

# LOUIS RIEL

Remembering, reassessing and  
reimagining an epic score

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Canada's most iconic opera

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(FROM LEFT): BERNARD TURGEON (RIEL), JOHN ARAB (D'ONAGHUE) AND PETER MILNE (DR. SCHULTZ) IN THE CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY'S 1987 PRODUCTION OF *LOUIS RIEL*. PHOTO: ALEX GRAY

# IDENTITY CRISIS

In some respects, **Louis Riel** may seem the most unlikely hero to celebrate Canada, but the very ambiguities of his story may make him perfect for the role

BY LINDA AND MICHAEL HUTCHEON

**I** *magine being an opera-lover living in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe.*

In the newly formed nations of Italy and Germany, in particular, opera has taken on national(istic) importance. This is not only because its stories can parallel local national politics (often repressed), but also because the powerful immediacy of opera's music both *evokes* and even *provokes* (and not only *represents*) nationalist feeling. Think of "Va pensiero," the chorus of the oppressed Israelites from Giuseppe Verdi's *Nabucco* that is Italy's unofficial national anthem still today.

***Now, imagine you are living in Canada in 1967 and the opera by Harry Somers and Mavor Moore called Louis Riel has just premiered at the Canadian Opera Company.***

The librettist has also stated that the goal in writing the opera was to "use the conventions and traditions of Grand

Opera as a form of nation-building, a platform for discovering who we are." At this important historical moment—the Canadian centenary—this might appear to make some sense. But, then, why choose as the subject for this Canadian-identity platform the story of a man who resisted, even defied, the newly founded nation of Canada, and in which the national government in Ottawa is cast as the villain of the piece? And with whom might you, as a spectator, find a point of identification? Composed at a moment of intense English-Canadian cultural nationalism, the opera displays a deep suspicion of unitary narratives of national identity and an even deeper distrust of the emotional power of nationalism. Less a celebration of nation-building, this work seems more an ironic, subversive cultural commentary: a warning about the dangers of defining any single national Canadian identity that erases manifest diversity.

*Now, consider the reality of Canada in 2017, 50 years later.*

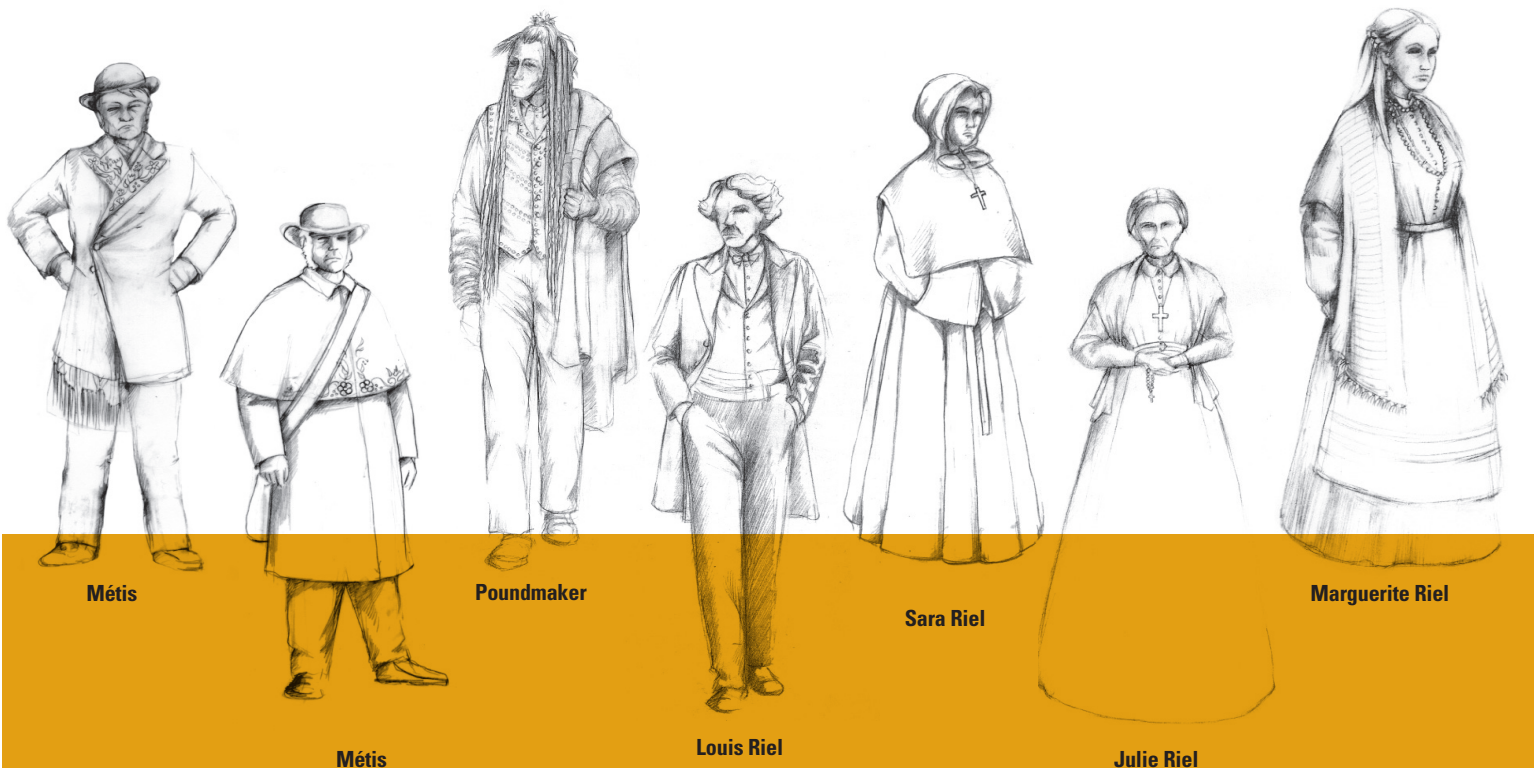
Our nation is bilingual and now (since 1988) officially multicultural. It is still caught in the emotional and ideological double bind of being tied historically to Europe and economically to the United States. And that opera, *Louis Riel*, when revived by the Canadian Opera Company this April, will inevitably be experienced by audiences differently than it was a half-century ago. Even if we still struggle to define what being “Canadian” really means, the nation’s multicultural diversity cannot be ignored. We now live in a country that our current Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, has called the first “post-national state,” one built not on “core identity” but, rather, on “shared values”—such as multiculturalism. Given this, might the opera, with its potent warnings about nationalism and the erasure of diversity, serve to remind audiences today of the lingering inequalities that nonetheless remain in our society?

