



Lipsynch

11-12 Aug , **Theatre**, **Theatre Reviews** Critics' choice

Maybe audiences who have forked out for a nine-hour show are actually asking for a bit more pain than Lepage provides?



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Right on the heels of the much anticipated re-opening of Hamer Hall, and a gala performance of Philip Glass's *Qatsi Trilogy*, the Arts Centre Melbourne is now presenting Ex Machina's *Lipsynch*, a nine-hour epic from auteur director Robert Lepage.

It's an exciting time for the high-end performing arts in Melbourne. If the Arts Centre can sustain this kind of commitment to bringing out large scale, internationally renowned works over the next five or so years – and they've already made some exciting announcements for the coming year – they will dramatically change the city's arts landscape, forcing companies like the MTC, Opera Australia, the Melbourne Festival and the commercial theatre promoters to rethink their place in the cultural ecology.

Because of its famous, or infamous, length, the opening night audience for *Lipsynch* at first appeared to be bracing itself for an endurance test. There were lots of extra cushions and bags of trail-mix being juggled in the foyer, and there was a kind of happy-dizzy mood of anticipation, like that before a movie marathon. Yet, as it turns out, *Lipsynch* is not a particularly arduous experience. Perhaps in this era of TV-on-DVDs, where audiences often swallow entire television series in one or two sittings, dedicating nine hours to a single artistic universe no longer feels like an outrageous demand. But, in any case, Ex Machina do not intend this to be a trial-by-art. With no more than forty-five minutes for each act, or episode, and seven leisurely spaced intervals, *Lipsynch* never threatens physical exhaustion.

Indeed, precisely because the acts are so discrete and episodic, I would recommend, for anyone

who wants to go but doesn't have a spare nine hours, that you try one of the single-evening, midweek segments on over the next several days. Taking in the full nine-hours at once does not, I think, define the experience.

Across nine discontinuous but linked stories, *Lipsynch* is a digressive celebration of the human voice, whether in an opera singer's aria, weighted with all kinds of historical and cultural significances, or in the groaning produced when gasses escape from a decomposing corpse and pass over the vocal cords, a merely physical phenomenon. We hear the human voice, and see its effects, as it leaps through half a dozen languages, across radio, poetry and telephony, in voiceovers, family arguments, hallucinations and dubbed films, on police tapes, confessions, and archival recordings. We meet people who have lost their voice, who read lips, whose voice still works but whose brains can no longer find the words, and, yes, people who lipsynch. It is, really, a thematic symphony.

Gertrude Stein, who was as fascinated as any twentieth-century playwright by the human voice and its immediate presence, said that the experience of seeing someone performing in a language she didn't understand, or knew only a little of, awakened in her a desire for melodrama, where "everything happened so quietly" and "what the people felt was of no importance" so that "one did not have to realize what was said."

The stories presented here have this kind of quiet melodrama about them. They are not epic in the sense of fabulous or incredible. These are ordinary people, even as their lives are touched, again and again, by melodramatic moments of tragedy. In Stein's words, it isn't important to realise exactly what is said, or to follow precisely the trajectories of the different characters (fortunate, because the surtitling on opening night were awful). It is enough to let the different subjects and ideas ring out and harmonise across the work.

The very many coincidences that link the nine acts belie Lepage's claim that *Lipsynch* describes a fragmented, interpenetrating, postmodern world. In fact, *Lipsynch* has a Baroque feeling to it, full of counterpoint, circularity and polyphony, rather than dissonance, quotation and atonality. Everything is resolved and brought back into the cycle. Although there are portions of English detective drama and French farce mashed in with lectures on the human brain, extended musical interludes and periods of pure expressionism, these feel more like stylistic variations than abrupt disjunctions. The final image of the night, of the statuesque Rebecca Blankenship cradling Nuria Garcia in her arms and assuming the pose of the Christian *Pietà*, bringing us back to the start, seems entirely appropriate.

Such images are what linger after the performance. Even while the relentless coincidences and the frequent forays into farce are sometimes exasperating, and the reflexive thought, 'Well, couldn't they have just cut this-or-that scene?' is inevitable, the stagecraft is consistently beautiful and surprising. The sequence set in a bookstore, for example, during a dark Quebec winter, is simply exquisite: a profound piece of theatre, full of silence, poetry, human drama and striking scenography. Sometimes, however, Lepage's predilection for confining the action within smaller stage elements – through windows, inside sound-booths, in cars, in rooms within rooms – and for working in a narrow horizontal frame does make the action seem quite distant, especially in a space like the State Theatre.

