Borderlines:
An Interview with Robert Lepage and Le Théâtre Repère

Denis Salter

Le Théâtre Repère was founded by the director Jacques Lessard in 1980 in Québec City. A theater of research, not a permanent acting troupe, Repère creates a special company of actors for each project it undertakes. Robert Lepage joined Lessard and Repère in 1983 and stayed until 1990 when he became, for three years, the Artistic Director of French Theater at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. His major projects with Repère have included The Dragons’ Trilogy (1985), Polygraph (1988), Tectonic Plates (1990), and now The Shakespeare Cycle, consisting of Michel Garneau’s tradaptations (translation-adaptations) of Coriolan/Coriolanus, Macbeth, and La tempête/The Tempest. After its premiere in Maubeuge, France, in October 1992, The Shakespeare Cycle toured to Paris, Frankfurt, Montréal, Amsterdam, Zurich, and Bremen; in autumn, 1993, it toured to France, Japan, and England. The scores were composed by Guy Laramée and interpreted by Louise Simard. Marie Brassard played Lady Macbeth, Ariel, and Virgilia; Anne-Marie Cadieux a Witch and a Lady in Macbeth, Caliban, and Volumnia.

LANGUAGE

Salter Why did you choose the Michel Garneau “tradaptations,” as he calls them?

Lepage They give us an interesting double perspective. We’re working with different kinds of Québécois and—at the same time—we’re preoccupied with Shakespeare’s original texts.

Brassard I think Garneau’s tradaptations are very beautiful, but the problem for the actor is to figure out how to serve Shakespeare and Garneau, or, even better, Shakespeare through Garneau. We try to be very aware of Shakespeare’s original scripts to make the meaning of each word clear. Sometimes we find Garneau twists the meaning a little—which is not uninteresting because we are witnessing Garneau’s very personal encounter with Shakespeare.

Salter But as the actor, who are you meeting—Garneau or Shakespeare?

Cadieux Shakespeare. Absolutely. This is why we spend so much time with the English text.

Brassard I like the Arden editions very much. I have learned a lot from their scholarly explanations and notes.

Salter Has Garneau “improved” Shakespeare for his contemporary audiences?

Lepage What Garneau gains, I think, is immediacy of effect, local color. In The Tempest, for example, he draws directly from the language and way of life of la Gaspésie where he was
raised, so that many of the Québécois expressions are of fishermen talking. You really believe, for example, that Trinculo and Stephano are sailors. Garneau, I would say, has figured out how to give us the sensation of Shakespeare through specifically Québec references.

**SALTER** The Tempest was Garneau’s first traduction, wasn’t it?

**LEPAGE** Yes. Then, he was trying to bring the play closer to us but being careful not to make it too, too Québécois. Instead it’s in a kind of easy French. He wasn’t as courageous as he was later with Coriolanus, which is so clearly Québécois.

**CADIEUX** Some people have complained that the language of The Tempest is far too popular, too cheap, too vulgar. And there’s a sense of national difference which some people find offensive, whereas Miranda and Prospero speak so-called “perfect French,” Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano speak Québécois.

**SALTER** The language of Garneau’s Macbeth traduction is certainly powerful but, in comparison, sometimes very difficult to understand.

**LEPAGE** Yes, the language is as different for contemporary francophone actors as Elizabethan English is for contemporary anglophone actors. We, of course, recognize the words from our Québécois grandparents so we can say them with the proper accent. But it isn’t the way we speak now. It’s a kind of poetic proposition of how rural Québécois used to speak.

**BRASSARD** My first reaction to Garneau’s language in Macbeth was very reserved. I thought I’d like to do a nice, safe Victor Hugo translation instead. Garneau’s sounds like the language spoken by rural Québécois in the 1950s, but it’s not really like that, not at all; instead, it’s a strange mix of old French, Québécois expressions, slangisms.

**CADIEUX** That type of language is very hard for us, because it is so loaded with memories of things we, in some ways, have tried to forget. When we played it in France, audiences and critics found the language refreshingly different. Here in Montréal, however, the critical reaction has been mixed. Some people think the language is great—a recuperation of our heritage—but others think it’s terrible to listen to characters speaking like Québécois peasants. In performance we have to be very careful not to let the language become patently folkloric.

