



# Metamorphosis of the Stage: *Elsinore* and *The Ring* by Robert Lepage

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## ABSTRACT

Robert Lepage is one of the most acclaimed directors of contemporary theatre. His concept of a flexible, mechanized performance space (in *Elsinore*, *Les Aiguilles et l'Opium*, and *The Ring*), resembles Gordon Craig's idea of using neutral, mobile, non-representational screens as a staging device. Lepage's theatre is characterised by the scenographic machine, in the double meaning of actor and dispositive (that is, an agent effecting a disposition). Within this, involving video and a continuous metamorphosis of the scene, the actor is an essential mechanism. The scene integrates images and mechanisms of movement of the set in a single theatrical device in which man is still at the centre of the universe, as in the Renaissance; theatre, in a multimedia perspective, can thus revert to being a laboratory of integral culture, where art and technology rediscover their common etymology (*tekne*). I analyse two examples of his productions: *Elsinore* (1995) where a single actor impersonates all the characters of the tragedy, thanks to a metamorphic and mobile scenic solution and video projections, and *The Ring* cycle (2014–2016), where the set is a high-tech huge machine designed for the entire tetralogy, a work of mechanical engineering, rotating, bending and transforming into different shapes.

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The Canadian-born Robert Lepage is one of the most acclaimed directors and interpreters of contemporary theatre. Together with the stage designer Carl Fillion and with the technical staff of his multimedia team Ex Machina, based in Québec City, he has planned and given life to some of the most emblematic examples of the dramaturgical use of the video technology on stage.

According to Steve Dixon:

Lepage and his Ex Machina company's treatment and evocation of scenic space is fuelled by expressive and eclectic ideas and mechanics including kinetic screens, video projections, mirrors, and ingenious mechanical sets, with which to transform traditional proscenium arch stages into myriad mutating locations and configurations. Indeed, explorations of space, and the scenographic mechanics of spatial metamorphoses are far more central to Lepage's aesthetic than traditional theatrical notions of characters and plots' (Dixon 2007: 500).

I too am convinced that the theme of *metamorphosis* is the core issue of Lepage's theatrical work: this develops around the plot, the life, and the interiority of the characters – which are in part the reflection of the author's life given back in a form of *auto-fiction*, a storytelling between autobiography and fiction – (Monteverdi 2018: 171). This psychological and intimate metamorphosis has, in fact, its visible counterpart in a complex system of changing and dynamic scenic presentations. What best identifies the work of Lepage is that of the machine, in the dual meaning of scenographic apparatus and actor: the scene integrates images and mechanics in a single theatrical device in which the actor is a crucial cog. The human actor is still at the centre of this process; theatre in a multimedia perspective can thus, revert to being a laboratory of anthropological experimentation and an integral culture, where art and technology rediscover their common origin in the etymology of *tekné*: in Greek antiquity, *teknites* were both craftsmen and artists.

Lepage's *mise en scène*, a true triumph of *tekné*, recalls a Leonardesque machine, rather than any apologetic and futuristic symbol of the modern technological myth; it is a place of an ideal integration of languages (as in Moholy Nagy's 'Theatre of Totality'), in appearance, a rudimentary anti-technological machine, a work of artistic engineering, that ironically, belies the perfection of the device and continues 'to play' in the ancient way. Lepage favours a formal solution that is fundamentally modernist and humanist: his integrated (and multimedia) scene has many affinities with the principles of the 'human scale of architecture' and of the 'organic composition' formulated by Frank Lloyd Wright, the protagonist of Lepage's play *The Geometry of Miracle* (1998). It is precisely Wright who seems to embody the 'tutelary deity' of Lepage's technological scene; his idea of organic architecture brought nature and man, earth and concrete back into unity.

In the past, artists such as Erwin Piscator and Josef Svoboda worked to overcome the dichotomy between technology and theatre: their stages were characterized by a free use of techniques that neither reassure nor alienate, nor give up the craftsmanship of the theatre, or its political and relational function. Piscator (1893–1966) was the promoter, in Germany in the 1920s, of an educational, political and didactic theatre, which envisaged the introduction of mobile structures and technical means as a typical form of a new theatre inspired by historical materialism. During his long career, the Czechoslovak 'light sculptor' Josef Svoboda (1929–2002) experimented the most diverse techniques and materials on stage: he used any material as a means of expression, as long as its qualities met the needs of dramaturgy and staging, from those linked to traditional staging, in wood to metal, to those enabled by the most advanced technology, and from basic dia and film projections, to the most sophisticated mechanical and lighting devices. He affirmed the need for a profound knowledge and mastery of technique, and acceptance of theatre's entitlement to the functionality of new technologies: 'Technique in its substance is active, capable of dramatic action' (Svoboda, 1994: 180).

