WASHINGTON PERFORMING ARTS PRESENTS

A REIMAGINING OF SCOTT JOPLIN’S

TREEMONISHA

BY JESSIE MONTGOMERY, JANNINA NORPOTH, LEAH-SIMONE BOWEN, & CHERYL L. DAVIS

A Volcano Theatre Production, in association with Moveable Beast Collective

Co-commissioned by Washington Performing Arts, Stanford Live, Southbank Centre, Canada’s National Arts Centre, and Banff Centre for the Arts

Coming to Washington, D.C. in October 2020

Washington Performing Arts has co-commissioned a new semi-staged production of Scott Joplin’s opera Treemonisha—a revolutionary and masterful work that, tragically, was never fully produced in the composer’s lifetime. The opera is being reimagined by an international team of creators and performers led by Volcano Theatre (Toronto), in association with the Moveable Beast Collective. This production is reflective of Washington Performing Arts’ investment in special productions that engage education, community, media, and mainstage partners across multiple genres. A new libretto for Treemonisha has been co-written by Volcano’s playwright-in-residence Leah-Simone Bowen and American playwright Cheryl L. Davis, and a new orchestration and music were created by New York-based composers and performers Jessie Montgomery and Jannina Norpoth, who are both known to Washington, DC audiences for their compositions and performances of contemporary works with the PUBLIQuartet. The reimagined work provides a 21st century framework for understanding a powerful story of Black identity and agency in the years following the Civil War. Washington Performing Arts seeks to collaborate with community and cultural organizations throughout the region for creating wider impact through residency and educational opportunities surrounding the historical and social themes explored in Treemonisha. The production will be presented in Washington, DC during the 2020-2021 season at Sidney Harman Hall.

PREVIEW VIDEO: TINYURL.COM/WPATREEMONISHA
JANUARY 2019 WORKSHOP VIDEO: TINYURL.COM/TREEMONISHA0119WORKSHOP

WHY NOW? THE TRAGEDY OF SCOTT JOPLIN’S WORK

Joplin’s vision—deeply feminist, politically progressive, and musically adventurous—never came to fruition during his lifetime. The libretto was problematic—Joplin was a novice librettist. But beyond that, no backer would touch it. The New York establishment was not ready to embrace an opera by a Black composer. Joplin spent his life savings on an unrealized dream, and was to be buried in a pauper’s grave just five years after its completion. His hand-written orchestral parts were tossed in the garbage sometime in the 1960s, and were it not for a piano/vocal reduction he registered with the Library of Congress, Treemonisha would have vanished forever. While there have been several notable productions of Treemonisha mounted since the 1970s, the creative team assembled by Volcano Theatre brings a contemporary lens to Joplin’s work. Their innovative voices use the original work as a point of departure for examining the Black experience in the United States from Reconstruction to the present.

SAVE THE DATE: Treemonisha in Washington, D.C. - October 2020
Contact Nicholas Brown (nbrown@washingtonperformingarts.org) for more information
ABOUT SCOTT JOPLIN’S TREEMONISHA

Joplin called Treemonisha an “opera,” and it is almost unbelievably progressive for its time, both musically and politically. Found under a tree by an ex-slave named Monisha, Treemonisha grows into a woman who will change the course of her post-Civil War community. Written in 1911, Joplin’s Treemonisha is one of the few surviving live performance pieces about the immediate post-slavery era written by a Black person who actually lived through it. It fuses classical and folk sounds with gospel; with the Black precursor to the barbershop sound; and with ragtime’s own signature syncopations. Joplin’s young female protagonist, Treemonisha, is elected by her 1880’s community as their leader—long before women, let alone Black women, were able to vote anywhere in North America. This was truly a new kind of opera.

