

The Dark Prince

Rufus Wainwright met the impending death of his mother with an explosion of creativity

by Gordon Bowness



Rufus Wainwright discusses his mother, Kate McGarrigle, in the most passionate of terms: confidante, protector, mentor, muse... he's even joked they were like a married couple.

McGarrigle was diagnosed with a rare cancer in 2006. Wainwright met her impending death with an incredible burst of creative energy. In addition to premiering his first opera, *Prima Donna*, in July of last year in Manchester, Wainwright collaborated with director Robert Wilson, writing music for a theatrical presentation of Shakespeare's sonnets, *Sonette*, that premiered the month before in Berlin, and he recorded his sixth studio album, *All Days Are Nights: Songs for Lulu*. He launched into a European and North American tour just as his mother died in January of this year.

Wainwright says McGarrigle is a constant presence on the tour. "I sing one of her songs at the end of each night, 'The Walking Song,'" he says. "It's a very brilliant and beautiful vignette about the brief moment of happiness my parents enjoyed in the mid '70s." (His parents divorced when Rufus was three.)

"More often than not I'll end up in tears. It's not something I enjoy necessarily. But I'm so fortunate to be able to ponder her through her music, and really get through this wild and wicked emotional baggage that I just have to unpack."

The sprawling *Luminato* festival brings the North American premiere of Wainwright's tour and opera to Toronto this month.

The recent works radiate what Wainwright calls a female force field, an emotionality that acknowledges his mother's influence, but also that of his sister (singer Martha, who gave birth to her first child in November) and other female archetypes (like Shakespeare's Dark Lady or *Sunset Boulevard*'s Norma Desmond).

With Wainwright accompanying himself on the piano only, *All Days Are Nights* is sombre and subdued. The 11 songs, including three Shakespeare sonnets and an aria from *Prima Donna*, are spare and deceptively simple, like a needle to the heart. One of the most poignant tracks, named for his sister, reads like a phone message detailing Wainwright's hopes for family reconciliation as his mother's death approaches. Tender and raw, it ends with Wainwright singing in a delicate, child-like voice, "Please... call me... back." Devastating.

While the album mostly shies away from the big bombastic singing that punctuates other albums, there are still some incredibly difficult notes to hit and the piano accompaniment can be fantastically complex.

"I just like to challenge myself. I enjoy the thrill of the hunt, and you can't hunt for something that's easy to get," Wainwright says, laughing over the phone from Barcelona.

The tour features video by Turner Prize-winning artist Douglas Gordon (a 30-foot projection of Wainwright's eye) and costumes by Zaldy Goco (a black, crow-



Anthony Crank



■ **IF LOVE WERE ALL** Luminato presents the North American premiere of *Prima Donna*, Rufus Wainwright's controversial new opera, starring Janis Kelly (left). Wainwright's new album and tour, *All Days Are Nights*, offers a devastating rumination on love and loss.

feather gown with a 17-foot train). During the first half of each concert Wainwright sings the new album straight through. Like a classical recital, he asks that audiences refrain from applauding between songs. It's more of an upbeat hit parade in the second half.

For those who worry that grief may overwhelm Wainwright, that the dark forces of his crystal meth years might be on the ascendant, rest assured. The album displays a maturity and wisdom as strong as its pain and sadness. The Lulu of the album's title refers to Louise Brooks' character in the silent movie classic *Pandora's Box*, a beautiful, lustful, self-destructive showgirl with a wicked bobbed haircut. To Wainwright, 36, she's a Siren signalling danger ahead.

"I've always been drawn to this femme fatale, the wasted beauty, the pointless fire," says Wainwright. "Louise Brooks is my medium. Whenever she appears I know danger is around. I love that feeling and I seek it out, naturally. And I'm not opposed to it existing at all. But I just need to identify it. When I start seeing that haircut I know it's time to man the ship."

Before going on stage some actors say, "Break a leg." Dancers say, "Merde." Opera singers say, "In bocca al lupo (Into the wolf's mouth)." Wainwright got savaged by wolves during his first foray into opera, receiving vicious reviews from a few British critics after *Prima Donna's* premiere. From all reports, audiences loved the debut, as did many critics. But it's clear many opera aficionados don't like pop stars on their turf.

