

The National Black Church Initiative Supports the PEAK Performances Production of "Blind Injustice" an Opera-in-Concert

Blind Injustice Tells The Stories of Six Wrongfully Incarcerated Individuals and How They Freed Themselves with the Help of the Ohio Innocence Project

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, February 7, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- PEAK Performances at Montclair State University is producing two opera-in-concert performances of Blind Injustice, composed by Montclair State University College of the Arts faculty member Scott Davenport Richards (A Star Across the Ocean, Charlie Crosses the Nation) with a libretto by David Cote (Three Way, The Scarlet Ibis). The performances—featuring 12 principal singers, a 12-member orchestra, and a chorus of 30—explore the true stories of six people who were tried, unjustly convicted, imprisoned, and who ultimately freed themselves with the

help of the Ohio Innocence Project (OIP). It paints a damning portrait of how our country's criminal justice system repeatedly fails not only the wrongfully accused but their families and communities—and offers hope for a shared future founded on justice and reform. Blind Injustice is based on the work of the OIP and the book of the same name by University of Cincinnati Professor of Law and OIP Co-founder and Director Mark Godsey. Robin Guarino is stage director and dramaturg, and Ted Sperling serves as music director and conductor.

Performances of Blind Injustice take place February 16 (at 7:30pm) & 18 (at 3pm) at the Alexander Kasser Theater (1 Normal Ave, Montclair, NJ) at Montclair State University. Each performance will be followed by a public conversation with Nancy Smith and Rickey Jackson—two exonerees represented in the piece—and Mark Godsey.



What Makes a Person Free? "Blind Injustice" an opera in-concert

Tickets can be purchased at PEAKperfs.org or 973-655-5112. All undergrads receive a prepaid ticket with a valid ID.

Blind Injustice was originally commissioned by Cincinnati Opera, where it premiered to acclaim in 2019, with The Wall Street Journal deeming it a “powerful piece of music theater.” Following the stories of Nancy Smith, The East Cleveland 3 (Laurese Glover, Eugene Johnson, and Derrick Wheatt), Clarence Elkins, and Rickey Jackson, David Cote’s libretto amalgamates text from the exonerees’ oral histories, research, and accounts from Godsey’s book into a work balancing scathing critique and hope, emotional testimony and meticulous analysis.

Richards challenges antiquated criteria for what constitutes opera, ascribing various musical styles and influences to each character in a composition whose flexibility of musical languages—jazz, funk, opera, musical theater, spoken word—allows it to dexterously flow between various storytelling modes and tones. At times, Richards’ composition upholds the colloquialism of its interview foundations, at others it mirrors and augments the libretto’s exploration of the insidious theatricality of the criminal justice system.

Scott Davenport Richards says, “I’ve been an actor, and as a composer I often think about character as an actor might. I will inhabit a character, speak the lines, create a rhythmic grid around those lines... followed by melodic shape, then compositional structure. Within the history of modern opera is an assumption that a given story will fit into the composer’s musical ideas. I don’t necessarily subscribe to that mode of working. I will take musical vocabulary from just about anywhere and use it, often with a sense of irony and commentary, to tell the story and to bring out something specific in a character. Here, the importance of the issue to society — and it is an issue for every community — justifies the musical size and the size of the voices.”

David Cote says, “It’s a lot of story for a 90 minute opera, and it was exciting to tell it in a very breathless, cinematic and episodic way, with all of this variation — whether using language from exonerees’ interviews about their experiences of incarceration or Mark’s book’s detailing how, for example, not all forensic science is created equal. The forms it takes hopefully reflect how the criminal justice system feeds on storytelling and stereotypes: often on delusion. How you build a case against people, the adversarial nature of prosecutors versus defense, it all contributes to a kind of sick theatricality that helps to convict people, regardless of the truth.”

About Scott Davenport Richards (Composer)

Scott Davenport Richards is an award-winning composer/librettist whose creative works have resided at various addresses around the intersection of Opera, Musical Theatre, and Jazz. Blind Injustice at Cincinnati Opera in 2019 to a sold out run and national critical acclaim. The live CD/Album was cited by Opera News as one of the 5 Best New Opera Recordings of 2022.

