

INTRODUCTION

Long before Robert Lepage came to the world of cinema, he had been internationally recognised as a director, writer, actor and designer of imaginative and innovative theatre work. He went on to achieve both national and international critical acclaim with his film-making, having taken up the medium in the mid-1990s. This is the first book-length study of Lepage's film work, and it offers comprehensive analysis of his four films to date: *Le Confessionnal* (1995), *Le Polygraphe* (1996), *Nô* (1998) and *Possible Worlds* (2000).

Lepage's films are inextricably linked to his theatre work, not only by the way they transform narratives from theatre to cinema but also by introducing theatrical vocabulary into cinematic language. In this, he follows in the tradition of many celebrated film directors who have drawn upon their own interdisciplinary experience – particularly that of theatre – such as Sergei Eisenstein, Orson Welles, Jean Cocteau, Andrzej Wajda and Mike Leigh.

Lepage thinks about theatre in a cinematic way: based on a Québécois tradition of collectively creating 'text' for theatre and dance performance, his theatre practice is thus fundamental to his creation of film narratives. Thematically and stylistically, his films reflect the concerns and preoccupations that permeated much of the 1990s: shifts in social, individual and political boundaries and borders; conflicts between the personal and the collective, and the national and global; the phenomenon of creative expression through a hybrid of arts, culture and new technology (particularly the use of internet and digital systems). The aim of this book is to respond to these interests by engaging with Lepage's film-making through the perspective of his personal world, his creative process borrowed from performance art, and the film's social and cultural context. Robert Lepage is a film auteur, and his work will be examined from the

viewpoint of *new auteurism*, which recognises the interrelationship of the personal style of a film auteur with important underlying social, political, cultural, economic and technological factors.

Cultural context: existing in between worlds

Robert Lepage's film narratives, as with those of other Québécois directors, reflect the social and political conditions dominant in Québécois 'national' cinema. The prevailing question of what constitutes national cinema is of course a complex one, particularly within the context of the North American film industry, where actors, directors and funding are usually culled from a variety of 'nations'.

The tension between global and national narratives is a significant driving force in Lepage's theatre and film work. National cinema, like any other national art, is an embodiment of national allegorical specificity. In the main, the themes and narratives of Québécois films have ideological aims: to re-order the past, construct a national identity and reflect a fictionalised collective self. Such political factors are intrinsically linked with notions of national selfhood and important influences on the development of the institutional structures (exercised through funding agencies) of a Québécois national cinema.

Approaching film-making with the experience of international theatre, Lepage's aim is not to make films only for the Québécois and French-speaking world, nor simply to expand on the political debates around national identity. He is interested in telling stories to an international audience about the relationships between personal and collective identity, the social centre and its periphery, past and present, reality and memory, truth and myth.

Key questions in Québécois cinema, which Lepage's work responds to, are thus how personal memory represents collective identity and imagined collective memory forms individual identity. He entered the terrain of Québécois cinema after a new generation of film-makers – Denys Arcand, Jacques Leduc, Léa Pool, Raúl Ruiz, among others – had shifted the emphasis of their work. Previously combining documentary with fictionalised notions of the 'real', they had produced a distinctly Québécois cinema which simultaneously engendered the idea of reality and acknowledged their national self. These film-makers have since sought to develop a more aesthetically and individually-driven work, which responded to global narratives, urban experiences and personal (rather than collective) political beliefs and notions of national identity.

Into this cinematic space, Lepage has brought fictionalised identities and a plurality of possible existences, lives full of overlapping and often colliding worlds, and a subjective view on personal and collective myths and memories. Nick Mansfield points out that

our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience. In

this way, the subject is always linked to something outside of it – an idea or principle or the society of other subjects. It is this linkage that the word subject insists upon. (2000: 3)

Lepage constructs the subjective experience of his characters through their involvement with the outside world, but this is a world that extends far beyond the local and familiar. At the same time, Lepage's film characters never fully depart from their local environment, nor do they forget their past. The pertinent question for Lepage, then, is how will the past be relevant for the present moment?

Narrative as myth and memory can be reordered according to the present moment, selected and edited based on personal as well as collective needs to tell a story in a particular way. Lepage points out that Pierre Falardeau's film *15 février 1839* (2001), about the Patriots' Rebellion in Lower-Canada (now Québec), received most of the available funds from government in 2001, thus preventing the funding of other film projects. The narrative of this film was fundamentally dealing, as Lepage points out, with 'remembering the past in a certain way' and 'correcting the history' (2002). The film was very well received by Québécois audiences, which suggests that an obsession with the past is pertinent in present-day Québec.