Certainly, in the last 50 years, Louis Riel himself has come to have a different cultural significance: he has, in fact, been claimed by everyone—even by the government that hanged him for treason—as the visionary advocate of social welfare and multiculturalism. Back in 1968, then Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau had invoked Riel when asserting that a country is judged by the way a majority of its people treats a minority. And indeed, more recently, for former Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, Riel “helped lay the framework for minority rights—and as a result for cultural co-operation—in this country.” For Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin, he “fought Canada in the name of values that Canada now proudly embraces: respect and accommodation for pluralism.”

This positive view marks a radical change from 1885, and even from 1967. How, then, will this opera affect us today in the multicultural world of 2017? Picking at the scabs of old Canadian wounds only partially healed, the opera *Louis Riel* explores tensions between past and present, East and West, the national and the regional, French and English, Indigenous and European that are not obscured in the least, but, rather, are placed centre stage, where they can be explored anew and re-considered in our new context, one famously called a “métis civilization” by John Ralston Saul: “What we are today has been inspired as much by four centuries of life with the indigenous civilizations as by four centuries of immigration.”

Let’s begin this exploration, then, with the curious choice of Louis Riel as the protagonist of a Canadian centenary Grand Opera. Moore’s libretto was loosely derived from a 1950 play in which he had created the title role for the New Play Society company at University of Toronto’s Hart House Theatre. Simply named *Riel*, John Coulter’s work has been cited as an important contributing factor to the growth of Canadian nationalism in the 1960s. The way this argument goes, Canadians lacked (and so sought) a “leader of heroic proportions” and found one in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Métis leader, Riel. But the actual history of Riel’s image in Canadian culture is full of discrepancies: he has been called everything from victim to hero, from the statesmanlike Father of Manitoba to the living embodiment of the Indian, French and English that together peopled this nation.

We can’t be alone in thinking that Riel is a strange “leader of heroic proportions” for Canadians to choose in 1967. Here was a man hanged as a traitor to Canada in 1885, whose death





reawakened hostilities between Ontario and Quebec, Orangemen and Catholics, English and French, the government and the Indigenous peoples and Métis (offspring of Indigenous women and European men). Yet perhaps that is precisely what made him an appropriate choice at the time for a centennial opera: an embodiment of many of the divisive and conflicting forces within the nation. In other words, could foregrounding a fractious history of linguistic, regional, racial, ethnic, religious and political differences in some way have helped us *then* more honestly celebrate—or, at

listed above) in a plot that tells the story of two rebellions, the one in Red River in 1868/69 and the other in Saskatchewan in 1884/85 that ended with the defeat of Riel at Batoche. But the opera enacts the nation's diversity in more structural terms as well.

For instance, the libretto is written in English and French, and also in Cree. There is even a little Latin (and less Greek) in the church and prayer scenes. Add to this the fact that the kinds of voice production used vary from speech through to a *parlando*, or inflected “sung speech,” to full singing. The music is diverse as well. The dialogue of the political scenes in Ottawa is accompanied by a kind of banal dance music, as if to underline the manipulative political dance underway. This contrasts sharply with the highly lyrical and melismatic arias of the visionary Riel.

