Needles and Opium

Written and directed by Robert Lepage

The Geary Theater
March 30–April 23, 2017
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Overview of Needles and Opium

Needles and Opium, written and directed by Robert Lepage, first premiered in 1991 at the Palais Montcalm in Quebec City, Canada. Lepage performed in the production as it toured around the world for three years. More than 20 years after its premiere, Lepage returned to the show to rework and reimagine it, and this iteration premiered in 2013 at Canadian Stage in Toronto before embarking on a world tour. This 2013 revival is the production that appears at A.C.T. in 2017.

Creative Team
English Translator ................................................................. Jenny Montgomery
Scenic Designer ................................................................. Carl Fillion
Props Designer ................................................................. Claudia Gendreau
Costume Designer ............................................................. François St-Aubin
Lighting Designer ............................................................... Bruno Matte
Music and Sound Designer ............................................... Jean-Sébastien Côté
Images Designer ............................................................... Lionel Arnould

Characters and Cast
Robert, Jean Cocteau ......................................................... Olivier Normand
Miles Davis .......................................................................... Wellesley Robertson III

Synopsis
Robert, a Quebecois actor, has traveled to Paris to record voice-over for a documentary about Miles Davis’s participation in a Parisian jazz festival in 1949. Robert is also suffering from a recent breakup. He can only find consolation in Davis’s music and in an essay by Jean Cocteau called “Letter to Americans.” As Robert navigates the city in search of a cure for the pain of loneliness and lost love, we are thrown back to 1949, a year in which Davis and Cocteau were inspired by travel overseas. Davis visited Paris, where he fell in love with French singer Juliette Gréco; Cocteau visited America and, on the plane back to France from New York, wrote “Letter to Americans.” Coincidentally, both Davis and Cocteau turned to drugs to mend their broken hearts. Back in the present, Robert seeks the aid of a hypnotist in order to get over his breakup more quickly.

OPPOSITE Olivier Normand in Needles and Opium. Photo by Nicola-Frank Vachon.
Above Him the Gods,  
Under Him Hell

The Life and Work of Robert Lepage

By Shannon Stockwell

When Canadian theater artist Robert Lepage was six years old, he was diagnosed with alopecia, a disease that renders sufferers hairless. This would normally just be a mildly interesting factoid, perhaps not even worth mentioning in a piece about the life and work of one of Canada’s most revolutionary theater makers. But the disease deserves a mention because it made physical the young Lepage’s difference from other kids.

The *feeling* of being an outsider was already familiar to him; he struggled with his sexual orientation from an early age (he would later come out as gay), and he grew up in a bilingual family at a time when most Quebecois spoke either French or English, but rarely both. But once he had no hair, he very obviously stood out. “Of course I had friends,” he says, “but it was very limiting because there was always a chance that at every corner someone would be laughing at me or waiting to beat me up. I had a very lonely childhood because of that.”

Even today, after all of his accomplishments in theater, circus, opera, and film, his collaborators can’t help but point out that he still doesn’t quite seem to belong on earth. “There is something about the smoothness of his skin,” says actor Sally Dexter. “It is absolutely pure, waxy. With eyes like big schooners of sherry he looks like a loveable alien you might like to befriend.”

Lepage found solace in theater when he was in high school—in 1975, at just 17 years old, he dropped out and auditioned for a spot at the Conservatoire d’art dramatique de Québec. He was accepted into the program (despite not having a high school diploma), but he soon discovered that he didn’t quite fit in there, either. Most of his teachers adhered to acting styles of psychological realism, which Lepage just couldn’t connect with. “At the Conservatoire,” he says, “I was taught a definition of emotion, which I learned but never managed to produce on stage. And for three years, I was told that I acted without emotion.” Upon completing the program in 1978, he was one of just two graduating students not to receive a job offer at a surrounding professional theater.

All this considered, it’s no wonder that so much of Lepage’s theater is about feeling like an outsider. From *En attendant* (1982), about the lives of artists, to *Quills* (2016), about the Marquis de Sade, his productions have explored what it is like to be “other.”
First Steps on the Stage

Before he could make these productions, however, he needed someone to give him a chance, and it wasn’t looking likely after his relative disappointment at the Conservatoire. Not to be deterred, however, he teamed up with the only other jobless graduate, Richard Fréchette. Together, they attended workshops on how to devise theater and started their own company, Théâtre Hummm, which lasted until 1982.

Théâtre Hummm operated on a shoestring budget and its shows often premiered before they were finished (a feature that would become a hallmark of Lepage’s later work). Yet Lepage and Fréchette gained something of a cult following in Quebec, as well as the attentions of someone willing to give them the chance they so desperately needed. Jacques Lessard, a former teacher from the Conservatoire and the founder of a new company called Théâtre Repère, liked their style and invited them to join his company in 1982. Fréchette, Lepage, and Lessard devised and performed in a show called *En attendant* (1982), which was a huge success, and they were invited to perform it all over Canada. When you consider the history of theater in Quebec, it’s easy to see why.

For centuries, there had been no Quebecois theater as such. Instead, plays produced there came primarily from France. So when playwrights like Michel Tremblay and Jean-Claude Germain began to write in Quebecois French dialect in the 1960s, it was revolutionary. Finally, the stage reflected the actual concerns of the audience. And yet
all of these plays written in dialect only did well within Quebec. They couldn’t tour nationally, let alone internationally, because they were so specific to the province.

*En attendant* was popular across the whole country because, instead of relying on text and plot, it focused heavily on stage visuals. The audience didn’t have to understand the words to appreciate the show. It was the same with their next play, *Circulations* (1984), which was billed as “trilingual”—one-third French, one-third English, and one-third a kind of visual language.

Lepage’s next production with Théâtre Repère was the one that put him on the map. After *The Dragons’ Trilogy* (1985), audiences no longer thought of Lepage as a part of Théâtre Repère; they thought of Théâtre Repère as Lepage’s company. *The Dragons’ Trilogy* was a six-hour-long play about the experiences of Japanese and Chinese Canadians. In what would prove to be Lepageian fashion, the show evolved even after its premiere and subsequent two-year tour.

The production took place in a sandbox onstage, a “unifying symbol of digging to discover your past in order to understand your future,” says theater scholar Aleksandar Saša Dundjerović. The sandbox also represented an old Chinatown somewhere in Quebec, which had been razed to the ground to make way for a sandy parking lot. In the show, objects took on different meanings depending on the context in which they were used. For example, a white piece of fabric was, at different times, laundry, a projection screen, sails on a ship, and, when it appeared bloodied, the symbol of the death of a character.

With such staging, one can see Lepage’s roots as a young artist making theater with pocket change, when it was necessary to have as few props as possible in order to come in under budget. Over the years, this transformative treatment of objects evolved into the extravagant kinetic contraptions for which Lepage became famous (like the rotating cube in *Needles and Opium*). Lepage believes the key to theater is transformation—not just of characters, but of mise-en-scène. He says:

[I am] drawn to plays in which the characters are transformed, but also to plays in which the sets are transformed and matter transcended. It’s incredible to be able to travel through time and place, to infinity, all on a single stage. It’s the metamorphosis brought about onstage that makes this kind of travel possible. . . . I think that if I remain fully aware of the stage as a place of physical transformation, I make it possible or can try to make it possible for the audience to really feel the direction in which the action and the characters are being hurtled.

Meanwhile, Lepage was developing an affinity for solo performance. He joined La ligue nationale d’improvisation (sort of like Second City in the US) in 1984 and began improvising solo shows at various venues. His first fully developed solo show was *Vinci*, which premiered in 1986 with Théâtre Repère. The show, about a young photographer who travels to Europe after a friend’s suicide, is strongly based on Lepage’s own experiences.
In fact, most of his work is based on his own life in some capacity. This is in part because of the unique method of devising theater that he developed early in his career, which is based on the RSVP Cycles, a 1960s system of creating theater. The “R” stands for Resources—the things the artist can draw upon to make theater—and what does an artist know better than his or her own experiences?

Needles and Opium

After the success of Vinci (it won an award in 1987 at the Festival “Off” d’Avignon) and The Dragons’ Trilogy, Lepage left Théâtre Repère in 1989 and became the artistic director of French theater at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. By then, he had also established himself as a freelance director and was invited to stage shows internationally. In 1992 at the Royal National Theatre in London, he directed an infamous production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream set in a mud bath. Actor Timothy Spall, who played Bottom, says, “I’m still picking the mud out of me arse.”

