

Arts Notes

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Margaret Atwood opera coming to Vancouver in 2010

By Jessica Werb

City Opera Vancouver has commissioned a chamber opera for local mezzo-soprano **Judith Forst**, to be written by Toronto-based composer **Christos Hatzis** with a libretto by Canadian literary giant **Margaret Atwood**.

Pauline, which is scheduled to premiere in 2010, will dramatize the final days of Canadian writer, poet, and actor **Pauline Johnson**. Johnson, the daughter of a Mohawk chief and a Quaker Englishwoman, is perhaps best known for her poem "The Song My Paddle Sings". She died of breast cancer in a Vancouver rooming house in 1913, at age 52.

Charles Barber, artistic director of City Opera, told the Straight he conceived of the project after witnessing Forst's performance as the Prioress in Vancouver Opera's 2005 production of *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, by **Francis Poulenc**.

"I called her [Forst] and asked her, 'Would you permit us to commission a chamber opera for you?' She said, 'Yes, if the story is right.'" Barber then contacted Atwood. "I said, 'Have you ever thought of a story you'd like to communicate in operatic terms?' She said, 'Yes, have I got a story for you.'"

Atwood's first draft of the libretto is complete, Barber explained. "The beauty of what Margaret has proposed is to move back and forth in time, back and forth in relationships, back and forth in identities," he said.

Barber hopes the work will be performed at the Pantages Theatre in the Downtown Eastside. The theatre was purchased more than two years ago by Calgary-based Worthington Properties, which has submitted a proposal for its renovation.