My first example is Lepage's *Elsinore* (1995), after Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is a solo-performer production based on a single place, Elsinore's Castle. It is the exploration of Hamlet's mind: all the characters are parts or interior projections of his Self correlated with parts of his body; they are *places* in his mind: the father the ear, the mother the eyes, the actors the mouth. In his solitude he embodies all the characters of the tragedy. A single actor, therefore, embodies the

universe of the characters of the court, from the solitary Hamlet to the evil King Claudius, from the feminine world of Gertrude and Ophelia, to the traitor Polonius, from the loyal Horatio, to the pliable courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

A single actor on stage or a *lonely* character? According to Lepage:

Whenever I do a solo show, whatever the theme is, I think it's about *loneliness*. So this was a way for me of breaking down what I was going to keep of Hamlet, and it's about Hamlet's loneliness. Among its many themes, it's a play about loneliness, and that is the thing I try to stick onto the characters. Not just Hamlet's loneliness, but Ophelia's and other characters'. It's a play where many people are alone (Lepage in Eyre 1997: 290).

Lepage uses complex stage mechanics. A single scenic element, through a mobile device holding multiple possibilities of movement, establishes a relation with the actor who *acts* inside its *dangerous mechanisms*, and which shows this indivisible and opposite polarity: the impiety of the court and the loyalty of Hamlet.

Its only attribute is the ability to transform itself. Its attitude is its own *mutability*: 'The combination of the moving set, continually creating new relationships between the performer and the space and the depiction of a range of backstage areas configures a number of the play's themes. *Elsinore* is about instability, about a whirl of activity around a central figure, about continual tensions between a human figure and a piece of machinery which one could express, metaphorically as a tension between individual and state or even the human and the cosmic' (Lavender 2001: 73).

The stage designer Fillion, as he told me during an interview, created first a prototype based on the idea from Lepage, of a *monolith* (Monteverdi 2018: 228), and then on the movement of the human body based on a particular set of 'ideal' human proportions (*Figures 1-2-3*). The designed shape of the stage, combining late 20th-century technology with more traditional forms of stagecraft, recalls that of a circle inscribed in a square, a symbol of harmony, perfection, and man himself (as in Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*, an obsessive presence in Lepage's theater).

**Figure 1** Elsinore: graphic test for the poster (non used).  
 Courtesy by Carl Fillion.





**Figure 2** *Elsinore*, the set.  
Photo by Richard-Max  
Tremblay



**Figure 3** *Elsinore*, Robert  
Lepage as King Claudius. The  
set is positioned vertically and  
contains a tilting chair.

The set comprises of three panels/screens, the central one of which can rotate. The scenic device (which Lepage himself calls ‘the Machine’) contains, invisibly, a circular disk that allows further low rotations, both in a vertical and horizontal position. The cutout at its center can represent a door, a window, a grave, the Queen’s bed, or the river where Ophelia drowned. Two side screens and a central backdrop for the projected images were added to the Machine to introduce other characters: the video images were live, doubling Hamlet’s figure, enlarging



him or dissecting a portion of his face, producing the effect of a stereoscopic vision (the contemporary but separate vision of the two eyes), or a cinematographic close-up ([Figure 4](#)).



**Figure 4** *Elsinore*: The final Scene. Live video for the impossible duel in this one-man-show. Photo Emmanuel Valette.

The video backdrop that is always present in its countless guises (infrared and thermal images, live webcams), immerses the spectator in an atmosphere of conspiracy; the cameras and the projected images produce an extraordinary multiplicative effect that reinforces the idea of Hamlet's madness (the crowding of thoughts in his head, the obsessive search for his father's murderer) and his voluntary isolation from the court of Denmark, but above all, they suggest the general climate of suspicion, where Hamlet himself seems to be under *special surveillance*. The video also allows the actor to act *only but not alone*, that is, to 'meet' several interlocutors on stage, shown in video as his multiples: Horatio is indeed his double, his *inner mirror*. The video allows the encounter, the exchange, and almost the poetic transformation of the two characters into each other. This is equivalent, on another level, to a symbiotic (and symbolic) co-existence of the video projections with the theatrical language. Technology does not alter the drama, it enhances it, it exalts it.

