



Yves Jacques in Robert Lepage's *The Far Side of the Moon*. Photo: Sophie Grenier

Perth Festival: The poetic clarity of Robert Lepage

by [Alison Croggon](#) February 24, 2018 0 comment

Perth Festival Diary #4: *The Far Side of the Moon* and *Cerita Anak (Child's Story)*

I've seen Robert Lepage's film of **The Far Side of the Moon** twice, but until last week had never seen it in a theatre. It's a measure of Lepage's profound understanding of form that, despite knowing *The Far Side of the Moon* originated as a work of theatre, I found it hard to imagine what it could possibly be on stage.

It's the same story, using much of the same dialogue and documentary footage, and employs the same central conceit – that the brothers at the centre of the story, Phillippe and André, are played by the same actor (in the film, as in the original production, they're played by Lepage himself). But the film and the play exist as two profoundly autonomous works. The stage production demonstrates why Lepage is such a brilliant theatremaker: the wit and ingenuity of his astonishing visual transformations never overwhelm the subtleties of the text or Yves Jacques' remarkable performance.

This is Lepage at his best, opening epic dimensions within intimate, domestic moments. With puppetry, documentary footage, jawdroppingly elegant stagecraft and a stunning score from

Laurie Anderson, Lepage weaves together the story of two estranged brothers in the aftermath of their mother's death with a narrative that circles around the Soviet-US space race of the '60s and '70s. The brothers, like the US and the Soviet Union, are mirrors of each other: the far side of each other's moons.

One of the surprising aspects of this production is that, despite its almost vertiginous sense of scale, it's a one-man show. The central character Phillippe is played, like everyone else – his mother, his doctor, his brother – by Jacques. He's a cancer survivor and divorcé obsessed by the idea of space exploration, who for years has been writing a philosophy PhD in which he posits that space exploration is driven by narcissism. In particular, he's obsessed by the Soviet cosmonaut and artist Alexey Leonov, the first man to perform a space walk.

His gay brother André is a successful TV weatherman. Unlike his unworldly brother, André is materialistic and pragmatic, and in a long-term relationship. He's demanding, unreliable and selfish and, as their mother's favourite, the focus of Phillippe's resentment. Everything wrong in Phillippe's life, André says in a moment of irritation, is blamed on him.

It becomes clear that Phillippe's failures are more to do with his disabling anxieties than his brother's malign intent. Lepage parallels the brothers' tentative movement towards mutual understanding with the famous meeting of US astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts, when they shook each other's hands in space.

The world has changed profoundly since he made this work: in 2000, there was no such thing as a smart phone. It was before the seismic shifts in geopolitical relations that followed 9/11 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2001, before the [catastrophic triumph of disaster capitalism](#). It seems, almost two decades after its premiere, very much of its time, but its lucid theatrical poetry gives it the sheen of a classic.

It's tempting to think of *The Far Side of the Moon* as a glimpse into a more innocent time. Perhaps its power now is as a reminder that the possibility of reconciliation exists: uncertain, difficult and ambiguous, to be sure, but the only way through our self-destructiveness towards a real freedom.

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Polyglot Theatre has been making theatre for children for 40 years, and over that time has developed its own style of theatrical lucidity. **Cerita Anak (Child's Story)**, a performance intended for two-to-seven year old children and "their adults", was developed in Java with the Indonesian puppetry company Papermoon Puppet Theatre.

It's based on a story of refugee arrival in Australia. For adults, this intensely immersive experience creates the emotional resonance of a journey through peril towards hope: but for small children, it's the best playground ever.

The space is immediately welcoming. The audience enters a small anteroom and is invited to draw a sea creature with crayons, and then to cut it out. Some small magnets are attached to

the cut-out, and they're put away in a basket: and then we enter the larger theatre through a curtain. Inside is Anna Tregloan's spectacular set, a boat with canvas sides, ropes, a wooden ship's wheel, and lots of bamboo props.

This signalled a period of anarchy: an explosion of pure child energy. Kids were pushing themselves around in miniature bamboo boats, climbing things, pulling ropes, twirling the wheel, moving anything that moved. When the performers (Pambo Priyojati, Emily Tomlins and Sonya Soares) began to pull out the blue silk that represented the sea, half the audience was underneath it, a series of giggling bumps, while the other half was jumping on the blue ripples.

Fortunately, the performers are adept child-wrangers. The children were all called back into the boat, where they were invited to fish, with magnetic rods, for the cut-outs they had made earlier. Then the set darkened and a storm arose: the ship sank into the depths and suddenly, with the help of lighting effects and shadow puppets manipulated by the children, we were surrounded by sea creatures. Finally, we were all rescued and made landing, though the children by now were all too fascinated by a flotilla of small boats to be too worried about landing anywhere.

The playfulness and curiosity of the kids was palpable and irresistible, although the storm sequence was all too real for one small boy, who started sobbing inconsolably. He was the only child who picked up on this story's darker resonances, but by the end, his face still puffy with tears, he was running around with the rest of them. This is a show that reminds you that a key word in theatre is "play".

***The Far Side of the Moon*, written and directed by Robert Lepage, artistic collaborator & project originator Peder Bjurman. Performed by Yves Jacques with puppetry by Éric Leblanc. Music by Laurie Anderson, set by Marie-Claude Pelletier, lighting design by Bernard White, costumes by Marie-Chantale Vaillancourt, puppet design by Pierre Robitaille and Sylvie Courbron. Ex Machina at the State Theatre Centre of WA, Perth Festival. Until February 24.**

***Cerita Anak (Child's Story)*, directed by Maria Tri Sulistyani, designed by Anna Tregloan. With Pambo Priyojati, Emily Tomlins and Sonya Soares. Polyglot Theatre and Papermoon Puppet Theatre at the State Theatre Centre of WA, Perth Festival. Until February 25.**

Alison Croggon flew to Perth as a guest of the Perth Festival