CO-COMMISSIONERS

Stanford Live, Stanford, California (World Premiere: April 23-26, 2020)
Southbank Centre, London, United Kingdom
National Arts Centre, Ottawa, Canada
Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada

THE REIMAGINING: A WORD FROM CO-LIBRETTIST LEAH-SIMONE BOWEN

“When I found out that Scott Joplin had written an opera with a Black woman as the lead character, I was intrigued. When I found out that he had written the libretto for an all-Black cast and that the central conversation in the piece took place within the Black community, I was blown away. Joplin wrote this opera set around the post-civil war Reconstruction era without White voices. To be a Black man writing in the early 1900’s and in this genre was a completely subversive move. At a time when Black people were newly freed, Joplin created a story of a community of Black people that had agency. He was truly ahead of his time.”

ABOUT VOLCANO THEATRE

Volcano is an international award-winning theatre company based in Toronto. Using innovations in global and intercultural performance practice, Volcano seeks to create theatre that is stylistically and socially modern, a theatre that explores identity, politics, history, and the contemporary human condition. Volcano is both cosmopolitan and uniquely Canadian, bringing Canada the latest in international theatre trends while touring Canadian artists and works around the world. Led by Artistic Director Ross Manson, Volcano has been a vital contributor to the independent theatre scene since 1994, and continues to question what it means to be a purveyor of outward-looking, rigorous Canadian theatre. Washington Performing Arts is honored to collaborate with such a distinguished and innovative international partner to reimagine one of America’s most compelling and rarely-produced operatic works.

COLLABORATING ORGANIZATIONS
THE ARTISTIC TEAM

Leah-Simone Bowen
CANADA
Story and Librettist

Cheryl L. Davis
USA
Co-Librettist

Jessie Montgomery
USA
Orchestrator, Arranger

Jannina Norpoth
USA
Orchestrator, Arranger

Weyni Mengesha
CANADA
Stage Director

Reza Jacobs
CANADA
Stage Director

Jeri Lynne Johnson
USA
Conductor

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar
USA
Choreographer

Deanna Downes
USA
Co-Dramaturge

Camellia Koo
CANADA
Set Designer

Marci Rodgers
USA
Costume Designer

Kimberly Purtell
CANADA
Lighting Designer
ABOUT WASHINGTON PERFORMING ARTS

One of the most established and honored performing arts institutions in America, Washington Performing Arts has engaged for more than half a century with artists, audiences, students, and civic life. The city is truly our stage: in venues ranging from concert halls and clubs to public parks, we present a tremendous range of artists and art forms, from the most distinguished symphony orchestras to both renowned and emerging artists in classical music, jazz, international genres, and more.

Washington Performing Arts deeply values its partnerships with local organizations and other arts institutions. Through events in myriad performance venues and neighborhoods, Washington Performing Arts engages international visiting artists in community programs and introduces local artists to wider audiences. We place a premium on establishing artists as a continuing presence in the lives of both young people and adults through residencies and educational programs.

Our achievements have been recognized with a National Medal of Arts and with three Mayor’s Arts Awards from the D.C. Government. We have now embarked upon our second half-century, ever-inspired by the motto of our founder, Patrick Hayes: “Everybody in, nobody out.”

WASHINGTON PERFORMING ARTS SPECIAL PRODUCTIONS

Washington Performing Arts has distinguished itself for cultivating special projects of national, artistic, and historical significance that provide a platform for creators across artistic genres. Highlights from recent seasons include the Of Thee We Sing: The Marian Anderson 75th Anniversary Celebration (broadcast nationally on BET and featuring Jessye Norman & Dionne Warwick), Wynton Marsalis’ Blues Symphony (a collaboration with Shenandoah University and Jazz at Lincoln Center), The Migration: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence (a collaboration between Step Afrika!, the Washington Performing Arts Men and Women of the Gospel Choir, the Phillips Collection, and 11th Street Bridge Park), SHIFT: A Festival of American Orchestras (in partnership with The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts), and Living the Dream...Singing the Dream (the annual Martin Luther King Jr. tribute, co-presented with the Choral Arts Society of Washington).

CONTACT WASHINGTON PERFORMING ARTS

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