**LEPAGE** In translating Shakespeare, there are always serious problems in deciding what to do about the images. The Victor Hugo translations tend, I think, to be faithful, but they no longer resonate for us. How do you translate, for example, Lady Macbeth’s line to Macbeth, in 1.7, “But screw your courage to the sticking-place, / And we’ll not fail,” when you don’t know exactly what it means, and all the scholars seem to be telling you different things about it? So instead of worrying about being “faithful” to Shakespeare, Garneau completely reinvents the text; he says, “J’ose-t-on encourager dós d’la cage du cour?” Courage, then, isn’t something linked to the hand holding, say, a crossbow or possibly a dagger; it’s a special quality found in the heart which you must build an iron cage around if you want to keep your resolve and not be moved or touched by the murder you feel compelled to commit. The Garneau is very bold, shocking—that’s the kind of strength we find throughout his work.

**BRASSARD** And there are passages where I feel Garneau uses certain words because he loves them—not because they fit exactly.

**LEPAGE** The archaic quality of Michel’s text is very beautiful. But it does create serious acting problems. At times the text sounds too much like the really bad historical soap operas, set in the 17th or 18th or 19th century, which we still see on Québécois television. If an actor falls into the trap of speaking like these tacky characters, the whole production begins to fall apart. There are in fact scenes where one actor has fallen into this trap, but the other actor is speaking in an appropriately grand and tragic mode. The stylistic differences are then really glaring.

**SALTER** Is there any way to overcome this problem completely?

**LEPAGE** I’m still not sure. In his review for Le Devoir, Robert Lévesque described it as “entre chien et loup,” “between the dog and the wolf,” that strange time between day and night—neither one thing nor the other. He also meant it, of course, as a pun, to refer to the stupid tv show Entre Chien et Loup, set in the 19th century, in which people speak in this ridiculous way. It was a tough review, but he was absolutely right about this problem in Garneau’s text. Of course, some of our actors—like you, Marie—have a profound understanding of this language, which you treat as a “foreign” object in order to give it “natural” meaning.

**BRASSARD** This language puts weight on your body, as though you are a peasant working in the fields. But these characters are kings and queens, so you have to lighten up and refine Garneau’s text somewhat.

**SALTER** Does Garneau’s translation help you amplify the levels of class conflict in Shakespeare?

**LEPAGE** His Coriolanus is clearly written in a sophisticated language of government, bureaucracy, and the social elite. Too often productions of Coriolanus only emphasize the dialectic of the rich and the poor. But we’ve clearly established various social strata: the elite, the common people, the media, the speculators, the union representatives who in fact hate the people as much as the elite do, dynamic grasping yuppies, some Parti Québécois guys, and so on. Of course, although we recognize the words, we don’t really speak that way—at least, not very often—here in Quebec. The Coriolanus is my favorite traduction—I think it’s more mature than his Tempest and Macbeth.
MUSIC

SALTER Guy, how did you start working on the music for Macbeth?

LARAMEE Macbeth was in fact my most joyful experience of all three productions. Robert said from the start that he felt that the sound needed to be metallic. So I spent almost four months shaking things, banging things, burning things, going to car dumps and scrapyards to find the right objects to turn into instruments.

LEPAGE Yes, for me the play comes out of a world of metal, of iron. When I first directed Macbeth in English with students at the University of Toronto in 1992, I asked them to draw the kinds of intuitions and images which the play gave them. They all felt compelled to draw swords, daggers, cauldrons, bells, crowns. So when I decided to redirect the play with Repere, I of course asked you, Guy, to bring in metal or iron pieces into rehearsal from which we would make the music.

SIMARD Actors don’t always want to play instruments, but, for me, at least some instruments had to be seen on stage. In fact I wanted the actors to play even more instruments.

LARAMEE For me the scene in which the Witches come back from their “travels” works best in making theater and music organic. Here the music is not just an accompaniment, it’s integral. I wanted every scene to work this way: this is why I worked hard to create instruments the actors would find easy to play.

LEPAGE Our original problem, I think, was that the Witches, on the one hand, and the music, on the other, seemed to be trying to “bewitch” Macbeth in separate, almost unrelated ways. We recently made some changes so now there’s no longer an aesthetic barrier: the Witches sing, they are the music.

