

# The Busker's Opera



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Freely adapted from *the Beggar's Opera*  
by **John Gay**

created and directed by **Robert Lepage**

Production **Ex Machina**

# The Busker's opera

[ **busk·er** (plural **busk·ers**), noun, *U.K.* **street musician or entertainer**: somebody who entertains in the street or a public place in the hope of receiving money from passers-by ]

***The Beggar's Opera*** was first performed in London on January 29, 1728, and it took the city by storm, becoming an overnight sensation. At once a satire of government corruption and a parody of then fashionable Italian opera, John Gay's comic play with songs touched a deep chord in his audience. The characters were drawn from the hierarchy of the criminal underworld: highway robbers, cutthroats, fencers, jailors and prostitutes; and Gay's new lyrics were set to existing melodies taken from popular songs of the day. For nearly 300 years, ***The Beggar's Opera*** has enjoyed enduring success with its public, and it has inspired many adaptations and interpretations, perhaps most notably, ***The Three Penny Opera***, written by Bertolt Brecht with music by Kurt Weill. It's no wonder, then, that its characters have become such an important part of our modern theatre mythology.

Freely adapted from John Gay's 18<sup>th</sup> century masterpiece, ***The Busker's Opera*** is a new musical work for the theatre – or perhaps it is more aptly called a *songspiel*, as the Germans would say, since its story is told almost entirely in song. The show is currently being created at Ex Machina in Quebec City by director Robert Lepage and a group of 10 performing artists comprised of actors, musicians, singers and a DJ. Together, they have composed more than 30 new songs as well as reinvented Gay's classic story for today's audience. Fans of the original will recognize the characters of Macheath and his jealous lovers, Polly and Lucy; the prostitute, Jenny; as well as the ruthless Mr. and Mrs. Peachum and the corrupt Mr. Lockit. In ***The Busker's Opera***, however, the characters do not belong to the criminal underworld, but rather to the underworld of the music industry, counting among themselves musicians and aspiring celebrities, groupies, agents and entertainment lawyers, foundation representatives... and prostitutes (yes, some professions are timeless).

Like its source, ***The Busker's Opera*** begins in London, but the show quickly changes gears and embarks on a Trans-Atlantic journey, first landing in New York and then traveling south through Atlantic City and New Orleans before arriving at its final destination, Huntsville, Texas. (Huntsville, by the way, is home to one of the principal capital punishment centers in the U.S., not to mention the infamous Killer Burger, which is served only on days when the death penalty is imposed) Throughout this satirical and often playful journey, many musical styles are explored: Ska, Reggae, Jazz, the Broadway/West End Show Tune, Rock, the Blues, Country, Tango, Disco, Rap and more. Irreverent and eclectic, the show also includes some of the classical melodies arranged by Dr. John Christopher Pepusch for the 1728 production of ***The Beggar's Opera***.

Somewhere between road trip and rock show, classical concert and the zydeco of the bayou, between the street musician and the sharks who seek to hold the keys to power, fame and fortune, ***The Busker's Opera*** concerns itself with the artistic freedom that remains after the steamroller of the music industry has driven by.

Performance in English. Estimated length of the show: 1 h 52.

# Cast

Frédérique Bédard

Cécile Boulin-Peachum, Diana Von Trapes

Martin Bélanger

Jimmy Twitcher (Highwaymen)

Claire Gignac

Jenny Diver

Julie Fainer

Polly Peachum

Frédéric Lebrasseur

Filch (Highwaymen)

Véronika Makdissi-Warren

Lucy Lockit

Kevin McCoy

Samuel J. Peachum

Steve Normandin

Pimp

Marco Poulin

Macheath

Jean René

Rashid Lockit



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# Biographies

## **Frédérique Bédard**

After graduating from the National Theatre School of Canada in 1980, Frédérique Bédard also studied classical singing and the harpsichord at Quebec City's Music Conservatory. She works as an actor, singer and musician, both on stage and on television.

