

# How Do You Grow An Opera?

A true Alberta story of bootlegging, murder and an execution, transformed into high art—can home-grown wizardry pull it off?

By Peter Oliva



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A DOZEN YEARS AGO, OVER A FEW BEERS, ROBERT KROETSCH AND I WERE talking about the Crowsnest Pass. “Ach!” he said, “I’ve got to stay away from that place! There are just too many stories there!”

I smiled at this news. Kroetsch had given me thunder, or courage, or some sort of idea I was interested in a place that had a lot going for it. There was also the vague suggestion I might just be brave enough to tackle the Crowsnest, and set it into words. I set down my beer glass, and left to begin work on a novel called *Drowning in Darkness*.

The research was fascinating. One of the tales I heard along the way was the story of Emilio Picciarello and Florence (Filumena) Losandro. It’s a sad story—entirely true—about a bootlegger and a young woman who shot a policeman in 1921. After a brief manhunt in the mountains, and after the police found their so-called “death” car, Picciarello and Losandro gave themselves up without much of a struggle.

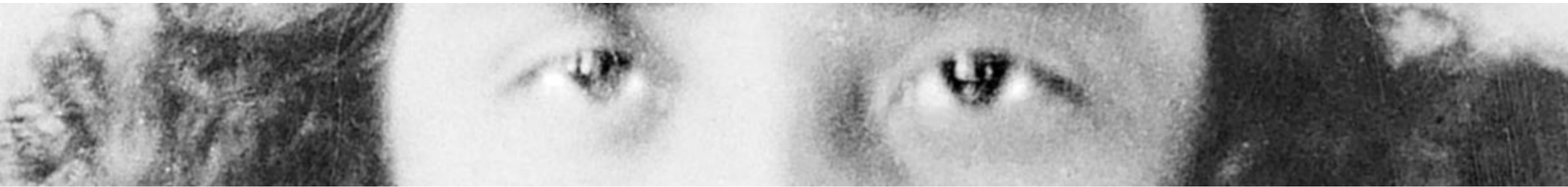
The story might have ended there, with an unfortunate death and the eventual conviction of two hapless criminals. But at that time, in 1921, the story of a murderess—and the question of Filumena’s innocence—created front-page headlines.

I read the court transcripts of the case and learned the story had many angles and ironies. The first: I discovered that an old family friend had been a witness at the hearing. She’d heard the gunshots and given some rather important testimony on the number of shots and on the bootlegger’s car she’d seen speeding through the small Crowsnest town of Coleman. Another surprise: in lieu of a courtroom, Filumena’s public hearing was held in the Coleman opera house.

A bootlegger, a young woman, a murder, an opera house and an execution—the first time in 24 years that a woman had been hanged in Canada. The events seemed larger than history, and by that I mean tragic in a fictional sense. Everything about these events screamed “Story!”

Today, 80 years after Filumena’s execution, the story of Pic and Filumena is about to make headlines all over again. It’s yet another irony that this tragic tale, which began in an opera house, is scheduled to be retold—performed—*as an opera*.

Calgary Opera and The Banff Centre for the Arts are teaming up on a major project—the first full-length opera set in western Canada.



JOHN MURRELL, THE BANFF CENTRE'S ARTISTIC DIRECTOR of theatre, has been musing over the tale of Piciarello and Losandro for eight or nine years. He's toyed with the idea of creating a play or a film treatment, but 18 months ago, Murrell met the composer John Estacio, just as Estacio became composer-in-residence with Calgary Opera and the Calgary Philharmonic. Murrell, flush with enthusiasm for Filumena's story, lured Estacio away from plans to complete a "traditional" chamber piece.

It's rare that an opera company will commission an original work, but it took only one luncheon, at Coyote's Restaurant in Banff, to get the production moving. Over a roast chicken sandwich, Murrell lobbied The Banff Centre for the chance to write the libretto and for Estacio to compose the music.

"The major challenge," admits Estacio, "was finding a composer and a librettist who can work together. And you need to find a story that everyone wants to tell. And then there's the funding. It's not something you can do in a vacuum."

The funding: there's the rub. While Murrell and Estacio were discussing their partnership, Calgary Opera was undergoing something of a transformation. Under a new director, Bob McPhee, Calgary Opera was reviewing its artistic goals. They found that in their 27-year history, they had made very little commitment to new repertoire and had never commissioned a new work. "Our audience had seen *Madame Butterfly* 10 times," says McPhee, "and they were ready for something new. If we don't find new repertoire, then the future of this art form is in question."

