

*Eventually, theater will regain its position as a great...
rassembleur*

Raluca RĂDULESCU¹  in dialogue with Robert LEPAGE



Robert Lepage is one of most renowned stage and film directors today and a leading figure in the Canadian avant-garde, writer, designer and actor. His artistic work attracts particular attention for his challenging cultural interferences and multimedia-rich theatrical performances, as well as for his innovative approach to the Shakespearian plays.

¹ Theatre critic, independent researcher, Radio Romania Cultural,
e-mail: ralucarescu@yahoo.com



Raluca Rădulescu: *Robert Lepage, you are back again in 2024 at the International Theatre Festival in Craiova, and the first question coming into my mind cannot be but linked to this: How do you consider this festival, what attracts you here?*

Robert Lepage: For me it's very important, I love the people who hang out there, there's a lot of Shakespearean scholars but it's also a great audience, I love the audience in Craiova, or Romanian in general, but what I find really exciting about it is that it's a great place to talk about Shakespeare because we're not in England, you know, there's always this thing in the English-speaking world where people in New York or people in London or in Stratford think that they have the monopoly of all the interesting ideas and the analysis of the Shakespeare work, when in fact it's really a universal work and I think that in Craiova it does that: in French we say, *un pied-de-nez*, we send a finger, and we say: "Okay, well, there's also other people in the world who are interested in him, who relate to his work and who are rewriting him, who are transforming him, who are using him as a writer of our time". So, I think Craiova has that special focus, I'd say. It's very different than having Shakespearean scholars from Great Britain or from the United States who come with their sentences and you know... So it's great, it's great fun and it's very crafty, I love how it's organized, I love the youth also of it, there's a lot of young people. I've seen some interesting costume exhibitions there, and people who do younger productions. It's the youth of it, and that's where the hope is if you want to continue to do Shakespeare in a modern way, a contemporary way.

Raluca Rădulescu: *Speaking of youth and hope, you're back in Romania with a new staging of Hamlet, a text that you're staging for the third time in the last, let's say, 30 years. After Elsinore, in 1995, the one man show in which you also acted, and Hamlet Collage in 2013, which was also seen in Bucharest at the FNT, in 2023 you did a dance show with a choreographer: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Over the years you have staged other Shakespeare plays. Why did you choose to return to Hamlet for the third time?*

Robert Lepage: Yeah, well you never finish doing *Hamlet*, you do it all your life, you never get it right, in fact, you never get it *full*, because *Hamlet* has so many facets to it and so many layers and I think it's a lifetime project *Hamlet*. You're more informed about what the play is, of course, the more you do it and the more people you meet who've played *Hamlet* before, because they shed light on certain other meanings of the play, but I think that for me what's interesting is the formal aspect of it. It's fantastic to suddenly be asked by a dancer, a star dancer, who wants to perform *Hamlet* and who says: "Well, you know I'd like you to help us stage this", and he does a choreography and I bring the whole dramaturgical approach and the staging approach to it. And what's interesting and challenging about that is that I say: "Yeah, but what about the words?" *Hamlet* is well known, it's the greatest soliloquy play of all times, it has all the great soliloquies and how do you do the soliloquies? How do you use the same themes and the same characters without using the words? So that of course is very challenging and that's why I like revisiting *Hamlet*, because it always challenges a consciousness of understanding, of transmission, so that's what I think is the main challenge. I mean, when I did a long, long time ago, a one-man *Hamlet*, I was obsessed by a different question: Where does this happen? Why Elsinore? Why the castle of Elsinore and how does this place tell the story? So, of course there're all these different layers and skins that you want to peel off and try to discover, and there's always something to discover: it's a bottomless pit.

Raluca Rădulescu: *And what is it like to switch from monodrama (after 2 one-man-shows) to a performance with so many characters, and above all combining nonverbal and dance theatre?*

Robert Lepage: This time it's not a solo, it's a company of dancers and what's interesting is that the scholars who are interested in the literature of *Hamlet* noticed that Shakespeare does not make characters speak the same way depending on their class rank, depending on their relationship. So, there're certain ways of speaking, certain words that are used if you're a prince or a king or a queen that are not used by other characters and so there is a kind of a hierarchy. In the dance version, we try to develop that feature because we have some classical ballet dancers who dance with contemporary dancers

and also with street dancers, there's people who do hip-hop... So, we take all of the different vocabularies of dancing and help create the level of the characters. The characters don't express themselves in the same way, physically. So that's the big challenge that we've done, so that we try to express the richness and the fullness of Shakespeare's language, through the gesturing, which of course is performed by different performers who have different disciplines.

It's a coincidence that I go to Romania for a second *Hamlet*, it's a coincidence because right now I'm preparing a *Macbeth* for Stratford for next year. I've done *Romeo and Juliet* and I've done *The Tempest* a few times and of course there are other Shakespearian plays that I would like to present eventually in Craiova, but now it's just a coincidence.

