Hard Work: Robert Lepage’s *Lipsynch* and the Pleasures of Responsibility

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Robert Lepage’s *Lipsynch* received its official world premiere at the Barbican in London on September 6, 2008. *Lipsynch* investigates the ‘specific signification [and] interaction’ of voice, speech and language in ‘modern human expression’ (Lepage, ‘Note’ 6). But according to one of its collaborators, Rebecca Blankenship, it was a visual resource which initiated the production (Blankenship). This resource, a drawing by Lepage, was translated directly into the first dramatic image of *Lipsynch*, following Blankenship’s emotive opening of the production (an aria from Gorecki’s *Symphony #3*). Lepage’s drawing showed two figures in the interior of an aeroplane. One is an adult sitting in club-class, in possession of a cultured voice, and the other is a screaming child at the back of the plane. The question of how to connect the drawing’s figures and understand the ‘journey’ of a human voice created a double fascination for Lepage. Indeed, the child (Jeremy), his mother (Lupe), and the ‘cultured voice’ (Ada) provide a structuring triad. Jeremy is adopted as a baby by Ada after Lupe dies. *Lipsynch*’s contemporary mythology largely stems from Jeremy’s quest in later life to discover his mother’s identity.

It is important to recognize that the image encapsulates both *Lipsynch*’s core narrative and its conceptual under-pinning, because this reveals that the dual nature of the experience that *Lipsynch* creates in performance was intrinsic from inception to realisation. Lepage’s assembled company of nine international collaborators do indeed present an exploration of the intricate and integral role that voice, speech and language play in shaping lives. And this is accomplished in nine contrasting but connected ways. Each performer leads one section of the narrative (in order – ‘Ada,’ ‘Thomas,’ ‘Sarah,’
Jeremy,’ ‘Marie,’ ‘Jackson,’ ‘Sebastian,’ ‘Michelle,’ ‘Lupe’), which partly explains Lipsynch’s variations in style. ‘Ada’ is operatic; ‘Jeremy’ cinematic; ‘Sebastian’ comic, and so on. Each section is, however, developed collaboratively. Therefore, Lepage’s reflection that Lipsynch’s ‘characters seem to have emerged from a place that is more profound’ seems to conceal the decisive contribution of his drawing in establishing both narrative and conceptual direction, and thereby his responsibility for Lipsynch’s successes and failures (Lepage, ‘Note’ 6). Because what Lipsynch uses – voice, speech and language – does not reveal what Lipsynch actually does – an important consideration in assessing its value.

Marie Gignac, one of Lepage’s regular collaborators, contributed to the development process of Lipsynch, but transferred her performance role to Frédérike Bédard during the process. Gignac, however, continued to collaborate on Lipsynch. Significantly, Gignac recognises that, while voice, speech and language provide the thematic material and ideation for Lipsynch, they also provide ‘a select locus of identity and emotion’ (Gignac 12). When Lipsynch is successful it is because it explores voice, identity and emotion simultaneously. Put another way, Lipsynch is successful when the thematic blends seamlessly with narrative and character – as in Lepage’s original drawing. When character dominates the thematic, as in the section ‘Sebastian,’ or the thematic dominates character, as in the section ‘Jackson,’ Lipsynch seems to be a glass distinctly half-empty.

It is not only the drawing upon which Lipsynch is based that predates its Barbican premiere. Lipsynch has played in Tenerife and Montreal. And a shorter, antecedent version was also presented at Northern Stage, in a week of development-through-performance (Newcastle, February 2007). Lipsynch at Northern Stage was radically unfinished, and provided a significant (and worthwhile) challenge to its
audience to find meaning and value. Lipsynch at the Barbican offered the same test at a lower level of difficulty. The degree of difficulty provided by Lepage’s work is determined by the degree of responsibility allocated to the spectator for the production of meaning. At Northern Stage, Lipsynch only worked if you worked hard on it. At the Barbican meaning was easier (not easy) to read. While significantly different materially, the approach to the audience was very similar. The challenges of Lipsynch’s thematic continuities establish it as the same work, in a different condition. Such a distinction may help critical reading by counteracting the exaggeratedly fluid status Lepage attributes to performance.