Armed with a fresh mandate to foster new works, Calgary Opera began readying its board, its staff and its audience. In 1998 they produced a contemporary take on *Carmen* (sans the red dress). Two years ago, they commissioned an educational operetta (a one-act) that staged another Crowsnest story—the huge landslide down Turtle Mountain, which buried the small town of Frank in 1903—in *Turtle Wakes*.

**In 1921, the story of a murderess created front-page headlines. In lieu of a courtroom—and to accommodate the huge crowds that turned up—Filumena's hearing was held in the Coleman opera house.**

"If your company is not in a financially stable position, you wouldn't be able to take such risks," says McPhee. Even with The Banff Centre's help, the new opera, *Filumena*, will be their most ambitious undertaking yet, with a projected cost of \$1.3-million. An average season may cost \$3-million, and with *Filumena*'s production costs looming, Calgary Opera projects the next year will come in at \$3.6-million.

Workshops eat up most of this money. Along with the resources, Estacio says "you need the ability to try things out, experiment—you can't just write a two-hour opera, show it off and sell it to the public." To that end, Murrell and Estacio completed their first two-week workshop last November, listening to collaborators and trying to meld all the disparate visions together into a unified whole. "It was the most intensive work I've done in the last 20 years," says Murrell.

They have a battery of supporters, people who have "guided us along the path," says Estacio. Kelly Robinson, artistic director at Mirvish Productions in Toronto, travelled to Banff and staged the first act as if it were a play. The conductor Bramwell Tovey was available as an orchestral touchstone, and Wayne Strongman was solicited as musical dramaturge. This meant Murrell had the chance to see the staging, make changes to the libretto, then Kelly could work with the actors and incorporate the changes immediately. Murrell and Estacio could see the new revision, discuss the changes and begin the whole thing again.

By the fall of 2001 the first of two acts was completely written. Twenty-five minutes of music was ready. After the

February and April workshops Estacio has only two months to write the orchestral score for the second act. A dry run of the complete show is planned for October, and the world premiere is slated for January 2003, in Calgary. (Banff will produce the opera in its summer program later that year.)

Both Estacio and Murrell were happy to put the first workshop behind them. The main trouble these days seems to be the typical Crowsnest problem of too many stories and not enough time. "There's lots of plot in this story," says Estacio. "Now we have to condense some of the events. Music can say a lot, in addition to the words. Now, we have to distil what's been done."

HOW DO YOU GROW AN OPERA? HOW DO YOU MAKE THE transition from staging *La Bohème* to being transported by locally composed music about Pic and Filumena? What makes Murrell and Estacio confident they can tell an Albertan story using a borrowed, European construct?

Kroetsch himself braved these questions when he pondered the problem "how do you grow a poet" in his 1977 book, *Seed Catalogue*. In that work, Kroetsch asked, "How do you grow a past/to live in/the absence of silkworms...the absence of Lord Nelson...the absence of lions...the absence of Heraclitus...[and]...the absence of ballet and opera." In the absence of "a past," or a cultural tradition, Kroetsch found inspiration in a seed catalogue to invent his own poetic form.

In the world of opera, Murrell's forerunners are easier to spot: Randolph Peters, Glenn Buhr. Calixa Lavallée, the composer of *O Canada*, wrote several operettas. Opera came to Alberta in 1903, with productions of *The Geisha*, *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As for an Alberta musical tradition, there was at least one musical, by Richard Harrow and Glen Mundy, about Jerry Potts, the Mounted Police scout and interpreter who gained the respect of white and Blackfoot leaders by contributing to

friendly relations between the two groups in the mid-1800s. But *Potts* is hardly a prototype for an opera about Italian-Canadians.

Murrell has this to say about indigenous culture: "Nearly 30 years ago, Canadians working in spoken theatre began to address their own place and time, and the yield of this exploration has been enormous. We dreamed and worked at exploring 'the Canadian context' in the plays we wrote and produced, and younger Canadian theatre folk can now either continue from where we began or can depart entirely from a Canadian focus in their work. The ground has been tilled.

"Canadian culture (and Calgary culture) will be ready for *Filumena*, if John E. and I get the story right, get the words right, get the music right: because it will speak about who and what we are in this part of the world, through our recent history, but in terms which will also essentially be understood in Avignon or in Hong Kong. That is the nature of opera, always has been, and that is the miracle of good art."

