

## OPERA

PACIFIC  
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VICTORIA

## KEY NOTES

*Taking Flight  
to Anywhere*

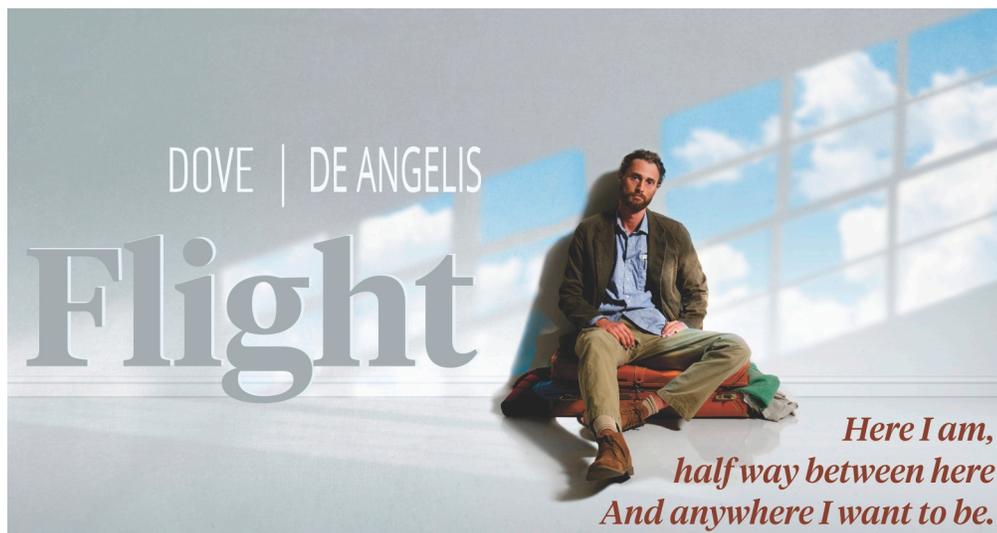
**M**any of us have heard of Mehran Karimi Nasseri, an Iranian-born refugee who arrived in Charles de Gaulle airport in 1988 and stayed for 18 years.

Paperless, unable to fly anywhere, unable to walk out into the French sunlight, he resided in what writer Paul Berczeller called *a lost dimension of absurd bureaucratic entanglement*. After seven years, Nasseri was granted a visa, but by then his mind wouldn't let him leave; his story became ever more fantastical, and his interminable stopover ended only with his hospitalization and a stay in a Paris shelter. Where he is now is unknown.

**Nasseri's bizarre predicament** inspired several films and documentaries – notably the 2004 Steven Spielberg movie, *The Terminal*, starring Tom Hanks and Catherine Zeta-Jones. But well before Spielberg made being stranded at an airport an occasion for romantic comedy, there was the 1998 opera *Flight* by Jonathan Dove and April De Angelis – a work that is both edgier and more lyrical.

**An exploration of the yearning for escape and for human connection**, *Flight* is full of laugh-out-loud scenes and scintillating musical moments – not to mention the most rambunctious (and possibly the only) childbirth scene in opera. Playful, risqué, touching, this high-flying drama has become one of the most popular of contemporary operas. This, its 30th production, is its Canadian première.

When asked to explain the reasons for its success, Dove says, *Flight is a comedy, which makes this opera almost unique in the 20th century... comedy seems to have*



*disappeared .... This is partly related to world events, as life has become darker, but also to the evolution of musical language, which did not lend itself to comedy. The music of Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio, does not have the characteristics that allow for comedy ... What's unusual with Flight is that you can hear people laughing in the room, and often!* (Interview with Laurent Bury for Forumopera.com, translated from French).

Another reason for its appeal may be the familiarity of its setting – the purgatory of an airport departure lounge, where disparate characters are trapped unwillingly together, stranded overnight by a storm. It's a situation reminiscent of a country house murder mystery – complete with a violent attack, concealment of a body, romantic mayhem, and an ensemble of quirky characters, all with their separate motivations and hangups, all longing for some kind of magic to change their lives, some route toward freedom...

