

Getting into the act

Known primarily as a singer, Jackson breaches the walls and pursues Wolf Moon in an acting role
By STEPHEN PEDERSEN Arts Reporter

A WOMAN WEEPS for the children she drowned to avenge herself against a disloyal lover. Another woman's hands are cut off by her father as forfeit in a deal with the devil. A third woman begins to lose her grip on reality on the isolated island to which her lover has exiled her. A fourth mutters incantations over the bones of wolves to transform herself first into wolf, then into a siren.

All these women, victims of their love for men, are impersonated by Halifax soprano Janice Jackson as she transforms herself into an actress on the stage of the Sir James Dunn Theatre, Dalhousie Arts Centre, Halifax, Thursday to Sunday in Wolf Moon.

The quartet of one-woman contemporary mini-operas is directed by Linda Moore with lighting by Leigh Ann Vardy.

Already one of the city's most dramatic singers, and the only one with a life-long commitment to new music, Jackson widens her performance potential in Wolf Moon.

"This is new for me," Jackson said as she and Moore wound up a rehearsal last Friday afternoon in an actor's studio on Agricola Street. "It's the first time I'm actually taking pieces and making much more of them than just singing."

Moore, former artistic director of Neptune Theatre and the Manitoba Theatre Centre, firmly endorses Jackson's new venture. "Janice is a stunning actress," she said.

"She's been known as a singer till now, but she's breaching the walls, pursuing contemporary opera while at the same time maintaining a connection with originality."

Jackson also talks about connection, but in a different sense. "My interest as a performer is the connection between me, the stories and the audience."

Her priority in performance, she added, is that the audience feels what she is feeling.

All four operas were commissioned by and written for Jackson. They include Naxos Revisited by Netherlands composer Barbara Woof; The Handless Maiden by Toronto's Wende Bartley; Wolf Woman by Alice Ping Yee Ho, also based in Toronto and Echoes of Time Weeping by Halifax composer Sandy Moore.

Strictly as a singer, Jackson has previously performed the Bartley and the Woof works. But the Ping and the Moore mini-operas will be world premieres Thursday night.

Moore is staging all four works on a bare-bones set. Even the audience will be seated on the stage, upstage of the proscenium arch, with the closed curtains behind them.

"Janice was attracted to the industrial textural feeling of the Dunn stage," Moore said. "I created a set using it."

It means maximum exposure at close quarters for Jackson, and given her new role as actor/singer it's risky.

In Alice Ping's piece she is also the "orchestra." She sings, acts, and plays the strictly scored work with a variety of percussion instruments and devices.

Though clearly excited by the project, she confesses to a degree of angst about it, not only about doing what the composers want her to do, but about breaking the mold.

"Everything I do is on stage, in front of the audience," she said. "It's the biggest show I've ever done — so much emotion, so much singing."

Wolf Moon came together first as separate pieces Jackson had collected. As she thought about them she began to get the idea of doing a contemporary music show about women in mythology.

"All the stories have myth as their foundation," Moore said. "The myths are about transformation, shedding darkness, coming into the light. We're working with fertile imagery. Sometimes you don't know why it's so powerful at first. But as you research it you discover resonances."

Jackson has no doubts about the audience appeal of the works. "Even though it's contemporary music, it's accessible because it's so theatrical," she said. "The stories are the thing."

Wolf Moon runs nightly at 8 p.m., ending Sunday. All tickets are \$20 but seating is limited and advance purchase is recommended.

Tickets are available from Vocalypse Productions (vocalypse@janicejackson.ca or 429-1797), and from the JazzEast online box office (www.jazzeast.com/).

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