All the while, he was producing his own work; Needles and Opium premiered in 1991 at the Palais Montcalm in Quebec City. Lepage had been introduced to the work of Jean Cocteau while at the Conservatoire; in fact, it was Jacques Lessard who had given him the collection of poems. Lepage felt an instant affinity toward Cocteau. Here was a man who had refused artistic labels, who worked in a variety of media despite intense criticism, who fused reality and mythology with a poetic imagination—all things to which Lepage aspired. He read Cocteau’s “Letter to Americans” in the early ’80s and was entranced—not so much by what the Frenchman said, but by how he said it. At first, Lepage wanted simply to stage “Letter to Americans,” and he began working with
musician Robert Caux, who felt that Miles Davis’s music would be a good fit for the mood of the show. But Caux and Lepage couldn’t find any connection between Davis and Cocteau. “Suddenly,” says Lepage, “we discovered the historical coincidence that these two men actually lived more or less the same kind of thing in more or less the same year; an American, Miles Davis, in Paris in 1949 and a French poet, Jean Cocteau, at about the same time in New York. . . . The two men never met but they had all these people in common.” Lepage also added in his own story, not just because it was the way his method worked, but also to make the point that “you don’t need to be a well-known artist to be connected to certain things in these great geniuses’ work.”

**Ex Machina**

In 1994, after five years at the National Arts Centre, Lepage founded Ex Machina, a multidisciplinary production company. Its first show was *Les sept branches de la Riviere Ota* (Seven Streams of the River Ota), which had a disastrous premiere at the Edinburgh International Festival. “Overran by two hours, the scenery went haywire, and there were long scenes in Quebecois French,” wrote one critic. But over the next three years, it evolved into a critically acclaimed production. Critic Charles Spencer said, “I was among those who found the first version of this show incoherent and self-indulgent, but this amazing production, radically revised and extended . . . lays such doubts to rest. At its marvellous best, *Seven Streams* creates a rapt spell of mesmerising intensity.” The seven-hour-long production compared the destruction of World War II (specifically the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima) to the AIDS epidemic.

The premiere had been so disastrous because the show wasn’t ready. Marie Brassard, who collaborated on and performed in *Seven Streams*, says, “It was such a catastrophe. . . . Some of the scenes were not even written. We were improvising in
front of the audience maybe a third of the whole show.” Audiences would soon learn, however, that when they saw the world premiere of a Lepage production, they wouldn’t be signing up for a finished product. The director is known for inviting audiences to open rehearsals; he believes that the audience is a central cast member, and therefore rehearsals cannot truly occur without spectators.

Lepage’s process is unique in many other ways. While some directors may wish to avoid chaos in the rehearsal room, Lepage seeks it out. Usually, a Lepage production starts with a seminal idea, and then graduates to improvisational exercises in rehearsal. “[We] don’t wait until the text has been solidified for the designers to join in,” he says. Instead, the designers improvise right along with them. “Chaos is necessary. If there is only order and rigour in a project, the outcome will be nothing but order and rigour. But it’s out of chaos that the cosmos is born—the order of things, yes, but a living, organic, changing one. This is where true creation lies.”

Seven Streams of the River Ota put Ex Machina on the international map, and every subsequent production was regarded with intense interest from the theater world. Lepage is not without his critics, however. Some believe that he is nothing more than a “techno-wizard,” that there is no emotional or intellectual substance behind the stage spectacle. But for Lepage, the spectacle contains the substance. Form is content and content is form. In Needles and Opium, for example, the spinning cube that makes up the main element of the scenic design reflects the vertigo caused by opium, heroin, and love. The way the actors have to clamber and adjust their balance as the cube spins evokes feelings of struggling to stay on one’s feet when love is lost or found. And being confined to that cube could mimic the claustrophobia and loneliness of being an outsider in a place that you do not call home.

Even in the face of criticism, Lepage has continued to create with Ex Machina. He uses all the technology at his disposal, including projections and kinetic scenery. In one of his more recent shows, 887 (2015), one of the main set elements was a large scale-model of Lepage’s childhood apartment building. The model was manipulated so that it became different things over the course of the show. This production also illustrated the way Lepage constantly innovates when it comes to technology; he began the play quipping about cell phones, and then used a cell phone during the play to film and simultaneously project elements of the miniature structure. This way, the audience could see all the small parts of the stage picture. “How do you maintain a sense of intimacy with a thousand people?” Lepage asks. “You have to rely on technology to magnify you, to change the scale on which you work.”

Other Work

Due to his versatility, Lepage has been invited to direct many productions outside Ex Machina. He directed touring concerts for musician Peter Gabriel in 1993 and 2003. Gabriel says, “Robert is a real visionary, creating theatre for people who don’t like theatre.”
Lepage’s affinity for acrobatics and striking visuals led him to direct for Quebec’s famous Cirque du Soleil. After his acclaimed production of Kà, which premiered in 2004, the CEO of Cirque du Soleil begged Lepage to come back and do another. He would even get to select the theme. Lepage assented and decided that his show, called Totem, would be about evolution, in honor of Charles Darwin’s 200th birthday. “[Circus] requires a much more poetic level of acting; psychology or dramatic framework rarely comes into play,” says Lepage. “[In Cirque du Soleil,] we’re in the realm of hyper-theatre, not unlike opera. Everything is larger than life.”

In recent years, Lepage grabbed headlines due to his controversial 2012 production of Wagner’s Ring Cycle, a four-part epic opera, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The main point of contention among reviewers was the central scenic element: 24 giant aluminum beams that rotated vertically to form different shapes, often serving as a surface for projections. Critics felt that the device was too distracting and prone to technical problems. But fans of Wagner found the production to be “extraordinarily true to [his] intent.”

From time to time, Lepage has moved off the stage entirely and into the world of cinema, his most recent movie being Triptyque (2013). Film and theater are very different mediums to Lepage in a physical sense. “Theatre, like circus, is a vertical way of telling a story—a man in the centre of a proscenium arch, above him the gods, under him hell,” he says. “Cinema is more horizontal, cameras panning left to right.”

He doesn’t say that to denigrate cinema. On the contrary, he finds it a very evocative medium. In fact, he believes that there is a lot of interplay between theater and film, that film and other modern media have changed the way people view theater—often for the better:

The audience that comes to see the theatre today does not have the same narrative education as people twenty to thirty years ago. If I play in front of an audience in a traditional theatre, the people who are in the room have seen a lot of films, they’ve seen a lot of television, they’ve seen rock videos, and they are on the [Internet]. They are used to having people telling stories to them in all sorts of ways. They know what different points of view there are. They know what a flash forward is, what a jump cut is. . . . People have extraordinary, acrobatic minds.

A Life of Reinvention
A Biography of Jean Cocteau

By Shannon Stockwell

He doesn’t have one lifeline; he has several.

_Thomas l’imposteur (Thomas the Impostor)_ , 1964 film, written and directed by Jean Cocteau

Jean Cocteau was born on July 5, 1889, in Maisons-Laffitte just outside of Paris, France. He lived with his mother, father, two older siblings, and maternal grandparents. Art was valued in his home, and he began drawing at an early age. Although his family was fairly bourgeois and well-to-do, there were also challenges—when Cocteau was just nine years old, his father committed suicide, which may have led to his later artistic obsession with life and death.

Cocteau attended the Lycée Condorcet in Paris, and although he didn’t do very well in school, he showed talent for writing; he published his first book of poems in 1909, when he was 19 years old. The young Cocteau was entranced by all forms of art: painting, drawing, sculpture, writing of every kind, dance, opera, theater, and music. The same year his first poems were published, he met Sergei Diaghilev, the manager of the iconic Ballets Russes. When Cocteau expressed interest in working with the ballet, Diaghilev responded, “Etonne-moi.” (“Astonish me.”)

Astonish is precisely what Cocteau spent his entire life trying to do. Until his death in 1963, he was a whirlwind of artistic activity as he attempted to impress and amaze. Although today he is best known for his filmmaking—he made six films over the course of his life, the most famous being _La belle et la bête (Beauty and the Beast)_ in 1946—he also produced four novels, seven plays, seven poetry collections, four autobiographical works, thousands of drawings, several essays, and a handful of sculptures.