**We meet a young couple heading off on holiday**, studiously determined to put some zest back into their marriage with the help of a book on relationships.

**A diplomat and his heavily pregnant wife** are caught between hope and dread as they head for a new posting in cold, boring Minsk. She is trying to come to terms with impending motherhood, a move to a strange country, and a sense that the shine has worn off her future.

**A middle-aged divorcée**, twice-married, has no intention of flying; she is waiting for her fiancé, a 22-year-old barman she met on holiday in Majorca, to come sweep her away – half-believing in miracles, half-knowing she's deluding herself.

**A Steward and Stewardess** carry on a steamy affair, slipping away whenever they can to some secluded corner.

**An Immigration Officer**, on the prowl for illegal aliens, patrols the concourse.

**A misanthropic flight Controller** presides over all the comings and goings – an imperious goddess, icily detached, her latent humanity held under tight control. Dove made an inspired choice to write the role of the Controller for a coloratura soprano, whose spectacular tones float high above the action, ethereal, steely. She even holds her own in a spine-tingling duet with the storm.

**Finally, there is the Refugee**, who for several weeks has made the airport his home. He is caught between worlds, without documents, belonging nowhere, eluding the Immigration Officer, mixing with the passengers, asking them for help. But they have places to go and lives to change, and no time for him. Again, Dove's soundscape is riveting. The Refugee is a countertenor – his enigmatic, other-worldly voice reflecting the plight of a man isolated in a kind of limbo, looking for ephemeral connections with people who will be gone within hours.

**As the stormy night wears on**, the characters' anxieties and desires emerge. The Refugee promises them miracles with a pocketful of magic stones – if they will only believe and promise to help him next time he asks. But when the women think he has duped them, they turn on him like harpies.

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## Taking Flight to Anywhere

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**Things eventually sort themselves out**, helped along by the birth of a child and the Refugee's haunting, heart-stopping story, untold till the end of the opera. As critic Rodney Milnes points out, *You almost feel guilty for having laughed so much when the Refugee's profoundly moving narrative hits you in the gut in the final minutes.*

**This juxtaposition of farcical and transcendent moments** gives *Flight* much of its impact. (It was commissioned by Glyndebourne Opera in the hope that Dove would create a modern-day *Marriage of Figaro*, merging tears and laughter while holding up a mirror to society. *Figaro* famously upended the class system by featuring a (*gasp!*) servant as star and, if not actually inciting the French Revolution, at least hinting at some of the spirit behind it.)

**April De Angelis' libretto** for *Flight* is peppered with revealing small talk, zingy one-liners and dazzling moments of poetry. The refugee's song welcoming the newborn is a thing of loveliness and surprise: *We wish the world perfect for you, So that it could deserve you.*

**Dove's music is full of show-stopping moments.** At times the orchestra seems a character in its own right. It perfectly captures the exhilaration of flying, evoking the earth-shaking roar of a jetliner revving up and taking off into the high blue yonder with such gravity-defying exuberance and sparkle that it could be the soundtrack for Santa's sleigh. It surely re-acquaints the most jaded among us with a sense of the miracle of flight (there's even a brief heavenly chorus).

Not unexpectedly, Dove also seized the chance to add to the world's catalogue of operatic storm music with a rip-roaring musical mélange of lightning, thunder, roiling rain and darkness; the climactic duet for soprano and storm is electrifying.

When the storm finally abates and forgiveness and hope are in the air, the travellers scatter to their corners of the world while the Refugee, Controller, and Immigration Officer stay behind in what the composer himself calls a "happy-ish ending."

**Today, two decades after *Flight* was created**, an entire Wikipedia page is devoted to people who have lived in

## Capturing the Spirit of *Flight*

**T**he Director-Designer team of **Morris Panych and Ken MacDonald** created Pacific Opera's 2016 Gaudi-inspired production of *The Barber of Seville* – a gorgeous bit of eye candy that has popped up on seven other North American stages since then, from Quebec to Colorado – and appears at Vancouver Opera this February.

