative and producing/business perspectives that was previously lacking in the scholarship. While the scope of my work here does not allow for a close consideration of Lepage's original stage works from 2008 onwards, Reynolds's volume covers this time period and includes a particularly detailed rehearsal-room observation of *Hearts* (2013), part of the four-part *Playing Cards* series of original productions that, at the time of writing, remains incomplete (see Chapter 6). Both Reynolds and Poll, in their volumes on Lepage's productions of existing plays and operas, draw attention to an important area of Lepage's practice that has emerged in the mature period of his career: revising and restaging his original works such as *The Dragon's Trilogy* and *Needles and Opium*. Poll calls these updated productions 'auto-adaptations' (151–80), while Reynolds adopts Lepage's own terminology and refers to them as 'upgrades' (*Revolutions*, 75–95).

Lepage and Québec

Another key area of Lepage studies focuses on the subject matter of his original productions, discussion of which brings us to the central place of his Québec back-

vi 'l'agencement particulier et dynamique de cette variabilité capable d'engendrer la nouveauté'.

ground and context in shaping his creativity and his outputs. From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, a number of Anglophone scholars brought a critical focus onto Lepage's representations of cultures that are not his own. Christie Carson, Barbara Hodgdon, and Jen Harvie criticised what they argued was his appropriation and exotification of non-Western cultures and the identities and experience of non-Québécois collaborators. Their work was a key instigator of my PhD research, in which I explored the relationship of Lepage's treatment of difference and otherness in his stage work to cultural codes and precedents specific to Québec, working to understand the ways in which his background and environment shaped an approach to representation that struck (and continues to strike) many outside that context as problematic. Indeed, examining Lepage's relationship to his home culture has been a rich seam for researchers, including and beyond issues of representation. Harvie and Erin Hurley laid down a gauntlet in the award-winning article 'States of Play: Locating Québec in the Performances of Robert Lepage, Ex Machina, and the Cirque du Soleil' with their claim that 'in the guise of a vague cultural pluralism, [Ex Machina] is promoting a Western metropolitan elitism in pursuit of major and diverse commercial investment' (307). In response to Harvie and Hurley's argument that Lepage (and Cirque du Soleil) were exploiting Québec for 'start-up and infrastructure funding' and then disowning the nation in favour of 'corporate and aesthetic identities that are homogeneous and unified' (314), I argued (see Fricker 'PRODUCT') that any current of exploitation between Québec and Lepage goes both ways. As part of its nation-building strategies from the 1980s into the 2000s, official Québec promoted its culture internationally through funding schemes and para-diplomacy, and a number of creative artists and companies including La La La Human Steps, Carbone 14, and Lepage benefited greatly from and contributed to these networks. In later writing Hurley characterises Lepage as one of a number of Québécois 'national stealth-figure[s]' (also including Cirque du Soleil and Céline Dion) 'whose work does not fit into the generally accepted criteria for inclusion in national theatre history' (*National* 14). Of these four criteria – ethnicity, geography, language, and aesthetic – Lepage meets only the first, being a 'francophone member of the dominant ethnic and linguistic group in Québec', but not the others, given that his productions travel extensively, are frequently multilingual, including 'languages not strongly associated with Québec', and are aesthetically resonant with practices of an international avant-garde, including the work of such high-profile figures as 'Robert Wilson, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Peter Brook' (14, 16).

It is tempting, given all this and in keeping with the argument I've established in this introduction, to classify Lepage's relationship to his home culture as ambiguous, and to explore the ways in which this might make him a representative Québécois subject. Jill MacDougall embraced such a conceptualisation in her 1997 volume *Performing Identities on the Stages of Québec*, which includes a study of Théâtre Repère's production *Tectonic Plates*. A key term for MacDougall is irony:

Contemporary Québécois identity thrives on the ambivalent, slipping back and forth across imaginary borders between subjects, languages, and spaces. It is in this ironic gap, where the anxiety over collective identity meets its critical counterpart and where the

longing for wholeness clashes with the postmodern explosion of identity tropes that I wish to situate this [study]. (4)

MacDougall at times expresses frustration with Lepage and his collaborators' resistance to their work being tied down to any particular meaning or shape, but eventually identifies the 'maddening shifting of positions' in which they 'have both denied and confirmed the political nature of their work' as 'itself a political strategy' (193). Lepage's then-company Repère 'developed a subtle strategy of projecting Québécois difference by performing the problem of language itself' (ibid.), through a production which brings together multiple spoken and visual forms of expression to tell overlapping stories of characters in flux between national, gendered, and sexed identities. Lepage's aforementioned appearance in *Tectonic Plates* as Jennifer McMann, a transgendered Québécoise radio host working for Radio-Canada in New York, using standardised French which effaced her national identity, is central to MacDougall's analysis of the production as 'curiously representative of an imminently Québécois subject' (177). *Performing Identities on the Stages of Québec* holds an important place in studies of Lepage's stage work, thanks to MacDougall's exemplary use of rehearsal-room access and her location of *Tectonic Plates* in its cultural context; her work has contributed significantly to my understanding. I believe, however, that the paralleling of Lepage's shape-shifting identity with that of his nation can be only a partial approach: embracing it too fully might allow Lepage to disappear, again. Casting Lepage as representative (in his indeterminacy) of his indeterminate, stateless nation runs the risk inherent in all mimesis: that the subject disappears, consumed by the entity claiming equivalence with the subject – a position that is for Lepage a recognisable hiding place (I further explore questions of identity and mimesis in Chapter 4).

It is also important to hold up to scrutiny the close association of Québec, in the years in which Lepage emerged as an artist, with the qualities of 'uncertainty and doubt' (Schwartzwald, 'Chus' 51).^{vii} The 1980s and 1990s were a period of ongoing and profound national self-questioning, as epitomised in the very close results of both referenda on Québec sovereignty – in 1980, 59.6 per cent of the voters voted no to the proposal that Québec pursue independence from the rest of Canada, while 50.6 per cent voted no in 1995. As debates raged in political, scholarly, and journalistic circles about the relationship of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural elements to the constitution of Québécois identity, some thinkers and artists argued that Québec should embrace such ambivalence as definitional and use it to shape a positive understanding of a diverse, hybrid society. In the argument of historian Jocelyn Létourneau, Québec culture is 'the product of a creative double tension between hybridities and lines of descent, on the one hand, and between centripetal forces (everything that tends towards a shared framework) and centrifugal forces (everything that tends towards diversification) on the other hand' (62). Similarly, the political philosopher Jocelyn Maclure argued that 'movement and *métissage* [cultural mixing] are integral to Québécois identity' (66) and characterised Québec as 'a plurivocal, dissensual community of conversation' (140–1).

vii 'l'incertitude et le doute'.