Despite his extensive creative output and his friendship with many members of the Parisian avant-garde, he never quite achieved the same level of fame as other artists of his time. Because of his ability to participate in so many fields, many of his contemporary critics called him an “acrobat,” a show-off without the intellectual substance to back up his art. Perhaps it had to do with his appearance. “Everything about him was strange,” admits biographer Claude Arnaud. “His hair grew sideways, his teeth were poorly set,
his face verged on the asymmetrical.” It certainly didn’t have to do with his personality, which was described by many as very kind and loving. In the end, the lack of recognition is probably most related to the sheer variety of his work.

Throughout his life as an artist, Cocteau was constantly reinventing himself, not only in terms of the media in which he worked but also regarding the themes he tackled. “Scattered among dozens of publishers and genres, hard to read exhaustively, Cocteau’s work is less a continent than a vast, unstable archipelago where many languages are spoken,” says Arnaud. “No doubt the sheer variety of his output contributes to his discredit by exposing him too much and emphasizing his about-faces, but he was incapable of premeditation. . . . He didn’t know if what he did was excellent or insipid: he just did, the way blacksmiths forge or bees gather pollen.”

Opium

In 1919, when Cocteau was almost 30 years old, he met Raymond Radiguet, a 16-year-old prodigy of poetry and prose. Radiguet was brilliant but harsh; Cocteau was fascinated and promptly fell in love. He took the boy under his wing, financially supporting him, giving him feedback, and enduring the torments of what appears to have been unrequited affection. Depending on which biography you read, they were either “lovers” or “friends,” but reality allows for a spectrum between these distinctions, and somewhere on that spectrum lay the relationship between Cocteau and Radiguet. The tension wouldn’t last long in the grand scheme of Cocteau’s life; Radiguet died of typhoid fever in December 1923, a little more than four years after they first met.

After Radiguet’s death, Cocteau was inconsolable. He likened the experience to being operated on without anesthesia and cried for three days straight. After that, he was a husk of the man he had been before. Cocteau found the remedy to his pain in opium, to which he was introduced by his friend Louis Laloy, a music critic, who insisted that the drug would make the mourning artist feel better.

At first, Cocteau found opium nauseating, but because he was so desperate for a salve to the pain he felt, he stuck with it for three months and finally felt some positive effects. In fact, one could say that he fell in love with the drug. “[It] didn’t just bring an end to the despair caused by Radiguet’s death,” says Arnaud. “By detaching him from life, it temporarily made him forget his obligation to shine constantly, to be productive and brilliant, morning to evening, summer and winter.”

But the drug rendered Cocteau anxious and sickly, so he entered a clinic in 1928 to detox. It was there that he wrote Opium : Journal d’une désintoxication (Opium: The Diary of His Cure), in which he describes the wonders and the downfalls of the drug. A portion of this text is heard in Robert Lepage’s Needles and Opium.

The detox was successful for a time, but the opiate remained in his life until his death in 1963. Although there is no marked difference in the quality of the art he created while on opium versus the art he created while sober, he believed that the drug helped
him work. “Shall I take opium or not?” he asks, and then answers: “It is useless to put on a carefree air, dear poet. I will take it if my work wants me to.” Then, acknowledging the power of the drug: “And if opium wants me to.”

A Trip to America

In December 1948, when Cocteau was 59 years old, he traveled to New York City to promote his film *L’aigle à deux têtes* (*The Eagle with Two Heads*). While in the United States, he spoke about his work to audiences and met celebrities Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, and boxer “Panama” Al Brown. He was also photographed for *Life* magazine alongside Leo Coleman, a famous dancer. The photos were “dazzlingly homoerotic,” says biographer J. S. Williams, and one picture was censored because it showed Cocteau’s nipple. The most famous photo of Cocteau (which is duplicated in *Needles and Opium*) came out of this photoshoot—the artist with several arms: one smoking, one drawing, one reading. In New York, says Williams, Cocteau “played the part of the rude and condescending Parisian and ostentatiously declined to speak English.” If his opinion of the United States wasn’t already clear from his demeanor, he would make it explicit in an essay he dashed off during his flight back to Paris in early 1949. In “Lettre aux Américains” (“Letter to Americans”), Cocteau admonishes people in the United States for their contradictions—for being bold and yet afraid of boldness. “New York is all paradox,” he writes. “People demand something new and want nothing to change.” “This is not one of his finest moments,” admits Williams, “for he is often here at his incorrigible worst, at once snobbish, arch and withering.”
The Acrobats

As a French-speaking theater student, Lepage was introduced to the work of Jean Cocteau by Jacques Lessard, a teacher at the Conservatoire d’art dramatique de Québec, which Lepage attended from 1975 to ’78. Cocteau had been dead for more than ten years, but Lepage found an affinity with this man “who also deconstructed myths to explore autobiography, poetics, and provocative mises en scène,” says theater scholar Aleksandar Saša Dundjerović.

Mythology is prevalent in the works of both Lepage and Cocteau. In Needles and Opium, Robert (the character) compares himself to Orpheus, a figure from Greek mythology who lost his wife and had to travel to the underworld to get her back, only to lose her again. Cocteau was also inspired by the Orpheus myth and created three film adaptations set in modern-day Paris: Le sang d’un poète (The Blood of a Poet, 1930), Orphée (Orpheus, 1950), and Le testament d’Orphée (Testament of Orpheus, 1960).

Lepage is not inspired only by ancient myths; he’s also interested in the creation of new ones, which he believes no longer happens as often. He says:

Generally speaking, our society has lost its oral memory. Instead we rely more and more on written or visual documents to immortalize the past, to store the things we remember, our history; and, as a result, our memory does not function anymore because it no longer has to make the effort to store things. So, memory no longer distorts facts by filtering them, which makes it all the harder for history to be transformed into mythology. . . . You have to be able to amplify the stories you hear, give a large dimension to stories you invent. This is how you transform them into legends and myths.

Cocteau also acknowledged the complicated relationship between myths and history. He was known to say, “History is made of truths that become lies, and mythology is made of lies that eventually become truths.”

Lepage found more than just an affinity with Cocteau’s philosophy and aesthetic. As his career went on, he found comfort in the fact that they believed in and were criticized for similar things regarding their art. Lepage remarks:

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 criticised 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.

The Prince of Darkness
A Biography of Miles Davis

By Elspeth Sweatman

“To examine [Miles Davis’s] career is to examine the history of jazz from the mid-’40s to the early ’90s, since he was in the thick of almost every important innovation and stylistic development,” says New York City Tribune music critic William Ruhlmann. For half a century, the trumpeter—known as the Prince of Darkness because of his gravelly, whispery voice and unpredictable, fiery temper—constantly reinvented his sound, striving for new combinations, techniques, and means of expressing himself. He spearheaded jazz’s development from swing to bebop, hard bop, cool, electric, and beyond. For this, he is considered one of the most important trumpeters in jazz history.

Davis grew up in East St. Louis, the son of a middle-class dentist. During high school, he played with jazz ensembles like the Billy Eckstine Band when they came through the city. In 1944, he arrived in New York to attend The Juilliard School, but he felt that the classes moved too slowly. He preferred to spend his time in the city’s music clubs on 52nd Street, playing with jazz greats Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Davis quickly became an important player in his own right, winning Down Beat’s New Star on Trumpet Award in 1946. His tendency to stick to the middle register and play with a straight, clear sound gave his music an introspective, intense quality that made him stand out from the other players.

In 1949, Davis traveled to Paris with the Tadd Dameron Quintet to play opposite Parker, a saxophonist, in the Festival International de Jazz. The 22-year-old Davis was the antithesis of Parker in every way. Davis used notes sparingly; Parker crammed as many notes as possible into his solos. Davis loved to play slow to medium-speed songs; Parker loved fast tempos. Davis was smartly dressed, quiet, sensitive, and self-controlled; Parker was hostile, greedy, and a risk-taker.

In Paris, Davis found what he had been searching for in the clubs of New York City: adoration and love. Bolstered by a native jazz community hungry for new music—an audience who really listened to the music, rather than treating it as background noise—he played with more assurance and owned his place as one of the leaders of his ensemble. Everywhere he went, he was treated like a superstar; every journalist wanted to interview him, and everyone wanted to meet him, including singer Juliette Gréco, with whom Davis fell in love. Communicating through gesture, touch, and body language—Davis
didn’t speak French, and Gréco didn’t speak English—they fell deeply in love. “Juliette and I used to walk down by the Seine River together, holding hands and kissing, looking into each other’s eyes, and kissing some more, and squeezing each other’s hands,” said Davis in his autobiography. “It was like magic, almost like I had been hypnotized, was in some kind of trance.”