The opera's musical stylistic diversity is, in fact, equally marked, with four major types of music being superimposed one upon the other. The core is what Somers himself calls “abstract, atonal” orchestral music, and it is used, with its strong dissonances, for both dramatic intensity and as a kind of “platform” for the singing. Against this is heard

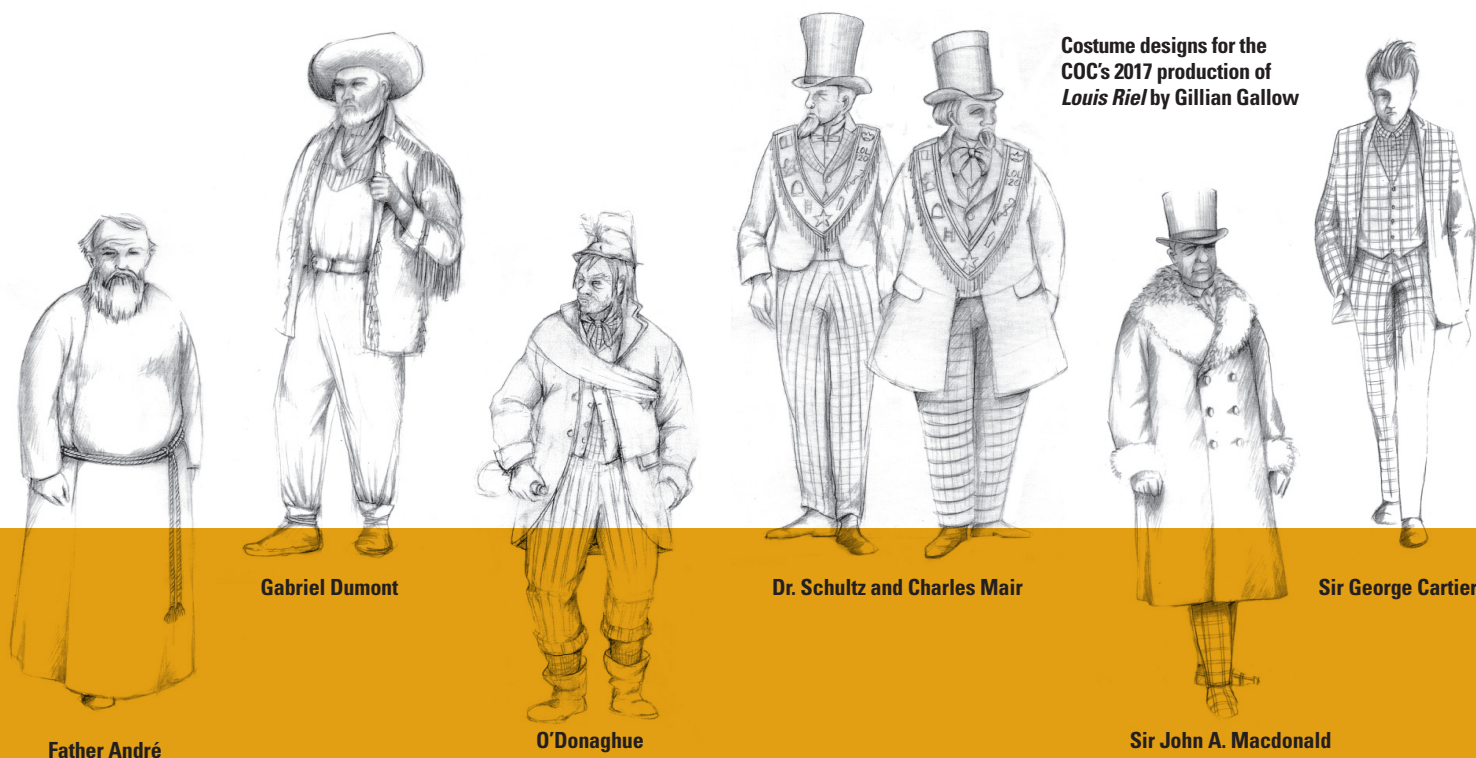
original folk music, whose motives weave in and out of the entire opera. Some of these come from the First Nations peoples: for example, Riel's Indigenous wife sings a lullaby in Cree, “Kuyas,” though the music is based on a five-note motif from the Nisga'a “Song of Skateen.” Less problematically, others are European/Canadian folk songs, sung in both French (“Est-il rien sur la terre?” and “Le roi malheureux”) and English. The chilling repetition of the song “We'll Hang Him Up the River” is taken from

“He fought Canada in the name of values that Canada now proudly embraces: respect and accommodation for pluralism.”

— CHIEF JUSTICE BEVERLEY McLACHLIN

least, face publicly—the consequences (for all Canadians) of the attempt to define a single national collective identity? And *now*, at the time of the sesquicentennial, have we learned the lesson of Louis Riel and *Louis Riel* about attending to diversity, or not?

As Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer put it, using an apt musical metaphor, Riel may personify the “dissonance at the root of the Canadian temperament.” After all, the opera named after Louis Riel openly enacts that dissonance (and all those differences



Coulter's play—a memory of the playwright's Ulster childhood.

