

For immediate release: March 7, 2017
Updated March 10, 2017

LOUIS RIEL RETURNS TO CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY WITH INCLUSIVE AND EXPANSIVE HISTORY RESTORED

A Contentious and Provocative Celebratory Work to Honour Canada's History

Toronto – Canadian history comes to life on the stage of the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts this spring when Harry Somers' *Louis Riel* returns to the Canadian Opera Company. A new production of this uniquely Canadian contribution to the opera world is being conceived by one of Canadian theatre's most acclaimed and inventive directors, **Peter Hinton**, with the COC's celebrated music director, **Johannes Debus**, conducting. This production of *Louis Riel* is proudly presented by the COC and its co-producer, **National Arts Centre (NAC)**, in anticipation of Canada's sesquicentennial and the 50th anniversary of the opera's premiere. *Louis Riel* is sung in English, French, Michif and Cree with English, French, Michif and Cree SURTITLES™, and runs for seven performances by the COC on **April 20, 23, 26, 29, May 2, 5, 13, 2017** at Toronto's Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. It will premiere in Ottawa by the NAC on June 15 and 17, 2017.

The 2017 production of *Louis Riel* is made possible through the financial support of individuals, corporations and charitable foundations and trusts. The COC gratefully acknowledges its underwriters: **The Catherine and Maxwell Meighen Foundation, Philip Deck and Kimberley Bozak, Asper Foundation, and The Max Clarkson Family Foundation in honour of Harry Somers**; with additional support from **Mark and Gail Appel, Margaret Harriett Cameron, Catherine Fauquier, Sally Holton, Michiel Horn and Cornelia Schuh, Michael and Linda Hutcheon, The Michael and Sonja Koerner Charitable Foundation, Peter Levitt and Mai Why, John D. McKellar, Trina McQueen, Roger D. Moore, Sue Mortimer, Dr. Shirley C. Neuman, Tim and Frances Price, Dr. Joseph So, Philip Somerville, Françoise Sutton, Dr. John Stanley and Dr. Helmut Reichenbacher, The Stratton Trust, and John Wright and Chung-Wai Chow**. *Louis Riel* has also been made possible by generous donors to the National Arts Centre Foundation, who believe in investing in Canadian creators, including **Kimberley Bozak and Philip Deck, Earlaine Collins and TD Bank Group**.

Composed by Harry Somers for Canada's centennial in 1967, *Louis Riel* was described as "**big, efficient, exciting**" (*Toronto Evening Telegram*) when the COC gave the opera its world premiere. *Louis Riel*, and its story of the Métis leader and Canada's westward expansion, went on to be called "**one of the most imaginative and powerful scores to have been written in this century**" (*Washington Star*) after its 1975 US premiere at the Kennedy Center. More recently, on the occasion of its 2011 DVD release, it was hailed as "**both a personal story and a national epic...the libretto is as taut and thrilling as a well-written play**" (*Globe and Mail*).

Telling the history of Louis Riel is ever more important in this period of Truth and Reconciliation. It is the COC's intention that an inclusive and expansive history shall be restored with the 2017 production. Throughout the conceptualization of the 2017 production of *Louis Riel* and in preparation for the rehearsal period, **Hinton** and his creative team have followed the guidance and wisdom of members of the Indigenous community.

"What struck me from the very beginning about this piece is the motivation for its creation. It is a contentious and provocative 'celebratory' work," says *Louis Riel* director **Peter Hinton**. "When composer Harry Somers and librettist Mavor Moore were commissioned in 1966 by the Floyd S. Chalmers Foundation to write an opera to commemorate the centennial of Canada, Somers and Moore chose the subject of Louis Riel. Their choice to show Canada's history of struggle and representation in the west, against colonialist and centralist objectives, is not only

a metaphor for the conflicts which forged the idea of confederation, but also serves as a challenge for present and future understandings of our country.”

“We asked Peter Hinton to direct this production of *Louis Riel* because of his long-standing relationship and involvement with Indigenous artists and his knowledge and experience in mounting a theatrical project of this scale,” says **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. “His involvement brings an informed and culturally sensitive approach to the interpretation of *Louis Riel* that we are sharing on the stage.”

“The National Arts Centre is thrilled to be the co-producer of *Louis Riel*. It’s one of the great Canadian operas—an epic story about our country,” says **Peter Herrndorf the President and CEO of the National Arts Centre**. “When Alexander Neef approached us a number of years ago about a partnership, our immediate answer was ‘yes’, and we both agreed that Peter Hinton had the sensitivity and vision to bring this story to the stage as our director.”

Since 1985, **Peter Hinton** has directed over 75 productions of new plays, classical texts and operas as well as written the librettos for two operas with composer Peter Hannan, working across Canada and with many theatre companies. He has been the associate artistic director at Theatre Passe Muraille and the Canadian Stage Company in Toronto, artistic director of the Playwrights Theatre Centre in Vancouver, the dramaturg-in-residence at Playwrights’ Workshop Montréal, and artistic associate of the Stratford Festival. From 2005 to 2012, he was artistic director of English theatre at the National Arts Centre, where he created a resident English theatre company, with actors from across the country, and programmed the NAC’s first season of Canadian plays. It was in this role at the NAC where **Hinton** initiated a commitment to producing the work of Indigenous theatre artists every season during his tenure. **Hinton**’s directorial work has included premiere works by Métis playwright Marie Clements, as well as producing plays by Kevin Loring, Waawaate Fobister, Yvette Nolan and George Ryga. In 2012, he directed an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* with 40 First Nations/Métis actors and starring August Schellenberg in the title role. He has directed works by Tomson Highway and, in the fall of 2017, **Hinton** directs the world premiere of City Opera Vancouver’s much anticipated production of *Missing* by Brian Current, with a libretto by Marie Clements about the Highway of Tears.

