

SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA

2020

PRESS RELEASE

Spoletto's discussion series, Exploring Omar, continues this fall with eight installments through 2021

Free virtual discussions kick off Spoleto ETC programming, including a partnership with the Charleston County Library for three book talks

October 2, 2020 (Charleston, South Carolina) — Spoleto Festival USA announces the continuation of **Exploring Omar**, a discussion series under the umbrella of **Spoletto ETC (Engaging the Community)**—the Festival's education and community engagement arm that encourages artistic learning and aims to build audiences of the future. Illuminating the historical and cultural significance of Spoleto's upcoming opera, *Omar*, the eight Exploring Omar talks feature international experts in the fields of religion, education, culture, and the arts who will connect elements from Omar Ibn Said's life and autobiography (on which the opera is based) to modern-day themes and ideas.

Born in 1770, Omar Ibn Said was a Muslim scholar and a member of the Fula ethnic group living in Futa Toro, a region extending between modern-day Senegal and Mauritania. At age 37, he was captured and brought to Charleston in 1807; he was enslaved until his death in 1863. Much of what is known today about Ibn Said comes from his autobiography, which he penned in Arabic in 1831 while enslaved by James Owen in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Ibn Said's manuscript is considered the only surviving, unedited autobiography of a Muslim slave in the United States. In 2017, the manuscript was acquired by the Library of Congress and digitized as part of the Omar Ibn Said Collection containing documents, letters, and newspaper clippings that, as describes the Library of Congress, "shed[s] light on the complex history of American slavery."

Co-commissioned and co-produced by Spoleto Festival USA and Carolina Performing Arts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, *Omar* traces Ibn Said's spiritual journey from Africa to his capture and enslavement in the Carolinas. Grammy Award winner Rhiannon Giddens has written the libretto and score; co-composer Michael Abels has worked closely with Giddens to develop the score. Festival Resident Conductor and Director of Orchestral Activities John Kennedy will conduct; Charlotte Brathwaite will direct. The opera, originally set to open Spoleto's 2020 season, will now receive its world

premiere during the 2021 season of Spoleto Festival USA, held May 28 to June 13, in Charleston, South Carolina.

Exploring Omar discussions will take place via YouTube Live and will be free to attend. Registration for the first three events, outlined below, can be made online at spoletousa.org. Conversations will be available for on-demand viewing after each event. Discussions set for January, February, March, April, and May 2021 will be announced later this fall.

Additional Spoleto ETC programming (including workshops with Charleston County Public Schools, HEART, Charleston Symphony Youth Orchestra, and the College of Charleston) will be announced in the new year.

In December, Spoleto Festival USA will also partner with Charleston County Public Library for the first of three book discussions, also reflecting themes found in *Omar*. The first talk, December date TBA, will examine Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (2020, Random House). In this nonfiction work, Wilkerson, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who also penned *The Warmth of Other Suns*, examines the systemic oppression of Black people in America. The Charleston County Public Library will host the three talks. Information about the talk will be available at spoletousa.org.

The Spoleto ETC discussion series, including Exploring Omar, are presented in collaboration with the Charleston County Public Library, the College of Charleston, and the International African American Museum. Exploring Omar is funded in part by SC Humanities, a state program of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Spoleto ETC Discussion Series: Exploring Omar

Register for the free talks at spoletousa.org. Live discussions will take place online. An access code will be emailed to registrants prior to each talk.

| Exploring Omar: Omar, the Man

Who was Omar Ibn Said?

Tuesday, October 13; 6:00pm

The world premiere opera, *Omar*, is carefully based on the life of Omar Ibn Said, a real figure of historical importance. This discussion, led by Ala Alryyes (who has translated Ibn Said's autobiography) and scholar Sylviane Diouf, examines what is known about Ibn Said from his autobiography as well as documents surrounding his life in the Carolinas. The panelists will also discuss Ibn Said's manuscript and its relevance today. The International African American Museum's Brenda Tindal serves as moderator.

Ala Alryyes is an associate professor of English at Queens College, The City University of New York. As a scholar of 18th-century British and French literature, the European Enlightenment, literature of empire and exploration, and slavery, he has written several books, including *A Muslim American Slave: The Arabic Life of Omar Ibn Said* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

Sylviane Diouf, Ph.D., is an award-winning social historian of the African Diaspora and a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice at Brown University. She has written numerous books, including the acclaimed *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. A recipient of the Rosa Parks Award, the Dr. Betty Shabazz Achievement Award, and the Pen and Brush Achievement Award, Diouf 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.

Brenda Tindal, Ph.D., is an award-winning educator, scholar, and museum practitioner, currently serving as Director of Education and Engagement at the International African American Museum. Previously, she held positions at the Detroit Historical Society, and Levine Museum of the New South, in Charlotte, North Carolina. In 2015, Tindal became Levine's first woman and African American to serve as Staff Historian and Senior Vice-President of Research and Collections.

| Exploring Omar: Between Two Lands

The cultural and environmental ties between Futa Toro (Senegal) and the Lowcountry
Tuesday, November 10; 6:00pm

In February, a previous Exploring Omar discussion revealed the environmental similarities between Omar Ibn Said's homeland, Futa Toro (part of modern-day Senegal), and Charleston—including their proximities to water and how the landscapes mirrored one another. This season, however, College of Charleston Professor **John Cropper** is joined by Professor **Mamaram Seck** of Senegal's University

Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar and **Veronica Gerald**, founding director of Coastal Carolina University's Charles Joyner Institute for Gullah and African Diaspora Studies, to expand on this topic. Looking at the intersections of the two lands' past and current geographies, the panelists will compare both regions and the cultures and traditions of those who inhabit them today. For instance: Omar Ibn Said identified within the Fula ethnic group of West Africa. What cultural practices of the Fula people are shared in Senegal and the Lowcountry today? Michael Allen, formerly with the National Park Service and who spearheaded the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, serves as moderator.

