

Reliving Trudeaumania

Larger-than-life character perfect subject for an opera'

Freelance arts writer STEPHEN PEDERSEN talks to Nova Scotia poet George Elliott Clarke about his new opera.



John Lindsay-Botten rehearses his role as Pierre Elliott Trudeau in the opera *Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path* with, from left, Megan Johnson, Karen Myatt and Troy Adams. The opera premieres Wednesday at 8 p.m. in Neptune Studio Theatre and continues to June 20.. (Eric Wynne / Staff)

PIERRE ELLIOTT TRUDEAU charmed, mesmerized, antagonized and polarized Canadians from the minute he stepped up to the microphone at the 1968 Liberal leadership convention wearing a red carnation in his button hole, to his famous "long walk in the snow" in Ottawa in 1984, where he decided to resign as Canada's prime minister.

Nova Scotia poet George Elliott Clarke has joined with Canadian jazz pianist and composer D.D. Jackson to write a new opera, *Trudeau: Long March/Shining Path*, which has its premiere performance Wednesday in Neptune Studio Theatre, produced by soprano Janice Jackson and Vocalypse Productions.

"The opera," Clarke said last week, "focuses on the cosmopolitan Trudeau, the world traveller."

Clarke sees Trudeau as a well-born gentleman who was comfortable talking to Communists and rebels, as well as different kinds of Canadians and people in general.

The libretto follows Trudeau, who witnessed the fall of Nanking to Mao Zedong's Communists in 1949, imagining a political conversation with Mao at the time, though they never actually met until 1960.

Later, Trudeau meets Fidel Castro and later still Nelson Mandela.

"Frankly, I think that Mao was a big influence on Trudeau, not in terms of communism, but in terms of style of leadership," Clarke said.

"People like Mao and Castro appealed to him. His son Sascha, in a Toronto Star article, argued that his father was really attracted to strong leaders, regardless of political background, even though Trudeau was very much a democrat."

Mao, Castro, Mandela were key figures in the breakdown of European empires. They decolonized their countries. That was their motivation, but it was their strength and leadership that appealed to Trudeau.

A character called Fanon, who represents the people who hated Trudeau in the opera, is loosely derived from West Indian psychoanalyst and social philosopher Frantz Fanon who, according to the website Answers.Com, "urged colonized people to purge themselves of degradation by exercising violence against their European oppressors."

Janice Jackson attended a workshop for the opera in Wolfville, an informal performance for members and students. "I asked George who was producing the opera and he said he didn't have a producer, so I said, 'I'll produce it.' "

"It premiered in a concert-workshop performance at the Harbour Front, but our production is fully staged, from memory, off the book."

Jackson sings the parts of Margaret Trudeau, as well as a fictitious journalist called Cixsou (Sissoo) and a fictitious Chinese poet-musician called Yu. Another fictional character (Roscoe Robertson) is loosely based on Oscar Peterson.

"I was a big fan of Trudeau in the '70s in high school," Jackson said. "I ran for student government as a Liberal and won."

They called young people's fascination for the dashing politician "Trudeaumania" in 1968 and 1969. Referring to Trudeau's romanticism, Clarke said, "I believe what had been a formative work for Trudeau is Edmund Rostand's great story of Cyrano de Bergerac. And I do think that Trudeau modeled himself on Cyrano, the swash-buckling, cape-wearing chivalric figure who is deferential to women, but willing to fight at a moment's notice and quote poetry at the same time, and cut a very dashing figure and sacrifice himself for love."

Juno Award-winning Canadian jazz pianist and composer D.D. Jackson collaborated with Clarke on his 2003 opera Quebecite. "I was inspired by certain contemporary classical trends," Jackson said.

"For example, certain elements of minimalism from John Adams Nixon in China is a sort of model as well as some of the harmonic vocabulary of jazz, but it's also influenced by a lot of world music styles.

"I really took my cues from George. The opera is sort of what George calls 'side-real' as opposed to 'sur-real'. It's sort of imagined, heightened reality set in various locales, essentially various encounters.

"In the first two acts (there are five) there is a real exotic variety from locale to locale. In each case, the form changes to match the setting — one scene in Monte Carlo is sort of an Italian film-music type of pop song. The opening number sounds more like John Adams (undulating, pulsating)."

The music for the opera will be provided by piano (Jackson), bass (Ron Hynes) and drums (Mark Adam).

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Trudeau: Long March/ShiningPath

MUSIC BY: D.D. Jackson

LIBRETTO BY: George Elliott Clarke

FEATURING: John Lindsay-Botten as Trudeau, Ross Thompson as Mao Tse Tung, Fidel Castro and Fanon, Janice Jackson as Margaret Trudeau, Troy Adams as Nelson Mandela, Roscoe Robertson and Neruda, Karen Myatt as Simone Cixous, and Megan Johnson as Yu Xuanji.

DIRECTED BY: D.D. Jackson, Mary Lou Martin and Marty Burt

PRODUCED BY: Janice Jackson and Vocalypse Productions

WHERE: Sir James Dunn Theatre

WHEN: June 16th – 20th, Wednesday to Sunday, 8pm; Matinee Sunday June 20th at 2pm