SALTER What are the main instruments which you invented for Macbeth, Guy?

LARAMEE Metal containers which I burned to give them a bluish sheen before cutting slots into them, so they seem like ancestors of the flute; then I added tail-like arrows to them to maintain the proper angle. The burnt impression works well, I think, with the atmosphere of destruction and death which Robert has given to the mise-en-scène. In fact, I wound up building ten sets of warrior props, including these metal containers, plus small cymbals, spirit-catchers, and so on.

SALTER What kinds of instruments do you have backstage?

LARAMEE There are many metal car springs on which we can change the tension to get a strange sound—a kind of eerie humming—a wooooing— which evokes the supernatural. As well, I placed springs in metal containers, and when Louise blows or sings into them, she can produce a disembodied witchlike drone. Robert decided that we should create this sound every time Macbeth is mentioned in the text. We have some really simple associations throughout: a specific sound for Macbeth thinking, another for the murderers, another for the Witches, and so on. It’s simple, naïve in a way, but it works.

SALTER Are these the major sound-patterns in the production?

LARAMEE No there are others as well, the most important being the Witches. They push Macbeth, gently but inexorably, so everywhere we hear “their music,” we are reminded of the force of destiny acting on him.

LEPAGE We have tried to create, throughout Macbeth, the kind of lyrical power found in Kabuki or Noh. But, practically, this becomes difficult: there are only really four actors who, at any one time, can produce the music for us. So the effects are never as pervasive as we’d like. We’ve also felt that, since Garneau’s text has a kind of archaic quality to it—rather like ancient Japanese theater texts—music should help the actors deal with his complex rhythms and wordplays.

SALTER Guy, what is the special instrument which you invented for The Tempest?

LARAMEE We simply call it “the tempest!” I had a strong feeling from the beginning that the production needed a musical instrument which would turn around. At a sculpture workshop, I saw a huge parabolic lens made out of fiberglass, and I knew I had found my solution. We cut a hole into it, to carry the sound, and then we positioned the strings across it, just like a harp. Because it’s hollow and doesn’t have an internal brace, we are able to shine light through it from the back to give it a mystical aura.

SIMARD To get a good variety of sounds, I can play it with many different instruments—a cello bow, a pick, and a metal bar—and I can pluck it with my hands. I can also turn the whole instrument like a ship’s wheel.

LARAMEE There are 36 strings but they only produce three notes. This is why the sound is so rich. It’s similar to an Aeolian harp. With so many strings tuned to a single note, all you hear are the harmonies—it’s really minimalist, really evocative.

SIMARD When the instrument is placed on stage, people have the impression they can actually see the sound. It’s not like taped music where the music is invisible.

SALTER After you had invented this extraordinary instrument, Guy, what kind of music did you want to write for it?

LARAMEE My starting point is always the text. I had a strong feeling that I had to make all the music with just one thing—the one instrument is like the island in the play, where you have to make do with what you find. The medium is really the air. But a wind instrument wouldn’t be able to do the job. Strings are much better.

SIMARD But for me it’s like a wind instrument; it sounds like a hundred flutes coming together!

*Musical instruments designed by Guy Laramee for Macbeth (top and bottom) and La tempête/ The Tempest (center).*
SALTER

LARAMEE New instruments force you to give up musical cliches. Placed in full view, they stimulate audiences to hear sounds, textures, nuances that they never knew existed. This makes them more attentive towards the whole production, including, of course, Shakespeare's text.

LEPAGE Originally we were simply fascinated with the remarkable instruments which Guy had invented, but now, with Louise's help as musician who has both acting and singing experience, we're really beginning to explore the kinds of aesthetic effects we can create with them. And we're figuring out how to make all production elements complementary, not antagonistic or redundant.

SALTER The "tempest" instrument certainly allows for natural or organic interconexions; but your music for Coriolanus is quite different; it comes out of the world of high-tech gadgetry.

LARAMEE Yes, but here, too, I wanted to demystify the music, by ensuring that the instruments could be seen. All the electronic hardware is placed at the front of the stage. Even though everything is high-tech, there is a double temporal perspective: for example, the truck horns create traffic sounds in contemporary Rome and trumpetlike effects to suggest ancient times, battles, and alarums and excursions.

