

Indigenous Parable Reborn as Canadian Opera: The Flight of the Hummingbird

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(57 minutes)



"Hummingbird in Flight" ¹

Segment One

Randy Kritkauskys: Greetings, or may I say Bozho in Potawatomi, to those joining us for today's Indigenous Perspectives show. I'm Randy Kritkauskys, an enrolled Potawatomi tribal member, and the co-host of Indigenous Perspectives.

Carolyn Schmidt: And I'm Carolyn Schmidt, the other co-host. For our Land Acknowledgment, we recognize Vermont where we are, as part of N'dakinna, the unceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people who for centuries have lived on the lands now included in present-day northern New England and southeastern Canada.

¹ Photo credit: <https://www.deviantart.com/fileboy/art/Hummingbird-In-Flight-510792778>
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Randy: We also acknowledge that this is the unceded land of our other-than-human kin - the winged ones, the rooted ones, the four-legged ones and the mountains and rivers who have been present on Turtle Island and have been partners and caretakers for countless millennia. They were here before the arrival of any of the two-legged. Before the Indigenous peoples who came over the Beringian land bridge from Asia more than 15,000 years ago, and before the European two-legged who arrived more recently.

Carolyn: For today's show, we'll be interviewing some of the members of the creative team that has worked together to produce an opera, *The Flight of the Hummingbird*.² This show carries an Indigenous story, and was developed and produced by a mix of Indigenous and Canadian artists.

Randy: Our first guest on today's show is Maxime Goulet. Maxime, welcome.

Maxime Goulet: Bonjour!

Randy: Maxime is a French-Canadian composer³ whose work in various realms of musical creation ranges from symphonies to video games. We first met Maxime back in June 2023, at the premier of his *Ice Storm Symphony*, *Tempête de Verglas*, with the Montreal Classical Orchestra. It turned out that Maxime has a long-standing interest in expressing the connections between people and our natural world – including the theme of resilience and emerging anew after disasters.

Carolyn: We discovered that Maxime had collaborated with an Indigenous writer and graphic artist, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, to compose and produce an opera based on a Quechua Peruvian⁴ traditional story. "*The Flight of the Hummingbird*" is described as "An Opera for All Ages". It was first produced by the Vancouver Opera and Pacific Opera Victoria in 2020.

² See the trailer of *The Flight of the Hummingbird* by Vancouver Opera and Pacific Opera Victoria (5 minutes) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8atJQOKajU>
Also see <https://pacificopera.ca/the-flight-of-the-hummingbird/> Pacific Opera Victoria, British Columbia

³ See <https://maximegoulet.com/flight-of-the-hummingbird/>

⁴ The story of the *Hummingbird* originated with some of the earliest Indigenous peoples of the Andes, who pre-dated the Incan Empire. Thanks to Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas for this clarification.

There are many layers to the story of “The Flight of the Hummingbird”; we’ll be uncovering some of them with each interview on today’s show, starting with Maxime, who’s responsible for the music in this opera.

So now – Maxime Goulet, welcome to Indigenous Perspectives.

Maxime: Thank you for having me on the show. It's a pleasure.

Randy: So let's begin. Can you tell us how you first learned about the story, The Flight of the Hummingbird, and the idea of turning it into an opera?

Maxime: Actually, the Vancouver Opera learned about Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas because they went to one of his conferences that he was giving and they learned then about his books, read their books, and they find that it was really an interesting approach to storytelling. They asked him could he be interested to write a libretto? He thought, well, I have a lot of stories that - at the same time maybe take a book that I already have? So they chose Flight of the Hummingbird, which is a short book that he wrote. But it's a very short book, you know you can read it in practically five minutes, but that was the base on which was built the whole libretto of The Flight of the Hummingbird. And then they approached me. And they looked at different composers and they approached me to be the composer for this project. That's how I learned about Flight of the Hummingbird.

I hadn't heard about it before, and I was really happy to be approached for this project because it's such a special project. I think one of the reasons that they liked my music and the way I work is that since I do a lot of projects for films and video games and classical music, I'm really used to work with different types of people. Michael is not a professional liberalist per se. He had never written a libretto before, him and his writing partner, Barry Gilson. So they had never done this before and I was used to work with all types of different persons, so that was a good fit on that personal kind of working level.

