

## Atwood pens opera piece about Vancouver first nations writer-performer

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Margaret Atwood has written the libretto for a chamber opera about the life and last days of Pauline Johnson.

It will be called *Pauline*, City Opera Vancouver will stage it, and mezzo-soprano Judith Forst will sing the title role. Atwood said Tuesday that Johnson - a writer-performer of Mohawk and English ancestry who toured Canada, Britain and the United States from the late 1800s to 1909 - intrigued audiences with her "doubles act."



She recited her poems about first nations lives, "some of which were pretty violent, not the kind of thing you could have gotten away with as a decorous Victorian gentlewoman. That allowed her to really let go.

CREDIT: Ward Perrin/Vancouver Sun  
Opera singer Judith Forst takes part in a satellite press conference with Margaret Atwood about the upcoming opera *Pauline*.

"But then . . . she would change into a ballgown and show that she could turn [ideas] into English poetry, as well, in a more lyrical way. That's what really captivated people, the way she could do both."

Charles Barber is the artistic director of City Opera Vancouver, founded 2 1/2 years ago. The company has presented programs at the Carnegie Centre and in Pigeon Park in the city's impoverished Downtown Eastside.

Now it is planning its first season of chamber opera (productions with smaller casts and less ambitious staging).

Barber expects that *Pauline*, the company's first commissioned work, will be staged in January or February 2010 in a renovated Pantages Theatre, at 152 E. Hastings.

The Pantages is Vancouver's oldest theatre and the oldest surviving one from Alexander Pantages's early 20th-century vaudeville empire. It is 100 years old and seats 650 people. Barber foresees it being a "dazzler" of a house. An announcement detailing renovation plans will be made April 16.

The idea for Pauline was born after Barber and colleague Douglas Berg heard Judith Forst sing the role of the Prioress in Francis Poulenc's Dialogues of the Carmelites in 2001. They decided to look into commissioning a "signature vehicle" for the Vancouver mezzo.

"The question," said Barber, "was, how do we get a good story for someone as terrific as Judy Forst? I got in touch with Margaret Atwood and asked if she had ever thought about a story for opera.

"Margaret proposed that our story be centred around Pauline Johnson, who was buried in Vancouver. She spent the last four or five years of her life here. She died, rather agonizingly, of breast cancer [in 1913], in a roominghouse at the corner of Bute and Alberni."

Atwood, though best known for her novels, has an association with opera. Her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has been made into an opera and her mythic *The Penelopiad* has been presented onstage with music.

Barber praised her for leading a renaissance of Canadian interest in Johnson, "a woman most of us simply knew from CanLit in Grade 8 and *The Song My Paddle Sings*."

City Opera has commissioned Christos Hatzis to compose the music. The Greek-born Torontonion said the libretto tells a universal story that transcends its historical and geographic particulars.

He doesn't see his task as setting it to music, but rather as bringing out its emotion.

Atwood has focused on the mysteries and strange relationships in Johnson's life: "Who was her secret lover? And why did her sister burn all her papers as soon as she could get her hands on them?"

Forst said: "We are dealing with her death, her pain, her relationship with her sister - these are operatic subjects; you can sing about them."

The company foresees staging the opera at a cost of \$400,000.

"This is a unique assembly of talent," said Barber, who will conduct the premiere. "We believe we have a project that all of Canada will be able to hear, understand and make their own."

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