



In one corner of a cavernous room in southeast Calgary, a puppet flies towards the ceiling before collapsing in an anguished heap.

Five puppeteers pass the puppet from hand to hand in a series of careful and tricky maneuvers. Two puppeteers move its legs to make it run and launch into the air; two more standing on a ladder take hold of it, and it takes flight. A fifth puppeteer helps support its body as it flies. The movements are fluid and look like a graceful dance. There's a sense of wonder as a simple cloth mannequin becomes transformed into a flying ghost.

That's just a small taste of the magic you'll see in *Ghost Opera* (page 31), a collaboration

The Diary of a *Ghost Opera*

Peek behind the scenes as Old Trout Puppet Workshop explores life and death in their newest production

BY SILVIA PIKAL

between the Old Trout Puppet Workshop (Peter Balkwill, Pityu Kenderes and Judd Palmer), acclaimed composer Veronika Krausas and Giller Prize-winning author André Alexis. They've partnered with Calgary Opera and Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity to present the production.

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Today's workshop is a way of testing out some ideas, like the best way to make a puppet fly.

While Peter Balkwill is guiding the puppet flight, Judd Palmer directs a puppeteer strapped into a harness who swings above the ground. Nearby, Pityu Kenderes saves a puppet that's about to fall from a puppeteer's chest. The puppeteer paces around the studio while dreaming up a potential



character. He pins a white sheet around the puppet's face to form a cloak, and holds two plastic limbs on either side for arms. He shuffles down the length of the room and ponders: "Is this puppet the tiny one that struggles to keep up? Does he have a gout foot?"

Two giant claws are lying on the floor, which belong to Charon, the larger-than-life demon in Greek mythology who is a ferryman for Hades.

The production will be a grand one, with 26 people on stage: six puppeteers, eight opera singers, 11 musicians and a conductor. There will be several life-size puppets in the show, puppeteers hanging from the rafters and even stilt-walkers involved in the spectacle.

Palmer says *Ghost Opera* is an Old Trout Puppet Workshop story at its core — scary,

funny and surreal. The libretto (text set to music in an opera) is about a philosopher who buys a house that's haunted by the ghost of the original owner.

In this tale, the ghost is the protagonist. Throughout the production, we hear the ghost's side of the story in why she's haunting the house.

"We're using the construct of a ghost story to ponder what it means to be alive and what it means that we have to die," Palmer says. "So it's a supernatural way to ask existential questions... What if we never die, what if we never leave? How can we make peace with our mortal limits? Is it possible to make peace with them, or is it just something you accept, because there's no option?"

Palmer says the production is a fusion of two art forms that are connected through a love

of the grandiose, ridiculous and fantastical — opera and puppets.

"Not only are these puppets, which are intricately and beautifully carved, flying through the air, they're also singing — with voices that'll ruffle your hair in the back row," he says.

The idea for *Ghost Opera* was born three years ago. Writer André Alexis stumbled upon an ancient Greek ghost story that captured his imagination. He brought it to composer Veronika Krausas, a long-time collaborator, and the two of them approached the Old Trout Puppet Workshop to see if they were interested in making a puppet opera. The answer was an enthusiastic yes.

"Opera is awesome," Palmer says. "You go to an opera and to me it's stirring as hell to be in the presence of that music. And that's why I think there's always been an operatic element in our shows, because you don't get better than that — the highest possible art form is opera. It's theatre and music at their most intense fused together."

November 22, 2018

Almost one month later, the Old Trout Puppet Workshop gathers in the Mamdani Opera Centre to listen to the entire composition for the first time on the piano.

Balkwill says a big challenge of the production is putting together each piece, from the libretto to the music to the set, as they creep nearer and nearer to show time.

"The libretto has to become written," Balkwill says. "Then the composition starts to happen, and you're refining the libretto in relationship to the composition.... and

Puppet heads dry in the Old Trout Puppet Workshop studio in Calgary.



this has an additional level of complexity to it because it's puppets. It's not just a set design."

Part of today's process is figuring out exactly how the puppeteers and opera singers will operate the puppets together — the puppeteers provide the movement, while the singers provide the voice.

He says what that looks like will be discovered in rehearsal; sometimes the singers will be physically puppeteering, other times they'll just be in physical contact with the puppet or puppeteer, and sometimes they'll be at a distance: "We'll see how that feels — whether it creates interesting dramatic tension or dissolves it, or at what range we lose the connection between voice and puppet, if any, or for what reasons."

"It's tricky because they're rehearsing and working on their voices, and puppetry is highly a secondary discipline," Balkwill adds.

"But even if they can keep the arm alive, it will help," Kenderes says. "They'll go a long way to make the puppet image better."



At one moment in the workshop, two puppeteers, an opera singer and a puppet are in the middle of the room. The opera singer stands at the back of the formation, one hand on each puppeteer's back, as the group practices moving as one.

The movement is an art in itself. The choreography in the production is influenced by Balkwill's training in the Tadashi Suzuki acting technique, which involves the practice of exercises inspired by Greek theatre and martial arts.

"This training could be considered martial dance in some way," Balkwill says. "It can be staccato or could be slow, and it's got a very formal sense of physical form, but it's still a kind of dance. Everything will operate in a lovely sense of concert."

February 28, 2019

About three months later, the Old Trout Puppet Workshop studio in Calgary is full of people busy designing, carving and painting the puppets. There are several puppet heads and hands ready to be painted or already completed. Two puppets are ready for costuming. Charon has a frame. The set is being refined and will be built in a few weeks.

Palmer says the production will never feel like it's finished.

"This is my piece of wisdom about theatre — it's never done, it's just too late now," Palmer says, which is followed by laughter from the rest of the group.

"Or we're out of money now," Kenderes interjects.

"The only chance at emotional peace that you will ever have is at that point where you're like — it's going to be what it is," Palmer says. "Which is great, because when you hit that point, a whole lot of things just fall into place by the cosmic nature of the universe."

Kenderes scrolls through new promotional photos on their computer, of puppets draped in finely detailed gold scarves and robes. The puppets are astounding. They are elegantly carved and expressive without moving.

One puppet's head is bowed; she looks pensive. Regretful. Like she has a story to tell. A secret she's hiding. For now she's static, but when the curtain comes up on stage, she'll come alive.

And in those moments in the darkness, you'll be ushered into a new world outside of your normal existence — where the living speak to the dead, and the dead speak back.

A world some of us dream of. A world some of us fear. Either way, it will be one we've never seen before. 

