

THE INSTITUTE FOR CANADIAN CITIZENSHIP

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ROBERT
LEPAGE

An Artist's View
on Identity
& Belonging

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Thank you. Thank you very much. Something Tony did not mention at the beginning: I also saw *King Lear*. The Stratford was a wonderful production, but I only saw it once.

So it's a great pleasure being here this afternoon. When I was asked to come and deliver this talk, I very, very naturally agreed to do it because the theme of identity and the theme of belonging have always been central to my work as an artist for the past 35 years. I've done many things, as Adrienne so eloquently said. I've done a lot of work in opera, circus, film, but my main world is the theatre world. And I have worked there as an actor, as a director mainly, and also as a writer.

And as a writer, actually we work in a collective manner. I work with artists from all over the world, so most of our work is not just Quebec-based, it's also in many languages and we get to co-produce with festivals and theatre companies from around the world.

The very first big collective show that did that propelled my work into the international spectrum was a show called *The Dragon's Trilogy*, which explored, of course, our relationship with the Chinese communities of Canada, and it was a show that lasted—it was a six-hour show and it was worth every minute of it, and it kind of spanned over 75 years.

Later on, we devised another piece called *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, mainly about the 50 years that followed the Hiroshima tragedy. This one was more about displacement, how populations and individuals were displaced by the war, whether the war with the Japanese or the Second World War in Europe. So this one was a seven-hour show.

And then we devised a nine-hour show—they just get longer as we go—called *Lipsynch*, which was a study on identity connected to the theme of voice, speech, and language, which of course is a theme that we will be discussing today during this talk.

Also, I've been very busy doing one-man shows. You know, in the midst of doing all these collective writings, I've done many solo shows that I've been performing myself. And they're all pretty much autofiction, even though I'm too chicken to actually use my own name in these, and I usually call myself Philippe or find some other name. But actually, they're very autobiographical, and a lot of those stories are about how you find your identity elsewhere, either because you can't really find it in your own community or that you feel that you have to go and hide somewhere to understand who you are. And of course, you're not really hiding from anybody because you're converted to somebody else's culture and to somebody else's society or identity.

So that's pretty much what my work is about, and I'm pretty much obsessed by these themes of identity and belonging. I started to be—I'd say I tried to remember and go as far back as I could of when I started to be interested in about that specific thing of belonging, and it had to do with when I came out of the conservatory. I was brought up in the '60s and '70s. I'm from the generation in Quebec City where people were kind of forced to speak English as a second language, but there was not really any use for it. I didn't see how—you know, there was nothing practical about speaking English when you were brought up in Quebec City. And it was in, you know, the great years of nationalism and sovereignty and separatism in Quebec, so of course that was an interesting project.

And so, if you were a 20-year old Quebecois Francophone that travelled, you didn't feel you belonged to a place called Canada: you were a Quebecker and that was it. And you know, I'd say that a lot of people, a lot of my friends, we discussed this and nobody would actually feel Canadian.

And I got to do my first trip to Europe, backpacking, and I remember one day going to the Piazza San Marco in Venice and came across these two, this couple, who also were backpacking from Edmonton, Alberta, and I knew they were Canadian because they had small Canadian flags on their backpacks. And we were queueing for the same museum or something; I don't know what it was exactly. And of course, you say, "Oh, you're from Canada. Where are you from? What part of Canada?" And you start talking, and we kind of became friends, and that evening we went out for drinks and met with other people, Italians and people from Germany. And I realized that I was part of a reality that I had never felt I was part of before, and I was introduced to them by these two people as fellow Canadians, and it felt right, which was kind of odd. So it was the first time that I felt really Canadian, that I could actually identify to something called Canada.

And it always remained—and it's still quite mysterious to this day and I hope that these forums could help clarify what this is about. But I say there, "Okay, why is it that I don't feel Canadian when I'm in Canada and I feel Canadian when I'm abroad?" And so, it's a bit of an odd feeling, but at the same time it kind of gives you hope that, you know, in this world of Arabs and Jews, Catholics and Protestants, black and white, whatever the conflicts are, whatever the paradoxes are, it means that if Martians were to attack us, we'd all be Earthlings, you know? We'd all feel that we're part of the same place.

