

‘A certain danger’: Contemporary performer engagement with the texts and methodology of Robert Lepage.

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Abstract

Between September 2008 and February 2009, a cohort of third year Drama Studies undergraduates at De Montfort University (DMU) in the UK adapted and then performed ‘The Seven Streams of the River Ota’ by Robert Lepage and Ex Machina. In my capacity as a module tutor, I acted as a director for the project. The original professional production developed between 1994 and 1996 was indelibly connected to and constructed upon the individual, creative contributions of the artistic company (performers and technicians) that Lepage assembled. It is therefore, arguably, a multiple set of autobiographical narratives. By perceiving the text in this way, as a reflexive creation, it prompts several questions for practitioners:

What potential is there for performers to find creative ownership and authorship when they are approaching such a text for the first time? Can the ‘embers’ of the written dramatic text ignite a new performance text? What performance challenges are created when performers are asked to navigate between written (dramatic) and devised (performance) text within one production?

The intention of this paper is to illuminate and analyze these questions by correlating our specific rehearsal and performance experience with the contemporary debate on Lepage’s own work. Reflections will be offered upon the possibilities and challenges created for performers in the intersection between an extant dramatic text of Lepage and the personalized, devising imperative of his working methodology.

Context

To contextualize the work of the student performers, I offer the reader a brief synopsis of the play (as originally created by Robert Lepage and his Canadian based company Ex Machina) and a summary of our adaptation. ‘The Seven Streams of the River Ota’ was, in its final version, an epic play spanning several decades within the narrative and lasting over eight hours in performance. The ‘seven streams’ referred to in the title are a literal reference to the tributaries of the River Ota in Hiroshima, Japan and a metaphorical frame on which to construct seven interconnecting narratives that link the global catastrophes of the atom bomb, the Holocaust and AIDS through the personal lives of those that were affected by them. As a performance group, the students and myself at DMU chose to focus on the narratives within the first four ‘streams’ as written in the text, so therefore it may be pertinent to offer some insight into these sections. Central plots within these ‘streams’ include the love affair between Nozomi (a ‘Hibakusha’: survivor of the Hiroshima bomb) and an American serviceman, Luke, who is in Japan to survey the damage for the US military. Luke is already married with a son in America but the new relationship blossoms and eventually leads to a child being born; unbeknownst to Luke. The plot is inspired by the narrative of ‘Madame Butterfly’, but unlike the opera, we see the long term after-r effects of the relationship as Luke returns to New York where he slowly dies of leukemia as a result of being exposed to the radiation.

His son from his first marriage, Jeffrey, is looking after his dying father in New York when Luke's Japanese son, another Jeffrey, arrives in the same apartment block by chance. They self title themselves Jeffrey 1 (American) and Jeffrey 2 (Japanese) to avoid confusion and over time they grow to realize their shared familial ties and become close brothers. This bond is tested until the end of Jeffrey 1's life as he asks Jeffrey 2 and his wife to be witnesses at his own assisted suicide which is his escape from the physical ravages and uncertain future of AIDS. The fourth 'stream' spins off from the New York apartment as well as it centres on the memories of another tenant, Ada Weber, who recounts the tragedy of separation from her mother, Sarah, during the Holocaust. Returning to the theme of 'Madame Butterfly', Sarah is an opera singer imprisoned in the Terezin camp, who's only escape from the pain of separation is to sing and finally, as with Butterfly herself, to take her own life. I selected these first four narrative 'streams' for the students and we used them both as a text to realize on stage, but also as stimuli from which to devise three or four other narratives of our own. The devising process eventually led to new plotlines centering on the following:

The 'Enola Gay' crew who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and the Captain Paul Tibbets in particular. The relationship between Laura, an English art student (who visits New York in 2008) and the 'Sphinx'; another ex-resident of the apartment block. We discover that he is living with, and making art in response to, the death of his wife in the tragedy of 9/11. The story of brother and sister George and Hannah Brady during and after the Holocaust. George survived but struggles to live with the memories of his sister who died. The lives of webcam sexworkers. This took its inspiration from the theme of cameras (and what an image can reveal and hide) which is key to the original text. Note – this tangential narrative was introduced by myself rather than generated by the students. The detailed creation of these narratives is not central to the analysis within this paper but offers the reader some indication of how the Lepage methodology prompts radical revisions in the adaptation process and the incumbent challenges that ensue when old and new text have to be reconciled.

