

**Press Release**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

August 17, 2016

**Washington National Opera  
Announces Programming for the  
2017 American Opera Initiative Festival  
January 13–15, 2017  
in the Kennedy Center Family Theater**

**Three new one-act operas, each inspired by the ideals of President Kennedy, will be presented as part of the Kennedy Center’s celebration of the JFK Centennial**

***What Gets Kept* by Frances Pollock and Vanessa Moody  
*Adam* by Zach Redler and Jason Carlson  
*Lifeboat* by Matthew Peterson and Emily Roller**

**Plus the world premiere of  
*The Dictator’s Wife*  
by Mohammed Fairouz and Mohammed Hanif**

**Program mentors are composer John Musto,  
librettist Gene Scheer, and conductor Steven Osgood**

(WASHINGTON)—Washington National Opera (WNO) today announced full programming details for the fifth season of the American Opera Initiative, its comprehensive commissioning program that brings contemporary American stories to the stage while fostering the talents of rising American composers and librettists. For the first time, all of the program’s world premiere operas will be presented during an American Opera Initiative Festival weekend, January 13–15, 2017 in the Kennedy Center Family Theater. Three new pairings of opera composers and librettists—

Frances Pollock and Vanessa Moody, Zach Redler and Jason Carlson, and Matthew Peterson and Emily Roller—will each offer new one-act operas, each based on a contemporary American story and inspired by the ideals often ascribed to President Kennedy as part of *JFKC: A Centennial Celebration of President Kennedy*. Two semi-staged concert performances of each opera will be presented on January 14, 2017. In addition, as previously announced, WNO will present the world premiere of a new hour-long work by composer Mohammed Fairouz and librettist Mohammed Hanif—*The Dictator's Wife*, based on Hanif's satirical play—on January 13 and 15, 2017.

"I'm excited to showcase four new American operas during our new festival weekend in January," said WNO Artistic Director Francesca Zambello. "I'm also proud that our commissioning program is a part of the Center-wide JFK centennial celebration this season. The creation of new opera—work that not only entertains but challenges and provokes new thoughts and ideas—is a fitting tribute to the legacy of President Kennedy and his inspirational ideals."

The three composer/librettist teams of the one-act operas will collaborate on their works with three distinguished mentors who have each enjoyed professional success with new American operas: composer John Musto (*The Inspector, Later the Same Evening*), librettist Gene Scheer (WNO's *Moby-Dick, Cold Mountain*), and conductor Steven Osgood (General and Artistic Director of Chautauqua Opera Company). The composer/librettist teams have been working with their mentors and advisors throughout the creative process, and a full collaborative workshop with all the composers, librettists, mentors, and cast members is scheduled for October 2016 in Washington.

"This season's American Opera Initiative Festival will bring a diverse and accomplished group of musical storytellers to Washington, and they all have personal and powerful tales to tell," said Michael Heaston, the departing program director of the American Opera Initiative and WNO's Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program. "For our gifted young artists, this is an incredible opportunity to see firsthand how new operas are created and to work directly with the composers and librettists, as well as our remarkable program mentors. Since most of the operatic canon is centuries old, this is a rare opportunity indeed. As we all look forward to the workshops in the fall, the program will continue to flourish under the new leadership of Robert Ainsley, who will see this cycle of exciting new works to completion."

## **New one-act operas expand the American repertory**

The three original one-act operas presented in two semi-staged concert performances on January 14, 2017 will each highlight a different aspect of American life and culture, and each has been inspired and informed by the ideals often ascribed to President Kennedy. These new works will be accompanied by a chamber orchestra conducted by Steven Osgood and will be performed in English. Following each performance there will be a Q&A session with the artists and creative team. Full casting for the three one-act operas, featuring members of WNO's Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program and other guest artists, will be announced soon.

