Needles and Opium
(2013)

Robert Lepage / Ex Machina
Needles and Opium

Text: Robert Lepage
Direction: Robert Lepage
With Olivier Normand and Wellesley Robertson III

One night in 1949, on the plane bringing him back to France, Jean Cocteau writes his Lettre aux Américains in which fascination and disenchantment intertwine: he has just discovered New York, where he presented his most recent feature film, L'Aigle à deux têtes. At the same time, Miles Davis is visiting Paris for the first time, bringing bebop with him to the old continent. Parisian jazz fans are ecstatic. As the notes of Je suis comme je suis linger in the air, Juliette Greco opens her arms to him.

Forty years later, at the Hotel La Louisiane, in Paris, a lonely Québécois tries in vain to forget his former lover. His emotional torments echo Cocteau’s dependence on opium and that of Davis’ on heroin. There begins a spectacular withdrawal experience where the drawings of the prince of poets and the blue notes of the jazzman, accompany his leap into nothingness, the desperate effort of a man looking inwards in order to vanquish the pain and liberate himself from his love addiction.

Thru highly visual staging, which is as much magic as it is theatre, Robert Lepage revisits, 20 years after its first production, Needles and Opium. A new scenography, original images, and an acrobat onstage complement Cocteau’s words. The result is a production with mesmerizing effects, a journey into the night that puts us under a spell and leads us into the light.

Estimated time: 1h35, no intermission
Terrified at the thought of being confronted by the ghosts of my old ideals, I avoid reviving my first shows as much as possible. And since I unfortunately don’t have an ounce of nostalgia, I admit that I hesitated a long time when Marc Labrèche suggested remounting *Needles and Opium*. Created in 1991 following a painful break-up, *Needles and Opium* was a reflection on the impulses and sometimes painful situations that drive certain artists to create, drawing parallels between an addiction to love and a dependency on opiates.

I began the hard work of rewatching old VHS recordings from the archives and discovered that, although the staging was dated, the story hadn’t lost any of its relevance. Written before the first Web browser, social media, and the events of September 11, the protagonist’s existential questions are more universal than ever, and the excerpts from Jean Cocteau’s *A Letter to Americans* now seem almost prophetic.

But it wasn’t enough to just remount the play. I felt it was necessary to deepen it—and even finish writing it—because when dealing with feelings of love and relationship conflicts, there are things one only understands much later. Because of this, I believe that the current version of *Needles* and *Opium* has grown and matured significantly. The structure of the play is based on three men who lost a love: Jean Cocteau, Miles Davis and “Robert”. In the first version, the three-pronged story was uneven because the two white characters had a voice and were present in flesh and blood, but Miles Davis was only evoked by a silent, two-dimensional shadow. This time I felt the need to invite other performers onstage to allude to the famous trumpet player and to even make Juliette Gréco appear briefly. You might say that’s a lot of people for a solo show, but I’ve discovered over the years that sometimes it takes a crowd to best express solitude.

Enjoy the show!

Robert Lepage
Needles and Opium

Text Robert Lepage
English translation Jenny Montgomery
Director Robert Lepage
Director Assistant Normand Bissonnette
Performed by Olivier Normand
Wellesley Robertson III
Set Designer Carl Fillion
Props Designer Claudia Gendreau
Music and sound Designer Jean-Sébastien Côté
Lighting Designer Bruno Matte
Costume Designer François St-Aubin
Images Designer Lionel Arnould

The show contains excerpts from Jean Cocteau’s A Letter to Americans and Opium, the Diary of a Cure.