The third type of “music” is better described as electronically produced “sounds,” which are used to vivid effect in Riel's final trial: they both jolt listeners and give us a visceral feeling of the kind of confusion and surreal distortion of justice (and sense) felt by the defendant. Somers also uses straightforward, tuneful diatonic music, and, interestingly, some of the most accessible and conventional music in the work is associated with and meant to arouse mass patriotism in the audience on the stage—if not in the theatre. But if our own personal experience is any indication, that theatre audience—rather relieved to hear melodic music—ends up being implicated (by this very reaction) in the politics represented on stage. Such involuntary, but noticeable, complicity turns out to be thought-provoking. This is not Verdi's “Va pensiero” chorus spon-



**Louis Riel (centre) with members of the Provisional Government of the Métis Nation, 1869**

“Before there was a Canada,  
the peoples of the West  
were free” – BISHOP TACHÉ

taneously voicing the yearnings of a people for a liberated nation; in *Louis Riel*, it is an excited mob that has been urged to start what the libretto calls “another holy crusade/to rescue yet another land from savages.” It is a mob of Ontario Protestants joining together to sing: “Canada First; Canada is British. Oh Or’ngemen Unite!” And the people they are uniting against (as a national force) is a mixed-race and Indigenous grouping led by one man, Louis Riel.

The story told in Canada's centenary Grand Opera, then, is a story of defeat and exclusion, of enforced exile and execution for treason. The opera is not, for example, the story of Riel's friend, Gabriel Dumont—the buffalo hunter, sharpshooter, daring and shrewd fighter (though he does figure in the second part of the opera). Nor is it the collective story of the Métis people. Instead, it is the individualized story of one Louis Riel, the self-styled religious prophet of the New World, charismatic deliverer of his people, and, to some, dangerous traitor to the new nation called Canada.

Riel was the son of a Saskatchewan Métis man and a French woman. Having spent 10 years, from age 14 to 24, at the Collège de Montréal, he returned to the west educated and eloquent—in

both English and French. The time: just a few years after Ontario and Quebec had united with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to form that new nation called “Canada.” The place: the Red River area in what is now west central Canada and was then part of the holdings of the Hudson's Bay Company. It was in the process of selling these lands to the new nation to be opened up for Anglo-Protestant Ontario settlers. But this was being done without any consultation with the settlers already on the land, who included British, French, Irish and Métis, not to mention, of course, the other Indigenous peoples.

The government in Ottawa sent out survey crews to mark off the land even before the transfer was made legal; the Company, now a lame-duck administration, collapsed. The enraged Red River settlers rebelled and set up their own provisional government, owing allegiance to the British Queen, *not* to Canada. According to the Law of Nations, this was an entirely legal act, in the absence of other effective government. Nevertheless, Canadian Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald sent out a governor, the anti-French, anti-Catholic William McDougall. That is where the opera opens, with the governor referring to the “damn half-breeds” he will teach to “be civilized.”

From this very first scene, Canada is (as noted earlier) the villain of the piece: the Métis repeatedly cry “À bas le Canada d'Ottawa!” Riel, as leader of his people, demands from the Canadians what he calls his people's “British rights.” Bishop Taché, the go-between (as the libretto words it) “entre les métis de l'Ouest/et les obstinés d'Ottawa” (“between the Métis in the West/and the obstinate ones in Ottawa”), tries to explain this position and its history to Macdonald:

Before there was a Canada,  
the peoples of the West were free;  
...  
their only ruler a distant queen.  
Now comes the giant Canada,  
measuring miles from sea to sea,  
taking their homes without their leave.  
But before you tell them anything  
you send surveyors out to grab;  
before you ask them anything  
you send a tyrant governor;  
before you give them any choice  
you order them to change their ways;  
before you grant them anything  
you take their all, and promise nothing.

Riel eventually succeeds, through negotiations with Ottawa, in having Manitoba recognized as a province of Canada, but his faith is shaken by the government's failure to provide amnesty for the rebels of Red River, despite promises. In enforced exile, Riel actually becomes an American citizen, before returning in 1884 to lead the Saskatchewan Indigenous peoples, both Métis and First Nations, in another uprising. His defeat and capture, his trial and execution, form the rest of the opera's story.

However, we have left out one important and tragic

“If we unite from sea to sea  
we shall become a mighty power:  
if we do not, we’ll all be naught...  
shouting unheard in French and English both.”

—SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD



Jean-Pierre Hurteau (left, Bishop Taché) and Donald Rutherford (Sir John A. Macdonald) in the COC's 1975 staging

irony—one that has structured both history and the opera. In that first confrontation between the Métis and the Canadian governor, a Scottish Protestant bigot named Thomas Scott is arrested by the provisional government for attacking its leaders, both physically and verbally. To a Métis' question “Pourquoi?” he responds: “Speak English, mongrel!” and then calls him a “low Popish half-breed.” His physical and verbal violence—his rhetoric of miscegenation as bastard mongrelization—and his attempt to foment rebellion against the provisional government lead to his being arrested and put on trial by the Métis. Riel acts as both official translator and prosecutor. The trial is conducted in French, alienating Scott from the proceedings and leading to accusations of unfair legal practices—according to British law, at least, if not to Métis custom.

Riel condemns Scott to death, in full knowledge of the consequences—the outrage of Protestant Orange Ontario and the likelihood of retribution. His reason, given first in French and then repeated in English, is: “I cannot let one foolish man/stand in the way of a whole nation.” These are the very same words that the opera's John A. Macdonald repeats when refusing to reprieve Riel himself 15 years later, after a trial with an equal number of legal improprieties and in equally full knowledge of the consequences: the further alienation of Quebec, the Métis and the other Indigenous peoples.

