

BOOK REVIEWS

Robert Lepage on the Toronto Stage: Language, Identity, Nation. By Jane Koustas. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. 214 pp.

Reviewed by Melissa Poll

For nearly three decades, Québécois auteur Robert Lepage has worked to stake a claim on the global stage. His devised theatre has toured internationally, gaining the attention of critics and theatregoers in major centres from Paris to Hong Kong. Each city has responded to Lepage's work through its own grounded cultural politics, producing not only wide-ranging reactions but also unique narratives surrounding the relationship of Lepage's theatre to its respective host cities over time. As a contextualizing introduction to my review of Jane Koustas's *Robert Lepage on the Toronto Stage: Language, Identity, Nation*, I offer the following snapshot of Lepage's reception in London and New York over the past twenty-five years.

Thanks to his highly visual devised productions, *The Dragons' Trilogy* (presented at the London International Theatre Festival [LIFT] in 1987 and Riverside Studios in 1991) and *Needles & Opium* (performed at the National Theatre in 1992), Robert Lepage rapidly became a critical darling in London. In 1992, he was the first North American to direct a Shakespeare production at England's National Theatre.¹ His contentious staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, defied imperial standards surrounding the "proper" delivery of Shakespeare's text through the accented English of a Québécoise Puck, Angela Laurier.² Moreover, while most critics failed to take issue with the production's culturally appropriative cherry-picking, which combined the sounds of the Javanese gamelan with indigenous chants (Hodgdon 1996, 83), Lepage's highly physical staging and choice to encircle the playing space with a pond inspired significant criticism. Spectators and critics in the front rows at the Olivier Theatre were provided with "hooded plastic macs" due to actors' literal mudslinging on a set purposefully drenched in muck to signify the messiness of young love (Taylor 1992). This irreverent, colonial take on Shakespeare earned the director a host of negative reviews, punctuated by Michael Billington's verdict that Lepage's *Dream* was "the most leaden, humourless and vilely spoken production of this magical play I have ever seen" (Billington 1992). Nonetheless, since 1992, Lepage has seemingly redeemed himself, forgoing Shakespeare by keeping his one-man adaptation of *Hamlet, Elsinore*, off the London stage, and instead returning to established territory with inventive, image-driven works such as the transnational epic *The Seven Stream of the River Ota* (1996) and *The Far Side of the Moon* (2001), a semi-autobiographical solo piece focused on family relationships as illustrated through stunning stage pictures inspired by the Russian-American space race.³ While London critics have queried some thematic and narrative aspects of Lepage's most recent productions, including the devised piece *Spades* (2013), technologically sophisticated works featuring arresting visuals like *The Andersen Project* (2006) have earned Lepage a permanent (if reductionist) role as London's beloved, theatrical "wunderkind" from abroad (Taylor 1994).⁴

In New York, Lepage's work hinges on a more storied narrative. He initially attracted attention when the *New York Times*' D. J. R. Bruckner positively reviewed the 1987 production of *The Dragons' Trilogy* in Stony Brook, commenting, "The play . . . spins through 70 years of Canadian life in a vivid whirlwind of spectacle, movement and music. Robert Lepage, and the eight actors in the performance . . . shatter the limits of theatrical expression" (Bruckner 1987). Though the iconic status accorded to Lepage in London would not be paralleled in New York, the Québécois director did develop a dedicated following at the Brooklyn Academy of Music through signature visual

productions such as *Needles & Opium* (1992), *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* (1996) and *Lipsynch* (2009). Nine years after the New York cancellation of his cabaret piece, *Zulu Time*, due to 9/11, and two years following his acclaimed Metropolitan Opera debut with Hector Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust* (2008), Lepage began his most high-profile project on the city's stage—a sixteen-million-dollar production of Wagner's four-part *Ring* cycle at the Metropolitan Opera (2010–12).