Director’s Agent Lynda Beaulieu
Production Manager Julie Marie Bourgeois
Assisted by Valérie Lambert
Technical Director Michel Gosselin
Tour Manager Charlotte Ménard
Stage Manager Adèle Saint-Amand
Sound Manager Marcin Bunar
Video Manager Thomas Payette
Lighting Manager Jean-François Piché
Costumes and Props Manager Claudia Gendreau
Head Stagehand Pierre Gagné
Stagehand Sylvain Bélard
Rigger Julien Leclerc
Automation Consultant Tobie Horswill
Video Consultant Catherine Guay
Make-up Jean Bégin
Costumes Carl Bezanson
Julie Sauriol
Set building Scène Éthique
Astuces Décor
Additional music

Générique by Miles Davis
Album: Ascenseur pour l'échafaud
Warner Chappell Music France / Bloc Notes Music Publishing
Courtesy of Universal Music Canada

Riff Tide
Words and music by Coleman Randolph Hawkins
© (ASCAP)

Tune Up (When Lights Are Low) by Miles Davis
Performed by Miles Davis Quintet
© 2006 Concord Music Group

Je suis comme je suis
Written by Joseph Kosma and Jacques Prévert
Courtesy of Universal Music Canada

My Funny Valentine
Music by Richard Rodgers, Lyrics by Lorenz Hart
Performed by Craig Pederson
© Courtesy of Rodgers & Hammerstein

The way you look tonight
Written by Dorothy Fields and Jerome Kern
© Universal - PolyGram International Publishing, Inc (ASCAP)
Used by Permission of Canadian Shapiro Bernstein
o/b/o Aldi Music Company
Performed by Marie Gignac

L'assassinat de Carala by Miles Davis
Album: Ascenseur pour l'échafaud
Warner Chappell Music France / Bloc Notes Music Publishing
Courtesy of Universal Music Canada

JS Côté
Contains a sample of Départ de Belle
Composed by Georges Auric
Performed by Adriano, Axios Chorus, Moscow Symphony Orchestra & Sergei Krivobokov
Album: La Belle et la Bête
Courtesy of Naxos of America

Smooch de Miles Davis and Charles Mingus
Performed by Miles Davis
© 2006 Concord Music Group

Broadway Follies by Ray Davies
Audio Network Canada Inc.

Additional images

Ascenseur pour l'échafaud
Louis Malle
©1958 NOUVELLES EDITIONS DE FILMS

Bridgeman Art Library

Désordre by Jacques Baratier © 1949 Argos Films.

Getty Images

Studio Harcourt

LIFE/Copyrights 1949 Time Inc.

Philippe Halsman/Magnum photos

Succession Jean Cocteau/SODRAC

NASA
NY Transit Museum

Prelinger Archives

*Un homme, une époque : Mouloudji*
Réa : Jean-Marie Coldefy 28/07/1961 © INA
Cinépanorama / Réa : Jean Kerchbron 19/12/1957 © INA
Festival Européen du Jazz © INA
Les Actualités Françaises, Saint Germain des Prés va-t-il prendre la relève du boul'mich? 27/10/1965 © INA

Trumpet played by
Craig L. Pedersen

Acrobatics consultants
Geneviève Bérubé, Yves Gagnon, Jean-Sébastien Fortin, Jean-François Faber

Production
Ex Machina

Co-production
Théâtre du Trident, Québec
Canadian Stage, Toronto
Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, Montréal
Adelaide Festival
New Zealand Festival
Le Grand T, théâtre de Loire-Atlantique
Les Quinconces-L’espal, scène conventionnée, théâtres du Mans
Célestins, Théâtre de Lyon
Le Volcan, Scène nationale du Havre
Festival de Otoño a Primavera, Madrid
ArtsEmerson: The World On Stage, Boston
NAC English Theatre with le Théâtre français du CNA
and the Magnetic North Theatre Festival
Setagaya Public Theatre, Tokyo
LG Arts Center, Seoul
The Barbican, London
La Comète - Scène nationale de Châlons-en-Champagne
La Comédie de Clermont-Ferrand scène nationale
Les Salins, scène nationale de Martigues
John F. Kennedy for Performing Arts
American Conservatory Theatre
«Marin Sorescu» National Theatre and Shakespeare Foundation, Craiova
The International Diaghilev Festival, Perm
Theatre Royal Plymouth

