

WILLIAMS

JORELL

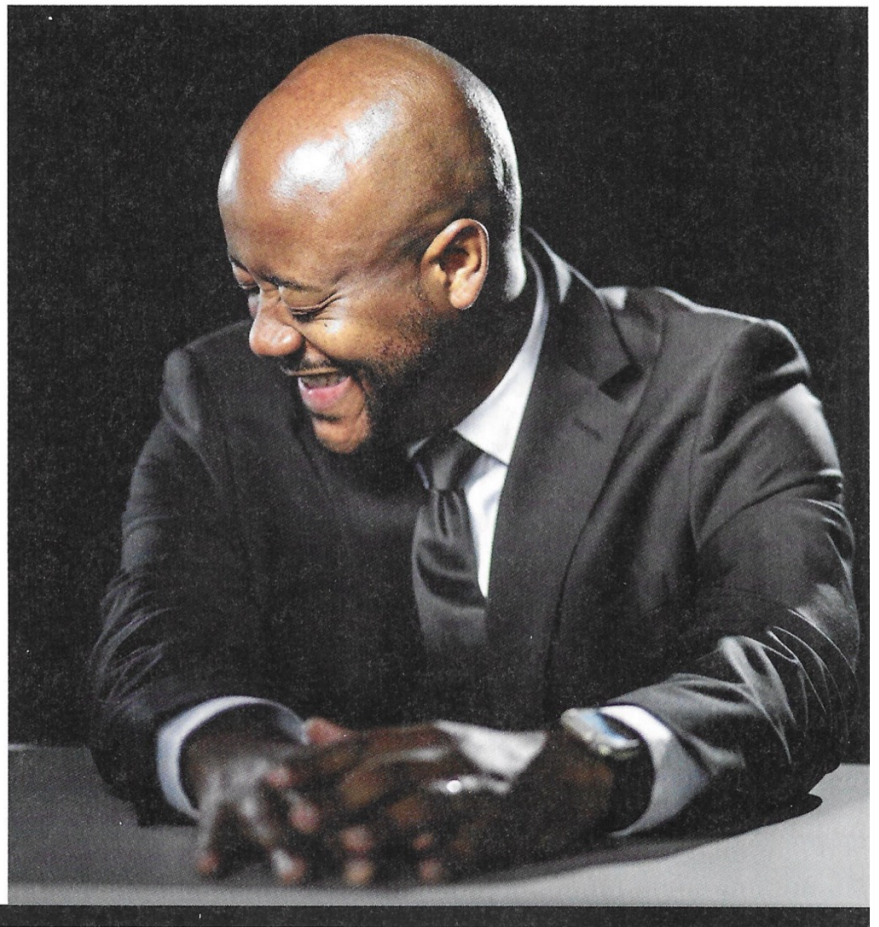


A QUICK STUDY WITH A
WIDE RANGE

BY GIDEON DABI

Proud to make Canada his new home, the Toronto-based baritone shares what inspires him, what drives him, and what opera needs today

Jorell Williams never intended to be a singer. “It was an accident,” he tells me from his condo in downtown Toronto. “I was a pianist. I had been playing piano since I was four.” Jorell had college auditions planned as a piano major. When he arrived for his audition at SUNY Purchase, they informed him that the program for which he was applying had lost state funding and was no longer in existence. “But you could audition for voice,” they informed him.