And also I think the music that I do is very approachable, very - you can hum the melodies so it's not like very avant-garde stuff. So it really can speak to the young audience because that's another thing that they wanted to do with this opera is to reach the young audience. So the original idea was to do this opera,

to be touring and going into schools and local theater. And there was 120 shows planned all across British Columbia. So different types of communities. And so it had to be kind of compact and it had to be reached - something that can communicate directly to the people. So I think my music has that potential also to be able to be perceived and understand immediately.

Carolyn: I'd like to build on the idea of how you connect with the audience. I really liked the phrasing of an opera for all ages. Because I felt, obviously it has a young people's audience in mind, but it's obviously reframing it. So there's not the negative view of oh, it's just for children, or something that trivializes it. Because obviously the themes are really powerful, and they call to adults also. So I wonder if you could comment on how conscious you were during the whole creative process that you were trying to reach adults as well as children.

Maxime: Well, we knew that the aim was for that tour because it was going to tour in primary school. So we knew there was kind of that bracket of age that was the target, but we knew that teachers will be there too. So we wanted to be more than just that. We wanted that target to be really a hundred percent entertained and absorbing that message and understanding what we're trying to tell them. But that someone that is older and has a longer life experience can have deeper understanding of what we're trying to say. And sometimes there's some little kind of inside jokes that only an adult can kind of really understand it.

And we workshopped it a lot too. So we had different workshops with singers and at the end of the workshop we would always have some audience come in and present them what we're working and then we would have a Q & A and ask them what did they think about it. And most of the people coming to the workshop presentation were adults. There were some kids, but all the kids were brought with their parents as well. So a lot of, we had feedback from both, but the parents enjoyed it just as much. So it's a bit like Pixar movies where it's targeted for young, but adult enjoyed it just as much. So that's what kind of the frame we had in mind when we worked on the project

Randy: For Indigenous peoples, we tell stories communally very often in the winter. And we could all be sitting by the fire. And you have elders and you have the youngest children. And the idea is the story isn't pitched exclusively to the wisdom of the elders who've been there for 90 years, or for the three-year-old who's just hearing the story for the first time. The idea is to share the experience and then stimulate discussion in the community. I think this is what you're doing with this marvelous work.

So, you mentioned your collaborators. One of the questions I had, and I hope I'm not imposing my own understanding, is that there's another collaborator kind of lurking in the background, which is Mother Earth. And I think I wrote to you saying, when I write, as an author I really feel sometimes like the muses of the other-than-human kin are directing me in a direction and even delivering messages. Did you have any sense of nature being a partner in this? I mean, this is very Canadian piece, as is your Ice Storm Symphony. How much does Canada come into story?

Maxime: Well, the nature and elements are really present in both of the works. For Flight of the Hummingbird, so in a nutshell, the story is that there's a forest fire and all the animals escape, except Hummingbird that goes from the river to the forest and drop by drop tries to stop the fire. And all the animals are saying, what are you doing? You're crazy. You're going to burn yourself. And she says, I'm doing what I can. And that story finished there.

We don't know if she succeeds or not, but she's just doing what she can. And so that was kind of the starting point of that story. And so there's these elements of the fire that is really present. The smoke, the water is really present as well, *[and]* the air because it's a flying bird. So all these kinds of elements are really important and were really an inspiration in the way we would lay down the music and the story on it.

And for the Ice Storm Symphony, of course the wind is very present and the symphony, when you listen to the recording, I had all the musicians doing some wind effects. So some instruments like the brass, they're just blowing it and just do like "whaaa!" And sometimes others just with their voice, the violins, since they don't have something to put in their mouth, they're just

“whoooo” with their mouth. But if you have 80 people doing that, it really sounds like a great wind coming in. So we have these kinds of wind effects.

It's very present in the first movement, but it kind of makes a tie between each of the different movements of the symphony. There are sometimes some effects - pizzicato played on the violin that evokes the ice drops falling on the rooftop. So for anybody who went through a kind of ice storm that sounds very distinctive of the raindrops falling, ice drops on the rooftop, you can hear it very clearly. So I wanted to evoke that as well.

