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ENGLISH EDITION

2023 NOV/DEC/JAN 2024 VOL. 29, NO 3 & 4 \$8.55



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IVANY
Miriam &
KHALIL
*Just Getting
Started*

LEONARD BERNSTEIN
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HIGHER EDUCATION GUIDE

CONCERTS: MONTREAL, QUEBEC CITY, OTTAWA, TORONTO



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by EVA STONE-BARNEY

Against the Grain Theatre (AtG) is a pillar of the Canadian opera scene. The award-winning company has been pushing boundaries and challenging audiences to experience opera in exciting, new ways since its founding in 2010 by director, librettist, educator, and administrator Joel Ivany, and his partner, soprano Miriam Khalil.

Ivany didn't grow up with opera. He recalls watching *La Bohème*, starring Pavarotti, on Laser Disk, and later, going to the Canadian Opera Company (COC) for the first time, in Grade 13. Entranced by the "big stage, big sound, big ... everything," he remembers thinking: "How are we going to do this, because I want to work in opera."

After high school, Ivany completed a music degree at the University of Western Ontario, before starting a diploma in Opera Directing at the University of Toronto Opera School. In the summer of 2007, he made his way to Italy for the Centre for Opera Studies in Italy (COSI) inaugural summer intensive. A young soprano, Miriam Khalil, also participated in that year's intensive. The two were both living in Toronto at the time: they had even "been in the same room," laughs Khalil. Ivany notes that he "knew who Miriam was because she was in the Ensemble at the COC," but it wasn't until they touched down in a tiny Italian town that they hit it off, working together in COSI's scenes program.

Two years passed, Ivany completed his degree, and Khalil began her professional career with a season at the Glyndebourne Festival Opera in the United Kingdom. Both were seeing significant professional success, and were excited by the opportunities they had to learn and work in established opera companies. Despite this, though, they found themselves frustrated by the "massive gaps in (their) schedules."

"We all just really wanted to work," says Khalil. "We wanted to sing, and direct, to conduct and play the piano. We had all these skills that just lay dormant between projects." And so, Against the Grain Theatre was born.

"It was very bohemian," says Ivany, recalling the company's grassroots beginnings. Without the budget of a major opera company, AtG started as an attempt to make something exciting, with the means that were available: "Let's try this, because it's all we can afford to do." And, as he put it: "The choices, motivated by money, opened everyone's eyes to what opera could be—that it could be something else." Khalil adds: "At the beginning, we were just doing things we felt were important, in terms of making beautiful art—the most beautiful thing you could make, or the funniest thing we could make."

The founding team was small, but packed with talent, including (but not limited to) lighting designer Jason Hand, music director and pianist Topher Mokrzewski and, of course, Khalil, who was both an artistic adviser and singer. "It was a very cohesive group, right from the very beginning," she says. "We (all) had great experiences (from working) at bigger companies, but we came together to do what we wanted to do, at our best—(something) that hadn't been done before in the world of opera." Khalil's budding international career brought legitimacy to



AYRE WITH JOEL IVANY AND OSVALDO GOLIJOV
PHOTO : DARRYL BLOCK



CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY - LA BOHÈME
PHOTO : MICHAEL COOPER

their casting, and made other young singers interested in being involved with AtG. "It wasn't just friends that ended up wanting to come sing with us," says Khalil, "it was people that wanted to work, to make art that was fun, and relevant to what was going on in the world." With that, they were off to the races.

