

For immediate release: September 29, 2023

CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY AND NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE COMMISSION *EMPIRE OF WILD* FROM IAN CUSSON AND CHERIE DIMALINE

New Indigenous-led opera is based on the best-selling novel

Toronto – The **Canadian Opera Company (COC)** and **National Arts Centre (NAC)** have officially co-commissioned *Empire of Wild*, an imaginative and enthralling new mainstage opera from composer **Ian Cusson** and librettist **Cherie Dimaline** that centres the Georgian Bay Métis community at the heart of its story.

“I am thrilled to be partnering with the National Arts Centre in the creation of this important, contemporary opera,” says **COC General Director Perryn Leech**. “*Empire of Wild* embodies years of community-rooted work that the Canadian Opera Company has been doing through regular discourse with its Circle of Artists, and marks a tangible response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s [94 Calls to Action](#). With this commission, we’re continuing our commitment to Indigenous representation by bringing a collaborative focus to the creation of opera that reflects a wider range of perspectives and lived experiences. We are proud to support the artistic leadership of some of Canada’s most prominent Indigenous directors, designers, composers, and stage crew.”

“It brings me immense pleasure to welcome Ian Cusson back to the COC as composer of this new opera, and I want to extend an especially warm welcome to Cherie Dimaline, joining us as librettist,” continues **Leech**. “The combined creativity of this pairing is simply off the charts and I look forward to seeing their artistic vision brought to life.”

“The NAC is incredibly proud to co-commission *Empire of Wild* with the Canadian Opera Company,” says **Christopher Deacon, President and CEO of the National Arts Centre**. “Over the years, we have collaborated extensively with Ian and are now delighted to be working with Cherie in reimagining this story for the stage. I cannot think of a better way to spotlight Indigenous artistry than having our two organizations come together in support of this project, and I look forward to bringing this unique opera to audiences.”

Empire of Wild will be sung in English and French and premiere in an upcoming COC season. Additional information on dates, as well as the opera’s creative team, casting, and design will be released as details become available.

A SUPERNATURAL THRILLER STEEPED IN HISTORY AND LEGEND

Based on **Dimaline**’s thrilling 2019 novel of the same name, *Empire of Wild* brings the dramatic musical style of grand opera to a riveting, contemporary tale, told through an Indigenous composer, librettist, and creative team. The story is inspired by the legend of the *rogarou*, a werewolf-like creature that haunts the roads and woods of Indigenous communities, and the opera weaves history, folklore, and intrigue into the story of Joan, a complex and strong Métis woman haunted by the sudden disappearance of her husband Victor. When Joan encounters a mysterious and charismatic preacher who bears an uncanny resemblance to her beloved, she must rely on the traditions of her community to uncover the truth.

“With *Empire of Wild*, audiences are in for an evening of music and drama that celebrates everything we love about historic opera while pushing the boundaries of what the art form can say,” says **Cusson**. “It is especially fitting that

during a week where we honour a national commitment to truth and reconciliation that the COC and NAC are announcing this major investment in Indigenous-led, mainstage work. Significant collaborations like this form the bold new future of opera, and I am thrilled to create it with two companies that are leading that charge.”

MEET THE OPERA’S CREATORS

Ian Cusson has collaborated with some of Canada’s most renowned artists and musical institutions, including being named Composer-in-Residence for the Canadian Opera Company in 2019 and Carrefour Composer for the National Arts Centre Orchestra (NACO) in 2017. Cusson’s most recent operatic work includes *Of the Sea* (2023) for Tapestry Opera and Obsidian Theatre, with librettist Kanika Ambrose; COC’s *Fantasma*, created with librettist Colleen Murphy in 2022; *In Winter* (COC, 2021), a meditative composition with text by Métis writer Katherena Vermette, and—in an important act of healing and reparation—the composition of a new Act Three aria, commissioned by the COC and NAC, for the 1967 opera *Louis Riel* which had originally incorporated, without permission, use of sacred laments of the Nisga’a First Nation.

“To be back at the Canadian Opera Company and the National Arts Centre feels like coming home—and getting to work with the stellar COC Orchestra and Chorus, NACO, and NAC Indigenous Theatre on a project of this scale is a dream come true,” continues **Cusson**. “I’m also thrilled to be working with Cherie, one of the most exciting and celebrated writers of our day. We both also happen to come from the Georgian Bay Metis community and *Empire of Wild* takes place on land that our families have lived and died on for generations. Having this level of connection is beyond unique in the operatic collaborative process.”