After a whirlwind two weeks in the City of Light, Davis returned to New York with the applause still ringing in his ears and heady with love for Gréco. “She was all up in my head, all up in my heart and blood. She was the first woman I think that I really loved, and being separated like that almost broke my heart,” said Davis. Hoping to get over this loneliness by working, Davis set about getting a gig in a jazz club or a recording session.

But there was no work to be had—at least not for him. In Paris, he had tasted what it was like to be treated as the great artist he knew he was, but in the US he was still treated like a second-class citizen. “In terms of American ideals and aspirations, he was a total success,” says Ian Carr in his biography of Davis. “He had every right to expect the natural rewards: regular work, a financial situation viable enough to enable him to lead a regular group, and certainly more recognition in his own country. Instead, he found no work at all, and no prospects of any in the foreseeable future. It is hardly surprising that despair and boredom made him turn to drugs.”
Davis’s substance of choice was one of the most prevalent drugs in the jazz community at the time: heroin. He continued to play after he started using, but his creativity deserted him. As the addiction affected his musical ability, he found other means of supporting himself (and his heroin habit), including pimping. “Shooting heroin changed my whole personality from being a nice, quiet, honest, caring person into someone who was the complete opposite,” said Davis. “It was the drive to get the heroin that made me that way. I’d do anything not to be sick, which meant getting and shooting heroin all the time, all day and all night.” At the height of his addiction, Davis saw Gréco again when she came to New York to promote a film. He went to her room at the Waldorf Hotel, asked her for money, then left. Gréco was stunned by the transformation in the man that she loved.

By 1954, Davis had hit rock bottom. He was stealing from his friends to get money for heroin. He was pawning his (and some of his friends’) possessions. Police routinely stopped him to check for needle marks on his arms. Even the musicians who had stuck by him for years were tired of him. So, demonstrating his incredible self-control, Davis stopped using. He locked himself in the guesthouse at his father’s farm in East St. Louis and worked his way through the painful withdrawal symptoms without psychiatric or medical help. It took him a little more than a week to overcome the addiction that had been plaguing him for four years.

No longer a slave to the next fix, Davis saw his abilities and creativity return. In the years following his recovery, he formed a new quintet and recorded 22 albums, including *Miles Davis All Stars Volumes 1 and 2* (1955), *Walkin’* (1957), and ‘Round about Midnight* (1957). Davis’s quintet became the pinnacle of the jazz movement at the time. Led by the unique lyrical, smoldering, metallic quality of Davis’s trumpet with his stemless Harmon mute, the quintet improvised on such popular ballad tunes as “Bye Bye Blackbird” and “My Funny Valentine.” This gave Davis more exposure than ever before.

In 1957, Davis returned to Paris as a jazz musician celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic. At Orly Airport, he was greeted by film director Louis Malle, who wanted him to create the soundtrack for his latest film, *Ascenseur pour l’échafaud* (*Elevator to the Gallows*, 1958). Davis agreed. This soundtrack became the impetus for a new sound for Davis, one that would define the next ten years of his career and push jazz into new territory. Because Davis didn’t have time to rehearse with the group, he decided to play music based around a mode—a single scale—rather than chord progressions. In the small hours of the morning, he and his collaborators improvised the soundtrack as they watched the film. Davis returned to this idea two years later for one of his most influential jazz albums, *Kind of Blue* (1959).

Now Davis truly was a superstar in America. He walked onstage greeted by screaming girls, just like Frank Sinatra. Celebrities like Elizabeth Taylor were coming to see him play. He drove a Ferrari and commanded the same fees as the conductors and major stars of “serious” classical music. He felt like the critics finally understood him and gave him the respect he was due. He was now revered as an artist, not merely as an entertainer. In 1960, he won his first Grammy Award for *Sketches of Spain*.
While everyone was praising Davis’s new sound, he was already exploring other musical territory. He experimented with playing very long pieces (more than 20 minutes) that had no identifiable beginning, middle, or end (*Miles in the Sky*, 1968; *Big Fun*, 1974). He became more interested in color and timbre than driving rhythms and harmonies. When rock and roll took over the airwaves in the 1960s, Davis incorporated electric guitar, electric piano, and bass guitar into his ensemble (*Bitches Brew*, 1969).

This creativity was once again stymied by addiction, this time to cocaine and alcohol. The drugs helped Davis with the pain caused by his various health problems—a bad hip, sickle-cell anemia, and fatigue—but they destroyed his relationships and his ability to play music, so he retired in 1975 and became a recluse. However, with the help of his then-girlfriend, actress Cicely Tyson, Davis overcame his addictions and picked up his horn again. In the 1980s, he began to put his own spin on tunes from popular pop singers such as Michael Jackson, Prince, and Cyndi Lauper. He also experimented with drum loops, samples, and synthesizers (*Tutu*, 1986).

One constant in these three decades of artistic exploration was Davis’s love for Paris, a city to which he returned at every opportunity. He toured there with his sextet in 1960 and ’63, and with his septet in 1983, ’84, and ’86. In July 1991, he performed a retrospective concert in Paris, where he played music from his whole career and with many of his old associates; this was unusual because Davis generally preferred to look forward, not backward. The following month, Davis became a Chevalier de l’ordre national de la légion d’honneur (Knight of the National Order of the Legion of Honor) and was hailed by French Minister of Culture Jack Lang as the “Picasso of jazz.” A month later, Davis was in the hospital suffering from pneumonia. When his doctors wanted to perform a procedure to help his breathing, he became irate, suffered a stroke, and slipped into a coma. He died on September 28, 1991.

Like many great artists, Davis was a complicated man. He was known for being charming, honest, and a man of integrity, but also opinionated, angry, and violent. He hated injustice of any kind, whether it came from his fellow musicians, the critics, or the authorities. Yet his influence on jazz is undeniable. “Davis’s greatest feat,” says Carr, “was to have imposed his own artistic values on [jazz]: unflagging intelligence, great courage, integrity, honesty and a sustained spirit of inquiry always in the pursuit of art.”

The Promise of Paris
African American Artists in France

By Simon Hodgson

When musician Miles Davis arrived in Paris in 1949 at the age of 22, it was the first time he’d stepped on foreign soil. Visiting for a jazz festival, Davis was lionized by music fans; the reception felt very different from the way he was treated back home. “I had never felt that way in my life,” he said in his autobiography. “It was the freedom of being in France and being treated like a human being, like someone important.” Many other black Americans had similar experiences in the City of Light and permanently uprooted their worlds to swap the United States for the French capital.

Leaving America Behind

For almost a hundred years following the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1865, the social and economic divide between white and black people was exacerbated by the discriminatory legal framework known as the Jim Crow laws. Black Americans found themselves at the back of the line when it came to fundamental civil rights to work, to vote, to own property, and to access healthcare and education. These laws were absolutely explicit in the South, where punishment for breaking them could be deadly.

For black musicians, discrimination made it extremely hard to find well-paying jobs. Bought and sold by white managers, they were prevented from running their own careers and choosing performance venues. If they played in the concert hall of a whites-only hotel, they weren’t allowed to spend the night in one of the rooms solely because of the color of their skin. “Because of the racial barrier,” says Dan Morgenstern, director of the Rutgers University Institute of Jazz Studies, “black musicians almost always made less money than whites and had to work worse venues. In order to make a living in the United States, you had to tour the South. And you can imagine what a trial that was.” With racism rampant in America, black musicians with the means set their sights elsewhere, their gaze often falling on Paris.

The Pull of Paris

“If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man,” said American novelist Ernest Hemingway, “then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.” The Paris cityscape certainly offered a feast for the artist’s eye:
picturesque parks, broad avenues, and mile after mile of classical architecture. Paris’s artistic infrastructure—its schools, museums, galleries, and exhibition venues—made it a fertile place for creatives to develop professionally. But it was the city’s cafés that really created a home for writers, painters, musicians and philosophers. Although these cozy shops initially served as an expedient solution to the problem of freezing Parisian attic apartments (for the price of a cup of coffee, one could stay warm for several hours), cafés such as Les Deux Magots and Café de Flore emerged as meeting places for artists of all kinds to exchange ideas.

