

ELEPHANT WAKE REVIEWS & MEDIA

Contents

Contents.....	1
<i>Elephant Wake</i> Patron Letter.....	2
<i>Elephant Wake</i> Media Reviews & Articles.....	3
<i>Elephant Wake</i> : By J. Kelly Nestruck, Globe and Mail, Nov. 09, 2009.....	3
<i>Elephant Wake</i> tinged with tragedy: By Cam Fuller, The StarPhoenix, Nov. 23, 2009.....	4
Lament for a culture: By Patrick Langston, The Ottawa Citizen, Nov. 01, 2009.....	5
NAC gets hit by <i>Elephant Wake</i> : By Elizabeth Kiy, The Charlatan, Nov. 11, 2009.....	6
<i>Elephant Wake</i> harnesses memory power: By Patrick Langston, The Ottawa Citizen, Nov. 8, 2009.....	8
Tremblay takes on the NAC: By Nick Miliokas, Leader-Post, Nov. 13, 2009.....	9



Elephant Wake Patron Letter

Hi, Peter –

I spoke to you and Bretta after the play tonight. It was difficult to find adequate language to express the impact that *Elephant Wake* had on me and –judging from the sobs, wet Kleenex, singing, audience participation and belly laughter – many others in the studio tonight.

I want to take a few moments to write my thoughts about this extraordinary play.

There was an elephant in that studio tonight. He was enormous, fragile, fearless, crushed, magnificent and flawed. For two hours, we were lifted high on the wings of his soaring spirit as he sang and danced and let us ride on his wrinkled back as he told his stories.

He was larger than life. He had such big ears – bigger than the ears of the Chinese elephant Mamere made – that took in everything, including the audience. His heart filled the theatre so we cried and laughed with him through his many stories. He raised the bones of Ste. Vierge and put it together with flour, water and paper. He created characters from beer bottles and papier-mâché: his magic trunk and the spell of his tales brought each of them to life. He filled the church with song and ritual and we sang the hymns with him and joined in his prayers. In his simplicity, he touched the bullied, hurt, deserted child we've all known. His memories released ours.

His stories of loss became ours. As Welby grew and Ste. Vierge disappeared, Jean Claude stood as a lone reminder of a vanishing way of life in Canada. Jean Claude, the village outcast, took flight. His dream of an elephant that people would flock to see in Ste. Vierge, a creation so large that they would walk through the pillars of his legs to enter the village, filled the theatre.

Jean Claude transported us and we were so very privileged to be taken off on this magical, creative journey. As the tiny lights of the village glowed at the end of the play, the shadow of the elephant towered above it; unforgettable theatre that transformed us all.

To Joey Tremblay, Bretta Gerecke, Sheila Crampton, Kasey Atcheynum and Jessica Didyk, thank you so very much for a unique and memorable night of theatre. Joey – this is a lifetime achievement. Your writing is elemental and luminous, bones and wings. As an actor, when you finished your stories, broke the spell, and stood on the stage as a mere mortal again, I felt we'd seen some of the best theatre it is humanly possible to create. That you did it alone is truly remarkable. Ottawa theatre goers are not known for spontaneous and heartfelt standing ovations, so I hope this rare display conveyed how moved we were by tonight's performance. Bretta – Joey was not alone. The set, costumes and lighting made the elephant fly. Kudos to you and the crew. Break a leg for the rest of the performances. I plan to come back at least once. I still can't believe my small ears and large eyes!

Peter, once again, thank you for inviting the elephant to fly across the country and grace us with his very large presence. It was not a Wake; it was an awakening.

Chris



Elephant Wake Media Reviews & Articles

Elephant Wake: By J. Kelly Nestruck, *Globe and Mail*, Nov. 09, 2009

- Written and performed by Joey Tremblay
- Directed by Bretta Gerecke
- At the National Arts Centre in Ottawa

Elephant Wake is a fascinating, if flawed, solo show about the last remaining resident of Ste. Vierge, a fictional French-Canadian hamlet on the Saskatchewan prairie.

Nearly 70, Jean Claude – played by the playwright, Joey Tremblay, in an impressive and interactive performance – is the guardian of the spirit of his dead village. On a silver, otherworldly, almost postapocalyptic set designed by director Bretta Gerecke, he preserves Ste. Vierge's history by creating little beer-bottle dolls that represent the large Catholic families that used to fill the town, its school and its church.

