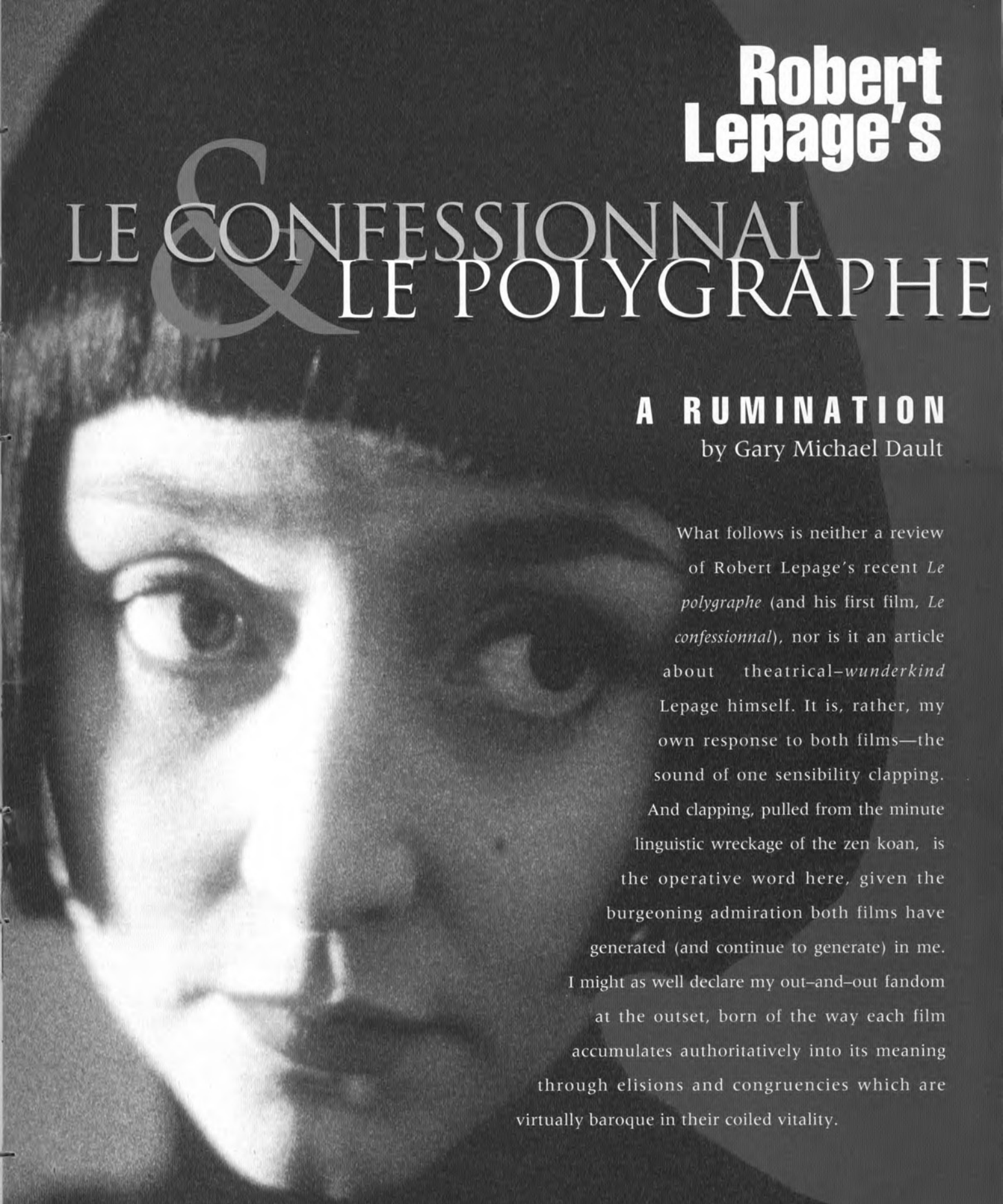
Robert Lepage's LE CONFESSIONNAL & LE POLYGRAPHE

A RUMINATION

by Gary Michael Dault

What follows is neither a review of Robert Lepage's recent *Le polygraphe* (and his first film, *Le confessionnal*), nor is it an article about theatrical–*wunderkind* Lepage himself. It is, rather, my own response to both films—the sound of one sensibility clapping. And clapping, pulled from the minute linguistic wreckage of the zen koan, is the operative word here, given the burgeoning admiration both films have generated (and continue to generate) in me. I might as well declare my out–and–out fandom at the outset, born of the way each film accumulates authoritatively into its meaning through elisions and congruencies which are virtually baroque in their coiled vitality.



