

OPERA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

How Toronto's
Against the Grain
Theatre is turning
the classical
form on its head

BY JENNA DOUGLAS

Rachel Marshall
plays Adanya
Dunn in Against
the Grain's
workshop
of *No One's
Safe* at Banff
Centre, 2016



PHOTO CREDIT: RITA TAYLOR

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E ARE IN AN era where opera looks very different from the stereotypes which pervade popular culture; any fan of the genre knows that the days of large, helmet-horned women and parking-and-barking are gone. It is through partnership, and through the sharing of resources, that opera can be well represented in the twenty-first century.

As a young Canadian pianist gaining a love and skill for working with singers, Banff Centre's Opera program became one of the earliest goals I distinctly remember pursuing. In 2007 I got in, and had an unforgettable summer; I played and rehearsed my first full-length opera, and made lasting relationships with people who are still friends and colleagues today.

But since that summer, there has been a significant shift in the shape and function of opera at Banff Centre, a shift that makes the program less about a finished product and instead more process-oriented. The Centre has now partnered with two of Canada's most influential opera companies: the Canadian Opera Company (COC) and the seven-year-old "indie opera" company, Against the Grain Theatre (AtG). Joel Ivany, co-founder and artistic director of the Toronto-based AtG, sees it as a merging of "the biggest in Canada, and maybe the most different."

It might not be surprising that the COC and Banff Centre, two of Canada's major artistic institutions, have decided to work together to foster and develop the current generation of opera. Yet the collaboration with Against the Grain is something that is rare and new within the opera industry. I remember feeling a sense of pride when I learned that AtG would be a major part of the new approach to opera at Banff Centre. Having always found its shows creative and novel, I and my fellow enthusiastic Toronto opera fans finally had proof that Canada's artistic giants felt the same way.

The reason for the symbiosis is simple: the COC offers resources and space to help AtG create better and better work, and AtG brings to the COC its creative license and loyal following – full of the young demographic which large companies court. "[The COC] is well aware of the press that AtG gets and gets for them," says Ivany, who is candid about what

makes the relationship work. "They brought our level to national exposure."

I've been lucky to see most of Against the Grain's productions over the years, and I got to work as music staff – playing rehearsals, leading the chorus, even playing some harpsichord – on a few of their fun projects, like the premiere production of *#UncleJohn*, a modern-day take on Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and two iterations of *#AtGMessiah*, a staged, choreographed version of Handel's most famous oratorio. To see the team in action is to see a clear vision enacted with enthusiasm, humour, and sharp focus.

"What Joel has in spades," says Paul Curran, stage director and a past mentor of Ivany's, "is a passion for redefining and retelling opera in its present form, in a new way – without corrupting." Rehearsals with Ivany are spent questioning every choice, every tradition that comes with the idea of attending an opera. He finds unorthodox venues, writes his own librettos – or "transladaptations," to use AtG's coined term – of Mozart and Da Ponte, and now, he has redesigned the mission of opera at Banff Centre.

Open Space: Opera in the 21st Century is the name of the five-week residency of AtG and the COC, held on campus in Banff. This summer will be Ivany's fourth spearheading the program. Through staged opera and chamber music, roughly a dozen singers and apprentice pianists work with Ivany, AtG Music Director Topher Mokrzewski, and an impressive faculty of teachers and coaches.

Young singers, mostly post-academic and eager to gain professional experience, audition from across Canada to work with Ivany and his team. They arrive as prepared as they can be, and open themselves up to the type of operatic deconstruction that *Open Space* is all about. The tight-knit creative team of AtG



Joel Ivany



Learn more about Against the Grain's performance of *No One's Safe* by watching our Banff Centre Presents video banffcentre.ca/banff-centre-stories



The cast of *No One's Safe* discovers the scene of a crime in the lobby of Banff Centre's Walter Phillips Gallery, 2016.

PHOTO CREDITS: NIKOLA NOVAK (IVANY), RITA TAYLOR (OPERA)

is small and communicative; I've seen them put up amazing shows in mere days, and I'm convinced there's a sort of alchemy about their process that turns deconstruction into a truly stunning finished product.

With its high-profile presence at Banff Centre, AtG has the resources to develop a new generation of versatile artists. Perhaps more exciting is their opportunity to further validate the power of small, chamber-sized opera. Ivany knows from experience that "leaner and smaller – you can still get a lot of attention that way."

Curran, who joined *Open Space* in 2016 to direct Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia*, believes that supporting chamber opera also helps to support large-scale opera at major companies. "Nobody is saying, 'I am not going to see *Tosca* at the COC because I'm seeing *#UncleJohn*,'" he explains. "I think what Joel does, and what AtG does, is entice people in a different way."

Part of that difference is the absolute consideration that Ivany gives his audiences. He

keeps listeners in mind at every point during his rehearsal process, and advocates for the audience's operatic experience from the moment they arrive at the venue.

"I've always got the idea that he very much feels he's serving a greater need or a greater good," says Curran. "He has a need to do this, rather than 'me, me, me.'" It's a sentiment that echoes the mission of Banff Centre as a whole; the Centre can play a pivotal role in an artist's development, yet it's a stepping stone that inevitably leads to great work outside of Banff.

With *Open Space*, everybody seems to win: Banff Centre stays close to its own vision of supporting emerging talent and fostering artistic creation; the Canadian Opera Company extends its influential reach to the novel and mobile face of opera; and Against the Grain Theatre has begun to earn the large audience it deserves. ▲

Opera at Banff Centre is generously supported by the David Spencer Emerging Vocalists Endowment.

OPERA AT BANFF CENTRE

In honour of Canada's 150th birthday, Against the Grain Theatre is staging *Kopernikus*, an opera by Canadian composer Claude Vivier, at Banff Centre.

Thursday, July 6, 7:30 P.M. and Saturday, July 8, 7:30 P.M. See event listing on page 60 for more information.