**Stunning architecture has inspired Morris and Ken's concept for *Flight*** as well, specifically Eero Saarinen's TWA terminal at JFK, which Morris calls *one of the most iconic and alluring spaces ever designed.*

With its striking curving wings and soaring, light-filled windows, this was the Sydney Opera House of airport terminals. (In fact while Saarinen was designing the TWA building, he was also a judge in the Opera House design competition.)

Saarinen saw his design for TWA as an abstraction of the idea of flight itself – an embodiment of the longing for open space and freedom that inhabits the dreams of the characters in *Flight*.

Sadly, in the wake of increased traffic and security measures, TWA's bankruptcy, and the impact of 9/11 on the airline industry,

airports. (Their reasons vary: some are refugees; some have lost their travel documents or run out of money; at least one wanted to be able to smoke and drink without his family bothering him). One of them, a Syrian refugee named Hassan Al Kontar, stranded for 7 months in 2018 at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, has been granted asylum in Canada, thanks to the kindness of strangers who sponsored him. He has now become an eloquent advocate for refugees.

**A second true story that also inspired *Flight*** speaks to the desperation and courage of many refugees.

As Dove has explained, *In the opera, the story that the Refugee tells is not that of Mehran Nasser, the real life refugee in Charles de Gaulle, it's the story that has really happened of two brothers... one of the brothers survived, and the other did not.*

He is referring to Pardeep Saini, who in 1996 miraculously survived a 10-hour flight from Delhi to Heathrow, hidden in

the TWA building was closed less than a month after 9/11. It sat vacant for 18 years, until it reopened in 2019 as a hotel.

Helping to stage the Canadian premiere of *Flight* are costume designer **Dana Osborne**, who worked with Morris and Ken on their previous Pacific Opera productions – *Macbeth* and *Barber*; lighting designer **Alan Brodie**, who has done a half dozen productions with us, most recently *Macbeth* and *Madama Butterfly*; and Pacific Opera's go-to choreographer, **Jacques Lemay**.

Artistic Director **Timothy Vernon** and the **Victoria Symphony** are facing the music with intrepid spirit and musicianship as they explore this challenging and fascinating opera.



*Flight*: Preliminary Design Sketch by Ken MacDonald

the wheel bay of a Boeing 747. (And yes, there's also a Wikipedia page devoted to wheel-well stowaway flights, most of them fatal.)

**As war and weather, politics and persecution** conspire to displace ever more people from their homes, the number of refugees world-wide grows, and these stories of stateless persons become almost commonplace.

**What *Flight* does so eloquently** is to bring our worlds together. The Refugee's dreams and those of the travellers are not dissimilar. They are all trapped somehow; they all seek escape somewhere; they all long for human connection.

In the opera's final mesmerizing duet, the Controller's coloratura winds round the Refugee's voice, as he acknowledges that the airport is his home now ... it is where he is bound to remain ... a space between worlds where he, perhaps, has found some kind of home.

Maureen Woodall

## The Cast of *Flight*



Making his role debut as the Refugee is British countertenor **William Towers** who has performed major roles with such companies as the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Teatro La Fenice, and the Canadian Opera Company.



**Sharleen Joynt** (Musetta in Pacific Opera's *La bohème* and Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute*) returns as the Controller, a role with its own spectacular vocal fireworks.



**Allyson McHardy**, our Carmen in 2012, is the conflicted Minskwoman. Acclaimed for her charisma and her expressive voice, the Canadian mezzo soprano has performed in opera and concert all over the globe.



**Neil Craighead**, the Minskman, returns to Pacific Opera following previous appearances as Truffaldino in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Pietro in *Simon Boccanegra*, and Don Fernando in *Fidelio*.