What the student performers hold in their hand feels, to all intents and purposes, like a finished article. It looks like a play, it reads like a play; indeed it seems anything but a catalyst for devising as it potentially runs for over eight hours without any additions being made. There is nothing initially to suggest ephemerality or temporality. The text of 'The Seven Streams of the River Ota' that the students possess is indeed a faithful transcription of the performances given by the company of Ex Machina in 1996 at the Wiener Festwochen. Yet the seeming permanence of the script is illusory as it was almost instantly superseded in the evolutionary process of Ex Machina's work. "...it seems appropriate to think of this script as a snapshot of The River Ota at a certain point in its history – specifically as it was performed in Vienna in June 1996. The river will have flowed on, and doubtless there will be changes, both major and minor in the production

by the time this script sees print.”¹ The challenge for the group begins to be revealed when we recognize the nature of the choices with which they are faced. If they attempt to stage the play as written (putting aside the pragmatic issues of duration, technical complexity and expense) what exactly will be presented: a misguided facsimile of Lepage and Ex Machina; a reproduction of a work that can only truly be interpreted by a specific group within a specific time and place from a decade ago? Or do they re-negotiate the text? Is it possible to find the artistic conviction and personal connections with the narratives in order to re arrange and augment the existing structure? Initially this may sound like an over complication of a production / devising process but it is timely to remember that initially the actors working on the original ‘Seven Streams’ had the freedom to start from their own personal perspectives, with a ‘clean page’ for ideas; unencumbered by existing script. The very nature of Lepage’s RSVP and Repère methodology² is centered on the imperative to begin from the intra - personal perspective. “It is commonly accepted in discourse on Lepage’s theatricality that his directing and devising emphasize the performers’ subjectivity, intuition, and spontaneity.”³ Whereas, the student performers at De Montfort University find themselves in a hinterland between what exists and what may exist, between the imagination of another and the imagination of the self, between the demands of a script and the demands of a methodology. This is the central challenge that this work seeks to document.

For many years Lepage has applied the RSVP methodology of Anna and Lawrence Halprin and the Repère cycles methodology of his one time mentor/collaborator Jacques Lessard within his devising work (with the emphasis latterly being on the less prescriptive RSVP process). James Bunzli, citing Lawrence Halprin, outlines the RSVP methodology as follows: “Lawrence Halprin defines the components of the RSVP Cycles: R: Resources, which are what you have to work with. These include human and physical resources and their motivation and aims. S: Scores, which describe the process leading to the performance. V: Valuation, which analyses the results of action and possible selectivity and decisions. The term "valuation" is one coined to suggest the action- oriented as well as the decision-oriented aspects of V in the cycle. P: Performance, which is the resultant of scores and is the style of the process.”⁴ The DMU performers were introduced to these practices within a workshop led by Aleksandar Saša Dundjerović who has worked alongside Lepage and written extensively on his work. So, the group had an early exposure to the notion of ‘transformative *mise en scène*’ which builds upon RSVP methodology and is central to the philosophy and praxis of Lepage. “At the heart of his transformative *mise en scène* are performers’ fragmentary individual and group experiences, shaped by the audience’s reception. The transformative *mise en scène* reinforces the postmodern and post structuralist notion of infinite possibilities of reading, without an author – imposed meaning setting a limit to the reader’s (spectator’s) response.”⁵

Aleksandar emphasized the instinctive nature with which the text should be explored and elevated the potential for the group to initiate new ‘streams’ (or storylines) that could reflect their experiences. The prospect, from Aleksandar’s perspective, of a Lepage facsimile was seen to be an unproductive exercise as he stated: “...what is the point in copying ‘Seven Streams’. The stories belong to someone else.”⁶ With this in mind, the group was invited to approach the text as negotiable; a point of entry and departure (akin to the metaphorical function of the airport in ‘Zulu Times’⁷) which can be edited, re ordered and elaborated upon. For a drama lecturer, such as myself, this offered a liberating opportunity as it offered a creative marriage between the ‘concreteness’ of textual exploration and the unknown of devising. Students had a firm base from

