



Haunted by

by Maurie Alioff

*Robert Le
Le Confession*

Hitchcock

oage's
ominal

"I'm waiting for the night
to fall/I know that it will
save us all/When
everything's dark/Keeps
us from the stark reality."
Depeche Mode

**KRISTIN SCOTT THOMAS AS HITCHCOCK'S
ASSISTANT ATTENDING THE OPENING OF
I CONFESS IN QUEBEC CITY, 1953, IN LEPAGE'S
LE CONFESSIOMNAL**



Robert Lepage once told Montreal actor Marc Labrèche that he liked Labrèche's performing style of keeping a distance while switching "easily between the theatrical and the ordinary." The description applies equally to Lepage himself, certainly as a director and actor, maybe even in real life.

In Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal*, the character Lepage plays is both a regular guy and intriguingly alien. When first glimpsed against a rear-screen cosmic explosion, he comes across as a space oddity, an angelic figure not quite of this earth. I would guess that Lepage is a mix of flying high and down-to-earth, tormented and relaxed, aloof and sociable, an approachable person who needs to keep a big chunk of himself at a cool distance.

As a stage director, Lepage works in close with people, building inventive, eye-popping theatre pieces through a collective process of improvisations and free associations that include actors drawing and talking about their latest dreams. After bursting onto Quebec's theatre scene in the early 80s, he became celebrated for his bold one-man shows like *Vinci* (it's been called a "multimedia meditation"), hallucinatory large-scale pieces like the noirish *Polygraph*, and the legendary *Tectonic Plates*. He constantly travels the international theatre circuit, either to supervise a mounting of one of his creations, present a new one, or fulfil an obligation to direct a Strinberg here, three Shakespeares there.

At the time I spoke to him in June, he had just been to Cannes where his much anticipated movie debut, *Le Confessionnal*, opened the *Quinzaine*. On the same trip, Lepage beamed over

to Vienna for a staging of his latest theatre piece, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* (like all his work, it will undergo frequent mutations until it reaches its projected seven-hour form by next year), to England for a meeting with Pink Floyd's Roger Waters, and finally to Boston where he hung out at M.I.T. "My big kick in the past month," Lepage told me, "was visiting their installations and extraordinary findings, playing with

When I interviewed him, he was busy "working a lot on the voice and the different technologies available to change its range and pitch."

Ex Machina's most ambitious venture, a multi-million-dollar one, involves transforming an old firehall donated by the mayor of Quebec City, Lepage's birthplace, into what he casually refers to as "a kind of multimedia lab where we'll be doing shows and music and films and

In *Le Confessionnal*, as in *I Confess*, we see Quebec as a city of stark perspectives and ominous shadows. In both films, past segues into present on a quick pan

a virtual dog and doing all these things you don't get to do too often."

