

Just watch him: George Elliott Clarke pens Trudeau opera

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A new opera by George Elliott Clarke brings Trudeau's life and politics back on stage

Is there anything left to learn about Pierre Trudeau?

The passions provoked by Canada's 15th prime minister have helped spur an industry. His influence and his indiscretions have been plumbed through countless books and essays, lectures and miniseries.

But George Elliott Clarke believes there's more to say. The Governor-General's Award-winning poet has long thought that Trudeau's monumental role was "crying out for" operatic treatment.

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"The Trudeau who appeals to me is the person who represented cosmopolitanism, who represented multiculturalism and who projected these values to Canada and the world," Clarke said in a recent telephone interview.

Years in the making, the Vocalypse production *Trudeau: Long March/Shining Path* opens this week in Halifax. The score for the jazz opera is by Juno Award-winner D.D. Jackson, and the libretto is closely related to Clarke's play of the same name.

Melding historical fact with fiction, the work imagines what happened as Trudeau hobnobbed with political giants of the 20th century.

"It's an opera that treats Trudeau as a kind of Odysseus figure," explained Clarke. "I see him as someone who was testing himself and testing his ideas in his travels around the world and meeting with these leaders."

Scenes set in foreign locales are reflected in the diversity of the score, Jackson says. "I was going to make this more of an overtly contemporary classical piece," he explains, "but then it ended up evolving as I added the exotic elements. "The work has become more jazzy to me. Ultimately there's a lot of groove to it, there's a lot of swing to it and with these exotic elements that makes that happen."

The production relies on multiple performances by a small cast; Fidel Castro, Mao Zedong, Nelson Mandela and Pablo Neruda are among the historical figures who make an appearance. And while some of these people are controversial, Clarke sought to avoid revisionist assessments. He wanted to present them as he believes Trudeau would have viewed them at the time.

Trudeau himself remains a highly controversial figure in parts of Canada. John Lindsay-Botten, who is singing the lead role, is keenly aware of the emotional weight with which Canadians have burdened Trudeau. Although too young to remember much about the former PM as a contemporary political figure, he knows many in the audience will come equipped with a firm opinion about the man.

"I hope that when people come to see the production they'll be able to notice, whether they love him or hate him, aspects of his life that are represented by my presentation," he said before a rehearsal. "One thing that George really keyed into [was that] I sang as he thought Pierre would sing.

"And actually having seen a video clip from an old archive..., I can see how his spoken voice would turn into a singing voice like mine. He might have been a lyric tenor if he was concentrating on the music world and the entertainment industry as opposed to politics."

Moments later, Lindsay-Botten was in character and responding to hectoring questions from Ross Thompson, as Mao Zedong, over whether he was a capitalist or a communist. He parried, with the deftness that Canadians of a certain age will remember, by quipping that he was "just a canoeist."

But the work recognizes also the more serious side of the political icon. Lindsay-Botten said that he identifies with some of the worries and insecurities the libretto reveals and believes Trudeau was reflective enough to recognize his faults.

The pain following the death of his son Michel is touched on, as is the fallout of his surprise marriage to 22-year-old Margaret Sinclair.

"There's a line in the opera, 'She feels like a widow bereft of love,'" said Janice Jackson, who performs the role of Margaret and also serves as the opera's producer.

She describes a powerful, albeit fictional, encounter between the couple shortly after the birth of their first son.

"Trudeau comes in at the end of the aria and looks at his briefcase, looks at her. Looks at her, looks at his briefcase, looks at her. Leaves. And doesn't even acknowledge the baby."

Trudeau: Long March/Shining Path runs June 16 to 20 at Halifax's Sir James Dunn Theatre. For tickets and information, visit www.vocalypse.ca or call 902-429-1797.