

Robert Lepage's Scenographic Dramaturgy: The Aesthetic Signature at Work

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Abstract

Heir to the *écriture scénique* introduced by theatre's modern movement, director Robert Lepage's scenography is his entry point when re-envisioning an extant text. Due to widespread interest in the Québécois auteur's devised offerings, however, Lepage's highly visual interpretations of canonical works remain largely neglected in current scholarship. My paper seeks to address this gap, theorizing Lepage's approach as a three-pronged 'scenographic dramaturgy', composed of historical-spatial mapping, metamorphous space and kinetic bodies. By referencing a range of Lepage's extant text productions and aligning elements of his work to historical and contemporary models of scenography-driven performance, this project will detail how the three components of Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy 'write' meaning-making performance texts.

Historical-Spatial Mapping as the foundation for Lepage's Scenographic Dramaturgy

In itself, Lepage's reliance on evocative scenography is inline with the aesthetics of various theatre-makers. Examples range from Appia and Craig's early experiments summoning atmosphere through lighting and minimalist sets to Penny Woolcock's English National Opera production of John Adams's *Dr. Atomic*¹ which uses digital projections and film clips to revisit the circumstances leading up to Little Boy's release on Hiroshima in 1945. Other artists known for a signature visual approach to locating narrative include Simon McBurney, who incorporates digital projections to present Moscow via a Google Maps perspective in Complicité's *The Master and Margarita* and auteur Benedict Andrews, whose recent production of *Three Sisters* sees Chekhov's heroines stranded on a mound of dirt at the play's conclusion, an apt metaphor for their dreary futures in provincial Russia. This said, Lepage's particular investment in what I've termed historical-spatial mapping demonstrates a comprehensive engagement with place, positioning it as the interpretive axis for his scenographic dramaturgy. Although Lepage has refuted suggestions of a set methodology guiding his work, referring instead to his creative approach as 'chaos' (qtd. in Tusa, 2005) my exploration of his historical-spatial mapping reveals the consistent use of a fixed process to stage extant texts. Upon beginning the process of conceptualizing an extant text, Lepage turns to the RSVP/Repère cycles², a devising practice composed of four steps: improvisation with an evocative central resource, scoring/recording physical texts, evaluating the scores and finally, performance. RSVP's central tenet—the resource—functions as the foundation for Lepage's interpretations. My argument deviates here from general readings of Lepage's work (including his own) as they identify his preferred resource as physical. I will counter this, demonstrating that Lepage's productions are defined by the conceptual resource of an era-specific place, which goes beyond the basics of 'setting' by making a significant investment in the zeitgeist of a particular

period. Questions of cultural and social context therefore define Lepage's historical-spatial mapping, allowing the two further branches of his scenographic dramaturgy, metamorphous scenography and kinetic bodies, to extend further meaning-making potentialities from an established interpretive foundation.

Lepage's fascination with geography began at a young age and has coloured his dramatic aesthetic ever since. His work draws heavily on his experience as an international traveller and frequently depicts the artist's literal and figurative quest towards self-discovery as played out in hotel rooms, airports and in flight. When asked by *The Guardian* to name his greatest fear, Lepage responded: 'Losing my passport' (qtd. in Harvie and Hurley, 1999: 299). Given that Lepage's career was launched by devised works consistently employing place and time as the central resource, it follows suit that the bulk of Lepage's extant text productions would turn to the creative resource with which he is most well-versed—place.

Lepage's devised works, among them *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* and *Needles and Opium*, rely not only on an engagement with place but also a grounding in the social, cultural and political conditions defining said location³. 1985's *The Dragons' Trilogy* spans seventy-five years and centers on three Canadian Chinatowns, suggested through scenic transformations using a sand box, a kiosk and numerous props. The odyssey begins in Québec City in 1910, passes through Toronto mid-twentieth century and arrives in Vancouver in the 1980s (Bernatchez et al., 2007), all the while employing simple staging conceits such as the reconfiguration of shoe boxes to summon the streets of Québec and the trampling of children's shoes by soldiers to evoke the destruction and loss of innocence caused by war. For its part, the sequel to *The Dragons' Trilogy*, *The Blue Dragon*, is rooted in further historical-spatial mapping. *The Blue Dragon* engages with contemporary Chinese politics, including the one child only policy, the loss of personal freedoms and, most centrally, the overwhelming push to amass wealth and power at the expense of equitable working conditions and artistry. Initially represented by a Kung Fu-inspired commercial for Kentucky Fried Chicken, China's capitalist bent is further contextualized by two dances summoning iconic moments in the nation's history: one, a 'long sleeve' ballet from the Tang era, serving as a reminder of the country's cultural golden age and the other, an approximation of the rifle-toting ballet performed during Mao's 'cultural revolution'. In its aggressive choreography, the second dance evokes the revolution's death toll as well as the large-scale destruction of ancient artifacts, consequently returning *The Blue Dragon* to its milieu in contemporary China, which is characterized by a generation still struggling to regain its cultural footing.