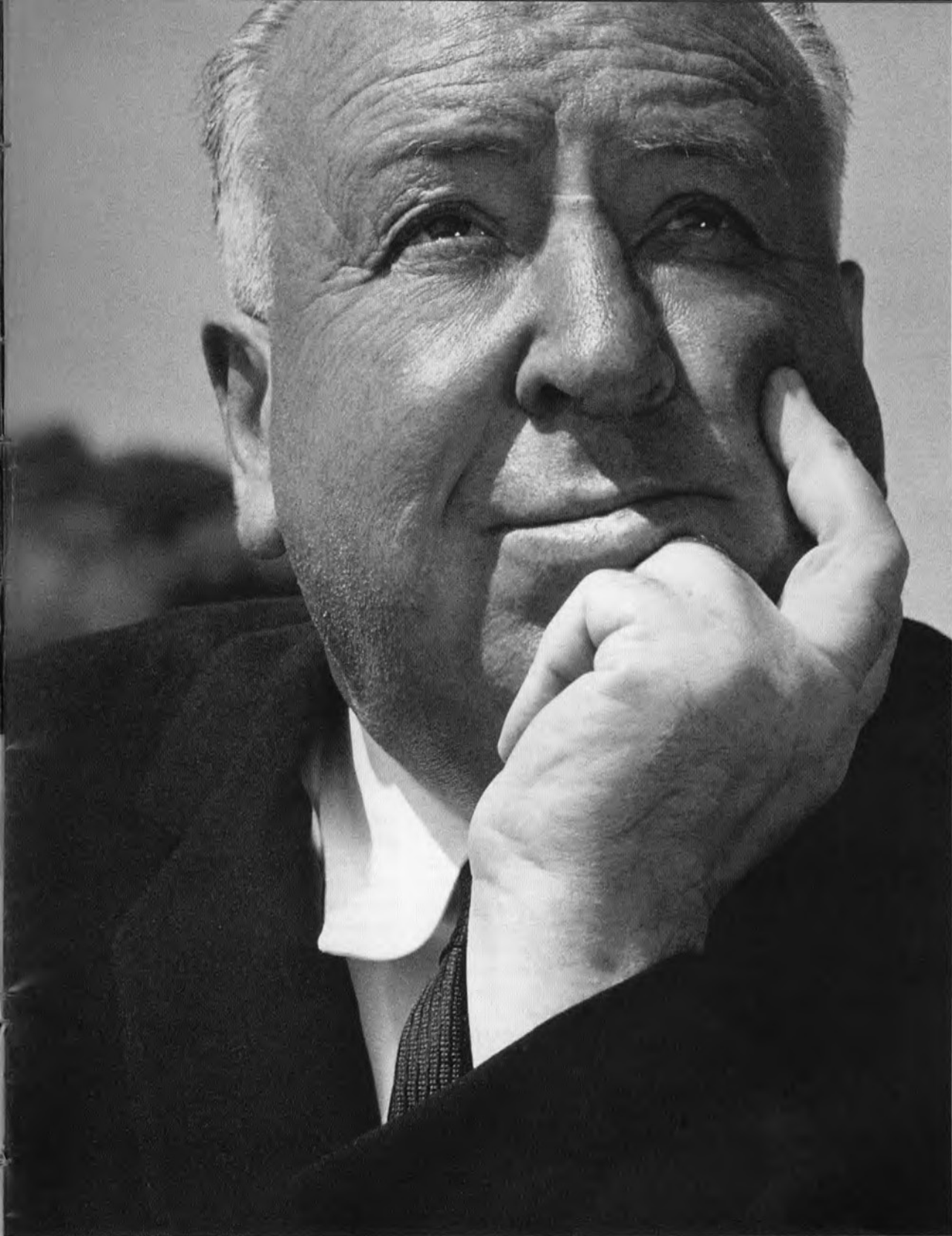
Until recently, Lepage considered himself a "low-tech, but a lot of low-tech" kind of artist, meaning he's relied on traditional stagecraft, film (rarely video) projections and sophisticated sound techniques. But now he's going digital with projects being developed by his newly formed, Quebec City-based production company and clearing house, Ex Machina.

One of Ex Machina's projects is *Elsinore*, which Lepage describes as "putting *Hamlet* under X-rays. I'm trying to grind the script through all these new technologies, process it in different kinds of computers." Lepage intends to play all the parts, including Ophelia.

video and whatnot." One of the dreams for the so-called "Caserne" involves electronically bringing together performers from around the world in a live virtual theatre.

Lepage loves to create areas where different worlds, time periods, and levels of the psyche melt into each other. Some scenes in his theatre work play realistically; others are dream-like. The two layers often slide together. He experiments endlessly with lighting, textures of sound and music, cinematic shifts in viewpoint.

Michael McKenzie, a Montreal director-playwright who's a member of Ex Machina, remembers being blown away by *Tectonic Plates*' virtuoso effects during "the scene on the piano top, which was also a roof in Venice. She (a



OPPOSITE PAGE: MONTGOMERY CLIFT AS A QUEBEC PRIEST AND ACCUSED MURDERER IN I CONFESS; THIS PAGE: THE MASTER HIMSELF, ALFRED HITCHCOCK

'60s junkie) shoots up, falls off and turns into a 19th century ballerina while Chopin is still playing the piano, and she's going round and round. But now Chopin is playing Jim Morrison." Within his intricate, euphoric spectacles, Lepage often hones in on themes of loneliness and estrangement. In *Tectonic*

Plates, a long rectangular pool both connects and separates the characters' psyches and situations. Lepage mediates his dark tone with an urbane sense of melancholy humour. In *Needles and Opium*, a forlorn *québécois* actor lies in a cheap Paris hotel room pining for the lover who's rejected him to the shrieks of

a woman climaxing on the other side of a wall.