## **Martin Bélanger**

Multi-instrumentalist and music lover Martin Bélanger loves to use his guitars, banjos, double bass and other to stringamajigs cross every possible musical line. Recently, he has been working regularly on theatre productions, both as a composer and musician, and often side by side with Frédéric Lebrasseur (the other half of the Ranch-O-Banjo duet).

## **Claire Gignac**

Contralto, flutist, composer and musical director Claire Gignac is the cofounder and artistic director of the New Music section of the Compagnie musicale La Nef. Over the last 25 years, she has touched everything from ancient to contemporary music.

## **Julie Fainer**

A Montreal artist with a wide range of interests, Julie Fainer (aka DJ Killa Jewel) first studied classical music, and then began working as a hip hop DJ, in various locations in Canada and the United States. She has a particular interest for merging hip hop and theatre.

## **Frédéric Lebrasseur**

This natural improviser and self-taught musician plays with a whole number of musical groups (including Les Batinsés) and regularly works with puppet theatre companies. He also composes film soundtracks and directs animation and fiction shorts produced by the National Film Board.

## **Véronika Makdissi-Warren**

After studying the violin at Quebec City's Music Conservatory and graduating from the city's Theatre Conservatory, Véronika Makdissi-Warren began working as an actor in 1996, collaborating on several new works created by local theatre companies. She recently played the part of Jeanne in the restaging of *The Dragons' Trilogy*, which was shown in Quebec and abroad.

## **Kevin McCoy**

Since 1985, Kevin McCoy has been very active as an actor, author and director, first in the United States (particularly in Chicago) and then in Quebec City and Montreal. His first collaboration on a collective project by Ex Machina, *Geometry of Miracles*, allowed him to tour several continents.

## **Steve Normandin**

A self-taught accordionist and pianist, Steve Normandin won the public's award and the stage performance award at Petite-Vallée's 2001 *Festival en chanson*. His encyclopedic knowledge of French songwriting of all times and styles has brought him to perform in many different parts of the French-speaking world.

## **Marco Poulin**

Since 1978, actor and self-taught musician Marco Poulin has worked with most of Quebec City's theatre companies. He has been part of several Ex Machina productions, including *Tempest*, *Geometry of Miracles*, *Zulu Time* and *far side of the moon*.

## **Jean René**

After a long period of time working in Italy, and after returning to school to study composition and conducting, Jean René became, from 1991 to 2002, the associate solo violist with the Montreal Metropolitan Orchestra. He works with various chamber music ensembles and is particularly interested in written and improvisational new music.

# Robert Lepage



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Versatile in every form of theatre craft, Robert Lepage is equally talented as a director, scenic artist, playwright, actor and film director. His creative and original approach to theatre has won him international acclaim and shaken the dogma of classical stage direction to its foundations, especially through his use of new technologies. Contemporary history is his source of inspiration, and his modern and unusual work transcends all boundaries.

Robert Lepage was born in Quebec in 1957. He took an early interest in geography, and when he later discovered all art forms, theatre caught his particular attention. He entered the Conservatoire d'art dramatique de Québec in 1975 at the age of 17. After a study period in Paris in 1978 he returned to Quebec and became involved in many creative projects, gaining experience as actor, author and director. Two years later he joined the Théâtre Repère.

In 1984, his play *Circulations* toured Canada and received Best Canadian Production award at the Quinzaine Internationale de Théâtre de Québec. The next year *The Dragon's Trilogy* gained him an international reputation, quickly followed by *Vinci* (1986), *Polygraph* (1987) and *Tectonic Plates* (1988). In 1988 he formed his own professional management company, Robert Lepage Inc. (RLI).

From 1989 to 1993 he was Artistic Director of the Théâtre français at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. Meanwhile pursuing his own creative projects, he directed *Needles and Opium* (1991), *Coriolanus*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest* (1992). With *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1992 he became the first North American to direct a Shakespeare play at the Royal National Theatre in London.