Such an understanding of Québec as inherently in motion and diverse grew out of its history – the complicated colonial situation of two settler cultures vying for rights and privileges on Indigenous land – and of successive waves of immigration and urbanisation. An influx of Italians in the 1940s and 1950s, Haitians in the 1960s and 1970s, Vietnamese in the late 1970s, and people of many other origins from the 1980s forward contributed to the creation of a ‘multiethnic urban population’ in Montréal (Ireland and Proulx 1), and to a lesser extent in the provincial capital (the presence of immigrant populations in Québec City was a central jumping-off point for Lepage’s *The Dragon’s Trilogy*, as I explore in Chapter 1). The question of how to interpret writing and other art forms emerging from this complex cultural landscape was a topic of considerable critical attention in the decades in which Lepage emerged as an artist. In the 1980s and 1990s Québec literature scholars widely adopted the term *écriture migrante* (writing in movement) to describe works that ‘question[ed] paradigms of cultural identity’ (Simon and Leahy 388) so as to avoid a binary distinction between work by ‘Québécois *pur laine*’ (people born in Québec, a terminology associated with ethnic nationalism) and by ‘the other: migrant’ (Phelps 85).^{viii} This depiction of Québec as ‘characterised by flux and hybridity’ became so familiar as to be a ‘critical reflex’ (Hurley, *National* 112), as literary and cultural scholar Simon Harel argued in an important 2002 article, in which he insisted, contra Simon and Leahy, on a distinction between literature by members of ‘cultural communities’ – the distinctly Québécois descriptor of immigrant and/or minoritised groups – and ‘migrant writing’. In Harel’s view, writing by members of cultural communities anchors the author in relation to their ‘social reality’ whereas *écriture migrante* articulates ‘a modification of the subject in the very movement of creation’. The overuse and imprecision of the terminology *écriture migrante* has ‘become essentialist in its desire to eulogise, at all costs, a generalised deterritorialisation’, argues Harel, evidence of a ‘symptomatic malaise’ in Québec around issues of identity (58 ff).^{ix} The conceptualisation of Québec-as-ambivalence, then, is problematic, inasmuch as this classification can become a blind, eclipsing the complex realities of a population made up of various groups and individuals with multiple, often competing claims of belonging, difference, and minoritisation; and risks fetishising an abstracted claim of otherness as somehow definitional of being Québécois.

Theorising Lepage

Bringing other theoretical perspectives to bear on Lepage’s work, while remaining attentive to the central and particular place of his socio-cultural and linguistic

viii ‘l’autre: migrante’.

ix ‘communautés culturelles ... écriture migrante ... réalité sociale ... une modification du sujet dans le mouvement même de la création ... me semble devenir essentialiste dans son désir de promouvoir à tout prix un éloge de la détterritorialisation généralisée ... un malaise qui traduit l’état des lieux au Québec sur la question d’identité’.

background in shaping his creative practices, is useful in avoiding such a discursive collapse of artist into context. Bill Marshall's approach in his 2001 volume *Québec National Cinema*, for example, embraces this conception of Québec culture being never-fixed, always-emergent, and dialogic by reading its subject through a Deleuzo-Guattarian lens. The history of film in Québec, he argues, reflects '[t]he multiple, relational reality of Québec cultural identity', which 'means that to inhabit that cultural space is always to be becoming something else' (13). Marshall identifies the process of defining and re-defining the nation against changing contexts and realities – so central to Québec in this period – as a movement between territorialisation ('the code of grounding') and deterritorialisation ('a process of decoding or unfixing'), and identifies Québec as a 'minor' culture vis-à-vis 'the vast North American and Canadian anglophone majority' and the language and culture of France (11, 12). This positioning, Marshall argues, affords Québec a 'capacity for proliferation and innovation (becoming)' and a resistance to 'the "major" culture's pretensions to the natural, normal, and universal' (13). Québécois artists are therefore particularly prepared to make work that resonates with audiences living under the conditions of globalisation – to 'carve out distinctive spaces' within the 'flows of postmodernity' (288). Significantly for this study, Robert Lepage emerges as Marshall's Deleuzian Québécois artist par excellence: an elegiac discussion of Lepage's 1995 film *Le Confessionnel* ends *Québec National Cinema*. While arguing that the difficulty of moving on from its troubled and indeterminate past is a familiar trope that has overdetermined Québécois cultural representations, Marshall celebrates *Le Confessionnel* for presenting a 'potentially new conception of nation-time ... that enables a revitalisation and problematisation of "our" perception of the present' (311). As already mentioned, Marshall argues that this is communicated through the film's central character, Pierre, and by productive ambiguities, including an open-ended ending in which Pierre carries his nephew on his shoulders as they cross the Pont de Québec on foot and 'the present opens on to a future that is contingent and open' (ibid.). Marshall's work helped to create a strong precedent of reading Lepage's films through Deleuze; indeed, Peter Dickinson calls a Deleuzian approach the 'dominant critical paradigm' ('Space' 133) in approaching Lepage's cinematic work. It is curious that this paradigm has barely been applied to Lepage's theatre, and in this book – particularly in Chapters 3 and 4 – I work to address that gap.

Another notable absence in scholarship around Lepage's theatre is that of queer theory, which would seem a highly relevant tool, given his interest in all kinds of border crossings, transgression of norms, and resistances to categorisation (see Sedgwick 1993). The lack of queer readings of Lepage's stage productions can be attributed in part to his reticence around treating some aspects of his personal life and experience in his work. As I explore in Chapter 2, his childhood was marked by the onset of alopecia – total hair loss – which he discusses in interview with Bureau as a foundational trauma and one which made some people pity him, which he rejects: 'Pity, that's not a value, don't have pity, that's not good. People should have compassion' (2008, 65). He links this traumatic experience of embodiment to awakening awareness of his sexual identity:

When I understood also that I was homosexual, that too, that's a thing, you say: 'On top of all that, you find out that you're gay.' With that, you have the sense that you're in ... So, you don't want that to become an important theme in your work, you don't want to identify with that, then pick up the gay flag. So you don't do that. And people say: 'Oh, OK, you're in the closet, you don't talk outright about your homosexuality, all of that.' But you do this because you don't want people, once again, to take you and categorise you. (65, ellipses in original)^x