The New York City Opera has performed two Richards works as a part of its Vox Festival of new opera; A Star Across The Ocean - Paris 1965 featuring Tony Award Winner, Chuck Cooper and

Charlie Crosses the Nation. He has completed commissions for The Public Theater; The Rumble of Myth (with Marcus Gardley) and the TONY Winning Signature Theatre (VA) The Break (with Michele Lowe). He was commissioned by Paulette Haupt, Artistic Director of The O'Neill Theatre Center's National Musical Theatre Conference to compose A Thousand Words Come to Mind for the inaugural set of her Inner Voices one-person musical monologue series. Other musical theatre works include music for Coyote Goes Salmon Fishing (written with Deborah Brevoort) directed by Molly Smith at Perseverance Theatre (produced by Stuart Ostrow in Houston) and the original score for A Christmas Story The Musical at Kansas City Rep. His play-scores have been heard at resident theatres around the country. Works for children include several commissions from Theatreworks U. S. A.; Corduroy (music, lyrics, orchestration), Sundiata! The Lion King of Mali (music, lyrics, orchestration), Island of the Blue Dolphins (orchestrations) and Junie B. Jones (orchestrations.)

As an actor, Mr. Richards originated the role of Sylvester (the stuttering nephew who almost ruins the recording session) in the historic original Broadway production of August Wilson's Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and assisted his father, Director Lloyd Richards in the origination and Broadway premieres of three other Wilson works.

A recipient of the Jonathan Larson, Frederick Loewe, Shen Family Foundation, Meet the Composer, and the NJ State Council on the Arts Composition Awards, he is Professor of Composition/Musical Theatre at Montclair State's John J. Cali School of music, a teacher/mentor in American Lyric Theater's Composer Librettist Development Program, and maintains a relationship as a recurring guest with New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program where he taught as a regular member of the faculty for 12 years.

As of today, he is hard at work finishing a new Paul Robeson opera with co-librettist David Cote which was workshopped at Cincinnati Opera in 2023.

M. F. A. New York University Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program
B. A. Yale University

About David Cote (Librettist)

David Cote is a playwright, opera librettist, and arts journalist based in New York City. This season: Lucidity with composer Laura Kaminsky, co-commissioned by On Site Opera and Seattle Opera.

Previous operas include Blind Injustice (Cincinnati Opera); Three Way (Nashville Opera and BAM); The Scarlet Ibis (Prototype Festival); and 600 Square Feet (Cleveland Opera Theater). David's plays include The Mûch, Saint Joe, and Otherland (O'Neill National Playwrights Conference finalist). He wrote the text for Nkeiru Okoye's Black Lives Matter monodrama for baritone and orchestra, Invitation to a Die-In. His Cocoa Cantata is a modern-day sequel to Bach's Coffee Cantata, composed by Robert Paterson. Recordings include Blind Injustice (NAXOS), Three Way

(American Modern Recordings) and In Real Life (AMR). David's TV and theater coverage appears in The A.V. Club, Observer, 4 Columns, and American Theatre. He was the longest serving theater editor and chief drama critic of Time Out New York.

David is the author of popular companion books about the Broadway hits Moulin Rouge! The Musical, Spring Awakening, Jersey Boys, and Wicked. His writing has also appeared in Opera News, The Village Voice, The Guardian, and The New York Times. David is currently working on a grand opera about the artistry and activism of Paul Robeson with Scott Davenport Richards and a monodrama with Stefan Weisman for mezzo-soprano Hai-Ting Chinn about climate change and Greenland's ice sheet.

About Robin Guarino (Stage Director)

Robin Guarino has directed opera, musical theater, film and over 60 new productions, including over seven world premieres. A frequent collaborator at Lincoln Center, she has directed HD productions at The Metropolitan Opera of *Così fan tutte* and *Der Rosenkavalier*, and fully staged operas at Avery Fisher Hall and Alice Tully Hall. Guarino has directed celebrated productions at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Next Wave Festival, The San Francisco Opera (HD of *Le Nozze di Figaro*), Seattle Opera, Canadian Opera Company, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Virginia Opera, Gotham Chamber Opera, The Skylight Opera, The Glimmerglass Festival, The Bard Festival, and Eos Orchestra as well as Juilliard Opera Theatre, The Yale Institute for Music Theatre, The Jacobs School of Music, The Manhattan School of Music, Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, and such distinguished young artist training programs such as The San Francisco Merola and Adler Programs among others.