So yes, I was really inspired by nature and elements and the power of nature also. So that was one thing that I liked about having a symphonic orchestra to express this piece is that to tell that story, the symphonic orchestra is very powerful and nature is very powerful as well. So we had a lot of possibility to evoke and to share that energy to the audience. And it was interesting also because most of the musicians that played on the concert and on the recording had experienced that historical ice storm of 1998 in Canada. So it was even more interesting for them and more evocative and connecting the dots.

Randy: So Canada is in the midst of what we on the U.S. side of the border envy, which is a long process - some people think it's taking too long - of Truth and Reconciliation coming to terms with its colonial past. And certainly many of the themes you're discussing are about truth and reconciliation, not just with First Nations people, but with Mother Nature herself. How does truth and reconciliation work its way into what you're doing?

Maxime: Well, The Flight of the Hummingbird has a lot of areas, a lot of little, what we can say like a song. And one of the songs is “Song of Persistence.” And this song talks about people, Indigenous people all over the world, trying to keep what's good from the world to be able to share it with others. And it's a very touching moment in the opera and it kind of stands out also, that aria. And one of the singers that was singing this aria during the workshop is called Melody Courage. And she will be singing this aria with the Opera Kelowna⁵ in 2024, in a show that talks about truth and reconciliation.

⁵ <https://www.operakelowna.com/>, in British Columbia

So they will talk about the almost a hundred recommendations [*made in 2015, by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, resulting from their investigations into the impact of residential boarding schools on First Nations children and communities*] and how are we now just down to 15 reconciliation recommendations done. So not a lot. So bring awareness about this fact that it's something that it must be addressed, and continuously. So the show talks about these elements and Indigenous people, and they wanted to have kind of a positive ending to the show. So this song kind of arises as something interesting to bring to the audience.

Carolyn: So what were some of the high points of your collaboration for the *The Hummingbird* with Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, the author and illustrator who wrote the libretto, and how did his Indigenous Haida connections play in?

Maxime: Well, it was really kind of a work of four people. So there was me, there was Michael, of course, there was Barry Gilson who was the librettist, and there was Glynis Leyshon who was the stage director, but also dramaturge. So dramaturge is someone who helps the librettist too, because a writer can sometimes write something that is good to read, but to be as staged on a play, sometimes they don't really have that vision necessarily. So the dramaturge will help the text to be playable, if I can say. So what I liked about our collaboration is that right from the starting point almost, we did the first workshop and Barry and Michael came with a first draft, which is completely different to what we end up having, but it was a really good starting point. And right away I was giving my opinion, my ideas on the libretto, we can do this and if we change this for that, me with the music, I could do that.

And Glynis was also bringing some ideas. And the same thing when I came with some music, Michael and Barry was giving me their advice. So instead of having the kind of traditional pipeline production where the text is written, then I take the text, I put music, then I hand it off to the stage director and so on. It was really kind of a group effort where everybody was helping each other with their understanding of their own art form. So that's one thing that I really like is that everybody was really open-minded. We were just trying to

align ourselves on what would make the best opera possible at all times. So this collaboration was very productive in that sense.

Carolyn: And I know obviously it really works and I know I felt the very strong message. It resonated with me, all the different ways that a number of the characters are trying to avoid or not acknowledge the problem. I mean, that was part, to me, that was part of the call to action message that I got as an adult for sure. I mean, there's the Owl agonizing over the fact that when he comes with these stressful things, he runs away, doesn't confront them. There's Bunny who's dealing with all of her stresses by focusing on keeping herself really busy and making her own nest really, really super good and denying the presence of the forest fire. And it's the Bear saying, "Smoke, smoke? I don't really know. Just sort of a gentle breeze?" So this was for me, this really spoke to me and the way each of them- the characters - has their own theme, their own - you had your different musical influences for each character's theme; it totally works.

Maxime: Everybody has their own reason to believe that they can ignore the threat. And it's a bit like that in the real world too. It's more kind of simplified in a way, but we always kind of justify that we don't need to take action: somebody else will do it, the danger doesn't really exist or stuff like that, I can just run away; if I don't think about it, it won't exist kind of thing. So it was kind of simplifying these themes and putting them into characters. And also the music also helps evoke these different type of characters.

