

THE DREAM HEALER

An Operatic Partnership of Art and Medicine

by Mari-Lou Rowley



The Institute of Mental Health and the department of Psychiatry are embarking on a creative partnership with the UBC School of Music. They will co-host the world premiere of *The Dream Healer*, a new Canadian opera based on the novel *Pilgrim* by Timothy Findley. *Pilgrim* explores the psyches of a suicidal patient who cannot die and his psychotherapist, the legendary Dr. Carl Jung. The opera will be staged in conjunction with a major symposium on psychiatry and mental health, a week-long event featuring an all-star cast of singers, musicians, researchers, and clinicians.

When composer Lloyd Burritt retired from teaching in 1999 and decided to write an opera, he asked the manager of a Vancouver bookstore what Canadian novel she would choose if she were to commission an opera based on its story. She handed him Timothy Findley's novel *Pilgrim*. Burritt read it twice and immediately wrote the first two arias, which he mailed to Mr. Findley. Surprisingly, the opera rights to the book were still available and Findley agreed to sell them.

Burritt then approached professor Nancy Hermiston, head of the Opera and Voice divisions of UBC's School of Music. Seven years later, *The Dream Healer* is scheduled to premiere at the Chan Centre in March 2008 as part of UBC's 100th anniversary celebration. Librettist Don Mowatt has focused the opera on Jung and his wife, and has transformed Findley's *Pilgrim* from a "real" person into a dream character. Set in the famous Burgholzi Clinic near Zurich in the early 1900s, Jung's dream of *Pilgrim* takes over and influences the

clinic's troubled patients, who are all grappling with their own versions of reality.

Operatic Dream Team

The stellar cast of internationally renowned artists includes mezzo soprano Judith Forst as Lady Sybil Quartermain and baritone John Avey as Carl Jung. Maestro David Adler will conduct.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for my students to be part of a world premiere and to work with international artists of the highest calibre," says Hermiston, whose bio is equally impressive. She began her career in Europe and has performed leading roles with companies such as the Nünberg Opera House, the Boston Grand and the Canadian Opera Company. Her New York debut took place at Carnegie Hall with Mario Bernardi and the National Arts Centre Orchestra.

The Power of Music and the Art of Medicine

Nancy Hermiston believes in the healing power of music, and has had an ongoing interest in the marriage of music and medicine. She is part of a team of researchers in medicine, music, education, and linguistics who are working to form an interdisciplinary performance research institute. Hermiston has also worked with Dr. Andrew Seal to organize events for students in Music and Medicine.

When she and Burritt decided to produce *The Dream Healer*, they immediately approached Dr. Athanasios Zis, then head of the department of Psychiatry. An opera lover himself, he responded enthusiastically. "This is an important project, because the issue of mental health and mental illness is finally being recognized by society, politicians and government as a serious problem that must be addressed," Zis says.

"This is an exciting and unique experience for everyone involved," Dr. Phillip adds. "Being able to express ourselves creatively through art and science is extremely important to individual development and mental health."

For more information about the opera, see www.thedreamhealer.com. ■