

\*\*\*\*\*

FINANCIAL TIMES

25.2.89

Claire Armitstead

\*\*\*\*\*

**R**OBERT LEPAGE'S extraordinary meta-physical detective yarn is extraordinarily based on the true story of a murder for which he himself was briefly a suspect. It is not essential to know this, although awareness of it does contribute yet another frisson and another colour to what is already a spine-tingling and prismatic piece.

Compared during his last London visit with Peter Brook, this outstanding French Canadian actor and director returns with a hefty reputation to live down - and at the Almeida it takes only minutes of *Polygraph* to prove that here, indeed, is a theatrical magician capable of conjuring images from thin air. He does so, literally, near the end of the piece when for a brief, thrilling and sinister moment a mirror reflects a non-existent form. Typically of the show, the reflection only lasts a second, leaving those in the audience who happened to be looking in the right place at the right time wondering whether they were seeing a thing or things.

The proceedings are conducted in front, over - and at several points through - a red brick wall which somewhat pretentiously in the opening scene prompts a narration about the partition of Berlin. The association - as often - is a free one, linked by analogy to a projected diagram of a heart, illustration to a post mortem report which is to form the starting point for a murder story without a corpse or a killer.

A young woman, in fiction as in life, has been raped and stabbed; her murderer has not been found. In a 110-minute series of vivid, captioned sequences, the autopsy is superimposed on a six-years-on encounter between a one-time suspect, the pathologist who carried out the post mortem, and an actress who has been hired to play the dead woman in a film of the murder.

Ingeniously the narrative threads its way between images of death and terror,

"reality" and recreation. On one level it is a straight story of love and death tinged by *film noir* images of figures stalked along dark sidewalks or splattered on pavements; on a second less convincing one it is a discourse on the politics of crime and/or the crime of politics; on yet another Lepage and his collaborators Pierre-Phillippe Guay and the superb Marie Brassard juggle delightfully and wittily with the differing tricks and techniques of cinema and theatre.

The wall, like any house of horror, oozes blood; the three performers leap time, genre and language with a staggering energy and accomplishment - Lepage himself affecting the gawky bespectacled persona of an American pathologist, who metamorphoses when appropriate into a prying, gravity-defying gnome capable of creeping headfirst down walls in pursuit of the suspect. If one has cause at times to question the intellectual content, there is no question at all about the theatrical strength of a show which confirms in spades Canada's right to a world rating.