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Anatomy of an Opera

Amy Smart, Times Colonist, November 6, 2011



Artistic director Timothy Vernon talks with singer Betty Allison during a rehearsal at St. John the Divine Parish Hall for Pacific Opera Victoria's production of *Mary's Wedding*.

Photograph by: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist, Times Colonist

Pacific Opera Victoria's first fully commissioned work, three years in the making, is just about ready for audiences. *Mary's Wedding*, adapted from a play of the same name, tells the story of a Prairie woman and the love she lost in the First World War. We get a behind-the-scenes look at the design, historical consultation and rehearsals - and learn what the work could mean for the company.



Artistic director Timothy Vernon leads performers in rehearsal for Mary's Wedding, Pacific Opera Victoria's first fully commissioned work at St. John the Divine Parish Hall.
Photograph by: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist, Times Colonist



Thomas Macleay rehearses a scene from Mary's Wedding with Betty Allison.

The Production

The heroine of Mary's Wedding is poised to enter a new stage of life. And so is Pacific Opera Victoria, the company mounting the new production.

Artistic director and conductor Timothy Vernon crosses one leg over the other and settles into a rolling chair in the wardrobe loft, as the wartime costumes are pieced together behind him.

"To be able to bring something new to the stage is significant," he said of what he calls the company's first true commission, which makes its world première Thursday night - fittingly, the eve of Remembrance Day. "We don't have a lot of operas in this country."

This will not be the first time the story of Mary's Wedding is told - the love story has already been performed on stages across Canada, as well as in the United States, England and Scotland, as a theatre production. But it will be the first time it is told in operatic form.

And it will be the first time that POV has complete control over the creation, which they hope will shake the stubborn shadow of Erehon - the financially disastrous previous commission from more than a decade ago. POV inherited that piece partway through development from the National Arts Centre, which abandoned it after a leadership change.

This time, POV has full artistic control from gestation. The company has hired Juno Award-winning composer Andrew P. MacDonald, selected Stephen Massicotte to write the libretto based on his award-winning play, as well as seen the process through three years of workshops, auditions and creative development.

While Canada has been a rich environment for fostering many art forms, Canadian operas that tell Canadian stories such as this one - which centres on Saskatchewan resident Mary Chalmers on the eve of her wedding in the postwar period - have been few and far between. And when independent opera productions are created, they're typically shelved after their first presentation. Only Louis Riel by composer Harry Somers is truly remembered and still talked about by a broad national audience, Vernon said.

"We have so much great art, we have paintings, we have plays, we have novels. Canadian literature is just flourishing, it's a jungle out there," Vernon said. "Opera has become forbiddingly expensive and complicated and risky."

He would know. POV's 2000 production of Erehon saddled the company with more than \$250,000 in debt - recovered through an emergency fundraising campaign.

"We'd had a work come to us semiformed - it was delivered to our doorstep in a basket for adoption. So we weren't there at inception," he said. "We didn't know that it was, unfortunately, a little bit malformed. But we nurtured it to the best of our abilities. We saw it through with a great investment of energy and lost money.

"It's been quite a long time, getting the company nerve back together to go forward with a proper commission."

The 11 years leading to this point have meant significant experimentation as well as caution - Vernon has not been afraid to explore ideas and abandon those that don't seem viable.

"We've gotten to a certain point with a couple of other ventures and I've found myself in a position of saying, 'Look, ladies and gentlemen, this is simply not going to work and it's better we stop now instead of potentially wasting any more time or money on it,' " he said.

"That is a decision that's tough to make," he said. "It sounds un-Canadian and it's not something we allow for. - But experimentation is going to imply failure. Not everything is going to succeed and you have to be aware of that."

It's for those reasons that Vernon and his team are so confident in *Mary's Wedding* - a story that has not only proven popular since its theatrical première in 2002, through stage production across Canada and internationally, but has survived that scrupulous experimentation process.

"My own approach to this, in starting out, was to try and be as modest in our aspirations as we could be and yet provide something of real substance and value in terms of repertoire."

The work has been developed on a budget that includes \$200,000 in workshop and commission costs as well as \$450,000 in production costs. That does not include the company's fixed costs - the rental of POV's production shop, box office services, marketing and promotion, permanent staff salaries and POV's administration costs.

The company has received \$175,000 in special funding from various organizations, including the Canadian Opera Creation Fund, Victoria Foundation and the Koerner Foundation. It also has several generous season and production sponsors.

Vernon said the goal with this production is not to create a grand, extravagant opera, but to tell a story that resonates with audiences.