Longtime Lepage collaborator, star and co-writer of *Le polygraphe*, Marie Brassard.

Photo: Claudel Huot

LE CONFESSIONNAL

Both *Le confessionnal*, which won Genies for Best Picture and Best Director in 1995 and *Le polygraphe*, nominated last year for nine more Genies without winning any, are set principally in Lepage's inexhaustible, quintessentially Catholic Quebec City. It's a city he cues fearlessly into symbolic and ultimately structural importance during the opening moments of *Le confessionnal*. It's then when we find ourselves gazing, along with the audience attending the Quebec City "premiere," at the dark looming Kafka/castle-esque hulk of the Chateau Frontenac Hotel which opens Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess* (1952), the making of and meaning of which plays such a forceful part in the shape and resonances of Lepage's highly complex film.

I Confess is, as Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol so neatly describe it in their *Hitchcock: The First Forty-four Films* (1979), "the story of a priest [Montgomery Clift] who is prisoner to the secret of the confessional." While the relationship between the presumably expiative act of confession and the extra-confessional effects of this weighty exchange between confessor and confessee does not inevitably set up any simplistic dualism between those two protagonists, it does announce polarity. And polarity is the fusion-engine which powers both of Lepage's films.

The confessional—the architectural seed of this polarity—is a cage to which the teller of expiations is temporarily and voluntarily affixed, in order to be free to engage in the commerce of atonement at an agreed-upon rate of exchange. It looks like an up-ended coffin, and it is supposed to work like a metaphysical elevator, presumably lifting the penitent from dank despair to the sunlit reaches of forgiveness. This imagery is made explicit (presented as an actual elevator-into-confessional transition) in a scene in *Le confessionnal* in which the pregnant sixteen year old Rachel tells Lepage's young Montgomery Clift-like priest that her sin (which is her contemplation of suicide) is "too horrible to forgive" and he replies that she is not confessing to him but rather to God. But she is confessing to him as well. And since the priest hearing a confession takes on the penitent's guilt and pain, there is, for a transactional moment or two, a simultaneous, intimate presence in both parties of the *same* good and evil, a fused overlay which, being a morally unified matrix, however, does *not* constitute, as Rohmer and Chabrol argue, the mainspring of the Hitchcockian [and Lepagian] drama, as it does in classical tragedy. Rohmer and Chabrol point out that:

> Though Hitchcock's protagonists participate simultaneously in guilt and in innocence, it is impossible to discern the exact point at which these two extreme poles are balanced. Each of these two forces, the positive and the negative, seems to grow not inversely but proportionately; the guilt of the innocent will increase in proportion to his absolute innocence and vice versa. Or at least, if this strange state of equilibrium is never actually reached, we are made to glimpse it as a possibility, an asymptote against which all our good or evil resolutions will come up, and which defines the constitutive—or let us rather say the *original*—flaw in our natures. If free will manages to find its point of impact on the curve and more or less deflect it's course, this can only be due to a miracle (p.113).

There is a powerful thunderclap of a moment in *Le confessionnal* when the actor playing Alfred Hitchcock slips into the cab (another confessional cage) being driven by Pierre, the father of the family of Lepage's troubled protagonist, who proceeds to recount (confess) to the somewhat distracted director the story of his pregnancy-engendering dalliance with Rachel, his sister-in-law, offering it and all its unendurable ramifications—which Lepage's film has been exploring—as "a good suspense story for you." The cab stops at the end of the ride, Hitch gets out, and, turning to the father—and we see this from an immense distance, as befits the smallness and lostness of the erring father who must now be condemned to the fallout from his actions—informs him that the story is *not* a "suspense story" at all, but rather a *Greek tragedy*. But Mr. Hitchcock—may God forgive us—is wrong. The point is that finding yourself up to your soul in a Greek tragedy would constitute being cathartically *let off the hook*, morally speaking. There is, by contrast, little respite, little sense of haven in Lepage's films—the inexorability with which they work themselves out notwithstanding—from the machinations of our "original natures." "The past" as Lepage's protagonist, Pierre, so movingly intones, may well "carry the present like a child on its shoulders" (the second time he says this, near the end of the film, he actually is literally carrying the child-of-the-present-born of-the-past) but this is not the stuff of classical tragedy. It is something far more poignant and fearsome, more various and lovely and inexplicable than that, something that lies, as Wordsworth once put it, too deep for tears: the wondrous, inexplicable shape of lives lived through time, pitifully fragile without the previously established mechanism of tragedy controlling their trajectory.

