

THE RAKE'S PROJECT

Ex Machina

At first glance, the set for this Ex Machina's opera production, *Rake's Progress* by Stravinsky, seems to be quite simple. It is a raked stage. That is where any semblance of simplicity ends. As with most of the work created by Robert Lepage and his company, Ex Machina, there are many levels under the surface. The scenography, designed by Carl Fillion who has worked on more than a dozen productions with Ex Machina, reveals the various scenes of the opera through the sophisticated use of traps located throughout the surface of the rake.

The three act opera, inspired by the series of eight paintings by William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* (1733), tells the story of Tom Rakewell, a young man who follows a path of vice and self-destruction after inheriting a fortune from his miserly father.

The current production had its début at Théâtre de la Monnaie de Munt in Brussels in April '07 and toured to opera houses in Europe and the United States.

"The setting of the opera on a simple plateau is relatively spare" says director Robert Lepage in the production's program. "Stravinsky's opera places a great deal of importance with the characters. Because of this, we must expect fewer technological developments than in past productions by Ex Machina."

Lepage with Fillion and the Ex Machina creative team transposed the action of the opera to the United States in the period from the forties to the sixties. The oil rich Trulove's family mansion is located in Texas where oil derricks are part of the landscape. Hollywood and Las Vegas also serve as backdrops to the opera with the famous Las Vegas Neon Boneyard used for the cemetery scene. The omnipresence of the Devil in the opera is reinforced by the image that each new act is announced through the scenery that emerges from below the surface of the stage.

The creative process for *Rake's Progress* began, as with most of Ex Machina's creations, at the Caserne Dalhousie in Québec City. Over several days of brainstorming, the concept of setting the action in a 1950ish Hollywood film production is developed and then presented to the co-producers in mid-November in Brussels. Ex Machina creates in a "work-in-progress" method. Because of this, the proximity of the shops to the design and production team is essential. As with past operas, Ex Machina chose to work with Scène Éthique (SE – Scène Éthique) for the structural design and fabrication of the scenery and mechanized elements. This began with a visit by Scène Éthique to the Caserne Dalhousie where Ex Machina had mocked-up the set. Working with scenographer Carl Fillion, production manager for operas Bernard Gilbert and technical director Michel Gosselin, Scène Éthique's president Martin Ouellet and project manager Sébastien Duchesne determined the overall dimensions of the scenery and defined the various effects that were to be incorporated into the raked deck.

Due to the many traps, some of which left significant openings in the deck, and the structural requirement of supporting some heavy set pieces such as a car and an oil derrick / camera crane, Scène Éthique determined that their OST structural beam system and the PTL deck attachment system were best suited to the production's requirements.

The patented OST – PTL system was originally designed by Scène Éthique to meet the staging requirements of Cirque du Soleil for whom Scène Éthique build most of the touring stages.

It offers great strength and high load capacities while being easy and fast to set-up. The strength of the OST structures with the PTL attachment decks allowed for 4 large traps each 6' wide by 20' long to form the Pool Scene opening of 12' by 20' and the Bedlam Scene opening of 24' X 20'. The decks were lowered using simple hand winches. Despite these large openings, the remaining deck retained its load capacity and rigidity allowing the important number of performers in the opera to be staged by Mr. Lepage without restriction as to their placement. One of these decks was also fitted with a hydraulic piston since it was used as the ramp for getting the prop car onto the stage from its upstage position. Once the car was positioned onto the ramp, it was lifted even with the surrounding deck using a hydraulic power unit fitted with accumulators to reduce noise.

The downstage section of the set features a hydraulically powered 40' wide by 7' deep lid that lifts to reveal the Boneyard Cemetery and also opens to allow the 40' long scissor lift elevator stored underneath to deploy and become the bar counter in the Saloon scene. The structural properties of the OST and PTL components allowed the lid to be lifted with little apparent mechanical support and gave the lid excellent stability since it is used as a performance area by the opera's dancers and chorus in its upright position.

The Boneyard Lid is located slightly further upstage than originally planned since the set had to conform to the varying positions of the fire curtain trough incorporated in the deck of the set's rake to match with the different opera house rigs where the production will be presented.

The other traps are much smaller in size and are all operated manually. An upstage trap serves as the well for the oil derrick. The oil derrick is later transformed into a camera crane that is used by a performer to "film" the dramatic action of the opera. The derrick – crane was designed by Carl Fillion to serve this double purpose and was engineered by Scène Éthique to be easily manipulated by the performers while having the capacity to safely move the "cinematographer" in its fully extended position.

The presence of technical director Michel Gosselin in the Scène Éthique shop during the trail fit-up of the set allowed for the integration of the "work-in-progress" alterations to the set as it was being designed, assembled and painted. Both Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Gosselin were present in Brussels with Scène Éthique's project manager for the assembly of the set in the opera house's rehearsal hall. This allowed for last minute adjustments and the integration of the props and video into the scenic picture during the final rehearsal and creative period.

Again in the production's program, Robert Lepage says, "The *Rake's Progress* was musically easy but scenically challenging to mount. In Buddhism, obstacles are your best friends and that is why, in opera, that one makes many friends."



The oil derrick become a camera crane



The Lover's Bed scene



The Bedlam scene



The Bedlam scene - 4 traps lowered



The Boneyard Scene