

# A composer and a comic book writer have reimagined Toronto and Montreal's hockey rivalry as an opera

Yes, you read that right

Laura Kenins · CBC Arts · May 3

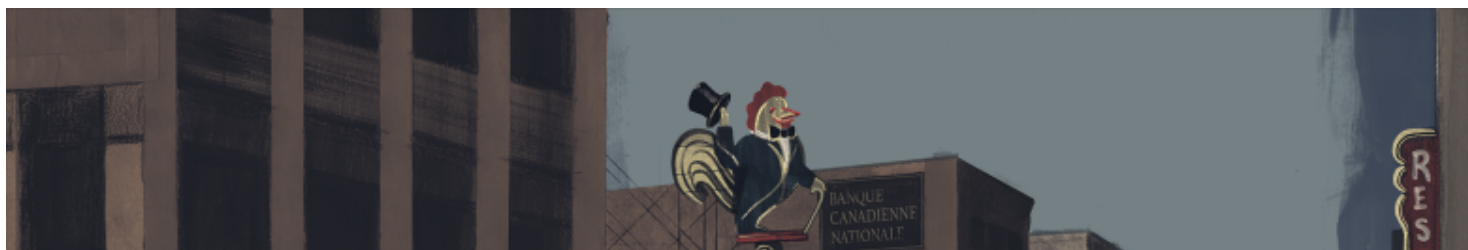


Hockey Noir. (ECM+)

Opera and comics might not seem like a natural pairing, but for creators Cecil Castellucci and André Ristic, it's an easy fit. The comic book writer and composer are both well-versed in cross-disciplinary projects, and *Hockey Noir* is their second comic-themed opera together, where Castellucci wrote the libretto and Ristic the music.

"I felt like opera really lent itself to comic books because it already has that tradition of having supertitles," Castellucci says from her home in Los Angeles.

Presented by Montreal's [ECM+](#) and Toronto's [Continuum Music](#), *Hockey Noir* is debuting in time for the Toronto Comic Arts Festival, which is co-sponsoring the performance. Inspired by film noir, *Hockey Noir* takes the age-old rivalry between Toronto's and Montreal's hockey teams — the "Cabs" and the "Pine Needles", in this case — as its premise, and spins it into a bilingual noir crime story.





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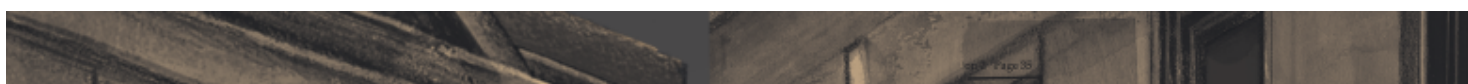
Castellucci and Ristic — both Canadians and former Montreal residents now living out of the country — had first worked together on another ECM+ production in 2010: *Les aventures de Madame Merveille*, a comic book opera in four acts each based on a different type of comics. Wanting to work together again, the elements of *Hockey Noir* began to come together.

"I was thinking about other kind of genres that had strong visual elements and I'm a big noir fan, and so noir just seemed like a natural next step...it lends itself so well to imagery," says Castellucci, who's also played in bands and worked on film and performance art collaborations. "Then I was at a hockey game, and I just started noticing how musical hockey is — when you've got the skaters on the ice, and the puck, and the slaps of the stick, and the crowd, and the music."

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The story of the opera focuses on a Montreal player who goes missing during the playoffs, partly inspired by the real-life 1951 disappearance of Toronto Maple Leafs player "Bashin" Bill Barilko. The music draws partly from film noir influences and partly from the atmosphere of an arena.





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"It evolved a lot. In the beginning we thought we'd have a lot of live hockey onstage, you know, players singing during a game," André Ristic explains over the phone from Belgium. He composed the music for string quartet, percussion and an electronic keyboard that's used mostly for sound effects and to evoke the sound of a Hammond organ — popular both in homes and at arenas in the 1950s.

The story is brought together visually by images from Toronto illustrator Kimberlyn Porter, who connected with Castellucci over Twitter. They came together over a shared love of film noir. In fact, Porter was such a fan of the genre that she made it her thesis project when graduating from the illustration program at Sheridan College, creating a series of film posters.