These statements provide an important vantage onto Lepage's resistance to definition, which he here equates with being reduced to identity markers which he understands as minoritised and inviting of condescending and dismissive responses. He offered a modified version of this position in an interview with the London *Times's* Dominic Maxwell in 2008: asked whether he brought his difficult early experiences into his work, he replied, 'No, I never wanted to do that. I mean, there are so many gay shows. In Québec, all theatre was about coming out for a while, and I would just think: "Oh come on!" For me it was just something in my life, it wasn't a problem. I didn't feel I had to be a spokesperson.' Such a point of view is at some distance from the social movements advocating for acceptance, pride, and equality for LGBTQI+ peoples that emerged in the global North in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but Lepage underlines that, for him, being classified as a gay artist is limiting. He points to a visit to a video store where he found *Le Confessional* in the gay film section as a decisive moment in his thinking about these issues:

I didn't dare think that it's because I'm gay that they put my film in that section. I said to myself: 'Look, that doesn't make sense, it's not a film about that, that's not the theme of the film.' There's basically one character who's gay in it, but it's not a gay film ... So, there are many things in my life, whether it's my childhood or it's this, that I don't share, that I don't talk about, not because I have shame, not because I want to hide them, not because it's bad, but people suddenly pity you, are politically correct with you. I avoid that. (66; see below for comment on the number of gay character/s in *Le Confessional*)^{xi}

However distant he keeps himself from public association with his gay identity and gay causes, themes and expressions of gender and sexuality – including same-sex desire and eroticism – are frequently present in Lepage's productions and films. The fact that his work has rarely been treated in scholarship on gay and queer Québécois

- x 'La pitié, c'est pas une valeur, faut pas avoir pitié, c'est pas bon. Faut avoir de la compassion... quand...' ai compris aussi que j'étais homosexuel, ça aussi, c'est une affaire, tu dis: "En plus de tout ça, tu découvres que t'es gai." Là, tu sens que tu es dans ... Donc, là, tu veux pas que ça devienne un thème important dans ton travail, tu veux pas t'identifier, puis commencer à prendre le drapeau gai. Tu fais pas ça. Et les gens disaient: "Oh OK, tu es dans le placard, tu parles pas ouvertement de ton homosexualité, tout ça." Mais tu fais ça parce que tu veux pas que le monde, encore une fois, te prenne puis te catégorise.'
- xi 'J'ai pas osé penser que c'est parce que je suis gai qu'ils avaient classé le film dans cette section. Je me dis: "Voyons, ça a pas rapport, c'est pas un film sur ça, c'est pas le thème du film." Il y a effectivement un personnage qui est gai, là-dedans, mais c'est pas un film gai ... Alors, ce sont toutes des choses dans ma vie, que ce soit mon enfance ou que ce soit ça, que je partage pas, dont je discute pas, pas que j'en ai honte, pas que je veux le cacher, pas que ça fait mal, mais les gens, tout de suite, ont pitié de nous, sont *politically correct* avec nous. J'évite ça.'

and Canadian theatre is a measure of his success in avoiding such consideration, and is particularly notable given the strong tradition in Québec theatre of work by gay male writers including Michel Tremblay and Michel Marc Bouchard, for whom the intersection of sexual and national identities is frequent theme.¹⁵ This connection has been much explored: as Charles Batson has noted, there is 'a veritable lineage of queer scholarship in Quebec' which connects 'the staged figure of the queer with a certain Québec, particularly one for which there are questions of *survivance* and of production of its differences' (Batson and Provencher 10).

Peter Dickinson's scholarship demonstrates the relevance of reading Lepage's films through the lens of queer theory and does important work in placing this analysis in the context of the particular conflation of the 'sexual symbolic and the national symbolic' in Québécois cinema. In *Le Confessionnal*, *Polygraph*, *Nô*, and *Possible Worlds* Dickinson identifies a consistent 'visual and narrative policing of the queer male body' in Lepage's films, which tend to adhere to the conventions of the 'thriller/mystery/detective story/whodunit/film noir' genres (*Screening* 131). Lepage, Dickinson argues, 'reproduces some of film noir's most entrenched clichés regarding gender and sexuality' and extends the homophobic trope, familiar from Québec film and other media representation, which equates 'that province's arrested development and English Canada's social dominance' with gay characters and same-sex desire (132). Dickinson identifies in *Le Confessionnal*, for example, an extended trope of overhead shots onto the body of Marc Lamontagne in states of emotional and physical distress. Such exposure occurs 'just before or after Marc receives crucial information about his family and about his own place within that sphere' and adds up to a 'policing of the queer male body as forever outside – *even when inside* – the bourgeois family' (137, emphasis in original).¹⁶ While such imagery could perhaps be understood as a critique of heteronormativity, Dickinson finds it challenging to square the recurrence of such tropes across nearly all of Lepage's films, alongside plot and character points that link gay/queer lives with secrecy and guilt (*Polygraph*) and with frivolity and lack of socio-political agency (*Nô*). Dickinson's project is comparative, placing his analysis of Lepage's films against the stage works from which they are adapted or with which they are in intertextual dialogue.¹⁷ Dickinson argues that these stage works are filled with 'all manner of queer characters and images of same-sex eroticism' (130) which is diluted and weighed down with 'overdetermined nationalist significations' when transposed to film (161). As my treatment of *Vinci* in Chapter 2 indicates, I locate more anxiety and ambiguity around queer themes and representations in Lepage's stage work than does Dickinson; in any event, it is hoped that this present discussion, alongside Dickinson's, might pave the way for more robust and sustained engagement with questions of queerness, nationality and other identity points in Lepage's stage work.

As will already be clear, questions of affect are central to my approach to Lepage's stage productions, and with this I address another gap in the scholarship. The focus of affect theory on all the ways in which '[t]he whole enterprise of theatre is geared to the perceiving body' (Hurley, *Theatre* 25) seems highly relevant to a corpus of work intended to generate feeling among audiences, and yet this approach has not yet been applied to Lepage's theatre (or, indeed, his films). Combining affect theory with the related work of Jacques Rancière on spectatorship allows me, in Chapter 4, to home

in on the effects of Lepage's signature moments of spatial montage – that is, to discuss the characteristic semiotic tropes in his work not only in terms of their formal composition but on how they work as 'feeling technologies', to borrow Hurley's terminology (*Theatre* 28). There is much more that can be done with these and other theoretical approaches to tease out the complexities of Lepage's work, and I hope that my use of them here may prompt further such explorations.

