Study Guide: Needles and Opium

An Ex Machina production presented by Canadian Stage, in co-production with Théâtre du Trident, Québec and Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, Montréal

Written and directed by ROBERT LEPAGE

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Overview and Context
A compilation of sources
Study Guide: Needles and Opium

A letter to teachers:

Education is a vital part of what we do at Canadian Stage. We are committed to sharing material with our audiences that will challenge, enrich and deepen their perspectives. As part of our 2013.2014 season we are delighted to offer students the opportunity to experience the work of one of Canada’s most renowned figures in performing arts, Robert Lepage, with a new production of his acclaimed Needles and Opium.

Presented as a hypnotic series of vignettes, this fascinating, introspective and high-tech show explores the complex relationships between displacement, drug addiction and the creative drive. Through his perfected process of Collective Creation, Lepage masterfully intertwines three storylines: Jean Cocteau’s return to Paris from New York, jazz musician’s Miles Davis’ first venture to the same city, and the heartbreak of a Québécois man named Robert, all set in 1949. The work highlights consistent themes in each man’s experience by utilizing stage trickery and technology along with carefully curated excerpts from Cocteau’s poetry as well as original text.

There is no script for Lepage’s Needles and Opium available. In this document I have compiled a variety of resources to provide background information about Robert Lepage’s style and process, along with the subjects he deals with in this piece with significant contributions from Karen Fricker, Assistant Professor of Dramatic Arts at Brock University. The intention is for students and teachers to feel equipped with adequate context when seeing the production and to maintain an open mind in order to draw your/their own conclusions and make unique personal connections to this rare theatrical adventure.

Links to drama, film, French, history and social studies curriculums will come to the surface as you peruse this guide. Clips from the original production are available online (see Appendix A), which may help clarify what to expect. It will not be until we see the production in action, however, that we can fully appreciate the craftsmanship and wizardry of Canada’s cherished multi-media performance art authority, Robert Lepage.

On Saturday, October 26, 2013 the Educator Advisory will be hosting a free Professional Exploration session for educators to suggest some appropriate pre-show activities for your students. To register you may contact me directly.

I hope that the mystery of what exactly we may expect from this show inspires thoughtful experimentation and discussion within your class.

See you at the theatre!

Cheers,

Erin Schachter, Education & Audience Development Manager
416.367.8243 x280
eschachter@canadianstage.com
Synopsis

Through highly visual staging, which is as much magic as it is theatre, Robert Lepage revisits, 20 years after its first production, Needles and Opium.

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 words and drawings of the prince of poets and the blue notes of the exceptional 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.

Through 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 the Miles Davis character onstage complement Cocteau’s words and Marc Labrèche’s sensitive and ingenious performance. 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.

Works Cited


Cast

Marc Labrèche
Wellesley Robertson III

Critical Exploration

Robert Lepage's art film for the stage
Contributed by: Karen Fricker, Assistant Professor of Dramatic Arts at Brock University

Introduction and Overview

Originally premiered in 1991, Needles and Opium (in French, Les Aiguilles et l’Opium) was Robert Lepage’s second major solo production. It placed the fictional story of a contemporary Québécois artist named Robert, suffering emotionally after a relationship breakup, alongside those of the

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American jazz musician Miles Davis and the French poet/filmmaker/playwright Jean Cocteau, who visited each others’ cities (New York and Paris) in the same time period, 1948-49. Both Davis and Cocteau had drug habits, and the production’s central metaphor was the likening of love to addiction. Depictions of the three figures were intercut to suggest parallels between Robert’s angst, and Davis’ and Cocteau’s addictions to opiates. The production is being revived by Lepage’s company Ex Machina and will tour from Québec City to Montreal and Toronto.

Theatrical Context

Lepage himself performed in the production for its first three years, when it toured throughout Canada, the US, Germany, France, the UK, Italy, Spain, and Sweden. In an innovation which became standard practice for Ex Machina, Lepage was then replaced by another actor, the Quebecois Marc Labrèche, who further toured with the production for two years in North America, Europe, and Japan. The production also featured another performer who served as a body double in order to enable a number of quick changes and visual tricks, but who did not consistently represent any of the characters.

Overall, the production was relatively low-tech: its central scenic feature was a large screen that revolved on a horizontal axis. The main performer (Lepage or Labrèche) sometimes appeared in a harness hanging above the stage, reciting passages of Cocteau’s Lettre aux Américains (Letter to the Americans). Many visual effects were accomplished by simple overhead projection, and by shadow play. There was a soundtrack that highlighted Davis' music.

For this 2013 revival, Lepage is revisiting and reworking the original material. At the time of writing, not much is known about this reworking (therefore the comments I make here about the 1991 version may not fully apply to this new version). About the restaging, Ex Machina’s website says this:

Throughout those years, [Lepage’s] constant search for significant and original methods of expression has led him to take a more mature look at this story where the mundane and extraordinary come together. The progress in technology and the multiplication of sources of information enrich the storyline and allow for new artistic narrative which will make the play relevant in the present day.

