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OPINION

Canada has become a place to be from – and opera can teach us a lesson

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Canada has become a place to be from – and opera can teach us a lesson - The Globe and Mail

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Per il maestro, che non scrisse per i palchi ma per la platea in piedi (for the maestro, who wrote not for the box seats but for the standing room).

I saw my first opera when I was seven – in 1972, at Lambton College in Sarnia. Not La Scala. Lambton College, in the heart of Chemical Valley. My father took me.

It was La Traviata – Verdi's story of a Parisian courtesan dying of consumption, sacrificing her happiness for bourgeois respectability. I was seven. My main preoccupation that year was trading hockey cards; I remember the absurdity of surplus Ed Van Impe cards that nobody wanted. And yet, there I was, watching Violetta expire in the arms of Alfredo. Bewildering. Fascinating. Weird. But not ridiculous.

I will be thinking about Lambton College this evening at the Four Seasons Centre, where my wife and I are joining dear friends for the Canadian Opera Company's opening night

of Rigoletto. For more than 70 years, this company has insisted Canadians deserve opera of international calibre, rooted here. But while La Traviata is a story of noble sacrifice, Rigoletto offers a darker diagnostic. Violetta gives up her life to protect someone else's future; Rigoletto sacrifices his daughter's future to secure his own present.

The opera opens with a curse. Count Monterone, whose daughter has been seduced and discarded by the Duke of Mantua, bursts into court to denounce him. Rigoletto, the Duke's hunchbacked jester, mocks the grieving father. Monterone turns: "Tu che d'un padre ridi al dolore, sii maledetto!" – "You who laugh at a father's grief, be cursed!" The rest of the opera is that curse's unfolding.

The curse has power because it is true. Rigoletto is not the tyrant of the story; he is its facilitator. Rigoletto tells himself he can serve the corruption by day and keep his daughter Gilda safe by night.

He believes his agility will exempt him from consequences. That belief is the engine of the tragedy. By the final act, Gilda lies dying, sacrificed to the Duke's appetites and her father's complicity.

Thinking of this evening's performance, I have found myself thinking not of 16th-century Mantua but of Canada. That, perhaps, is the curse of our times. It is the role we have chosen to play.

We are not given to grand gestures, and that instinct has often served us well. Flattery, on the other hand, still works. We have watched Canadian enterprises pass quietly into foreign hands – Inco, Alcan, Stelco, and the pattern continues: Shopify's brightest engineers recruited to Seattle; Bombardier sold to Airbus; Teck courted by Glencore. Each decision defensible on its own terms. Together, they describe a country that has learned to adapt while forgetting to insist.

We nurture our own Gildas – promising ventures, strategic resources, brilliant children – only to hand them to the dukes of a larger court, mistaking subservience for safety. The tragedy is not that they are taken, but that they are given. The curse is not magic. It is the consequence of forgetting how to say no.

But if Rigoletto diagnoses, its composer offers something else: evidence that from the most unpromising circumstances, a voice can emerge that changes everything.

Giuseppe Verdi was an innkeeper's son from Le Roncole, a hamlet so obscure his birth certificate could not settle whether it was Oct. 9 or 10, 1813. At 18, he was rejected by the

Milan Conservatory – too old, inadequate technique, foreign. Within two years in his mid-20s he had buried his wife and both infant children. He was 26, alone, and his mandated attempt at a comic opera had failed disastrously. That he rose from this abyss to produce Nabucco – whose chorus "Va, pensiero ..." became an anthem of Italian nationhood – suggests something miraculous. The music did not tell Italians what to think. It revealed what they already felt. When Austrian censors tried to ban Rigoletto before its premiere at La Fenice in 1851, Verdi fought them. The conservatory is now named after him.

Verdi understood what jesters forget: a voice is not merely a gift; it is an inheritance that must be received, cultivated, and transmitted. In his final years, he built what he called his greatest work: not an opera but an institution – the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti, a home for aged musicians, endowed in perpetuity. When he died in 1901, his funeral was modest, as he had wished. A month later, his reinterment at the Casa di Riposo became the largest public gathering in Italian history to that point: Arturo Toscanini conducted a chorus of 800 before 300,000 mourners. He came from nothing and left behind not just music but memory.

This is what I call mnemonic capital – the institutional memory that allows a society to learn from its past and transmit it forward. Canada is dangerously overdrawn. When we exhaust our mnemonic capital, we lose the capacity to imagine a future that is not merely a franchise of someone else's present.

How do we rebuild this capital? Not through protectionism – that is its own form of amnesia. But through stewardship: recognizing that we are trustees, not merely owners, of what we have inherited. The opera itself offers a libretto for renewal.

The Chorus Requirement

Verdi insisted Italian opera be sung in Italian – not from nationalism but because a nation cannot borrow its voice. The courtiers had jobs; what they lacked was agency. Serious acquirers of knowledge should demonstrate how headquarters functions – strategic decision-making – will be preserved. Not jobs; judgment.

The Casa di Riposo Principle

Institutional memory is among an enterprise's most valuable assets. We expect environmental remediation when mines close. Why not expect acquirers to show how institutional knowledge will be preserved? This is not regulation; it is due diligence, applied to what matters.

The Monterone Protocol

The curse has power because Monterone speaks it aloud. A National Interest Advocate, articulating publicly what a major acquisition would cost, would ensure Canadians understand what they are choosing.

I do not know if Canada is ready to hear its own curse. We are comfortable, and comfort is the enemy of transformation. But I know what I have seen: the slow, undramatic emigration of ambition – the quiet acceptance of an offer from Seattle, the child home for Christmas speaking of opportunities that do not exist here, the soft apology: it's just where the work is. There is no anger in this exodus.

Canada has become, for the ambitious, a place to be from.

Renewal cannot be left to boardrooms. It belongs to the parent in Sarnia who suspects that success should not require exile, to anyone who has felt the grief of watching something Canadian become something else – not destroyed, merely absorbed. We do not own this country; we hold it in trust. What we inherited, we are obliged to transmit.

Verdi did not write for the box seats. He wrote for the standing room. A voice does not become an anthem until it is claimed by those it speaks for. The curse is already upon us. The only question now is what we do with it.