

The Dragons' Trilogy



Robert Lepage / Ex Machina

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The Dragons' Trilogy speaks of an imaginary China, a China invented in the minds of two young girls in the 1930s, brought up in the mysterious surrounding areas of the Chinese quarter of Quebec, a quarter which no longer exists. One of these young girls, the only character present during all the periods of the piece, started off the performance with a few words which announced both the limits and the interest of the project : « *I have never been to China* ».

Since the creation of « The Dragons' Trilogy », many performances directed by Robert Lepage have been presented in Asia, Singapore, Tokyo, Hong Kong... The naive and curious approach which shaped the first Trilogy – one based around the exported China to be found in the Chinatowns of Quebec, Toronto and Vancouver – no longer exists. For the past 15 years, several of Lepage's productions have demonstrated his comprehension of a much explored and better understood vision of the Orient. He now offers a revised Dragons' Trilogy, a collaboration with Asians and with a whole new generation of performers using a far richer theatrical vocabulary .

We may find there a new answer to that question often asked between opium fumes, tai chi and Mao chants :

So what does the Chinese launderer from the Saint-Roch quarter dream about?

The Dragons' Trilogy, Grand Prix of the Festival de théâtre des Amériques in 1987, has been presented in over 30 cities in North America, in Europe and in Oceania from 1985 to 1992.

In the beginning...

In the beginning there was nothing, or almost nothing. Six actors (including the director who had brought them together), plus two set designers and a producer, all seeking the road to the Orient. In a wasteland turned into a parking lot, imagination and memory began digging deep.

In the beginning there were three Chinatowns – one in Quebec City in the 1930s, which served as the backdrop for the green, spring-like and aquatic dragon; one in prosperous, mid-century Toronto in the décor of the red dragon of earth and fire; and one in the flourishing Vancouver of the 1980s where the white dragon, autumnal and ethereal, spread its wings. There was the imaginary China of myth and cheap goods, of Tintin and the blue lotus, of Tao, Yi Ching, mah jong, tai chi, Chinese laundries and chow mein, yin and yang, rickshaws and « made in Hong Kong ». There was the story of Aunt Marie-Paule who married a Chinese man, and the mother in the CWAC and the parking lot attendant in his booth with a glass ball that played Japanese music.

In the beginning there were Françoise and Jeanne, twelve years old and inseparable friends. They played in the store with shoeboxes, making St. Joseph Street and its boutiques come to life. There was Lépine the undertaker and the barber shop belonging to Jeanne's father, where she spied Bédard and all that fascinating red hair, and there was also old Mr. Wong's laundry, where one chilly night a certain William S. Crawford showed up, just off the boat England with hopes of setting up shop in Quebec City.

Marie Gignac



photo © Erick Lahhé

The Dragons' Trilogy, new version

Presented in its six-hour entirety at the Festival de théâtre des Amériques in 1987 in Shed No. 9 of Montreal's Old Port, *The Dragons' Trilogy* was a rare moment of bedazzlement. The play has since toured the planet and launched writer and director Robert Lepage onto the major stages of the world. The fact that he has decided to make a modest return to the zen garden of this seminal play, to shift the stones so that the magic coiled up in hair scented with the aromas of East and West comes bursting forth, suggests that it is his way of creating a work of memory and transmission, a gift to give us pleasure.

Assisted by a new team of actors and designers, he is remounting his sets in a former railroad repair shop. In an enormous rectangle of sand and gravel and in a parking lot in the middle of nowhere, under harsh night lighting Jeanne and Françoise (the pivotal characters of this saga) come back to life. They are the linchpins around whom several unforgettable characters revolve.

Dancing back to the Source

This fabulous saga is structured like a three-part waltz, a dance marking spring, autumn and winter. First is a waltz of innocence, premonitions and destinies in decline. Then a waltz of war, travel and progress followed by the third movement, a waltz of death and rebirth. This long migratory dance travels from east to west all the way to the gateway to the Orient, taking us through the Chinatowns of Quebec City, Toronto and Vancouver and winding its way to Hong Kong, England, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Maoist China, hurtling like Halley's Comet as it spins the lifelines of history between 1910 and 1985.

Driven by a surging primal force, the lives of the characters unfold in the traces of an outline of a virtually unexplored imaginary tale, the hidden story of the West – the Orient. The adventure begins with three voices from the shadows speaking in familiar and foreign tones, voices in unison of men and women inviting us in confidential tones on a journey. *"I have never been to China. When I was small, there were houses here. This was the Chinese neighbourhood. If you scratch the ground with your fingernails, you will find water and motor oil. If you dig deeper, you will most likely come across shards of porcelain and bits of jade and the foundations of Chinese houses. And if you dig even deeper still, you'll end up in China."*

The Magic of the Imperceptible



photo © Érick Labbé

In *the Dragons' Trilogy*, the movement is cyclical, part of a complex dynamic that quashes the logic of binary opposition between myth and reality, between the body and the mind, intuition and reason, interiority and exteriority, the sublime and the trivial, between tragedy and comedy. The entire composition proceeds by impulses, suggestive impressions and thematic and metaphorical condensation. Dance, movement, dialogue, objects and actions are as one, propelling this poetic conspiracy of languages, jargons, codes, references and quotations, the intimate breathing of vivacious beings who live and die in the bodies of the actors. Scenes take place simultaneously in the time and space of a song that encompasses Quebec City, Toronto, Tokyo and a military base in England. Sequences are presented in counterpoint with narration and commentary. Danced segments replay the action in tai chi movements and tango dance steps. Metaphors are woven through the anecdotal story line, and changes in tone and rhythm reactivate the movement of the piece as it oscillates between humour and solemnity, emotion and reticence.