Given Lepage’s renowned ability to integrate technology into his stage storytelling, it seems likely that the new staging will be spectacular and visually impressive. The 2013 revival once again features Labrèche, and another performer, the Toronto-based actor/acrobat Wellesley Robertson III. Photos on the Ex Machina website showing Robertson holding a trumpet seem to indicate that, for at least part of the time, Robertson will embody Miles Davis in the show.

Editor’s note: learn more about the 2013 production here.

Autobiography - or is it?

As soon as he started to make his own theatre productions, Lepage employed personal, autobiographical material in it, and has acknowledged throughout his career that making theatre about himself helps him understand his life. “Everyone makes shows a little bit for therapy,” he told Josette Féral in 1988. “Theatre helped me find myself” (p. 140). He underlined this in 1999 to Mark Fisher: “There’s no distinction between my work, my personal life, and my love life. My private life is my work.” The autobiographical relationship between Lepage and his work is rarely as straightforward as characters and events mapping exactly onto events in Lepage’s life; rather, he uses his own experience and his own preoccupations as creative springboards. As James Bunzli
argues, Lepage’s projects are “built in response to a series of ongoing responses – personal, artistic, and political” (1999, p. 98) to what Rémy Charest has called “the chaos of [Lepage’s] existence” (p. 66). About the personal references in his work, Lepage told Brian D. Johnson “…that’s why you do art – to know what you’re about.”

His first solo piece, Vinci (1986)*, concerns an artist who travels to Europe to recover from the suicide of a friend and fellow artist; Lepage has confirmed in interview that this fictional trip was based on a real-life trip he took to Europe, prompted by his own friend’s suicide attempt. The larger point of the production, however, for Lepage, was an examination of artistic integrity:

Integrity is the attempt to find out who you are, to figure out your morals…. I’m not saying that I can really know who I am, but I understood a little bit, travelling in Europe and doing research for Vinci… who I was artistically. I want to try to stay true to that; that’s essential for a work of art (Cited in Fréchette).

Polygraph (1988), which Lepage co-created with Marie Brassard and Gyllian Raby, is a fictionalization of the real-life murder of one of Lepage’s closest friends, for which Lepage was briefly a suspect. The creators adapted events and changed real names in the making of Polygraph, one of whose central characters, the actor François, is, like Lepage, a suspect in the crime. Later Lepage called the play “an act of mourning, a way to untangle very, very dark feelings about that event. But it was also about filmmaking, about the ethics of telling a true story” (Cited in O’Mahoney).

Needles and Opium is the only production in which Lepage named the central character directly after himself, but in a 1992 interview with me, he still resisted directly identifying himself with the fictional Robert, quickly changing the subject to the larger thematic frame suggested by the show’s juxtaposition of Miles Davis and Jean Cocteau:

[Robert] is myself, and not myself. He’s a Quebecker, and what’s so strange about our culture in Quebec is that we are halfway between French and English… we are North Americans and European, and I thought it was interesting to add a third character that has a Cocteau and a Davis side.

It is now generally accepted, however, that the fictional Robert, who in the show is recovering from a devastating romantic breakup, is a self-identified character and that Lepage was using the show to recover from the “meltdown” of one of his own relationships, as he told John O’Mahoney in 2001.

Needles’ Robert and Vinci’s Philippe are instances of a prototypical figure which Lepage has placed in all his early original works, a Québécois artist on a physical and personal journey who stands in for Lepage himself. Of these characters as they appear in his solo productions, Lepage told Bunzli that they “[speak] for me, in my voice” (2000, p. 23). Underlining their autobiographical nature, all of the abovementioned characters were originally played by Lepage himself.

Given these self-references, Bunzli argued in 1999 that Lepage’s “entire oeuvre to date pieces together an ongoing autobiography,” but one that is “postmodern” and “fragmented” (p. 98). Bunzli asserts that Lepage expresses an “identity as a postmodern subject” through “the interaction of character and persona” (2000, p. 37) – that is, the fact that he creates fictional characters who represent him, and then performs them himself, in the work. Similarly, Ann Wilson argues that Needles and Opium and works like it are compelling because they “render the self as complex”; in them
the self-consciousness of the performer producing his identity in the context of a wide range of social forces disrupts the notion of a coherent self which can be told in a story (p. 37).

It is my view, however, that while individual works could be interpreted as postmodern expressions, we can trace a strong and coherent narrative through Lepage’s early stage work communicating an idealised vision of a desired personal and spiritual wholeness. There were clear indications in the productions (and Lepage’s commentary on them) of a way of seeing the world in which a clear and unmediated sense of self is the goal of existence, and that a viable means for Lepage to achieve this was by performing characters and situations that represented himself on stage.