Cherie Dimaline is a best-selling author who has published 12 books to date and whose award-winning fiction has been anthologized internationally. Her 2017 book, *The Marrow Thieves*, won the prestigious Governor’s General Award as well as the Kirkus Prize for Young Readers and has appeared on numerous Book of the Year lists that include *The Globe and Mail*, *Quill and Quire*, CBC, and the New York Public Library. With *Empire of Wild*, National Public Radio hailed, “Dimaline has crafted something both current and timeless, mythic but personal.”

“Adapting this book for the Canadian Opera Company and National Arts Centre stage, in anticipation of all the incredible talents who will help give it new life, is not merely a retelling, but rather a reimagining,” says **Dimaline**. “I could not think of a more beautiful art form than opera to pull forward the underlying complexities and aching romance of *Empire of Wild*.”

“It’s such a gift to work with Ian on this project,” continues **Dimaline**. “He brings so much experience and expertise to the project, along with an intimate connection to the story itself. Co-creating with somebody who shares ancestral ties to a uniquely beautiful, deeply spooky land is the experience of a lifetime.”

MORE ABOUT IAN CUSSON

Ian Cusson is a composer of Métis (Georgian Bay Métis Community) and French Canadian descent whose work charts a comprehensive course from art song to opera to orchestral work and explores the Canadian Indigenous experience, including the history of the Métis people, the hybridity of mixed-racial identity, and the intersection of Western and Indigenous cultures. He studied composition with Jake Heggie (San Francisco) and Samuel Dolin, and piano with James Anagnoson at The Glenn Gould School. Cusson is the recipient of the Chalmers Professional Development Grant, and grants through the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, the Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council. He was a Co-artistic Director of Opera in the 21st Century at the Banff Centre, the recipient of the 2021 Jan V. Matejcek Classical Music Award from SOCAN, and the 2021 recipient of the Johanna Metcalf Performing Arts Prize.

MORE ABOUT CHERIE DIMALINE

Cherie Dimaline is an award-winning novelist and active member of the Georgian Bay Métis Community. Her 2017 book, *The Marrow Thieves* was declared by *TIME* magazine one of the Best YA Books of All Time. Her ensuing novel, *Empire of Wild*, became an instant Canadian bestseller and was named Indigo’s “Best Book of 2019” featured in *The New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *GOOP*, and the *Chicago Review of Books*, among others. *Hunting*

By Stars, the hotly anticipated sequel to *The Marrow Thieves*, was published in 2022 and named American Indian Library Association Honor Book that year. Dimaline's most recent novel *VenCo*, about a contemporary coven of witches, was published in February 2023 with plans in the works for television adaptation.

ABOUT COC COMMISSIONS

Empire of Wild is the eighth mainstage opera commissioned by the Canadian Opera Company since 1950, with *Hadrian*, by composer Rufus Wainwright and librettist Daniel MacIvor premiering in 2018. Most recently the COC debuted a number of world premiere operas at its Canadian Opera Company Theatre that include: *Fantasma* by composer Ian Cusson and librettist Colleen Murphy (2022); *The Queen In Me* (2022) by Teiya Kasahara 笠原 貞野; and *Pomegranate* by composer Kye Marshall and librettist Amanda Hale which enjoyed a sold-out run in June 2023. *Aportia Chryptych: A Black Opera for Portia White*, by composer Sean Mayes and librettist HAU will make its world premiere at the COCT in June 2024.

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. General Director Perryn Leech joined the company in 2021, forming a leadership team with Music Director Johannes Debus and Deputy General Director Christie Darville. The COC enjoys a loyal audience, including a dedicated base of subscribers, and has an international reputation for artistic excellence and creative innovation. Its diverse repertoire includes new commissions and productions, local and international collaborations with leading opera companies and festivals, and attracts the world's foremost Canadian and international artists. The company is an incubator for the future of the art form, nurturing Canada's new wave of opera performers and creators with customized training and support. The COC's purpose-built opera house, the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, is hailed internationally as one of the finest in the world. For more information, visit coc.ca.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE

The National Arts Centre (NAC) is Canada's bilingual, multi-disciplinary home for the performing arts. The NAC presents, creates, produces, and co-produces performing arts programming in various streams — the NAC Orchestra, Dance, English Theatre in collaboration with Black Theatre Workshop, French Theatre, Indigenous Theatre, and Popular Music and Variety — and nurtures the next generation of audiences and artists from across Canada. The NAC is located in the National Capital Region on the unceded territory of the Anishinaabe Algonquin Nation.