And that was kind of confirmed to me by Guy Laliberté, who is the big boss at Cirque du Soleil who actually got to go in outer space and visited the space station because he's a multi-billionaire, so he could afford flying there. And he went there for ten days and he said, "It's really the feeling that you have because you're so outside of all the different cultural barriers or identifications and that you feel—everybody in the shuttle or in the space station, whether they're Russian or Taikonauts, Cosmonauts, Astronauts, they're all Earthlings. And I know that, you know, we can't all experiment that and actually go out there and say, "Oh, we're actually all from the same place," but there is something about that phenomenon that intrigued me and kind of forced me to acknowledge it and to explore that theme.

When my work started to be exported and I started to do more and more touring, I was asked a lot to either deliver lectures or to do seminars for a couple of days with some theatre students or with, you know, in theatre festivals, where there would be people from all over the place. And of course, if you're going to spend a couple of days devising a short piece of work, you want to know who it is that you're working with. And a way to do that is I would always kind of unroll a very long roll of paper on the floor and I'd put some markers and crayons, and I'd say, "Okay, we're going to draw a map of the world," and so people would spend about half an hour. We'd play music and they would draw a map of the world.

And anywhere this would happen, any country of the world where I did this, they would always put the Americas in the centre, right? Of course, Europe would be on this side and Asia and Australia would be on this side. And I would always be amazed, even if there were no Americans in the room, how everybody knew exactly how the United States was shaped. You know, the Panhandle of Florida, and they all knew where Miami was and where Cuba was, and of course, even Australia.

But when they got to draw Canada, they would go up north and then there was this blob and it would just kind of go, and go this way, you know? And I was, “My God, nobody knows anything about what this country looks like, and they can map a small island in the Pacific and they don’t know anything about this huge, important country which is called Canada.” And most of them thought that, of course, the capital of Canada was Montreal, and they would place Montreal in the middle of the blob, where Sault Ste. Marie is. And I would always be, you know, a bit embarrassed that I came from a place nobody knew anything about.

And one day, because on top, not only did they have to draw a map of the world, but they were allowed to make comments, little arrows and little comments they would write, and some jokes, and you could see politically where they were and you could see what they thought of what was going on in the world today. And one guy one day on the big, giant blob wrote, “Open country,” and all other countries had been identified with their proper names, but there was no “Canada.” There was “Open Country.” And I said, “Well, what do you mean by Open Country? It’s just like it’s just big, massive land with nobody in it?”

And, well he said, “Yeah, but it’s also because Canadians are open. They’re open people. It’s open country.” And he said, “You know, there’s a lot of space in Canada, physically, but there’s a lot of space in the mind.”

So I said, “Oh, that’s kind of cool.” You know, we have a reputation of being very, very open. And it kind of corresponded to the feeling I had of Australia, the first time I visited Australia, which was a huge territory. Very few people, like in Canada. A lot of space, physically, but a lot of space in the mind. Two very young countries where everything is to be invented, and that felt very comfortable. And I wasn’t embarrassed anymore of being a citizen of a blob or anything, you know? It was just, you know, like a very, very positive thing. It was a way to change that into a very, very creative piece of information.

Now, I’ve often been asked to, as a theatre director who devises plays collectively, to one day do a play about Canada, and I don’t do these kinds of things. I don’t say yes to commissions like that. It’s too complicated. But what I do is I try to use metaphors often for these commissions, and what I would do instead of doing a show about Canada, I would use my family, my own family, as a metaphor for Canada. So if you don’t mind, for the next couple of minutes I’m just going to do a little bit of a family history here so you understand why I’m saying that my family is a perfect metaphor for Canada.

It’s that my father and mother are French Canadians from Quebec City, and my father, of course, it was during the Depression years and the time when people would pull children out of schools, and my father was eight and he was sent to work in the shipyards and on the docks in Quebec City. And of course, he was—kids were offered to be paid either with candies or cigarettes, and of course my father said cigarettes because it was more of a manly thing to do. And then after that, he met my mother and they got engaged, and the war, the Second World War, broke out, and because my father had worked in the shipyards and knew all about ships, so of course he enrolled into the Canadian Navy. My mother enrolled into the Canadian Army, Canadian Army Women’s Corps—Canadian Women’s Army Corps. “Quack,” whatever, and she was sent to England. So they went and spent about three years in their service, and when they came back, they got married. But of course, both of them had learned English by that time. Before that, they were unilingual French. Now they were speaking English and my father was practically bilingual, and very proud of that. Very, very proud to actually speak both languages so easily.