The rendering of Hamlet's meeting with Horatio through the live webcam, certainly one of the most touching scene of the entire show ([Figure 5](#)), is explained by Lepage thus:



**Figure 5** *Elsinore*, screenshot from the videodocumentation, 1997. Lepage as Hamlet and Horatio.

When Hamlet talks to Horatio about how he feels about him there's one camera back there and a projector in front. There's no wizardry, but it presents a meeting point of a live actor and a video image of him. The live actor has nothing to do with the video image, he's a different character, even if I am performing them both, because the video image is two-dimensional, he's bigger, he's made of electricity and light, he's a completely different being. For me it's the only moment in this show where I really feel there's a pivot between theatre and electronic mediums, that these two types of storytelling can actually make dialogue' (Lepage in Eyre 1999: 291).

*Elsinore* is the physical and mental space of the tragedy, where Hamlet is forced to stay ‘in-between’, to live so close to the corrupt court and be spiritually isolated from it; he is relegated to an impossibility of free movement, effectively a prisoner, while the scene moves ceaselessly and revolves around him. All the characters in one, all the places in one: this *scene machine*, ‘humanized’, as the stage designer Fillion likes to define it, (Monteverdi 2018: 247), is subjected to variations and changes, and is a true *theatrical mask*, because it takes on different expressions, faces and different personalities, constantly changing. As all the scenes were expressly created by the movement of the device itself, the actor is forced to follow its rhythm, its breath. He can cross it, remain suspended, lean on it and thus create a relation of symbiotic complicity with the machine. He has a dialogue with it and finds, also, dangers between its cogs. A reversal of roles takes place: the machine, which has crushed its *artificial terminations* to become a body, is the true protagonist, an automaton-actor, a kind of Übermarionette, whilst the actor is the spare partner. If the machine is humanized, the actor becomes a machine. As Lepage explains:

For me, machinery is *inside* the actor, in his ability to speak the text, to engage with the play; there are mechanisms in that, too (...). I tell stories with machines. The actor is him/herself a machine. I know that some actors don't like that we refer to them as machines, but in theatre it is something like this.

(Lepage in Charest 1999: 23).

Such a notion seems to precisely fulfil Craig's prediction of the theatrical automaton in *The Theatre advancing* (1919):

Not natural? All its movements speak with the perfect voice of its nature! If a machine should try to move in imitation of human beings, that it would be unnatural. Now follow me; the Marionette is more than *natural*; it has style – that is to say, *Unity of Expression*: therefore the Marionette theatre is the true theatre'.

(Craig 1919: 97).

The realisation of Craig's thoughts for the contemporary theatre ('the iconic function', his 'visual quality'), is underscored by Lorenzo Mango:

Craig's approach is at the root of many of the theories of acting that characterize early twentieth-century avant-gardes, in which the problem of the actor's body as Form becomes central, leading to the necessity for a complete transformation of the human figure, in order for it to acquire an artistic quality. Even in more recent theatre, however, we find significant echoes of this approach, especially in the experiences associated in one way or another with the so-called theatre of images. The choice of orienting communication entirely towards vision necessarily entails a different conception of the human figure and of the actor's role, which ultimately derives from Craig's teachings.

(Mango 2011: 22)

In *Elsinore* the theatrical machine is also the X-ray machine that detects changes in Hamlet's emotional state and thoughts, a brain-reading tool that opens his mind, carrying to his consciousness recollections and truths. The techno-theatrical machine becomes a lie detector, that is to say –as in the title of one of the most famous Lepage's spectacles– a *polygraph*: theatre is the place where the truth is revealed, the intrigues are unmasked.

As with the screens of Craig's 'kinetic-visual' theatre ('the thousand scenes in one') as used in production of *Hamlet* in Moscow in 1913, which allowed several combinations, Lepage's stage also is like a transforming face, thanks to movement and light:

'The theatre' Lepage explains 'is the art of transformation at all levels. Transformation becomes not a manner, but really the actual foundation of my work' (Lepage in Charest 1999: 161).