Origins of Jazz in Paris

When Davis traveled to Paris for the first time, he was following in the footsteps of African American artists who had been drawn to Europe, and France in particular, for decades. In the years following the end of World War I in 1918, there were hundreds of African Americans in France. Some were musicians-turned-soldiers who stayed after they were demobilized because they felt a sense of social belonging in France that they hadn’t felt back home—African American soldiers were welcomed by the French because they were viewed as allies who had fought to save the country from the German invaders. Other black American expatriates were economic migrants looking for well-paid gigs; artists, writers, and musicians from the flourishing of African American culture in New York City known as the Harlem Renaissance.
Among the black American artists to make a splash in 1920s Paris were writer Langston Hughes and New Orleans–born trumpeter Sidney Bechet, but the most celebrated at the time was Josephine Baker, who went from being a 19-year-old chorus girl to chanteuse, comedienne, and grand opera diva. The jazz of Bechet and Baker became increasingly popular in certain Parisian neighborhoods. Young French enthusiasts spread the word, leading to the 1931 launch of the Hot Club, a nationwide organization dedicated to promoting jazz. Soon, French musicians were inspired to play alongside American visitors and expats.

Postwar Expatriates

After Paris was liberated in 1944, a fresh generation of African American artists installed themselves in the apartment buildings of the Left Bank. In jazz clubs like Caveau de la Huchette, literary writers such as James Baldwin and Richard Wright rubbed shoulders with drummer Kenny “Klook” Clarke, painter Romare Bearden, and hard-boiled detective fiction writer Chester Himes. These expats weren’t tourists; they sparkled with talent, energy, and ambition, and each one played his or her part in building an African American community in the French capital. In Montparnasse, painter Herbert Gentry and his wife, Honey, founded an art gallery that doubled as a jazz club. In Pigalle, former soldier Leroy Haynes set up a soul food joint with his French wife. To a black American, Paris combined elements of the foreign and the familiar, and that’s what Davis found when he arrived.
The French Tour

In the late 1940s, France was on the map for touring American jazz stars. In 1948, Louis Armstrong, the biggest name in jazz worldwide, headlined the Nice Jazz Festival in the south of France. The same year, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie arrived to play at the inaugural Festival International de Jazz held at the prestigious three thousand-seat Salle Pleyel in Paris. The following year, when Davis arrived, the roll-call of US stars in the Festival International de Jazz included Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk, two of the greatest musicians from New York’s jazz scene.

The French people were welcoming not only because they liked jazz. They also seemed to be more open. Jake Lamar, a New York–born black writer who has lived in Paris for more than 20 years, says that part of this is due to “the respect the French have for artists in general.”

New York or Paris?

Miles Davis experienced the pull of Paris, just like many black American expatriates. But ultimately, he chose to live in America for artistic reasons. “While I didn’t love being in America all the time,” he says in his autobiography, “I never thought about moving over to Paris. I really loved Paris, but I loved it to visit, because I didn’t think the music could or would happen for me over there.”

But many other postwar black American artists discovered that France’s economic opportunities and racial égalité exercised a powerful gravitational tug. “I belong in Paris. I am able to realize myself here,” said Beauford Delaney, a black American painter who swapped the concrete canyons of New York for the City of Light. In creating new lives in a new country with a new language, these African Americans found the community, the economic mobility, and the artistic success that had eluded them back home. In a 1951 article for Ebony magazine entitled “I Choose Exile,” Mississippi-born novelist Richard Wright said, “I tell you frankly that there is more freedom in one square block of Paris than there is in the entire United States of America.”

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Postwar Provocateurs
A Who’s Who of Paris, 1949

By Jessica Katz

Before World War II, Paris was a hotbed of artistic activity, made up of a web of luminaries who frequented the city’s many cafés, garrets, and galleries. These intellectuals and artists became known collectively as the École de Paris, and they kept pace with an ever-changing landscape of new philosophies and forms. Then, in 1940, the Nazis occupied France and the Vichy government—the puppet government installed by the Germans—took control. Artists were allowed to work openly, but only if they churned out French nationalist creations. The École de Paris was forced to move underground.

When liberation finally came in August 1944, the city was in shambles, food was scarce, and tensions were high. But the artistic world slowly came out of hiding as young people from the countryside flocked to the city for community and distraction, and Paris eventually reclaimed its creative and civic reputation. Philosophers, students, and artists huddled around cups of coffee and exchanged ideas in cafés in the Left Bank—the more affordable, bohemian neighborhood of the city, located south of the Seine River. During the postwar years, a few interconnected players formed the center of the arts world in Paris, 1949.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86) was the author of several works, foremost among them Le deuxième sexe (The Second Sex, 1949), one of the foundational texts in second-wave feminist theory and criticism. Along with penning revolutionary treatises and authoring critically acclaimed fiction, de Beauvoir unapologetically broke with tradition in her personal life. She never married, never had children, nurtured a lifelong relationship with philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, and had myriad lovers (men and women). Her intellectual appetite and her relationship with Sartre have cemented her status as a postwar Paris provocateur. She is remembered as a bold woman even by today’s standards.

Simone de Beauvoir. Photo by Brassai, 1944. Courtesy Flickr.

OPPOSITE French crowds cheer the victory parade after the liberation of Paris in 1944. Photo by Jack Downey. Courtesy Library of Congress.
Born in Paris, de Beauvoir was raised Catholic and aspired to be a nun before experiencing a sudden and irreversible crisis of faith that led her to declare atheism at the young age of 14. As a girl, she was an isolated chatterbox who struggled to make friends, but she was more interested in learning than personal relationships. Her parents’ financial situation worsened after World War I, so her options for marriage were jeopardized because she lacked a suitable dowry. But the lack of marriage prospects didn’t hinder de Beauvoir’s plans; her sights were set on the classrooms of Paris’s most venerated universities.

She attended the Sorbonne (the second-oldest modern university in Europe) in 1926 and the prestigious École normale supérieure in 1929 to study philosophy. Around the time de Beauvoir met Sartre, they were both preparing to take exams for a rigorous French philosophy degree with 21 other students. Sartre beat de Beauvoir for the first-place award. She came in second, even though the auditors acknowledged she was a more astute and skilled philosopher—not to mention the youngest person to ever take the test. Sartre called her castor, or “beaver,” as a nickname: a nod to her hardworking nature. He proposed to her for practical, financial reasons, but she rejected him; nevertheless, they maintained a lifelong open relationship.

After graduation, de Beauvoir went on to teach philosophy at various schools in Paris throughout the 1930s, all the while writing works of fiction. Her novels have since been eclipsed by the impact that The Second Sex made on twentieth-century feminist thought. One among her many philosophical/social treatises, the book is a clear and cogent appraisal of the place of women in societies that are built for the success of men. It earned her the condemnation of the pope for its assertions about economics and sex.

De Beauvoir was very politically active throughout her life; she was an ardent supporter of French student movements in the 1950s and ’60s and a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War. But although The Second Sex was credited with bolstering second-wave feminism, she didn’t actually identify with the word “feminist” until 1970. From then on, she was a committed leader of the feminist movement. In 1976, she acknowledged the sacrifices she had made: “Women like me who have carved out a successful sinecure or career have to be willing to risk insecurity.” De Beauvoir died in 1986, almost six years to the day after Sartre’s death.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80) is famous for his contributions to the existentialist movement with novels (La nausée, or Nausea, 1938), philosophical essays (L’être et le néant, or Being and Nothingness, 1943), and plays (Huis clos, or No Exit, 1944). He was born and grew up in Paris with his mother and grandfather (his father died when he was two years old). Small in stature, cross-eyed, and inclined to study, young Sartre was bullied by his classmates but found refuge in writing and reading. He studied at the École normale supérieure from 1924 to 1929, where he met de Beauvoir. In 1931 he became a professor of philosophy at the Lycée le Havre.
Sartre’s scholarly work was interrupted in 1939 when he was drafted to serve as a meteorologist in World War II. He became a prisoner of war in 1940. He was eventually granted civilian status in 1941, but he returned to an unrecognizable Paris occupied by the Nazis. Sartre, a committed Marxist, threw his energy into antifascist publications run by intellectual friends until Paris was liberated in 1944. He continued writing, and he taught at various schools over the next 15 years.

