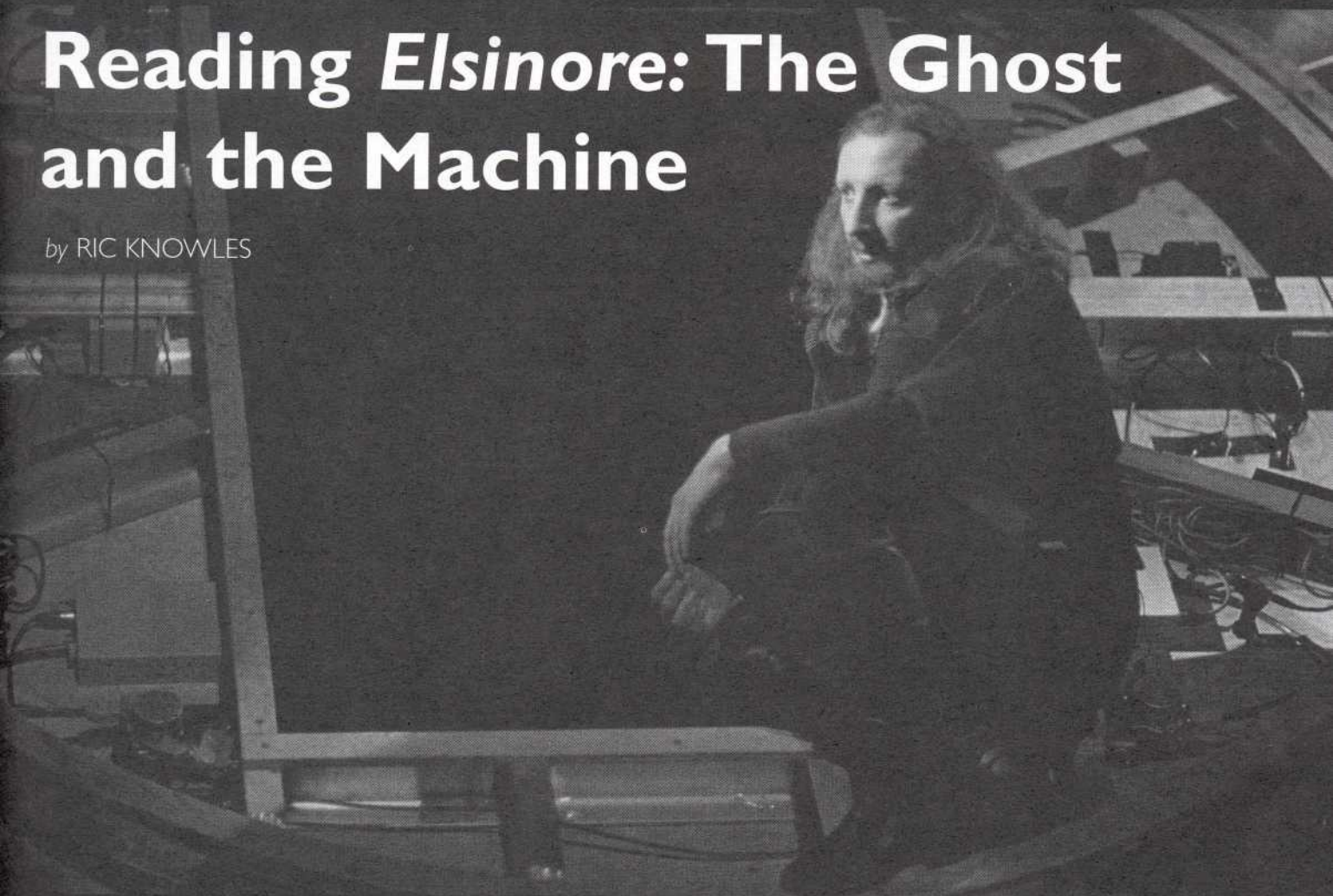


Reading *Elsinore*: The Ghost and the Machine

by RIC KNOWLES



Is Lepage the Ghost in the machine? He is pictured here, as Hamlet, on the backstage side of the computer-operated hydraulic circle (with its rectangular gateway) that was the centrepiece of the set for *Elsinore*.

PHOTO BY CLAUDEL HUOT

Publishing or reading *Elsinore*, “written and directed by Robert Lepage,” according to the show’s program, seems misguided. The play’s claim to fame is its inventive computer-controlled hydraulic staging rather than its text, after all, and not a word of the script is in fact “written” by Robert Lepage – at least not as writing is conventionally understood. In one sense, to read the play is to be reminded of the old joke about a student’s dismissal of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* itself as nothing but a pastiche of familiar quotations. And Lepage’s adaptation of *Hamlet* for a solo performer (doubled) only exacerbates the problem: as in his other somewhat obsessive forays into *Hamlet* (in the various extant versions *Le Polygraph*, for example, or even in his acting role in Denys Arcand’s 1989 film, *Jesus of Montreal*), he focuses in *Elsinore* on what may come to have been understood as the play’s clichés. These include most notably the “to be or not to be” soliloquy, which, against the original *Hamlet*’s narrative logic, introduces and frames the version of *Elsinore* published here as an eschatological (or perhaps ontological) meditation. And like many whose contact with *Hamlet* is indirect or distant, Lepage seems to get the scenes all mixed up and in the wrong order.