The contradiction and tension in Québec between new and old world; modernity and postmodernity, localism and internationalism, personal and collective, is all too apparent in Lepage's work. Taking up these themes, Bill Marshall's seminal book, *Québec National Cinema* (2001), offers a valuable explanation of the relationship between Québec's cinema and its national identity. His study ends with an examination of memory and *Le Confessionnal*, stating that 'memory is not within us as individuals; rather, we are within memory, of the nation and of the world' (2001: 312). Lepage is interested in communicating these experiences and connecting to the world, in exploring what it is that makes us similar and different, expressing the problematic, and never fully resolving characters' feelings and conflicts.

So what is the place of Lepage's cinema of personalised visual imagery and poetics of memory in the context of Québécois cinema? How does the 'personal' in his films work in combination with the social and cultural pressures for commercial success and the representation of national identity? His cultural milieu is rooted in the contradictions of contemporary Canada and Québec. Québec (as geographically part of North America) is, indeed, in postmodern terms, culturally and nationally unstable terrain, made of a set of social contracts where the need to preserve the past collides with a pragmatic present, where a plurality of perspectives and multi-disciplinary forms thrive alongside modernity, protectionism and nationalism. These conflicting forces are a complex of influences that shape the conception and reception of film narrative.

Lepage's work has to be considered against the outside influences shaping Québécois cinema. His film narratives give presence to Québec cinema within the context of the global film industry dominated by Hollywood and to lesser extent Europe. It is a significant problem for any national cinema attempting to find a

space for the representation of its own authentic voice – from the use of English as a world cinema language to the adoption of specific filming styles, stories and themes. Increased dominance by US cultural models and the ownership of cinemas by American corporations have affected Québécois society, no less than any other regional society: in multiplex cinemas and on cable television, ‘the same cultural products are shown across the continent’ (Dickinson & Young 2003: 365).

Critical context: performance, technology and media

Historically, film theory has been dominated by two central concerns: the establishment of film as an art form, and the exploration of its social and cultural function. Motivated by the desire to elevate the status of film theory, using films as a visual text that can be recorded and analysed from a theoretical perspective, theorists have attempted to incorporate the dominant relevant discourse of the day. There is a tendency in film criticism to interpret films using methodologies employed by other disciplines: literature, psychoanalysis, politics, cultural studies, sociology, feminism, to name but a few. In order to understand Lepage’s creative process it is important to look at his film-making within the context of performance theory and practice. Considering his work as an auteur, this book will examine how theatre performance techniques, in particular Ann Halprin’s RSVP Cycles – a creative process for dance theatre – and Alan Knapp’s devised performance techniques, are used in transforming theatricality, character and *mise-en-scène* to create a film text.

As with his work in theatre, opera, rock concert and television, Lepage is a creator of film texts who uses the specific technology of a medium to tell a story, as an instrument of narration. Nick James’s observation that North America’s ‘most creatively fertile cinemas’ are at a point of change, with an uncertain future due to new digital and internet technology, helps us to understand the context in which Lepage operates:

It is thus a timely opportunity to consider the shifting parameters of the contemporary North American film industry, and illuminate the variety of currently working film-makers ... auteurs, movie brats, studio hacks and independent artists. It may very well be that, as cheaper movie-making technology enables more people to be included in directing such as this, the cinema will become richer and stranger. (2002: xix)

Cinema began as a technological device, a bastard child of photography and live performance, incorporating elements of theatre, painting and literature. Popular use of digital technology in film and theatre making will, in all likelihood, allow a change in the way film and theatre are made and perceived. Lepage points out that there may now be emerging a form of art located somewhere in the middle, between theatre and film:

I really think that there's not a lot of hope for theatre as it is today and there's not a lot of hope for cinema in the direction it's going right now ... And there's a place in the middle I think, and there's a form of art and I don't know what it looks like and I don't know what's going to happen ... but I am sure it's going to happen and that's what I'm interested in. (2002)

Lepage did not come out of the film industry, nor did his personal creativity follow industrialised production methods. Rather, his film-making process is suggestive of theatrical collective creation and collaboration. Lepage's cinema cannot be viewed separately from his efforts as a multi-disciplinary artist; his films are adaptations of other film and theatre texts. He works as a renaissance artist, freely engaging with other art forms essential to his self-expression, and unafraid to enter into group collaboration where art is produced in the workshop. It is not surprising that throughout the history of film, works external to the cinematic canon of the time, such as Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), succeeded in extending the vocabulary of film as a medium by bringing a new set of references borrowed from other disciplines. Welles came from theatre and placed the camera as a spectator in different perspectives, and Resnais, drawing on new avant-garde literature, displaced the chronological order of plot with subjective recollections.

Lepage is an important auteur not only because of the quality of his films, but also because of the manner in which he works. He is engaged in the analysis of the nature of cinema itself and the exploration of the medium, seeking to move cinema further into the area where film and theatre merge. Like other film artists entering cinema from a variety of other disciplines, Lepage brings with him a creative vocabulary developed in live performance as actor, director and writer. Coming to film from theatre thus freed Lepage from the burdens of a heritage of film theory and practice, having neither formal training nor experience in the film industry. He has therefore attempted to use film solely as a medium, exploring its potentials and shortfalls.