From the outset, some local operagoers were apprehensive about Lepage's reputation as an "auteur," a term seen by many, including the Metropolitan Opera's then music director James Levine, as synonymous with productions driven by an "exterior allegorical gimmick" (in Wakin 2010). Prior to the *Ring*'s opening, the company's artistic director, Peter Gelb, provided repeated assurances to the media that Lepage would "tell the story" and (patently offensive) assertions that the production would not be "some high-concept Eurotrash staging" (in Tommasini 2010). Ultimately, the four productions were plagued by highly publicized local union action taken over scenic construction that occurred in Québec, costly reinforcements to the Metropolitan Opera's stage due to Lepage's forty-five-ton set, and more than one last-minute withdrawal from the cast. With the exception of the third opera, *Siegfried*, Lepage's *Ring* stagings were widely condemned with spectators booing his team when they appeared on stage during curtain calls and the *New Yorker*'s Alex Ross calling the cycle, "pound for pound, ton for ton, the most witless and wasteful production in modern operatic history" (Ross 2012). And yet, despite the *Ring*'s negative reception, Lepage's 2012 Metropolitan Opera production of Thomas Adès's *Tempest* opera was highly acclaimed and, in 2016, Gelb chose Lepage to stage the premiere production of the second opera by a woman ever to be performed at the venue, Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de Loin* (Cooper 2016). New York may not have cast Lepage as a theatrical wunderkind, but local producers like Gelb and the city's spectators had seen enough of the auteur's work to be forthcoming with fourth and fifth chances in the opera genre.

As positioned alongside this brief sampling of two major cities' fluid relationships with Lepage's work, Jane Koustas's 2016 book, *Robert Lepage on the Toronto Stage: Language, Identity, Nation* represents a timely opportunity to examine Lepage's evolution through his theatre's reception in Toronto, the earliest and most frequent English-speaking stop on the director's travel itinerary. At its heart, *Robert Lepage on the Toronto Stage* makes a compelling claim: over the past three decades, Lepage's devised theatre, which largely explores the artistic pursuit of self-realization through encounters abroad, has demonstrated an evolving engagement with identity politics, resulting in a symbiotic relationship between the Québécois director's oeuvre and Toronto's quest to position itself on the global theatre circuit. Koustas's publication offers a detailed account of Lepage's productions in Toronto since the mid-1980s and goes some way toward framing the director's theatre as contributing to the city's global cultural ascension; nonetheless, select arguments, including her assertion that Lepage's devised productions feature a progressive interculturalism, falter due to a lack of empirical evidence and rigorous engagement with extant Lepage scholarship.

Structurally, Koustas's book is thoughtfully laid out. The first chapter functions as a theoretical primer, drawing on Patrick Lonergan's theatre and globalization theory, Ric Knowles's articulation of intercultural theatre as well as his detailed analyses of Toronto's diverse theatre landscape, and Karen Fricker's Lacanian reading of Lepage's "thinly fictionalised self-depictions" as an "attempt to 'other' himself—to use the stage as a mirror through which he can see his own reflection" (in Koustas 2016, 31). This is followed by three main sections charting the history and reception of Lepage's work in Toronto. "Lepage Meets the ROC [Rest of Canada]" examines the auteur's

introduction to Toronto audiences in the 1980s through his early devised productions with Théâtre Repère, including *Circulations*, *The Dragons' Trilogy*, *Vinci*, and *Tectonic Plates*. Koustas's interrogation of these productions points to the ways in which Lepage's early shows caught the attention of Toronto critics and theatregoers by exploring the Lacanian self/Other dialectic and introducing the city to an emerging voice on the international scene. The second section, "The 'Love Affair' Begins," looks at: Lepage's groundbreaking solo show, *Needles & Opium*; the first devised productions by the director's own company, Ex Machina, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* and *The Geometry of Miracles*; and his one-man adaptation of *Hamlet, Elsinore*. Here, Koustas explores the negative critical reception of *Elsinore* and *The Geometry of Miracles* in Toronto, arguing that both productions stray too far from Lepage's signature artist-searching-to-self-realize model and the thematic language-identity-nation trifecta featured in much of his critically acclaimed work. In an argument perhaps indicative of Toronto's enduring ties to England and its specific Shakespearean production standards, Koustas comments that *Elsinore's* tepid reception can be linked to the fact that, in *Elsinore*, Shakespeare's language takes a backseat to scenography. Koustas also suggests that *The Geometry of Miracles* was far too unstructured—even by Ex Machina's work-in-progress standards—to receive critical recognition. In the third and final section, "The World Leader on the Toronto Stage," Koustas concludes that the original plays produced by Lepage over the past decade, such as *The Andersen Project*, *Lipsynch*, and *The Blue Dragon*, present the auteur at the height of his global theatre game, not only engaging with diverse cultures but critiquing the politics of the international theatre circuit, within which he is now firmly embedded.