which to begin but also the permission (inherent in Lepage's methodology) to rewrite text and create new material within an already established stylistic framework. In principle, therefore, the path was clear, yet the process from this point forth generated a range of anxieties which on reflection could have been partially predicted. The student performers perception of text and its value is particularly worthy of record here. They placed a noticeable significance on the existing text to the extent that the roles and narratives within the 1996 translation held a pre-eminence over any self- created material and created an initial block to initiating personal scores and new 'streams'. Tension, therefore, arose in the process of allocating the roles that were already 'prescribed' by Lepage as many saw these prescribed characters as *the* central figures within the drama rather than an initial set of roles on which to build significant others. Whilst it was unforeseen, in retrospect it may be viewed as perfectly understandable if consideration is given to the pre-eminence of text within the drama 'training' and drama education of students; both within university and the UK secondary/tertiary education process (11 – 18 years). Whilst the student performers have experience of devising within other situations, when presented with a play text there is an instinct, learned over many years, to value the written word and perceive it as permanent and authorial in prescribing boundaries. Amplifying this anxiety and reluctance to forfeit the haven of the text is the student perception of the visual nature of Lepage's work. The text that is potentially being created is not only rooted in devised, self- reflexive material, it is also grounded in a visual language that gives prominence to the kinetic and proxemic inter-action between actor, audience, space and technology; the *mise en scène* or, as Dundjerović has referred to it: '*techno en scène*'.⁸ The presumption that the performers would accept parity between these two approaches – the line on the page and the action in space – was not a safe one to make as western (particularly British) theatrical traditions are enmeshed with the pre- eminence of the text and the secondary consideration of visual language. This complex negotiation as to how to engage with the play found additional complication when intersecting with the duality of modernist and post modernist practices in Lepage's work. Initially the group found an easy affiliation with the modernist narratives in '*Seven Streams*' which communicate universal anxieties and connectivity of humanity; the worldwide threat of AIDS, the horror of the Holocaust and others. They were able to make connections between relevant practitioner theory that could be applied to character development (predominantly Stanislavskian) and envisage the process of making and presenting this text. Ironically, they were able to make a relatively easy transition into playing an 'other' in the form of Luke or Nozomi, during early workshop rehearsals, as the roles had a matrix of conventions (plot, naturalistic dialogue, recognizable relationships) that could be interpreted and realized by a performer through well trodden methodologies. This journey into an 'other' was less readily travelled however when the 'other' was initially self- reflexive and required a set of post modernist 'autoperformative' methodologies which are not usually applied to the realization of text. It has been noted by writers on Lepage that he is both modernist in the nature of his universality and collaborative practice, whilst he is contiguously post modernist in his emphasis on personalized, multiple readings of a stimuli and the self sufficiency he adopts through solo performances which echo a performance art tradition of the 1960's and 70's.⁹ It is worthy of note that the demands on the students to find convergence between these potentially incompatible practices proved a creative stumbling block for a notable period. The RSVP and Repère processes utilised by Lepage are premised on the perpetual re-appraisal of ideas to the point where performance is perceived as an opportunity for new development rather than a culmination. Karen Fricker articulated this in her 2003 article '*Tourism, The Festival Marketplace and Robert Lepage's The Seven Streams of the River Ota*': "What Lepage