Like *Le confessionnal*, *Le polygraphe* is about truth and its ambiguities, the epicenter, eye-of-the-truth storm having been changed now from the venerability of the confessional and the hushed intensities of its dialogues to the steely bureaucratic monitoring of the merely bio-mechanical polygraph/lie-detector—the results of which are, in the film, invariably "inconclusive." *Le polygraphe* is about a young doctoral candidate named François Tremblay (Patrick Goyette) who is suspected of having murdered his girlfriend, Marie-Claire. Two years after their initial investigation, the Montreal police are still keeping Patrick under scutiny. ("Want a ride back to Quebec?...") Not far into *Le polygraphe*, a Montreal writer-director named Judith St. Laurent (Josée Deschenes), friend of the late Marie-Claire, decides to make a film based on the case, employing François' next-door neighbour, the melifluously named actress Lucie Champagne (longtime Lepage collaborator and co-writer Marie Brassard) in a leading role. Compounding the suffocating strangeness of this growing interpenetrability of fact and fiction, truth and dare, is Judith's nearly obsessive

***Le polygraphe* photos this page: Véro Boncompagni**

desire to use François himself to play the prime suspect in her film. The airlessness of this horrifying arrangement is made almost complete by the addition to all their lives of Christof Haussman (played with a spellbinding and reptilian vulnerability by Peter [*Fargo*] Stormare), a brilliant forensic scientist, now working with the Montreal police, who has recently walked out of East Berlin and into the heart of Lucie. Lepage closes his circle by placing Lucie on stage, earlier in the film, playing that virtuoso of ambiguity and oscillating indecision, Hamlet, gazing into the disinterred skull of Yorick and meditating—in that lyrical autopsy of a graveyard soliloquy—upon our bounded, terrestrial natures. (The longest reach of flashback here, as opposed to the 40–year oscillations of *Le confessionnal*, is to the days just before the reunification of Germany. It is one of the small ironies of the film that François' doctoral work involves a close inspection of the late Cold War period in general and dismantling of the Berlin Wall in particular.)

I know nothing at all about the degree to which the situations or events of *Le confessionnal* may have been autobiographically derived, but *Le polygraphe*, based on Lepage's 1987 play of the same name, harkens back to a now 17–year–old murder case in Quebec City in which an actress friend of Lepage's was killed. During the subsequent investigation, Lepage—along with everyone else who knew her—was grilled by police, treated as a suspect, and was subjected to a polygraph test. Québécois (and now Hollywood–based) director Yves Simoneau made a film about the incident called *Les yeux rouges ou les vérités accidentelles* (*The Red Eyes or Accidental Truths*). Astonishingly, Simoneau apparently asked Lepage to appear in the film as the killer—a monstrous bit of tastelessness sharply memorialized in *Le polygraphe* when François tries to explain his feelings about this to Judith ("Do you realize the position you're putting me in?"), finally screaming at her into the phone that she is an *"opportunist!"* All of which, I suppose, makes Lepage some modality of Opportunist of the Self: the quintessential artist.

Pierre, protagonist and seeing–eye/camera–eye of *Le confessionnal*—the character through whose accumulating understanding we, too, come to piece together that film's interlocked and ornately overlayed truths—is an open book compared to *Le polygraphe*'s François. Pierre is as innocent as a child, a naked eyeball rolling through experience. The brilliant François is clouded with myopic self–doubt. There is a telling moment in the film when François, coiled about himself with unresolvable tensions, is furious when,

From the top: *Le confessionnal*; Patrick Goyett in *Le polygraphe*; Kristin Scott Thomas in *Le confessionnal*; Le polygraphe.

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working on his thesis, he cannot scan into his computer an image of the Brandenburg Gate because the machine is—like him—"out of memory." While Pierre sets about through *Le confessionnal* to discover the truth, François has to come to terms with the elusive nature of truth itself—most challengingly manifested in the fact that François is increasingly unsure of whether or not he actually is Marie-Claire's murderer—he keeps protesting to his friends that he doesn't *think* he is. At one point, in a strangely isolated scene (written by playwright and co-founder of Lepage's Ex Machina company, Michael Mackenzie), François pays a visit to an ex-lover named Claude (played by Maria de Medeiros, the Anais Nin of Philip Kaufman's *Henry and June* and Bruce Willis's girlfriend in *Pulp Fiction*), whom he has not seen since Marie-Claire's death. He finds it necessary to confess to her the quite unprepared-for news (there is nothing else made of this in the film) that when Marie-Claire died, part of him "felt relieved." François consists of François' billboard-scaled scrawling in red paint of "History is written in blood" on the side of his apartment building—and then, near the end of the film, vainly (like Lady Macbeth) trying to wash it off again. ("What film did Roman Polanski make just after the murder of Sharon Tate?" asks one of Judith's filmmakers, during a particularly gothic cinema-trivia game.)

