

LIFE IN THE MINOR KEY

By Barb Bruederlin

Not everybody can make the leap from being homeless to performing off-Broadway, but that's exactly what some members of Canada's largest homeless shelter will be doing this summer. Two members of the DI Singers, a choral group made up of residents of the Calgary Drop In and Rehab Centre, are heading to the Big Apple in July to tread the boards at what's been called "the Sundance of musical theatre," the New York Musical Theatre Festival. The DI Singers, along with chamber musicians, soloists, and the production's creators, will team up with a NYC cast of homeless and housed. Together, they will introduce the original Calgary oratorio, *Requiem for a Lost Girl*, to an off-Broadway audience. While taking a chomp out of the Big Apple, they just might open up a few eyes and some hearts.

The DI Singers were formed in 2008 by Onalea Gilbertson — singer/theatre artist/poet/musician — after she was hired as one of the artists for Calgary's *This is My City* pilot project, an initiative aimed at providing the city's homeless community with increased means of creative expression. "I felt that I needed to go to the Drop In Centre, to integrate and immerse myself in the culture. The funding allowed me to be at the DI working with the singing group for a year," explains Gilbertson. Until just recently, the group met at the Drop In Centre every Monday night, and now meet off-site.

Under her tutelage, the group flourished, putting on public performances about 15 times a year, including singing songs for the Governor General as she attended a *This is My City* event on homelessness and the arts. The act of making music together has instilled its members with a sense of

belonging and purpose and has helped many cope with personal demons. It's been said that people come to the Drop In Centre, not because they are desperate, but because they are hopeful. The success of the DI Singers, the recognition of their collective creative talents and the fact that some members have moved out of the Drop In Centre into independent housing, confirms that sense of hope.

The impetus for *Requiem for a Lost Girl* came about when Onalea Gilbertson learned of the murder of a young teen who had been living on the streets. Loathe to let the girl's life and tragic death disappear unacknowledged into the morass, she worked with the DI Singers, using their original poems and songs and their personal knowledge of homelessness, to create a libretto about poverty, homelessness, mental health and addiction. The resulting oratorio, commissioned by the Land's End Chamber Ensemble, premiered at One Yellow Rabbit's 2010 High Performance Rodeo under the original title *Two Bit Oper-eh?-shun*, and starred members of the DI Singers, along with soloists, a choir and the Land's End Chamber Ensemble.

Gilbertson expects the off-Broadway debut to be every bit as powerful as the original Calgary production. "The honesty is undeniable and the beauty is undeniable," she maintains. In preparation, she has been making frequent trips to NYC to connect with participants from Covenant House Youth Shelter and Fountain House mental health facility, and with adults and children from the Henry Street Settlement. "I'm really excited to be working with some youth in this new incarnation of the play," she

explains, "because the young woman who was lost to the streets was only 15."

John Harris, one of the original members of the DI Singers, is still a bit incredulous to be performing off-Broadway this summer. The affable musician with the easy laugh and the shock of grey hair busks most of the summer. He has an impressive catalogue of children's songs from the early 1900's in his repertoire, and he always has some candy in his guitar case for the kids. A gifted classical guitarist who has performed on the same stage as B.B. King, Harris is not easily given to stage fright. He is, however, somewhat taken aback by the opportunity afforded to members of the DI Singers who participated in the original project. "We used to just play our instruments and ask people to join us. Some people would bring a guitar, some a mouth organ." He laughs, "We are now, at this juncture, kind of an export product of the Drop In Centre."

No longer homeless, Harris now lives in an affordable housing unit just across the river from the Calgary Drop In Centre. Being part of the DI Singers remains a vital part of his life, even aside from the upcoming NYC performance that promises to launch them into the international spotlight. "Just being part of the group, you develop a sense of belonging," he explains. To illustrate, he gently sets down his guitar and picks up a hand-written note, from which he reads the words of a poem he wrote while homeless. "What does it mean to be part of humanity? What does it mean to be apart from humanity?" *Requiem for a Lost Girl* may go a long way toward answering those questions.



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