Lepage and the role of the theatre director

While Lepage has strategically worked to avoid classification and there is little scholarly consensus on how to approach his contribution as a theatre artist, it is nonetheless the case that he is frequently mentioned as one of the most important stage directors of his era. In many ways Lepage's professional identity corresponds to the role of the director as defined in the modern era – the 'single figure capable of harnessing and organising all the multiple crafts and codes that make up the theatrical experience' (Delgado and Rebellato 6) – but in others his practices resist such categorisation. This is a point of tension not just in Lepage's practice, but in fact draws attention to the changing understanding of Western theatre directing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – a function in which complex questions of creativity, authority, celebrity, and commodity converge. As Charlotte Canning argues, the standard history of stage direction features 'a focus on heroic figures' – nearly all male – 'whose towering genius had an enduring effect on theatre's practices even into the current moment' (50). Feminist and post-structuralist approaches such as Canning's set out to expose the 'discursive construction' (55) of the director as a 'disciplinary demonstration of power' (49). Lepage's approach to his work, and to the crafting of his public persona, can be read as an attempt to distance himself from this tradition of the star, *auteur* director and the power dynamics that come along with it. As previously noted, he resists being called a genius, and a repeated trope in interviews is the formulation 'I don't want to sound pretentious, but ...' – a verbal buffer through which he simultaneously disclaims and claims status and fame.¹⁸ Lepage's resistance to the modern director function is further apparent in his working practices themselves, specifically in his use of collaborative creation techniques, his emphasis on process over product, and his claims of lack of authorial control over his work and its meanings – all of which follow larger tendencies in contemporary Western theatremaking, and which also reflect the specificity of his background and training in Québec.

The relationship of devising/collaborative creation techniques to director-led theatre has been explored in several recent studies which usefully problematise any 'binary opposition' between devised performance and text-based theatre (Radosavljević, *Theatre-Making* 62) and offer a usefully critical perspective on the assumed values and ideologies underlying devising practices.¹⁹ In *Devising Performance: A Critical History*, Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling offer an overview of devised theatre in the

United Kingdom, United States, and Australia from the 1960s to the early twenty-first century, while Duska Radosavljević, in two volumes published in 2013, explores devising as one of a number of interrelated contemporary theatremaking strategies. While Canada and Québec are not included in these accounts, many of the points made in them are applicable to Canadian and Québécois theatre traditions and contemporary practices (with some caveats and specifications which I note below). Devising had its heyday in the late 1960s and 1970s; working collaboratively rather than in traditional, hierarchical, director-led structures, and bypassing the system of authority that is the theatrical canon by creating original work from scratch, were ways in which some theatre workers participated in the counterculture movement. Among the 'early rhetoric' associated with devising practices was that they reflected the equal contribution of all members of a group to a creative process, and such work was regularly associated with 'freedom' (Heddon and Milling 4). Indeed the 'qualities frequently assumed to be implicit in devising ... give it an almost mythical status', argue Heddon and Milling; such qualities include:

a social expression of non-hierarchical possibilities; a model of cooperative and non-hierarchical collaboration; an ensemble; a collective ... a de-commodification of art; a commitment to total community; a commitment to total art; the negating of the gap between art and life; the erasure of the gap between spectator and performer ... innovative; risky; inventive; spontaneous; experimental; non-literary. (4–5)

As they note, however, not all of these values were necessarily manifest in practice. For example, many companies using devising techniques were never non-hierarchical: among the prominent directors who worked 'within their ensembles or companies' include 'Judith Malina and Julian Beck, Joseph Chaikin, Richard Schechner, Liz LeCompte, Lin Hixon, Nancy Meckler, John Fox, Naftali Yavin, Hilary Westlake, Tim Etchells, and James Yarker' (5). In *The Contemporary Ensemble* Radosavljević similarly argues that 'there is ample historical evidence that a dominant leader has often been associated with ensemble, especially if training and group development formed part of the picture' (6). Her enumeration of such 'prominent leader[s] ... associated with an ensemble' includes Jerzy Grotowski, Ariane Mnouchkine, Eugenio Barba, Max Stafford-Clark, and Anne Bogart (5). Whatever associations that devising may have had with 'a particular political stance or creative methodology', it is now more accurate, Radosavljević argues, to consider devising as a term identifying 'an evolving performing arts sector in the United Kingdom not based on plays and playwriting' (*Theatre-Making* 60). Similarly, Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart see devising practices as 'one of the major methodologies through which leading contemporary companies and practitioners create innovative work on an international scale' (4).

Lepage's approach to theatremaking, then, in which he serves as the leading figure and director of a collective practice, is not unusual, but in fact in sync with broader trends in twentieth- and twenty-first-century practices. The fact that he puts some distance between himself and the traditional profile of 'the director as visionary leader or author/auteur' is itself in keeping with a larger evolution in theatre practices which also includes, as Harvie enumerates,

scepticism about logocentrism, or the primacy of the word or text; in a related shift, a recognition that it is not only, or even principally, the playwright who creates a performance, but all those who contribute to theatre's multiple arts, including its performance, directing, and design; and a parallel recognition that the meanings of performance are produced not just by its 'backstage' and onstage makers, but also by its audience. ('Introduction' 3)

These characteristics and values are all present in Lepage's practice and his statements about it: the prioritisation of the visual and physical alongside if not above the textual; the distribution of theatrical authorship among multiple figures, including performers, directors, and designers; and the foregrounding of the spectator's role in theatrical meaning-making. All of this adds complexity to questions of authorship and authority in Lepage's practices, as I explore in Chapter 6.