Always intrigued by movies and clearly influenced by their language, Lepage was offered the opportunity to make his first picture by Montreal producer Denise Robert. A \$3-million Canadian/French/British co-production



**THIS PAGE: LOTHAIRE
BLUTEAU AS PIERRE
LAMONTAGNE;
OPPOSITE: SUZANNE
CLEMENT AS RACHEL**

that has David Puttman as one of its partners, *Le Confessionnal* started filming at the end of May, 1994, and wrapped in the summer of that year. The shoot was followed by long post-production in three different countries.

Although Lepage says he had no big problems making the transition from stage to screen, the switch wasn't entirely a cakewalk. Accustomed to developing a project with "zillions of collaborators around, giving me feedback," he was intimidated by the writing of his first script ever and obsessively read all the self-help manuals, including the inevitable Syd Field. "To be the only one who decides what the plot says, who feels what—I've never done that," Lepage recalls. "I felt extremely alone."

As for the editing, another dauntingly cloistered experience, "I started to understand how fragile the craft is, how the slightest little frame you take in or out sometimes changes the whole story. In theatre, you cut a complete scene and nobody sees a difference the day after. The actors are alive, they readjust, the energy is spread out differently. But in film, my God, it's just like cutting into a

human being."

Lepage found himself adjusting "my mind, the way my brain's structured, to the flat and linear" nature of film, compared to the "cubic, very three-dimensional" characteristics of the stage. Then during *Le Confessionnal*'s early screenings, Lepage made yet another discovery. "In movies," he says, "the relationship with the audience is one-on-one," as opposed to the collective interactions of the theatre. "Film talks about you mainly, and you speak to another person, not to an ensemble. Strange because when I saw the final cut, I was amazed at how dark it was, and how in film, you get to talk about yourself much more than in theatre."

Le Confessionnal opens in 1989 as one of Lepage's typically wandering spirits, an artist called Pierre Lamontagne (Lothaire Bluteau), returns to Quebec City from China. Pierre's father (François Papineau) has just died. Marc, his strung-out adopted brother (Patrick Goyette), is obsessed with the hidden identity of his birth father, a secret that his mother (Suzanne Clément) might have revealed to a young priest, and no

one else, before she killed herself. The brothers' quest to shed light on this mystery keeps pulling the movie back to 1952, which happens to be the year Alfred Hitchcock shot *I Confess* in Quebec City.

Hitchcock's movie, a low-profile curiosity item in his repertoire, includes hidden relationships, betrayals of trust, secret sin revealed in the confessional booth. The story involves a Quebec City priest, Michael Logan (Montgomery Clift), who, through a series of flukes, gets accused of murder. Although the real murderer has confessed the crime to him, Logan will not break his vow of silence to clear himself.

I Confess is a rapid-paced film that's all low angles on steeples and spires against fast-moving clouds, shots of Clift rushing through churches in a long black cassock, dramatically choreographed mob scenes. The film is so high on Quebec City's glut of Catholic imagery, it sometimes goes way over the top—as in a long shot of a brooding Clift foregrounded by a kitsch outdoor sculpture of Jesus straining heroically under the cross.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS FROM *LE CONFSSIONNAL* BY CLAUDEL HUOT



In *Le Confessionnal*, Lepage uses *I Confess* as a fulcrum between then and now... He implies that modern Quebec society is haunted by ghosts from the past as it wanders through a present existence of rootless amorality

Throughout *Le Confessionnal*, Lepage folds into his own story lustrous black and white footage from *I Confess*, or action depicting Hitchcock (Ron Burrage) and his assistant (Kristin Scott Thomas) making the film. We see them negotiating for shooting locations with clerics offended by the movie's back story about a love affair Logan had before he took his vows. We also get to watch Hitch auditioning small parts and filming scenes recognizable to those who know the picture. Lepage's use of Hitchcock as an ironic presence in *Le Confessionnal* is, like Miles Davis in *Needles and Opium*, one of his typical dramatic uses of a visionary, even oracular artist. For Lepage, the Hitchcock in his film is "a persona of maturity, someone who doesn't speak much, but actually seems to hold the key to mysteries."

