



WAINWRIGHT'S first opera, *Prima Donna*, will have its North American debut at Toronto's Luminato arts festival in 2010

Rufus has a message for Toronto

There's a new CD/DVD and a biography, but first Rufus Wainwright has to make amends

BY ELIO IANNACCI • On the phone from his home in New York, pop star Rufus Wainwright is at a loss for words. The 36-year-old Juno-award-winning singer-songwriter—who has six albums to his name—usually has something clever to say about any subject, but asked about his next trip to Toronto, all Wainwright can manage is a nervous cackle. There is, of course, a reason for this. A little over a year ago the British newspaper the *Guardian* published a story that quoted Wainwright saying this of Canada's largest city: "I wish I didn't have to go back there. It's trying to be the New York of the Midwest." After the story hit the Internet, it was announced that Wainwright's first opera, *Prima Donna*, would make its North American debut at Toronto's Luminato arts festival in June 2010.

The "Rufus hates Toronto" story flooded the blogosphere once more, setting off a slew of hate comments directed toward the singer. Even though this isn't the first time that Wainwright—who is openly gay and highly opinionated—has made news with his views, he refuses to be precious about it. "I'm not going to backpedal. I've had bad experiences [in Toronto] but I'm in debt to the city now," he says. "It was the first place in North America to take a chance and embrace *Prima Donna*, so when I get there [for the debut], I am going to kiss and make love to it again."

Oddly enough, the story behind *Prima Donna* is all about reigniting old flames: an aging opera singer plots a comeback and then falls for a newspaper writer who is reporting on her return to the stage. The reviews have been as contrary as Wainwright's own brand of humour: the *Independent* panned the performance, calling it "at best banal, at worst boring"; the *New York Times*,

though calling it "muddled," also said it was filled with "music of enticing ambiguity." Regardless of the critical reaction, the two-act production is an impressive feat for any musician. Rife with art-imitating-life/diva-imitating-pop-star moments, the opera's many scenes, says Wainwright, are plucked from his very own backyard.

"There's a lot of me in this opera. Beyond the fact that the artist gets seduced and befuddled by a journalist—which has happened a number of times in the past," he explains. "I have had to make several comebacks myself, whether it was due to [my] record company being destroyed [Wainwright's first label Dreamworks closed down in 2005] or just answering to new musical forms. I know what it means to have to go back out there and stake your claim again."

According to Wainwright, *Prima Donna*'s production story is as grandiose as its content. "I started off very excited and almost finished my last draft of the libretto in the Big Apple," he explains. "Then I had to find it a new home," he sighs, speaking to the fact that New York's Metropolitan Opera—which commissioned the work—dropped out because *Prima Donna*'s lyrics were written entirely in French. He had to then shop the project around before settling on premiering it at Manchester's Palace Theatre.

"It didn't stop there," he says, eager to tell his trauma-ridden tale. "In the middle of the [Manchester] production, the entire cast and the director committed mutiny," he continues in a shaky voice. "They switched the whole ending of my first act and rewrote it without me. I quickly contacted my lawyers and got it changed back to my original draft. It felt like a physical violation. I'm fine now but at the time, I wanted to kill myself. Now I know why there are laws against changing an artist's material!"

Those who can't wait until next year for new Wainwright material will have to settle for a recently released Rufus biography by Kirk Lake titled *There Will Be Rainbows*, or pick up Wainwright's brand-new CD/DVD called *Milwaukee at Last*. Filmed in Wisconsin in the summer of 2007, the disc's track list includes some of Wainwright's most operatic tracks to date, including *Leaving for Paris 2*, the anti-Bush-era aria *Going to a Town* (from his last studio album, *Release the Stars*) and a striking cover of Noel Coward's *If Love Were All*.

The latter track, which Judy Garland frequently sang in her early '60s concerts, is a throwback to Wainwright's previous live disc and widely acclaimed tour, *Rufus Does Judy at Carnegie Hall*. "When it comes to a Jesus Christ figure for me, Judy Garland is right up there," he says. "She represents the heart and soul of what it is to be a gay person. Talk about a saviour who overcame obstacles." M



THE DOLLY ROCKERS... HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY

So there is a WAG in every mag that you all know / Thinks she's got everything but she ain't got nothing / Well she was real plain, had no brain and had no dough / But now she can roll in it and watch her boobs grow / All the boys will pay / When she's out for prey if they're straight or gay she won't end up alone / All the boys stand still / If looks could kill they probably will—Gold Digger, the debut single from British band the Dolly Rockers