As his career developed, Lepage continued to use autobiographical material in the creation of his original works, particularly his solo shows. In *The Far Side of the Moon* (2000, made into a 2003 film in French as *La face cachée de la Lune*) he grappled with his mother’s death and with emerging concerns around personal and artistic legacy. *The Andersen Project* (2005) was the first solo production in which, rather than portraying himself as a struggling artist, Lepage acknowledges his international fame and status, and uses his self-identified character as a means to satirize the high-stakes performing art world in which *The Andersen Project* itself participated.

Since that time, Lepage’s career has branched in many ambitious formal directions: has directed two major circus shows for Cirque du Soleil; numerous opera projects including a complete staging of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle for the Metropolitan Opera; and created a ground-breaking outdoor sound-and-light spectacle, *Le Moulin à Images* (*The Image Mill*) which ran for the past six summers in Québec City. At the same time he has continued to create original large-scale collaborative theatre pieces including the nine-hour *Lipsynch* (2007) and, currently, *Cards* (2012), a four-part production in which each section is themed around a suit in the pack of cards (spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs). While these productions are all doubtless fed by Lepage's preoccupations, ideas, and feelings (along with those of his collaborators), this mature work is less obviously autobiographical than his previous creations. It will therefore be particularly interesting to see in the reworked *Needles and Opium* how Lepage treats the personal material in it.

* Nearly all of Lepage’s productions tour for multiple years. The dates I include here are of their premieres.

**Creating a Cinematic Scenography**

The time he first created *Needles and Opium* was one of enormous creative productivity and experimentation for Lepage, in which he was trying out different scales of production (solo, several-character, large-scale) and different ways of working with other creative partners. While Lepage has always preferred creating collaboratively, his work bears a distinct personal artistic signature, and it was during this time (the late 1980s and early 1990s) that this signature was really coming into focus. Lepage’s theatremaking is often described as “cinematic”, and we can liken some of his early productions to different film genres. *The Dragon’s Trilogy* (1985) is in many ways a sustained, epic-scale melodrama. *Polygraph* was Lepage’s stage thriller, his first sustained foray into the detective genre, with which he would further engage in his first film, *Le Confessional* (1995).

Continuing in this vein, it’s useful to think of *Needles and Opium* as Lepage’s art film, by which I mean the subgenre of film that emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s created by auteurs such as Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Jean Renoir, and François Truffault. *Needles and Opium* is like an art film (as influentially defined by film theorist David Bordwell) in that it poses a different and more complex “reality” than do classic narrative forms like the 19th century novel. In its original version,
"Needles and Opium" was notable for the indirect, layered, fragmented quality of its narrative. Less than a sense of forward-moving plot, the production's effect was one of visual, aural, and thematic accumulation, as scenes featuring Robert were interspersed with monologues by Cocteau and silhouetted images of Davis against sounds of his music. As Lepage suggested to Alison McAlpine, "[the production] has layers of stories that are connecting. The action that you see is that connection, and the connection is a vertical one" (p. 144).

He is making a distinction here from a traditional story arc, in which events line up in a linear order towards a conclusion -- which we might call horizontal storytelling, to which Lepage contrasts his "vertical" theatremaking style. Describing his narrative structure in such terms is typical of the spatial and multi-dimensional nature of Lepage's creative imagination. This is an approach that is more analogical than critical, and one that invests considerably in audiences' engagement: he places ideas, stories or impressions in relationship to each other -- he suggests that x is like y -- and invites spectators to explore the connections between x and y, and determine what the larger stakes are in those relationships. We can liken this to the way plot is communicated in art films: cause and effect are drawn out and the there are multiple gaps in the story which may never be filled in.

Frequently, an art film is presented as reflecting the subjective reality of an individual in what Bordwell calls "a boundary situation" - a pivotal moment in which the protagonist recognises that "she or he faces a crisis of existential significance" (p. 208). In "Needles", Robert's extreme distress in the face of his recent breakup, compounded by being far from home, represented his boundary situation; and the choppy, non-linear, dreamlike (sometimes nightmarish) quality of the production's construction was a reflection of this existential crisis.

Spectators were invited to identify with Robert in an initial monologue, addressed to the audience, in which he revealed how, while working in Paris as a voice-over artist on a documentary film about Miles Davis, he started to feel anguished and as if he was losing his ability to speak. Robert goes on to reveal that he was carrying a Davis recording and a copy of Cocteau's 'Lettre aux Américains' when he arrived at Charles de Gaulle airport. This provides the only link or cue to the subsequent scenes, in which Cocteau and Davis are represented. The spectator's job here is not to piece these pieces into a coherent, forward-moving, cause-and-effect-driven story; rather, it is to appreciate that this is an experience taking place in "psychological time, not Newtonian time" (Bordwell, p. 209), one in which part of the pleasure will derive from an appreciation of the creator's style.