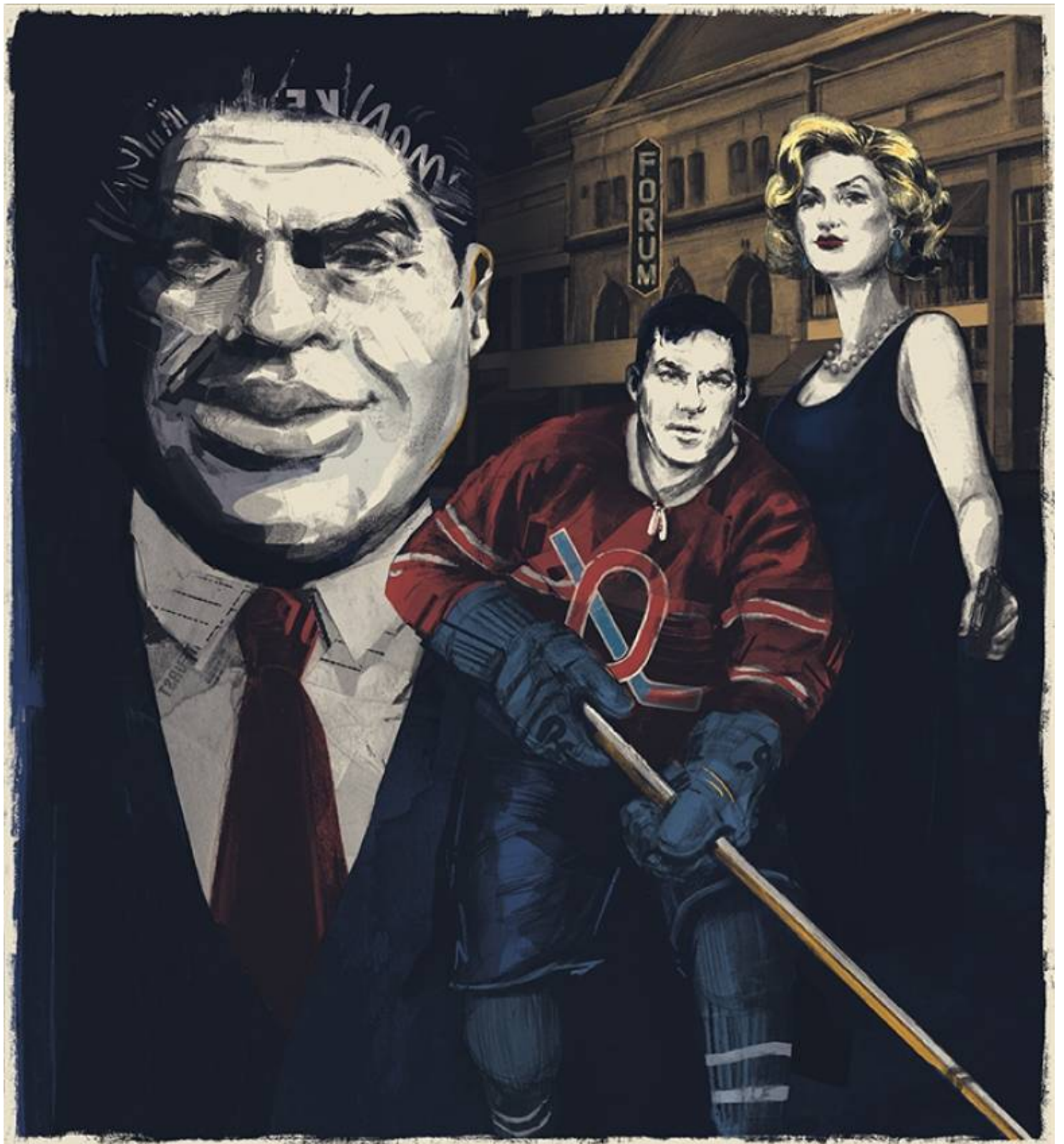
Castellucci was looking on Twitter for an illustrator who was a fan of both noir and hockey. "I told her that I love film noir, but I don't know that much about hockey," Porter says.



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Accustomed to writing scripts for comics, Castellucci had to adjust her approach in art directing the imagery for opera. "The difference when you're doing an opera or a hybrid kind of performance piece is that even though you're going to have sequential images, they're not sequential in the way that they are on the page when you're writing a comic book," she says.

"You're thinking about the elements that someone could use over and over again, or the motifs that they could use to... move the story forward," says Castellucci. Porter created around 50 images for the performance, to be projected onstage. Working in Photoshop, collage and pencil crayon, she created layered images that the production team has added animation to — something that Porter's motion graphics classes at Sheridan helped with.



"I'm not really familiar with Montreal," Porter explains, speaking of the challenges in creating the visuals, "and it's supposed to be in the '50s, so going back to figure out what's actually accurate for that time period is really interesting...I basically had to define Montreal in maybe two or three scenes, so we had to come up with visuals that would represent Montreal." This included double-checking details like the city's iconic "Farine Five Roses" sign — which read as the bilingual "Farine Five Roses Flour" until the 1970s.

Ultimately, being a hockey fan isn't really critical to the narrative. "The hockey's really a background thing," Ristic explains — the mood conveyed is more about the cultural impact of a national sport. "[The story]'s all around hockey, but technically there's not much of a hockey game going on...I think you could change a few words here and there and make it happen in a soccer stadium in Manchester. Or," he laughs, "if you would make an Indian version, it would have to be cricket."

For her part, Castellucci is excited to combine graphic storytelling and music again. "I'm so grateful that TCAF is co-presenting it," she says.

"What I'm trying to do is push the way that we tell sequential stories."

***Hockey Noir. Music by André Ristic. Libretto by Cecil Castellucci. May 3-4, Monument-National, Montreal; May 10-11, Jane Mallett Theatre, Toronto. [www.ecm.qc.ca](http://www.ecm.qc.ca)***