

For immediate release: March 21, 2012

COC PREMIERE OF *SEMELE* OFFERS A FEAST FOR THE EYES AND EARS WITH EAST-MEETS-WEST DYNAMISM, DIRECTED BY FAMED ARTIST ZHANG HUAN

Toronto – The Canadian Opera Company’s 2011/2012 season closes with the company premiere of George Frideric Handel’s *Semele* in a production directed by famed Chinese visual and performance artist **Zhang Huan**. Joining **Mr. Zhang** to present Handel’s sparkling and seductive opera about the pitfalls of love affairs between gods and mortals is Italian Baroque opera specialist **Rinaldo Alessandrini**, who leads the COC Orchestra and Chorus. Sung in English with English SURTITLES™, *Semele* runs for eight performances at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts on **May 9, 11, 13, 16, 19, 22, 24 and 26, 2012**.

The COC’s presentation of *Semele* is the first opportunity for audiences to experience **Zhang**’s production of *Semele* outside Brussels, Belgium, where it premiered in 2009, and Beijing in 2010, where it was China’s first major staging of a Baroque opera. **Zhang** made his directorial debut with *Semele*, conceiving a work that blends a Baroque aesthetic with the splendour of China in a production the *New York Times* called “scenically stunning, theatrically absorbing, musically rewarding” and “a feast for the eyes.”

Zhang’s *Semele* takes the world of classical music and presents it through the lens of a contemporary Chinese artist, drawing on parallels between Greco-Roman mythology and Chinese legends, as well as Buddhist concepts of karma and reincarnation, to create a true interaction of Eastern and Western cultures. He weaves together many elements of Chinese culture, incorporating dazzling and innovative visual effects involving mirrors, puppetry, a Chinese dragon and artists who sing while moving suspended through air. **Zhang** also incorporates traditions reflective of Japanese and Tibetan cultures through the inclusion of sumo wrestlers and a traditional Tibetan singer. The production’s centerpiece is a 450-year-old Ming Dynasty ancestral temple salvaged by **Zhang** from a small town in China. The temple’s own history, with an adulterous story that eerily parallels *Semele*’s plot, makes its way into the production in the form of a black-and-white documentary projected during the overture (see attached backgrounder).

Han Feng, sought-after for her fashion as well as costume and exhibition designs, plays with **Zhang**’s concept to create a fusion of Chinese theatre and European Baroque in the costumes enhanced by the magical lighting design originally conceived by **Wolfgang Göbbel**.

Rinaldo Alessandrini, founder and conductor of the Italian early music ensemble Concerto Italiano, makes his COC debut conducting *Semele*, the first Handel opera performed at the Four Seasons Centre. He leads the COC Orchestra and Chorus through a score that showcases Handel at his most expressive and inventive with sparkling music that evokes both a sensual tone and vividly dramatic sound.

In the opera, a love affair between the god Jupiter and the princess Semele goes horribly awry when Semele sets her mind to become immortal. Canadian coloratura soprano **Jane Archibald**, who dazzled audiences and critics with her vocal dexterity and dramatic presence in the COC’s *Ariadne auf Naxos* last spring, returns to sing the flighty and narcissistic, but innocently naïve, Semele. American tenor **William Burden**, highly praised for a wide-ranging repertoire showcased at the major opera houses of Europe and North America, makes his COC debut as Jupiter. Cast as both Jupiter’s jealous wife, Juno, and Semele’s sister, Ino, is Canadian mezzo-soprano and COC Ensemble Studio graduate **Allyson McHardy**. Last with the COC in

2009's *Madama Butterfly*, **McHardy** returns to the company on the heels of acclaimed debut performances with Opéra national de Paris, Opéra Comique in Paris and Château de Versailles and Pacific Opera Victoria.

Canadian soprano **Katherine Whyte**, last with the COC as Iphigenia in 2011's *Iphigenia in Tauris*, returns to sing the role of Juno's messenger, Iris. American bass **Steven Humes** makes his COC debut portraying Semele's father, Cadmus, and the god of sleep, Somnus; and young countertenor **Anthony Roth Costanzo**, a 2009 winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, makes his COC debut as Semele's jilted suitor, Athamas.

Handel's *Semele* offended many at its premiere in 1744. It was shocking in both its subject matter and style. While Handel had great success composing Italian operas for the London stage for much of his career, by 1738 public taste began to change and he made writing and producing oratorios the main business of his career. In composing *Semele*, however, the work took shape as an opera. When it was performed in London, pious oratorio purists who expected a high-minded religious work were insulted by *Semele*'s sexuality and opera aficionados were put off because it was in English rather than the then-accepted proper language of opera – Italian. Cast aside after its initial performance, *Semele* experienced a renewed enthusiasm in the mid-20th century that has not since diminished.

The COC's *Semele* is a co-production of Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels and KT Wong Foundation.

ENSEMBLE STUDIO PERFORMANCE

Experience the exciting young singers of the Canadian Opera Company's Ensemble Studio performing the lead roles in their own performance of *Semele* on **Wednesday, May 23 at 7:30 p.m.** Under the direction of the same creative team as the mainstage cast, the Ensemble Studio members also appear with the full COC Orchestra and Chorus. More details will be available in a forthcoming press release.