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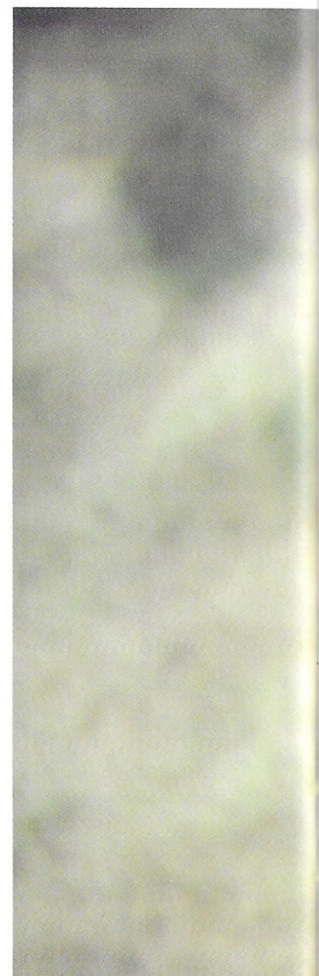
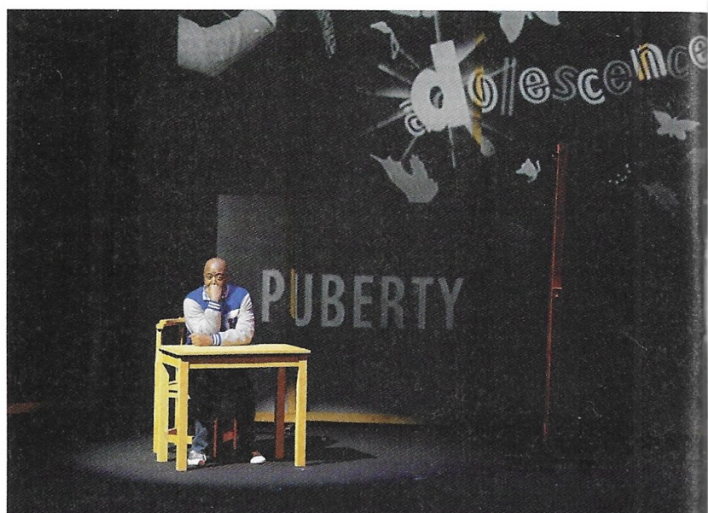
Scrounging together Mozart's art song "Abendempfindung" in three days, Jorell auditioned as a voice major and was accepted. "And the rest is history!" he says mockingly of himself. What Jorell didn't realize at the time was how being asked to step into a new role in the final hour would become emblematic of his career. "That's how I often get work – being asked to step in. At some point I wonder when some of these folks will just hire me to begin with," he laughs.

Born in Brooklyn and raised in Brentwood, Long Island, NY, and now a proud permanent resident of Canada, Jorell Williams was no stranger to the world of music. His father, James "D-Train" Williams (Jorell is sure to affectionately emphasize the "D-Train" stage name part of his father's name), is an accomplished R&B singer having performed with the likes of Vanessa Williams, Osceola Davis, and others. "Yup," he smiles, "that's my dad. Jheri curls and all." I ask Jorell how he became a pianist. "Well, there was this yellow 'Muppet Babies' keyboard..." He goes on to explain the lining up of keys with notes and lights the associations he created. "I learned 'Rainbow Connection' and all of the other Muppet songs." After his father discovered the young Jorell teaching songs to himself, he decided to hire a piano teacher for the young JoJo, as his nickname is (he reveals to me with slight embarrassment). After Jorell began studying piano in earnest with Cathy Lee, he found himself in a piano store trying out pianos when a couple asked him to demonstrate. Following them around the store, Jorell played every piano they asked for until they finally settled one and bought a piano in cash. The owner offered Jorell a job. "I played piano all day and it paid for my lessons," he says. After Jorell was accepted into SUNY Purchase he began studying with

Thomas Goodheart (now at Binghamton University) to whom he credits most of his vocal development. "I still have those lesson tapes. He showed me how to use my voice. The beginning was interesting. 'Amarilli [mia bella]' was tough!" he laughs. "Once you get past the first *passaggio* you're good!" he follows up.

Earlier this year in these pages I interviewed the great Canadian bass-baritone, John Relyea, about the differences between the Canadian opera scene and the American opera scene. At the time, Relyea said that there was "more of a sense of comradery" among Canadian singers. I ask the Brooklyn-born Jorell if he agrees. "I agree," he tells me. "Canada is full of opportunities for early music, concert music, for oratorio, and it is a staple of Canadian music. It allows for [the singers] to have a more versatile CV. It solidifies your artistry because then you can bend as necessary within an opera which is more large scale. [New York City] is very cutthroat and oversaturated. There are many places to perform. The money is there. There's a lot of push and pull and politics." Although Jorell laments the year "lost in residence" due to the pandemic, he's extremely grateful to how agreeable Canada has been. "In June of 2021 I got notification that I was a permanent resident."

Jorell's connection to Canada is simple but meaningful: it's where he met his Canadian wife, mezzo-soprano Marjorie Maltais. "We met in St. John's, Newfoundland. We became fast friends. Fast forward two years, we started dating, and now we're married and have a baby." Relocation is always a precarious position for a singer, in particular one from New York, a city through which nearly every company comes through for auditions. Just before the pandemic, Jorell was singing for Seattle Opera in a production of Daniel Schnyder's





PHOTOS: (PREVIOUS SPREAD & RI) DAHLIA KATZ; (L) STEVEN PISANO

Above: Williams in *As One* by The American Opera Project and NYC Opera, 2019

Below: As Maduka in Cusson/Ambrose's *Of the Sea* with Tapestry Opera, 2023

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PHOTO: DANIELA KATZ / TAPESTRY OPERA

