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CONTACT:
Christina Kellogg/510.643.6714
ckellogg@calperfs.berkeley.edu
Joe Yang/510.642.9121
scyang@calperfs.berkeley.edu

**VISIONARY ROBERT LEPAGE RETURNS TO CAL PERFORMANCES WITH THE BUSKER'S OPERA,
A MODERN DAY VERSION OF *THE BEGGAR'S OPERA*,
THURSDAY - SUNDAY, JUNE 23 – 26 IN ZELLERBACH PLAYHOUSE**

BERKELEY, May 16, 2005 – Internationally acclaimed director, producer, playwright, actor, and Canada's foremost cultural ambassador, **Robert Lepage** returns to Cal Performances with the Bay Area premiere of *The Busker's Opera Thursday – Sunday, June 23 – 26*. Recognized for his dynamic and original approach to pushing the boundaries of theatrical performance, Mr. Lepage was inspired by **John Gay's** 1728 comical musical play *The Beggar's Opera* when he created the playfully irreverent *Busker's Opera* (a busker is a street musician or entertainer).

Utilizing his multi-talented company **Ex Machina**, Mr. Lepage combines 10 actors, musicians, singers, and a DJ with a myriad of artistic styles and musical genres not commonly found in an opera. The productions' 30 songs include jazz, Broadway show tunes, rock, blues, country, rap, tango, and reggae, among others. Everyone is expected to be versatile including the set that features a band playing from the back of the stage, costume changes in plain sight, a traveling video screen projecting subtitles and visual comments, and scenery and props that morph from piano bar to phone booth to prison cell, creating more of a rock concert feel than a traditional opera experience. When presented at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, the production carried a warning, "Cigarette smoking onstage and strobe effects will be used. In fact, this production may offend everybody."

THE BUSKER'S OPERA

When Robert Lepage began creating *The Busker's Opera*, his original intent was to produce a new take on *The Three Penny Opera* written by Bertolt Brecht with music by Kurt Weill, which had been inspired by *The Beggar's Opera*. After four performances, however, representatives from the Brecht and Weill foundations decided that Mr. Lepage's version was too innovative and closed the production. Shocked, yet determined to continue his work, Mr.

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Lepage decided to turn to Brecht's original model, John Gay's satirical masterpiece. *The Busker's Opera* premiered in February 2004 at the Montreal High Lights Festival.

While *The Beggar's Opera* depicts the poor and the homeless in the criminal underworld, Mr. Lepage's *Busker's Opera* transforms the antiquated bottom-feeder characters into the modern day music industry personalities with characters including aspiring celebrities and musicians to agents and entertainment lawyers. In this version the highway bandit, Macheath, has become a rock musician. The *songspiel*, a play told almost entirely through song, tells the story of Macheath's downfall as he encounters a whirlwind of troubles in his career and personal life. The initial narrative begins in London, but the show quickly changes gear and embarks on a trans-Atlantic journey, first landing in New York and then traveling to Las Vegas and New Orleans before arriving at its final destination, Huntsville, Texas.

"A whore one minute, a classical musician the next. A money-hungry agent in one scene, a trombonist in another," is the way the *Herald Sun* (Melbourne, Australia) described the range of characters cast members portray while playing multiple instruments, dancing, singing, and acting. This brash style is also typical of the lyrics, revamped from popular songs of today and classic melodies. One of the musical sequences samples *Star Wars*, *Lost in Space* and Led Zeppelin's "The Immigrant Song." "[*The Beggar's Opera*] took tunes everyone knew and trashed them," observed Mr. Lepage, describing how Mr. Gay's songs satirized life in the 1700s.

ROBERT LEPAGE

The Busker's Opera award-winning director **Robert Lepage** is credited with some of theater's most imaginative productions. His works include the internationally acclaimed solo piece *the far side of the moon*, presented and co-commissioned by Cal Performances in the actor/director's 2001 Bay Area debut. Other one-man shows include *Vinci* (about Leonardo da Vinci), and *Elsinore*, his examination of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Expanded plays include his ethereal ruminations on Hiroshima in *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, the destructive addictions behind Jean Cocteau and Miles Davis in *Needles and Opium*, and the genius of Frank Lloyd Wright in *Geometry of Miracles*.

In an ongoing attempt to extend his artistic reach, Mr. Lepage founded Québec's *Ex Machina* group in 1994, a not-for-profit multi-disciplinary production company that brings together actors, writers, set designers, technicians, opera singers, puppeteers, graphic designers, video artists, film producers, contortionists, and musicians. At first devoted to the production of essentially theatrical works – such as *Seven Streams of the River Ota*, *the far side of the moon* and *La Casa Azul* – the artistically diverse company has branched out into new fields including publishing, multimedia (the *Anamorphosis* and *Metamorphosis* web sites), music (*The Damnation of Faust* and *The Busker's Opera*), cabaret (*Zulu Time*), and museum installation. Nonetheless, a theatrical dimension permeates all of Ex Machina's work. Along with the directors of Ex Machina, Mr. Lepage has also founded another production company specifically for film and television endeavors known as In Extremis Images, Inc. Its principal mandate is the screenplay adaptations of productions initially intended for the theater, in particular, the shows produced by Ex Machina.

Recently, Mr. Lepage oversaw *La Casa Azul's* world tour and revived the cult-classic *Dragons' Trilogy* for the Festival de Théâtre des Amériques' 10th Edition. Mr. Lepage has also had the chance to produce his fifth feature film, adapted for his award-winning play, *the far side of the moon*. Currently, Mr. Lepage is collaborating with Cirque du Soleil on their next permanent Las Vegas show, titled *KÁ*. Along with Maestro Lorin Maazel, Lepage is working on an opera based on George Orwell's novel, *1984*. Finally, he is also performing his latest solo piece, *The Andersen Project*, based on the life of Hans Christian Andersen.

Mr. Lepage's work has been recognized and honored numerous times. Among the most recent prizes are the 1999 medal of l'Ordre National du Québec and 2000's SORIQ Award, for his successful international career. 2002 was a banner year for Lepage: in March the French embassy invited him to join the Legion of Honor; in April he was named "Grand Québécois" by the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce; and in November he was the recipient of the Herbert Whittaker Drama Bench Award for his outstanding contribution to Canadian theater.

