

Lipsynch

By [Nicole Eckersley](#) artsHub | Tuesday, August 07, 2012

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Robert Lepage's epic nine-hour production, *Lipsynch*, was a brave programming choice for Arts Centre Melbourne – particularly outside of a festival – but there's no doubt that this is an impressive work of theatre, and definitely worth the effort.

To be fair, it isn't really nine hours long: with four intervals and a dinner break included, it's actually less than seven hours. (Though I doubt anyone was left feeling short-changed.) While many people might feel daunted by the idea of going to the theatre for nine hours, to be honest, I've probably spent more time at a workstation staring at an empty spreadsheet and playing solitaire, or watching five movies in a row during MIFF.

The work itself is frankly astonishing. By the end of nine hours, not only did I not want to kill everyone involved, I was still thoroughly enjoying it: a ringing endorsement of the sustained quality of the work, which managed to stay intriguing, insightful, hilarious and powerful without ever approaching repetition or boredom. It's also astonishing in its complexity: featuring over 40 characters, performed in (at least) four languages, and set in (deep breath) Frankfurt, Montreal, Quebec, London, Nicaragua, Los Angeles, Madrid, the Canary Islands and two different aeroplanes.

The quality of the performances was uniformly excellent, with the actors taking on multiple roles, often in multiple languages and genders, as well as several seamless and extremely accomplished vocal interludes. Admittedly, nobody was onstage for the full work, but the sheer talent and energy required to pull off something like this was more than enough to earn a standing ovation at the final curtain.

The play springs off one seminal moment: a young woman dies on a plane, and a stranger holds her baby for a minute. We follow the lives of the baby, the stranger and a crossed-paths network of their acquaintances; the work is divided into chapters of roughly an hour, each focussing on a different character. The script – jointly devised by Lepage, the

performers, and dramaturgy consultant Marie Gignac – must have taken a ream of paper to print, and had a lovely balance between reflection, tension and actual genuine side-clutching hilarity. There are certain inevitable comparisons: there was a distinctly soap-operatic feel to the proceedings, and more than one attendee pointed out the distinct sense of having spent the afternoon hooked on episode after episode of a particularly compelling TV program.

In most theatrical works it's hard to thoroughly explore a subject; theatremakers have to be content with the equivalent of a handful of choice remarks. With this much space to work in, though, it's possible to really sink some teeth into a topic; *Lipsynch* is the 4000-word essay of theatre. The subject is speech, voice and language, which is explored with admirable thoroughness: speech, aphasia, opera, recording, Babel-like multilingual conversations, aural hallucinations, dubbing, international phone calls, speech therapy, lip reading, made-up languages and of course, some very impressive use of the titular lipsynch. All of this was capably assisted by the restrained excellent sound design.

Jean Hazel's stage design was utterly astonishing. A series of movable panelled walls – some flat, some curved – were transformed and reshaped constantly, with the help of just-so props, into an endless series of sets. The metal tube frame of a plane became a swanky modern curved-wall BBC recording studio; flat panels became a bookshop, a hotel room, a movie set, several apartments and countless other locations. All of this was manned by the performers and an army of backstage crew, who were often endearingly integrated into the performance with costumes and tropes.

The one serious flaw with the work – and one that threw up interesting questions on the subject of language – was the mildly disgraceful surtitling. When one's surtitles are being niftily projected all over the place, on bits of set and flies and backdrops, one would also expect them to be reasonably accurate. Instead, there was either a series of minor and annoying technical problems, or the work experience kid was operating them. Frequent lag and even occasional missed lines made the experience frustrating, particularly on top of the dual-attention-point conundrum of surtitles, and the additional difficulty of reading small text. This had odd knock-on effects: for the bilinguals, the mild disjointed sensation of reading a surtitle that doesn't match what's being said, and for the rest, the definite sense that something is out of whack.