Lepage's creative approach is also part of wider shifts in theatre and performance-making practices that reflect the influence of performance art and live art through a prioritisation of creative process over the creation of a polished final product. Such foregrounding of ongoing creativity over the end result can be understood both as a resistance to the commodification of art and as a critique of the idea that 'art can be posited (in Tracey Warr's words) as a fixed synopsis of the artist's intentions' (Mermikides 104). In so doing, such a way of working undercuts 'the principle underlying director's theatre': the 'Romantic notion' that the artwork represents the 'individual vision' of the creator (Mermikides 105). Inviting audiences to observe creativity in process underlines the extent to which each spectator brings her individual subjectivity and positionality to bear in making meaning out of the theatre event. In related innovations, postmodern practices such as those of the Wooster Group and the Builders Association critique the logocentrism of modern theatre by using existing plays as resources for creativity by cutting, reordering, and recontextualising material rather than presenting a play as a whole. Such irreverent treatment of theatre texts prompts awareness of the extent to which all theatre 'is involved in quotation or reiteration' (Schneider 293), be it of a canonical play, or of a set of activities established in a rehearsal process. In postmodern theatre practices a performance does not set out to mirror or imitate the world beyond the theatre, but, rather, questions the concept of reality itself, or, in more politicised practices, 'the "reality effects" of representational practices which ghost our habits of meaning-making' (ibid.). In such work, as Rebecca Schneider has argued, the work of the director can be understood as that of arranging a montage of cultural quotations and invented activities.

All of these currents – the relative mainstreaming of devising in contemporary theatre practices; the influence of live and performance art in centring process and spectatorship; and a postmodern awareness of theatrical creation as quotation and montage – contribute to shifting understandings of the work and authority of the director. In Maria Delgado and Dan Rebellato's estimation, contemporary theatre directors 'no longer aim to provide answers through their work but rather ask questions with which to provoke, surprise, and disarm an audience' (19), thus challenging the terms of evaluation which audiences and critics bring to all performances, be they experimental or traditional *mise-en-scène*. The notion of the 'death of the director' has been debated in continental Europe since the 1970s, but, in the view of

Patrice Pavis, the director (understood as the lone figure responsible for the *mise-en-scène* of an existing text) has not died, but in fact evolved into the 'neo-director', whose work tends to lack politics, avoid direct cultural and social reference, and offer no 'clear perspective, reflecting the world in which we live' ('Director's' 395, 397, 398). Such a description could usefully be applied to Lepage's stage work; while Pavis does not reference Lepage directly in this assessment, he had, seven years earlier, published an emotive reaction to the *Ex Machina* production *Zulu Time*, in which he decries the show for having 'crossed the limits' from a human spectacle into a technological one ('Afterword' 189), but allows that it nonetheless posed 'a challenge to aesthetics and to *mise-en-scène*' because it forced the audience to discern between what is 'foreseeable and mechanical' and what is 'unpredictable and human' (190). Such reconsiderations of the work of the director help to frame this study of a major theatre artist whose practices participate in – and have been questioned in terms of – the sharing of credit, responsibility, and authorship between star director and other collaborators; and who foregrounds creative process as something that gives his work value and liveness. A central tenet of my approach is to understand Lepage as a *montageur*, and the question of the extent to which his work engages critically with the postmodern realities it reflects is a central one, feeding into the 'what is he trying to say?' question that so troubles Robert Lévesque and, in a related way, troubles Pavis.

A related further set of questions has to do with the international artistic and cultural environment in which Lepage functions. The fact that star names such as Simon McBurney and Lepage rise out of avowedly collaborative practices is evidence not only of their approach to theatremaking but of a globalised network of production and circulation that requires – in fact, has produced – celebrity figures who function as brands in this particular niche of what Lash and Lury have identified as, following Adorno, the global culture industry. The star director's 'signature aesthetic' (Delgado and Rebellato 21) is that which gives him or her currency in this industry, even if this 'brand' may be 'cultivated by a team' (*ibid.*). Many of the moves in contemporary performance practices already outlined – the valorisation of process over product; the dispersal of authority via collective practices – can be read as attempts by theatre practitioners to resist or work around the overriding force of commodification bearing down on all aspects of contemporary life, including culture and the arts. Early twenty-first-century systems of neoliberal capital, however, have deftly adapted alongside creative practices in ways that now threaten to engulf or supersede them. As the focus of global systems of production shifted away from work that produces commodities and towards immaterial or affective labouring in which the outcomes, such as information and communication, are more conceptual than physically realised, it becomes increasingly difficult to consider creative practices as somehow different from or outside the marketplace (as if they ever were). In a related set of moves, governments and pundits celebrate the 'rise of human creativity as the defining feature of economic life' (Florida 15) and as 'the font of economic promise' (Ridout and Schneider 8) in the contemporary age. For Schneider and Nicholas Ridout, performance offers an ideal site for the contestation of this neoliberal appropriation of creativity inasmuch as the 'embodied balancing act of the live performer' (7) can be mobilised in resistant ways to critique the totalising logic of neoliberalism. It has also been argued,

however, that theatre and performance are perfectly suited to neoliberal conditions, given that they have always involved immaterial and affective labouring towards ephemeral outcomes. The challenge becomes, in Patricia Ybarra's words, to discover 'openings within neoliberal circuits of culture [that] can make critique possible – but from inside, rather than from outside its networks' (121). For Schneider and Ridout a means to this end could be a Brechtian deployment of affect 'in which a body producing affective engagement simultaneously critiques deployments of affective engagement in the neoliberal affect factory' – if indeed such a thing is possible: 'Can affect critique affect? Can complicity critique complicity?' (9). These, too, are apposite questions with which to frame a study of Lepage's work, given that questions have consistently been asked about whether a critical perspective is discernible in his work (prompting further questions about whether the presence or not of such a perspective should matter).

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.

Lepage and Théâtre Repère

Through his training at the Conservatoire d'art dramatique de Québec and formative work with Théâtre Repère and Jacques Lessard, Lepage entered into a field of process-based, collective theatremaking that blossomed in Québec and Canada in the 1960s and 1970s, alongside similar practices throughout the West. As Alan Filewod has argued, part of the impetus behind the collective theatre movement was the 'desire' – in the spirit of the 1960s – to 'democratise' and render less hierarchical theatre processes 'which in the twentieth century placed increasing emphasis on the genius of the director as the interpreter of the text' ('Collective Creation'). Filewod notes a number of factors which converged in English Canada in the 1960s and contributed to what became known as the Canadian alternative theatre movement: an upsurge in nationalist feeling and a desire to articulate a Canadian theatrical voice distinct from the influences of Britain and the United States; newly available government funding; the maturing of a post-war generation eager to reject existing societal conventions; and a 'world-wide revival of experimental theatre' (*Collective Encounters* vii). A parallel yet distinct set of forces were at play in Québec, as a population 'alienated from every point of view' (Hébert, 'Sounding Board' 29) in terms of political, economic, social, and cultural autonomy experienced the period of rapid change, modernisation, and national self-realisation called the Quiet Revolution. As Chantal Hébert argues, 'committed political theatre, improvisation, and collective creation' were the main tenets of this new theatre movement in Québec, the means whereby artists and companies

questioned 'traditional values'; collective creation was a particularly powerful tool for an emergent women's theatre 'whose activity stood out as if in counterpoint to the political questions of the day' (31). The years 1968–78 are recognised as the 'golden age' of politically engaged collective creation in Québec (32), but the narrow failure of the 1980 referendum shifted the national mood and also prompted a shift in the focus of theatrical activity. While theatre continued to boom – in the five years after the referendum some forty-seven new companies were formed in Québec – and collective methods continued to be popular, energies moved away from work on national themes, to a questioning of theatrical norms and traditional theatre languages; the foregrounding of 'the figure of the artist' rather than the creation of 'family portraits'; and a focus outward, as young artists worked to insert themselves 'into the international scene' (37, 36). Lepage emerged as the representative figure of this period.

