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THEATRE



Scene change

BY CHRISTOPHER HOILE June 03, 2009 21:06

The Children's Crusade

Libretto and music by R. Murray

Schafer. Directed by Tim Alberty.

Musical direction by David Fallis.

Featuring the Canadian Children's
Opera Company, Diego Matamoros.

Produced by Luminato with
Soundstreams Canada. Previews June

5. Opens June 6-11. Fri-Sat, Mon-

Thu 8pm. \$40. 153 Dufferin. 416-

872-1111. www.luminato.com.

Two of the most anticipated works at this year's Luminato Festival deal with opera. Robert Lepage's nine-hour play Lipsynch is about voice and voicelessness, and features opera as one of its themes. R. Murray Schafer's *The Children's Crusade*, an actual opera having its world premiere at the festival, is about the idealism of children and, in turn, about giving a voice to the voiceless.

Months before this year's Luminato, the Canadian Opera Company announced that Lepage would stage *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables*, his second independent production for the company, in early November 2009. Then Luminato announced that it would stage Canadian singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright's first opera, *Prima Donna*, next year. With the buzz surrounding the Four Seasons Centre, inaugurated in 2006 as

Canada's first purpose-built opera house, showing no signs of dying down, and with recent stagings of operas in pubs, art galleries and at the Fringe Festival, it seems the art form is more diverse and ubiquitous than ever.

In many ways Schafer's operas encapsulate this diversity. Still a rebel at age 75, Schafer has long rejected the opera house as a privileged venue and has instead created works for a variety of

unconventional indoor and outdoor locations. His opus maximus is *Patria*, a cycle of 12 operas, many of which have been staged outdoors in the Haliburton Forest and Wildlife Reserve. Why set your works in such unconventional settings? Schafer aims to awaken staid operagoers into active participants.

The Children's Crusade reflects these concerns. The opera, co-commissioned by Soundstreams and Luminato, will be presented June 6-11 in a disused warehouse at 153 Dufferin in promenade style. This means that the audience will follow the cast and the musicians as they move from one significant station to the next through the space, the audience's journey paralleling that of the characters.

Schafer's inspiration is the so-called Children's Crusade of the year 1212, one never sanctioned by the Vatican or counted as one of the nine official crusades of 1095-1272. In fact, modern historians now agree that medieval writers may have intentionally misconstrued the mass movements of poor people in the 13th century. The poor, commonly referred to as *pueri* (Latin for boys), was later mistranslated, generating the "children" myth. The French version of the legend has 12-year-old shepherd Stephen de Cloyes arriving in Paris, claiming he has a letter for the King of France from Jesus. Rebuffed, Stephen gathers a crowd of 30,000 children and leads them to the Mediterranean Sea, convinced it will part as the Red Sea had for Moses.

According to David Fallis, who conducts the opera, "Schafer is interested in the legend for its symbolism not its historicity. His focus is the conflict between innocence and idealism of the children versus the cynicism of the adults."

Tim Albery, who directs the opera, says that Schafer has completely re-imagined the event. Stephen, now renamed "The Holy Child," has visions in which Ariana, a Muslim woman, appears along with a Jewish boy. They ask the Child to come to the Holy Land, not to convert them but to stop the violence so they can live in peace. Albery stresses that *Crusade* is a thoroughly modern work and in no way a recreation of medieval pageantry. Fallis says similar things about the music, which is extremely diverse and written for an orchestra of 16 who play contemporary, medieval and Middle Eastern instruments such as the *riqq*, *qanún* and *darabouka*. Designer Leslie Travers costumes the cast and musicians in non-period dress, the children looking like present-day street kids.

The undertaking of *Children's Crusade* is massive: the show features over 100 performers, including the Toronto Consort, the Canadian Children's Opera Chorus, adult choirs, dancers and actor Diego Matamoros in four speaking roles. Albery, director of such mammoth works as Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and Prokofiev's *War and Peace* for the COC, was engaged during production in solving the work's logistical issues such as how to signal the audience to move from station to station, and how much time to calculate for each segment of the promenade. The brilliance of this kind of production, he says, is that "No two people in the audience will have precisely the same experience, since their perspective will change constantly as the action progresses."

