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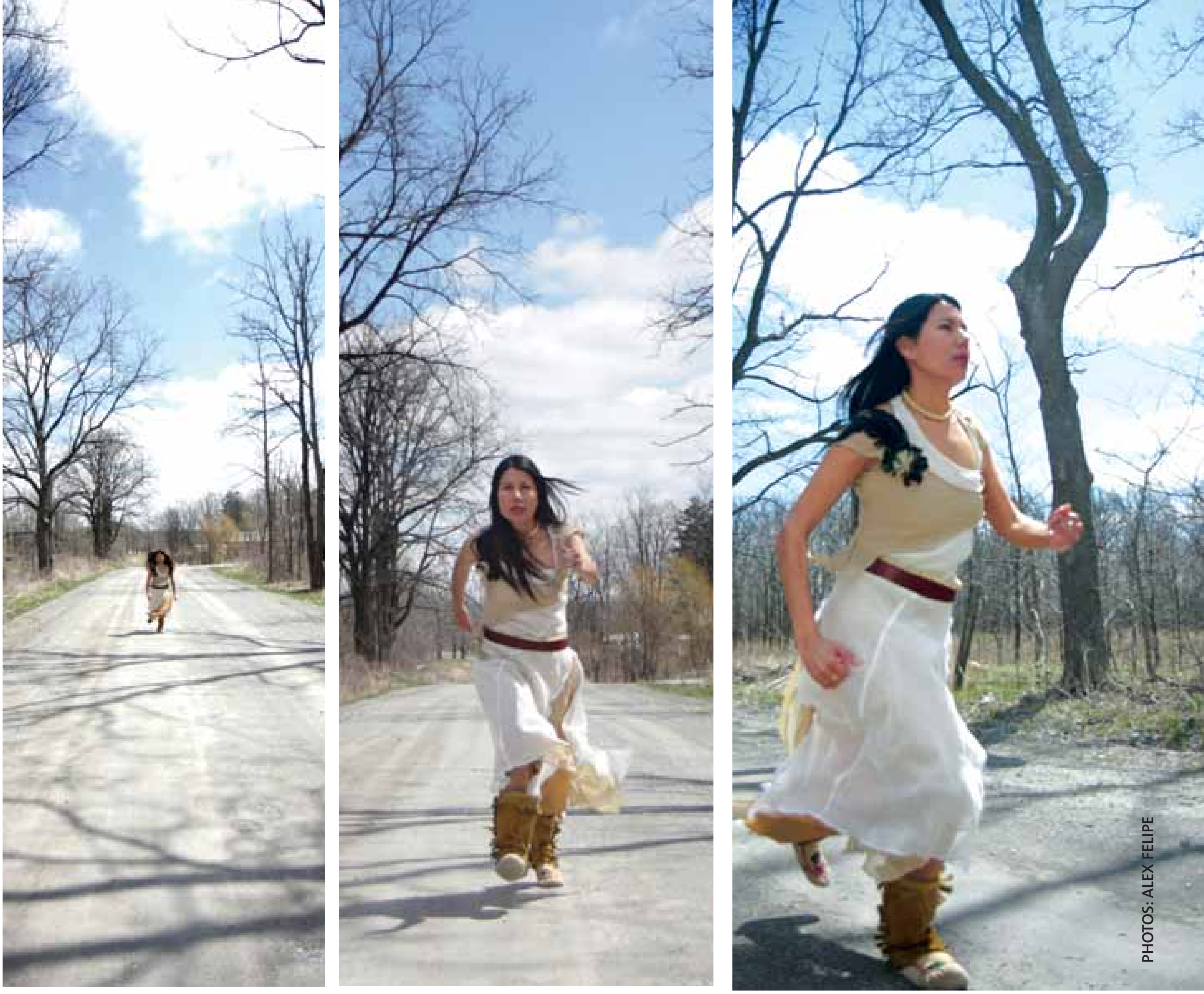

PHOTOS: ALEX FELIPE

GIIWEDIN

ABORIGINAL VOICES IN OPERA

Joseph K. So

Spring is opera time in Toronto—this year there are no fewer than six staged productions. As usual, the Canadian Opera Company and Opera Atelier will be front and centre, but for something different there is *Giiwedin*, a new opera presented by Native Earth Performing Arts and An Indie(n) Rights Reserve. Written by Spy Dénommé-Welch and co-composed by Welch and Catherine Magowan, it tells the story of a 150-year-old Aboriginal woman, Noodin-Kwe, fighting for her land. *Giiwedin* is unique in that it gives our First Nations people a voice in an art form that has historically been Eurocentric, from composers and performers to audience members. At first glance, it seems unusual that an Aboriginal artist like Dénommé-Welch would have chosen this art form. But in fact the winds of change have been blowing for some years; witness the number of new creations by composers and librettists of diverse backgrounds who have chosen this genre for their storytelling.