Tickets for the May 23 performance are only **\$22** or **\$55**. See ticket purchasing details below.

TICKET INFORMATION

Single tickets for *Semele* are **\$12 – \$318** (includes applicable taxes). Tickets are available online at **coc.ca**, by calling **416-363-8231**, or in person at the **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts Box Office**, located at 145 Queen St. W., Monday to Saturday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Standing Room

Sixty **\$12** Standing Room tickets are available at 11 a.m. the morning of each performance, in person only at the Four Seasons Centre Box Office. Limit of two tickets per person. Subject to availability.

Young People

Special young people's tickets are priced from **\$22.50** to **\$107.50** (includes applicable taxes). These ticket prices apply to those who are 15 years of age or under, accompanied by and sitting next to an adult.

Opera Under 30

Patrons between the ages of 16 and 29 may purchase **\$22** Opera Under 30 tickets as of **March 31, 2012** at 10 a.m., online at **coc.ca** or in person at the Four Seasons Centre Box Office. Opera Under 30 is presented by TD Bank Group.

Student Group Tickets

Student group tickets are **\$22** per student and may be purchased by calling **416-306-2356**.

Rush Seats

Rush seats, starting at \$22 and subject to availability, go on sale at 11 a.m. on the morning of each performance at the Four Seasons Centre Box Office.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Spring Season Supported by the **Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund**

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This Ensemble Studio performance of *Semele* has been generous underwritten in part by **Wendy J. Thompson** and the late **Samuel A. Rea**.

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The COC Ensemble Studio is Canada's premier training program for young opera professionals and provides advanced instruction, hands-on experience, and career development opportunities. The Ensemble Studio is supported by the Government of Canada through the Department of Canadian Heritage, RBC Foundation and other generous donors.

COC ANCILLARY EVENTS AND INFORMATION

BMO Financial Group Pre-Performance Opera Chats

Free to ticket holders, the COC offers 20-minute introductions to the opera and its themes in the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts 45 minutes prior to every performance.

Opera 101: *Semele*

The COC's popular, **FREE** discussion series, **Opera 101**, wraps up its season on **May 2, 2012 at 6 p.m.** at the **Duke of Westminster** (77 Adelaide St. W.) with an evening devoted to the COC's production of Handel's most sensuous opera, *Semele*. Canadian soprano **Jane Archibald**, who sings the title role, and COC Technical Director David Feheley join Opera 101 host **Brent Bambury** (CBC Radio) at the pub for a dynamic discussion about this exciting production that blends a Baroque aesthetic with the splendour of China. Audience members are welcome to ask questions throughout the event, adding to the lively nature of the conversation. Though the event is free, reservations are strongly recommended. To make a reservation, contact the Duke of Westminster at **416-368-2761**.

East Meets West – A Cultural Extravaganza

In celebration of Asian Heritage Month, the Canadian Opera Company has partnered with the Sony Centre For The Performing Arts, Art Gallery of Ontario and the Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto to present **East Meets West – A Cultural Extravaganza** on **Thursday, May 3, 2012 at 7 p.m.** at the **Chinese Cultural Centre**, 5183 Sheppard Ave. E., Toronto. This **free** event highlights three upcoming Chinese cultural events in Toronto, including the COC's production of *Semele*. Tickets must be reserved in advance. For more information, or to request tickets, contact info@coc.ca.

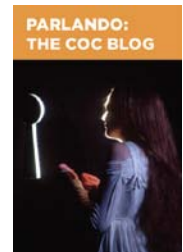
Semele Interactive Features on COC Radio

Through COC Radio, visitors to coc.ca can find, in one place, a variety of audio and digital features available for streaming, all aimed at exploring an opera and its background as well as the artists appearing with the COC. Among the resources on *Semele*, visitors will find a podcast series sponsored by Decca: The Opera Label. Hosted by the COC's Gianna Wichelow and Gianmarco Segato, the podcasts explore the opera and its background, and feature interviews with singers and members of the creative team.

About the Canadian Opera Company

Based in Toronto, the Canadian Opera Company is the largest producer of opera in Canada and one of the five largest in North America. The COC enjoys a loyal audience support-base and one of the highest attendance and subscription rates in North America. The COC celebrates its 62nd anniversary during the 2011/2012 season. Under its leadership team of General Director Alexander Neef and Music Director Johannes Debus, the COC is increasingly capturing the opera world's attention. The COC maintains its international reputation for artistic excellence and creative innovation by creating new productions within its diverse repertoire, collaborating with leading opera companies and festivals, and attracting the world's foremost Canadian and international artists. The COC performs in its own opera house, the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, hailed internationally as one of the finest in the world. Designed by Diamond and Schmitt Architects, the Four Seasons Centre opened in 2006, and is also the performance venue for The National Ballet of Canada. For more information on the COC, visit its award-winning website, coc.ca.

INTERACTIVE LINKS



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For more information or to request production photographs, please contact:
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