

THÉÂTRE DE LA PIRE ESPÈCE PRESENTS

# CITIES

PRESS REVIEWS





« **Sublime and brilliant.** »

La Presse - Jean Siag

« *Cities is a hugely enjoyable and **visually impressive portrait** of our urban condition, with each city questioning our constructed world and the social conditions we create.* »

Nadine Lee - The Wee Review

« **A magnificent creation...** and we are the «flâneur» of his little collection of cities, Baudrillard is in the wings, so is Baudelaire, watching, wondering, taking it easy, enjoying the surfaces, the graffiti, the sounds, the new urban space devoid of living creatures... **DON'T miss this.** »

Alvina Ruprecht - Capital Critics' Circle

The Wee Review - January 29, 2017  
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# TVBOMB

SCOTLAND'S ARTS AND CULTURE

## CITIES at The Lemon Tree



Imaginative lo-fi visual theatre charms  
 Aberdeen's Lemon Tree



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NADINE LEE | 29 JAN 2017

For the first time in human history, the world's population in cities has recently outnumbered rural populations. *Cities*, part of this year's [Manipulate Festival](#), is a lo-fi visual theatre exploration of this change, using a vast collection of inanimate objects including Playmobil, corn kernels, printed symbols and circuit boards to construct a series of imaginary cities and the human and physical constructs that inhabit them.

Presented by leading Quebecois company [Théâtre de la Pire Espèce](#), the stage is set with two tables, two cameras and a screen. Around 25 cities are built by an actor before our eyes using his delightfully low-tech collection of objects, and projected to us live on screen in the UK premiere of this performance.

The beauty in *Cities* lies in the perspective these everyday objects are given when they appear on camera. On the table we merely see a circuit board, but under the camera's gaze this everyday object transforms into a city of skyscrapers – bustling with all manner of human constructs and desires. The performance also includes the most stunning manipulation of a page of binary code perhaps ever, using a simple piece of corrugated glass.

The piece is written, directed and performed by Olivier Ducas, who invites us along for a trip through his personal collection of cities. In one city called “Lea”, Ducas plays the role of a scientist-cum-house-salesman, who informs us that we can build a house by simply pouring a solution into a plastic mould. When the mould has set, he pops out a familiar green Monopoly house from the resin. He then presents a

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brilliant street plan of green houses and red hotels on screen, creating the ultimate dream of suburban planning.

Ducas also explores the art of the collection, paying homage to [Jean Baudrillard's theories on the psychology of the collector](#). Perhaps this is the key to why the cities are named after women, like a collection in itself, as Baudrillard says that an avid collector renders his romantic relationships doomed.

*Cities* is a hugely enjoyable and visually impressive portrait of our urban condition, with each city questioning our constructed world and the social conditions we create.

Capital Critics' Circle – October 16, 2014  
 Article available on the web



Capital Critics' Circle  
 Le cercle des critiques de la capitale

Reviewing Theatre in Canada's Capital Region - La critique théâtrale de la région Ottawa-Gatineau

**Villes: Collection particulière. A production of the Théâtre de la Pire Espèce: visual genius on the stage of Lasalle secondary public school.**

Reviewed by Alvina Ruprecht



© Mathieu Doyon  
 Olivier Ducas... le magicien!

La Nouvelle scène is still a hole in the ground but it is on the way to being built, said Anne Marie White, playwright, director and artistic director of the Théâtre Trillium as she introduced le Théâtre de la Pire Espèce... For the moment, all the Franco-ontarian theatres are performing at the LaSalle School on Saint Patrick street.

This time, Trillium has us sitting with the artists/technicians on the stage, as Wajdi Mouawad loves to have us do... and we were close to the inventions and magic moments, the machines, the sound equipment, the props and everything that Olivier Ducas brought to life during this highly original spectacle...

