

Albertine in Five Times

by Michel Tremblay.

Dalhousie Theatre Department Production, October 1996.

Tactical Strategies for Production

My approach to directing this drama springs from three simple yet fundamental observations. The play is political. The play is symphonic. The play demonstrates the lateral simultaneity of human consciousness.

1. Firstly, the play is deeply political.

Albertine in Five Times communicates what it means, intellectually and emotionally, to be a minority in a country of minorities: what it feels like to be prey to a host of conflicting emotions concerning one's most intimate identity as defined by and in one's language, one's family relationships and one's own personal memories.

To produce this play one must consider the immense cultural changes that occur during the time-frame it spans.

The Dark Ages of Duplessis: Albertine at 30 and Albertine at 40.

The family has recently moved from the country to the city. Here they live close to the Church dominated experience of rural Quebec. During the "reign" of the arch-conservative premier Duplessis (1936 to 1959) there was a gradual migration of the working classes from the isolated rural poverty of the country to the crowded poverty of the city. Here Church and Government conspired to keep power in the hands of foreign, anglophone interests. As Quebec became industrialized, the francophone population lacked access to the machinery of government and business. Barely 50% completed highschool, while only 2% went on to get a university degree.

Frustration, anger and self dissatisfaction burgeoned among francophones. Albertine at 30 and 40 personify the spirit of the age: a sense of trapped claustrophobia and a yearning for pre-industrial self-determination of the pioneer days was exacerbated by fear of the invisible governing powers, and of the judgements of community and church.

Lesage and The Quiet Revolution: Albertine at 50
Duplessis died in 1959 and Jean Lesage immediately led the Liberal Party to a sweeping electoral victory with his campaign slogan "Il faut que ca change". In the freer atmosphere of the 1960's, Albertine at 50 experiences how the individualistic Youth Culture and fast food consumerism potentially clashes with the more traditional family-centric culture personified by Madeleine. Moreover, in 1962, when we meet Albertine at 50, Lesage had another, more overt and confident slogan "Maitre chez Nous". In her personal decisions, this is exactly what Albertine at 50 is demanding for herself. She becomes "Mistress of her own life-- and damns the consequences.

The consequences for Quebec comprised of unmatched cultural highs, with a new focus on the french language, Expo 67, and the founding of the Parti Quebecois in 1968. Education curricula moved from under the control of the Church, secondary education was free, and a vigorous programme of nationalization and economic renewal was instituted.

As Albertine at 50 learns, however, the decade was also that of the FLQ, the October Crisis and the War Measures Act. Her newfound independence, her passion, her nationalizing, worker-liberating rejection of the Duplessis style, must be paid for, as Albertine at 60 wryly comments, in blood. As with Albertine's children, those too angry or unable to grasp the individual opportunities of the new economy became more marginalised, more confused.

The Parti Quebecois and Albertine at 60

Albertine at 60 personifies the emotional backlash that followed the October Crisis and served to diffuse the nationalistic agitation which had characterized the sixties. Despite much popular sympathy for the FLQ Manifesto, the group was generally viewed as a suspect terrorist organization and the Separatist movement was divided and fraught with anxiety. In the provincial elections of 1976, the Parti Quebecois side stepped the Separation issue to run on a platform of "honest and efficient government". Their posters bore slogans such as "Ca ne peut pas continuer comme ca" and "On meritait mieux que ca". This feeling of having failed, of having been ripped off at some point, betrayed by one's own, is expressed by Albertine at 60. She has withdrawn, filled with self-disgust, from public affairs. She lives insulated by drugs until she attempts suicide.

The Referendum of 1980, Bill 101 and Albertine at 70

In 1977, within a year of being in power, the Parti Quebecois passed the controversial language Bill 101. This made French the official language of education, law and business in Quebec, and served (temporarily at any rate), to allay the urgency activists had felt over the preceding ten years. Thus, the “To Separate?” Referendum of May 1980 saw a majority of the eligible francophone electorate vote to remain in federal Canada.