As *Le Confessionnal* jumps between 1989 and 1952, tracking Pierre's mythic quest into his family's past, the characters, scenes, even the film's style keep echoing *I Confess*. For instance, in both movies the hero is seen painting walls, and a corrupt man is the key to a puzzle. In *Le Confessionnal*, as in *I Confess*, we

see Quebec as a city of stark perspectives and ominous shadows. In both films, past segues into present on a quick pan.

Lepage's multifarious absorption with *I Confess* has nothing to do with its value as a movie (Hitchcock said of it: "We shouldn't have made the picture"), but with the film's impact on Quebec City, the political history of the province, and his own life. Like thousands of other people from his hometown, Lepage has been told he was baptized in the church where Hitchcock filmed (St-Zéphirin de Stadaconna). "It's far too small," he chuckles, for "the entire city to have been baptized there.

"And everybody knew Hitchcock," Lepage goes on. "Everybody bumped into him. My father [a taxi driver at the time, like Pierre's father in *Le Confessionnal*] never actually drove Hitchcock but he might have [Pierre's father does]. The Quebec you see in *I Confess* is the period just before I was born, when my parents met and married. It's my pre-history in a way, my most important roots." Lepage got the idea to build a theatre project around *I Confess* about 10 years ago. "You have these

Hollywood myths [representing] that kind of very modern, post-war American society. And in the backdrop you have the population of Quebec, which is still living in 1945."

When Hitchcock's movie opened in Quebec City (an event Lepage coolly stages in *Le Confessionnal*), the audience was transfixed by the sight of neighbours and friends fused with Monty Clift, Anne Baxter and Karl Malden against the looming grandeur of the Château Frontenac. Throughout the rest of the province, the film had an equally strong impact, and it still plays regularly on local TV.

I Confess signifies a moment between Quebec's past and its present, the point at which it began to slip away from the oppressive morality of the church, not to mention the authoritarian inflexibility of its politicians. In *Le Confessionnal*, Lepage uses *I Confess* as a fulcrum between then and now. Moreover, through his characters and story structure, he implies that modern Quebec society is haunted by ghosts from the past as it wanders through a present existence of rootless amorality. When

Quebec broke away from the church, “this whole society flipped,” says Lepage. “Which is okay, because it’s normal for the pendulum to swing from one extreme to another until it stabilizes itself.”

Returning to Quebec City and the empty apartment where he grew up, Pierre is a disconnected being, free-falling into the traumatic history of his crumbling family. His brother Marc is also unmoored, measuring out life in lines of coke and visits to gay bath houses decorated with Tom of Finland erotica. The two men recall Denys Arcand’s drifting French Canadian academics in *The Decline of the American Empire* and the actors in *Jesus of Montreal* before they find their mission.

Lepage delineates the contours of aimless amorality without making judgments. In fact, Pierre’s—and the movie’s—only really pleasurable moment of release comes when he spends the night with brother Marc, Manon (Anne-Marie Cadieux) and Moose (Billy Merasty), the latter two being sex-show performers who work a bar that has its own rituals, its own version of a confessional booth.

In a movie filled with repressed and hapless women in mid-century frocks, cusp-of-the-nineties Manon emanates heat and power. She’s both a woman who throws her sexuality around with masculine pugnacity and a nurturing mother who calculates her son’s insulin dose, a cigarette sticking out the side of her mouth. Manon and Moose appear late in the film, as does a motel where Pierre sleeps peacefully beside Marc while the bathroom sink dreamily fills with trout. Pierre must work his way

toward this zone of amoral outcasts who offer at least the promise of miraculous healing. For most of *Le Confessionnal*, he labours, tormentedly painting the musty walls of his parents’ apartment blood red, one of the many colour signifiers in the movie. Pierre is asserting life over death, paradoxically erasing the past as he wilfully reenters its precincts.

