



Elephant Wake

written and performed by Joey Tremblay
directed and designed by Bretta Gerecke

a Globe Theatre (Regina) production

Study Guide

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"You can hear some things when you pretend not to listen."
- Jean Claude



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The Characters

Jean Claude - a 55-year-old man who grew up pre-Vatican II. He is the sole remaining resident of Ste. Vierge.

Period and Setting

The play is set in a fictional French hamlet called Ste. Vierge, a ghost town situated on a gravel road somewhere on the Saskatchewan prairie.

Synopsis

Elephant Wake is a lament for a dying way of life on the prairies. On the surface, it is a story of two fictional Saskatchewan towns - Ste. Vierge, a diminished Francophone town, and the prosperous English town, Welby, that has forced Ste. Vierge out of existence. At its heart, though, it's a story about nostalgia versus progress.

Jean Claude is the sole remaining resident of Ste. Vierge. Once a town populated mostly by Jean Claude's large Catholic family, everyone has either died or moved away in pursuit of the "fancy" offerings of the new town.

Jean Claude tells the story of his life as he explores what remains of his beloved *memère* and *pepère*'s home. He recounts stories of growing up as the youngest member of a huge family, his time as a funeral singer, and as a French school boy in an English school with his Métis friend 'Tit Loup. Just like his *memère* taught him, he creates a menagerie of papier-mâché animals and people to fill his imaginary world - a safe world for his solitary existence.

In an attempt to revive his dying town, Jean Claude hatches a plan to draw people back to Ste. Vierge.

Running Time

Approximately two hours, including one intermission.

The Playwright

Joey Tremblay grew up in a very small hamlet called Ste. Marthe in Southeast Saskatchewan. He received a B.F.A. in Drama from the University of Regina (1987) and a Diploma from the Vancouver Playhouse Acting School (1989). After working several years as a freelance actor, Joey co-founded Noises in the Attic, a theatre company mandated to produce and create new Canadian plays on the fringe festival circuit across Canada. From 1996 to 2002, Joey was the Artistic Co-Director of Catalyst Theatre in Edmonton where he wrote, directed and produced (and sometimes performed in) the following plays: *Electra*, *The Abundance Trilogy*, *My Perfect Heaven*, *Elephant Wake*, *Songs for Sinners*, *The House of Pootsie Plunket*, *The Blue Orphan* and *Carmen Angel*, which, combined, have garnered over 30 awards and nominations for outstanding work: including two Scotsman Fringe First awards for outstanding writing.

Currently Joey is living in Regina and is pursuing his career as a freelance actor/director/writer/teacher. For Globe Theatre, Joey has written and directed *The Alice Nocturne* and *George Dandin*. He devised and directed *Fusion I, II and III*. He performed in the plays *A Man for all Seasons*, *Twelfth Night*, *Just So*, *Sylvia*, *The Red Priest*, and *Strawberries in January*.

Joey attributes his artistic inspiration to his grandmother, who inspired one and all - she made Ste. Marthe a magical place with her own menagerie of papier-mâché animals, complete with lemons. His uncle, Joe Fafard, is one of Saskatchewan's best known visual artists, and cousin, Joel Fafard, is making his mark in the musical world.

In terms of his work, Joey says his work is always based on collaboration. He believes that it is important for everyone working on process to have a voice in the creation of the piece. In the case of *Elephant Wake*, he started with a finished script, but feels Bretta Gerecke's directorial and design choices had an enormous impact on the text and the production.

His career in the theatre has been a multi-disciplinarian one, first having started as an actor and then moving to a writer and then director.

"I never come to theatre with a single discipline, it sounds really pretentious, but my relationship with theatre has been very Renaissance."

- Joey Tremblay
Campion's Brag
 Spring/Summer 2004

The Play

Elephant Wake originally started out as a short story called “An Elephant Memory”. It is based on the milieu the Joey Tremblay grew up in. In 1995, the one-act play was performed at the Edmonton Fringe Festival. It was revised and then performed in 1996 at Edmonton's Catalyst Theatre, with Jonathon Christenson as the director, Bretta Gerecke as the designer, and Joey Tremblay as Jean Claude.

Elephant Wake travelled to the Edinburgh Fringe in 1997 and to the Brighton Festival the following year. It was highly acclaimed by critics and awarded an Edinburgh Fringe First Award for Outstanding New Work.

In 2007, Globe Theatre commissioned Joey to make *Elephant Wake* into a full-length play.

The play was written as a one-man show because it is about a kind of loneliness. According to Joey, it was essential that it be performed solo because the character is the last remaining resident of his decaying town. What he now finds interesting, after having performed in front of an audience, “is that it really isn't a one-man show. The entire audience becomes a very important character in this piece.” The character of Jean Claude is very chatty, and he just can't help speaking directly to the audience about the things that have happened in his life.

Elephant Wake was inspired by a pivotal moment in Joey Tremblay's young life when he realized he would be leaving Ste. Marthe. This play explores the point of view of the one who chose to stay behind rather than move on.

