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» ENTERTAINMENT

Walking to the guillotine for their beliefs

Canadian stars join forces for French Revolution opera tale *Dialogues Des Carmelites*

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The French Revolution's guillotine works overtime in *Dialogues Des Carmelites*.

The crowd's blood lust extends beyond the necks of nobility to nuns in a cloistered order who are sacrificed for keeping their faith in the Canadian Opera Company production opening May 8 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts.

Playing the nuns in the Francis Poulenc opera are some of Canada's top opera singers. Isabel Bayrakdarian, Adrienne Pieczonka and Judith Forst — two sopranos and a mezzo-soprano — are together for the first time in the story, directed by Robert Carsen. "I am proud it is such a big Canadian cast," says Pieczonka, who has never performed in this opera before.

Although all three singers do not appear on stage at one time, there's been tons of camaraderie offstage, she says.

"We are comrades who support each other and say 'well done'."

Bayrakdarian plays Blanche, a young woman beset by fear and a troubled faith, who comes to the convent for escape. Forst is the aging Madame de Croissy, who dies from a terrible illness, thereby turning the convent over to Madame Lidoine, played by Pieczonka.

The nuns try to live under the radar of the savage crowds, but a confrontation results in the gentle ladies being stripped of their vestments and marched off to die.

The singers have been deeply touched by the subject matter of the opera.

"It is such a great piece," says Pieczonka. "It's an opera about women,

the strength of them. It is very powerful."

The way the older nuns refer to Blanche as "my daughter" and the words "sister" and "mother" are used between the women in the convent reinforces that this is a "team of women, sharing closeness," she says.

"You don't have to be Catholic to see that it is something holy, otherworldly and sacred."

Forst, who recently performed the role of Madame de Croissy in British Columbia and has also played Madame Lidoine in past productions, has a vigorous death scene. "It's exhausting, I sing in bed, on the floor, collapsing, everything is happening."

"What a thrilling part," Forst says, "It's a terrible death in every way."

In her agony, she sees something in Blanche that touches her and it is almost like "she is giving her life for this girl to continue on," says Forst.

Although the part of Blanche is a literary invention, the massacre of the Carmelites is a real historical event.

Bayrakdarian is reprising a role she had in a 2006-07 Lyric Opera of Chicago production, which was also directed by Carsen. Since then, she has become a mother to two young children and is struck by the motherly role of de Croissy.

"In her pain and suffering, she wants to protect the child (Blanche). When you have a child, you can't bear to see them suffering," says Bayrakdarian.

In spite of all her waffling and fear, Blanche matures and ultimately chooses to follow the nuns to the guillotine. While the others sing "Salve Regina" (help us), Blanche walks to her death calmly singing of



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

Canadian stars Judith Forst, left, Isabel Bayrakdarian and Adrienne Pieczonka, absent here, are teaming up the upcoming production of *Dialogues des Carmelites* at Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts.

"It's exhausting. I sing in bed, on the floor, collapsing, everything is happening. What a thrilling part. It's a terrible death in every way."

JUDITH FORST
CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY

the glories of heaven in "Veni Creator Spiritus."

"She doesn't ask for help. She sees that her end is bright," says Bayrakdarian.

The guillotine's blade did not end the Carmelites' story.



A scene from the Lyric Opera of Chicago production of *Dialogues des Carmelites*.