Albertine at 70 exhibits the new sense of self-determination, and the self-respect generated by an education curriculum that emphasized Quebec’s distinctive cultural heritage and history.

It is important that we don’t assume this to be a happy ending-- or any ending at all, however. The irrevocable weight of the past still presses on her, shaping her future. Tremblay ends his play on a cry of continuing isolation.

Albertine/Quebec’s inability to nurture and educate her own, her misplaced anger towards her cultural roots, her agrophobic relation to the world and her fear of reaching out to others, are things that no newfound faith or acceptance can allay. In the final moments of the play, even her self-understanding falls away, until all her many selves know for sure is that they are linked by awareness of their isolation. This solitude of Albertine is the defining character of Tremblay’s Quebec.

The Quebecois Spirit integral to Albertine, and the Dalhousie Production.

The Haligonian audience’s lack of Quebecois cultural imprinting will make it difficult to communicate these resonances of the play. Tremblay’s avoidance of “key” political dates in stage directions suggests that overt Brechtian signposting is not his intention: the play is specially coded, personalized, for a Quebec audience. Perhaps others must merely enjoy it as a sentimental-educational experience about family relations and the debilitating effects of anger. But given the topicality of the Separatist issue today, this play offers us the opportunity to send a message to our Maritime audience, about the cultural imperatives behind the apparent intractability of the Parti Quebecois’ determination to separate. In this production, I propose to do the maximum to communicate the spirit of Quebec during these seminal periods of her development.

Creating the Cultural Environment particular to each Albertine.

A precise and impactful sound score to evoke popular music from the period, possibly some archival radio broadcast fragments and set items which draw attention to the state of communications technology can help considerably in achieving this. As a starting place, I intend to use Tremblay’s definitive directions “Silence” as the cue for such reality-anchoring sound.

Subtle suggestions from set, costume, light will reinforce the more intrusive aural dimension. Objects are very important in the text and to the character interaction, so props must be few but exact. Items will be carefully chosen so as to create exactly the actual feel of Duplessis era country; Duplessis era city; Lesage era downtown plateau; Levesque era suburbs.

2.

Secondly, the play is musical in structure.

The stylized performance of Greek drama

In numerous interviews, Tremblay has described the seminal influence of Greek drama on his writing. Throughout this drama we experience the rhythmic attack of stychomythia, the symphonic scale of choral odes, the strophe-anti strophe approach to thematic development, which interweaves plot information with emotional philosophy in an overall concerto-like structure.

Tremblay’s various statements about his love for Brahms enables us to grasp his development of leitmotif from one instrument-character to another, through four movements.

Albertine in Five Times resembles a Brahms String Quintet.

In fact, the String Quartet in G, Op111 mirrors the development of the play’s rhythmic movements, as follows:

Allegro (pages 8 through 24 where Albertine at 70 dominates with a lively questing).

Adagio (pages 24 through 35 where the rage of Albertine at 40 is contained by the lack of sympathy from the others)

Allegretto (pages 35 through 52 where Albertine at 30 breaks her restraint and trusts Madeleine with her story of beating Therese, and her terrible fear of her anger)

Vivace (pages 52 through 76, where Albertine at 50 presents her spirited defense to be defeated by Albertine at 60’s absolute despair; the exit of Madeleine,

and the drift back into “pieces detachées”-- facets isolated from understanding of one another and linked only by the bloody pain of the moon.

Awareness of these important musical dimensions will affect my approach to rehearsal and casting of the play. Vocal contrast, counterpointing of vocal pitch and quality will be important considerations. The rhythmic interactions of the scenes will be a focus for rehearsal, and my intent will be to capture the developing emotional rhythm of the various story units of the piece.

3.

Thirdly, the play demonstrates the lateral simultaneity of human consciousness.

(i.e. consciousness as the personal “mind-space” where we organize perceptive data into simultaneous and rival cognitions/ memories/ creations).

The most urgent statement communicated by the divided consciousness’ of *Albertine In Five Times* concerns the necessity of emotional intelligence-- lack of which will stunt all other mental processes. I believe there are two ways this statement can be communicated through the *mise en scene*. The first relates to the inner “I” space of each character. The second relates to the way in which they experience time.