Coincidence in Art Films and Lepage's "Needles"

Particularly relevant here is the role that coincidence plays in art film narration - and, frequently, in Lepage's narratives. In talking about the genesis of "Needles and Opium", Lepage celebrated the role of coincidence as the spur for creative intuitions which turn out, in his perception, to reflect truth. As he told Paul Léfevre in 1993, he had become interested in Cocteau when his friend and collaborator Richard Fréchette introduced him to the "Lettre aux Américains", but did not feel inspired to make a show about Cocteau until he read a biography of Davis and "started to make links with Cocteau's text".

The original production of "Needles" included a clip from Louis Malle's film "Elevator to the Gallows", for which Davis had improvised music; Malle saw "Needles and Opium" in its first version and spoke to Lepage afterwards, confirming that "some details [about Davis]" that Lepage had invented in fact were true. Similarly, during the run of the show, Lepage met an elderly aristocratic Frenchwoman in whose home Cocteau had stayed during the Second World War. She, too, "confirmed some intuitive discoveries" Lepage had made about the French poet. For a time before he made "Needles", Lepage had felt that he needed to rationally examine everything he contributed to a creative process, which
"took a lot of the soul out of my work." But his experiences meeting those who could affirm his instincts about Cocteau and Davis prompted Lepage to perform the show more confidently, he says, and taught him to "be true to my creative instincts."

This emphasis on coincidence as a stimulus for the creation of Needles and Opium brings us back to the question of artistic signature. Bordwell's final key aspect of art cinema is the central role of the creator's imagination and sensibility in unifying and delivering the material. If art films are fragmented, leave gaps for the spectator to fill in, and self-consciously point to their status as film, this draws attention to the auteur figure standing behind their complex construction. Needles and Opium was an early point where we can see Lepage's authorial signature coming into focus with particular clarity; the production offered itself to us as an exercise in composition, mood, and style.

A Signature Style

It is interesting to note that it was with Needles and Opium that journalistic critics began to recognize and comment upon what they were starting to perceive as an identifiable Lepage style. In his New York Observer review, John Heilpern praised Lepage for his capacity to "expand the frontiers of theatre and produce images of great beauty," and chided those who had compared Lepage to Peter Brook:

Mr. Brook is the master magician who says to us: 'look, I have nothing up my sleeve.' He uses minimum means for maximum imaginative effect. Mr. Lepage is the magician with everything up his sleeve, not that he minds us knowing.

Ian Shuttleworth, in London's City Limits, saw Needles and Opium as further proof of Lepage's "phenomenal sensitivity both to the mechanical possibilities and the evocative emotional potential of theatre", which "continues to leave one awestruck." Already, only eight years into his touring career, Lepage was understood to have a distinctive authorial signature which created expectations around his work, and gave it particular value - and it was with this theatrical art film that this signature really took hold.

References
All translations from French-language sources are mine.


Note: Some of this material is adapted from my upcoming book Making Theatre Global: Robert Lepage’s Original Stage Productions which will be published in 2015 by Manchester University Press. I request that it not be excerpted or reprinted beyond this Canadian Stage educational context without my permission.

Historical Context

Jean Cocteau

Jean Cocteau (July 5, 1889-October 11, 1963) was an accomplished French novelist, poet, designer, dramatist, filmmaker, artist, and playwright. His body of work is expansive, but consistently has a surrealist focus.

Jean Cocteau’s impression of, and on, America

Les Parents terrible, shot…in May-June 1948, was Cocteau’s artistic counter-response [to criticism regarding his previous film, The Eagle with Two Heads. In response to criticism for being artificial and over-theatrical, Les Parents terrible was] a ‘hypotheatre’ that ‘detheatricalized’ his original play while remaining utterly faithful to its theatrical ‘mechanism’… The [film] is a work of calculated voyeuristic fascination as we observe in keyhole detail every movement and twitch of the characters, who, although blessed with the potential for free will, are also creatures of squirming
organic matter. Almost every frame in the film becomes like a cage squeezing them ever tighter in their sealed tragic world.