offers, however, is participation in projects that are in ongoing artistic development. ... his practice rests on a high-modernist belief in the possibility and desirability of artistic and personal completeness, evidenced by the trope of life as a journey towards self-fulfilment that runs through his oeuvre, and by his statements about his productions being in progress towards an achievable, ideal state. This would seem to imply that at their early stages of development his productions are less complete, and presumably less audience-worthy, than when they are fully developed.”¹⁰To summarize, at this stage, the student performers and myself had several challenges to address: the negotiation between text and devising with its incumbent anxieties over which roles have value; the self reflexive nature of the RSVP process that required an untraditional value to be placed on ‘self’ as role *and* the requirement to accept perpetual change throughout the entire creative process, including the performances. They had to embrace ‘transformative *mise en scène*’ as a permanent fixture of the learning process rather than merely a technique to apply selectively. “In Lepage’s theatricality, the outcomes and final destination of the creative journey are unknown and unpredictable; a new performance world emerges out of disorder, rather than out of order. As Lepage points out, “chaos is necessary. If there is only order and rigour in a project, the outcome will be nothing but order and rigour. But it’s out of chaos that the cosmos is born – the order of things, yes, but a living, organic, changing one. This is where true creation lies.”¹¹This is undeniably a provocative challenge to a student performer as it is potentially both inspirational and disabling. It offers a future nirvana of creative fulfilment but is predicated on an ever present instability which may be counter intuitive to students who wish to find resolution in their creative work and therefore some security when performance assessment is upon them. The professional actors who have worked with Lepage over the years (and who are not constrained by the pressures of educational time scales and assessment regimes) appear to embrace this uncertainty. Bunzli notes the reaction of Marie Gignac and Marie Brassard: “Actors seem to enjoy the “sportive” approach to creation. Gignac states, “We like to put ourselves in that kind of situation - a certain danger” (Gignac 1995). Brassard refers to the process as “a playful way of making theatre,” and claims “I don’t dislike this crooked way of being not ready and being messy” (Brassard 1995).¹²However, as the DMU students are all too aware, this “certain danger” has the potential for calamity and a direct impact on their learning and subsequently their achievement. One student wrote in their journal towards the end of the process: “I understand that making performance right up to the last minute is exciting but it is also unnerving as I want to understand my characters and what they are saying.” *So it is in this context that the re – interpretation of ‘Seven Streams’ ran its course at DMU. As indicated by the RSVP methodology, the student performers initiated their adaptation of the script with a process of compiling *Resources* and then *Scores* that were personal to them and connected their experiences to the text. For example, one student took *resource* and *score* inspiration from the life of one of her friends who went to New York. She wrote in her acting journal:

“I immediately began to formulate the beginning of a story with the idea of an artist who has travelled from a small town in the UK, waiting to meet William Dennison.” (*aka Felix - a character from the original text*) *

I would propose at this stage that it is vital for the director / tutor working within this methodology to remove the critical distance between themselves and the material. In other words, to embrace and share their own personal perspectives and to use autobiographical references as a means of demonstrating effective practice to students who may feel anxious in this new environment. I modelled this activity and so it may be pertinent to detail my own *resource* and

score material at this point. In one of the early rehearsals I described, to them, my own instinctive relationship to the play:

“My personal connections with the play began with parent / child relationships; Luke and Jeffrey 1 [*his son from his first marriage*], Nozomi and Jeffrey 2, Sarah and Ada Weber [*mother and daughter separated by the Nazis*]. The idea of living without someone you love is something that I as a parent and a husband can empathise with instantly. From this I revisited the original story of ‘Madame Butterfly’ [*a principle source of inspiration for the original text*] in which ‘Butterfly’ has a child with an American but then he leaves her and she eventually kills herself rather than being alone without her son or first love. The opera ends with her son witnessing her lifeless body. The premise of the short span of innocence that children have before adult life led me to think about metaphors of butterflies. From this I created a score based on the idea of chasing butterflies – something out of reach, fragile, tender – offering the actor parallels with romantic, unrequited love...”¹⁴

The intention was to suggest the personal, emotional reaction of ‘self’ that was permissible in such a devising methodology and to emphasise the visual nature of Lepage’s practice; finding metaphors in image and movement. For the actors, the development of such an idea relied on an ability and a willingness to seek a personal narrative and then to abstract it on to a metaphorical, visual plane. As outlined earlier, the background of this particular group of student performers was rooted in a textual tradition, so the progress from original Lepage text through to personal resource and visual score (as a basis for devising) was not necessarily a sleek transition. Rehearsals by this stage had begun on both original text and new material and a degree of comparison between the detailed certainty of the extant text and the quality of nascent, devised scores proved an anxious cross reference for many. Note this comment made by one of the students in his acting journal:

“The dialogue between Ada and Jeffrey 1 (*extant text*) seemed more refined than the dialogue between Harry and George which had been built around improvisation during rehearsals. They felt different; there was a different energy in the writing of the old text.” *

Another wrote:

“It became apparent that the process of developing individual scenes for new streams and working alongside the original dramatic text caused concern on how and if the narrative would join together and whether it would work.” *

