



# To the Queen and Beyond: *A Conversation with Teiya Kasahara*

BY JANE FORNER

Teiya Kasahara, the spark behind the one-person *The Queen in Me*, talks about the show and touring to BC this spring and summer

# When was the last time you went to an opera that featured a P!nk song as an encore?

My answer is that it only happened once for me: in September 2022, at the performance of *The Queen in Me* (TQIM) in its piano version at the Meridian Arts Centre in Toronto. An audience on their feet, cheering – an atmosphere of exuberance and joy roused by an invitation to “Raise Your Glass,” the stomping 2010 club classic that embraces those who feel “wrong in all the right ways.” Nothing could offer a better pop-culture parallel to Teiya Kasahara’s one-person show, a captivating, searing takedown of the operatic patriarchy.

Almost two years later to the date, I sat down with Kasahara, a multifaceted opera artist with an established career as a coloratura soprano, to chat about their upcoming work and reflect on their development of *TQIM*, touring in 2025 to BC – with stops in Kelowna and Vancouver – and Houston. Although the dates in Vancouver and Houston are still being finalized, **Opera Kelowna is presenting *TQIM* on February 26th and 28th** as well as a “bonus” performance of Queen songs on March 1st featuring Kasahara. After its premiere at the Canadian Opera Company in June 2022 and a second run of performances in Toronto that fall in reduced version, successful tours followed to Belfast and Ottawa.

*TQIM* is a showstopper of a piece – literally. You might think you’re in for a one-person aria showcase, but halfway through the notorious “Der Hölle Rache,” Kasahara’s Queen cuts it short. “Hang on a second. What am I *doing* here?” It’s a rupture that sets off reflection, interrogation, satire and critique. Each scene then uses a different aria, beyond Mozart, as a vehicle to emphasize the Queen’s message, ventriloquizing through successive generations of operatic heroines to point to the deep-rooted issues of sexism and racism that continue in the opera world. What resulted is not only a deconstruction of the Queen as a Mozartean character, but a dazzling, fierce examination of opera itself juxtaposed with a performance as indebted to cabaret and spoken-word theatre as it is to classical forms.

Having undergone various metamorphoses over nearly nine years – including navigating the pandemic towards the official world premiere – Kasahara now has two tight, well-oiled shows, a full version with large chamber orchestra and one for piano and voice only in collaboration with pianist David Eliakis. Set and costumes designed by Joanna Yu craft a truly larger-than-life icon of the Queen, while Laura Warren’s video projections create a roiling, vibrant backdrop.

But it was a voyage to get to this point. Relaying its early stages, Kasahara’s narrative of *TQIM*’s genesis is one of glue guns and tablecloths, ripping and stapling to fashion crowns and costumes. It’s also a narrative of exceptional collaboration and support at every stage. *TQIM* is produced with

official involvement of three companies (the COC, Nightwood Theatre and Theatre Gargantua) as well as the many individuals and organizations that facilitated the project’s development (Toronto’s Buddies in Bad Times and Vancouver’s Queer Arts Festival to name only two).

Co-creation is vital to Kasahara’s practice, and it’s more than evident how much co-directors Andrea Donaldson and Aria Umezawa impacted and continue to shape the piece. Amplified Opera, meanwhile, the small but mighty company Kasahara created with co-founders Umezawa, Asitha Tennekoon and Marion Newman, states its mission to “GET LOUD!” It’s this spirit, a noisy reclamation and occupation of operatic space that propels *TQIM*, a DIY collaborative spirit that queer art engages in every medium.

Unlike many of opera’s canonic ill-fated heroines, people don’t tend to question the Queen of the Night all that much, taking it more or less for granted that she’s the

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wicked, overbearing, dark-magic mother than Mozart and Schikaneder tell us she is. Kasahara says “I had been doing a lot of Queen of the Nights. And just feeling the grind of it, the exhaustion, and just feeling really pigeonholed in a certain type of character that I was playing because of my voice, what my voice was doing, and what people saw.”

With a gap between contracts, the seeds of *TQIM* began to be sown for Kasahara, as they began looking behind the veil of coloratura to ask “Where did she come from?” They were inspired, then, to “tell my story through this character. She’s a part of me: my queen of my version.”

Having sung the role many times, Teiya found that tearing the Queen apart





and rebuilding it also required grappling with how their operatic career demanded upholding certain types of gendered and racialized expectations, “existing in this microcosm of intense conservative patriarchy, sexism and racism, and then also being queer and figuring out my transness through writing this show.”

Opera has played with gender conventions throughout its history: “pants” roles are familiar and unquestioned, but gender remains somewhat fixed along a binary. The modern practice of replacing early opera’s castrati roles with countertenors or mezzos – and more nuanced approaches to *en travesti* characters – has encouraged productions that dwell, pleasurably, in thickets of gender ambiguity, teasing out the tangles of body-voice-identity relationships in ways that more explicitly soften rigid boundaries between “male” and “female.”

The opera singer’s body is perennially under scrutiny, and Kasahara confronts this head-on with a mix of fearlessness and grounded vulnerability. Speaking of altering texts to include different pronouns, Kasahara emphasized that it’s not only a case of embracing a non-binary identity specifically,

but a plurality. “It’s including all of these people, like sopranos and women and these characters who feel devalued.” This approach is a powerful catalyst for engagement with an audience. “I get people saying ‘I see myself in that,’ whether they’re cisgender, transgender, queer, straight, a man, a woman, person of colour or not, and it feels really validating. They feel seen, they can connect to it.”