Following the successful release of Les Parents terribles, Cocteau embarked in December 1948 on a short trip to America to promote The Eagle With Two Heads (the original play starring Tallulah Bankhead had been badly translated and poorly received on Broadway). He was shepherded around New York variously by the French consul, the actor Jean-Pierre Aumont and the art historian and critic of the Museum of Modern Art, Monroe Wheeler, and he made brief contact with assorted stars and celebrities, such as Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo and ‘Panama’ Al Brown. Except while on stage presenting his work or in the company of friends, Cocteau played the part of the rude and condescending Parisian and ostentatiously declined to speak English. He found time, however, to execute some dazzlingly homoerotic photo sessions for Life magazine with the photographer Philippe Halsman featuring the black dancer Leo Coleman. One series of these ‘living paintings’, where Cocteau as the Poet brings an image to life, was never published because it exposed Coleman’s nipple. In another Cocteau portrayed himself as a multi-talented monster-magician with three pairs of hands smoking, drawing and reading. On the overnight flight back to France in mid-January 1949 he dashed off an essay entitled Lettre aux Americains. This was not one of his finest moments, for he is often here at his incorrigible worst, at once snobbish, arch and withering. Believing that his twenty days in New York gave him the right to speak about all Americans, he indulged in some truly warped clichés about a nation founded exclusively on material success and scientism. If only ‘you Americans’ had the capacity for self-criticism and experimentation, he admonishes, you could learn sometimes that two plus two can equal five! Act more like who you are, a people of intuitive, childlike heroes, for once you have saved yourselves you will then be able to achieve your preordained mission of preserving the dignity of all mankind. The saving grace in all of this is yet again Cocteau’s mordant self-deprecation. He can say all this because he is, after all, just a relic of old Europe, or more specifically that ‘old French Farmyard’, a land of dupery that still possessed some genius. We observe once again that whenever Cocteau returns to France from abroad it is always to re-evaluate his homeland and with it his own identity. The French, he asserts, are strong in their weakness and thus have contempt for their own products, otherwise they would be terribly vain. And whereas Americans are not really free, and worse, do not even know it since they are afraid to open themselves up to their dreams and the unconscious, ‘I’ – that is to say, the unique Jean Cocteau – am a bastion of authentic freedom and ‘disorder’, a true individual with an ‘agile mind’. This smug self declaration provokes some personal home truths, however, that reveal Cocteau’s own inner insecurities. He may be one of the world’s last free men but he is also one of the most alone: ‘I’m speaking of those like me who always expect to get hit’, he rue.

**Lepage on Cocteau**

Robert Lepage was originally introduced to Cocteau’s poetry during his studies at Conservatoire d’art dramatique de Quebec. “Lepage could identify with the world created in Cocteau’s work, the world of contemporary mythology, poetic transformations, and eroticism...He was particularly drawn to the way Cocteau brought everyday life into mythology, or rather to the way he interjected mythological references into real life...[Furthermore], the Coctelian way of creating stories out of sequences and of transforming visual imagery inspired Lepage’s theatricality.” (Dundjerović, 2007)

Furthermore, Lepage states that

> If we have nothing to say, the form remains simply the form, the medium the medium. But if we have something to say, the medium will be the message. I have met some remarkable men who argue this, who know this. Cocteau knew this and, as I noticed while researching Needles, he was criticized throughout his life for the
same things as I am. He was considered an acrobat, an aesthete without substance, a formalist. But once the dust settles, you see what endures.

When Cocteau writes about opium, you can find the rhythm and movement of opium in his poetry. And the moment one reads it aloud one realizes this. When I pick this theme up in Needles and Opium, this is the moment in the show when I am not in a harness, when Cocteau’s character isn’t flying. And it’s also the moment when it’s most easy to cast a spell on the audience with words.

And Cocteau’s genius is that his writing reflects the nature of his themes: speed, translucence, childhood. Cocteau saw – or wished to see – death through the veil of life. His poetic theories overlap with some contemporary scientific theories. For example, according to Cocteau, the reason we don’t see other dimensions – the world of spirits – is because they move at a much greater speed than we do. This is where the image of a propeller came from in Needles. Is there anything more solid, more cutting and more opaque than a propeller? But when it turns, it becomes transparent, it seems immaterial and it no longer prevents us from seeing what’s hidden behind it. But if you put your hand through it, the propeller will cut it off. This is what death is like. Here, Cocteau touched on characteristics of matter that preoccupy many scientists today. (Charest, 1995, pp. 164-5)

If you want to stage the birth of a new world, built on the ruins of an older one, you have to portray the world in ruins to make this transformation explicit. Cocteau says at the end of Needles and Opium, ‘One world will end, another will begin. Americans, it seems that you will decide whether we have darkness or light.’ Everything remains open. In 1949, he saw clearly that the United States would dominate the second half of the century, would decide whether we had war or peace. In his mind, we had to live through this war of massive destruction, of holocaust, genocide and the atomic bomb. The war had led many people towards darkness, but for Cocteau the outcome of world conflict provided instead an opportunity for rebirth from ashes. (Charest, 1995, p. 91)

Works Cited:


Miles Davis: a love affair with Paris

While segregation raged in the US, Miles Davis found the freedom and respect he craved in Paris. A new exhibition shows the feeling was mutual
Paris is many things: a city of romance; a hotbed of culture, and the inspiration for countless artists, musicians and poets. It's also a place that, for more than 40 years, had a special relationship with the jazz trumpeter Miles Davis. Paris was the first foreign city Davis ever visited, and it was one of the last major cities he played in, shortly before his death on 28 September 1991. Now the relationship between musician and city is celebrated in a new exhibition at the Musée de la Musique.

