

## Review:

# The Overcoat is Canadian opera's new mantle

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Geoffrey Sirett as Akakiy in *The Overcoat: A Musical Tailoring*.

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This is it, everyone. *The Overcoat: A Musical Tailoring* is without question a part of the operatic canon of the 21st century. It has all the moving parts of a show that entertains, and it has that perfect triumvirate – text, music, and production – that will stand up to future generations of critics, the way Mozart's or Verdi's work does today.

*The Overcoat*, based on the short story by Nikolai Gogol, had its first stage adaptation 20 years ago, the product of writer/director Morris Panych and movement director Wendy Gorling. It was a piece of wordless theatre, scored with music by Dmitri Shostakovich. In the updated “musical tailoring,” co-produced by Canadian Stage, Tapestry Opera and Vancouver Opera, composer James Rolfe joins the original creative team (including the brilliant set, costume and lighting designers Ken MacDonald, Nancy Bryant and Alan Brodie), giving *The Overcoat* an original score – and newfound status as a world-premiere Canadian opera.

Akakiy Akakievich Bashmachkin, a quirky, quiet lover of numbers, dares to improve his shabby image by getting a new overcoat. He pays everything he has to Petrovich, the tailor upstairs, and, when the stunning overcoat is finished, the investment appears to have been a worth it. His new coat earns him respect at work, approving glances from beautiful women and a party invite from his boss. When Akakiy is mugged for his overcoat, though, the plot thickens.

I don't think I've been to an opera in Canada – a world premiere, at that – with a more obviously enthusiastic audience response; the show was punctuated with laughter and spontaneous applause. Indeed, *The Overcoat* is so beautifully crafted from the inside out, that it seemed no piece of the puzzle – no phrase, no piece of design, no performer onstage – could be removed without the show losing its magic.

Panych's libretto endears in its immediacy, seeming to satisfy an engaged audience by having a character say precisely what listeners were thinking. At the same time, *The Overcoat* is full of brilliance, plays on words that introduce us to the introverted arithmophile, Akakiy. Gorling's aesthetic of kinetics, exaggerated yet swift, is a jaw-dropping combination of Cirque du Soleil, 1940s Disney cartoon and rhetorical gesture. Rolfe's score pays homage to *The Overcoat* in its previous form, his music an organic extension of the text and physicality.

The premiere cast feels inextricable from Panych's creative vision. Geoffrey Sirett is extraordinary as Akakiy. Sirett has always been a brilliant performer (and inexplicably underutilized, in my opinion) with the kind of magnetism that comes from combining realism with exhaustive extremes. As Akakiy, Sirett is immediately endearing, blissfully ignorant of the bullies at work and entirely uninterested in things such first impressions or a healthy diet. There's a simplicity to the character that exaggerates his sudden ambition, and seems to make him especially fragile when his success turns out to be short-lived.

Also worthy of a big nod is Peter McGillivray in his dual roles as the tailor Petrovich and Head of the Department. He mastered Gorling's aesthetic, physicalizing everything from pomposity to functional addiction with eerie precision, and yet he never resorted to a two-dimensional villain-type. He was an utter riot, and like Sirett, made easy work of introducing new music to the public's ear.

This cast is about as Canadian as it gets, and I've heard almost all of the singers before. Something about *The Overcoat* brought out in all of them their best performances yet. Erica Iris Huang makes a sympathetic tailor's wife, Meher Pavri is all sashays as the secretary and Andrea Ludwig is a landlady right out of something by Bertolt Brecht. The Greek-style Mad Chorus of Caitlin Wood, Erica Iris Huang and Magali Simard-Galdes – their true function slowly revealing itself throughout the show – sing some of Rolfe's most hauntingly beautiful moments of the score.

As I write of this communal, true marriage of operatic elements, I'm wary of sounding hyperbolic. *The Overcoat* came out of Tapestry Opera's LibLab, a densely packed workshop for composers and librettists. Panych and Rolfe's short scene was one of hundreds that have been created within Tapestry's system of opera workshopping, and the finished product is tangible proof that it's quantity that begets quality.

Like the *Traviatas*, the *Don Giovannis* and the *Carmens*, which stand out as a successful few out of the hundreds of forgotten (perhaps lesser) operas of the same time, *The Overcoat* is exceptional, a piece of detail-work deserving of a firm place in the canon.

*The Overcoat* runs at Toronto's Bluma Appel Theatre through April 14, before heading to the Vancouver Playhouse April 28 to May 12.