These are but some examples of the richness of the writing and the organic structure of the piece, its fabric woven and embellished with myriad elements ranging from shoeboxes, shoes and skates to sheets, matches, a bicycle, a wheelchair, a rickshaw, light bulbs, pliers, paintings and a glass ball, as well as costumes and wigs for imagined

destinies. The characters and the actors recreate the world in a sandbox sculpted by light, music, choreography and images projected on a billboard. Robert Lepage has put his dual world on stage to present his saga of life, death and endless transformation in a prism of light that takes the characters and the audience to the China of the imagination, the mythical land hidden deep in our hearts, the China unearthed in 1985 by a group of actors conducting an imaginary and archaeological excavation in a parking lot in Quebec City's St. Roch neighbourhood on the former site of the city's Chinatown.

Three Dragons in a Sandbox

In the *Dragons' Trilogy* the entire play is contained in each detail, reproducing the principle of the hologram. 75 years of life and dozens of daily lives of ordinary people over three generations end up in an art gallery in Vancouver. The third and final movement of the dragons' waltz accompanies two young artists, the children of a third generation of migration and commingling, in a reflection on art and creation, the constant struggle between life and death, interiority and exteriority, animus and anima, the visible and the invisible. At the heart of this installation theatre, where the characters of the saga come to die, Eastern and Western cultures are reflected in the Pacific Ocean and in Chinese villagers celebrating the Year of the Dragon while Pierre and Yukali make love in a zen garden where three dragons sleep in a starry galaxy. At the same time, an Air France pilot falls from the night sky between Vancouver and Japan, Stella's head strikes metal, Françoise buries a glass ball and Crawford is transported by fire back to Hong Kong. An elderly guard leaves his sentry box and picks up the glass ball, an artefact of a performance that has come to an end. Antonin Artaud saw theatre as Eastern, and Ariane Mnouchkine refers to it as the primary source to which all Western artists must return if they wish to reclaim the body and flesh of theatre. East and West gaze at each other by night in the mirror of the Pacific.

Lorraine Hébert
in Festival de théâtre des Amériques programme

The Cast

Sylvie Cantin

An old Chinese woman, Stella, Sister Marie-de-la-Grâce

Jean Antoine Charest

The parking lot attendant, Morin-the barber,
the American officer, the Chinese soldier, the male nurse

Simone Chartrand

Françoise, Crawford as a child

Hugues Frenette

Bédard, Lépine-the undertaker, Pierre Lamontagne

Tony Guilfoyle

Crawford, Françoise's fiancé, the doctor

Éric Leblanc

The Chinese laundryman (Lee's father), Lee,
the shoe store customer, Philippe Gambier, the pilot

Véronika Makdissi-Warren

Jeanne

Emily Shelton

An old Chinese woman, the geisha, Yukali's mother,
Yukali



photo © Érick Labbé

The three dragons

Le Dragon Vert : 1h19

Le Dragon Rouge, 1st part: 0h49

Le Dragon Rouge 2nd part: 0h48

Le Dragon Blanc : 1h18



Robert Lepage



© Julie Perreault

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: *KÀ* 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 Quebec 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 Quebec 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.

Credits

Text	Marie Brassard Jean Casault Lorraine Côté Marie Gignac Robert Lepage Marie Michaud
Director	Robert Lepage
Dramaturg	Marie Gignac
Assistant to the director	Félix Dagenais
Assistant to the director, original version	Philippe Soldevila
Performed by	Sylvie Cantin an old Chinese women, Stella, Sister Marie-de-la-Grâce Jean Antoine Charest Morin the barber, the American officer, the male nurse and others Simone Chartrand Françoise and others Hugues Frenette Bédard, Lépine the undertaker, Pierre Lamontagne Tony Guilfoyle Crawford, the doctor Éric Leblanc the old Chinese, Lee Wong, the pilote and others Véronika Makedissi-Warren Jeanne and others Emily Shelton an old Chinese women, three generations of Yukali
Original music	Robert Caux
Associate composer and musical arrangements	Jean-Sébastien Côté
Performed by	Martin Gauthier
Original set design	Jean François Couture, Gilles Dubé
Set design and properties assistant	Vano Hotton
Properties assistant	Marie-France Larivière
Lighting designer	Sonoyo Nishikawa
Original lighting design	Louis-Marie Lavoie, Lucie Bazzo

Costume designer Assisted by	Marie-Chantale Vaillancourt Sylvie Courbron
Projection design	Jacques Collin
Image design	Lionel Arnould
Director's agent	Lynda Beaulieu
Production and tour manager	Louise Roussel
Production assistant	Marie-Pierre Gagné
Technical director	Serge Côté
Technical director (touring)	Patrick Durnin
Stage manager	Annie Pilon
Lighting manager	Dominic Minguy-Jean
Sound and video manager	Claude Cyr
Costumes and properties manager	Marie-France Larivière
Chief stagehand	Simon Cloutier
Assistant to costume and properties	Sylvie Courbron
Technical consultant	Tobie Horswill
Seamstresses	Nicole Gadoury, Valérie Couture, Stéban Sanfaçon
Wigs	Joëlle Monty & Richard Hanson Rachel Tremblay
Choreography consultant	Harold Rhéaume
Set building	Les Conceptions Visuelles Jean-Marc Cyr
Additional Music	Youkali/Music by Kurt Weill, Lyrics by Roger Fernay Used by arrangement with European American Music Corporation, agent for The Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, Inc. and agent for Heugel S.A.
Canadian Army Show images	Fox Movietonews, Inc.
Cantonese translation	Truong Chanh Trung

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Ex Machina

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