In 1949, a 22-year-old Davis travelled to Paris, as part of a quintet that included the pianist Tadd Dameron. The quintet was booked to play at the first Paris international jazz festival since the war ended. In the US, Davis was already a rising star in the jazz world, but while he was highly respected among his peers, in mainstream America he was seen as a second-class citizen. It was a time when segregation and discrimination were rife, and most US states enforced anti-miscegenation laws. But France was a different story, and nothing could have prepared Davis for the reception he would receive in Paris. "This was my first trip out of the country," recalled Davis in his autobiography. "It changed the way I looked at things forever ... I loved being in Paris and loved the way I was treated. Paris was where I understood that all white people were not the same; that some weren't prejudiced."

"Miles often talked about Paris," says the Australian film director Rolf de Heer, who worked with Davis in Paris in 1990. "The French were in love with Miles and treated him like a god. He liked that because it was a form of respect he didn't get in his own country." French jazz pianist René Urtreger adds: "Miles was proud and touched by the fact that in France, jazz was considered to be very important music."

The Miles Davis and Tadd Dameron quintet played at the Salle Pleyel concert hall, and Davis was soon befriended by Boris Vian, a 29-year-old French polymath, whose numerous talents included writing, poetry, engineering, songwriting and playing jazz trumpet. Vian introduced Davis to Picasso and Jean-Paul Sartre, and the group would sit together in hotels, cafes and clubs in the Saint-Germain district, using a mixture of broken French, broken English and sign language to communicate. Davis also met another acquaintance of Vian's: the actor and singer Juliette Gréco. Gréco, who was almost the same age as Davis, first met him at the Salle Pleyel: Gréco stood in the wings with Vian's wife, Michelle, watching Davis play. Gréco's long black hair, large dark eyes and petite frame soon attracted Davis. Gréco in turn, was entranced: "I caught a glimpse of Miles, in profile: a real Giacometti, with a face of great beauty," she said in a 2006 interview. They were introduced and fell in love.
Davis and Gréco would often explore Paris together; walking hand-in-hand by the banks of the Seine, drinking in cafes and listening to music in clubs. "Juliette was probably the first woman that I loved as an equal human being," recalled Davis. He also fell in love with Paris; with its smells of coffee and cologne, and with the freedom it offered.

Davis wasn't the only black American musician who fell for the charms of Paris, and some (like the drummer Kenny Clarke) decided to stay in France rather than return to a harsher life in the US. But back home, Davis had a partner and two young children. He said goodbye to Gréco (although they would remain in touch all their lives) and returned home. But back in America, jazz was in crisis, with clubs closing down and gigs becoming harder to find. Depressed by his longing for Gréco, his status in American society and deteriorating work prospects, Davis became a heroin addict. It would take him four years to kick the habit.

In 1956, a cleaned-up Davis returned to Paris for the start of a European tour featuring the Birdland All Stars (Birdland was a top New York jazz club, and other artists on the tour included saxophonist Lester Young and pianist Bud Powell). Davis played with a French rhythm trio that included Urtreger: "The 1950s were a golden age for jazz in France," says Urtreger. "In England, you had union laws that restricted the number of American jazz artists who could play there, but in France, we welcomed everybody." Davis also formed a romantic attachment with Urtreger's older sister, Jeannette. The following year, he returned to Paris for another tour and was joined again by Urtreger. Around the same time, Davis was asked by French director Louis Malle to compose the soundtrack to the film noir Ascenseur pour l'Echafaud (Lift to the Scaffold). The soundtrack, consisting of improvised music played by Davis, Urtreger and others, was a huge success.

Davis regularly returned to Paris throughout the rest of his life. In 1989, he received one of Paris's highest awards, the Grande Médaille de Vermeil, which was presented to him by the then mayor of Paris (and future French president) Jacques Chirac. Urtreger attended the ceremony: "Miles was very moved and very honoured," he says. In the same year, Davis played at the 10th annual Paris festival of jazz. The next summer, Davis spent three weeks filming in Paris, playing the role of a jazz trumpeter in the movie Dingo. "I'll never forget after we had shot the final scene," says De Heer. "We were on the banks of the Seine and Miles turned to me and said, 'I just don't want this to end,' and part of the reason was that he was so comfortable being in Paris."

On 10 July 1991, Davis played a remarkable concert in the city at the Grande Halle de la Villette. Entitled Miles and Friends, it saw the trumpeter and his current band playing with many of his old associates including saxophonists Jackie McLean and Wayne Shorter, keyboardists Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock and Joe Zawinul, and guitarists John Scofield and John McLaughlin. The English bassist Dave Holland, who played with Davis in the late 1960s, also took part: "It was like a festival based around Miles and people who had played with him," he says. The French pianist Katia Labèque met Davis in his dressing room afterwards: "He was very moved and very happy about the concert," she notes. Six days later, Davis was back in Paris to receive one of France's highest cultural awards: he became a Knight of the Legion of Honour. Davis received the award from French culture minister Jack Lang, who described him as: "The Picasso of jazz." Barely two months later, the musician was dead.