Sartre’s philosophical stance was deeply tied to his work as a writer. His novels and plays are concerned with representing people as close to their unvarnished selves as possible. These representations are often highly unflattering as his characters struggle with dignity and confront their capacity for cruelty and the consequences of their actions.

Sartre was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964, but he refused it in a public renunciation of what he believed was the institutionalized nature of literature. Still, suspicion about his true mettle as an activist followed him throughout his career. Despite his political actions and the causes Sartre championed during his life, his peers saw him as someone who wrote first and resisted second. Nevertheless, today he is remembered as one of the greatest philosophers in the Western canon. After his death in 1980, an estimated fifty thousand people filled the streets of Paris to attend his funeral.

**Juliette Gréco** (born 1927) is a renowned French actor and singer who has been active in Paris culture and arts since the late 1940s. Gréco eventually became a French icon in fashion and a muse to the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre and John Lennon, but her life before and immediately following World War II was anything but glamorous.

Born in Montpellier, France, Gréco was the daughter of Corsican parents who were involved in the Résistance—organized opposition to the fascist regime taking hold of Western Europe. Her parents were often absent due to their work, so Gréco was raised primarily by her grandparents.

In 1943, her mother went missing. Not long after, Gréco was arrested in Paris by the Gestapo for her affiliation with the Résistance and taken to the horrific Fresnes Prison, where torture was rampant. She was just 16 years old. Later that year, she was released, and she
walked eight miles back to Paris in the dead of winter. There, she stayed in a rundown hotel in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés district, borrowing ill-fitting clothes from friends. Her old language tutor offered her a temporary home and encouraged her to enroll in drama classes. Gréco frequented Left Bank cafés after classes, where she met other intellectuals. Following in her parents’ activist footsteps, she started attending Young Communist meetings.

Gréco soon became a fixture among the artists and intellectuals who flocked to Paris after the war, and her style of wearing too-large clothing became iconic. Soon, her look was associated with and emulated by the postwar Parisian avant-garde. Her fame in fashion enabled her to launch a singing career in 1949. Her politics were present in her music; her hit “Je suis comme je suis” (“I Am What I Am”) was ardently pro-pleasure and pro-sex and filled with assertions that the world should not try to change her.

The singer developed a close friendship with musician and writer Boris Vian, who she describes as being “very protective” as she navigated the circle of artists in Paris’s political and cultural scene. When Vian and his wife, Michelle, brought Gréco backstage at a performance in the prestigious Salle Pleyel concert hall, she discovered Miles Davis.

The relationship that bloomed between Gréco and Davis defied conventions of race and distance. Davis loved Gréco but rejected marriage, because he worried that racism toward him would negatively affect her career abroad, particularly in the US. When they were seen together in public in New York, Gréco described the experience as painful because of the reactions from restaurant staff, who didn’t bring the couple food for two hours. She wrote that the experience exposed to her the realities of racism; in the US, his “colour was made blatantly obvious to [her], whereas in Paris [she] didn’t even notice that he was black.”

The year 1949 was also big for Gréco professionally, with the premiere of Jean Cocteau’s film Orphée, which starred Gréco and propelled her to an even higher public profile. Her recognition as an actor and musical artist gained traction in the 1950s. This newfound popularity led to album after album, as well as theater work in New York and film offers from Hollywood. She has continued acting and producing acclaimed music throughout her long career. Today, she is considered an icon of French artistry and the face of bohemian Left Bank culture. In 2015, at the age of 88, Gréco released her latest album, Merci.

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) was a painter, sculptor, printmaker, ceramicist, and playwright who is widely recognized for pioneering the cubist movement. Picasso was born in Málaga, Spain. From a young age, he showed an aptitude for drawing. After his sister died in 1895, he and his family relocated to Barcelona. Picasso found a rhythm there that spurred his creative spirit, and he started to frequent Els quatre gats (The Four Cats), a café that served as a meeting place for artists.

After taking a trip to Paris in 1900, Picasso moved there permanently in 1904 and started his life as an expat. He became friends with Jean Cocteau in 1915 when Cocteau
was preparing for his ballet *Parade* and approached Picasso to collaborate on set and costume design. It was the beginning of a long friendship.

The work that Picasso produced over his career went through periods in which he was heavily influenced by a particular color or form that reflected his personal outlook on life. As time went on and political tensions erupted in Europe, Picasso turned his focus to civic commentary, creating *Guernica* (1937) and *Le Charnier* (*The Charnel House*, 1944–48) to give visual life to the horrors perpetrated by fascist regimes.

His investment in social and civic activity went beyond the canvas. When Paris was liberated in 1944, Picasso participated in efforts to oust Parisians, even other artists, who had collaborated with the Vichy government and Nazi occupation. He publicly identified as a communist the same year. Even after World War II, he continued to be outspoken about global violence outside of Europe, stunning the Paris arts community with paintings like *Massacre en Corée* (*Massacre in Korea*, 1951), which graphically depicted American intervention in the Korean War.

Picasso valued open exchange of ideas among artists. He consistently provided studio space where other artists (including Jean-Paul Sartre) could mingle and share thoughts. Although Picasso played a major role in fostering Paris’s art scene, this work and his later exploration in sculpture are often overlooked in favor of his most celebrated paintings. He died at the age of 92 on April 8, 1973, leaving behind an inimitable legacy in the artistic sphere.

**Boris Vian** (1920–59) was a jazz musician, composer, club owner, and writer active in the postwar arts scene in Paris. Vian contracted rheumatic fever when he was 12 years old, which contributed to severe and lifelong heart problems. His parents encouraged him in his studies at the prestigious Lycée Condorcet, but he resented them for their constant vigilance over his health. Although he did not believe that his health was dire, his heart condition kept him from enlisting in the military in the 1930s.

Vian’s constant craving for more physical freedom nurtured his love of jazz, which he felt was inherently linked to raw impulse and personal expression. In 1937, Vian discovered the trumpet, as well as the Hot Club in Paris, a ring of musicians experimenting with jazz. He attended his first Duke Ellington concert that same year.
In 1941, he married Michelle Légilse while he was still in engineering school. Although he loved music, he started work as an engineer at the Association de Française de normalisation to attain some financial security after graduating. His participation in resistance efforts during World War II was minimal; the most he did was continue to play and translate American jazz after it was banned by the Vichy government, and it seems that even this decision came more from his personal affinity for the art than from any desire to make a political statement.

He also penned the novels *Vercoquin et le plankton* (*Vercoquin and the Plankton*) and *Trouble dans les andains* (*Turmoil in the Swaths*) and started writing for the jazz magazine *Hot Club Bulletin* under a pseudonym. He began spending more time with other intellectuals populating the café scene and grew close to singer Juliette Gréco. He was fond of the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and met him, as well as Simone de Beauvoir, in 1946. The seeds of a continued friendship and healthy rivalry were sown. That same year, Vian began contributing to the couple’s publication, *Les tempes modernes* (*Modern Times*), while finishing manuscripts and starting his collection of short stories, *Les fourmis* (*The Ants*). Vian was able to leave his job as an engineer because his work as an artist earned him enough to make a living.

Eventually, his views and beliefs diverged from Sartre’s, and Vian began to mock the other writer’s work. Vian eventually shifted his career to more fully encompass musical pursuits in jazz, to critical and popular acclaim. He became artistic director for the Jazz Division of Philips Records in 1955, a position he held until his death in 1959.

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All Good Poets
Addiction and Creativity

By Shannon Stockwell

We’re all familiar with the notion of the drug-addicted artist. You can probably think of a dozen names off the top of your head: Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, Marilyn Monroe, Amy Winehouse. Many people initially assume that artists use drugs to enhance their creative abilities. Scientifically, there is some truth to this: drugs alter a person’s state of mind, leading them to stumble upon ideas they may not have developed while sober. Writer William Faulkner and poet Charles Bukowski both claimed that they relied on alcohol to help them write; Jack Kerouac famously wrote *On the Road* during a three-week drug bender. “The poet makes himself a *voyant* [“seer”] through a long, immense reasoned deranging of all his senses,” said poet Arthur Rimbaud, who dabbled in psychedelics and possibly opium. Many artists are familiar with the adage, “Write drunk, revise sober,” often attributed to author Ernest Hemingway (although actually said by a character in a 1964 book by Peter De Vries).