Though the identical words are repeated, they have totally different meanings, though both are equally suspect in ideological

terms within the world of the opera. Riel's Métis “nation” is not Macdonald's Canadian “nation,” but both are presented as single, unitary, collective identities with single strong leaders. Indigenous and Métis—not to mention Québécois—distrust of the national government in Ottawa is not new or unwarranted, as Moore and Somers suggest in their portrayal of Canada's first Prime Minister. Smug, cynical, sarcastic—though witty—Sir John A. is more than simply a political opportunist and manipulator, a prevaricator and a procrastinator who acquired the nickname “Old Tomorrow” because of his policies toward Indigenous peoples. Macdonald is also the voice of Canadian nationalism in the opera, and it is he who articulates what, in this context, is the problematic (single) identity narrative of the nation:

Nothing can stop this country now.

...

If we unite from sea to sea  
we shall become a mighty power:  
if we do not, we’ll all be naught...  
shouting unheard in French and English both.

In the very next scene, Riel's mother tells of hearing, as a young woman, the voice of God telling her not to become a nun, but rather to marry, because her first-born son would be “chef de sa nation”—a different nation than Macdonald's. Indeed, her son has visions himself in which God names him David, king of his



Métis nation. But this king is a strangely solitary leader of men, as Somers underlines by having Riel's major arias—and only his—begin without any orchestral accompaniment of any kind. The sudden silencing of the instruments effectively isolates the voice, as the narrative action isolates the man.

Riel's national mission was not only political, however; it was also religious. By 1885, the pious, visionary Riel had rejected the Catholic Church, preferring to speak directly to God. From the start, however, megalomaniac madness is offered as an alternative or corollary to Christian mysticism as an explanation for his behaviour. In a scene in a church, Riel casts out the priest, announcing the “fall of Rome,” and proceeds to give the terrified congregation a sermon (of sorts) about his mission and his prophetic vision. The stage directions tell us that Riel is in a “mystical trance” and that the people listening to the charismatic leader are “hypnotized.” In other words, for all his resistance, Riel turns out to be as dangerous a nationalist as Macdonald: the chorus that greets Riel after this aria is “Riel avait raison!/Riel l'avait prèdit!/Riel est prophète!”—a frightening collective response to the solo voice of a nationalistic, even demagogic orator.

Roxolana Roslak as Marguerite Riel in the COC's 1975 staging




“What are these mad ideas of mine? Only that human beings have rights.” –LOUIS RIEL

In Coulter's play, Macdonald executes Riel “for the public good,” before he can “fatally” mar “everything Confederation may mean.” Canadian nationalism erases Métis nationalism. Macdonald, however, delivers the verdict of history: he says Riel will go down as “one of the mortal instruments that shaped our destiny.” He says this, according to the stage directions, in an ironic manner, “slightly burlesque and pompous.” But the joke is on Macdonald—the historical, dramatic and operatic Macdonald. The people whose needs he ignored and whose rights he refused—the Métis as a New World people who racially and culturally embody the hybrid nature of so much of today's world—for many become the ones with whom to identify in the opera, the representatives of the diverse Canadian peoples as a whole, caught as they are between many cultures, languages, religions, local affinities and national self-identifications.

When the CBC televised this opera in 1969, it ended the program with the words spoken the year before by then Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau: “Louis Riel's battle is not yet won.” The COC's press release for the 1975 revival of *Louis Riel* referred to the opera as a “provocative foray into Canadian political mythology” because it captured “the tragedy and high drama of an episode that almost tore the country asunder, an episode which has had important and lasting effects on the relationship between French- and English-speaking Canada”—a statement that reflects the troubled years of the Quiet Revolution, the War Measures Act and Quebec separatism. The hope was, as the opera's Riel says at his trial: “When I am dead my children's child/will shake hands with Protestants—/French and English side by side.” But will the Métis and other Indigenous peoples share in this fellowship?

Of course, in 2017, given our current diverse society, there are even more different peoples arriving from around the world who come to call themselves “Canadian.” Multiculturalism is now one of those “shared values.” That said, there are still problems left unsolved, making our current Prime Minister's belief in Canada as a “post-national state” perhaps more aspirational than descriptive. *Louis Riel*, like Louis Riel, can act as our conscience today: the relationship between the government of Canada and its Métis and other Indigenous peoples is still a fraught one, reminding us all of unsettled land claims, the inquiry into the fate of missing Indigenous women, the Truth and Reconciliation Commis-

sion's recommendations, and the stark social inequalities still to be tackled. Startlingly relevant even after 50 years, the opera still speaks to Canadians of all races and creeds. 

Michael and Linda Hutcheon, a physician and a literary theorist, are the co-authors of four books: *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* [1996], *Bodily Charn: Living Opera* [2000], *Opera: The Art of Dying* [2004],

and most recently *Four Last Songs: Aging and Creativity in Verdi, Strauss, Messiaen, and Britten* [2015].

