

NEEDLES & OPIUM

Jonathan Gottelier Reviews a solo piece by Robert Lepage at the Lyttleton Theatre, RNT

Robert Lepage is making quite a name for himself: artistic director of French Theatre at The National Arts Centre (Canada's National Theatre), first North American to direct Shakespeare at Britain's Royal National Theatre, and the accolade of having had an edition of the BBC's Omnibus made about him. The word genius is regularly linked with his name.

Add to this the fact that at the time of the performances of *Needles & Opium* in November last, his productions were filling the two largest of the Royal National Theatre's three auditoria - The Olivier Theatre was playing host to Lepage's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and you begin to realise the level of impact he is making.

Needles & Opium is a stunning piece of theatre, all the more impressive for the fact that it is a solo piece. It takes three unconnected stories and weaves them into one spell-binding piece, pulling elements from each of the three stories, making emotional or accidental connections between them, and continually flitting from one story to the other. The three elements are as follows: Hotel Louisianne, Paris, 1989 and a young man is on the line to New York trying to reach the lover who has rejected him; Hotel Louisianne, Paris, 1949 and Miles Davis is falling in love with Juliette Greco; high above the Atlantic Ocean, Jean Cocteau, flying back after his first trip to New York, drafts a letter to the American people.

At this point you may be saying to yourself, why is L&SI covering such a small scale theatrical production, no matter who it's by? The answer to these questions lies in its staging and is best provided by a quotation from the Observer's review of the piece: "*Needles & Opium* is the most technically adroit and emotionally coherent mixed media presentation I have ever seen".

To help him combine the different elements within the show, while at the same time keeping them distinct and also keeping the audience clearly informed of what is going on, Lepage has used a whole cocktail of different techniques: back projection, front projection, overhead projectors, slides, 16mm film, flying



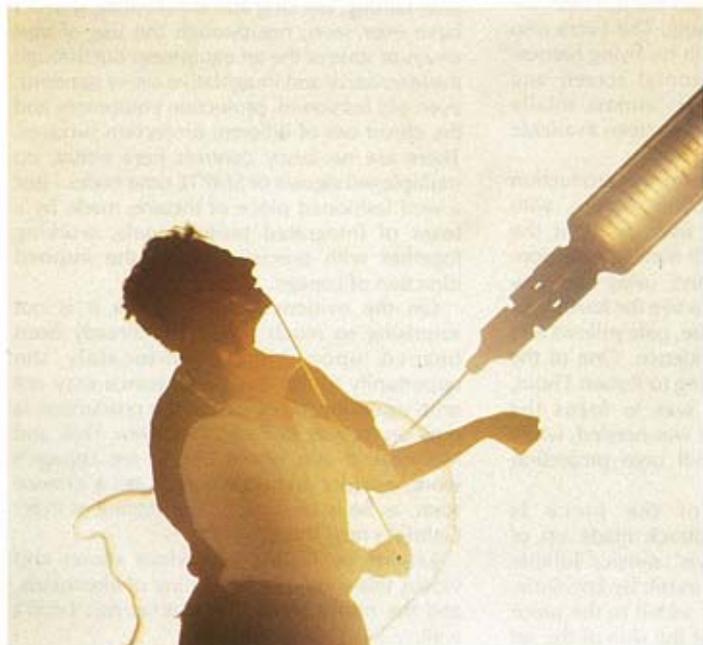
Above and below, Robert Lepage with his solo performance of *Needles & Opium* at the RNT.

harnesses, rotating screens and even sub-titles.

The stage itself is dominated by a large screen approximately three and a half metres square, supported at both sides by two-metre high pillars of red aluminium trussing and surrounded by a larger truss frame. Cantilevered from each top corner is a trussing arm, with a six-bladed propeller at the end.

The screen stands on a riser, about one metre high and five metres wide by three metres deep. This acts as a stage, giving the feeling of a

smaller, more intimate performing space within the larger auditorium. It has other benefits as well, allowing up-lighting and smoke to represent the pit of hell in one scene, facilitating Lepage's assistants to quickly and unobtrusively set the props for the next element of the piece while Lepage himself continues with the performance (the piece is one hour and 25 minutes long with no interval). The front of the riser is also used as a screen onto which are projected sub-titles, which explain to the



audience where the present part of the piece is, in time and space.

The screen itself is the main focus for projection; it also acts as a boundary, keeping the three elements of the piece separate. All the 1989 action happens in front of the screen, the Miles Davis element happens behind the screen and the Jean Cocteau element above it. The screen is able to rotate about its horizontal centre, allowing Lepage to move quickly from front to back and vice-versa. The Miles Davis element is largely back-lit, thus Lepage becomes a silhouette against the screen, removing any problem the audience might have in accepting the red-headed, caucasian actor as Miles Davis. Also, from behind the screen, an overhead projector is used to great effect. Small scale action happens on the platen of the projector (the assembly of a trumpet and the preparation of a heroin fix), and is rear-projected onto the screen. This allows the audience to be privy to what is happening, yet at the same time keeps the feeling of intimacy of these symbolic acts. The OHP is also used to show the meeting and romance of Davis and Juliette Greco. They meet in a cafe, the projector platen acting as the cafe table, thus you see the glasses of wine poured and removed, and the lingering first touch of hands between the two. This method of using the OHP allows Lepage to communicate subtle and intimate actions to the audience, which would otherwise be difficult enough in a normal theatre performance, and impossible in a solo piece.

Lepage also interacts with the images generated from the OHP. When the heroin injection has been prepared, the normal-sized and silhouetted Miles appears on the screen along-side the syringe, seemingly as large as himself, and is injected by the hand which has prepared the fix (all OHP manipulation is done by Claude Lemay).