A central issue with this study is the fact that Koustas's thesis rests in part on her assertion that the politics of cultural exchange in Lepage's devised work have evolved due to the productive feedback loop provided by Toronto's intercultural audiences. She supports this claim almost exclusively through evidence drawn from journalistic criticism, framing the tastes of Toronto spectators as synonymous with those of the city's newspaper critics. Though she acknowledges the inherent trouble with forging such a conclusion, noting that "reviewers are not necessarily representative of the entire audience," she maintains that "critical response is nonetheless the access point for many audience members and remains the only last trace for the researcher" (49). In doing so, she overlooks the information that can be gleaned from ticket sales and holdovers (which she intermittently cites in her book), as well as audience feedback solicited by producing companies or, in the case of more recent productions, spectator responses posted on social media. Koustas's readers are left with questions regarding how exactly spectators outside the realm of professional criticism have the means to influence the director's work.

Koustas's claim that Lepage's theatre has evolved over time to demonstrate progressive interculturalism also leaves lingering questions. She references companies and artists who have contributed to Lepage's devised productions but fails to provide empirical evidence regarding how these "collaborations" unfolded in the rehearsal room. Proof of the distribution of agency among intercultural team members simply cannot be gleaned from comments by Koustas such as "this direct collaboration [*Lipsynch*] . . . did involve genuine exchange untainted by power brokering; the influence of the eleven international writer-actors is clearly felt" (127) or quotes provided to the reviewing media by Lepage and co-producers financially invested in a given production's success. Moreover, though one of Koustas's central arguments is that Lepage's theatre exemplifies Knowles's "true intercultural theatre" and Robert Gordon's model of performance as cultural exchange, her examples often do not adhere to these definitions (150). She acknowledges that "Ex Machina productions from *Needles [and Opium]* (1994) to *The Far Side of the Moon* (2000) may not have met all

the criteria established by Gordon or Knowles for genuinely intercultural theatre, in that none involved the direct involvement of other theatre companies” (112). As well, a number of the productions cited in her book’s final section as intercultural, including *The Andersen Project*, *The Far Side of the Moon*, and *Eonnagata*, see Lepage at the helm of small groups of exclusively white, Western—if bilingual—central collaborators. This clearly falls out of step with Knowles’s definition of contemporary intercultural theatre as “a new kind of rhizomatic (multiple, non-hierarchical, horizontal) intercultural performance—from-below that . . . no longer retains a west and the rest binary” and “is no longer dominated by charismatic white men” (Knowles 2010, 59). Given that Lepage productions such as *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* have arguably trafficked in Orientalism through exoticized portrayals of Japan (Harvie 2000, 122), *Robert Lepage on the Toronto Stage: Language, Identity, Nation* would have benefitted from specific examples of the practical inner-workings of the productive cultural exchanges Koustas cites as being integral to the auteur’s evolving creative process.

The book’s discussion of interculturalism is further complicated by the ways in which Koustas glosses over contradictory aspects and readings of Lepage’s productions while omitting other conflicting details altogether. Though her study focuses primarily on Lepage’s original productions, she briefly mentions—but does not expand on her statement—that Toronto critics flagged the “potentially racist slurs” in Lepage’s 2004 adaptation of *The Busker’s Opera*.⁵ As well, she undercuts her largely convincing argument about the evolution of Lepage’s theatrical engagement with China from *The Dragons’ Trilogy* (an examination of Chinatowns in Québec and Canada) to *The Blue Dragon* (a “spin-off” of the former, exploring the lives of Quebecers in China) by failing to acknowledge Susan Bennett’s counter-argument, which views *The Blue Dragon* as symptomatic of Western artists’ for-profit global cultural commodification of Asia (Bennett 2013). Relatedly, Koustas’s response to critiques by Jennifer Harvie and Karen Fricker surrounding Lepage’s use of China and Japan as vehicles for Western fantasies in *The Dragons’ Trilogy* and *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* lacks depth. Koustas suggests that while the Asian characters may be presented as victims and stereotypes in both Ex Machina productions, they are also portrayed as “respectable” and “admirable” individuals who, however distorted, lead theatregoers “on a voyage of self-discovery” (Koustas 2016, 71). This statement paradoxically affirms Fricker’s and Harvie’s arguments by acknowledging the reduction of Asian characters to a device in service of Western characters. Koustas wades further into this debate, stating: “The play [*The Seven Streams of the River Ota*] was . . . never intended to accurately represent Asia but rather the inner and imaginary journey that the characters and audience take to discover the Orient within themselves” (71). While theatre may make meaning metaphorically, it cannot escape the ways in which it signifies literally.