The key aesthetic referents in Lepage's production of *The Damnation of Faust* come from his initial work with a place resource. In a video preview for the opera, staged initially at the Festival Saito Kinen in Japan,⁴ Lepage comments that the opera director's job is not to 'decorate' the composer's music but to 'illustrate its energy' and 'extend' the score (qtd. in Bufano and Fuhs, 2009). In many of his opera productions, Lepage's use of historical-spatial mapping is his creative approach to elucidating the music's energy as he perceives it. Regarding *Damnation*, Ex Machina's opera production manager, Bernard Gilbert, notes that by featuring some of the earliest motion picture projections alongside visual references to the lush, romantic aesthetic that defined European opera

production in the mid-1800s, Lepage turns to ‘an avant-garde way of deconstructing the story linked to the period when Hector Berlioz wrote the piece’ (qtd. in Mehta, 2009). The story in question is based on Goethe’s *Faust*, which details Faust’s deal with the devil and his consequent descent into Hell.

Berlioz, who initially studied to be a doctor, maintained a keen interest in science and technology while championing the aesthetics of romantic opera through his adherence to the genre (Macdonald, 2005) including its tragic hero narrative, the privileging of intuition over rationality and the ‘idealization of nature’ (Sampson, 2010). The medieval castles, fantastical nature scenes and choruses of devils elaborately represented in nineteenth century opera houses contrasted significantly with the realities of working class life in a newly industrialized Europe. This tension became the central directorial conceit for Lepage’s *The Damnation of Faust* scenography.

Lepage’s set for Berlioz’s légende dramatique, built of twenty-four vertical quadrants, creates grand romantic images through modern technologies including video sequences and projections (i.e., twenty-four ballerinas performing in their individual quadrants as projected curtains billow furiously within each quadrant’s frame). The natural world, a highly celebrated trope in romanticism and an important muse for Berlioz (Macdonald, 2005) is depicted through various scenes referencing nature via technology. These segments serve not only to represent the popular opera aesthetics contemporary to Berlioz but also to reinforce important narrative tropes.



Figure 1. *The Damnation of Faust* featuring Marcello Giordani (Faust) and John Relyea (Mephistopheles), 2008 (photo: Ken Howard / Metropolitan Opera)

One such segment features a filmed underwater dream sequence depicting Faust floating weightlessly in a love-induced ecstasy. Here, Lepage delivers his interpretation of a man whose love is powerfully euphoric, leading Faust to an other-worldly state in which cherubic mer-women in flowing garments similar to his lover’s surround him, demonstrating that his adoration of Marguerite colours his every thought and action. In another sequence combining nature and technology via projections, Faust’s fervor for Marguerite is further incarnated on screen:

In Olga Borodina's aria [...] her blonde tresses appear to lift into flames, and with each movement, the flames—actually one image multiplied—burn higher and bluer as the tempo speeds up. While the Russian mezzo-soprano has a charismatically earthy voice, it's the visceral combination of flames and the giant image of her plastered across the scrims that is most arresting. (Mehta, 2009)

Lepage's set also functions to juxtapose Berlioz's love of the romantic aesthetic with his dedicated interest in the nineteenth century's budding technology. Resembling a giant reproduction of film or photography negatives, the set's quadrants use performers and film clips to depict movement sequences in progressive states. Eadweard Muybridge, a contemporary of Berlioz's who studied animal locomotion by deconstructing movement with photographed stills, would lay the foundation for early moving pictures. In keeping with his place/time resource (nineteenth century Europe) Lepage projects the English photographer's 'horse in motion' footage onto each quadrant of the set and incorporates live acrobats rigged to appear as if they are riding the horses. Through his employment of such sequences interspersed with the aforementioned images representing romanticism's expression of the natural world, Lepage gives spectators the option to re-author the music's meaning via an emphasis on the conditions of time and place.