In many respects, the students found a voice through rapidly creating the persona of an ‘other’ or ‘others’. The *resource* and *score* material that was generated was less of an overt autobiographical nature and more akin to a projection of self on to another. Safety was found in immediately establishing role as a devising resource through which personal emotional content could be explored with a degree of security. All of the narratives and characters that were created by the performers were anchored to the original text by building on existing stories from the first four streams. New roles such as George and Hannah Brady or Laura the English student were ‘justified’ by a direct correlation to the text and they gained credibility through association. Whilst there is no reason to question the validity of the approach, it is notable that a more ‘disconnected’ process drawing on more tangential stimuli was put to one side. The opportunity to transgress the limit of the text and develop narrative stimulated by personal, potentially irrational

instincts was declined at this stage. The legitimacy of text and naturalistic dialogue were seemingly preferential to a visual landscape in which role was potentially secondary to the meta-illusion. The stylistic approach of Lepage himself and other avant-garde directors of visual theatre such as Robert Wilson were yet to be embraced.

In time, four additional narratives had been developed and three of the original streams had been discarded for pragmatic and artistic reasons. The group were left with eight *streams*, all of which had been re – contextualised within the new adaptation. Even the original four [*Moving Pictures, Two Jeffreys, A Wedding, The Mirror*] that survived had been injected with additional scenes and new perspectives were being offered on a range of existing characters by revisiting them or relatives of them in other new streams.

It may be appropriate at this stage to momentarily revisit the three challenges, as outlined earlier, which faced the student performers. Firstly, the negotiation between text and devising was still to be resolved, as the entire body of work was yet to be fully connected; although tentative steps had been taken to open up the ‘dialogue’. Secondly, the self reflexive nature of the devising had, to some extent, been circumvented by the immersion in the fiction of an ‘other’. Whilst this was understandable, from a directorial/tutor perspective, it potentially limited a radical re-interpretation as new material was sited within known bounds of naturalism. On reflection, however, this may have been predicted as such a newly formed group of young performers would always have found it a challenge to rapidly develop a trusting working relationship in which personal vulnerabilities could be shared. The Lepage methodology is infused with a self reflexive process containing inherent permissions for other students to view and respond to your personal journey. Lepage refers to actors ‘digging’¹⁵ into the material, through personal connections, and this can prove a problematic and anxious methodology for some. The desire for character is a natural retreat, driven by instinct or habit in terms of previous drama education, actor training or just human nature. Ironically, to be an ‘other’ is arguably more familiar than being oneself. This state of mind also reflects students’ perceptions of what is legitimate acting for assessment purposes. To be within a fictional, naturalistic role is perceived as having greater credibility and depth compared to the less objectively identifiable skills required within an ‘auto-performance’ mode.

The third challenge was to embrace, or at least manage, the state of flux; the perpetual recreation of the work, and this continued to prove a challenge within a restricted rehearsal period and with a fixed performance date. This self imposed structural abandonment in which linear progression and rationality are subordinated to the energy of the performance text has been referred to by the Piagean term ‘*décalage*’:

“For Robert Lepage, *décalage* is the main impulse, the principle 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.”¹⁶

Within rehearsals, this Lepagean approach was received with a spectrum of reactions. By some it was interpreted as an absence of coherence, rather than an attendance of methodology. For others

it was a permission to experiment. The internet discussion forum for the project was testament to a fervent dialogue amongst participants who either relished the unknown quantity of the devising yet to be done, or who perceived the ongoing ‘digging’ and (to pursue the labouring metaphors) ‘excavation’ of personal scores to be lacking focus and intent.

In the instincts of those who sought greater linearity of process, from rehearsal to performance, there are echoes of Meyerhold’s ‘Theatre of the Straight Line’¹⁷; the four stage sequential process: author – director – actor – spectator; marking the lineage of dramatic creativity. Inherently it is a hierarchical progression that has been central to western traditions of theatre making and drama studies, in which the text and the dramatic structure are anointed as the sources of the creative impetus. For Lepage it is the performance text itself, the *écriture scénique* as Roger Planchon¹⁸ referred to it, that is central to the process and performance. The ‘transformative *mise en scène*,’ created through visual layering of narratives and metaphor, is the text and the written play script is subordinated to that visceral creation. It is worth noting that Lepage refers to the performer “as a ‘writer’ of theatre”.¹⁹ It demands that actors prolong their receptivity towards change, chance and reinterpretation; *décalage*, and relinquish the certainty of pre-written stage directions as prescribed by a text. This attitudinal imperative was emphasised to the performers towards the end of the rehearsal process so they might develop a methodology for staging the text, both extant and new, that could embrace juxtaposition, ephemerality and ambiguity. To underline this notion I offered, to the group, the words written by Strindberg in an introduction to ‘A Dream Play’ in 1901 (and recounted by Andy Lavender as analogous to Lepage):