The stately peeling-away of the layered, almost archeologically stratified truths within *Le confessionnal* has an almost romantic langour compared to the pointed attacks of claustrophobia by which *Le polygraphe* progresses. Like the earlier film, *Le polygraphe* abounds in cinematic *devices*, though here, most of them are time-related rather than the fluid, spacially exploratory devices of *Le confessionnal*. Where *Le confessionnal* revels in seamless intoxicated pans from one setting to the next (often *set* in a former or later time, but where it is

then asks the clearly emotionally fragile Claude (who will eventually immolate herself in the same apartment Judith uses for her film), to "reassure" him that he was indeed *with her* the night of Marie-Claire's murder. "You know what I am to you?", the distraught Claude asks François: "*an alibi!*" And soon to be an *ex*-alibi.

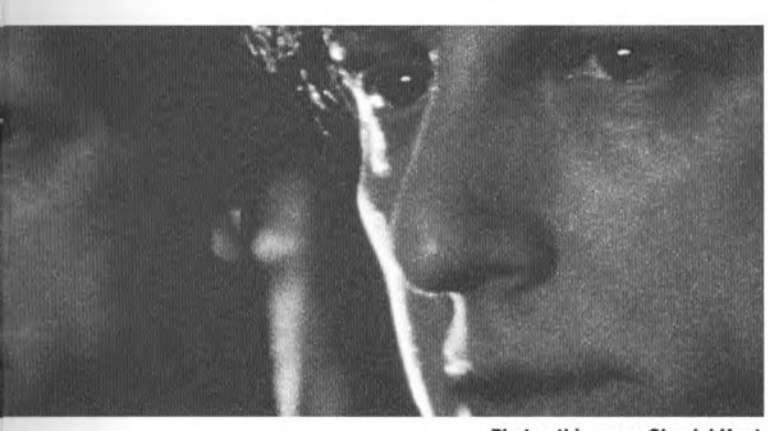
Like *Le confessionnal*—where chessplaying, checkmating images underscore the inexorable unspiralling of the revelations locked within the film—*Le polygraphe* flails wildly at the truth, grasping at it with its narrative fingernails. One of the film's major graphic *utterances* *the getting there* that counts, like the sumptous opening dolly down the aisle of the church from the present back to 1952), and bleed-throughs from one image to another (a naked man in foetal position suddenly superimposed on pregnant belly), *Le polygraphe* rakes over-angled mirrors (in which we watch a subway suicide, for example) and into cramped quarters (the bathroom where Lucie tries to reseduce Christof as he shaves). Regretably, *Le polygraphe* also subjects us to the ordeal of speeded-up and radically slowed-down rhythms, violent and indeed perverse intercuttings, the most cheeky sustained example being the simultaneous

Robert Lepage's

LE CONFESSIONNAL & LE POLYGRAPHE

warping and woofing of Christof's morgue–lecture on the medical ins and outs of a stabbing wound and François' thesis defense, in which he discourses on the fatal cut into the heart of the city caused by the partitioning of Berlin. These flashy techniques are like sexual champagne corks popping in your face. On the other hand, the collapsing of time and space incarnated in the nested Baboushka dolls Christof brings with him in his suitcase from Berlin ("...truth is hiding *another* truth, is hiding *another* truth, is hiding *another truth*...an on until infinity...") is brilliant and moving.

In their discussion of *I Confess,* Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol mention (shifting metaphors with creative abandon) that "the conducting canals through which the overflow of consciences is drained," are made up of *glances*. *Le polygraphe*, too, is made up of glances (contrasted to the long looks of *Le confessionnal*), ocular



Photos this page: Claudel Huot

stabs in time, which result in a mosaic of partial understandings, incomplete conveyings of information, shards of meaning. Compared to *Le confessionnal*'s luxurious assuredness and mandarin pronouncements, *Le polygraphe* is a kind of virtuoso stutter. Rohmer and Chabrol proposed an asymptotic curve of accumulated innocence and guilt whose arc might serve to define the "constitutive or original flaw in our natures." It would be a kind of miracle, they point out, if instances of free will were to impact on this curve and "more or less deflect its course." There can be no such "miracle" in *Le confessionnal*. But *Le polygraphe* is precisely about the strangled attempts made by its characters to effect just such an impact. There is no room in it for the dreamy beauty of *Le confessionnal*. *Le confessionnal* is entirely centripetal in its energies. Whereas *Le polygraphe*, angular and driven, is entirely centrifugal. ■

Right: Marie Brassard and Patrick Goyette. Like *Le confessionnal*, *Le polygraphe* is about truth and it's ambiguities.