As argued, there is international precedent for a collective process to be led by a director, and the particular ways in which theatre culture developed in Québec provide further context for Lepage's such positioning. As Irène Roy has chronicled (76–7), the very rapid surge in development of theatre in Québec from the Quiet Revolution onwards, following many decades of relative stagnation, meant that the role of the director (as opposed to the textual author) as the central, determining factor in a work of theatre came into focus at the same time as the flourishing of collective methodologies. Thus, perhaps even more so than in the cultures treated in Heddon and Milling's *Devising Performance* and in Radosavljević's studies, collaborative theatre and so-called director's theatre were not distinct or oppositional movements in Québec but, rather, mingled ones. Accounts of the genesis and growth of Théâtre Repère further illuminate the specific circumstances in which Lepage emerged as a professional theatre artist and reveal that tensions around his status as an exceptional or star figure have existed since the earliest days of his career. These accounts include 'Dix ans de Repère' (Ten years of Repère), a dedicated issue of the Québec theatre journal *L'annuaire théâtrale*, in particular Héléne Beauchamp's chronological account of the company's first decade; Roy's analysis of Repère's working methods and culture; and Lepage's discussion of this period in *Connecting Flights* and *Creating for the Stage*. The basis of Théâtre Repère's work was the Repère cycles, a structured methodology for generating and shaping performance material which Jacques Lessard adapted from Laurence Halprin's RSVP Cycles.²⁰ Within Repère, as Roy describes, while all members of the ensembles 'were called upon' to use the Repère cycles, 'the director plays a primary role. It is he who leads the team, oversees the application of the process, sparks inspiration in everyone, and proceeds onto the organisation of the chosen material. Like a motor, he generates movement that he must then sustain through the stimulation of his presence' (32).^{xii} In the spirit of collective creation, then, Repère was founded to facilitate group exploration of the Cycles and to use them to create theatre pieces, some wholly original, others drawing on classic texts. At the same time there was a structure of creative leadership within the organisation,

xii 'qui sont appelés ... le metteur en scène joue un rôle primordial. C'est lui qui dirige l'équipe, voit à l'application du processus, suscite l'inspiration de chacun et procède à l'organisation du matériel choisi. À la façon d'un "moteur", il engendre un mouvement qu'il se doit de soutenir par sa présence stimulante.'

with Lessard as its founding artistic director; and its productions were spearheaded by directors, almost always Lessard or Lepage. As Beauchamp recounts, Repère's first ten years were varied and volatile, by the end of which the company had established a strong reputation in Québec for its structured approach to theatrical creativity, driven by Lessard's 'charisma' and 'generosity' and Lepage's 'immense creative energy' (53, 54).^{xiii} Within the company there were growing tensions, however, about how to manage its productivity, and in particular what to do about the interest of domestic and international venues and festivals in productions directed by Lepage, including *Circulations*, *The Dragon's Trilogy*, and *Vinci*. While for Lepage the priority had 'shifted to touring our shows' (qtd in Charest 144), Lessard felt that '[t]he grants were too limited, the demand was too high, there were too many projects' (qtd in Beauchamp 51).^{xiv} This led to a situation where, in essence, 'there were two Repères', one committed to international touring and the other 'involved in research and pedagogy' (Lepage qtd in Charest 144). Lepage left Repère in 1989 to take on the position of artistic director of French theatre at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, clearly frustrated that Lessard's proposed establishment of 'two legitimate divisions' never took root institutionally (ibid.).

Many of Lessard's ideas became fundamental to Lepage's approach, for example the view that, in Lessard's words,

The artist, in his creative act, should give precedence to emotions more than ideas ... Every human being has opinions. But these opinions are not the material of creation. Every opinion can be contested and every discussion based on the exchange of opinions will disappear when the moment to create arrives ... You can't contest emotions. ('Préface' 8)^{xv}

Such a point of view is evident in Lepage's articulation, in a 1989 interview, why physical objects rather than ideas, themes, or concepts are preferable starting points (what in RSVP/Repère parlance are called resources) for creative projects:

The survival of the artist ... that's a theme. If a group of actors get together and discuss it, we'll argue. The debate will become very intellectual. And in the end, the piece will be beige, because it depends only on the confrontation of ideas. A resource is something solid. A fried egg, for instance. If someone says that he sees in a fried egg something that has died so that someone else can live, I can't argue with that. It's a feeling. (qtd in Manguel 34)

Lepage is consistent in underlining the formative influence of Lessard's ideas and his time at Repère on his work, while acknowledging that in some ways he adapted the Repère principles, using them in a 'freer form' and more 'intuitively' than Lessard did (qtd in McAlpine 134). Given this relationship of influence, it is notable that the first sustained scholarly consideration of Repère's work – Roy's 1990 Master's thesis

xiii 'charisme ... générosité ... immense énergie créatrice.'

xiv 'Les subventions sont trop limitées, la demande trop forte, les projets trop nombreux.'

xv 'L'artiste, dans son acte de création, se devait de donner la préséance aux émotions plutôt qu'aux idées ... Tout être humain a des opinions. Mais ce ne sont pas les opinions qui sont les matériaux de la création. Toute opinion est contestable et toute discussion basée sur l'échange d'opinions est à fuir lorsque vient le moment de créer ... Les émotions, elles, ne peuvent se contester.'