The downside of the type of environmental and experiential opera that Schafer favours is that fewer people can participate in each performance than if it were held in a conventional opera house. The work's specialized requirements also mean that it will likely be staged only at festivals. Tim Albery agrees that a traditional opera company could stage it, but only if it acceded to the work's on-site particularities.

On the other hand, the diversity and daring that Schafer's work represents is not uncommon in the city's opera scene at large. Most Torontonians are probably unaware of just how opera-mad our city has become. The Canadian Opera Company may only be the sixth largest in North America in terms of budget, but it ranks first on the continent in audience support.

Claudine Domingue, Director of Public Relations for the COC, has seen the latest statistics (from a 2006-07 survey), and reports that the COC's 75 per cent subscription rate is the highest in North America, which has an average of only 44 per cent. COC performances also play to 99 per cent capacity, the highest on the continent. (The North American average is 78 per cent.) What's more, the COC's "Opera for a New Age" program, which reserves 147 seats for those aged 16 to 29 (a \$20 expense), has sold out every performance since the Four Seasons Centre opened, no matter whether the opera is well-known or not — a fact that, at the very least, speaks to the willingness of young people to experiment.

That said, the COC is not known as a frequent commissioner of new works. The last mainstage opera they performed was *The Golden Ass* in 1999 by Randolph Peters to a libretto by Robertson Davies. The company's first season at the Four Seasons Centre was to have included Inana's *Journey* by Peters to a libretto by Margaret Atwood, but Peters' continuing ill health has delayed the project. Otherwise, their most recent commission was the one-act opera *Swoon* in 2006 by James Rolfe to a libretto by Anna Chatterton. Such was its success that the COC has asked the duo to write a mainstage opera for the 2011-12 season.

But a focus on such big works neglects the COC commissions that have actually introduced young people to opera. In 2006, Dean Burry's *Isis and the Seven Scorpions*, a play intended for kids, became the first Canadian opera to be performed at the Four Seasons Centre, albeit not on the main stage. Meanwhile, Burry's children's opera *The Brothers Grimm*, scored for five singers and four instruments, has had over 350 performances since its premiere in 2001 and been seen by over 100,000 young people and adults, believed to be the most performed opera in Canadian history.

The contrast of a grand, site-specific work like Schafer's *The Children's Crusade* with a more modest one like *The Brothers Grimm*, whose portability has helped it to achieve enormous exposure, raises the question of whether Canadian opera will grow most with small- or large-scale works. Clearly, the dream will always remain of Canada creating one of the latter, which will enter the national repertory and, at some point, the world's. There have been recent developments in this area such as Toronto's *Tapestry New Opera Works' Iron Road* by Chan Ka Nin (2001), Calgary Opera's *Filumena* (2003) and *Frobisher* (2007), both by John Estacio, and Manitoba Opera's *The*

Transit of Venus (2007) by Victor Davies — the last three, surprisingly, in cities where modern opera had previously been anathema.

Wayne Strongman, managing artistic director of Tapestry, believes, “we have finally turned a corner in opera in Canada when audiences now want to see their own stories on stage.” Dáirine Ní Mheadhra, co-artistic director with John Hess of Queen of Puddings Music Theatre (QoP), agrees, saying that the number of excellent composers and singers, growth of less risk-averse audiences and instigation of www.opera.ca has reached a “critical mass” in Canada that has led to this recent boom.

Still, the size of a new opera is usually reflected by costs that affect its dissemination. The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, recently invited QoP to take its *The Midnight Court* (2005) by Ana Sokolovic to play at its Linbury Studio. Despite the work’s critical and popular success in London, Ní Mheadhra says that the amount of fundraising needed to take an opera with a cast of 13 and a six-piece band to London was exhausting. From now on, QoP will focus on “operas of a size that are always potentially tour-able,” like Sokolovic’s one-person opera *Love Songs* (2008), which recently returned from Paris, Ljubljana and the Zagreb Biennale, where it was recognized as the best of the festival.

And so it may be that smaller works ultimately have more impact. Tapestry’s *Elijah’s Kite* (2006), an opera for young people by James Rolfe for five singers and a three-piece band, has so far toured to 17 towns in Ontario and reached an audience of 20,000. Tapestry’s two-person opera *Nigredo Hotel* (1992) by Nic Gotham has been revived twice in Toronto and has achieved that distinction necessary for the spread of Canadian opera — a second production by a non-Canadian company, in this case in Canberra, Australia.