Because he was in the Navy, they were sent to Nova Scotia, because in Halifax and Dartmouth there were some naval bases there, and they were trying very hard to have children, but my mother would always have miscarriages. So at one point they said, “Well, we’re probably not going to be able to have any kids, so maybe we should adopt kids.” So they decided to adopt my older brother, Dave, and my older sister, Anne, and they were brought up in English because they were in an English-speaking province. And in those days, in Halifax, there were no French-speaking schools, so they started their elementary school in the English language.

And then after that, they were transferred back to Quebec City, and then my mother was able to deliver a child until the very end of her pregnancy, so I was born and my younger sister, Linda, was born, and we were sent to a French-speaking school. So, and my older brother and older sister were sent to St. Patrick’s School, which was the local English-speaking, Irish Catholic school. So of course, they would hang out with their English friends and my sister and I would hang out with our French friends. And we all got along pretty well, and I think the family was very harmonious until Saturday nights, when we had *Hockey Night in Canada*.

And in Quebec City in those days, there were two TV networks, two channels, basically: Channel Four, Channel Five. Channel Four was kind of an amalgamation of French CBC with some private programs coming from Montreal. That was on Channel Four. And Channel Five was English CBC with some early shows of CTV. But on Saturday nights when hockey was being aired, they would beam the same signal on both channels, but if you switched to Channel Four, you’d have the French commentator, and if you switched to Channel Five, you had the English commentator. And it would be, like, the biggest tug-of-war you could ever see where my brother and I would be fighting to, “No, we want to watch it in French.” “No, we want to watch it in English.” And we’d be always kind of switching channels. And of course, my father would take for my brother and my mother would take for myself, because my mother was always a sovereigntist. So anyways, so it was a huge mess. And eventually, because my brother was bigger than I was, he would almost always win and he would steal the knob, because in those days there were knobs, until I found a pair of pliers where I could actually turn it back to French.

So anyway, so that was pretty much how this—how we dealt with it in the house, and there was a moment where my brother had this big identity crisis because his name was Dave and it was very important that he wasn’t called David; he was Dave, the English guy, Dave Lepage. And so, a lot of the French Canadian kids in the neighbourhood would beat him up because he was a *Maudit Anglais!* You know? So when he turned 18, he chose to study psychology and eventually photography in New Brunswick, in an English-speaking province, and where he thought he would feel at home and he would feel that he belonged somewhere. And of course, he got there and with a name like Lepage ... And of course, in the meantime, he chose a French Canadian girlfriend from Rivière-du-Loup, so that didn’t help. And they were speaking French all the time, so he would be beaten up because he was a French pea soup.

So he never felt that he belonged anywhere for a long time, until he got a job in Ottawa. Now of course, Ottawa is like the ideal bilingual city in Canada because even bus drivers, and I think firemen, have to prove that they’re perfectly bilingual. So he actually got a job teaching photography at Carleton University and spent pretty much all of his life there, raising his children in French, and they all have jobs now in an English company, and he’s still there today. And it’s really where he felt he belonged and his identity is really he’s the Ottawa guy, definitely.

When I was a kid, when I was five years old, I came down with a disease called Alopecia. Of course, it wasn’t called that in those days, it was called Cat’s Disease. But what it is basically is that you lose your hair. And so, of course, that was very tragical when it happened. I didn’t really care because I was too young to really know exactly what it was about and what it would entail later on, but what happened is that, of course, you know, children are very, very cruel, and if you come down with something like Alopecia or if you have any kind of difference, of course, they make you feel like you don’t belong. And they beat you up and they call you names. And so, of course, I don’t want to take the violins out and say, “Oh, poor me and pity on my faith, but actually, you know, it was a very, very tough childhood.

But today, what I find interesting about that is that it's not that I feel that that thing has been resolved or that it doesn't bother me anymore, it's just that I feel that what happened is that it made me more conscious of what it is to come from a different country if you're an immigrant, or if you're a different race, or if you have a real handicap, if you have any kind of physical difference, or if you don't correspond to the canons, you know, the modern-day canons of beauty. So I've always been extremely sensitive to that and thought, "Well, you know, it's all very politically correct to say that we're against racism and all of that, but you don't really know what it's about if you haven't been in a position where you've been secluded, or that you feel that you don't belong because people don't want to play with you, or the people who want to play with you make fun of you, or whatever it is."