Lepage's 2010-2012 staging of Richard Wagner's opera cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, demonstrates an exhaustive engagement with geography as the production's jumping-off point. Upon confirming his *Ring* collaboration with the Metropolitan Opera, Lepage and select collaborators from Ex Machina (his Québec-based theatre company) travelled to Iceland to explore the country and experience its terrain (Froemke, 2012). Once again, Lepage turned to historical-spatial mapping; he would use Iceland as the central conceit for his re-envisioning of Wagner's apocalyptic music drama, which takes its inspiration from the Icelandic *Prose Edda*, *Poetry Edda* and *Völsunga Saga* alongside the epic German poem, *Das Nibelungenlied* (Millington, 1992). In 2010, Lepage's forty-five ton *Ring* set, built of twenty-four computerized planks, brought the ideal of Iceland's shifting tectonic plates to the stage. This machine became the central site for meaning in Lepage's *Ring*; in coordination with the music, Lepage's set reconfigured itself to summon the Rhine via the individual rippling of consecutive planks and transformed again to offer a rainbow bridge to Valhalla, allowing Wagner's opera to be visually written in space. As later examples will demonstrate, Lepage used his set to further interpretive purposes through metamorphous scenography and a performance text born of interactions between the singers and the set.

http://ringcycle.metoperafamily.org/behind_the_scenes

Figure 2. Preview for *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera

Granted Lepage regularly employs historical-spatial mapping to provide interpretations of an extant text, his use of this conceit does not always produce clear readings. When it comes to Lepage's production of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, the use of historical-spatial mapping is unusually forced and struggles to offer an accessible reading of either the text or context. Instead of setting *The Rake's Progress* in its usual

London milieu, as depicted by William Hogarth's eighteenth century etchings, which are the inspiration for Stravinsky's opera (Taruskin, 1992), Lepage's production is set in the late nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties, moving from Texas oil country to Hollywood and Vegas. Lepage believed the Hollywood connection was relevant due to the fact that Stravinsky settled in Los Angeles with his wife in 1941 and made road trips throughout the country for concert engagements. Historical-spatial mapping becomes problematic here as Lepage's deference to Stravinsky's biography is coupled with constant references to a Wim Wenders film. Both conceits bear a too-distant connection to *The Rake's* narrative and the latter, though viewed by Lepage as an exciting interpretive angle, serves to obscure Stravinsky's narrative while demonstrating Lepage's universalized assumptions:

You've seen *Paris, Texas* by Wim Wenders? [...] Europeans have a way of depicting America that is completely different [...] There's a lot of beauty in there, a great love for American landscapes and desolation and all that. We're sending back to America the image of itself and its film culture, how we see it. (Lepage qtd. in Hurwitt, 2007)

While Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy succeeds in crafting a specifically Wenders-inspired locale, the relevance of this conceit remains unclear. As depicted in *Paris, Texas*, which charts a man's self-revelatory journey from Texas to Los Angeles, Wenders's America is a boundless Southwestern landscape marked by 'staggering beauty' (Ansen, 1984). Here, Lepage follows suit, depicting Texas as a wide-open landscape with little to clutter the stage. Through a video backdrop representing Texas's seemingly endless plains and star-studded sky, Lepage paints Tom's beginnings as humble. As *Paris, Texas* moves forward to depict the lead character's self-searching, cross country trip, Wenders summons expansive highways and road signs that we learn are crafted by the main character's brother. Similarly, Lepage sends Tom's beloved, Anne Trulove, on the same journey as she attempts to recover Tom and return with him to Texas. Through lighting and sound as well as a life-sized prop car creating the illusion that Anne is barreling along in her sporty 1950s vehicle, Lepage depicts long stretches of expansive Wenders-style highway lighting up as the car's high-beams flash on the iconic road signs leading up to L.A.