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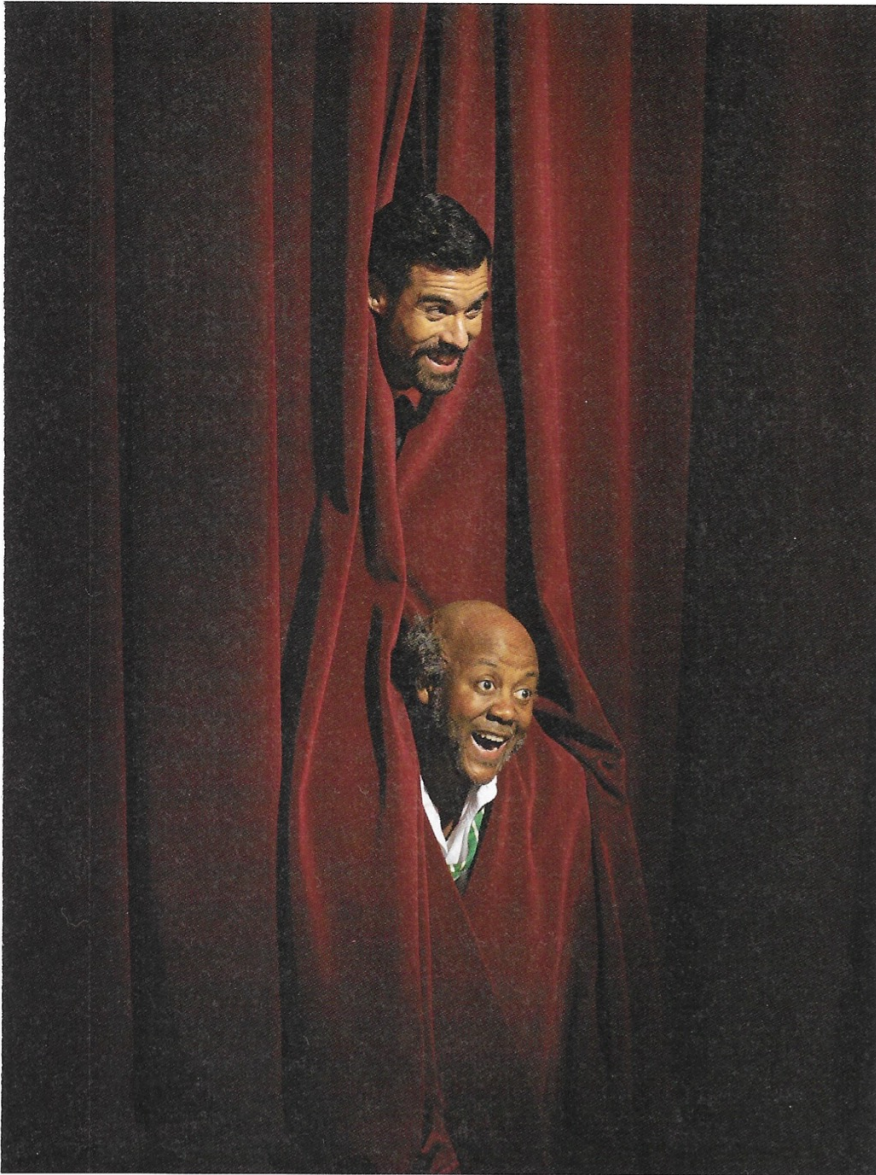
Williams as Maduka in Cusson and Ambrose's *Of the Sea* in March 2023; *Opera Canada* said that he sang "powerfully" with "beauty" and was "emotionally engaging"

Yardbird, based on the life of Charlie Parker. "I said, 'if this is the last performance I ever do I'd be ok with it.' [Marjorie] stopped me in my tracks and said, 'Absolutely not.' That's when I knew she was the right one for me."

Among the upcoming projects with which Jorell is involved is one with the Toronto-based Nathaniel Dett Chorale. Nathaniel Dett was a pioneer in the promotion of afro-centric music in America and Canada. Born in Ontario in 1882, Dett was famous for having composed many works, including *The Cake Walk* and *After the Cake Walk*, as well as *Listen to the Lambs* (1914), *Juba Dance* (1913), and the oratorio *The Ordering of Moses* (1937). Among Dett's great posthumous collaborators was the legendary American composer, conductor and arranger Moses Hogan. The specific project with Jorell is involved is an upcoming recording of a work entitled *The Colour of Joy* with soprano Jonelle Sills. "These works are in print, but there's no recording of them," Jorell says. "It's as if Schubert wrote a prequel or sequel to 'Erlkönig.'"