‘Time and place do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories, experiences, free fancies, incongruities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse, assemble. But one consciousness rules over them all, that of the dreamer.’²⁰

Whilst these words evoke a creative maelstrom in to which many may wish to immerse themselves, it is likewise a challenge to performers, who have developed material and rehearsed pre-scripted dialogue, to be asked to forego concerns over losing narrative clarity and personal character investment for the ‘greater good’ of ‘transformative *mise en scène*’. Indeed the ‘*techno en scène*’ approach adopted by Lepage arguably requires even greater obfuscation of the actor as it foregrounds technology as an integral tool through which characters are drawn and narrative expressed. Technical operators play as significant a role as actors in shaping the meaning of the work and are central to realizing the performance text. The students at DMU, although aware of this approach early in rehearsals, continually negotiated these ‘compromises’ throughout rehearsals as they were seemingly required to undertake a degree of *deconstruction* in their roles (lines cut or changed, actions re-staged, linear narrative disrupted) in order to *construct* the performance.

An overriding instinct within the DMU performers was the preservation of complex, inherently naturalistic characters who could be (and this word was repeated on many occasions) ‘comprehended’ by an audience. It is impossible to directly translate their collective interpretation of this word but arguably, ‘comprehension’, in this context, meant an audience’s ability to

empathize with the personas and experience a certain catharsis. My observation was that for these actors, their perception of emotionally complex performance was significantly correlated to, and reliant on, direct communication to an audience via text. As we approached the performance dates, the central challenge was to find the courage to shape and then *continually* re-shape the material into a performance text. To permit a reinterpretation of all the diverse contributions, through a confident visual language, into a coherent performance that was more than the sum of its parts. To risk the unknown interaction between performance and audience by foregoing narrative 'comprehension' in preference of the pursuit of a more instinctive, visceral 'dialogue'. Reading back through the journals, there are indications that students were beginning to adapt to this approach. One student wrote:

"Lepage's method concerning metaphors was a constant personal reminder throughout the project, grasping the concept that visual and dreamlike metaphors are more imperative when practicing Lepage's work, rather than individual narrative." *

For the DMU group, there was, perhaps, an emergent acceptance that they would be in the hands of the audience and could not control the engagement as they might wish to. Many of the actors who have worked with Lepage have commented on the honesty and transparency required when presenting the work in public. Marie Brassard, when interviewed in 1995, stated:

"In a very open way we go in front of them and say 'look-we are artists and this is where we are now with the creation we are doing, and we are giving it to you like that.'" ²¹.

This approach requires a perception of the relationship between actor and audience as one to be negotiated; to be made 'in the moment' rather than imposed through bravura, technique or didacticism. "...what distinguishes the audience role in Lepage's work is the difference he makes between "communication" and "com- munion." He prefers the latter, finding it a more suitable mode of experience for the theatre, especially the kind of theatre he is working to create." ²² To trust that this will occur and that it will 'succeed' is arguably built on experience. So for a group new to Lepage this is a complex leap to conceive and one that was to be approached with some trepidation. Many of the DMU student actors were conscious of being judged within the performance as it was assessed, so there is a self imposed pressure to 'complete' the work to a 'performance standard'. Running contrary to this instinct to 'show' ones abilities in performance is the high degree of self- effacement and low degree of ego-centrism required to embrace the uncertainties and vulnerabilities as highlighted by Brassard. This performance state is made all the more complex if one remembers the ego – centric nature of the *resource* and *score* stages earlier in the process. The duality of this, and the impetus to shift between these modes, is perhaps one of the most significant challenges in structuring the teaching of and learning through such a methodology and requires constant negotiation between collective and individual concerns. The final days of the creative process leading up to the performance were the most intense and productive period for the students and myself. It was in these sessions that the potential for the RSVP methodology to stimulate and frame innovative, experiential learning came to be fully realised. Up until these final days, the *valuation* stage had been limited as all too often the group and I had become too quick in fixing upon a particular idea, drafting it as script and then perceiving it as part of the performance. For *valuation* to be truly productive it requires a willingness to keep reviewing material, synthesising *scores* and using scenographic