So for me, that was a very, very important thing in my life, even though it doesn't really bother me anymore, but to understand the—you know, from within, what it is to be different. And probably the reason why I don't like children, which is kind of odd; it's not a nice thing to say. Because you know, I always thought that, you know, childhood is a dress rehearsal for all the cruelties you will be doing later on in society.

So as I said earlier, I never felt that when I was growing up in Quebec, that even though my father was kind of imposing this English language, even if he wasn't originally, it wasn't his mother tongue, that it was kind of forced onto me, and I didn't see any kind of use to that until I got to travel and got to work and collaborate with other people. When I started doing co-productions with different theatres around the world, I started to appreciate the fact that I had been taught English because I already—because with my French, my mother tongue, was very useful. It served as a basis to understand Italian when I got to learn Italian, and then Spanish, and then Portuguese. And English, of course, was very useful to start learning German and I started working in Germany, eventually Dutch, eventually Scandinavian languages, because I got to work in Sweden and Denmark and Norway. And all of that grouped together was very useful when I got to work in Russia, and the Cyrillic that I got to identify and to read helped me find my way through Greek cities. And when I started to work in Japan, the Portuguese that I knew helped me learn Japanese, of all languages, because one-third of the language is actually based on Japanese [sic]. *Arigato* is a mispronounced *obrigado*, basically. So, and all of the Chinese characters that I've learned when I was learning Japanese were very useful finding my way in Shanghai.

So I'm not saying this to kind of brag about all the languages I can read, I could only speak a few of them, but I could actually find my way through. And the most important thing about this is that when you speak another language, you feel differently. You express part of your personality that has never been expressed before or that is not summoned in your mother tongue. For example, right now, I'm much more relaxed than if I'd actually be doing this in French because it's not my mother tongue, so I could actually be wrong. I could put on the Celine Dion accent, and you know, it's okay, you would excuse, you know? It's not a problem. So I'm more relaxed and it's kind of cool and it's—you know, English is kind of a language; there's all sorts of diagonals(?) and stuff. And you know, I kind of my English identity. But when I speak French, of course, I'm more kind of high-strung and I'm more scientific about it and I have to get all the verb tenses right. And you know, when I speak Spanish, it's something else. When I speak Italian, it's something else, etc., etc.

And all these personalities are not personalities that come out from somewhere, they actually are within me. And so, learning different languages not only makes you connect to the world and help you have x-ray eyes with you walk through a town where things are written in a foreign language; not only it kind of helps you to reach out, it also makes you reach in. It makes you discover who you are, and there's tons of stuff in there that you never thought—that only need a different language to make it come out.

So something that I've encountered at one point is that there's this extraordinary lady called Brenda Milner, and she was the assistant of Wilder Penfield of the Penfield Institute, and in the '60s—well, her—the section in which she was working was neuropsychology and she was very instrumental in trying to identify how memory works and where it came from. And of course, that work helps understand Alzheimer's. And she and her colleagues did some tests in Montreal on people who were unilingual and people who were—patients who were bilingual, and discovered that in the case of bilingual people, the onset of Alzheimer's Disease is postponed an average of four years. So the more you speak languages, the healthier your brain is, and I hope you actually get to see one of her lectures. She's 96, and believe me, she has all her marbles. She's an extraordinarily articulated lady who still gives conferences about the brain and about memory. She herself is from—she was born in England, but she went to work in Montreal at the Penfield Institute and was very happy actually to get to work in English but to live in French, and for her that was like a key in understanding how the brain works and how memory works.

There's kind of an odd thing in Quebec, an expression. We say *Québécois pure laine*. Now what that means, *Québécois pure laine*, it means pure wool. "I'm a Quebecois made of pure wool." And I've been—I was brought up with this idea that I was a *Québécois pure laine* because both my parents were French Canadian and my ancestor's name was Louis Lepage and he was one of the very, very early French settlers on the island of Orleans, not very far from Quebec City, and he had two sons, Pierre and Gabriel; Peter Gabriel. And him and his wife and his two sons actually ploughed, were the first to cultivate the land, and pretty much owned the island of Orleans, which was a huge, huge, huge chunk of land in 1634. And of course, Louis Lepage and his wife died and the two sons inherited the land, and like in Cain and Abel fashion, kind of fought, so the meanie, Pierre went away and founded Rimouski, so he became the Sieur of Rimouski. So in Quebec, if your name is Lepage, you're from one of the branches: you're either from the meanie, from Rimouski or the nice, diplomatic guy from Île d'Orléans. And of course, in the show business world, and I'm probably the only one from Île d'Orléans.