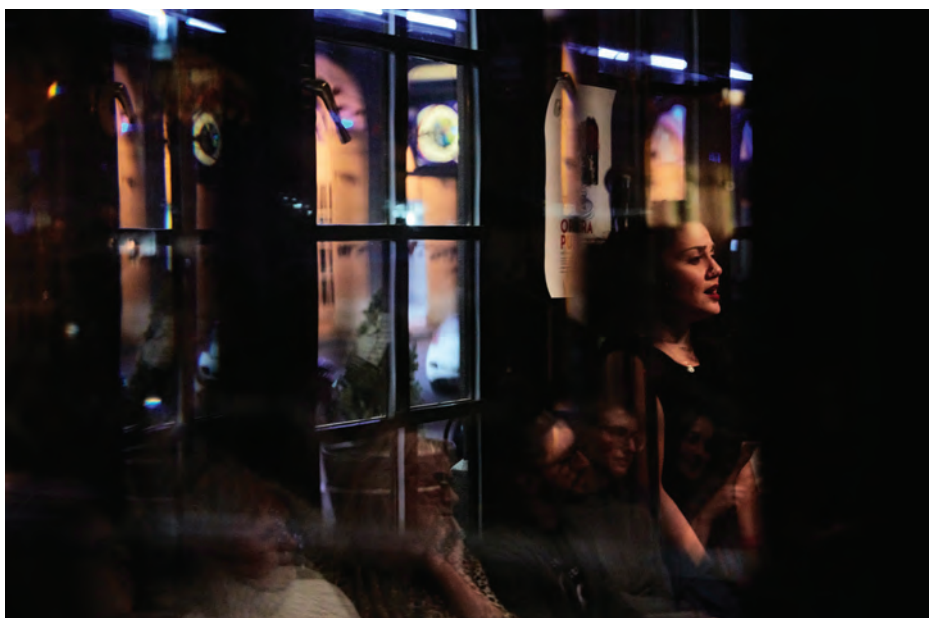
Both Khalil and Ivany are quick to point out how crucial the support of the Canadian opera community was to the early success of Against the Grain. The COC, for example, provided Ivany with unofficial mentorship opportunities as a young director, and later helped AtG develop media contacts in their infancy. "We were supported so well by Alexander Neef," says Ivany. "He really wanted to embrace this city (Toronto), and what it meant to be Canadian."

This ethos of community-building runs throughout AtG's story. The company became a space in which emerging and established talents were able to "hone (their) skills, working alongside colleagues that (they) really cared about."

It is with community in mind that they've worked to expand Canadian opera audiences,

by making the art form more accessible. AtG took opera out of the concert hall, and put it in art galleries, warehouses, yoga studios, clubs, bars, parks and forests. One of their most successful initiatives—the Opera Pubs, as they are called—have become a pillar of the classical music scenes in Banff, Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver. They've been so successful, in fact, that other, unaffiliated companies and opera schools have started to borrow the model. At an Opera Pub, opera lovers and unexpected bar visitors alike are treated to canonical classics, performed with piano, over pints and conversation. "Anyone can go into a bar," says Khalil. "There is no barrier excluding people from that experience; that's essential. Opera should be for everybody, always. We wanted to openly invite people, so they feel welcome. That is, was, and continues to be our goal."

AtG continued this work during the pandemic, when they brought classical vocal music to home audiences worldwide with their film production of *Messiah/Complex*, a creative reimagining of Handel's beloved work. It was



MIRIAM SINGING AT ATG OPERA PUB IN TORONTO
PHOTO: DARRYL BLOCK

born out of a simple desire to make art, similar to that which had precipitated the founding of the company.

The film featured dozens of singers from across the country, filmed outdoors in some of Canada's most beautiful landscapes, singing in Arabic, Dene, English, Inuktitut, and Southern Tutchone. The project aimed to honour and amplify underrepresented, Indigenous voices. *Messiah/Complex* was nominated for a Juno award, and viewed online, for free, by more than 140,000 people. Against the Grain has since produced a number of filmed opera works including *Sāvitri*, *Requiem*, *BOUND*, and, most recently, *Identity: A Song Cycle*.

There's no shortage of accomplishments for AtG, Ivany, and Khalil to be proud of. Khalil remembers her experience working on what has been described as a definitive performance of Osvaldo Golijov's *Ayre* as one such feat. "We had no idea what we were doing when we made that CD," which went on to receive a Juno-nomination. Along with such successes, however, have come numerous challenges. Like many arts organisations, AtG has suffered at the hands of failed grant-appeals and "bare-bones" administrative responsibilities.

The couple's most recent challenge came when Ivany decided to step away from the company he and his wife had built over 13 years. He describes the decision, which he announced in July of this year, as "really devastating." It was hard, says Khalil, to think about stepping away from something that they had "built, watched grow, and (hadn't) really grown out of."

