

Philanthropist urges support for black opera

Neil Armstrong/Gleaner Writer

A JAMAICAN philanthropist is urging the Jamaican Canadian community to support efforts to raise funds to cover the production cost through crowdfunding of Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*, one of the world's first Black operas.

Kamala-Jean Gopie, a patron of the arts, has pledged \$5,000 to the fundraising campaign for the production and has also joined its Impact Team.

As someone who challenged the Canadian Opera Company a few years ago at one of its annual general meetings about what it was doing to reflect the diversity of the community and to increase its audience, she was intrigued when she heard about *Treemonisha*.

Treemonisha was written in 1911 by the famed African-American ragtime composer Joplin, who became the first Black person to write the first opera about life after slavery.

The fact that it was about the US Black experience and women in particular appealed to Gopie, who said it filled a vacuum. She said the opera has universal appeal and this was an opportunity for people, including Jamaican Canadians, to look at their commonality and support the production "because it enriches all of us".



GOPIE

Crowdfunding to help ease cost for 'Treemonisha'

VOLCANO, A Toronto-based live performance creation company producing Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*, says the budget for *Treemonisha* is \$1.3 million, but the aim is to raise \$150,000 in Toronto "to help plug the hole".

Ross Manson, artistic director of Volcano said this opera has the potential to change perceptions about many things, such as "intersectional realities, leadership, what progress looks like - even opera itself as a form that isn't just for Europeans".

Described as significant, the project brings together an international team of talented Black artists to honour the work of the ragtime giant.

Leah-Simone Bowen, who adapted the story and is the co-librettist, said when she found out that Joplin had written an all-Black opera with a Black woman as the lead character in the

early 1900s, she was impressed.

REVOLUTIONARY PIECE

"The story is essentially about an educated woman who leads her community and she's a young woman," says Bowen who was surprised because in his early days Joplin was a hit pop music maker.

She said when Joplin wrote this opera he had to have known that it was going to be a challenge to get it sold.

"This was not the traditional way of hearing Black people sing at the time and so it's such a revolutionary piece. That's the reason it didn't really get made while he was alive," she said.

Bowen explained that the main conflict of the piece is essentially the educated versus the uneducated and the uneducated African-Americans in this piece are connected to magic.

She said this is seen throughout

history in the African diaspora - African American, people from the Caribbean - whether it is obeah, hoodoo or voodoo, where those traditional practices were seen as evil "or seen as backwards or seen as something to let go so that you could appear more educated and more a part of the dominant white culture".

This is what she considered when she was adapting the book to see "how can we look at this with 2019 eyes and ask the question of what colonialism and slavery did to traditional African practice.

Treemonisha, which has a global cast of performers and creators from Canada, the United States, the UK and elsewhere, will be presented at Stanford Live in Palo Alto, California from April 23 to 26, and at Cal Performances in Berkeley, California from May 2 - 3.