

OPERA: PAULINE

Atwood takes on role of librettist

Vancouver production will recount life of native poet Pauline Johnson

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VANCOUVER -- Margaret Atwood is known internationally for the printed word, but Canada's first lady of literature is also an enthusiastic opera devotee. Her love for the genre goes all the way back to high school, where she co-wrote an opera for a home-economics project. Since then, many of her works have been transformed into opera, musical and stage shows, but now Atwood is embarking on a new role: an operatic librettist in an all-Canadian project.

The City Opera Vancouver unveils its plans today for an opera based on the life of Canadian literary figure E. Pauline Johnson. Atwood, who has written the libretto, will join the news conference via satellite from Toronto, along with Christos Hatzis, who is composing the work. (Hatzis's composition *Constantinople*, recorded by the Gryphon Trio, is up for two Juno Awards.) Vancouver-area mezzo-soprano Judith Forst will sing the title role in *Pauline*. "What is interesting for me is to put my footprints where none have been," Forst said about *Pauline* during a recent interview. "It's a very important part of my yearly work to do new music."

Earlier this month, Forst sang a lead role in another world-premiere opera based on Canadian literature, *The Dream Healer* (based on Timothy Findley's *Pilgrim*). The opera was also staged in Vancouver, at the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts.

Johnson was born on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ont., in 1861. Her father was the head chief and her mother was from England, and Johnson grew up exposed to both Victorian poetry and Mohawk tales and legends.

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Her aboriginal background was often a theme in her writing, as in her often-anthologized poem *The Song My Paddle Sings*.

Johnson was also a performer, touring poetry readings across North America and to England. Sometimes she

performed in traditional native dress; sometimes in Victorian attire.

In 1909, Johnson settled in Vancouver, where she continued to write.

She died of breast cancer in Vancouver in 1913, three days before what would have been her 52nd birthday. Her ashes are buried in Stanley Park, near Siwash Rock, which she had written about. Vancouver was often the subject of her later writing; she also coined the name Lost Lagoon, one of Stanley Park's most beloved features, in her poem *Ode to the Lost Lagoon*.

In Atwood's seminal work of Canadian literary criticism, *Survival*, she did not include Johnson in her First People chapter. In a new introduction, written for a 2004 edition, Atwood said that when she wrote the book in 1972, few native people had been writers - "with the quasi-exception," she wrote, "of Pauline Johnson."

But Atwood is clearly intrigued by Johnson. This isn't the first time she has tried to write an opera about her; an attempt a few years back went nowhere. Then, in 2000, Atwood and composer Randolph Peters were commissioned by the Canadian Opera Company to write another opera, *Inanna*, but the composition has never been completed.

Her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has been turned into an opera - adapted by the Royal Danish Opera Society in 2003 (Atwood did not write the libretto). And her children's story *The Festival of Missed Crass* was transformed into a musical for what is now the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People in Toronto. Before Atwood's book *The Penelopiad* was adapted as a play, there was some talk of staging it as a musical.

If the *Pauline* project is realized, it will be the first time Atwood's work as an operatic librettist will be seen on the public stage. (Which stage, specifically, may also be revealed today.) City Opera Vancouver artistic director Charles Barber has been a long-time vocal advocate of the restoration of the once-grand but now-dilapidated Pantages Theatre in the Downtown Eastside, Vancouver's roughest neighbourhood. There's no word whether the Pantages plays a role in City Opera's plans for *Pauline*, but that would certainly make this even more of a dream project for Barber - and perhaps for Atwood as well, who enthusiastically supported the construction of the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto.

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