But it may not be stretching things to suggest in an issue on Shakespearean adaptation that Lepage in *Elsinore* is less concerned with adapting, interpreting or producing *Hamlet* – or Shakespeare in the contemporary world – than with *Hamlet*’s, or Shakespeare’s, own production of that world, and the extent to which, “Willy-nilly,” we speak Shakespeare; or at least, in the ways that the play’s words and iconography have entered contemporary discourse, we speak of “*Hamlet*’s

greatest hits." One indication of this interest may be the fact that, in its French-language version, *Elsineur*, Lepage eschewed the new or Québécois translations that he has used in his other French-language productions of Shakespeare in favour of the canonical Victor Hugo translation, the one through which *Hamlet* has entered (and shaped) dominant discourse in the francophone world. Another would be the fact that in some versions, at least, of *Le Polygraph*, Lepage yokes together the play's most familiar moments by having the "To be or not to be" soliloquy spoken by an actor holding a skull (presumably Yorick's), which Shakespeare's Hamlet does in a different scene entirely. Seen in this way, what at first seems in *Elsinore* to be a radical de- and re-conceptualization of *Hamlet*'s greatest hits may begin to seem like a meditation on the fragmentary, disjointed and decontextualized process of *Hamlet* writing "us" into (our contemporary version of) existence.

Is *Hamlet*, then, the ghost in the machine, and the ideology that unconsciously informs and naturalizes the technologies through which we understand ourselves? Certainly Lepage's version as staged takes its place among a plethora of postmodern "Hamletmachines," from the eponymous Heiner Müller version to variations by everyone from Sigmund Freud to Arnold Schwarzenegger (in *Last Action Hero*). In production, the reader needs to know in this otherwise opaque publication, *Elsinore* was realized through (and contained within) an immense and complex multimedia stage machine, unrepresentable here except through always inadequate photographs, its set consisting of modular flats manipulated by a computer-controlled hydraulic system that produced breathtaking and transformational visual images. All of the flats could be performed or projected upon, using slides, video and a complex lighting plot, and the central flat housed a large circular section that could spin or tilt independently, within which a cut-out rectangle could open or close, serving as a doorway, window, ship's hatch or grave. This resulted in a physically transformational dramaturgy that enabled and underscored the solo actor's shifts from character to character, gender to gender, role to role. Scenes involving Claudius and Gertrude were presented with projected King and Queen playing cards; Hamlet's debate with Claudius was accomplished with the aid of a revolving table, his duel with Laertes through the aid of a body double and foils equipped with tiny video cameras; and the "what a piece of work is man" was covered by a projection of Da Vinci's geometrical/anatomical sketch of "man," contextualizing the speech not within *Hamlet*'s narrative logic but within the formative history of Western humanism.

How all this worked, and why it is not possible in a print publication to render the full experience of the production through stage directions, is perhaps best indicated by a description of one transformational sequence among the many that made up the show: the one that represented Ophelia's death. (It is worth noting that, in spite of a childhood illness that left Lepage hairless, he performed *Elsinore*, including the women's roles, with a false beard

and a wig, and that, when the English-language performances were taken over by Peter Darling, the actor did not use a wig to disguise his encroaching baldness, even in the women's roles. This show deliberately performed rather than embodied gender.) The actor entered as Gertrude, stage right, in a stiff, gilded dress, and delivered Gertrude's speech from act four, scene four of *Hamlet* "straight" and effectively in front of the curtain. At the end of the speech, the dress broke away from the actor like the encrustation from a pupa, and Ophelia emerged embryonic in a flimsy white elasticized undergown, partially open at the front to reveal the male body beneath, evoking an effective androgyny that was reinforced by the falsetto singing of a medley of the standard early-modern settings of Ophelia's songs from the subsequent scene. At this point, the actor-as-Ophelia crossed to centre stage – the curtain had risen – and lay down on a vast blue cloth, his/her arms crossed at the chest, as the stage mechanism rose – all but a rectangular, coffin-shaped opening at its centre, into which the body seemed to sink, engulfed by the watery drapery that slid into the grave-like opening to enshroud her. As the machinery lifted, however, the same actor, as Hamlet, emerged from beneath it to soliloquize, completing a breathtaking – and economical – series of metamorphoses.

Is *Elsinore* an independent play? A production of Shakespeare's play? An adaptation? A collage? Lepage himself, in a program note to the play in production, argued that "you can't make a *Hamlet* without breaking a few eggs," signalling in the yoke joke both his intention to "make a *Hamlet*" – this was, in his mind, at least in part, a production of Shakespeare's play – and the radical disruption that "making a *Hamlet*" now involves. But his joke also indicates that to make either a meal or a chicken of an egg – to realize its potential, one way or another – the shell must be broken: it must cease to be an egg. CTR

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