

FATED POSSIBILITIES

By Isa Tousignant

Photos courtesy of Odeon Films



Tilda Swinton with Tom McCamus

A Conversation with Robert LEPAGE

“I do what I want to do,”

said Quebec's own Renaissance man as I sat before him, sweaty palmed and heart aflutter, in Montreal's noisy Café Méliès. I was catching Robert Lepage at the tail end of a day-long media junket prompted by the Canadian release of the latest thing he has wanted to do: his fourth film – but his first in English – *Possible Worlds*. “I'm very privileged...I don't know how, but I've always managed to get what I want. I want to do opera. I do opera. I want to do a rock show. I do a rock show. Maybe it's because I'm not working for anyone but myself.”

Independence of mind is indeed what Lepage is best known for. He is admired, acclaimed even, for the chameleon-like effortlessness with which he crosses from artistic medium to artistic medium, constantly changing his creative “floppy disk,” as he describes it, and keeping audiences perpetually on their toes. His bio reads like a book: recipient of a Governor General's Award; fathered a dozen internationally successful and critically lauded plays; directed four feature films; has worked with the likes of Peter Gabriel and Laurie Anderson; and is friends with Lou Reed (colour me green). He travels the world constantly – in Montreal fresh from Berlin especially for the screening of *Possible Worlds* at the International Festival of New Cinema and New Media, which closed the festival – and it was a considerable honour, confirmed by the bustle of admirers, assistants, journalists and self-important press attachés in this hippest of cinematically friendly hangouts, to be in his presence.

For me, it was, in fact, a dream. The first time I saw Lepage in action was when, at 13, I saw him perform *Vinci*, his one-man play based on the life of Leonardo de Vinci. It was one of my first adult theatre experiences ever, and the event marked me, frankly, like no other theatrical event since. The richness of his aesthetic vocabulary, the palpable emotion Lepage so breezily and abstractly transmitted moved unsuspecting and largely uncomprehending pubescent me to tears, and instantly placed him in the creative demigod slot of my brain. From whence he has not been dislodged. I have followed his career – his film work especially – closely, and have continued to be awed. *Ergo*, the sweaty palms.

In addition to being his first English-language film, *Possible Worlds* is Lepage's first adaptation of another artist's work. Interestingly, it is based on a play by a similarly multi-faceted and multi-talented playwright (and mathematician, physician, philosopher and poet), John Mighton. The plot line verges on the indescribable: tagged in the press material as a “cubic love story,” it's the tale of George Barber (Tom McCamus), a man who has the ability to consciously experience his existence in a multitude of parallel lives. While he remains the same, his environment morphs, resulting in his on-going state of confusion and disorientation. Though the presence of his one true love, Joyce (Tilda Swinton), is a common thread throughout his lives, the changing nature of her presence is what affects him most: she might shun him, or love him, or ruthlessly use him with no forewarning. At the end of it all he is murdered, the top of his head severed and his brain stolen. What we viewers witness is the investigation into his death – which involves the machinations of a foreign scientist. Oh, and a couple of aliens too.

“I'm only interested in the surreal inasmuch as it informs the real,” defends Lepage. And it's true, the film is surreal in a Lynchian kind of way – “We are not responsible for our influences,” he mutters – but is in no way daunting. Its emotional base feels too real. Awash with striking symmetrical shots and velvety smooth transitions, *Possible Worlds* employs a sensuous palette that vacillates allusively from cool blues, greys and whites to warm ochres and browns. Ideas of relativity, spirituality, Nietzschean fatalism, science, love and how they all fuse in post-modern life, bounce off one another in a captivating game of reflective ping-pong, heightened by a choreographed, careful acting style. The performances by McCamus (*The Sweet Hereafter*, *I Love a Man in Uniform*) and Swinton (*Female Perversions*, *Orlando*) are masterful. Flowing, languid, watery themes are translated in a style of delicious ethereality, conjuring, at a near-subconscious level, endless symbolic possibilities. The film streams into consciousness with complete ease, and is, in keeping with the rest of Lepage's cross-media oeuvre, more philosophical statement than film. And as such, is a juicy subject for discussion.

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IT: *Possible Worlds* marks a return to the theme of symmetry, which you first explored in *Le Confessional*, and which you express stylistically through an extensive use of the symmetrical shot. In *Le Confessional*, I had read it as a stylistic extrapolation on the two sides of the actual physical object of the confessional, which is the starting point to the film's narrative; in *Possible Worlds*, is it representative of the two sides of the brain?

