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## After earlier perils, Atwood's opera Pauline to open

March 12, 2008

**MARTIN KNELMAN**

Nine years ago, the late Richard Bradshaw of the Canadian Opera Company announced that Margaret Atwood was writing the words for a new opera about Pauline Johnson, the legendary poet whose "The Song My Paddle Sings" was probably on the curriculum if you went through school in Canada.

Atwood wrote the libretto, only to discover that her collaborator, Winnipeg composer Randolph Peters, was not keen on the subject.

Upshot: this diva of CanLit was left up the creek with her paddle.

Flash forward to yesterday's arts bulletin. Atwood has just been signed to write the libretto for *Pauline*, an opera about Johnson.

Before you say "déjà vu," take note: the details are different now. This venture comes from Vancouver, not Toronto.

And it could have a better chance of reaching the stage. This time the goal is not grand opera but a chamber opera for a small theatre.

There is a different composer: Christos Hatzis, who has written many kinds of music, though this will be his first opera.

There's also a star: the great mezzo-soprano Judith Forst, doing *Pauline* as her last hurrah before retiring. And the commission is from a new group, City Opera

### **PAYBACK TIME FOR ATWOOD**

Payback: Debt as Mental Construct and the Shadow Side of Wealth. Margaret Atwood will deliver the 2008 Massey Lectures, and that's her subject.

Atwood had previously agreed to undertake the prestigious task for 2009 but flipped dates with scientist Wade Davis, according to John Fraser, master of Massey College, which runs the event in partnership with CBC Radio and House of Anansi Press.

When the launch for Atwood's new untitled novel was postponed from 2008 to 2009 - because her New York publisher does not want a pub date close to the U.S. election - it became clear the lectures would fit into

Vancouver, with the premiere planned for early 2010 under the baton of music director Charles Barber at Vancouver's Pantages Theatre.

Yesterday, Atwood made clear she has not lost any of her enthusiasm for developing an opera about one of her literary heroines.

"Pauline Johnson was extremely well known by the time she died in 1913, but there were great mysteries about her," says Atwood.

"Who was her secret lover? And why did her sister burn all her papers?"

Those are the sorts of questions that make for operatic fireworks. And Atwood is happy to explore them, focusing on the mental turmoil Johnson experiences as she looks back on her turbulent life as she is dying of cancer.

Forst - who will be onstage every moment from beginning to end - explained at a two-city media conference that she is thrilled.

"There is music coming out of your words," she told Atwood during a teleconference. (Forst was in Vancouver, Atwood in Toronto.)

"Reading the text, I could feel who this woman was."

Moreover, Forst says she could tell that playing Johnson would be one of those intense experiences at the end of which "you leave a bit of yourself in the theatre."

Still, there are as many mysteries about this venture as there are about Johnson - who fascinated audiences near the end of her life when she would perform violent poems while dressed in native costume, then switch to a ballroom gown and demure style.

**Q:** How much will it cost to stage?

**A:** \$400,000, much of which remains to be raised.

**Q:** Who will direct? Stay tuned.

**Q:** Is Forst willing to reprise her role in Toronto?

**A:** "If Toronto wants us, we'll be there," she said.

Prediction: Watch for *Pauline* at the 2010 edition of Luminato.

Negotiations are already underway.

her schedule better this year than next.

She will deliver parts of the lecture in five cities, ending at the U of T's Convocation Hall on Nov. 1.

The lectures are broadcast on the CBC and published as a book by Anansi.

Previous Massey lecturers include such intellectual heavyweights as Northrop Frye, Martin Luther King Jr., John Kenneth Galbraith, George Steiner, Jane Jacobs, Doris Lessing, Willy Brandt and R.D. Laing.

- *Martin Knelman*

Chris Lorway, Luminato's director of programming, says: "This is just the kind of daring, original concept that seems right for us."

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