

# **POCAHONTAS SYNOPSIS**

An Opera in One Act  
Music by Linda Tutas Haugen  
Libretto by Joan Vail Thorne

## *Note*

*The following sequence of dramatic events is not what this opera is about. It is simply the historical background around which the story is woven. In the opera itself, time and place are fractured, and the fictional character of her mother, for whom we have no history, tells the story of Pocahontas; in the opera itself, the short life of a young woman who lived only nineteen years becomes a vision of courage that transcends time and inspires awe.*

## **Scene 1**

In the way that art transforms time, the opera opens at the end of the story -- on the burial of Pocahontas in Gravesend, England. In the way that art conquers fate, Pocahontas is not dead; she is as alive as she is today in history, myth, and collective memory. In the opera there are two Pocahontases, and in the opening scene the younger Pocahontas appears with the older one and takes her back to the time of her youth in Virginia. All the members of the company appear in Indian attire and perform a ritual of thanksgiving and rebirth that is akin to the Green Corn Dance of the Algonkian Indians. They are led by a priest of their tribe, called Uttamatomakin, who chants the creation story of their people.

## **Scene 2**

Two of the most important figures in Pocahontas' life appear in the following scene. The English colonist and adventurer, Captain John Smith is taken captive to the principal village of Powhatan, the Great Chief. He and Powhatan agree to trade between their peoples, but it soon becomes evident that while the Indians save the lives of the colonists with gifts of food in a time of terrible drought, the English are far less generous with the goods they promised and often did not deliver in return.

## **Scene 3**

Pocahontas is Powhatan's favorite child, and in the next scene, that clearly demonstrates her precocious wit and charm, she acts as her father's emissary and brings gifts of food to the starving Jamestown colony. True to the mischievous nature suggested by her name, she turns cartwheels for John Smith, and he is much taken with this unusual and intelligent child.

#### **Scene 4**

In a subsequent scene Powhatan and John Smith swear their kinship in a ceremony presided over by the priest, Uttamatomakin, as Pocahontas hides in the forest to observe. Powhatan takes Smith as his adopted son, and Smith promises to serve him as a son should.

#### **Scene 5**

Both time and the world turn back to England now, and Pocahontas, though still only nineteen, is seen as a grown woman. She has married the English colonist, John Rolfe, and journeyed with him to England to pay a kind of state visit to his homeland. The priest, Uttamatomakin, travels with them to gather information about the English for Powhatan, whose daughter becomes the toast of London. She is much admired and entertained by the aristocracy, even received at court by King James I.

John Smith, who had left Jamestown ten years before and been thought by Pocahontas and Powhatan to be dead, pays a call on the Lady Rebecca, as she has come to be called by her Christian name. Because he has not kept his word to her father, has not even bothered to let him know of his continued existence, Pocahontas angrily chastises him and his countrymen for their mendacity and fickleness.

#### **Scene 6**

A short rhetorical recitation of some of the major and minor atrocities that occurred during the most difficult times at Jamestown – atrocities committed by the English against the Indians and in reprisal by the Indians against the English.

#### **Scene 7**

Time and place shift again and Pocahontas is back in Virginia where relations between the English colonists and the Indians have become ever more cruel and dangerous. She is betrayed by some of her own people, kidnapped, and taken prisoner aboard the English ship of Captain Argall and then transferred to Jamestown.

#### **Scene 8**

In Jamestown she is held for ransom of some English prisoners whom her father, Powhatan, is holding captive. There her life changes dramatically. She is taught Christianity by Reverend Alexander Whitaker and English by John Rolfe, who falls in love with her.

#### **Scene 9**

She returns Rolfe's love, becomes a Christian, and is married to him.

Their union has Powhatan's approval, and brings a period of peace between the warring nations. In due time they have a son named Thomas.

### **Scene 10**

The final scene of the opera returns to England where John Rolfe and his wife and young son are preparing for their return to America. She becomes gravely ill aboard the ship and has to be taken off to an inn at Gravesend. There she dies, and the cycle of life and death and rebirth that the opera celebrates begins again.