RL: Well, yes, there is that idea of the right and left side of the brain and a very clinical approach to it, that's for sure. But it's not...it's not a film with that many conflicts going on. It's a conflict that takes place inside the brain of a guy, so in order to represent that cinematically you have to play on this symmetry all the time, this mirror thing. I think something else that created the theme was the fact that there are two Joyces – even if there are more than two, you can say they all stem from two main strands – so the film becomes not so much symmetrical as bipolar. And you have to have a bipolar mind when you do work with a script like this. You have to be very rigorous and very logical. Sometimes I was even tempted to shoot it with two cameras, side by side. However, that idea came too late.

The theme of water also recurs in your work, this time to the degree of making me want to pee from mid-film on! Water flows everywhere through the film, both literally on screen but also in the fluid visual transitions from scene to scene and the delicate, tinkling soundtrack.

The strange thing is that I was wondering: is it my films that tend to be watery, or is the selection of themes and subjects watery? Am I attracted to something that will allow me to do watery things? I don't know; in this one, of course, it was water and glass a lot. A brain floating in a jar full of water (a recurring image in the film) – around that I developed this whole aesthetic.

Was the imagery as present in the play?

It was there...but glass wasn't, and water was very present but only in the sound. You never really saw it.

What attracted you to working with Mighton? Do you think you were fuelled by the fact that he is a fellow Renaissance man?

Well, yes, that's exactly why; he's one of the rare theatre people I know who has a preoccupation with science and art combined together. I'm not that much of a scientist myself, but I've always been interested in the same kind of questions. John certainly is, because he's a Ph.D. in philosophy and mathematics, and he's also a poet. I've always been interested in meeting someone like him – someone who really, really incarnated these two realities. And John – you know he's a real nerd, but he's a really charming guy – the first time we met I said, "Those are nice ideas, but what happens when it's real?" Then I saw his play and I was absolutely flabbergasted. I just thought: "Whoa, this guy really knows how to incarnate extremely sophisticated philosophical and scientific ideas." That, for me, was a revelation. It was the first time that I could really work with somebody else's creation. You become very respectful of the other person's work and you become very disciplined. I realized how sloppy I am with my own stuff! Because you always feel, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, well we'll rewrite that," or, "that doesn't work, so we'll cut it," or whatever. You do that with your own stuff, but you don't do it with somebody else's. And certainly that principle is something I came to respect a lot.

Sean McCann



be there, and I'm not working for anyone but myself I am very privileged." Robert Lepage

Robert Lepage



Was Mighton very involved in the process of making the film?

Well, he was very involved because we wrote the screenplay together. Except that when the shooting came I told him "I don't want you around!" He came to a couple of shoots of course, but it was better that he wasn't too present and that I'd be free to do my thing. But because I have so much respect for this guy, I had to be extremely rigorous. The pre-production was very organized, the shooting and all that...and also I felt I had to consult him when I cut a line. I did end up cutting lines, but I would phone him every time I took a decision. I would say, "Listen, this line has to be cut," and we would have a huge debate.

I guess you didn't end up cutting much! Did you add anything, for smoothness of transition or stylistic coherence?

No we didn't; it was mainly cutting. But cutting not because things were too long, but because you always think when you adapt a theatrical play to film that the screenplay says it all, but then you shoot it and you realize so many things are being said visually that the play doesn't say. Actors come up with ways of conveying ideas that sound redundant when they're actually being spoken, so you're always surprised by how much seems excessive.

Is it that wordlessness that prompts you to work in film for certain projects rather than in theatre? Or is it aesthetically motivated? Do you start craving celluloid at some point?

I think there are stories better told in film and stories better told on stage. When I do a stage show, it always evolves and is being written as I perform it. Eventually after three or four years of touring, it comes to a written form that's been tried so many times, and rehearsed and restructured, that we have something very, very, polished. And then you say, "Wow, it's a pity that this can't be recorded." I always have this fantasy of what it would look like as a film, then I realize that film would be obsessed with a totally different aspect of the story. So sometimes film allows me to continue to dig into a subject where I feel theatre has gone all the way; it could be that, or that it's just better told that way.

I guess you started this sort of digging process with this film, seeing as even though it is theatrically based, your side of the deal was to transform it into a film from the start. I would say that there's a chronologically increasing level of surrealism in your filmic work, in addition to the increasing freedom from words and dependence on the visual as communicative mode.