A turning point in his career came with the founding of his multidisciplinary production company, Ex Machina, in 1994. Under his artistic direction, this new team produced a steady output of plays, beginning with *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* (1994), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1995) and a solo production, *Elsinore* (1995). In 1994, he made his début in the world of cinema. He wrote and directed his first feature film, *Le Confessionnal*, which appeared the following year at the Cannes Festival Directors' Fortnight. He went on to direct *Polygraph* in 1996, *Nô* in 1997, *Possible Worlds* in 2000 (his first feature film written in English), and finally, in 2003, a film adaptation of his play *The Far Side of the Moon*.

La Caserne, a multidisciplinary production centre in Quebec City, opened in 1997 under Robert Lepage's leadership. In their new quarters he and his team created and produced *Geometry of Miracles* (1998), *Zulu Time* (1999), *The Far Side of The Moon* (2000), *La Casa Azul* (2001), a new version of *The Dragons' Trilogy* with a new cast (2003) and *The Busker's Opera* (2004). This was followed by *The Andersen Project* (2005), *Lipsynch* (2007), *The Blue Dragon* (2008) and *Eonnagata* (2009).

Robert Lepage is often asked to turn his creative hand to new fields. In 1993, he directed Peter Gabriel's *Secret World Tour*. In 2000, he was involved in producing *Métissages*, an exhibition at the Musée de la civilisation in Quebec City. In 2002, he joined forces with Peter Gabriel again to direct *Growing Up Tour*. He later designed and directed Cirque du Soleil shows: *KÅ* in 2005, a permanent show in Las Vegas, and *TOTEM* in 2010, a show under Grand Chapiteau that will tour worldwide. For Quebec City's 400th anniversary in 2008,

Robert Lepage and Ex Machina created the largest architectural projection ever achieved: *The Image Mill*™. In 2009, *Aurora Borealis*, a permanent lighting installation inspired by the colors of the northern lights was created on the same location.

Robert Lepage made a grand entrance in the opera world when he staged the successful double bill: *Bluebeard's Castle* and *Erwartung* (1993). His presence on the operatic stage continued with *La Damnation de Faust* presented for the first time in the Saito Kinen Festival Matsumoto, Japan (1999), then at the Opera National de Paris and the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Among his achievements in opera: *1984* based on the novel by George Orwell, with Maestro Lorin Maazel providing the musical direction (2005), *The Rake's Progress* (2007) and *The Nightingale and Other short Fables* which premiered in Toronto at the Canadian Opera Company (2009), and has been presented at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence and Opéra de Lyon in 2010. *Das Rheingold*, Wagner's Ring prelude, premiered September 2010 at The Metropolitan Opera with the cycle being presented during the 2010-11 and 2011-12 seasons.

Robert Lepage's work has been recognized by many awards. Among the most important was the medal of the Officers of the Ordre national du Québec in 1999. In September 2000, he was given the SORIQ Award (La Société des relations internationales de Québec) for the impact of his work outside Québec. In October, 2001, he was recognized with the World Leaders Association of Harbourfront Centre, once again in honour of the international scope of his career. In 2002, France received him into the Légion d'honneur, the Québec Chamber of Commerce named him "Grand Québécois", and he won the Herbert Whittaker Drama Bench Award for his outstanding contribution to Canadian theatre. The following year he won the Denise Pelletier Prize, the highest distinction awarded by the Québec government in the performing arts field, as well as the National Theatre School's Gascon Thomas Award. In 2004 he was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Prize for his outstanding artistic contribution to honouring Hans Christian Andersen worldwide. In 2005 he received the Institut France-Canada's Samuel de Champlain Prize for his contribution to French culture and the Stanislavski Award for his contribution to international theatre and the dissemination of his productions *The Dragons' Trilogy*, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* and *The Busker's Opera*. In 2007, the Festival de l'Union des Théâtres de l'Europe honoured him with the distinguished Prix Europe, previously awarded to Ariane Mnouchkine and Bob Wilson among others. The production of *The Far Side of the Moon* was recognized by The Golden Mask Festival of Russian Performing Arts 2007 in the category of Best Foreign Production. In 2009, he received the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for his outstanding contribution to the cultural life of the country.