The material was developed with the cast through an intensive series of workshops between 2005 and 2009, when the play gradually expanded from five to seven to nine hours. According to cast members – and this production features the original cast – Melbourne might be the last city to see the show at its current length, one that obviously makes extraordinary demands on the

performers and crew. It makes demands on its audience, too, but those demands are not as great as many expect, and perhaps hope. More even than dissatisfaction at the gossamerlike web of linkages, or the vague nature of what the play is actually trying to say about the human voice, this seems to be a recurring complaint. Maybe audiences who have forked out for a nine-hour show are actually asking for a bit more pain than Lepage provides?

Words by Andrew Fuhrmann

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Lipsynch details

The Arts Centre

Address

State Theatre
100 St Kilda Rd
Melbourne 3004

Transport

Nearby Stations: Flinders St

Telephone 1300 182 183

[Buy tickets](#)

Price from \$99.00 to \$179.00

Date 11-12 Aug

Open 1pm

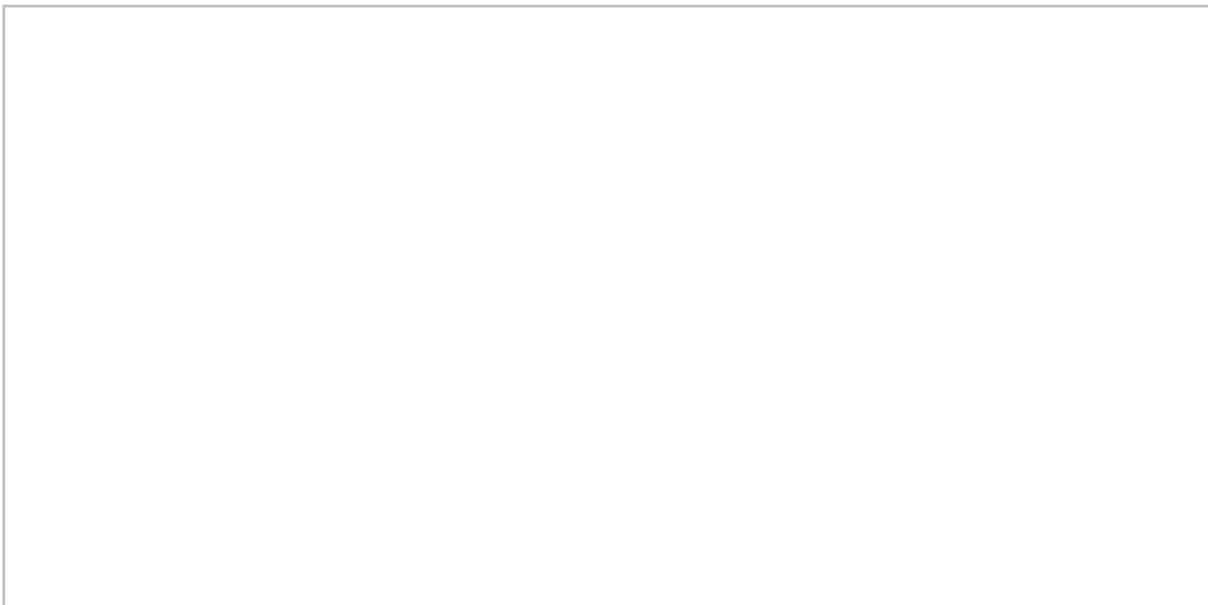
Director: Robert Lepage

[Lipsynch website](#)

[The Arts Centre details](#)

[Melbourne area guide](#)

The Arts Centre map



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Bluestone Restaurant

773m - The Bluestone restaurant, open for both lunch and dinner, boasts



Stellini Bar

898m - Recent renovations saw Stellini Bar grow from a tiny sliver of a place to a...



The Cellar Bar - Grossi Fiorentino

1198m - Every Cinderella has a sister – usually she's

an...

plainer but often she's more...



Von Haus

1202m - A discreet laneway lurks in the heart of town, Von Haus is an intimate...



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1481m - You can spot a second-generation chef from a mile away. When culinary...



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1999m - For more than 20 years the scent of spicy food has been wafting out of Nyala...

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480m - With multi entertainment venues, including a cocktail bar, a formal dining...



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859m - Inspired by the rat pack shenanigans of Dean Martin, Sammy Davis and...



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1069m - For a taste of Europe's best bier offerings and some hearty food, head to...



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1125m - Just getting to the Croft Institute feels like a little adventure. It's...



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2225m - The words "Irish pub" are enough to strike fear into the heart of any...



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1002m - See the world of craft in a whole new light at this art space devoted to...



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1039m - Citadines on Bourke offers smart apartment-style hotel rooms within easy...



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1136m - Delivering cutting edge labels to those in the know, Fat stocks hand picked...



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