"I felt very strongly that it was important not to start trying to write a new story as well as writing the music. Let's find something that has legs, let's find something that has a history as a good piece of theatre that might lend itself to extension through opera," he said. "This is, I hope, what we've been able to do."

The creative process - which has included workshops where members of the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra and the Banff Centre Ensemble have performed selections of song, as well as sitdown readings by various actors of the libretto - has been promising.

"When you sit in a room around a table and find yourself reaching for a hanky over a reading, you know you're onto something with some potency, some emotional power."

Vernon said composer MacDonald has brought significant experience - his works have been performed by notable ensembles including the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and CBC Vancouver Orchestra - while playwright Massicotte's libretto reads like poetry. It will be the first full-length opera for both creators.

"As a production, it reflects what we have learned and what we're able, as a company, to assemble and put forward," Vernon said of *POV*, which he began in 1980 as a young composer.

"Thirty years ago, it was possible to do a couple of productions of very popular pieces, using singers with local connections. And gradually, over time - over 30 years - it's grown into something that has real legs, that's become entirely professionalized. - I'd say in the last eight to 10, we've arrived at a certain standard from which we do not want to retreat."

It may just be the beginning for the company.

"I genuinely hope that our production of *Mary's Wedding*, as wonderful as we certainly intend it to be, will absolutely not be the last."

<http://www.timescolonist.com/entertainment/Design/5665552/story.html>

The Design

In a cavernous warehouse filled with sawhorses, tools and trollies of props, the main set for Mary's Wedding is coming together.

Three wave-like ramps of curved plywood rise from the concrete floor - the dynamic, structural landscape that will carry audiences from a serene Saskatchewan backyard through trench warfare when Mary's Wedding opens Nov. 10.

The carpenters are on their break in the lunchroom and designer Ian Rye - responsible for the esthetic vision of this opera - motions with his arms as he explains the idea behind his creation.

"The world of [the First World War] comes into this environment as Mary's dream. And so, this beautiful environment is transformed into the trenches and into no man's land and into the bow of a ship - but never do we leave the place of Mary's home. And never do we leave behind the essence of beauty and of a beautiful, first love affair," he said. "Hence, the setting."

Rye has been working on this production for three of his six years at Pacific Opera Victoria. His other designs have taken the stages of the Belfry Theatre, Arts Club Theatre, the Vancouver Playhouse, Canadian Stage and more.

This will be Rye's first mainstage set design for opera.

Practically speaking, the three lines work well for staging - it's easy to choreograph a military charge over a hill and the simplicity allows for extended backdrops invoking skies and vistas, according to artistic director Timothy Vernon.

While many opera companies around the world borrow travelling sets, the smaller venues that house POV productions almost always mean an original.

"It has become one of the salient features of the company's identity," said Vernon. "It isn't normal in the Canadian context. In the first place, going back some years, it was necessity becoming the mother of invention. We didn't have a theatre that would hold rental seats."

The McPherson Playhouse, which hosts Mary's Wedding, is small relative to other opera houses in the country. Compare its 772 seats with the Canadian Opera Company's maximum capacity of 2,163.

Vernon said a fresh set means a fresh experience for performers - if they've been travelling with the show, for example, they must wake up from routine and reorient themselves to a new space.

"It means you get a fresh investment from all those involved in it," he said. "It brings a special focus and real contribution that I feel has characterized our history as a performing company."

<http://www.timescolonist.com/Memory+Project/5665550/story.html>

The Memory Project

Toward the end of the First World War, Clara Louise Hogben - a young mother of two toddlers - received a letter from her husband, a Canadian soldier in France.

"I received a letter from my mother today enclosing one of yours written on the 25th of Aug. in which you say I was reported missing," Ralph Walker wrote. "Well, darling, you don't know how grieved I was that you should have had that report - You can take it from me that up to Sept. 15, 1918," - the date of his letter - "I am quite well and getting on alright."

The letter - posted online by Clara and Ralph's grandson Bryan Wilson as part of Pacific Opera Victoria's Memory Project - explains that Walker hadn't been able to get a cable or letter out, or else he would have made contact earlier.

"It might have taken two weeks for my grandmother to receive this letter from her husband," Wilson wrote on the memory project website. "So you can imagine her reaction when she received the following night lettergram on Oct. 11, 1918, as the war was drawing to a close:

'Deeply regret to inform you Pte. Ralph Stockwell Walker Infantry officially reported killed in action Sept. 25.'

Wilson is one of a handful of people who have submitted family memories and stories to the memory project, one of three companion remembrance projects to the opera that also include exhibits at the Royal B.C. Museum and the University of Victoria Archives and Special Collections.