It is true that drugs help a person think differently, but the substances—especially depressants (like alcohol) and opioids (such as opium and heroin)—severely inhibit a person’s ability to *act* on those new ideas. In his book *The Dynamics of Creation*, psychiatrist Anthony Storr tells the story of a composer who said that using marijuana caused him to think of amazing songs in his head, but he could never find the motivation to write them down. And when the high wore off, he couldn’t remember the songs. This experience holds true for many artists. If drugs don’t incite a person to actually create, to make and do things, then they cannot be said to enhance someone’s *creativity*.

And sometimes, it turns out that the drug does nothing at all. “I never thought I could write without the bottle,” Bukowski said in an interview in 1989. “But the last five or six months I have had an illness that has limited my drinking. So I sat down and wrote without the bottle, and it all came out just the same. So it doesn’t matter.” But if drugs don’t actually enhance creativity, then why are there so many artists addicted to drugs?

The phenomenon of the addicted artist may not have anything to do with creativity at all. Psychologists say that addiction is the result of mental distress of some kind; rarely do people turn to drugs to feel better when they feel good to begin with. Following that
line of logic, maybe the connection is actually between mental illness and creativity. This idea goes way back; even the ancient Greek philosopher Plato said, “All good poets are not in their right mind when they make their beautiful songs.”

The image of the mad artist is as pervasive in our culture as the addict artist. But which comes first, mental illness or creativity? It could be that the mentally ill are predisposed to artistic sensibilities. Many creative people claim that making art is one of the only ways to soothe their inner turmoil. “If I don’t write to empty my mind, I go mad,” said the poet Lord Byron, who probably suffered from bipolar disorder and who harbored an affinity for opioids. Psychiatrists Paul J. Silvia and James C. Kaufman say, “Some disorders foster, enable, or provoke creative thought and accomplishment. . . . Researchers have suggested that the diverse, loosely associated pattern of thought fosters creative ideas.”

Alternatively, maybe the realities of being an artist cause mental distress. For example, many artists (even famous ones) struggle to maintain a regular income, and lack of money is a common cause of stress. Additionally, artists must endure rejection and harsh, often public, criticism. Silvia and Kaufman cite the writer Sherwood Anderson, who had a major depressive episode in the middle of his career. This was just around the time when most critics turned against his work. The timing of his depression was probably not a coincidence. When a person spends his or her life working toward something only to be told that what he or she has made is worthless, depression is a natural human response.

Or maybe the mad artist is nothing more than a stereotype. Writer and literary critic Anatole Broyard once said, “There are just as many disturbed and self-destructive bakers, but critics do not analyze their bread.” Maybe it seems like artists are more prone to mental illness and addiction simply because artists tend to be celebrities in our culture, so we hear about their lives more often. The world didn't know when your carpenter friend started going to Alcoholics Anonymous because the world didn't know who your friend was to begin with. But when Ozzy Osborne checks into rehab again, we are bound to hear about it.

Movies and television further perpetuate the myth of the mad artist (see Almost Famous or Walk the Line), and this is probably because stories in which protagonists struggle against something are more engaging. There is conflict. The story of an artist who takes care of herself and is generally happy won't grip an audience in the same way.

Miles Davis knew that drugs wouldn’t increase his creative capacity. “I wasn’t never into that trip that if you shot heroin you might be able to play like Bird [Charlie Parker],” he says in his autobiography. “That ain’t what got me into heroin.” He started using the drug, he says, because of the depression he felt upon returning to America following his trip to Paris in 1949; his music wasn’t appreciated in the United States like it had been in France. And he missed Juliette Gréco, the singer he had fallen in love with during his time in Europe. Heroin wreaked havoc on his creativity, his body, and his happiness. His life revolved around acquiring the drug, which meant that he sold his possessions
and stole from his friends. Music, which had brought him joy since his childhood, was left in the dust. It wasn’t until he detoxed in 1954 that his creativity returned, and with it, his joy.

Jean Cocteau’s addiction initially had nothing to do with his art. He started using opium to numb the pain he suffered after the death of Raymond Radiguet, the object of his affections. He grew to love opium, and yet even in his book *Opium: The Diary of His Cure*, in which he espoused the wonders of opium, he rarely mentioned that he felt it enhanced his creativity. In fact, says biographer Claude Arnaud, it had the opposite effect; it rendered him lethargic, so he didn’t feel the fiery need to create that he experienced while sober. The drug made Cocteau so anxious that even the smallest sound was enough to send him into a rage. He stopped eating and became constipated. He had no energy. He lost weight and his skin hung from his frame. This living hell caused him to check into rehab in 1928.

The connection between addiction and creativity has not been studied with conclusive results. When all is said and done, the causes of addiction are as varied as addicts themselves. Some artists may use drugs because they erroneously believe that they enhance creativity. Some may turn to substances as a way to ease the mental stress that comes with the territory of being an artist. Some might develop addictions for reasons unrelated to their work entirely.

No matter the cause, addicted artists all have complicated relationships with their substances of choice. Cocteau and Davis loved the way that drugs made them feel at first, but as it does for everyone, addiction took its toll on their happiness, their wellbeing, and their work. What is important to remember is that there is always something behind addiction, and if this is never addressed, the addiction will not go away. As Cocteau said in *Opium*, “If you hear someone say: ‘X . . . has killed himself smoking opium,’ you should know that it is impossible, and that this death conceals something else.”

Acupuncture is used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat a variety of ailments. It involves inserting very thin needles at various points on the body. For example, the 12 meridians (6 points on the hand and 6 on the foot) are part of the life-energy (chi) pathway; needles are inserted here to treat stress, addiction, and physical problems. Although Robert says in Needles and Opium that there are 653 acupuncture points on the body, there are actually as many as 2,000.

The age of reason, also known as the Enlightenment, is a term used to describe the rise in rationalism and scientific inquiry that took place during the seventeenth century. Philosophers such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and René Descartes looked to science as a means of driving progress; they wanted to explore the capabilities of the human mind. The age of reason philosophers emphasized science and rational thought instead of creativity and imagination. French auteur Jean Cocteau uses the age of reason in his essay “Letter to Americans” (1949) as part of an analogy comparing points in a person’s life to eras of humanity. He compares the time of ancient Egypt (3100–332 BCE) to a childhood spent building sandcastles, and the time of Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (roughly 600–300 BCE) to the point in adolescence in which a child’s curiosity about the wider world flourishes. Cocteau hopes that, in this analogy, his life does not reach the age of reason, “because it is the dreariest phase of all.”

Louis Armstrong (1901–71) was an American jazz trumpeter, composer, and actor. He helped introduce to jazz the concept of an extended solo and popularized scat singing and improvisation.

The aurora borealis (also known as the northern lights) is an atmospheric phenomenon caused by electrons from the sun bumping into molecules of oxygen and nitrogen in Earth’s atmosphere and releasing their energy as light. It is commonly seen in areas surrounding Earth’s northern magnetic pole.

Bell Canada is a telecommunications company based in Montreal, Quebec. Its calling card is a plastic card that can be used as a method of payment when making phone calls. These cards are commonly used for making long-distance calls. They are still available today.
Chinese water torture is a technique used to drive someone mad by slowly dripping water onto his or her forehead. Its origin is debated, but it is agreed that it is probably not Chinese; it may stem from magician Harry Houdini’s Chinese Water Torture Cell act in 1910 or from an invention by Italian lawyer Hippolytus de Marsiliis in the fifteenth century.

Clinique de Saint-Cloud was a clinic that Jean Cocteau visited in November 1928 to detox from opium. It was located in a western suburb of Paris. In the early twentieth century, the opium detoxification process usually involved the use of short-acting opioids, such as morphine, as well as decreasing doses of heroin and cocaine. By weaning the addict off opium slowly, it lessened the severe symptoms of withdrawal, which include nausea, muscle cramping, anxiety, fever, and depression.

A decibel is a measurement of sound level and intensity.

Existentialism is a literary and philosophical movement that explores the human condition. It developed in the 1940s and ’50s as a reaction to the chaos of World War II, when many people were trying to make sense of how humans had been capable of such extreme cruelty and destruction. Existentialist philosophers responded by focusing on notions of authenticity and freedom. They argued that human beings should guide their lives according to their own beliefs rather than be guided by roles, stereotypes, and other societal categories.
Familière is French for “familiar,” “informal,” or “colloquial.”