And so, for me, I've always thought that, you know, I'm one of the early settlers. I'm from that lineage. Until one day, you know, that the island of Orleans still today is pretty much rural, even though it is a suburb of Quebec City, and we still have traces of the 17th century there: some wells and some old houses that are 350 years old. And so, in the '60s, it was a great film set for a TV series called *Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville*. *Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville* was an early French settler during the New France period and the French television in France did a co-production with French CBC, and so they shot this series. Pretty much everything was shot in studios in Montreal, but all of the outside exterior shots were done on the island of Orleans.

And of course, this French hero, who would build forts and houses and would be constantly attacked by Iroquois and, but of course, in Quebec City, they would try to find extras to play the Iroquois and it would be very politically incorrect to go and see the Hurons to play Iroquois. So they sent a talent scout in Quebec City and the guy would kind of scout through bus drivers and taxi drivers to try to find people who would have some kind of Aboriginal feature. And so, what they would do is that they would group these taxi drivers and bring them to a YMCA, ask them to strip down, shave them, put them in these communal showers. You know, paint them, throw red paint at them, put a black wig on, a loincloth, put them in a school bus, bring them to the isle of Orleans, and act [sic] them to ask [sic] like Iroquois. And so, that's pretty much what you see in the series. All these Iroquois are taxi drivers from downtown Quebec.

My father was a cab driver and he, of course, refused to do this, but of course, all of his co-workers would try to coax him, to say, "Come on, you're the one who looks the most Indian, you know? You should do it. You look like an Indian." And so, that kind of made me think, "Oh, well maybe we do have some Aboriginal blood, and that makes it even more *pure laine* because it means that we're not like the Anglos, you know? It's French and Native, and you know, it's the real thing and it's real Quebec."

And so eventually, when I turned 50, a friend of mine had my family tree done and gave me this as a gift. And so, I just kind of, you know, sifted through all of the names in trying to see if there was some—hoping to find Iroquois or Huron blood. And there was, like, in hundreds and hundreds of names, there was a guy called Picah(?) who could have been Huron because Picah was a name that you'd bump into a lot in the Huron village, but other than that, there was no trace. So I thought, "Well, maybe I should look on my mother's side." And on my mother's side, there were all these Americans with people coming from Scotland and Ireland and Wales. And then, you know, I discovered that actually I had a lot of Anglo blood within me and that there is no such thing in Quebec as pure wool, right?

Of course, as a theatre person, I feel more comfortable if I bring props, so of course I brought a few props with me. So what I want to show to you now is what the Canadian flag looked like before 1965, alright? So you might have to switch microphones because I'm going to do my little demonstration here. Alright. So this was the Canadian flag. Do I have it on the right side? Yeah? Alright. Okay. So up until 1965, this was the flag. And the Federal Government, knowing that the Centennial was coming in 1967, thought that maybe we should change the flag and have it kind of, you know, upgraded and do something a bit more funky, and you know, more modern.

But the real reason behind this was that it was Lester B. Pearson, who was the head of the Liberal government in those days, and of course he had been elected mainly by French Canadians from Quebec. And he knew that French Canadians did not identify to this flag. They didn't really like it because there was way too much red, and red was associated mainly to the Brits, and French was associated to blue. Of course, the only blue you could find here is, you know, on the Union Jack. And the Union Jack actually is a reminder to Quebec people that they've been defeated and that their culture, you know, is—so it was not the best flag to try to involve French Canadians into the great modern project of Canada.