With a French-speaking mother who died in childbirth and an unknown English-speaking father from the nearby, growing English town of Welby, Jean Claude, who suffers from an unnamed mental disability, is a bridge between the area's two main cultures, one of which has slowly been swallowing the other all his life. He expresses himself to us mostly in English but with smatterings of French, not always knowing the right words in his new language, but often unable to recall the old ones in his mother tongue.

(In this, Jean Claude is an interesting contrast to Harwan from Wajdi Mouawad's *Seuls*, which played the National Arts Centre French theatre last season. Harwan had almost entirely lost his mother tongue of Arabic and replaced it with French, proving English isn't the only language that assimilates.) While *Elephant Wake* certainly buys into the romantic notion that the world is more clearly seen through the eyes of a child or a childlike adult, this character study is not caught up in the romantic politics of linguistic preservation. Tremblay is deeply interested in the tension between stasis and change, but doesn't fall on one side of the argument or the other. "What is truly worth holding on to and what is necessary to let go?" he asks in his program note. "Furthermore how does nostalgia impede progress and how does progress eliminate our connection with the past?"

In a potent dramatic metaphor, Jean Claude often sings to us in a high-pitched voice as he recalls his days as a boy soprano at the church.

The angelic voice he is said to have once possessed, however, has now turned into a strained falsetto. And so here he is singing in Latin, a language now excised from church services and nearly dead, in a simulation of a voice he no longer possesses. It is at once beautiful, and you long to have heard him as a boy, but at the same time eerie and even morbid.

There's a sadness in growing up and changing, Tremblay seems to be saying, but if we don't, we may end up like Jean Claude, a stunted outcast. It's a brutal trade-off.

Tremblay explores his themes through other characters, too, notably Jean Claude's uncle Elis, who lives in the woods with a Métis man and fondly recalls his days singing Edith Piaf songs in drag in Paris. When

Tremblay is playing Jean Claude playing Elis playing Edith Piaf, his performance digs deep into the layers of identity (and brings to mind *Hosanna*, a play by another Tremblay).

Other times, however, *Elephant Wake*'s metaphors feel a little too laboured.

The papier-mâché zoo that Jean Claude builds with his grandmother – and which gives the play its title – is too eccentric to be affecting.

It also comes too late in the game, and here is where *Elephant Wake* exhibits a common symptom of Fringe shows expanded beyond their original length.

The show began life 12 years ago at the Edmonton Fringe and eventually toured to Edinburgh, where it won a Fringe First Award; this two-act version was commissioned by Regina's Globe Theatre last season, however, and it feels overstretched. I've said it before, but a play is "full-length" when it is the right length – and that could be 10 minutes or nine hours.

Elephant Wake is only hurt by its intermission, which breaks the spell Tremblay skillfully weaves, and longer running time, which makes the sometimes irritating Jean Claude outlive his welcome.

After its run at the NAC, Elephant Wake tours to Persephone Theatre in Saskatoon (Nov. 19-29) and then will be presented as part of the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad in March.

***Elephant Wake* tinged with tragedy: By Cam Fuller, The StarPhoenix, Nov. 23, 2009**

It's no wonder writers love a dying town. Like stories, they have a beginning, middle and end.

History, romance, nostalgia and regret add flesh to framework, creating an experience that almost can't help but be compelling.

Actor-writer Joey Tremblay uses all these elements in Globe Theatre's touring production of *Elephant Wake*. He plays Jean Claude, a 77-year-old man-child who's the last living resident of the Fransaskois community of St. Vierge.

Jean Claude, not "right in the head," as they used to say, reflects on his past in what becomes a funny, sad and emotionally draining experience. You're left in awe of Tremblay's performance, both for what it contains in one viewing and for the fact he's able to muster the physical and spiritual strength to do it night after night.

Jean Claude has recreated the people in his life using beer bottles covered in papier mache -- a brilliant way to illustrate his world. He slips easily into the characters, depicting the priest who founded the town (and the stuffy English founder of the thriving town of Welby nearby), a gay uncle, his grandparents who raised him, a cruel teacher and so on.

There are many laughs, but everything is tinged with the tragedy of the dying culture and the empty town you picture outside the walls. Elephants used to fly, Jean Claude insists. And the church used to be



packed on Christmas Eve. And one is about as likely to happen again as the other.

The playing space is beautiful and intriguing. Along with specific rural artifacts such as old tractor seats and a cream can, designer-director Bretta Gerecke adds conceptual elements -- the floor is thick with shredded paper; one fascinating set piece with headlights and a grille like a car, lit at least four different ways, seems to have a face, and glows with emotion at various times. Hanging in the air are two dozen lanterns. It's a one-man play but the actor never seems alone.