About his own background Murrell explains: "I have worked on at least five other libretti for operas, which have not come to completion. I also wrote the libretto for a one-character opera or dramatic cantata called *Josephine*, which concerns Napoleon's rejected empress, about 50 minutes in length, composed by Canadian Timothy Sullivan, and performed a few times in Canada and the States, with some success. Many years ago, I wrote the text for a chamber opera called *Electric Gospel*, by Calgary composer Greg Levin, which was performed only once, to my knowledge, in Toronto, in the late seventies. I have written both words and music for a number of my plays, including *Farther West* and *Democracy*."

In the 25 years since Kroetsch posed the problem of creating indigenous art on the bald prairie, how has our idea of the past changed that we are suddenly claiming bootleggers as tragic figures? Or, to use Kroetsch's exam-

ples, when did we start embracing crows and gophers instead of distant lions? When did fence posts and gopher holes become sexy? Do we now have the history we need to grow an opera?

Well, we do have a tale, a lively past and all the requisite ghosts. It's not a pretty thing, this past. It's full of heart-break, migrants, old languages and new jobs. But we have this thing, this marvelous story...and perhaps now it is time to hear it.

THE STORY BEGINS AT A WEDDING. YOUNG FILUMENA is getting married to a man she doesn't know. Her father has arranged everything, in the Old Italian way. And at this wedding she meets the lively Piciarello, a bottle-chaser, a bootlegger, a tin-pot emperor of the area, a Godfather of sorts and a future town councilman all rolled into one.

The opera version of their history begins with Estacio's take on a Sicilian tarantella. (Both groom and bride are Calabrese—they might "reel" in their graves to such Sicilian strains.) Estacio, however, of Portuguese descent, is counting on a convergence of rustic peasant flavour to bridge the Mediterranean and the Strait of Messina. "My personal style will come through," he says. "It comes through me and through my Italian take on it."

Perhaps it is just this sort of confidence, even hubris, one needs to grow an opera, I think. Perhaps you need something more than luck and story and history and money. Perhaps you need a little immigrant get-up-and-go, too. In Vivaldi's absence, some swaggering bravado might come in handy.

One third of the opera will be sung in Italian, the rest in English. Piciarello begins with a toast to the bride and groom, and the tarantella-inspired music moves from a march into a traditional love song, "like a heartbeat," says Estacio.

By historical account, Filumena cuts a sad figure: thin and unhappy with her lot. The problem is, Murrell must raise her up (in stature) in order to make her descent significant. It's his personal challenge and the very definition of tragedy: characters must fall from a great height. "So," asks Murrell, "what height can you take them to, so that we feel shaken by that fall, from the largeness of spirit? I didn't want to invent history, but I wanted the story to suggest characters of real scope, with a dream of something better."

Filumena, for her part in history, would certainly have dreamed of something better. Born in Italy in 1900, she and her family moved to Fernie, B.C., when she was nine. After her marriage she was isolated in the Crowsnest, living in a grungy Blairmore hotel with a man she didn't love. Her husband moved from one unsuccessful venture to another, changed his last name to hers (to avoid an immigration dispute), and Piciarello eventually employed him to run booze through the Pass, from "wet" B.C. to "dry" Alberta. Prohibition was big business, and Piciarello's operation was the Alberta equivalent to the Bronfman empire, spanning the distance from Nelson to Regina.

## "The major challenge was finding a composer and a librettist who can work together. And you need to find a story that everyone wants to tell."—John Estacio, composer

Against her husband's unspoken wishes, Filumena tagged along on some of the runs. Piciarello needed a decoy, a young couple who looked like they were crossing the border for an afternoon picnic. And Piciarello's son, Steve, was a young man, just about the same age as Filumena...

This is where both history and opera get interesting. Filumena's role, according to Murrell, was to camouflage Piciarello's booze smuggling operation. She started out as a decoy, then became a shield of sorts, since the police were unaccustomed to shooting at women. Soon Filumena was ostracized by the other women for running booze and running around with men, and eventually shunned by her husband, who let her take a room in another part of the hotel.

"She's a bit of an outsider," says Murrell, "even in her own community. I like that quality, in terms of her having a hope, until Pic (Piciarello) comes along. Pic has a dream that is larger than himself. She and Pic are kindred spirits; at least they both wanted more than the circumstances that life offered them."