at the Université Laval, published as a short volume in 1993 – side-lines Lessard's contribution as a director. Roy's study focuses exclusively on four of Lepage's productions, referring to Lessard as 'the creator of the Repère cycles' and Lepage as a 'director who uses this creative process' (31 ff).^{xvi} This selective coverage of Repère's activity is particularly notable, given that Roy was a founding member of the company, along with Lessard, Michel Nadeau, Denis Bernard, Camil Bergeron, and Caroline Lepage (see Beauchamp). Through his application of Repère's principles, Roy argues, Lepage has 'overturned the mechanism by which theatre reproduces the world' and created a 'new language' of theatre in which objects rather than words are privileged as the 'primary discursive sign' (12, 13, 12).^{xvii} By disrupting spectators' expectations and inviting them to process the relationship of different kinds of information (objects, bodies, sounds) in unexpected ways, Lepage's productions work on a connotative level that 'touches the emotional and sensory dimensions of the viewer while revealing to him a new vision of the world' (88).^{xviii} By Roy's account, the magnitude of this contribution would seem to be such that it dwarfs or eclipses all other of Repère's activities and accomplishments (an account that Lessard himself endorses by contributing a preface to the published version of her research). As I discuss in Chapter 2, a similar claim that Lepage's work offers spectators new ways of looking at the world is made by Chantal Hébert and Irène Perelli-Contos in their 2001 volume *La face cachée du théâtre de l'image*. Hébert and Perelli-Contos wrote the book while they were professors in the faculty of literature at the Université Laval, where Roy too became a professor, forming something of a Laval school of Lepage studies. While drawing on and benefiting from this scholarship, I find it driven by a certain imperative to establish Lepage's singular contribution to contemporary artistic practice, in ways that, in Roy's case, lead to a limited account of application of the Repère principles across the company's work, and a foregrounding of Lepage's contribution to the extent that it occludes Lessard's. Such examples point to the complexity of the terrain of Lepage scholarship, and the importance of reading historical materials critically and against each other to clarify the influences on and trajectory of his career.

In this introduction I have established the key terms of reference for the chapters that follow, framing all of my comments in the context of Robert Lepage's resistance to categorisation, which I read as his professional, creative, and personal strategy to work and live on self-determined terms. I propose globalisation as an appropriate and usefully flexible framework within which to explore the development of his professional practice, and isolate one aspect of that practice – original productions created between 1984 and 2008 – as the focus of my discussion, while taking note of other creative activity in which he has been engaged then and since. My understanding of Lepage's work is informed by his own statements and by the writings of many other scholars and critics, which I introduce here both to provide readers with other potentially relevant references and to underline that I approach this book very much as an ongoing

xvi 'créateur des Cycles Repère ... metteur en scène qui utilise ce processus de création'.

xvii 'le genre théâtral est bouleversé dans ses mécanismes de reproduction du monde ... nouveau langage ... signe discursif premier'.

xviii 'toucher les dimensions émotives et sensorielles du spectateur tout en lui révélant une nouvelle vision du monde'.

dialogue – with Lepage’s creativity, and with others who are fascinated and provoked by it. Lepage’s successful strategies to avoid discursive capture have led to a dominant understanding of his work as defined by paradox, and, while acknowledging that this can be a productive approach, I also signal my intent to identify those points at which his work and the discourses around it present what I perceive to be contradictions. Underlining the subjective nature of such a perception is crucial: the 2018 controversies around *Slàv* and *Kanata* exposed the extent to which commentators’ backgrounds and socio-cultural positioning shaped their response to those productions. This is, on the one hand, an obvious statement that could be made about any cultural interaction: where you’re coming from determines what you perceive and how you respond. More specifically, the response to *Slàv* and *Kanata* revealed deep ideological divides around questions of cultural appropriation and creative freedom in Québec, the rest of Canada, and internationally that can be partially but not completely attributed to the differences between Anglophone and Francophone intellectual and cultural traditions. What some observers saw as contradictory and culturally tone-deaf actions and statements on Lepage’s part, others saw as assertions of his artistic rights that were worth celebrating and championing. Understanding Lepage, then, needs to start with understanding his cultural milieu, and it is for that reason that I launch this study with the following chapter, which places his first group production to be a major international success, *The Dragon’s Trilogy*, in the context of post-colonial Québec.

Notes

- 1 See Lavender; Fouquet *Visual*; Dundjerović; Knowles ‘From Dream’; Hébert and Perelli-Contos *La face cachée*; Poll *Scenographic*; Reynolds *Revolutions*; Roy.
- 2 See Albacan, Dixon, Giesekam, Pluta, Woycicki.
- 3 See Bovet, MacDougall, Harvie and Hurley.
- 4 See Koustas *Robert Lepage*, ‘Zulu Time’; Simon ‘Robert Lepage’, *Le trafic*.
- 5 See Carson; Harvie ‘Transnationalism’, ‘Robert Lepage’; Hodgdon; Reynolds ‘Acting’, ‘Authorial’.
- 6 In addition to *décalage* (a term also significant to Woycicki’s analysis), the concepts and terms that scholars have used to analyse Lepage’s stagecraft include *transformation* (Lavender; Hébert and Perelli-Contos *La face cachée*), *mediaphors* (Pluta), *technological echoes* (Fouquet *Visual*), *past-present effects* (Dundjerović), *scenographic dramaturgy* (Poll *Scenographic*), *simultaneity* and *the uncanny* (Reynolds ‘Acting’, ‘Authorial’, ‘Hypermobility’), and *suspension* and *the extratemporal* (Dixon).
- 7 The Cottesloe was renamed the Dorfman in 2013.
- 8 Lepage’s practices around documentation have shifted as his career has developed. Early resistance to capturing the work in the form of published scripts has eroded, and Ex Machina now sometimes authorises publication of its playscripts, working with the Québec City-based publisher L’instant scène. I explore these publishing practices further in Chapter 6.
- 9 A chronology of Lepage’s productions (both original and of extant texts), along with his other creative work, appears as an Appendix to this volume and supplements this overview.
- 10 According to Reynolds, who interviewed Lepage on the subject, ‘the negative experience of *Elsinore*’ prompted him to stop acting and to step back ‘somewhat from classical

