

# "Making Trudeau Sing!"

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Writer George Elliott Clarke's poem formed the basis of a modern opera about former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

The Barrie Advance spoke with Clarke while he was in Banff. Winner of the Governor-General's Award for Poetry, Clarke is the inaugural E.J. Pratt Professor of Canadian Literature at the University of Toronto.

He spent two years working on the dramatic poem about Trudeau, which was originally composed as the libretto for the opera. It received enthusiastic reviews for its workshop debut at Toronto's Harbourfront in April.

A special engagement in Barrie will offer a sampling of five songs and a glimpse into the life of one of our nation's most controversial leaders. The life and character of Pierre Elliott Trudeau was as a natural dramatic candidate for a modern-day opera.

Explored with poetic licence, Clarke said the icon was an obvious choice for the subject of an opera, but cautioned he is not presenting history or a biography.

Clarke and Jackson previously collaborated on the jazz opera, *Québecité*, in 2003. Both admired the real-life Trudeau and have worked with libretto and music to capture a complex man, complete with gifts and flaws in the context of a dramatic stage life.

Clarke, 47, noted that Trudeau was deserving of an opera, but admits that in his early youth he was not a fan of the man.

He recalls being eight when Trudeau became prime minister. "To make my anti-Liberalism even stronger, my kindergarten teacher was Alexa McDonough, who was later the federal NDP leader. But as a teenager, I had to take note of his character. This gentleman was a very impressive political figure who seemed to stand for a more egalitarian and more liberated Canada, which I certainly always desired and still desire.

"He was a symbol of that for myself as a black person, for my community, for the multicultural communities across Canada, for my parents' generation as well, even though in many ways he failed to live up to his own symbolism in terms of government policy and legislation," Clarke said.

What appealed most to Clarke was Trudeau's intellectual side and especially his writing, which he examined very closely.

"As a Canadian figure, who else is there really who combines all those elements of charisma, intellectuality, sportsmanship, athleticism, as well as looking good on television and being a constitutional scholar?" he said. The opera ventures to portray those aspects of Trudeau in scenes with Fidel Castro and Mao Tse Tung, among others. Now it will also contain an additional scene of the man as he got contemplative during a walk in the snow, as he did the day he decided to resign as federal Liberal leader and Prime Minister in 1984. Robin Munro, executive producer of the Barrie Jazz and Blues Festival, suggested the scene.

"When he mentioned it to me, I thought, this is a legitimate scene to have. So it's the one change I have made. D.D. has written the music ... it allows me to add a few more things and to talk about 1984."

Clarke noted that when researching, he encountered many opinions on Trudeau, so many that he considered compiling an anthology of stories. And while he asks viewers to suspend a bit of disbelief, he has attempted to share a reasonable account of a very public figure.

The opera includes scenes set in Cuba, China, Montreal, Ottawa, Tahiti, South Africa, and the wilderness. The music takes on some flavours of jazz but expands into other genres.

“I would describe it as an international opera, as a world music opera,”

Featured for the June 16 performance at 8 p.m. will be a bluesy-ballad sung by the character of Margaret Trudeau, titled Snow Over Ottawa, as well as the rock and roll number, Satisfaction. The duet Monte Carlo focuses on the dialogue between the two (young) lovers.

“This is based in real life. I love this story. They meet in Tahiti, February, 1968 ... he asks her to move to Ottawa and live for two years to secretly study in French ... Meanwhile, he’s still dating (other women)...”

Trudeau’s solo, Wilderness, is a poignant one. \_“I just had to imagine that after he became leader for the Liberal Party and prime minister, that he had some doubts. I wanted to give him some doubts. He never acted like he had any. He goes into the wilderness by himself, canoeing and he says, damn, now what the hell am I going to do?”

In the humanizing, deathbed song, I Have Merely Been a Traveller, the Trudeau character sings about having made mistakes.

“I hope it’s an accurate reflection of how he may have felt,” Clarke noted.

Happy to be sharing his work in Barrie, Clarke had one final note. “For the record, if I had to do it all over again (I’m not going to do it all over again), but I would have done more Margaret and less Mao.”