

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

# SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA

PRESS RELEASE



From left: Rhiannon Giddens, Michael Abels, Karim Sulayman, Yuval Sharon

## Reimagining Possibility: Spoleto Festival USA Announces Three New Operas for its 2022 Season

Two world premieres that challenge received narratives:

- *Omar*, composed by Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels, based on the life and 1831 autobiography of Omar Ibn Said, a Muslim African scholar enslaved in the Carolinas
- Karim Sulayman's *Unholy Wars*, a collection of early Baroque pieces explored through an Arab American lens

A new production from an opera trailblazer:

- Yuval Sharon's revolutionary take on *La bohème*, upending the traditional storyline

**November 17, 2021 (Charleston, South Carolina)** — Today, Spoleto Festival USA announced its opera programming for the 46th season, taking place in Charleston, South Carolina, May 27 to June 12.

Reflecting Spoleto's founding vision and commitment to contemporary innovation and experimentation, the works also herald the Festival's next era under the leadership of Mena Mark Hanna.

The centerpiece of Spoleto's upcoming season is the long-awaited world premiere of *Omar*, with music by Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels. Opera programming also includes tenor Karim Sulayman's *Unholy Wars*, a multidisciplinary work that interweaves Baroque period pieces about the Crusades sung from a contemporary Arab American perspective, as well as Yuval Sharon's newest operatic revision: a bold retelling of *La bohème*, which sets Puccini's masterpiece from end to start.

"This season, Spoleto is purposefully expanding the traditional opera canon," says Hanna. "Each production, in its own way, rethinks the standard practice and repertoire of opera, questioning how it has traditionally been performed and what it can mean today."

Spoleto's two world premieres in particular—*Omar* and *Unholy Wars*—aim to challenge received narratives. "*Omar*'s story, for instance, is not simply a reckoning with this country's past—it's a reclamation of history," says Hanna. "It's a story of the foundation of this country and one that platforms the marginalized at center stage. And for these reasons, it's all the more important that it receives its world premiere here in Charleston, a city that served as one of the main harbors of the Transatlantic slave trade."

To further examine themes from the operas as well as additional 2022 season programming, the Festival is again hosting a virtual discussion series addressing the arts' connection and intersection with religion, education, social justice, and identity politics. This season's series is moderated by New York-based theologian Hussein Rashid—an educator and academic whose research focuses on Muslim and American pop culture—and will feature an assortment of artists, authors, historians, and thought leaders from around the globe. The first discussion, held December 14, 2021, will highlight the lives of several African Muslims in 18th- and 19th-century America, including Salih Bilali, Bilali Mohammed, and Ibrahima Abdur Rahman. This and future discussions, plus links for registration, will be available on [spoletousa.org](http://spoletousa.org).

Details for each opera follow. The remainder of Spoleto's 46th season will be announced on February 11, 2022, with tickets available to the public beginning February 22, following a donor pre-sale.

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## Omar

*World premiere*

Music by Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels

Libretto by Rhiannon Giddens

Directed by Kaneza Schaal

Conducted by John Kennedy

Principal cast:

Jamez McCorkle, Omar

Cheryse McLeod Lewis, Omar's mother

Laquita Mitchell, Julie

By 1808, Charleston's ports alone recorded more than 100,000 West Africans who had been stolen from their homelands and whose brutal vanishings left families and future generations wondering of their whereabouts and existences. *Omar*, a new opera based on the life and 1831 autobiography of Omar Ibn Said, tells one such story.

Opening in Senegal, the opera's narrative traces Omar Ibn Said's spiritual journey from his life in West Africa to his enslavement in the Carolinas. A Muslim African scholar, Said was 37 years old when he was captured in Futa Toro and brought to Charleston. His story is one of strength, resistance, and religious conviction, a story of truth and of faith.

Upon arrival in the United States, Said was sold to a Charlestonian, but escaped and fled to North Carolina, where he was recaptured, sent to jail, and then resold to James Owen, the brother of one of the state's governors. Said penned his autobiography in Arabic in 1831. It is considered the only surviving autobiography of an enslaved person in the United States written in Arabic and therefore unedited. According to many scholars, as many as 30 percent of the enslaved Africans who arrived in the colonies, and subsequently the United States, were Muslim, a largely unexplored truth in modern American discussions of slavery.

Rhiannon Giddens, a Grammy Award winner and MacArthur Fellow known for exploring the legacy of African American folk traditions, has created the libretto. **Giddens spoke about the opera: "To have the opportunity to craft an opera around Omar Ibn Said is a dream come true that I didn't even know I had until I was deep in the thick of it. I realized I am a mere shepherd of this work—what is coming through me is truer than anything I could think up on purpose. This is my way, of the possible many, many ways, through the story that Omar represents. He was a remarkable man whose words speak to us beyond generations. Bringing this music to life with the supremely talented and collaborative composer Michael Abels has been nothing short of fantastic. I've learned much from Michael and from Omar, and I can only be honored that I have had a hand in bringing this version of his life to the operatic stage."**

Giddens has co-composed the score with Michael Abels, an American composer perhaps best known for his work in award-winning films including *Get Out* and *Us*. Musically, the work incorporates West-African traditions with conventional Western opera instrumentation. It is written for a cast of 8 soloists with a full choir and orchestra. **"Omar's story demonstrates the power religious belief has to nurture and uplift the spirit under the direst circumstances,"** says Abels. **"The unavoidable postponement of the premiere due to the pandemic provided the opportunity for Rhiannon and me to enhance the storytelling and music even more. I'm excited beyond words to finally be able to share Omar's journey with Spoleto audiences."**

Acclaimed opera and theater artist Kaneza Schaal leads the work's direction. **"The West has a fantasy of its singularity; it imagines itself as constant and fixed. Opera lost itself to that lie,"** says Schaal, a 2021 Guggenheim Fellow. **"This new work, about Omar Ibn Said, brings the opera back to its true self—a form built on hundreds of years of cultural exchange, and one that has always been deeply hybrid. It's a place big enough for the contradiction, violence, and holiness of Said's journey."**

*Omar* is co-produced by Spoleto Festival USA and Carolina Performing Arts at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. Following its world premiere in Charleston, *Omar* will be presented in future seasons by opera companies including LA Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, San Francisco Opera, and Lyric Opera of Chicago. The opera is inspired by Dr. Ala Alryyes's translation of Omar Ibn Said's autobiography in his book, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said*. Reprinted by permission of the University of Wisconsin Press. © 2011 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All rights reserved.

