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Percussionists, tap dancers and opera singer to come together for unique performance inside Britannia mine

By STUART DERDEYN, The Province May 22, 2013 3:22 PM

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The venue itself will be played as a musical instrument during NEWmatica, a concert of new music and modern tap dance featuring Fringe Percussion, soprano Heather Pawsey and tap dancers Danny Nielsen and Dayna Szyndrowski.

Towering 26 stories above the Sea to Sky Highway, the ore mill at the [Britannia Mine Museum](#) is an imposing monument to extracting mineral wealth from the Earth. Grinders, conveyors and pneumatic hammers pounded out a steady pulsing beat in the building that echoed all across Howe Sound for decades.

Now [Astrolabe Musik Theatre](#) wants to revive that percussive industrial history, but as something modern and classical.

In its co-production with the Britannia Mine Museum titled NEWmatica, Vancouver-based [Fringe Percussion](#) (Jonathan Bernard, Martin Fisk, Brian Nesselroad and Daniel Tones), tap-dancing duo Danny Nielsen and Dayna Szyndrowski and soprano Heather Pawsey present a unique performance inside the mill. Works by composers John Cage and R. Murray Schaefer will not only take place inside the structure. The mine will be part of the instrumentation.

“This is the fourth concert I’ve done at the museum under the New Music in New Places banner,” says Astrolabe’s Heather Pawsey. “At those shows, I had instruments like piano, strings and such and toured people through the tunnels and became quite familiar with the space. Jonathan Bernard of Fringe Percussion was at the last one of those shows and approached me about doing a show there. I thought, why not do one together?”

With the support of the museum’s executive director Kristin Clausen, the two began to develop a program for percussion and voice in the space. Finding repertoire wasn’t easy. However, Pawsey was mentored by Canadian composer R. Murray Schaefer and was looking at doing something for his 80th birthday when she came upon a piece he had written for just that instrumentation.

“That was the start and we began to build the show and Murray’s own score gave me the idea of bringing in the tap dancers, because he had open spaces in it reading ‘perhaps add other instruments or improvise.’ I wanted tap and Danny and Dayna came very highly recommended for their improvisational skills.”

Describing herself as “not your average tap-dancing accountant,” Szyndrowski and her partner Nielsen were immediately taken with the idea of their part in the performance. Having travelled the world with tap and immersed herself in the percussive dancing of every culture from Greece to Spain to others, Szyndrowski says her initial attraction to tap was its percussion more than the movements. NEWmatica presents exciting challenges for both.

“Like any musician in discussion about a performance, you can spend a lot of time discussing your instrument’s qualities,” says Szyndrowski. “You use different shoes for different things and always have to consider things like surface, acoustics, rugs on the floor; all of the above as well as what kind of shoes are best for the show. We will be bringing along a board to this one as well as using the interesting percussion potentials of the building itself.”

If the R. Murray Schaefer piece is the primary for this program, then the three other compositions by John Cage, André Cormier and Jocelyn

Morlock will certainly frame it effectively. All four composers are adventurous without sacrificing a love of melody and beauty in the music. Pawsey says that being able to take advantage of the building's steel beams, girders, round wooden platforms and various bric-a-brac to make the music fits right into the composer's intentions.

"You always give it your best shot with something like this and often the challenges are finding how we all can communicate across genres," says Pawsey. "Usually one element tends to dominate, but with bringing the dancers in as percussion rather than visuals puts them on — no pun intended — a different footing. Also, for this concert we are carrying on four advance workshops with members of the public who are learning both vocal and rhythmic motifs to perform throughout (and on) the building to make transition music between the primary pieces."

The entire crew and audience will be incorporated in the finale as well. Even the venue is going to get to improvise its own part as its random echoes and resonances are not something the performers can control.

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NEWmatica

Where: Britannia Mine Museum, 1 Forbes Way, Britannia Beach

When: Saturday

Tickets: \$25, srs/sts \$18 at brownpapertickets.com

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