### ***What Gets Kept***

Music by Frances Pollock

Libretto by Vanessa Moody

Amy, suffering from a terminal illness, has decided to pursue death on her own terms with medical assistance. While her teen daughter faces the situation head-on, her husband seeks to buy the family more time together. Embracing its unique blend of dark humor and deep compassion, the family navigates the difficult tasks of grieving for a living person and finding peace in the aftermath of loss. *What Gets Kept* champions the ideals of courage and creativity as the family interacts with death in brave and inventive ways. Harnessing the ideal of community, the family must balance the needs of the individual with those of the whole. *A JFKC Commission*.

### ***Adam***

Music by Zach Redler

Libretto by Jason Carlson

*Adam* is the story of the creation of the world's first sentient artificial human. Mirroring the spirit of President Kennedy's launch of the U.S. space program, Adam's creator Athena seeks her goals "...not because they are easy but because they are hard" (JFK). She does so in the service of science and of her country...but is there justice in creating a being with free will for a purpose that he did not choose? Will Athena have the courage to stand by Adam against forces that would own his destiny? The ideals that inspire these questions would be as essential in such a future as they are now and as they were in the Kennedy era. *A JFKC Commission*.

### ***Lifeboat***

Music by Matthew Peterson

Libretto by Emily Roller

Three refugees are stranded in an inflatable lifeboat out in the open ocean; they are the sole survivors of a shipwreck. After three days, tensions erupt between the strangers, who each fled the same conflict for different reasons. As their pasts are revealed, cooperation—and survival—seem unlikely. *Lifeboat* explores and challenges the ideals of courage, social justice, and service; can these ideals overcome major divides

between people of different backgrounds and experiences? Can we all live in the same boat? *A JFKC Commission*.

**Acclaimed writing team uses satire to tell the story of *The Dictator's Wife***

Following the sold-out success of *Approaching Ali* (2013), *An American Soldier* (2014), *Penny* (2015), and *Better Gods* (2016), WNO is proud to present the world premiere of *The Dictator's Wife*, a new hour-long opera by American composer Mohammed Fairouz and librettist Mohammed Hanif, based on Hanif's acclaimed play of the same title, on January 13 and 15, 2017. Fairouz, born in 1985, is one of the most frequently performed, commissioned, and recorded composers working today. His fourth symphony, *In the Shadow of No Towers* for wind ensemble, about American life in the aftermath of 9/11, premiered in 2013 at Carnegie Hall. Hanif's first novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), was shortlisted for the 2008 Guardian First Book Award and longlisted for the 2008 Man Booker Prize; he is also a regular Contributing Op-Ed Writer for *The New York Times*. Another opera written by Fairouz and Hanif, *Bhutto*, about the former prime minister of Pakistan, will have its world premiere at Pittsburgh Opera in 2018.

*The Dictator's Wife* will be conducted by Nicole Paiement, the Principal Guest Conductor of The Dallas Opera, who previously led the WNO Orchestra in *The Little Prince* in 2014, and will be directed by internationally acclaimed theater director Ethan McSweeney, who staged last season's world premiere of WNO's *Better Gods*. Full casting for *The Dictator's Wife*, featuring members of WNO's Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program, will be announced soon.

***The Dictator's Wife***

Music by Mohammed Fairouz

Libretto by Mohammed Hanif

In this biting satirical work, the glamorous yet tormented wife of a once-powerful dictator bemoans that she now has to answer for all of the terrible atrocities committed by her husband, who has taken to cowering in the bathroom as the country falls apart.

## **TICKET INFORMATION**

[American Opera Initiative: \*Three 20-Minute Operas\*](#) will be presented on Saturday, January 14, 2017 at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. in the Kennedy Center Family Theater. [Tickets](#) are \$20. [American Opera Initiative: \*The Dictator's Wife\*](#) will be presented on Friday, January 13, 2017 at 7 p.m. and Sunday, January 15, 2017 at 2 p.m. in the Kennedy Center Family Theater. [Tickets](#) are \$35.

Tickets are available by visiting the Kennedy Center box office, by calling Instant Charge at (202) 467-4600, or through the Kennedy Center [website](#). Groups of 10 or more may contact the Group Sales office at (202) 416-8400.

## **Biographies of the 2017 American Opera Initiative Festival Composers and Librettists**

Initially stepping up to the operatic stage as a singer, composer **Frances Pollock** (composer, *What Gets Kept*) draws inspiration from her love of storytelling and the human spirit explored through theater. Her most recent opera *Stinney* received numerous grants and awards, including the Diversity Innovation Grant from Johns Hopkins University and the “Best of Baltimore: Best New Opera” by *City Paper*. Her works have been staged at the North Carolina Governor’s School as well as the Baltimore War Memorial, where she recently collaborated with librettist Vanessa Moody in the quintet *God as She Makes this Earth*. Frances holds a BM in Theory and Composition from Furman University and a MM in Vocal Performance from Peabody Conservatory. She studies composition privately with Dr. David Smooke.

**Vanessa Moody** (librettist, *What Gets Kept*) is a Brazilian-American writer splitting her time between New York and Baltimore. Growing up bilingual, she developed her love of language at a young age. Her latest publication, *what it sounds like inside*, was recently published in an issue of *Willow Springs*. Other recent publications appeared in the *Yellow Chair Review*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Leland Quarterly*. She was one of four poets featured at the New York Botanical Garden’s February event, *The Poet is In*, where she wrote on-the-spot personalized poems. The text to her piece, *God as she makes this earth*, set for a quintet by composer Frances Pollock, premiered at the Baltimore War Memorial in May 2016. She earned her BA in English from Stanford University, where she studied with Tobias Wolff and Adam Johnson. She is now pursuing her MFA in Poetry at New York University.

**Zach Redler** (composer, *Adam*) is an award-winning composer, pianist, and music copyist. His music has been performed at Lincoln Center, Merkin Hall, National Opera Center, and a variety of international venues. He spent 2011–2013 in residence as a Van Lier fellow at American Opera Projects as part of their Composers and the Voice Program. In 2014, along with collaborator Sara Cooper, he was awarded the American Theatre Wing’s Jonathan Larson Grant for their contributions to musical theater. *A Song for Susan Smith*, his opera with Mark Campbell, was featured in the 2015 Frontiers Festival at the Fort Worth Opera as well as the University of Colorado Boulder’s CU Now series. His musical *The Memory Show*, created in collaboration with Sara Cooper, recently opened to rave reviews Off West End in London. He is a member of ASCAP and Local 802, a graduate of the Tisch Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program, and

currently adjunct faculty member at Steinhardt and Tisch at New York University. [www.zachredler.com](http://www.zachredler.com)

A 2015 Kleban Prize Finalist, **Jason Carlson** (librettist, *Adam*) is a lyricist, librettist, and playwright. His musical, *Rain Down the Ruin*, with composer John Grimm (an alumnus of WNO's American Opera Initiative), was staged by the Collaborative Development and Production at NYU Tisch Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program in 2014 and by The University Players at Indiana University in 2015. His and Grimm's chamber opera, *Odette*, was a finalist at the 2012 New York Avant Garde Festival. He is a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute and the Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, as well as a member of the Dramatists Guild of America.

Since moving to Sweden from North Dakota in 2008, Stockholm-based composer **Matthew Peterson** (composer, *Lifeboat*) has explored frontiers of sound and expression in music featuring vivid orchestrations, rhythmic vibrancy, expressive clarity, and emotional depth. His expansive output ranges from a chamber opera based on Wisconsin court cases to modern settings of sacred texts and stunning orchestral soundscapes. More than 60 of his compositions have been performed across Europe and North America. A graduate of St. Olaf College and Indiana University, he has received numerous honors, including the Fulbright Grant, grand prize in the Uppsala composer competition, the ASCAP Nissim Award, two BMI student composer awards, grants from Svensk Musik and FST, and honors from the Minnesota Orchestra, Fort Worth Opera, Opera Vista, National Opera Association, Chanticleer, and Vocal Essence. The 2016–2017 season includes performances by Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, NorrlandsOperan Orchestra, Swedish Chamber Orchestra, a feature on Stockholm's Waldemarsudde chamber music series, and the world premiere production of *Voir Dire* with Fort Worth Opera and Milwaukee's Skylight Music Theatre.

**Emily Roller** (librettist, *Lifeboat*) is a Brooklyn-based opera and musical theater librettist, playwright, and novelist. Her work has been performed at various venues, including Dixon Place and Joe's Pub, and has been published in literary magazines, including *Piff Magazine* and the *Baltimore Review*. She is the author of *The Alloway Files* (New Stein Publishing House) and *Hookers, Flankers & Locks* (Bare Knuckles Press). She has a BA in English from Yale, an MA in Writing from Johns Hopkins University, and an MFA in Musical Theatre Writing from New York University. She is a fellow in the Composers and the Voice workshop series at American Opera Projects.

**Mohammed Fairouz** (composer, *The Dictator's Wife*), born in 1985, is one of the most frequently performed, commissioned, and recorded composers working today. Hailed by *The New York Times* as "an important new artistic voice" and by BBC World News as "one of the most talented composers of his generation," his large-scale works engage major geopolitical and philosophical themes with persuasive craft and a marked seriousness of purpose. His catalog encompasses virtually every genre, including opera, symphonies, vocal and choral settings, chamber, and solo works. He became the youngest composer on the Deutsche Grammophon label to have an album dedicated to his works with the 2015 release of *Follow, Poet*. His music has been performed at major venues around the country including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Boston's Symphony Hall, and the Kennedy Center, as well as throughout the Middle East, Europe, and Australia. Recordings are available on the Deutsche Grammophon,

Naxos, Bridge, Sono Luminus, Albany, GM/Living Archive, and GPR labels. His principal teachers in composition have included György Ligeti, Gunther Schuller, and Richard Danielpour, with studies at the Curtis Institute and New England Conservatory.

**Mohammed Hanif** (librettist, *The Dictator's Wife*) is a British-Pakistani writer and journalist who is best known for the critically acclaimed *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, which was long-listed for the Booker Prize, shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award, and won the Commonwealth Prize for Best Book. His second book, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*, won the Wellcome Book Prize. He also works as a correspondent for the BBC News based in Karachi and was the writer for its critically acclaimed drama and the feature film, *The Long Night*. His work has been published by *The New York Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Washington Post*. His play *The Dictator's Wife* has been staged at the Hampstead Theatre. In addition to his work at WNO, he is currently collaborating with composer Mohammed Fairouz on an opera titled *Bhutto*, which will receive its world premiere at Pittsburgh Opera in 2018.

### **Biographies of the 2017 American Opera Initiative Festival Mentors**

Regarded as one of today's most versatile musicians, **John Musto** is a composer and pianist whose activities encompass virtually every genre: orchestral and operatic, solo, chamber and vocal music, and music for film and television. His music embraces many strains of contemporary American concert music, drawing inspiration from jazz, ragtime, and the blues. These qualities lend a strong profile to his vocal music, which ranges from a series of operas—*Volpone*, *Later the Same Evening*, *Bastianello*, and *The Inspector*—to a catalogue of art songs that is among the finest of any living American composer. He was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for his orchestral song cycle *Dove Sta Amore*, and is a recipient of two Emmy Awards, two CINE Awards, a Rockefeller Fellowship at Bellagio, and an American Academy of Arts and Letters award.

**Steven Osgood** was recently named General and Artistic Director of the Chautauqua Opera Company, where he conducted productions of *La traviata*, *The Mikado*, and *Song From the Uproar* in the summer of 2016. He has conducted the world premieres of dozens of operas, including works by Tan Dun, Xenakis, Missy Mazzoli, and Daron Hagen. He was Artistic Director of American Opera Projects from 2001 until 2008, during which time he created the company's renowned Composers and the Voice fellowship program. In recent seasons he has appeared with Atlanta Opera, Opera Memphis, Chautauqua Opera Company, Fort Worth Opera, New York City Opera, Wolf Trap Opera, Manhattan School of Music, Edmonton Opera, and the Netherlands Opera. He recently conducted the world premiere of *JFK* by David T. Little and Royce Vavrek at Fort Worth Opera and will lead the world premiere of *Breaking the Waves* by Mazzoli and Vavrek with Opera Philadelphia in the fall of 2016.

Librettist **Gene Scheer** has collaborated with composer Jake Heggie on many projects, including *Moby-Dick* (The Dallas Opera), *Three Decembers* (Houston Grand Opera), and the lyric drama *To Hell and Back* (Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra). Other collaborations include *An American Tragedy* with Tobias Picker, which premiered at the Metropolitan Opera, *Everest* with Joby Talbot (The Dallas Opera), and the oratorio *August 4, 1964* with Steven Stucky (Dallas Symphony Orchestra), which was nominated for a Grammy and performed at Carnegie Hall. *Cold Mountain*, his most recent work

with the composer Jennifer Higdon, premiered at Santa Fe Opera in 2015. He is currently working with Jake Heggie on an operatic adaptation of *It's a Wonderful Life* for Houston Grand Opera, which is set to open in December 2016.

### **ABOUT JFKC: A CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF JOHN F. KENNEDY**

In the year leading up to the centenary of John F. Kennedy's birth on May 29, 2017, the Kennedy Center is revitalizing the very mission of the institution created to honor him. Inspired by a handful of enduring ideals he championed—Courage, Freedom, Justice, Service, and Gratitude—the Center is reenvisioning itself as a “living memorial”: a place that explores, challenges, and reflects the contemporary spirit of America. Guided by JFK's legacy of idealism, hope, and empowerment, the Kennedy Center will launch new initiatives, serving as a catalyst and a meeting place, and invite members of the public to engage with artists and ideas, and to participate in the civic and cultural life of their country.

### **ABOUT WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA**

Washington National Opera (WNO) is one of the leading opera companies in the United States. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Francesca Zambello, the company presents a diverse season of grand opera—including both classics from the repertory and more contemporary pieces—plus several newly commissioned American works and a variety of special concerts and events. The WNO Orchestra is led by Music Director Philippe Auguin. Founded in 1956 and an affiliate of the Kennedy Center since 2011, WNO has a storied legacy of world premieres, new productions, international tours, live recordings and radio broadcasts, and innovative education and community-engagement programs. Throughout its history, WNO has been led by titans in the opera field, including the legendary Plácido Domingo, who headed the company from 1996 to 2011.

WNO contributes to the future of opera through two signature artist-development programs. The Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program, now in its 15th season, has become one of the nation's most competitive and comprehensive professional training programs for young singers and collaborative pianists. Alumni of the program have won major competitions and gone on to successful careers at major opera houses in the U.S. and abroad. The WNO Opera Institute nurtures the ambitions of high-school-age singers from across the nation during an intensive three-week summer program held at American University in Washington.

Among the company's most successful recent programs is the 2012 launch of the American Opera Initiative, a comprehensive commissioning program that works to expand the American operatic repertory, to give WNO's young artists the chance to collaborate with living composers and librettists on new works, and to make American opera more relevant to 21st-century audiences. The most popular of WNO's community-engagement programs is M&M'S® *Opera in the Outfield*, during which an opera is broadcast live from the Kennedy Center Opera House stage to the high-definition scoreboard at Nationals Park. The company's other education programs include the *Kids Create Opera* program at local elementary schools, Look-In performances for students in grades 4–8, and the Student Dress Rehearsal Program for middle and high school students. The company also offers free Opera Insights programs before every performance in the Opera House.

To celebrate the company's 60th anniversary, Washington National Opera presented three complete cycles of Wagner's *Ring* in spring 2016. These performances, featuring an acclaimed production by Artistic Director Francesca Zambello and conducted by Music Director Philippe Auguin, marked the first time the company presented *The Ring* in complete cycles in its history.

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### **FUNDING CREDITS**

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### **TICKETS & INFORMATION**

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