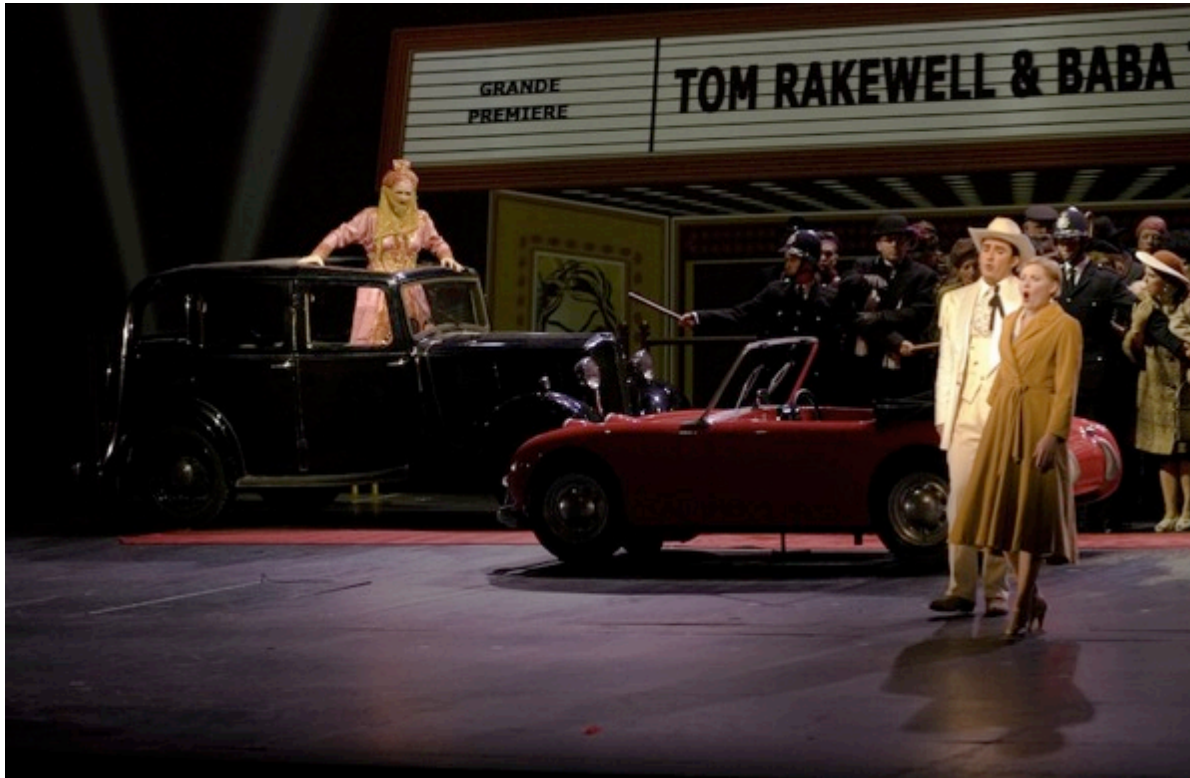


Figure 3. *The Rake's Progress* featuring Dagmar Peckova (Baba the Turk), Andrew Kennedy (Tom) and Laura Claycomb (Anne), Théâtre de la Monnaie, 2007 (photo: Boris Firquet)

Unlike his production of *The Damnation of Faust*, Lepage's references to the composer's cultural/historical milieu fail to serve *The Rake's* narrative. As Tim Ashley suggests, Lepage's transposition to Texas and later, Hollywood, functions with limited relevance and deflates the production's stakes: 'Stravinsky's viciously capitalist London is replaced by an unthreatening series of screen tests, location shoots and red-carpet parades. Later on, as ruin looms, Lepage makes points about television's erosion of cinematic glamour, which have nothing to do with Stravinsky's Hollywood experience' (2010). Given the availability of a far higher stakes biographical resource, based on Stravinsky's European tenure during which he faced exile to Switzerland, his wife's tuberculosis and the First World War, Lepage's choice of a Hollywood setting seems even more arbitrary. Moreover, beyond the minimal threat posed by Hollywood, Lepage's *Rake* also rings false due to repeated references in the libretto to London. Lepage's re-envisioning of operas works best with open-ended pieces set in flexible environments such as the *légende dramatique* or monodram; Stravinsky's traditional opera, set clearly in London and relying on specific details of the city during the eighteenth century, including the notoriously poor conditions endured by psychiatric patients at Bedlam and the syphilitic prostitutes populating local brothels, loses relevance in Lepage's transposition. In short, Lepage's choice of a place/time conceit undermines rather than illustrates *The Rake's* narrative.

Metamorphous Scenography

By naming the second tenet of Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy 'metamorphous scenography', I am referring to a dynamic stage space characterized by a set that shifts

position, height, depth, and/or composition to represent the director's interpretation of a written text. Such transformative scenography can be viewed in a range of contemporary productions, from the Wooster Group's evocative employment of shifting platforms and large video screens to suggest the complex memory-making process in *Vieux Carré* to Robert Wilson's lighting, which instantly frames actors posing in photographic tableaux and reconfigures stage space in Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. The term 'metamorphous scenography' is particularly relevant for Lepage's shifting sets as it aligns his work with Craig's 'architectonic' scenography, a technique first named by Denis Bablet in response to the English director's kinetic sets (McKinney and Butterworth, 2009). Craig rejected illusionistic scenery in favour of a minimalist, symbolist aesthetic, featuring moving walls and shifting platforms—literally fluid architecture; his scenography underwent these architectural transitions to evoke new configurations and, as combined with evocative lighting inspired by Appia, suggested the mood and atmosphere driving his interpretation of individual scenes featured in his extant text productions (McKinney and Butterworth, 2009).