Giiwedin is a labour of love for Dénommé-Welch, who is Algonquin/Nishnawbe, and Catherine Magowan, a first-generation Canadian of Hungarian-Jewish descent. Dénommé-Welch studied violin, film and theatre at university, and is currently pursuing a doctorate in indigenous music, opera and pedagogy. Magowan is a composer, arranger and bassoonist, having trained at the Glenn Gould School of the Royal Conservatory. This is the first operatic venture for them and for Native Earth Performing Arts, an organization dedicated to the expression of the Native experience through theatre arts. When we sat down for our interview, Dénommé-Welch looked improbably youthful, but it didn't take long to realize he's a mature and serious artist with a brilliant mind. Soft-spoken, articulate, friendly and intense, Dénommé spoke with passion and purpose, allowing a glimpse into his creative world:

PHOTOS: LEAH-SIMONE BOWEN

SPY DENOMME-WELCH and Catherine Magowan

TMS: Tell us a bit about the story of *Giiwedin*?

SDW: *Giiwedin*, which means North Wind, is set in Temiskaming in 1890. It's about Noodin-Kwe, a woman living on the land she inherited from her ancestors. She has been living there since the 1700s—she witnessed the signing of the Royal Proclamation in 1763. She is 150 years old in 1890. Her age is symbolic in our traditional teaching of seven generations. In her case, she carries seven generations of knowledge, tradition and history. One day, a friend comes to tell her about an "Iron River" cutting through the forest. It's actually the railroad the French and the English are building from North Bay, bringing it as far as Moosonee. The plan is to use it as a viaduct to export resources—furs, logs, etc. It comes as a big warning to her. The opera is about her resistance.

Tell us about the genesis of the central character of Noodin-Kwe. Given that she is 150 years old, is her character entirely fictional? Is she based on native mythology?

SDW: Part of her character was inspired not so much by mythology as by our oral tradition of storytelling, stories used by elders to teach lessons to guide you in life. My grandmother told me about a river that's named after my great-great-grandfather, one of the last hereditary chiefs in the area before displacement occurred. I did a lot of research and discovered letters written by an ancestor to the government in July 1911. There was a verbal agreement that when the whites first came, $15,000 was going to be paid as compensation. This part of it is historical. The detail is now ambiguous—I don't know if that's for all the land or some of it, or if it's like rent. There was no legal treaty. No legal document was ever signed or written. With the letter, this native woman is saying, "This is what the agreement was, but I just want the land back." We looked fully into this—there's no ground for the argument of this native woman, but it's a story that resonates across the country. What I find extremely empowering about her is that it predates women's rights. Women didn't vote at the time, and a lot of cultural practices were banned. For her to write this letter showed a lot of love for those who come later.

MARION NEWMAN, Neema Bickersteth, Catharin Carew, and Jessica Lloyd in rehearsal

You've chosen the genre of opera to tell a story of the First Nations culture. Are you convinced that opera is a relevant medium to the Native experience? Why opera? Why not a play?

SDW: For me it is not a huge leap. Music has always been at the core of our native culture. Within my Nations, there are some who can sing as much as 6,000 years of their history. On that level, this opera spanning 300 years is kind of miniscule! For a time, I had taken a departure from music—I was trained in violin and self-taught in guitar. I went into theatre at university. A couple of years ago, when I learned to make my own drum, [music] started to call me back. Coming back to it has strengthened my story telling. I like the space to imagine that opera has opened up for me.

How do First Nations people feel about your creations? Are you writing *Giiwedin* for them as well as for non-natives?

