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Note: Images are available in the [online media gallery](#).

For Immediate Release

## SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA

2020

PRESS RELEASE

### Spoletto Festival USA announces Exploring Omar, a Spoleto ETC Discussion Series

Three panel discussions to be held at various downtown Charleston locations  
Free to attend | February 20, March 12, and April 23

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**February 6, 2020 (Charleston, South Carolina)** — Spoleto Festival USA announces a new discussion series under the umbrella of Spoleto ETC (Engaging the Community)—the Festival’s education and community outreach program that aims to build audiences of the future, encourage artistic learning, and provide unique experiences for all members of the community. To that end, this year’s Spoleto ETC Discussion Series, titled Exploring Omar, will expand on the historical context and cultural significance of Rhiannon Giddens’s newly commissioned opera, *Omar*, based on the life of Omar Ibn Said. Each of the three discussions feature expert panelists and moderators in the fields of religion, education, culture, and the arts.

Discussions are free to attend; reservations are required and can be made online at [spoletousa.org](http://spoletousa.org) or by calling the box office at 843.579.3100. The Spoleto ETC Discussion Series is presented in collaboration with the Charleston County Public Library, the College of Charleston, and the International African American Museum.

#### Spoletto ETC Discussion Series: Exploring Omar

Cultural Ties Between Futa Toro (Senegal) and the Lowcountry

Thursday, February 20, at 6:00pm

Randolph Hall, Alumni Memorial Hall, College of Charleston

66 George St.

Panelists **Victoria Smalls** of the Penn Center in St. Helena Island, **Professor Elizabeth West** of Georgia State University, and **Professor John Cropper** of the College of Charleston participate in a discussion about the past and current cultural intersections between the Lowcountry and Omar Ibn Said's birthplace, Futa Toro (present-day Senegal). Using Ibn Said as a basis for contextual understanding, panelists will highlight the faith and cultural traditions of both regions. The moderator for this panel is **Dr. Muhammad Fraser-Rahim**, professor at The Citadel.

## Islam and Enslaved Africans in Early Charleston

Thursday, March 12, at 6:00pm

Charleston County Public Library, Main Library Auditorium  
68 Calhoun St.

In a moderated conversation between historian **Nic Butler** of Charleston County Public Library and **Professor Hussein Rashid** of The New School, audience members are invited to learn about the City of Charleston from 1670 to the present. As the City commemorates its 350th anniversary, the Festival presents audience members with an opportunity to learn about the influence of Islam as introduced by enslaved Africans. The moderator for this panel is **Brenda Tindal** of the International African American Museum.

## Omar Ibn Said, the Man

Thursday, April 23, at 6:00pm

Avery Research Center, College of Charleston  
125 Bull St.

(Reception to follow)

The world premiere of *Omar*, co-commissioned and co-produced by Spoleto Festival USA and Carolina Performing Arts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is carefully based on the life of Omar Ibn Said. But who was Omar and why is his autobiography one of particular relevance? **Professor Ala Alryyes** of Queens College and **Dr. Sylviane Diouf** discuss Omar's historical importance and how his story is still relevant today. The moderator for this panel is **Dr. Muhammad Fraser-Rahim**, professor at The Citadel.

## Panelist Bios

### Victoria A. Smalls

A Gullah Geechee native of St. Helena Island, South Carolina, Victoria is a public historian and educator, arts advocate, and cultural preservationist. Victoria also serves as a federal commissioner with the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. In this role, she helps to recognize, sustain, and celebrate the important contributions made to American culture and history by the Gullah Geechee. She also assists state and local governments and public and private entities in South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Florida in interpreting the story of the Gullah Geechee and preserving the culture for the benefit and education of the public. She serves as a state commissioner with the South Carolina African American Heritage Commission, where she assists in identifying and promoting the preservation of historic sites and culture of the African American experience in South Carolina. In this role she also advocates for the inclusion of African American history, art, and culture into the curriculum of South Carolina schools.

Victoria served as Director of History, Art and Culture, and Director of Development and Public Relations from 2012-2017 at Penn Center on St. Helena Island, SC. She was then recruited to serve as the Program Manager to help build the \$100 million International African American Museum in Charleston, SC due to open in 2021. In April 2019, Victoria returned to her roots at Penn Center as the History and Culture Director, Program Development Director, and Assistant to the Executive Director.

### Elizabeth J. West

Elizabeth J. West received her Ph.D. in English with a certificate in Women's Studies from Emory University. Her teaching and scholarship focuses on spirituality and gender in early African American and Women's Literature, and African Diasporic Literatures of the Atlantic World. Her works can be found in critical anthologies and in journals such as *MELUS*, *Amerikastudien*, *CLAJ*, *PALARA*, *JCCH*, *Womanist*, *Black Magnolias*, and *South Central Review*. Her book *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visions of Memory, Community, Nature and Being* (Lexington Books 2011) is distinct in its employment of a diachronic lens to examine specific African spiritual sensibilities traceable from early to modern black women's writings.

