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John Terauds

It's disorienting to walk into an opera rehearsal to find several dozen children running around yelling "Og, Og, Og" at each other.

And this was just a fraction of the nearly 200 young voices who have been corralled for the Canadian Children's Opera Company (CCOC) premiere of *The Secret World of Og*, based on the 1961 Canadian kids' classic by Pierre Berton.

Toronto composer Dean Burry, the man behind *The Hobbit*, one of the most successful children's operas in current times, has condensed Berton's ambling fable into music theatre that not just the singers' mothers will love.

Berton's tale was born from the late Canadian icon watching his own kids at play around the family spread in Kleinburg, back when the Toronto bedroom community was a village far away from urban clangor.

In the story, youngest boy Paul — Pollywog to everyone — escapes from his high chair, venturing into the secret underground world of green-skinned, mushroom-eating Ogs. Older siblings Penny, Pam and Pete, along with a cohort of furry friends, mount an elaborate search-and-rescue mission filled with more twists and turns than a Grimm fairy tale.

Burry's text and music emphasize the kids' natural energy and ever-present sense of complicity in a special mission. And opera director Joel Ivany is now trying to translate that to the stage.

Because the 42-year-old institution is so large, the CCOC is presenting *Og* with three different casts, each spanning the full range of ages, from those just beginning school to pubescent teens with groaning daily timetables.

Each scene needs three rehearsals, while the other groups look on. Amid the shuffles, whispers and squirming, Ivany patiently, cheerfully takes the young singers through their paces, time after time, scene after scene.

"They get so much law from people saying 'Be quiet,' that I have to stay positive," Ivany explains during a break. "You have to be quick to adapt and say, 'okay, this is how it goes.' They're learning something, as well, not just being told where to stand."

He grins. "I'm really glad to have done it, because, even when you work with adults, it's all about how you communicate with everyone to get the most out of them."

Ivany, who is still paying his theatrical dues, loves this new challenge.

The University of Western Ontario music grad and University of Toronto-trained opera director apprenticed with director Tim Albery in last season's blockbuster Canadian Opera Company production of Sergei Prokofiev's *War and Peace*. He was assistant director for the COC's *La Bohème* last spring, and has begun taking on directing projects in Europe.

Like the siblings in *Og*, Ivany came from a big family. He remembers how each had to take piano lessons from his mom. She enforced the discipline of practicing for 30 minutes a day by withholding their allowances if they didn't check off that day's work on a chart.

Ivany thrived and developed a love of Broadway musicals. As a teen, he worked on musical projects as a camp counselor — experiences that he's using to help guide the CCOC choristers toward a production that they can own and cherish.

"We had one girl on Saturday who is one of the cats," he recalls. "She had to sing in front of everyone last week, and he just started crying because she was really nervous. It was a good reminder that it can be stressful to perform and sing by yourself."

"I remember being one of four kids and our mom put us on display singing and doing plays. So, it's tough to be in front of people but, also,



Director Joel Ivany works with a young member of the Canadian Children's Opera Company on *The Secret World of Og*

PHOTO/JOHN TERAUDS

once you are in front of people, you can like that and enjoy that. It is good to be creative and express yourself in that way.”

With CCOC artistic director Anne Cooper Gay conducting the children and a small orchestra at the intimate Enwave Theatre, Ivany is confident that Og will come together in time for its first curtain.

“They will bring 100 times more energy when people are watching and reacting,” he says with confidence.

If you go

WHAT: The Secret World of Og, by Dean Burry

WHERE: Enwave Theatre, Harbourfront, 231 Queens Quay W.

WHEN: Eight performances, from May 6 to 9

TICKETS: \$15-\$35 at 416-974-4000 or www.harbourfrontcentre.com