Prior to working in film, Lepage spent 15 years with his Québec-based theatre group. Every one of his films comes out of, or is related to, a theatre production. This way of working in theatre was thus transported into film narrative and these performance influences will be closely examined in chapter one. Some of the actors from the theatre group also worked on Lepage's films. These and Lepage's other collaborators were more than colleagues; they were long-standing friends, part of an extended family. They include: Marie Brassard, Marie Gignac, Patrick Goyette, Richard Fréchette, and Normand Bissonette among others. The composers Robert Caux (*Le Polygraphe*) and Michel Côté (*Nô*) composed the original music for Lepage's films as well as for his theatre productions. At his studio base in La Caserne in the rue Dalhousie in Québec City, where most of the interior shots for *Nô* were filmed, Lepage controlled all aspects of the work, by having his collaborators on site, with offices facing the central studio space. La Caserne has also been used for theatre production rehearsals; it is a generic performance space for multi-media productions.

In his studio Lepage experiments with both theatre and film, exploring the technology of these media.

Central to Lepage's cinema is the adaptation of narratives and working methods taken from his theatre practice. These exchanges between media merit close scrutiny and will also be examined in chapter one. Like Jean Cocteau, Mike Leigh or Woody Allen, Lepage is an artist who works with his group of actors around very personal themes. Similarly to that of Mike Leigh, Lepage's devising process places character at the centre of the creative process basing development of the story on the actor/co-creator. Lepage creates his cinematic imagery primarily through engagement with Québec's social and cultural milieu. Film narratives are symbolically related to the loss of space of Québec's national identity, and the social, political and cultural factors that shape such film narrative will be considered in chapter two.

Lepage's film debut, *Le Confessionnal*, was the result of an invitation to direct a film that would bear the creative signature of his theatre work. He did not bring with him any inherited clichés of the cinematic medium, or concrete ideas of how films should be made. He was relatively 'innocent' and convention-free from the craftsmanship of the medium. As a consequence, his films create personal worlds made of poetic and visual images that favour a subjective position over 'group thought'. With *Le Confessionnal* Lepage discovered that it was his own ideas and impulses that were critically acclaimed. After this experience, he wanted to learn more about film by just doing it: 'So, that's how I was pushed into this thing. Now that I'm in it, I'm trying to learn how to do it. That's why now I'm doing these little improv things with a DV camera, and I'm trying to do my own school and to learn how to understand the medium' (Lepage 2002). With each new film, he continues to educate himself in order to discover something new and relevant about contemporary life.

Lepage's theatre has frequently displayed his interest in science, in particular the relationship between human biology and identity in terms of genetic coding and its influence over behaviour. His films reflect this fascination with nature and the information we receive from our biological setting rather than conventional social and psychological framing of the subject. The most overt reference to science is in *Possible Worlds*, where the central image is the human brain on a life-support system and the narrative collages of multiple realities created by the brain. However, in each of his three previous films, Lepage uses biological factors as an important reference point. In *Le Confessionnal*, there are consciously repeated pointers to signs of diabetes and blindness used as proof of parenthood. In *Le Polygraphe*, the central image is a lie detector, questioning the nature of truth and the imperfection of personal memory. In *Nô*, the main character discovers that she is pregnant but is unsure who the real father is.

Lepage relies heavily on his own recurring themes in communicating through 'universal' images that relate to the spectator in the manner of Jungian archetypes. Trusting the work to show itself, looking for hidden connections and similarities, using personal and collective memories and playing with them, following intuition and

freely associating ideas – these are the essential aspects of Lepage’s poetics of memory. Thus, this work has to consider the sources from which these ways of working are formed and attempt to rationally explain an aestheticism that fundamentally privileges the irrational, fantasy and imagination.

The poetic interpretation of memory has a thematic and structural presence in Lepage’s film narrative. His characters are in emotional states of being, responding to a set of outside influences; they are trying to understand their past and present selves in situations of grief, loss, doubt, anxiety, loneliness, displacement and personal chaos. Chapters three, four, five and six examine his films individually and pose key questions central to his engagement with memory. An exclusive interview with Robert Lepage is included as an appendix, offering a first-hand insight into the director’s work.

I very much hope that this book will be of interest to readers in film studies and contemporary performance studies, multi-media, postmodernism, and those interested in cultural and personal memory. It should also attract those concerned with Québécois and Canadian national cinema in the representation of personal and collective identities. Finally, I hope that the reader will find my attempts to engage with Lepage’s life and cinema on the crossroads of the poetic and the real, the personal and the collective, the national and the international, both stimulating and provocative.