Tremblay always involves the audience, which is part of reason the play is so engaging. Like a clever comic, he picks out a couple of audience members and bounces things off them, keeping everyone on their toes. You're involved in the story. So when somebody dies, or somebody is cruel, it hits, and it hits hard. It's a little too sad, in fact, just a flashback or two too many to bear. But no one is going to see this and not be grateful for the experience.

Elephant Wake runs until Sunday at Persephone Theatre's Backstage Stage.

It will also be playing in March in Vancouver as part of the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad.

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Lament for a culture: By Patrick Langston, The Ottawa Citizen, Nov. 01, 2009
One-man play holds mirror to Saskatchewan's problems

Elephant Wake

When: Nov. 5 to 14 (previews Nov. 3 and 4)

Where: National Arts Centre Studio

Tickets: NAC box office, Ticketmaster outlets or 613-755-1111, nac-cna.ca

Jean Claude has aged a lot in 15 years. When the protagonist of Joey Tremblay's Elephant Wake, which opens Thursday at the National Arts Centre, made his debut at the 1995 Edmonton Fringe Festival, he was in his 30s. Now, he's in his late 60s. That's a lot of living in a short time, especially for a man who abhors change.

Basically a monologue by the chatty, "idiot-savant" Jean Claude (played by Tremblay), the play is about the aging man's nearly extinct francophone village of Ste. Vierge in southern Saskatchewan and its booming anglophone neighbour Welby. At the show's heart is the conflict between trying to hang on to the past and embracing the present -- a conflict of particular relevance to contemporary Saskatchewan.

The original show was rooted in the well-oiled theme of Canada's two solitudes, says Tremblay. But when he returned to his native Saskatchewan a few years ago after a stint in Edmonton, it hit home that the province was still largely a have-not one littered with dying small towns like Ste. Vierge. (It's a situation Tremblay knows intimately. He grew up in Ste. Marthe, a now-vanished hamlet just down the road from Rocanville, these days awash in potash and oilfield money.)

The bilingual playwright always knew that the original fringe piece merited revisiting, not least because it had won the award for outstanding new work at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival after debuting in Edmonton. So when Regina's Globe Theatre commissioned him to expand the 45-minute show into a



full-blown production, he decided to downplay the two-solitudes theme in favour of what he had seen since returning.

"I wanted it to be more a story about Saskatchewan and the decay of small-town life ... to focus on a wake, a lament for a culture and a way of being."

Against that is set progress and the good things it can bring.

Doubling Jean Claude's age was one way to drive home the loss, Tremblay decided. As an older man, Jean Claude has known more people from his village and known them better than a young man would. He's become the town's informal archivist.

As well, says Tremblay, because Jean Claude has lived so long in his beloved hometown, its demise is "a loss he's experienced; it's not his grandparents' loss."

And, of course, an older man almost automatically commands credibility even if, like Tremblay's protagonist, he's given to occasionally bellowing like an elephant and slipping on a cap ornamented with a papier maché trunk (the reference is to Chinese elephants, now as extinct as those prairie towns).

Tremblay also made Jean Claude the singer at town weddings and funerals, adding songs to the script. The best way to portray a culture, says the playwright, is through its songs.

That tension between moving forward and getting stuck in the past plagues his province, says Tremblay. It's more than just a theoretical conflict. "Should we develop our uranium?" he asks. "Should we sell the potash corporations to the Americans?"

Jean Claude would doubtless say no, or just withdraw into his memories. Audiences -- Tremblay's NAC show launches a national tour, including a stop at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics Cultural Olympiad in March -- may not get off so easily.

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NAC gets hit by *Elephant Wake*: By Elizabeth Kiy, The Charlatan, Nov. 11, 2009

Joey Tremblay's clearest memory of his childhood in a diminishing western- Canadian French town is of the paper-mache elephant his grandmother made, being maliciously run over by a group from a neighbouring English town.

The incident had a profound effect on the young Tremblay who considers it the end of his childhood and the moment of his loss of innocence.

But it inspired *An Elephant Memory*, an autobiographical story that Tremblay adapted into the fictitious play *Elephant Wake* in which he also stars.

In revisiting the story, Tremblay said he decided to incorporate aspects of his memories into what he described as "a fictional character, someone who didn't grow up from an experience but stays blessed



or cursed in his own childhood and never moved beyond that.”