# RETAGING *RIEL*

Stage director Peter Hinton speaks to the inspirations and imperatives for his bold new production



**O***pera Canada:* *Louis Riel* has been referred to as Canada's "grand opera," though the composer tended to talk of it in terms of "music theatre" and in some respects it seems to recall the work of Berthold Brecht and his musical collaborators. How would you position the piece?

**Peter Hinton:** Well, I think it's a re-examination of history, a retelling of history, but not just in a narrative sense. That's why I think the grand opera definition is a bit faulty for it, because there's nothing heroic about it. It's critical, and examines what happened and how that's understood.

A thing that really struck me when I first approached the piece was that the work was commissioned to commemorate Canada's centennial, and Somers and Moore *chose* the subject of Louis Riel. That might sound like a "splitting hairs" distinction, but to me, it was really important that they

PHOTO: SAM GAETZ/CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY



chose to commemorate the union of their country with a story that's very divisive, that's about a lot of injustice, that's unresolved, that continues today, that contains as much resistance in it as it does an idea of unity. It puts a lot of questions to an audience.

I really appreciate the comparison with some of the Brecht opera works because it feels as if *Riel*'s dramaturgy is informed by a very Brechtian idea of analysis and alienation. Rarely in the opera is one encouraged to get empathetic and swept up in the story and taken away somewhere else. You're constantly reminded of the decisions Riel is making, the opposition that he's up against, the political machinations that are at work.

In staging it, it's incredibly bizarre because its tone shifts. It's got a kind of collage or montage effect, a wide range of styles from almost buffo burlesque with Sir John A. Macdonald through very slow, sonic meditative pieces to high political scenes. A lot of the libretto is written a lot like a play, with an enormous amount of words and enormous political arguments and rhetoric. So, finding a unity, finding a container for it is part of its challenge and part of what I think the opera is about—always keeping you in a place of skepticism and attention. The audience is encouraged to analyze and think as much as they are to feel, if perhaps not more so.

There was an interesting thing I read in an interview with Somers that spoke to me because I come from a theatre background much more than an opera one. Someone was referring to the amount of speaking in the opera, and Somers said that whenever someone speaks, they're always telling the truth. When they sing is when they go into proselytizing, politicizing or, in the case of Riel's visions, inspiring. I thought that was interesting because it contrasts with the general rule of the theatre that you speak mundane things, then when passion overwhelms you, you burst into song. In *Riel*, it's sometimes the reverse, so there is a real job of navigation in staging it because sometimes the music is working on one level, the action is working on another, and the staging on yet another.

I think it's important to remember that *Riel* is very much a work of its time in the 1960s. At that time, there was suspicion and skepticism about romantic opera, and trying to deconstruct that and break that apart, crack that open. So rarely is the opera melodic and tuneful, it's constantly playing against that. It has this alienating energy.

**OC:** When you started to look at the piece, were there any aspects that helped focus your thoughts on the staging?

**PH:** I was very drawn into the success of the courtroom scene at the end of the third act and the way in which the trial is set and dramatized. It became a sort of motif for this production that the whole opera takes place in a courtroom. [Michael Gianfrancesco's] beautiful set is very transformative and can suggest all the locations the opera indicates, but essentially it's a courtroom. There's a gallery in which the chorus is like a jury that sits in observation

throughout the opera. Part of what I think the opera is about is putting many things on trial—in the historical narrative Riel is put on trial, but there's also the trial of Thomas Scott in the second act, and in many respects Confederation is put on trial.

I was quite struck with the depiction of Sir John A. Macdonald. He has been portrayed as a big dreamer with foibles, and that his coast-to-coast, "National Dream-Last Spike" ambitions were marred perhaps by a drinking problem. I was really struck by how critical Moore and Somers are of Macdonald and how they exposed the political machinations of Confederation to his gain and to the gain of Ontario. He's a very unsympathetic character. So Confederation itself is on trial.

Hinton rehearsing Act III, Scene III, the trial scene, with Dion Mazerolle (left, F. X. Lemieux) and Russell Braun (Riel)



To be reviving this opera this year amid a lot of public attention to Canada 150, it felt very right to beg the same questions that Somers and Moore did 50 years ago. What are we celebrating? What are we commemorating? What is Canada? Canada 150 is a kind of nonsensical thing at one level because there have been people here in Canada for 12,000 years at least. It's still a Eurocentric definition, so one aspect of the production was to try to redress some issues of indigeneity and framing and perspective.

**OC:** In one of the COC releases about the production, you are quoted as referring to the "colonial biases" of Somers and Moore. Where do you think these biases lie mainly?

**PH:** Well, I think that if this opera were to be commissioned and created today, there would be Métis and indigenous involvement in its creation. So, for example, in the libretto, the Métis speak predominantly in French, and speak English when they are talking to central Canadians. There is no appearance of Michif, the language of the Métis, and so there's a lack of authenticity in that. I think those biases are laced with good intentions and come from an honourable place. But this opera is as much an artefact of its own time as it is a telling of a history. I think it's very important that we acknowledge in this production that the opera is not a definitive or authentic presentation of Louis Riel or the Métis people.