Of course, history doesn't reveal whether Filumena had an affair, either with Pic or his son, Steve. She certainly did their bidding, right to the end of her life. And as for the opera, Estacio admits there are enough romantic suggestions—the disparate ages, the picnics, an unhappy marriage—that he and Murrell didn't have to go looking for a love triangle (or rectangle) to make the story sizzle.

"Everything looks well at the end of Act 1," says Murrell. Pic is newly elected to the town council. He's entering the hotel business and nearing the end of his bootlegging career. Even Filumena "is gaining strength and self-respect," away from her husband. "It was important not to make her into a victim," says Murrell. "Of course she was a victim—we are all victims at different times—but I wanted her to have a dream for herself and a belief in the possibilities of this new country she'd adopted. A quality of heroism."

Again history gives Murrell exactly what he's looking for. Act 2 tracks a failed booze run, a stopped car, an injured son and a rumour that reaches Pic's ears. Vowing revenge, Pic speeds off to find the man who supposedly shot Steve.

Even today it's unclear why Pic took Filumena with him, or how they happened to shoot a policeman—Constable Stephen O. Lawson—in the back, on his front lawn, in front of his daughter. The details of that day are murky and dark.

"Pic will fare better in the opera than in reality," says Estacio, because their trial will happen off stage, along with



John Estacio, composer, and John Murrell, librettist, of the opera *Filumena*.

their deaths. So the opera-house hearing will disappear. The Calgary trial, too. "Why?" I want to ask. Is it hard to sing in court? Perhaps this sort of plot-tightening decision is a personal choice that makes for structural casualties.

The defence thought a jury would never sentence a woman to death by hanging. And they were wrong.

I can't give away the ending of an opera still in production, but history is pretty clear about what happened next. On his last day, Piciarello was offered two ounces of *Spiritus Frumenti* and went to his death without admitting a thing. Filumena asked for a bouquet of lilies (which never arrived) and received the same drink and an injection of a half-gram of morphine. And then she blamed Pic. (The opera will have to correct this admission—it doesn't befit a tragic heroine.)

YEARS AGO, I SPOKE TO FRANCIS WINSPEAR ABOUT THIS case—this was well before he donated millions of dollars

to build the Winspear Centre in Edmonton. As a young accountant with a big curiosity, Winspear had actually watched Filumena's trial and followed the story. He told me that the trial deeply divided the Crowsnest community, and alienated the Italian immigrants, depending on who you talked to, or on who had benefited from Pic's generosity over the years.

In 1921 the controversy spread throughout the province. In Edmonton a crowd of Italians petitioned Alberta's attorney general (and later premier) John Brownlee to have Pic's and Filumena's bodies returned to the Pass and buried in holy ground. According to Winspear, Archbishop O'Leary ruled against a Catholic burial and said that the only hallowed ground where Pic could be buried was within the confines of the Fort Saskatchewan jail.

## The trial deeply divided the Crowsnest community and alienated the Italian immigrants.

The crowd left, humiliated by this news, silent.

Will this story work as opera? Filumena was an outsider (even in death) and Murrell is betting on the idea that each of us can relate to Filumena's alienation as an immigrant.

Is Alberta ready for this opera? Murrell thinks so:

"As misunderstood as it often is, opera remains a valid art form which has been successful in most places where it has been tried. When a particular story with universal relevance is set to music which extends its resonance and allows access to the deeper meanings and emotions of the story, and then performed for a broad audience base, from the educated to the unprepared, then opera can speak more eloquently and persuasively to us than any other art form, with the possible exception of film—which is, for me, its closest cousin in the world of art. Opera is the most eclectic yet the most immediate of all the performing arts, when it is done well."

Today, in a North Edmonton cemetery, Pic and Filumena rest in unmarked graves. The opera dramatizing their lives is coming to Calgary and Banff in 2003. But it seems to me the final irony in this bizarre story is this: if Murrell and Estacio are successful, they will see their opera at the Winspear Centre in Edmonton, and beyond.

History, I think, is a funny thing. Sometimes it's almost fiction. Imagine a young man watching a trial. Imagine him getting older, becoming rich. Then imagine him leaving a fortune for an opera house that might, one day, stage the trial that he watched as a young man.

How does that happen, exactly? How do you grow an opera?

Time, I think. It takes a lot of time.

**Peter Oliva** is a Calgary writer. His most recent novel, *The City of Yes*, won last year's Writer's Trust of Canada Award and the Bressani Prize.