**Emilia Boteva**, who was a riveting and lyrical Kostelnička in our 2017 production of Janáček's *Jenůfa*, returns as the Older Woman. The Canadian-Bulgarian mezzo soprano has sung throughout Europe and North America.



BC baritone **Justin Welsh**, an alumnus of Pacific Opera's Young Artist Program, most recently sang the title role of *The Marriage of Figaro* and Papageno in *The Magic Flute*. He joins the cast of *Flight* as the dreaded Immigration Officer.



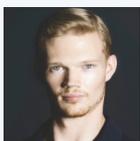
**John Brancy**, who was Harlequin in *Ariadne auf Naxos* and Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, returns (freshly minted Grammy in hand!) as the Steward – a role he performed with Opera Omaha in 2017.



Quebec soprano **Kimy McLaren** makes her Pacific Opera debut as the uninhibited Stewardess. She has performed extensively in France, including Opéra national du Rhin and Théâtre du Châtelet, as well as in Latin America, Asia, and Canada.



Also new to Pacific Opera is **Jacqueline Woodley** as Tina. She has created roles in several contemporary operas, including Milica in *Svadba*, Dahlia in *M'dea Undone*, and Nataliya in *Oksana G*.



American tenor **John Robert Lindsey**, who made his Canadian debut as Števa in *Jenůfa*, returns for his role debut as Bill, Tina's determinedly unpredictable husband.

## Doing What we Can

### The Flight of the Hummingbird

**What can you do when your world is burning up?** This question has seared itself into our consciousness as wildfires flare across the world. In Australia, more than 10 million hectares and a billion animals have been destroyed. Even here in Victoria, far from the danger, we remember the blanket of smoke that lay over our city during the devastating 2017 and 2018 seasons.

Wildfires have become the new normal. The causes – a mixed bag of deforestation, legal and otherwise, lightning, extremes of temperature and drought, human carelessness and greed – have created their own political firestorms.

**Whether the fire is on the other side of the world or the other side of the mountain**, there is a question – What can I do? – which is at the heart of *The Flight of the Hummingbird*, a new opera for young audiences that is touring BC schools.

Co-commissioned by Pacific Opera and Vancouver Opera, *Hummingbird* is based on an indigenous parable from South America's Quechuan people that over the years found its way into Haida culture, where it inspired the book *Flight of the Hummingbird: A Parable for the Environment* by internationally acclaimed Haida artist Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, who, with Barry Gilson, wrote the libretto and created the design for the opera. The delightful music is by francophone composer Maxime Goulet, and the production is directed by Glynis Leyshon.

**In the opera, Owl, a refugee from a forest fire**, escapes to the rainforest where Hummingbird, Bunny, and Bear are unsure how to respond to the looming danger. Flee? Stay? Deny everything and bury yourself in housework?

**Told with humour and charm, *Hummingbird* is a call to action**, a reminder that even the smallest among us has the power to make an impact. It's not that we all need to become volunteer firefighters (this is essentially what the characters do at the end of the opera). But we have the power and the responsibility to do what we can.

If you're an opera company, you can make noise. And so we've sent the cast and musicians on a road trip. They're singing their hearts out at over 100 schools across southern BC (and they're showing up in bright new hybrid electric vehicles, thanks to support from the Province!)

The Greater Victoria Public Library is also getting in on the act with *Be a Hummingbird*, a series of programs on environmentalism, responsibility and courage. These include a Living Opera presentation by Pacific Opera artists; a retelling of the story in Indigenous languages; and a Teen Writing Contest with Pacific Opera Artistic Director Timothy Vernon as judge (get your entries in by February 27).

A limited number of spaces are still available for school tour performances of *The Flight of the Hummingbird*.

**Public performances** take place March 19 to 22 at the Baumann Centre.



Jan van der Hooft (Bear), Evan Korbut (Owl), Sara Schabas (Hummingbird), Simran Claire (Bunny). Photo Tim Matheson

**For information, call 250.385.0222 or visit [PACIFICOPERA.CA](http://PACIFICOPERA.CA)**

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Everyone welcome. Donations gratefully accepted.