It's amazing to me the number of opportunities, in creating a piece about Riel, that Somers and Moore chose not to take. There's no Michif music, no fiddle music. The piece has a very European tone, the musical influences are all European, they're not indigenous.

So how do we stage this opera to celebrate its strengths and its accomplishments and its beauty and the truth that it has? Part of that is acknowledging what it casts light on and insight into and what it doesn't. This is not a definitive telling or Riel's story, it's a telling of it. I think an important part of looking at our history, given that there is so much appropriation in it, is that we redraw lines and assumptions, that we remember and include stories of resistance always. And so we have made the best efforts we can in this production to provide a more expansive and inclusive perspective.

**OC:** To produce that more expansive and inclusive perspective, you've made some material changes to the piece, in one

“For me to do this opera, I needed to find a way that was more inclusive of perspectives we don't see.”



(Top) Hinton rehearsing Act III, Scene V, the prison scene, with Russell Braun (Louis Riel) and Allyson McHardy (Julie, Riel's mother) in the rehearsal room of the COC's Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Opera Centre; (Bottom) Rehearsing Act III, Scene III, the trial scene, with Jani Lauzon (left, Clerk of the Court), Neil Craighead (standing at table, government prosecutor B. B. Osler) and ensemble.

instance adding a character and reassigning music. Why was it necessary to do that?

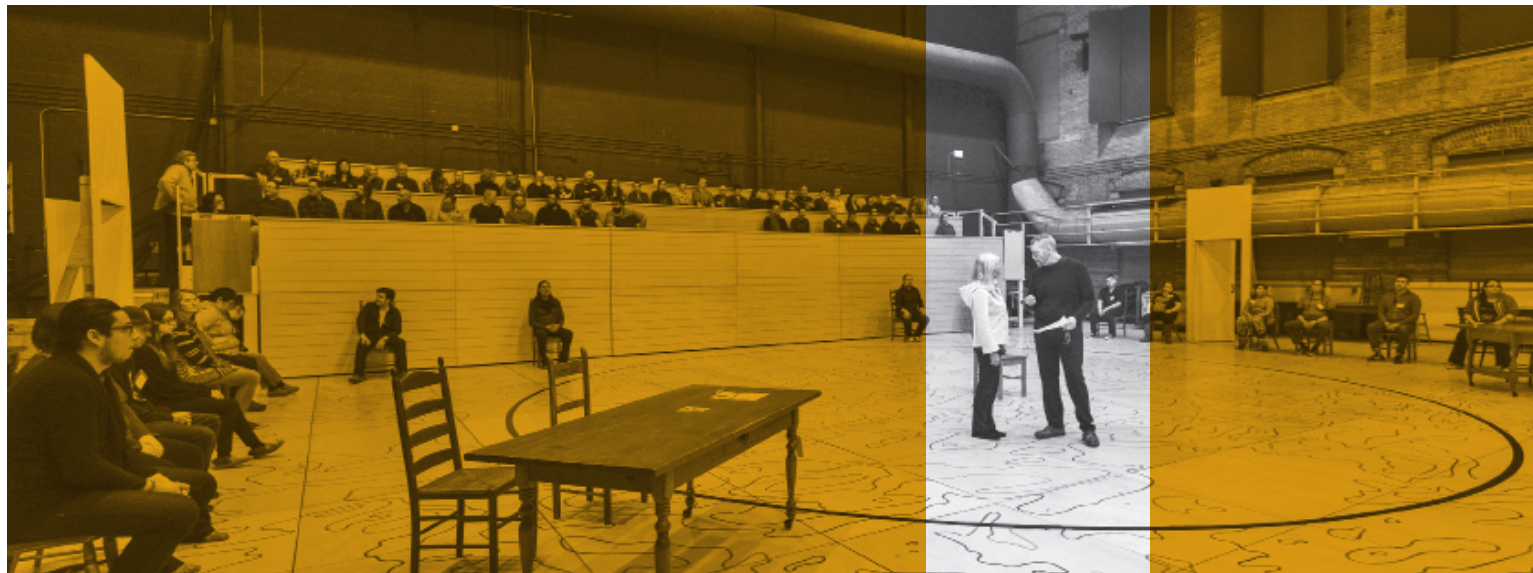
**PH:** One of the things I found interesting in researching the piece is seeing how Somers and Moore, as any author does, take the enormous expanse of history and synthesize it into a narrative. They made many simplifications and many artistic, interpretative choices. One that they made was when Riel was in Montana and Gabriel Dumont and a group of confederates arrived to invite him back to lead the Métis nation in Saskatchewan. Somers and Moore chose three people [Dumont, James Isbister and the Cree chief, Poundmaker], and they set it in the winter and had Riel's child a baby, so made some adjustments to history to create a kind of motif, which I think is true to Riel's vision of three wise men coming, with Riel and his wife Marguerite appearing like Joseph and Mary. But that's not actually what happened. Four men journeyed to Montana to meet Riel and it was on 4<sup>th</sup> June.

