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In the Cards:

Robert Lepage Launches the First of a New Dramatic Quartet

Robert Lepage recently returned to his epic mode in *Playing Cards 1: SPADES*, which had its North American debut at the Luminato Festival in Toronto.

The first installment of a tetralogy, this Ex Machina production was commissioned by Luminato and members of the 360 Degree Network, an international group of artistic venues configured in the round. According to Lepage, "This is a project I've been waiting to do for years: four separate pieces of theatre, each one centered on a different suit of cards, each one set in a different period, with a different theme. *Spades* is from their original use as weapons, connected to the military

and the world of physical power."

Spades takes place in Las Vegas during the weekend, in 2003, when George W. Bush invaded Iraq and Celine Dion first opened her show at Caesars Palace. The 30 characters and their narratives were developed and written in conjunction with the six actors who play them. The elements include a gambling addict; hookers; a scam artist; immigrant hotel employees; an innocent, just-married couple; a desert mystic; and a recreated Iraqi village where US soldiers are being trained before their deployment. "It's close to a Robert Altman kind of storytelling, a mish-mash of styles, from the Brechtian to the Faustian," says Lepage.

As a touring show in the round, the production carries its stage and all its gear from venue to venue. The stage is a black, circular, revolving platform, 42" above floor level, which set designer Jean Hazel turns into a multitude of locations: hotel room, bar, casino, swimming pool, Jacuzzi, airport, military dorm, the desert, the mock Iraqi village. All manner of set dressing, costumes, props, wigs, and special effect materials are stored within the stage or overhead in a flying-saucer-shaped grid, from which four television screens (as well as chairs) descend. Fourteen-millimeter LED screens, supplied by Tek-Sho, display surtitles that translate English, French, and Spanish dialogue, as needed.

Hazel's remarkably flexible and multidimensional sets are the foundation on which the rest of the creative team weaves its magic.

Lighting designer Louis-Xavier Gagnon-Lebrun lights 24 scenes and

Photos: Erich Laibow

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Jason Robinson - Production Design

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12 transitions. Among his favorites are those “that are centrally staged. In the Jacuzzi scene, the center platform descends and the actors sit around the square in the middle. This is a perfect use of the set and made it easier to light. The light comes from the center, from under the stage, and it lights the actors perfectly on all sides. The direction of the light is very clear, and provides the same experience to the audience on all sides. I didn’t need specials for this scene; it seems to live by itself. The circular stage and 360° audience made things very difficult; when working, you always have to go around to see the scene from different angles—but, by the time you get back to the lighting desk, the scene is over and you didn’t have time to make the necessary adjustments. Many times, the show looked great from the lighting desk but Robert, who sat opposite us, saw different things. In a show that changes a lot during its creation, it is very difficult to decide what experience we want to deliver for all sides of the set. The danger is to light each side so as to give the same experience to the entire audience. That makes the scenes very flat, so in some scenes some actors are in shadow on one side but shining brightly on another. A hard part was finding the direction of the light for every scene but not overloading the understage.”

Gagnon-Lebrun creates dazzling



indoor and outdoor looks. Unforgettable moments include the star-studded sky above the Nevada desert; the desert that he paints an eerie Royal Blue; the Jacuzzi scene, which he brings to life with two MDG Mini Max foggers; and the raw, sexually charged scenes he bathes in Lipstick Red. He uses Philips Vari*Lite VL1100 TS units, Philips Color Kinetics eColor Fuse Powercore LED units, 1K and 2K Fresnels, ETC Source Fours of varying degrees, Robert Juliat 714SX2 profiles, Wybron Forerunner scrollers, custom cold and warm white 18” LED strips, custom acrylic cold white 18” LED panels, custom cold white 4’ LED strips, and, for control, MA Lighting’s grandMA1 Light.

“Everything in the set travels with the production,” the designer says. “It

makes the lighting hang much easier, as everything is well-marked on the trusses, and we have exactly the same positions in each city. This helps a lot, compared to the company’s other shows, where we use the local venue’s fly system and it is not always possible to get the exact same lighting positions.”

Since Lepage is notorious for constantly changing his “works in progress,” sound designer Jean-Sebastien Cote says, “My technique is always the same with Robert: Have a simple, but versatile, design that can be adapted to whatever he asks. As an example, I have four Yamaha MSP-5s in the floor of the set pointing towards the ceiling. They’re used for cell-phone rings, TV sounds, doorbells, etc. We do not necessarily use the four of them,

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so we could take one out. But I would never do it, as Robert may flip things over in the staging of a scene, and I would then need the one that wasn't used previously."

Because this is a touring show, Cote "decided to go with a very straightforward design, using eight Meyer UPA-1Ps for the 'main kit,' hung to our trusses. Those are provided by the venue. I also have eight Meyer UP-4XPs underneath the stage. I decided to buy them, as space there is very limited and I didn't want to deal with different sizes of cabinets or big amps in each venue with different coverage or hanging gear. This way, the first rows are covered, however big the venue. We add delay speakers, provided by the venue according to its size. Board, computers, wireless mics, we carry with us."

At one point, Cote's sound and Gagnon-Lebrun's lighting seem to throb in perfect synch. Cote congratulates the "lighting guys" for that, saying, "I know they spent a ridiculous amount of time programming their Vari-Lites to certain musical cues." According to Gagnon-Lebrun, "The cues are very precise, and this is where the magic resides, when everything is well-synchronized: sound, light, set changes."

Cote captures the sounds of Las Vegas and the surrounding desert with four Meyer UPM-1Ps for the delays (two per side for the north and south axis); eight Meyer UPM-1Ps (four clusters of two) in each corner of the space for the surround; and four Meyer 700-HP sub-



woofers. Control is provided by a Yamaha LS9-32 digital mixing console. Sennheiser MKE2 Gold mics are used with Lectrosonics Venue receivers and Lectrosonics SMA and SMV transmitters. The designer was particularly pleased that everything was set up right for "nice, enveloping surround sound for the ambiances: cafeteria, casinos, desert. I'm often frustrated by the fact that I make 'surround-type' soundscapes that are either not heard or heard too much. Theatres are rarely well-equipped for surround. In *Playing Cards*, if the space is interesting, sound can come from everywhere."

Image designer David Leclerc keeps a close eye on his design by traveling with the show as its video manager. He uses Dataton Watchout 5.2 software, running on a custom video server with an AMD video card with four outputs and



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a BlackMagic Decklink studio capture card. Four Samsung UN46D6000 46" TVs receive a VGA signal aided by AdderLink CAT5 extenders.

"One Kramer VP-8X8 VGA matrix gives us the flexibility to route video signals to whichever output we need," he adds. "For wireless SD video, we use a Videocomm 916MHz transmitter and receiver, which is good enough for our Iraqi training facility scene. Almost all our Ethernet cables are supplied by Digiflex."

The images Leclerc puts on the television screens identify the many locales of the scenes and provide transitions. "My production challenges are humbled by the massive work that went into the design and manipulation of the circular set," he says. "Our crew of four, along with two locals and six actors, has to spend close to three hours in a very confined space containing all props, costumes, and set pieces. Compared to that, my challenges were small. Our overhead technical grid, as well as our revolving stage, travels with us; once we set them up in the center of a venue, everything falls into place."

Lepage is now putting the finishing touches on his Metropolitan Opera premiere of Thomas Ades's contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. He then aims to turn his attention to the development of *Playing Cards 2: HEARTS*, the suit of belief and religion. —Julie Reikai Rickerd

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