Lepage's first opera staging, *Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung* at the Canadian Opera Company⁵ parallels Craig's evocative architectonic scenography. In the first production of this double bill, *Bluebeard's Castle*, Lepage's metamorphous scenography demonstrates its marked availability to unconventionally structured and, therefore, seldom produced works. *Bluebeard's Castle* focuses on Duke Bluebeard and his new wife, Judith. Although Bluebeard welcomes Judith into his castle, as she goes from room to room, opening seven different doors and discovering increasingly horrifying scenes, she begins to question her recent nuptials. Based on Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolist narrative, *Bluebeard's Castle* is mythical in character but maintains a keen self-awareness. To highlight the meta-theatrical question librettist Béla Balázs poses in the text of *Bluebeard's* prologue, which asks the audience, 'Where's the stage? Is it outside or in?' (Stewart, 2010), Lepage's set features the Brechtian device of an oversized frame, drawing attention to spectators' cognitive complicity in creating the drama. The set also transforms to reflect the grim realities of life in the castle and the terror experienced by Bluebeard's latest bride. As Judith opens the door to the first room, harsh red light reflects from within and projections create the illusion that the moaning walls are also bleeding as streams of blood trickle down the set. Through his depiction of Bluebeard's torture chamber, Lepage keeps the Duke's murderous intentions at the forefront of his conceit.



Figure 3. *Bluebeard's Castle* featuring John Relyea (Bluebeard) and Malgorzata Walewska (Judith), Seattle Opera, 2009 (photo: Rozarii Lynch)

In his aforementioned production of Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust*, Lepage encountered yet another unconventionally-crafted and seldom produced work. Because it contains sequences that present staging challenges, Berlioz's opera hybrid or 'légende dramatique' (Macdonald, 2005) is often limited to concert performances. Through metamorphous scenography, however, Lepage not only addresses the scenic challenges presented by *The Damnation of Faust* but also uses interactive technology to illustrate his meaning-makings conceit. To stage Berlioz's opera, Lepage and set designer Carl Fillion built a structure composed of twenty-four vertical quadrants or what Lepage calls 'a giant picture book' (qtd. in Bernatchez et al., 2009). This structure is used simultaneously as a playing space and backdrop for fluid digital projections and video segments mimicking the lavish pictorial depictions of nature that define romantic opera production.

These digital projections also serve as a key interpretive device for Lepage to present his reading of the characters' inner lives. In this, he uses advanced technology to pursue a staging technique synonymous with Josef Svoboda. As defined by Svoboda, psycho-plastic space is a dramatic space that reflects characters' emotional states through shifts in scenography (McKinney and Butterworth 111). Given the limitations of technology and scenic design in the mid-twentieth century, Svoboda once made due with moving walls and a suspended overhead mirror to convey Hamlet's skewed perspective in a 1965 production: 'The spectator saw a double [...] vertical movement of menacing monolithic objects vividly conveying the sense of a crushing dehumanizing world with which Hamlet must cope' (Kennedy, 202).

In the first scene of *Damnation*, Lepage employs Svoboda's psycho-plastic space with digital technology as an elderly Faust appears in his library, lamenting his solitary

existence. To underline the character's isolation, Lepage replaces a projected wall of books with digital footage featuring a grey sky populated by an ominous flock of black birds. Worn by the performer playing Faust, motion sensors register shifts in the singer's voice and body enabling his pitch, pace and movement to dictate the birds' trajectory. As the music swells and Faust's lament becomes particularly plaintive, the flock of birds expands and moves upwards, disappearing in the grey sky; this interactive sequence mimics the singer's dynamic and melodic trajectory while also suggesting that Faust is desperate to escape his isolation. A further example of Lepage's metamorphous scenography involves Mephistopheles's appearance to Faust in the forest. Through motion sensors attached to the performer's body, Mephistopheles's sinister nature is relayed through an arresting image of death; as he passes different trees in the forest, they die instantly, rapidly withering and shedding their leaves.

The Rake's Progress offers low-tech variations on how Lepage's transformative scenography can 'extend and illuminate' aspects of the original text' (Pamela Howard qtd. in McKinney and Butterworth, 2009). When Tom abandons his true love (literally Anne Trulove) and Texas homeland to conquer Hollywood, Lepage uses scenic metaphors to frame Tom's judgment as faulty and disaster-bound. One scene, in which a disillusioned Tom snorts cocaine, features his movie-set trailer actually inflating and deflating before spectators' eyes. Through metamorphous scenography, Lepage suggests that much like his deflated trailer, Tom's Hollywood career and vastly inflated ego are both on the verge of imminent collapse. Moreover, Tom's strategic, fame-driven marriage to the celebrated bearded lady, Baba the Turk, is metaphorically revealed as loveless when the main feature of the couple's extravagant property materializes. The too perfect, blue luxury pool adorning the Rakewell-Turk estate is created through pristine periwinkle lighting gels and trompe d'oeil scenography⁶. For the majority of the scene, the pool remains empty; here Lepage offers the conventional moral for Stravinsky's opera—the pursuit of ephemeral wealth and fame is no match for a life lived with love.