Her film *Crossing the Atlantik* was featured on Independent Focus, PBS. She recently directed critically acclaimed new productions of *Dialogue of the Carmelites* and *Madame Butterfly* at Opera Theatre of St. Louis; a double bill, *War Stories*, for the Philadelphia Opera Festival; *The Rake's Progress* for the San Francisco Opera Merola Program; *AS ONE* for Cincinnati Opera; and the world premiere of *Blind Innocence*, a project inspired by the Ohio Innocence Project, for Cincinnati Opera. She held the J. Ralph Corbett Distinguished Chair of Opera at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music from 2008-2020 and before that was the Dramatic Co-Advisor of the Juilliard Opera Theater from 2004-2008.

Guarino has a strong commitment to developing new works and supporting the work of living composers and librettists and continues that passion as Artistic Director of Opera Fusion: New Works, a collaboration with Cincinnati Opera, funded by The Andrew W Mellon Foundation, that has developed the following new operas and world premieres for major companies across the United States: *Intimate Apparel*, *The Hours*, *Eurydice*, *Hadrian*, *DOUBT*, *Champion*, *Robeson Opera*, and *Lincoln on the Bardo*. Guarino is a judge for the Metropolitan Opera National Council and the Lotte Lenya Competition.

About Ted Sperling (Musical Director and Conductor)

Ted Sperling is a multi-faceted artist, director, music director, conductor, orchestrator, singer,

pianist, violinist and violist. He is the Artistic Director of MasterVoices and Music Director of the recent Broadway productions of My Fair Lady, Fiddler on the Roof and The King and I. He has directed the premiere productions of The Other Josh Cohen, Red Eye of Love, Striking 12 and See What I Wanna See, all off-Broadway.

A Tony Award winner for his orchestrations of The Light in the Piazza, Mr. Sperling is known for his work across many genres, including opera, oratorio, musical theater, symphony and pops.

Artists that Mr. Sperling has directed and conducted include Itzhak Perlman, Joshua Bell, Isabel Leonard, Stephanie Blythe, Nathan Gunn, Rufus Wainwright, Glenn Close, Eric Idle, Kevin Kline, Martin Short, Deborah Voigt, Kelli O'Hara, Victoria Clark, Audra McDonald, Idina Menzel, Michael Bublé, Randy Newman, Bryn Terfel, Anthony Roth Costanzo, Anne Hathaway, Matthew Broderick, Sarah Jessica Parker, Jeremy Jordan, Santino Fontana, Dove Cameron, Jennifer Holliday, Cheyenne Jackson, Nathan Lane, Kristin Chenoweth, Vanessa Williams, Sutton Foster, Harvey Feuerstein, Zachary Quinto, Jesse Tyler Ferguson, Jane Lynch, Patrick Wilson, Donna Murphy, Mandy Patinkin, Patti LuPone, Chita Rivera and Liza Minelli. His program "The Traiblasting Music of Joni Mitchell, Carole King and Carly Simon" has generated enthusiastic responses from critics and audiences alike.

About Mark Godsey (Author, Blind Injustice)

Mark Godsey is the Carmichael Professor of Law and Director of the Ohio Innocence Project at the University of Cincinnati College of Law. A former federal prosecutor in Manhattan, Godsey co-founded and now directs one of the most successful innocence projects in the country, which to date has secured the freedom of 42 wrongfully convicted Ohioians.

About the Ohio Innocence Project

The Ohio Innocence Project (OIP) is a law clinic at the University of Cincinnati College of Law. Fueled by the idealism and energy of law students, OIP investigates the cases of Ohio's incarcerated who claim they are innocent and were wrongfully convicted. The OIP is one of the most active and successful innocence projects in the country, and to date has secured the freedom of 42 innocent Ohioans who together served more than 900 years in prison for crimes they didn't commit.

About PEAK Performances

PEAK Performances, which is based at Montclair State University in Montclair, NJ, commissions, develops, produces and presents music, dance, theater, musical theater and opera by world-class artists. Its 2023-24 season is the first under the direction of Wiley Hausam. For more information, please visit peakperfs.org

About NBCI

The [National Black Church Initiative](#) (NBCI) is a coalition of 150,000 African American and Latino churches working to eradicate racial disparities in healthcare, technology, education, housing, and the environment. NBCI's mission is to provide critical wellness information to all of its

members, congregants, churches and the public. The National Black Church Initiative's methodology utilizes faith and sound health science. Visit our website at www.naltblackchurch.com.

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