Such devices are reminiscent of the stage machinery (the *ingenii*), designed for the production of theatrical effects in the Renaissance, the era of the invention of mobile stages, rapid scene changes. They were a true mixture of marvels and *ars mechanica* (such as the Buontalenti's stage inventions for the Theatre of Uffizi, in Florence), a true spectacle within a spectacle in which

staging was all about machinery, gears and self-propelled wings. Between the 15th and 17th centuries, when the perspective with views of the city had definitively replaced the paratactic mansions of sacred representations, the theatrical scene was progressively transformed by the introduction of machines and winches, devices that allowed flights, the appearance of the sun, demons and announcing angels, designed by Brunelleschi, Vasari, Sangallo and Buontalenti for wedding parties at the Farnese and Medici courts. Leonardo was also an ‘apparatore’ (‘scenographer’) on the occasion of the staging of Poliziano’s *Orpheus*, as can be seen from studies and plans dated 1506–1508 in the Arundel Codex (Jacquot 1964; Zorzi-Sperenzi 2001).

This Renaissance lineage is amplified by the projection on stage of Leonardo Da Vinci’s famous study of the male human proportions (*Vitruvian Man*) based on the correlations of ideal human proportions with geometry. After all, following Leonardo’s own thoughts, man is a machine, the bird is a machine, the building is a machine, the entire universe is a machine.

Everything occurs as if there is another spectacle behind the spectacle: many technicians, sound designers and light engineers, and also numerous ‘manipulators’ act behind the stage moving panels, setting up the scenic arsenal and steering video projectors by ropes, as if they were moving a giant marionette. To explain the importance of the backstage, Lepage refers to Japan:

The first time I assembled a show, I played an improvisation in front of the technicians and machinists. The technician is the first collaborator and the first spectator. When I was in Tokyo, a person said to me that he worked in the ‘shady part’ of the show; he explained to me that the Japanese Theatre is a balance between the light part and the shadow part of the show: there are two sides of the same medal. The Japanese are aware of the fact that theatre is a totality and what takes place behind the stage has the same importance as what takes place on the front. Western theatre, on the contrary, is obsessed by the visible part of the scene only. (Monteverdi 2018: 134)

The essence of Lepage’s theatre is a metamorphic stage, which transforms ceaselessly before the eyes of the spectators: technology is shown, its operations are well in sight because: ‘People are not worried by the technology which they understand’, and he adds: ‘Video has become totally domestic and common, one can use it on stage. The principle is understood and, as a result, the spectators accept that technology can contain poetry’ (Lepage, 1996).

## THE DRAMATURGY OF THE MOVING SET: *THE RING*

The commissioning of the *Ring* from Lepage by the New York Metropolitan Opera dates from 2005; it was the year in which the Canadian director made his debut with the show *KÅ* for the Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. The Met’s CEO, Peter Gelb, expressly asked for a production that would dialogue with the circus arts, just as technological and colossal, for a new Wagner production. The three phases of conception, artistic development and technical development for the creation of the prototype up to the final scenic construction, took four years, from 2006 to 2010, the year of the performances.

For the project and for the scenic creation of the entire tetralogy, Lepage called again on stage designer Fillion, and technical collaborators and artists from the Cirque du Soleil. Lepage was aware that his directing and scenic proposal would receive a lot of criticism from Opera purists; the negative reviews, at least at the debut, did not take long to make themselves heard, using colourful tones and, in some cases, harshly critical expressions (‘frustrating opera’, ‘Wagner circus’, ‘a comic book’, ‘scenic baillamme’).

The most fierce criticism was directed at the very high staging costs but also at the absence of real scenic direction, replaced by a technologically dynamic set which was too innovative for a traditionalist audience. But curiously, these same features were praised within more dedicated theatre criticism, which recognized a precise reference to the scenography of the early twentieth century.

The scenography, unique for all four parts of the *Ring*, is free of bulky objects to accommodate a single Leonardian *monstrum* that seems to have come out of the hands of an alchemist of the past, a natural heir to the avant-garde scenographer Josef Svoboda.

Lepage's interpretation turns the audience's point of view upside down: having cleared away the idea of a close-up of the actor-singer and the set design as background, it plunges the performers into an immense space, where proportions are at their disadvantage.

The gigantism of the scene is already a theme in itself: whoever crosses it, has to struggle with a space that besieges him, crushes him and shows his infinite otherness and irreconcilability.



**Figure 6** The 'Machine' during the first test.



**Figure 7** The Machine 'coloured' with video projection mapping.

Innovation and tradition were the key words for this complex production; Lepage said he remained faithful to Wagner, but in a modern context: 'There is a way to be respectful of the tradition of the work, of its lexicon, of its different theories, but there are also moments when the director can actually create his own vision'.