The Performing Body as Meaning-Maker

Be it through non-speaking bodies, the physical challenges presented to actors via spatial limitations or the use of metaphorical acting machines in which a kinetic set prompts a meaning-making dialogue between actors and their environments, numerous companies rely on physicality to make meaning. While Forced Entertainment most recently presented dancing ghosts and animated trees in *The Coming Storm*, auteurs Thomas Ostermeier and Calixto Bieito have both made a literal mess of Shakespeare, having characters enact their emotional journeys by writhing, playing and even consuming dirt. For its part, Station House Opera has dramatically offered up a commitment to embodied staging with productions such as *Drunken Madness*, in which performers are suspended under the Brooklyn Bridge. Hailing from such influences as Antonin Artaud, Jacques Lecoq and Vsevolod Meyerhold, Lepage's process also includes an expansive view of the body's role in performance, employing it as a site whereupon meaning is developed and ultimately unfolds.

In *The Damnation of Faust*, Lepage focuses his scenographic dramaturgy on the

signifying potential of non-speaking bodies when interpreting Berlioz's libretto. In both cases discussed herein, the body's role as primary communicator is integral to conveying the meaning of each scene. Lepage downplays Berlioz's triumphant 'Hungarian March' (Haupt, 2008) which celebrates war, by offering a counter-narrative; war's futility is emphasized as the female chorus members' musical tribute to their absent partners is accompanied by scenography representing death as a routine facet of battle. Portrayed from an aerial perspective, soldiers on cables repeatedly march into battle by walking vertically up the set's back scrim only to re-emerge as lifeless corpses falling to the ground after a series of gunshots are heard. Through non-speaking bodies and scenography, Lepage goes against the text (or score) to counter conventional interpretations of this scene, thus 're-writing' an extant work by offering spectators an embodied, uncommon (albeit not unique) reading—the heroics of war are easily superseded by the banality and anonymity of daily slaughter on the battlefield. Lepage also uses an evocative embodied conceit for *The Damnation of Faust's* denouement. Prior to the first choral note being sung, Faust's arrival in Berlioz's underworld seemingly functions to characterize Hell as a great equivocator—through a large chorus of shirtless men bathed in projected images of crackling fire, Faust learns that everyone is punished equally in Hell.