The Global Refusal Manifesto is an antiestablishment and antireligious work written by artists and intellectuals in Quebec in 1948. Through a collection of writing and artwork, this manifesto railed against the government in Quebec and the Catholic Church. Its writers wanted the Quebecois to embrace other cultural influences aside from France and Roman Catholicism. Its publication is credited as the birth of modern French Canada.

The Hôtel de la Louisiane was a boarding house in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés quarter of Paris (it is now a hotel). During the 1920s and ’30s, it served as a meeting place for many jazz musicians and intellectuals, including Miles Davis and Ernest Hemingway. Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and later Juliette Gréco all lived in this boarding house in the 1940s and ’50s.

India ink is traditionally a black pigment made from lampblack (soot). It is used for writing, drawing, and printing. Today, the term also refers to a certain kind of colored pigment.

Jazz is a style of music that centers on improvisation and syncopation. It began in New Orleans in the late 1800s but quickly spread around the world, embracing local musical styles wherever it went. It traditionally featured brass instruments, particularly the trumpet. Some of jazz’s most famous musicians include Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald. Jazz was very popular among existentialist philosophers in Paris, such as Jean-Paul Sartre.
July 14 is celebrated in France as Bastille Day. The Bastille was a fortress and prison used during the French Revolution to incarcerate spies and political dissidents. On July 14, 1789, revolutionary soldiers captured the fortress. They then proceeded to force King Louis XVI to agree to a constitutional monarchy. The storming of the Bastille became a symbol of the French Revolution, and that's why Bastille Day is celebrated every year in France.

Life magazine was a weekly news magazine in the United States from 1883 to 1972. It favored using images, rather than words, to tell stories. It was well known for innovative photographic essays, capturing now-historic visuals of contemporary culture.

Louis Malle (1932–95) was a French screenwriter and film director. He is associated with the 1960s new wave movement, which focused on contemporary social issues and experimented with new methods. For his film and documentary work, Malle won a Palme d’Or, an Academy Award, and two Golden Lions. The score for Malle’s film noir Elevator to the Gallows (1958) is by Miles Davis. This score is considered groundbreaking for its intimate connection to the images on screen, which stems from the fact that Davis improvised as the film played in front of him.

The New York Times critic to whom Jean Cocteau refers in Needles and Opium is Bosley Crowther, the paper’s film critic from 1940 to 1967. He was known for being unpredictable in his reviews of popular films. About Cocteau's The Eagle with Two Heads, Crowther wrote, “It sometimes helps if a reviewer has a faint idea of what a film he is reviewing is supposed to be about. . . . Unfortunately, Mr. Cocteau neglected to make it clear.”

The October Crisis of 1970 began with the kidnapping of British trade commissioner James Richard Cross by four members of the separatist terrorist group Front de libération du Québec (FLQ). They wanted the Canadian government to broadcast their manifesto (arguing for Quebec independence) on television and to release members of their group from jail. While there was initially public support for this group, the people quickly changed their minds after FLQ members kidnapped and killed Canadian Minister of Labor Pierre Laporte. During these turbulent times, the Canadian government invoked the War Measures Act, which suspended some civil rights of incarcerated people; it was the first time this had been done during peacetime in Canada.

Opium is an addictive drug made from poppy seedpods. It is used in the creation of morphine, codeine, and heroin. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, opium was widely used as a recreational drug across Europe and the United States, and it came to be particularly associated with artists for its supposed ability to spur creativity.

Orpheus is an ancient Greek mythical hero renowned for his musical abilities. After the death of his wife, Eurydice, Orpheus traveled into the underworld to save her. Hades, god of the underworld, stipulated that Orpheus could take Eurydice back, but he was not allowed to look at her
as they left the underworld. As they approached the **Gates of Hell**, Orpheus could resist no longer. He looked back at her, and she disappeared. In some versions of the myth, Orpheus was later killed by resentful **Bacchae**, followers of Dionysus, god of wine and theater.

A **phonograph** is a sound-recording and playback machine invented by Thomas Edison in 1877. During the 1900s, phonographs were the dominant audio system. They later evolved into gramophones and record players.

**The Place de la République** is a square in Paris, constructed in 1879. Featuring statues of liberty, equality, and fraternity, this civic plaza has great symbolic significance to Parisians, who have gathered here for protests, remembrances, and national events.

**Quebec** is a province in eastern Canada. It is the only French-speaking province, which linguistically and culturally puts it at odds with the more Anglocentric provinces.

**The Quiet Revolution** began in Quebec in 1960 when a liberal government rose...
to power. Through this new government’s economic and social policies, it began to lay the foundation for the modernization and nationalization of Quebec. During this time, people began to call for Quebecois to become a distinct nationality and for the French language to be put on equal footing with English.

Raymond Radiguet (1903–23) was a French poet and novelist. He became a part of the dadaist and cubist movements and was an apprentice to Jean Cocteau (as well as the object of his affections). Radiguet’s most famous works include Le diable au corps (The Devil in the Flesh, 1923) and Le bal du comte d’Orgel (Count Orgel Opens the Ball, 1924).

The referendum about Quebec’s independence refers to a vote held in 1980 about whether Quebec should split from Canada and form its own separate country. The campaign on both sides of the issue was controversial, and many national politicians were involved. The measure was defeated by 60 percent to 40 percent. By 1995, when a second referendum was held, the margin had shrunk to less than one percent. These referenda have shattered any sense of Canadian nationalism. In 2006, the Canadian government formally
recognized Quebec as “a nation within a united Canada,” but it is still unclear what impact this has upon the independence movement.

Roland Garros (1888–1918) was a French pilot who made the first nonstop flight across the Mediterranean Sea in 1913 and performed in stunt-flying exhibitions. Garros was also involved in what is thought to be the first air battle of World War I. He was killed when his plane was shot down in October 1918.

Rolleiflex is a line of high-end cameras originally made by Franke & Heidecke.

“Romeo, banishèd, jealous of the carrion flies that can seize on dear Juliet’s hand and its white wonder” is an amalgamation and rewording of two lines from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. “Romeo, banishèd” is uttered several times in act three, scene two, as the Nurse informs Juliet that her husband, Romeo, has killed her cousin Tybalt and been exiled from Verona. The remainder of the line is from the subsequent scene, in which Friar Laurence informs Romeo that he has been banished. Romeo moans that flies can touch his beloved Juliet, but he never will again.

Saint-Germain-des-Prés is a neighborhood in Paris, south of the Seine River. During the 1940s and ‘50s, it was the center for philosophers and artists of the existentialist movement, as well as home to many jazz clubs. Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and many other intellectuals gathered in its many cafés.
Segregation laws in the US, which varied from state to state, made racial discrimination legal. Some of these laws prohibited and criminalized interracial marriage and sex. While many segregation laws were overturned with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, interracial marriage wasn’t made legal countrywide until 1967 with the Supreme Court’s decision on *Loving v. Virginia*.

A *strophe* is a rhythmic unit of two or more lines that is repeated. It is similar to a stanza in modern poetry. A *catastrophe* is a tragic event, often brought about through a destructive natural disaster (like a hurricane) or through violence. It is also a term for the final event in a dramatic arc (especially in a tragedy).

“That trumpet from the Bible” refers to the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, which states that the apocalypse and the second coming of Christ will be announced by a series of seven trumpets. Each trumpet calls forth another catastrophic event and is intended as a wake-up call for sinners to repent their sins. In his “Letter to Americans,” Jean Cocteau compares these trumpets to the trumpets played by black musicians in America, concluding that the rise of jazz signifies the end of one era and the beginning of a new one.
Questions to Consider

1. In Robert Lepage’s theater, form and content are interrelated. How did the technical features of *Needles and Opium* (scenic, projection, lighting, sound, or costume design) influence your emotional reaction to the show?

2. How is love like an addiction? How is addiction like love?

3. What is Jean Cocteau saying in “Letter to Americans”? Do you think it still has relevance to modern American culture?

4. Why was Miles Davis treated so differently in Paris and New York? Would his experience be different today?

5. What were the reasons behind the migration of African American musicians from the United States to France? Why do people leave the countries where they are born?

6. Does feeling out of place have an effect on creativity?

Have an answer? We’d love to hear from you. Email your thoughts to sstockwell@act-sf.org.
You may even see your answer published on our blog at blog.act-sf.org!

For Further Information