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## Unholy Wars

*World premiere*

Conceived and performed by Karim Sulayman

Directed by Kevin Newbury

Music direction by Julie Andrijeski

Visual design by Kevork Mourad

Creative producer, Jecca Barry

In this intimate work from Grammy Award winning tenor Karim Sulayman, selections from the early Baroque period are stitched together to reveal a compelling story of the Crusades. The narrative shifts, however, as the works—originally written through a European lens by composers including Monteverdi, Salamone Rossi, Handel, d'India, and Giulio and Francesca Caccini—are sung from a contemporary Arab American perspective, examining the Western opera canon's relationship to the Middle East.

**"This is a story about the resilience of marginalized people everywhere, and the reclamation of our own stories,"** says Sulayman, a first generation American from Lebanese parents. **"In our post-9/11 world, I've been faced with my otherness more than ever before—the recipient of questions or jokes tinged with menace. For centuries, the Middle East has been at the center of immense conflict—all under the pretense of God's name—and these wars rage on. My aim is to delve into racial inequities that ravage our history and our present moment. Music can create a space without borders; this is an opportunity to create a sense of belonging."**

Accompanying Sulayman is an ensemble of Baroque music specialists, who will also perform original interstitial compositions. The multidisciplinary performance, directed by Up Until Now Collective's Kevin Newbury, incorporates choreography as well as video animation and projections by Syrian visual artist Kevork Mourad.

*Unholy Wars* is co-produced by Spoleto Festival USA and Up Until Now Collective. It receives its world premiere at Spoleto Festival USA.

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## La bohème

*New production*

Music by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

Directed by Yuval Sharon

Conducted by Vimbayi Kaziboni

Set Designer, John Conklin

Costume Designer, Jessica Jahn

Lighting Designer, John Torres

Principal cast:

Matthew White, Rodolfo

Lauren Michelle, Mimi

Troy Cook, Marcello

Brandie Sutton, Musetta

One of opera's most widely performed tragedies receives a bold new retelling in this co-production between Spoleto Festival USA, Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT), and Boston Lyric Opera. In a historic first, director Yuval Sharon sets Puccini's *La bohème* in reverse order—starting with Act IV and ending with Act I—extracting hope from tragedy, life from death, and love from loneliness. This adventurous production is designed by John Conklin, one of the foremost principal figures in American stage design.

Sharon, MOT's recently named artistic director and the co-founder of Los Angeles-based opera company The Industry, will stage the premiere in Detroit before it travels to Charleston and, subsequently, Boston. A MacArthur Fellow and one of the most innovative names in opera today, Sharon has been hailed as "opera's disrupter in residence" (*The New York Times*). He is widely known for city-spanning operas and immersive site-specific works, staging operas in moving vehicles and parking garages, amongst many other non-traditional performance spaces.

About *La bohème*, Sharon says: **"Reordering a performance of *La bohème*—to begin with the end and end with the beginning—means working back from devastation towards hope and love. It means listening with fresh ears to a piece that falls often into predictability. Reemerging from the pandemic and returning indoors to see live opera requires all of us to transform our habits, and I believe this is precisely the moment to reexamine our connection to these masterpieces. For those who know *La***

***bohème* so deeply, this may open a new door to experiencing the work in a new way. And for people who are unfamiliar, it will be a beautiful entry point.”**

*La bohème* receives its premiere at the Detroit Opera House on April 2, 2022. Following its performances at Spoleto, the opera will run in during Boston Lyric Opera’s 2022/2023 season.

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## Spoletto Festival USA

Spoletto Festival USA was founded in 1977 by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Gian Carlo Menotti, who sought to create an American counterpart to the annual Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, that he had founded in 1958. Now in its 46th year, Spoleto Festival USA is internationally recognized as America’s premier performing arts festival. For 17 days and nights each spring, Spoleto Festival USA fills Charleston’s historic theaters, churches, and outdoor spaces with performances in opera; theater; dance; and chamber, symphonic, choral, and jazz music. Spoleto’s mission is to present programs of the highest artistic caliber while maintaining a dedication to young artists, a commitment to all forms of the performing arts, a passion for contemporary innovation, and an enthusiasm for providing unique performance opportunities for established artists. Beyond its role as a launching pad for young talent, Spoleto also serves as a catalyst for cultural change and has aided in Charleston’s flourishing as a top arts and culture destination. With General Director Mena Mark Hanna at its helm, the 2022 season takes place May 27 to June 12 in various locations on the downtown peninsula. Spoleto Festival USA is a 501 (c)(3) charitable organization.

**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*

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; the National Endowment for the Arts; 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; The Samuel Freeman Charitable Trust; Post and Courier Foundation; Leslie K. Williams and James A. Attwood, Jr.; Mr. and Mrs. Richard DeScherer; Jan Serr and John Shannon; and Ms. Susan L. Baker and Mr. Michael R. Lynch.

*Omar* is 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 and the discussion series

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