

# Guitar fuels Ghost Tango opera premiering in Halifax

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## A story of revenge, reconciliation and Argentina's Dirty War



Janice Jackson and R.L. Thompson star in the world premiere of Ghost Tango. (CHRISTIAN LAFORCE / Staff)

Who ever heard of an opera being played entirely on a guitar?

Celebrated Canadian guitarist Tim Brady will do just that in Ghost Tango, an opera about revenge, reconciliation and Argentina's Dirty War, starring R.L. Thompson and Janice Jackson (*see Halifax showtimes [below](#)*).

"At times people will think there is a synthesizer but everything is played live with only guitar," says Brady.

The Montreal composer, who recently released a CD with Symphony Nova Scotia, has spent the last 30 years working in solo electric guitar with live electronics.

At his feet will be four devices that change tone and two devices for looping and freezing sound. "With the electronics there is a huge range of textures and colours," he says.

Brady is excited about exploring this musical language of electric guitar and electronics with the voices of Jackson and Thompson.

Jackson, who has sung over 200 world premieres and performed contemporary music internationally, premiered two of Brady's works in the 2010-2011 season, *15 Stages in the Search for Radium* and *Love about the life of Marie Curie* with Victoria's Aventa Ensemble and *We're Hardcore*, based on texts by the Tragically Hip's Gordon Downie, with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra

"I like working with people that I know," says Jackson, artistic director of Vocalypse Productions. "I said to Tim, 'Do you want to write an opera?' and Tim said, 'I want to use Douglas.'"

Librettist Douglas Burnet Smith, an award-winning poet who teaches at St. F.X. University and lives part-time in Argentina, wrote a story of recrimination and retribution inspired by Argentina's Dirty War. "His wife is Argentinian," says Brady. "She had family members detained and killed during the war."

Jackson plays a woman 20 years after she was abused in an Argentinian prison cell during Argentina's period of state terrorism, from the mid-1970s to 1983 against left-wing guerillas, dissidents and anyone adhering to socialism.

Her character, simply named Woman, thinks she recognizes her torturer on a cruise ship.

When the ship runs aground, he is seriously injured and she is faced with the moral dilemma of whether to forgive him or exact revenge.

"It's not black and white," says director Anne-Marie Donovan.

Jackson's character "represents the people of Argentina," she adds. "The Dirty War is part of their history and something they have to reconcile with.

"It's the same with Canada's history. We're trying to reconcile our history with First Nations and aboriginal people. How do you reconcile what you did and what happened?"

The role is a "emotionally difficult," says Jackson. However, "I would say it's a privilege and I've never had a lot of problems accessing dark feelings.

"It's giving a voice to the Disappeared and to those who have experienced trauma and what happens to them afterwards. This trauma has changed her in many ways.

"For me there is a profound sense of loneliness in the character and self-imposed isolation and it certainly is there in between the notes and the words."

Thompson, a Truro-based musical theatre and opera singer who performed in Vocalypse's Truro: Long March/Shining Path, doesn't mind playing the bad guy. "He's a character that compartmentalizes and he's also wily," he says. "I'm delighted to work on it. New music is not an area I've spent much time in."

Brady wrote two tangos and the actors learned the body language of tango but do not dance. "It's very subtle," says Brady.

"There are only two people on stage for an hour. Their bodies have to be like these moving sculptures all the time."

While this may be the only opera for guitar and voice, Brady says his approach to voice is not avant garde.

"R.L. and I are actually singing notes," says Jackson, whose work in contemporary music is widely varied. "I'm not making strange sounds."

Brady believes opera should be clearly understood.

"Douglas wrote a great text so let's hear the text. You can hear every word. This is an opera but the theatrical side is very important."

After its Halifax run Ghost Tango has two performances in Kitchener and its creators hope to tour it in 2016 in Canada and internationally. Two presenters are coming to the Halifax show.

"We believe it's a very strong project and it's practical," says Brady.

### **GHOST TANGO AT A GLANCE**

Bradyworks (Montreal) and Vocalypse (Halifax) present the world premiere of Ghost Tango, a new chamber opera that tells the story of a Canadian woman trapped in Argentina's Dirty War, at Sir James Dunn Theatre, Dalhousie Arts Centre, Halifax.

Ghost Tango features a score by virtuoso guitarist Tim Brady and libretto by award-winning poet Douglas Burnet Smith.

**Starring:** Janice Jackson, soprano, and R.L. Thomson, baritone.

**Creative team:** director Anne-Marie Donovan, video projection designer Lukas Pearse, costume designer Arianne Pollet-Brannen, lighting designer Leigh Ann Vardy, stage designer Carolena Charles and production manager Andrew David Terris.

**Showtimes:** Wednesday to Saturday, 8 p.m.; Saturday, 2 p.m.

**Tickets:** \$25 at the Dalhousie Arts Centre box office (902-494-3820 or toll free 1-800-874-1669 or [online.](#))