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## **Virginia Arts Festival celebrates "Pocahontas"**

Norfolk - It's America's biggest birthday since the 1976 bicentennial celebration of the Declaration of Independence: the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, the first permanent English-speaking settlement in the New World. And to commemorate the landing of those 104 adventurous Englishmen the Virginia Arts Festival and the Virginia Opera co-commissioned "Pocahontas," a tribute to the young Native American woman who charmed the new arrivals. The favorite daughter of Algonquian chief Powhatan, she learned English, converted to Christianity, married Virginia colonist John Rolfe and gave birth to a son, whom both Thomas Jefferson and Robert E. Lee claimed as an ancestor. Renamed Rebecca by a clergyman who saw her as the mother of two nations, Pocahontas traveled to England, where she was presented at court and, as she prepared to return to Jamestown, died suddenly at 24 in 1817. She is buried at Gravesend, and it is there that the one-act chamber opera by composer Linda Tutas Haugen and librettist Joan Vail Thorne begins.

From there it moves back to Jamestown and the early hostile confrontation between natives and settlers. Pocahontas appears now as an adolescent, a tomboy attractive to both parties and simultaneously as a mature woman respected on both side of the Atlantic. This interplay between the young and mature character is particularly effective in underscoring her role in two cultures.

Beyond the outer facts of her brief life, little is known about the "real" Pocahontas. Contemporary accounts were - in the style of the day - elaborately embellished, and later generations - including the 1995 Disney film - have added undocumented ornamentation. And although Haugen and Thorne obviously did an immense amount of study - including on-site observation of artifacts and landscape, they have made no effort to fill in blanks. Their endeavor focuses not on linear narration, but rather on an evocation of the unusual woman that Pocahontas was. While committed to cultural accuracy, the creative team has sought not to write history, but to explore the mystery of this woman who did much to establish peace between two peoples.

**And the mesmerizing quality of Haugen's score stresses that basic questions about Pocahontas remain open. "I ask myself who I am**

**and I do not know the answer," she sings. "There will never be an answer; I will always be ... a question."**

**Acclaimed a success by the enthusiastic audience that packed Norfolk's Roper Performing Arts Center for the world premiere on May 19, "Pocahontas" is an opera like no other. It is a pastiche that combines song and extensive spoken dialogue in a superbly crafted score. Haugen, noted for her use of ethnic voices and instruments in previous works, went to the tribes still resident in the East for motifs that she has woven into the work, the instrumentation of which calls for specially crafted Native American flutes, drums and shakers. . .**

**With a voice decidedly her own the composer has combined all this in a 90-minute seamless score for nine instrumentalists seated on stage behind the small, near-empty space upon which the story plays. "Pocahontas" is engaging and accessible . . . . The music is beautiful . . . powerful . . . wonderfully singable. Rolfe's wooing of the heroine and her death scene elevate this enigmatic woman into the company of Violetta and Mimi.**

**Pocahontas is famous beyond her native region, and this opera deserves stagings elsewhere.**

Wes Blomster