And what I find interesting is that in the opera you have all these characters that are so different, but in some way at the end they all work together for a common cause. And I felt when I was working on the opera, it was really that because we were all from - I mean me and Glynis from different generations, Michael from Indigenous background, me, I'm a French Canadian, Glynis English Canadian, and Barry is from Britain.

So it's kind of all this weird mix of people together and to do one thing in common. So it was really a bit like in the opera in some sort of way. And we all - we're different, but we all kind of really get along very well. So at least that. But we all came from different backgrounds. Glynis was really experienced

with opera; this was my first opera. I came from concert music and video game music, but I had never really written a real opera. And Michael wrote some books and some visual arts, and Barry was kind of more his manager. So we all had different - it was really an interesting mix. And like in the story of The Flight of the Hummingbird at the end, we just came together for the best, what we can do altogether.

Randy: So in both your symphony about the Ice Storm and in the Hummingbird, this notion of working together to try to solve a problem just - is very gently but beautifully and firmly pushed to the forefront. Is this a theme that is particularly appealing to you?

Maxime: Yes. I think it's because it's - when you work with an orchestra, an orchestra is really that - that you have 80 people and they need to all be aligned on the same vision to make it happen at the quarter of seconds, milliseconds. They always have to be together. You need to breathe together, you need to do everything together. So I think that kind of - it's a good image of how when we're all together, we can make something bigger than the sum of all the individuals.

Randy: That is a wonderful way of characterizing the two works we've been discussing. And I just want to say that when we first heard your symphony about the ice storm, it was just an extraordinary emotional experience, especially when you get to the parts where the traditional maritime music comes in as an image of people gathering around the fire and digging into the past. I feel like I'm meeting a young Anton Dvorak who came to this new world and discovered what it had to offer. And here you are acting in the spirit of really expressing what the quote unquote New World has to tell us, its own stories. I congratulate you and thank you for what you've done.

Maxime: Thank you very much.

Carolyn: So this concludes the first segment of this version of Indigenous Perspectives. Thank you very much, Maxime Goulet.

Maxime: My pleasure.

Segment Two

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives. We'll be talking now with Glynis Leyshon, the director and dramaturge for The Flight of the Hummingbird, about her work in bringing this marvelous opera to the stage. Glynis has a long and distinguished career in opera and theater⁶. Born in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, she immigrated to Canada as a child and grew up in North Vancouver. She's now based in Victoria, British Columbia, the traditional territory of the lək'wəŋən [*prounounced "lekwaunkwen"*] speaking peoples. In addition to her long standing connection with Pacific Opera Victoria in British Columbia, she's directed operas, plays and films across Canada. She'll be talking with us today from Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, where she's directing performances at the Shaw Festival. So welcome, Glynis.

Glynis Leyshon: Lovely to be here.

Randy: So could you begin just by telling us about your work on the opera? Is there anything that sticks in your mind as an image or an experience that is the one you hold onto and cherish?

Glynis: Well, I cherish the role that I've been given as a dramaturge. It's an interesting role. You're the editor; you're the ear for the librettist and the libretto team, in this case with Michael Yahgulanaas and Barry Gilson, and bringing that to the musical stage with our composer. So while I envision how it's going to be done, as a director, really it's about the work and the focus on the work itself, which is the privilege that I spoke of. It really is a meaningful piece. It resonated with me when I read the very tiny parable that was the book that inspired the opera, and it has stayed with me over the years that we've been working on its creation.

Carolyn: So can you comment on how you worked as a dramaturge to highlight the Indigenous voices and presence first in the Hummingbird, and then also other comments on your other works?

⁶ See <https://www.ccpacanada.com/personnel/glynis-leyshon/>

Glynis: It's interesting. When I first met Michael, I had a very serious conversation with him about whether or not this was a piece that I was suitable as a dramaturge, that it was at the right thing. And Michael was terrific. It in fact was a story gifted to him from South America, from the people of the Altiplano [*Andean Plateau*]. So it's not specifically Haida. If it were, I would be an enthusiastic bystander and supporter of the piece, but it in fact was gifted to him, a story from away. And while filtered through his artistic sensibility as a senior Haida artist - visual artist especially - it is a piece that he felt very strongly needed and should resonate across diverse cultures, diverse lives, because it is after all about our earth, the earth that we all share and what is happening to our earth. So that became the conversational model for us and to bring our own inside, our own sensibility, to the work. As always, respectful of the original creator, who is of course Michael.