Firstly, the physical and mental space which the “I” requires, and must create, in order to exist will require us to study Anger, Family Dynamics, and the frontiers of responsibility and freedom. Tremblay has dissected all these with intelligence and passion. In rehearsal they provide the primary area of intense psychological/performance investigation. This dimension of the play is intenselyactable and will be a main focus for the ensemble.

Secondly, the development of set and lighting design concepts will be ordered by the drama’s concepts of Time and the vital role it plays through Madeleine.

The simultaneous ways of being that we are able to view in *Albertine* puts us outside the limited experience of quottedian time. This is, ofcourse, one of the fundamental projects of theatre-- but here we find that Tremblay has intensified the theatrical “birds-eye experience” of a stage lifetime. His drama enables us to understand the words “Life” and Time” in a new way: no longer simply as “lifetime”-- the analog of a human’s uninterrupted life line--- but as inconstant and unpredictable, clashing, dissonant, mutually devour-

ing, mutually inspiring, digital entities. For Tremblay, an individual is born from a collision, and must recreate themselves moment by moment as the shocks continue to bombard the first wreck like a multi-vehicle pileup on an airport runway.

Each shock is absolutely specific. For the purposes of the *mise en scene*, time must not be considered as universal, symbolic or general., or else the play becomes maudlin and unactable. The reality of Madeleine at Duhamel waiting for the car-light beams; the reality of Albertine at 50’s excited ownership of her cafe space and her window view; the reality of Albertine at 40’s dead-end rats-warren apartment life; the reality of Albertine at 60’s self-immolation, and of the tentative reclamation of living space made by Albertine at 70, must be precisely communicated.

A Thought about the Tenses Inhabited by Albertine’s Selves.

When considering life/time as Tremblay has in *Albertine*, it appears that time, particularly when filtered through language is actually an emotional factor rather than something scientifically measurable.

Madeleine moves freely between timeframes. She is able to communicate to the Albertines as they are stuck in all the various tenses of the play. This is partly because Madeleine will never commit to a particular time in terms of carving herself a place in it. She “goes with the flow” follows the status quo and avoids confrontation at all times. In terms of the Quebec experience, Madeleine represents the quiescent rural tradition of Quebec-- the nurturing and enduring Quebec which has enabled francophone identity to survive three hundred years of oppression.

Madeleine is not good with words. She communicates through body language and the senses. Hers is, as Merleau-Ponty would have it “a language beneath the spoken language”. Albertine, on the other hand, exists in a linguistic nightmare where she can experience time/life in just one tense at a time.

Each of them provides a linguistic frame of reference for the pain of being:

-- past & present (*Albertine* at 30 has clearly had enough”),

--imperfect (*Albertine* at 40 is having enough already yet her situation self-perpetuates, never-endingly)

-- future (*Albertine* at 50 declares, proactively,” this will be enough”),

--future perfect (*Albertine* at 60 “ will have had enough” the others all sense that she will come to the

point where she cuts the lifeline.)

-- subjunctive/ imperative(Albertine at 70 must and should understand “it is enough to be” as she tries to bring the full spectrum of ways to experience Time into a fluid whole.)

What enables us to have consciousness, what enables us to connect the disparate moments of being, is firstly a fluid relation to Time enabled by emotional intelligence, and lastly, the moon, according to Tremblay.

The medium, the fluid concentrate which penetrates and connects all the Quebec/ Albertines, consist of three things. First, the mythopaeic magnetic-fertile life-force that is the moon. Then, the sensual reality of the land, the culture, the history of human-being-in-a-particular-time-and-place. Thirdly, the language-frames which provide the “tensions” (please pardon the pun) between possibilities of Being.

The rhythmic collision and compromise between these three dimensions is what forms character-- and this can be viewed in each aspect of Albertine.

To me, it is an extraordinarily profound insight Tremblay has made. He has done it with such craft and such simplicity, our principle challenge will be to render his vision on stage with even a modicum of his finesse.
