

## CALEDONIA: Synopsis

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century PEI farm house, eighty seven year old Dan John Dan MacKinnon, dressed for travel, watches Grand Prix Wrestling. From shadow emerges his granddaughter, sixteen year old 'Mordred' MacArthur, hair spiked, black clothing artfully ripped – lips, ears and nose pierced. Mordred is 1980's high punk. Her mother Katherine MacArthur enters from Dan John Dan's bedroom, carrying a packed suitcase. Katherine's husband, Douglas MacArthur, props a real estate sign against the downstairs door frame.

Dan John Dan's removal from the MacKinnon homestead sets the action; the quartet 'Alone' sets the tone. Mordred's shout/speak 'aria' to loss and hope, *The Sea*, shatters time and convention. The farmhouse disappears. Mordred is propelled back through time. She stands on a gracefully arched wooden country bridge. This central image of Caledonia spans the stage, forms the base on and around which the action unfolds. Below Mordred, it is 1911. The members of the ensemble enter on their knees, picking potatoes, exhausted by their days work; they sing *Red Clay Loam*, a hymn of thanks for the bountiful crop. Dan John Dan, now age sixteen, emerges from the ensemble. His *Harvest Prayer* arises from the choral.

Mordred is terrified and intrigued. She witnesses the arrival of the unilingual lowland Presbyterian minister Reverend Stewart. He is challenged by community elder, Sinè Màiri Mac à Phearson, a Gaelic speaker of great authority. Dan John Dan becomes the linguistic bridge between the Gaelic community of Caledonia and the dominant Anglo culture which seeks its assimilation. The battle is joined in the trio *The Ballad of Times Gone By*. Dan John Dan and Sinè Màiri, with her beautiful daughter Mary Margaret, engage the Reverend in musical debate. The ballad culminates in the proclamation/response duet, *The Sacred Vessel*, in which Dan John Dan is inducted as guardian of the culture by Sinè Màiri. Mordred walks among the shadows. Only young Dan John Dan and Sinè Màiri see her. And she sees them. They are bound to each other by 'the sight'.

In the present, Mordred's erratic behaviour includes 'liberating' her sullen, withdrawn grandfather from the *Whispering Pines Retirement Villa*. Katherine banishes Mordred to Thornhill, a regimented girls school in New Brunswick. Mordred is enraged. As are *The Island Celts*, her nascent punk rock band. They trash the *Whispering Pines*. Their mind-numbing rendition of the punk rock 'spew' *Behind the Barn* seals Mordred's fate.

Caledonia's dual time lines converge at the end of act one. World War One destabilises Caledonia, already isolated, by claiming many of her young men. As young Dan John Dan prepares to leave Caledonia, he sings the title aria, *Caledonia Air*. In the present, grim Mordred, glum and dark, prepares for Thornhill.

At the top of act two, Dan John Dan returns to his daughter Katherine's birth, and the resulting death of his beloved Mary Margaret. He puts the substance and symbols of the declining culture with its too painful memories aside. Mordred returns from Thornhill, looking like Olivia Newton John; a style she can barely wait to shed. Mordred undergoes profound change; she finds her true voice, and style. She adopts 1990's chic, becomes elegant and self-possessed. Something in her remains unfulfilled: she re-assembles *The Island Celts*.

Time lines diverge as the second act progresses. Mordred stands witness as Dan John Dan relives the tragic consequences of Katherine's birth. In the climactic *The Lesson/Lamb of God*, he conjures Sinè Màiri's death. Katherine joins them. Their movement back in time provides the information Katherine requires to complete her journey. The aria *Mother* frees her soul. Mordred finds her *raison d'être* in her reprise of Dan John Dan's act one aria, *Caledonia Air*. With the help of smitten *Island Celts* manager Kyle Jones, she collects and records Dan John Dan's songs, in Gaelic, which begin to emerge rapidly as old age resettles upon him.

Her rise to fame as a contemporary Gaelic singer reassures re-invented twenty two year old Mary Katherine (formerly known as Mordred!) Still grieving her grandfather, she marries Kyle. Katherine's wedding present to her daughter? The deed to the beloved MacKinnon farm. On the bridge Mordred gives a spontaneous Gaelic concert. The wedding party erupts in jubilant, traditional song and dance. The old songs summon her ancestors, Dan John Dan now among them. At Mary Katherine's wedding, four generations mingle, the present becomes acquainted with the past, ancestors live in the future, the future beckons... and we are reassured.