And he drove the vision - visual imagery - that we use, the idea of imagery. But he was also fascinated by theater itself. That's not his realm, so that became a really interesting and dynamic aspect: what theater can provide, what we can do - ideas for Michael. We would go and see some productions and share, see, this is what a light can do, this is what video can do. There's all kinds of applications that we were interested in playing with. So as with the decision very deliberately to have Maxime as our composer, not a First Nations composer, but rather someone who comes from another and very different, very rich culture in Québec. And I think the strength of the creative team, perhaps, I hope anyway, has been bringing all these various backgrounds to work on the singular vision for *The Flight of the Hummingbird*.

Randy: I love your description of combining different cultural perspectives because I am - I walk in both worlds, and seem to live part of the day in one and part in the other. And I like to view myself as a bridge builder. And there are tensions out there in the Indigenous world saying everything must be done by Indigenous people. But I find that working with people who are not born in and of the Indigenous world, very often it raises opportunities for getting the message across that doesn't always work if it's only in an Indigenous voice. I think -

Glynis: - sorry to interrupt -

Randy: - no, no, please go with it -

Glynis: - it's complicated, isn't it? And it is complex, and it is a dialogue that's ongoing. It needs to be open and honest and deeply passionate. That's why I said I would only have been comfortable if Michael had welcomed me into the process, as much as I was intrigued, as much as I was excited. I think that's the important - it's the leadership role and the dynamic of leadership that plays a large part in whether or not a team can be successful. And there's no question that in the end of the night with both Maxime and I, it is Michael's story to tell. And so there's a leadership perspective that I think is one that we honor.

I've had a personal - I think one of the reasons I was approached is I've had a personal creative history with a number of what became important projects from our First Nations community. Kevin Loring is now the head of the Aboriginal programming at the National Arts Centre of Canada, significant role. And Kevin was a very young student in Vancouver when I was at the Playhouse. And I recognized his singular talent very early. So yes, I was able to offer him work as an actor, but he became part of a writing team at the Playhouse, and we were proud to première his work "Where the Blood Mixes", which went on to win the Governor General's Award for playwriting that year. It's now produced all over. And produced by First Nations artists.

So I was able to direct that piece to give it life, but it certainly has lived far beyond that original production and the acclaim that it received. So that's where you feel part of the sweep of what's changing and needs to change in our culture. But I hope that the dynamic of shared creative impulses continues because it's rich and it's valuable, and I would hate for that dynamic to be lost.

Randy: That's a wonderful explanation. Can you just comment briefly on any insights you might've developed personally working on this particular opera, or with the others, that gave you a perspective on the Indigenous world that you might not have had previously?

Glynis: Well, it was always amazing to me beginning this process, the process of the play, the opera. How do we tell this story? How do we make the story as simple as that parable, yet as complex and visually dynamic as theater needs and wants to be. And I guess at the end of the day, it was watching those young audiences hang on every note, on every word, that gave me a sense that the work was important and continues to be as it now grows into a larger more chamber kind of opera. So as always, I think that the key is to listen, listen to the audience and their response. Listen to your creative partners, their needs, their ideas, what they might not be able to articulate, but what they're feeling strongly about. And I think from the silences and the pauses of listening carefully, something special can be created.

Carolyn: Thank you very much, Glynis.

We've been talking with Glynis Leyshon, the director and dramaturge of The Flight of the Hummingbird. Thank you so much.

Glynis: Thank you.

Segment Three

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives. In this segment, we'll be speaking with Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, who wrote the libretto for the Flight of the Hummingbird opera, based on his book. Well, first, welcome Michael; welcome to the show.

Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas: Thank you very much for your interest.

Carolyn: And we thought we'd start off with your saying a few words to give us what you want our listeners to know about your background and your achievements and the things that you're proud of in your life.

Michael: Well, much of the work that I'm doing in the last couple of decades⁷ has been international in scope and based in visual arts, and now includes the opera Flight of the Hummingbird. It's all grounded in geography though, and

⁷ See Michael's website: <https://mny.ca>

that geography is an archipelago of 144 islands located off the west coast of Canada and immediately south of Alaska.