“Our challenge is taking an artifact from the 1960s and reviving it for today within a contemporary and inclusive practice,” adds **Hinton**. “It is a delicate balance of renewing the original spirit of the piece with contemporary perspectives in order to revise the opera’s colonial biases and bring forward its inherent strengths and power.”

Working alongside **Hinton** is assistant director **Estelle Shook**, a Métis artist from British Columbia. Artistic director of Caravan Farm Theatre from 1998 to 2010, and current interim artistic and managing director, she recently directed the Dora Award-winning *Sunday in Sodom* for Canadian Stage. **Shook** is also a descendant of Saskatchewan pioneer Thomas McKay, who testified at the trial of Louis Riel in 1885. **Shook** makes her opera debut with *Louis Riel*, bringing personal, professional and cultural perspectives to the production.

Santee Smith makes her COC debut as the choreographer for *Louis Riel*. **Smith** is a member of the Mohawk Nation, Turtle Clan from Six Nations of the Grand, Ont. One of Canada’s most exciting choreographers, she is the founding artistic director/choreographer for Kaha:wi Dance Theatre and has propelled her company to international acclaim. In *Louis Riel*, she re-imagines and re-stages a number of dances, including the Buffalo Hunt.

Canadian **Michael Gianfrancesco**, who previously designed sets and costumes for COC school tour productions of *The Magic Flute*, *La serva padrona* and *The Barber of Seville*, makes his COC mainstage debut as the set designer for *Louis Riel*. His work has been seen across Canada in productions of theatre, opera and dance, with the Stratford and Shaw festivals, Canadian Stage, Neptune Theatre, Theatre New Brunswick, Theatre Passe Muraille, Theatre Aquarius and Pleiades Theatre, among others.

In *Louis Riel*, **Gianfrancesco** has created a single set with the flexibility to convey the epic-scale of the events being told as well as the more intimate moments of quiet reflection. The physical space sits atop a solid wood floor into which the topography of the Red River Valley has been carved. Set pieces will come in and out as needed to suggest interior and exterior spaces, transporting the audience from the Parliament Buildings of Ottawa to Fort Garry in Manitoba to Riel’s home in exile in Montana.

Dora Award winning Canadian designer **Gillian Gallow** makes her COC debut as the costume designer for *Louis Riel*. Her work in set and costumes has been seen across Canada in productions for Thousand Islands Playhouse, the Stratford Festival, Theatre Calgary, Vancouver Playhouse, Soulpepper and National Arts Centre, to name but a few.

Gallow's costume design for *Louis Riel* is inspired by the drive for historical authenticity while also communicating a modern-day sensibility. The resulting aesthetic realizes the visual contradiction between truth and misconception and what is being lived out in the East versus in the West, as well as offers an opportunity for audiences today to see themselves reflected back in the onstage action.

Canadian lighting designer **Bonnie Beecher** returns to the COC with *Louis Riel*, last with the company in the 2008 Ensemble Studio double-bill presentation of Giuseppe Gazzaniga's *Don Giovanni* and Igor Stravinsky's *Renard*. A multiple Dora Award winner and frequent nominee, **Beecher's** work has lit the stages of theatres across Canada, including the Shaw and Stratford festivals, Opera Atelier, Soulpepper, National Arts Centre, National Ballet of Canada and Tarragon Theatre, as well as internationally for the Dutch National Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, Glimmerglass Opera, The Royal Shakespeare Company, New Zealand Opera, Stuttgart Ballet and Kevin O'Day Ballet. The lighting design for *Louis Riel* will serve the range of experiences and spaces playing out on stage, from epic and intimate, to interior and exterior, to realistic and magical.

Louis Riel was the first opera written by a Canadian to be presented by the COC, and the COC is the only professional opera company to date to have ever performed it.

The NAC presents *Louis Riel* on June 15 and 17, 2017 as part of its Canada Scene festival in Ottawa. For more information on the NAC's performances of this production of *Louis Riel*, please visit www.nac-cna.ca.

Additional information about the libretto and score of *Louis Riel*, as well as complete casting, and a series of public education and outreach events will be forthcoming in separate press materials issued in the coming weeks.

TICKET INFORMATION

Single tickets for *Louis Riel* range from **\$35 – \$235** and box seats, when available, are **\$350**. Tickets are now on sale, available online at coc.ca, by calling **416-363-8231**, or in person at the **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts Box Office** (145 Queen St. W.). For more information on **specially priced tickets** available to **young people under the age of 15, standing room, Opera Under 30** presented by **TD Bank Group, student groups** and **rush seating**, visit coc.ca.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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About the Canadian Opera Company

Based in Toronto, the Canadian Opera Company is the largest producer of opera in Canada and one of the largest in North America. The COC enjoys a loyal audience support-base and one of the highest attendance and subscription rates in North America. 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 Schmitt Architects, the Four Seasons Centre opened in 2006. For more information on the COC, visit coc.ca.

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