A most original production that creates a whole universe of imaginary spaces and forms, linked to the conscience of Olivier Ducas who has reimagined the world, and set it up using contemporary forms and images taken from film, from computer images, from graphic design, from web cams, from spy cameras, from animated film techniques; a great mass of textures, colors, styles that meet and melt and explode... as the narrator who wields the camera tells us the story of his collection of towns, their different temperaments, their forms, the way their elements are integrated... it is theatre with no characters, no narrative, no psychological types, no action, no elements that come from novels...but this is PURE cinema—and abstraction as seen by Kandinsky\_ pure form, pure color, space, texture, sound, light the essence of modern art... quite a magnificent creation... and we are the "flâneur " of his little collection of cities, Baudrillard is in the wings, so is Baudelaire , watching, wondering, taking it easy, enjoying the surfaces, the graffiti, the sounds , the new urban space devoid of living creatures.. DON'T miss this... *Le Théâtre de la Pire Espèce* is a marvelous little group of creative energy from Montréal, that we hope to see again in Ottawa.

Anglophones and Francophones...will enjoy this...



## JOYFUL MAGPIES

A TALE OF IMAGINARY CITIES:  
ORDINARY OBJECTS COME TO  
LIFE IN THÉÂTRE DE LA PIRE  
ESPÈCE'S CITIES



*Olivier Ducas in Theatre de la Pire Espece's Cities. Photo Credit: Mathieu Doyon.*

Normal everyday objects can and do say a lot about a person. Think about a bookshelf, sometimes people look at a someone's bookshelf to gather an idea of that person. Or,

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consider what photos people take the time to frame and put on display in their homes. Objects carry meaning, and they form a larger narrative, curated by the individual.

Presented by Theatre Junction, Théâtre de la Pire Espèce's *Cities* is a series of imaginary cities, as conceived by writer/director Olivier Ducas and scenographer Julie Vallée-Léger, dissected onstage. The cities are organized in seven categories, from Sand Cities to Pocket Cities to Dual Cities. Ducas presents each city's story to the audience by using a camera to focus on particular aspects of a city, supposedly revealing its soul in the process.

The city of Myriam, for example, has plans to replicate into near-infinity, seemingly with no originality in its plans. The main concern is growth, governed by conformist policies. Ducas starts with two red blocks, embedded vertically in a box of sand, then begins to place mirrors around the blocks to create the illusion of infinity.

For the city of Maxine, which is labelled under Ghost Cities, Ducas takes out a large wooden block with tall, slim blocks compacted together. He uses semi-opaque dividers to transform the cities' towers into different graphs of data, explaining what each set of data says about the people living in Maxine. However, the city, Ducas tells us, has chosen to present only positive data, keeping less-than-favorable statistics about its residents hidden – at this point, a light turns on at the block's base to reveal a negative bar graph.

The objective is subjective.

An idea of interest given that the federal government is currently asking Canadians to complete the national census, or else face fines and/or jail time. Data can be manipulated to tell or support any number of narratives. Human bias cannot be separated from the equation.

Even Ducas' presentation of these imaginary cities is corrupted by human bias. The audience is only ever given Ducas' interpretation of what he considers the true nature of these cities. What reference does the audience have to confirm the truth any of what Ducas says? None, not only because the cities are imaginary to begin with, but also because the audience has never visited these cities. The show should be seen as a collection of tourist propaganda, so to speak, not inherent truth.

Setting aside the problematic notion of objective truth, *Cities* is interesting as there is no dramatic tension that develops. The show is a journey through one man's collection of imaginary cities. And yet, the show is oddly compelling. One reason for that is the spectacle of

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assembling regular objects, like sugar cubes and coffee beans, to create an intimate portrait of a city, but another is the psychology behind collecting that Ducas discusses in monologues. Why do people collect? What happens when collections are completed, when the seeking ends? Ducas suggests that for some people, collecting is less of a hobby and more of an activity in purpose seeking and fulfillment.

Interestingly, the majority of Ducas' cities have female names (Cassandra, Gloria, Scarlett, Sylvia, Cathy, and nearly a dozen more). What comes to mind are sailors who, lonely at sea, would name their ships after wives or girlfriends. Thinking about that, what assumptions can we make about Ducas and his mostly female cities? The very same we make when we enter someone's apartment for the first time and analyze their walls and shelves for information.

Profoundly imaginative, Théâtre de la Pire Espèce's *Cities* is an intimate journey through the alleys of human rationality and emotion.

Exeunt Magazine – February 1, 2017

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## Review: Cities at Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh

*Where in the city do you belong? Andrew Edwards reviews the UK premiere of Théâtre De La Pire Espèce's imaginary urban spaces work.*

**ANDREW EDWARDS**



Cities at Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, as part of Manipulate 2017. Photo: Mathieu Doyon.