Map of Haida Gwaii⁸

And it is a people there, the Haida Nation of which I am a citizen, that has established a reputation for being very solutions oriented in a fairly strong but

⁸ Map By Kelisi - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=120886007>

Haida Gwaii – “Islands of the Haida People”. In 2010, the Haida negotiated the Kunst'aa guu – Kunst'aayah Reconciliation Protocol with British Columbia. Among other items, this established joint management of protected lands (in green on the map) and officially recognized Haida Gwaii as the name of the archipelago formerly known as Queen Charlotte Islands / Îles de la Reine-Charlotte (1787 - 2010).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haida_Gwaii#cite_note-BCGNISHaidaGwaii-2

respectful way. And so those are the attributes that I try to apply in my work internationally and in the visual arts.

Randy: So what we've read about this wonderful story is that it is Peruvian in origin and it was gifted to you. Can you give us a little bit of background on the origin and how you came to be associated with it?

Michael: Yes, it does come from the Altiplano. It precedes a time when there was such a thing as a Peruvian nation-state. It comes from even before the Quechua speakers. So it's a very ancient parable.

I used to take Japanese university students into the deep forest. These were people from some of the most urbanized communities on the planet, and I would take them to places where the nearest light bulb was maybe 40 miles away. And in that course, *[we]* established relationships with some of the things they were engaged in, such as the Candle Night⁹ parade in Japan, which is an effort - successful, I would say - to limit the use of electricity, with the implications for the nuclear industry.

And they *[the Japanese students]* invited me over to visit them, and I remember them pulling out a stack of paper - quite a heavy stack, and they proudly announced it as the next book. And I proposed that really the book needed to have illustrations that - the power of the image versus that of the word - and the story that they were working with was a parable from the Altiplano. And I illustrated that for them in the publication. But I also went down to the Altiplano and met with the community - it was high up. Oh my goodness, it was it 4,000 meters? I don't know; I was just at the limits of my capacity to breathe. And there the adobe house with the hummingbird image underneath the eaves trough was there.

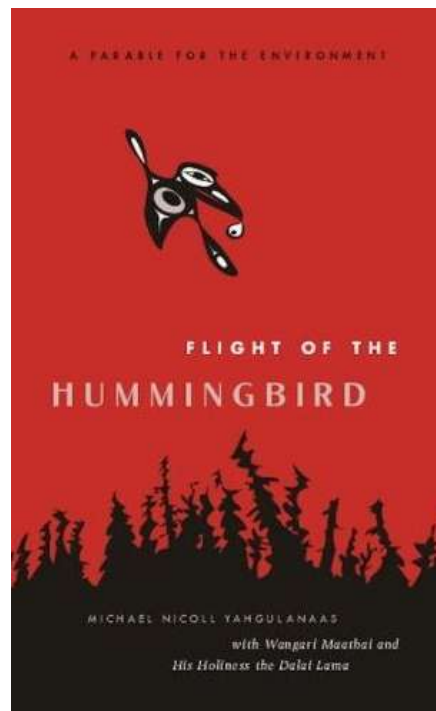
And in the conversations and in the work I did down there I actually was helping them make connections with other agricultural communities as part of work that I did out of the United States for ten years with a foundation called The Christensen Fund¹⁰, where we actually fund communities, resilient

⁹ For more on the Candle Night parade, an annual event in Tokyo since 2003, see <https://en.japantravel.com/tokyo/candle-night-at-zojoji/69072>

¹⁰ <https://www.christensenfund.org>

communities, based on the premise that if a community has been, as we have in Papua New Guinea where we also worked, if a community's been around for 50,000 years with agriculture, it may be they have something to teach us. And so let's get behind *[them]* and try to keep them resilient. And I guess the motto for that period of my life was "If the planet was a ship, we invest in the lifeboats."