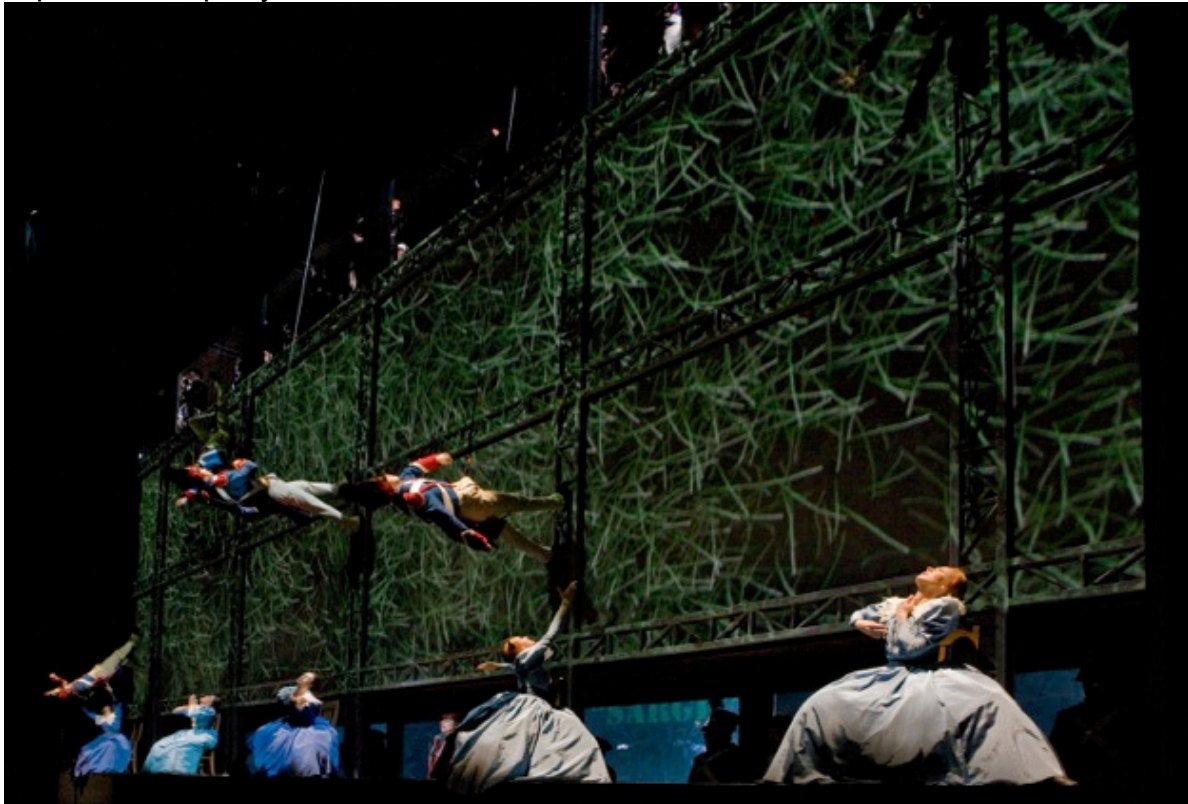


Figure 4. *The Damnation of Faust*, 2008 (photo: Kent Howard/Metropolitan Opera)



Figure 5. *The Damnation of Faust* featuring John Relyea (Mephistopheles), 2008 (photo: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera)

Erwartung, Schoenberg's operatic 'monodram' of the aforementioned double-billed *Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung*, offers an instance of Lepage using silent bodies in space to reflect a character's internal state. *Erwartung* follows the story of a mentally unstable young woman who searches the forest at night for her lover's body. She first mistakes a tree trunk for her lover prior to discovering his actual corpse and then wanders away from the scene in a disoriented, panicked state. While Schoenberg's original *Erwartung* narrative is crafted for one performer, 'the woman', Lepage chooses to literally embody her psychosis by adding three acrobats to portray the imagined figures in her tortured mind. As the woman sings her aria, the three sources of her agony—her therapist, her murdered lover and his mistress—appear from an aerial perspective on the set's back wall (via rigged harnesses). Through a 'painfully slow' backdrop of acrobatic sequences, Lepage's staging physically embodies Schoenberg's vision:



Figure 5. *Erwartung* featuring Susan Marie Pierson (*The Woman*), Seattle Opera, 2009 (photo: Rozarii Lynch)

the composer ‘once remarked that the whole work [...] represented in slow motion everything that occurs in a single second of the greatest psychological stress’ (Neighbour, 1992). Spectators are not left to imagine the woman’s torment; instead, they are confronted by her inner psychological turmoil in material form.

To seek out what he terms the ‘hidden text’ (qtd. in Dundjerovic, 2009: 43) in both his devised work and stagings of extant texts, Lepage inevitably turns to corporeal experiments or spatial ‘play’ to make meaning in rehearsals (as did Meyerhold and Lecoq). When directing Shakespeare, Lepage follows the Artaudian principle of investigating the possibilities of the actor’s body in space, thus de-privileging the written text’s assumed position as the stage’s primary language; he instructs the cast to ‘Be respectful of the work but not of Shakespeare [...] Each word is an object. Play with the sound and sense of the words. Treat them like toys’ (qtd. in Johnson, 2001: 92).

For his 1993 production *Shakespeare Rapid Eye Movement* in Munich, which featured German adaptations of *Richard III*, *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Lepage faced a language barrier as his cast possessed varying levels of English and he spoke no German. To elicit the interpretation he’d envisioned—a frenetic representation of Shakespeare’s dreams as ‘rapid, visual and full of movement’ (qtd. in Johnson, 2001: 137)—Lepage turned to the body and spatiality, particularly in scenes from *Richard III*. In this section of the production, bodies are effectively used to dramaturgical ends just prior to Richard’s death featuring Richmond (Hans Piesbergen) and Richard (Rufus Beck). Lepage turns to spatial limitations telling Beck that no matter what impulse he experienced, he had to remain seated. Through these corporeal restrictions (which are drawn from Lepage’s Lecoq training⁷), Lepage summons a fictional space through actors’ bodies while also foreshadowing the new world order Shakespeare presents at the play’s conclusion. In a telling juxtaposition, Lepage directs

Richmond to pace about freely in the space; this open, boundless trajectory reinforces Richmond's position as a character foil, amplifying Richard's physical limitations and habitation of a static, confined space. This embodied staging also foreshadows the withered king's impending demise at the hands of his young, agile successor, Richmond. Through Beck's physical choices, including using his chair to 'huddle in a fetal position, tied in a knot' (Johnson, 2001:100) fictional space appears to be closing in on Richard as the dramatic action is doing just that.