elements to inspire the creation of a visual, as well as verbal, performance text. The pre-eminence of this performance text was self evident as the work was shaped on the stage and with the technology of lighting, sound and film projection. The visual and aural narrative was the central touchstone and the written script was edited as a result of physical changes rather than a beacon to be guided by. In this experiential, applied context, it was clearer for students to recognise the parity between the visual and the verbal, between the newly generated performance text alongside pre existing dramatic text. The physical space and the technology appeared to offer them 'permission' to re-negotiate the narrative structure through *valuation*. One performer wrote in her journal at the time: "...once I was confined to a square box of lighting, saw my body projected through a live feed camera and heard the music from 'Madame Butterfly', I felt the role had become three dimensional, visual and existed in the play." *The group also took the opportunity to reorder the first two *streams* (*Moving Pictures & Two Jeffreys*), using areas of defined lighting to denote location and time changes, so that the plotlines intermingled in a form that never appeared in the original productions. With this realisation that re-negotiation of text was permissible came a greater freedom of expression and the majority of students responded proactively to the challenge of 'writing' text in the moment. In particular they became more confident in the potential for visual metaphors to be created through the juxtaposed transformation of one image into another. This was perhaps most noticeably realised in the final moments of the play where the female doctor attending the suicide of Jeffrey 1 transforms into a sexualised nurse persona offering her 'services' via a webcam. The cinematically sized image of her heavily made up face is projected behind the lifeless body of Jeffrey 1 as the final moment of the play; a poignant counterpoint between two images of sexual identity. The student who played this role noted the following in her journal: "For the duration of the moment there was a split second where I was revealing the nurse's outfit whilst still wearing the doctor's coat and consequently I was performing simultaneous roles together." *Such a set of images could only be created in the moment of *valuation* by being receptive to change, to the spirit of *décalage*. In many ways, the dramatic text prescribing the death of Jeffrey 1 resisted such a reinterpretation but the performance text as it developed demanded such juxtaposition. Directing (and in particular the directing of student performers) in such instances must be flexible and accept that ownership and authorship are often found in the unexpected moments where dramatic text is defied rather than acquiesced to. It is a reminder of the autobiographical potential of the RSVP process as it places the actor at the centre of the creativity as an active agent who can re-write text. On reflection, our own performances, whilst being a necessary and satisfying conclusion of the process, were not able to accomplish their full, reflective function as perceived within the RSVP cycle. In an 'ideal' Lepage process we would have used audience feedback from these final performances to revisit and reshape the work for any future presentation. On this occasion our own timescales did not permit this extensive, practical reappraisal, although it is important to stress that *performance* in this context is an intrinsic part of process, and to this extent was engaged in during the latter stages as sections of work were presented to the rest of the group then edited and shaped into a cohesive style. It is also worth noting that many student performers undertook this activity conceptually within their own written evaluations and the potential for *performance* to be a springboard for future *resources* and *scores* was embraced by the group with many proposing lucid ideas for extending existing narratives or introducing new *streams*. I would argue that this indicates a powerful ownership over the material and an understanding that their performance work can be revisited and built upon through a creative dialogue. Now that this production is over I would hope it is possible to gauge the success in simple terms. In particular,