While researching elephants, Joey came across an article in National Geographic magazine about the curious behavior of elephants returning year after year to places where herd members have died, and their very solemn way of picking up the bones and passing them among the herd. This has baffled scientists because the behavior seems so human. All of the elephant facts that Jean Claude talks about during the play are based in either science or myth. For example, the idea of elephants flying is taken from an East Indian myth.

“I like to do one-man shows once in awhile, it exercises your chops.”

- Joey Tremblay
Campion's Brag
 Spring/Summer 2004

Globe Theatre's Version

Cast and Company -

Jean Claude - Joey Tremblay

Director / Set, Costume & Lighting Designer - Bretta Gerecke

Stage Manager - Sheila Crampton

Apprentice Stage Manager - Kasey Atcheynum

Design Assistant - Jessica Didyk

Designer and Director's notes:

Bretta Gerecke grew up in Winnipeg and has resided in Edmonton for the past 13 years. She graduated from the University of Manitoba with a Bachelor of Interior Design in 1992 and from the University of Alberta with a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Design in 1996. Bretta is the resident designer at Catalyst Theatre, where she has designed world premieres which have toured internationally to Great Britain, Australia, the U.S. and Canada. Bretta also works at The Citadel Theatre, Edmonton Opera, Theatre Calgary, Canadian Stage, Calgary Opera and Globe Theatre. She is the recipient of 13 Elizabeth Sterling Hayes Awards for Outstanding Achievement in Set, Lighting and Costume Design, The Enbridge Award for Best Emerging Artist, and was short listed for The Siminovitch Prize. Bretta designed a summer home on Devil's Lake, Alberta and continues her work as an archaeological illustrator.

Bretta was the designer for *Elephant Wake* at the Catalyst Theatre in Edmonton in 1996, and subsequently traveled with the tour of the production to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It gave her the opportunity to watch the growth and change of the script, and to play a part in the visual identity of the show.

Working on *Elephant Wake* has been a collaborative effort for Bretta and Joey. She feels that the process has been one of constantly bringing offers to the table and finding which ones work. "There are no real boundaries or job descriptions. So you have to be generous - and thick skinned. The only thing that matters is making *Elephant Wake* as fantastic as we possibly can."

For this particular production, Bretta wore multiple hats. As the set and lighting designer, the vision for this version was placing Jean Claude in a type of metaphorical playground where archaeological site meets farm graveyard. Their intent was to surround him with the bones of the town he is mourning, and with objects and fragments of memory that would trigger the character to tell a particular story.

Everything on the set is on a value scale of white to light grey. The use of lighting against the highly reflective surfaces of the set and props allowed her to create a dreamy, other world.

For Bretta, the greatest challenge about working in the round, both as designer and director, is the matter of sightlines and ensuring that everyone can see the action. She needed to make sure that the movements of this single character did not look contrived or confusing, but rather brought the audience into Jean Claude's world. The focus for her needed to be very clear, and the perspective one that kept shifting to represent the audience's four perspectives. In her words, a perspective seen "more as one of a continuous dance than a play."

When asked what insights she might provide to students, Bretta replied "Be brave, be fearless, and let yourself be lost in the creativity of the entire company you are working with. Don't be precious - always be prepared to let go. The answers or inspirations can come from anywhere. Stay open. Respect all the artists you work with in every department. They are a gift. And they are specialists. This is a highly inter-dependent art form - a great team can always make for a great show."

Discussion Questions and Activities

1. What themes can you identify in this play?
2. Write a character sketch of Jean Claude. Compare and contrast his character to that of his family.
3. Do you feel that the name of “Choux gras” suits Jean Claude? Explain why or why not.
4. Discuss how Ms. Gerecke uses different colours and textures in the lighting to transform the setting from scene to scene.
5. Describe how Ms. Gerecke achieved the “archaeological” feeling of the set. What archaeological finds aided Jean Claude in his storytelling?
6. Research the relationship between French and English in Saskatchewan. Discuss the impact of the French system of land ownership versus the English system.
7. Discuss how one dominant culture marginalizes another. Give examples of this in Saskatchewan history. What about today? What examples are there of dominant culture in Saskatchewan? Consider what factors might determine the demise of a small town, as well as the conflict between nostalgia and progress, and their effect on each other as they relate to the province's future.
8. How did Jean Claude's costume set him apart from the set? How did it convey the idea that he is a solitary man left in rural setting? In what ways did Mr. Tremblay portray this character to complete the characterization?
9. Mr. Tremblay has stated that “naive hope sustains us as a province”. Do you agree? In what ways has this hope allowed Saskatchewan to survive? In what ways does this same type of hope sustain Jean Claude?
10. Given Jean Claude's description of what the elephants do when they come upon the bones of their ancestors, discuss how Jean Claude reacts to the “bones” and artifacts that he finds throughout his yard.
11. The papier-mâché elephant is the central metaphor in the play and it functions on several levels. Discuss those different levels.
12. Why would Jean Claude describe the moon as being French and the sun as being English?

Sources

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