SIMARD This is my favorite show to play. I like the high-tech mischievousness, the ways in which music can be used for deeply ironic purposes!

LEPAGE Coriolanus is the easiest show in which to integrate the music, because we have always been very clear about exactly where we want it and what it's supposed to do. There are scenes, for example, where, because there's no music at all, everything feels very compressed. Suddenly, when the scenes are over, the music just blows out. It's very clean, very emphatic, very compartmentalized, as the music comes directly out of the pressure of "silence" that has been building up. The music is saying something on its own; it's not just incidental.

LEPAGE I am now very obsessed with the language of the frame and what it does to storytelling. The perspective in theater tends to be so expansive or wide-ranging that I find it hard to create intimate close-ups, blow-ups of small details, and ways to isolate things, to concentrating fully on them. However, the frame around the theatrical action allows me to create these kinds of filmic effects without a huge budget. In videos at Michael Jackson shows and things like that, they tend to blow up the figure, but that, I think, is the wrong approach. You don't get intimacy that way.

SALTER Placing most of the scenes within a window frame stretching across the entire width of the stage made us feel we were seeing a TV show, a media circus.

CADIEUX The idea is to isolate figures, to show people preoccupied or "framed" by self-interest and self-advancement.

LEPAGE I wanted the visual signs for the production to be very pure, very sculpted, like a Roman fresco in which we could "fract" the action.

SALTER Within the TV frame for Coriolanus, you can create all kinds of visual irony, undercutting the games of power and manipulation.

LEPAGE Yes, taking advantage of the frame, you can position a character downstream, saying such and such, while upstage, behind him, you can position a big icon which is suggesting something altogether different. The frame is a way of putting everything—including the fragmented body—into parentheses.

SALTER: What are the main advantages of the frame in doing Shakespeare?

LEPAGE These pieces are always done as epics with armies, cavalry, flags—awkward and time-consuming solutions in filling up scenic space. The frame simplifies effects, saves money, and allows me to multiply my actors by 20.

SALTER The frame also creates a radically simplified aesthetic.

LEPAGE Exactly. If Coriolanus were being done in a contemporary context at Stratford, there would be a real television in the bar—they'd be watching the war on CNN—they'd eat real spaghetti. People could say, "Look how clever we are! We're setting it in modern times." But with the frame, you don't need to worry about realism: a couple of chains, some tables, a backdrop—they're enough.

SALTER How did your vision for The Tempest begin, Robert?

LEPAGE We were very vague about what we first wanted to do. One of the things I love about it is that it's a play about the theater. Each scene seems to be a resumed of earlier plays. So we set it in a rehearsal room where Prospero is more or less the director. It's very simple. There are no gagets, no clever set devices, and some of the casting—such as you, Anne-Marie, as Caliban—is deliberately unusual.

SALTER Caliban seems like a punk-rocker jacked up on speed. Where did this approach come from?

LEPAGE Ferdinand/Caliban and Miranda/Ariel all form mirror images which we wanted to establish clearly on stage. I'm also interested in how Shakespeare explores dreams, sleep, and the unconscious. Caliban is like a savage, sex-driven, teenage monster with zits, playing with black magic, painting his room black, filling it with black candles, flirating with black Sabbath rituals; the time in our lives when we're servants of the devil and just want to masturbate and have sex all the time. That kind of adolescent ugliness and horror is also contained, somewhere, within Ferdinand. Caliban is the monster—with spots all over his body—which we've all been.

SALTER So how did you explore these qualities with Anne-Marie?

LEPAGE I said, "Try to imagine Marjo as an adolescent, with her deep smoky voice, and think, too, about the no-future generation." We tried to imagine Caliban as a kid, locked in her room, withdrawn, spitting out her anger at the world.

SALTER Anne-Marie, your Volumia is high-spirited, almost a cartoon figure. Is this because of Garneau's text?

CADIEUX It's more because of Robert's conception of the play and the character. But even in Shakespeare, I think, she has some elements of dark comedy. When she talks about Coriolanus's wounds, for example, she elaborates in great detail, as she imagines him a wonderful hero—it's a kind of erotic fantasy. But in Garneau, this speech is much simpler, shorter, more direct, with a kind of comic edge to it. You have to punch it out much differently than in Shakespeare.