and speaking honestly for myself, I would hope it is possible to say that the play became a work of 2009 and spoke of the students' contemporary lives rather than merely being a lens on to experiences past. Feedback from the students suggested that they developed a significant degree of ownership over the final performance text although this relationship had been built on months of artistic struggle. This for me is a reminder that *process* within drama studies teaching should not be forsaken for the desire to create perfect *product*, in the form of performance. Lepage offers the drama practitioner the opportunity to privilege the creative process, which is continuous, even through the final stages of rehearsal and into performance.²³ Our experience of 'Seven Streams' reveals that staging dramatic text and generating new devised material are not mutually exclusive creative paths and can lead to a performance text that interweaves both. The text offers a thematic and stylistic 'pulse' whilst the devising creates a window of opportunity for students to raise their own authorial voice over work which originally had the resonant echoes of other performers lives within its pages. Doing 'justice' to an extant text, or the 'comprehension' of it as it is written should not be the barometer of achievement for an actor or student of drama. For Lepage, the text was a conduit to something more immediate and it is in that context that his methodology can be seen as a creative provocation; advocating the self, the performance group *and* the audience as co- constructors of meaning. In reviewing 'Elsinore', (a work by Lepage from 1996) Jocelyn Clarke of the Sunday Tribune wrote: "The play text? That's hardly the central concern. The contemporaneity of the production in front of its audience matters more."²⁴ In this light we finally return to the ephemeral pursuit of ownership and authorship. To be contemporary is predicated on an awareness of self within the world and an acceptance that to understand the here and now is also to accept its transience. To perform a re-interpretation of Lepage and to learn through the creation of that performance is to embrace flux. The director and performers must embrace multiple readings of the original text and multiple interpretations of the performance text by an audience which are ever changeable and unpredictable. To have ownership over the material is intrinsically bound to relinquishing ownership over its reception. Inevitably, the river flows on.

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Notes

1. Fricker, *Introduction to 'The Seven Streams of the River Ota'*, vii
2. Dundjerović, *The Theatricality of Robert Lepage*, 30. RSVP cycles – a creative process methodology created by Lawrence and Anna Halprin. It is centered on the actor's personal connection with the stimulus / text and accentuates the cyclical nature of creativity. Repère cycles were an adaptation of the RSVP system, created by Jacques Lessard, in Quebec in the late 1970's and used to an extent by Lepage.
3. Dundjerović, *The Theatricality of Robert Lepage*, 29
4. Bunzli, 'The Geography of Creation: Décalage as Impulse, Process, and Outcome in the Theatre of Robert Lepage', 87 - 88
5. Dundjerović, *The Theatricality of Robert Lepage*, 26
6. Dundjerović, *DMU workshop* 20/11/08

7. 'Zulu Time' – 1999 production in which the central 'transformative' space was based on the resource of an airport lounge
8. Dundjerović, 'Juliette at Zulu Time: Robert Lepage and the aesthetics of "techno-scene"' 69
9. Innes, 'Puppets and Machines of the Mind: Robert Lepage and the Modernist Heritage', 74 – 75
10. Fricker, 'Tourism, The Festival Marketplace and Robert Lepage's The Seven Streams of the River Ota', 85
11. Dundjerović, *The Theatricality of Robert Lepage*, 209; citing Lepage 'Connecting Flights', 88
12. Bunzli, 'The Geography of Creation: Décalage as Impulse, Process, and Outcome in the Theatre of Robert Lepage', 96
13. O'Mahony, 'Aerial Views'
14. Author, *rehearsal notes*
15. Lepage, cited in Fricker, 'Tourism, The Festival Marketplace and Robert Lepage's The Seven Streams of the River Ota', 82
16. Bunzli, 'The Geography of Creation: Décalage as Impulse, Process, and Outcome in the Theatre of Robert Lepage', 89 – 90
17. Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 50 – 51
18. Dundjerović, *Robert Lepage*, 14
19. Lavender, *Hamlet in pieces – Shakespeare reworked by Peter Brook, Robert Lepage, Robert Wilson*, 135
20. Strindberg, *Authors note to 'A Dream Play' in translation by Michael Meyer*, 175
21. Bunzli, 'The Geography of Creation: Décalage as Impulse, Process, and Outcome in the Theatre of Robert Lepage', 96
22. Bunzli, 'The Geography of Creation: Décalage as Impulse, Process, and Outcome in the Theatre of Robert Lepage', 97
23. Note on assessment - *I am conscious that continuous change raises problematic issues regarding assessment of performance, as we seek to quantify a 'moment in time', but I would suggest that this prompts a re-evaluation of assessment methodology (a topic for another paper perhaps?) so as to account for cyclical as well as linear production processes*
24. Clarke, 'Theatre is dead, long live theatre' cited in Lavender, *Hamlet in pieces – Shakespeare reworked by Peter Brook, Robert Lepage, Robert Wilson*, 146

* - all citations marked with an asterisk are taken, with kind permission, from student journals written during the rehearsal and performance process.

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