

The genius of Robert Lepage**Canadian theatre goes global**

As his most thoroughly international work, the genesis of *Tectonic Plates* provides the perfect illustration of how Robert Lepage is bringing his theatrical magic to the world.

Built on the metaphor of continental drift, *Tectonic Plates* weaves stories from Montreal, Venice, Paris, Glasgow and New York into a seamless theatrical experience.

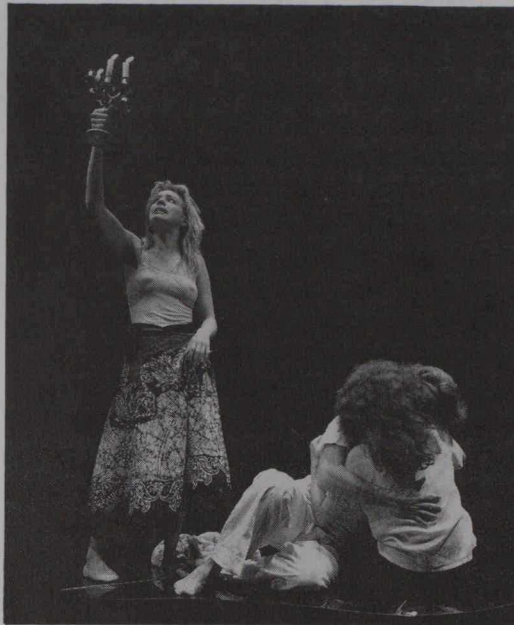
The play, like the geography of the earth itself, is constantly shifting. It has evolved from its original Toronto production in 1987 through performances in Quebec City in 1989; Glasgow, London and Montreal in 1990; and Ottawa in 1991.

Lepage is now the artistic director of French theatre for the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. In the program for the National Arts Centre production of *Tectonic Plates*, Lepage described its growth as follows:

"*Les Plaques tectoniques* was an enormous challenge involving four years of travel to six cities on two continents and nearly ten kilometres of paper spewed from various fax machines. It was a major effort, requiring massive amounts of touring equipment. The show gradually evolved and changed from city to city and is presented here in its full and final form. The team is complete and includes members from France, Quebec, Wales and Scotland."

The latest form in which *Tectonic Plates* has manifested itself is celluloid. Directed by Peter Mettler (*The Top of His Head*), the bilingual film will be broadcast on CBC, Radio-Canada and Britain's Channel Four.

Irving Wardle, theatre critic for *The Independent on Sunday*, in an article in *Canada Today* magazine compared Lepage to Peter Brooks (*Marat/Sade*, *The Mahabharata*). He noted both directors' penchant for multinational productions but said that this tendency didn't surface in Brooks until



later in his career, while Lepage has had this international outlook from the very beginning.

Born into a Franco-Irish family, Lepage completed his studies at the Conservatoire de Québec and the Conservatoire d'art dramatique in Paris. In 1981 he joined the Théâtre Repère de Québec. It was with Théâtre Repère that he directed *The Trilogy of the Dragons*.

A six-hour voyage from Quebec to Vancouver that spans seventy years and is performed in English, French and Chinese, *The Trilogy of the Dragons* has been staged in Quebec City, Montreal, Australia, Mexico, the United States and Europe.

The performance of the epic piece in London, England, in November 1991, garnered Lepage such notices as "the golden boy of the avant-garde" and the play was received as "a genuine theatrical spellbinder."

The spell is a result of Lepage's unique method of creation where all the actors are given a common reference point, or resource, from which to build the performance. In *The Trilogy of the Dragons* the resource was a parking lot. In *Tectonic Plates* it was the notion of colliding continental shelves.

Actor Normand Bissonnette has been with *Tectonic Plates* since its inception.

"It is a very unique way of doing theatre because the actors are part of the whole process," says Bissonnette. "If you have ideas about the sets or a line or about improvements then you can go up to Robert and discuss them. Robert has an incredible flair. He knows immediately if it will work or not. Not in the sense of what will please the crowd, but in the sense of what will make the play better."

Emma Davie joined the production in Glasgow and has been with it ever since. She found Lepage's method of working liberating and the international experience enlightening.

"When I began my company in Scotland," she explains. "I was interested in language and cultural identity. I don't think that you can ever look at your identity directly. You've got to look at it through something else. That's something very interesting that I have learned through working with this company. I think it's a stage that Quebec theatre went through where they were obsessed with their own identity and that they were always doing work about their identity. Now, they look at other things and bring out their identity in that way."

This confidence shows itself in the ever expanding horizons of Lepage's work. Most of his creations contain references to Shakespeare and he has directed French versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, and a bilingual version of *Romeo and Juliet* set in the Prairies. A new opportunity was presented to him when he was invited to direct the Royal National Theatre in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in London, England, in May 1992.

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