But Paris's love affair with Davis lives on. In October, a major Miles Davis exhibition opened at the Musée de la Musique. Called We Want Miles, it gathers together some 400 Davis-related items (including music scores, videos, instruments and photographs) from around the world. "Miles is the first jazz musician to be honoured in this way," says exhibition curator Vincent Bessières. He says that the number of visitors is expected to reach 50,000-70,000 – similar to the numbers who attended previous exhibitions on John Lennon and Jimi Hendrix.
The reason is simple, says Bessières: "Paris was special to Miles, and Miles was special to Paris."

Opium
The following is recorded from an interview with Robert Lepage, in his own words, with an introduction by Rémy Charest.

Excerpt from:
Pages 75-78

One of the most striking images of Robert Lepage’s work is the screen projection of a huge syringe plunging into Miles Davis’s silhouetted arm in his solo show Needles and Opium. Though it may not always have been as directly illustrated, the theme of drug use and its various effects on the user have been present in almost all of the director’s plays, in one form or another. For the director, the theme is important for its metaphorical qualities and because it allows for the transformation of perception, in characters as well as in audiences.

I think that *Needles and Opium* marks a kind of culminating point in our use of the drug theme, which appears quite frequently in our works. In *Circulations*, there’s a scene in which two guys and a girl are smoking a joint in a motel, quietly talking in the moonlight that’s streaming in through a skylight above them. Then the stage goes to black and when the lights come up we see the same scene but through the skylights, in other words, from the point of view of the moon. It was the first time we used an inverted perspective in our work. The actors were stretched out horizontally, giving the audience the impression they were watching the characters from the sky, from above. And it was the use of drugs that made this kind of poetic transposition possible.

In general, although the drug theme is partly linked to the period and place in which the narratives unfold, it also provides a means for us to express certain metaphors. Drugs allow you to present things from a very different point of view on the pretext that a character is under their influence. So we can move from the level of realistic performance to one of poetry, showing different facets of a scene, depending on what the subject allows.

Drugs provide a transformative tool at both a scenic and narrative level. *Needles and Opium* revolves to a great extent around two artists, Miles Davis and Jean Cocteau, who both sought inspiration through drugs. But really they found inspiration the moment they stopped taking drugs. Miles made his mark only after his four years of intoxication and four weeks of detoxification were over. The same for Cocteau – also four years and four weeks. Cocteau found a certain kind of inspiration in opium, but it was mostly a balm for the pain caused by the death of his lover, Raymond Radiguet. And the pain of his detoxification brought about a genuine return to inspiration. The transformation doesn’t only come about because the narcotics make you see cockroaches or alter your mood, but because they transport you to another level...
Beyond its transformative effects, there’s another constant in the drug theme in my shows, which is opium itself. In *The Dragons’ Trilogy*, the opium that the old Chinese man introduces to Crawford leads us into a dance to the deadened beat of the drug. Heroin, a derivative of opium, plays a more or less central role in *Tectonic Plays*, in *Needles* and in *Seven Streams*. If I keep coming back to these drugs, it’s because of an experience I had when I was a teenager that left me in a state of depression for almost two years.

When I was fourteen, I tried drugs for the first time with a girl I was falling in love with. No big deal. We smoked tea and then a little marijuana, which didn’t have that much of an effect on us. But one day, she had a fling with another guy. I was deeply affected, deeply hurt by the whole thing. I was discovering what it meant to be in love, which also meant accepting love’s painful consequences. When I continued to do drugs in the following weeks, it had a different effect, and I had a real bad trip from a joint spiked with opium. For two years, I was prescribed anti-depressants. I would go to school but would run straight home afterwards and watch TV. That’s all I did.

I felt the state I was in was the result of the drugs, which I also connected to the notion of interchangeability, to the ambiguity of emotions and sexuality...It took me a very long time to realize that my depression wasn’t due to my bad trip, but even so, after those six months of experimenting, I rarely shared a joint at parties. I never really touched the stuff again. I’m now grateful to that bad trip for helping me to see the relative sides of reality and unreality and for pushing me to become introspective, which I wasn’t inclined to be before.

To benefit from the experience, though, I still had to surface from my depression, and this I owe to my sister, Lynda, who pushed me really hard to act in my first play, *Le p’tit Bonheur* by Félix Leclerc. It was often put on in drama classes at my high school, along with his *L’auberge des morts subites* because there were lots of parts for everyone. I liked the drama classes a lot, which I sort of had to take because the programme of studies required us to take one arts course a year and drama was just about the only option I hadn’t taken.

But in the state I was in, I just couldn’t imagine going on stage. First of all, I never went out of the house at night, and I couldn’t see myself performing to a hall filled with people. But the group I was working with on the play were really counting on me because it had been going well and, while some of the others were scared and had given up their parts, I had kept up with all of my small parts. And I have to say I really liked the rehearsals. So my sister decided that enough was enough and that I would do the play. She would dress me up and put me in a taxi and I would cry. I didn’t want to go. But she forced me to and in the end I did it, and it was a great success. And then I began to crave this appreciation which had liberated me from my state of withdrawal. It helped to bring me back out into the world.