So it was out of that relationship that was gifted the use of the story. And I kind of like this because it's a connection between various very different parts of the planet. You have a Haida from the North Pacific working with the Altiplano Indigenous peoples, the source of the potato, for example, very ancient and persistent cultures, along with the Japanese environmental groups. So this is how the story sort of fell into a publication here in Canada.¹¹



Carolyn: Michael, building on the Japanese connection you just mentioned: you're known for pioneering the Haida manga style, a fusion of Indigenous

¹¹ Flight of the Hummingbird is available from Greystone Books, an independent publisher based in Vancouver, British Columbia. <https://greystonebooks.com/products/flight-of-the-hummingbird> There is also a version titled "The Little Hummingbird" specifically for children (simpler wording, shorter sentences, larger book size) published by Greystone Kids, a division of Greystone Books.

visual traditions from the Pacific Northwest and the Japanese graphic storytelling of manga. Can you comment on the hybrid nature of this style and why it works so well to engage readers and audiences?

Michael: The reason why that I do the manga, Haida manga, is a nod to a historical time when it was a dangerous time to be an Indigenous person in the Canadian embrace, the British embrace at that time, I suppose. In the late 1800s when men from my village - in fact, from my own family - traveled to Japan as part of the pelagic seal, fur seal hunt, and came back. And even as a younger man in the 1960s, I heard stories of how amazing it was *[in Japan]* to be into a world that was so different and yet so respectful. Where *[Haida]* people could walk into any store, you could walk into a restaurant, you could freely move around the society without judgment.

Meanwhile, here in North America - toilets, there were no *[public]* toilets for Indigenous people; there were signs on cafés saying, “no dogs, no Indians.” I mean the systemic racism was very oppressive, and Japan was a place of relief and welcome. And I had to compare that to the North American story, which has changed a bit, thank goodness. But there was a time when Japanese people of Japanese descent were incarcerated simply because of their ethnicity. And I had to reconcile these two ways of looking at the same community. And I wanted to thank Japan essentially for being such a place of refuge for my own family during such a terrible period.

Randy: Michael, you keep touching - either directly using the word, or in your work - on the theme of resilience. Can we close out with your return to that theme? Because it seems to just appear again and again and you do a fabulous job.

Michael: The Flight of the Hummingbird parable, which has a hummingbird trying to put out a fire, ends without us ever knowing whether the hummingbird was successful. We don't know if the hummingbird got burnt in the flames or whether the fire was put out. And the lesson there is it doesn't matter the outcome. We are so ingrained in thinking we can manage everything around us that we lose sight of *[the truth that]* it's not about managing the end result; it's how we play, it's the type of relationships that we

have. We are not wise enough to predict results. And so this is the call to action, to become engaged in the world, not to waste oxygen.

Carolyn: Wow. Michael, that's a wonderful and strong conclusion for this segment. Thank you very much. We've been talking with Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, the librettist for The Flight of the Hummingbird. Thank you very much, Michael, Migwetch.

Michael: Okay. Talk to you again, I hope.

Randy: Thank you. It was just unbelievably crystal clear and articulate. And congratulations. Migwetch as we say in Potawatomi, for the work you do.

Michael: Okay.

Segment Four

Carolyn: Welcome back to the final segment of today's show, which we've titled "Indigenous Parable Reborn as Canadian Opera: the Flight of the Hummingbird."

Randy: So let's start with the idea of rebirth and why we chose that for our title. We feel that really this parable has undergone a journey from the Altiplano in the Andes Mountains, and in a sense has been reincarnated or reborn through generations of storytelling, probably at its origins, and then made into a graphic novel by a Haida Canadian artist, Michael Yahgulanas, and then ultimately made into an opera with a multicultural team whom we've had the privilege of guesting on this show.¹² So this leads to the question of why has the story been so enduring even through all of these permutations?

Carolyn: Well, I think for one thing, it has a multi-generational appeal. People of different ages and levels of sophistication can connect with it, and as I understand it, originally the opera was conceived as mainly for children, and the idea was to tour British Columbia doing performances in schools. But the

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOm9EPYixrc>

Interview with the creative team of The Flight of the Hummingbird (10 minutes)

creative team that produced the opera realized that adults in the audiences were responding very positively. The characters and their dilemma can be understood by everyone on a variety of levels. So it's now subtitled "an opera for all ages."

