

For immediate release: March 20, 2017

## **CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY ASSEMBLES ALL-CANADIAN CAST FOR *LOUIS RIEL***

### ***Renewing Opera's Original Spirit with Contemporary Perspectives for 2017 Revival***

**Toronto** – The Canadian Opera Company has brought together an all-Canadian cast, led by renowned Canadian baritone **Russell Braun** in the title role, for its highly anticipated revival of Harry Somers' *Louis Riel*. This new production of *Louis Riel* is co-produced with the National Arts Centre in anticipation of Canada's sesquicentennial 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. This production will have its premiere in Ottawa by the NAC on June 15 and 17, 2017.

Composed by Harry Somers for Canada's centennial in 1967, *Louis Riel* is a uniquely Canadian contribution to the opera world about Métis leader Louis Riel and Canada's westward expansion. Telling the history of Louis Riel is ever more important in this period of Truth and Reconciliation.

"Perhaps the most considerable challenge in staging this opera is the Eurocentric tradition of opera as a form and its collision with the voice, culture and representation of indigeneity in this history," says *Louis Riel* director **Peter Hinton**. "It is a delicate balance of renewing the original spirit of the opera with contemporary perspectives in order to revise the opera's colonial biases and bring forward its inherent strengths and powers."

A group of Indigenous men and women have been cast as a physical chorus known as the **Land Assembly**. On stage throughout the opera, the **Land Assembly** is a silent chorus in protest, and stands for the people for whom the opera has not provided a voice. The **Land Assembly** shift and transform in response to the actions on stage and are a constant, physical representation of the Indigenous men and women who are directly affected by the outcomes, victories and losses of Riel. Among the individuals joining the Land Assembly for the Toronto presentation is acclaimed theatre creator and artistic leader **Cole Alvis** of Métis-Irish/English heritage from the Turtle Mountains in Manitoba.

Thirty-five members of the **COC Chorus** will take on the role of the **Parliamentary Chorus** and represent a group of settler and immigrant men and women. The **Parliamentary Chorus** sings and is seen but does not participate in the physical action of the narrative, only commenting and debating on what should take place. They serve as a modern-day Greek Chorus while also representing the functions of Members of Parliament who legislate and validate the struggles of all Canadians in Ottawa. An additional five members of the **COC Chorus** will be members of the **Métis Nation**.

*Louis Riel* features 39 named characters portrayed by 30 artists, listed here in order of approximate first vocal appearance.

**Cole Alvis** is the Land Assembly leader and takes on the created role the **Activist**, delivering the Land Acknowledgement as the opera unfolds and setting the tone for interpreting the action playing out on stage.

Juno Award-nominated multidisciplinary artist **Jani Lauzon**, of Métis heritage from East Kootenay, B.C., makes her COC debut in the newly created role of **The Folksinger**, delivering the first vocal line of *Louis Riel*. Where previously delivered in the styling of a classically trained operatic voice, it will now be heard in the style of a

contemporary Métis singer. **Lauzon** also takes on the roles of **Elzéar Lagimodière**, a follower of Riel, as well as the **Clerk of the Court** and the **Prison Guard**.

Baritone **Doug MacNaughton**, a graduate of the COC Ensemble Studio who has gone on to sing throughout Canada, the United States and Europe, is **William McDougall**, the Canadian lawyer and politician turned away from Fort Garry by Riel. He also sings the role of the **Judge**.

Ensemble Studio tenor **Charles Sy**, a young artist praised for his “pleasing, sweet timbre, and innate musicality” (*Musical Toronto*), is **Ambroise Lépine**, a farmer and leader of the Métis people.

Tenor **Keith Klassen** is first heard as a **British Soldier** and then as a **Hudson’s Bay Scout**.

Tenor **Michael Colvin**, an Ensemble Studio graduate who has appeared on opera and concert stages throughout Canada and abroad, sings the role of **Thomas Scott**, the Protestant Orangeman executed on orders from Louis Riel.

In the roles of Louis Riel’s fellow Métis, present at the trial of Thomas Scott, are five singers from the COC Chorus: baritone **Bruno Cormier** is **Joseph Delorme**; baritone **Jan Vaculik** is **Janvier Ritchot**, bass-baritone **Michael Downie** is **Elzéar Goulet**; tenor **Vanya Abrahams** is **André Nault**; and tenor **Taras Chmil** is **Baptiste Lépine**.

Singing the title role for the first time is internationally renowned Canadian baritone **Russell Braun**. He brings the full force of his celebrated vocal and dramatic prowess to embody **Louis Riel**, one of the most pivotal figures in Canadian politics of the 19th century.

As **Dr. Schultz** and **Charles Mair**, leading opponents of Louis Riel’s provisional government, are rising Canadian opera singers baritone **Andrew Love** and tenor **Thomas Glenn**.

Ensemble Studio alumnus bass-baritone **Neil Craighhead** takes on the roles of **O’Donaghue**, a Fenian Irishman banished from Canada alongside Louis Riel, and **B. B. Osler**, Canadian lawyer and prosecutor in the Riel trial.