By overcoming stage fright, I began to understand what it meant to conquer something – since stage fright gives you a terrible and inexpressible vertigo, but also an incredible adrenalin rush. Because overcoming stage fright had changed my life, I wanted to create a context in which I could throw myself into the battle every night and come out on top. So I made it my profession. Sometimes, it becomes almost more important than the play.

Appendix A: Excerpt from *Gordon Craig in the multi-media postmodern world: from the Art of the Theatre to Ex Machina* by: Christopher Innes

http://130.63.63.23/crc/resources/essays/craig_lepage_wales.php
An Overview of *Needles and Opium* including clips of original production from 1991

First performed in 1991, *Needles and Opium* sets up parallels between drug-addiction, psychological obsession and art. The figures of the American jazz musician Miles Davis, and the French poet Jean Cocteau, caught at a moment in 1949 when each visited the other’s country, are linked through the experience of a Francophone north-American in the present (forty years later) alone in a Paris hotel room and making frantic transatlantic telephone calls to an estranged lover. On the surface, because they never actually met each other, placing the American trumpeter and the French poet together is an image of disjunction and displacement; and this sense of separation -- of things falling apart -- is intensified by the modern-day figure of the young Quebecker who literally cannot connect at all.

Miles Davis was on his way to Paris, where he fell hopelessly in love with Juliette Gréco and then spiraled into self-destructive heroin abuse. At exactly the same time Cocteau was flying to New York, high on opium and mourning the death of his lover (the novelist Raymond Radiguet) while writing *Lettre aux Américains*. Each is moving in the opposite direction -- while Lepage’s alter-ego (named Robert, which of course is Lepage’s own name) is cut off in his hotel room, and taking cocaine as well as suffering from the disorienting effects of hypnosis therapy.

Yet underlying this geographical and psychological fragmentation is a net of coincidental correspondences. Cocteau made a film with Juliette Gréco immediately after her relationship with Miles Davis broke up; both Cocteau and Davis were high on derivatives of the same drug -- as is the modern-day Robert; and the art of each changed in response to meeting an alien society for the first time; while their music and poetry are integrated in the cultural context of the present. As Lepage puts it:

"It’s important to see all these old European surrealist roots and newer things like jazz and black culture that’s actually embedded in everything [now]."

The excerpts you’re going to see aren’t quite in order. The first segment shows a group of scenes illustrating the multimedia nature of the performance -- not only the combination of the live actor on stage, filmed action, back-projection and recorded sound, but also the integration of action and musical score (theatre aspiring -- quite literally here -- to the condition of music, in Craig’s terms). Note the way abstract shapes turn into a familiar physical object -- note too the disorienting effect of shifts in scale -- plus the extreme illusion of movement that Lepage creates through his use of video projection.

Launch video clip of *Needles & Opium* [ opens in new window ]

One of the striking things about that last sequence is the way the fire-escapes of a New York apartment building are transformed from background scenery to symbols of Cocteau’s effortless transcendence -- an acrobat of the soul indeed -- then into the fall of Icarus. Finally there’s a scene showing Lepage’s ability to draw spectators in to the action, and the effect of lighting or film on the neutral screen. All these segments are to some extent hallucinatory -- the aim of the piece being to draw us in to the psychosis of the central figure, whose drug use and therapy have caused him to lose touch with reality, and to open us to the liberation of fantasy. Here we pick up on the end of a long monologue where Lepage tells us this quite explicitly.

Launch video clip of *Needles & Opium* [ opens in new window ]
Since today's society has a film education, Lepage insists theatre must "use the capacity of an audience to read things in fast-forward, jump cuts. . . People have a new language, and it's not all linear." [iii] And in *Needles and Opium* there are two moments that together could stand as an emblem for this approach. The first is the last segment you've just seen, where Lepage is suspended on wires and revolving vertiginously against a disorienting spinning disk, which dissolves into a checker board floor through which a hole starts to burn: destabilization. The second is when the separate pieces of the trumpet, looking like purely abstract shapes, become reassembled into the musical instrument: reintegration. And that trumpet image highlights another aspect of Lepage's structure: the use of cross-media intertextuality.
This Study Guide was created and compiled by:

Erin Schachter, Education & Audience Development Manager
Megan MacDonald, Education Intern

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Erin Schachter eschachter@canadianstage.com
Alicia Roberge alicia.roberge@tdsb.on.ca
Brendon Allen ballen@bss.on.ca
Christine Jackson
Janet O’Neill
Jennifer Burak Jennifer.burak@tdsb.on.ca
Julian Richings
Kristen Beach kristen.beach@tdsb.on.ca
Laurence Siegel ljsiegel@sympatico.ca
Melissa Farmer mfarmer@branksome.on.ca
Michael Limerick Michael.limerick@tdsb.on.ca
Sally Spofforth Sally.spofforth@tdsb.on.ca