Along with receiving internal university support for her research and teaching, she is a former DAAD (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany) and AAUW Fellow, and scholar in residence at Dartmouth College in the Department of AAAS. She was among scholars interviewed and consulted in the

production of Georgia Public Broadcasting's award-winning documentary on the 75th anniversary of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*. She is Treasurer of the College Language Association, Executive Director of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association, and serves on the Advisory Board of The Obama Institute for Transnational Studies.

## John Cropper

John Cropper earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and currently serves as an assistant professor of Modern African History at the College of Charleston. His research interests include the history of the environment, development and aid, energy use, and politics in French West Africa. His current book project, *Fueling the State: Energy, Politics, and the Environment in Senegal from 1450 to Present Day*, investigates the ways in which states used, stored, and deployed different forms of energy to broadcast and consolidate power. By chronicling Senegal's transformation from a pre-industrial economy to a mixed energy economy, it shows that control over energy resources played an instrumental role in how precolonial African kings, French colonial officials, and postcolonial African leaders attempted to centralize and maintain power over time and space.

## Muhammad Fraser-Rahim

Dr. Muhammad Fraser-Rahim is the Executive Director, North America, for Quilliam International. He is an Assistant Professor at The Citadel and a Visiting Assistant Professor at Yale University. He completed his Ph.D. at Howard University in African Studies with a focus on Islamic Thought, Spirituality, and Modernity issues, and has a newly released book titled *America's Other Muslims: Imam WD Muhammad, Islamic Reform and the Making of American Islam*.

Dr. Fraser-Rahim is a native Charlestonian, third-generation Muslim, and is the project author of The Lowcountry Digital History Initiative (<http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/>). In partnership with the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture and the Carolina Lowcountry and Atlantic World (CLAW), this digital public history project hosted by the Lowcountry Digital Library at the College of Charleston highlights the experiences in the American south of Omar Ibn Said, Ayyuba Suleiman Diallo, Ibrahima Abdur Rahman, Salih Bilali, Bilali Mohammed, and Muslim culture on the Georgia Sea Islands in the online exhibit, "Enslaved and Freed African Muslims: Spiritual Wayfarers in the South and Lowcountry."

## Nic Butler

Nic Butler, Ph.D., is an interdisciplinary historian with an infectious enthusiasm for Charleston's colorful past. A native of Greenville County, South Carolina, Dr. Butler attended the University of South Carolina before completing a Ph.D. in musicology at Indiana University. He has worked as archivist of the South Carolina Historical Society, an adjunct faculty member at the College of Charleston, and a historical consultant for the City of Charleston.

## Hussein Rashid

Hussein Rashid, PhD, is the founder of islamicate, L3C, a consultancy focusing on religious literacy and cultural competency. He works with a variety of NGOs, foundations, non-profits, and government agencies for content expertise on religion, with a specialization on Islam. His work includes exploring theology, the interaction between culture and religion, and the role of the arts in conflict mediation.

Hussein has a BA in Middle Eastern Studies from Columbia University, a Masters in Theological Studies focusing on Islam, and an MA and PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, focusing on South and Central Asia from Harvard University. His research focuses on Muslims and American popular culture. He is a contingent faculty member and has taught at Hofstra University, Fordham University, Iona College, Virginia Theological Seminary, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, SUNY Old Westbury, Barnard College, and Columbia University. He is currently affiliated with The New School. He is on the advisory boards of The Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art (Building Bridges Program), Sacred Matters, Anikaya Dance Theater, the Tanenbaum Center, and Abe's Eats.

## Brenda Tindal

Brenda Tindal is an award-winning educator, scholar, and museum practitioner. Prior to joining the International African American Museum (IAAM), Tindal was the Director of Education at the Detroit Historical Society, where she oversaw the K-16 education initiatives and public programming, and provided organizational leadership in the areas of museum visitor experience and strategic engagement. In 2003, Tindal launched her career in the museum field at Levine Museum of the New South, in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she was part of the curatorial team that developed an exhibit that received the National Medal for Museum Service in 2005. In 2015, Tindal became Levine's first woman and African American to serve as Staff Historian and Senior Vice-President of Research and Collections.

Tindal is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including a 2011 Institute of Museum and Library Service (IMLS) at Princeton University. Tindal graduated with a Ph.D. in History & Culture in Spring 2019.

