

Press Release

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

December 6, 2016

Washington National Opera  
presents

# American Opera Initiative Festival

January 13–15, 2017

Kennedy Center Family Theater

World premiere of

## ***The Dictator's Wife***

by Mohammed Fairouz and Mohammed Hanif

plus

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

***Lifeboat* by Matthew Peterson and Emily Roller**

***Adam* by Zach Redler and Jason Carlson**

***What Gets Kept* by Frances Pollock and Vanessa Moody**

(WASHINGTON)—Washington National Opera (WNO) presents the fifth season of its acclaimed American Opera Initiative, a 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 are presented during the American Opera Initiative Festival weekend, January 13–15, 2017 in the Kennedy Center Family Theater. The festival begins with

the world premiere of a new hour-long work by composer Mohammed Fairouz and librettist Mohammed Hanif—*The Dictator's Wife*—on January 13 and 15, 2017, directed by Ethan McSweeney (WNO's *Better Gods*, 2016) and with the WNO Orchestra conducted by Nicole Paiement (WNO's *The Little Prince*, 2014). Three new pairings of opera composers and librettists—Matthew Peterson and Emily Roller, Zach Redler and Jason Carlson, and Frances Pollock and Vanessa Moody—offer new one-act operas during the festival, 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 20-minute opera are presented on January 14, 2017.

**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 presents the world premiere of *The Dictator's Wife* by American composer Mohammed Fairouz and librettist Mohammed Hanif, based on Hanif's satirical play, on January 13 (at 7:30 p.m.) and 15 (at 2:00 p.m.), 2017, in the Kennedy Center Family Theater. Fairouz, born in 1985, is one of the most frequently performed, commissioned, and recorded composers working today. Another Fairouz world premiere opera, *The New Prince*, with libretto by *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, will premiere in March 2017 at the Dutch National Opera in Amsterdam. Hanif's first novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 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* is performed in English and is 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 is directed by internationally acclaimed theater director Ethan McSweeney, who staged last season's world premiere of WNO's *Better Gods*. Casting features members of WNO's Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program.

### ***The Dictator's Wife***

Music by Mohammed Fairouz\*

Libretto by Mohammed Hanif\*

#### Creative team

Conductor: Nicole Paiement

Director: Ethan McSweeney

Costume Designer: Lynly A. Saunders

Lighting Designer: A.J. Guban

#### Cast

First Lady: Allegra De Vita ‡

Ms. Holy: Ariana Wehr ‡

ADC: Hunter Enoch ‡

I Will Sell My Children Mom: Leah Hawkins ‡

Give-Me-Cheap-Petrol Protestor: Rexford Tester ‡

Death Row Dad: Timothy J. Bruno ‡

#### Synopsis

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.

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

The three original one-act operas presented on January 14, 2017 at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m., in the Kennedy Center Family Theater, highlight a different aspect of American life and culture, and each has been commissioned by the Kennedy Center's *JFKC: A*

*Centennial Celebration of John F. Kennedy*. These new works are accompanied by a chamber orchestra conducted by Steven Osgood and are performed in English.

Direction of the two semi-staged concert performances is by Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist alumna Andrea Dorf McGray. Following each performance there is a Q&A session with the artists and creative team.

### ***Lifeboat***

Music by Matthew Peterson\*

Libretto by Emily Roller\*

#### Cast

The Professor: Andrew McLaughlin

The Soldier: Raquel González ‡

The Doctor: Daryl Freedman ‡

#### Synopsis

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*.

### ***Adam***

Music by Zach Redler\*

Libretto by Jason Carlson\*

### Cast

Adam: Frederick Ballentine ‡

Athena: Raquel González ‡

Colonel Grey: Andrew Bogard ‡

### Synopsis

*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? Does the combination of great power and free will inevitably lead to conflict? 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*.

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

Music by Frances Pollock\*

Libretto by Vanessa Moody\*

### Cast

Amy: Daryl Freedman ‡

Emma: Jennifer Cherest

Lawrence: Frederick Ballentine ‡

### Synopsis

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*.

\* Washington National Opera Debut

‡ Current member of the Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program

The three composer/librettist teams of the one-act operas have been collaborating 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).

## **TICKET INFORMATION**

[\*The Dictator's Wife\*](#) is 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. [\*Three 20-Minute Operas\*](#) is presented on Saturday, January 14, 2017 at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. in the Kennedy Center Family Theater. [Tickets](#) are \$20. 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.

## **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 last season, 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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**#AmericanOperaDC**

### **FUNDING CREDITS**

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**David and Alice Rubenstein** are the Presenting Underwriters of WNO.

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WNO's Presenting Sponsor  
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### **PRESS CONTACT**

Michael Solomon  
(202) 416-8453  
[masolomon@kennedy-center.org](mailto:masolomon@kennedy-center.org)

### **TICKETS & INFORMATION**

(202) 467-4600; (800) 444-1324  
[www.kennedy-center.org/wno](http://www.kennedy-center.org/wno)