And not only that, if you look on this side here, there's the cultural makeup of Canada. In those days, Canada—and Quebec represented maybe one-third of the population, and on here it only represents one-fourth. You see, it's Jacques Cartier's golden *fleur-de-lis*, next to the Irish harp, next to the Scottish lion with the lilies around it, and the three English lions. So the interesting thing was also this here, the three maple leaves joined to one stem. And I really did my homework, so I really tried to find what that was all about, and the only thing I could find, on Wikipedia, was a reference to somebody who had done a study about heraldry and protocol and all that, and that actually what it represented was the French, the English, and the Others. So I looked into the English version of Wikipedia and the French version, and it's the French, the English, and the Others. So who are these Others, right? Are they ... Does it refer to the Aboriginals or the immigration, the immigrants, or what does it refer to? And it's very, very unclear and it's very, very, very vague.

So Pearson thought, "Well, let's have Quebecers identify to the flag and let's go for a new design." So he asked a group of designers to think about it, and they came up with this marvel here. So this here is what we call Lester B. Pearson's pennant because it was so ... So you see, it's a much, much longer flag, like the Canadian territory. What's wonderful about it is that the three colours are the three colours of the two founding nations, right? So you have—you could recognize the French flag in this and the Union Jack. On each side, you have these blue sections that represent the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean, which makes a lot of sense because our motto is *A Mari Usque Ad Mare*, "from sea to shining sea," I think it is in English. And of course, the three maple leaves joined by the same stem, which of course is the French, the English, and the Others. But you know, why not Aboriginal? Why not French speakers, English speakers, and people who speak languages from all over the world? Men, women, and the other folks? Whatever. But it's a very, very open design.

So of course, Diefenbaker, who was the leader of the opposition, did not like this flag. There was way too much blue in it. And so, decided to vote against it and asked for a referendum. Now, Lester B. Pearson was at the head of a minority government and didn't want to risk losing the power over a flag, so of course he asked the designers to go back to the drawing board, and of course, they come up with the Canadian flag as we know it today, which is all red, a bit of white, and one single maple leaf. So I'd like to bring this to any politician's mind that maybe for the year 2017, for the 150th anniversary of Canada, if there's any chance or project of redesigning the Canadian flag, maybe to reopen the debate about this flag, which I think is a very, very, with all its flaws, you know, a much open proposition. This I think reflects more what Canada is about or what Canada wants to be about.

During the Calgary Olympics, I was invited to perform and I was part of a cultural festival. They had that also in Vancouver. It's about two weeks before the Olympics. They have this big, international arts festival and there's all sorts of forums and gatherings. And they asked journalists from all over the world to come to Canada, and they travelled through the whole country. They were trying to understand what this country was about. And there was a meeting and there was a rapporteur, somebody who spoke in the name of all these reporters, who said, "Well, what we conclude is that Canada is not one country, it's five countries." Of course, in those days, they didn't take into account the territories; there were two territories, not three, in those days. And so they said, "You know, we really frankly have the impression that this is not a country. It's the federation of five countries."

So a lot of people debated that and people were against and people were for it and whatever, but the thing that I found interesting is that they had an interesting perspective because they were outside. It was a view from outside, and that a way to restructure the country or to start new debates about the country or, you know, constitutional debates, it was refreshing to have a view from outside.

And in 2008, I was in London performing a show, and I don't want to sound like I'm name-dropping, but I was having a beer with some of my London friends, so Miranda Richardson and Alan Rickman were sitting there. And Alan Rickman turns to me and says, "Hey, Robert, I hear Iggy might be your next Prime Minister."

"Iggy? Who's Iggy?"

And of course, he was talking about Michael Ignatieff, and everybody in London seemed to know him, which was quite interesting, and the hip people seemed to know him, and the interesting thinkers seemed to know him, and I had never heard about him before.

So what was interesting, and the reason why I ... And for the people who, in the room, don't know who this man is, he was the leader of the Liberal Party from 2008 to 2011 I think, during the ... Until the Federal Election of 2011, where he lost to the hands of the present Conservative government. And the thing that's interesting about Michael Ignatieff is that he had a refreshing view. To my taste, he had a refreshing view because he was a guy from the outside for a while. He's a guy who, you know, lived in London for a long time and came in with a lot of fresh ideas about what Canada could be.

And he did something and said something that I've never heard any federal politician say before, and certainly not in Quebec. He was appearing on a TV show that's watched by absolutely everybody in Quebec called *Tout le monde en parle* on Sunday evenings, during the Federal Campaign. And he spoke in an amazing ... And he had an amazing command of the French language, with a slight English Canadian accent, and had a lot of charm, was funny, a lot of wit. Wickedly intelligent. And somebody asked him, said, "Well, what do you think of, you know, people here in Quebec do not feel Canadian? People feel Quebecois."