You realize that, when you take the words out of Hamlet, *Hamlet* still exists and it exists because there's so much action and people forget that it's a play of action. It's about action and inaction, right? What's the problem of Hamlet? It's that he thinks a lot, but he doesn't take action, right? Action is very, very important, so how you can express that physically is all about action or non-action. So, we've discovered other layers of that play through the dancing, and this is quite interesting. It's very respectful of the play, and it's also respectful of the epoch. I think we are doing a very modern Hamlet but it's not set today. It's set in the Elsinore, the Denmark of Jor. But the way we use it, the way we choreograph it, the way the dramaturgical work has been approached is very, very contemporary I'd say.

Raluca Rădulescu: But still, why were you tempted by directing a dance performance?

Robert Lepage: Very often, in the dance world and, certainly, the classical dance world is closer to theater than contemporary dance, there's a high level of abstraction, that often frees the dancer. The dancer is free to go into expressing the subconscious, expressing certain poetic levels of character that you can't really do when you speak. But, very often there's a lot of details about the characters that are overlooked, and in this case, we worked very closely with the dancers and my semi-great pride is that the night of the opening, there's a lot of people who said: "Oh, where did you find all those actors who can dance?" That means that they think there are actors who dance and they say

they dance amazingly well for actors, because a lot of these dancers, for the first time, have been instructed of all the subtleties of the characters and their contradictions and their paradoxes. And how do we express that? It's interesting because they create all this amazing choreography, then I come in and I say: "Yes, but this character could not do this because of that", or "I think this is missing". And because they work so fast (that's the amazing thing about the dance world, they're so quick, you know, they do and redo and undo and everything is so quick, which is not the case with actors), I took advantage of that and said: "It's okay, fine, let's redo this, but this time there's this level that's missing or there's this explanation that has to be brought in, or let's see how we express that without miming".

For them it's been a good experience I think, and they've become good actors doing this... All of my shows are always works in progress, so, of course, the more we perform, the more we rework and also because, contrary to theater, even if they've done the performance many times, every day they come in and they do classes, and they're always revisiting and re-questioning not just the dance, and the gesturing, and the movements; they're also re-questioning everything, which enriches the whole experience.

***Raluca Rădulescu:** Robert Lepage, we talked about your most recent performance, which can also be seen by Romanian spectators at the Craiova Shakespeare Festival, but starting from here, I would also like to ask you how you see contemporary theater, with all its current trends, from Montreal, from Ex Machina?*

Robert Lepage: I think theater today is in reaction to cinema or in reaction to television; it's either fighting against or incorporating it. So, I think that that's what we're seeing, and sometimes it gives interesting things, I'm not against that. But when you want, for example, to structure what you perform or write on a more filmic format (you know the film format is anyways modeled on the Greek tragedies; if you read all of the Hollywood "How do you write a screenplay", it's actually based on the five act tragedies and even on Shakespeare's) you can take the good things from film, and leave out the bad things from film. Then I don't have any problems with that type of contemporary theater.

There were a lot of big revolutions in music. I think that's because people got used to having predictable music. Even if you've never heard a piece of Bach you could predict how the musical phrase is going to end, so contemporary, let's say modern, composers would try to contradict that, and say: "Well, let's do music that you can't predict!" so, it's a reaction to classical that gives a way to another form of expression. That's why I try to be open to that, and I try to understand why it is the way it is.

Raluca Rădulescu: I was thinking about the themes you approached and about your interest in the contemporary text...

Robert Lepage: I just came back from Shanghai, where I was performing 887. And you feel that even though theatre is very contemporary in Shanghai and there're some fantastic artists there, they are thirsty, they want to see change, they want to see how their craft can be part of the conversation, and it's really tricky you know: How do you invite the younger crowds into your theater? You really have to be appealing, and you have to allow a lot of aesthetic changes for that to happen... That's an interesting debate and the only way for it to work is when you see work that works in the sense that I look at somebody who's doing the *Tempest* or doing another play and I see it as an approach that changes my perception of the play. And I learn from that and it changes my way of adapting the values of the play to nowadays. Then, I can use this on other shows, on other conversations, so I'm interested in all of these, because the thing that we have to understand is that theater is about transformation. In *Midsummer Night's Dream* for instance, you see a character transformed into an ass, you know he's transformed into a donkey and you have other people being transformed... And that's what the stories on the stage have to be about; that's what the sets do and the costumes too, they change, you change, so it's all about change! I think we have to take that literally, theatre is a craft about change and changing. I don't think it's a trend, I think it's part of the nature of theater.

Raluca Rădulescu: And does the use of technology on stage have something to do with this transformation, with the changing you were talking about?

