

Luminato: *Prima Donna* Dazzles, Yet Disappoints

By [Carly Maga](#) on Jun 15, 2010 584 Views

From June 11–20, [Torontoist is exploring](#) the best and most promising of Luminato's many offerings.



Janis Kelly as the pained former soprano, Régine St. Laurent. Photo by Antony Crook.

At the tender age of fourteen, confused by his changing sexuality and frightened by the AIDS epidemic, Canadian singer/songwriter [Rufus Wainwright](#) says that [opera saved his life](#). Then in 2006, almost twenty years later, it was Wainwright's turn to repay the favour.

Collaborating with [the Metropolitan Opera](#) in New York City, Wainwright was assigned the mission of resuscitating the dying art form, which has struggled to maintain its audience in an age of MP3s, a recession, and a younger generation that consistently chooses Gaga over Wagner. It was the latest attempt to use pop star power—something that the member of [the Wainwright musical dynasty](#) literally has running through his veins—to attract a new, youthful viewership to opera houses around the world.

The result is [Prima Donna](#), Wainwright's first foray into the genre, which saw its North American premiere last night at the Elgin Theatre as part of [Luminato](#). At first, the plan actually seemed to work—the crowd filling the marbled lobby had a significant proportion of young, fashionable bow-tied men and red-lipped women willing to shell out between fifty and two hundred bucks a ticket. But, unfortunately, that's where most of the innovation ended.

Set in 1970s Paris on Bastille Day, *Prima Donna* tells the story of Régine St. Laurent, an aging former opera star struggling with her fears of returning to the stage after six years out of the spotlight.

Wainwright insists that an opera about opera has never been seen before, but the show fails to expand on that premise. Presented with the opportunity of taking a reflective look at the art form, the plot of this "meta-opera" instead focuses too much on the melodrama—the brash temper tantrums, the embellished embraces, and the soul-crushing heartbreak that have become clichéd in the eyes of non-opera-goers, clichés that may have actually contributed to the alienation of young audiences from the art form. And in its rush to reach the sensational, key moments to build intrigue, suspense, and characters are glazed over. Within the first few minutes after the curtains rise, Régine quickly reveals the mystery behind her fall from grace, and her recently hired maid, Marie, divulges her own dark secret with uncomfortable speed.

The archetypal characters in the story also contribute to convention—there's the regal-yet-crippingly-insecure celebrity who is past her prime, the young and naïve maid, the conspiratorial butler, and the handsome, eager journalist. Each character has his or her moments of wit and depth with lyrics that ooze of Wainwright's dry humour, but for the most part, they play one emotion full-tilt until the opera's final climax. In the end, it's hard to look past their exaggeration and form any connections with the characters, despite an impressive cast lead by the renowned Scottish soprano [Janis Kelly](#).

However, coming from the guy who [dressed as Verdi for the world premiere of *Prima Donna* last year](#), subtlety would actually be a surprise. In fact, there were some moments where Wainwright's flare for the flashy worked beautifully. The stunning and extravagant set design by Antony McDonald—which featured tall windows and walls etched with Victorian-style mouldings and trims to give Régine's apartment a hint of her former life of luxury—was a definite highlight. **But the set's reflective finishing really shined, literally and figuratively, enhancing Thomas Hase's impressive lighting. The final result was a few visually mesmerizing moments that kept the audience rapt in the story and music, while demonstrating the changing mental states of the play's heroine through hues transitioning from dark black to warm amber to a dream-like blue.**

Director Tim Albery of last year's [The Children's Crusade](#) took over the production when it premiered to harsh reviews at the [2009 Manchester International Festival](#) (which co-commissioned the opera with Luminato after Wainwright's partnership with the Met dissolved). Even though some of the same problems persist today, it remains one of Luminato's highlights. In *Prima Donna*'s best moment, when Régine finally decides the fate of her singing career and comes to terms with it in smart lyrics and moving melodies, it's clear the show has the potential to fulfill its role as a beacon for new, young opera fans. But, as of now, the show is more like the Bastille Day fireworks Régine watches as the play closes—eagerly anticipated, visually stimulating, attention-grabbing, yet ultimately leaving its viewers with little lasting impact.

Prima Donna will be performed again on June 16, 18, and 19 at 7:30 p.m. at the Elgin Theatre. Check out [our Luminato guide](#) or [today's Urban Planner](#) for our Luminato recommendations, or follow our coverage [here](#).

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