



Traitor or Hero?:

Canadian Opera Company Revives *Louis Riel*

Fifty years ago, “two white guys,” composer Harry Somers and librettist Mavor Moore, created the first opera by Canadians to be produced by the Canadian Opera Company. It was commissioned in 1966 by the Chalmers Foundation, a year before the centennial of the nation’s confederation, to commemorate its centennial.

Their chosen late-19th-century subject, Louis Riel, was both “contentious and provocative” because he, a Métis—part European, part First Nations—and a French Catholic from

Quebec who moved west, and was considered a martyr by his people and many others. Riel, the founding father of the province of Manitoba, who sought equal rights for the Métis from the Anglo-Protestant Canadian government. He was considered a traitor for leading an armed rebellion and for condemning to death by firing squad a scout (and member of the international Protestant fraternal organization Order of the Orange) who had attacked the Métis. Riel, in turn, was tried and convicted of treason and sentenced to

death by hanging in 1885.

Much has changed in Canadian society since the 1967 Toronto premiere of *Louis Riel* and its last performance by the COC at its US premiere at the Kennedy Center in 1975. Sensitivities towards indigenous peoples are very different today. As a consequence, Canadian Opera Company, in cooperation with Canada’s National Arts Centre in Ottawa, commissioned a new 50th-anniversary version of *Louis Riel* to celebrate the country’s sesquicentennial this year.

Although the director of the new production, Peter Hinton, is also “a white guy,” his approach encompasses “current injustices and the process of truth and reconciliation as regards the past and present.” The opera is sung in four languages: English, French, Michif (Métis), and Cree, and



“gives voice to Métis and First Nations perspectives that will contribute to Canada’s ongoing efforts to reach reconciliation with its indigenous people.”

Hinton met frequently with his creative team beginning 16 months before opening. “Throughout the conceptualization of the 2017 production and in preparation for rehearsals, we followed the guidance and wisdom of members of the indigenous community,” he says. “What struck me from the very beginning about this piece is the motivation for its creation. Somers and Moore chose the subject of Louis Riel to show Canada’s history of struggle for representation in the west against colonialist and centralist objectives, as a metaphor for the conflicts that forged the idea of confederation, and as a challenge for present and future understandings of our country.”

Assistant Estelle Shook is a Métis artist from British Columbia and a direct descendant of Thomas McKay, who testified at the Louis Riel trial in 1885. Choreographer Santee Smith is a member of the Mohawk Nation, Turtle Clan from Six Nations of the Grand, in Ontario. In *Louis Riel*, she reimagines and re-stages several indigenous dances, including the Buffalo Hunt.

Many members of the *Louis Riel* cast and chorus are Métis or First Nations artists, as are the many

indigenous consultants and academics whose involvement gave native perspectives to Somers and Moore’s earlier interpretation of the relevant history, retaining the original opera’s integrity, yet also making it contemporary and inclusive.

Michael Gianfrancesco’s minimalist set, featuring a vast, empty stage, accommodates a series of scenes and tableaux from Fort Garry, Manitoba to Ottawa to Montana. A large, horizontal, wooden flat of authentic blonde birch plywood, in its original finish, stretches from stage right to stage left and periodically splits into two sections that reveal two rows of bench-like seating, on which the chorus perches, bearing witness to the action and commenting on it all.

Apart from the two “walls” at mid-stage right and mid-stage left that surround entrances and exits, tables, chairs, desks, and trunks of rifles create the setting for Fort Garry and Montana. Canada’s capital, Ottawa, is represented by a drop on which an original 1860s document, illustrating a blueprint of the capital’s Government buildings, was digitally printed. Hamilton Scenic, based in Hamilton, Ontario, scanned the document as well as a topographic map that covers part of the stage floor and defines Riel’s territorial claims. Ottawa is also defined by leather armchairs, a long

glass conference table, and a drinks caddy: the Prime Minister was known to be quite a tippler.

A Montana scene shows Riel working at his desk while his wife sings to their infant son in his cradle, a prop that previously appeared in the 1967/1975 productions.

Costume designer Gillian Gallow faced the challenge of “a lot of people to sift through, and making sure the audience knows who’s who, who each represents, and who each supports. Our meetings were epic in discussing the politics of the opera versus the designs. We consulted with historians as well as indigenous consultants about the designs, for example, regarding the dressing of Riel himself in European clothes in order to have him look both dignified and somber.” In contrast to Riel, his family, the priests, and his supporters, the prime minister and his people look awkward in their brightly colored red and royal blue plaid suits. Hudson’s Bay Company officials, who represented the company in the territorial dispute by virtue of their lucrative fur trade in the region, are easily recognizable by their white suits, bordered by the company’s linear colors of green, red, bright yellow, and navy blue on a white background, a branding the company still uses today. Gallow dresses a band of Métis all in red throughout; they are

a silent chorus of indigenous people who bear witness to the proceedings and their tragic consequences.

Lighting designer Bonnie Beecher says she loved Hinton's bold and brave ideas, his risk-taking, and the 16 months of preparation to "paper-tech the show." The designer's brilliant colors make Gianfrancesco's set come to life. "I used eight booms with lots of gear, like in dance," she says. "I used a lot of sidelight and that is where I put most of my conventional gear. I had dance towers and ladders in every wing with a combination of ETC Source Fours, 5K Fresnels, and 2K

Martin by Harman MAC Viper Performances, and PRG Best Boys. "My new favorite moving light is the Best Boy, as it is brighter than a 4K HMI," the designer says. "I also used Best Boys and some narrow PAR cans for strong light through the windows and doors in the side walls of the set."

Beecher says that she set her gear "to get a multitude of looks and colors on the RP screen. The workhorses were the [Chroma-Q] Color Force 72 LED units, which were hung fairly low to shoot up the RP screen. I also used IRIS3s as a lower ground row and IRIS4s to light the upper part of the RP

only exceptions were the digitally printed blueprint and topographic floor map, created by Hamilton Scenic and a realistic open fire mid-stage created by Toronto-based AirMagic Special Effects.

Gallow and Beecher team up again with Peter Hinton at this year's Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, where he directs *An Octoroon*. Written by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins in 2014 yet incorporating characters and some dialogue from Dion Boucicault's 1859 melodrama, it addresses miscegenation, racism, and racial tolerance then and now in



Fresnels. The dance towers had to be on wheels so they could roll in and out of the wings for scenery and chorus entrances."

Overhead, Beecher used 30 moving lights: Philips Vari*Lite VL1000s, VL3500Q Spots, VL3000Q Washes,

screen." She also chose Robert Juliat Aramis 2.5K followspots at the front of house, to pull characters out of the set; her console was an ETC Eos.

The set, props, and costumes were all undertaken by the COC's in-house departments, as was the rigging. The

America. Beecher will design the lighting and Gallow both the set and costumes. Michael Gianfrancesco next tackles the sets for Bram Stoker's *Dracula* at the Shaw Festival and *Guys and Dolls* at the Stratford (Ontario) Festival. — **Julie Rekaï Rickerd** 