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

Press Release

With “a sweeping achievement” at its center, Spoleto Festival USA’s 46th season carries renewed energy and artistic vitality

Ticket sales topped \$2.7 million with more than 48,000 seats occupied for 120 performances and events

June 14, 2022 (Charleston, SC) — From May 27 to June 12, 2022, audiences from 49 states and nine countries flocked to Spoleto Festival USA, the annual celebratory compendium of music, theater, opera, and dance, with more than 48,000 ticket holders and \$2.7 million in sales. As the first full festival season since 2019, Spoleto’s 2022 season felt full of possibility and promise. The Festival marked General Director Mena Mark Hanna’s first, and while there were significant hurdles due to rain (which moved the Festival’s picturesque kickoff indoors), a fractured global supply chain, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the artistic achievement of the season far outweighed any setbacks.

Audiences filled the Sottile Theatre especially; six sold-out performances of *Omar* had 4,250 people in attendance. Reviews were overwhelmingly positive—national buzz from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, NPR’s *Morning Edition*, and *Opera News* helped to churn excitement surrounding the premiere. *The New York Times* called the production a “sweeping achievement” as well as “moving, joyous...intensely spiritual,” with reviewer Joshua Barone foretelling that “it should not have trouble winning over audiences, as it did on [opening night].”

Charleston’s *Post and Courier* similarly exuded praise; arts editor Maura Hogan wrote of the work’s “transfixing, poetic pan-cultural libretto” and its “clear and present power.” On May 29, *The Post and Courier* released its major special report, “Making Omar,” across five pages. This 5,000-word article by Adam Parker featured stunning behind-the-scenes imagery and video by Gavin McIntyre. The digital version (postandcourier.com/omar) includes an eight-minute video that peeks into the creation of this work, along with clips from the orchestra, and four shorter video interviews with Rhiannon Giddens, Michael Abels,

Kaneza Schaal, and Jamez McCorkle. There is also a photo essay that parallels the making-of-the-opera imagery with photography from Senegal.

Spoletto's second world premiere opera *Unholy Wars* was also critically acclaimed, with its creator Karim Sulayman and others lauded by *The Wall Street Journal* for singing "with stylish elegance and intensity, accompanied by an excellent period-instrument octet led by violinist Julie Andrijeski." The reviewer also praised Yuval Sharon's flipped *La bohème*, writing the reversal of the work "offers an unusually fresh take on a chestnut" that, she says, "is not just a gimmick—it works."

The internationality of Spoleto Festival USA was once again a major characteristic. Over opening weekend, audiences heard the vocal splendor of Youssou NDOUR, a Senegalese global icon backed by a 15-piece ensemble; the US premiere of *Alongside a Chorus of Voices* from Swiss percussionist/composer Jessie Cox—and an evening of jazz piano from South African composer Nduduzo Makhathini, whose "precision was impressive, channeling the deftness and angularity of Thelonious Monk and nimble modal brilliance of fellow South African pianist, Abdullah Ibrahim" (*The Post and Courier*). Works in subsequent weeks included the US premiere of *The Approach* (from the Irish Landmark Productions), a repertory program from Cuba's Malpaso Dance Company, and the US premiere of *La Galerie* from one of Quebec's top physical theater troupes, Machine de Cirque.

Standout works from artists within the borders of the United States included Dael Orlandersmith's play *Until the Flood*—"an amazing, transformative theater experience" (*Broadway World*)—as well as *POWER* from Brooklyn-based dance ensemble Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group: "a strong ensemble, invested and focused in the world they created" (*The Post and Courier*). The presentation of *POWER* was made possible by the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project, with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Mellon Foundation.

In writing an early Festival overview, Hogan of *The Post and Courier* signaled that the season overall was "primed for a new era, one that is both vibrant and vital, ready to receive and share new perspectives in an ever-shifting world." This sentiment rang true in many ways—including the display of new backdrop at the Dock Street Theatre for the Bank of America Chamber Music series (described by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* as "one of America's best chamber festivals"). Framing the musicians in bright, warm hues, the new addition, created by artist Fletcher Williams III, was a perfect encapsulation of the series' bold and, at times, unpredictable programming. When several of the artists were sidelined by COVID-19 throughout the series, others quickly learned new parts, made substitutions, and allowed the 33 concerts to continue without interruption. It was a testament to the musicians' versatility and unflappable talent—as well as the longtime leadership from Geoff Nuttall, director of the series.

This artistic tenacity was also exhibited by the extremely nimble members of the Spoleto Festival USA Orchestra and Chorus. Despite similar obstacles due to illness, the Orchestra—led by Festival Resident Conductor and Director of Orchestral Activities John Kennedy—received some of the highest praise of the season. Classical Voice North America deemed the Orchestra "splendid" and chronicled the US premiere of *Aiōn* as "an extraordinary three-movement work by Icelandic composer Anna Thorvaldsdottir...a soundworld that could be massively placid, deafeningly chaotic, weirdly unearthly, or awesome with oceanic majesty." Similarly, *The Post and Courier* called the Festival Orchestra's singular concert a "tour de force," while another writer described an evening of choral music in the Charleston Gaillard Center as otherworldly: "If heaven had a soundtrack, it would resonate with a sound similar to the voices at 'Lift Every Voice.'"

This was also the inaugural season of the Spoleto Festival USA Chorus, which—following the model of the Orchestra by which members audition each year through a nationwide search—allowed Director of Choral Activities Joe Miller to tailor the full ensemble's parts to the season's needs. Its success was noted by a *Post and Courier* critic who imagined "[former choral director Joseph] Flummerfelt hovering nearby with his infectious smile, as if to add his blessing to the chorus, to Miller, and this new era of Spoleto Festival USA's choral music."

Programming in 2022 endeavored to minimize boundaries between disciplines—a first step at erasing labels that can pigeonhole artists and stymie artistic innovation. Tyshawn Sorey, for instance, performed two nights and as part of two Festival series—Wells Fargo Jazz and Music in Time. Sorey himself remarked at the Spoleto Festival USA Orchestra's openness to experimentation and the challenges put forth in his avant-garde and improvisatory works heard June 6 at the Sottile Theatre—a willingness he struggles to find in many of the top symphonies across the country.

Sorey's jazz trio performance with Aaron Diehl and Matt Brewer was indicative of the series overall: In a review titled "The Wells Fargo Jazz series spotlights fresh new work," *The Post and Courier* wrote, "Linda May Han Oh and Tyshawn Sorey are extraordinary torchbearers for those who keep a well-lit flame to guide us in the present and lead us into the best of what the future could be." From a contemporary dancer centerstage in baroque opera to a set of Stevie Wonder songs during a chamber music concert and a clarinetist (Allison Russell herself) front and center for a First Citizens Bank Front Row concert—interdisciplinary comingling is poised to continue at Spoleto Festival USA in broader, bolder, and deeper ways in seasons to come.

As the Festival season drew to a close, more than 2,800 people packed blankets, chairs, and coolers for the Wells Fargo Festival Finale, held for the first time at the expansive Firefly Distillery in North Charleston. Local synth-pop band Babe Club led the festivities, warming the crowd for the raucous yet overwhelmingly joyous melodies from Shakey Graves. Fireworks ended the evening, setting a clear sky ablaze with

celebratory bursts of color, marking the culmination of a season filled with energy, light, and excitement for the future.

SPOLETO 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 2023 season takes place May 26 to June 11 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](#).