SDW: Excited! People tell me it's what they've been looking forward to. It's very inspiring that they have such strong feelings about this. It feels relevant; it speaks to "now". When a work gets presented, you need to think who is the audience, who it is for. Sometimes a work can be widely received, but when you bring it to the community, they feel it is totally inaccurate. There's no justification for creative freedom, that you have the license to do it just because you are an artist. There's a responsibility in how you're telling the story. I seek permission from the elders. I don't just take the liberty; it has to be respectful.

The score contains many different musical genres. How do you decide on which genres to use in a particular dramatic situation? Do you write accessibly?

SDW: Yes, we choose to write accessibly in a way that pleases us, and others. We've listened to everything—from Gilbert and Sullivan to Hildegard von Bingen to madrigals, early music, rock 'n' roll and jazz. Catherine and I study, listen, and read music purposefully to inform our decisions and choices, and applied different aesthetic techniques as a way to create various affects through music and sound. It's important not to make assumption as to who wrote what—just because I am Nishnawbe that I would be writing the traditional pieces. People might be surprised! Catherine has early music training, and it would be easy to think that she wrote all the baroque music and I stuck to the modern. It's a shared experience, and a spiritual experience, writing about something so close to your heart.

There is some snobbery in classical music circles about music that is very accessible, for example, music with hummable melodies. Since your score invokes many musical styles, are you worried that it might be considered derivative or lacking in originality?

SDW: No, I'm not. My biggest worry is that my work won't be memorable. So if people remember my music, people who relate to it even though they aren't familiar with the classical genre, then I've achieved something. I love this question—"is it derivative"—I'm still pondering it! I don't think what we've done will be perceived that way. I'm thinking of other composers writing accessible work—for me, it's exciting work. Historically there are all kinds of composers coming from different angles, critiquing each other. We're very open to hearing what others are saying about the work in progress. We're excited about what the response will be, as opposed to being apprehensive and fearful. ■

Giiwedin plays at Theatre Passe Muraille Mainspace
April 8 – 24, 2010 » 16 Ryerson Ave., Toronto
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MARION NEWMAN
FIRST NATIONS MEZZO

Joseph K. So

Spy Dénommé-Welch and Catherine Magowan have found in mezzo-soprano Marion Newman the ideal interpreter for Noodin-Kwe, the central character in *Giiwedin*. Not only does Newman possess a beautiful voice, she also happens to be Kwagiulth and Salish from British Columbia. Newman has already sung leading roles, from Cherubino to Rosina to Carmen. With her First Nations heritage, she brings a unique perspective to Noodin-Kwe.

TMS: You are one of the very few native artists in opera. What draws you to this art form?
MN: Well, I've thought about this a lot. My aboriginal culture involves a potlatch ceremony that's real theatre, with drumming, singing and acting. We use our voices to tell a story, which is what opera is! Music and storytelling are universal—it's not that far a stretch for me.

Is this the first native-themed classical work you've done?
MN: No, I did a *Magic Flute* in Vancouver with native West Coast themes that spoke so much of my home. There were moments when I was choked up seeing it on stage. It was very meaningful for me to see the opera presented this way.

What are your thoughts on Noodin-Kwe?
MN: This character makes me think of my paternal grandmother. She lived through a lot of changes, and had to learn new ways in order to fit in with the white culture that took over. She always kept her traditional beliefs. She would tell us stories about the incredibly hard things she went through, and yet still managed to laugh. Noodin-Kwe is going through the experiences of meeting the settlers, who are making new rules and forcing her people to live according to new laws. She is watching many of her people die of starvation and yet she manages to stay strong and keep fighting for her rights. We are still working through act one, but I'm feeling Noodin-Kwe's strength already. I am not trying to play her as a 150-year-old, but rather just as a compassionate, passionate, smart, perceptive, practical human being.

As a native artist, do you feel a certain responsibility in representing your people and your culture?
MN: Of course I do! I feel responsibility to First Nations people, to represent us well. I'm not Nishnawbe—I'm from the West Coast. I want to make sure I don't have gestures that don't fit, or mispronounce the words. I certainly feel the responsibility of telling a story that many of my relatives have been through, losing their homes, land and children. My father, for example, was taken to a residential school from five until 16, when he escaped. My responsibility is to carry on these stories, to let our cultures be seen in a light that invokes discussion among people.