From its opening moments, *Le Confessionnal*’s nervous twisting and turning in time and space mirrors the characters’ emotional volatility. Constantly on edge, Pierre and Marc navigate through a network of enclosures that suggest a maze of coffins and confessional booths. From the point of view of a high-angle moving camera, the clients in the bathhouse wait like supplicants in their meshed cubicles.

Are the characters in the movie, and the modern French-Canadian society they are meant to incarnate, seeking some kind of absolution? Definitely not, says Lepage. “What I hope comes out in the film is that the past haunts the present. And whether it’s through our psychology, or whether it’s ghosts, I think that the past always comes back at you if you haven’t solved it. I don’t think you need to be absolved. You need to solve things.”

The quest for solutions that *Le Confessionnal* dramatizes doesn’t necessarily lead anywhere and, in one case, ends in disaster. The movie closes with an ambiguous scene that could imply either a renewal, or yet another cataclysm. Lepage likes to compare his ending to Hitchcock’s final scene in the *The Birds*. “You don’t know how *The Birds* finishes. They pick up the wounded woman. They get into this very fragile

little car, and they drive into the countryside. You see all the birds flapping their wings, and you don’t know if they’re applauding the departure or if they’re about to attack. Some people see it as the darkest ending of a Hitchcock film, some people see it as an extremely positive one.”

The undulating structure of *Le Confessionnal* carries you through a series of vivid impressions, enhanced by a soundtrack highlighting music by Depeche Mode and Bristol Trip Hop bands, Portishead and Tricky. Shot by veteran cinematographer Alain Dostie, every scene has a visual hook. To maximize the movie’s visual impact, Lepage and Dostie used an array of filters and two film stocks—Agfa for what Lepage calls the “more European texture” of the past; Kodak for the “sharper cold colours” of 1989. The movie’s cast, consisting mostly of stage actors Lepage knows well, is fine, the one weak point being Jean-Louis Millette in the role of a pivotal shadowy figure, a type of character Millette has done so often on stage and in film, it has turned into a mannered schtick.

The major problem with *Le Confessionnal*, one that it shares with other recent high-profile *québécois* movies, is that the characters and storyline come through as vehicles to carry images and ideas, rather than as real narrative meat. In *Jesus of Montreal*, you know viscerally what the character played by Lothaire Bluteau wants, especially when the joke of directing a passion play for tourists becomes a dead serious enterprise. In *Le Confessionnal*, although you can figure what drives the Bluteau character (whose haircut makes him look like Anthony



Perkins in *Psycho*), it's hard to bond with him. You don't experience the '50s from the intimacy of the main character's viewpoint, as you do, for example, from Guido's buzzing memories in Fellini's *8 1/2*. The past is here because Lepage wants to overlap eras and meditate on the juxtapositions. Like Jean-Claude Lauzon in *Léolo*, or Terence Davies in his films, he also wants to conjure up the sensual details of a long-gone world.

If *Le Confessionnal* is too self- and cross-referential, too much a construct of metaphors on top of metaphors, too po-mo when po-mo is post, it is a shot at the kind of experience Lepage thinks movies should offer in an era when TV has replaced them as the contemporary mirror. "I think film has to move into a more free-form thing," he argues, "a place where the rules can be bent, where realism is not necessarily rule number one. That's what I like a lot about the cinema of Wim Wenders and Lars Von Trier and guys like Tarantino and Peter Greenaway. Whether we like their films or not, they're not approaching film in a traditional filmic way, in a chronicler's way." In touch with today's splintered consciousness, Lepage believes that this is exactly where the audience wants to go, despite the conservatism of market analysts. "I'm always amazed how people decide what the audience wants. You know what people want? They want to train. They work all day and they go to gyms to work out. They go to films for the same reason. Of course, they want to relax, they want to laugh, but they want to be energized. That's the main reason people go out to be entertained. They want to be challenged."



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**FROM LEFT: PATRICK GOYETTE
AS MARC LAMONTAGNE;
KRISTIN SCOTT THOMAS;
NORMAND DANEAU AS LE JEUNE
ABBE MASSICOTTE**