Jean Claude was originally a much younger character who merely retold the stories of people he had known, but is now a 60- to 70-year-old man who reminisces on his memories of the town and its demise, Tremblay said.

Creating and inhabiting the world of a character who is both completely naive and oddly wise, was his favourite part of the process, said Tremblay.

Tremblay said he sees Jean Claude’s struggles as universally relatable and described him as “a character who has experienced a great deal of loss in his life and is struggling against a sense of loss and sadness, to maintain hope and joy.”

He referred to the central themes of the story – nostalgia and progress – as a double-edged sword. He said nostalgia sticks people in the past, unable to adjust to change, while progress breaks their connection to memories.

Elephant Wake centres on Jean Claude, the only person left in Ste. Vierge, Saskatchewan, a French community that no longer exists in the plot because of the new, prosperous English town that has grown nearby.

The story is not specifically about Canada’s French-English conflict, but uses it to illustrate the other cultures in the prairies which were diminished by the English, including the Ukrainians and the First Nations people, Tremblay said.

Tremblay said he intended Elephant Wake to present the universal pattern of weaker cultures gradually swallowed up by more dominant ones.

Tremblay uses the medium of a one man monologue to present the character’s own story. By presenting it in this manner, Tremblay attempts to emphasize the loneliness that defines Jean Claude, giving him the responsibility of filling the empty space with his stories.

Although sole actor and writer, Tremblay sees the production as collaboration with the director, designer and stage manager, Bretta Gerecke, in which every element works in cohesion.

He said Elephant Wake is the sort of play where audience presence and emotion is important to intertwine and interact with the drama.

“It is almost impossible for an audience not to be transported.”

***Elephant Wake* harnesses memory power: By Patrick Langston, The Ottawa Citizen, Nov. 8, 2009**

Warm-hearted idiot savant visits home, opens his soul

Elephants, which once flew, can't anymore because of an evil-tempered teacher.

It seems that once, several elephants accidentally landed in a tree, beneath which the teacher was sitting. The tree collapsed, and she, furious, responded with a curse that erased their ability to fly.

The tale is just one of many told or enacted by Jean Claude in the Globe Theatre production of *Elephant Wake*, Joey Tremblay's warm-hearted, if imperfect, one-man show at the NAC.

Although the elephant story is a flight of imagination, for the aging Jean Claude, a bit of an idiot savant, it's as true as anything that ever happened in his fictitious native village of Ste. Vierge, Sask.

A once-thriving francophone community populated mostly by Jean Claude's colourful relatives, when the play opens, Ste. Vierge has become a ghost town. Jean Claude is the last resident, forever resentful of Welby, the nearby, self-satisfied English community that grew in part because it sucked the commercial life out of its unassuming neighbour.

It's a tale too common, and one that Tremblay, who grew up in the now-vanished Saskatchewan town of Ste. Marthe near the current boom town of Rocanville, knows only too well.

Alone with his memories, Jean Claude rebuilds his town and his identity for us. Using papier mâché and other simple props, he tells the family and community stories, playing everyone from his loving grandparents to the insufferable British founder of Welby.

Tremblay playing Jean Claude playing Oncle Elis who, drunk and wearing a fur coat, plays Edith Piaf, is an especially fine and poignant bit of acting. Jean Claude also

engages us directly through asides, brief dialogues that have something of the stand-up comic about them, and at a couple of points, audience sing-alongs.

Struggling to be realistic about his town's demise -- "Everybody dies; everybody moves away. You don't have to get so frickin' crazy about it," he says at one point -- Jean Claude is, in fact, driven almost crazy by the loss and loneliness.

That conflict between holding on to the past and letting go, especially relevant as Saskatchewan shifts from have-not to have status, courses through the play.

Given to high-pitched giggles and other irritating mannerisms, he's the kind of guy you'd quickly shuffle off when he tried to buttonhole you. But you'd be the poorer for it, as we learn when we are drawn into Jean Claude's teeming, alternately tragic and comic world.

Elephants, like his relatives and friends, appear and vanish in Jean Claude's recounting. Exotic and massively real, deeply linked to their fellows, their ability to fly now gone, the elephants are like the



town of Ste. Vierge.

They are also Jean Claude's totem animals, and he occasionally dons a hat adorned with an elephant trunk, and also makes elephant noises.

The Wake of the title is at once that of the fabulous animals, Ste. Vierge, and all that, rich in its simplicity, cannot withstand the onslaught of changing times and ungenerous outsiders.