In terms of contradictory production details omitted from Koustas’s study, her discussion of the first Toronto staging of *Needles & Opium* fails to reference the fact that Miles Davis, one of three titular characters in the piece, is voiceless and only briefly embodied once in silhouette, unlike the more fully realized representations of Jean Cocteau and Lepage’s loosely autobiographical character, “Robert.” Similarly, Koustas mentions but does not examine the characterization of Rashid in Lepage’s solo show, *The Andersen Project*. Cloaked in a hoodie, the Mahgrebian immigrant is seen either tagging a subway station or toiling at his janitorial job, mopping out soiled peep show booths in central Paris. He is later named as a chief arson suspect. Koustas does not broach questions surrounding whether this is Lepage’s purposeful comment on the marginalization of Arab immigrants in Paris (Fricker 2007, 124) or simply an essentializing characterization. Though

Koustas's thesis hinges on representations of cultural identity, she does not seize the opportunity to weigh in on, let alone argue against, a potentially reductionist portrayal of difference.

Koustas's foundational theorizing of the reception of Lepage's theatre also could have been grounded in a more thorough account of the politically driven reactions to Lepage's work in Québec, which she juxtaposes against Toronto's embrace of the auteur. Koustas explains Montréal's negative reception of the auteur's theatre as fuelled by professional jealousy over Lepage's "international itinerary," financial advantages, and the fact that he had been elevated to star status by Toronto critics (Koustas 2016, 28). Additionally, she references Lepage's comments on Québec as "a small incestuous society" and privileges the auteur's work over that of more locally focused Québécois playwrights, such as Michel Tremblay, by lionizing Lepage's goal to create "not for a local public but for multicultural distribution and global recognition" (29). In many sections of her book, Koustas overlooks the potential downsides of work crafted specifically for global cultural consumption, including the risk of cultural erasure, brand politics, and/or aesthetic appropriation. She also omits any discussion of the potential benefits of localized work like Tremblay's, which features a unique grounding in regional politics. More importantly, her argument about Lepage's contentious reception in Montréal largely overlooks the pivotal role played by sovereigntist politics. For many Montréal critics, it was, in fact, the global scope of Lepage's productions that seemed like a betrayal due to his (then) strong separatist politics. *The Dragons' Trilogy* "was derided as opportunistically *fédéraliste*, as having exploited Canadian and international content to make it more appealing to audiences outside the province" (Fricker 2005, 173). In contrast, because Lepage's support for Québec's nationalist separatist movement was generally absent from his productions, in Toronto, Lepage's personal politics remained just that.

When it comes to Koustas's discussion of Toronto and anglophone Canada, she often relies on the expression the "Rest of Canada" or the "ROC." Using Philip Stratford's 1979 articulation of the "ROC," she defines the term as denoting "the 'other' solitude, the non-Québec, non-French-speaking factor in the 'two solitudes' equation" (in Koustas 2016, 5). Framing Canada as a nation divided by an extremely limited French/English, bilingual/bicultural binary may be partially pertinent to Lepage's theatre in the 1980s; however, it erases Canada's First Peoples from the cultural conversation and fails to take on board the country's rich diaspora. By employing Toronto as a stand-in for the rest of the non-French-speaking nation, Koustas overwrites regional identity politics and ignores a valuable opportunity to contextualize the relationship between Lepage and Toronto through the auteur's distinct reception in other Canadian cities. For example, the urban experience in Vancouver is far less defined by the official French-English bilingualism Koustas cites as a normalized aspect of daily life in Canada; instead, the city's identity is bound to its large Asian-Canadian population and position on the Pacific Rim. Critiques of the selection of Lepage's *The Blue Dragon* rather than a local work to inaugurate the Fei and Milton Wong Theatre as part of Vancouver's Cultural Olympiad demonstrate the importance of regional context. Vancouver scholars, such as Peter Dickinson (2014), have problematized *The Blue Dragon*'s status as the official opener for a new theatre named after two Chinese-Canadian, Vancouver-based philanthropists. In Koustas book, these vital regional differences are erased by the prevailing notion of a homogeneous, non-French-speaking ROC.

Despite the weaknesses highlighted here, aspects of Koustas's study succeed. She lays out Lepage's production history in Toronto comprehensively and, though her study lacks the support of production stills, she uses a level of narrative detail unparalleled in English language Lepage scholarship when describing many shows, including the six-to-nine-hour epics *The Dragons' Trilogy*,

The Seven Streams of the River Ota, and *Lipsynch*. Her discussion of Lepage's earliest work, *Circulations*, is accompanied by rare excerpts from the program notes, including Théâtre Repère's own articulation of the company's devising process, on which Lepage's method is broadly based. Additionally, the scope of the reviews and scholarship cited in her book is impressive; Koustas works seamlessly between French and English (though the lack of in-text English translations is sure to frustrate non-French-speaking readers). Her production analyses offer strong insights on the tropes woven through Lepage's oeuvre, particularly his more recent works' critiques of the global cultural marketplace in which they are implicated. Of *Lipsynch*, she concludes:

Lepage . . . challenges preconceived notions, suggested by the trend toward globalization, that the passage from one language to another can be smooth and obstacle-free, and questions the possibility of an entirely harmonious co-existence of language and cultures, as portrayed in film and theatre productions in which dubbing and subtitling appear problem-free and totally reliable. In *Lipsynch*, the rough underside of the supposedly seamless transition from one language, community, culture, or voice, and hence identity, to another is exposed. (118)

Though *Robert Lepage on the Toronto Stage: Language, Identity, Nation* fails to rigorously engage with the central counter-arguments articulated in related scholarship and relies throughout on a narrow conception of Canadian identity rooted thirty years in the past, Koustas's publication does offer a detailed description of Lepage's reception in Toronto, as well as some insightful interrogations of the interrelated identity politics defining his unique theatre. In this, Koustas's book has the potential to draw a broad readership. Whether attracting readers new to Lepage's signature theatre or scholars with a particular interest in the evolution of the director's work in Canada's English-speaking global cultural capital, her account of the artistic journey of an internationally-acclaimed Québécois director who feels paradoxically *chez lui* (at home) in Toronto makes a clear contribution to extant Canadian theatre histories.

Notes

1. All production dates cited in this article correspond to the year a given production first appeared on stage in the city being discussed.
2. *Independent* critic Paul Taylor mocked the accented English of Angela Laurier, writing "she negotiates English verse with all the nimbleness of Inspector Clouseau: 'Wat 'empem 'omesperns 'ave we swaggereeng 'ere?'" (Taylor 1992).
3. After cancelling the opening night performance, Lepage performed *Elsinore* at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1997.
4. Lepage has also built a reputation in London as an opera director, offering visually evocative stagings of both Lorin Maazel's operatic vanity project *1984* (2004) and *The Rake's Progress* (2008) at the Royal Opera House.
5. In "Cheap Slurs Beggar Opera," *Globe & Mail* correspondent Alan Conter questions a number of choices made by Lepage and his co-adaptor Kevin McCoy, among them making the Lockit family Arabs who are swindled by the "not just incidentally Jewish but vilely Jewish Peachum family," "the Klansmen who appear as officers of the law," and the use of blackface (Conter 2004). This is compounded by the fact that Lepage's precursor to *The Busker's Opera* was the devised piece *Zulu Time*, a production critiqued for using a "white actor caked in grey clay and clad as a Hollywood Zulu warrior." Of this production, Conter concludes, "This isn't so much a cultural hybrid as awkward appropriation. What was he [Lepage] thinking?" (Conter, 2002).

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