Ensemble Studio graduate bass **Alain Coulombe**, one of the most commanding and exciting singers of his generation, returns to the COC as **Bishop Alexandre-Antonin Taché**, the Roman Catholic bishop who served as an intermediary between Riel’s provisional government and Sir John A. Macdonald’s cabinet.

Baritone **James Westman**, a graduate of the Ensemble Studio, now brings his passion and musicianship to the role of Canada’s first Prime Minister, **Sir John A. Macdonald**.

Ensemble Studio tenor **Aaron Sheppard** appears in two roles: as **Donald Smith** of the Hudson’s Bay Company, sent to Fort Garry to assist in settling the terms of a union with Louis Riel’s provisional government, and as **Sir Frederick Middleton**, the British commander that led the attack on the Métis stronghold of Batoche, Sask., and captured Louis Riel.

Ensemble Studio graduate tenor **Jean-Philippe Fortier-Lazure** returns in the roles of Canadian statesman **Sir George-Étienne Cartier**, an intermediary with Canada’s government at the time of the Red River Resistance in 1869-1870, and **Father André**, Louis Riel’s spiritual adviser before his execution.

Ensemble Studio graduate **Allyson McHardy**’s mezzo-soprano has been described as radiant, dusky, incandescent, and sumptuous, complemented by a noble and spell-binding presence. She returns to the COC as **Julie Riel**, Louis Riel’s mother and confidante.

Making her COC debut as **Sara Riel**, Louis Riel’s sister, is soprano **Joanna Burt**. A Métis/Saugeen Ojibway artist from Lindsay, Ont., **Burt** is currently completing the Artist Diploma program of The Glenn Gould School of Music at The Royal Conservatory of Music.

Ensemble Studio graduate baritone **Peter Barrett** is **Colonel Garnet Wolseley**, who led the military force to capture Fort Garry.

Ensemble Studio alumna soprano **Simone Osborne** is quickly establishing herself as one of the most exciting emerging artists in the opera world and returns to the COC in the role of **Marguerite Riel**, Louis Riel's wife.

Unique to the score of *Louis Riel* and the role of Marguerite Riel is the "Kuyas" aria, which opens Act III and is sung in Cree. The music for the "Kuyas" aria was based on a Nisga'a mourning song called "Song of Skateen" that was recorded by Marius Barbeau and transcribed by Sir Ernest MacMillan on the Nass River in 1927. The words for "Kuyas" were selected by Somers from *Cree Grammar* by Rev. H. E. Hivers and the *English-Cree Primer and Vocabulary* by Rev. F. G. Stevens, as well as from a story told by Coming Day to Leonard Bloomfield on the Sweetgrass Reserve in Saskatchewan. The composer was further assisted in ascertaining pronunciation and feeling for the language by Mrs. Lou Waller of Cree descent from Alberta, to whom Somers dedicated the "Kuyas" aria. With respect to both the Nisga'a and Métis peoples and in recognition of how the songs of one nation are not the same as another's, the COC and NAC's co-production of *Louis Riel* acknowledges the current holder of the hereditary rights to this song: **Sim'oogit Sgat'iin, hereditary chief Isaac Gonu, Gisk'ansnaat (Grizzly Bear Clan), Gitlaxt'aamiks, B.C.**

The delegation that travelled to Montana to bring Riel back to Canada was originally written by Somers and librettist Mavor Moore for three singers although historically it was a four-man envoy. The 2017 revival of *Louis Riel* has taken this into consideration by making minor adjustments to reflect the historical account of this pivotal meeting. Acclaimed stage, film, and television actor and playwright of Cree descent, **Billy Merasty**, makes his COC debut as the Plains Cree chief **Poundmaker**. Ensemble Studio baritone **Bruno Roy** takes on the newly introduced role of **Louis Schmidt**, who was Riel's friend and secretary of the provisional government during the Red River Resistance. **Roy** also appears in the additional role of **Dr. François Roy**, who testified at Riel's trial. Ensemble Studio alumni, tenor **Andrew Haji** and baritone **Clarence Frazer**, appear in the roles of Métis leaders **Gabriel Dumont** and **James Isbister**, respectively.

Cree bass-baritone **Everett Morrison**, originally from Moosonee, Ont., makes his COC debut as Cree war chief **Wandering Spirit**, who joined with Louis Riel leading up to the events of 1885.

Baritone **Dion Mazerolle**, praised for a wide range of operatic roles and concert performances, makes his COC debut as **F. X. Lemieux**, Louis Riel's lawyer.

Making his COC debut as the **Buffalo Dancer** is **Justin Many Fingers (Mii-sum-ma-nis-kim)**. A singer, actor and dancer from the Lavern Kainai Blackfoot Reserve in southern Alberta, **Many Fingers** performs two dance sequences entitled "Buffalo Hunt," in the last scene of Act II of *Louis Riel*, intended as a reenactment of a Métis buffalo hunt.

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, Earlane Collins and TD Bank Group.**

*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. *Louis Riel* is sung in English, French, Michif and Cree with English, French, Michif and Cree SURTITLES™.

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](http://www.nac-cna.ca).

### **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](http://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 **specialty 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](http://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](http://coc.ca).

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