Lepage seeks to make the spectator active in the production of meaning, but in doing so, the spectator is actually handed responsibility for meaning. Read alone, sections like Sebastian and Jackson do not seem to be an integral part of Lipsynch in terms of core narrative material. But they can be ‘rescued’ from such drift – if the spectator chooses – by an effort to connect them synchronically and diachronically with the thematic. This enhanced productive role relies upon – and risks – the spectator’s patience.

Lepage believes that his work stimulates the ‘gymnastic minds’ and ‘gymnastic understanding’ of his audience, whose ways of seeing are shaped by the pace of perception demanded by cinematic editing (Lepage, ‘Conversation’ 148). But what elevates Lipsynch above the ordinary is the spectator who gives it a whole day. The spectator trusts – not that Lipsynch is worth the money, but that it is worth the time. The contract of trust which Lepage’s monumental pieces make with the spectator – that there will be an eventual thematic consolidation of the material – represents an act of patience, and even one of faith. Building up to thematic consolidation requires the mental work of the spectator. The pace of the experience is not determined by the
material, but by the slow recognition of its meanings. Rather than a cinematic pace of perception, *Lipsynch* establishes a *museum* pace. This mode of spectatorship functions through the accumulation of perceptions from different angles. *Lipsynch* is a slow ‘walk’ around a thematic assemblage of meanings that appears (deceptively) purposeless in its early stages. But ultimately, such interiorisation creates the pleasurable impression of having gained a multi-dimensional perspective upon a complex and fundamental element of identity, emotion and performance.

And it is *torture*. Not actual torture (although at the Barbican *Lipsynch* the spectator on my right walked out early), but torture in a different sense. The museum pace of spectatorship created by Lepage’s theatre generates an effect similar to what Erwin Panofsky describes as the ‘torturing quality of the three-dimensional.’ This is most evident in Mannerist sculpture, where the viewer sees the limitations of a single, fixed angle of perspective upon a sculpture and is forced into *chasing* the sculpture’s other dimensions. And this,

far from allowing the beholder's eye to rest upon one predominant and satisfactory view....seems gradually to turn round so as to display, not one view, but a hundred or more...Each of these views being just as interesting and, on the other hand, just as incomplete as the other, the beholder feels indeed compelled to circulate around the statue. (Panofsky 175)

Each of *Lipsynch*’s nine sections present and compel a different perspective on the material and its meanings. The resolution of this tension through thematic consolidation was achieved at the very end of the Barbican *Lipsynch*. Jeremy and Ada follow each other in holding Lupe, in a reversal of the traditional Pietà, accompanied only by music. This sculptural image of parent and sacrificed child is emotive in itself. But it also re-iterates the structuring triad of the absent parent mythology introduced at the beginning of *Lipsynch*. The barriers of time and space are dissolved: neither Jeremy nor Ada knew Lupe as a person. The circularity of the structure connects the characters physically.
This invites both the chain of existence presented, and the multiple perspectives upon it, to be read through this consolidated image. At Northern Stage, *Lipsynch* had no formal resolution as such. The Barbican ending functioned as a resolution because it invited thematic consolidation.

If you can read theatre in this way, and choose to, it is a moment of great pleasure that works the same way as a chocolate orange. Thematic consolidation functions as a jolt, a sharp blow that relieves the torture of holding together *Lipsynch’s* ‘segments’ – its accumulated and multiple angles of perspective. This is a cathartic release of tension. It creates a sensation of everything falling into place, an impression of a holistic awareness of *Lipsynch’s* full meaning. Describing this as a sensation or impression is necessary, as many things remain out of place, and, as in Lepage’s other productions, comprehensive description of a take-home meaning is elusive. Lepage’s methods of signification come without guarantees. Particularly if you cannot, do not, or will not, read theatre in this way. For me, the spectator who initially sat on my right hand side at the Barbican (who walked out), and the spectator who subsequently occupied their vacant seat (and sobbed joyfully through the standing ovation), demonstrate the knife-edge Lepage’s theatre balances on. One spectator’s boredom is another’s epiphany...
References