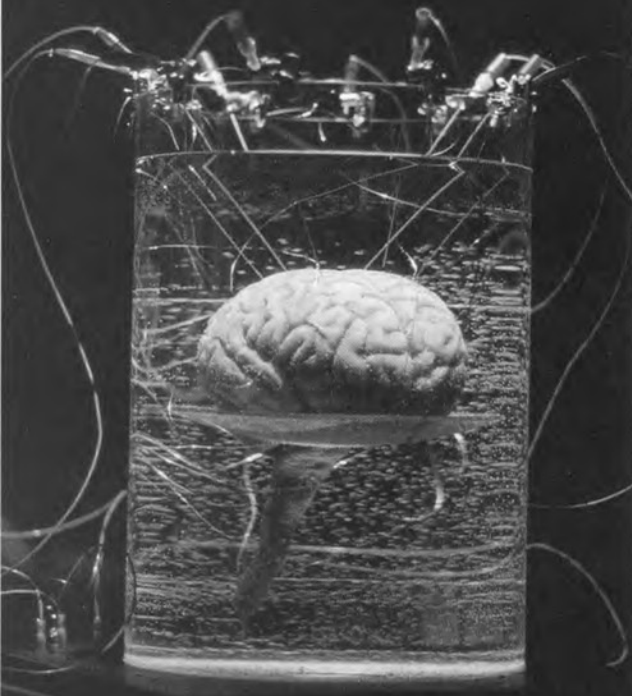
Film is not a medium that's free from all the preconceptions we have. Theatre is free. It's free because nobody goes, and it's not the chronicler of our times anymore; it's just this crazy thing we do to try to tell stories. Film is stuck in a production system that's very expensive, where you have to ask permission for everything; you have to ask permission to be a filmmaker, to do your first film, to get the money, then for this and for that, then to distribute it. You're always begging your way through a project. It's a very tricky thing, because you feel it's a prison. I think it takes a while. You have to make a lot of films before you're able to turn the obstacles into advantages. And I'm not there yet!

Has it affected your work in theatre?

Oh, radically. But I've always been very cinematic when I've done theatre. I've always borrowed a lot from film's narrative vocabulary. And I think



Above:
Tilda Swinton as Joyce
"Possible Worlds is not so much
symmetrical as bipolar." Lepage



that in the good shows, we've revitalized the theatrical narrative. Today, it's an interesting experience because I'm doing both, so a lot of questions I have in cinema, I bring into theatre, then realize, "Wait, I don't have that problem in theatre – just get rid of it." It has a very, very big influence.

Do you feel that being a multi-disciplinarian is intrinsic to being a fulfilled post-modern artist/creator?

Well, I do what I want to do. Opportunities happen to be there, and I'm not working for anyone but myself, so I have the impression that I am very privileged because I can do a work that is theatrical and be influenced by the visual arts, or by music. All of these different disciplines inform each other; they don't work against each other. So sometimes I'm working on an opera, and I come up against a problem, and I get lost. Then I have a meeting for a film project, and when I come back, just the fact that my brain put on another structure, or another floppy disk, helps me find a solution. You can see how all these things are close cousins. It used to be a bipolar thing for me – theatre, cinema. Now it's really this huge kind of...hodgepodge. I'm too much of a zapper to be able to limit myself.

I would say that this is what makes your vocabulary such a rich one. Your work has always struck me as ultimately philosophical.

Actually, there's a thing that I'm just discovering now – one of the virtues of film that I would never have suspected was there. What I always hated about cinema, compared to theatre, is that cinema is always the ghost of your ideas. If I tour a play for 10 years, even if it's an old play, me, myself, right now – what's going on in the Middle East or whatever – will have a different echo on how I'm going to be telling the story. But by the time the film comes out, I'm already into another project; I look at it and go: "Oh my God, this is who I was two years ago." I always thought that was a problem. But eventually I came to appreciate how films, even though they're locked and represent a picture of who you were, they eventually start making sense, with time. For example, I was in Berlin last week performing and I met this woman who directs a film conservatory, and by coincidence she was teaching *Le Confessional*. I was interested to hear how people analyze the movie, but frankly I was a little embarrassed. It's like this old thing that I did and I just wanted to excuse it, "yeah, it was my first film." She showed up after a performance with a few students who had prepared questions on *Le Confessional*. They had this whole theory about the way I had used colour in the film, the order in which the colours of the wall go from yellowish to red to green and blue. They said, "Have you been a Buddhist for long?" I said, "What are you talking about?" Well, I've been in a Buddhist environment for the past six years of my life. I met a guy from Chicago – he's my boyfriend – who's a Buddhist; I started working with a lot of people who are Buddhists. I did a one-man show for which Laurie Anderson wrote the music and when I went to meet her at her apartment I saw she had a Buddhist shrine. And there's Lou Reed...a lot of people I know now, or who I've collaborated with are Buddhists, and I've become interested. But at the time I shot *Le Confessional*, there was none of that around. So for me it was so interesting: they had this whole theory that was logical and that worked, but I wasn't aware of any of this when I made the film. It made me realize these things are there, and film – something that's locked and canned – can actually have its virtues. It can actually tell you, "Stop running away from what you are. This is what this film is about, this is what you were about, and what you were bound to become." So I shouldn't be embarrassed by these films after two years. I should accept what they become, that they mean something else with time.

That they morph along with you, and all your possible worlds...

Exactly. ●