Through the emotional catalyst of the acting machine, performing bodies offer further representational possibilities. An heir to Meyerhold's biomechanics, this scenic concept uses fluid, transformative space⁸ (including sets that shift position, height, depth, and/or composition throughout a production) to prompt a central meaning-making dialogue between actors and their environments (McKinney and Butterworth, 2009:137-138). Lepage presents his interpretation of the *Ring* by prompting singers to interact with his constantly morphing set, a ninety-thousand pound structure composed of twenty-four vertical planks which are reconfigured via computer control and manual manipulation.

In act three of *Die Walküre*, the solemn mood established by the fallen heroes is offset by adolescent giggles and playful cavorting among Brunhilde and her Valkyrie sisters; each character sits astride a bridled plank and revels in the see-saw motions of her flying 'steed'. Through this interactive, adrenaline-producing conceit, Lepage encourages the women to feel joyful invigoration which prompts their bodies to communicate a meaning that breaks with conventional interpretations; while the Valkyrie are traditionally still and solemn in this scene, their bodies enacting grief and stoicism, Lepage turns the tables by emphasizing the youth and humanity of Wagner's warriors as they sing their battle cries and slide off their 'horses' with enthusiastic laughter. Similarly, Siegmund's terrified sprint from persecution in the forest takes on a new urgency thanks to a scenic reconfiguration that forces the performer (Jonas Kaufmann) to seemingly negotiate a maze of giant (digital) trees. As critic Anthony Tommasini notes, by having Kaufmann invest his whole body in navigating such difficult terrain, Lepage greatly enhances the dramatic tension of Wagner's score: 'It was an arresting realization of action depicted in the opera only in fitful orchestral music' (2011).



Figure 6. 'The Ride of the Valkyries', *Die Walküre*, 2011 (photo: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera)



Figure 7. 'The Ride of the Valkyries', *Die Walküre*, 2011 (photo: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera)

Conclusion

As demonstrated herein, the central components of Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy—historical-spatial mapping, metamorphous scenography and kinetic bodies—yield varying implications in production. Though Lepage's signature approach sometimes struggles to provide a clear reading, it often succeeds in illuminating a text. Overall, Lepage's scenographic dramaturgy demonstrates the evocative potential of a highly visual and physical performance text, particularly with regards to more open-

ended canonical works. While his scenographic dramaturgy is effective at suggesting unconventional readings and drawing out subtext, it also enhances traditional interpretations. As Lepage continues to produce inventive opera stagings via projects including Thomas Adès's *The Tempest* at the Metropolitan Opera, his place in the twenty-first century theatre continuum will no doubt be integral to contemporary performance's continued dialogue with scenic writing.

1 Penny Woolcock first staged *Dr. Atomic* at the Metropolitan Opera in 2008.

2 Jacques Lessard, Lepage's teacher, trained with Anna Halprin to learn a devised process known as the RSVP cycles. Lessard rejigged Halprin's model and passed it on to Lepage as the Repère cycles.

3 □ *Seven Streams* uses Hiroshima as its central resource, tracking the lives of those affected both directly and indirectly by the bomb while *Needles and Opium* takes Paris and New York as its inspiration, charting the reverse journeys of Miles Davis and Jean Cocteau over the Atlantic in 1949. Further examples of historical-spatial mapping are featured in *The Far Side of the Moon*, *Tectonic Plates*, *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables* and *The Andersen Project*, among others.

4 □ *The Damnation of Faust* was restaged at the Metropolitan Opera in 2008.

5 □ Originally presented at the Canadian Opera Company in 1993 with a 2009 revival at Seattle Opera.

6 □ As depicted in Lepage's production, the pool is a tribute to British artist David Hockney, a painter famed for his depictions of LA pools. Hockney also designed scenery and costumes for an iconic 1975 production of *The Rake's Progress*.

7 □ Lecoq used exercises emphasizing the body's capacity as a scenographic vehicle. In one activity, actors are told to communicate with one another across thousand of miles of open forest while actually confined to a small stage space. This teaches them that the body can evoke/perform large or small spaces through specific gestures and movements suited to the fictional space (Lecoq 2000: 65).

8 Lepage's one man adaptation of *Hamlet, Elsinore*, offers an earlier example of the metaphorical acting machine at work. (The production's title further references Lepage's interest in historical-spatial mapping.) For a detailed discussion of this production, see Andy Lavender's insightful and succinct publication *Hamlet in Pieces*.

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