"I heard that opera reflects at all angles when you work in that medium, the drama kind of goes everywhere," Wainwright says. "I was not disappointed. It was pretty shocking how wide the battlefield is. In retrospect I wouldn't expect anything less."

Wainwright never stopped to lick his wounds. His ego or creative centre or whatever you want to call it is large enough and secure enough to take on all comers.

"Opera is such a gargantuan animal," he says, "and everybody's got teeth. I in turn have developed mine."

First he stared down Peter Gelb, general man-

ager of the Metropolitan Opera in NYC. Gelb had originally commissioned the opera but didn't want Wainwright to write it in French. Wainwright walked. Then he feuded with Daniel Kramer who directed the Manchester debut. By the time *Prima Donna* played London, Kramer was gone and a new director, Tim Albery, had totally revamped the approach. (Albery is again at the helm for the Toronto production.)

"What's fantastic about *Prima Donna* is that it's developed quite the little reputation," says Wainwright, "in terms of bypassing the Met and dealing with some of the most insane critics of England, and still surviving, and having singers launch new careers from it. It's a real spitfire of an opera. Of course the audiences adore it."

Prima Donna is the story of Régine Saint Laurent, a famous opera diva who mysteriously stopped singing years ago. Set in Paris in 1970, it's a day in her life as she contemplates a comeback. At Luminato soprano Janis Kelly reprises her role as Régine.

The opera turns its back on 20th-century innovations, referencing and sampling the lush melodies and effects of late-19th- and early 20th-century music instead. "With this character, the prima donna character, I was able on one hand to inject a lot of my own experiences into her life," says Wainwright, "whether with the press, her voice or with music, one's love of music. It also borrow some very iconic images and situations from the history of opera — whether Maria Callas, Diva [the film] from the '80s or Norma Desmond — this idea of the prima donna. As well, I was also able to musically explore my favourite repertoire, which is the Romantic repertoire for opera, presumably because this is music that is running around in her head."

"*Prima Donna* is great for anyone who is not that familiar with opera, very tuneful and accessible," says Chris Lorway, artistic director of Luminato. "And it's great for opera fans, too, constantly referencing things you've heard before. It's a celebration of opera."

"I've been involved with the production for two years and one of my favourite stories is from the first time it was played through with an orchestra in Leeds.

I was sitting up in the balcony during a rehearsal with Rufus's mother, Kate. At one point there was a flourish of strings and Kate leaned over and whispered, "That's The Wizard of Oz part." So whether conscious or not there are all these allusions written in."

Lorway also approves of the new, pared-down directorial approach. "The story is campy in some ways," says Lorway, "but by playing up the camp, [Kramer] detracted from it. Albery, by playing it straight, pulls out the real character of the play, like the darkness and drama of a Joan Crawford movie."

Camp, melodrama, are key to both Wainwright's pop and classical music. Like the dark versus light and reality versus dream motifs on the new album, Wainwright consistently plays with opposites. His music displays both heart-wrenching romanticism and world-weary cynicism; there's joy in singing about pain; and his ego is as famous as his generosity as a performer. Somehow his soaring vocals and his long melodies pierce through those opposing states, melding them together.

It's as if the real Rufus Wainwright only exists on stage or in song — like another one of his dark ladies, Judy Garland. Find his rendition of Judy's "If Love Were All," penned by Noel Coward. It's all there: The shadowy ambivalence of the performer, a singer's plea for love.

For Wainwright — and this was true of his mother — the show's the thing.

Even with his supportive if tempestuous family and long-term boyfriend, perhaps it's music itself that is Wainwright's most passionate relationship. And it never fails him.

"I have such a great love for music — I'm not saying nobody else does — but my idea of it is so mystical and powerful and malleable, you can do it whatever you want to it and it will always come to bear. I love the elasticity of music; it can put up with anything." ■

PRIMA DONNA runs Mon, Jun 14, 16, 18 & 19 at the Elgin, 189 Yonge St. \$50-\$200. All Days Are Nights tour plays Tue, Jun 15 and 17 also at the Elgin. \$45-\$65. (416) 872-1111. Luminato.com. For more hot Luminato picks see page 28.