An actor, a table, a camera. These are the building blocks of *Cities*, Quebecois company [Théâtre De La Pire Espèce](#)'s private collection of imaginary urban spaces, which were unveiled to UK audiences for the first time at Manipulate Festival 2017. Emphasising a low-tech aesthetic, *Cities* is an endlessly innovative and charming performance about the nature of collection, imagination and the values we ascribe to objects.

*Cities* is presented with no easily identifiable narrative. Guided by Oliver Ducas, we tour a series of portraits, urban snapshots threaded together by the use of similar materials or languages, all of which are assembled from everyday objects. Our host's collection is as varied as the objects that compose it, comprising cities by the sea, cities in 2D, cities

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divided, cities on circuit boards and cities where GDP is measured in skyscrapers. There's even a city that can't be seen, and doesn't really exist, because it is the perfect city. Each portrait allows its audience a different perspective, a different angle, which because of its distance allows us to reframe our own relationships to urban spaces. We are positioned in, above and between these cityscapes, at distances near and far, always returning to the streets where we dwell nestling in the backs of our minds.

Each city passes by quickly, giving way to the next portrait in the collection. This pace ensures a work that is entertaining, yet offers only glimpses of what it means to live in a city, and what cities are like to live in (perhaps this pace, and frustration, is in part what cities are like to live in). When our host breaks away from his collection to address the audience directly, and as the pace slows ideas are afforded more attention, the results are very engaging. Ducas muses how our cities of birth are both carried by and carry us, how they occupy spaces in our passports and become the frames of reference through which we experience every other city. It calls to mind *y filltir sgwar* (the square mile), the Welsh notion of the intimate landscape of one's childhood, discussed by Mike Pearson in his book *Theatre/Archaeology*. This is a space that is known in a detail that you never come to know anywhere else, from which everything else follows. For those born in cities (as of recent years the majority) what is the size of this mile? Is it continuous or a mile stretched across areas connected by underground transport? Where in the city are you born, and where in the city do you belong?

Ducas assembles his collection under the eye of the camera, expanding the table-top so that it stretches across the rear of the Traverse main stage. Watching these structures' assembly, close-up on the collector's deftly moving hands, brings the inhabitants of cities most clearly in to focus. More pressingly than the quality of city living, *Cities* examines how we value and have relationships with objects. Jean Baudrillard's theories on collection are a recurrent reference point throughout, briefly summed up as the idea that objects are abstracted to exist in a realm under the collector's control, where their meaning is governed by the collector alone. Collection then is seen as a way to make sense of and order the world, the creation of a personal microcosm. What is most fascinating about watching *Cities* is observing this microcosm up close, nose to the window, watching with glee the attention and care invested by Ducas in objects such as Playmobil, sweetcorn and sugar cubes. It is incredibly engaging to watch, made all the more so by its incomprehensibility; our inability to access the quality of these particular relationships between human and object.

*Cities* was on as part of *Manipulate 2017*.

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## La Pire Espèce's Oliver Ducas talks about building Cities out of coffee

[Jon Roe, Swerve](#)



MATHIEU DOYON /SWERVE

La Pire Espèce is taking you on a trip to 28 cities in one night.

The Quebec company's Cities is a one-man show that has co-artistic director Olivier Ducas on stage telling stories of imaginary cities while building them out of surprising materials. At first glance, it's rapid urban exploration, but at its core, Cities explores human relations. Ducas sat down with Swerve Going Out editor Jon Roe to talk about the upcoming Calgary shows.

**This will be the first performance of the English translation. Was there dialogue that proved difficult to translate?**

A lot of them. My writing is—how can I say that?—few words for a lot of meanings. The way the show is written, I'm on stage and I'm some kind of producer or guide, in a way, into these cities made of objects. I'd say the writing is a dialogue between the words and the images. At some point, the words must say just enough but not too much.

Calgary Herald – May 2, 2016

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**How'd you decide which materials you wanted to use in the construction of these various cities?**

It depends. Some cities, first, I knew what I wanted to work with. The exact meaning of the city would appear working with the objects. Some other cities, there was text at first. It was very clear what was meaning of the city, but what I had put together was not really clear. Each city had its own creative process, but most of them arrived from intuition—I know there's a city in these objects, but how can I put it together? There's a city where I'm making a coffee. I have sugar cubes and I have the coffee grains. I know there's this contrast between these two objects. I knew I wanted to make clear the contrast in the people of the city.