## Ala Alryyes

Professor Ala Alryyes, who received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in Comparative Literature, is an associate professor of English at Queens College, The City University of New York. He is a scholar of eighteenth-century British and French literature, the European Enlightenment, literature of empire and exploration, and slavery. His current book project, *War's Knowledge and the Laws of Nature: Philosophy and the Novel, 1660-1798*, was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship and an American Philosophical Society grant. He is the author of *A Muslim American Slave: The Arabic Life of Omar Ibn Said* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2011) and *Original Subjects: The Child, the Novel, and the Nation* (Harvard University Press, 2001), as well as numerous articles. In addition to Queens College, Professor Alryyes has taught at Yale University.

## Sylviane Diouf

Sylviane A. Diouf, PhD is an award-winning social historian of the African Diaspora. She is a Visiting Scholar at Brown University's Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice. Dr. Diouf has a special interest in the experience of the Africans deported, through the international slave trade, to the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, including the particular experience of African Muslims.

She is the author of the acclaimed *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. The fifteenth anniversary edition of this 1998 seminal book was released in 2013. Dr. Diouf won several prizes for *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America*. She is the author, most recently, of *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons*. A recipient of the Rosa Parks Award, the Dr. Betty Shabazz Achievement Award, and the Pen and Brush Achievement Award, Diouf has appeared in several documentaries and gave a keynote speech to the United Nations General Assembly on the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. She was the inaugural director of the Lapidus Center for the Historical Analysis of Transatlantic Slavery at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of The New York Public Library.

## Spoletto Festival USA

Founded in 1977, Spoleto Festival USA is an annual 17-day performing arts festival in Charleston, SC, that presents leading artists in classical and popular music, opera, jazz, dance, and theater. The 2020 season takes place May 22 to June 7 in various locations on the downtown peninsula, including the historic Dock Street Theatre and the Charleston Gaillard Center. Spoleto Festival USA is a 501 (c)(3) charitable organization.

## Leadership

**Nigel Redden**, Spoleto Festival USA General Director | [Bio](#)

**John Kennedy**, Resident Conductor and Director of Orchestral Activities | [Bio](#)

**Joe Miller**, Director of Choral Activities | [Bio](#)

**Geoff Nuttall**, The Charles E. and Andrea L. Volpe Director of Chamber Music | [Bio](#)

## Images

A selection of high resolution images can be found in Spoleto Festival USA's [online gallery](#).

## How to Buy Tickets

Tickets are available online at [spoletousa.org](#) and by phone at **843.579.3100**. Call center hours are Monday to Friday, 10:00am to 6:00pm; and Saturday, 10:00am to 2:00pm.

**On-site box office operations** will be located at Charleston Gaillard Center beginning May 1. Tickets may be purchased in person Monday through Sunday, 9:00am to 5:00pm.

**Go Spoleto! hotel-and-ticket packages** are available in partnership with seven Charleston hotels: Ansonborough Inn, Belmond Charleston Place, Charleston Marriott, Francis Marion Hotel, Emeline, Palmer's Pinckney Inn, and Zero George. Guests can book a room with one of the Festival hotel partners and receive a code to purchase a range of specially priced performance tickets. For more information, visit [spoletousa.org/gospoleto](#).

**Festival gift certificates** can be purchased in any amount and used towards performance tickets, merchandise such as Festival posters, or charitable contributions to Spoleto Festival USA. To purchase gift certificates, order online at [spoletousa.org](#) or by phone at 843.579.3100.

## Spoletto Festival USA Funders

Spoletto Festival USA is generously supported by Wells Fargo; Bank of America; BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina; First Citizens Bank; South State Bank; American Express; Bloomberg Philanthropies; BMW Manufacturing Co.; Sherman Capital Markets, LLC; Charleston GI; and the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelly Foundation. The 2020 season is made possible in part by the City of Charleston; South Carolina Arts Commission, which receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts; and the County of Charleston. Spoleto ETC is made possible in part by Carol H. Fishman, in memory of Leo Fishman; The Samuel Freeman Charitable Trust; William R. Kenan Jr. Charitable Trust; and Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts.

## Funding for *Omar*

Generous support is provided by Doris Duke Charitable Foundation; The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation, the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art; Ford Foundation; Deborah Kennedy Kennard and William E. Kennard; OPERA America's Opera Grants for Female Composers program, supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation; JPMorgan Chase & Co.; The Samuel Freeman Charitable Trust; Post and Courier Foundation; Leslie K. Williams and James A. Attwood, Jr.; Mr. and Mrs. Richard DeScherer; and Ms. Susan L. Baker and Mr. Michael R. Lynch.

Omar is co-commissioned and co-produced by Spoleto Festival USA and Carolina Performing Arts at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. Carolina Performing Arts' participation in this project is made possible through the support of the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust.

## Funding for Spoleto ETC

Spoletto ETC is generously supported by JPMorgan Chase & Co.; Carol H. Fishman, in memory of Leo Fishman; The Samuel Freeman Charitable Trust; William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, and Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts.