

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Chopin hangs suspended in mid-air playing a sky-blue piano, his precarious position a metaphor for the tenuous link that exists between peoples. Such is a scene from Robert Lepage's *Tectonic Plates*, a play commissioned by the European Economic Community, which addresses the theme of mutual attraction between the Old and New Worlds. Its visual iconography is stunning, and is a hallmark of the audacious young Québécois actor/playwright whose work continues to win him international acclaim as one of the major innovators of the contemporary stage.

With plays such as *La Trilogie des dragons* (1985), *Vinci* (1986), and *Tectonic Plates* (1988), Lepage has demonstrated his ability to combine visual and technological virtuosity while embracing contemporary themes in an original and exciting way. A waist-high swimming pool, a fallen tree, a blue grand piano that floats in the air: all contrive to create a shape-changing theatre, one that cannot be boxed in or pinned down, a theatre that shifts, like tectonic plates, and begins anew over and over again.

Lepage was drawn to the theatre because it is a collective art or an "art of communion" as he calls it. He thrives on collaborative creative projects and applies his creativity to all aspects of theatre from acting, writing and directing to set-design and lighting.

Robert Lepage in *Polygraph* (1987): avant garde theatre at its best.

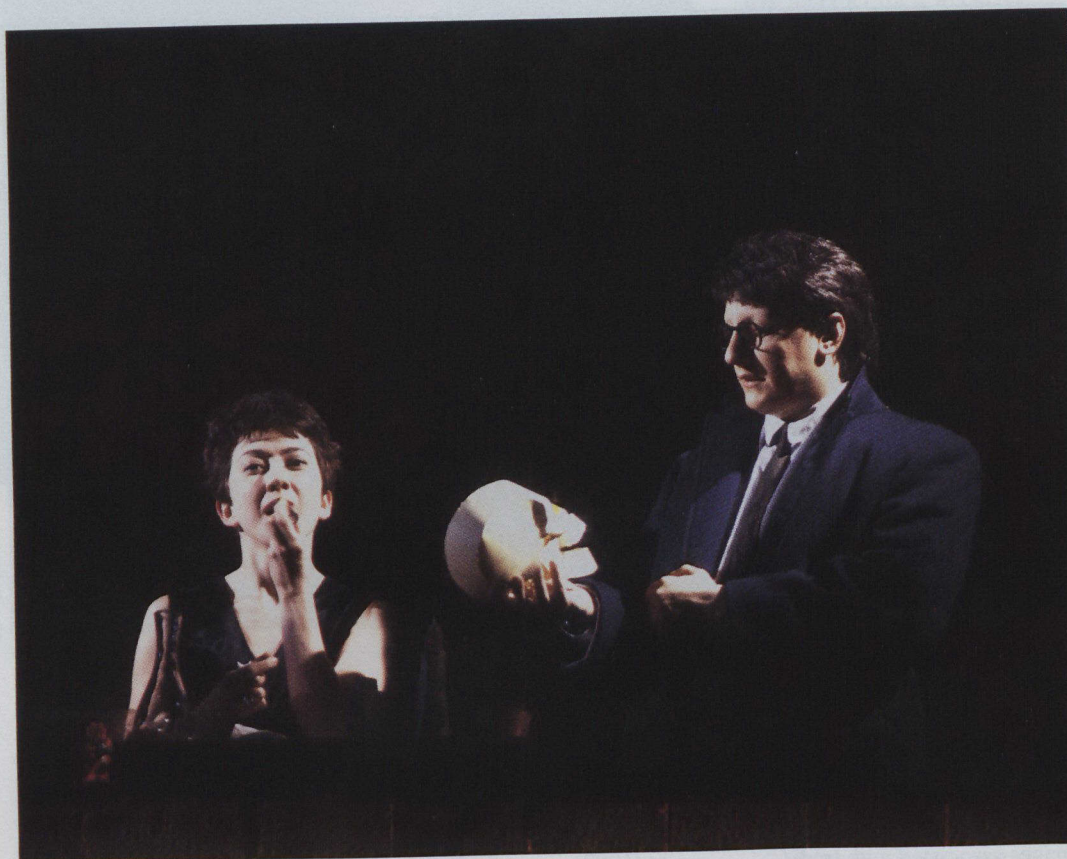
While he adheres to the methods and aesthetic values of contemporary Quebec theatre, Lepage, who describes himself as a "francophone artist open to other influences," has used various languages in his plays to break down the barriers between art and audience. His solo show *Vinci* is performed in French, English and Italian. *La Trilogie des dragons* uses French, English and Chinese. And *Tectonic Plates* adds Spanish to the linguistic mix.

In his work, Lepage relies more on imagery to convey his message than on the spoken word. While his talents are unique, his dramatic technique reflects the avant garde theatre scene in which he developed.

After studying drama in Quebec City and Paris, Lepage began his career as an actor in Quebec's thriving café-theatre scene. In 1980, he co-founded an experimental theatre company, Théâtre Repère, with Jacques Lessard. The company follows a creative process known as *les cycles repères*. A crucial element of

this method, which Lepage applies in all his works, is the principle of building the play around a "resource," a concrete object or image evocative of the play's subject matter, rather than around a theme. The Repère method is appropriate for collective play-making and it explains Lepage's preoccupation with set design, which takes on special significance in the symbolic and imagistic theatre he practises.

After rapidly amassing numerous stage credits, Lepage's career as a playwright and director took off with *Circulations* (1984) and *La Trilogie des dragons* (A Trilogy of Dragons). *Dragons*, which toured throughout



Théâtre Repère