Elephant Wake began life almost 15 years ago as an Edmonton Fringe Festival piece, going on to win the outstanding new work award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

With the help of director and designer Bretta Gerecke, Tremblay expanded the original production into a two-act touring show. He's both gained and lost in the process.

While Elephant Wake is engrossing and Tremblay a riveting stage presence, the show is too long. And although it's anything but cobbled together, there are sections that feel grafted on to the original to flesh it out. Marred or not, Elephant Wake will do well as it continues its national tour.

Elephant Wake continues in the NAC Studio until Nov. 14. Tickets: NAC box office, 613-755-1111, nac-cna.ca .

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Tremblay takes on the NAC: By Nick Miliokas, Leader-Post, Nov. 13, 2009

Two weeks ago, when Joey Tremblay hit the road with his one-man show, a signature piece for this Regina playwright and actor, there were artistic directors at both ends of the country crossing their fingers and holding their breath, hoping that Elephant Wake would be a resounding success. There is much at stake for the Globe Theatre here at home, and yes, even for the National Arts Centre in Ottawa.

For Ruth Smillie, this is an opportunity to add another dimension to the Globe, by convincing her colleagues across Canada that importing a made-in-Saskatchewan product could be a profitable venture. For Peter Hinton at the NAC, it is a chance to advance a pet project, a Studio Stage series that would showcase plays from "some of the more remote regions" of the country, as Tremblay puts it.

At this point, it's impossible to tell if the longterm goals will be met. In the short term, the two-week run at the NAC, where the tireless Tremblay is performing evenings and matinees in an intimate space that seats 300, has produced encouraging signs. "They get it!" he says with a laugh, when asked how his small-town play about a vanishing village in Saskatchewan is going over in a big city in Ontario.

Feedback in the form of letters to the NAC has been overwhelmingly positive, Tremblay says, painting verbal pictures of audiences "swept away by the magic, transformed by the narrative." One woman wished the show would last forever. Another confessed that it was well into Elephant Wake before she realized the play is not about her own home town. "People are taking ownership of the story," Tremblay says.

The story is set in the fictional French-Canadian hamlet of Ste. Vierge, where the 70-year-old Jean



Claude, an idiot savant, wages a determined but ultimately hopeless battle to preserve the community's history, or at least his memories of that history. *Elephant Wake* was created 12 years ago as a one-act entry for the Edinburgh Fringe, and has since been expanded by the Globe into a full-length play in two acts.

Even at a reasonable one hour and 40 minutes, *Elephant Wake*, alas, is too long for the critics, or at least a couple of them. Both Patrick Langston in the *Ottawa Citizen* and J. Kelly Nestruck in the *Globe and Mail* have raised this point in print. Their reviews were complimentary in many respects, but the running time of the play, and particularly the 20-minute intermission, was clearly not to their liking.

Tremblay has no say whatsoever on the length of intermission, at the NAC or anywhere else, but he was stung by criticism of the running time of the play itself. "At first," he says, "it put me into a tizzy." It may well have caught him off guard, because in Regina, when it comes to local shows, be they theatre or music or dance, the reviews in general tend to be almost always positive and supportive.

Eventually, with respect to the *Globe and Mail*, specifically, Tremblay was able to heal his wounds with the balm of ironic humour. Nestruck took exception to the length of the play, and yet the parts this critic liked best, Tremblay says, were the parts that have been added. He was also flattered to be mentioned in the same breath as heavyweight Canadian playwrights Wajdi Mouawad and Michel Tremblay.

But there have also been enthusiastic standing ovations performance after performance, as well as frequent, uninhibited shouts of "Bravo!," irrefutable evidence from the audience, it would seem, that a piece of regional theatre has successfully gone national, in a venue that sits "on the border of our so-called two solitudes," as Tremblay puts it, adding with a laugh: "I didn't expect it. I'm a cynic."

The most satisfying thing about these last two weeks, Tremblay says, was "the universality of the story echoing thousands of miles from home. It's like, 'Come on, everybody, there's stuff everywhere that's worth seeing.' It was gratifying to see people relating so completely to the narrative."

Elephant Wake closes its run at the NAC on Saturday. It then moves on to the Persephone Theatre in Saskatoon, opening Thursday and continuing through Nov. 29 on the BackStage. In March, it will be presented in Vancouver as part of the Saskatchewan contingent at the Cultural Olympiad 2010.

Beyond that, Tremblay would like to see it produced in Quebec and New Brunswick as well.

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