In addition to the OHP, there are also two slide projectors behind the screen. These are used in combination with three other slide projectors and a 16mm film projector front of house. Many of the effects used are created by the rapid changing of images and the switch from front to back projection. Thus a twinkling star field (not unlike a Starcloth) is generated by switching between images on the three front of house slide projectors. Lepage appears as a ghost-like image behind the screen by combining back-light and light from the sides of the stage and by combining front-projection with back projected images on the screen, and only materialises when part of the back-light source is obscured by a silhouette.

When Lepage becomes Jean Cocteau, and is supposed to be flying back across the Atlantic, he is flown up above the screen, which is then angled to give the impression of the land below. In addition the cantilevered arms swing in from the truss and the propellers start to spin, giving the impression of the plane on which Cocteau is travelling. This gives not just the image of the plane, but also the hum of the engines, for the sensation of flying. The propellers, however, also serve another purpose. Later in the piece they become yet another image surface, onto which are projected line drawings of eyes and then hands. This use of the propellers is very effective, in no small part due to its unexpectedness. Suddenly out of nowhere there are two large eyes staring at you. The flickering caused by the propellers themselves only serves to add to the effect.

Much use is made of the flying harness, with Lepage sometimes sitting motionless in the air conducting a conversation with the audience. At other times he is seen tumbling continuously end-over-end in front of endlessly moving and



With *Needles & Opium*, Lepage has created a 'cocktail' of different techniques.

changing images projected onto the screen, to give the impression of tumbling into the abyss of insanity. The mechanicals have been designed so that when Lepage is flown in his harness he can not only turn himself, but he can also be rotated in a standing position around his own vertical axis (ie. like a spinning top) and moved from side to side along the truss. This is achieved using hand-winchers operated from the bottom of the truss and required careful mechanical design. The set and its mechanicals were originally developed and built by Michel Elliot in Montreal.

"Without a doubt this is one of the most entertaining, exciting and exhilarating shows I have ever seen."

One other element of the set which deserves comment is the main screen itself. This is made of double knit Lycra. In addition to its lightness and its suitability for back and front projection, it has another property which is well used in this piece, its elasticity. This allows the material to stretch out of shape and spring back again with no damage. Thus objects can be pushed into it from behind giving the screen form and shape. In this case a female mannequin is pushed against the screen shaping a woman's body in relief and then hands are run over the torso to simulate love making. The Lycra also allows the sight of Lepage in his flying harness walking across the horizontal screen and apparently sinking into it, almost totally swallowed up, yet leaving the screen available for projection only seconds later.

Most of the illumination for the production is provided by the projection sources, with much of the rest being used to light the imposing red trussing which frames the action. What remains is very muted, using soft, low lighting to pick out Lepage when the harsh light of the projections is not in use, pale yellows and ambers being much in evidence. One of the biggest difficulties, according to Robert Thout, Lepage's tour manager, was to focus the additional lighting where it was needed, while ensuring there was no spill onto projection surfaces.

Throughout, much of the piece is accompanied by a soundtrack made up of recordings of Miles Davis' music, Juliette Greco's singing and other music by Eric Satie. Additionally, live music is added to the piece by Robert Caux who sits at the side of the set

throughout the performance controlling the soundtrack and playing keyboards. Since Caux joined the production this Spring he has worked with Lepage to change and improve the soundtrack. Now it certainly forms an integral and enhancing part of the whole performance.

So how was all the different projection and lighting equipment controlled to achieve such dramatic results? Had the company brought with them some fancy new computer-based show controller to integrate the entire show and ensure the smooth running of this technically complex piece?

The answer to these questions turns out to be no. All the projectors are controlled by hand, with at most the projectors' own remote units. The projection sources themselves are nothing out of the ordinary either, standard slide, over-head and 16mm projectors, if anything rather out-dated. The real genius in the staging of this piece is to have taken such standard equipment and to have combined it in a way that gives a thrilling and almost magical result. Here again, Lepage gets much of the credit, as he is not only the solo performer, but also the writer and designer of the entire original concept.

According to Robert Thout, during rehearsals for the show Lepage was in total control of what was going on, able to pick out any changes in the soundtrack, or the lighting and to visualise how such adjustments would affect the form of the piece and how they would be perceived from the audience.

Without a doubt this is one of the most entertaining, exciting and exhilarating shows I have ever seen; not through the use of vast arrays of state of the art equipment but through the innovative and imaginative use of standard, even old fashioned, projection equipment and the clever use of different projection surfaces. There are no fancy controls here either, no multiplexed signals or SMPTE time codes - just a well fashioned piece of theatre, made by a team of integrated professionals, working together with precision under the inspired direction of Lepage.

On the evidence of this piece it is not surprising so much praise has already been heaped upon him. Unfortunately the opportunity to see this performance may not arise again for sometime, as the production is now on its way to Paris, then New York and Montreal. If you would like to see Lepage's work, a wider audience should get a chance soon, as he is involved in the staging of Peter Gabriel's next show.

Judging by Gabriel's previous shows and videos this should be a meeting of like minds, and the results should be spectacular. I can't wait.

LIGHTING+SOUND

International



PIRATES IN CRYSTALS: VISUAL MAGIC AT GARDALAND, ITALY

PHOTOS: MALCOLM LEWIS

- Italy's Gardaland: the Technology behind I Corsari
- Specials: Lepage at the RNT; Valley of the Kings; P&O in Hong Kong
- Talking to Lights: David King on the BBC's new Voice Control System
- Strand Lighting International: Tony Gottelier talks to Chris Waldron
- Company Profiles: Canon Audio and White Light
- Intelligent CD control from Revox

JANUARY 1993