Randy: This really brings us back to the essence of what Indigenous storytelling is. By tradition, stories were told to the entire community, often sitting around a fire, and children were present, elders were present, and the story had to be at least partly intelligible for the youngest people in the audience, but also resonate with the wisest elders in the room. So the idea here is that generations are transmitting and giving the wisdom they have to the next generation for whom these might be new insights. So Carolyn, what were some of your reflections on the story? What insights did you see coming out of this?

Carolyn: Well, one theme I got was the importance of humility that all human beings should have, dealing with the natural world. The force is much larger than we are. We can't fully understand them. We certainly can't control them, and we're deluding ourselves if we pretend that we can. That hit me pretty hard.

Randy: Well, that's really a major theme today in Indigenous culture: the notion that western science, no matter how much it studies something and re-studies it and reevaluates it and does more investigation, doesn't completely and totally understand the natural world, and certainly not to the point where we can dominate it. So what is beautiful, I think about this opera is that it is bringing back an Indigenous perspective, which recognizes simultaneously the paradox that Mother Nature gifts us, reaches out to us, heals us, restores us, sustains us, but also there's an Indigenous understanding that the very Mother Nature that provides fish from the sea is a danger sometimes to the fishermen. That the very forest where we find the wild animals can be dangerous to the humans who live there. That the very forces of nature, such as fire, that can revitalize the forest as the opera demonstrates, can also be threatening both to humans and our other-than-human kin. This was a kind of a contradiction for Western logic and science, but it is not a contradiction; it is a conundrum with which Native Americans have lived. So we have the fire and

the ice in Goulet's two productions being harmful, but at the same time, as we've discussed on other shows, Indigenous people can also view these as part of the ecosystem restoring itself.

Carolyn: I think also part of an idea, at least in mainstream society of children's stories is often that, oh, they're going to always have a happy ending and they're going to be sort of sentimental and so forth and so on. And this story certainly is not sentimental. It doesn't have any guaranteed ending, yet it is accessible. It draws you in and it makes you think.

Randy: Yes, it's little Red Riding Hood, not knowing how it ends - whether Wolf eats Little Red Riding Hood or Little Red Riding Hood escapes. But that is the world in which Indigenous people live. And as I think we learned this summer, when we tried to go outside and the sky was orange from wildfires and we couldn't breathe the air and we couldn't go for a walk or go biking when we were in Montreal. We learned to be a bit more Indigenous. Even those of us in the mainstream learned to be a bit more Indigenous and nuanced in our understanding of how or if we could even imagine dominating nature or if we need to begin to think about how to live with nature. And part of it is rolling with the punches and the threats and the disruptions that the natural world can send our way.

Carolyn: And I'll say also for me, the fires, the smoke, the weirdness, and the dangers of being outdoors in Vermont, coming from wildfires in the Canadian forests, also knowing they're related to climate change - it does bring home the idea that we are all connected, and that also emphasizes the value of each of our actions.

Randy: I think one of the things that we're taking away from this podcast above and beyond the moral and Traditional Ecological Knowledge aspects that we just mentioned, is that this production of *The Flight of the Hummingbird* is the epitome of the concept we've discussed many times on previous podcasts. And that is the notion that respectful sharing and borrowing of offerings of Indigenous culture, as happened in the production and creation of the story and the opera, is something that does not harm the original culture where the story originates. It is a gift to the mainstream

culture, and we're really, really grateful and fortunate to have people like the creative team who made this opera to bring from halfway around the world a parable that is resonant with us and understandable by us. It's what we so desperately seek in our culture at this time.

Carolyn: So we want to thank Michael Yahgulanaas, Glynis Leyshon and Maxime Goulet for participating in this Indigenous Perspectives show and for bringing this Indigenous parable into our household and to mainstream non-Indigenous culture and audiences.

Randy: I hope this broadcast is giving you time and space to reconnect with your roots and Mother Earth and your ancestral roots. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, we encourage you to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna, our animate kin, and perhaps even that of our ancestors and others who have walked on. Allow yourself to touch their presence, capture that moment and hold onto it.

Carolyn: And write to Randy. Let him know about your experience, if you wish. Or with any questions or suggestions you have for these shows. He can be reached at his email, randykritkausky@hushmail.com or through his website, which is www.randykritkausky.com

Randy: So, until our next show, Migwetch - thank you - and goodbye.

Carolyn: Migwetch.

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