Jorell has embraced working throughout Canada (Vancouver Opera, Pacific Opera Victoria, Tapestry Opera, as well as the Canadian Opera Company (COC)). Jorell tells me how he had to sit out a performance of *Salome* (with the COC) due to the birth of his daughter, Emma. "My wife called me and said, 'I'm going to the hospital.' 'Is it just a check-up,' I asked. She said, 'No I'm in labor.' I always had it in my head that [the birth of my child] would happen during a performance or rehearsal or in a major venue," Jorell tells me while shaking his head. As luck would have it, the doctor delivering their baby was a COC subscriber. "Well, he's missing work tomorrow," said the doctor of Jorell. COC Director of Artistic Planning Roberto Mauro decided to make an event of Jorell's newfound fatherhood. "He was checking up with me every hour. Then he asked if I minded if he made an announcement to the company. I didn't know what he meant by that. So he made this beautiful announcement [before the performance] about me not being able to perform and having something much more important than that. I have the recording of it. It was such a beautiful thing."

Among Jorell's upcoming projects is a collaboration with Catapult Opera and the Greek National Opera to produce Nadia Boulanger's *La ville morte*. Though



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completed in 1912, the original production never made its premiere due to the outbreak of World War I. The original orchestration did not survive fully though some fragments were found. In 2005, Mauro Bonifacio completed a re-orchestration of the piece and it was finally premiered in Siena. In a seemingly fitting fate for the American premiere of the work, the Gotham Chamber Opera production of *La ville morte* had to be postponed due to COVID-19. When I ask him what the challenges of the piece are, he gestures backwards to his home smilingly. “Having an infant. When you have role debuts as opposed to roles you’ve already done, expediting the process is what’s hardest. But I never worry about what’s coming next. I have the weird luxury of being Mr. I-Can-Learn-It-Last-Minute and have been reliable in doing so.”

I notice that much of Jorell’s upcoming work is – as the Nathaniel Dett Chorale’s work describes it – Afrocentric. I ask him how he feels the opera business has fared with respect to racial inclusivity, something more acutely on the minds of many in the wake of the George Floyd demonstrations of 2020. “All that matters is that [a company] has this artist that we feel is captivating.” I ask Jorell if he feels progress has been made. He says, “I wonder if there are people who are on the other side of the [audition] table who can think of anything other

PHOTOS: (L & R) T. GRADY / OPERA OMAHA

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Baritone Luis Alejandro and Jorell Williams peeking through the curtain in Opera Omaha’s *Don Pasquale*, October 2023



Williams starring in the title role of Opera Omaha's *Don Pasquale* by Donizetti, October 2023

than that 'Jorell is Black'; that there are people [like me] who have already struck out." But Jorell is determined to stress the point that "...this should have nothing to do with race. What should matter is that this person came in and delivered a performance that was so captivating." When I ask what can be done to improve the situation, he begins to explain the folly of so-called outreach. "The problem is this idea of 'outreach.' I hate when organizations use this term. It seems as though you are extending yourself to help someone. As though these companies are doing a favor to underserved communities by 'reaching out to them.' This is backwards. The reality is that these companies would be helping *themselves* by – instead of 'reaching out' – inviting these people into their houses to see how the sausage is made [by attending open rehearsals], so to speak." I ask Jorell how that would be better. He responds with emotion, "The whole appeal of opera is to see how people transform into superhuman beings. For these people in underserved communities to see how the 'sausage is being made' will help us and will help them see how what we do is so special. Going out to their school at 7am to sing some weird opera isn't going to do anything. Getting them to come to our house to see our transformation from regular person in sneakers

or whatever into a superhuman [character] is what will matter. Some of these companies would be better served giving away some tickets."

In this respect, Jorell Williams speaks from his own experience as a student. "The first opera I ever attended was a dress rehearsal of *Les Troyens* at the Met. This was back in the day when the singers would just come out to the lobby to shoot the s—t afterwards. Dwayne Croft came out knowing SUNY students would be there. And he was just talking to me about what it's like to be baritone. That meant everything to me. That's [the type of thing] we need to do to get people involved." When asked why he continues to pursue his career as a performer he nods with determination telling me of a mentor who told him he needed to have the answer to that question. "I finally have the answer and I told him: the whole purpose is to make someone feel something – to laugh or cry or anything even within a circle of fifths. I know that is my job. We have to find a way to speak to people on a higher level. What we do is difficult. And people appreciate that." **OG**

GIDEON DABI is a performing singer, guest lecturer, voice teacher, and freelance writer based in New York City.