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# Credits

## ***The Busker's Opera***

Inspired from ***The Beggar's Opera*** by John Gay

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Original design & direction by              | Robert Lepage   |
| Musical direction                           | Martin Bélanger   |
| Assisted by                                 | Steve Normandin   |
| Dramaturg                                   | Kevin McCoy   |
| Music composed, arranged and performed by   | Frédérique Bédard<br>Martin Bélanger<br>Julie Fainer<br>Claire Gignac<br>Frédéric Lebrasseur<br>Véronika Makdissi-Warren<br>Kevin McCoy<br>Steve Normandin<br>Marco Poulin<br>Jean René |
| Contribution to the musical arrangements    | Jacques Leblanc   |
| Text  | John Gay  |
| Adaptation                                  | Kevin McCoy, Robert Lepage  |
| Assistant to the director and stage manager | Félix Dagenais  |
| Assistant set designer                      | Marco Poulin, Véronique Dumont, Paul Bourque  |
| Assistant lighting designer                 | Laurent Routhier  |
| Costume designer                            | Yasmina Giguère   |
| Assisted by                                 | Isabel Poulin   |
| Seamstresses                                | Janie Gagnon, Louise Guay, Sophie Royer   |
| Wigs  | Rachel Tremblay   |
| Technical designer                          | Tobie Horswill  |
| Properties                                  | Sylvie Courbron   |
| Projection design                           | Jacques Collin  |
| Image design                                | Lionel Arnould  |
| Set building                                | Astuce<br>Conception visuelle Jean-Marc Cyr   |
| Choreography consultant                     | Denise Biggi (Les Sortilèges)   |



|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| English coaching                | Cynthia Gates  |
| Robert Lepage's agent           | Lynda Beaulieu   |
| Production manager              | Louise Roussel   |
| Production assistant            | Marie-Pierre Gagné   |
| Tour manager                    | Emmanuelle Nappert   |
| Technical director              | Paul Bourque   |
| Lighting manager                | Laurent Routhier   |
| Sound manager                   | Frédéric Auger   |
| Video manager                   | Francis Leclerc  |
| Costumes and properties manager | Sylvie Courbron  |
| Head stagehand                  | Frédéric Labelle   |
| Stagehand                       | Simon Laplante   |
| Produced by                     | Ex Machina   |
| In coproduction with            | Festival Montréal en Lumière<br>La Filature, Scène Nationale de Mulhouse<br>Maison des Arts, Créteil<br>Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for Performing Arts, UC Davis<br>spielzeiteuropa   Berliner Festspiele, Berlin<br>Théâtre de Caen<br>Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Bruxelles<br>Cankarjev Dom, Ljubljana<br>Melbourne International Arts Festival, Melbourne<br>Teatro Central, Sevilla |

Associate Producer, Europe, Japan: Richard Castelli

Associate producer's management team, Europe, Japan: Chara Skiadelli, Florence Berthaud, Claire Dugot

Associate Producer, United Kingdom: Michael Morris

Associate Producer, The Americas, Asia (except Japan), Australia, NZ: Menno Plukker

|              |               |
|--------------|---------------|
| Guest artist | Lucie the dog |
|--------------|---------------|

|                  |                                 |
|------------------|---------------------------------|
| Acknowledgements | Doctor John Christopher Pepusch |
|------------------|---------------------------------|

Ex Machina is funded by the Canada Council for the Arts, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Quebec's Arts and Literature Council, the Ministry of Culture and Communication, the Fonds de stabilisation et de consolidation des arts et de la culture du Québec, the City of Quebec.



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