Experiencing the work as a queer person, I hear and see the impact, palpable in the theatre. One senses the electrifying realization of “*This* can be opera, too!”

Even though the trim one-hour show isn’t changing as it tours, Kasahara is keenly aware of its potential to resonate in countless ways for different audience, describing its “iterative spirit” as a work that keeps generating, rather than existing in a fixed state. An untethered spirit of the characters they inhabit onstage has many afterlives, a “multitude of the queens that exist out there.” The multiple meanings of “queens” in the show’s context is, itself, generative. “The audience is like the missing final piece. Whenever I perform the show, they give me energy, and it’s always a little bit different every time in every city.”

*TQIM* also demonstrates the remarkable spirit of curiosity that suffuses Kasahara’s art. As P!nk says, “Why so serious?” It’s not insubstantial business on the agenda – the deaths and tragedies of opera’s women rarely are – but the sheer abundance of energy Kasahara brings to their performance is, necessarily, imbued with a deep sense of play. It is, at heart, a piece that breaks down conventions and rigid categories of voice, of identity, of dramaturgy, but it doesn’t so much break boundaries as it toys with them with a grip that’s sometimes playful and sometimes biting. There is a sense driving the piece of unlocking an operatic potential that deserves to be tapped – a sense that invigorating the genre for the future will require the kind of challenging, critical curiosity that Kasahara brings to all their work.



Pianist David Eliakis and Kasahara in a performance of *The Queen in Me*



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They are firm in what matters to their creativity. "I want to have artistic excellence. I want to have rigour in my practice. I want to have discipline. And I want to do something really well and with ease and sustainability. But I also want to let my curiosity lead, to get messy, to try something out. I want to be able to play and follow that path of curiosity, kind of like a scavenger hunt."

Kasahara's work engages imagination that also leans into the surreal and fantastic. In *TQIM*, this play across gender boundaries also functions as a speculative, almost utopian act. When experiencing multiple forms of discrimination in the "real" world, theatrical and artistic environments offer spaces not only to escape from oppression as a temporary balm, but also to work through it, to create a world that deconstructs and interrogates – and then imagines alternative ways of being.

This stance of speculative invention is a powerful artistic strategy precisely because it confronts and negotiates with the canon. It also helps to steer through the tricky terrain of dealing with art we love that does harm. As Swedish writer Tiina Rosenberg puts it in her 2016 book *Don't Be Quiet, Start a Riot*, "Can feminists forgive anything for a good tune?" It's easy, we both agree, to get drawn into a spiral of *why*: why continue to make opera, to grapple with it, to try to change it?

It was a "huge realization" for Kasahara that accepting their identity and rejecting

the "conditioning and socialization as a woman, as a girl" that they experienced throughout school and training, especially in playing operatic roles, didn't have to mean "destroying what I'm doing musically. It was in the act of saying 'Yes' to me where I could finally be like, I can be creative now. I can be artistic. It can be both."

Coming back to the role of the Queen during development of *TQIM* also prompted Kasahara to relate differently to the character, reflecting that it felt

like "an echo, but also a returning, like when you return to your childhood home or school. You're still you, but you're also a different person with so many experiences."

A tale of what seemed nothing less than cosmic intervention, the kind one might read about in a *101 Operatic Disasters*-style book, underscores this returning. With a Queen sick for a COC mainstage performance of *Magic Flute* in May 2022,

Kasahara got the last-minute call. The story is cinematic – a fierce rainstorm, a voice teacher that just happened to be in town, half an afternoon at most to warm up and see if this could work – and of course, it did. Singing downstage, "I felt vindicated. I'm standing up here as a trans person in a tux, singing Queen of the Night, saving the day." It feels only right that the following month, they'd step once more into that familiar space, but this time on their own terms.

Other projects have offered and continue to open spaces for Kasahara to tackle important topics, especially around racialized and gendered identities in opera. *The Butterfly Project*, which is still in development, similarly interrogates one of the genre's most popular roles and works from a critical lens. Alongside the tour of *TQIM*, Teiya's work in the 2024-25 season includes covers in the COC's *Madama Butterfly* and *Nabucco* and more co-creation across the country, reflecting their strong spirit of collaboration. Kasahara took on the role of "O" in the Vancouver-based re:Naissance Opera's *Eurydice Fragments* in fall 2024, an adaptation of the perennial myth featuring cutting-edge motion-capture technology. They will also create a role in a premiere for Edmonton's Nuova Vocal Arts, an operatic adaptation of Moira Buffini's 1999 play *Silence* (June 2025), and curate a concert for Musica Intima in Vancouver (July 2025).

And future possibilities for *TQIM*? It's in a solid form now: a tight show that can tour, scale up, scale down. But Kasahara is slowly watering the seedlings of where it could go, with potential ideas for a radio play version and a filmed version – the latter a strong fit for the opera world's swelling interest in digital opera of late. In the meantime, its journey to reach many diverse audiences is still in full swing.

What, I asked, would you want somebody to know who's coming to the show for the first time?

"I think it's more that I need to be encouraged and say 'This is opera!' If I'm touting this message that we need to evolve opera and create new works and reimagine things, then I should be saying 'This is opera!' I'm so glad when a lot of people say that [*TQIM*] was their first opera! And I think, well, I am really lucky that you got to see *this* as your first opera, and that you know this is possible." In other words, it's opera "because I say it is." **OC**

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