And he said, “Well, fine.” He said, “You know, I don’t believe in any false patriotism. I think if you’re Quebecois first and Canadian after, that’s not a problem. You come from Iran, you’re still Iranian first? Go for it, and then you’re Canadian; that it’s not Canadian first.” And he was the first one to have this kind of discourse, and I had never heard that before. And of course, I think it’s a pity that, of course, then he kind of vanished into woodwork of politics, and I think that there was an interesting debate there of how people feel about Canadian identity, and it’s something that I kind of identified to.

And the thing that I found that was really cool about this is that we are different countries within a country. We are—and if we can’t say “countries,” let’s say “nations.” We are different nations within the same country. It’s very practical, actually. If you owe money to someone or if you want to trash your girlfriend and, you know, get rid of her or whatever, and then you want to run away, you go Vancouver, you know? And it’s like flying to another country, completely, and without the border patrol and all of that stuff. So it’s a great thing. It’s a great feeling, you know, actually, to be—and to be a different person. And it comes back to the whole thing I was saying earlier about feeling different depending on what language you speak, but that’s the thing that I find exciting about Canada, is that you could be a very different person depending where you go. You could have five different lives with five different wives in different parts of the country, and it’s great. And that, for me, is one of the exciting things about this country.

I’d like to finish off on something, actually it came from a question I had this morning. I had a radio interview with a very interesting man who had some very pertinent questions about identity and about belonging, and he asked me about where and when do I feel that I belong. And of course, because we were talking a lot about theatre, I said, “Well, on the stage.” But I’d say in a broader perspective, I feel I belong somewhere when I feel I’m doing something for my community. Now of course, you have to know what is a community and what is your community. But after I finished my theatre school and I started having some kind of relative success in Quebec City, I did what everybody does in theatre in Quebec, is that I moved to Montreal. And I spent five years there, and for five years I did not feel like a Montrealer. It was my language, I had a lot of work opportunities, I was well-treated. I wasn’t in the shadows; I was in the foreground. But I just did not feel that I belonged there.

And it’s only when the mayor of Quebec at that time said, “Well you know, we have a bit of money maybe we could give you, and we have this amazing space that we’d like you to maybe transform into a theatre or some kind of theatre space. Would you consider coming back to Quebec City?”

And I said, “Well, okay. Maybe I could do that.” And I felt useful, I felt I was at the right place, and I felt that I wasn’t a small fish in a big pond anymore: I was a big fish in a small pond. And whatever I would try to achieve or whatever project that I would start, that it would actually have an impact for real and I would actually see the results. And that’s really where I thought, “Well, this is where I belong.” And a sense of community and a sense of reality, it’s very difficult to define.

And I won’t bore you further with exactly why I feel that Quebec City is where I belong, but I bumped into Michel Tremblay once, and people were wondering why his plays, who were written in a Quebecois dialect for so many years, why they’re translated into 34 languages and they’re performed and staged all over the world. And he said, “Well, that’s because I don’t write international stuff. I write universal stuff. And the more you are local, the more you talk about what you know, the more you try to understand who you are and your very, very, very near community, then you’re universal.” And unfortunately, we’re in a culture; we’re encouraged to be international.

I remember going on tours and performing a play like *Far Side of the Moon* that’s set in Quebec City and people would ask me when I’d come back, “Oh, well, did you change all of the names of newspapers? And did you change this? And why? Because there don’t understand that our newspaper is a different name than their newspaper?”

So there's this thing where we're in a culture where, for example, I get all these film scripts sent to me, either as an actor or as a director, and it often starts by, "The action takes place in a place that could be Toronto, it could be New York, it could be San Francisco, it could be London." And it sucks because it's nowhere. A good story has a sense of place. And that's what Hitchcock used to do. You know, *The Birds* starts, it's in San Francisco, and *Psycho* starts in Phoenix, Arizona. And when you have a sense of place, then there's a sense of values and morals that come with that place. There's a system. There's a language. There's a décor. And unfortunately, we're in a culture where we're all kind of making this vague blob. You know, once again.

So I'd say the more you are local, the more you are universal, and that's your real identity. So I thank you very much.