Now, how do I write that? I can just explain it, but that's not the point. People have to make it clear for themselves what is the difficulty in this relationship. It has to appear slowly to them. This intuition, I had to find a way to write it not in sentences, not so it's just like a list of words. Then it becomes obvious at the end of the city. That was a different game for each city and I had to find the right game so that each of them was very unique.

**So you had some cities where you had the objects first and then others where you had the description first.**

I had seven cities that are just recorded and that I use so I can change up the set. These cities, the text does it all. I told myself, if I want to make images on this text, I will ruin it. This is only text cities. I have a couple cities without text and some are mainly told by the light changes.

At some point, Julie Vallée-Léger and I worked together—she's a set designer—we created the cities together. But at some point, when my sound designer and light designer came and played with us, some cities started to be written—with all of this, words is just one part. Then the objects and then the light and then the sound. Some of the cities are very cinematographic because mainly of the soundwork. It's mainly slices of lighting that are put one above the other.

**One of your goals was to try to make something that wasn't traditional theatre. Why did you want to go in that direction?**

There's many answers. The first is that, since I got out of school in 1999, we (Ducas and co-creator Vallée-Léger) tried different things with objects. Puppeteering with objects is one part

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of our work. We worked with different aspects of objects to find that there's a huge strength and meaning with objects in theatre. This is so powerful, that you can write to make the meanings emerge. The cities are my characters and my archetypes, because each city is like an archetype of many cities that we all know a bit of but not exactly. It's not New York, it's not Houston, it's just one big city that can be all of these archetypes. If the cities are my characters, I should not be myself the main character because if I do it's going to be my story and the cities are going to be information to help the audience to know me. That would be like concrete theatre or traditional theatre. That's not the point.

If the cities are my characters, I have to become something else. I have to become a mix between the author and the actor. Am I a traveller's guide? Am I a museum guide? Am I making an advertisement for a city? The point is not being a character, but just a voice or a narrative voice. In books, we don't care that there's the author putting himself into a narrator, sometimes the author comes back, making a commentary on what he's writing. And we go back to the narrator and then we go to the characters. We don't have any problem getting from one layer to another. But in theatre, it's very difficult because our body is there. If I'm someone, I can't be someone else and who I was before at the same time.

With object theatre, what's really nice is that we're not in the illusion. I'm not pretending I'm someone else. I'm just me. The objects are the main focus of the meaning. I think that's what I was interested in. It's kind of freeing the actor on stage, working with objects this way. If I'm free, let's make the best of it.

**One of the inspirations for this was the Italian novel Invisible Cities. Why did you want to build off that?**

What I loved about it is every description is very, very short. It's just like a half page, one page max. And it's this idea that the author, Italo Calvino, is talking to us, about people, but taking it from the side, not directly. And he would talk about some philosophy and some sociology but always just describing a city. It's not brutal, in a way. I loved this approach. When we started to work with the Calvino Cities, it was ridiculous because the text was so strong, we were killing it. But we had something else. He had literature and this was the best of what he has. But our tools are very different, so what are our tools? Being here now, it's the possibility of building images. With the camera, it's the possibility of building images that seem to mean something but because the camera takes it and brings it on screen, it means something else or it means something more. We started to create our own cities. We have other tools, let's have other cities, different cities.

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## **Do you expect audiences to identify their own city in the different cities you're showing them?**

I think the spectator is entering into some kind of dialogue. It's a little bit like when you go to see visual arts. You have to dialogue with the painting at some point because it's in front of you but it's not speaking. Well, it's saying things, but you have to confront it. I think the people live the show a little bit the same way. When I speak to people after the show, they say, I love this one, or I love this one more. I think every city has a lover in some way.

*Cities: Wednesday, May 4 to Thursday, May 7 at Theatre Junction Grand, 608 1st St. S.W. 8 p.m.; matinee Saturday, 2 p.m. \$27 – \$45. 403-205-2922, [theatrejunction.com](http://theatrejunction.com).*