Robert Lepage: Technology is not necessary, and I don't use it all the time, but I invite it, in the sense that I let it happen. But I don't necessarily want to do a technological thing and technology is just... how can I say, it's like inventing a new painting... You know, when in the 19th century, the painters decided to move away from Romanticism and Realism and they decided to democratize painting. Because the acrylic is invented, suddenly, it's fantastic, everybody can use it! But acrylic comes with a problem, it dries very quickly, so that gives the start to impressionism because it's just what you can, what you have the time to do: an impression. But that creates a whole different way of painting, so that's why I'm saying that technology is a new way of writing or painting or doing music and it leaves its traces, and it changes the way we do things. I don't think it's necessary, but when it happens, you have to accept that technology has a great influence on how you say things, how you edit things, how you decorate things... and technology is part of the language that the people speak today. You know, the audiences are able to send emails and all that, they have a different technological vocabulary... It means you have to embrace the energy of your times in a lot of freedom.

***Raluca Rădulescu:** In 2018-2019 Robert Lepage signed two shows that were controversial from the perspective of diversity and inclusion, one staged at Cirque du Soleil and the other in Canada as a "theatrical odyssey based on black slave songs", but with the parts played by white actors, and it was canceled. The director considered it a "direct blow to artistic freedom", but after several public discussions and debates he apologized and the show was revived, leaving the impression that we first accuse and only after we analyze. And situations are often more complex than they seem at first sight. In this context, I ask Robert Lepage how he sees diversity and inclusion in theater today.*

Robert Lepage: Of course, I think that when people deal with realism, be it cinematographic or televisional, it is a tricky thing, because it's a different way of dealing with that new reality, but in theatre, there is a lot of poetic freedom, so that's why I enjoy more these propositions in theatre. You know, when I worked in Japan, a few times, what I found very enjoyable about the Japanese contemporary theater is that they don't have any problems to have

in the same play actors who are from different disciplines. So, you have a kabuki theater actor who will play with an American style actor, who will work with a kyogen actor. And for them, that's what they call "richness". In the Western world, we have a tendency to avoid this. You know... for example three sisters have to come from the same theater school... we have this kind of approach and I think it's a good thing that we break that, that we decide to allow ourselves to say: "well, people are not necessarily all from the same background".

The theater is always a suspension of disbelief, right? You walk into the theater, and you ask the audience, you say: "You know that I am not the character for real, you know, I'm an actor, but I ask you to have a suspension of disbelief". And I think that now, the new diverse approach to theater actually commands that; now you have to say to the people: "well, come in and you have our consciousness and our way of reading what we're going to do is at another level. It's more difficult in cinema, because cinema cares so much about realism and detail and accuracy of the facts. The facts, of course, sometimes have difficulties following this new trend, but of course, it's a necessary trend. And maybe there will be eventually a kind of balancing, maybe we are going very far into that, and then, slowly, we'll come back to maybe a more balanced approach. But for the diversity, you need diverse writings too. You have to have more and more diverse people who write their own plays, who speak about themselves. And that I think this is lacking for now, but there will be a moment I think where the repertoire, the dramaturgical repertoire will be enriched also by the diversity in writing.

Raluca Rădulescu: Would you say that theatre is still magic?

Robert Lepage: Oh, completely. Absolutely. And it's magic beyond the supposed magicians that we are, you know, people think that all the magic that we cast is all controlled and it's a vision, but not at all. Theater has its own power and pulls us in directions we never thought we'd go.

Raluca Rădulescu: Besides theatre you did opera and film. If you had to choose what would you choose?

Robert Lepage: I think theatre, I think that theatre is a grandmother art, it invites all the other forms of art. I think it is freer. The opera has too many rigid rules in the state it is right now. I think theatre is a more forgetful and open form of art. And I have hope that theatre will eventually regain in the West, will regain its communal power. Because, as I said, I just came back from Shanghai, but it's like that in Seoul, in South Korea or in Japan, I could see that the audiences are very young. The people who are in the audience are much younger than in the West. So, I have the impression that there is some kind of movement eventually where theater will regain its position as a great, in French, you see, *rassembleur*. You know, it's an art that assembles people around the project, but also assembles people in the room.

Raluca Rădulescu: *And a last question: what is Robert Lepage still dreaming of, today?*

Robert Lepage: Well, I think my dreams are about education in the sense that I've always been very, very busy creating all sorts of new shows and gathering people around different crazy projects and all that. I have the impression that I've done a lot of research and I've worked with a group that's been very generous with me to do that. But there's an aspect, maybe because I'm getting older, there's an aspect of my interest now, that is more connected to teaching. In the sense that, you know, sometimes we have people from all over the world who come to see us work, but I would like to have like an official, not school, because "school" is a bit rigid word, but a studio, have a place where people come and they try things, and I could coach them, and they could contradict what I say and whatever. That is for me, I'd say, a long-winded project.

Raluca Rădulescu: *Thank you!*