So we took that inspiration because on another level, given the form of the music, I did not want a white person playing Poundmaker. We have the great opportunity of having Billy Merasty play Poundmaker and we have this very complex score doing another thing musically. So we went to history and went to a fourth man who went there. What's interesting is that the four men who arrived to invite Riel back were representative of the French Métis, the English Métis, the indigenous first nations and the white settlers. And they were inviting Riel to lead all of them. Riel's vision was for all people. And so that was a stroke of necessity as contemporary casting meets a piece from the 1960s and history itself. It's one example of the kind of revision that's necessary, I believe, in a piece like this, that is both respectful to the piece and more honourable to the history.

**OC:** But so many operas in the standard repertoire are inaccurate portrayals of time and place, though we don't generally change things for those reasons.

**PH:** I just think we have a reprehensible history of telling our story inaccurately. And telling it falsely. And so for me to do this opera, I needed to find a way that was more inclusive of perspectives we don't see. I don't defend my version of *Riel* as definitive or superlative, it's my way. It's the way that makes sense to me as I understand the people I know and the communities I exchange with and live in. And I wanted to put a different perspective on it. I wanted to take away the idea of it being a kind of adventure in the Wild West and restore some truth, some dignity to it. I wanted to try to engage an audience in the decisions Riel was making, and what he was truly up against.





**Hinton setting up Act III, Scene III, Riel's trial in the courtroom in Regina, with Jani Lauzon (Clerk of the Court) and ensemble in the rehearsal room at the COC's Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Opera Centre on Mar. 30, 2017**

I can think of many examples of contemporary opera stagings of classic repertoire that contradict, I think, the intention of the original. I am not trying to disregard Somers and Moore, I am trying to put a different frame on it. So we can see into it, so we can see what it does have to say and not be derailed by any of its assumptions that remain 50 years on.

**OC:** After all this work, how do you see Riel? Is he a tragic figure?


**PH:** It's a really good question. I think many of the people around him are definitely tragic figures because they make decisions for the good of something and bring about their own downfall in doing it. There is no question that he is unjustly tried, unjustly hung and does not get to see the full fruition of his vision. But he does have vision. The opera gives voice to him and does it in a very demonstrative and powerful way. So here's nothing victimized about him, though we see how the machine of politics can work on someone. It's a story about a great social activist. He is Martin Luther King a hundred years before Martin Luther King.

Tragedy implies that he has some flaw within him, but I don't think the opera works on that level. I don't think it's really about his flaws, or whether he's mad or truly inspired or that kind of thing, ... The play is a political drama more than it is a tragedy, but there are tragic elements, tragic components and tragic events. It's interesting to talk about tragedy as a form in our time because it's very unpopular—it gets into ideas about fate, it's much more philosophical and catastrophic—about how one is powerless to avoid one's demise. This is not about how Riel is powerless, blinded by his religiosity. This is about how he was ruthlessly manipulated and how colonization and Confederation took place on the blood of people. That's the indictment of the whole piece.

**OC:** Moore talks about Riel in terms of the "Hamlet syndrome," where there is a tension between thinking and action. Do you see that in the character?

**PH:** Yes, Russell Braun and I were talking about this in rehearsal, that it's very like Hamlet. There's this very interesting thing that

happens every time Riel comes on stage—he tells everyone to stop doing whatever it is they're doing. He's so torn between what is promised to him and what he believes, and he tries to be honourable with Ottawa. And an interesting thing that I really appreciate that Moore brings into the libretto is that when Riel and the Métis seized Fort Garry, it was not an act of hostility. At that point, the Hudson's Bay Company had put up Rupert's Land for sale, but neither Britain nor Canada had purchased it. So by the Law of Nations, Riel was acting within his absolute rights to claim it for the people who were there. He was trying to maintain peace and authority. And that Hamlet idea comes in that. I lived in Ottawa for 10 years and sometimes the length of time it takes to move something forward is a trial to anyone's patience.

And on this scale, it becomes really indicative of the man of action. Where do you wait? Where do you put stock in promises made? So we see two very different Riel's throughout the opera. One where he's making decisions, leading people, sometimes very demonstrably, throwing priests from the pulpit. Other times very reflectively, very contemplatively, very privately. Which is very interesting and very dramatic. 

*Since 1985, Peter Hinton has directed over 75 productions of new plays, classical texts and operas, as well as written the librettos for two operas with composer Peter Hannan and worked across Canada with many theatre companies. He has been the Associate Artistic Director at Theatre Passe Muraille and the Canadian Stage Company in Toronto, Artistic Director of the Playwrights Theatre Centre in Vancouver, the Dramaturg-in-Residence at Playwrights' Workshop Montréal, and Artistic Associate of the Stratford Festival. From 2005 to 2012, he was Artistic Director of English theatre at the National Arts Centre, where he created a resident English theatre company, with actors from across the country, and programmed the NAC's first season of Canadian plays. It was in this role at the NAC that Hinton initiated a commitment to producing the work of Indigenous theatre artists every season during his tenure. In the fall of 2017, he will direct the world premiere of City Opera Vancouver's production of Missing, composed by Brian Current to a libretto by Marie Clements, about the Highway of Tears.*