All in all though, *Lipsynch* is a rounded, successful work, with high aims that it doesn't fall short of, and a thoroughly enjoyable way to spend a day. Pack a picnic basket, or book a dinner, and settle in for a bit of top-shelf melodrama.

Rating: 4 stars out of 5

Lipsynch

Directed by Robert Lepage

Dramaturgy consultant: Marie Gignac

Performed by Frédérique Bédard, Carlos Belda, Rebecca Blankenship, Lise Castonguay, John Cobb, Nuria Garcia, Sarah Kemp, Rick Miller and Hans Piesbergen

Text by Frédérique Bédard, Carlos Belda, Rebecca Blankenship, Lise Castonguay, John Cobb, Nuria Garcia, Marie Gignac, Sarah Kemp, Robert Lepage, Rick Miller

and Hans Piesbergen

Set designer: Jean Hazel

Lighting designer: Étienne Boucher

Sound designer: Jean-Sébastien Côté

Costume designer: Yasmina Giguère

Assisted by: Jeanne Lapierre

Props manager and designer: Virginie Leclerc

Images produced by: Jacques Collin

Wigs: Richard Hansen

Creative collaboration: Sophie Martin

Production manager: Marie-Pierre Gagné

Tour manager: Louise Roussel

Technical director: Paul Bourque

Stage manager: Judith Saint-Pierre

Lighting manager: Renaud Pettigrew

Sound manager: Stanislas Elie

Video manager: David Leclerc

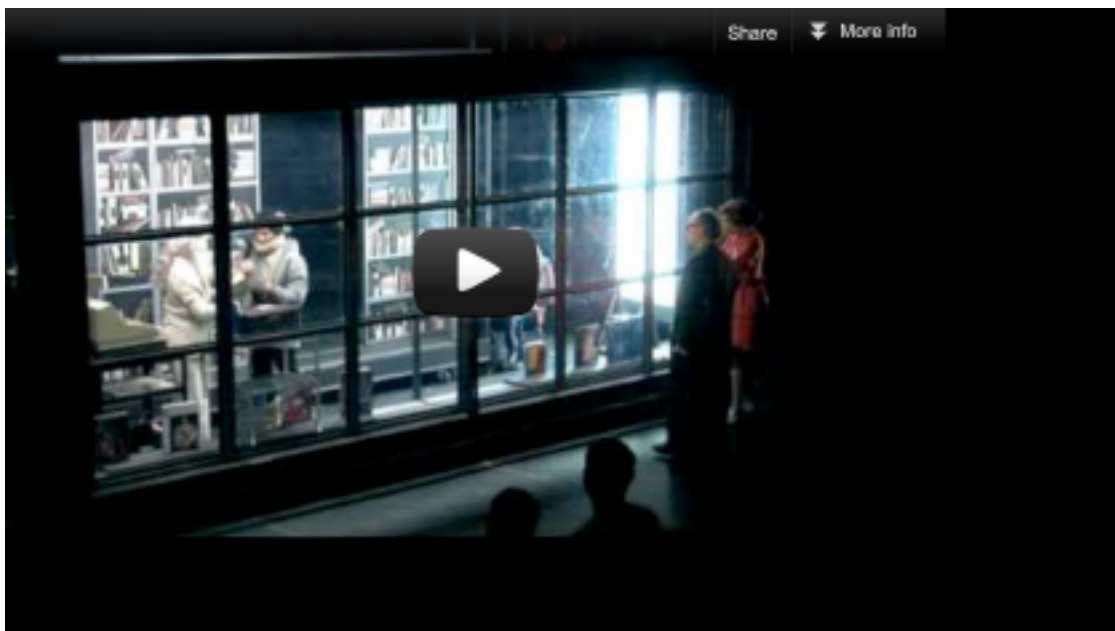
Wardrobe manager: Sylvie Courbron

Head stage manager: Anne Marie Bureau

Stagehands: Simon Laplante, Éric Lapointe

Arts Centre Melbourne, State Theatre

August 4 – 12



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