Ivany's reasons for leaving the role are many. A couple of years ago, Khalil was appointed to the Voice faculty at the University of Alberta, a position that requires her to both perform and teach. Shortly after their family relocated from Toronto to Edmonton, the general director of Edmonton Opera (EO) retired, and the Artistic Director position be-

came available. Ivany took the job. While he continued to work for AtG remotely through the pandemic, Ivany recognized that managing both positions, coupled with his work at the Banff Centre and his responsibilities as a husband and parent to two young children was taking a "mental and physical toll" on him. "It was possible, but not sustainable," he says. Khalil adds: "I don't know how you did it."

Weighed down by the administrative tasks of managing three programs, without an assistant, Ivany says that he was beginning to feel his intense schedule take a toll on his creativity. "It was draining, and it gets very sad. I like the artistic side—I still love to direct!—that's what sparks my creativity, my joy." In this new chapter of their professional and personal lives, Ivany's priorities are to find balance between his creative and administrative work and, most importantly, to be a "great dad, and a great husband."

There is sure to be a great deal of creative work in store for both Khalil, in performance and pedagogy, and Ivany at the Banff Centre and Edmonton Opera. EO started their 60th anniversary season with performances of *Carmen*, starring Rose Naggar-Tremblay in the titular role, conducted by Simon Rivard. They've also celebrated the second year of their Rumbold Vocal Prize competition, which saw Sydney Baedke take home first place, and Jamal Al Titi second. Later this year, they will present an updated, English version of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (February 2024) on the mainstage, as well as an adaptation of Wagner's *Das Rheingold* by Jonathan Dove and Graham Vick (May/June 2024). In April, Edmonton Opera will present Golijov's *Ayre*, sung by Khalil. Although AtG may be behind Ivany and Khalil, their work as civically-engaged artists and educators is far from over.

Ivany looks forward to continuing to present "shows in different spaces," to "exploring

more with technology," and to continuing to "support emerging musicians." Audience members under the age of 21 are invited to attend productions at EO for free, and dress rehearsals are open, for free, to students of all ages. Hopefully, these initiatives will encourage first-time operagoers to come give the art form a try, much in the same way AtG's Opera Pubs have over the last decade.

Khalil, too, has an exciting year ahead, filled with performance and teaching in equal measure. Coming up in January, she will star in *Adoration*, an adaptation of Atom Egoyan's film of the same name, composed by Mary Kouyoumdjian, with libretto by Royce Vavrek, and directed by Laine Rettmer. Commissioned by Beth Morrison Projects and Trinity Church Wall Street, the piece explores themes of family, prejudice, and community. In February, she will sing in Golijov's *Ainadamar*, performing the role of Margarita Xirgu, Federico García Lorca's muse (Feb. 21-23) with Pacific Opera Victoria. "All year I get to work on important, intense projects (as a singer), and then discuss these themes, this music, in my studio class," Khalil says. "We watch operas, watch modern takes, and talk about them; the students get to have opinions."

Khalil encourages her students to "hone in on what they can bring to their singing—what their native language is, for example; what they feel when they sing in that language—bringing that into whatever they are singing. If they aren't doing that, they aren't digging deep enough." This approach, she says, is based on her own experience of rediscovering her love of singing in Arabic after many years of putting it aside in favour of her western classical training. "It speaks to me," she says. "It speaks to how I sing my other repertoire."

Against the Grain isn't going anywhere, and while they may have parted ways with the company, neither are Joel Ivany and Miriam Khalil. There is no doubt that all three will continue to make waves on the Canadian—and international—opera scenes for years to come. Khalil will continue encouraging students to understand the relevance of their art form, to develop their perspectives and, as a soprano, to perform music that resonates with our ever-changing social and political environments. Ivany, meanwhile, will take on projects at Edmonton Opera and beyond. He notes a particular interest in chamber opera (taking canonical works and shortening them, reducing their scale) as a means of securing opera's endurance. Considering the students they teach; the artists they mentor; the audiences they generate, perform for, and move; and all the experiences they accumulate along the way, 13 years in, Ivany and Khalil are really just getting started.

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For more on soprano Miriam Khalil, director Joel Ivany, and Against the Grain Theatre, check out their websites: www.miriamkhalil.com; www.joelivany.com; www.atgtheatre.com