SALTER Robert, where did your idiosyncratic ideas for Volumia's characterization come from?

LEPAGE It's a conflation from many sources: top models in Italian fashion magazines, a Spanish aristocrat I once observed on a first class flight to Madrid, Jackie Kennedy, Princess Margaret; someone cold, thin, snobbish, who smiles all the time! I also wanted her to look like an animated figure from an ancient Egyptian frieze, and like Cruella De Ville in 101 Dalmatians!

CADIEUX Acting Shakespeare is always a question of finding the right balance. Although I love naturalistic acting, as well as antithetrical acting where you seem to be doing nothing on stage, I also love overtly "Shakespearean acting" where you are so clearly a personnage. It's a mistake, I think, to do Shakespeare very naturalistically. You need to develop the theatrical dimensions or the plays will die.

Interview with Lepage and Le Theatre Reperes
Robert Lepage's production of Coriolanus with Le Théâtre Repère.

SALTER Robert, how do you try to do this in Macbeth, for example with the mise-en-scène?

LEPAGE It's meant to be, like Garneau's text, barbaric, primordial, and it has some aesthetic aspects—in costuming especially, but a little bit in the gestural language as well—from the way new Japanese theater does magic on stage, creating illusions with shadows. After all, it's a play about light and dark, about people experiencing their lives within shadows.

CADEUX One of the things I like about Marie's performance as Lady Macbeth is that she manages to transcend Garneau's archaic language by giving a very contemporary tone to it. Of course, this contrast between the archaic and the contemporary is also found in Robert's mise-en-scène, in the scenes, for instance, where we see Lady Macbeth naked, making love to Macbeth.

BRASSARD Normally Lady Macbeth is made to look tall and dark and strong and evil, like Jeannette Nolan in Orson Welles's film. But I'm not like that, not at all. I am very small. So we decided to explore my qualities—to give her a lot of spiritual strength contained within one small body.

SALTER Is this the reason you decided to make her naked in key scenes?

BRASSARD Partly this was symbolic, a way to convey her fragility through a balanced image pattern. She's naked at the beginning and she's naked at the end. In other words, at the beginning, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have nothing—they are almost like servants. Throughout the play, however, they become regal, powerful, but, by the end, they have nothing—again.

SALTER The production seemed very modern in the way it heightened their sexual relationship, even though it seemed strangely one-sided, because she was naked and he wasn't. Robert, why didn't you want Gérard's Macbeth to be naked as well?

LEPAGE Love-making scenes are always distracting for audiences because they begin to worry about the wrong things: Are they really touching? Is that his cock dangling down? You can't really listen to a scene this way.

CADEUX What I like about the nakedness is that it gives her a human dimension. And this makes us hate the two of them even more!

BRASSARD I would like people to feel at the beginning that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are sympathetic, understandable human beings, not stereotypical evil monsters. I want people to be able to relate to them—to think that they themselves, in the right circumstances, could behave just like them.

SALTER How does she lose her strength and authority?

BRASSARD She feels increasingly abandoned by him. Although she is the one to initiate their crimes, Macbeth becomes more and more secretive and isolated, choosing, for example, not to tell her once he's decided to kill Banquo. She loses control, becoming weaker and weaker, once she realizes that Macbeth intends to act less and less with her assistance.

CADEUX Well, that's just one interpretation! I prefer to think that guilt is what destroys her, not the feeling of being abandoned by Macbeth.

BRASSARD No, for me it's different. She has strong ambition at the beginning, but gradually she loses it. She is not proud of him when he acts alone, but only when he does things under her direction.

SALTER Robert, do you want to continue directing Shakespeare in radically different cultural contexts?

LEPAGE Yes, definitely. This fall [1993] I'll be doing another Macbeth and then another Tempest in Japan, in Japanese, with Japanese actors. By then I will have done these plays four or five times in the last two or three years, in different versions, in different collages. In Europe, directors are expected to shed new light on the text every time they do it.

SALTER What kind of contemporary theater do you like?

LEPAGE I'm a great fan of the Wooster Group. When I saw their Fish Story people were walking out. It's extraordinary work, very theatrical, very risky. It's not the same show every night, it's always changing, as they dare new things all the time. You could see strong committed actors on stage. You could feel how the theater should always be a forum for new expression, for explosions.