- drama' (*Revolutions* 3). The production's world premiere in November 1995 at Montréal's Monument National received profoundly mixed reviews: while *La Presse's* Jean Beaunoyer raved about the production as a 'great moment of theatre' (un grand moment de théâtre) and complimented Lepage's acting in particular, *Le Devoir's* Lévesque called the show superficial, narcissistic, and obsessed with technology and stage trickery at the expense of engagement with the text ("Trucs pour jouer"). Lévesque berated Lepage's performance in particular: 'What's really surprising about this heartbreaking failure is the weakness of Lepage's acting' (Ce qui étonne dans cet échec navrant c'est la faiblesse du comédien Lepage). Lepage and *Ex Machina* received another round of negative press when the show was cancelled in Edinburgh as a result of 'equipment failure' (Hannan and McNeil) – one of the motors that powered the moving stage 'malfunctioned' (Glaister). Writing in 2003, the *Guardian's* Michael Billington called that 1996 non-event one of the 'great theatrical disasters' of our time, because audience expectations were very high and the cancellation happened at the last minute ("The show must float on").
- 11 I co-supervised, with Helen Gilbert, Poll's doctoral research about Lepage's productions of existing plays and operas at Royal Holloway, University of London between 2009–14.
 - 12 As I neared completion of this manuscript, a new book of interviews by Ludovic Fouquet titled *Robert Lepage* was published by Actes Sud.
 - 13 One of the book's authors, Patrick Caux, was a journalist who subsequently became Lepage's personal assistant; the other, Bernard Gilbert, was at the time the director of opera production for *Ex Machina*, and in 2017 became director general of Le Diamant.
 - 14 Aleksandar Dundjerović, Benjamin Knapton, Andy Lavender, Jill MacDougall, Melissa Poll, and James Reynolds are among the other scholars who have been rehearsal-room observers of *Ex Machina* productions and co-productions. The dramaturg Lise Ann Johnson's account of the creation of *Shakespeare Rapid Eye Movement* is also a valuable part of this corpus, written by someone directly involved in a production.
 - 15 The 2018 collection *Q2Q: Queer Canadian Theatre and Performance* does not include discussion of Lepage's work. Rosalind Kerr's 2007 collection *Queer Theatre in Canada* includes a reprint of Reid Gilbert's "'That's Why I Go to the Gym": Sexual Identity and the Body of the Male Performer', originally published in *Theatre Journal* 46 (4), in which Gilbert includes Lepage's *Polygraph* in a Lacanian exploration of the relationship between embodiment and sexual identity in three plays by gay men. André Loiselle, in *Stage Bound: Feature Film Adaptations of Canadian and Québécois Drama*, and Dickinson, in *Screening Gender, Framing Genre*, treat Lepage's adaptation of *Polygraph* from stage to screen. Both are critical of what they argue are homophobic elements of the theatre piece and the film. Sylvain Duguay briefly discusses queer aspects of the stage version of *The Far Side of the Moon* in a 2012 chapter about stage-to-film adaptations. These are, to my knowledge, the only significant published engagements with gay/queer themes and representations in Lepage's theatre.
 - 16 In Dickinson's reading, *Le Confessionnal* has 'two queer characters' (135): Massicotte and Marc. The former (played as a young man by Normand Daneau and an older one by Jean-Louis Millette) is a priest who leaves the church and becomes a powerful diplomat, while the latter (Patrick Goyette) works as a male prostitute, with Massicotte as a regular client. The film charts the complexities of the Massicotte/Marc relationship: the older man knows the central secret of Marc's parentage, and Marc commits suicide after Massicotte tells him who his father was. By contrast, as noted above, Lepage asserts there is 'basically one' gay character in the film, presumably referring to Massicotte. Marc had previously been in a relationship with Manon, an exotic dancer played by Anne-Marie Cadieux, and they have a young son. If Lepage's comment implies that Marc is a straight man who turns tricks

with men to make a living, this offers a different, but still abjected, portrayal of sex between men than that which Dickinson sees in the film. It is a portrayal which also potentially supports Martin Lefebvre's reading of *Le Confessional* as a national allegory, in which Marc, representing Québec in a state of 'permanent identity crisis ... allows himself to fall back into a homosexual relationship' (Dickinson 132) with a figure representing English Canada (Massicotte is a federal diplomat). As do Schwartzwald ("Symbolic" homosexuality) and Marshall, Dickinson critiques the 'homophobic presuppositions underpinning' such readings of Québec films, including *Le Confessional* (ibid.).

- 17 *Le Confessional* involves characters from *The Dragon's Trilogy* and *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, while *Nô* extends one of the seven sections of *River Ota*. *Polygraph* and *La face cachée de la lune* are adaptations of plays of the same names. Dickinson's chapter also treats *Possible Worlds*, a film directed by Lepage with a screenplay by John Mighton based on Mighton's 1992 play.
- 18 In 1995, Lepage told Brian D. Johnson in *MacLean's* that 'I don't want to sound pretentious ... but I get offers from every opera house in the world' ('The Visionary' 60). In December 2001, referring to the seeming prescience of the show *Zulu Time* in its depiction of airborne terrorism, he said to the *Advocate's* Matthew Hays: 'I don't want to sound pretentious or anything ... But you know, our company, when we immerse ourselves in new work, sometimes things like this happen.' Chapter 5 notes Lepage using this formulation at a 1998 press conference at the world premiere of *Geometry of Miracles* (see pp. 166–9). In 2017, discussing the legacy of his work, he told me in an interview for the *Toronto Star* that 'I don't want to sound pretentious, but I am way beyond the point where you want to be recognised' ('Robert Lepage's show 887').
- 19 *Devising* is the favoured term in the United Kingdom for what is generally called *collaborative creation* and *création collective* in the North American context. While the terminology signals some differences in emphasis – devising 'does not insist on more than one participant' (2), while collective creation 'more clearly emphasises the origination or bringing into existence, of material *ex nihilo*' (3) – Heddon and Milling use both terms to describe 'a mode of work in which *no* script – neither written play-text nor performance score – exists prior to the work's creation by the company' (3, emphasis in original). I use the terms as synonyms here.
- 20 As Lessard explained to Philippe Soldevila in an interview published in 1989, he went to California in 1978 feeling 'fed up with collective creation' (ras-le-bol de la creation collective; 32) and looking for new ideas. Studying movement with Anna Halprin, he encountered her husband, Laurence, an architect, who was writing a book called *The R.S.V.P. Cycles*, which articulated 'a way to create architectural environments respecting their inhabitants and nature. It was a sort of creative cycle – a tool – which put all the elements of creation in perspective' (une façon de créer des environnements architecturaux respectueux des habitants et de la nature. Il s'agissait donc d'une espèce de cycle de création – d'un outil – qui mettait en perspective tous les éléments de la création; 32). Lessard adapted the RSVP Cycles' four-step approach – resources, scoring, valuation, and performance – to the context of theatrical creation.