## Inside Opera Sunday, February 9, 10 am or noon

Phillip T. Young Recital Hall, UVic. Robert Holliston interviews members of the creative team. Free admission, free parking.



## Opera Goes to the Movies

Thursday, February 13, 7 pm. Baumann Centre  
Screening of *The Terminal* and discussion of Mehran Karimi Nasseri, inspiration for the film and the opera *Flight*. Jaime Martino of Tapestry New Opera will speak on contemporary opera and diversity.

**Opera Motifs** Tuesday, February 18, 12:30 pm  
Baumann Centre. Robert Holliston shares some of his favourite contemporary operas.

**Opera Today: A Conversation with Jonathan Dove**  
Wednesday, February 19, 7 pm. Baumann Centre.  
In Victoria for the Canadian première of his opera *Flight*, Jonathan Dove talks about his life, his passions, his music, and the impact of *Flight*.

**Lunchbox Opera** Tuesday, February 25, 12:30 pm  
First Metropolitan United Church, 932 Balmoral Road.  
Recital by Grammy-winning baritone John Brancy and pianist Robert Holliston.

**Master Class** Wednesday, March 4, 7 pm.  
Baumann Centre. Soprano Danika Loren and pianist Stéphane Mayer coach Victoria based singers.

**Opera Today** Thursday, March 5, 12:30 pm.  
Baumann Centre. A celebration of International Women's Day.

## OPERA WORKS CAMP FOR KIDS 9 TO 13

### Spring Break Opera Creation Camp

Monday, March 23, to Friday March, 27. 8:30 am to 3:30 pm  
First Metropolitan United Church, 932 Balmoral Road

Create and stage your own opera! Write the words & music. Design, build, & paint the set. Create the costumes. Then perform your new opera for friends & family!

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Contact Rebecca Hass at 250.382-1641, ext. 204  
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# Flight

At the Royal Theatre

Pre-performance  
lobby lecture  
1 hour before curtain

February 20, 22, 28, at 8 pm  
Sunday, March 1, 2:30 pm

## Student & Family Preview

Tuesday, February 18, 7 pm, Royal Theatre

School Groups & Students: book through the Pacific Opera Box Office: 250.385.0222

Families: \$25 adults / \$15 students, from PACIFICOPERA.CA or 250.385.0222. Minimum 1 student ticket with each adult ticket.

## Sense of Occasion

Thursday, February 20, 6:30 pm. East Lobby, Royal Theatre  
Pre-performance reception to celebrate the opening night of *Flight*. Gourmet finger foods and wine. Space is limited. Dress is festive. \$35 per person. Reserve with payment by February 11: 250.382.1641.

## DONOR SALON SERIES

### President's Circle Working Rehearsal

Tuesday, February 18, 6 pm. Royal Theatre

6 pm: Coffee and cookies

6:15 pm: Discussion: The world today through the lens of *Flight*

7:00 pm: Final Dress Rehearsal

By invitation to members of the President's Circle and Impresario Circle.

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## HOME GROWN

### Danika Loren, Soprano, Stéphane Mayer, Piano

Monday, March 2, 7:00 pm. Baumann Centre

Soprano Danika Loren and pianist Stéphane Mayer present a recital of their own compositions, along with works by Debussy and George Crumb, in their cross-country compositional debut.

Adults: \$25 / Students \$15  
PACIFICOPERA.CA 250.385.0222

## THE FLIGHT OF THE HUMMINGBIRD

March 19 & 20, 2 pm

March 21, 4 pm & 7 pm

March 22, 7pm

The Baumann Centre

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THE BAUMANN CENTRE FOR PACIFIC OPERA VICTORIA  
925 BALMORAL RD VICTORIA BC V8T 1A7

BOX OFFICE: 250-385-0222  
PACIFICOPERA.CA

ADMIN: 250-382-1641  
E: boxoffice@pacificopera.ca

Editor  
Maureen Woodall