

By Jeremy Podeswa

The tectonic plates that comprise the surface of the earth have for thousands of years been subject to the phenomenon of continental drift. It is generally believed that the entire planet's land mass was once joined in a single super continent that has since separated, setting off a chain of geological shifts and collisions that continue to affect the destiny of our planet. With this natural phenomenon serving as the central metaphor, filmmaker Peter Mettler and veteran theatre director Robert Lepage have fashioned a complex and haunting film about the inexorable forces that shape the evolution of human life and culture.

Lepage is Quebec's leading theatre artist, a true visionary whose remarkable contributions to the international theatre world have included "The Dragons' Trilogy" and "Polygraph". In 1987, Lepage's company Theatre Repere conceived of "Tectonic Plates", an experimental production that would evolve through successive mountings in a variety of countries. The play was from inception, a lyrical, thematically dense and highly theatrical work about memory, identity, art and evolution. Over time, it acquired an epic richness that has since been developed and exploited to maximum effect in Peter Mettler's remarkable film treatment.

Tectonic Plates begins with a romantic triangle. Aspiring artist

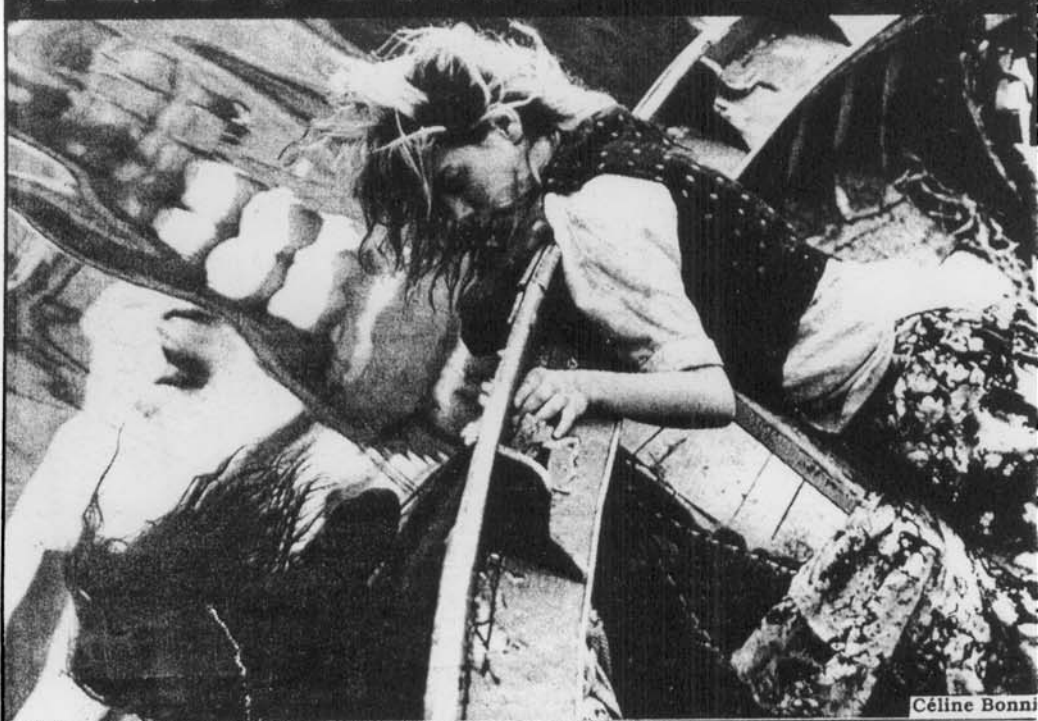
Madeleine (Marie Cignac) and deaf-mute librarian Antoine (Richard Frechette) are both in love with art instructor Jacques (Robert Lepage). When Jacques leaves them both, apparently unable to negotiate any kind of intimacy, Madeleine is thrown into a severe depression. Feeling unworthy of love, she contemplates suicide and, being 18 and of a romantic disposition, she travels to Venice, the floating city of mystery, to perform the desperate act.

In Venice, however, she encounters Constance (Celine Bonnier), a compulsively self-destructive drug addict who awakens in her ardent feelings of compassion and vitality. Madeleine's relationship with Constance ends tragically, but her desire to live is nonetheless restored.

The film jumps ahead twenty years to find Madeleine unhappy and still haunted by the ghosts of her past. Returning to Montreal to exorcise her personal demons, she is reunited with her former rival Antoine, eventually discovering that Jacques, her former mentor, has moved to New York and assumed a new identity as a transvestite named Jennifer. Impulsively, Antoine decides to track down Jacques/Jennifer, and the emotional reunion that ensues sets off a series of dramatic encounters and revelations that comprise the film's third and final act.

A simple account of the key narrative events in **Tectonic Plates** does little to convey the density of themes or the complexity of the film's presentation. Among the primary thematic strands is the profound effect of history on the present. Just as the

TECTONIC PLATES



Céline Bonnier

earth's land mass continues to be affected by the primeval forces of continental drift, so are we unable to escape our personal or collective history. As time moves forward, there is constant change, things are perpetually transformed. The cycle of birth, death and renewal continues unchecked; people, cultures, and even personal identities forever move apart and collide.

In his eloquent and richly satisfying treatment of this material, Mettler demonstrates once again that he is arguably the most versatile and intuitive of contemporary Canadian filmmakers. A master of formalism, his idiosyncratic and highly personal approach to composition, movement, montage, and soundscape are evidence of a fresh, distinct, and highly articulate film language. Call it "Mettler-vision" or "Mettler-ama"; his best works (which include **Eastern Avenue**, **Scissere** and **The Top of His Head**) are the closest things to "head films" that this country has produced.

Some of the more conventionally dramatic sequences in **Tectonic Plates** are fairly static (though the performances are uniformly excellent), and the first act requires a great deal of studied concentration, but the rewards of the film are many. The narrative is undeniably compelling; there are numerous bravura sequences (most notably, the erotically charged and drug-hazed meeting of Constance and Madeleine), and the cinematography of Miroslav Baszak (**Highway 61**) is lush and richly textured.

Tectonic Plates begins and ends as a theatrical presentation before a live audience, but the bulk of the film shifts fluidly and effortlessly, between the stage and a succession of breathtaking locations in Montreal, Paris, Venice, Scotland and New York. Employing a complex network of visual motifs (water, light, architectural details), artistic allusions (Delacroix, Shakespeare, Chopin), and formal devices (including rear screen projection), the film is an elusive, but undeniably powerful construction.

In describing the central metaphor of **Tectonic Plates**, Lepage has said that "Drifting does not only mean being lost, it also means colliding into other drifters." In this unique collision of characters and cultures, narrative and metaphor, memory and myth, theatre and film, Mettler and Lepage have woven an evocative and challenging filmic tapestry.



Robert Lepage and Lorraine Côté

"Tectonic Plates" premieres at the Bloor Cinema Nov. 27-30 and the Revue Cinema Dec. 1-3. PREMIERE PRICES.