Ex Machina Producer
Michel Bernatchez, assisted by Vanessa Landry-Claverie

Associate Production - Europe, Japan
Epidemic (Richard Castelli, assisted by Chara Skiadelli, Florence Berthaud et Claire Dugot)

Associate Production - The Americas, Asia (except Japan), Australia, NZ
Menno Plukker Theatre Agent (Menno Plukker, assisted by Dominique Sarrazin, Isaïe Richard and Magdalena Marszalek)

Ex Machina is funded by the Canada Council for the Arts, Quebec’s Arts and Literature Council and the City of Quebec.
Olivier Normand
Actor

A graduate of the Conservatoire d’art dramatique de Quebec, Olivier Normand has performed on all of Quebec City’s stages. Most notably, he has played in Les Feluettes by Michel-Marc Bouchard, L’école des Femmes and Le Misanthrope by Molière, La nuit des rois by Shakespeare and Britannicus by Racine. Olivier Normand has also had a lead role in Playing Cards: HEARTS by Robert Lepage and Ex Machina and has reprised the famous role created by Lepage in Vinci during a revival in 2015.

He co-founded the Théâtre des 4 Coins, a youth theatre company. Their first show, Le fantôme de Canterville, has been played more than 300 times and has won the 2006 Critics’ Award.

Interested in movement, Olivier Normand teaches at the École de cirque de Québec. As stage director, Olivier Normand created Insomnia for the 2013-2014 Carrefour international de théâtre de Québec, as well as the Flip FabriQue’s first show, a circus show that has toured in 10 countries. He staged Crépuscule, another circus show seen by more than 110 000 people; a new version was presented in 2016. In 2017, he directed Le songe d’une nuit d’été, in co-production with Le Trident and Flip FabriQue.

Wellesley Robertson III
Actor

Born and raised in Toronto, Wellesley was first bitten by the performance bug when he was very young and has been performing ever since. Wellesley considers himself to be a mover, and has a background in acrobatics, physical theatre, breakdance and circus arts, he has been able to perform on stages all over the world; from San Francisco to London, from Bahrain to New Zealand and all parts in between and has been part of this incarnation of Needles and Opium since the beginning in 2013.

Other projects that he has worked on with Robert Lepage are The Tempest (Thomas Ades, 2012), The Canadian Opera Company’s production of Stravinsky’s The Nightingale and other Short Fables (2011-2012, 2018) and the critically acclaimed collaboration with the National Ballet of Canada, Frame by Frame (2018).

Having graduated from the conservatory at Second City and completing the diversity fellowship there as well when not performing as an acrobat, you can find him honing his skills as an improvisor or always looking for a great meal.

Instagram & twitter: @wellesley3rd
Robert Lepage
Author and director

Versatile in every form of theatre craft, Robert Lepage is equally talented as a director, playwright, actor and film director. His creative and original approach to theatre has won him international acclaim and shaken the dogma of classical stage direction to its foundations, especially through his use of new technologies.


As part of the festivities surrounding the Grand Bibliothèque’s 10th anniversary, Ex Machina has created, based on an original idea by Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, an exhibition inspired by Alberto Manguel’s The Library at Night. Multifaceted, The Library at Night (2015) embarks visitors on a journey through 10 libraries across the world, real or imagined, by means of virtual reality.


Robert Lepage’s work has been recognized by many awards. Among the most important: the Légion d’honneur (2002); the Denise Pelletier Prize (2003); the Hans Christian Andersen Prize (2004) for his outstanding artistic contribution to honouring Hans Christian Andersen worldwide; the Stanislavski Award (2005) for his contribution to international theatre; the Festival de l’Union des Théâtres de l’Europe honoured him with the distinguished Prix Europe (2007), previously awarded to Ariane Mnouchkine and Bob Wilson among others; the Médaille de la Ville de Québec (2011); and the Eugene McDermott Award in the Arts at MIT (2012). In 2013, he became the recipient of the Tenth Glenn Gould Prize awarded by the Glenn Gould Foundation and in 2015 he was awarded by the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ) for his contribution, his commitment and his dedication in developing, promoting and extending the influence of the Quebec culture.