Michael Allen is a former community partner specialist for the National Park Service, of which he served from 1980 to 2018. Through the creation and implementation of exhibitions, markers, and educational community programs, he has played a playing a “pivotal role in telling the story of African Americans in the region before and after the Civil War” (*The Charleston Chronicle*). Allen led the creation of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor; and in October 2006, the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Act was passed by Congress, establishing the first and only African American Heritage Area in the country. Since his retirement, he has assisted Historic Charleston Foundation in the management of the Mosquito Beach Civil Rights Project and he currently serves as Community Preservation Specialist at South Carolina State University.

Veronica D. Gerald is a professor emeritus of Coastal Carolina University, where she has taught since 1982. She is the founding director of the Charles Joyner Institute for Gullah and African Diaspora Studies and was the Director of History and Culture at Penn Center on St. Helena Island. Gerald brings both an indigenous and academic perspective to her advocacy of Gullah culture, and through lectures, storytelling, and participation in festival displays and museum exhibits, Gerald has worked to ensure promotion, greater understanding and representation throughout South Carolina and the United States. She received the Jean Laney Harris Folk Heritage Advocacy Award in 1999.

John Cropper, Ph.D., 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, chronicling Senegal's transformation over time.

Mamaram Seck, Ph.D., is a scholar at the University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar whose research interests include Wolof language and linguistics, political and religious discourse

analysis, and Senegalese society and culture. His first book, *Narratives as Muslim Practice in Senegal*, published with Peter Lang, examines the structure and function of oral narratives in religious practices in Senegal. His current research includes the narrative about Omar Ibn Said and a contemporary reading of the Toorodo revolution of 1776.

| Exploring Omar: Complex Identities in the Arts

Past and present Festival artists discuss bias in opera.

Tuesday, December 15; 5:00pm

On May 28, 2021, Omar Ibn Said's story will be told through opera—an artform that has, historically, contributed to the unjust practices of systemic racism and failed to promote the voices of Black and non-white artists, especially in directorial or leadership roles. In this talk, artists of current and past Spoleto Festival USA productions—including director and designer Jennifer Wen Ma, director Atom Egoyan, and *Omar* librettist and co-composer Rhiannon Giddens—discuss their shared and differing experiences on stages nationwide and the biases they have faced in the performing arts industry. Festival Director of Orchestral Activities and *Omar* conductor John Kennedy serves as moderator.

Atom Egoyan is a two-time Academy Award nominee and a five-time Cannes Film Festival award winner. He has directed critically acclaimed productions of Strauss's *Salome* and Wagner's *Die Walküre*, as well as the world premieres of the contemporary operas *Feng Yi Ting* for Spoleto Festival USA in 2012 and *Dr. Ox's Experiment* for English National Opera. For the Canadian Stage, he directed the North American premiere of Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender*, and his production of Samuel Beckett's *Eh Joe* won the Irish Times/ESB Award for Best Direction. He directed an orchestral program titled *You Are Mine Own* for Spoleto's 2018 Festival.

Rhiannon Giddens is the librettist and co-composer of *Omar*, which receives its world premiere during Spoleto Festival USA in 2021. Giddens studied opera at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music before founding The Carolina Chocolate Drops. She is a MacArthur Fellow and Grammy Award winner. In 2019, she released the album *there is no Other* with multi-instrumentalist Francesco Turrisi and formed the band Our Native Daughters with three other Black female banjo players. She hosts the podcast *Aria Code*, produced by WNYC Studios and WQXR, in partnership with The Metropolitan Opera. She was recently named the artistic director of the Silkroad music organization.

Jennifer Wen Ma is a visual artist, whose interdisciplinary practice bridges varied media such as installation, drawing, video, public art, design, performance, and theater. Her opera, *Paradise Interrupted*, received its world premiere at Spoleto Festival USA in 2015, and has been subsequently staged at Lincoln Center Festival, Singapore International Festival of the Arts, the National Kaohsiung Center of the Arts, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 2008, Ma was a member of the core creative team for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics; she received an Emmy Award for the US broadcast of the opening ceremony. She works and lives between New York and Beijing.

John Kennedy is Spoleto Festival USA's Resident Conductor and Director of Orchestral Activities. He has led acclaimed performances and premieres with leading organizations worldwide of opera, orchestral, ballet, and new music. In recent seasons at the Festival, Kennedy has conducted operas by leading composers of our time including Francesconi, Glass, Lachenmann, Lim, Huang Ruo, Saariaho, and others. Especially noted for his interpretations of contemporary music, Kennedy has worked with many of the leading composers of our time in over 300 premieres and numerous recordings.

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 2021 season takes place May 28 to June 13 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.

Download the [Spoletto Festival USA press kit](#).

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

For more information, visit the [press room](#).

Funding for *Omar*

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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.

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