

Challenging work

Weirdo proprietress leads a delusional neurosurgeon on an increasingly bizarre psychological trip in a decrepit way-side hotel — a thriller as chilling as vintage Hitchcock — and all to an edgy and atmospheric jazz accompaniment!

No, no! You haven't read the program notes! The very title of the work is a vital clue. "Nigredo" means "dark night of the soul" and you need to understand a few Jungian concepts and make reference to sections of the Bible, the work of William Blake and Latin etymology to really appreciate this work, a collaboration between composer Nic Gotham and librettist Ann-Marie MacDonald.

The 60-minute, one-act work — I'd call it a dramatic jazz piece rather than an opera — had a gestation of five years before its premiere in 1992 by Tapestry Opera, Toronto. Gotham says that originally he intended to have a single character, the neurosurgeon, Raymond (the essential male) but MacDonald persuaded him to create Sophie who is, in fact, Raymond's own self, his "anima" whom he confronts and eventually learns to love and understand.

During this journey of

with top singers

canberra

self discovery Raymond recalls his childhood, singing that he learned about concepts such as centrifugal force but now he has left this excitement of discovery behind and believes in the primacy of rational thought, a belief which is continually challenged as he is confronted with Sophie's weird behavior. The mystical number seven features as a projection on to the floor of the set and in the seven wires that fan out from the stage, seven traditionally being the number of years required to develop a child's character.

In this production Sophie is played by soprano Rebecca Collins who last year gave a stunning performance in Stopera's *Jane Eyre* and Raymond by bari-

tone David Pearson, recently returned from several very successful years in London. Both these performers act the demanding roles with great skill but the work does not give either the opportunity to show the real quality of their voices. It is not easy to move directly from spoken words to sung lines and it is not until the end of the story that the pair blossom in the duet, *For Love is strong as Death*.

The surreal set, while visually interesting, is devilishly difficult to negotiate.

Designed by Kaoru Alfonso who also designed the arresting *Jane Eyre* set and the delightfully whimsical set for *The Country Philosopher* it features a mounded circle of salt which can be lit in many interesting ways but tears and scratches exposed body parts. Then there is the lad-

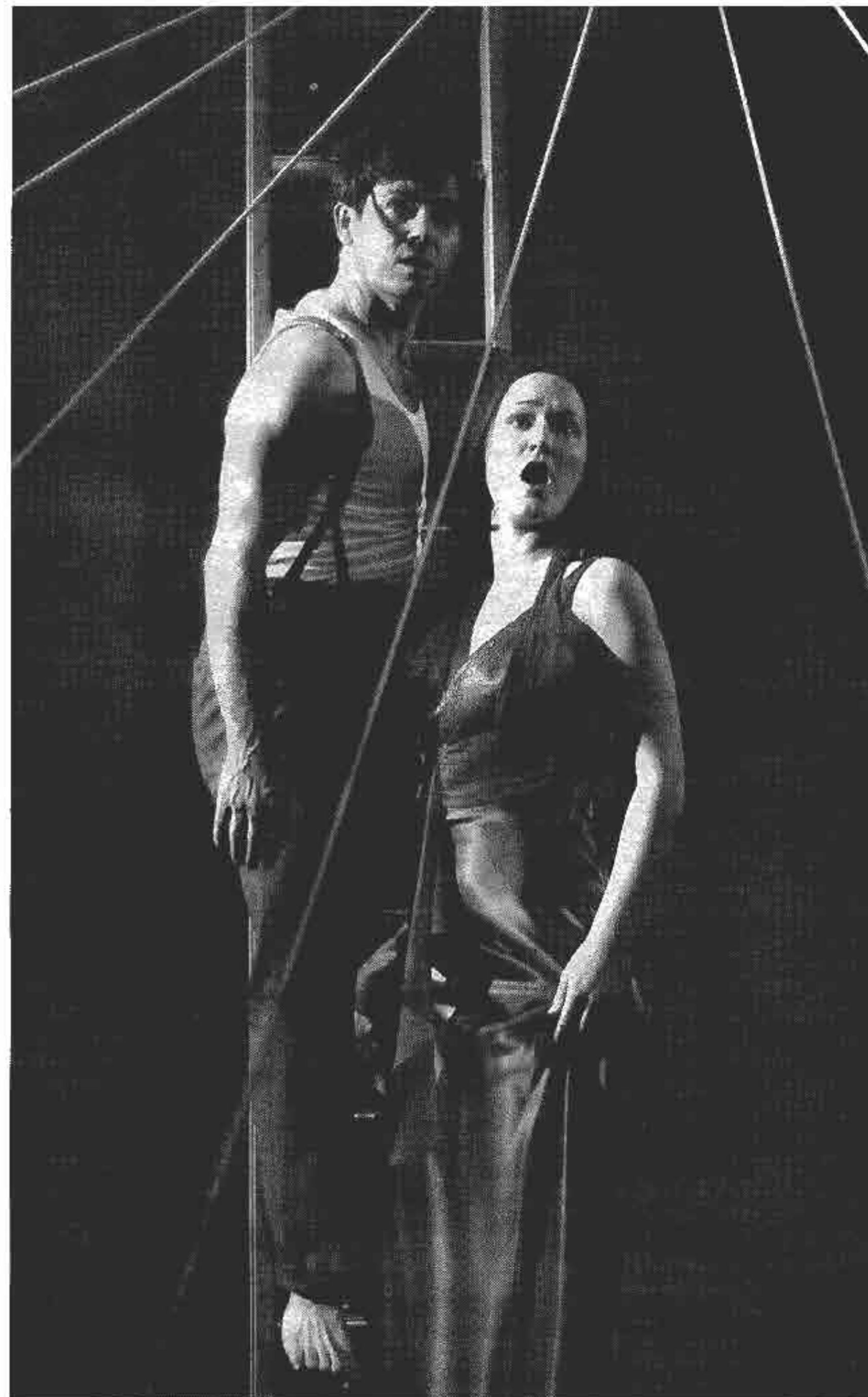
der with a hole beneath (perhaps representing the plug-hole that Sophie sings about in a snatch of nursery song) which made one hold one's breath in the hope that Raymond and Sophie weren't going to plunge into it.

The great strength of the work is the jazz influenced score. In this production it is played by Adam Laslett, directing from the piano, Nicole Canham on clarinet and bass clarinet, Gary France on percussion and Gareth Hill on double bass and electric bass guitar. This quartet is framed at the back of the stage and they produce an exceptional sound, at times irritable, creepy, edgy and finally almost rhapsodic.

Strangely Gotham, a saxophonist, has written no part for a saxophone but he tells of being struck by the significance of the clarinet part in a Canadian Opera Company's production of *La Clemenza di Tito*: "It served to mediate between the soloists onstage and the pit." In this work the clarinet is eminently appropriate and beautifully played by Canham.

Stopera is to be congratulated for once again introducing a challenging work featuring top class performers under the direction of Caroline Stacey who is now the artistic director and CEO of the Street Theatre.

— JANET WILSON



The Stopera production of *Nigredo Hotel*: David Pearson as Raymond, Rebecca Collins as Sophie. [Photo 'pling]