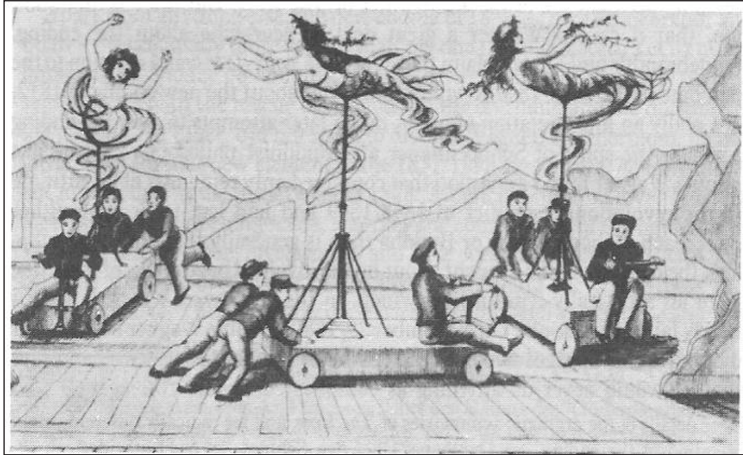
Flexibility and transformability, as in all Lepage's sets, were the primary characteristics of this ambitious and complex set, which some critics would call *The Machine* or even *The Valhalla Machine*. This giant apparatus, designed by Fillion for the entire tetralogy, was a masterpiece of mechanical engineering, patented by the Canadian company Scène Ethique. It consisted of 24 aluminum axes, each 9 metres long, with a triangular base, covered with fibreglass and then made opaque to allow the projection, attached exactly in the middle, to a further horizontal central axis connected to two side elevators; the axes rise to a height of about six meters and can rotate 360 degrees, thanks to a complex hydraulic and mechanized system. They can make independent or integral movements in relation to the whole structure (Monteverdi, 2018: 339).

Every other movement of the axes was performed by hand with ropes by the technicians behind the scenes and then blocked by special brakes. Thus, with hydraulics and automation and with the fundamental help of the shunters, the Machine took on a large number of combinations of different shapes, becoming the backbone of a dragon, the mountain of the Gods or the horse of the Valkyries.

This was a 'Craigian' machine suitable for receiving lights on the surface and generating movement, like the screens invented by Craig, and also for suggesting moods: in itself, a



powerful device of symbolic meaning which translates, in a non-illustrative and non-decorative way, the epic plot. But it is above all, a real Wagnerian machine, considering that *Rhinegold*, at its debut in 1876 at the Festspielhaus Bayreuth, provided a series of machines for the flight of the Rhine Maidens (the ‘swimming machine’). Wagner personally gave indications about the technical contribution to make the choreography more effective. These were realised by Carl Brandt, considered the best stage technician of his time and expressly sought by Wagner. He mixed smoke machines with dynamic projections of colored and bright lights (gas lamps combined with electric lights). Other unexpected effects were produced by carts or stairs with wheels hidden behind a high stage curtain, creating different stage movements for the singers.

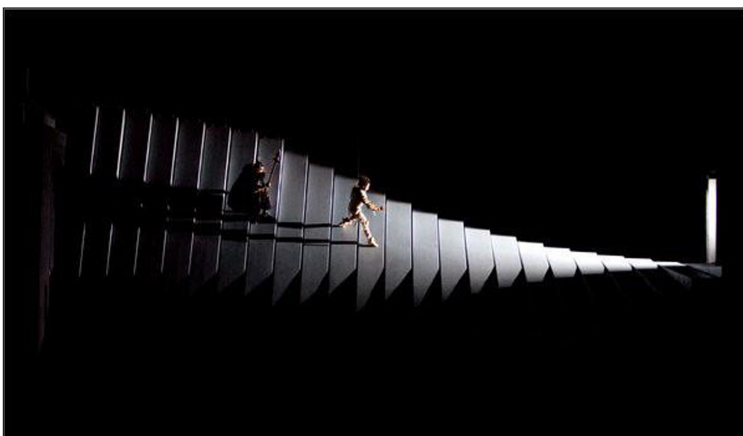


**Figure 8** The famous engraving showing behind the scenes, the Rhine maidens hanging from the flight machine (Getty Museum Images Collection). The entire *Ring* cycle of 1876 was realized under Brandt's technical direction. His solutions for making the waves in *Das Rheingold*, were on drawings by Josef Hoffmann.

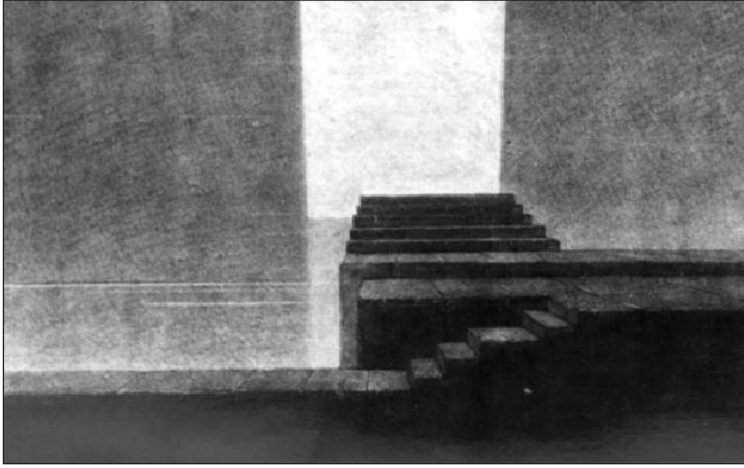


**Figure 9** The Opening bars in *Rhinegold* by Robert Lepage with the Rhine Maidens.

In Lepage's set, the variable inclination of the planes lent itself to a truly impressive flight of stairs, conspicuously evoking Adolphe Appia's drawings (**Figure 10**) and some of Svoboda's scenic solutions. For example, in a memorable piece of staging, subsequently cut because of the dangers of performing on it, the structure rotates on itself horizontally like a screw and becomes a huge staircase from which descend Wotan, the supreme god, and Loge, the semi-god master of fire, to access the Nibelheim, home of the deformed dwarfs who forge in the fire there (**Figure 9**).



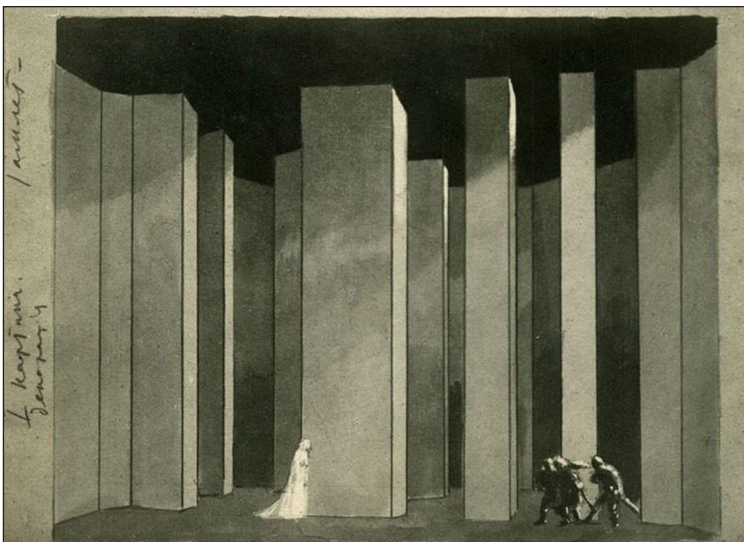
**Figure 10** *Das Rheingold*, Wotan and Loge descend into Nibelheim. Photo: Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera.



**Figure 11** Adolphe Appia, *Rhythmic Spaces*. c. 1909.

To sing at this height and inclination the artists were secured by cables and, on some occasions, they were replaced by stuntmen. These had to move over steep walls with enormous difficulty and risking loss of balance, slowing down the action.

The immense scene, arguably a more complex visual recension of Craig's visionary illustrations in the volume *Scene* (1923) contrasts with the datum of the man who walks through it, diminutive by comparison.



**Figure 12** Edward Gordon Craig's Model Stage for *Hamlet* (Moscow Art Theatre), 1911 (source: Craig's book *Towards a New Theatre*, 1913)



**Figure 13** Set by Robert Lepage from Wagner's *Ring* Cycle. Photo: Ken Howard/ Metropolitan Opera.

(The images by Lepage's *Ring* are taken from <https://www.pri.org/stories/2012-05-15/robert-lepages-ring-des-nibelungen-met>)

During an interview for the documentary *Wagner's Dream* by Susan Froemke (2012), Lepage reveals that he had the idea of the scenic machine when thinking of the places in Wagner's source texts, the medieval epic of the Nibelungen the poems of the Edda; so the metal plates of the scenography would correspond in a synthetic way, to the sharp landscape of Iceland, to its volcanic formation, to its unstable geography, to its deep crevasses due to lava, and together with the mountains, to the gigantic thermal springs, all concentrated in the same landscape, between ice and fire.

Even the tectonic formation of the Country, characterized by the clash of the Eurasian and North American plates and their subsequent departure, suggested the image of an organic becoming, of a landscape in continuous transformation that gave further inspiration both to Fillion: 'What happens in *Das Rheingold*' says Lepage 'is that we are in a world of mists and lightning, fire and water, an elementary kingdom. This is the reason why the set is constantly taking on shapes reminiscent of a rock or a spine'.

In the director's own words, the set was a device, 'versatile, metamorphic and organic' to restore the power of myth and elementary symbols. 'It was important to create a versatile theatrical machine, a set that had its own life and could actually go through several metamorphoses, but at the same time be very organic. We tried to find a very organic way not to illustrate the Ring but to visually return the Ring to its poetry (...). For us it was important that the whole was very agile, very flexible, very adaptable and alive, so that it not only moved, but also breathed' (Park 2012).

In addition to the geographical and iconographic inspiration, Lepage explained that the moving axes would be nothing more than a visualization of Wagnerian *Leitmotifs*. Just as the individual musical cells join together in a generative model to create more or less elaborate themes, associated with a feeling, a person or an object, so the individual parts of Lepage's scenography can be released in unison or show themselves individually; the scenography amplifies the dramaturgical function of the conducting motifs, showing them concretely as living elements like the actor, and in perpetual movements, like the human body. If the *Leitmotifs* express the character's emotionality and moods, the moving scene translates them in a non-illustrative or realistic way, but no less profound and no less capable of expression.

In the abstractness of the shape, in the suggestive emanations from the structure when lit, in the immateriality transmitted by the video projections, and above all in the metamorphic scenic machine, Lepage seems to refer directly not only to Gordon Craig's drawings and stage designs, but also to his overarching symbolist aesthetic: the idea of movement generating everything, the inspiring principle of the scene.

The utopian goal of an expressive and mobile scene, enabled by screens, appears first in Craig's drawings of 1907, in which he illustrated a revolutionary notion of scenography: a thousand scenes in one, a three-dimensional scene with infinite possibilities of movement. He patented these screens in 1910 in London, the documents significantly containing an explicit reference (which Lee Simons even called 'plagiarism') to the scenery designs of Sebastiano Serlio, author of *Il secondo libro di Prospettiva*, 1545.

Once again, as in the much smaller scale of *Elsinore*, the scenic device moves while the actor and singer plays in front and above it, and the machine has both a mechanized device and a hand-guided machinery. The scene dominates, but the human dominates it.

In the *Ring* all the technicians not only operate the machine but also relate to it almost respectfully, walking slowly, discovering the tricks, the difficulties, getting in relation with it; the mechanism, Lepage will say, after a first difficult period of break-in, was 'well oiled'.

Technology comes first: it invents, arranges, prepares, but once again, the hand of man is driving it. The actor is in perfect harmony with the integral rhythm of the stage machine. Many scenes are truly memorable such as the Prologue of *Twilight of The Gods* when the threads of destiny are broken by the machine itself, or Siegfried's journey by raft down the Rhine, with his horse Grane, running the entire width of the set.

The physical axes of the set resemble the keys of a giant piano, and images are projected onto it in videomapping to show forest trees, caves, or the waters of the Rhine; in some moments it is the video that dominates the scene, with some impressive visual solutions, such as in the

final of Act III of *The Valkyrie* in which both static and interactive video images were used, which make the set dynamic, thanks to a motion tracking system from cameras and a software (Sensei program) developed by Realisations Society.

The interactive video projections are activated both by the movement of the body and the voice of the singers, and by the instruments placed in the orchestra pit detected by microphones and infrared cameras; the information is passed to the computer through the Sensei detection software that in turn activates effects and images (clouds, water bubbles, sand, stones, rainbow), which are projected on the surface of the metal plates. The scenography and the singers are, in effect, one entity, a living and organic element that feels and responds to, and participates in, the action.

Three projectors of 25 thousand ansi lumens were placed at the bottom of the stalls, and at the height of the first tier of the galleries, and six others at a lower level: the images followed the movement of the machine, adapting and correcting in real time the perspective distortion of the image, giving the impression, in Fillion's words, that the scene is 'painted on the surface'.

An example of the way in which the movement of the machine, in combination with the movement of the actors above it, suggests fantastic settings is given by the ascent of the gods to Mount Valhalla in scene 4 of *Rhinegold*. It is the moment when Wotan, Fricka and the other Gods cross the rainbow bridge that leads to Valhalla. They hear a melancholy song coming from the depths of the Rhine, the maidens crying for the loss of gold, and Wotan asks Loge to make the maidens stop crying but the wailing continues during their journey. Wagner, as regisseur for the 1876 production at Bayreuth, expressly wanted the gods to physically cross the rainbow bridge as if it were a solid structure, showing the public the effect of a rainbow produced by a prism light projector designed by Otto Bähr.

In Lepage's production only 4 axes of the structure are detached from the others to form a bridge that rises from the bottom to the top, traversed for safety reasons by stuntmen rather than the singers, who are also lifted, by ropes which then magically disappear in an infinite horizon, traced precisely by the rainbow.

My final example of the dramaturgical power of the machine is demonstrated in the Prelude of *Rhinegold*. The scene it introduced in the first public production at Bayreuth in 1876 included Lilli Lehman, one of the most famous sopranos of the time, in the part of Woglinde, and also the celebrated stage mechanics that seemed as if the Rhinemaidens were swimming high in the air; the girls were hung from special wagons equipped with wheels that ran the entire width of the stage behind a semi-transparent screen (as visible from the only remaining photograph of the work).

The Prelude opens with the slowly growing Leitmotiv of the wave, suggested by the silky note of the double basses, with bassoons and eight horns ; the primordial atmosphere, with this indefinite flow of notes, was admirably displayed by Lepage's and Fillion's device which, in spite of its massive configuration, took on an unexpected and sinuous wavy movement that followed the rhythm of the music, as the famous arpeggio in E flat major resonates, introducing the so-called theme of nature. It is a scene in which the musical element is as if in a state of suspension, reduced to a minimum and, in the production, seemed to accompany the slow growth of the machine from the earth to the sky pausing only to provide the right support to the ripples. In his production the 'Machine' was positioned high like a giant that awakens, seeming to imagine before us and imposing rocks emerging from the river. While the overture takes shape, with a crescendo of sound and instrumentation and while the endless flow of notes flows like a lullaby, the carriage with the Rhinemaidens rose and dropped them from above, the wavers, guardians of gold, dressed as mermaids, are placed in front and above the structure that in the meantime, welcoming the blue projections, is transformed into the depths of the Rhine with its precious gold.

## CONCLUSION

Lepage, in his extensive use of technology, both physical and electronic, has on several occasions underlined how its evolution has changed his way of telling stories in theatre. For him, technologies 'invent new forms', impose filters, rules, schemes and constraints, just like



metrics and rhymes in poetry. His relationship with the Renaissance, and in particular, his encounter in Florence with the genius of Leonardo (to which he dedicated his first solo show, *Vinci*, in 1992) led him to give a precise characteristic to such a theatre, which evokes such a past whilst projecting a firm ambition to use innovative means of presentation, inevitably and often disturbing to much of audience expectation.

As regards practice after the rise of Modernism, and in tracing moments, theories and practices that offered examples of a renewed scenic vision, the outstanding figure is Craig, whose mobile 'screens', self-propelled panels that replaced the traditional stage, affirmed the value of a symbolic and abstract scene made by movement and lights only. Svoboda also used mechanisms, and above all lights, as a source of expression, defining his stage a 'psychoplastic space'. Such references make it possible to read the scenic dynamic of Robert Lepage's theatrical works as a persistence of the memory of modern theatre.

I conclude by inferring from my examples and discussion, a position that eschews any unnecessary opposition between the presence of a machine as a craft attribute that is dependent on the human and moved by him/her (the *mechané*), or completely autonomous from him/her and which eliminates the human presence (a computer system), and that also minimises the distinction between a bulky, imposing machine, and simple and discrete one, whether archaic, or modern, possessing innovative attributes. On the contrary, it is a question of defining what this presence brings into the stage in terms of relationships (spatial, dramaturgical, social). And above all, the issue is the 'qualification' of the machine as a 'mask', that is to say, as that object which embodies par excellence, in theatre, the attributes of 'mutability' and 'metamorphosis'. With the introduction of the concept of the machine as 'mask' Lepage escapes from ordinary and conventional representation, to take refuge in the more appropriate territory of the 'symbolic'; it is the path towards the purification of the human in Craig's *Übermarionette*. The fickleness of the human face corresponds to a form that embodies the value of mutability. The essence of theatre is transformation.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

[[COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT TO BE PROVIDED]]

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