Both Tapestry and QoP will continue to create new opera in their different ways. Tapestry takes on the role of facilitator, encouraging composers and writers to mingle with and plunge into opera through its experimental “Lib Labs.” Ní Mheadhra, Irish-born and happily free from Canadian modesty, states unreservedly that “Canada has the best singers in the world.” Her company’s goal is to create new works that show off “the incredible treasure we have.”

Toronto has become the kind of city where chamber opera can spring up in unexpected places. A glance ahead at this year’s new-opera performances provides ample proof. Ashiq Aziz and Patrick Young see Toronto as “blossoming as a city for opera,” and have just founded Opera Erratica as “the young face of that renaissance” with stagings that embrace the latest in digital video technology; their production of *Dido and Aeneas* plays August 19-29, in collaboration with the Classical Music Consort. Native Earth Performing Arts’ 2009-10 playbill includes the opera *Giiwedín* written by Spy Dénomme-Welch (and composed with Catherine Magowan) in French, English and Anishnawbe. TrypTych presents a workshop staging of 31-year-old Mark Richards’ opera *Hamlet* June 24-29 and plans a full production of Andrew Ager’s *Frankenstein* this fall.

What is it about opera, whether on a large scale or small, that has attracted new audiences and the interest of artists from other disciplines? Acclaimed actor and playwright Alex Poch-Goldin recently wrote his first full-length libretto for *The Shadow*, which *Tapestry* premiered a few weeks ago. Asked what opera can do that a play cannot, Poch-Goldin suggests it takes us to an “ecstatic place.”

“It doesn’t always happen,” he qualifies, “but when it does it is very unlike a play. Plays can accomplish great things and move you immensely, but music in an opera can expound on those feelings. It can take the audience even further.”

Meet the innovators

To be young, gifted and operatic

Okay, we get it. You’re sick of the wigs and powder, the 60-year-old Don Giovannis, the walkers and canes blocking the emergency exits. But opera is changing! We swear! Here are some of the fresh young faces helping to make it cool. CLAIRE CALDWELL



Melissa Hui

Composer Melissa Hui has sought inspiration in everything from African pygmy music to Federico García Lorca’s poetry. Most recently, she collaborated with Tomson Highway on *Pimootewin*, the first Cree opera. Over a dozen international organizations have commissioned Hui’s works, including Montreal’s *Nouvel Ensemble Moderne*, a chamber orchestra devoted to contemporary artists and aesthetics.



Colin Ainsworth

In opera, there’s something to be said for sticking to tradition — especially when one’s path to success is anything but

conventional. Take Colin Ainsworth: he discovered classical music in high school (a time when many aspiring professionals are fine-tuning their repertoires); he was raised by deaf parents; and he sings in the increasingly rare tenor range. Still, he's snagged some major roles lately, including Jaquino in the Vancouver Opera's '08 production of Beethoven's Fidelio.



Alexis Diamond

Alexis Diamond has shattered the myth that opera just isn't sexy: the playwright's cheeky libretto for Tapestry's 2009 one-acter *The Perfect Screw*, composed by Abigail Richardson, is bursting with tool-related innuendo. A participant in several opera-creation workshops, Diamond is adamant that solid collaboration is key to pushing contemporary opera forward.



Ashiq Aziz

Welcome to the new Enlightenment, headed by the Classical Music Consort's Ashiq Aziz. The conductor promotes the values of tolerance, morality and beauty that informed the works of Beethoven and Mozart. But Aziz isn't just kickin' it old school. In 2008, he conducted Handel's *Acis and Galatea* at the Toronto Fringe: the full-scale opera featured traditional instruments alongside video and sound art.



The Barrett Brothers

Siblings have long been mainstays of showbiz, and Peter and Michael Barrett are no exception to the trend that saw the Jacksons, the Hansons and the Jonases rise to fame. Thankfully, opera draws fewer fangirls — making it easier to listen to Michael's tenor and Peter's baritone in several of

this season's Canadian Opera Company productions.

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