



Lipsynch

August 6, 2012

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Reviewed by John Bailey

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Reviewer rating:



Directed by Robert Lepage, Ex Machina and Theatre Sans Frontieres State Theatre, until August 12

FIRST, the elephant: yes, this play from Quebecois director Robert Lepage is nine hours long. And yes, there were those on opening day (and night) who let their feet voice their verdict.

But while it might be a case of theatrical Stockholm syndrome, or just an opportunity to return blood to the buttocks, the standing ovation this epic earned was one of the most immediate and unanimous the State Theatre has witnessed.

It's not the ordeal it sounds. The work is divided into nine segments, each about an hour long, with five intervals including a dinner break. It's little more taxing than a day spent watching a DVD box set, but a more appropriate comparison might be the airport novel. It's unarguable that *Lipsynch* could be seriously cut back - entire chapters could be culled, characters omitted and scenes pared without any essential story lost.

The same could be said of your average 800-page potboiler; we don't read such things out of duty. *Lipsynch's* extraordinary duration is itself as much a part of its meaning as its intertwining narratives. Dozens of stories echo and branch off one another: a German opera singer discovers a dead woman on a plane and raises her baby as her own; a Scottish detective tracks down a missing prostitute while dealing with impending divorce; a BBC announcer is haunted by ghosts of childhood abuse; a Hollywood director's film redirects the course of his own history.

Lepage began with an interest in the human voice, speech and language, and their permutations here are countless: from talking appliances to crying babies, live film dubbing, mime, arias and torch songs, pop, rock, rap. A woman embarks on a heartbreaking quest to re-create the voice of her dead father, a memory cut out along with a brain cancer. Recordings are phantoms, here, reminders of the past but also distortions of it.

Yet nothing in *Lipsynch* can be understood as its governing theme or question. If that were the case, there would be a point at which its audience could "get it" and dispense with the rest. Instead, the encyclopaedic form Lepage employs reflects the globalised, postmodern milieu it describes - irreducible to a single story, ungraspable as a totality and characterised by excess, waste, spectacle and a relentless sense of motion.

Surprisingly, it doesn't depend on stagecraft to hold the gaze over its span; there are many moments of visual trickery and technological sorcery, but the stories and the sheer brilliance of the performances do most of the hard work. There are also achingly funny sequences, which don't hurt.

There will be those who'll see the effort as a work of supreme arrogance or not worth the bother, and both judgments are valid. Most who make it over the finishing line, however, will understand the appeal of the marathon over the sprint. To give voice to that difference really does take around nine hours.



Nuria Garcia in *Lipsynch* is one of myriad voices and stories. Photo: Rodger Cummins

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