POV executive director Patrick Corrigan said these engagement projects highlight the community's personal connection to the story of Mary's Wedding, which centres on Western Canada's participation and loss in the war - a pivotal point in the country's growth and development as a nation.

"This is an opera about us," he said. "So how do we let everybody know that Mary's Wedding is about us?"

They came up with the idea of an informal forum, where people can submit stories, letters, photos and other memories.

Community engagement is not new for POV. For its production of Cinderella, for example, the company had a large open house, inviting families backstage to see costumes and other behind-the-scenes components, for example.

When audiences can relate to the story, operas often have more longevity, Corrigan said, referring to the longeststanding operas.

"A lot of these works survived so long because they resonate with everybody," he said.

Stories of great-uncles and grandparents shared through the memory project will be on display at the McPherson Playhouse on the night of the show.

Wilson, who found his grandmother's letters in a box of mementoes belonging to his mother after her death, said it will be the first time his family's story will be shared publicly.

"It's kind of personal, but it's a story that needs to be told," he said, "to show the heartache that went on during the war and the supreme sacrifice that families made."

The Mary's Wedding Memory Project is at <http://www.pov.bc.ca/maryswedding.html>



Props - both real and replica - are used extensively in Mary's Wedding.
Photograph by: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist, Times Colonist

The Background

Mary's Wedding weaves fiction with history - and as such, relies on historians and experts for accuracy.

While the main story and most of the characters were fabricated, the story of a First World War romance is set in a historically real time and place. And Gordon Flowerdew, one of three main characters, was a real-life Canadian Victoria Cross recipient. He led Lord Strathcona's Horse, a Royal Canadian regiment, in a fatal cavalry charge against German machine guns at Moreuil Wood.

Here are some of the consultants who worked on the project:

- Ian Newby at International Movie Services is a military specialist and collector who fashions military clothing, weaponry and vehicles for the film industry.

"You call up [Newby] in Vancouver and you mention Gordon Flowerdew and he knows precisely who you're talking about," said designer Ian Rye, who checked out everything from tanks to personnel carriers when he visited his collection.

Through Newby, Rye gathered a mix of authentic and replica props to use in the show - it's impossible to tell which are the fakes on an explosives carrier carrying fuel tanks and munitions, amid other gathered props.

- Barry Rose is a Victoria-based retired officer of Lord Strathcona's Horse - and an opera-goer. He acted as military and cavalry consultant.

"He has been in rehearsal with us, advising on the authentic use of weapons and uniforms, as well as soldier and officer protocol," Rye said.

- Vancouver-based fight director Nick Harrison helped choreograph the battle scenes in the opera.

<http://www.timescolonist.com/travel/Exhibits/566551/story.html>

University of Victoria Libraries Home About The Collection Directions Contact

The World of **Mary's Wedding** Reminiscences of World War I from UVic Archives and Special Collections

Private Remembering
Letters, Diaries, Scrapbooks, Memoires, etc...
Click Here

Collective Remembering
Military Records, photographs, Maps, Oral Histories, etc...
Click Here

The Art of Remembering
Poetry, Art, Literature, Music, Drama, etc...
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The Exhibits

Two companion exhibits build on themes explored in Mary's Wedding to bring remembrance to the community.

First, the University of Victoria Library Archives and Special Collections dives into its extensive military collection to present *The World of Mary's Wedding: Reminiscences of WWI*.

"We tried very hard to match the themes of both the play and the opera," said Susan Henderson, UVic's libraries communication officer.

Among the 150 items are sketches by an officer at the front line, news clippings announcing the deaths of local soldiers and a photo of troops preparing to set sail from the Inner Harbour.

"We're sort of bystanders now in history," said Henderson. "It can be hard to find a connection to something that happened so long ago."

The memorabilia is on display at the McPherson Library Gallery at UVic through Nov. 17, as well as at the McPherson Playhouse during the run of *Mary's Wedding*. A dedicated website will remain as a permanent legacy: <http://worldofmaryswedding.library.uvic.ca/>

The Royal B.C. Museum will also host its annual Remembrance Week - five full days of free displays honouring those who have served and continue to serve.

This year, two members of Lord Strathcona's Horse, the regiment featured in *Mary's Wedding*, will be in uniform Wednesday and Thursday.

The Remembrance Week displays will be on the ground floor 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. from Monday to Friday.

Remembrance Day events at the museum also include a children's choir performance and free talks by children of Hong Kong veterans.

A full list of events is online at <http://calendar.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/2011/11/02/remembrance-week/>